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Agatha Raisin and the Busy Body

Written by M. C. Beaton

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Agatha Raisin AND THE BUSY BODY

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Agatha Raisin AND THE BUSY BODY

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For Hope Dellon,
with love

Chapter One

Having found that her love for her ex-husband, James Lacey, had more or less disappeared, Agatha Raisin, middle-aged owner of a detective agency in the English Cotswolds, decided to hit another obsession on the head.

For the past two years she had been determined to create the perfect Christmas, the full Dickensian dream, with disappointing results. So she decided to flee Christmas by taking a long holiday in Corsica. Her second in command, young Toni Gilmour, was more than capable of dealing with the usual run of dreary divorce cases and missing pets, the bread and butter of the agency.

Agatha had booked a room in a hotel in the town of Porto Vecchio at the south of the Mediterranean island. She had Googled the information and found that it was an old Genoese town with a winter temperature in the low sixties Fahrenheit.

She arrived at the hotel late because it took her over an hour to find a taxi at Figari Airport. Agatha looked forward to celebrating Christmas with a lobster dinner. No more turkey.

The receptionist at the hotel greeted her with, 'I see you've booked in with us for three weeks. Why?'

Agatha blinked. 'Why? I'm on holiday.'

'But what are you going to do?' asked the receptionist. 'Most of the shops and restaurants are closed. You don't have a car. There aren't that many taxis, and the ones that there are don't like short trips.'

'I'll think about it,' said Agatha wearily. 'I'm hungry. Do you have a restaurant?'

'No, but if you go out of the hotel and turn right and then next left it will take you up to the citadel and there are a few restaurants there.'

Agatha left her luggage and set off on the steep climb up to the citadel. The Christmas decorations were the most beautiful she had ever seen but the streets were deserted. She reached the square in the centre of the old citadel. There were two restaurants open and, in the middle of the square, an empty skating rink where men were pouring water on the surface of the ice so that it would freeze overnight. Agatha's spirits sank even lower. She had not imagined Corsica ever getting cold enough for ice to freeze.

There was a heated area for smokers facing one restaurant. She sat down and ordered a meal, which turned out to be nothing special and came to forty-two euros, which, thanks to the falling sterling, meant it cost her the equivalent of forty-two pounds.

She sat and puffed on a cigarette and debated whether to hire a car or not. The trouble was Agatha could not parallel park. In fact, she only felt happy when there was an empty parking space that could take the size of a truck. The cars she had seen parked were all tight together. How on earth did they manage to get out without damaging the cars parked up against them, front and back?

Agatha did not want to admit failure. She did not want to return home and say she had made a mistake. A good night's sleep was all she needed. She trudged back to the hotel through the deserted streets under the sparkling golden haloes of Christmas decorations around every street lamp.

The next day was sunny. After a good breakfast, Agatha asked directions to the port, where she was sure there must be delicious seafood. 'There's a quick way down from the

citadel,' said the receptionist, 'but it's terribly steep.' Agatha's arthritic hip gave a nasty twinge.

'What about round by the road?' she asked. 'How long would that take?'

'About half an hour.'

So Agatha set out. And walked and walked and walked until, an hour and a half later, she found herself at the port. There was a restaurant open, but no lobster. She ordered a salmon steak, the special of the day, reflecting that she could easily have got the same thing back home in England. At the end of the meal, she hopefully asked the waitress to phone for a taxi. But the result was no taxi would take her. 'They only like long trips from town to town,' said the waitress.

So Agatha decided to try the shortcut up to the citadel. It was incredibly steep. At one point, she could have sworn the pavement was staring her in the face. The pain in her hip was severe and she panted for breath the whole way up. When she reached the square in the citadel, she sank down into a chair in a restaurant and ordered a beer. She took out a packet of cigarettes and then put them away again. She was still gasping from the climb up.

I have to get out of here, she thought. Bonifacio is supposed to be beautiful. Dammit. I'll hire a car and go there. There's bound to be lobster there.

Back at the hotel, she checked Bonifacio on her laptop. She read that the harbour was exclusive and sophisticated with many good restaurants. There was an old medieval town on the cliff above the harbour. There did not seem to be many hotels open but she found one that looked promising and booked a room, saying cautiously she did not know how long she would be staying.

As she drove off at dawn the following morning in her rented car, she was glad of the deserted roads and the fact that the route to Bonifacio was well signposted. As the sun rose on another perfect day and her car climbed up into the mountains, Agatha felt happy. It was all going to be all right.

The hotel turned out to be outside the town. She was given a small house in the grounds of the hotel, like a fairy-tale house, made of old stone with a red-tiled roof. There was a large living room, bedroom and a bathroom with an enormous bath. The hotel only served dinner, so, once unpacked, Agatha drove down to the port.

Practically all the restaurants were closed. In the short time since her arrival, the sky had darkened and a freezing wind was bending the palm trees in the port and singing in the shrouds of the yachts moored alongside the quay. Agatha had lunch in one of the few restaurants. The food was good – but no lobster. Determined to visit the old town, after lunch Agatha drove up into it and found herself in a terrifying maze of very narrow streets. Several times she nearly scraped the car. Several times she nearly lost her way, before, with a sigh of relief, finally finding the route to the port again. Rain was slashing against the windscreen.

'Sod this for a game of soldiers,' Agatha howled to the uncaring elements. 'I'm going home.'

By the time she got to Charles de Gaulle, she had a sore throat and was cursing that she now had to leave by terminal 2E instead of the former 2F. The terminal was huge and bewildering and the check-in chaotic. The only bright spot was when the man checking her bags through security asked to see her passport. He studied her photograph. 'This, madame,' he said, 'is the photograph of a beautiful woman, and you are even more beautiful today.'

Agatha, accustomed to the French ability to flirt, answered, 'Monsieur, such a compliment coming from a handsome man like yourself makes me feel beautiful.' He smiled, everyone in security smiled, and Agatha felt a glow. Aren't the French marvellous when it comes to flirting, she thought. It's a technique we lost in Britain as soon as the birth-control pill arrived on the scene. Flirt with a

man back home and all you get is: enough of this nonsense, drop your drawers.

The gate for the flight to Birmingham was down in the basement. Then all the passengers were put on a bus that took so long to reach the plane that Agatha wondered whether they were going all the way to Calais.

As she drove down the road leading to Carsely, towards her cottage, she thought, I can ignore Christmas here just as well as I could in Corsica. But Agatha automatically looked for the Christmas tree on top of the church tower. No Christmas tree. She blinked in surprise. Every year, the lights of the Carsely Christmas tree on top of the square church tower had shone out over the surrounding landscape. She circled the village green. Even the second Christmas tree, which usually stood there in December, was missing, as were the fairy lights, usually strung across the main street of the village.

Agatha mentally shrugged. They had probably come to their senses and were all fed up with all the commercial hoo-ha of Christmas. Still, the church could hardly be accused of being commercial. She did not know then that there was only one man behind the darkness, one man who was going to bring death and fear into the Cotswolds.

It had all started the day after she had left for Corsica. The vicar, Alf Bloxby, with two sturdy helpers, was mounting the steep stairs to the church roof, carrying a Christmas tree. Once up on the top of the tower, they were just looking out the cables kept in a chest on the tower roof to anchor the tree, when a voice from the doorway to the tower cried, 'Stop!'

Alf turned round in surprise. Standing in the doorway was Mr John Sunday, an officer with the Health and Safety Board based in Mircester.

'You can't put that tree up,' he said. 'It's a danger to the public. It could fall off the tower and kill someone.'

Mr Sunday was a small, barrel-chested man with a pugnacious face and thick pepper-and-salt hair. 'I am within my rights as an officer of the Mircester Health and Safety Board,' he said. 'If you persist in erecting that tree, I will have you taken to court. Furthermore I am putting red tape round the gravestones in the churchyard.'

'Why on earth?' exclaimed Alf.

'Because they might fall over.'

'Look here, you stupid man, those gravestones have been standing for hundreds of years without falling over.'

'A gravestone fell over in a cemetery in Yorkshire and injured someone. It is my job to ensure safety.'

'Oh, go away,' said Alf wearily. 'Come on, men. Let's get this tree up.'

But two days later the vicar received an official letter from the Health and Safety Board telling him he must take down the tree or face court proceedings.

The Carsely parish council was then informed that if they wished to put up fairy lights along the main street, they were not to use ladders. A cherry picker had to be used instead by two trained workers, which would have cost the village one thousand two hundred pounds in training fees, plus their wages and the cost of the equipment. Every light fitting must undergo a 'pull test' using expensive special equipment to make sure it was strong enough. Lampposts were deemed unsafe for hanging illuminations.

John Sunday earned the nickname of 'Grudge Sunday' as his unpopularity grew. The village shop was told it could no longer have wooden shelves which had been there since the time of Queen Victoria 'in case someone ran their hands along the shelves and got a splinter'. The village school was ordered to leave lights on at night 'in case unauthorized intruders tripped over in the dark'.

And children were warned not to play with 'counterfeit banknotes' after playing with toy money that did not show a picture of the queen.

Grudge Sunday swelled in importance after each report. He thought the hatred directed towards him by the villagers of Carsely was prompted by envy.

All this Agatha learned when she called on her friend, Mrs Bloxby, the vicar's wife, a day after she had arrived home. But to Mrs Bloxby's surprise, Agatha did not seem particularly interested in the iniquities of Grudge Sunday. In fact Agatha did not seem to be interested in anything. When asked when she was going back to work, Agatha said listlessly, 'Probably some time in the New Year.'

Mrs Bloxby had often wished that her friend would grow out of her silly obsessions, but, she thought, Agatha without an obsession seemed gutted somehow.

Agatha Raisin still presented a smart appearance. She had thick glossy brown hair, good skin, excellent legs, but a rather thick waist and small brown bearlike eyes. She was wearing a tailored dark-blue cashmere trouser suit over a gold silk blouse. But her generous mouth was turned down at the corners and her eyes were dull.

'Our Ladies' Society is having a meeting with the Odley Cruesis society tonight. Do come along. They come under the rule of Mr Sunday and they wish us to join forces to see if there is something we can do. You haven't been to the society for ages.'

'I won't know anyone,' said Agatha. 'People keep selling up and the incomers get older and older.'

'Apart from myself and Miss Simms,' said Mrs Bloxby, 'you never cared much for the last lot. Oh, do come along.' Her usually mild and pleasant voice took on an edge. 'What else are you going to do? Sit at home and brood?'

Agatha gave her friend a startled look. In the tradition of the society they addressed each other by their second

names, dating from some now long-forgotten time when the use of first names had been considered vulgar.

'I just can't seem to get interested in anything or anyone,' sighed Agatha. 'All right, I'll drive you over. I've never been to Odley Cruesis.'

'It's a pretty village. Nice people. The meeting is to be held in the vicarage. The vicar's wife, Penelope Timson, is an excellent baker. Her cakes are the talk of the neighbourhood.'

Odley Cruesis was situated ten miles from Carsely, reached along winding roads glittering with frost. With its old Tudor thatched houses, it seemed a little part of England that time had forgotten. To Agatha's dismay, cars were parked bumper to bumper outside the vicarage. 'I'll never be able to park,' she moaned.

'Yes, you will,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'There's a space right there.'

'I'm not driving a Mini,' said Agatha.

'Let me. I'll park it for you.'

Agatha got out and Mrs Bloxby got into the driver's seat and then parked Agatha's Rover neatly between two cars, leaving only inches on either side.

Agatha walked up to the vicarage. She could faintly hear the chatter of voices. She sighed. Cakes and boredom. Why had she come?

The vicarage drawing room was large. There seemed to be around twenty-five people there. But apart from Miss Simms, Agatha could not recognize anyone else from Carsely. Mrs Bloxby whispered in a disappointed voice that they must have decided not to attend. Agatha waved to Miss Simms, Carsely's unmarried mother, who was wearing a very short skirt, pixie boots, one of those fake French fisherman's jerseys, and long dangling earrings.

There was a log fire on the hearth giving out a dim glow and occasionally sending puffs of smoke into the room.

Agatha refused tea and cakes. She could not be bothered to balance a teacup and plate. All the comfortable chairs had been taken up. Extra hard chairs had been brought in. Agatha sat down in a hard chair and wondered how long this wretched evening was going to last. The room was cold. Long French windows had been let into one wall of the old building and she could see steam from the breaths of all the cold visitors beginning to form on the glass.

A new arrival was being greeted with great enthusiasm. Agatha judged her to be in her seventies. She had leathery brown skin criss-crossed with wrinkles, thick black hair streaked with grey, and sparkling blue-grey eyes. 'Freezing out there,' she said, divesting herself of her coat and pashmina. 'They say we're going to have a blizzard tonight.'

'Who is she and what's that accent?' asked Agatha.

'She's Mrs Miriam Courtney, widow, South African, millionairess,' whispered Mrs Bloxby. 'She bought the manor house here about two years ago.'

Miriam looked brightly around the room. 'Am I expected to sit on one of those bum-numbing seats?'

'Have my chair,' said Miss Simms eagerly, surrendering her armchair.

Agatha felt a twinge of jealousy.

'Goodness, it's cold,' said Miriam. 'You've got coal in the scuttle over there. Why not throw some of that on the fire and get up a blaze?'

'It's not smokeless,' protested Penelope Timson, a tall thin woman with very large hands and feet and stooped shoulders, as if she had become bent after years of bending down to speak to smaller parishioners. She was wearing two cardigans over a sweater, a baggy tweed skirt, and woollen stockings which ended surprisingly in a pair of fluffy pink slippers in the shape of two large pink mice. 'You know what Mr Sunday is like. He tours around looking for smoke. We're supposed to burn smokeless.'

'Oh, never mind him. Courage. Chuck on a few lumps,' urged Miriam.

Bowing to a stronger will, Penelope picked up the tongs and deposited a few lumps. A blaze sprang up but the fire smoked even more.

'Damn, I brought brandy and I've left it in the car. I'll go and get it,' said Miriam. 'Don't wait for me. Get started.'

'I thought we weren't supposed to drink and drive,' muttered Agatha.

'She's probably thinking of herself,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'She can walk home. I wonder she bothered to drive.'

'I wonder anyone local bothered to drive,' said Agatha. 'Couldn't they just walk?'

'It's only in cities that people walk, I think,' said Mrs Bloxby. 'These days, in the country, people seem to drive even a few yards.'

Penelope called the meeting to order. Agatha's thoughts drifted off. Perhaps she could rescue the little that was left of her holiday and go somewhere warm. But she didn't like beach holidays any more and Miriam's skin was surely an example of what happened to women who baked in the sun. It was all so stupid, reflected Agatha, this obsession with tanning. Understandable in the old days when only the rich went abroad in the winter and people wanted to appear jet-setters, but now the British from every walk of life flew out to exotic destinations, visiting a tanning parlour before they left. I mean, thought Agatha, you wouldn't leave a fine piece of leather out in the sun to dry and crack, so why do it with your skin? She remembered the slogan, 'Black is beautiful.' Quite right, too. But if she invented a slogan saying, 'White is beautiful,' she'd probably end up before the Race Relations Board.

Then she became aware that Penelope was asking, 'Where is Mrs Courtney? She should be back. I hope she hasn't slipped on ice.'

'I'll go and look for her,' said Miss Simms eagerly.

The meeting went on. Descriptions of the iniquities of Grudge Sunday wandered in and out of Agatha's brain. She wondered where her ex-husband was and reflected on how glad she was that she had got over her obsession for him, and yet, how empty life seemed without it.

'Found her! Mrs Courtney had to go home for the hooch. It wasn't in the car,' cried Miss Simms from the doorway. She came into the room followed by Miriam. Both were carrying bottles. Penelope went off to find glasses and returned with a tray full of them.

The room was soon full of genteel murmurs – 'Oh, I am sure one wouldn't hurt.' 'Such a cold night, one does need something.' 'Ooh, not so much!' – as brandy was poured.

'I think it's going to snow,' said Miriam. 'The wind's getting up.'

'Too cold for snow,' said Agatha, prompted by a sudden desire to contradict Miriam on any subject she cared to bring up.

The room was filling up with smoke. Penelope batted at it ineffectually with her large hands. 'Must get the sweep in,' she said.

She stared at the French windows and screamed. The tray she was holding, with a few remaining glasses, fell to the floor. Everyone stood up, turned and looked towards the French windows and soon the smoky air was full of cries.

His face pressed against the glass, his bloodied hands smearing the windowpanes as he slowly sank down, was John Sunday. Seen dimly through the steamy glass, it all looked unreal, like something out of a horror movie.

Agatha was never to forget that long night. They were trapped in the cold vicarage drawing room. The scene-of-crime operatives in their white suits worked outside the windows while a policeman stood guard. They seemed to take forever. Then there was a long wait for the arrival of

the Home Office pathologist. After he was finished, Detective Inspector Wilkes, with Agatha's friend Detective Sergeant Bill Wong and one of Agatha's pet hates Detective Sergeant Collins, an acidulous woman, arrived. One by one they were interviewed. Bill went on as if he did not know Agatha, apart from muttering to her that he would call on her sometime. Collins insisted they were all breathalyzed before they were pronounced fit to drive home. Miriam and Miss Simms were taken off for questioning, being the only two to have left the room.

To add to all the misery, when Agatha and Mrs Bloxby left the vicarage, it had warmed up just enough for snow and it was coming down heavily. The cars which had been parked in front and behind Agatha's had already driven off.

Snow danced hypnotically in front of her and whitened the road in front as she drove along the narrow lanes.

Agatha dropped Mrs Bloxby at the vicarage in Carsely and then drove home, edging her way through the white wilderness.

Her sleepy cats came to meet her. Agatha glanced at her watch. Five in the morning! She was bone tired but the palms of her hands were tingling. A murder!

Her last waking thought was that she must get back to the office.

She awoke late the next day to find snow piled against the windows. The central heating did not seem to be coping very well. Huddled in a dressing gown, Agatha went down to her living room and lit the fire that her cleaner, Doris Simpson, had laid ready in the grate. Then she went through to the kitchen to prepare her breakfast – one cup of black coffee. She retreated to the living room and phoned Toni Gilmour, knowing that her young assistant lived around the corner from the office and would be on duty.

'How was your holiday?' asked Toni.

'Foul. I'll tell you about it later. There's been a murder.'

Agatha outlined what had happened, ending with, 'John Sunday appears to have made so many enemies around the villages that it's going to be hard to find the culprit. Maybe he made some enemies at work. Could you check with the Mircester Health and Safety Board? And ask Patrick to find out from his old police contacts if there's any news of exactly how he died.'

Patrick Mulligan, a retired policeman, had worked for Agatha for some time, along with Phil Marshall, an elderly man from Carsely, Sharon Gold, a bouncy young friend of Toni's, and Mrs Freedman, the agency's secretary. Paul Kenson and Fred Auster, who had briefly worked for her, had left to work for a security firm in Iraq.

Agatha fretted as she glared out at the still-falling snow. She made herself a cheese sandwich and another cup of coffee and switched on the television to BBC news. There was a global warming demonstration in Trafalgar Square with protestors nearly obliterated on the screen by the driving snow. She sat patiently through the whole of the news but there was nothing on the murder of John Sunday.

The day dragged on in its dreary whiteness. Agatha's two cats, Hodge and Boswell, sat patiently by the kitchen door, wondering why Agatha did not let them out.

The phone rang at midday. It was Toni. She said that Patrick had little news other than that the police had said it looked as if Sunday had been stabbed with something like a kitchen knife. He had tried to defend himself and there were cuts on his hands and forearms.

Agatha relapsed into a snowbound torpor. She fell asleep on the sofa in the afternoon, only awakening an hour later at the ringing of her doorbell.

On opening the door, she found Miriam Courtney on her doorstep, unbuckling a pair of skis. 'The snow's stopped and I thought I'd come and see you,' said Miriam. 'The gritters haven't been out on the village roads but the

farmers had snowploughed them so I put on my skis and came over. Thank goodness the snow has stopped. Aren't you going to ask me in?'

'Sorry,' said Agatha. 'Come in.'

Miriam propped her skis against the outside wall. 'Come through to the kitchen,' said Agatha. She had taken a dislike to Miriam but decided that any company was preferable to none. 'Coffee?'

'Sure.' Miriam took off her padded coat and woolly hat and sat down at the kitchen table.

'What brings you?' asked Agatha, plugging in the electric coffee percolator.

'I heard you have a detective agency and I want to hire you. I'm prime suspect.'

'Why?'

'Because I was the one person, apart from Miss Simms, who was out of the room for any length of time. Furthermore, I am on record as having called at the offices of the Health and Safety Board in Mircester and threatened to kill Sunday.'

'Why?'

'Because in the summer I open the manor to the public twice a week. It's an old Tudor building. I get a good number of tours. Sunday said the steps up to the front door made it impossible for the disabled to have access. I would have to have a ramp. The ramp they suggested was a great metal thing that seemed to stretch halfway down the drive. I said in the past that the rare visitor in a wheelchair was just wheeled backwards up the very shallow steps. Sunday said that unless I had the ramp, I could no longer open the house to the public. I said I'd kill the stupid bureaucratic bastard. The police turned up this morning at the manor with a search warrant.'

'How did they get through the snow?' asked Agatha, putting down a cup of coffee in front of Miriam.

'They got through somehow in Land Rovers. Took all my kitchen knives away. I want you to find out who really did

it. I'm an outsider in that village. The trouble's started already. The two women who clean for me phoned up this morning to say they would no longer work for me.'

'Why do you need to open the manor to the public? Do you need the money?'

'Not a bit of it. But I enjoy showing the place off. I've done an awful lot of restoration.'

'I haven't a contract here but I'll get the office to send you one to sign,' said Agatha. 'Can you think of anyone?'

'He offended so many people, I can't suggest where you should start. Listen! That's the gritter at last.'

'Good,' said Agatha. 'I've been getting cabin fever sitting here.'

'Isn't that someone at your door?'

Agatha went to answer. The muffled figure of Sir Charles Fraith, one of Agatha's closest friends, stood there. 'Gosh, I thought I'd never get here,' he said, stamping snow from his boots. 'I had to borrow the gardener's Land Rover. My drive is like the Cresta Run. I heard about the murder on the morning news.'

Charles followed Agatha into the kitchen and she introduced him to Miriam. 'A "sir",' said Miriam. 'How grand!' To Agatha's irritation, she was almost coquettish.

Miriam went on to explain the reason for her visit. 'Oh, Aggie will sort you out,' said Charles, helping himself to coffee.

Charles was a medium-sized man with immaculately barbered hair and neat features. Agatha often thought he was as self-contained as her cats. He came and went in and out of her life, often using her cottage as a sort of hotel.

'You didn't use your keys,' said Agatha. 'Have you lost the keys to my cottage?'

'No, but you got shirty the last time I just walked in.'

Miriam looked from one to the other, her eyes sparkling with interest. 'Are you two an item?'

'No!' said Agatha. 'But no time like the present. I'd like to get back to Odley Cruesis and see what I can dig up.'

'I'll drive you over,' said Charles. 'How did you get here, Miriam?'

'On my skis.'

Charles laughed. 'What a lady. I've got a roof rack for your skis. We can all go together.'

Agatha turned away quickly to hide the scowl on her face. She had few friends and was jealous and possessive of the ones she had. 'I'll just go upstairs and change.'

As Agatha put on warm clothes, she could hear Miriam's peals of laughter followed by appreciative chuckles from Charles.

I bet the fact she's employing me is a blind, thought Agatha. I bet she did it. Please God, let Miriam be the murderer.