



# HOUSE OF AGNES

FIONA ZEDDE



# CHAPTER 1

“YOU KNOW, ALL WORK AND no play makes Queen Agnes a very dull girl.”

Agnes saved the spreadsheet on her computer and looked up, masking her irritation at being interrupted. A glimmer of light fell over the bare shoulders of the woman walking into her office unannounced, the emerald minidress a complement to her slim but curvaceous figure. The woman’s high heels teased the marble floor, and her smile said she wanted a lot more than a talk.

“It’s a good thing I’m not a girl then.” She sat back in her leather executive chair, giving Rox the attention she obviously wanted. “The evening went well?” Although if it hadn’t, one of Agnes’s security people would’ve let her know long before now.

“Just as expected.” Rox gave her trademark smile, the one that regularly had men and women offering up thousands of dollars to spend a few hours with her.

She pulled a small stack of bills from her cleavage, all hundreds and all miraculously dry, and laid it on Agnes’s desk. “It went *very* well, actually. And I kept the tip.” Her cheek dimpled and her red mouth glistened in the soft golden glow from the Tiffany desk lamp. “Care to help me celebrate?”

Before Agnes could accept or refuse the offer, Rox shrugged off her dress. It slithered from her body and pooled around her feet in a puddle of green satin.

Agnes drew in a breath. The lamplight played over Rox’s curves, showing off her high breasts with nipples stiff from the arctic air-conditioning. Her

belly was tight with muscle and her hips rounded and smooth. The V at the joining of her thighs was completely bare of hair.

Bald vaginas had never been Agnes's thing.

She sat back in her chair and rolled her favorite pen between her fingers, leisurely appreciating all the ways Rox had taken care of her body.

The woman was beautiful. Truly. From the loose waves of hair around her fashion model face to her long legs and every worthwhile stop in between. But Agnes didn't fuck any of the women who worked for her. Never had, never would.

They all knew that and, Agnes was well aware, still tried to make a game of seducing her. She'd seen plenty of naked women before though, had touched enough of them, had made them come. There was nothing special she could have by drinking from that particular well.

"I've already had my dinner for the night," she said with slightly pursed lips, finally smiling when Rox huffed out a sigh of frustration and picked up her dress.

They'd done this dance too many times before for Agnes's refusal to come as a surprise.

"Look at you," Rox went on. "With your gorgeous face, all that flawless skin, those tits and legs any girl here would kill for, you're perfect. But you might as well be a statue for all the use you make of what some of us go under the knife to get. It's a waste."

Even for Rox, this was a little far. She usually only took it as far as a little flirtation, flashing bare breasts or sending suggestive texts. However, her attempt at cruelty was nothing compared to what Agnes had suffered on a daily basis at the hands of the man who'd raised her.

"Are you quite finished?" Agnes didn't hide her amusement at the pathetic stab.

It made her glad, these flashes of meaningless challenge she saw in Rox and some of the others. Before, with her father, they'd been too terrified to do more than breathe around him. Now, they felt safe.

Rox made that frustrated sound again. "Fine, but you can't sit here untouched in your glass tower forever. One day, you'll have to let someone in, let them touch you, and feel what it's like to be a real woman instead of a queen of air and broken dreams." Rox draped the three-thousand-dollar

dress around her neck like a scarf and turned on her stilettos, her nude body again shimmering faintly in the light. “Good night, Queen Agnes.”

“Good night, Rox.”

Agnes went back to what she'd been working on before the interruption, paying scant attention to the petulant stab of high heels into marble as Rox walked away. She barely glanced at the stack of hundreds, content enough to know it was there.

“Oh, God, I'm so sorry!” Her assistant, Clare, rushed in, slight color in her cheeks despite the level tone of her voice. “I tried to stop her from interrupting you, but that woman who keeps trying to see you called again.” She swept up the cash Rox left and sat down on the nearby leather sofa to count it.

“Next time our persistent mystery woman calls, just put her through to Whit.” Whit was Agnes's personal security. “As for Rox,” she said with a faint quirk of her mouth. “I can handle a woman trying to seduce me.”

Clare acknowledged the order about the mystery woman with a nod. “Was that a seduction? It looked like an ambush to me.”

“To certain wildcats and other prey animals, it's the same thing.”

Clare snorted and tapped the neat stack of hundreds she'd just counted. “It's all here. Five thousand.” She made a note on the iPad she always carried and put the money in the floor safe hidden underneath a waist-high bronze statue of Oshun. “By the way, Rox requested the next week off.”

Agnes mentally consulted the schedule. “Of course. She's earned it. Give her two weeks if she needs more.”

“You know she won't.” Sitting once again on the sofa, Clare started doing something on her iPad that involved lots of fast but silent typing. “She'd want to get back to work as soon as whatever is keeping her away gets sorted.”

The “whatever” was probably a woman, maybe even someone Rox met on one of her recent assignments. Incredible. Sometimes Agnes was surprised at the stamina Rox had for someone her age. Agnes liked sex as much as most, but she couldn't understand doing it for work then running off and doing it for fun too. Which was probably why she wasn't having any sex at all.

“I just sent her the approval of the next week off and your offer for the one after that.” Clare interrupted Agnes’s useless musings on her sex life. She darkened the iPad’s screen and put the device face down on her lap.

“Perfect.” Agnes tapped the mouse to wake up her own screen. A reminder to herself that she still had work to do even if a part of her wanted to step out and breathe different air. “Thank you. You can head home now. I know it’s late.”

“I don’t mind staying.” Clare gave her quick smile, hands tucked in her lap. A trick she used to seem vulnerable and compliant when she was anything but. It also was a trick she didn’t need to use with Agnes. But habits were hard to break, especially ones painfully learned.

“I know, but you need to go home so I can have a clear conscience.” Agnes made a shooing motion toward the door. It was already half past five on a Friday afternoon. Although Clare’s cat wouldn’t be calling the cops to find out where her human went, Clare still needed some time away from The House. Even if she didn’t want to admit it.

“Fine. I’ll go, but only if you do too.”

Agnes raised an eyebrow, giving her assistant a single glance.

“Fine. I’ll stay out of your affairs.” Clare stood up, smoothing down her skirt. “You should leave, though. I’m sure there’s someone out there who wants your company.”

Agnes smiled at that not-so-subtle way of trying to find out what was going on in her life. They’d worked together for over five years now, the entire time this current version of The House had been in existence. Despite that, Clare—and most of The House’s employees—knew nearly nothing about Agnes’s personal life, and she preferred it that way.

She’d made The House of Agnes from the ashes of what it had been and created an image for herself—deliberately remote yet fair, untouchable, and just a little bit dangerous—so their competitors didn’t get any foolish ideas. That cultivated persona wasn’t easily worn, but she kept it up in all areas of the business. She didn’t become or stay Queen Agnes by allowing everyone to know intimate details about her, such as whether or not she had a family and, if so, where they lived. Not that many people even knew where she lived.

Her business details, though, were more public. It was common enough knowledge that the top three floors of this twenty-story building housed

her offices plus a pair of penthouse apartments for her exclusive company use. H Holdings, the name The House of Agnes did business under, quietly owned the whole building and rented the rest of it out to other businesses.

“Thank you, Clare. I’ll only be here another hour or so anyway.”

“All right. I’ll keep my cell phone close if you need me.” Then, with another apologetic smile, her assistant was gone.

Agnes waited until she heard Clare’s footsteps disappear down the hallway toward the elevator before she stood. Her bones hurt. She stretched her long body and sighed at the sensation of moving muscles held too long in one place. The outer glass walls of her office, tinted and bulletproof, reflected her figure against a background of the night’s darkness. High heels, matching gray skirt suit, white blouse with the high collar held closed by a diamond brooch. Cool. Professional.

Clare was right, though. It had been a long day, and this suit she wore, both the face and the outfit, were pulling tight now over her skin. She ached to get rid of them.

So, she did.

She slipped out of her suit, the matte heels, her boring blouse. Unpinned the stern updo. Her reflection this time was very different from the one everyone saw. Her nearly six-foot body, nude except for the plain black bra and G-string, straightened hair loose around her face and brushing the AC-hardened tips of her breasts. As Rox had so charmingly stated, not bad for thirty-six.

The freedom of being nearly naked and away from the scrutiny of others made her close her eyes for precious seconds. Then she shook herself. It wasn’t as if she had all night.

In the closet, she chose pink. A knee-length pencil dress with three-quarter sleeves and a high neck. It looked good, softened her usually remote-looking features, and hinted at an innocence she no longer had. She stepped back into the matte heels. An attempted smile in the mirror looked more like a snarl, but that was all right too.

After setting an alarm on her phone, she took her private elevator down to the garage. There, she climbed into one of her anonymous-looking cars and drove toward her private club, where she usually ended up at least once a month. It was a routine Whit repeatedly warned her to break.

But she didn’t want to.

## CHAPTER 2

THE HALCYON CLUB WAS SUITABLY discreet, its facade nameless with only a numbered address above the thick metal door that managed to look both secure and elegant. It had pretensions to those centuries' old members-only British gentlemen's clubs, except membership was limited to women. Agnes loved it.

For her, it was a place where she could blend into the background and observe other people—not something she was free to do as Queen Agnes—and occasionally take someone upstairs to one of the private rooms for sex. If she was in the mood.

“Good evening.” The woman outside the door greeted her with a respectful nod as she scanned her membership card on the handheld device. “Welcome back.”

There was no name tag attached to the breast of the woman's dark suit, but Agnes remembered her from the last time. “Thank you, Nicole.” Though Nicole was obviously trained to keep her face neutral, something akin to the guards at Buckingham Palace, her thin lips twitched with pleasure. Not quite a smile but just enough.

Nicole opened the tall, heavy door for her and stepped back to let her pass through.

She made a note to leave Nicole a tip before she left.

Colder air washed over Agnes's face as she walked in from the late September evening. She took a table in a darkened corner that placed her back to the wall and gave a view of the circular, high-ceilinged room. As expected, for a Friday evening, it had a decent crowd. With the tables spread far apart, the mostly low-voiced conversations were light background noise,

leaving the members tucked away in their own private bubbles. On the second floor, ringed by a dark steel balcony and accessible via a winding staircase, were more private tables, more hidden corners. The next floor up were the meeting rooms, some outfitted with desks and computers, others with beds and safe-sex paraphernalia. All the rooms were soundproof.

Faint longing throbbed inside her, to touch someone, to make them cry out with pleasure. Maybe she'd make use of one of the rooms before she left.

A woman in the club's crisp uniform—black trousers and matching suspenders worn over a burgundy long-sleeved shirt—appeared at Agnes's table. She already had a single glass of golden liquid, along with a nearly full bottle, balanced on her tray.

Agnes nodded her acceptance of the eighteen-year-old single malt scotch whiskey.

"Would you like the bottle as well, madame?"

"Just the glass for now, thank you."

Once the waitress placed the drink gently on the table and melted away, Agnes took a sip and sighed at the fragrant burn. A slow stroke of her tongue along her lower lip caught any lingering drops of the precious liquid. The purely physical pleasure from the whiskey's heat spread through her chest and down into her belly.

After a moment, she felt a prickle of awareness and noticed a nearby table of well-dressed women discreetly lapping her up with their eyes. Agnes didn't mind. She liked to watch too. It was a completely human impulse after all. Although sometimes, like tonight, she'd much prefer—

"May I join you?"

A low voice shook her from her musings. Standing near her table, close but still at a respectful distance, was a young woman. At a guess, in her early to mid-twenties. She wore her thick, natural hair twisted and fastened at the back of her head in an elegant bun. Her face looked young yet interesting, with its confident eyes and a smiling mouth painted with nude lipstick.

A sudden image came to Agnes of the young woman on her knees, smearing that lipstick all over Agnes's clit. Her thighs squeezed together, and she almost moaned at the resulting zing of pleasure.

Luckily, the young woman seemed oblivious.



She was dressed appropriately for the club in a loose yellow blouse that bared one shoulder and showed off the fact that she wore nothing underneath it. Dark high-waisted slacks clung to her lush hips, and she wore bright yellow stilettos. She looked good in the simple yet objectively alluring outfit, but there was something about the way she stood that gave the impression of a child playing dress-up.

Maybe that was something that did it for Agnes then, because there was no denying the stirring of interest in her lap.

At Agnes's appraisal, the woman put her glass of wine on the table but didn't make a move to sit down. Which was fortunate. Agnes didn't deal well with people who presumed too much. Even one as intriguing as this.

Between the girl's youth and Agnes's own time constraints—she'd need more than an hour to properly appreciate a woman like that in her bed—she made the only logical decision she could. "I'm not looking for any company tonight," she said. "But thank you."

The woman's confident expression leached away, and her lower lip slid out in a pout. "It's only a shared table, you know. I didn't say I'm on the menu."

"Still, no."

Eyes that had been warm only moments before took on a more calculating edge. Before the young woman could say anything else, the server who'd brought Agnes's drink appeared.

"Miss, there's a free table over there if you want a place to sit." The server's voice was low yet authoritative, and something in her tone reminded Agnes of Whit. No nonsense. Dangerous.

Panic flicked across her would-be companion's face, and she backed up a step.

*Oh for God's sake.*

"It's all right," Agnes said to the server. "She's not bothering me."

"Are you sure, madame?"

"I am. Thank you."

The server looked between Agnes and the young woman, then backed away with a slight nod in Agnes's direction. Agnes wouldn't be surprised if the woman was being tracked by cameras and investigated right now. Despite her presence in Halcyon, the girl didn't seem like a member, especially not with the way she was just treated.

Once the server walked away, the stranger gave Agnes a wide smile. The relief on her face didn't seem quite in proportion to what almost happened, though. "Why do I get the feeling you saving me from getting put on my ass wasn't an invitation to sit and enjoy the rest of my drink with you?"

"Because you're as smart as you look." Agnes raised an eyebrow.

The woman pursed her lips, then, with her head slightly tilted Agnes's direction, she picked up her drink from the table. "Then I guess I'll see you around then."

"Perhaps."

The woman paused. "That sounds like a challenge."

"Let me guess. You love a challenge."

"Something like that." The woman shifted, but it seemed like strategy rather than nervousness, a movement designed to show off her thick thighs in the clinging slacks and to incite the jiggle of her full, high breasts. Her perfume smelled light and sweet. "Now it's my turn to make guesses," she said, not smiling. "You love to be in control. On top of everything and everyone at all times, like a queen in her high castle."

Agnes drew in a quiet breath. The woman definitely knew what buttons to push. Agnes had come here to escape who she was in her glass tower and had even put on different clothes, but here she was still trapped in that persona she wore like a suit of armor.

She could step out of that suit, though, just like the other one she'd left behind.

Temptation blew its warm breath at the back of her consciousness. This wasn't one of her employees. She could take what this woman offered, guilt-free, even if it was just to share a drink and conversation. Her lips parted, the invitation to stay for a drink—and maybe more—just there on her tongue.

The phone in her purse vibrated, a burst of three sharp tones.

A kick of relief straightened her spine, and she forced a regretful smile. "Excuse me. I have to get this." She took out her phone.

A red light blinked next to the name on the screen. One of her assets was in trouble. Fingers moving quickly, she sent a text to an extraction team on standby near the woman's location. Agnes never second-guessed her assets. She'd promised to keep them safe when they came to her house, and that was exactly what she did.

*ExTeam6: En route. Four minutes.*

*Agnes: Let me know the situation when you arrive.*

She tapped the button next to the asset's name, changing the blinking red light to blue, letting her know help was on the way. The extraction team would handle it, but Agnes made a note to have a debrief with her asset in the morning and flag that client as one they wouldn't work with again. Once done with the phone, she put it away and turned her attention back to the woman.

"What's your name?"

"Delores."

"That's your real name?"

"Yes. Why? Don't you like it?"

"It just seems like a bit of a mouthful for someone like you."

"Trust me, I've never had any complaints about being more than a mouthful." A teasing smile flashed. "But since you object, you can call me Lola."

"Lola." Agnes rolled it around on her tongue a couple of times and found that she liked the taste. And speaking of taste... "Would you like another drink?"

While Agnes had been paying attention to her phone, Lola had drained her wine. Only a smear of red remained at the bottom of the glass.

Lola seemed to consider her. "As much as I'd love to help spend your cash, I think I need to keep sober around you."

"A sparkling water then?"

"Sure."

Agnes signaled for the server while Lola sat down opposite her. The girl leaned forward, her forearms resting on the table and shoulders back, a pose that bared the heavy weight of her breasts in her blouse the color of sunlight. Her nipples had hardened in the club's cool air, and the pleased curve of her mouth said she knew Agnes was watching.

It was a beautiful sight. That curvaceous body. The knowing glint in her eyes. A private amusement.

“Here you are, ma’am.” A new glass of red wine and a fresh whiskey appeared, courtesy of the very efficient server, while Agnes was busy ogling Lola.

“And a sparkling water, please.”

“Of course.” The server sailed off toward the bar.

With the whiskey a hot caress on her tongue, Agnes allowed herself the luxury of a thorough look while the heat of attraction moved slowly through her veins and settled between her thighs like an impertinent tongue. The muscles in her belly jumped. Aching now for some kind of relief, her sex thickened and soaked the thin crotch of her underwear.

This *child* was pushing all her buttons.

Although she didn’t live like a nun, it was rare that a woman, a stranger, had such a strong pull on her. Sure, Lola was sexy, but Agnes worked every day with women gorgeous enough to appear on movie screens. This was the first time in years—maybe ever—that the urge to touch snaked under her skin and pushed her toward a hasty decision.

Exhaling a sigh of equal parts pleasure and chagrin, she put the heavy glass down with a gentle click against the wooden coaster. Would it be that much of a shame in taking this thing as far as it could go?

“So now that we’re sharing a table,” Agnes murmured, “what do you have in mind for us to do?” She put the metaphorical ball in Lola’s court, intrigued to see what she would do with it.

“What, is this some sort of audition?” Lola took a sip of the new wine, ignoring the water the unobtrusive server had brought, and Agnes licked her own lips at the smear of red that clung to Lola’s mouth. “Should I dance for you now?”

Okay. Agnes could play with this hand. “No audition. You just do whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want...” Lola playfully tapped her lower lip with two fingers, dragging Agnes’s attention back to that hot mouth and what she wanted to do to it. Agnes shifted her thighs, stirring the heat between them. “Even if I want you to sit in my lap?”

Surprise felt a lot like desire, and Agnes swallowed it down with a mouthful of scotch. Normally people wanted to sit in *her* lap and have her tell them what to do, now and even back a thousand years ago when she dated men. Well, maybe the men didn’t want to sit in her lap, but they’d

always deferred to whatever she wanted, and she'd been only too happy to take the reins.

This new development was *intriguing*. It was all too easy to imagine it, draping herself over Lola's lap and letting Lola take charge of her. Not that Agnes would ever allow it to happen, but still... She squirmed then and drew in a silent breath at the sweet ache the movement stirred inside her core. Yes, she was definitely into Lola, into this moment and whatever it promised.

"While I'm not sure you could handle me, it's not an *idea* I would be opposed to," Agnes finally said once her brain stopped its little short circuit.

"Really?"

The comical widening of Lola's dark eyes and the way she leaned into Agnes with a smile that was almost childlike in its glee, so different from the poised, overtly seductive creature she'd first presented herself to be, made Agnes think she was actually seeing Lola, who Lola really was, for the first time. Until that moment, it didn't even occur to Agnes that Lola was being anything but genuine. Pushy, yes. Flirtatious, absolutely. But the idea that Lola had been putting on a front twisted something in Agnes's stomach. Despite the low-grade desire threatening to take Agnes over like a fever, it raised an alarm in the parts of her above the waist.

She took a mental step back and forced her body to calm down. Lola was a stranger, even with a casual fuck lurking on the horizon, Agnes wasn't about to break her years-long habit of constantly being on guard. No matter how interesting the potential fuck was. "Yes, really. For now, let's just enjoy our drinks, shall we?"

Disappointment stilled Lola's face, and Agnes silently cursed, instantly wanting to bring back that joyous flirtation. Maybe she was being manipulated, but this felt too good to let go.

She slid a hand over Lola's. "Can I interest you in—?"

A familiar chime on her watch sounded. And stopped her in her tracks. Quickly, Agnes drew her hand back, or at least tried to, but Lola grabbed it.

"Can you interest me in what?" Lola asked.

But Agnes didn't have any more time to waste.

The alarm she'd set before she left the office chimed again.

“It doesn’t matter, because now I can’t.” Agnes allowed the regret to touch her voice. “Real life calls.” She pulled her hand away and stood, taking one last sip of whiskey before picking up her purse. “The bill is already settled. Enjoy another drink or two if you like, and have them put it on my tab.”

A pang of disappointment tightened her throat. This was the first time in years she’d felt something this delicious, this powerful. And she wasn’t fool enough to think it would happen again anytime soon.

“Enjoy the rest of your life,” she said to Lola and headed out the door.

It wasn’t until she was in the car and speeding toward home that she realized she hadn’t given Lola her name.

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As usual, it was quiet in the underground garage and long passageway between the H Holdings high-rise and the other glass and steel tower where Agnes lived. She parked her car in its spot among three other vehicles, still wrestling her regret at leaving Lola in the club without a way for them to contact each other again.

*Whit could make some discreet inquiries, a traitorous part of her whispered. After all, how many twenty-something Deloreses could there be in New York?*

The walk in the underground passageway, about two city blocks, gave her plenty of time to recall each intriguing moment she’d spent with Lola. Soon enough, a steel wall stopped her from going any farther. Agnes pressed her hand to the palm print reader built into the tunnel wall, then the retina scanner when prompted. The massive steel door opened with a gentle rumble, releasing a breath of cool air.

“Welcome home, Agnes,” the computer said.

“Thank you,” she said, responding to the prompt for voice-ID.

At the elevator beyond, she went through the same security measures again, then pressed the button for the penthouse. The doors opened and the smells of home greeted her—the lavender room freshener Whit insisted on, furniture polish from a recent cleaning, and the faint scent of something with cardamom from the kitchen. Right on time, her stomach rumbled.

“Honey, I’m home,” she called out and imagined the resulting frown on Whit’s face.

Her high heels clattered and fell to the floor just inside the door when she kicked them off with a sigh. From behind her came the delicate chime letting her know the apartment's alarm had reset behind her. Her keys and purse went on the narrow pedestal by the elevator door.

"Whit won't like that." Bare footsteps sped across the marble in the long hallway, and a young girl appeared, running toward Agnes with a wide, gap-toothed smile. She skidded to a stop. "You should put your shoes in the closet like you always tell me to do."

"She can ground me if she wants." Agnes crouched in time to catch the girl leaping into her arms, gasping out a laugh at the five-year old's weight. "Hey, sweet pea." Gretchen smelled like Dove soap and mint toothpaste, fresh from a bath.

"Nessa!" The girl giggled. "You know Whit won't do that. You're too big."

"Whit doesn't care how big Nessa is," someone else said softly.

Agnes turned with Gretchen in her arms—Lord, her sweet girl was getting heavy—to see her bodyguard and friend making a more sedate way down the hall. "You know it's creepy to talk about yourself in the third person."

Whit wore her typical "relaxing at home" outfit of mid-height pumps, A-line skirt, and lacy blouse under a light sweater. All in shades of beige. At one point, someone might have told her the look and color choice helped her blend in, but it did the opposite. A six-foot-tall woman with a puckered scar down one cheek and the habit of wearing purple lipstick could only blend in so much.

"You have no idea just how creepy I can be," Whit said with a smile in her low, smoky voice. Her warm eyes crinkled at the corners. "Did you brush your teeth, Gretchen?"

"Yes, I did!" Small arms tightened enough around Agnes's neck to pinch skin as Gretchen leaned toward Whit, her mouth wide open. "Smell." Agnes winced and adjusted Gretchen's grip.

Smiling wider now, Whit took her up on the challenge, sniffing at Gretchen's mouth. The movement exaggerated the already dramatic line of her jaw and graceful shape of her head under her low-cut, natural hair. "I suppose that's good enough." Whit drew back. "You know it's past your bedtime, little one."

“I know,” Gretchen whined, her charmer’s smile on full wattage, making Agnes smile right back. Gretchen was so precious. “But I was waiting for Nessa to come home and tuck me in.”

Which was why Agnes had set her alarm. No matter how much fun she was having at the club, Gretchen remained her first priority. She lightly squeezed the child in her arms. “Come on. You can tell me all about your day while I tuck you in.” As she headed toward Gretchen’s bedroom, she felt more than saw Whit melt away to another part of the house.

“You have to tell me a story!”

“Okay, one story. A short one.”

When Gretchen had come into Agnes’s life, one of the things the parenting coach had stressed was how important routine was to a child. Five years ago, as well as now, Agnes arranged most of her life around Gretchen. The rewards of making that decision were clear every day.

“Your hair looks nice.” Gretchen tugged Agnes’s loose hair and leaned in to smell it. “Like a princess!”

Agnes chuckled. “Thank you, sweet pea.”

“Did you have a date?” The way Gretchen said the last word sounded as if she was parroting someone. Probably Whit.

“No, darling. I did meet a nice woman after work, though.”

“Ooooh. Did she have princess hair too?”

“She did. It was very beautiful. Like a cloud.”

“That’s nice. Will you bring her home so Whit and I can meet her?”

Agnes imagined Lola in her home, spread across the living room couch, drinking wine while Gretchen peppered her with all kinds of questions. The thought wasn’t as ridiculous as it should have been.

“Maybe one day, sweet pea.”

Satisfied with that, Gretchen settled down in her bed and was already yawning when Agnes started to read the requested bedtime story. It wasn’t long before she fell asleep, and after kissing her smooth forehead, Agnes turned on the night-light and closed the bedroom door behind her.

Just as the door clicked shut, Whit stepped into the hallway. Her previous smile was gone. “We may have a problem.”



## CHAPTER 3

SHE ALMOST HAD HER.

Cursing under her breath, Lola called herself a thousand kinds of blazing idiot.

Queen Agnes was right there in her sights, practically eating out of her hand—or about to eat something—and she just *fucking* let her go.

“Shit.”

“Is there something else I can get for you, miss?”

The waitress who basically offered to toss Lola out on her ass earlier glided up to the table like some kind of vampire, and Lola nearly jumped out of her skin. How the hell was she going to slip under the queen’s skin if a normal woman made her lose her shit?

“No, thank you. I’m fine for now.” She waved the waitress off.

Lola’s hands vibrated against her thigh, and her leg was shaking so hard it was as if she were tap-dancing with one foot. As much fun as she was having at this crazy playground for rich women, she couldn’t stick around to enjoy all the snobbery. She had to get the hell out of Dodge and follow the reason she’d come to Club Halcyon in the first place.

The whiskey Agnes left behind on the table was tempting. God, was it ever. She needed something strong after finally confronting the woman responsible for her sister’s death.

Her hand twitched toward the whiskey, but she reached for the wine instead and nearly choked on the tasteless crap.

What she really wanted was a beer. But a Bronx girl who’d rather chill on the couch with a Red Stripe beer and a plate of homemade sweet potato fries wasn’t about to snag someone like the queen. If Lola had to drink an

ocean worth of overpriced grape juice, she'd do it to get close enough to Agnes Noble, the notorious New York madam. Close enough to ensnare her. To seduce her. Then bring her entire house tumbling down.

If Lola could help it, Zoe would be the last innocent young girl Agnes lured into her trap.

*Fuck it.* She grabbed the glass of whiskey and downed it, choking as a path of kill-me-now fire raced down her throat.

"Can I help you, miss?" The waitress appeared out of nowhere with that calm look on her face that most likely hid a sneer.

"No." Lola coughed again. "I'm good."

After giving Lola a disbelieving look, the waitress left her alone again. Lola dragged the glass of red wine closer. The merlot wasn't beer, but at least she could handle it.

Unlike the whiskey.

Unlike Agnes Noble.

When she and Jamika first came up with the idea to dig into The House of Agnes and expose it to the world, Lola was sure Agnes was just a normal woman, overrated and easy to trick with a quick smile and an offer of sex from a hot young piece. Although Lola wasn't vain enough to think she was necessarily hot, she *was* younger and had been around the block enough to know that most rich old people were either trying to fuck the wrinkles away or bury their aging bodies into something young and fresh so they could forget they were one birthday away from collecting social security.

From Jamika's research, they'd found out that Agnes was one of those older women, nearly forty, probably wrinkled as fuck up close, and easy to tumble into bed. Easy to bring to her knees with a few hours of hot sex, some wiretaps, a juicy newspaper article, and the right word to the cops about her very illegal business.

But they had been dead wrong.

The pictures Lola had looked at when she was doing her research should have prepped her, but the reality of Agnes was nothing like any of the photos Lola had seen. From the moment she invited herself over to Agnes's table and caught Agnes's eyes, it felt as if she'd been trapped by some kind of spell. Agnes was surface-of-the-sun blazing hot.

Her skin was flawless. Absolutely smooth without a single laugh line. At first glance, she could easily pass for a woman in her twenties or early

thirties. But a more thorough inspection would catch that sharp and dangerous gaze, a gaze that shattered the illusion of Agnes being a youthful and carefree twenty-something.

That perfect skin said Agnes wasn't the laughing type.

Somehow that made Lola—well, not *sad* exactly, but...almost empathetic. A wrong emotional step. She wasn't going to win this thing by feeling sorry for the woman who'd basically killed her sister. The woman whose cool façade couldn't hide the dangerous fire in her dark eyes.

Jamika was right. She had to be careful.

After drinking the rest of her shitty wine and sending a "thank you" text to Maddie, the woman who'd helped her get into Halcyon, she left the club.

"Would you like me to call a cab for you, miss?" The woman at the door asked Lola as she stepped down the short steps and onto the sidewalk.

"No, thank you. I'll be walking." She slipped the woman a twenty-dollar bill. "You have a nice night."

"You too, miss."

The wind was brisk out on the street. Lola shrugged on her jacket, making sure her apartment keys were still in the zipped inside pocket.

"So, how did it go?"

*Jesus fucking Christ!*

A skinny girl suddenly appeared at Lola's side, nearly giving her a heart attack. The girl, her lips skinned back from her teeth in a smile that looked disturbingly like a shark's, laughed and huddled deeper inside a fake fur coat. "You got in all right, didn't you? No trouble?"

"Yes, I got in fine, Maddie," Lola said, trying to get her rabbit heart under control. "Uh, thanks for the connect."

"Glad to help." Maddie fell in step with Lola, and Lola had to keep herself from groaning out loud. She definitely wasn't in the mood for company right now. But if it hadn't been for Maddie, she wouldn't have gotten this far, so Lola sucked it up and kept walking toward the subway.

"What're you doing out here, anyway?" Lola asked.

"I got your text."

"And you just happened to be near here?"

"Nope." Maddie flashed her teeth. "Was waiting for you to be done. I want to know how it went." The all-business glint in her eye said she was

actually hanging around for some cold, hard tip money in case Lola got what she wanted out of the evening.

The too-skinny twenty-something escort had a connection who'd not only found out Agnes's hang-out spots, but also had access to them.

Lola had met Maddie by accident in the lounge of one of the high-end hotels known to be trolling grounds for call girls and rent boys. Her search for clues about Zoe's life and what happened to her led there and she'd been getting discouraged, exhausted from weeks of fruitless searching. Lola had been at the bar, on the edge of giving up for the night and going home, when Maddie, looking nineties heroin-chic in a tight white dress, sat next to her.

Maddie was a paler version of early-'90s Naomi Campbell, all long legs and longer weave, her tilted eyes cunning and narrowed as if she were seeing right through Lola's clothes to count exactly how much money she had in her pockets.

Of course, she'd propositioned Lola.

And once Lola had said she was only looking for information but still willing to pay, Maddie became a gushing fountain of information.

Yes, she knew Zoe, Maddie said that night. Word on the street was that she'd hooked up with the vicious director of The House, an old guy so hopped up on Viagra that he personally "tried out" every woman who worked for him.

This same man had once promised Maddie herself a place at his escort agency but ended up screwing her instead, then screwing her over. He had a daughter who took over after he died. This daughter, Agnes, was just as bad as he was. She also had a taste for the ladies.

No, she didn't know what happened to Zoe, Maddie said the last time they'd talked, but she could help get Lola close enough to Agnes to find out.

All this Maddie had said in a voice as sweet as buttercream.

"So, if you're out here, I guess the bitch didn't take you up on the offer of your fine self." The look Maddie skimmed over Lola's body now hinted that she'd never do anything as stupid as turn her down for sex.

"She didn't turn me down."

But hadn't she, though? One minute, Lola and Agnes had been flirting with the sweet certainty of sex in one of the upstairs rooms between them.

And the next... Well, Lola wasn't exactly sure what happened. Agnes's phone had gone off, but even before that she'd started to pull away.

"Well, hope you didn't expect her to be as easy as all that to get into the sack."

Lola flushed because obviously that was exactly what she'd thought.

"She has a hundred and one hot properties she can take anytime she wants," Maddie continued. "You can't just expect to show up with some firm tits and have her lose her shit over you."

Well, if that didn't give Lola the ultimate reality check... "Fuck."

Maddie's laugh was loud and mocking. She threw her whole body backward, braying like a skinny, hairless donkey. Nobody near them looked their way, but that was just New Yorkers for you. Maddie could've knifed her on the sidewalk, and the most Lola would've gotten was some teenager taking a video to post online for likes.

The girl's laughter cut off as suddenly as it began. "Sorry to break it to you, but that house didn't stay on top just because of luck. Agnes runs a tight operation. Even if you did somehow get into her pants, that doesn't mean you'd get to wander all over like a happy little bloodhound." A manic giggle bubbled up from Maddie and, doubled over, she pressed a hand to her belly. She was probably an only child, or just somebody really good at entertaining themselves. "Only someone who works at The House can bypass all that security and get the kind of info you're looking for." Her laughter trailed off, but her smile stayed put. "I mean, you seem like a real go-getter and all, but I doubt you'd have the stones to get in there and bust that place wide open."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, come on." A sudden cold wind whipped by. Maddie sank her chin down into the collar of her thick coat, jammed her hands into the pockets. "You're a college girl who barely knows about real life. You probably never stole a single thing. Never had to back up your girls in a fight. The world Agnes lives in would chew you up and wouldn't bother spitting you out."

It was on the tip of Lola's tongue to tell Maddie all about her investigative reporter credentials, that she wrote for some big papers under a pseudonym even Maddie would recognize. She didn't waste her breath, though. The point wasn't to impress a girl who was obviously only interested in the money Lola gave her in exchange for information.

An idea prodded at her, begging for notice.

Lola had the experience. She'd gone undercover in shady restaurants, banks, the offices of government officials. Would infiltrating an escort agency be any different?

She'd done all kinds of dangerous things for a byline. Finding out what happened to Zoe was worth more than that. If it wasn't for Zoe, Lola wouldn't have made it to college, much less have the career and the life she had now.

"You have no idea what I'm capable of," she finally said to Maddie.

Maddie puffed out a breath of disbelief. "Sure."

Hiding her annoyance, Lola said her good-byes when they got to the nearby subway station. Maddie disappeared down the steps to catch a train, and Lola, after turning over the crazy idea that wouldn't go away, called a Lyft to take her back up to the Bronx.

Her thoughts were still buzzing when she let herself into the fifth-floor walk-up she shared with her best friend and tossed her keys on the bookshelf near the door.

"That doesn't sound like the key toss of a returning conqueror," Jamika called out. "Did you fuck up and fall face-first into the queen's lap?"

"Shut up! I almost had her," Lola shouted back as she kicked off the painful high heels she'd borrowed from Jamika. She wriggled her toes to get some circulation going. "How the hell do you wear these fucking things?"

"*Fucking things* is right, so be careful with them. They're the keys to my sex life."

Their apartment was small, though bigger than the shoebox Lola had shared with her mother and sister growing up, so it only took a few steps down their short hallway to get to the living room where Jamika lay sprawled on the sofa with a small plate of the Nutella crunch cookies Lola had made that morning sitting on her belly. A glass of chocolate milk was within easy reach while some sci-fi show with hot girls in tight clothes murmured from the TV screen.

The gray light from the small set flickered over Jamika's round-cheeked face, her T-shirt with NYPD over the boobs, and gray sweats. Her blond-streaked dreads were pulled back in a long ponytail. She bit into a cookie, scattering crumbs all over her chest, and slowly chewed while keeping her eyes on the TV.

It would be easy to think Jamika was relaxed, the way her long body was almost liquid on the oversized couch they'd both loved on sight at an estate sale. But her deep-set eyes were intent, and lines of tension etched the sides of her mouth. "You found her. What happened?"

Between squirming out of her cougar-trapping clothes and grabbing a pint of ice cream and a spoon from the kitchen, Lola gave Jamika the highlights.

"And she wasn't even that scary," she finished, sinking down beside Jamika on the couch. Jamika moved aside to give her some room. "I had her sniffing up my skirt without even really trying. She has a big and bad reputation, but she's just another woman who likes to get her snatch scratched."

Lola wetly licked her spoon, intentionally being gross. If she didn't do something to distract herself from her sweating palms and pounding heartbeat, then she'd be taking them—and Agnes—far too seriously.

Jamika's eyes narrowed, and the look she gave Lola felt as if she were seeing far too deeply under Lola's carefree surface. "What else?"

Lola bit back a sigh. This was what she got for having a best friend who knew her better than anyone. "I ran into Maddie on the way home."

"You know I don't trust this chick, but keep going."

"You were right. Seducing my way into The House isn't going to do it. I need a better plan, and I think Maddie has the perfect one—although she doesn't think I can do it." She dug her spoon into the ice cream and left it there.

"Which is?" Jamika looked worried.

Lola outlined the plan she'd come up with in the simplest terms: infiltrate The House as one of their escorts, metaphorically burn the place down from the inside, collect her Pulitzer Prize by writing a blazing exposé while Jamika got her high-profile bust.

Easy. Right?

The details of the plan had come to her during the car ride home, and although her stomach had sloshed unhappily at the thought of what pretending to be an escort meant, she was determined to go through with it.

"Are you out of your mind?" The plate of cookies on Jamika's stomach almost fell as she quickly sat up. "That's the craziest thing I've heard

you say—ever. This is a dangerous businesswoman, not some overhyped celebrity chef with an inflated ego you can stroke with a few words and a smile.”

“No, no. It’s going to be so easy. After meeting her in the flesh, honestly, she’s not that intense.”

Lies.

Although Lola had gone into the club fully intending to go through with fucking Agnes if she could, she’d never expected to feel the sharp jolt of attraction, the melting at her core that told her having sex with Agnes would be no hardship. Actually, becoming one of Agnes’s escorts and sleeping with strangers for money was a big, uncomfortable leap. But it shouldn’t be. Although Lola was only twenty-three, sex hadn’t been a big deal for years. Working for The House—assuming she could get on their payroll—should be nothing.

Jamika’s plate scraped across the coffee table as she abandoned it to pin Lola with one of her serious stares. “Let’s say I believe you, and you finally get into The House as one of their escorts. What are you going to do when she asks—no, excuse me, when she *pays*—you to fuck somebody?”

“I’ll do it. It’s just sex, Jamika, not my soul.” But Lola didn’t feel as certain as she wanted to.

“I know you like sex, but allowing strangers to use your body isn’t like taking home a random hottie from the club. It’s dangerous. You don’t get to say what happens to you once they pay.”

Lola found a smile from somewhere, determined not to show Jamika how much her words worried her. She had to do this. For Zoe. “It’ll be fine, J. You’ll see.”

Jamika made a sound filled with doubt and resignation, then knocked back her glass of milk as if she wished it were something stronger. “This is crazy,” she said again.

Triumph turned Lola’s fake smile into the real thing. She plopped her melting pint of ice cream next to Jamika’s cookies and stretched out to take up more room on the sofa. Even though Jamika hated the plan, at least she accepted it. That meant she’d have Lola’s back, no matter what.

All was right with the world.



Lola snagged a cookie and bit into it, humming at the rich flavor of the Nutella and crunchy pieces of hazelnut. This was a pretty good batch. Better than the ones she'd made before.

"It's no crazier than you chasing bad guys around New York in your designer pantsuits, *Detective*," Lola said.

"I have to gain respect somehow." Jamika rolled her eyes, a sign that she was giving in to Lola's diversionary tactics, and everything else, for now.

"Come summertime, you'll basically be a walking sponge, dripping sweat and funk. No one's going to respect you then." Lola reclaimed her ice cream.

Jamika snorted out a laugh. She was a new detective, barely eight months in with her spanking new badge and partner who kind of hated being stuck with a twenty-four-year-old, and a woman at that. Jamika's words. That was part of the reason Jamika had gone all in with Lola on the mission to bring down Queen Agnes and every rotten thing she stood for. Few of the people at work took Jamika seriously. Sure, she'd graduated from high school at fifteen and finished college before she could vote, but that just made them think she was too booksmart to do real police work. Jamika wanted to prove them wrong, and what could be a better way than bringing down Queen Agnes, the Madam of New York?

All that was true and as real as the glass ceiling, but the main reason Jamika had involved herself in this whole operation was because of Lola. Best friends forever since they met in Mrs. Miller's Pre-K class a million years ago. They'd been ride or die through Jamika's abusive ex-girlfriend, the death of Lola's mother, Jamika's fear she wouldn't pass the detective's exam, and Zoe's disappearance.

Jamika was amazing, and sometimes Lola didn't think she deserved her.

She shoved a spoonful of the mostly melted chocolate brownie ice cream in her mouth and forced herself to chew then swallow as she looked away from Jamika's worried face to the TV screen. Her vision blurred, but she blinked the stupid tears away.

"Anyway, I'm going to her office on Monday," Lola said.

"That soon?"

"There's no point in waiting. The sooner I get in there and start investigating, the better. God knows how many women are trapped in The House and too scared to look for help. We can be that help." Even though

it was too late to save Zoe, they could rescue women like her who had been caught in a bad situation.

“I’m just nervous *you’ll* be the one needing rescue down the line,” Jamika said. “Agnes didn’t get to be this powerful because she nicely *asked* the competition to stop existing.”

“I know that.” The steel in Agnes’s gaze had more than hinted at her ruthlessness. “Neither of us is going into this blind. Trust me, I know what I’m getting into.”

Maybe that was the problem.

As much as Lola tried to pretend with Jamika that Agnes didn’t scare her, Lola’s knees were knocking together like sticks in a storm. She was going to confront Agnes again, talk with her, lie to her and get her to implicate herself on tape. Maybe even on camera if she could pull it off. Lola was nervous as hell. But the part of her ruled by the hungry ache that made her want to hunt under Agnes’s skirt and eat what she found there was weak. Lola wanted to see Agnes again and not just to bring her to her knees in the way she’d first planned.

Lola’s mouth longed to taste.

Her hands ached to touch.

The muscles of her thighs trembled to clench around Agnes’s face and never let go.

And that scared Lola out of her ever-loving mind.

Which was probably why, that night, she dreamed about the news she’d gotten nearly seven months before. Five years, eleven months, and one week after Zoe went missing.

With fear and nausea dueling in her stomach, Lola had huddled against her best friend in the medical examiner’s office, waiting for the doctor to come back in. Jamika had squeezed her hand but didn’t bother with any unnecessary words. One of the reasons she and Lola were best friends. She understood what Lola needed.

“Sorry about that, ladies.” The medical examiner came in, eyes radiating sympathy under round-framed glasses, her apple-shaped body clad in a boring, comfortable-looking pantsuit. She’d given her name earlier but for some reason, it kept falling out of Lola’s brain. “This office is too busy when I don’t want it to be, then dead otherwise.” She winced. “No pun

intended.” The chair behind her desk sighed as she sat down. “Now, where were we?”

“You were telling my friend that her half sister is dead,” Jamika said, and sickness churned in Lola’s stomach. It was the same sickness that had sent her rushing to the bathroom earlier that week when she’d first gotten the call to identify what the ME’s office had determined were the remains of Zoe’s body.

In the nearly six years since Zoe had left, Lola had lived in a dream world assuming Zoe had just taken off because she was sick of whatever she had been doing to keep Lola out of foster care and a roof over their heads.

“Young lady...” The ME gently scolded Jamika, although she couldn’t have been much past thirty. Lola eyed the boring pantsuit again, the low heels. Okay, maybe forty.

“I’m not that young,” Jamika pulled herself straight in the chair. “I just made police detective this year.”

The woman brightened, even if it did seem a little artificial. “Congratulations!”

When Lola felt Jamika’s uneasy look aimed her way, it was her turn to give a reassuring squeeze. Despite what was going on right now, Jamika didn’t have to apologize for being proud she’d arrived at the goal she’d been racing toward since they were kids.

Lola straightened in the uncomfortable plastic chair and steeled herself for what was to come. “I’m ready.”

The ME cleared her throat. “All right then.” After a quick search for what turned out to be a baby-sized box of tissues, she produced a manila envelope from a drawer. Several photos came out. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“As I’ll ever be. Don’t worry. I had my freak-out before we came over.” Still, the sickness moved around in her stomach, and Lola had to swallow a couple of times to make sure it stayed down.

With her look of sympathy amped up to the point where Lola almost worried about her, the ME slid three large photos across her spotlessly clean desk. Facedown.

“Although a dental record match wasn’t possible and her fingerprints aren’t on file for a match, we’re confident who we found is Zoe Anders. It would be pointless to show you any photos of the body because, frankly,

there's nothing there you'll recognize." The ME paused, and Lola felt the woman's eyes on her face although she couldn't bring herself to tear her gaze away from the backs of the labeled photos. "What I have are photos of items that were with the victim, in her handbag, on her person." Another pause. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." The words scraped from her throat in a whisper.

Jamika gripped her hand. "We can do this later if you want. Tomorrow. Next week. Never."

"No. I already waited this long to find out what happened to Zoe. I can't be a coward now."

"Okay." Jamika blew out a breath. "Okay."

Her hand shaking, Lola quickly turned over all the photos, Band-Aid-ripping style.

The first photo was a close-up of an oversized burgundy leather purse, designer like the type Zoe had taken to carrying around the last year or so before she disappeared. Laid out side by side in the second photo were a matching burgundy wallet, Zoe's driver's license, a couple of faded receipts with dates Lola could barely make out, a tube of expensive lipstick, and what looked like a brushed steel pen.

The ME reached over and tapped the third photo. "These are the clothes she was wearing." Size four designer jeans, a cropped blouse that might have once been white, and black high-heeled sandals.

"That's it?" Zoe always carried a bunch of random stuff in her bags—candy, a change of clothes, a book or three because she loved to read. Once Zoe had even reached into one of her endless purses and taken out a mini first aid kit when Lola had cut herself messing around in the park.

"Were you expecting something else?" The ME's eyebrows rose.

"She—was a little bit of a hoarder when she had those jumbo purses, like she had to fill them up—you know?—since there was so much room." Lola tore her eyes away from the photos to look at Jamika for confirmation. "Right, J?"

"True." The hand on her shoulder migrated to her back, a warm and settling weight. "But maybe somebody robbed her before the—uh—before she was found."

Lola swallowed like crazy, fighting the rising lump in her throat and the tears that burned her eyes.

A few days before, after the police had called her and told her there was a strong likelihood her missing sister had been found, Jamika went digging. Lola almost regretted knowing what Jamika had stumbled onto. Zoe had been found in an old suitcase, her body folded up like origami and left to rot near a dumpster in Jersey. No clues about the actual site of her murder or why the body had turned up now.

Everything in the photographs the ME put out for her said the woman they found was Zoe. Her strong, bullheaded sister who never gave a second thought to taking care of Lola when their mom checked out.

The tears spilled out of her eyes and down her cheeks, her fight to keep them at bay lost. Her head felt cotton-thick, and she wanted nothing more than to go home and curl into a ball in her bed.

“The police did some investigating, but—” And here, the ME’s eyes flickered to Jamika, as if to silently communicate something with her. Apparently the ME was speaking in a language Jamika didn’t know because Jamika just stared back at her. “It’s an old case and as a suspected sex worker...”

Shock raced up Lola’s spine. “Don’t say shit like that. You don’t know anything about my sister.” Fingers pinched her hip in warning, but she ignored them. “She was a waitress.”

The ME braced her hands on the desk. Sympathy still warmed her face, but there was a bit of impatience too. “During the preliminary missing person investigation six years ago, the officers found credible evidence that suggested Zoe Anders was a prostitute—and I’m sure you’re able to verify that.” She nodded at Jamika. “Sad to say, and as awful of a truth as it is, Ms. Osbourne, cases of missing prostitutes aren’t investigated quite as rigorously as they should be. And one this old...” Regret took the place of sympathy on her round face. “I’m sorry.”

Unpleasantness twisted Lola’s insides. This time, it wasn’t nausea; it was a truth she didn’t want to see. Like realizing her mother was an addict after watching her grow more and more hooked on the drugs a boyfriend had given her, seeing the drugs eat her alive until there was nothing left of a mother, nothing left for Lola and Zoe to love. Their mother’s addiction forced Zoe into a role she never wanted—trying to mother a teenager when she was still a child herself.

Once their mother had died of an overdose, barely seventeen-year-old Zoe kept them both fed and clothed and sheltered in their cramped one-bedroom apartment. Gradually, Zoe had become distracted and absent, disappearing for long stretches of time and reappearing with more money than her waitressing job could ever earn.

The three years between them had seemed like an ocean.

When Zoe did eventually come back to the apartment, she'd smelled like a stranger, of designer perfumes and expensive silks and leather. Then one day, not long after Lola had graduated high school and was accepted to college on a full scholarship, Zoe had just disappeared.

And had apparently ended up being murdered and tossed in an old suitcase along with her useless designer clothes and matching leather accessories.

"Do you want them, Lola?"

What?

While she'd fallen into the well of memory, things had kept on going without her. The ME held out a large paper bag while Jamika looked at her with worry pressed between her eyes.

Lola shook her head. "I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Your sister's recovered personal effects." The ME put the bag on the desk.

"I can deal with this if you don't want to," Jamika said quickly.

"No, no. It's okay." She would rely on Jamika for the support because it was something she needed like air right now, but she wasn't about to use her friend's presence to avoid doing what she needed to do. Zoe didn't raise her to be a coward.

With the bag in her lap, she slowly opened it. The brown paper crinkled in her shaking fingers. Somehow, she'd expected the inside of the bag to smell like death, rotten meat and old blood, or maybe even like the dumpster near where they'd tossed Zoe. But only the scent of old leather drifted up from it. Something metallic glinted from inside, and she picked it up. A pen. It was the one from the photograph.

The slim barrel was cool between her fingers. Pressed into the top part of the pen was a small logo no bigger than the tip of her index finger. The logo, etched on a royal blue background, was a stylized H and A printed in

the same shade of silver as the pen and intertwined to form a crown. The pen was heavy and felt expensive.

Lola twisted the cap, expecting to reveal the nib—wasn't that what they called the part that did the actual writing?—but instead a thin, deadly blade gleamed in the light. Breath rushed from Lola's mouth, and all her muscles tensed.

Danger! That was what the knife seemed to shout.

“What's HA?” Jamika peered at the penknife's logo, frowning.

Lola had no idea, but she intended to find out.

Lola swam up from the dream with tears burning twin paths down the sides of her face. Zoe was dead. And Agnes Noble had something to do with it. The queen was as much her enemy as was Lola's attraction to her. She had to destroy them both.

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# HOUSE OF AGNES

BY FIONA ZEDDE

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