



## Her Black Wings

AGATHA TK CUT OUT ON A RAINY SUNDAY morning, just the other day. I was heading up the block at a steady clip, already late for church, when I noticed the mammoth moving truck parked outside of New York City Custom Leather, the 9th St. boutique where she sold her triple and quadruple-digit leather creations.

Hand-made pants were her specialty—hip-hugging boot-cut styles ranging from your basic black to blue suede with studs and a lace-up fly. She personally reworked each pair after a few wears to cleave sagging butt after sagging butt, at no extra charge. I had seen her handiwork stop traffic, upturn tractor trailers and shake the foundations of whole city blocks. Where was she taking it all? Plus, I'd recently purchased a gift certificate that had yet to be redeemed and wondered if we might still strike some kind of deal.

A stalking Mephistopholean figure in custom black leather trousers was directing the mover outside the shop. I approached him as he smoked in the drizzle and asked what was going on. He vaguely mentioned something about closing for 13 months.

"Agatha's inside. Go ask her," he said.

Yikes. The last time I tried to do that, a barking Doberman lunged at the door.

My only previous contact with Agatha herself occurred over the phone several years ago when my boss, tied up on another line, instructed me to have her red leather hot pants customized to fit "*fucking tight*." At the time I mistook her name for Golgotha and the voice on the other end of the receiver somehow gave me the impression of a basement workshop where strong fingers pushed raw-

hide under the beak of a shiny black machine—the regular tolling of bells in the distance.

Subsequently, though, I would go out of my way to pass the storefront and gloat over her latest leather halter top/Stetson ensemble—behind which a feral little boy might be riding the hellhound around the shop while F.F. Coppola fingered a ram's-horn goblet and a Harley Davidson swung from the ceiling.

Wearing pigtails and tight flairs (a style she apparently adopted during the fall in lieu of the cheek-riding daisy-dukes she wore throughout the summer) and a skinny tank top airing the Motorhead logo tattooed across her back, I found her stomping around behind a broom in hoof-like heels. Her dominion—once a chilly, leather Olympus—had been reduced to a couple of racks and patterns. I drew an involuntary breath and inquired about my gift certificate.

"How much was it for?" she asked with a directness as startling as her raw-boned gait. (I'd pass her on gray mornings as she walked the Satanic Doberman up 9th St., a steely wind whipping its clipped ears and her widow's peak bangs.)

"Fifty bucks," I said.

She trotted over to a pile of leather-bound ledgers and satchels haphazardly stacked in a handbasket, peeled off a Grant from a fist-sized roll—and handed it to me, no questions asked. I took the bill, scratched an imaginary itch and wondered how many people still did business this way.

I would have asked about her destination if I hadn't been rendered speechless by the exchange. I would have. But by the time I returned that evening it was too late. The heart-shaped signboard with Agatha's name swathed across a field of stars and stripes was gone—and a *For Rent* sign left in its place behind the padlocked grate.

—STACEY SZEWCZYK

