Agnes TREADiNG WATER

CHARLOTTE FRENCH

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Cover Artwork by Hannah French / Cover Design by Charlotte French

www.charlottefrench.com.au / hello@charlottefrench.com.au

Content Note: This sample includes a mild sex scene—an inebriated, barely consensual but not protested encounter.

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1
today

The diamonds in her ring catch the light from the work lamp as Agnes yanks and twists the surgical tongs. They're peripheral glints that nudge with each jerk of her hand—only hours to go.

Her small attic is dim. Her house is quiet. Her mind is not. She came up here while still dark, hoping to centre herself. However, she's sitting upright with her bare feet tapping the smooth floorboards, working with anything but her usual methodical calm. Tufts fly and mohair settle like a weightless blanket over her lap and the bear she's inflicting the treatment on, while her mind wanders. Through her body—gut, organs, nerves—there's a twitchy edginess as if she's gulped down three cups of Niina's Colombian.

She stops abruptly with the tongs held mid-air like a weapon. He just sneaked in—Guy. Guy, before he proved a first-class arse. It's his warm breath on her face, his stubble, his scent. If she'd close her eyes, she'd be back there, onboard Felicity with him.

With a sigh, she sinks into her wingback chair, stretching out her legs and placing her toes on the floor-level sill of the

window. There's condensation on the glass, and outside the morning is colourless, more March than May. The sun casts a hazy yellow past the dark silhouette of the old oak up on the canal. The leaf-out of the trees seems delayed this year.

So what if she always imagined a June wedding? You can't trust Swedish summers, anyway. There's nothing wrong with a ceremony in her sunroom. It'll be charming. If anything, it's an advantage. They can't squeeze more than a dozen people in which means she won't have to look like the friendless reclusive she is.

Agnes drops the tongs back on her side table and eyes the ring. It's slim, the inset diamonds tiny, tiny. Up close, it looks as if a cookie cutter has pressed into the gold and lifted out the star shapes to reveal diamonds hidden underneath. Thomas chose the opposite of loud with her in mind, wanting to get it right. And he's insisted on an impromptu, unassuming home wedding to make it easy for her. It's so sweet. Yet, when her mind wandered just then …

What does that tell ya?—Niina's voice in her head as always.

'Residues,' whispers Agnes. 'That's all it is.' Not that Guy deserves to be her residual memory.

You're rushing this.

'No, I'm not.' Agnes pulls the ring off her right finger and slides it onto the correct one. It feels as awkward as holding scissors with her left hand would.

Australia. That's what's bothering her.

Last night Niina confirmed, 'Look, Agnes, people play mind-fuck games. You got caught in the middle.'

So Agnes had played as well, then? 'Should I tell Thomas?' she asked.

Niina slapped her lightly on the forehead. 'Oh, Ness, we know you're daft as a brush with no bristles, but surely, you know the *What happens in Vegas*?' Then she'd pulled a typical Niina face—one brow up, one down, a crooked smile. 'Actually, forget the Vegas thing. Tell him. Or I can.'

Agnes lifts the bear from under the pile of fur to inspect the damage, which sets off the mechanical growl. 'Let's hope she didn't hear that.' Agnes is not mentally ready for in-the-flesh-Niina just yet. She blows forcefully and brushes the last bit of mohair off, then holds in a swear word. Collectors love tattered vintage style, not plucked clean bodies.

Agnes places him back on her lap, careful not to produce another growl. 'It's wedding jitters,' she says. The bear contemplates this with his deep amber glass eyes. 'A bit of anxiety is normal,' she consoles herself, fumbling for scissors in her toolbox. She finds her old pair and touches the dull blades before guiding one tip into the bear's belly. The point is too blunt. Only stretches the weave.

Niina doesn't get it, not really. Like Agnes, she has no family. But she has lots of friends, and no problem meeting men. Agnes doesn't want to meet any more men. One will do with a family she'll become part of. A family she's already met

might have been preferable, but it'll be fine. His cousins, and what have you, won't be coming today. Mind you, it would have been nice if Pernilla was.

Not there for her dad's wedding. What does that tell ya?

'Oh, shut up already.' It's probably better if she doesn't have to face his daughter. It'll be enough to have his mum, stepdad, and friends scrutinising her. 'I've not met his mum.' That's it. Britt-Marie is it. Agnes had the opportunity five days ago but opted for the bus home instead. It was a mistake for sure, yet she had no choice.

She forces the scissors through the material to its base and pushes, using too much power. In one swift action, she rips along the mid-seam, from the crotch to less than an inch below his neck. This time she lets the cussing out. The wood wool stuffing protrudes, a compressed lump wanting to escape. An opening this length is not aesthetic. There's a fine line between meticulously crafted imperfections and an obvious misfortune.

'Third thing I clocked about you,' Niina told her once. 'Beaten by your eyes and killer smile, but only just.' And she'd laughed. Then she'd pointed out that external scars are nothing compared to internal ones.

True. However, there will be new people and all of them looking at her. Too much sun brings it out, and she's come home with the customary pale line across her tanned forehead. It looks like a worm, trapped under her skin.

Too many new strangers checking her out—that's what's bothering her. But Niina will do wonders with the makeup.

She will.

Niina! Of course. Will she behave today? 'That's it,' she whispers to the bear. 'Niina is my anxiety.'

Agnes sighs and draws her thumbs along the raw edges of her cut. How could she be so careless with the scissors? She who's never dressed a bear before or sold seconds for years will have to knit a little jumper to disguise the damage and drop the price.

She applies anti-fray along the cut and lets it dry while opening the bag with coconut fibre. Using the tongs again, she crams the fine frizz into the opening, easing it in under the raw edges, covering the wood wool. When she's finished stuffing, Agnes sits back, assessing the result. The poor bear does not look a little wear-and-tear-loved. He looks knifed by a madman. Next is the ladder stitching. Rough and arbitrary. She doubts that'll fix the disfigurement.

'Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.' she whispers. 'Someone will fall in love with you.'

'Talking to stuffed things again?' says a hoarse voice from the doorway at the other end of the room. 'Sewing on your wedding day. Who does that?'

'Just doing some touch-ups. I need to stitch—'

'Your Maid of honour is about to put a nicotine nail in the coffin,' Niina interrupts. 'And she wants company. So your

arctophile blabbering will have to wait. I will, however, offer more than a growl in response. After coffee, that is.'

2
twenty-eight days ago

Where was Thomas? The serpentine line-up was shrinking, one or two shoves at a time, as other travellers patiently herded towards check-in. She'd been waiting at the end of the queue for well over an hour, keeping her suitcases out of the way, letting people past. The queue was shortening, and she was no longer part of it.

While the terminal cacophony of voices, announcements, and anything on wheels or feet echoed around her, Agnes kept looking around searching for him. She took a break from biting her nails, unfolded her ticket for the umpteenth time. Terminal five. Australian Airways. And she had the correct flight number. Of course, she was in the right place. So why wasn't he here? Was he stuck in the Stockholm traffic with a flat battery? Why didn't he answer his phone? They would miss their flight. Agnes lifted her shoulders, held for a moment, and let them drop. It did nothing to release the tension, and a nail was between her lips again.

'She'll be right.'

Startled, she turned around.

'Didn't mean to give you a fright.'

The English-speaking man smiled, his top teeth white against tanned and weathered skin, his beard and shoulder-length curls, sun-kissed. His face gave the impression of a man who'd spent a month crawling through the desert, and you'd half-expect torn clothes, and sand gathered around bare feet. In reality, his jumper over a shirt, jeans, leather boat shoes, a light parka on one arm, and a massive duffel bag over his shoulder made him look as if he'd stepped out of an advertisement for one of those outdoor adventure mags.

Agnes brushed her fringe, suddenly self-conscious about her choice of travelling outfit—worn out sneakers, favourite home tights, an oversized jumper. She had opted for comfort right at the last minute, knowing full well Thomas wouldn't approve. Ten minutes before the taxi arrived, she'd decided that a leap into the unknown was better achieved if she felt comfortable. Now she wished she'd made some effort.

'You had a worried look on your face is all,' he said, and then slower, 'I didn't mean to scare you.'

Had he been observing her?

'Apologies. My Swedish is no good.'

This is where you say something, Agnes.

'You don't speak English?'

'I am waiting for someone.' She'd practised around the bears for weeks, pleasantries she might need. Now she didn't like how she sounded. Pretentious. Stupid. Very school English.

'Visiting Australia?'

She nodded.

'Been Down Under before?'

Agnes shook her head. She'd been nowhere, except to Stockholm twice. Disorientated, she'd asked Thomas about north and south every five minutes. Drove him mad. Touching her fringe lightly, Agnes wondered how she could let him know to move on without being rude.

'Where to?' said the man.

'Sydney.' *He knows that, you dummy.*

The man from outdoors laughed. 'I hope you get to see more than the city. We got the best beaches in the world.'

Agnes looked around for Thomas. 'It's a business trip,' she said. It sounded worldly like she knew what she was doing. 'Exhibition and a holiday.' She added, 'With my fiancé.'

'He might miss his expo.'

'Actually, I'm the one … I have an expo.'

'My bad.' The man placed a hand on his chest. 'Blame it on my backward, prejudiced upbringing as an Aussie bloke.'

Talk about a broad accent. Language had been one of her better subjects in school. She sold bears all over the world, had no problem with written communication, but this, actually speaking with a foreigner, was different. Yachts from all over the world took the trip past South Hamlet during summer, and the town filled with tourists. But you didn't talk to the visitors. At least she didn't.

‘Poor excuse, really. I’ve got a heap of industrious sisters,’ he said. ‘So, what kind of exhibition?’

Agnes couldn’t help but touch her fringe again. If Niina was here, she’d elbow her. ‘Oh, it’s just a niche,’ she said, pressing Thomas’s number again, willing him to pick up.

‘Have you had the help desk put it over the speakers?’

‘I don’t think he’s arrived at the airport yet. If he has, he should be here.’ She held up the phone. ‘Not answering, and I’m worried something’s happened.

‘Right.’ The Australian dropped the duffel bag at his feet. ‘Anyone else you can call?’

Agnes shook her head again, like a dimwit. She’d never had numbers for his family or for any friends of his. There had never been a need.

‘We’ll figure this out.’ He held out a hand. ‘Guy Ventura.’ His name sounded made up, but his hand was warm and firm. Was he too friendly? Guy held on, giving her a quizzical look. ‘And you are?’

‘Agnes.’ When he didn’t let go, she added, ‘Andersson.’ Should be safe. Such a common name. But she too could have made something up. The phone went off in her other hand so unexpectedly, she dropped it. Guy was quick. He let go, caught the phone mid-air, and handed it back to her, all in one effortless sweep.

‘Hey.’ Thomas’s voice sounded thick and woolly.

‘Where are you?’

'You won't believe this, but I'm home. Fever, headache, aching body. I got it all.'

Thomas—who freewheeled through life, feet off the pedals, hands off the handlebars, forever breeze in his hair—was still in bed? 'I've been calling you.'

'Been out like a light, Agnes.' He coughed. 'Guess you checked in by now?'

'Not without you.'

'This came on in the middle of the night, didn't want to worry you. Slept through the alarm this morning. I'm so sorry babe. Just woke up.'

'So … What are you saying?'

'I won't be going anywhere today. You better check in.'

Agnes couldn't imagine boarding a plane, flying for the first time in her life, and arriving in Sydney on her own, trying to figure out where to go, how to get there. 'Might go home,' she said.

'You've got an expo. This is your chance.'

'I don't want to go alone. I can sell them online. And I don't mind. Honest.'

'*I* will mind.' Another cough. 'You have to go.'

This had been his idea. He'd seen the advertisement in one of her bear mags, asked why she'd never exhibited. There'd never seemed to be a good time. If not for her mum's stroke, at some stage, she may have gone somewhere. Maybe a London show, if Niina could have been trusted for support. Her best friend's travels were short and—according to Niina,

herself—cheap debauch Mallorca trips. Agnes would have liked to invite and pay for her. The problem was, Niina would have all the best intentions but wasn't trustworthy in the men-department.

When Thomas had suggested the Teddy Bear Exhibition in Sydney, she'd thought him mad. You couldn't get much further than Australia. Besides, it was so last minute. But Thomas had phoned the organisers who said they'd be delighted to have a Scandinavian artist, and his enthusiasm and theirs had made it sound exciting. That's what she needed, he said, something exciting. They would go on their first holiday, and abroad. After the expo weekend, they'd rent a car and spend two weeks sightseeing. Driving on the other side of the road didn't faze Thomas. Nothing did. This trip was to be *their*trip. The thought of doing this on her own? No.

'I know it's hard to understand, Thomas, but I … I can't do this. Her voice sounded tremulous. That's how she felt internally—shivering as if she'd just been pulled out of bitterly cold water.

'Don't be silly. You'll be fine. For crying out loud, it's a civilised country.'

Agnes bit a nail while listening to Thomas cough again. He didn't get it. How could he? He was normal. She was not. People travel all the time. It was nothing. Absolutely nothing. Why was she like this? Her teeth bit down hard. A sliver of nail came off. The pain gave a sharp second's relief.

Guy had not picked up his duffel bag and walked off. He was waiting as if the two of them were in this pickle together. He was watching her. Self-conscious she dropped her hand.

'Look, Ness,' said Thomas. 'I feel bad enough as it is. I know you're worried, but you've got the address for the hotel. All you need to do is find a taxi.'

Agnes brushed her fringe across again. It wasn't meant to be this way. 'What on earth will I do in Sydney for three weeks?' Renting a car was out of the question. The two times she'd travelled to Stockholm, she'd ended up in the wrong suburb.

Thomas laughed and coughed at the same time. 'You do the weekend as planned, silly, and I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll sleep it off in a day or two, you'll see. I'll be there by Tuesday, latest Wednesday.'

'I don't know.'

'Isn't he coming?' said Guy.

'Sick.'

'I'm on the same flight. I mean, if you want company.'

'Thanks, but I'm going to cancel.'

'No!' Thomas's voice was so loud even Guy reacted, giving her a funny look. 'You need to do this,' said Thomas. 'You know that.'

'Please, don't tell me what to do.' She needed to think. Agnes stared at the phone, trying to decide while Thomas talked about how she had to do this for herself. Did she? Would going home be so bad? Would it prove her a useless

human being? Guy looked at her, at the phone, then back to her. He offered a faint smile and raised his eyebrows. In the background was Thomas's motivational speech. He was on a roll now.

Guy abruptly grabbed the phone, hung up on Thomas, and held it in his open hand as if it were contagious. 'Don't worry. You'll get it back. I just think you look like you need a moment to think.'

Agnes gawked at him, said nothing, didn't know if she was pissed off or thankful. She should snatch it off him, grab her suitcases, and walk out of there. Niina would. If that was her wish. But Niina would have jumped for joy if she travelled with Thomas, and he got sick—an absurd comparison.

The phone rang. Guy didn't hesitate. He pressed the red button. 'You said you have a business expo.'

'Oh, it's not that important.' Wasn't it? Wasn't her first-ever exhibition important? She'd prepared for months and even designed a unique kangaroo, especially. 'I make collectable teddy bears.' Agnes tapped her brand new vintage-style suitcase. Thomas had shaken his head when he saw it only minutes after she'd paid for it. 'I should have stayed to make sure you didn't spend a small fortune on something like luggage,' he'd said. But she would use it at home as well, find a spot downstairs and let the bears hang there. And she'd claim it as an expense.

'There are bears inside of this beauty? I say they travel in style.' Guy crouched by her suitcase and moved a hand over

the leather. 'You've got good taste. Superb craftsmanship. I hope the handlers won't scuff it.'

'That's okay. My bears have a scuffed look about them.'

'Now I *am* curious. A travelling teddy bear artist. That's pretty cool.'

'Well, actually … I've not really travelled much. Anywhere. On my own. Or at all.' Why on earth, did she tell him that?

He smiled up at her. 'Australia is my neck of the woods. We're more or less a friendly lot. You'll be fine.' The phone rang again. Again, Guy pressed the red button. 'We don't bite, not us two-legged critters.' He reminded her of Crocodile Dundee, not in looks, age, or outfit but something about his joviality, and the way he spoke. 'See! I've put you at ease now, haven't I?'

Agnes squinted at him. 'What about the ones without legs or the ones with too many?'

He stood and grinned. 'Brown snakes are not to be trusted. But the spiders stare at you wearily with their eight eyes, hoping you'll let them live. And the cockroaches? I reckon you'll get good with the shoe in no time.' With an amicable smile, he pressed the red button again. 'It's your choice, not his, and certainly not mine, but for what it's worth, when thrown in the deep end—swim.' He handed her the phone. 'But you are running out of time.'

Over at the check-in, the counter was empty. The air hostess looked up and waved.

You had a chance to travel. And you came home with the tail between your legs. Shame on you, Agnes. Fucking shame on you. I should fucking disown you.

Niina would never disown her, but Agnes would hear about it for months, if not for the rest of her natural life. Agnes nodded to edge herself on. 'Let's go then.'

Guy swung the duffel bag back over his shoulder, stepped past her and grabbed the handle to her suitcase. She let him lead the way to check-in while sending Thomas the one desired word—going.

At the counter, she handed over ticket and passport, hoping neither the air hostess nor Guy noticed the tremble in her hands. As her suitcase set off on the conveyor belt, she suppressed panic, wishing she'd not capitulated, wishing she'd slept in herself, which is what she'd dreamed the previous night—instead of her usual nightmare.

While Guy checked in, she texted Thomas, let him know she'd email on arrival at the hotel. He texted her a heart and a sleeping emoji. Agnes suppressed her frustration. It wasn't his fault that she was forced out of her comfort zone.

'I hope you don't mind, but I took your fiancé's seat,' said Guy. 'The plane is pretty full.'

She should have seen that coming. Thirty hours, right beside a stranger. If he touched her inappropriately, if something went weird, she'd call it out, ask to sit somewhere else. *Talk about paranoia. He's being helpful.*

'Agnes, relax,' said Guy. 'Flying's a bit like sailing. I reckon you'll love it.'

She didn't. Apart from the obvious—getting from A to B—her virgin flight was not a success. She knew where she went wrong. He'd wanted a beer while waiting. And did she mind? And would she perhaps like a drink? She and alcohol would never be a good combination, yet she'd agreed to a small bottle of wine. He'd suggested it would help if she was nervous about flying, and he'd been nothing but helpful, and they were surrounded by people in broad daylight. When the departure was delayed, she'd ordered another one because he had. By then, drinking wine seemed like the best idea.

The rest was a haze—the lineups, the cool air as they stepped into the plane, the roar of the jet turbines, and the force of the giant beast pushing her into the seat. When Guy's hand patted hers, Agnes had grabbed it like a fish snapping its prey. The retching that followed, the stumbling to the toilet on shaky legs, the apologising to Guy and the businessman in the aisle seat—that was all foggy. Waking up in London drooling on Guy's shoulder wasn't.

They were in the next airbus at an altitude of 35,000 feet with an empty seat between them. Agnes was sober with a headache, and dressed in airport-boutique *tracky-dacks*, as Guy called them. She looked sick in yellow, but that's all

they'd had with 7/8 legs, and they'd been on the run to their gate. No time to look around. At least she didn't stink of vomit anymore.

She was not a drinker. There was never alcohol in her house—not officially. Her mum kept a special Port locked in the bottom drawer while her dad stayed dry. It wasn't until years later, the day after her mother's debilitating stroke, that he fell off the wagon again.

Agnes had never even tasted wine until a sleep-over at Niina's when they were seventeen. It had been a cheap and sour introduction to intoxication. She'd slept it off in Niina's bed after vomiting on her long pile wool rug. The very last time Agnes drank alcohol was when Niina had dragged her to South Hamlet's nightclub to usher in the summer. Niina, who'd worked in the bookshop every weekend for years, had been offered a full-time position. Agnes also had something worth celebrating. She wouldn't have to set her foot in school ever again.

The night started with them in a corner, sipping Sangria. When some funky favourite of Niina's swept her away, Agnes stayed, thinking another Sangria would help her brave the dance floor, too. That second drink was her downfall. After that she let a handsome tourist introduce her to tequilas.

One minute she was sculling shots and sucking lemons. The next she was in the alleyway, behind overloaded rubbish bins, pressed up against a brick wall. She had no memory of walking outside with him, no memory of saying yes. She

never said no, never uttered a word. There was only the dull thumping bass from inside the nightclub and a spinning world. After, when trying to wiggle the skirt down and pull her undies up, she toppled over. There was no hand offered as she struggled to get to her feet. The handsome tourist lit a cigarette as she shambled away with a limp, heading for the canal and the long walk home.

Someone tapped her and she jolted. 'Agnes?'

‘Apple cider from now on.' Her words came out sharp.

'Oh, sure.'

'Sorry, I was miles away—your thumbs, can I see the damage?’

He held out broad palms. ‘These rugged tools are used to haul ropes and pull against the forces of nature. Your nails are pretty harmless.’ He winked.

Agnes couldn’t help but blush and tuck her hands away.

‘Don’t know if you remember.’ Guy offered a crooked smile. ‘I sail other people’s yachts.’

He’d done all the talking while she’d been concentrating on her fringe and her nails and what on earth she was doing, and why did she make it such a big thing?

‘I live right next to a canal,’ she said. ‘Göta Kanal. Doubt you’ve heard of it, but it cuts across Sweden from east to west. Still water, and narrow. Not so much sailing really.’

Guy gave her a surprised look. ‘I have heard. Connected with a Swede in Brazil. Just been to see him. His company picks up groups in Stockholm, sails them around the

Archipelago and through the locks to one of your lakes, drops them there, and picks up a new group. Then does the reverse. And you're right. Not much sailing.' He combed his fingers through his beard. 'It put me off a bit, but I'm seriously considering the offer. 'And you don't sail?'

'I've never been on a boat.'

Guy cocked an eyebrow. 'Fair dinkum?'

'I head butted a yacht once when I was four.'

'Might need to hear that story.'

'Apparently, I wandered up to the canal embankment on my own, fell in the lock, onto a sailing boat, and sort of bounced off the deck before landing in the surging water. Would have drowned, if not for one sailor. Arm in a sling for six weeks, and a considerable concussion. Fifteen stitches.' Agnes brushed her fringe aside though he would have already seen. It may be the third thing you noticed, but you couldn't miss it.

Guy reached over, hesitated, then touched her forehead with his fingers, felt along the worm light as a feather. He brushed her fine hair across again. 'It's not that noticeable,' he said. 'But fringe suits you.' He dropped his hand back in his lap, his eyes fixed on hers. 'Good thing you have no memory of the almost drowning.'

She nodded.

The memory of almost drowning was in her dreams most nights, and vivid. The waddle home along the canal, the night she gave up her virginity to some nameless brute, ended up

longer than expected when she tripped over and lost her balance.

It still haunted her—the fear, the cold, the sinking, the sound of silence underneath, swallowing water, splashing and fumbling for anything to save her, and nothing but liquid, her head bobbing above and below the surface, being swallowed up in the Swedish summer night. Somehow and suddenly her hands had found the grassy edge. She'd not been able to pull herself up but held on while the path, the water, and the sky reeled.

Time had stretched out endlessly. Then finally voices. Hands of strangers dragged her out. With chattering teeth, Agnes pretended her house was down the next road and ran off. She never told anyone, not even Niina. It was too pathetic.

'Are you all right?' Guy was patting her knee again. 'Adrenaline, alcohol, and another language—no wonder you're spaced out.' Then he nodded to the front. 'Food's on the way.'

The background noise rushed in, the hum of the engines, people talking, a baby's cry. As the two of them straightened up in their seats and released their tables, Agnes snuck a sideways glance at Guy. She was a yellow–fleece–pudge with a scar and funny dialect who'd vomited all over him, and *he*'d not asked to sit somewhere else.

3
twenty-seven days ago

'Big day tomorrow,' said Guy.

Together, they'd gone to collect their luggage. His duffel bag had tumbled out early, and they were waiting for Agnes's suitcase. The surrounding fellow travellers were steadily dispersing as their luggage arrived. Guy's words brought home what she'd been suppressing—the cocoon she'd nested in was about to release her. After close to thirty hours with him, swapping meals, dozing with his knees against her body or her head on his shoulder, exchanging bits about themselves, Guy seemed like someone she'd known for years. He'd made travelling easy. Now she'd be on her own.

Sharing a cab into the city made sense. Her destination was a hotel near Wynyard, while Guy would continue to Circular Quay. He'd be visiting friends in Manly for the weekend before heading up the coast.

'I was thinking,' he said. 'Why don't you come out for a bite?'

'Tonight?' The thought was comforting. 'Thanks, but I need an early night.'

‘Casual drinks with some mates of mine. They don’t bite, and I promise to have you home before you turn into a pumpkin.’

Mates of Guy surely meant jargon and jokes. She wouldn’t be able to keep up. It would be a night of bewildered smiles, and too many people always made her words come out jumbled or not at all.

‘Ferry leaves from Circular Quay, close to your hotel.’

No way would she step on some boat in Sydney harbour, not for anyone. A quiet evening—preparing for tomorrow, making sure she’d know where to go, book a cab—that was her.

‘Say yes?’

‘I have to make up bear names and write tags.’

‘Come on, Agnes.’ He elbowed her gently. ‘It’s your first time in Australia, and thought we’d already decided on names.’

It was true. They had. Strangely, Guy had shown a genuine interest in her bear-making. He’d listened to her describing the journey from design to execution to a finished creature without his eyes glazing over. She’d told him the history of teddy bears, and the story of her father’s bear, the story of her parents. Only Niina had heard that one.

‘How about we’ll take the ferry over,’ said Guy. ‘Plenty of good places to eat only walking distance from your hotel. Perfect.’

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘But I wonder where my suitcase is.’

The conveyor opening had stopped spitting out luggage. A few remaining travellers were picking off their bags and walking off. Agnes and Guy gave it another five minutes before accepting that her giant suitcase was missing in action.

'We do apologise. Something's gone wrong somewhere,' said the lady at the help desk.

'Miss Andersson has an important expo this weekend.' There was a change to Guy's voice. Agnes imagined him at the helm ordering around his crew. 'Haul the sail.' Something along those lines.

'I'm sorry, sir. We will, of course, track down the suitcase and have it sent to your hotel, Miss Andersson.'

'Agnes will need it by tomorrow.'

His tone of voice filled her with hope. They'd take this seriously. It wasn't some tedious-tourist-complaint but an Australian-skipper-of-yachts command. The woman made note of Agnes's hotel details, promising they would contact the hotel as soon as they knew.

Guy asked Agnes to wait and took off, returning ten minutes later with a pre-paid phone card. He helped her activate it. She left her new mobile number so the airline

could reach her directly, and Guy offered his number as a backup.

The cab trip into town was sombre. Guy tried to cheer her up. 'They'll sort it,' he kept saying. Agnes stared out the window watching suburban Sydney moving past outside, the endless traffic, the low buildings, the long streets hosting shop after shop, office after office, massive advertisement signs, one tackier than the other. Her skin was grimy, her scalp itchy, and an enormous lump of dough had settled in her gut. She pulled the hood over her head, then leaned into Guy's solid shoulder and dozed off.

'Agnes,' said Guy softly.

She sat up, disorientated. 'Where are we?'

'At your hotel.'

She released her seatbelt, found her wallet in her bag, and handed Guy two twenty-dollar bills.

He accepted one. 'This is plenty.'

The taxi driver got out to lift her cabin bag from the boot.

After so much time with Guy, it was weird to think she wouldn't see him again. The cab's dark windows softened the light from outside and dimmed the details of his face.

But she'd seen him in stark fluorescent light, and up close. Agnes knew well the fine wrinkles when he smiled, and his hazel-coloured irises with flecks of brown, the warmth in his eyes.

'I'm sorry, but I won't come out tonight,' she said. 'The luggage—I'm worried.'

'We'd do our best to cheer you up,' he said.

As much as Agnes hated the thought of getting out and having to face the rest on her own, she declined. All that mattered were the bears. 'I want to be here when it arrives. I will probably ring the airline again. 'I need my bag before tomorrow.'

'I understand.' Guy reached out and touched her tracky-dack-knee.

'Thanks,' said Agnes. 'For everything.'

The driver had left her cabin bag on the paving outside her door. He was back in the driver's seat. 'Time to go,' he said.

'Give us a minute,' said Guy with his skipper's voice.

She swallowed. 'I owe you—'

'Nonsense, you made the trip a lot of fun.' He took her hand in his.

'I'm in a hurry,' said the driver.

Agnes withdrew. 'Better go.'

Guy held his phone up. 'Any time, okay? If you need a chat. It's nice to know at least one person on this patch of land.'

The lump in her throat made her 'thanks' a whisper.

'Keep me posted on that suitcase. I bet they'll sort it. After you've had a shower and your bears restored, you might change your mind about tonight.'

'I have another booking,' said the driver.

Guy sighed and shook his head. 'Chin up,' he said.

Then she was out the door. Agnes watched the cab leave the kerb and disappear into the traffic. She stood there long after she'd lost sight of them—a yellow track-suited foreigner with a cabin bag handle in a tight grip, significantly smaller than usual in the shadows of the tall buildings around her.

Once Agnes had settled in her room, showered, and was freed of that awful tracksuit, she ordered food to her room and brought her bear photos out. As she and Guy had been brainstorming names, she'd written them on the back of each photo. All she had to do was transfer the information about each, and their name, to the swing tags. And then there was only worry left.

Agnes went to bed hoping, wishing, willing a knock on the door, at some ungodly hour by a suitcase delivery. Instead, she came alive in accordance with her internal clock set to Swedish time and stayed wide awake through the ungodly hours, watching endless re-runs of seventies cop shows and homegrown comedies that she didn't find funny, mentally kicking herself for having packed her new, four-hundred pages book purchase, in the vanished suitcase.

4
five days ago

Thomas had picked some new hot spot in Old Town. The stone-walled cellar with dripping candle chandeliers and brocade-upholstered chairs oozed charm with soft jazz and warm spices. He was being romantic. It didn't surprise Agnes when the velvet box came out minutes after sitting down. A fool, she was. A fool.

When he was waiting for her at arrivals, wearing the clothes he wore on the video clip from two days ago, she should have known he was taking up where he'd left off. She should have texted him before flying out of Sydney to make sure he *wouldn't* meet her at the airport.

To her defence, she'd been too upset to bother with her Swedish SIM card. It was still floating around in her bag. And she'd not in her wildest dreams imagined he'd meet her. When he did, his arms around her had both annoyed and comforted. She'd wanted to cry, let out all the bottled-up emotions held in for forty-eight long hours. There was so much inside, all jumbled. Confusion. Anger. Regret. Agnes supposed she'd hoped being held by him would return her to something she'd lost.

It didn't.

Then she'd let him talk her into this, coming out for dinner. Maybe it was a need for familiarity. She could have insisted on taking the bus home. But no, she'd pulled a crumpled top out of her suitcase, dry shampooed her hair, and added basic make-up. Gosh, next to him, she was dishevelled—inside and out. During the drive here and all his questions about the trip, she'd kept the lies and half-truths going. Short answers. All hazy now. *Now* was hazy.

'See if I can open it this time,' he said sliding the box closer to her.

Her head hummed from hours of movie dialogue, the thrum of aircraft engines, and her own thoughts which had not shut down since what happened on Felicity. If someone had stomped on her head and rubbed sand in her eyes, she couldn't possibly feel worse. Her heart ached as if inflamed—as if every disappointed cell in her body had dumped its toxic waste right there and given it a new density.

Talk about melancholic drivel.

This time he managed to open the box. 'I hope you like it.'

Agnes focused on the pinpricks of white brilliance, trying to sort through what she felt. She should not have agreed to this, should've taken the bus. She wasn't ready. Didn't matter though, did it? She was here. Agnes held out her hand, wondering if the ring would even fit.

It didn't.

'Fluid retention. You should see my calves. Look how tight this is.' She showed him her other hand with his original ring. She'd forgotten to take it off, though she'd experienced the same swelling, flying to Australia. The finger was a fat sausage around the once gold-plated metal.

'All the flying I've done, and never.' Thomas slotted it back into the velvet.

Agnes reached for the box, offering him a kind giggle. 'Don't worry. By tomorrow it'll fit.' She held the box close so she could take in the ring. 'It's pretty.' Was she relieved? Would it be easier to break it off with him if the ring never made it onto her finger? And was that what she wanted? There were no silver balls rolling into their slots, giving her a sense of arrival after her one bewildering detour. What her disarrayed mind needed was sleep. She tried the ring on her pinky. It managed halfway. Thomas laughed.

The champagne arrived. A waitress uncorked for them, congratulated them, and filled their glasses before disappearing again.

'To us and diminishing fluids.' He leaned in, and they met in a kiss over the table.

She made it swift, pretending the stretch was too far for her neck. When her lips touched his, she remembered Guy's.

Thomas smelled of her Christmas gift, *Pursuit* by Don Diego. Agnes had an urge to touch his shaven jaw. She didn't act on it.

They reposed in their seats. Away from the immediate light, it was easier to face him, her energetic and persuasive man. His short crop of hair was blow-dried and textured, his blue eyes intense on her while he sipped his bubbly.

If Thomas looked hard enough, surely he'd see the betrayal imbued on her irises and tattooed on her skin—the weight of another man, her palms on another man's buttocks, another man's tongue in her mouth. There was a fault in the linen weave where her fork rested, a stitched mend. Agnes touched the undulation with her fingers.

'So … about the wedding.' Thomas dropped the glass back on the table.

'Wedding?'

He hesitated. 'I've … booked a celebrant.'

'You've set a date?'

Thomas licked his bottom lip, back and forth, half-open mouth. 'I've had time to ponder. I want you to hear me out.'

He'd been sick, yet he'd been thinking of her while she'd been busy making a fool of herself, merely thinking of him in brief spurts.

'We'll keep it small and intimate. I know you wouldn't want anything glitzy.'

'When?'

'We've waited long enough. Time to do what's good for *us*.'

This was Thomas, the insurance man. This was him persuading a client to take the company's life, home and personal accidents package, plus all the extras.

No, that was something Niina would say. That was unfair. He'd missed her.

'South Hamlet,' he said. 'Your place, family, a few friends, nice and chilled.'

'A summer wedding?'

'Found a great deal on the Greek Isles—for the honeymoon. Spring's the best time over there. You'll love it.'

'Next Spring?'

'Not next …'

Agnes drew her fingertips across the linen, landing her hands in her lap.

'I know it's madness. Totally.' His tone softened. 'Isn't that exactly what we need? Greece is booked and paid for,' he said, so softly she could barely hear him.

'When Thomas? When?'

He looked her straight in the eyes, again hesitated. 'Thursday,' he said finally. 'This one coming.' Then he picked up his glass again, on edge.

She sat stunned, watched him drink, waited until he put the glass down. 'Five days from now?'

'I kind of imagined you'd be all for it.'

'It's … sudden.'

'Says the girl who once wanted to elope. Come on, Agnes, let's go the whole hog mad. I've got a place sorted for tonight, around the corner. A mate's Airbnb. Dennis—you've met him. Overlooks the water, the city, the royal castle. He's had it

refurbished. Wait till you see the bed.' Thomas winked at her. 'Swollen limbs or not, I can't wait to see the rest of your tan.'

His words fed the jitter in her stomach. Of course, he had organised a place to stay. As Niina often said. Daft as a brush.

'Why do you shake your head?'

'I … I need to go home. I'll reimburse you for any cost.'

He laughed contemptuously. 'You're not serious? I had to twist his arm for it. Dennis had a date tonight. He was going to use it himself. You and I, it's been what, a month? And we just got engaged.'

It had barely been forty-eight hours since Guy. It was too fresh.

Thomas shook his head in disbelief. 'You expect me to put you on the bus after this?'

Squinting, she nodded.

'Why Ness?'

She dropped her gaze and stared into her lap, at the ring still tight on her little finger. 'I'm sorry. I'm exhausted.'

'You'll sleep like a baby in that bed. Tomorrow we'll go find you a dress.'

'I already have one.' The heat behind her eyelids was intense. There was no plausible excuse for a two-hour bus ride this late. But go to bed with him? No. She needed to find her bearings, process in peace. He'd gone out of his way, and she was both deceitful and an idiot for putting him, and herself, in this situation.

‘Even better,’ he said. ‘We’ll have a lazy Sunday. Tomorrow we could brunch with my mum and—’

‘I’m taking the bus.’ Her words came loud and sharply blunt. Agnes sunk into her seat and clasped her hands, exhaled. ‘It’s the jet lag,’ she said. ‘I feel off.’

He considered her, licking his bottom lip.

Awkward silence.

To her relief, the waiter arrived with their entrees—delicate towers of seafood and black caviar sprinkled across white porcelain.

‘What is going on?’ said Thomas, once they were alone again. ‘You’re not yourself.’

‘You know what could be romantic? We wait. It’ll make it more special.’

‘Extreme, don’t you—?’

‘And getting engaged and married all in the same week aren’t?’

Thomas looked at her wide-eyed.

‘I know you had a plan,’ she said. ‘However, it’s overwhelming—a wedding in five days? I need to go home tonight.’ She longed to crawl into bed. Her bed. Alone.

‘All right. Forget it.’ He picked up his fork, scooped up the decorative sprig of dill, and placed it on the side of the plate. ‘Should I drive you to the bus stop right now or can you manage our engagement dinner?’

She let his sharp words wash over her without as much as raising an eyebrow.

He ate while she picked up caviar eggs with her fingertips. It looked delicious, but she lacked appetite. 'You can have mine,' she said after he'd finished his plate, then watched him work his way through the main as well, while she settled for a pot of chamomile tea.

She tried to return them to small talk but found she had nothing to say, and no energy to keep up the pretence about the bus tour. Her Australia trip had been a fiasco—except for facing her one fear, something she'd never explained properly to Thomas, to begin with. She couldn't bring that up now even if she wanted to. She also didn't want to.

Thomas thawed, found his default plus mode—a Thomas trait she loved—and turned his annoyance into enthusiasm over the wedding. He named the people he'd invite, his parents, his closest friends and their partners. No kids except for Pernilla, of course. Asked who she'd invite. Niina. He'd had the foresight to book enough rooms at the Hamlet Guesthouse. Had he organised catering? No. Could she do it? After all, it was her hometown.

With such short notice, they would have to settle for simple. Not that she'd let that trouble her—*if* she moved ahead with this. A smorgasbord with finger food was fine and their local baker would whip a cake up if she wanted nothing too outlandish. That didn't trouble her either. An unassuming wedding was perfectly fine.

Niina wouldn't approve—that troubled her, and her own confusion. What she needed was to sleep, find the Agnes

she was three days ago but without the witless Guy-crush roadblock. That Agnes would see clarity.

By the time she stepped inside the door, it was almost midnight, and Agnes was shivering from exhaustion and sitting in air-con air for hours. The window lamp's glow, the warmth from the elements, and the house scent welcomed her with a bitter 'home sweet home' reminding her of loss and aloneness. The wall pegs seemed sad and deserted. She hung her jacket on one, her scarf on the next, then her handbag, and a boot on each of the other.

It was probably because she'd been gone for almost a month, this uncertain gut feeling, the sense of something foreign among the old and intimate. She locked the door. Then she walked through the house, flicking on lights.

The kitchen, dining and lounge room looked how she'd left them. So did the glass veranda. The panes, like mirrors against the black outside, displayed three Agnes, three frazzled reflections. She alone suffered the itchy scalp and the pull from the elastic snared into her sun-bleached mess.

Her mum's office was immaculate—neater than Agnes remembered. Cold prickled at the back of her neck. 'Get over yourself,' she said in a loud voice. 'You've forgotten how

you left it.' She'd been pretty frantic, nervous about flying, nervous she'd forget to pack something. Agnes closed the door. Then she remembered the phone, walked back in and took it off the hook. If Olga spotted her lights on from across the canal, she'd ring in the morning. And what Agnes needed was to sleep.

She continued upstairs to check. As the rooms lit up, as the house came alive, her unease faded. Nothing was out of place. Her jewellery box was on its spot on the small shelf by her bed. She lifted the lid and yes, her parents' wedding bands and the few gold trinkets of hers were still there. Her bed was too neat, she thought. The throw pillows lay scattered differently from how she normally did. *I could have done that.* Agnes checked the guest room again. Nothing out of place. She must have done that.

She climbed the stairs to the attic, switched on the light bulbs hanging from the sloped ceiling, and inhaled. There it was, the aroma of metal, wood and fibre, of beeswax candles she burned when shaping noses, of browning essence from staining their fur, and her scent too—her sweat from the arduous work of stuffing the bears' hollow costumes, filling limbs with wood wool, and giving bodies shape. She'd spent some intense weeks here, in the lead-up to the expo. Agnes walked around her space, touching the sturdy oak table, the sewing machine, the empty shelves with one lonely bear in a slouching position, his ears in his lap, and no eyes.

'Poor little sod. I'll get you sorted this week—promise.'

The mere thought of replicating all the bears she'd lost … By default, she never made the same bear twice, but this time she'd have to. Collectors had made their picks.

Your suitcase has not disappeared into outer space, Agnes. You'll get it back.

Guy. Where had he come from? She had no intention of having him in her head. Niina was already taking up enough room.

She would ring the airline again. They were predictably pleasant on the phone, but nothing happened. Tomorrow or the next day—after she'd slept—she'd threaten with the ombudsman. She needed her bears returned. Losing the hand-made ones was awful enough. Her dad's vintage Steiff was irreplaceable.

Leaving Villa Solus lit up like a late-night shopping mall, Agnes fetched Thomas's ring box and placed it on the rim of the bathtub. While running hot water, she took a shower to wash off her hours of travelling, using half a bottle of conditioner to persuade the stubborn elastic without losing too much hair. Agnes thought of her last two showers in Australia, the before and after Guy. Anticipation and physical longing. The memory pulled like grief, like drowning.

Once she finally stepped into the silky heat, Agnes sunk her head below the surface and screamed. She came up for breath, then under again, kept at it until her voice wore out. There were no tears, only water dripping down her face. After all, Guy didn't deserve tears. Agnes leaned back, closed her

eyes, and breathed in … and out … in … and out. She exhaled Australia and inhaled Sweden. Out with the holiday … in with her normal life … out with Guy … in with Thomas.

After lathering up her finger with soap, she pulled the old ring off. With wet hands, she slid it into the box. Next to the engagement ring, the blue gemstones looked pretty shabby.

She lay back and rested her head on the hard edge, thought of their first time. They went for a drive out into the forest. She suggested it, thinking it was about time she put her introduction to sex behind her. After that, they went for forest drives each time he came by on his way south. When the weather cooled, Thomas persuaded his boss that South Hamlet was the obvious layover on his business trips south. He'd book the motel outside town and she'd stay until the mornings. Their first 18 months had been the best. She was in love.

Then she finally agreed for him to meet her parents, and the trouble started—her sneaking behind their back, pretending it was over, he talking her out of eloping, sure that her parents would get over it. And then the stroke, which made her mum impossible.

Reconnecting with Thomas this time around had been different. There was a new freedom but also a desperate need in her. When he showed up on her porch the week after her father's funeral, exhausted with grief and guilt she'd slid into an embrace without uttering a word. He stayed the night.

Her lovemaking had been fierce, a hunger to be filled, be consumed, be seen and vanish into him, into a different life.

And now she could have it all. Thomas had a point. Why wait? For what? It was their turn now. Greece would undo Australia. Greece would connect her to him, again.

'You know what, Mum, he keeps coming back.' Her words resonated between the tiled walls. 'You were wrong about him. Why shouldn't I say yes? And this time you don't get to interfere.'

Later—long after she woke up shivering again, after she'd layered up in fleece, watered plants, gone through the mail, and drunk a litre of tea—Agnes went to use the downstairs guest toilet. And peculiarly, though she'd never leave the seat up, up it was.

This is the end of the sample. If you'd like to join Agnes for her holiday & wedding day—two journeys destined to collide—you'll find links to purchase on the next page.

Reader Reviews

BookLife Prize — "The author maintains suspense... by dropping hints... Readers are drawn into wondering how each of these narratives will pan out, and that works well for creating interest."

★★★★★ "Charlotte French's debut novel is a page-turner in every sense … unexpected twists and turns that just keep coming, and finally a satisfying, fist-pumping, heart-warming and realistic conclusion that leaves you sad that it's over, but cheering for Agnes." — Chris Lofts, Author

★★★★★ "What a beautifully written story! With rain-filled Swedish canals, sun-kissed Aussie beaches, a larger-than-life best friend and unexpected twists and turns, Agnes Treading Water will keep you hooked until the end." —KSD, Amazon Reviews

★★★★★ "What an interesting plot. A brilliant storyline. Every time I thought THIS is going to happen, I was completely wrong! Easy to read, very relaxing.

Congratulations to you! Keep writing." — Amazon Reviewer

★★★★★ ""We're right there with Agnes, for all the twists and turns (of which there are a lot!), until we're as confused as she is. Until French skilfully pulls us back, weaving in the threads we've missed. A sensational debut." — MJ Burke, Author

★★★★★ "Agnes is creative, intelligent and caring - worthy of more than she seemed ready to settle for, so the resolution of her story is all the more satisfying." — Lynne Fellows, Amazon Reviews

★★★★★ "I was swept up in Agnes's journey from the beginning, as a shy, Swedish teddy bear maker facing all her self-doubt and fears and the consequences of the choices she makes. A page-turner that readers of contemporary women's fiction will thoroughly enjoy." — Anna, B&N Reviews

★★★★★ "I'd give this book higher than five stars if I could. I honestly haven't been this excited about a book in a while!" — Catherine Castoro, Author

★★★★★ "There's lots to love in this story, starting with Agnes, a complex, well-drawn character. I was happy to find the story well-written and fast-paced with mystery, adventure, and romance." — Carol Ervin, Amazon Reviews

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About the Author

It took a migration across continents, half a century, and everything from dish pig to boutique owner before Charlotte faced her persistent aspiration and deepest fear of pursuing writing. Charlotte grew up in Sweden, but lives on the east coast of Australia with her husband, in the house they've built, not far from the beach where they first met. The children have left the nest, but Banjo has successfully planted his four speckled paws inside the door, and attached his exuberant personality to their hearts.

Charlotte is an award winning author who writes contemporary character driven drama about everyday people and their conundrums. She writes to entertain readers seeking lighthearted escape, weaving in romance, mystery, and unexpected twists. When not tapping away on the keyboard, Charlotte goes about her daily life pretending *not* to be thinking about writing and obsessing about anything and everything story. She's working on her third novel.