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Opening Extract from...

Hiss and Hers

Written by M. C. Beaton

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Chapter One

Agatha Raisin, private detective, was in the grip of a great obsession. Her friend, the vicar's wife, Mrs Bloxby, reflected sadly that Agatha, a normally shrewd woman, seemed to lose her wits when she fell in love.

For Agatha had fallen for the village of Carsely's gardener and odd-job man, George Marston. He had worked on her garden until it was into shape and then Agatha, to Mrs Bloxby's horror, had smashed up her perfectly good bookshelves in order to employ him again doing carpentry.

George Marston, ex-army, was over six feet tall with green eyes and thick blond hair streaked with grey.

But Agatha had fierce competition from the other women in the Cotswold village, and from one very dangerous one in particular. Jessica Fordyce, a leading actress in a long-running hospital drama, had bought a cottage in the village for weekends. Jessica was in her thirties, petite, with flaming-red hair framing a heart-shaped face. And she was witty and

amusing. *And* she seemed to need a lot of gardening work done.

Agatha began to begrudge the time spent out of the village on detective work. She ran a successful detective agency in Mircester. But she reminded herself that she had moved to the Cotswolds from London and had taken early retirement, although in her early fifties, to enjoy life.

She fretted over her appearance. How could thick, glossy brown hair and good legs compete with such as Jessica? Jessica's eyes were large and blue. Agatha's were small and bear-like, looking warily out from a round face.

Things came to a head for Agatha when George rang one evening and said he hoped to take her for lunch the following day to repay the lunch she had previously bought him. 'But of course you will be at work as usual,' he said.

'I'm free this weekend,' said Agatha hopefully.

'Sorry. I'm all booked up. Another time.'

I'm sick of work, thought Agatha furiously. I'm going back to being a village lady.

The doorbell rang. Oh, be still my heart! But it was only Mrs Bloxby.

'Come in,' said Agatha grumpily. Mrs Bloxby noticed that Agatha was wearing full make-up and high heels. She never seemed to relax these days. Agatha was always impeccably dressed and her make-up was a trifle too thick.

'Have a drink,' said Agatha. 'I could do with one.'

'I'll have a sherry.'

Bless her, thought Agatha, hobbling into the sitting room. Sherry somehow went with Mrs Bloxby's quiet eyes and ladylike appearance.

'Why don't you kick off your shoes?' asked Mrs Bloxby when the drinks were poured. 'Your feet seem to be hurting you.'

'Oh, all right.' Agatha cast one longing look at the window as if hoping to see George's tall figure and then eased her feet out of her shoes and wriggled her toes.

'I've decided to give up,' said Agatha.

Relief flooded Mrs Bloxby's face. 'What a good idea. He's really not worth it, you know.'

'What are you talking about?'

'What were you talking about?' asked her friend cautiously.

'I've decided to give up work.'

'But why?' wailed the vicar's wife, although she was very sure of the reason.

Agatha avoided her worried gaze.

'Oh, it's such a glorious summer and . . . and . . . well, the truth is, I need a break from the detective business.'

'But, Mrs Raisin, although you have an excellent staff, you *are* the detective business.' Although friends, they called each other by their second names. It had been an old-fashioned tradition in the now-defunct Ladies' Society to which they had once both belonged

and somehow they had continued with the tradition.

Mrs Bloxby wanted to tell her that giving up a successful job to chase after a gardener was ridiculous. But she had come across many addicts in her years of parish work and knew that if you told an addict to do one thing, then the addict would just do the other. And Agatha was in the grip of an addiction as heavy as if George Marston had been a drug.

Agatha called a meeting of her staff on the following morning. Standing around, looking at her anxiously, were Mrs Freedman, secretary, and detectives Toni Gilmour, young and pretty, Simon Black, also young and with a jester's face, Patrick Mulligan, tall and lugubrious, and elderly Phil Marshall with his white hair and gentle face.

'I have decided to take extended leave,' said Agatha.

'Why?' asked Phil. 'Are you ill?'

'No,' said Agatha. 'I am in perfect health. I would just like a break.'

I wonder who he is, thought Toni. Agatha's been wearing ankle-killing stilettos for the past weeks.

'Let's just go through the cases,' said Agatha briskly. 'Each of you can take on one of my cases.'

'How long do you plan to be away?' asked Phil.

'Oh, until I feel I've had enough time off,' said Agatha airily, thinking, Until he proposes.

She proceeded to deal briskly, allocating her work. When she left at lunchtime, they waited until they heard her reach the bottom of the stairs and slam the street door.

'What's it all about?' asked Patrick.

Phil, who lived in the same village as Agatha, felt he knew the answer. 'Agatha's been employing this gardener. I think she's smitten. But so are most of the women in the village. Agatha probably feels she's losing out by being away at work.'

'Maybe I could find out something about him to put Agatha off,' said Simon. 'Toni and I could look into it.'

'There's too much work,' said Toni sharply. She hadn't forgiven Simon for declaring his love for her and then joining the army, getting engaged to a female sergeant and then ditching his sergeant at the altar.

'I'll ask around,' said Phil. 'I live in the village, although with the amount of work Agatha's left us, I won't get much chance for free time. We'd all better get to work.'

Agatha had found the side mirror on her car had been bent in. She pressed the electronic button to restore it to its proper viewing position, and, as it slid into place, she got a clear reflection of her face. Before the mirror settled back into its correct position and her startled

face disappeared from view, she noticed two nasty little lines on her upper lip.

She was seized with a feeling of savage jealousy of the beautiful soap star who had invaded the village. Jessica, unlike Agatha, did not smoke. She went for long healthy walks at weekends. She did not have to worry about the disintegration of the body that plagued Agatha: the body that seemed determined to have a square shape with saggy bits.

For one clear moment she felt ridiculous. Chasing after a gardener? What a cliché. But then she thought of George, of his strong body and those beautiful muscled legs, and set her lips in a firm line.

Into battle once more!

She arrived home to find Detective Sergeant Bill Wong waiting for her. He was the product of a Chinese father and a Gloucestershire mother. The result was a pleasant round face with almond-shaped eyes. He was Agatha's first real friend after she had first arrived in the village, lonely and prickly.

'What brings you?' asked Agatha.

'Just a social call. I haven't seen you for a bit.'

'Come in. It's a lovely day and we can sit in the garden.'

When they were settled over mugs of coffee at the garden table, Bill exclaimed, 'I've never seen your garden look more beautiful.'

'I have a good gardener.'

'Do you know the names of all the flowers?'

'I think I used to, but they've all got Latin names now.'

'I thought you'd had a hip replacement,' said Bill, looking down at Agatha's high-heeled strapped sandals.

'I don't talk about it.'

'You should think about it,' said Bill. 'Heels that high can't be good for you.'

'What's come over you?' snapped Agatha. 'You're going on like a nasty husband.'

'Just like a caring friend. Who is it this time?'

'What?'

'The heels, the heavy make-up, the tight short skirt.'

'Let me point out to you I have always been a well-dressed woman. Talk about something else. How's crime?'

'Nothing major. Usual binge drinkers at weekends, car theft, few burglaries, no murder for you to get excited about. Why are you home on a working day?'

'I'm taking time off,' said Agatha. 'It's a lovely summer and I felt the need to relax.'

'I see James is back next door.' James Lacey was not only Agatha's neighbour but her ex-husband.

'Haven't seen much of him,' said Agatha. 'How's your love life?'

'Zero at the moment.'

The doorbell rang. Agatha leapt up like a rocketing pheasant and ran to the door. Her

face fell as she saw one of her other friends, Sir Charles Fraith, on the doorstep. 'Oh, it's you,' she said. 'Bill's in the garden.'

Charles's neat figure was dressed in a pale blue shirt and darker blue trousers. As usual, he looked cool, compact and well barbered.

He walked before Agatha into the garden. 'Hello, Bill. How's crime?'

'Not bad. No murders for Agatha. She's just been telling me she's taking time off work.'

'Chasing after the gardener?' asked Charles. 'They'll be nicknaming you Lady Chatterley soon.'

'Wasn't that a gamekeeper?' asked Bill.

'Will you both shut up!' shouted Agatha. 'Snakes and bastards, can't I have a break from work without you two jeering at me?'

Charles began to talk about a garden fête that was soon to take place at his mansion, telling funny stories about squabbles among the organizers. Bill listened and laughed, relaxing like a cat in the sun. Agatha was sure her ankles were beginning to swell.

Bill at last said he should go. Charles lingered. He waited until he heard Bill drive off, and then said, 'Look, Agatha. There's nothing worse than looking *needy*. Everyone in the village is dressed for the heat. Yet here you are in crippling shoes and a power suit and so much make-up on you look as if you've wandered out of the Japanese Noh theatre. For heaven's sake, lighten up and be comfortable. You've got good skin and it's buried under a

mass of muck. You should go and visit your ex. You were in love with him.'

'I don't like being lectured,' said Agatha petulantly. 'Just go.'

As soon as she was on her own, Agatha went up to her bedroom. She selected a tan cotton blouse and shorts. She stripped off and took a long shower and then put on the blouse and shorts and low-heeled leather sandals. She applied a thin layer of tinted moisturizing cream to her face and put on pale pink lipstick. She checked her legs in the mirror to make sure she didn't have any hairs on them and then went downstairs.

She sat down at her desk. If she looked on George Marston as a project, a client to be taken over, she might hit on something. Agatha had once been a very successful London publicity agent.

She flicked on her email. The name Fordyce seemed to leap out at her. Where had the cow got her email address from? Jessica was appealing for funds to refloor the village hall.

Agatha phoned Mrs Bloxby and asked what it was all about. 'Miss Fordyce felt she would like something to do to help the village. The floor really does need repair.'

'How did she get my email address?'

'Probably from some former member of the Ladies' Society. Do you remember, we all used to have each other's email addresses?'

'Tell her not to worry,' said Agatha, her brain working quickly. 'I'll pay for the floor and then we'll be able to hold a charity ball. It'll be fun.'

'I thought you were going to be resting,' said Mrs Bloxby cautiously.

'A change is as good as a rest,' said Agatha sententiously. 'We'll make it a really classy event. Full ballroom rig.'

It was amazing, thought Mrs Bloxby, how such a normally hard-nosed detective such as Mrs Raisin could turn into a romantic teenager when she was in the grip of an obsession.

There was quite a large proportion of the middle-aged to elderly in the village. They became quite excited at the prospect of wearing ball gowns again. A shop in Broadway, a nearby village, which hired out evening suits for men, received a steady flow of orders.

The staff at Agatha's agency received invitations. Toni was thrilled and started to ransack the thrift shops for a suitable gown. Phil Marshall was sure that the whole affair was Agatha's elaborate plan to snare Marston. Young Simon dreamt of wooing Toni. Mrs Freedman looked gloomily down at her comfortable figure and thought of the gowns she had worn in her youth when she was a slim young lady. Patrick Mulligan was privately determined to invent an illness to get out of the whole thing. He was fond of Agatha and had an uneasy feeling that if he went, he

would witness her making an awful fool of herself.

James Lacey, who had found that Agatha seemed to be avoiding him these days, wondered why she was bothering with it all. He could not quite believe that Agatha no longer had any feelings for him. He was really a confirmed bachelor and had felt nothing but relief when the divorce was finalized, and yet a good bit of excitement seemed to have gone out of his life with the absence of Agatha's adoration. He did not listen to gossip and was apt to freeze off anyone who tried to tattle to him and so he had not heard of Agatha's continuing pursuit of her gardener.

George Marston, like himself, was a retired army man and sometimes dropped in for a drink.

The gardener arrived one evening and settled into an armchair in James's book-lined living room. 'Does the leg hurt?' asked James, knowing that George had lost a leg in Afghanistan and wore a prosthetic.

'Sometimes,' said George with a sigh. 'Bloody women! All this fuss about a ball.'

'Oh, that's Agatha for you. Endless energy,' said James.

'What happened to your marriage?' asked George curiously. James was tall and rangy with bright blue eyes in a handsome face and he had thick black hair just going grey at the temples.

'Like another drink?' asked James.

'Wouldn't mind,' said George, understanding that James had no intention of talking about his marriage to Agatha. 'I don't feel like going to this ball but everyone expects me to. What's it all in aid of?'

'The money goes to Save the Children. That's why the price is a bit steep.'

'It did seem odd to get an invitation with a price on it,' said George.

'Well, that's Agatha for you. Like a pit bull when it comes to fundraising. In fact, I think she's coming to call. I just saw her through the front window.' The doorbell rang.

George got to his feet. 'Look, be a good chap and don't say I was here. I'll let myself out the back way.'

George hurried off as James went to answer the door. Agatha didn't wait for an invitation. She pushed past James and looked wildly around the living room before swinging round and asking, 'Where is he?'

'Who?' asked James.

'George. I saw him come in here.'

'He did and he's left,' said James. 'I looked over the fence at your garden. It looks fine. Do you need any more work right now?'

'No. I mean, yes,' said Agatha, looking flustered. 'Getting weedy.'

'Haven't you got his phone number?'

'Yes.'

'So phone him up. Drink?'

'Gin and tonic, lots of ice.'

James reflected that Agatha looked much better without those ridiculous heels on.

'How's life?' asked Agatha, taking a big gulp of the drink he handed to her. She wanted to get it finished as soon as possible and go for a walk around the village where she might come across George working in someone's garden. Hadn't she seen him one evening going into the Glossops' house? And it could only be to do work because Harriet was her own age and certainly no oil painting.

'I'm taking a break from writing travel books,' said James. 'I've been commissioned to write a life of Admiral Nelson of Trafalgar fame.'

'I would think,' said Agatha cautiously, 'that there are a lot of books on Nelson.'

'And so there are. Another won't hurt. I'm enjoying it.'

'What happened to your television career? You were going to do a programme on expats in Spain?'

'Well, I did, but it hasn't been shown yet. I didn't enjoy it. With the Spanish recession, the high state of the euro, a lot of retired people are finding it hard to make ends meet. And Lord protect me from dreamers. Seemingly perfectly sensible people who have worked hard all their lives suddenly decide to buy a bar in Spain. No previous experience. Not prepared to put in the long hours a Spaniard would. Of course, I . . . Are you going?'

'Got to rush. Just remembered something.' Agatha darted out the door.

Doing a sort of power walk so that anyone seeing her would assume she was exercising, Agatha ploughed on through the village under a pale violet evening sky. The air was heavy with the scent of roses. Some people sat out in their front gardens and waved to her. So many new faces, thought Agatha. The recession meant that many people were selling up and richer people were snapping up the cottages and moving in. At least it was not the weekend, so there was no danger of running into Jessica Fordyce.

Carsely village consisted of one main street with a few lanes running off it, like the one in which Agatha lived. There was one general store, one pub, the church, a primary school and, on the outskirts, a council estate. Many of the cottages, like Agatha's, were thatched. But unlike nearby Chipping Campden, there were no cafés, restaurants, antique shops or gift shops so it was free in the summer from tour buses.

It had been said, because of all the incomers, that village life had been destroyed, and yet, there was something in old Cotswold villages that seemed to bind people to them. Agatha herself now felt an outsider when she visited London. Her walk took her towards Jessica's cottage, which was in a terrace of Georgian

cottages parallel to the main street. She stopped at the entrance to the terrace. Jessica's little scarlet sports car was parked outside.

As she watched, George Marston came out, shouting farewell. Agatha scurried off, suddenly not wanting to be seen spying on him.

Her heart was heavy, but when she got home, she phoned George. 'Hello, Agatha,' he said cheerfully. 'You can't want any gardening at this time of the evening.'

'I've decided to take some time off work,' said Agatha. 'Are you free tomorrow?'

'Sorry, booked up all day.'

Agatha bit her lip. Then she suddenly thought, What if he does not come to the dance? It would all be for nothing.

'You are coming to the dance?' she said as lightly as she could.

'Of course. And the first dance is yours. Wouldn't think of dancing with anyone else. Got to go to bed. I'm exhausted.'

Agatha's rosy dreams came back. She could see them moving together across the dance floor while envious eyes looked on.

Two days of drenching rain brought some much-needed relief to the parched countryside. And then summer returned in refreshed glory. Agatha travelled up to London to buy an evening dress. She spent almost a whole

afternoon at Harvey Nichols before deciding on a gold silk gown embroidered with little gold leaves. She bought a pair of high-heeled gold silk evening shoes to go with it.

Agatha was about to get on to the train at Paddington Station in London when she suddenly saw, farther along the platform, George Marston about to board the same train. Agatha had a first-class ticket, but she hurried to see if she could join George in the economy seats.

When she reached his carriage, she was disappointed to see he had a female companion. The seats round George and his friend were full. There was no way she could muscle in. And even if she could, when the ticket collector came around, he was bound to point out she had a first-class ticket and then George would think she was pursuing him.

She sadly retreated to the nearest first-class compartment.

For the first time since her obsession began, Agatha began to feel stupid. She was a rich woman, but all the expense of the ball began to seem mad. It was not as if she could recoup any of the money, because it would all go to Save the Children.

When the train finally rolled into Moreton-in-Marsh, she felt clear-headed and somehow lighter. As she was getting into her car, a voice said, 'Can you give me a lift?'

She looked up, startled. It was George, those green eyes of his smiling down at her.

'Of course,' said Agatha. 'Get in.'

'My car's in the garage,' he explained. 'Someone ran me down to the station.'

'What took you to London?' asked Agatha. George was formally dressed in a dark suit, striped shirt and tie.

'I went up to join my sister. We had to go to the bank and sort things out. She lives in Oxford. What about you?'

'Buying a gown for the ball.'

'Still going ahead, is it?'

Agatha threw him a startled glance. 'Of course! Everyone is looking forward to it. Aren't you?'

'Not really my thing.'

'But you will be there!'

'Yes, I promised, didn't I?'

'You look tired,' said Agatha. 'Want to come to my place for a drink?'

'Yes, all right. As a matter of fact, I've been meaning to ask you something.'

All of Agatha's obsession came flooding back. Once inside her cottage, she told him to sit in the garden. Her hands trembled a bit as she collected their drinks: beer for George, gin and tonic for herself.

'Now,' she said, sitting beside him in the garden, 'what do you want to ask me?'

'You're a detective, right? You must have come across many weirdos in your career.'

'Quite a number,' said Agatha. 'Why?'

'How do you recognize a psycho?'

'Do you think you've met one?'

'Maybe.'

'Well, there are lots of books on the subject, or you could look it up on the Internet,' said Agatha. 'The trouble is, I think there are different levels. I mean, a captain of industry, say, could be a psycho but it's all channelled into power. He's not going to kill someone. I suppose I would operate on gut instinct. Is someone threatening you?'

'I'm beginning to think I've got an overactive imagination.'

Agatha's doorbell rang. She went reluctantly to answer it. 'Oh, it's you,' she said bleakly to James Lacey.

'I saw George coming in with you,' said James. 'I'd like a word with him.'

'He's in the garden.'

Cursing James in her heart, Agatha led him through to the garden. She offered James a drink. He said he would like a whisky and soda. When she returned, James and George were deep in army reminiscences.

At last, James turned to Agatha. 'I'm sorry, we must be boring you to death.'

'And I must go,' said George, getting to his feet.

'I'd better get back to my manuscript,' said James.

'I'll run you home,' said Agatha to George.

'Don't bother. I'll enjoy the walk. Thanks for the drink.' He bent and kissed her on the cheek.

Agatha stood on the step and watched them go. James went into his cottage, and George

walked down the lane to the corner. As if conscious of Agatha watching him, he turned and waved.

And that was the last time Agatha saw him alive.