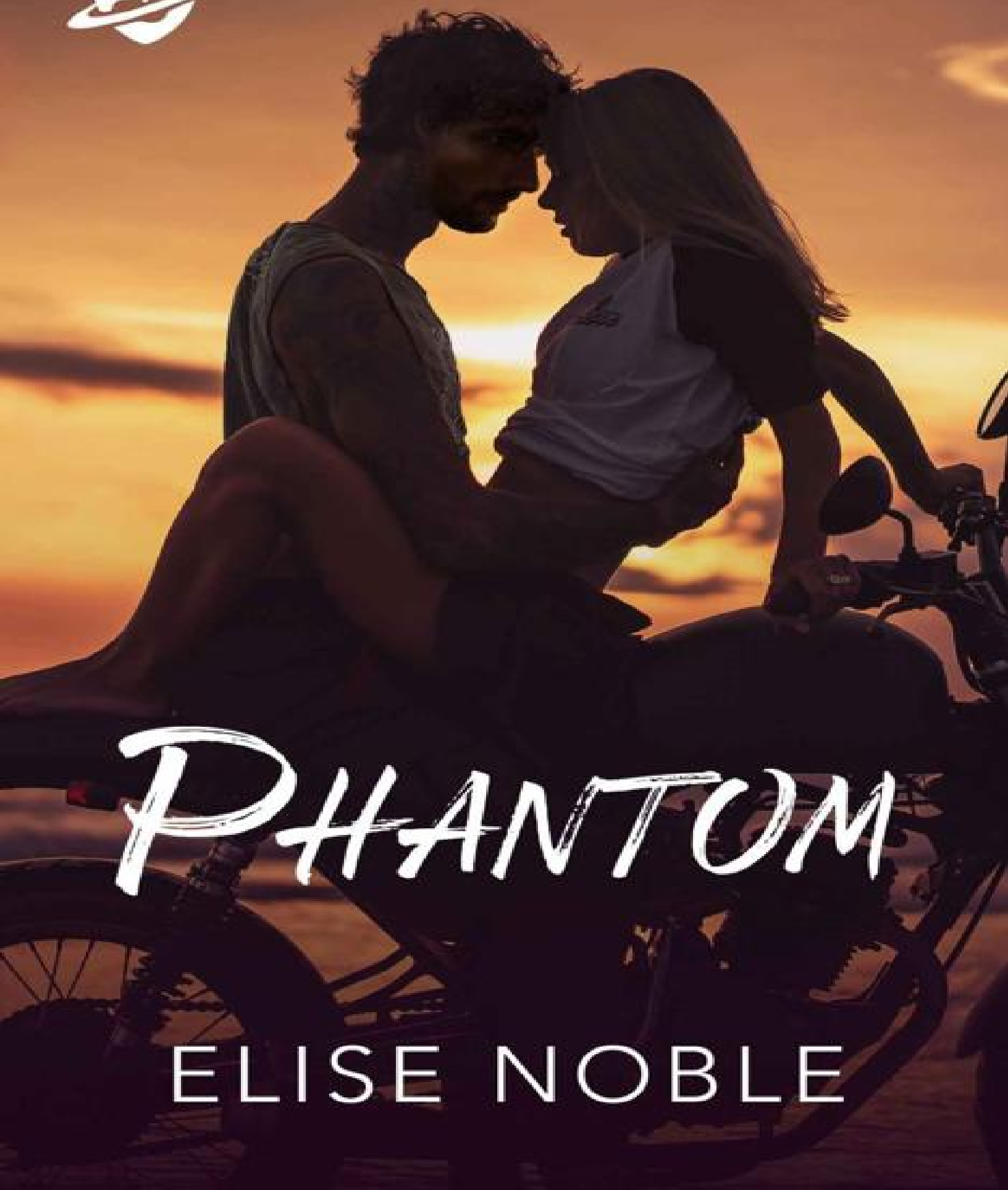




BLACKWOOD SECURITY BOOK 14.5



# PHANTOM

ELISE NOBLE

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BOOK 14.5

ELISE NOBLE

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It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality.

— *VIRGINIA WOOLF*

If I am the phantom, it is because man's hatred has made me so. If I am to be saved it is because your love redeems me.

— *GASTON LEROUX*

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# AGATHA

ME:

Tonight?

I sent the message and sat back on the couch, sighing. This was a bad, bad habit I'd gotten into. Other women—my sisters, for example—had normal, healthy relationships with men. They went on dates, shared meals, talked about the future, and then got married. Me? I had booty calls with a self-confessed asshole.

HAWK

Yeah.

That was it. One word.

Brendan Hauser, otherwise known as Hawk, was my filthy little secret. Well, maybe not so little. But I hadn't mentioned our non-relationship to my friends or colleagues—which were the same thing, seeing as I had no life outside the office—and I certainly hadn't told my family. My mom would shit a brick if she found out I was sleeping with a former commando who hung with his dad's biker gang in his spare time. Okay, so we didn't actually sleep much, but you get the point.

Out of their three daughters, I was my parents' biggest disappointment. Clarice, my older sister by four years, had joined the peace corps after college



and spent time overseas promoting environmental awareness in Borneo before she married her high school sweetheart and began producing offspring. Odette, the baby of the family at three years younger than me, was an elementary school teacher—poor kids—with ambitions of becoming a housewife, a dream she'd achieve sooner rather than later. Because she'd gotten engaged. Last month, she'd video-called giggling and squealing to show me the ring and gush over Stu's proposal, but I had plenty of time to come up with an excuse to skip the ceremony. How long did weddings take to arrange? Years. It was years, right? At least I didn't have to be a bridesmaid. Those slots were reserved for her friends.

The thought of spending several days with my family filled me with dread, but that was tomorrow's problem. Tonight, I had a more pressing issue to deal with. Hawk. I needed to take a shower because if past form was anything to go by, he'd walk through the door in around thirty minutes. I'd never given him a key. He didn't seem to need one.

Perhaps I should have been more alarmed by the whole lock-picking thing, but Hawk was in special ops—he probably picked his own locks at home just for fun—and he only showed up at my apartment when I'd invited him. Which, if I was honest, was too often for comfort, but I'd become addicted to his touch, and the pheromones he shed like confetti overrode rational thought. When he was with me, I felt sexy, desirable, a different woman from the flat-chested blonde waif who stared back at me from the mirror each morning.

Fool that I was, I'd bought new underwear for this evening's encounter, and as I headed to the bathroom, I wondered how much longer the arrangement would carry on. Last month, I'd turned twenty-eight. I was a grown-up with a semi-respectable job. And my biological clock was ticking, as Mom never stopped reminding me.

In the shower, I clipped my hair on top of my head and stood under the hot spray as the water washed away some of the day's tensions. My small

team at Blackwood Security—there were three of us—supported the Special Projects and Investigations teams by providing information as and when required, and both departments were busier than ever. I'd started the morning on run-of-the-mill infidelity cases and ended the evening hunting for a missing teenager. She'd gone to meet an online friend in Maryland, a fellow Indigo Rain fan who'd offered a spare ticket to their concert, but the pretty sixteen-year-old brunette from Facebook had, in reality, turned out to be a middle-aged guy. Two hours ago, the field team had found the missing girl crying in a motel room, and now she was on her way home. The groomer? Our target was only fifteen, so his catfishing ass was in jail.

I scrubbed harder. Maybe I was trying to wash off a little of the second-hand misery that clung to me as well. I loved my job, both the technical aspects and the fact that I got to help people, but some of the things I saw along the way, they gave me nightmares. Hawk took me out of the darkness, if only for a few hours.

Although he wasn't exactly sweetness and light. No, he was a grouchy, secretive, pushy asshole. An asshole who made my blood run hot and reliably provided multiple orgasms before he left me in a boneless pile on the bed and disappeared into the night. But he was also safe. With Hawk, I knew exactly what to expect. He never made any false promises, and in the brief moments we spent together, he took care of me.

Not like the men who'd come before him.

He'd saved me from making at least one big mistake, and probably more.

It had all begun on a cloudless night in the Brotherhood of Thieves, or should I say, outside it. The Brotherhood had started out as a biker bar, a real spit-and-sawdust place that Hawk would have felt quite at home in, but like so many establishments, it had fallen on hard times. In its second incarnation, it had become the kind of establishment where city boys drank when they wanted to feel badass. Rebels without the risk. Bandidos who wouldn't dream of violating any city ordinances. The new clientele rode motorcycles on the

weekends, bragged about their bonuses, and didn't care how much the drinks cost.

It was also Blackwood's unofficial watering hole, seeing as Logan, another reprobate from Emmy Black's Special Projects team, part-owned the place. We had a favourite table near the back, and I sometimes swung by for dinner when I was too tired to cook. Edgy but safe, that was the Brotherhood. There was a Harley in the bar, plus a pool table and a wall covered in dollar bills. Tradition dictated that the customers pinned their change there for charity, and now folks came from two states over to take Instagram selfies in front of the famous "dollar wall."

I'd been there one Friday night with a few colleagues—Dan, Mack, and Hallie—and as the drinks flowed and the talk got dirtier, I'd begun craving an orgasm that wasn't battery powered. Just a few hours with a man. Fingers, dick, a fleeting connection. I hadn't dated since my FBI days, and for good reason. My only serious relationship had ended badly. In hindsight, I'd jumped in too fast, and after my ex cheated and blamed his infidelity on my long work hours, I'd been left to untangle the mess of a joint mortgage, shared furniture, and a cat he'd adopted but no longer wanted.

That night in the Brotherhood, I'd gotten talking to a guy at the bar. He'd bought me a drink, which turned into two drinks, which turned into an invite to his place soon after nine o'clock. A reasonable hour for a one-night stand, don't you think? Late enough to be pleasantly tipsy, early enough that I'd have time to do the deed, get home, and grab some sleep before I headed back to Blackwood in the morning. Yes, I often worked weekends. The office was my second home, okay? There was a gym, a kitchen full of snacks, and a shooting range. What more could a girl want?

"We can take my car," my new friend said. "I've only had one drink."

"Do you live nearby?"

"I have an apartment in Tuckahoe."

While he hunted through his pockets for the car key, I snapped pictures of

both him and his vehicle and sent them to Dan, just in case he was secretly a psycho, and activated my phone tracker. I'd had more than two drinks, but my judgment wasn't impaired enough that I forgot basic safety procedures.

Dan sent a message back: *Enjoy! Don't do anything I wouldn't do ;)*

That didn't leave much out. I could ride him like a prize rodeo bull or taser him in the balls, and Dan would be just fine with it.

But I never got the chance to do either.

I'd climbed halfway into the car when a steel band tightened around my waist, and I found myself being lifted right back out again. Fear surged through me, and I opened my mouth to scream, but then Hawk spoke.

"She's not going with you, asshole."

The guy jumped out of the car. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I heard you and your buddies talking, and if I ever see you in this bar again, you're gonna lose teeth. You don't treat women that way."

What way? The criticism was a bit rich coming from the man currently holding me in a vise-like grip. If it had been anyone other than Hawk, I'd have been rooting through my purse for my stun gun, but...but... It was Hawk. Back then, he'd just joined Blackwood's Investigations team in the aftermath of a hellish case, and every time I saw him in the office, I had to press my thighs together. Hawk was hot. Incendiary. Six feet of brooding muscle topped by dirty-blond hair and dimples that didn't match his usual scowl.

I was about to tell him it was fine, that I was up for a one-night stand and I'd gotten into the car voluntarily, when the guy stammered out an apology, climbed into the driver's seat, and took off without another word. Only then did Hawk's grip loosen.

"What the hell?" I demanded.

"You're welcome, babe."

I twisted in his arms and shoved at his chest. "You're such a jackass. All I wanted was a non-self-induced orgasm, and you just ruined that."

“That motherfucker was never gonna make you come. He was only in it for himself.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Based on what? His BMW? His button-down shirt? The fact that he bought me drinks? I know you just attended a behavioural analysis course, but you’re taking the judgmentalness way too far.”

Judgmentalness? Was that even a word? Well, it was now.

“Based on the fact that he and his buddies were having an in-depth discussion on stealthing and the best way to go about it.”

Stealthing? I froze. “And you think...”

“Yeah, I do.”

Stealthing—a man surreptitiously removing the condom during sex—had been on the rise recently. Blackwood had even been hired to hunt down one perpetrator after his victim found herself pregnant after a ten-minute mistake in a nightclub bathroom. And that could have been me. Not the bathroom part, but the rest. I sagged in Hawk’s arms and murmured an apology.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I called you a jackass, but why are men such assholes?”

“Practice.”

I couldn’t argue with that.

“Dating is a minefield, and even the path to a one-night stand is littered with IEDs. Is one tiny orgasm really too much to ask?”

One corner of his lips twitched. “I don’t date, but I can help out with the orgasm.”

It took a long moment for his words to filter in. “W-w-what?”

“Five minutes, and I’ll have you gasping my name.”



## AGATHA

**W**as Hawk serious? He was actually serious, wasn't he? My heart began hammering, and that ache between my legs returned with a vengeance. Possibly once or twice, I'd dreamed about this man, and maybe, just maybe, I'd touched myself in the process. Now he was offering to do it for me?

"Make a decision, Agatha. Yes or no?"

He seemed indifferent, as if he were offering me a cup of coffee or a donut, not a life-changing experience. And make no mistake, it *would* change my life. How could it not? Would things get awkward when I saw him around the office? Would he tell his friends about me, spread rumours that I was a slut?

I pinched my eyes shut. No, no, this wasn't the FBI. Unlike Special Agent Briggs, Hawk wasn't a gossip. He was a man of many secrets; everyone knew that. And if I turned down his offer, I'd always regret letting cowardice win yet again.

"Yes," I whispered.

His lip twitch turned into a full-on smile. An actual freaking smile.

I figured he'd lead me to a vehicle or call a cab, and then we'd head to his place or mine, but no, that wasn't what Hawk had in mind. Instead, he backed me up against the truck parked next to us and ran his hands down my sides as he studied me like a science project.

Then he fisted my loose hair in one hand.

“No pigtails tonight?”

Once I’d gotten the orgasm idea into my head, I’d taken them out in the bathroom. Pigtails were cute, not sexy.

“I wanted a change.”

“Shame.”

“You like the pigtails?”

A hesitation. “Yeah.”

Hawk tilted my head to the side and feathered kisses along the edge of my jaw. I melted against him, but then realisation dawned, and my stomach clenched. Here? He was planning to do...whatever this was, here?

“Wait! We’re in a freaking parking lot.”

“So?”

“So someone might see.”

“Nah.” He nodded at the vehicles on either side of us. “That’s Logan’s truck, and this is mine.”

“What about the cameras?”

I knew damn well that Logan would have installed cameras.

“Stay against the truck, and we’ll be out of range of the motion arc.”

My first instinct was to mutter an excuse and run. I had an apartment—I didn’t need to sneak around like a teenager anymore. But Hawk also had a home, or possibly a Batcave. He wasn’t doing this here because he had to; he was doing it because he wanted to. And even as my brain was coming up with a thousand reasons why this was a terrible idea, fire was running through my veins, and my body was sandwiched between the cool metal of the truck’s door and the hot muscle of his abs. Holy hell, he was hard. His dick pressed into my stomach, and I let out a soft moan.

“I’ll stay against the truck.”

“Good girl.”

This was happening. This was really happening. Goosebumps prickled on



my arms as Hawk inched the hem of my little black skater dress higher and caressed my thigh. Why had I worn pantyhose? They were in the way, and— Oh, never mind. They weren't a problem anymore, shredded. His lips brushed against mine. He'd barely touched me, and already I was about to come on the spot, or possibly his hand.

Hawk teased the seam of my lips with his tongue, his gaze never leaving my face, his ice-blue eyes focused on my own. They shimmered in the moonlight, hypnotic, and I couldn't have turned away even if I'd wanted to.

“Open for me,” he murmured.

My mouth or my legs? Just to be on the safe side, I obliged with both, and he slid my panties aside with a finger as his tongue touched mine. He hadn't been kidding about the five minutes, had he?

I forgot our surroundings as he kissed me deeply, and looking back, that was the moment everything changed. When I abandoned any thoughts of finding a nice, respectable man and became a junkie for Hawk Hauser. His finger headed for my clit like a homing pigeon, and I gasped as he hit precisely the right spot, circling, stroking, teasing. My knees trembled, and only his other hand on my ass kept me from slithering to the damp asphalt. The man was a maestro. He played my body perfectly. The orgasm was already building when he slipped a finger inside me, and with one tiny nudge, he sent me over the edge.

“Hawk...”

His name slipped out, more of a groan than a gasp.

“Four minutes and fifty-three seconds. Told you.”

That smirk... I wanted to slap it off him, but I didn't have the strength.

“You asshole.”

“I've never pretended to be anything else, babe.”

That much was true. I laid my head against his shoulder, breathing hard, waiting for my heart rate to reach something approaching normal. Wishful thinking? Definitely. Just being near Hawk made my pulse race, and now

he'd ruined me. Ruined me for all other men. How could I ever go back to a vibrator after this? No toy could compete with his dick. It was a steel rod straining at his fly, but he made no move to touch it.

“What about you?” I asked. “Don't you want to...you know?”

“Next time.”

What? “Next time?”

“Next time you need an orgasm, call me.”

Did he really mean it? I considered for a moment. This was Hawk—he wouldn't have said it if he didn't. But more importantly, would I ever have the guts to take him up on the offer?

He dropped to his knees and tore off the sorry remains of my pantyhose, then pressed a kiss to my clit before he settled my dress back into place. Without thinking, I began fanning myself, only to stop in a hurry when he rose to his feet.

“Let's get you back inside.”

“I... What?”

“Dan can give you a ride home.”

How could he still form actual sentences?

“A-all right.”

I let him lead me into the Brotherhood, one hand on the small of my back as he opened the door. He might have acted like a gentleman on occasion, but I knew now that he was anything but.

Dan, Mack, and Hallie all looked up as we approached, and Dan raised an eyebrow.

“I thought you were hooking up with BMW Guy?” she said.

Hawk answered for me. “He turned out to be a prick. Get her home safe, okay?”

Then he disappeared into the crowd, leaving me with still-wobbly legs, veins swimming with dopamine, and a whole lot of confusion.

Tonight, I felt the air change in my apartment. How long had I been

standing under the water? Too long, it seemed. A minute later, Hawk materialised in the bathroom, already naked, already hard. He didn't say a word as he strode into the shower, lifted me against the wall, and kissed me senseless.

The words I didn't say?

*I've missed you.*



## AGATHA

“**W**hat do you mean, the wedding’s next month?”

“I know it’s short notice, but the hotel on Steppen Island had a cancellation. For July! That’s peak wedding season. Another couple broke up and called their whole engagement off, and, well, their loss is our gain. If we don’t take this slot, the next available weekend is almost three years away, and I just can’t wait that long to be Mrs. Stu Boldt.”

Odette sounded far too happy about someone else’s misfortune. Or was it my own horror that had skewed my interpretation?

“But...but...can you really organise a wedding in a month?”

“Agatha, I’ve been planning my wedding for practically my entire life. I picked out my dress years ago. All we need to do is make the final alterations; decide on the menus for the wedding day, the rehearsal dinner, and the family meal; order the flowers—roses, peonies, and snapdragons; confirm the guest list and the seating plan; and start my pre-wedding diet. I only need to lose eight pounds, so that’s totally doable.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be able to get the time off work. We’re super busy at the moment, and—”

“Of course you can get the time off work. You’re not in the FBI anymore, Aggie. You just play around with software or whatever. Nobody’s going to die if you don’t install the latest Microsoft update for a week.”

Okay, so maybe I hadn't told my family exactly what I did at work. "Analyst" covered a multitude of sins, and they'd never cared enough to dig any deeper.

"There are still rules. I'll ask, okay?"

"You skipped Clarice's rehearsal dinner *and* her post-wedding brunch because of work. I'm not letting you ruin my wedding too. I'll call your boss myself if I have to."

Did my presence truly matter that much? Odette and I had never been close as kids. Mack would back me up if I wanted to use work as an excuse, but if I stayed at home, my entire family would never stop reminding me of how bad a sister I was. The easiest approach would be to suck it up and go.

"I'm sure I can swap some of my time off."

"Great! Jasper Rodenburgh's still single, so Mom thought you could sit with him at the dinners."

Fantastic. As if four days on Steppen Island with my family weren't bad enough, now Jasper Rodenburgh had entered the picture? There was a reason he didn't have a girlfriend, let alone a wife.

"I'll be quite happy sitting on my own."

"But then we'd have an empty seat, and the pictures would look unbalanced. Jasper doesn't mind—Mom already asked him."

I bet he wouldn't mind. He'd asked me out seventeen times in high school, and I'd declined on every occasion. And when we were sixteen, I was ninety percent certain he'd groped my ass at the fairground, but we'd been in a crowd, so I'd never been able to prove it. In short, Jasper Rodenburgh was a sleaze.

"What if *I* mind?"

"Don't be silly, Aggie. You can't spend the rest of your life alone. It's not healthy."

"But I don't need a man. I have a good job, a nice apartment, and a cat."

Odette let fly with a peal of laughter. "But don't you want to be a mom

someday?”

“No?”

“Then the next thing you know, one cat will have turned into ten, and everyone will be calling you the crazy cat lady.”

Which was far better than being called Mrs. Rodenburgh, but sometimes, having a conversation with Odette was like talking to a wall. It was time to take a different approach.

“My boyfriend might get upset if I spend four days with another man.”

“Your...boyfriend?”

Oh, that little hesitation. I loved it. I was still going to hell for the lie, but spending my afterlife in a fiery pit couldn't be much worse than growing up as the middle Lerner sister.

“We've been seeing each other for a few months now.”

“Really?” Odette slipped into gossip mode. “Tell me everything. What's his name?”

“Damn, my other phone is ringing.”

“I can't hear it.”

“That's because it's on silent. Gotta go—I'll introduce you at the wedding. Have fun with the diet!”

I hung up, feeling like a bitch and a fraud, probably because I was both of those things. I had a month to either come up with a fake boyfriend or confess my sins, and neither option was palatable.



“What's up?” Monday, and Mouse had gone to get lunch with Ziggy, so Mack dropped into the empty chair next to me and held out a bag. “Cookie?”

I shook my head. “No, thanks.”

“You didn't answer the first question.”

“Work’s fine, honestly.”

“That still isn’t an answer. You’ve been staring at the wall for the past ten minutes.”

Mackenzie Cain might have been my boss, but she was also a friend, so it wasn’t surprising that she’d noticed my misery. All weekend, I’d agonised over what to do. Hell, I’d even gone as far as looking at escort pages on the internet, but if I showed up with Fox, six feet four of ripped manliness, guaranteed to bring me pleasure, my mom would have a heart attack. Plus he wouldn’t know anything about me. If they asked a personal question, the game would be up. Another possibility was to hire an actual actor, but I hadn’t gotten around to researching the logistics yet.

“I have to go to my sister’s wedding next month.”

“Next month? I thought it was next year or the year after? But I’ll approve the time off, no problem. The rest of us can cover.”

“It is a problem.” The story came spilling out—how the venue my sister had her heart set on was booked solid for the next three years, but they’d had a late cancellation. How the thought of my mom playing matchmaker with a man I hated left me cold. How I’d stupidly made up a fake boyfriend, and now I had to produce the goods. “What I need is a nice, juicy murder case. Something I can’t possibly take time off for.”

“Or a fake boyfriend. That’d be easier to arrange.”

“You think? Every escort I’ve found looks like a Ken doll.”

“It’s simple—just offer one of the single guys around here a per diem plus hazardous duty pay, and they’ll charm your family for however long you need. Want me to send a memo out?”

“No!” Although, if a Blackwood guy stepped forward, it would be the answer to my prayers. “Maybe?”

Mack offered an encouraging smile. “I’ll find you a good one, I promise. A man your mom will love.”

Doubtful. But what choice did I have? I gave a hesitant nod, my chest



tight, and resigned myself to a weekend I'd rather forget. Although I wasn't the only person who'd been looking stressed today. I hadn't missed the tension around Mack's eyes or the way she'd been worrying at her bottom lip with her teeth. And I didn't think work was the problem—we had a relatively easy load this morning.

“Are *you* okay?”

“Yes?” She slumped lower in Mouse's chair, then reached out a foot to kick the office door closed. Only the two of us were in the room. “No.”

“Want to talk about it? I don't need to find you a replacement husband, do I?”

She shook her head. “Luke's wonderful. Everything I ever wanted. Well, almost...” Mack heaved out the heaviest sigh. “I thought having a baby would be easy—just skip the birth control for a while, and voila. But it turns out it isn't that simple.”

My heart ached for her. I hadn't even realised she was trying for a baby, but if she had the maternal instincts that I lacked, then throwing the trauma of fertility issues into the mix must hurt.

“How long have you been trying?”

“For over a year. We took all the at-home tests, but still...nothing. The doctor says there are plenty of options left for us—fertility drugs, IVF, even surrogacy—but I guess I'm just not looking forward to bringing a bunch of scientists into the process.”

“Is Luke okay with it?”

“He's going for more tests at the clinic tomorrow.” Mack managed half a smile. “Mine are next week. We'll get through it, but I wish we didn't have to.”

“My older sister and her husband had their first daughter through IVF, and then the second came along naturally two years later. They call her the miracle baby. If there's anything I can do...”

“I appreciate it. At least finding you a stand-in boyfriend will take my

mind off pelvic exams and phlebotomists. Do you have any preference on height or hair colour?”

“As long as he chews with his mouth closed, I’m good, but Mom isn’t a fan of long hair on a guy.”

“Short hair, got it. You’re okay with tattoos?”

“I am, but my family would probably choke if he has a sleeve.”

“If they choked, wouldn’t that solve the whole problem?”

I stared at her for a beat, and then the laughter came. Uncontrollable laughter, bordering on hysterics, but it was better than crying, right? Mack joined in, and it was a full minute before either of us could speak again.

“I just need a regular guy. Respectable, polite, not too hot. My sisters will smell a rat if I show up with a Jason Momoa clone.”

Mack pulled a face. “Hmm, that rules out half of the guys here, but I’m sure I can come up with a solution. Leave it with me.”

I didn’t have any other option, did I?



## AGATHA

“**W**hat happened to you?”

I stared at the stain seeping through the sleeve of Hawk’s tight white T-shirt—it was practically his uniform—and quickly rolled up the fabric. Scarlet blossomed through the bandage underneath. Friday night, and I’d succumbed to temptation again, only for him to show up bruised, battered, and bloody.

“It’s nothing. I fell out of a building is all.”

“You fell out of a building? How the hell did you fall out of a building? Actually, forget it. I don’t want to know.” When he rose from the arm of the couch to follow me into the kitchen, I shook my head and pointed. “No, sit. I’m going to get the first-aid kit. Who bandaged that?”

“Gage.”

“Did you get it checked by Dr. Kira?”

Blackwood had a small infirmary and a doctor on staff because on Emmy’s team especially, incidents like this were all too common. Anything serious, such as a gunshot wound, for example, was treated in the ER, but Kira Stanton handled the more minor injuries in-house.

“She went home already.”

“She only lives five minutes away, and she’s on call. That’s her job.”

A shrug. “It’s fine.”

It wasn't fine. The cut was still seeping blood when I peeled away the dressing, and I sent silent thanks to whoever insisted that all Blackwood personnel had to learn basic first-aid, no matter their role in the company. Hawk clenched his jaw but didn't complain while I cleaned the wound with antiseptic, checked for any debris, closed it with butterfly stitches—careful to line up the edges of his tattoo—and rebandaged the whole thing. Then I stood back and studied him. He didn't look so good this evening, and his usual cockiness was missing.

“How much sleep did you get last night?”

“None.”

*Give me strength.* For a smart man, he really could be dumb sometimes.

“Then why did you come over? Why aren't you at home in bed?”

“Because you messaged me.”

“You could just have told me you were tired.”

He seemed to contemplate that for a moment. “Well, I'm here.”

“And I'm kicking you out. Are you scheduled to work this weekend, or can you catch up on rest?”

“I have tomorrow off.”

“Good. Go find your bed.”

I grabbed his uninjured arm and tugged him toward the door. He looked like shit. Okay, not actual shit because that would be impossible, but his smouldering good looks were marred by charcoal smudges under his eyes and a general air of weariness.

“Agatha, don't.”

“Your health is more important than whatever this...this thing between us is.”

“I'm used to functioning with little sleep.”

“That doesn't mean it's a great idea. If I'd known you were exhausted, I'd never have messaged you in the first place.”

“But you did.” Instead of giving in and following me to the door, Hawk

swung me around and caged me with his arms. “Babe, don’t do this. I…” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed hard. “It’s been a shit week, and I need you tonight.”

Whatever retort I’d been about to make, his confession stopped the words in my throat. In all the months we’d been hooking up, I’d assumed that I was the needy one, that he’d been doing me a favour by constantly showing up. Sure, he got his rocks off, but there were a hundred other women he could have done that with, and probably he did on the days he wasn’t in my bed. We’d never discussed exclusivity, but I had no expectations. Instead, I fought with my guilty conscience for every message I sent him. Never had it occurred to me that he felt any kind of emotion during our time together. I mean, he got dressed and walked away as soon as we were done, and he barely even made small talk.

He needed me?

The words in my throat turned into a lump.

“Okay. Okay, then stay if you want to, but I’m doing all the work. Deal?”

Could it be that the Tin Man had a heart hidden in that solid chest of his?

He flashed me a rare smile. “Deal.”

Usually, Hawk took charge in the bedroom, not that I had any complaints about that. He knew exactly what he was doing. But today, I got to play, which left me a little apprehensive because I definitely didn’t have the same experience.

He lay on the bed as I stripped off my robe—I rarely bothered getting dressed when I knew he was on the way because my clothes never stayed on for long—and watched me through hooded eyes. With my ex, I’d always felt self-conscious when it came to my body, mainly because he’d been excellent at spotting every flaw, but with Hawk, I figured I didn’t matter enough for him to care about a few scars or the dimples on my thighs that showed up when the light hit me wrong. The lack of commitment had given me confidence.

But maybe he did care? And with that revelation came nerves.

I quickly dimmed the lights.

He tangled his fingers in my hair while I feasted on his cock, and when he'd turned to rock, I rolled on a condom from the box on the nightstand. A month ago, I'd picked up a giant, economy-sized package, more out of hope than anything else.

His rough groan as I lowered myself onto his shaft sent me halfway to heaven, and he gripped my hips as I rode him, guiding me because he couldn't quite give up control. I knew when he got close—his fingers dug into my thighs and his breathing quickened—but he held out until I shattered and then followed me into oblivion, filling me with his heat.

This man... I watched him for a moment, lying there with his eyes closed, then got up to deal with the condom. So many times, I'd wondered if I should heed my family's advice and try dating again, but I couldn't give him up. Our twisted affair was worth more to me than I'd ever admit.

“Hawk? You want a coffee before you leave?”

Nothing.

“Hawk?”

Silence, apart from his steady breathing.

Shit, had he fallen asleep? Should I wake him? I knew he wouldn't want to stay, but at the same time, I worried about him driving home. Hell, I didn't even know where he lived. Sure, I could have found my way into the HR database and checked, but that would have felt too much like an invasion of privacy. I'd take the little snippets he gave me, and nothing more.

No, I'd leave him to sleep, but should I share the bed with him? Or take the guest room? Which would be weirder? In the end, I figured I'd put on a pair of pyjamas and sleep in my own bed as usual. We'd had sex every week—usually multiple times—for the past year. Would it really be so bad if I slept beside him?

And did I want to pass up the opportunity to spend a little extra time with

the man I could never have?

No.

No, I didn't.

I woke in the early hours in a tangle of sweaty sheets. Sharing a bed with Hawk Hauser was like sleeping beside a furnace, if a furnace were shaped like an octopus. His limbs were everywhere—an arm wrapped around me, one hand on my breast and another on my stomach. My legs were trapped, and I couldn't have gone anywhere if I'd wanted to, not that I did want to. I could have stayed there forever, safe in the arms of a mercurial asshole way, way out of my league.

In the morning, the bed was cold again, but when I tiptoed into the kitchen, I found a paper bag propped up on the counter, and the aroma of pastries filled the room. Danishes? He'd brought me Danishes? I unrolled the top and found buttery goodness, maple pecan and apple custard.

And on the bag, he'd written two words.

*Thanks, babe.*

I messaged him back.

ME

You're welcome x



“And the lucky man is...” Mack spread her arms to say *ta-da!* “Kellan.”

“Kellan? You mean for the wedding?”

“What else? A hundred bucks a day plus meals, and he'll bring an air mattress for the hotel room and share the driving.”

A day of travel each way, four days in Maine—six hundred bucks. I was



getting a bargain. Kellan was a former cop on Dan's Investigations team, and while he was definitely on the hot side of average, he wasn't ridiculously tall, he didn't have visible tattoos, and he remained polite at all times. Mack had done good. I flung my arms around her.

"You're a lifesaver."

"No, that's Kellan. I promised you'd email him an itinerary."

"I'll do it today."

It wouldn't be difficult—Odette had already sent a minute-by-minute briefing, starting with breakfast on Thursday morning and ending with drinks and board games on Sunday. In between, we'd be expected to attend a family meal on Thursday evening, the rehearsal dinner on Friday, the ceremony and reception on Saturday, and brunch on Sunday. Plus Odette had arranged a boat ride, a guided walk around the island, a fishing trip for the men, and mani-pedis for the women. Did Kellan know how to fish? I'd have to ask him.

A half hour later, I got my answer. Kellan used to fish with his grandpa, and although he hadn't been near a rod and line for several years, he recalled the basics and was happy to go on the trip with my folks. At least one man in my life knew how to reply to a message—I hadn't heard a word from Hawk since he left last Saturday morning, and it was too soon to invite him over again. I usually tried to allow a few days. Should I have sent the x at the end of my text? I'd agonised over it all weekend because what if he thought I was getting sappy? Logic said a digital kiss shouldn't matter when we were exchanging bodily fluids, but this was Hawk. Where he was concerned, logic went out of the window.



## AGATHA

“**W**hy is there an ambulance in the driveway?” I asked.

My shared office had a view across the front parking lot at the Blackwood campus, and right now, the ambulance was trundling toward us, lights flashing but sans siren, thankfully. Mouse hated loud noises. Even with the earplugs he wore, a siren would have upset him. But what was the problem? There’d been no emergency broadcast, no company-wide alert. Was the driver lost? Or had he just arrived early for my impending coronary? With one day to go until I left for Maine, my blood pressure was through the roof.

“Where?” Mack asked, peering through the window beside me. Mouse and Ziggy came to look as well, and it was Ziggy who found the answer.

“There’s been an accident in the gym.”

“What kind of an accident?” I asked.

Blackwood’s gym was normally super safe. The equipment was state of the art, and everyone knew how to use it. The last sports-related injury I knew of was a torn ACL on the basketball court, and that had happened over a year ago.

“Hawk and Kellan were sparring, and I guess Kellan forgot to duck.”

“Tell me this is a joke?”

“Uh, no? I mean, I don’t think so. Jack was there when it happened, and that’s what he said.”

Shit!

“Is Kellan badly hurt?”

“Hold on...” Ziggy tapped at his phone. “Okay, Jack says that whoever called the ambulance might have jumped the gun. It’s just a loose tooth and possibly a fractured jaw. Kellan could have driven himself to the emergency room.”

A loose tooth? A fractured jaw? And Hawk had done this? That...that *asshole*. Couldn’t he have taken the tiniest bit of care not to ruin my entire weekend? Seeing red, I marched out of my office and headed for the gym. I needed to offer sympathy to Kellan and a piece of my mind to Brendan Hauser.



Sheesh, what a mess. There was blood on the floor by the boxing ring, and Kellan was sitting on a stretcher, an ice pack pressed against his face and more blood on his chin. At least he was conscious. Thank goodness for small mercies.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Not really.”

Kellan spoke through a grimace, wincing in pain. He had a cut above his eyebrow too. Where had that come from?

“I’m so sorry this happened. My gosh, it looks so sore. Is there anything I can do?”

“Nuh-uh. I can’t...can’t...”

“Mr. Gilmore, you need to stop talking.” The EMT gave me a dirty look.

“You can’t make the wedding?”

“Shorry.”

“Ma’am, you have to leave the patient alone.”

I patted Kellan on the knee. “Just make sure you heal up quickly. And don’t worry about the trip to Maine—I’ll manage fine on my own.”

It was a lie. I’d probably cry a little after Mom and Odette had yelled at me for kneeing Jasper Rodenburgh in the nuts. But I couldn’t let them down at the last minute, and it was too late to find a replacement for Kellan. Anger building, I stomped over to the boxing ring where Hawk was leaning against the ropes.

“What the hell did you do that for?”

“It was an accident, babe.”

“Don’t you ‘babe’ me. You knew Kellan was meant to be leaving for Odette’s wedding with me first thing tomorrow.” After yesterday’s booty call—yes, another one—I’d told Hawk I’d be out of town for a week and explained the reason why. You know, out of courtesy. The way grown-ups did. “Now what am I meant to do?”

A shrug. “Go alone? Call one of your other boyfriends?”

I glanced around to see if anyone else was within earshot, but thankfully, they were all gathered around Kellan.

“What other boyfriends?” I hissed. “The only man who’s been near me in a year is you, jackass, although I don’t see why that matters. Neither of us made any promises when it came to exclusivity. I was literally paying Kellan danger money to back me up this weekend, and now I don’t have time to recruit a replacement.” A sob welled up, and I tried to swallow it down. “Mom wants to pair me up with a sleaze from high school, and I’ll spend the whole time slapping his slimy hands away.” I shoved Hawk’s chest, which was pointless because he didn’t go anywhere. “Have fun riding your motorcycle or whatever it is you do when you’re not fucking me or working.”

The tears came as I ran out of the gym, well aware that I’d be the subject of the Blackwood gossip mill by morning. Hopefully, the spectators would just think I was upset by Kellan’s injury. I’d send him a card and some candy. No, not candy because, duh, he couldn’t eat it, but maybe movie tickets or a

book. He still deserved the hazardous duty pay too. Did I have a moral obligation to make it right when the man I was secretly screwing injured the man I was pretending to date?

It was official: my life was a shitshow.

And today had only been the opening scene.



Five thirty in the morning, and I poured black coffee into a thermos. I'd need every molecule of caffeine to keep me going on the eleven-hour drive to Maine. Of course I'd take breaks, but they'd have to be shorter now, and I couldn't rest while Kellan drove the way I'd planned to. I'd texted him several times last night—his tooth had been splinted, and a specialist would assess the crack in his jaw this morning. The ER doctor didn't think it would need a surgical repair, but Kellan would have to be incredibly careful in his activities over the next several weeks.

For the last time, I went over my packing list. Laptop, check. Tablet, check. Phone, check. Stun gun, check. Wedding gift, check. Odette and Stu had requested a top-of-the-line air fryer because of course she loved to make him dinner every night. I'd swapped my usual gloomy wardrobe for pastels and packed sensible shoes. Nothing with a spike heel. Emmy Black had rustled up a bottle of Xanax from somewhere, and I'd tossed that into my suitcase too, just in case an emergency arose. My car was topped off with gas, oil, and coolant, and I'd checked the tyre pressures. Now all I had to do was get to Steppen Island. The website billed it as a New England paradise, but the pictures of the fall foliage on the homepage made it look like a living hell.

Odette's wedding party would have sole use of Steppen Island Lodge over the weekend, a luxury hotel that specialised in destination weddings. I'd

been assigned a deluxe room on the second floor that came with a jacuzzi tub and a balcony, and I prayed it wasn't anywhere near Jasper Rodenburgh. Last week, I'd hacked into the hotel's booking system and assigned Jasper a room as far away from mine as possible, but if Mom found out Kellan wasn't coming, she'd probably shuffle things around so Jasper and I were neighbours, which was why I hadn't told her about last night's incident yet. There would be plenty of time to break the news after everyone had checked in.

Had my audiobook finished downloading? Mack had recommended the Stellarium trilogy, and a healthy dose of other-worldly romance should keep me awake on the long drive. Still a few minutes to go, but I could load the car while I waited. I should have done it last night, but I'd been shattered after the drama in the gym, plus I'd only have ended up unpacking again this morning to check I hadn't forgotten anything.

Hmm, it seemed I wasn't the only fool awake at this stupid hour. A man was leaning against a truck in front of my car, and when he turned his head in my direction, I froze. Yes, I stayed in the shadows at Blackwood, but I'd ruffled enough feathers during my time there that I needed to remain vigilant, and despite this guy's smart clothes and relaxed stance, there was an air of danger about him.

And also something familiar.

I did a double take.

"Hawk?" What the hell? I squinted against the rising sun, taking in the dress shirt, the grey slacks, the polished shoes... Instead of his usual tousled mess, he'd slicked his hair back, and the effect was kind of unsettling. I'd only ever seen him in jeans, boots, and a tight T-shirt that showed off arms full of tattoos. Occasionally, he changed things up with a leather jacket. "What are you doing here?"

"Driving you to Maine. Want to take your car or my truck?"

"Back up. *Back up*. Why would you do that?"

“Because I fucked up with Kellan yesterday, and you’re mad at me, so now I’m trying to fix things.”

“By inviting yourself to my sister’s wedding? We’re not exactly at the ‘meet the parents’ stage, are we?”

Was that a flash of hurt in his eyes?

“You’ve met my dad.”

Only once, in the aftermath of a Blackwood case. He’d shown up at the office to thank Emmy for her assistance, a gesture that had surprised everyone.

“That’s different. He was part of an investigation.”

“And you were going to take Kellan.”

“As a paid assistant.” Hawk would really go with me? I’d never even considered asking him because I assumed he’d hate the idea. Mom would lose her mind if she saw the tattoos, and even in the shirt, he still came across as intimidating. On the positive side, Jasper would bug out if Hawk looked at him funny. “My parents are super judgmental. They’ll interrogate you and probably drop in a few snide insults, plus my mom will mention my biological clock at every possible opportunity.”

“Babe, I’ve survived several actual war zones, and I’m also experienced with undercover work. I can handle anything they throw at me.”

“Can you handle being called Kellan? Because that’s who they think I’m bringing.”

A shrug. “Yeah.”

Hawk and I had never even shared dinner before. Could I honestly make it through six whole days with this man and his overwhelming pheromones? And more importantly, if I passed up the chance, would I later regret it? Almost a year ago, I’d asked myself the same question in the parking lot outside the Brotherhood of Thieves, and my decision to take what Hawk offered had certainly paid off.

“Fine. *Fine*. Come if you must. Can we go in your truck?” Mainly



because I'd always wanted to drive a giant pickup, but I didn't actually want to own one. Parallel parking wasn't my strongest suit. "We'll need to hurry. I'm already late."

"Where's your stuff? I'll put it in the back."

A road trip with Hawk... I knew that whatever happened in Maine, things could never be the same again.



## AGATHA

“**B**abe, you want breakfast?”

“Huh? Where are we?”

“We just went past Baltimore.”

With awkwardness simmering between us, I’d figured that feigning sleep would be the best idea, but it seemed I’d been a little better at it than I’d anticipated. Was I hungry? Last night’s dinner had been a bag of potato chips, so yes. Plus I needed to use the bathroom.

“Is there somewhere to stop?”

“There’s a diner ahead.”

Hawk pulled into the near-empty parking lot, and I climbed out, grateful for the opportunity to stretch my legs. Now what? I knew every inch of this man’s body, but I’d barely scratched the surface of his mind. Apart from my pussy, what did he like to eat? He could be a militant vegan for all I knew.

But no, he settled opposite me in a booth, and when the server came over, he ordered a three-egg omelette with coffee. I picked the Belgian waffles with maple syrup. If ever there was a day I deserved carbs, it was this one. Crushing a Xanax and sprinkling it over the top was also tempting.

“Is there anything you don’t like to eat?” I asked.

“Grits. Don’t think they serve them here, anyway. Why do you ask?”

“Because I know next to nothing about you, and we have to pretend to be

a couple. We'll be expected to know each other's dietary habits."

"So, what do you like to eat?" Hawk smirked. "I know you're not vegetarian."

"Do *not* say that in front of my family."

"I'll be on my best behaviour. Scout's honour."

"You were a Scout?"

"Not exactly."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"They asked me to leave after a month."

"You got kicked out of the Boy Scouts? How old were you?"

"Eleven. Turned out I was pretty good at lighting campfires, and how was I supposed to know the Scout building had flammable siding?"

I choked on my coffee. "You set the place on fire?"

"It was an accident."

I regarded him closely over the rim of my cup. "An accident like breaking Kellan's jaw was an accident?"

"A more accidental accident."

"So you did hurt him on purpose?"

"I only meant to leave a bruise, but he didn't get out of the way in time."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

A muscle in Hawk's jaw ticced. "Because I didn't like the idea of him spending the weekend with you."

I wasn't sure whether to be mad or merely exasperated.

"He was helping me out as a friend, that was all. He was going to sleep on an air mattress. If you hated the plan, why didn't you say something when I told you about the trip on Monday?"

"I should have."

"Yes, you should—"

"Ma'am, here are your waffles. If you want more syrup, just give me a holler. Sir, here's your omelette. Do you want any sauce with that?"

“Nope.”

“Can I top off your drinks?”

I held out my cup. I was walking a fine line between caffeine consumption and bathroom availability, but I figured I could use a refill.

“So, what is your favourite food?” Hawk asked once the server had returned to the counter. “Waffles?”

“Don’t think you can just change the subject.”

For a moment, he didn’t move a muscle, but then he fixed those pale-blue eyes on me, his gaze so intense that I wished I hadn’t called him out. Mom’s voice echoed in my head. *Silence is a virtue, Aggie*. Fucking around with Hawk was easy. Finding out what lurked in that twisted mind of his was not.

“Agatha, I made a mistake, and I’m sorry.”

I swallowed hard. Because a genuine apology had been the last thing I expected, and I had no idea how to handle it.

Hawk was such a freaking enigma.

“Uh, fancy chocolates. I like fancy chocolates.” When he didn’t object to me pinballing around the conversation, I carried on. “Once a month, I treat myself to a box, and sometimes Bradley brings me extras.” Bradley was Emmy’s assistant and the world’s biggest shopaholic. Luckily, Emmy was married to a billionaire, or she might have ended up penniless, albeit with great shoes. “And I also like cheese, but the French kind, not the American kind. Someday, I’d love to visit Paris.”

“Cheese and chocolate are staple foods over there.”

“Have you been?”

“Not for a few years.”

“Did you visit for work or for pleasure?”

A pause. “Work.”

That would be the super-secret work he never talked about. I knew he’d been in the Army and then joined the CIA, but only because I’d happened to be in the room when Alaric, who owned a private intelligence agency, spilled

the beans to Emmy. I also knew that Hawk had lost the rest of his team—the Phantoms—when a mission went wrong. One day, maybe he'd tell me the details himself, but until then, I wouldn't push. Mainly because I was scared of pushing him away altogether. Navigating my way around Hawk's psyche was like inching my way across a glass bridge—one misstep, and cracks might appear.

I kept the subject light. "I'd like to climb the Eiffel Tower and take a boat ride down the Seine. We're meant to be riding in a boat this weekend, by the way. Do you know how to swim?"

"Why? Is the boat going to sink?"

"I hope not. What about fishing? Can you fish?"

"Not really."

"Not really? What does that mean?"

"I once caught a barracuda with a home-made spear during a survival exercise, but I guess that's not what you mean."

"My sister's fiancé has plans for a boys' fishing trip on Friday before the rehearsal dinner."

"I always thought fishing was just an excuse that men used to get away from their wives."

Having spent a number of years around Odette, I honestly couldn't blame Stu if it was.

"Do you have any hobbies apart from motorcycles?"

"Yeah, you."

"Screwing me is a hobby?"

"I do it for pleasure."

A hobby... I figured that sounded better than "fuck buddy" and slightly more personal than "acquaintance with benefits." I'd take it.

"Anything else? Do you like to paint? Play the guitar? Grow your own vegetables?"

He gave that some thought. "I have a cactus on my kitchen windowsill."

“I guess it’s a start. What about pets? Do you have any pets?”

“When I was a kid, I had a goldfish.” He smiled for a second, and then his expression clouded. “One of those motherfuckers from Dad’s MC pissed in the tank and killed it.”

Shit. “I’m so sorry.”

A shrug. “I drank four litres of soda and pissed in his gas tank. The bike stalled on I-95, and while he was waiting for the recovery truck, it got hit by a semi.”

Sheesh. “How old were you when you did that?”

“Nine or ten. Who’s taking care of your cat while you’re away?”

“Margaret, my neighbour. Basil spends half of his time there anyway, and she’ll pet him all day as long as he stays out of her yarn basket. Do you like cats?”

Hawk had scratched Basil on the head a time or two, but he’d never made any comment about him. Silence was his forte.

“Yeah. Maybe I’d get one if I had a Margaret, but I work away too often at the moment.”

“Do you have an apartment?”

Hawk shook his head. “A house. I bought it last year. Haven’t met the neighbours yet.”

“You’ve lived there for a year, and you haven’t met the neighbours?”

“I don’t spend much time at home.”

“So you might actually have a Margaret, and you just don’t know it?”

“I guess it’s possible.”

At least it wasn’t only me he didn’t speak to. The thought made me feel a little better. A cat and a cactus—today, I’d learned something about Hawk other than his favourite sex position. Which was against the wall with my legs wrapped around his waist, by the way. If I was wearing heels, so much the better. Hmm... Perhaps I shouldn’t have left all of my fancy pumps behind? Yes, I was still mad at Hawk, but if he was in my bed for the next

four nights, then I definitely planned to take advantage of him.

I wasn't a saint, okay?

"You want to drive the next stint?" he asked. "Or are you still tired?"

"I'll take a turn."

When he paid for our food, I noticed he didn't try to claim the veterans' discount. An oversight? Or was he trying to forget his past? Whatever, I wasn't going to mention it. No, I was going to climb behind the wheel of his big-ass truck, drive to Maine, and hope this weekend didn't turn out to be as painful as I feared.





## AGATHA

I'd been to Steppen Island once before, not for a wedding but to scatter the ashes of my grandfather. He used to fish there when he was a boy, travelling over on the ferry from his home on the mainland. The old house had long since been redeveloped, but he'd reminisced about those trips until the day he died, even after Alzheimer's stole most of his mind.

The ferry still ran every half hour, and judging by the age of it, my grandfather might have taken the very same boat.

"What time does the hotel stop serving dinner?" Hawk asked.

He was in the driver's seat again, his piercing eyes ever vigilant as we chugged across the bay. We'd covered the basics on the journey north, nothing deep and meaningful, but at least if someone asked me what kind of music he liked, I knew the answer was rock and not heavy metal. He currently had four motorcycles, one of which was in pieces, and his house was a three-bedroom ranch on the outskirts of Rybridge. A surprisingly nice area, although he'd picked the place up cheap after one of the previous occupants died in the bathroom. A lovers' tiff that turned tragic, the press reports said. Of course I'd googled the details on my phone.

"Did you at least replace the tub?" I'd asked him.

"Yeah, but the dead don't bother me. It's the living you need to watch out for."

Wasn't that the truth?

I already knew his mom had died when he was a teenager—from pancreatic cancer—but he grudgingly filled in a few more details. His had been an unconventional upbringing, but not an unpleasant one. He missed his mom, and he wished his dad had spent more time with him, but he understood the pull of the open road. And I told him more about my family, the stories liberally sprinkled with warnings about what to expect this weekend.

“Clarice, my older sister, is perfect. Seriously, she never puts a foot wrong, in my parents’ eyes at least. She married Buckley twelve years ago, right after they finished in the peace corps.”

“Buckley?”

“Yup, and he looks exactly how you’d expect a Buckley to look.” Slicked-back hair, chinos, polo shirt buttoned up to his chin. “Now they live in suburban utopia with their two kids, Charity and Chastity.”

“Chastity? Poor kid.”

“I know, right? She shortens it to Chas. They both behave impeccably, but I swear, someday that kid’s gonna get sick of acting like a Stepford child and rebel.” Chas was fond of getting muddy in the yard, she hated dolls, and at nine years old, she still had an imaginary friend. “Charity’s a clone of Clarice, but Chas has a mulish streak.”

“Like you?”

I flashed him a smile. “Maybe. When I left the FBI, Mom told me how relieved she and Dad were that I’d finally come to my senses, and she honestly expected me to move back to Lewiston and start popping out babies. A woman’s place is in the home, don’t you know? Expect plenty of questions about your ability to provide for me.”

Hawk’s lips twitched. “So I shouldn’t tell them I’m a feminist?”

“Don’t you dare. Odette took some of the pressure off when she got engaged to Stu, but once she has a ring on her finger, Mom will start

dropping hints again. Oh, whatever you do, don't mention golf in front of Stu—he'll never, ever stop talking."

"How about Buckley? Any topics to avoid?"

"If the stock market's up, he'll drone on about his portfolio, but otherwise, he's pretty quiet. A workaholic. He's senior vice president of something or other at a medical insurance company, so he earns plenty. Five bucks says he mentions the size of his bonus before dessert tomorrow. Then Stu will start talking about cryptocurrency—which he doesn't really understand, by the way—and they'll get into a financial dick-measuring contest. With any luck, we can slide off and no one will notice."

And then we could have our own dick-measuring contest. Hawk's dick, my tongue, and a whole night to do whatever we pleased without him rolling out of bed and disappearing back to his lair.

That was, if I could still move after tonight's efforts. Past performance suggested that could be an issue, and if we were sharing a bed, I couldn't imagine Hawk turning over and going to sleep before he'd given me at least two orgasms. In some ways, he was incredibly generous.

The ferry chugged closer to the shore. Closer to impending doom.

"The kitchen closes at nine, but Odette arranged sandwiches and snacks for any latecomers. The staff will bring them to our room after we arrive."

"You think we'll see your family tonight?"

"Gosh, I hope not."

Hawk glanced ahead at the island. "Maybe I could just scale the wall and hop over the balcony?"

"Don't you dare leave me to face them alone, *Kellan*."

He sighed. "Point taken."



The island hadn't changed much since I last set foot there. The dock was a little more weathered, although the collection of construction materials—stacked lumber, piles of stone pavers, and metal girders—suggested repairs were underway in the area.

I took a deep breath as we approached the hotel. Hawk hadn't laughed when I climbed into the back seat and swapped my tight black jeans and plum sweater for a knee-length pastel sundress, and I'd finished off the look with white ballet flats, a flowery hair clip, and a swipe of iridescent lipstick. Why didn't I stick with my regular clothes, you ask? Because three years ago when I'd worn a skater dress to my aunt and uncle's pearl anniversary party, Mom had told me to stop dressing like a teenager. Apparently, I was too old to wear short dresses now. Oh, and jeans weren't ladylike. I disagreed with both sentiments, but I also hated being criticised in front of an audience, so today, I changed my outfit.

Out with comfort, in with country-club chic.

Five months had passed since I'd last seen any of my family in person—was this sense of dread normal? The more time I spent away from them, the harder it was to pretend.

Hawk backed the truck into a parking space and when I looked around, I spotted my parents' Audi and Stu's SUV near the entrance, and a row farther back, Buckley's vanity plate—BFARBBER—on a brand-new Mercedes. With any luck, they'd gone to bed already. Wait a second... I was an analyst. I didn't need to rely on luck.

Hawk was halfway out the door, but I grabbed his hand.

“Hold on a second.”

“What's wrong?”

“I need to check something. Where's my laptop?”

Two minutes later, I studied the blobs on Blackwood's phone-tracking app. I'd zoomed in on the hotel, and working on the assumption that my family were carrying their phones around with them, my parents had retired

to their room in the east wing, Clarice was sitting on her balcony, and Odette was in the bar.

“Could we just wait here for a short while? Odette can’t hold her liquor, so she’ll go to bed soon.”

“What if she’s drinking soda?”

“Wait a moment...” I quickly navigated through the hotel’s billing system. “Okay, five minutes ago, she charged a mug of cocoa with extra whipped cream to the bridal suite. Guess she wants to avoid a hangover on her big weekend.”

Hawk chuckled softly to himself. “That’s my girl. Always playing detective.”

“Sure beats playing housewife. Anyhow, we just need to sit here for half an hour max, and then we can sneak right up to our room.” I settled back to wait, but Hawk started the engine. “Hey, what are you doing?”

“Moving to a darker spot.”

“Why would you—” He ran a fingertip along the inside of my thigh, and heat flooded through me. “Oh.”

“Oh?”

“Technically, I’m still mad at you. Tell me you apologised to Kellan?”

“I did.”

“And? Are things okay between you?”

“He understood the situation.”

Hawk found a spot in the far corner of the lot, tucked between a hedge and another truck. I noted it was also out of range of the stationary security camera on the front of the building, so when he pulled me across the centre console and onto his lap, I didn’t protest.

“How do you feel about make-up sex?” he whispered.

“I guess...” Damn, his fingers always found exactly the right spot. “I guess we could give it a try.”



## AGATHA

“**A**ggie...” Jasper gripped my arms as he leaned in to kiss me on both cheeks. “It’s been a long time.”

*Not long enough.*

“How are you doing?”

“Good, good. Did your mom tell you I opened a new store in Topsham?”

“No, she didn’t mention it.” After high school, Jasper had joined the family business. His parents ran a chain of pharmacies that reached from Maine down to Connecticut. “Congratulations.”

Why was he still holding my arms? I tried to back away, but he stepped forward to match me.

“It’s been a crazy year—footfall’s up, revenue’s up, profits are up... But enough about work. Are you looking forward to the wedding?”

I forced a smile. “It’s not every weekend that a girl gets to watch her little sister walk down the aisle.”

I felt rather than saw Hawk materialise behind me, and a second later, his arm snaked around my waist. Jasper’s hands fell away, and now he backed up so fast that he tripped over his own feet.

My smile turned genuine. “Jasper, this is Kellan.”

The two men shook hands, and I took a small measure of satisfaction when Jasper’s knuckles turned white.



“Good to meet you,” Hawk said, his tone congenial. I couldn’t see his face, but I suspected his eyes were anything but. When Jasper’s cheeks reddened, I nudged Hawk, but only when I kicked his shin with my heel did he finally release Jasper’s hand.

Hot damn.

“Uh, you too.” Jasper stuffed both hands into his pants pockets and inched toward the exit. “So, uh... I just need to, uh, I need to go do something for Stu.”

He practically ran out the door, and Hawk stroked my arm, a barely there caress that made me shiver.

“I don’t think he’ll try touching you again, babe.”

I would have kissed Hawk right there and then if my phone hadn’t vibrated. Quickly, I checked the tracking app that I’d modified earlier that morning when Hawk snuck out for a run. Now I got an alert if a family member came within fifteen yards of me. My parents were heading in our direction.

“Exit stage left,” I hissed as my stress level rocketed.

The real Kellan would have handled the meeting like a pro, but Hawk was notoriously unpredictable. Mouse had known him for far longer than I had, and every so often, he’d divulge little snippets of Hawk’s history, such as the time Hawk had put a man in a headlock after the prick called Mouse a retard. What a freaking idiot. The name-caller, not Mouse. Mouse was actually a genius, but his personality could be a little quirky. Hawk was also smart, but his intelligence came with a side of fierce loyalty. An admirable trait on any other day, but when my dad tossed out an offhand insult—probably without realising he’d done it—I didn’t want Hawk to break his hand.

“Is this your strategy for the weekend?” he asked. “Avoidance?”

“It’s worked for years. Move!”

Hawk laughed softly as we hurried along the hallway, but when he

paused by the fire exit, I grabbed his arm.

“We can’t. What if it’s alarmed?”

Automatically, I began looking for wires, contacts, but Hawk was one step ahead of me.

“It isn’t; I already checked.”

Of course he did.

He grabbed my hand, and I ran down the steps alongside him in childish glee, thinking of the times I’d skipped English lessons at school because I really wasn’t a Shakespeare fan. If teachers wanted kids to read, why not give them a book that wasn’t four hundred years old? Okay, he had some great one-liners, but...

“Where are we going?” Hawk asked.

“Somewhere. Anywhere. I don’t care.”

“Aren’t you going to speak with your family at all?”

“I texted Mom and my sisters to say we’d arrived.” None of them had responded. “The boat ride is optional—I double-checked the final itinerary—and we’ll see them at dinner. The thing is, they don’t actually care that I’m here.”

“I thought Odette insisted on you coming?”

“She did, but only because she’d have felt insulted if her own flesh and blood skipped her big day. It’s about her self-esteem, not my company.”

We’d ended up on the lawn that ran from the rear of the hotel down to the beach at the water’s edge. To the left, the wedding pergola stood bare on a terrace, waiting to be decorated with Odette’s roses and peonies and snapdragons. The terrace was bordered by neatly pruned shrubbery in brick-edged beds, and an ornamental pool with a heart-shaped fountain and fake koi—because it was illegal to keep real koi in an outdoor pond in Maine—provided a backdrop for the all-important wedding photos. A stiff breeze blew, and I hoped the stylist planned to bring a good supply of hairspray, or the pictures would need a whole bunch of photoshopping before Odette could

post them on Instagram.

“Want to go for a walk?” Hawk asked. “There’s a small café beside the lighthouse at the other end of the island, and we could get breakfast.”

“I’d like that.”

He didn’t let go of my hand as we ambled past the golf course next door and along the shore, our silence comfortable rather than strained. The sun came out, and if it hadn’t been for the whole wedding thing and Kellan’s “accident,” I might actually have enjoyed the trip. I’d always been curious about what it would be like to spend more time with Hawk. Over the year we’d been screwing, my feelings had evolved from “phew, I’ve found a man who wants what I do” to “I wish he’d stay for longer than a few hours.” But I appreciated that he’d never pushed me, and in return, I’d given him the space he wanted.

Now, there was no space. After he steadied me over a rocky section, he tucked his arm around me, and I leaned into him, grateful for the warmth. There was still a chill in the air, and I hadn’t brought a jacket.

The café was a tiny tourist place with a dozen tables outside, sheltered from the wind by a thick hedge. Only two of them were occupied—one by a young family, and the other by a group of girls taking photos of themselves, the lighthouse, their drinks, and the water. When the waitress came over, one of them asked if they could get free breakfasts in exchange for “exposure.”

Hawk snorted. “Pay for the food, ladies. Exposure doesn’t cover the bills.”

That earned him a synchronised glare from the girls and a grateful smile from the waitress. They did grudgingly agree to pay, though.

Today’s Hawk was more chilled than I’d ever seen him. Sure, he relaxed in the office with his team and occasionally joined pick-up basketball games, and I’d heard he spent time in the clubhouse at The Darkness MC’s compound, but his smiles seemed to come more readily here.

“You want waffles again?” he asked.

“Or pancakes. Whatever they have. But I’ll pay today—it’s the least I can do after I dragged you away from the free breakfast in the hotel.”

“No, you won’t. And you didn’t drag me anywhere.”

Okay, he definitely hadn’t eased up on the stubbornness.

The waitress poured us coffee and then wrote down our orders, and I took some time to admire the scenery. A rare moment of peace in a life of chaos. Steppen Island was pretty in a wild, windswept kind of way, and I could see why Odette had chosen this place for her wedding, even if I couldn’t understand why she wanted to marry Stu in the first place.

“One day down, five to go,” I murmured to myself.

“You don’t get along with your family?” Hawk asked.

“Nope. And it’s not just that we don’t get along; we don’t have a single thing in common either.”

“Couldn’t get into flower arranging, huh?”

“It goes deeper than that. Our whole psyches are wired up different. Sometimes, I wonder if I was adopted.”

“How are they different?”

“My parents, they have a very specific idea of a woman’s role in society, and when I question those beliefs, they react by doubling down and trying to make me conform. Honestly, my mom never stops meddling, and it gets... tiring, I guess. They’re never going to change, and neither am I. And my sisters did conform, so now they parrot the same lines.”

“Which means it’s easier to stay out of their way?”

“Exactly. My life is stressful enough without added reminders of my failure to live up to their expectations. Not that I mind the challenges at work. Most of the time, I love my job.” I took a sip of coffee. “You get along with your father, don’t you?”

“Usually I do, but that doesn’t mean we’re alike.”

“But you have plenty in common.”

A love of motorcycles and a complete disregard for legalities, for

example.

“Yeah, and also no. Sure, we both enjoy riding Harleys, but he’s always been happy as ruler of his own small kingdom, and I wanted to see more of the world. The difference is that he supported me when I chose to go my own way.”

The waitress brought our food over, and I dug into the stack of blueberry pancakes. Hawk had ordered granola with yogurt this time. It was clear who the health freak was in this non-relationship. He didn’t get those abs by eating fries with every meal, not that I was complaining or anything.

“My parents think I should be married with at least two kids by now,” I said with a shudder. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Odette brought the wedding forward because she’s secretly pregnant.”

She’d sent me a picture of the gown, and it had an empire waist. Yes, she was a big fan of Jane Austen, but when I was messing around with the hotel’s booking system, I’d also happened to notice that there was a vacant weekend toward the end of September. Why hadn’t she taken that slot instead of rushing the arrangements? It was possible there had been another late cancellation, or maybe she’d just gotten herself knocked up and didn’t want to tell anyone yet? Oh, the scandal! Mom would be horrified.

“See if she drinks any alcohol at dinner,” Hawk suggested.

“I’m planning to.”

He watched me for a long while, chewing thoughtfully.

“You don’t want kids?” he asked finally, and I silently cursed myself. Why had I opened this stupid can of worms? No, it shouldn’t have mattered, but discussing my lack of maternal instincts with the man I was quietly screwing around with left me uncomfortable.

“I guess I just don’t see myself as a mom. I don’t mind spending time with my nieces, though.”

Was it really fair to bring a son or daughter into the world when, hand on heart, they wouldn’t be my priority? Clarice seemed to think it was okay—it

was Buckley who'd wanted kids, and she'd gone along with it because it was her *duty*, but the girls spent an awful lot of time at after-school clubs, at summer camp, and at friends' houses, plus Charity had ballet school, violin lessons, sewing club, and junior cooking classes. Chas seemed to prefer hanging out with next door's cat. To Buckley, the girls appeared to be more of a status symbol than anything else—look at my perfect family and lovely home, see what a good hunter-gatherer I am—and he mostly hid out at the office.

“Hmm.”

Hmm? What did “hmm” mean?

“How about you?” I blurted.

Hawk stayed silent for so long that I thought he wasn't going to answer, shifting in his seat. I'd never seen him anything but confident. He could Matrix his way through a hail of bullets, but talking about children made him uncomfortable?

“I don't think I could do the job I do if I was a father,” he said after an age.

“Because you travel a lot?”

“Not that. I lost my mom, and it was hard.”

Without thinking, I reached across the table to squeeze his hand. “And if something happened on an op, you wouldn't want to put a child through that?”

“Yeah. Or a girlfriend,” he added more quietly.

Oh.

One tiny sentence, one big confession. Or at least, it felt that way. I'd always assumed that Hawk had become the king of hookups because he simply didn't like commitment. To find there was a deeper reason for him running out before the clock struck midnight was strangely comforting. Perhaps I wasn't the only one whose past experiences had affected their ability to have a healthy relationship?

We both looked up as an oversized dirt bike spluttered into the parking lot. Was it meant to sound like that? I didn't know much about bikes, but even I could tell there was a problem with the engine. The boy riding it—I put him in his late teens—pulled a face as he removed his helmet and ambled over to the waitress.

“I thought you fixed it,” she said.

“Guess I didn't. Harry's away for another week, so I'll have to try YouTube again. Or take it to the mainland.”

“Will it make it that far?”

The kid shrugged.

“It's probably a blocked jet in the carburetor,” Hawk murmured. “Or moisture in the fuel system. Or a dead spark plug. Looks like a nice old bike apart from that.”

“Why don't you go tell him?”

Hawk looked down at our joined hands. “You wouldn't mind?”

I'd actually be grateful. The conversation had been getting too heavy, stirring up feelings I didn't want to unpack.

“I could do with checking my emails, so...”

“It won't take long.”

Turned out the café was a family business, and the teenager was the waitress's brother. He worked part-time in the hotel when he wasn't at school, helping to keep the grounds tidy. Poor kid. He was scheduled to work this weekend when Odette would absolutely go full Bridezilla.

Hawk spent the rest of the morning and part of the afternoon helping to take the bike's engine apart while I read my own emails, plus those from the Steppen Island Lodge. The nightmare had already started. Odette was having a hissy fit because rain had been forecast for Saturday, and although the hotel offered the option of an indoor ceremony in the ballroom that overlooked the bay, she was insisting they source a new gazebo instead. The one they already had wasn't good enough. Too small and the wrong colour,

apparently.

Hawk seemed happy tinkering, and his efforts earned us a free lunch and as much coffee as we could drink. Secretly, I enjoyed watching him in his element, sitting on the ground surrounded by tools and engine parts, his shoulders relaxed as the tension melted away.

The bike was running smoothly when the time came for us to leave. Dinner was waiting, and so was my family.





## AGATHA

“So, Kellan, what do you do for a living?” Stu asked.

His pink polo shirt matched Clarice’s palazzo pants, my nieces’ dresses, and the bloom on Buckley’s cheeks that came from one too many glasses of wine. My older sister had styled her mahogany hair into a sleek chignon I’d never be able to master, and Odette wore her highlighted locks piled on top of her head in an intricate bun. Both were walking ads for Sephora, airbrushed to within an inch of their lives, while I considered dark lipstick and eyeliner to be perfectly adequate. Not for this event, clearly, but on a normal day. This weekend, I’d settled for pale-pink lip gloss and gritted teeth. Meanwhile, Charity and Chastity were seated at their own table on the far side of the dining room, picking at their dinner and playing games on their phones. Out of sight, out of mind. Earlier, Chas had asked if they could visit the petting zoo on the mainland, but Buckley had dismissed the suggestion out of hand.

“I’m an operations executive at Blackwood,” Hawk told Stu.

“That’s the place Aggie works at, right?”

Oh, how I hated being called Aggie.

“Yes, but we’re in different departments.”

“How much does that bring in?” Buckley asked. “Ballpark?”

Odette giggled as she took a tiny bottle of Tabasco sauce out of her purse and sprinkled it all over her beef Wellington. What the...? When we were

fifteen, she'd freaked out at Mom's birthday dinner because a waiter ground black pepper on her steak without being asked, and it was too spicy.

"Sweetie, you shouldn't ask people to discuss their salaries," she told Stu. Hawk just shrugged. "I make about the same as Agatha does."

Oops, wrong thing to say. Clarice looked at him with pity.

"Maybe someday, when you have more experience, you'll earn a promotion. Did you go to college?"

I wanted to sink into the floor, right through the layers of bedrock to the earth's molten core. Hawk's shoulders were rigid again.

"No, I didn't."

"I guess not everybody can have the opportunity."

"You should consider alternative investments," Stu told him. "Growth is huge right now. If you'd put a hundred bucks into YABA last year, you'd have ten thousand bucks today."

"Yaba?" Hawk's eyes widened infinitesimally. "You're investing in methamphetamines?"

"What are you talking about? YABA's a peer-to-peer, open-source cryptocurrency that utilises blockchain technology."

"What does that mean?"

"Uh, it's just the protocol." Translation: Stu didn't actually know. "But YABA is old news now. SlugCoin is forecast to grow exponentially over the next quarter."

SlugCoin? Shit. "Stu, Slug is most probably a scamcoin. The developers have no experience, and the returns they're promising are unrealistic."

"I've done my homework, Aggie. There's a whole community of investors backing this project."

That didn't mean it was safe; it just meant that a bunch more gullible dumbasses like Stu had been taken in by the marketing hype. I wasn't a crypto expert, but I kept my finger on the pulse. With the decentralised nature of digital currency, it tended to attract shady characters who wanted to either

launder funds or simply rip off investors.

“I’d still suggest—”

“Have you looked at NFTs?” Buckley asked. “They seem like a better idea to me—you get the digital investment *and* the artwork or music or whatever.”

“I bought a cartoon chinchilla.”

“I like the idea of the HyperLions myself—apex predators wearing sweats.”

“They were designed by AI, right?”

“Yes, which means each one has unique features. I’m on the waitlist.”

Hawk was trying not to smile. “What’s the point of owning an AI lion?”

The look Buckley gave him... Condescension mixed with sympathy for not understanding such a simple subject.

“It’s the new fine art. Think of it as owning a modern-day version of Van Gogh’s *Sunflowers*.”

Good grief.

“That’s not an appropriate analogy,” I told him. “It’s more like you saw the *Sunflowers* in Van Gogh’s studio and said, ‘Boy, I like that painting,’ and some guy who wasn’t Van Gogh offered to sell you a receipt saying you owned it. The receipt gets filed in a drawer that nobody ever looks in, and meanwhile, Van Gogh’s selling prints of the painting to anybody who wants to buy one because he kept the copyright.”

Now I got the oh-you-poor-dumb-fool look. “No, I don’t think that’s right.”

“Understanding this stuff is literally my—”

“Aggie, what happened to your hair?” Odette asked.

“Uh, nothing?”

“It’s all fluffy. And you need to get the split ends trimmed off, but the stylist can do that before the rehearsal tomorrow.”

“I have smoothing serum you can borrow,” Clarice offered.

There was no point in arguing; I knew that from experience. “Thanks.”

A sigh escaped as I looked longingly at the kids’ table. Charity and Chastity had definitely gotten the better end of the deal tonight. Couldn’t my sisters manage just one evening without pointing out my flaws? At least Hawk was doing a good job of playing the dutiful boyfriend. He made appropriate small talk, used the right cutlery, and kept his mouth closed when he chewed. To say I was relieved was an understatement.

“How long have you and Aggie been dating?” Mom asked him.

“Almost a year.”

“Really? She’s never mentioned you.”

“She’s told me plenty about you. I understand you’re on the events committee at the country club?”

My mom preened. Now that her children had left home, her life revolved around tennis, yoga, and long, lazy lunches. She did volunteer work too, but in private, she bitched about single mothers and homeless people and their poor life choices.

“That’s right. The Independence Day cookout was a great success, and now we’re working on the Labor Day picnic and the charity golf tournament. Stu, you are playing, aren’t you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Janice.”

*Don’t talk about golf, don’t talk about golf...* Surreptitiously, I tapped at my phone and called Stu from an anonymised number. Because he liked to feel important, he never turned off his phone at the dinner table, and as I’d hoped, he stepped away.

“Hello? Hello?” He checked the screen. “Hello? Huh. Nobody there. Must’ve been a wrong number.”

Buckley’s phone rang next, but that wasn’t me. No, it appeared to be a business call, and he began talking about profit margins as he strode out of the room. Fortunately, the waitstaff chose that moment to return with dessert, and conversation was forgotten as everyone dug into chocolate mousse

served with a caramel tuile.

“Did you learn to cook yet, Aggie?” Clarice asked.

“Well, I haven’t starved.”

She gave a not-so-ladylike laugh. By my count, she’d just started her fourth glass of wine, and I hoped someone had remembered to bring Tylenol. She wasn’t having mine. I needed it for myself. Of note: Odette had drunk one glass of champagne and then switched to water.

“Kellan, when Aggie was twelve, she tried to bake a cake for the church picnic, but she got the salt and sugar mixed up. You should have seen the pastor’s face.”

Hawk gave another shrug. “Good thing I know how to cook.”

Mom, Odette, and Clarice exchanged puzzled glances.

“*You* make dinner?” Odette asked. “Don’t you spend any evenings with Aggie?”

“Yes, but I don’t expect her to run around after me.”

That much was true, but I sincerely hoped he didn’t elaborate.

“Maybe I’ll take a cooking class someday,” I said. “Who wants more wine?”

Clarice shook her head. “I need to put the girls to bed.”

Buckley never did come back, and it didn’t take long for the rest of my family—Odette excluded—to drink enough that they wouldn’t miss us. If I’d stayed in my hometown, I’d undoubtedly have turned into an alcoholic myself, so I could quite understand why they turned to liquor. If any weekend called for inebriation, it was this one, especially when Odette began gushing both tears and her love for Stu at ten in the evening. At least her vision was blurry enough that she didn’t notice when we exited stage left.

“Aggie?” Hawk asked as we speed-walked along the hallway. “You’re not an Aggie.”

“Mom says ‘Agatha’ is too much of a mouthful.”

“Didn’t she choose the name?”

“Yup.” As we got farther from the dining room, I felt myself relax. “Thanks for not throat-punching anyone. You were surprisingly...”

“Civilised?”

“I was going to say surprisingly good at being a fake boyfriend.”

“As I said, I’ve done a lot of undercover work.” He paused to kiss the top of my head before he held open the door to the stairs. “Investigative work too, and you could be right about your little sis being knocked up.”

“You think? I figured the hot sauce might be a pregnancy craving, but then she drank a glass of champagne. And Odette might be a pain in everyone’s ass, but she isn’t irresponsible.”

“She poured the champagne on the potted plant next to her. And when she thought nobody was looking, she sprinkled that sauce on the chocolate mousse too. Looks as if you’re gonna be an auntie again.”

“Holy crap.”

“Don’t forget to ask Bradley to pick out a christening gift.”

“Christening? Right now, I’m trying to think of a valid reason not to go to the baby shower.”

“Men are excused from that, right?”

“Good point. How long does gender reassignment surgery take?”

Hawk wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “No surgery. I like you exactly as you are.” He paused to study me. “Mostly. You’re wearing too many clothes.”

“I hope that’s a situation you plan to rectify soon.”

Before I could blink, his hand snaked under my dress, and my panties disappeared.

“Hey!”

If I’d expected an apology, I wasn’t going to get one. No, he treated me to a filthy grin instead.

“Relax, I’ll buy you a new pair.”

“And shred those too?”

“Yeah, probably. And, babe, you’re gonna let me.”  
Yes. Yes, I was.





## AGATHA

**I**f I hadn't grown up with Marjorie, Ashley, and Kimberlee, I'd have been looking around for a way to unplug them. Like Clarice, the three of them had gone full-on Stepford Wife. Perfect hair, perfect skin, perfect make-up, even as they lazed around in robes and slippers. I'd thought Hawk had drawn the short straw with Stu and Buckley's fishing trip, but the spa session was even more painful than I'd imagined. And I didn't just mean the eyebrow plucking.

"Janie Pettigrew must have bribed the judging panel," Marjorie whined. "It's the only explanation. Elsie should have been Miss Pre-Teen Lewiston. She's been practising her talent routine for months, and her pageant coaches said she was perfect."

"Did you get any feedback?" Clarice asked.

"Melody's mom said the judges didn't like the cut-outs in Elsie's evening gown, but the girl who got the crown sang 'Over the Rainbow' *off-key*."

"That's shocking," Odette said without a hint of sarcasm.

"Isn't it? Elsie's been in tears since the weekend. There's only one year left before she moves up to Junior Miss, and the pressure..." Marjorie clutched at her hair and then shrieked. "I smudged my manicure! Can you fix it?" she asked the beautician. "You have to fix it."

Just over two years ago, Mack had gone to a secluded spa with Emmy

and some of the other Blackwood girls for her bachelorette party. Rumour said they'd ended up burying a body in the middle of the night, and that actually sounded like more fun than being trapped among bamboo decor and mood music with my sisters and their friends.

"If pageants make Elsie cry, why not let her try a different hobby?" I suggested.

Marjorie turned to me, incredulous. "What?"

"They seem to make you stressed as well."

"Have you ever been a pageant girl?" She looked me up and down. "Well, clearly not. So you don't understand just how many doors they open—it's not all about the sash and the trophy, you know. When I won Miss Maine Coed, I got a cruise, a spa weekend, a two-year car lease, a clothing allowance, a photoshoot, jewellery, gift cards, a cookware set, *and* the chance to emcee at the next year's pageant."

"But that's mostly just stuff."

All five of the other women sucked in a collective breath.

"*Stuff* is what sets us aside from the peons," Marjorie told me haughtily.

Peons? Oh, she was going down.

"And it's about more than stuff, anyway," Odette said. "Marjorie met Chandler at a pageant."

"Really?"

I'd crossed paths with Chandler once, and that was quite enough. He was another insufferable bore out of the same mould as Buckley and Stu, but roughly fifteen years older.

"Yes," Odette told me in the same snooty tone that Marjorie had used. "He was there with his daughter, being supportive. But that's yet another thing you have no clue about."

If we hadn't been in front of an audience, I'd have pulled Odette's hair out, which was something I *was* quite familiar with. Don't be fooled by the prim exterior—she knew how to use those nails. I still had a scar on my arm

from one of our childhood fights. But even after all the spats we'd had over the years, she still hurt me more with her words than with her fists. Odette possessed an uncanny ability to make me feel inadequate, especially when she insulted me in front of others.

"When it comes to my friends, I know how to be supportive, thank you very much. But you didn't ask for any help with the wedding planning, plus I live an eleven-hour drive away."

"I meant children. You know nothing about children."

"I know when they're miserable."

From my own personal experience, no less. Plus I babysat for Cade at work sometimes when he wanted a night out with his fiancée, and his daughter was a normal, healthy six-year-old who wouldn't be in the running for the Junior Miss Android prize, unlike my nieces.

"I suppose it's a good thing that you're too selfish to have babies yourself," Odette said. "Growing up with all that negativity would only impact their personal development."

I'm sorry, what?

"You think I'm *selfish* for not having children?"

"Well, yes. What if your husband wants to be a father?"

"I don't have a husband."

Odette rolled her eyes. "Exactly."

Clarice held her arms out. "Ding-ding, end of round one. Can't you two quit fighting for just one day?"

I wasn't about to stop defending myself. "Odette started it. I don't even know why she made me come to this stupid wedding."

Odette gasped. "My wedding is *not* stupid! Tomorrow is the most important day of my life. Do you have any idea how much effort I've put into planning everything?"

Marjorie, Ashley, and Kimberlee swivelled their heads from side to side, the three of them spectators in our game of verbal tennis. Honestly, I should

have stayed home instead of returning to Maine to relive my teenage years, I understood that now, but I still refused to let Odette win. The drive that had turned me into a good FBI agent and an excellent hacker might have made me a terrible sister, but Odette was a pain in the ass, and I just couldn't keep my mouth shut.

“What happens after the wedding?” I asked.

“We're going to Antigua.”

“No, I mean after that.”

“Huh?”

“Putting so much focus on one day is unhealthy. Isn't life with the man you love more important than a fancy dinner?”

“Of course it is. After the honeymoon, we're signing the papers on a house in east Lewiston, and then we'll start a family. And what will you do? Stay in your crappy apartment with your cat and buy another computer?”

“Odette...” Clarice's tone held a warning. “That's enough. Not everyone has what it takes to be a mother.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” I asked. “You think I don't have what it takes?”

“You chose the easy route in life, that's all.”

“The *easy* route? Do you have the faintest clue what I even do each day?”

“I know you quit the FBI, and you've never had to change a diaper or clean up baby vomit at one o'clock in the morning.”

Clarice shrugged one shoulder, and that tiny gesture said more than words. She was basically dismissing my entire career. In the FBI, I'd tracked foreign adversaries and helped to keep the country safe so she could sleep at night, and at Blackwood, I'd been part of a team that busted a freaking trafficking ring. But all of that meant nothing because I didn't know how to change a diaper?

I tapped the beautician on the arm.

“Sorry, but you need to stop that.”

“Uh, ma’am?”

I pulled out the toe separators and dropped them onto the chair I’d just vacated. How was it possible for me to be genetically related to Clarice and Odette? I’d taken time off work and spent hundreds of bucks to come here this weekend, not to mention being indirectly responsible for Kellan’s broken jaw, and right now, I wished I’d burrowed under the comforter and hidden for a week instead.

“Where are you going?” Odette asked.

“Somewhere else.”

“You can’t do that. The stylist hasn’t fixed your hair yet.”

“Watch me.”

If they wanted to bitch about my life choices, they could do it when I was out of earshot.



“Is that a new thing?” Hawk asked. “Five white toenails and five pink ones?”

The white was the base coat.

“Don’t mention the toes.”

“Okay.” He studied me for a few moments. “Do you need space or a hug?”

“I... I don’t know.” I’d been trying to resist the lure of the Xanax for the past two hours. “How was the fishing trip? Did you catch anything?”

“Nah, I couldn’t see the point. Who has time to gut fish today? I didn’t even bait the hook.”

“You didn’t murder Stu, did you?”

“Tempting, but no. I asked him a question about his favourite golf course, and the asshole talked for an hour straight. I just tuned him out the way I used to tune out gunfire when I needed sleep in a war zone. What happened in the

spa? Do we have any bodies to bury?”

I choked out a half laugh, half sob. “I left my gun at home.”

“I have a spare if you need to borrow it.”

Hawk wrapped me up in his arms, and I laid my head against his shoulder. He made a better fake date than I’d ever imagined he would. If he hadn’t been there, I’d have jumped on the ferry to the mainland by now. Hell, I’d have swum across the bay if necessary. Just for a moment, I imagined that this thing between us was real, that Hawk was the caring, doting boyfriend and he’d be my emotional support commando for longer than five minutes.

“It’s okay.” He rubbed my back with soft, soothing strokes. “Families can be difficult to deal with. You know my buddy Smith?”

One of Hawk’s partners in crime, quite literally. “Yes?”

“Every time he gets back from visiting his folks, he has to spend a day on the range, blasting out his frustration.”

“He doesn’t get along with his parents?”

“His father smacked him around for years, until he was big enough to fight back.”

“What about his mom?”

“His mom?” Hawk snorted. “When he was six, his mom left him at an airport.”

“By accident or on purpose?”

“She claimed by accident. But he was basically baggage to her, so who knows?”

“Wow. Maybe my sisters aren’t so bad in comparison, but I’m still dreading the rehearsal dinner.” I glanced at my phone over on the table. My mother had sent eleven text messages, each one more peeved than the last, and I’d ignored those plus her six calls. “And I’m surprised Mom hasn’t marched up here to demand I apologise for feeling insulted.”

“Your mom has her hands full with Odette at the moment.”

“What? Why?”

“These peonies aren’t pink,” Hawk squeaked in a surprisingly good impression of my younger sister. “They’re *salmon*. They don’t match the bridesmaid dresses, the cake, the place settings. Find me pink ones! I ordered pink!”

“Oh dear.”

“She’s in the ballroom having a meltdown. Medication was mentioned.”

“Does she need Xanax? I have Xanax.”

“You take Xanax?”

“Emmy gave it to me for emergencies.” I choked out a giggle. “Sometimes, the people at work seem more like my family than my blood relatives.”

“Know that feeling. I wasn’t sure about Emmy to start with, but she turned out to be one of the good guys, although she’d probably disagree with that sentiment. Want me to go ask about the Xanax? Should I make an excuse for us to skip the rehearsal dinner?”

“If I’m a no-show, it’ll only cause more problems later. There’d better be wine.”

“There’s wine, although Clarice seemed to be drinking most of it when I left.”

“Where were Charity and Chastity?”

“I didn’t see them anywhere. Maybe they’re with Buckley? He’s keeping a low profile.”

Hawk switched to tracing small circles on my back, and I finally relaxed. He settled me. He was my rock, my anchor, for this weekend at least. And when he kissed me on the forehead, I tilted my head to press my lips to his, and sweet turned to heat.

“Thank you for being here,” I whispered when we finally broke apart.

“Want me to take your mind off the shitshow downstairs?”

“I’ll love you forever if you do.” I gasped as I realised what I’d said. “Shit! Sorry! It was just a figure of speech. Kind of like saying I want to kill



my sisters, which I obviously don't because, well, they're my sisters and I also hate the idea of prison, but I can't help wishing they'd be a little less condescending."

Although if I cared to admit it, which I didn't, perhaps I *had* fallen a tiny bit in love with Hawk Hauser over the past year, at least when he wasn't punching Kellan. The evenings I spent with him were my favourite parts of the week, and only the thought of scaring him off completely, of losing that fragile connection, stopped me from inviting him over every single night. And deep down, I was scared too. Scared that this weekend would change everything between us, that he'd run a mile now he'd met my family.

"Shut up and kiss me again," he said.

I shut up and kissed him.



## AGATHA

“**T**his is so good,” I murmured as I sank into the hot tub, naked. The frosted glass walls on either side of the balcony kept us hidden from prying eyes. Unless someone happened to be out in a boat. With binoculars. Hastily, I scanned the ocean to the horizon, but the grey waters were mercifully quiet. “Seems that there’s one benefit of being here on the island.”

The rehearsal dinner had basically been a repeat of last night’s family dinner, except with a few more guests present to listen to Odette freaking out about the flowers. I’d snuck a look at the table centrepieces before we made our way to the dining room, and the peonies looked pink to me, but what did I know? I’d forked my food down as fast as possible, kept my mouth shut unless I was asked a direct question, and made an Irish exit with Hawk just after nine p.m.

“Only one benefit?”

Hawk slid in beside me, and I took a moment to admire his muscles before they disappeared beneath the bubbles. Okay, maybe there were two benefits.

“The coffee at the lighthouse café is quite good too.”

I let out a squeak as he lifted me onto his lap, and he wrapped his arms around my waist, holding me in place. His cock was as hard as granite already.

“There’s nothing else you’re enjoying besides the coffee?”

“I guess tonight’s dessert was tasty.”

You couldn’t go wrong with Boston cream pie and maple walnut ice cream. Not unless you were Odette, anyway—she’d only managed to shed three of the eight pounds she’d planned to lose, and her dress was slightly on the tight side, which was probably another reason she’d been so antagonistic earlier. Stress turned her mean. And she still hadn’t mentioned a word about her possible pregnancy, so maybe hormones were involved as well.

“Is that what you’re calling my cock now? Dessert?”

“Depends. Are there any of the strawberry-flavoured condoms left?”

“You used them all.” He tightened his arms and groaned. “And as much as I’d like to fuck you right here in the hot tub, I’m not sure if that’s safe.”

Right. Chlorine, heat, slippage... “I could google?”

“Or you could relax and let me use my fingers.”

“Or...” How would he react to a really personal question? “When was your last medical?”

“Six months ago.”

“Oh.”

“Babe, if you’re asking whether I’m clear of STDs, I haven’t had another woman since that night in the parking lot.”

What? I twisted to face him, and he groaned again, but this time it was altogether filthier.

“Are you serious?”

“Deadly.” Hawk nuzzled my neck. “Why would I want anyone else? You gave me everything I thought I needed.”

“Everything you *thought* you needed?”

“Fuck.” He cursed under his breath. “We shouldn’t do this, not tonight.”

“Do what?” My mind cycled through the possibilities, and of course it landed on the worst one. “Wait, are you dumping me?”

Dumping me in a hot tub on what was quite possibly the most

uncomfortable weekend of my life? Because that was low. Really freaking low. I tried to scramble up, but he held firm.

“I’m not dumping you. Are you crazy? I’m... I don’t know what I’m doing.”

He sounded almost flustered, and Hawk never got flustered.

“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know where to start,” he admitted.

“How about at the beginning?”

“The beginning?”

Hawk’s expression turned haunted, and I wondered if I’d regret having this conversation. What had Mom always said? That some secrets were better left buried. It was one of the few scraps of wisdom she’d ever shared, buried in between gems like “eyebrows should be plucked, never bushy” and “never expect a man to vacuum.”

“We don’t have to do this,” I whispered, but he shook his head.

“You already know about my mom. Her death hit me hard, but not as hard as... Dammit.”

He swiped at his eyes, and I didn’t know where to look. What to do. We’d gone from sexy time to deep and meaningful in barely a heartbeat. This wasn’t what I’d signed up for, but I found that I wanted to be there for him. Needed to take away his pain.

“It’s okay. Whatever it is, we’ll make it okay.”

“Will we?” He took a deep breath. “Nearly a decade ago, I got recruited to join a covert team. I can’t go into the details, but I’m the last man standing. There were four of us. We were on a job in Ukraine when we got ambushed by a Russian hit team.”

He was talking about the Phantoms, wasn’t he? And for the past year, he’d been *my* phantom, flitting in and out of my bed under cover of darkness. A ghost with a magical cock.

“I’m so sorry.”

“We’d rented a house, and my room was on the top floor.” He gave a joyless laugh. “The only reason I’m alive today is because the stairs creaked.”

“Did you get them?”

“Too damn right I got them. The aftermath...it wasn’t pretty. There must have been a leak somewhere, and the brass tried to say it came from my team, but that was a lie. The Phantoms were tight. We didn’t leak.”

I traced one of the tattoos on his left arm, four ethereal beings being chased by a monster. “This is you? Them?”

“Yeah. Four foot-soldiers being hunted by bureaucracy. They tried to put me on a new team, but I quit after that. How could I carry on when I didn’t trust the people I worked for?”

“That was why you came back home?”

He nodded. “Some of the men in The Darkness might be assholes, but they don’t sell out their friends. And I found myself a new crew—Snake, Sailor, Smith, and Mouse—but you already know about that.”

“And then you joined Blackwood.”

“Emmy earned my trust. Man, that bitch is crazy.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

He ran a hand through damp hair. “But losing my brothers hurt. Fuck, it hurt, and I swore I’d never put myself in that situation again. Swore I’d never get close enough to anyone to care.” Finally, I got a smile. “Sure screwed that up.”

“You did?”

“I thought that if I just kept my distance from you, it would be okay, but...” He ran a finger down my cheek. “That turned out to be harder than I thought.”

“Really? You only spent one whole night in my bed, and that was because you passed out from exhaustion.”

His smile was sheepish. “Yeah, well, I wanted to stay plenty of other

times.”

“Then why didn’t you say something?”

“I was... I was scared. Scared of the past repeating itself, and scared that you wouldn’t want more anyway. You seemed happy the way things were.”

“I thought you were a commitment-phobe.”

“At first, I was. But I like you, Agatha. I really fucking like you.”

“I like you too.” My turn to take a steadying breath. “Maybe I even more than like you. How much of this weekend has been an act?”

“None of it. Apart from fishing with Stu—that guy’s a fucking asshole.”

“No dissent here. So... What are you saying? That you want to try dating?”

“Would you consider it? I still have a dangerous job, and there’s always risk involved, and—”

I put a finger over his lips. “At this stage, I’m more terrified of missing out on the good times with you than I am of facing up to the bad.”

He kissed me softly on the lips. “What about you? There was a nasty break-up in your past, wasn’t there?”

“My long-term ex cheated and blamed it on my job.” I worked too much, he said. It was practically impossible for him not to sleep with our neighbour. “So I had a dumb rebound fling with a colleague, and when we split, he bad-mouthed me all over the office.” And because he also worked in cyber, he’d made a deepfake porn vid and sent it to his friends. Just his little joke, ha-ha. I’d become known as Bukkake Special Agent Lerner. “But you’re not either of those men, Hawk. I know that much.” He’d kept our hookups quiet for nearly a year, given me the space to heal and get used to the idea of being part of a couple again. “I get depo shots. We don’t need the condom.”

This time when he kissed me, there was a whole new level of heat. Deeper, more intense, feelings twining around us. Hawk wasn’t a fake boyfriend anymore. This was real. Which left me with the awkward problem of explaining to my family that he was Brendan and not Kellan, but I’d worry

about that later.

Right now, I had more important things to focus on. Like Hawk's molten gaze as I straddled him. Like the delicious stretch as he sank into me bare. Like the new emotions we'd unlocked with our heart-to-heart. Like the argument Clarice was having with Buckley on the balcony next door.

This time, there was nothing sexy about Hawk's groan.

Did my sisters have to ruin everything? Okay, okay, I understood that Clarice had no idea what we were doing just a few feet away, but her sense of timing was terrible.

"I have a headache," she said.

"Take a Tylenol."

"I'm still not in the mood, all right?"

"The girls are asleep. I locked the connecting door."

"Don't you ever listen to a word I say? I'm tired, and the day's been quite bad enough already with Aggie and Odette and those damned flowers."

"Are you saying that sex with me is bad?"

Oops.

A long pause. "Of course not, darling." Clarice's voice turned placating. "Okay, fine. But I'm exhausted, so you'll have to be quick."

The balcony door closed, and I let out a quiet snort. There was trouble in paradise? If Clarice hadn't spent the past decade taking so much joy in telling me how awful my life was, I might have felt a modicum of sympathy.

"Way to kill the mood," Hawk muttered.

"Sorry."

"Not your fault your sisters came from the shallow end of the gene pool."

"Only two more days, and then we can go home. Uh, do you want to stay over on Monday night?"

"I want to stay over every night."

"I'll clear you some closet space."

Plus I'd have to buy more towels, and pick up whatever Hawk liked to eat



for breakfast, and get a spare key made because if he was pretty much living there, it would be weird if he kept picking the locks. And—

“Stop,” he ordered.

“Stop what?”

“Overthinking. Whatever you’re worrying about, it doesn’t matter tonight.”

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologising and kiss me.”

I was only too happy to comply.



## AGATHA

Six a.m. on The Big Day, and I was awoken by my phone buzzing. Not my work phone—an emergency would have been a blessed relief—but my personal phone. Hawk propped himself up on one elbow and brushed the hair out of my eyes.

“What’s up?” he asked once I’d read the message.

I glanced at the tented sheet. “You?”

That suggestive smirk would be mine every morning from now on. How lucky was I?

“I meant the phone. Is it work?”

“If only. No, Odette’s decided to hold the wedding ceremony at three p.m. instead of noon.”

“I’m sure the catering team and the waitstaff and the officiant and the DJ will all be overjoyed. Why’d she change it?”

“Apparently, there’s a cloud somewhere over the horizon, and it might rain between twelve and two.”

“I thought there was an indoor option?”

I just looked at him.

“Right,” he said after a moment. “Odette.”

“Exactly.”

“Want me to go hunt breakfast? I’m sure we can find something to do for

three extra hours.”

“How do you feel about taking a shower and then heading to the lighthouse café? The farther we get from the hotel, the safer we’ll be.”

“Will you also be in the shower?”

“Yup.”

“Then I’m good with the idea.”



We so, so nearly made it. The two of us were halfway across the lobby, hand in hand, when Buckley’s voice boomed from the top of the stairs.

“Aggie, have you seen Chastity?”

“Isn’t she with Clarice?”

“She wanted to stay in her room and read, but I just went to borrow another hanger from the girls’ closet, and she’s not there.”

“She probably changed her mind and went with her mom.”

“Where’s Clarice?” he asked.

How should I know?

“If you listen for Odette’s voice, I’m sure Clarice won’t be far away. Try the bridal suite?”

“I’m not allowed in there.”

“Are you sure? I thought that was just the groom.”

Although I’d be the first to admit that wedding etiquette wasn’t my strong point.

“Can you look?” Buckley asked.

For crying out loud... Couldn’t he call his own wife? Although after the conversation Hawk and I had overheard last night, I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance she wouldn’t answer, increasing to seventy-five percent if I tried phoning myself.

“I’ll be two minutes,” I said to Hawk.

“I’m not going anywhere, babe.”

The bridal suite was on the second floor in the hotel’s east wing, far away from the groom’s suite in the west wing so there was no risk of Stu accidentally seeing Odette in her dress before she walked down the aisle. Predictably, she was bitching when I arrived, this time to the hairstylist who was trying to explain that she had to pin up Odette’s hair now, at the time she was booked for, and she couldn’t delay things by three hours since she’d been hired for a Sweet Sixteen party in the evening.

“Clarice, where’s Chastity?”

Charity was there, curled up in an armchair playing games on her phone, but there was no sign of my younger niece.

“She’s in her room, reading.”

“Buckley says she isn’t there.”

Clarice had been rummaging in one of Odette’s many plastic boxes, but now she whipped her head around.

“What?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Why was he in the girls’ room?”

“He needed an extra hanger.”

“Why couldn’t he borrow one out of my closet?” Clarice huffed.

“How should I know?”

“Well, did he check the girls’ bathroom?”

“He didn’t say. I guess so?”

“Can you go get him to look?”

“Maybe you could do that?”

I mean, it was her husband and her daughter we were talking about. Or did they expect me to play messenger all morning?

“I’m super busy. Please?”

Please? Was Clarice feeling okay? She was never that polite.

“Okay, fine. I’ll ask him.”

No, Buckley hadn’t looked in the bathroom. He’d just called Chastity’s name, and when she didn’t answer, he’d come downstairs to foist the problem onto somebody else. I trailed him into the elevator because when he found her, he’d undoubtedly forget to tell me, and I’d be left standing in the lobby like a fool while he discussed the ins and outs of various dubious investments with Stu and the rest of the groom-bros.

Buckley took three attempts to get the door open, muttering about “damn room cards.”

“Chastity,” he called. “Where are you?”

I pushed open the bathroom door, but it was empty. Buckley checked the closets, and I looked under the bed. The door to the balcony was still bolted from the inside, thankfully, and there wasn’t anywhere else she could be.

“Could she have gone into your room?” I asked, rattling the connecting door. It wouldn’t budge.

“I don’t think so. It’s locked.”

“Well, she’s not in here. Maybe she left and couldn’t get back in again. Did she have her own room card?”

“You’ll have to check with Clarice.”

Much as I wanted to tell Buckley to check with Clarice himself, I was beginning to get slightly concerned. Chas was only nine years old. Hellishly smart for her age—who knew where she’d gotten that from?—but still too young to be meandering around the hotel alone, especially with us being so near to the water.

I jogged downstairs to find Clarice. She was back to rummaging through the boxes, muttering about toupee tape and blister bandages.

“Clarice? Chastity definitely isn’t in her room.”

“She isn’t?” Clarice acted calm, but I didn’t miss the hint of worry in her voice. “Are you sure? What about my and Buckley’s room?”

“He’s checking at the moment, but the connecting door is locked.”

“Maybe she got hungry? They’re still serving breakfast in the dining room.”

“I’ll take a look, but you need to help us find her.”

The stylist put her head in her hands as Odette marched over to us, shedding bobby pins in her wake.

“Clarice doesn’t have time to look for anything but my blister bandages. Who’s missing?”

“Chastity.”

A normal sibling would have gasped in horror and immediately joined the search, but not Odette. No, she put her hands on her hips and glared at Clarice, which I suppose made a change from her glaring at me.

“Why didn’t you watch her? I knew she’d do something like this.”

“Something like what?” I asked.

“She didn’t want to wear her flower girl dress,” Clarice said. “She hates the ruffles.”

“She’s a little girl. Little girls are meant to wear ruffles.” Odette narrowed her eyes and turned to me. “Of course, we all know who’s to blame.”

“What? How is this my fault?”

“You always wanted to wear pants when you were younger, and so does Chastity.”

*Give me strength.* “I didn’t encourage her to disappear, Odette. I haven’t even seen her today.”

“Are you sure? Just because your life is dysfunctional doesn’t mean you can ruin mine too.”

I itched to slap my sister, but I also didn’t want to ruin the make-up artist’s hard work. Why did everything always have to be about Odette? Ten bucks said she’d only invited me to her wedding so she could rub my face in it by forcing me to watch how perfect her life was compared to mine.

“Oh, sure, *my* life is dysfunctional. I’m not the one who thinks Band-Aids are more important than a nine-year-old’s self-esteem. And for your

information, I spent this morning fucking my boyfriend, not persuading your niece to wage a vendetta against her dress.”

Too late, I realised Mom had walked up behind me, and for the millionth time in my life, I wanted to sink through the floor. Actually, what was the point? I was already in hell.

“Aggie! Having relations out of wedlock is quite bad enough without us having to hear about them. And where did you get that filthy mouth? It certainly wasn’t from me or your father. Don’t you dare speak to your sister that way.”

“Tell you what, I won’t speak to her at all. I’m going to go help look for Chastity. Good luck with the blisters.”

I stormed out, my blood boiling. This. *This* was why I hated spending time with my family. Their priorities were messed up, and so were their attitudes. Didn’t they realise that Chastity’s whereabouts was the most important issue right now? Where would a ruffle-hating nine-year-old hide?

“I’ll help, okay?” Clarice ran up behind me. “I’ll check the dining room.”

She strode in that direction as Hawk caught hold of my hand. I’d almost walked right past him.

“Babe, what’s happening? You didn’t find Chastity?”

“Not yet.”

“Did anyone try calling her? That kid always has a phone in her hand.”

Of course. Of *course* she did. And I’d been so busy fuming at Odette that I couldn’t think straight.

“Nobody called her, and I don’t have her number. I’ll need to ask Clarice.” Or Odette, although chewing my own arm off would have been more fun than going back to the bridal suite.

But Buckley chose that moment to step out of the elevator. “She’s not in our room.”

“Call her,” Hawk said.

“I already tried that, and she’s not answering.”



Which did lend extra credence to the “hiding” theory. But no matter—as long as she hadn’t turned the phone off, I could still find her.

“What’s the number?” I asked.

“I doubt she’ll answer for you either.”

“Just give her the number,” Hawk told him.

“Fine.” Buckley read out the digits. “I need to get the staff to search.”

“Odette thinks she’s hiding out of spite because she didn’t want to wear a frilly dress.”

Buckley rubbed his chin, then winced when he drew blood. Presumably he’d managed to cut himself shaving this morning. “I suppose it’s possible. She’s done that before.”

“Recently?”

“Last year when she refused to go to Odette’s summer cookout.”

“Because of a dress?”

“Because she didn’t want to eat meat.”

“She’s turned vegetarian?”

I’d noticed Chastity picking her way around the roast chicken at dinner the other night, but I didn’t realise she’d stopped eating meat completely.

“It’s just a phase.”

I dialled Chastity, but as predicted, she didn’t answer. Instead, I got through to a generic voicemail greeting and left a message.

“Chas, it’s your Auntie Agatha. Can you call me? I have a question about ponies.”

Chas loved ponies, but she wasn’t allowed to take horse riding lessons because ever since a mule stole Clarice’s ice cream when we took a trip to a ranch two decades ago, my older sister had been terrified of all things equine. If I needed to bribe Chas into returning my call, ponies might do it.

“Told you,” Buckley said. “She’s in one of her moods.”

I didn’t bother to dignify that with an answer. Chas was a child, and she was miserable. Instead, I ran to the room I shared with Hawk and grabbed my

laptop. I needed to check which cell carrier Chas used and then track her phone, and I wasn't about to do that in front of my family because I didn't need a lecture on the illegal use of personal data.

“Anything I can do?” Hawk asked.

“Can you sneak into the bridal suite and remove the ruffles from a flower girl dress?”

“I'm special ops, babe, not a fucking magician.”

A part of me wanted to dither because Odette deserved to suffer for a little longer—she had three extra hours, after all—but ultimately, the only person who would end up suffering was Chas. Tracking a phone wasn't rocket science, and I got it done from scratch within five minutes. Then I stared at the screen.

I checked, double-checked, triple-checked the data again.

“Everything okay?” Hawk asked, holding up a mean-looking knife. “I guess I could try to do something with the dress.”

How could everything be okay when Chas's phone was on the mainland, moving steadily along the road in the direction of Brunswick?

“No. No, things aren't okay at all.”



## AGATHA

“**T** here are three possibilities.” Hawk ticked them off on his fingers. “One, someone took Chastity’s phone. Two, she ran off to hide and stowed away in a vehicle. Three...” I knew what he was going to say, but I didn’t want to hear it. “Three, an unknown subject deliberately took her off the island.”

From what I’d seen of Chas, she was careful. She never left her phone lying around. And if she made a habit of losing it, you could be sure Clarice would have complained long and loud. Yes, there was a chance a thief could have stolen it, but if that had happened, Chas would have gone straight to her mom, probably in tears.

“I don’t think someone took the phone.”

“Fuck.”

“Maybe we should call the FBI?”

Hawk glanced at his watch. “There are only three minutes before the ferry leaves.”

We looked at each other for a beat.

I shoved my laptop into the backpack I used as a purse.

And then we ran.

We ran as far as the parking lot, where we found Hawk’s truck blocked in by a limousine with white ribbons decorating the hood. Why did Odette need

a wedding car, you ask? When she was getting married in the hotel? Because she wanted to have photos taken by the lighthouse, and she didn't want to walk there.

Even though he'd been in the Army and then the CIA, Hawk cursed like a sailor. There was no driver in sight. In fact, the whole parking lot was deserted, probably because Buckley had summoned the staff inside to join the search for Chas.

Then I heard an engine. Not a car, but a bike, and the young guy from the café pulled up beside us.

"Where is everyone? Did the dragon lady make them trim the grass with scissors?" He gave me a knowing look. "I heard stories."

"No, there's—"

"Can we borrow your bike, buddy?" Hawk asked. "There's an urgent issue we need to deal with."

"Uh, yeah, sure."

Wait, wait, wait...we?

Hawk took the guy's helmet and squashed it onto my head. "Let's go."

"On that thing? Are you crazy?"

"That's what the rumours say." He swung a leg over the seat. "They're all true."

"I've... Uh, I've never been on a motorcycle before."

"Just hold on, and don't forget to breathe. Two minutes, babe."

Was I really doing this? I didn't have a choice, did I? Someone needed to track Chas's phone in real time, and Hawk couldn't do that and watch the road. What it came down to was trust. Did I trust Hawk to keep me safe?

Yes.

Yes, I did.

I climbed onto the seat behind him and closed my eyes.

We roared off, and did people honestly do this for fun? The whole bike tilted alarmingly as we zoomed around a corner, and I let out a squeak that

Hawk thankfully couldn't hear over the sound of the rushing wind. How far away was Chastity? If she'd taken the ferry that left before this one, then based on an average speed of, say, forty miles per hour, she could be twenty miles away by now. Okay, that helped, distracting myself with math problems to take my mind off imminent death. If we travelled at twice the speed of our quarry, we could catch her in thirty minutes, no, more like forty because we needed to allow time for the ferry crossing. Although if we ended up on a rural freeway or the interstate, then we'd have to travel at a hundred and fifty miles per hour, and did the bike even go that fast? I quickly came to the conclusion that we were going to either run out of gas or take a one-way trip to the morgue.

Hawk had been alarmingly relaxed until that point, but when I felt him tense, I opened my eyes again.

Oh, no, no, no.

The ferry was leaving early. Only by a minute, but the railing was closed, and the boat was slowly but surely pulling away from the dock. In another half hour, Chastity could reach Portland and end up lost in the busy city. What if the person who'd taken her found her phone? In forty percent of nonfamilial child abductions, the child was killed, and three-quarters of those deaths occurred within three hours. Extend the time to twenty-four hours, and the rate went up to ninety percent.

Okay, Blackwood had an office in Portland. While we waited for the next ferry, we could make some calls, and beg, borrow, or steal any spare staff to assist. The directors always supported emergency operations like this one, and—

Why wasn't Hawk stopping?

What was he—

“Nooooooooo!”

A scream tore from my throat as he aimed the bike at the pile of building materials stacked up on the jetty, using a plank as a ramp to launch us into the

air. I buried my head against his back as we sailed over the barrier, and quite possibly cracked a tooth when we landed on the deck of the ferry. Were we still alive? The pain in my head suggested it was a likely scenario.

“Do you have any cash on you?” he asked. “We need three bucks for the ferry fare.”

Date a special ops asshole, the romance novels said. It’ll be fun, they said. They lied.

“Babe? You okay?”

“No, I’m not freaking okay! You just tried to kill both of us.”

“I’ve been riding bikes since I could reach the foot pegs. That was an easy jump.”

“You and me, we have very different ideas of ‘easy.’”

My hands were shaking as I fished around in my backpack for money, and I noted the ferry operator was as white as an anaemic snowman too. He didn’t say a word about our unorthodox method of boarding, probably because Hawk was in commando mode and looked kind of terrifying.

*Breathe, Agatha. Focus on Chas.* I had to focus on Chas.

We didn’t have much time, so I linked my cell phone to my laptop and synced her phone data into the app. Now I could track her from my cell. At least, I could if I dared to release my death grip on Hawk.

To my relief, he waited for the ferry to actually dock before he roared onto dry land, and my admiration for Emmy ratcheted up a notch. How did she do these things every day without popping anxiety pills like a junkie? I should have brought the damn Xanax.

Before we disembarked, we’d worked out a system—if I needed Hawk to turn left, I tapped his left thigh, and if I needed him to turn right, I tapped his right thigh. *Don’t drop the phone.* When I’d asked how I should signal him to slow down, he’d just laughed.

But that was the signal I needed.

Because ten minutes into our breakneck journey, the green blob of Chas’s

phone stopped.

Just...stopped.

What did that mean? I tried to zoom in, but with limited success because I only had one free hand. Using voice control was out of the question. The engine was too loud. She seemed to be at some sort of...farm? Oh no. He'd ditched the phone, hadn't he? Chas was on her own with a monster, and we had no way of tracking him.

We needed to identify his vehicle. Maybe there'd be a traffic camera somewhere along the way? Hell, I really needed to keep my eyes open instead of screwing them shut whenever the bike tilted sideways. The only cameras I'd noted at the hotel were in the lobby and directly outside the front entrance, but perhaps we'd get lucky and catch a glimpse of a car? The local police would have to be informed, and the FBI too. We'd need manpower to canvass for witnesses. Forensics would also get involved, although with the speed necessary in a kidnapping investigation, lab work would be of limited use unless... No, I didn't want to think about it.

At a stoplight, I quickly explained the situation to Hawk.

"We're only ten minutes from the location," he said. "Let's head there and look for witnesses. A farm?"

"Or maybe a ranch?" I'd managed to zoom in now. "It's called Ambling Acres, and it looks as if there are pastures and outbuildings."

And, it turned out, a small museum with exhibits on the history of farming, a petting zoo, pony rides, trampolines, an education centre, and a café.

I stumbled away from the bike, legs trembling, beyond relieved that I was still breathing. Hawk rode like a maniac. We'd played chicken with oncoming semis and survived with inches to spare, and the smell of burning rubber was fresh in my nostrils. Where was the phone? The small parking lot was half-empty, and according to my app, the device was farther onto the property.



“This is weird,” Hawk said.

Yeah, it was. I could see an abductor tossing the phone into a trash receptacle and speeding off, but paying the entrance fee to a kids’ leisure park?

The teenager in the brightly painted kiosk beside the gate gave us a suspicious look, which was understandable, seeing as we were the only visitors without a child in tow. At times like this, I missed my FBI credentials.

“Here are your maps. The Shetland pony show takes place at ten, twelve, and two o’clock. Museum tours are at eleven and three. Please don’t feed the geese if you want to keep your fingers.” She delivered the speech in a monotone. “Do you need any tokens?”

“Tokens?”

“To exchange for animal feed or pony rides.”

“No, thanks.”

“Enjoy your day at Ambling Acres.”

No visible cameras. I considered questioning the gate attendant but decided it could wait. Finding Chas’s phone, and hopefully Chas herself, took priority. And the cell hadn’t been tossed, I realised. Now that I could zoom in and focus properly on my screen, I saw it was moving slowly around. Since we arrived, it had travelled from—I consulted the map—the duck pond to the pot-bellied pig pen.

I gripped Hawk’s hand as we navigated across the farm. Chas was a sweet kid despite her parents, and I desperately wanted her to be okay.

“That’s her?” Hawk whispered, and I glanced up from the screen.

From the back, it sure looked like my niece. The height, build, and hair colour all matched, and she’d worn that pink-and-yellow sweater to dinner on Thursday.

“I’m almost certain it is.”

But who was the male with her? For a moment, he turned his head, and I

saw him in profile, but that was no help. I didn't recognise him from the wedding, or from any of the family events I'd reluctantly attended over the years. Yet she was holding his hand as they peered over the wall into the pig pen, and she didn't appear to be in distress.

"Any ideas on the guy?" Hawk asked.

"Not a one." But I did know that he'd taken my niece without the permission or knowledge of her parents, and that made him a criminal. "We need to get her away from him."

"I'll keep him occupied while you liberate her."

"We can't have any blood, okay? Not at a children's farm."

"Relax. I can do subtle."

"Are you sure? Kellan's jaw would disagree."

Hawk just flashed me a smile and tucked an arm around my shoulders, steering me in the direction of our targets. Did the man have a weapon? I couldn't see any bulges under his clothing, but I still needed to get Chas out of range. Hawk could handle himself; I knew that much.

We walked right up behind them, and in the blink of an eye, Hawk twisted the man's free arm up behind his back and pushed him forward, trapping him against the wall. He grunted in pain, and I spun Chas toward me.

"It's all right, sweetie. We're here to take you back to your mom and dad."

Her reaction wasn't quite what I'd been expecting. Chas shoved me away and flung her arms around the man as best she could, then kicked Hawk with one sneaker-clad foot.

"Don't hurt Uncle Eddie!"

Uncle Eddie? What the hell? Chas didn't have an Uncle Eddie. She didn't have an uncle at all. I didn't have a brother, and Buckley was an only child, thank goodness for small mercies.

"Get off me!" The man tried to wriggle free, but Hawk didn't give an

inch.

“Who are you?” I demanded. “Why have you brought my niece here?”

“Your niece?” His face was still twisted in agony, but I saw a glimmer of something else in his eyes as well. Recognition? “You’re Aggie, right? The middle sister?”

How did he know that?

“It’s Agatha, and you didn’t answer my question.”

“Get this thug off me.”

“He’s not a thug, and not until you answer the damn question.”

The guy half sighed, half yelled. “I’m Eddie, okay? A friend of Clarice’s.”

“Oh, really? Why did you take her daughter without her knowledge?”

“She knows. I sent her a message.”

“Then explain why she’s searching the hotel for Chastity right now.”

“Shit.”

“You shouldn’t say that word,” Chas told him.

Eddie blew out a breath. “I’ll explain, I swear. Just get this ass— jerk to let go of my arm.”

I nodded to Hawk, and he released his grip. Eddie wouldn’t get far. Firstly, Chas was still hanging onto his waist, and secondly, Hawk might have been big, but he was also fast, and he’d chase Eddie down like a lion hunting a warthog.

Possibly with more bloodshed.

The guy crouched down to my niece’s eye level. “Chas, do you want a pony ride?”

“Yes, but I don’t like that man.” She glared at Hawk. “He’s mean.”

“It’s okay, kiddo. I just need to talk with these folks for a few minutes. You have your tokens?”

“Of course I do. Can we still go to the Shetland show? You pinky promised, and you can’t break a pinky promise.”

“We’ll pick out our seats right after your pony ride.”

The hell they would. But I knew the basics of interviewing a suspect, and building rapport was important. I kept myself between Eddie and Chas as we headed over to the pony rides, and Hawk brought up the rear. I trusted him to have my back. When we got closer, Chas ran on ahead to join the line, clearly familiar with how things worked at this place. I turned to Eddie.

“Okay, pal, you’re up. Talk.”

This story had better be good.



## AGATHA

I nstead of confessing his sins right away, Eddie settled onto a bench overlooking the dirt arena where teenagers were leading kids—mainly girls Chas’s age—around on half a dozen ponies. Chas turned to wave, and after Eddie had waved back, she began chatting with a girl wearing a pink cowboy hat who was waiting ahead of her.

“Figures that it’s you who showed up. Clarice always said you were the smart one.”

“She did?”

“You’re an FBI agent, right?”

“Former FBI agent. I moved into the private sector.”

“Probably more money there. Less stress.” Eddie reached into his pocket, and Hawk grabbed his arm before I’d even registered what was happening.

“Easy. I just need to look at my phone.”

“No sudden movements, got it?” Hawk warned.

“Were you an FBI agent too?”

“No.”

When Hawk didn’t elaborate, Eddie shrugged, then pulled out his phone and scrolled through the messages.

“Must’ve flipped the darn thing onto silent again.” A pause. “Ah, right. I see the problem now. Buckley noticed Chas was missing? Guess there’s a

first time for everything.”

“You’ll have to explain,” I told him.

“The short answer is that Buckley’s an asshole.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“In eleven years, he hasn’t changed. Back then, he reversed his car into my truck and denied he’d done it. The prick had a dent in his bumper, and the paint on my fender matched his damn Mercedes. Darn. I meant ‘darn.’ I don’t swear when I’m around Chas.”

“What does a decade-old dented bumper have to do with anything?”

“Because in those days, I was young, and I was stupid, and I figured the best way to get back at him was to bang his wife.”

“You...what?” I struggled to process his words, and even Hawk’s eyes had widened. “Are you saying that...you and Clarice...”

“She’s not always as uptight as she appears.” He must have taken in my expression. “Yeah, it surprised me too.”

“How did you meet her? I mean, going from a vehicular accident to an affair is a big step.”

“Not really. I did yard work at the Farber house—still do—and even before Buckley backed into my truck in the driveway, I knew how lonely she was. He was never there, just left her to raise Charity while he played golf or whatever.”

All the little pieces began to click into place. Chas’s rebellious nature. The way Charity had Buckley’s nose and chin and Chas looked nothing like him. Even Chas’s miraculous conception—Charity had taken three gruelling rounds of IVF, while Chas, it seemed, had only taken a romp with the landscaper.

“She’s your daughter.”

“I was scared shitless—damn...darn, I mean ‘scared stiff’—when the test came up positive. We both were. I was only twenty, and Clarice wasn’t much older.”

“So you decided to pretend she was Buckley’s?”

“He wanted another kid anyway. He’d been pushing Clarice to go through IVF again, and she said it was awful—injections, hormones all over the place, doctors fishing around inside. Buckley never wanted to believe that he was the problem, so letting him think she’d conceived naturally seemed like the best solution.”

“Best solution for who? For you?”

“For everyone. I was a terrified kid sharing an apartment with two other guys. Clarice was living in a five-bedroom McMansion in a good neighbourhood, no money worries whatsoever. She was never going to leave Buckley. Hell—heck—I couldn’t even afford the medical insurance so she could give birth safely, and Chas’s health was the most important consideration. We came to an arrangement—she’d let Buckley think he was Chas’s father, and I’d get two visits a month.”

“Why didn’t you just make a clean break?”

“Because she’s my daughter. You don’t have kids, do you? I realise that being a parent isn’t for everyone, but I love my little girl.” He glanced over at the riding ring, where Chas was getting ready to climb onto a champagne-coloured pony. “I guess she’s not so little anymore.”

“Buckley’s never asked questions? Never wondered why the landscaper was taking his daughter to the petting zoo? You’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

“It’s one of Chas’s favourite places. And no, Buckley’s never been around enough to notice or care. He likes to brag that he’s a father, but he doesn’t understand the true meaning of the word.”

“What about Charity? Does she know?”

“She’s always busy doing some activity or another. I hear she’s quite good at playing the violin.”

“And Chas has never slipped up? Mentioned you in front of Buckley?”

“Oh, sure she has, especially when she was younger. Clarice just told



Buckley that Chas has an imaginary friend named Eddie.”

Oh. My. Goodness.

I could absolutely believe that Buckley was that dumb, but at the same time, the story was unbelievable. Clarice had spent a decade lying to all of us, maintaining the illusion of a perfect wife while sleeping with the landscaper and hiding her daughter’s parentage. Clarice’s initial reaction when I’d told her Chas wasn’t in her room made sense as well—she hadn’t been so concerned that her daughter was missing, more freaked out that Buckley had noticed.

“Are you and Clarice...you know...still together?”

Eddie laughed. “No, aw, heck no. The pregnancy gave us both a wake-up call. We couldn’t keep playing with fire, and when it came to making a choice, she picked financial security over fun. We stayed friendly, though. If she’d left Buckley, I’d have stood by her, no question, but the final decision was hers.”

“And whose decision was it to bring Chas here today?”

“Chas’s. Look, Clarice has been messing me around for months, cancelling visits because Buckley’s been at home doing some nifty shit on his computer instead of playing golf.” Nifty shit? Then it clicked. The NFTs. “And for the past three days, Chas has been calling me in tears because Odette keeps yelling at her, so I figured she needed a break. I told Clarice I’d bring her back for the ceremony. Odette really delayed things by three hours?”

“Yup.”

“Figures.”

Eddie’s tone told me he wasn’t an Odette fan.

“You know Odette?”

“Met her a few times over the years.” He gave a little snort and smiled. “The Farber lawn is the only one I still cut personally. Got sixty guys working for me now, and Grass Masters is franchised across seven states.”

“Congratulations.”

“Made my money the old-fashioned way,” he told me proudly. “I didn’t come from a wealthy family.”

The words left unsaid? *Unlike Buckley.*

“How did you get Chas out of the hotel?”

“I didn’t. She snuck out of a side door all by herself. My little girl’s clever.”

Chas was on the pony now, trotting around the ring with a huge smile on her face as the handler jogged beside her, and I realised this was the happiest I’d ever seen her. Gone was the Stepford Child. She had smudges of dirt on her jeans, her hair was sticking out in every direction, and when the pony shook its head, she hooted with laughter.

“Does she take regular riding lessons?”

Eddie nodded. “For the past year. Someday, I’d like to get her a horse of her own, but that might have to wait until she goes to college.”

“And what will you tell Buckley?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Maybe he won’t be in the picture? Clarice gets more unhappy with each passing year.”

“That’s not what she says. She never misses an opportunity to tell me how much better her life is than mine.”

Eddie guffawed, but there was nothing funny about having my entire existence constantly belittled.

“She doesn’t handle envy well.”

“Envy?”

He nodded. “She’ll never openly admit it, but she’s always been envious that you had the guts to leave and do your own thing, even when everyone said you were making the wrong decision. Criticism is something else Clarice can’t deal with.”

“She’s been a bitch to me for years.”

“I can’t comment on that. But Clarice is two souls living in the same body

—a woman who wants to fit in, and a girl who longs to rebel. Growing up with parents like yours wasn't easy. You reacted by walking your own path in life, but Clarice took a different approach."

I guess that made a weird kind of sense. While I'd always run from pressure, she'd shielded herself from criticism by toeing the family line. I was still mad at her for the way she treated me, but now at least I understood. This conversation with Eddie, it was a key. A key to unlocking the secrets of my family and myself. Hell, Clarice and I probably both needed therapy.

"What about Odette?" I asked. "She acted the same way as Clarice."

"No offence, because I know she's your sister, but she's a nasty piece of work. And also your mom's favourite daughter, so Clarice tiptoes around her."

"No offence taken."

How could I be offended when he spoke the truth?

Behind Eddie, Hawk tapped his watch, and my mind jolted back to a much bigger problem than my screwed-up childhood. We had a wedding to attend. A child's disappearance to explain.

"We need to take Chas back to Steppen Island."

Eddie checked the time as well. "Yeah, after the Shetland pony show."

"No, right now."

Although I wasn't certain how we'd do that on a dirt bike. I'd have to ride in a cab with Chas while Hawk followed.

"Chas pinky promised that she'd wear the flower girl dress Odette chose without a fight as long as she could watch the show. Unless you want more tears, you'll need to wait."

"What if someone calls the police? Or the FBI?"

How would I explain my disaster of a family to my former colleagues? I'd be the talk of the office again, and I didn't even work there anymore.

"They won't. Clarice will hold them off."

Was she capable? I had to concede she was an excellent liar. She'd pulled

the wool over everyone's eyes for over ten years. Plus nobody at the hotel would *want* to believe there was a problem, not today, not when Odette was due to tie the knot with Stu in less than three hours.

Which meant I had a decision to make. Eddie's revelations had left me reeling, and jumbled thoughts careened around inside my head. I could insist on taking Chastity back to the hotel this second, and I didn't think he'd stop me. A part of me wanted to reveal Clarice's hypocrisy to the world, to show that she wasn't the perfect wife she pretended to be, but how would that help Chas?

Eddie wasn't going anywhere for the moment, that much was clear, and when I motioned to Hawk, he left Eddie's side and came to mine.

"We need a minute," I told Eddie.

"Sure." He shrugged and turned to face the riding arena, a faint smile on his face.

Hawk gave my shoulder a squeeze. "Chin up, Lerner. This wedding weekend's been more fun than I expected. I figured we'd just stand around eating hors d'oeuvres most of the time."

"What the hell should we do?"

"About Chas?"

"About Chas, about Clarice, about this whole non-kidnapping."

"All we need to do is take the kid back to the hotel. The rest of the shitshow is Clarice's problem."

"But Clarice has been lying about everything."

"And if you announce that at Odette's wedding, how do you think it'll go?" Hawk settled his arms around my waist. "I get that you're angry, and you have every right to be. Clarice hasn't made your life easy."

"And thanks to her lies this morning, we nearly got totalled by a semi."

His lips flickered into a smile. "Nah, babe, there was plenty of room."

"So you think we should cover for her?"

"Who's the most important person in this situation?"

I answered with no hesitation. “Chas.”

At least she was smiling now. Eddie was a better father than Buckley, and I actually kind of liked the guy. Yes, he’d been an absolute dick when he was younger, but he’d learned and grown from his mistakes, and he was doing his best to be a father to Chas in the limited way possible.

“And what do you think would be best for her?” Hawk asked.

“If all the adults in her life avoided a fistfight at her aunt’s wedding?”

“Exactly. We’ll take her back, keep our mouths shut, and let the chips fall where they may.”

I let the sweet taste of revenge slip away and nodded. Fine, we’d take Chas and bite our tongues through the ceremony, but I *would* be having words in private with Clarice later.



## AGATHA

“**W**e *will* talk about this,” I’d hissed at Clarice before Hawk and I took our seats on the terrace beside the ocean.

I expected a snippy comment, but she’d just nodded and disappeared back into the bridal suite to assist Odette. Inside, I could hear my younger sister panicking about the damp grass outside, and how was she supposed to walk over it in heels?

Chas’s return had gone surprisingly smoothly, although of course, I was only now realising what a duplicitous nature Clarice had been hiding. While we watched the Shetland pony show, an intern from Blackwood’s Portland office had arrived at Ambling Acres with a Ford Explorer, and I’d ridden back to Steppen Island with Chas in the back seat, the two of us hidden behind tinted windows. Hawk was with us the whole way, following on the bike, and he kept the ferry captain busy so he didn’t get too curious about any passengers in the SUV.

Meanwhile, Clarice told Buckley that Chas had finally answered her phone and admitted she was hiding but wouldn’t say where, and when the SUV pulled up outside the hotel, Hawk and I had miraculously “found” her behind a bush in the parking lot. Clarice promised to have a serious talk with Chas later rather than causing more drama because nobody wanted to spoil Odette’s special day, did they? My big sis could teach the folks at work a

thing or two about long-term covert ops.

While we drove back, Odette had gone into a full-on meltdown, furious that her wedding was being overshadowed by a missing child. Chas had been fired as a flower girl, a move intended as a punishment but one that had left Chas beaming with happiness. Now she was sitting between Buckley and me in the second row, fiddling with the hem of her non-ruffled dress.

A three-hour delay turned into three and a half as Mom calmed Odette down, and on the way to our seats, I'd overheard the waitstaff panicking that the food would be overcooked. *This will all be over soon.* I sucked in a calming breath, taking in the aroma of salt water and paint. Yes, paint. Odette had insisted that the florist spray-paint the freaking peonies, although to my untrained eye, they still looked exactly the same colour as they had in the first place. *Twenty-four hours, and I'll be packing my bags to go home.*

Hawk squeezed my hand. Although I'd hated the wedding celebrations, one good thing had come from this trip, and that was my future with the man I'd fallen in love with. Yes, I loved him. Clarice might not be able to admit to her true feelings, but I finally could. I wanted this moody, brave, ridiculously sexy asshole to be mine forever.

Okay, so confessing out loud might take me a few more weeks, but at least I knew where I stood.

The rest of the guests settled into their seats, and I leaned my head on Hawk's shoulder. When we arrived back at the hotel, he'd changed into a dark-grey suit, and not just any old off-the-rack suit. No, it looked custom made, and it had taken every ounce of my self-control not to peel him right back out of it. He looked *hot*. Better yet, he'd promised to do magic things with the silk tie when we got back to our room, and my panties were damp already.

Chas gripped my other hand. "How long till it's done?"

"Not long now, kid."

"And then there's gonna be cake, right?"



“Yes, there’ll be cake.”

A three-tier fruit cake decorated with sugar peonies, to be precise, topped with a tiny bride and groom painted to look just like Odette and Stu, if Stu had been three inches taller and fifteen pounds lighter.

Music started, the traditional wedding march, and I sighed with relief as Stu took his place by the altar and the wedding party made their way down the aisle. When Clarice appeared, I glared at her, but she refused to meet my gaze. Clarice was followed by Charity, perfectly prim as she carried both rings, and Odette, who looked just a tiny bit smug because, as usual, she’d gotten everything she wanted. A late ceremony, pink flowers, the man of her dreams and my nightmares. She stood under the hastily acquired gazebo with Stu, their hands clasped. His parents looked on from the front row, his mom dripping with diamonds and dabbing at her eyes with a lacy handkerchief.

“Ladies and gentlemen, family and friends,” the officiant began. “We are gathered here today to witness and celebrate the joining of Odette and Stuart in marriage. With love and commitment, they have decided to—”

“Hey, did I miss the objection part? Tell me I didn’t miss the objection part.”

All heads swivelled to the back, where a pretty young blonde in a babydoll dress stood with her arm looped through a twenty-something guy’s, puffing as she tried to catch her breath.

“No, ma’am,” the officiant said. “We didn’t get to that part yet.”

“Skip it,” Odette ordered. “Just skip it.”

“Can they do that?” Hawk whispered.

“Who knows?”

The officiant stepped forward. “Do you have an objection?” he asked the newcomers.

It was the guy who spoke. “Yeah, we do. That jackass in the tuxedo got my sister pregnant and then refused to take her calls.” He was pointing at Stu. “He didn’t even give her his real name.”

Shocked gasps drowned out the music, and Hawk's lips twitched.

"This should be good," he whispered.

Odette's jaw dropped. For the first time in her life, she was speechless, but it didn't matter. Because when it came down to it, there was one woman in our family who was the undisputed master at slaying a person with words and a withering gaze, and that was our mother. She drew herself up to her full height, all five feet two of it, and marched up to Stu.

"Is this true?"

"I... Uh..." He squinted at the blonde. "Marcie?"

"It's Darcy."

Had we accidentally stumbled down a rabbit hole and ended up in Wonderland? This was surreal. And also strangely satisfying.

"Who added schadenfreude to the guest list?" I whispered to Hawk.

"No fuckin' clue, but I'm here for it."

"We should've brought popcorn."

"Probably woulda been cheaper than that biodegradable confetti."

My mom had never been a violent person—guilt and shame were her weapons—but today, she raised a hand and slapped Stu so hard he staggered sideways.

"You are *not* marrying my daughter."

Odette dropped her bouquet and sank to the ground, holding her stomach.

"This can't be happening."

"Oh, it isn't. Odette, that girl is pregnant."

"Well, so am I."

Called it. Damn, I hoped the videographer was getting this on tape.

The wedding descended into chaos. Darcy's brother ran up the aisle and landed a well-deserved punch, and blood gushed from Stu's nose as he stumbled into the officiant and knocked him to the ground. Mom and Mrs. Boldt got into a verbal altercation that turned physical when Mrs. Boldt emptied a bottle of water over Mom's head and yelled that Odette wasn't

good enough for her son anyway, and Charity began screaming. Clarice helped Odette to her feet, and someone must have called for medical help because a man in golf slacks carrying a doctor's bag ran into the melee a few minutes later, just as it started to rain. Presumably he'd been playing a round on the course next door, one more person whose day had been ruined by Stu and Odette's antics.

Marjorie, Ashley, and Kimberlee stood under the gazebo open-mouthed, clutching their bouquets of painted flowers. What were they waiting for? The "kiss the bride" part? Because the only thing Stu would be kissing today was ass. Then Mom threw an emergency can of hairspray at Mrs. Boldt and it hit Ashley instead. Kimberlee began screeching while Ashley swayed a little, and one of the groomsmen smacked her hand away when she reached out for support. What a charmer. Marjorie wisely decided to get the hell out of there, but not so wisely, she did that by running past me. I stuck my foot out, and she shrieked as she tripped and fell head first into the non-koi pond.

"Peons, one, pageant girls, nil," I told her as the photographer snapped away with manic glee. Well, he'd been paid to take pictures, hadn't he?

"What's happening?" Chas sobbed. "I don't like this."

Buckley had abandoned her to help Stu, so Hawk scooped her up in one arm and wrapped the other around me.

"What time are they serving the hors d'oeuvres?" he asked.

I choked out a laugh.

"Who knows? Maybe never."

"Then why don't we take a walk to the café? We can return the keys to the bike on the way."

"That's the best idea I've heard all day."



“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for everything I said and did over the past decade. I just... If you’re not part of the team, you’re a target, and I was scared. Scared of being pushed out, of being ostracised and left with nothing.” Clarice took another gulp of wine. “I’m not smart like you, Aggie.”

“It’s Agatha.”

“Uh, right. Agatha.”

“And it was more than ten years. You’ve been mean to me for most of my life.”

“I really am sorry.”

Charity and Chas were in bed, Buckley had gone to the hospital on the mainland with Stu, and I was sitting on the velvet couch in Clarice’s hotel room with a large glass of rosé. She’d already drunk most of a bottle.

Her apology was welcome, but too little and too late. I couldn’t simply forgive and forget, not yet.

“I judge people on actions, not words. If you truly are sorry, you need to show it, not just say it.”

“How?”

“By not making me feel small every time we see each other. Even if you don’t stick up for me when Mom and Odette put me down, the least you could do is not join in. And how about accepting that wanting to stay childless is a perfectly valid life choice? Not being a mother doesn’t make me a lesser person, and nor does having a boyfriend instead of a husband. I enjoy my job. I’m comfortable in my apartment. And I love Hawk.”

“Hawk? Who’s Hawk?”

“Kellan. Who’s actually called Brendan, but that isn’t important right now. What matters is that I’m happy. The only thing that makes me unhappy is coming back to Maine and spending time around my family.”

“I wish I could be happy,” she whispered.

Clarice’s cheeks were streaked with tears, and her hair was a bird’s nest of crispy hairspray and loose bobby pins. She’d changed into silk pyjamas

and a robe, which was as casual as she got. In Clarice-terms, she was a mess. She'd never normally be seen dead in sleepwear.

"You *could* be happy. If you don't like the status quo, change it."

"But I don't have any money. There's a prenup—Buckley's parents insisted on it because he inherited the house from his grandfather."

"Then get a job."

"How? I have children."

"So do millions of other employees. Start with part-time work during school hours, or get Buckley to step up on the weekends."

Her uncharacteristic snort told me what she thought of that possibility.

"Buckley's always busy on the weekends."

"So I heard from Eddie. Who seems like a decent guy, by the way."

Clarice had chosen the wrong partner. Sure, Eddie had been poor when they met, but he'd have stepped up—he'd said it himself. And real men weren't born; they were made.

"He is. Thank you for not telling Buckley about him."

"I didn't do that for you; I did it for Chas. But you should tell Buckley yourself—lying isn't fair to anyone."

"He'd divorce me."

"And that's a bad thing? He'd also have to pay child support for Charity, and I'm sure Eddie would contribute toward Chas's needs."

"He puts the money into a separate bank account every month. It's her college fund."

"Well, there you go. If you want to spend the rest of your life running around after Buckley, carry on as you are. But if you're as unhappy as you seem to be, then you need to learn that change comes from within. Only you can make the difference. Be true to yourself."

I rose from the couch and headed to the door. Either Clarice would change or she wouldn't—I was done caring. Hawk was waiting for me. My own personal therapist, and I definitely enjoyed his hands-on approach.



## AGATHA

“S ure you don’t want to skip this?” Hawk asked.

Whenever there was a murder or a kidnapping or some other nasty crime, I always wanted to know the details. Call it a bad habit, but that curiosity was why I’d read true-crime books obsessively as a child, and it was why I’d become an FBI agent. It was also why I’d be going to Odette’s post-shitshow brunch instead of staying in bed for two extra hours. In all honesty, I was surprised Odette hadn’t cancelled, but Dad said that he’d paid for the food so we were damn well going to eat it. Plus the ferry service didn’t start until after church on Sundays, so we were stuck on the island anyway. At least the guided walk had been called off.

“It’s tempting to duck out, but I’m curious. Aren’t you curious?”

“In a rubbernecker-at-a-car-crash kind of way. Did Stu get his nose reset?”

“I’m not sure. Can you zip me up?”

I turned so Hawk could reach the zipper on my floral shift dress. He looked as uncomfortable in his chinos and dress shirt as I felt. After he’d used his tie as a blindfold and fucked me in the hot tub yesterday, he’d stuffed the suit into his duffel bag, then chuckled when I fished it out and hung it neatly in the closet.

“Don’t get any ideas, babe. That’s for weddings and funerals only.”

“What if I said I was harbouring a secret ambition to sneak into the bathroom at one of those fancy gala dinners Emmy always has spare tickets for and suck your cock while you’re wearing it?”

“I’ll get it dry-cleaned next week.”

I checked my reflection in the mirror. Only one more day of pretending to be a respectable daughter and not the black sheep of the family. Should I wear the kitten heels or the sandals? The strap on the sandals rubbed, but the kitten heels were hideous.

Wait a second... *Pretending?*

Hadn’t I given Clarice a well-deserved lecture on that very subject last night? I’d told her to be true to herself, but here I was, dressed as if I were heading to a church luncheon.

You know what? Screw it. Screw appearances and screw my parents’ expectations.

“Can you get the zipper again?” I asked Hawk.

“You’re changing?”

“We’re changing. Put on jeans and a T-shirt, the tighter the better. And your leather boots.”

“I left them in the truck.”

“Go get them, and my boots too.”

“Are you trying to give your mom a heart attack?”

“You think that’s possible?” I asked with a little too much hope in my voice.

“Probably not. I reckon there’s a fifty percent chance she’s animatronic. Did you see how many people it took to pull her away from Stu’s mom yesterday?”

Half a dozen at least, and she’d taken several handfuls of hair with her.

“I could hardly miss that.”

“If I ever come to one of your family events again, I’m gonna borrow an EMP weapon from work. That oughta take out half of the attendees.”



Good plan. “And I’ll remember my taser.”



“This is a private event, young man. You’ll have to eat somewhere else.”

Mom’s words dripped with condescension as she failed to recognise Hawk from a cursory glance. No, she just assumed he was an interloper and tried to shoo him away.

Instead of being fazed, he walked farther into the room where my whole family—minus Stu—was eating breakfast. Had Stu been excommunicated? Or was he still at the hospital? Perhaps he was drowning his sorrows over the fact that he’d have to pay two lots of child support?

“If I play my cards right, maybe you’ll be my mother-in-law someday, Janice.”

What? Hawk was kidding, right? He had to be kidding. I stepped out from behind him, resisting the urge to giggle when my mom’s already dark look turned positively black. I’d changed into skintight black jeans, a maroon tank top, and a pair of black Chelsea boots with a line of metal studs running up the heel.

“Hi, Mom. Hope someone saved me a croissant.”

She leaned forward in her seat. “What on earth are you wearing? You look terrible.”

“Clothes. I figured it would be inappropriate to show up in lingerie.”

“This is no time for jokes, Aggie.”

“My name is Agatha.”

“Yes, that’s what I called you.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Odette just had to chime in as well. “What’s all that stuff on your face?”

“Do you mean the lipstick or the eyeliner?”

“You look like an extra in a horror movie.”

“After what happened yesterday, I feel like an extra in a horror movie.”

“Aggie!” Mom’s fork clattered onto her plate. “Apologise to your sister. She’s traumatised.”

“So because Odette has terrible taste in men, I have to wear pastels?”

“You should dress appropriately for your age.” Her voice dropped to a hiss. “And that man you’re with has tattoos. I brought you up better than this.”

“No, you didn’t. You just made my life hell whenever I didn’t conform to your expectations.”

Support came from an unexpected source.

“I think she looks okay,” Clarice said. “The boots are nice.”

And Chas, bless her, jumped up and ran over to Hawk. She seemed to have forgiven him for twisting Eddie’s arm yesterday, probably because he’d bought her ice cream at the lighthouse café and listened patiently while she told him all about her favourite pony.

“You have drawings on your arms. Is that a dragon?”

“Yeah. His name is Kukulkan.”

“When I’m older, I want drawings on my arm, but I want horses. And a kitten. Mom, can I have drawings on my arm?”

“When you turn eighteen, we can discuss it.”

“Clarice!” Mom had us both in her sights now. “The correct answer is ‘no.’”

“If she’s legally an adult, I can’t stop her.”

“Buckley, has Clarice been drinking this morning?”

Buckley glanced up from his phone. “Uh, I don’t know. Maybe? Is there any more coffee?”

I pulled out an empty seat, and Hawk took his place next to me. Yes, this was uncomfortable, but for once Mom was on the back foot, and Odette was subdued too. Perhaps I should have felt sorry that her life had fallen apart?

She'd already quit her job in anticipation of becoming a housewife, and now she'd have to stay at home with Mom and Dad for a while longer. But after my ex cheated on me, I distinctly recalled her telling me it was my own fault because I'd tried dating out of my league, and so today, I struggled to dredge up any sympathy.

No, I stayed polite and made small talk, mostly with Clarice, and occasionally with Buckley and my dad. But every time Mom or Odette tried to land a job, I blocked and countered with one of my own. At one point, I caught them looking at each other, puzzled. Who was this woman and where had meek little Aggie gone? Hawk kept one arm draped over the back of my chair, providing support but letting me take the lead.

I couldn't say I'd enjoyed the weekend, but I'd learned a lot. About Hawk, about my family, and about myself. I'd finally stood my ground against my parents, and I'd discovered that my sisters weren't as perfect as I thought—Clarice might even be human—plus I got to hang out with my favourite niece. And most importantly, I'd found the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with.

Our relationship would never conform to my mother's ideals, but one thing was for sure—we'd be putting the fun in dysfunctional.



## EPILOGUE - HAWK

**T**hree months later...

The miles disappeared beneath the wheels of Hawk Hauser's motorcycle. Life didn't get much better than this—he had his bike, his girl, and the whole weekend ahead of him. It had taken him a month to persuade Agatha back onto a bike—this time with leathers, boots, and a properly fitted helmet—and when they returned from the short test ride, she'd grudgingly admitted it had been "okay." But she'd also struggled to hide her smile, and he'd known then that someday, she'd grow into a biker babe.

*His biker babe.*

Today, they were on their way to Connecticut for a dirty mini-break. So fucking domesticated, but Hawk had grown used to doing the boyfriend thing now. Wondered why the fuck he hadn't tried it sooner. Fear had a hell of a lot to answer for.

Agatha had found a hotel she liked on the coast, and they planned to spend four days Netflix and chilling. Maybe five days. Blackwood was flexible when it came to taking time off, and nobody minded if staff on the Special Projects team headed off on an impromptu break when things were quieter. If a cyber emergency arose, Agatha would have her laptop with her. She took it everywhere, the same way Hawk carried a gun.

Everyone at work knew they were an item now. It had come as no surprise at all that their colleagues had been running a pool, although there was some disagreement on when it should pay out. Was the official start of Hawk and Agatha's relationship the weekend on Steppen Island, or the night in the Brotherhood's parking lot? In the end, Emmy and Luther had agreed to split the pot. In Hawk's eyes, the only thing that mattered was that he had Agatha now, and he intended to keep her.

On Sunday, they planned to meet Clarice. It would be the first time Agatha had seen her sister since the non-wedding, but they had been talking regularly. Whatever Agatha had said that Saturday night on the island, it had made a difference. Clarice was attempting to be friendly, and although there were a fuck of a lot of bridges to mend, Agatha thought it was worth making the effort. Hawk wasn't sure he'd have been so forgiving, but his girl had a big heart.

Not big enough for Odette or her mom, though. Neither of them had called, and Agatha seemed fine with that. When SlugCoin lost ninety-nine percent of its value, she *had* brought out a bottle of champagne, poured two glasses, and toasted Hawk with a grin on her face. The loss wouldn't ruin Stu—apparently, he had a trust fund—but it wouldn't do him any favours either.

Hawk kept his speed down so Agatha would enjoy the ride, and they pulled up outside the hotel in the afternoon. The Sunshine Inn. He glanced skyward and saw nothing but clouds. The rain had held off for the trip, thank fuck, although showers were forecast overnight. Agatha climbed off the bike and stretched her legs.

“Okay?” he asked.

“A little stiff. I'm still getting used to this.”

She looked so damn hot in her leathers, even if she hated the “old lady” tag. Hawk respected that. Although he'd been brought up in The Darkness MC, there was plenty about the lifestyle that he disliked, which was why he didn't spend much time at the clubhouse anymore. He swung by to visit with

his dad most weeks, but evenings, he mostly hung out with Agatha unless he was working. Sometimes he went out for beers with his buddies, but he turned down more invites than he accepted. This relationship was too important to risk losing.

“I can help you to loosen up, but do you want to get dinner first?”

“How about we compromise on room service?”

“Works for me.”

He'd arranged for a fancy box of chocolates to be waiting, plus a bottle of good champagne, so they could start with those. Every damn day was worth celebrating when he was with his girl. The suite he'd splashed out on had a balcony with a sea view, no hot tub this time, but he was planning to install one in his yard next spring, so it didn't matter. Agatha had more or less moved in now. Her clothes were in his closet, and she'd made friends with the neighbours. Yeah, she still had her apartment, but they hadn't spent a night there in weeks, and even her cat called Hawk's place home these days.

“You did good, Hauser,” she said as she flopped backward onto the bed. “This room is the size of a football field.”

“Don't get any ideas about running for the end zone.”

“I won't,” she said, her voice dreamy. “I'll just lie here and wait for you to score a touchdown.”

Room service could wait. He undressed her slowly, savouring every inch of creamy white skin that was revealed, tasting her, worshipping her. This woman was his everything, and he didn't need a ring to tell him that. Agatha responded to his touch with breathy little gasps, her legs parting as he worked his way down her body, nipping at her breasts in the way that made her moan before he fucked her with his tongue. He loved making her come like this. Loved seeing her body arch off the bed as his name spilled from her lips. He was hard already, had been for half the trip north, and her thighs were slick when he slipped inside her. Tight, warm, ready. Always ready. Two weeks ago, they'd stopped at the Brotherhood for dinner, and he'd fingered her in

the parking lot, just for old times' sake. Except that night, she'd dropped to her knees afterward and returned the favour.

His perfect partner.

He'd marry her if she wanted that, but she said her family had put her off marriage for life. Hawk would take whatever she gave, and in return, he'd give her himself, in every way she'd take.



“Hey.”

Agatha greeted Clarice with a tentative hug. They'd agreed to meet at a zoo in Bridgeport, one which didn't have ponies, but Chas wanted to see the tigers. Charity was at a music camp, and Buckley had flown to Vegas for a three-day bachelor party after he left the office on Friday.

“Hi.”

“Auntie Agatha!” Chas's hug was more enthusiastic, and Hawk didn't escape her affections either. “Uncle Hawk?”

“If that's what you want to call me.”

Seemed he was staying in the kid's life, so he didn't mind the nickname. Uncle Eddie was still around too. Apparently, he'd built a barn in the pasture beside his house, and he was planning to buy Chas a pony for Christmas. She didn't know it yet. And since horses weren't fond of living on their own, he was learning to ride as well with a view to getting the pony a friend.

Meanwhile, Buckley had forgotten his not-daughter's tenth birthday, and when Clarice reminded him about the party, he'd said he had to work late and skipped it entirely.

Agatha sensed that change was coming. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not even this year, but Clarice was taking an online bookkeeping course, and at a point in the not-too-distant future, Buckley would have to find some other



poor sap to iron his underwear.

Chas grabbed Hawk's hand. "Can we go see the tigers now?"

"Sure."

"And there are red pandas too. I watched them on a camera on the internet."

"Do you know where we're going?"

"I learned the map. Will you ride on the carousel with me?"

Agatha was trying not to laugh, and even Clarice was smiling.

"I'm probably too big for that."

"But if you're not?"

It couldn't be worse than riding in a Mad Max-style armoured pickup through a sketchy part of Al Anbar province, right?

"As long as your Auntie Agatha promises not to take any pictures."

"What if my finger just happened to slip on the button?" she asked.

"Babe..."

"Okay, okay. The memory alone will be worth it."

"You can take a picture of me." Chas tripped over a loose paving stone.  
"Shit."

Clarice sucked in a breath. "You shouldn't say that word, sweetie."

"Daddy says it. He says it a lot. And he yells at me for singing and at Charity for playing her violin. When we go to stay with Uncle Eddie, can I sing again?"

Chas looked to Clarice, whose cheeks turned scarlet. "Uh...uh, yes, you can."

When they went to stay with Uncle Eddie? Was Buckley spending that much time away from home that he'd fail to notice if his wife and daughters spent nights with her ex? Agatha was burning to ask, Hawk could tell, but she managed to keep her mouth shut until they reached the tiger enclosure. When Chas ran forward to peer through the windows, Agatha turned to her sister and raised an eyebrow.

“Sleepovers?”

“I can’t stand it any longer.” Clarice’s words tumbled out in a rush. “None of us are happy, and Buckley’s temper’s gotten ten times worse since he lost money on some crypto thing. Eddie has a guest house on his property, and he said we can stay there until I get a job and find somewhere more permanent.”

Smart move.

“The girls are okay with that?”

“Chas can’t wait to spend more time there.”

“What about Charity?”

“I haven’t told her yet, but she’s miserable because Buckley won’t let her practise her piece for the school concert. I know I’m her mom and I’m biased, but she has real talent, and she’s gradually dropping all of her other hobbies to focus on music.”

“I’m just happy you have a safe place to go.” Agatha took both of Clarice’s hands in hers. “Do you have any idea when you’ll leave?”

“Next weekend. Buckley has a work conference in New Hampshire.”

*Alleged* work conference. Agatha had been monitoring Buckley’s finances just in case a divorce was on the horizon, and she’d noted that the man spent a fuck ton of money on OnlyFans, including five hundred bucks for a VIP ticket to a meet-and-greet with one of the women.

“Will you be okay moving on your own?” Agatha asked.

Clarice nodded. “I’ve taken five carloads of stuff over there already. The place is furnished, and it’s looking real nice.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re making the right decision, for you and the girls.”

Hawk shared the same opinion. Buckley was a jackass. Literally everything came before his wife and kids, and Hawk would bet his favourite Harley that the man wasn’t wearing his wedding ring in Vegas.

“I know I am. What you said after Odette’s lucky escape really hit home.

Did I want to spend another nine years waiting for the girls to leave for college before I found the courage to file for divorce?” Clarice shook her head. “Starting fresh now will be hard, but at least when I turn forty, I’ll be settled into a new life, whatever that life might be like.”

Hawk could take a guess. He’d seen the look in Eddie’s eyes when the guy talked about Clarice. A decade might have passed since they last hooked up, but he still had feelings for her. Guest house, huh?

There was no hope for Odette—she was still pining after Stu while the prick tried to wriggle out of paying child support—but Clarice had seen the light and realised that staying in a bad marriage was worse for kids than making a clean break. She’d do okay.

And so would Hawk and Agatha.

No, they’d do better than okay. There wouldn’t be kids or wedding bells, but damn, it felt good to have someone to go home to at the end of each day. To share his secrets and his life with. Some nights, he’d just lie there watching her sleep, which he’d worried she might find creepy, but one time, she’d woken up and caught him and confessed she did the same. Now, he couldn’t imagine a future without her in it. Didn’t want to. Ring or no ring, she was his, to have and fucking hold, till death do us part. Maybe he *would* buy her a ring. Not a wedding ring, more of an “I’ll love you until the end of time” ring.

Yeah, he’d do that. When he got back to Virginia, he’d do that.

“Starting fresh might not be as hard as you think,” Agatha said to Clarice. “And weekends will be so much more fun if you’re not looking for Buckley’s missing golf glove.”

“I hid his golf glove behind the ironing board. He’ll never find it.”

“Good for you.”

“Lose one of the clubs too,” Hawk suggested. “Only one. Fifty bucks says he won’t notice until he goes to use it.”

Clarice nodded. “Agatha, you found a good man.”

“I didn’t just find a good man; I found the best man.” Agatha grinned.  
“And he’s gonna ride that carousel horse like a pro.”

Fuck, he thought she’d forgotten about that, but he might be able to turn the situation to his advantage. Hawk leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“Only if you promise to ride my face later.”

The blush spread up to her ears, and “later” couldn’t come soon enough.  
“You drive a hard bargain.”

“Do we have a deal?”

“We have a deal.”

## WHAT'S NEXT?

**My next book will be *A Secret to Die For*, the fourth book in the Baldwin's Shore series...**

All Sara Baldwin ever wanted was to be a dancer, but that dream died along with her mom and dad when she was nine years old. As the only witness, Sara was too scared to tell anyone what she saw.

At LKB Events, she takes on the challenge of making others' dreams come true while she works toward the goal set by her grandfather to claim her inheritance. But the path to happiness is paved with pitfalls, and when she's fired from the company she helped to build, the bottom drops out of Sara's world. She falls with it, right into the path of a monster.

US Marine Garrett Dorsey doesn't believe in fairy tales. On active duty, he saw the worst of humanity, and after returning home to run the family business, he definitely isn't looking for love. But all that changes the night a fake Cinderella sprints out of the ballroom at the Peninsula Hotel, leaving his bruised ego and one glittering shoe in her wake...

For more details:

[www.elise-noble.com/a-secret-to-die-for](http://www.elise-noble.com/a-secret-to-die-for)

**The next instalment in the Blackwood Security series is Hallie's story, *Pretties in Pink*...**

Five years ago, Mila Carmody disappeared from her bed, and that was just the beginning. Six little girls, swallowed by darkness, never to be seen alive again. For Micah Ganaway, it might be the end. Arrested for child abduction, he's already been tried in the court of public opinion and found guilty. The lead detective assures him the trial is just a formality.

But private investigator Hallie Chastain isn't so sure. On paper, Ganaway makes a good suspect, but in person... Well, that's a different matter.

For more details:

[www.elise-noble.com/pink](http://www.elise-noble.com/pink)

**If you enjoyed *Phantom*, please consider leaving a review.**

For an author, every review is incredibly important. Not only do they make us feel warm and fuzzy inside, readers consider them when making their decision whether or not to buy a book. Even a line saying you enjoyed the book or what your favourite part was helps a lot.

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### **Blackwood Security**

For the Love of Animals (Nate & Carmen - Prequel)

Black is My Heart (Diamond & Snow - Prequel)

Pitch Black

Into the Black

Forever Black

Gold Rush

Gray is My Heart

Neon (novella)

Out of the Blue

Ultraviolet

Glitter (novella)

Red Alert

White Hot

Sphere (novella)

The Scarlet Affair

Spirit (novella)

Quicksilver

The Girl with the Emerald Ring

Red After Dark

When the Shadows Fall

Phantom (novella)

Pretties in Pink

Chimera

The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (2024)

Blue Moon (2024)



## **Blackwood Elements**

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## **Blackwood UK**

Joker in the Pack

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## **Blackwood Casefiles**

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Blurred Lines (novella)

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Cursed

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A Very Happy Christmas (novella)

A Very Happy Valentine (2024)

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Life

Coco du Ciel

Twisted (short stories)

## **Books with clean versions available (no swearing and no on-the-page sex)**

Pitch Black

Into the Black

Forever Black

Gold Rush

Gray is My Heart

## **Audiobooks**

Black is My Heart (Diamond & Snow - Prequel)

Pitch Black

Into the Black

Forever Black

Gold Rush

Gray is My Heart

Neon (novella)