

USA Today Bestselling Author

CHARLOTTE BYRD
RONAN BYRD

SAY

*you'll
stay*



SOMERSET
HARBOR

MACMILLAN BROTHERS BOOK 2

SAY YOU'LL STAY

A SOMERSET HARBOR NOVEL

CHARLOTTE BYRD

CHARLOTTE BYRD
dangerously addictive

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About Charlotte Byrd

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PRAISE FOR CHARLOTTE BYRD

“Twisted, gripping story full of heat, tension and action. Once again we are caught up in this phenomenal , dark passionate love story that is full of mystery, secrets, suspense and intrigue that continues to keep you on edge!” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

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“Charlotte Byrd is one of the best authors I have had the pleasure of reading, she spins her storylines around believable characters, and keeps you on the edge of your seat. Five star rating does not do this book/series justice.” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

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“I loved this book, it is fast paced on the crime plot, and super-hot on the drama, I would say the perfect mix. This suspense will have your heart racing and your blood pumping. I am happy to recommend this thrilling and exciting book, that I just could not stop reading once I started. This story will keep you glued to the pages and you will find yourself cheering this couple on to finding their happiness. This book is filled with energy, intensity and heat. I loved this book so much. It was super easy to get swept up into and once there, I was very happy to stay.” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

“BEST AUTHOR YET! Charlotte has done it again! There is a reason she is an amazing author and she continues to prove it! I was definitely not disappointed in this series!!” (Goodreads) ★★★★★

“LOVE!!! I loved this book and the whole series!!! I just wish it didn't have to end. I am definitely a fan for life!!!

(*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Extremely captivating, sexy, steamy, intriguing, and intense!”

(*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Addictive and impossible to put down.” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“What a magnificent story from the 1st book through book 6 it never slowed down always surprising the reader in one way or the other. Nicholas and Olive's paths crossed in a most unorthodox way and that's how their story begins it's exhilarating with that nail biting suspense that keeps you riding on the edge the whole series. You'll love it!”

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“Captivating!” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Sexy, secretive, pulsating chemistry...” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Charlotte Byrd is a brilliant writer. I've read loads and I've laughed and cried. She writes a balanced book with brilliant characters. Well done!” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Hot, steamy, and a great storyline.” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“My oh my....Charlotte has made me a fan for life.”

(*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“Wow. Just wow. Charlotte Byrd leaves me speechless and humble... It definitely kept me on the edge of my seat. Once you pick it up, you won't put it down.” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

“ Inigue, lust, and great characters...what more could you ask for?!” (*Goodreads*) ★★★★★

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ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

Charlotte Byrd is the bestselling author of romantic suspense novels. She has sold over 1.5 Million books and has been translated into five languages.

She lives near Palm Springs, California with her husband, son, a toy Australian Shepherd and a Ragdoll cat. Charlotte is addicted to books and Netflix and she loves hot weather and crystal blue water.

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ABOUT SAY YOU'LL STAY

Meet Beau MacMillan, the suave and wealthy COO of Somerset Harbor Resort, and Elsie, the brilliant architect who's got a heart of steel!

When the MacMillan family needs their new resort to be nothing short of extraordinary, Beau takes matters into his hands. He wants the best, and that means one architect in particular, but fate has other plans. Instead, **he's stuck with Elsie, the talented yet feisty architect** but not his first choice.

With equal power and an instant dislike for each other, sparks fly like dynamite! Beau might have the money, but he can't buy Elsie's heart, and she's not about to make things easy for him. Their working relationship is as explosive, with heated arguments and clashes at every turn.

But as they spend more time together, something starts to shift. Elsie's tough exterior hides a vulnerability that intrigues Beau, and he finds himself reevaluating his first impressions. Likewise, Elsie begins to see past the surface of the wealthy resort owner and discovers a man worth knowing.

As they work side by side to redesign the resort, they learn to navigate the rough waters of their initial conflict and find common ground. But will their newfound respect and affection be enough to bridge the gap between their worlds?

- ✓ Enemies-to-lovers romance
- ✓ Billionaire romance
- ✓ Steamy and hot

Join Beau and Elsie as they take an emotional rollercoaster ride in “Say You’ll Stay.” This steamy romance will have you cheering for love to conquer all! Grab your copy today and get lost in the passion and drama!

BEAU

If I have a fatal flaw, it is this—I like things a certain way. Schedules, my clothes, my home, my days, all of it is customized to my needs. So when I notice the paper cut on my forefinger, it makes me smile. Any other day, and I would be annoyed. But not today.

Nothing will get me down today. I am meeting the illustrious Pavel Cerny. Today is the day I will stand in the presence of greatness.

Dramatic? Perhaps. In fact, the grandiose thought makes me roll my eyes at myself. But the fact remains that Pavel Cerny is the greatest architect in a generation and securing him for my project has taken up much of my time, so I allow myself some bombast on the matter. I made the best connections, schmoozed the right people with a delicate touch, and now I am to be rewarded for all my efforts.

Sliding a folder into my brown leather briefcase, I am reminded of the hard work which went into scoring this meeting. More importantly, I am also relieved.

The rumors were false. Pavel is available for our project.

My downtown office is charming, but it will be nothing compared to the office I'll have once we build our resort. Currently, I am surrounded by a posh desk, chair, and bookshelf setup that would suit any executive, which makes sense considering it's a rental office. Dark woods, shining finishes, the works. I even have a view of the harbor. But now, I want more. I already have ideas for my resort office, and

Pavel will have the genius to make them even better. I deserve that office. A Cerny original. I can practically see it in my mind. Everything is coming together.

A bold knock at my door calls my attention.

“Enter.”

My older brother, Cormac, walks in. Our family resemblance is undeniable, but it’s the little things that distinguish us from one another. Similar brown hair, only mine has faint lowlights of auburn. I’m taller, but he has ten pounds of muscle on me. A negligible difference, but he’s always quick to remind me when it comes up. Still, I’m better than him at tennis, so I don’t mind much. He has our father’s gray-blue eyes—dark and steely. Mine are like Mom’s. Hazel green and not at all mysterious. Not quite fair of Fate to give him the nicer eyes. He’s always been too straightforward with them. Had I the blue eyes of a wolf, I might have been one.

He smiles. Of course he smiles. He’s been all smiles since finding Lily Olson, his nanny-turned-girlfriend, just a few months ago. Ever since their reconciliation, he’s had wedding bells across his face. I’m surprised he hasn’t asked me to go with him to Manhattan for ring shopping yet. “You must be excited to meet Pavel.”

“That is Mr. Cerny to you, peasant.”

He laughs. “Right, yes, I hear he’s got a bit of a proper streak about him. That should be fun to work with for the project.”

“I’ll call him *King* Cerny, if it gets me the resort I want. And so will you.”

“I cannot get over how much of a man crush you have on him.”

I huff. “It’s not a crush. It’s a bit of hero worship mixed with sheer awe, we lucked out.”

“Admittedly, I’m surprised Barbara Tanner’s intel wasn’t solid.”

“Why is that?”

“You said she heard from his ex-wife that he had a project in Dubai—

“Yes, and you said that ex-wives are not known for their solid information, meaning the Dubai rumor was likely untrue, which was a comfort, and you sound as though you are peeling that comfort away. Why would you do that to me right now?”

Cormac laughs. “Calm down, Beau. You have the meeting. Stop worrying so much. This is happening.” He is right, of course, but still.

Though I try to be unflappable, my blood pressure cannot take the panic that set in once I heard about the Dubai rumor. Not again. I take a breath and let it out slowly. “You’re right. It’s... this has been a long time coming, and I am eager to get to Manhattan to meet with him so he can tell me his vision, and I can breathe easy again. Out of curiosity, what makes you doubt Barbara Tanner’s intel?”

“You said she had heard about Dubai from his ex-wife. Pavel is an artist—they shift with the wind. So, all I meant was, his ex-wife could have been current on his plans and still be wrong. Not her fault, not Barbara’s fault, either. Also, not an issue. The meeting is set. This should be a victory lap for you, Beau. You did it. Relax. You have a long drive ahead of you.”

I nod and close my briefcase. “Well, I have everything. If you need me, call before ten. That’s when the meeting starts—”

“I saw it on the calendar,” he says with a tone. “Promise me you’ll drive like a reasonable human and not a race car driver.”

“My Aston likes to be driven fast.”

“And your driving record? What does it like?”

“That question does not warrant an answer.”

“You’ll be lucky if there isn’t a warrant out for your arrest, if you get pulled over again.” A tight smile tells me he is in conflict. There’s warmth in his voice, though. “Please do not get another speeding ticket just because you’re excited about meeting your architectural idol. There’re only so many you can get before it becomes more serious.”

“Since when do you do the dirty work of nagging me on his behalf?”

“Since he named me CFO, and all I can do is think about the money it will cost the family when you get another ticket. Do me this one favor.”

“Fine.” I promise, “I will do my best. The truth is, I don’t want to do anything that would put the meeting back, including getting pulled over. Having Pavel Cerny design our resort is going to put it on the map. People will come from all around the world just to see his latest work. This will change everything for the MacMillan Corporation, Cormac.”

He sighs and smiles. “For Somerset Harbor, too. You’ve done well, Beau. You really have. I’m proud of you.”

“As much as I’d like to take all the credit...no, wait, I think I will.”

He snorts a laugh. “Asshole.”

“Of all the people in the world to say it, though, I want to hear it from Dad. That we took MacMillan Corp into the future with this design. That we are the future of the company, and not only because we’re his sons. But because we earned it.”

“I get that. But don’t be upset if he never says it outright. You know how tightlipped he can be with things like that.”

“Which is why I wanted Pavel in the first place. I want the resort to be so perfect that Dad can’t stop himself from saying it.”

He smiles. “I bet he will. You better—”

“Get going,” I tell him, nodding. “Right. But before I go, thank you again for getting the financials in order so quickly. Once I knew Pavel was available, I knew we had to snatch him up. So I am grateful for all your hard work. Dealing with the investors is not my idea of a good time.”

“What is your idea of a good time these days, Beau?”

I laugh. “You know, I’m not sure anymore. I’ve worked on this project for so long that I’m overdue.”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps you’ve banked enough good times over the years that you can live off the memories.”

“Absolutely not. When this is all over, I plan to go on adult Spring Break to celebrate.”

Cormac laughs. “What’s an adult Spring Break for you?”

“A toxic weekend in Vegas, followed by a week or two of detoxing in Sedona.”

“Sounds like you plan to let Vegas kick your ass.”

“You have it backward.”

He smirks. “I’m sure I do.”

I grab my briefcase and straighten my tie. “How do I look?”

“Nice suit. Is that black or navy? I can’t tell in this light.”

“Navy. Fresh from my tailor on Saville Row. I told you I can hook you up with Jones. He’s the best.”

“No need.” He chuckles. “I’m good. I can’t go spending Franny and Aiden’s college fund on clothes.”

As if he doesn’t have the money. “Very well. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it, but good luck, all the same. Uh, you sure you don’t want to borrow my SUV? Has to be a lot more comfortable than your little sports car for the drive.”

Leveling a look at him, I walk past without a word, dashing out of the offices, down the stairs, and out to my car. My baby. My Aston Martin DBS. Minotaur Green, which is almost black. I’d wanted the Scorpus Red, but talked myself out of it when I realized how easy it was to notice the color from a mile away. No need to stick out when it comes to cops and speeding. If I weren’t so concerned with presenting myself a certain way, I’d put the top down. But presentation is everything, and I cannot go into the meeting with windblown hair.

The sound system is custom, and I crank up a playlist of eighties hair metal bands. The drive to Manhattan is long enough. There’s no sense in not enjoying myself, though the urge to speed overcomes my urge not to annoy Cormac. I

could tell myself it's the music or the car that makes me speed, but that's a lie. I've never been good at waiting for anything, including my destination. Back when I was a mere lonely nerd in high school, speeding was my chosen vice to deal with the pressure of maintaining my GPA. I hated waiting for graduation to have a real life, so speeding was a way to cope.

Thankfully, the Manhattan skyline comes into view before I rouse any trouble. It's as though fate is trying to make up for giving me the wrong eye color by making the police overlook me today. It's a sign. This meeting is the start of everything. Nothing will stand in my way.

-

ELSIE

What is that pounding? Oh, right. My head.

Another tension headache from focusing too hard on my monitor. Not that it matters. The only thing that matters right now is the drawing on the screen. It's perfect. Truly perfect. Well, it's perfect for a soulless corporate Manhattan location for Apple, but it's *my* soulless corporate Manhattan location for Apple, and it's absolutely perfect.

Except for one tiny flaw that stands out now that everything else is in order.

One of the front windows could stand to be moved left by a quarter inch. It's not a fatal flaw and no one would notice it but me, but that's the point. I'll be walking past it every day. If I walk past my *almost* perfect storefront with the window that's off by a quarter of an inch, I'd have to abandon my life in Manhattan and live under an assumed name on the West Coast, purely out of shame.

No one else would know it's wrong but me, and that's enough.

After tweaking the window, I sit back. Not with a flourish or a sense of pride. My past dictates such things are not allowed. There is always something I can do better. No matter how many times my boss, colleagues, and clients tell me they love my work. No matter how many awards I have. It's never enough. Nothing could ever be enough.

It has to be perfect.

I've worked on this Apple store for weeks now, and I'm set to meet with the clients Friday, so I'll need my boss to look over the design again before that happens. It's tempting to pop over to his calendar and pen myself in, but I can't stop staring at the moment. I cannot afford to get this wrong, and a few more minutes of studying the drawing won't hurt anything except my head.

It's like when I was a kid and I messed up coloring in my Muppet coloring book, but I couldn't see what was wrong at first. Days after Mom stuck the picture on the refrigerator, I saw it. That slight misstep of green, just outside the thick black line of Kermit's eye. That eye, staring back at me, judging me each time I walked into the kitchen.

Every drawing as a professional architect has been full of Kermit's eyes. Staring back at me, judging me.

Silly to think the mistakes of youth haunt me decades after, I guess. But it's also the reason my work is sharp and why I've risen in the ranks beyond my colleagues as fast as I have. I've earned a reputation for being exacting and cordial, or at least, those are the words people say to my face.

But I've heard the other words when I was in the bathroom and my coworkers think I can't hear them. Picky. Bitchy. Bossy. Each one makes me smile almost as much as when I flushed and left the stall to look the gossips in the eye while I washed my hands. I never mentioned the bathroom incident to anyone, not even when the gossips were put on my team for a couple of projects. As far as I was concerned, their grievances were free advertising.

A reputation like that takes a woman far in my industry.

Unfortunately though, not far enough. One day, I'll run my own firm. So, I can't afford to be the woman who brings in brownies or the one who is an outstanding architect who also pours everyone coffee in the meeting. Softness, of any kind, is not allowed in this male-dominated industry. Which is fine by me. I've never been all that soft.

The problem is, I'm not great at balancing the expectations of a woman in my industry and playing the politics of it at the

same time. I don't care about who likes me, and that has, on occasion, bitten me on the ass. Thankfully, my boss likes me. He's the one who made sure I got the Apple job in the first place. He's also the reason I have a glorious corner office on the forty-second floor, with a stellar view of the park and the city I love.

That I never look at because I'm too busy working.

Doesn't matter, though. Right now, I'm looking at the only sliver of the city that I care about. The one with my name on it. Soon, everyone in Manhattan will know the name Elsie Braudel, and as everyone knows, if you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. Okay, the saying is from Broadway, but it's in Manhattan, so the idea holds.

A soft knock makes me jump, but I know who it is. "Come in."

My boss, Walter Klein, ambles in, but there's an uncertainty in his face that leaves me unsettled as he closes the door behind himself. My guest chairs aren't comfortable by design. I don't want people to stay for a chat and a cup of tea. I want them to get in and get out so I can work. But I always feel bad when it's Walter in the jump seat. He could use some comfort for his arthritis.

He gives me an apologetic smile, and I know I'm going to hate this conversation. "Elsie."

"Walter."

As the owner of the firm, he is within his rights to do whatever he sees fit, so seeing him on edge is disconcerting in the extreme. He clears his throat. "If we had the time, I'd butter you up—"

"For what, exactly?"

A heavy sigh rolls out of him. "You're not going to like it."

"Oh, I can tell. Out with it."

"I need you to send me whatever you have for Apple and switch gears to a new project. Immediately."

My throat goes dry. All that work. Out of my hands. This isn't right. "I'm getting reassigned?"

"It's not like that—"

"You said—"

"Okay, fine. *It is* like that. The previous architect on the project has become unavailable, and we need the client happy. I can't think of anyone else who would make them happier than you."

Shifty. His entire answer is shifty. It's not like Walter to do this. "Pavel can take whatever jobs he wants, but *I'm* getting reassigned?"

He scrubs his hand over his wrinkly face and through his thinning hair. "Elsie, I need you to be a team player on this."

"You mean you need me to take one for the team?"

To calm me down, he gestures with both hands, something I know for a fact hurts his arthritic knuckles. Which means this is really important to him. So, I can't say no. *Shit*. He grumbles, "We are under contract with the MacMillan Corporation. I need my best on it."

"And *your best* doesn't get notice ahead of time?"

"It's not ideal. But I need you for this, Elsie."

"What is so important that I'm getting yanked away from Apple for some company I've never heard of?"

He smiles, and I almost believe it, but not quite. "A resort."

That's a huge gig. I'm instantly picturing something upstate or someplace out West. *This could be amazing*. "Where is it going to be?"

"Somerset Harbor."

I frown. I know the name, but can't place it. "Where the hell is that?"

"It's—"

"Wait," a sinister feeling sinks into my gut, "that little nothing tourist trap on Long Island? You want me to design a motel for

mistresses and their made men boyfriends? Are you kidding me?”

He smiles, trying to appease me while knowing nothing short of a miracle will do the trick. “It’s actually more like The Hamptons, and the resort is going to be a fancy, exclusive multi- multi-million dollar project. This isn’t a downgrade.”

“So, you want me to go to some crappy little town and create a masterpiece to be wasted on women named Muffy who dress Coastal Grandma and sip martinis, while dreaming of their glory days back at Vassar?”

His voice firms up. “Yes, and I put the meeting on your calendar. You have five minutes before the client gets here.”

“What?” I snap.

He rubs his temples. “Elsie, you know I would not ask this of you if I didn’t need you, right?”

“Is this because Pavel ended up taking that gig in Dubai? They wanted him, right? He’s the architect who is suddenly unavailable?”

He loudly exhales out his nose. “It’s because the client asked for the best.”

“That’s not a no.”

“Does it matter?”

He’s talking in circles, and I want to argue my way out of this. Anything to get out of creating a beautiful hotel where it, *and my talents*, will be wasted. No one is going to go there for a resort, and what else is in that nothing town? For that matter, what moron is funding this thing? No one cares about Somerset Harbor.

But a new Apple store in Manhattan will see thousands per day. It will be a star attraction. It should have been *my* star attraction. To think my skills will be squandered like this...it’s a gut punch. A damn near literal gut punch.

But it doesn’t matter. There is nothing I can do. Not really. Walter is my boss, and Pavel Cerny is a spoiled brat who does whatever he wants. It has infuriated me many times since

coming to Klein and Associates. Walter runs a tight ship, but somehow, there's a leak.

Pavel has all the leeway in the world simply because he's ten years older than me and who his father was. Ivan Cerny, Pavel's father, was a legendary architect. He designed for celebrities, royalty, anyone with enough name recognition to earn his attention. Even though he's gone now, his name opens doors around the world for his son. Growing up in that realm, Pavel knows everyone, so he can pull whatever strings he likes. Sure, he's good at his job. But I'm better. He and I have equal seniority at Klein and Associates, and I thought that would matter.

I was an idiot for believing it would.

The firm has used his contacts several times and gotten lucrative contracts by doing so. I've brought in business, sure, but not like Pavel. No one else has his connections and family legacy. It's grating. Still, this doesn't make any sense. *Who has the clout to pull Klein's best, but not get Pavel?*

"What's the real story here, Walter? If this client can pull me away from Apple, but not get Pavel when he is who they wanted, who the hell is it?"

"The sons of a friend are building this resort. Please do me a solid, Elsie. The meeting is about to start—"

I close my laptop, stand, and walk around my desk. The fact is, this is happening. If I suck it up and get on with it, then it'll be over faster. "Then we should hurry, right?"

His wrinkles subside with his anxiety. It obviously means a lot to Walter, and as much as I'm pissed off about it, he's taken good care of me over the years. I can do this for him.

Begrudgingly. He joins me at my office door. "Thank you, Elsie."

"You owe me, Walter."

"Agreed."

"In perpetuity."

"Don't push it," he says with a gleam in his eyes.

BEAU

It seems theatrical for my heart to pump harder when I pull into the valet at the office building of Klein and Associates. But I'm excited, and Cormac is right. I've worked hard, and I've earned the right to celebrate this achievement. I refuse to tamp my excitement down.

But now, I have to give the keys to my Aston to a stranger, and I always hate that part of things.

Foolish, perhaps, but I love my Aston and giving her up isn't easy. I have the same reaction when I get her detailed. But I pass the key with a smile. Pavel wouldn't work in a building that had shoddy valets. "Thank you. This may be a while."

The valet smiles assuredly, taking the key. "Don't worry. I'll be gentle."

"Don't be. She likes it rough."

He smirks. "I've got this."

The glass doors of the lobby open to an enormous space filled with even more glass, shining steel, and a veritable jungle of potted plants. But the quirk of them is that they are ivies, trained to grow up the walls between the windows, giving the entire space a feeling of being outside. It's a rather pleasant contrast, one I may consider for parts of the resort.

My enthusiasm for the meeting springs my steps to the desk for directions. The woman smiles politely and upon my request, she says, "Klein and Associates can be found on the forty-second floor. Take that elevator to—"

“I have to go up to Klein,” a security guard tells her. The guard is rather pretty and carries a package under her arm. I’ve never been interested in a woman in uniform before, but she is lovely enough to make me change my mind. With long black hair in a bun and a rich tan that hints at a Greek heritage, she is rather captivating. “You can follow me, sir.”

“An armed escort?” I tease. “It’s my lucky day.”

She smirks at me and gives me a quick glance over. “Behave, and I won’t have to use my cuffs.”

“Where is the fun in that?”

She laughs, and I’m looking forward to the elevator ride and every subsequent visit to the firm’s offices. It would be pointless to ask her out, of course. I’m not looking for a relationship, nor am I looking for an awkward post breakup exchange each time I come to this office. Best to simply enjoy her as nice scenery.

I follow her into the elevator, and she selects the destination.

“First time here?”

“In person, yes.” Though Walter Klein is on my parents’ friend circle periphery, I have never met the man myself. My parents’ social set is a collective of snobs who grate on my nerves, and I generally avoid them when possible. The fact Walter has remained only on the periphery could speak well of him. I’ve always been of the opinion that the way people treat those who serve shows their character, and I’d like an unbiased view of the man. So, I ask, “Out of curiosity, what is your impression of Klein and Associates?”

She gives a confused smile. “You’re asking me about architecture?”

“No. I’m asking about the people. How do they seem to you?”

“I don’t really know any of the others, but Mr. Klein is one of the good ones. He comes early, stays late. He always asks about my son by name. I like him.”

“Are you sure he’s not hitting on you?”

She laughs. “Not likely, given he’s married to a man.”

I'd forgotten that about him. "Thank you. It's nice to know my money is going to someone who treats people well."

The elevator doors open and there stands an older man I recognize from the articles I've read about the firm. He smiles as I walk off the elevator. The guard passes him the package. "Mr. Klein, this came for you."

"Thank you, Thalia." He turns to me as the doors close. "Beau, I am so glad to finally meet you in person. Your parents have been bragging about you for years."

"All lies, I assure you." I give him a cheeky grin, and he chuckles.

"We are going to the Inspiration Conference Room. Right this way," he says, leading me down a hallway.

His office suits his reputation. The floor and ceiling are light wood, and the ceiling features warm lights, giving the illusion of daylight from above. A half wall to the right provides the semi-privacy of open cubicles. By the faint hum of phones being answered in hushed tones, I presume these people are the clerical workers. The other wall is glass, which provides a hell of a view of Manhattan, and at this height, it's a gorgeous spectacle. I've always loved coming to the city, even when I was a boy and had no say-so in where we went. Just being there, I felt at home.

My family used to tease that once I crossed into the city, I was an instant New Yorker. I walked faster, talked faster.

Navigating the streets and the people came naturally for some reason. The food, the arts, the pulse, all of it was a perfect fit.

And yet, I never moved there.

Perhaps it is the comfort of my actual home, but as much as I love the city, I like the wide open spaces of Somerset Harbor more. My hometown features genuine quiet, something that is scarce in New York. Somerset Harbor is also home to my career—not that I can't commute. Walking through the hall beside Walter, I cannot deny the pull of Manhattan. Or maybe it's the feeling that destiny has led me to this moment.

He smiles, and it's then that my hackles raise. I can't put my finger on it, though. Something feels off. He asks, "How are your parents, Beau?"

"Quite well. Though they will be better once this project is off the ground."

"So will we all," he says. We turn the corner and walk along another wall of windows. "The drive wasn't too bad, was it?"

"No, I rather enjoy trips to the city."

"Funny. I've always enjoyed trips to Somerset Harbor. I'll enjoy them even more once your resort is there. It's going to be a hell of an improvement over the Somerset Hotel."

"I should hope so," I say with a chuckle. "That place has needed a renovation for two decades, at least."

He nods knowingly. "We come to the regatta every summer, and the one year the yacht club was booked up, we stayed at the hotel." He shakes his head. "It's not bad. It's just... not good either. The yacht club is far better suited to my tastes."

Just the mention of the Cargills' yacht club sends a pulse of resentment through me. The Cargills have been a thorn in my family's side for a generation, and their yacht club is the only actual competition we will have when we open the resort. Thankfully, they don't have the room capacity we will have, nor the amenities. If it weren't for the yachting aspect of things, we'd put them out of business, never mind the fact that my sister is dating their youngest son. If I have my druthers though, no one will care about the yachting aspect once they see our amenities. It will be so satisfying to see the Cargills close up shop.

I put the thought out of my mind. "I understand the Olson B&B is rather nice." Since my brother is dating their daughter, I feel a strange obligation to bring it up as a viable alternative until the resort opens.

"It is. But I still prefer the yacht club for now. Until the resort opens."

"Understandably."

He stops in front of a pair of wide brown doors, smiling. “Here we are.” He opens the doors together.

I take a breath, and my pulse rises even more. Not for the conference room, though.

The conference room’s back wall is all glass, overlooking Central Park. Side walls host a long counter and shelves with various décor and accoutrement, as well as a few potted plants. A massive light wood table takes up the middle, and it’s surrounded by plush brown leather chairs. But I cannot focus on any of that at the moment, because inside sits a woman I recognize, but cannot place.

And no Pavel Cerny.

She strides confidently to us, a smile on her face.

Walter says, “Beau MacMillan, this is Elsie Braudel. She will be the architect for your resort.”

No, she will not.

-

BEAU

She is not Pavel Cerny.

Not her curly blond hair. Not her crystalline blue eyes. Certainly not her amply curved body. She is too young, too inexperienced, too pretty. If a magazine of women who have slept their way to the top of their fields existed, she'd be on the cover. Her skin is flawless, like her crisp white blouse under her gray suit. Elsie Braudel is an imposter, and a bad one at that. She looks like an underwear model, sent to distract me.

What the hell is going on? There had been mention of her a few weeks back when I caught wind of Pavel's possible departure from our project. Cormac had even looked her up online. I'd seen her picture then and dismissed her outright. Not for her looks—she's a stone cold fox—but for her not being Pavel.

It's not her fault that I'm pissed about this. So, I shake her hand out of sheer politeness, and she returns my grip, pressure for pressure. "It's nice to meet you, Elsie."

"You too, Beau," her smoky voice is a little tight, and I can't tell if she's nervous or annoyed, but it's definitely something in that realm. "Ready to get started?"

Not with you. But I'm thrown off my game at the moment and mutter, "Yeah, sure." We sit at the conference table, and an assistant scurries in to take our coffee orders. Once they're placed, I ask, "What, um, what do you have for me?"

Elsie's head tips slightly. "I was given to understand you've worked with another architect and that you had some plans to

go off of from them.”

“Right,” I tell her and produce the drawings from my briefcase. “Here you can see what they did—”

“And all the red marks you added,” she notes, studying the drawings. The coffees come, and then she looks up. “I can see why you fired the last firm.”

“Oh?”

“This was Hamilton and Sons, wasn’t it?”

I’m shocked. “Yes. How did you know?”

“Their signature style is prosaic and unimaginative. I doubt that’s what you’re looking for, or you wouldn’t have come to Klein and Associates.” She has me nailed.

And I might care about that kind of thing, if I weren’t pissed off about Pavel. “That’s true, but—”

“And you don’t strike me as the type to settle, Beau. You want a resort that will call to the residents of New York, as well as people from around the world.”

I nod once. “It is crucial that Somerset Harbor becomes known for more than our annual regattas, which is why I wanted—”

“And nothing less than perfect can manage such a feat.”

“You’re right about that, Elsie.” I shift gears to stop her from cutting me off again. “Not to get off on the wrong foot here, but Walter, what is going on?”

The old man’s eyes jump to her before returning to me. “What do you mean? How is your coffee?”

“Good. Great actually, thank you. I mean, I was under the impression that I’d be working with Pavel Cerny. That’s why I’m here. For him.”

Elsie’s jaw tightens, but she says nothing.

Okay, she’s smarter than I gave her credit for.

Walter says, “Unfortunately, there was nothing we could do. Pavel’s contract stipulates he may pick and choose his projects, and evidently, he could not resist working for a

prince. He is in Dubai as we speak. Our hands are tied. My apologies.”

I stand up, unwilling to take this sitting down. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, Elsie. Thank you for your time. Walter, can I speak with you outside?”

He sighs. “Certainly.”

As the conference room doors close behind us, it is all I can do to keep my voice at a civil volume. “Walker, as much as I appreciate you cajoling the second string into working with me, I came here for Pavel Cerny. He is why I signed the contract. He is why I drove all the way here with a smile. I didn’t mind jumping through some hoops to get the architect I wanted. And now I’m not even getting him? Is this some kind of joke?”

“Of course not—”

“I have no interest in working with her or any other inexperienced architect. I want Pavel.”

“And if it were within my power, I’d be more than happy to give him to you. I have no interest in disappointing you or your family, Beau. I know how important this project is to you —”

“Not bloody likely.”

He sighs. “But the facts are these. Pavel is unavailable, and that is out of my hands. The contract between my firm and your corporation did not stipulate his presence on this project, because Pavel’s contract stipulates his right to take whatever jobs he wants to work on. If you break the contract between us, I understand and I hold no ill will on the matter—”

“And you shouldn’t, considering this bait and switch tactic.”

“I intended no bait and switch here, Beau. I’d thought Pavel was going to stay in the States, given his children are here. Yesterday, I learned the prince is giving him a jet to fly back and forth whenever he wants,” he says, annoyed. “Nothing I could say or do was going to top that offer.”

“Not my problem, Walter.”

“No, but you do have one,” he says carefully. “As I said, I understand about being disappointed. Having said that, I hope you understand that if you break our contract, it will cost you significantly.”

“You’d enforce the material breach clause, even though this is your fault?”

“Fault is one of those tricky things best left to arbitration, don’t you think?”

The sly bastard. No wonder my father likes him. My blood boils from the threat, but I have to give it to him. He might be old, but it would be a mistake to underestimate this man. I grit my teeth to ask the question. “What do you propose as next steps?”

“The only reason Elsie Braudel isn’t as famous as Pavel is because of his father and his age. But in ten years’ time, Elsie will outpace him. She already has more talent in her little finger than he does in his whole body. By then, I imagine she could run her own firm, or even take over here, if I’m lucky.” He takes a beat. “She isn’t a big name yet, but think of having her design your resort as an investment in the future.”

“That’s one hell of a hard sell, Walter. And I’m not buying it.”

“If anything, I’m underselling her. Out of respect for your father, I want you to have the best available. Elsie is precisely that.”

No matter what he says about her, though, she is not why I’m here. “Out of respect for my father, you should have made Pavel happen.”

“If I could have, I would have, I assure you. No one wants to have these sorts of conversations, and I certainly do not want the reputation of disappointing important clients such as yourself. This was unforeseeable.”

“I came here because you’re supposed to be the best. Not to get pawned off on an unproven entity. You can expect to hear from my lawyers.”

He takes a breath. “Understood, and you can expect the same.”

I march out of the office, following the glass wall back to the elevators. Part of me thinks I should have known this would happen. I was too confident, too sure I'd made all the right calls, all the right friends. Fuck, I worked so hard on this.

Only to have it all swept out from under me by a damned prince.

I rapid fire-press the button another dozen times, as though the elevator understands urgency. I know it doesn't, but it makes me feel better. And when the elevator doesn't speed up at my request, it makes me feel worse. The elevator, like Walter Klein himself, doesn't think much of my requests.

No flirty security guard to ride down with, either. The day's disappointments are stacking up. If there is damage to my Aston, then I'll be out for blood. When the valet pulls up with her, I take a slow walk around and look for anything out of place. Lucky for him, she's still perfect. I tip a hundred-dollar bill and zip away from the city.

Eighties hair metal will not soothe my inner beast. I select a spa music playlist and I'm angrier by the fifth note, so I turn it off. Perhaps silence is the order of the day.

Now, I get to be the one to disappoint everyone. I hate being the bearer of bad news. As COO of my family's corporation, I've had to do it more frequently than I care to recall. But that's why I am well-compensated for my work. It is my role to liaise with the rest of the world for the corporation, and that means I get to tell everyone the best and the worst of it.

Lucky me.

Any other day, I'd say I love my job. Right now, though, I am seething with rage and require a large stiff drink before I call our lawyers. They're going to love this. How many billable hours will it be before I get what I want?

ELSIE

“I still cannot believe you didn’t want to rent the convertible,” Savannah says wistfully. “Look at this place. The weather is perfect for it.”

Annoyingly, she’s right. Somerset Harbor’s weather is stunning. The warm day is no match for the cooling sea breeze off the harbor. The little town irritates me. It’s all cute shops and no traffic with plenty of fresh air. How dare they be so adorable and quaint? It’s off-putting.

Being three hours outside the city, I’d thought there would have at least been a Starbucks or something, but I haven’t seen a chain store since we arrived. How does anyone stand it? Where do you go for the comfort of a predictable, consistent cup of coffee? The whole town is something off of a postcard from the sixties but with upscale boutiques.

Wide sidewalks line the streets, and bright yellow and blue flowers sit next to them, while orange butterflies dance in the sea breeze. People smile with recognition at each other when they walk past. Not just the detection of another human, but they appear to know each other. Each brick storefront varies from the one next to it in some way, but they have the same feel as the other one, giving the town a homogenous feeling. Like everyone has been here forever, and they have no intention of leaving.

My nightmare.

I huff. “I still cannot believe I let you talk me into bringing you on a work trip.”

She giggles. “I’m very persuasive when I want to be.”

“The woman, who has gotten backstage for free at more concerts and plays than I’ve ever even been to, is persuasive? You don’t say.”

“Clearly, my powers need some tuning up, though. Otherwise, we’d be in that convertible.”

“Your powers are not enough for me to deal with a tangled mass of hair before the most important meeting of my life. Sorry, Savannah.”

“Tell me again why your boss is making you do this. I thought it was all settled.”

I huff and hope I don’t run anyone over while explaining. Driving and talking has never been my strong suit. “In all fairness to Walter, I could have handled the conversation better —”

“Huh?”

“I didn’t exactly jump at the chance to be booted from the Apple job to work in this godforsaken hellhole—”

Her laughter is light. “What? This place is precious. I might need to buy a vacation house here. How can you call it that?”

“Don’t you have four vacation houses already?”

“You can’t have too many.”

I roll my eyes and allow myself to dream of her semi-charmed life for a moment. Savannah Wilborn has never had to work a day in her life, and I’d hate her for it, if she weren’t also one of the nicest people I have ever met. She understands how fortunate she is, and I have never seen her take that for granted.

In college, I’d once asked her why she even bothered to get a degree in library sciences, since she doesn’t need a career. She said she had to have a degree to keep her parents happy, and she liked to read, so it was a nice way of securing her degree while doing that. When her parents died in a car crash a few days after our graduation, they left her as an only child, which

meant their hundreds of millions in timber money went to a young Savannah.

Wisely, she immediately went to a financial advisor instead of blowing the fortune by partying for the rest of her life. She'd read many accounts of people who had won the lottery and lost their money in a year, so she had no interest in such a thing. Savannah wants a family and a legacy of charity, not a lifetime of nights she couldn't remember.

It is that savviness that has kept us friends all these years. She sees the world in ways I don't, and she's thoughtful in ways that never occur to me. I'm grateful for her friendship and her company on this trip.

But she is so damned sunny about Somerset Harbor that I might need to strangle her a tiny bit.

"I gave Walter a hard time about coming off that account, and when we met with Beau MacMillan—that's the client—I was less than impressed by the drawings he gave us. There's the distinct possibility that I called them prosaic—"

"Elsie!"

"But they were the drawings from his last firm. It's not like he drew them himself. Anyway, he seemed fine with it. I don't think he took it personally, but I might be wrong about that, because a minute later, he asked to speak to Walter in the hallway, and the next thing I know, Walter comes back and he's pissed. He said I let my mouth run away with me and Beau was already put off because he wasn't getting Pavel, so I just made it worse." I huff. "I don't know. Maybe this whole thing is my fault. I'm not good at handling people—"

She laughs once.

"What?"

"Do you remember what happened when that TA asked you out?"

"Ugh." I do. All too well. "Darren, the *friendly* TA, who liked to trade grades for dates? How can I forget?"

"He was a piece of work."

“That’s putting it mildly. At least I put a stop to that nonsense.”

“And ended up getting lightly stalked in the process.”

I shrug. “Not my fault if he refused to take no for an answer. And tried to get me kicked out of class. And when I turned him in for grade fixing, he got kicked out of Columbia. Okay, that last bit was my fault.” Which makes me smile. I’m still proud of that outcome.

“That was one hell of a debacle.”

“I’ve dealt with worse.” Again, I shrug. “But the Darren thing wasn’t because I didn’t handle him well. It was because he was a psycho.”

She waves me off. “Of course. But I think you’re more comfortable spraying vinegar than offering honey. Maybe when you speak to Beau, try honey.”

“I’ll have to,” I grumble. “When Walter came at me about the whole mess, he made it clear my job is on the line here. I have to convince Beau to call off his lawyers and work with me, or I’m fired.”

“Really? I thought Walter loved you.”

“He does. But that love is contingent on my ability to do my job, and sometimes, that requires finessing the clients, which I suck at. So he’s using this situation as a test to see if I can learn to kiss a client’s ass.”

“Speaking as someone who has been a client of many people, it is not ass-kissing that makes a client happy. You just have to talk to them the way you’d talk to someone you want to impress.”

I frown. “I’m not sure I can do that.”

She laughs. “Of course you can, Elsie. You’re the smartest person I know. You were always great at talking to the deans and the faculty at school. Just talk to him like that, and you’ll do great.”

“This is why I bring you on these things, isn’t it? The free pep talks.” I’m already feeling a little better.

“Free?” She shakes her head, brown ponytail swishing side to side. “When you get out of that meeting, we are stopping for an ice cream at that cute little shop back there.”

“That’s fine. I don’t get my dream job with Apple. I have to convince hardass who thinks his resort is overly important to work with me. And I’ll probably get listeria from that ice cream shop when I’m almost certain this town is too small to have a hospital to take care of me. Sounds like a perfect day.”

She laughs harder this time. “You have to stop seeing the negative all the time, Elsie. Sure, you got pulled off your dream job, but now you have the chance to do something even better. You were already complaining about having to work within Apple’s parameters on the other job, right?”

“True,” I admit.

“And okay, so this Beau character is a hardass, but that only means your victory will impress Walter even more, and isn’t he looking to retire soon?”

“So?”

“So, this sounds like the kind of opportunity you need to secure yourself a nice place in his company. Maybe even his office—”

I laugh. “Now, you’re reaching.”

“And if you get listeria from the ice cream shop, I will have you medevacked to my personal physician’s office. Estella is the best doctor in all of Manhattan. Deal?”

There is no arguing with Savannah when she’s this cheerful. “Deal.”

“Splendid. It’s good for you to get out of the city sometimes, and it’s been a while since we had a road trip, so pry that stick out of your butt and pay attention to the scenery. There is nothing wrong with enjoying someplace outside of Manhattan, and this hoity toity town is just what you need right now.”

“You think it’s hoity toity?”

“Didn’t you notice the cars? That Acura is the cheapest thing parked on the street.” She has a point.

Audi, Mercedes, BMW, Maserati, Land Rover, Rolls, they're all here. There's even a McLaren, and I don't see them much even in the city. As I pay more attention, I notice the old money people walking around. They're easy to mistake for middle class—decent highlights, nice enough clothes. But it's the shoes that give them away. I'd gotten good at spotting them when I came to New York. They could blend in until I saw their shoes. Shined and well-kept.

“Maybe I underestimated Somerset Harbor.”

She beams at my admission. “See? That's the spirit. Keep that attitude, and you'll bowl over Beau MacMillan. I believe in you, Elsie. It's in the bag. And when you get to take over at Klein and Associates, you can stop working fourteen-hour days.”

“Why would I do that?”

“So you can have a life. I know, I know, it doesn't suit your goals of becoming a corporate husk, but it is healthier than that.”

I laugh. “I never said it was a goal to become a corporate husk. Pretty sure I said corporate *shill*.”

“Shill, shell, husk, whatever. The point is, you could do so much more than that, and that includes knocking this out of the park.”

The GPS tells me we have arrived at our destination. It's a little B&B near Beau's downtown office, and admittedly, it's cute as heck. Bright white siding with blue shutters, a wraparound porch, and windows in all directions. The banister hosts a vine covered in tiny white flowers, and as soon as I open the car door, I'm hit by the scent of jasmine. Okay, maybe the town isn't awful.

But I'll never admit that to Savannah. My contrary nature won't allow it.

“Cute,” I say flatly.

“Come on, you have to love this!”

I will not get caught up in her joy. I'm here on serious business. "If you say so. Still can't believe you convinced me to stay the night here."

"Neither one of us wants to deal with the traffic at those hours, and how long has it been since you weren't in the city for a night?"

"A while. Let's grab our bags and get checked in."

-

ELSIE

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come in for the meeting?” Savannah asks on our way to Beau’s office. “I could pretend to be your assistant and make you look even more important.”

I laugh. “Thanks, but no.”

The drive through downtown gives me another chance to appreciate it. In all fairness, Somerset Harbor is more upscale than I gave it credit. Our B&B rooms are nautical and homey. The downtown boutiques are brightly lit and lovely. In fact, everything I’ve seen is rather nice. It’s no Manhattan, though.

Stop judging, Elsie. That will not help you now.

I park in front of his office building. It’s only two stories, and I’m guessing it’s a rental, given the look of the place. Not at all what I expected from someone like Beau MacMillan. He’s old money. Or he was. Has he been recently defunded?

Not with that Aston Martin I parked next to. But it might not be his.

At least his office building is right next to the marina. That’s got to be a nice view. But he might be like me and never look out the window. No, I doubt that’s the case. He’s the kind of man who appreciates how things look, I’m sure of it.

When I catch the expression on Savannah’s face, I completely stop thinking about Beau. “What’s wrong?”

“What is so funny about me pretending to be your assistant?”

Oh, hell. Because I would never think to ask you to leave your Himalaya Birkin in the car, and I guarantee Beau would know what that bag is the moment he saw it. You couldn't pass for my assistant any more than I could pass as the president, Savannah. It's sweet, but this will go better if I'm not also lying to the client."

"I'd leave the bag in the car for you."

Her offer makes me smile. However, her purse cost more than my parents' house, and the thought of it getting stolen is enough to give me palpitations. "Thank you for the offer. But no. You're not getting my rental broken into."

"Fine," she huffs in mock exasperation. "Forgive me for wanting to meet the man you're jumping through hoops for."

"He's just another suit. Nothing special." I neglect to mention the fact that he's dangerously handsome, strictly because if I tell her that, she'll insist on meeting him, and things are precarious enough at the moment. No point in adding more pressure to the situation. For that matter, dwelling on the fact Beau was so sexy that I nearly thanked Walter for assigning me to the job will only get me more tongue-tied.

There is something about Beau MacMillan that makes me sit up and take notice. That was why I was so abrasive during our meeting. I had to do something to keep myself from saying the wrong thing. So, naturally, I said the wrong thing, but in the other direction. I offended him. Spectacularly.

I just couldn't make myself shut up around Beau. Of course, it would have been great had Walter jumped in at any time, but that is a moot point now. I'm here.

"Wish me luck."

"You don't need it, but I wish you good luck all the same." Savannah really is the best.

"Thanks." I grab my bag and head to the building. Like most of the downtown area, this building is brick and two-story. It looks historic, pre-war, definitely. The door knob is a proper knob—the building hasn't even been brought up to code for the disabled. In all fairness to the building, a lot of older

buildings in Manhattan haven't been brought up to code, either. They were grandfathered in. But I'm so used to things being modern and updated in my neighborhood, it's always notable when I come across something so retro.

I take the stairs two at a time to get my blood up. Maybe if I'm out of breath when I see him, I won't say the wrong things again. His office is at the rear of the landing and simply says his name on the door. No corporate logo. No sign that there's an outer office. Not even a reception desk. Odd.

It feels strange to be able to knock on his door with no precursor or announcement of my presence. Every place in Manhattan has security and executive assistants ready to pounce. I'm surprised Beau doesn't demand more of his company.

When I knock, I hear, "One moment." It's him. Not an assistant, unless his assistant sounds just like him. But that baritone voice is hard to mimic.

The door opens, and it's him. With his shirtsleeves rolled up and his thick forearms exposed when he shakes my hand. His expression is strained and his words are clipped. "Nice to see you again, Elsie. Come in."

"Did I interrupt something?"

"No, not at all. I forgot my assistant is away for the day. Shelly usually has her office door open to catch my visitors before they get to my door. On that note, coffee? Tea? Water?"

Something stiffer, if you have it . I'm fine, thank you."

He walks to the desk chair and gestures for me to sit across from him. As I take my seat, I notice the surroundings. Dark. Everything is dark. From the desk to the chairs to the bookshelves. It's a stark contrast from the bright, sunny seaside town. The only thing that hints at the office's location is the window. Somerset Harbor glitters in the afternoon sunlight, sparkling and deep blue, as sailboats drift by.

I hope he appreciates that view.

Beau begins, "I agreed to this meeting because of the longstanding relationship between my father and Walter Klein.

According to my father, he has earned a second chance. So, in keeping with that spirit, wow me.”

I almost laugh at his arrogance. *Wow me? Who talks like that in real life?* Clearly, he is not thrilled about having me on the project, and this is going to be an uphill battle. I keep the sighing to a minimum.

The truth is, I’ve faced a lot of uphill battles in my life. Beau MacMillan is just another in a long line of men who think the worst of me. So far, I’ve proven them all wrong. He won’t be the one to ruin that track record.

I force a serene smile onto my face. “We didn’t have a chance to discuss your ideas at our last meeting, Beau.”

“You saw the drawings.”

“Yes, and they showed me what you don’t like. Not what you *do* like. When I work with someone, I like to take their ideas and run with them. So—

“Is that what you were doing for Apple?”

I cannot imagine Walter told him what I was doing before I was assigned to him. “You did your homework on me?”

“I hire only the best, and my lawyers are exceptionally thorough. They discovered you were pulled from the Apple account to work with me, which, admittedly, is a feather in your cap. If a company as notoriously picky as Apple is happy with you, then there’s a slim chance you might be sufficient.”

I let a small laugh escape. I can’t help it. Politeness and client ass-kissing be damned. That comment was a cheap shot, and we both know it. “Beau, I am well aware you’re not happy about this situation. I am also aware of the fact that if your lawyers are skilled enough to find out about what my job has entailed, then they have also discovered the fact I am an award-winning professional at the top of her field. While I understand I am not who you had in mind, it is unnecessary to call me *sufficient*. I am more than enough for this project.”

He sits back with a hint of bemusement on his face. “Prove it.”

Arrogant asshole.

So, I sit back, too. “Tell me why you went to Hamilton and Sons first.”

An eyebrow arches my direction. “They have an outstanding reputation.”

“They do. If you want boring, which you clearly do not want. So, why did you go to them?”

“I want the best.”

“That’s not why you went to them. You would have come to Klein first, if that’s what you wanted.”

He exhales, annoyed. “A friend recommended them to me. What does it matter?”

“The mere fact you came to Klein and Associates does not mean you want something as innovative and cutting edge as we can give you. You may be looking for traditional, while I might have shown you something too modern. Going from Hamilton and Sons to us may be a bit of a culture shock, and I needed to know your reasoning for going to them before I present my work. It’s easier to give my client what he wants when I know what he’s looking for, and I don’t believe in wasting my time or yours, Beau.”

His shoulders relax and the annoyance in his eyes fades to nothing. “Glad to hear it. I presume you’ve brought examples with you, since you didn’t email anything.”

“Innovative or traditional?”

“Can’t it be both?”

I smile. “I have just the thing.”

-

BEAU

It is a pity Elsie said that thing about not wasting my time, because that is precisely what she is doing, and now, I feel a pinch of guilt about wasting hers as well. Still, though, she is fun to watch. The way she moves is breathtaking. Is it really a waste of time to enjoy the company of a beautiful woman?

It is, since I don't intend to buy what she's selling.

Never mind that. I'm here to listen. But she distracts me as she moves. She tied her long blond curls back into a loose, but professional ponytail and every time she turns her head, her curls bounce. A silly thing to get caught on, but I like it. Those bright blue eyes light up when she discusses her drawings, proud and confident. She knows what she's doing, and she is miles ahead of where I thought she'd be.

This is the same woman I thought had slept her way to the top, and now, I feel like shit for thinking that about her.

Though it's true, she could have made someone else do the drawings for her, no one is this good of an actress. She isn't pretending while presenting someone else's work—I know precisely what that looks like.

When I'd been a nerd, hopelessly devoted to a cheerleader who used me for her schoolwork, I had seen her present my work over and over for years. She never knew the details of it, never studied what I gave her. It was all a show, and some teachers caught onto her game, but could never prove what she had done, and I wasn't about to speak up, either.

This is certainly not that.

I pick a random question to test her. “Elsie, why have the family restaurant there? Why not by the outer wall near the pro shop for the golfers?”

She smiles. “Two reasons—this way, it’s closer to the kid’s pool so families can easily go from one place to another, and the plumbing will already be on the other side of that wall for the fountain in the lobby. If you were to put it by the pro shop, there’s almost no plumbing around, which means you’ll have to run extra lines from there and there for the kitchen, doubling or even tripling your plumbing expense. It’s doable, if you want to blow up your budget.”

“I don’t.” A smirk tugs at my lips. “Continue.”

She nods once and goes on, and I’m struck by her answer. She is mindful of our budget, while keeping an eye out for the things I might like. It’s an outstanding trait to have for someone in her line of work—the customer service aspect of her job I thought she didn’t have, given our last meeting. She had been spiky then, and I’m not sure why exactly. But she hadn’t left me with the impression that she understood how to speak to a client, and I am pleasantly surprised by her turnaround.

And when she turns around, I am pleasantly surprised again. That ass—

“Beau, are you with me?”

I blink. “Yes, apologies. Clearly, I need more coffee.”

She smiles politely. “Understood. I’ll make the rest of this quick. If you...”

But I tune out once more. One of her buttons has come undone, giving an even better view of her ample cleavage. I never know what to say to a person when that happens. Well. I never know what to say to a woman when that happens. With a man, it’s generally safe to alert him to the situation. With a woman, it’s treacherous waters. They could accuse me of all sorts of things, and regardless if they’re true, the fact remains I can see the edge of her pale pink bra’s lace.

It vexes me. Almost as much as her perfume.

I'd caught the fragrance when she breezed in, and now my office will be scented with Elsie Braudel after she leaves. Not that she wore too much of it—on the contrary, it's a rather light perfume. Almost floral mixed with something else... vanilla? I can't quite tell. But I like it.

But. No matter how good she smells or looks, no matter how innovative or professional she is, she is still not Pavel. I had to take this meeting to make it look like I was playing ball and honoring our contract, but I am waiting on pins and needles for my lawyers to give me my way out of it. So, I smile and nod and pretend to pay attention to more than her pink lace. She wraps up her discussion of the restaurant, and moves on to the golf course, and I cut in. "Does Klein and Associates do many golf courses, or do you outsource?"

"We can do everything in-house, but you are welcome to contract with a golf architecture firm if you like. The golf course wasn't stipulated in our contract, so that is up to you."

That's a relief. I had neglected to realize it could be in the contract. "Is there someone you like to work with on these things?"

Elsie's plump lips curve upward like she has a little secret, and it's devious and sexy as hell. Damn, she's got to stop doing that, or I'll have a hard time kicking her out. "I am supposed to tell you about someone on our design team who is fabulous and will make all your golfing dreams come true, but the fact is, Denny Winters at Dynamic Golf in Manhattan is better. I can send you an introduction email, if you like."

"That is quite generous. I'd appreciate it. Thank you. And thanks for the honesty, as well." She is doing her best to make me not want to dismiss her.

She shrugs, smiling. "Walter had tried to get Denny in at Klein, but he has a contract with Dynamic. No sense in making you miss out on something extraordinary just because he has a contract in the way."

Her turn of phrase cuts at the heart of the problem, but I refrain from pointing that out. “Indeed. Go on.”

Another smile, and she’s on to the next portion, while I’m enjoying the melodic tones of her speech. It’s almost like music and if I don’t get her out of here soon—

My watch flashes with a message. I try to be subtle about checking it, but subtle is not my strength. From my lawyer, “The contract is air tight. Unless you want to pay several million in penalties, there is nothing we can do.”

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My lawyers are the best and if even they cannot find a decent way out, then I am screwed. I cannot ask Cormac to find more financial backers simply because I want to break a contract. Word would get out, and we would look like irresponsible fools.

So, Elsie Braudel is here to stay. It is all I can do to maintain my composure, but the flashes of pink lace help. I am both pissed off and turned on, and neither of those feelings is suitable for a proper business meeting, so I am forced to keep everything inside at the moment. Thankfully, a childhood of maintaining appearances serves me well in times such as these.

I continue to smile and nod and consider what she’s telling me, even though all I want to do is have a stiff drink and gripe about my situation. Though, in fairness to Elsie, her presentation is much better than I’d thought it would be. Her ideas are considerate, polished, and she’s waving her hand in my face.

“Um, yes?”

She chuckles. “I think you might need that caffeine sooner rather than later, Beau.”

“You are absolutely right. My assistant usually keeps me caffeinated throughout the day, and without her around, I forget to do it myself. She deserves a raise.”

When she hits me with her full smile, my brain resets. It’s incredible and not reserved at all. The kind of smile dentists

wish they had on their billboards, because it's contagious. Even though I'm angrier than I've been in years, I can't help but smile right along with her. Elsie nods. "Sounds like she is due for one, if you need her to function."

"Too true. Please go on."

"I noticed on the drawings from the other firm that you hadn't marked out the spa. Why not?"

"It was one of the few features they didn't screw up. I thought it was good as is."

She hesitates. "Their design was fine, if you want something traditional and to offer the services people expect."

"You do a marvelous job of making traditional and expect sound like curse words, Elsie."

She laughs. "I don't know about you, but when I try a new spa, I want to try something I've never had before. Swedish massage, your standard facial, couples' massages, you need those for people who want the normal stuff. But not everyone is going to come all the way out to Somerset Harbor for the appeal of average. If you want to pull people in from around the world, you'll need to surprise them."

"Obviously, you have something in mind."

The gleam in her eye is mesmerizing. If I have to be stuck with someone, at least she is entertaining to watch. She pulls up a new drawing to show me, and it is...bold. "This is the—"

"Is that a waterfall in an indoor cave?"

"Yes. That is the cold pool and there is the heated pool. These are for contrast therapy while guests wait between services. Here, there is a juice and smoothie bar, lockers, of course, and an adjacent salon, good for weddings and other events. In the salon, there will be hair, makeup, nails, all the things people want for their beauty fix—"

"I hadn't thought of needing a salon." It hadn't occurred to me.

"The great thing about salons in resorts is the exorbitant markup you can throw at guests and they won't bat an eye at

paying those rates because they generally don't want to leave the property if there's an event happening, so they either go to your salon or have stylists come to their rooms. If you make salon room service an offer from your salon team, you can clean up there, too."

I cannot believe I hadn't thought of any of that. As someone who sees his manicurist regularly, it's embarrassing to admit. *Perhaps we can hire Ramona as a manicurist on staff.* Before I get ahead of myself on that thought, I tell her, "That is a great idea, Elsie."

"Thank you. But wait, there's more..."

I was hoping there would be.

ELSIE

Aside from the occasional cocktail, I do not do drugs. I've never been interested. My work has always been sort of a drug, something I need to do. The high being when someone says they like my idea, that's the best feeling in the world. That rush is amazing, particularly when I know they came to the table prepared to brush me off.

I fully expected Beau to be blasé about my presentation, or whiny about Pavel, or something else equally insulting. It is why the drive to Somerset Harbor felt like torture—I was sure I'd end up fired because of this guy. So, when his soulful hazel-green eyes go from cocky, but polite to completely impressed it gives me a hell of a high.

I try not to ramble. The poor guy is too under caffeinated for a full Elsie ramble, and I've been told I tend to drone on when I'm overly pleased with myself. Brevity is the soul of wit and all that, but when I'm excited, it's hard to contain it.

Plus, he's so damned handsome I could cry.

Now that it's just the two of us, I don't have Walter to distract me from really looking at Beau. He has faint auburn streaks in his mocha brown hair, styled so casually that I can't tell if that's just how it lays or if he spent twenty minutes on it this morning. Whichever it is, it works for him. He has the prominent jawline of a male model, square and even. And lips I want to suck on for days—

Get your mind out of the gutter, Elsie. Resort, talk about the resort.

“...and here I was thinking the steakhouse—”

“I would have thought a steakhouse would be too *traditional* to end up on *your* design,” Beau teases.

Getting teased in that baritone voice has more of an effect on me than I’d like to admit. Something about his contrarian nature—why the hell does that do it for me? He’s arrogant. He’s an asshole. *So, stop thinking about what his skin tastes like.* I smile. “I can concede to your traditionalist tastes now and then.”

He laughs. “How generous of you.”

“I try. As I was saying—”

“Do you think a steakhouse is too traditional for my resort?”

Is he actually asking my opinion, or is he toying with me?

“Not for your resort, no.”

He sits back with that smirk, that damnable smirk. The one that says he’s having fun at my expense. “Not for *my* resort?”

“Caught that, did you?”

He chuckles. “Oh, I heard it in your voice. You think I’m too traditional, don’t you?”

“I think that for your resort to succeed, you will need to expand your horizons to include some unexpected items. Otherwise, it’s like I said—no one will come to Somerset Harbor for what they can get anywhere else. If you want a steakhouse, then make it spectacular.” I swipe across my tablet to show him my idea. “You’ll have to—”

“Burn the place down?”

I laugh. “A cooking fire pit in the middle of the restaurant will set your steakhouse apart from anything in Manhattan.”

“Because of safety codes! How can that even work?”

“Glad you asked.” I explain the details and get that high again when I see him following along, interested and focused. He likes what he’s hearing and what I’m showing him, and if I could get that look on his face while being naked in front of him—

Stop. The resort is the topic. Not your libido.

“That all sounds incredible, but I think it’s dangerous.”

“I told you. The safety—”

“Not the safety aspect, Elsie. The guest aspect. I’m not sure they are going to want something so outlandish. It’ll scare the old folks off—”

“And are they the guests you’re courting?”

He looks perturbed. He caught the challenge in my voice, even though I’d tried to ask the question innocently enough. “I am courting *every* guest. The resort will be family-friendly, and that includes the grandparents. We don’t need them to be put off by some extreme fire hazard in the restaurant, not to mention the smoke—”

“Beau. If you’re not into it, that’s fine. I can come up with some other options. I thought you came to Klein and Associates for innovation, but you aren’t ready for everything we can give you. You want to make little old ladies comfortable and so you’ll give them the mundane things they have enjoyed for the past eighty years. I understand.”

He is silent for a moment, before he lets out a solitary, sharp laugh. “Bravo. Was that a dig for the *sufficient* comment I threw at you?”

I smirk and say the first thing that comes to mind. “If the shoe fits...”

He laughs harder this time, and I’m glad to see he’s not completely offended. “I’ll let that slide for now. Condescension suits you.”

“I’ve lived in Manhattan long enough to pick up a few things.”

“Where are you from originally? I noticed a hint of an accent earlier—Southern?”

I fight the urge to bristle. A year of accent training, gone down the drain. And I had worked so hard to lose it... shit. Keeping my smile on, I tell him, “Virginia.” My standard answer. It’s not a lie. I don’t have to tell him which one.

“It’s a beautiful state.”

“Thanks, so back to the steakhouse. If you want me to, I’ll come up with something between firepit and traditional, or you can go straight traditional. Do you have a preference?”

I am grateful when he doesn’t mention the fact I sidestepped his Virginia conversation starter. Maybe he picked up on my vibe, because all he says is, “Something between. Perhaps we can surprise the old ladies a little.”

“Sounds good.” I close up my tablet and pop it into my bag. “Well, I think I have enough to go on for now—”

“Splendid. I need that coffee, and I have another meeting coming in shortly, so I’ll be going to the coffee shop down the street. I’ll walk you out.”

If he walks me out, then Savannah will see him, and I will get such shit for not letting her pretend to be my assistant. “No need to trouble yourself.”

“It’s no trouble at all.”

“Okay.” What else can I say? No, don’t go outside right now because my best friend will ogle you and rag on me for keeping you all to myself? That’s not gonna fly.

We walk out, and I realize I’m starving. Something about being nervous does it to me. “Any place you like around here for lunch?”

“There is a new vegan place that’s all the rage, or at least, my sister, Maya, likes it. It’s called Beans and Things. Very retro, very trendy.”

“Okay, but do *you* like it?”

He chuckles. “It is not for me. There is Rita’s, which is a fabulous taco shop, if you’re looking for something more substantial. It is also downtown, but on the industrial side, a few blocks over from here. Some say that is the bad side of town, but Somerset Harbor doesn’t really have a bad side. Just a slightly less wealthy side.”

“That sounds more like lunch to me.”

Beau opens the door for me, and I can only hope Savannah is busy on her phone.

She is not. She is looking right at us.

He says, “Thank you for agreeing to this meeting. My manners were subpar in Manhattan. It has been a trying time, you understand.”

“Of course. Thank you again for the lunch recommendation. Enjoy your coffee.” We shake hands, and that’s when I see it. In the reflection of his sunglasses, I notice my blouse has unbuttoned itself. Do I react or do I pretend I didn’t notice? *Reacting is too embarrassing—pretend.* “Have a nice day, Beau.”

“You, too, Elise.” Only he doesn’t release my hand right away. In fact, he lingers. *Is he looking down my blouse?* I can’t tell—the mirror on his sunglasses blocks the view of his eyes. He gives a smile and a curt nod before leaving for his walk to the café nearby.

What was that? Just the fuzzy-headedness of a man in deep need of coffee, or the lingering glance of a man appreciating my tits? Is that why he kept phasing out of our conversation?

I get into the rental and button my blouse. Savannah has such a giant grin on that I’m almost grinning, too. “What?”

“You come out of his office—*that* man—and your shirt is unbuttoned—

“By one extra. It popped open during the meeting.”

“Right. By itself.”

“You have never had a shirt do that to you?”

That kills her grin. “Look at your tits, then look at mine, Elise. No. I’ve never had a shirt do that to me.”

She has a point. Her A-cups aren’t likely to come out and say hi, whereas my C-cups practically have their own burlesque peep show if I wear something too tight. I shake it off.

“Whatever. The meeting went well, and I am starving. Tacos?”

“Seriously, nothing happened with him?”

“Just my presentation. And I think I nailed it.”

“Without nailing him, too? Good for you.”

I laugh and start the car. “Beau MacMillan is nothing special, Savannah. Just another suit.” A suit who was checking out my tits. I think.

“A suit with his eyes on your chest as he shook your hand.”

“He’s a guy. If I were shaking hands with a guy who had his dick out, I probably wouldn’t be making eye contact, either.”

She laughs. “How awkward would that hand shake be?”

I snort a laugh. “Awkward and likely illegal.”

“Yeah, but if he looked like Beau, I think the cops might let public indecency slide.” She gazes out her window at him. “In fact, I think it’s rather indecent that he must wear clothes at all.”

“Savannah!”

“There should be an ordinance in honor of a man with shoulders like that. The Beau MacMillan Should Be Naked All The Time Ordinance of Somerset Harbor.”

I put on my most grownup voice, as though I’m offended. “He is a client, and that is all. No more talk of naked clients. It is downright unprofessional.”

“Good thing I’m not your assistant,” she teases and giggles again, and then I catch it, too. We giggle all the way to the taco shop.

ELSIE

The spiced scent of birria tacos permeates the air around Rita's and my mouth waters in an instant. When our order comes up, I go to the window and bring it back to our bright orange picnic table. It has an even brighter yellow umbrella with some beer logo on it, and a box with high-quality paper napkins, along with two bottles of homemade hot sauce. The green sauce wants to melt my face, but the red sauce has a fruity and chocolaty quality to it. Delightful.

"Oh my god," Savannah gushes while the taco grease pours down her hands. "This is incredible."

"I know," I moan. It's too good. "This is worth the price of admission to Somerset Harbor. I would come back to this coastal grandma tourist town for these alone."

She sips her pineapple soda. "Same here. But I also like it here. I did a little sightseeing while you were gone, and this place is adorable."

"You find adorable everywhere you go." The Mexican Coke is everything I needed to settle my stomach. Damn nerves.

"I do, but that's because I have a better outlook on life than you do, always looking for the cracks like you do. Why do you do that, Elsie?"

"Experience."

She makes a sour face at me, and on her, it doesn't match.

"Seriously. Why are you always so negative?"

It is not the first time she has asked me something similar, but it's the first time I feel like telling the truth. "I need you to swear you won't judge me for this."

She gives the most perplexed, cat-eating-a-piece-of-lettuce look on her face. "When have I ever judged you for anything?"

"Never, it's just..." I shrug. "Pretty sure *I* judge me for it."

"Oh, sweetie, no." She reaches out for my hand, then stops. "Okay, I would normally give you a comforting hand squeeze right now, but with sauce all over my hands—"

"It's appreciated all the same," I tell her with a smile. But then the sigh comes out. "I think I've mentioned before that I'm from Virginia, right?"

"Right."

"I'm from West Virginia."

She thinks for a minute. "I don't really know the area. Is that like the Lexington area?"

"No, you're thinking of Kentucky. I mean the state of West Virginia, not the western side of Virginia."

"Oh. Why lie about that?"

I sigh again. "Sorry for lying to you about it. I left that life behind, and I didn't want anything to do with it—"

"If you don't want to tell me about it, that's okay, Elsie. But if you do, I'm here for you."

"I do not deserve you. You know that, right?"

She giggles and cheekily says, "Of course you don't, but who does deserve me? I'm fabulous. Go on, if you want to."

"I came from a town called Sewmond. The only industry in the place to this day is coal mining. If you don't work in the mines or the two restaurants or the one gas station, then you are unemployed. Opioids hit the place hard, and it's a wonder how people even survive there. It was my nightmare, every single day."

“God, honey, I’m sorry.”

I am not there now. Take a breath. Do not panic. I gulp down some more coke. “I worked hard in school, and thankfully, it wasn’t difficult to excel when no one else really bothered to try. Valedictorian is easy when there’s no competition, but I still maintained a perfect GPA throughout school.”

“That is a lot of work.”

I nod. “I had my eyes on a scholarship, and I got it. Several, actually. I went to West Virginia University, which is a total party school, by the way. Far worse than their reputation, too. But I leveraged my good grades into getting into Columbia, where I met you.”

She smiles. “See? A happy ending. I don’t understand how all of that left you perpetually grumpy.”

“There’s something else I never told you about.” I finish my taco and hope to keep it down.

“Again, if you don’t want to tell me, then you don’t have to.”

“It’s about time I own up to this. Remember around graduation, I got a little distant about things?”

“Yeah. You said you were worried about your job prospects, but I told you that was silly, because you’re brilliant. What’s that got to do with anything?”

I take a breath. “And do you remember how I never dated in grad school? When Darren asked me out, I told him I was engaged?”

She laughs. “Yeah. Can’t really pull that off without a guy and a ring. You should think of better lies next time...” But then a hint of recognition comes over her face. “Oh my god, Elsie.”

Slowly, I nod. “Yeah.”

“You...you were, I mean, you are...are you a lesbian?”

I laugh and choke on my coke for a moment. “No!”

“Oh, well, I mean, can you blame me for thinking that?”

“I guess not. But that’s not the secret. I *was* engaged at the time.”

She blinks at me. “What?”

“He was my high school sweetheart. Jimmy Wayne Davies.”

“No!”

“Yep. And we were supposed to get married right after graduation.”

Savannah shakes her head. “You’re not about to tell me you’re Mrs. Jimmy Wayne Davies, are you?”

“No.”

“Well, what the hell happened?”

I take a breath and steady myself, thinking back to that day all those years ago. “I made the drive back to Sewmond. It was raining, and I tried to think that was romantic, but it wasn’t. The rain has been ruined for me that way... anyway, I tried, Savannah, I really tried. But I had dreaded my wedding day for years.”

“No one should dread their wedding day. Why did you? Was he awful? Hooked on opioids or something?”

“Nothing like that. Jimmy Wayne was a decent enough guy. Hardworking. In the mine. Just like his brothers, his dad, his grandfather, back for generations. And I knew that if I married him, our kids would get sucked into that life. None of them would reach their potential. My career would mean nothing there. And Jimmy Wayne would never leave Sewmond, not for me, not for anyone. We had grown apart for years, and when I saw him that day, I hardly recognized him.”

She nods. “He wasn’t right for you, and you weren’t right for him.”

“Exactly!” I shake my head, seeing a sea of disappointed and confused faces in church pews in my mind. “You got it in two seconds, but my family...that day, just before I was supposed to walk down the aisle, I broke the news to Jimmy Wayne. It crushed him. I almost didn’t do it out of fear of hurting him, but it was better to hurt him then rather than years later after

kids and a mortgage we couldn't pay. At least, that's what I told myself."

"God, that's so hard."

"What's worse was, he lost it. Couldn't speak because he was so choked up. Then his brothers started teasing him—"

"What?" she shouts.

"They didn't know why he was choked up—they're not monsters. They just thought he was so moved by seeing me on our wedding day."

"Oh."

"When I explained everything to them, they were so mad." I gulp and steal her soda. She doesn't say anything about it. "And all of them were so mad that they made me explain it to the congregation, who had been waiting for me for an hour past our time to get started with the wedding, because I had dragged my feet. So, I explained it to them, and..." A fiery ball of sadness parks in my throat, and no amount of pineapple soda will wash it down. "The things they said...things they told my parents—"

"Why? What do you mean?"

"My parents have been friends with Jimmy Wayne's parents since they were in the cradle. That's how things are in Sewmond. And when I couldn't marry him because things weren't right between us, none of them understood it. When you give your word, that's as good as a contract to them. There is no going back on it. Not even for the good of everyone involved. Your word is your bond."

"But you didn't even have a ring—"

I shake my head. "I couldn't wear the one he gave me. It was from a pawn shop two towns over and the wrong size and fake. I was allergic to the metal, but he promised to have a real ring for me on our wedding day."

"Oh," she says solemnly.

"After I confused all of Sewmond on my wedding day by not getting married, I sped off to my parents' house to grab a few

things, but Jimmy Wayne had already been there. He always wore this stupid cheap gold chain, and when I got to Mom and Dad's, his stupid cheap gold chain hung on the doorknob with our wedding rings on it."

She sighs. "I am so sorry you went through that, Elsie."

"I couldn't even walk into their house after finding it. Just got back into my rental car and left for New York. Everything with my family has been strained ever since, and we barely speak. According to them, I've ruined the whole town with my *theatrics*, as they put it. I haven't been back to Sewmond since my wedding day."

"I don't blame you at all. For them to not understand it—"

"No, I mean, you're right, but I also get it. They had paid for their daughter's wedding. Mom said that college had been *my* dream for me, but my wedding day to Jimmy Wayne was *her* dream for me. More than that, there are people in Sewmond who don't talk to them anymore because of what happened. They think I got too big for my britches—"

"What?"

I sigh. "With my grades and my clean living, a lot of people thought that I thought I was better than them. I don't know. Maybe I do. But I made the effort to change my life, and they would rather just stay miserable, so am I wrong? I don't know. Anyway, they think I'm a snob, and *that's* why I couldn't marry Jimmy Wayne. They will never understand the actual reasons."

"Because they won't try to understand them."

"Pretty much."

"Wow. That's just... wow."

I half-smile. "It's a lot, right?"

"Oh yeah. And I understand why you kept all of that to yourself. I don't judge you at all—you did the right thing. But it's messy, and a lot of people don't understand messy."

"Exactly. After a lifetime of growing up where everyone knows your business, the idea of privacy is heady. When I

came to Columbia and no one knew anything about me that I didn't tell them, it was a revelation. I got in the habit of keeping my life to myself, so I'm not great at sharing my past stuff."

"No need to explain it to me, Elsie, I promise. You've been through enough without feeling bad about that, too."

"Thanks."

We order another round of tacos and sodas, and I am happy she lets the topic drop. While waiting for the food, she says, "You know, I don't remember you dating since then, either."

I shake my head. "I'd rather focus on my career. It's the only thing that's never let me down." I pause. "Besides you."

She smiles beatifically. "Aw. And if you're ever going to date again, Beau MacMillan isn't a terrible place to start."

"A client and a suit?" I laugh. "No, thank you."

"There are worse attributes than wearing a suit to worry about."

"A suit that I'm working with? Absolutely not. And certainly not one that's an arrogant asshole who could ruin my entire career trajectory."

"I thought you said he wasn't so bad."

I shrug. "He's not. But then sometimes he's just such a dick about things—"

"Then why are you smiling when you say it?"

I laugh. "I'm not sure. He confounds me."

She raises her perfectly arched eyebrows. "Sounds like there's something—"

"There's not. Trust me." The tacos are ready, and I am happy to fetch them. No sense in even thinking about Beau like that. He is off limits.

ELSIE

“**W**hat do you mean early to bed, early to rise? How old are you?”

Savannah laughs. “I need my beauty sleep. We are going to the beach tomorrow. What if I were to meet some fabulously wealthy man from an old money family? Somerset Harbor is rife with them. I need to look my best.”

“You have got to be kidding me. You don’t need any money.”

“Well, *I* don’t need money, but our kids could. Or they could use his connections in life—old money families always have the best connections.”

I laugh and roll my eyes. “You’re being ridiculous and you know it.”

“Going to bed at 8 o’clock at night is not exactly ridiculous. Plenty of people do it.”

“Yes. Those people are called babies.”

“And those babies look fresh and as young as the day they were born.” She giggles herself, and I can’t help but to do the same.

“You’re a little bit of a nut, you know that?”

“I am being responsible to my future offspring.” She pulls her eye mask down. “Good night.”

I laugh again and turn out the light on the way to my room. The Olson Bed and Breakfast has a seaside theme throughout, but it’s not overdone. My room has navy walls with white trim

and those colors decorate the bedding and everything else. A few small whale drawings and a boat wheel-framed mirror are the only nautical items. Otherwise, my room is simple and classy. Savannah's room is beachier, with sand colored walls and muted blues and taupe on the bedding. Her shell filled glass lamp is topped with a starfish lampshade, but everything else is normal. The owners keep things fun, but not over the top. It's rather cozy.

Back in my room, I try to get distracted by the TV, but I'm not. My mind is too busy. I turn out the light and lie there, thinking in the dark for hours. Talking about West Virginia makes me think about that whole mess. I can't help but wonder if Jimmy Wayne is okay. I hope that he is. Back when we were in high school, he was a decent enough guy. Just not the right one for who I am now.

In the morning, I smell a bit of heaven that is so enticing that I wake up because my stomach is growling. I know that scent. It's in my DNA. Buttermilk biscuits.

I dress in a hurry and knock on Savannah's door. "Wake up." Then I am off to the dining area. The room is a blur, because all I care about is getting biscuits. I find a table for me and Savannah—there doesn't seem to be any formality to it, so I just grab one.

Ellen, one of the owners of the place, smiles as soon as she sees me. "Elsie, good morning. Coffee?"

"Sure, thank you, and my friend will probably like a cup, too. If I'm not mistaken, I smell buttermilk biscuits—

"Yes." She pours my mug, then turns Savannah's over and does the same for her. "Breakfast today is biscuits with whipped butter, a homemade berry compote, orange curd, bacon, and eggs to order made by Geoffrey. Would you like any of that?"

"I'd like all of it, if that's okay."

She smiles wider. "A woman after my own heart. How would you like your eggs?"

"Over easy, please."

“Of course.” As she walks away, a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Savannah practically bounces into the dining room. It never fails to amaze me how she can go from sound asleep to sunshine personified in a matter of moments.

“Good morning. Did you sleep?”

“Eventually. You?”

“Like a log. It’s a good thing we didn’t share a room, because I think I might have kept you up all night with my snoring.”

I chuckle, and Ellen returns for Savannah’s order. Once the food comes, I cannot help myself. I devour biscuits until I am stuffed, and so does Savannah. “Ellen, these are the best biscuits I have had since I left Virginia. What’s your secret?”

“No secret at all. My recipe calls for both buttermilk powder *and* liquid buttermilk. And no skimping on the butter, either. A proper biscuit will put weight on you.”

“No argument here. And please let Geoffrey know the eggs were perfect.”

“I will.”

The other guests get up and leave, and it feels strange not to pay for breakfast. I suppose they imply it in the name, but I didn’t think we would actually get a free breakfast out of staying at a Bed and Breakfast.

Savannah moans, “We should walk to the beach for our digestion.”

“Sounds like a plan. It’s not far, and I could use the exercise after all that.”

We pack up for the beach and head out. It’s a bright, sunny day. A warm breeze catches my hair. Blue water languidly laps at the shore, while seabirds call out above us. Sand and sea in either direction and not too many tourists. Since the B&B is far from the MacMillan job site, I doubt the resort will spoil their end of the beach and I can enjoy it without the possibility of guilt ruining the morning.

Towels down, we lay out. Savannah yawns. “I am totally buying a vacation home out here. Or moving out here. I love

it.”

“There are worse places in the world.”

She laughs. “Gee, that’s a ringing endorsement.”

“What do you want me to say? I haven’t seen much of the town, so it seems a little premature to talk about moving here. Though, admittedly, Somerset Harbor has its charms.”

“Oh? Are you coming around to not hating it?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

After an hour of morning sun and gulls stopping by in hopes of food, we pack it in and decide to see the downtown boutiques. Pretty sure Savannah is trying to convince me Somerset Harbor is exactly where we should both live, because she takes me around with the enthusiasm of a child.

“...and see? Isn’t it just as cute as I said?”

I hadn’t realized she wanted to walk into literally every single shop on Main Street, so my mood is less than favorable. “It *is* cute.”

“Can’t you just picture yourself here, on a Saturday morning walking with your two-point-five kids and a husband—”

“Okay, I’m gonna stop you there. That’s your fantasy, Savannah, not mine.”

She bounces her shoulders in a shrug. “Well, I can see myself doing that. They have a lot of great clothes, that shop does custom furniture. There’s an ice cream place just down the road. I think we should go there. After the three shops between here and there.”

“You’re determined to burn off those biscuits, aren’t you?”

“Oh my gosh, they were so good. But now, I think a little more shopping is in order.” She beams and drags me into another boutique.

“This is a men’s store.”

“Where better to meet men?”

I laugh and peruse the place with her, finding a black leather belt for myself. When I try it on, the old shop clerk pops by. I expect him to explain that the store is for *men*, so I prepare a response in my head. I usually prefer men's accessories—they are almost always of a better quality than women's and the styling is plain, the way I like it.

He smiles. "Good morning. If you like that, it also comes in a few more colors. I have it in toffee, tobacco, steel gray, and espresso."

"Oh. I'd like to see the steel gray."

"Right this way..." He leads me through the shop and shows me a few more items, and before I know it, I've spent way too much and do not care.

When we leave, Savannah nudges me. "Aren't you glad we stopped there?"

"Okay, you win. This place isn't nearly as stuck-up as I thought it would be. In fact, it's kind of nice."

"See?" she asks excitedly. "I knew you'd like it. Come on, I need ice cream."

"For lunch?"

"For a starter. Then we can talk about lunch." She zips ahead, and just as I speed up to catch up to her, my phone dings.

It's Walter, and my heart stops. The moment of truth. Either Beau has decided to ditch the contract and won't it be fun to be fired? Or I'm safe. I take a breath and answer. "Hey, Walter."

"Elsie, what did you say to Beau MacMillan?"

Shit. "I did my presentation, and it seemed to go well. What ___"

"You're right about that," he says, chuckling. "He wants to move forward with you on the resort. Congratulations."

I am so relieved that I almost drop my bags. "Walter, going forward, if you could maybe not make it sound like I was fired before giving me the good news, that would be great."

He laughs. “Sorry about that, but I have never heard such a turnaround in a client’s voice, and I’m dying to know what you said to change his mind about you.”

“Nothing special. I just did my job.”

“And you knocked it out of the park. Keep this momentum going, Elsie. The MacMillan resort will be a showpiece for your portfolio.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

“Beau wants to officially get started right away. How soon can you set up a temporary residence in Somerset Harbor?”

“Give me three days, and I’ll be ready to get on this. I just have a few things to take care of in Manhattan before I can dedicate my full attention here.”

“Sounds good. Take care.” He hangs up.

I’m not fired. I have the job. And I’m going to eat way too much ice cream to celebrate.

BEAU

W *here is she?* In the days since Elsie left, I've kept replaying our interaction in my mind. *Had she realized that I was looking down her blouse? Did she think I was too much of a pain in the ass?* Only time would tell, I guess.

Time, or whenever she shows up.

Maybe Klein is fine with having his people come a bit late, but I am not Klein, and this is not okay. It's a matter of professionalism. Arrive early, or, at the very least, on time. Right now, she is running late to be early. Will she be on time? A ghastly prospect.

According to Klein, she had to go back to New York to pick up a few things and make arrangements for her absence there. Perhaps let a boyfriend know to water her plants or feed the cat. Who knows? Once I gave him the go-ahead for keeping her on the project, she decided she would be staying in Somerset Harbor. Certainly makes for a better commute for her and it's great for going forward because I imagine once she knows the drive to the job site, she won't run behind. But for today, I am annoyed. Hopefully, she will not make a habit of being late.

It is not good for team morale for my construction crew to see me standing around doing nothing while I wait for her. Sure, I'm their boss, but they need to see me work, too. So, I screw around on my phone to look busy.

Just as I'm ready to text her, I hear one of the guys let out a low, quiet whistle. A few of them are staring in the same direction like a bunch of lemmings. I turn around to see what they're looking at, and it's Elsie. Not that I blame them.

She shows up at the job site wearing boots, tight jeans, and a fitted black T-shirt, nothing too professional. But she *does* look like she's ready to work. For that matter, she looks like she's about to strip and pose for a construction crew's nudie calendar. But she also has a bulky crossbody bag slung over her shoulder, so I forget the calendar fantasy and focus on what might be in the bag.

It's hard, though. I have never been this distracted by a woman in all my life. After I left her the other day, I couldn't stop thinking of her. And that pink lace. When I returned, a faint whiff of her perfume had haunted my office until I opened the window and replaced it with the sea breeze. There is no point in getting hung up on Elsie Braudel. A woman as beautiful as she is must have a significant other. Or if not, she must enjoy the single life. Either way, she is not for me.

Not to mention the fact we will be working together for the foreseeable future. I do not need to complicate matters for the resort. Things are complicated enough as they are.

She strolls straight to me, ignoring the other guys. Her sunglasses hide those pretty blue eyes, sadly. "Good morning, Beau."

"Good morning, Elsie. You're late."

"Yes, by three minutes, but it'll be worth it. I brought Trigger." She pats the bag on her hip.

"Trigger?"

"My drone."

I chuckle. "You named your drone after Will Rogers' horse?"

She frowns. "I named her after Willie Nelson's guitar. Ready to get started?"

Never would have guessed that in a million years. I literally never know what is going to come out of this woman's mouth.

It is bothersome, and yet, I almost like that she is unpredictable. Odd. Normally, I prefer predictability.

“Uh, sure.” We begin our walk so she can get pictures and examine the site lines. “The crew has finished most of the groundworks, as you’ll see. The surveys have shown the land is stable, no contamination. We were able to work with the local authorities for the tree removal, no problems there...” I go on about the details and can’t help but wonder if she wore the tee shirt to prevent me from seeing down her blouse again.

I am being paranoid. Probably.

For all I know, she wore it to prevent the construction crew from being able to check her out. But I’ve worked around these guys long enough to know that most of them have X-ray vision and X-rated imaginations. There is nothing she could wear that would stop them from their fantasies.

When she pulls out the drone, one of the guys pops by. He smiles. “I can help you fly that, if you’d like.”

I shoot him a glare, but he doesn’t notice. So, I point out, “Ricky, don’t you have a backhoe to drive?”

“I’m on a break,” he says to me without taking his eyes off of her.

Elsie smiles, but there is something sinister in it. She’s pissed. “So, you drive backhoes *and* drones? You have range.”

He chuckles. “I’m a bit of a renaissance man. Here, I’ll—”

But she keeps the controller in her hands. “Can you fly a Freetel Alto Dual-evo 1040X quadcopter with thermal imaging resolution, obstacle avoidance, a 3.5:1 thrust ratio, and DoD compliance? Have you, I mean?”

“Well, no, but I’m sure I can get the hang of it. I can drive anything. Let me give it a shot.”

“*Give it a shot?*” That ominous smile is frozen on her face. “My drone costs more than your backhoe, Ricky, so that’s gonna be a no from me, but thanks for the offer. I’ve got it.” She keeps walking.

It is all I can do not to laugh at him or yell at him, so I catch up to her. “Sorry for his—”

“No worries. I get it all the time. Guys see a shiny new toy, and they want to play with it, or, barring that, they want to impress a woman in front of their friends.” She shrugs. “No need for you to apologize, Beau. What about that hill there? Do you think...” Elsie goes on, as though Ricky’s behavior doesn’t even bug her.

But it bugs me. “I’ll have a talk with Ricky. That was unprofessional of him.”

She stares for a beat. “You’re still stuck on that?”

“He was rude, not to mention the fact that he has a job to do.”

“It’s your job site, Beau. Run it how you like. But honestly, it’s no big deal for me. Happens all the time.”

I will move on with her and speak to him later. No need for her to think about any of that. I prompt her, “As you were saying...”

“Right, I’d like to get a few good shots from there, and then I’ll get Trigger up in the air and have a better idea of what we’re working with.”

“Sounds good.”

She hikes up the knoll, where I picture either a gazebo or a fountain—I’m not sure which—and when she gets there, I run through all the things I want to say to Ricky. How interrupting a woman’s work so he can impress her is not okay, and interrupting me so he can flirt is also unacceptable. Acting as though she doesn’t know what she’s doing with her own equipment is condescending and sexist. That if he wouldn’t treat a man that way, then he shouldn’t treat a woman that way either. And how he should stay away from Elsie, because she and I work together, not him. She’s *my* coworker, and he can just fuck off. If he harasses her again, he’s fired.

Why do I feel the urge to protect her from Ricky? She handled him beautifully and cut him down to size. If it doesn’t bother her—no. I need to say something to him. He cannot treat women that way, and he needs to stay away from Elsie. Ricky

is good-looking and rugged, and if he gets the idea that her response was a tease, he might come after her, and then where would I be with Elsie?

Nowhere, genius. Exactly where you'll always be with her, because she is not an option. Not ever.

I shake off the errant thoughts and watch as she flies the drone. She flies it well, though I don't have much experience to judge. Still, it's nice to see her doing her thing. So, she was three minutes late. So what? If this is what I get for three minutes late, that's fine. Plus, I appreciate the innovation of using a drone for this. Far better than what the other architect pulled. I think he used a sextant and a compass, for god's sake. A drone is a vast improvement.

Trigger. What a name. And after Willie Nelson's guitar? I didn't peg her for a country music fan. I smirk to myself and watch as she brings Trigger in for a landing. She rejoins me. "I think I have enough to go on around here, but I'd like to see the site from those trees over there."

"Let's go." I am not sure how to make conversation at the moment, so I pick something mundane. "How are you liking Somerset Harbor?"

"It's fine."

"Once more with feeling."

She laughs. "I'm not big on small towns, so it's an adjustment."

"Ah. I get that. It's a vast change from Manhattan, I'm sure."

"Oh, yeah."

We end up under some elms, and she turns to look from that angle, snapping pictures with a massive camera. "And the city approved the resort for how many rooms total?"

"Four hundred and fifty, with leeway for more."

"Good thing the groundworks are almost done. We have a lot of work ahead of us."

With Pavel, it wouldn't have felt like work. It would have felt like creating art. I sigh, before realizing this doesn't feel like work, either. It feels more like a date. Nope, nope, nope. Got to snap out of that thought.

“So, Elsie, Walter mentioned you had to take care of some things back home before coming out here. I hope this wasn't a huge inconvenience for your boyfriend.”

She laughs. “He didn't mind.”

Damn. She isn't single. Well, that puts an end to all my musings. Best to just focus on the work ahead. What a relief—now I can give all my attention to the resort.

“That's good of him. Is he used to you being gone for long stretches like this?”

“He doesn't exist, so he does whatever I tell him.”

“Huh?”

She looks away from her camera and smirks up at me. “I don't have a boyfriend, Beau. I was just being facetious.”

“Oh, I shouldn't have assumed. A girlfriend?”

Her attention diverts to her camera once more. “I don't date anyone.”

And with that, I have no clue what to think. Aromantic? Asexual? I always get those confused. Either way, she is not the woman for me, and my priorities shift once again.

But I can't think about the resort when I can't stop staring at her ass in those jeans.

ELSIE

Why does Beau have to look that good while being my boss? Under the trees, he takes his sunglasses off, and it is all I can do to keep my eyes on the property. He's got his sleeves rolled up again, like he knows what that does to me. I am trying to concentrate here, and all he's doing is pointing out different parts of the site. It's almost as though he has no clue how hot he is, especially when he is excelling at his work. I love a man who knows what he's doing.

So why do I want to tear into him?

While he shows me an area he thinks will be perfect for the pro shop, I'm tempted to knock at his idea. I want to poke holes in his plans just to take some of the power back in our dynamic and let him know he's not the only one who knows what they're doing. It's petty, and I don't care.

His hotness is getting to me. Beau MacMillan is like art in a museum. He is perfect and untouchable. It makes me twitchy.

I want to mess up his immaculate hair while he goes down on me.

I shake my head to hide the shiver that thought gives me, and a sly smirk comes over his face. "Something wrong?"

Oh my god, lie. "You didn't see that bee?"

"Uh, no."

Why did I say that? That was stupid. Say something better.

"So, anyway, the pro shop could go there, but that'll shift the guest flow in a way that'll discourage them from going to it."

He frowns. *How does someone frown handsomely?* I don't know, but Beau does. "If someone needs the pro shop, they'll go there."

"Sure, but if you make it easier to get to, then they may end up there by accident and find themselves a new hobby. If you hire good enough salespeople and golf pros."

He laughs. "You think that's how people pick up golf? Through *sales*?"

I tip my head to the side. "Oh, I get it. Never mind. Anyway —"

"What?"

I give a little shrug. "You don't think you'll be able to hire a good golf pro, so you're not invested in making the pro shop what it could be. I mean, I get it—it *will* be hard to attract a former pro golfer to this town, but I had more confidence in you than that. Thought you already had someone lined up. But I'm guessing by your comment that you don't, which means in your mind, the pro shop will be an add-on and not a draw—and you're fine with sacrificing it's positioning. If that's your philosophy on the matter, that's fine. No big deal. Anyway—"

"You really do just speak your mind, don't you?"

"Any reason not to? You're not the kind of guy to have a fragile male ego, so I didn't think I needed to pull any punches. Was I wrong?"

At first, I'm not sure what to think of his expression. It's something between pissed off and shocked. But then, his full lips widen into a shit-eating grin. "No. You're not wrong."

"Good."

"At least, not about me."

"I'm wrong about something else?"

"People do not start playing golf because of salespeople and golf pros. They start playing golf because they are interested in the sport."

I smirk. “And how do you think they get interested, Beau? By osmosis?”

“I did not start playing golf because someone sold it to me. I started playing because my father plays, and he used to take me and my siblings to the driving range for lessons.”

“That sounds an awful lot like sales to me.”

He huffs. “Not the kind of sales you’re talking about—”

“No. But the kind of sales I’m talking about will help men like your father get their kids into golf. If you want to have generations of golfers on your property, then they will need an easily accessible pro shop to facilitate perpetuating the hobby, instead of an out-of-the-way pro shop that’s an afterthought.”

Beau’s thick shoulders heave a little with his breathing. He’s mad about something, but he’s also quiet, which unnerves me. His jaw flexes for a second, and he growls, “That’s a good point.”

Not what I expected to hear. “Thanks.”

He clenches his jaw again, before admitting, “I have been going over this property in my mind every day for over a year. I should have thought of that.” He’s not mad at me. He’s mad at himself.

Crap. I feel bad for the guy. “It’s my job to think of the things my client doesn’t. Every property I work on, I do my best to help them maximize their project’s potential, so I have a lot of practice at this.” I shrug. I know guys hate consolation, so I don’t tell him not to feel bad for not thinking of it. He’ll likely just get frustrated if I do that. “The pro shop can go wherever you want it, Beau. I just wanted to offer my professional opinion.”

He thinks for a beat. “Do you play golf?”

“Not well,” I say with a chuckle. “I can never seem to get it in the clown’s mouth.”

He laughs, and the tension in his face fades. “I get stuck in the lighthouse.”

I smile. “And you’ve been playing since you were a kid? Shame!”

He grins, and it’s got that movie star thing, where it’s a little crooked, which makes it even more attractive. “Father always speaks of disowning me when we’re on the green. My game is tennis.”

Father? How formal. “I’m more of a bocce girl myself.”

He laughs again. “A Willie Nelson fan and a bocce player in the same person? Will wonders never cease?”

“Predictability is overrated.”

His gaze penetrates me. “Couldn’t agree more.”

Is he flirting? This feels like flirting. I clear the thought away and pull out my tablet to show him some concepts. “So, as far as the overall structure goes, to distinguish the resort from most of Somerset Harbor, I was thinking of something like this. With the wooden decks, the off-center angles, and open, but roofed walkways, it’ll give the resort a contemporary vibe while providing a gorgeous view all around. They—”

“Wait, let me stop you right there, Elsie. That is way too modern for what we have in mind.”

Here we go. “So, you want something more traditional than this?”

“Of course. We cannot get approval from the city with something like that. They’ll never accept a boxy, modernist vision in this town.”

“And you’re not willing to push them on it, because it’s not what you want, right?”

He pauses for a moment. “It’s not going to sit well with anyone who lives here.”

Why won’t he admit it? “Just say it, Beau. It’s not what you’re looking for—”

“Fine. It’s not. It’s too bold, too futuristic. We won’t stop anyone from going to say, The Sagamore, by looking like we should be catering to The Jetsons.”

“The Sagamore is a fine establishment. I can understand why you’d want to mimic them. I did a paper on them in grad school. Classic for a reason.”

He gives a curt nod. “So then you understand—”

“That you want to follow in the footsteps of a resort built in 1883? Sure.”

He huffs. “I only meant some of the styling. The white exterior, the gabled roofs—”

“The horse-drawn carriages.”

Oh, if looks could kill, I’d be dead. Except his glare is on my lips. If I didn’t know any better, I would think he was about to kiss me. But angry men don’t go for kissing. Do they?

He snaps, “There goes that smart mouth of yours again.”

“Look, the design you’re talking about would fit in with the old money places around here. I did some driving around, and if you want to match the only actual competition you have in town, then have at it. But I didn’t think you’d want to blend in with the Somerset Harbor Yacht Club and Spa—”

“We don’t,” he says, clipped. His eyes narrow on me.

Clearly, I hit a nerve. “So, then consider my design. Otherwise, the resort won’t stand out. You’ll just blend in with them.”

“My resort will stand out. We will be the newest, the biggest ___”

“The most derivative.”

“Elsie, seriously, this is what I want. Why are you fighting me on this?”

“Because you deserve something better. Something spectacular. Not something that you can get with any other architect. And I don’t think you’d be arguing this much with Pavel, either. You’re only arguing with me about my vision because you think I can’t give you something as amazing as Pavel. If I had his name, you’d be kissing my ass right about now.” *Shit. I meant to keep that inside.*

He stands back, folding his arms. “That’s what this is about, isn’t it? You think I’m treating you differently than I’d treat him?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course you are. You have been since day one.”

“I wouldn’t be, if you were giving me what I wanted.”

“How can I, when you’re throwing up roadblocks at every turn? All I know is that you want something far more traditional than you led me to believe, but you haven’t settled on a design for some reason. Make up your mind, Beau!”

Frustration steams off us both. He grunts, “Fine. I want something between the Sagamore and the rest of Somerset Harbor. Make that happen.”

“We’re back to that now?”

“Yeah,” he snaps.

“God, you are so damned pigheaded I don’t know what to do with you!”

His eyes bulge, and I am *so* about to be fired.

-

ELSIE

“I’m pigheaded?” he barks. “You’re the one who thinks all her ideas are gold!”

“That’s because I know what people want when they stay at a resort! I travel all the time!” If he weren’t so frustrating, I might be attracted to Beau MacMillan, but all this arguing has nullified any attraction to the man. He is the most stubborn, arrogant bastard I have ever met. How could anyone be attracted to that? It’s like he’s the hot outer shell, but the inside is rotten with cockiness, and it makes me want to scream.

But, priorities. Right now, all I care about is getting this resort to showpiece quality. If I give into what he wants, it’ll be just another snobby-looking place where people drink pricy martinis and wear the same pastel polos as every other place in New York. Unimaginative. Dull. In short, an embarrassment for me. I want it to be a diamond in my portfolio, not a nice place for a nap. And all he seems to care about is pissing me off.

“Elsie, I understand that you think that you know how resorts should be because you spend time in them. That does not make you an expert in how *mine* should be. So—”

“Yes, I do, and that gives me good insight as far as what guests are looking for. Not to mention the fact that I *have* designed hotels before. This is not my first rodeo, Beau.”

He frowns. “Why do you keep saying my name like that?”

The question stops me in my tracks. “Like what?”

“You keep saying my name like it is a curse word. It’s the same way you say *traditional* or *expected* or *normal*.”

I grit my teeth. I cannot believe he’s calling out my tone, and it makes me snap. The little restraint I had left with him is gone.

“Because every time I think your name, I think *pigheaded*. So, if I say *Beau* instead, then that’ll keep me out of trouble.”

He laughs, but there is no humor in it. “And you think telling me that you’re using my own name as an insult will keep you out of trouble with me?”

“Well, I don’t want to lie to you.”

“You think honesty is a defense right now? Is that right?” He is so haughty I cannot get over it.

“I don’t really think I need to defend anything right now. You hired me for my expert opinion on things, and I am giving it. If you wanted someone to rubber stamp things, then you would have stayed with your old architecture firm.”

His nostrils flare. “Am I paying for your expert opinion on *me*?”

I snap, “I don’t think you want my expert opinion on *you*, but I will give it if you want me to.”

He is less than amused. I am one hundred percent about to be fired. I can hear it in his voice. He dares me with, “Go ahead, Elsie. Tell me all about me. I’d love to hear your expert opinion.”

“Fine.” *I am not losing this job without letting him know every single thing I think about him.* Just as I take a breath to lay into Beau, two rough-looking men in white tees and jeans walk up to us. They are hot, in a construction worker kind of way. *Please do not be here to play with my drone. Or me.*

The better looking one teases Beau, “Raised voices, and you’ve been here less than an hour? Is that a record for you?”

Beau glares. “No one asked you.”

“Someone else you like to snap at? Maybe we can be friends,” I taunt him.

The new guy says, “Saw you over here with her, and I just knew you’d be in trouble, Beau.” He brandishes a conspiratorial tone when he says to me, “So sorry he doesn’t know how to talk to people. We try not to let him be alone with anyone—they dropped him on his head as a baby.”

I snort a laugh, wondering who this brazen guy is to speak of the boss that way in front of him.

Beau rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, but I can handle this just fine without your supervision. You may go. *Now.*”

The new guy smiles, friendly but not leering. “If my brother had any manners, he would have introduced me already. I’m Beckett MacMillan, the contractor for the MacMillan Corporation.”

I see it now—they are so related. Beckett has the same faint auburn streaks as Beau, but crystal blue eyes and a kinder face. He is as muscled as his older brother, but has a darker tan, the sort you get from being outdoors, not the kind from a tanning bed. His scruff isn’t as well-kept as Beau’s, but it suits him all the same. Beckett is handsome, but nothing close to his brother.

I shake his hand, and before I can speak, Beau says, “This is Elsie Braudel, our architect from Klein and Associates. She will be designing our resort. *For now.*”

Why did he have to add that for now at the end? The dick. But I smile and say, “Nice to meet you, Beckett.”

“You too. This is Cole Kendrick, honorary MacMillan, my best friend, and our foreman. In that order.”

While shaking Cole’s hand, I note, “You keep business in the family, huh?”

Beau explains, “We like to work together. We’ve always been rather tight-knit. Being in business together keeps us that way and it keeps the family fortune right where we want it.”

“I cannot imagine working with my family,” I mumble.

Cole smiles. He’s not as good looking as the MacMillan brothers, but when he smiles, he’s a ten. He asks, “Are your

family architects too?”

I almost laugh. “Uh, no.”

Beckett smirks at his brother. “Nice of you to peel yourself out of your office for the day. Didn’t know you had it in you. Getting your hands dirty along with those designer shoes must be a change for you.”

Beau rolls his eyes. “I keep an office onsite, remember?”

“Yes, but we haven’t seen you here in days.”

“Didn’t know you were keeping tabs on me, *Mom*.”

Beckett laughs. “Hey, you calling me Mom is flattery. She’s awesome, and you know it.”

Beau grunts, exasperated and conceding. “Fine, whatever. Why are you here? Don’t you have something else to do or people to manage?”

“Yeah, I’m looking right at him.” Beckett grins at Beau, enjoying his irritation the way siblings do. It’s refreshing, given the bickering of the past hour. He adds, “The guys are on a break and I thought Elsie might need one from you.”

“He is nothing I can’t handle,” I say, smirking at Beau.

“I’m sure of that,” Cole teases. Not sure if he’s teasing me or Beau at this point.

Beau sighs. “Everything is under control, guys. You can go.”

“Given you’re our architect, Elsie,” Beckett says, ignoring Beau, “do you do residential or industrial only?”

“I’ve done both, but I prefer industrial. What makes you ask?” God, it is so nice to think about anything other than Beau and his ego and his retro resort.

“Do you do project administration? Am I out of a job?”

I laugh. “Not at all. I enjoy working with contractors—I have no desire to manage your people. If you want me to be more involved with them, I can be, but I prefer to stay in my lane.”

He nods. “Sounds good. Thought I might get a vacation, but —”

“Another one?” Beau gripes.

“The salmon are hitting in Nimmo Bay. You have to go when they are there. But no worries, Elsie. Next season will be just as good.”

Cole offers, “And we could do a weekend trip for rainbow trout instead.”

“Yeah, true,” Beckett says.

“So, the two of you are big outdoorsmen?”

They shrug together. Beckett says, “We like fishing and camping, but we’re not hunters. You?”

“I used to fish walleye on the Potomac when I was a kid.”

His face lights up. “No shit!”

I chuckle. “My aunt used to bread them in potato chips and bake them. God, I haven’t had that in forever.”

Cole grins. “That sounds delicious. And tricky to catch, if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Yeah, in late summer and early fall, they are a hell of a fight.” I cannot believe I’m talking walleye fishing from my childhood. *The fuck? I never talk about my childhood with anyone. On purpose. And it just slipped out. What is that about? Beau has me flabbergasted.*

He looks at me like I have two heads before he turns to Beckett. “Was there something pertinent on your mind? Maybe something job related?”

“Actually, I wanted to see if you’re coming to the clambake at Mom and Dad’s this weekend,” Becket says.

“That’s this weekend?” He pauses, thinking. “I can make it.”

He turns to me. “And Elsie, you should come, too. It’ll be a blast. There’s beer and clams and everything is super chill. You might even get to see Beau pry that stick out of his ass.”

I snort a laugh, but then I realize he means socializing outside of work with Beau. Who I hate. And want to bang. This will not be good. I cannot risk this job by screwing this up. “A

clambake? Which one of you is Martha Stewart?" I tease. And stall.

Beau says, "Neither of us really are. But my mother is going to host, and my other brother's girlfriend, Lily, is a fantastic chef. Or at least, he's always been bragging about her for it. This is the first time she will cook for the whole family. So, I'm sure she is nervous and wouldn't mind a little company from somebody else outside of the family."

Beckett nods. "You'd be doing her a solid."

I consider my options. Making friends with the family would be great for my career. The MacMillans are well known for their various projects, and they have properties around the world, so it would make sense to get in good with them. Might guarantee me more work in the future. Plus, making good with Beau's family will probably keep me from losing this job.

But I also don't want to get into the habit of losing my weekends to my client, either. Not that it really matters at the moment. Right now, I've been pissing him off for the last hour straight, and I need to make amends. Of course, if I end up sleeping with my client, that might make amends, too.

Stop it, Elsie. Keep it in your pants.

Swallowing my pride, my libido, and the butterflies in my throat, I tell them, "You know what? That sounds great. I want to learn more about Somerset Harbor, and that seems like a fun way to do it."

Beckett smiles. "Oh, that's great. The more, the merrier." How is this ball of sunshine related to a ball of egotistical sexiness in a suit? Beckett is practically Savannah's long-lost brother, but Beau...what is he, besides a giant pain in my ass?

A sexy giant pain in my ass.

"I've never been to a clambake before—do I bring something?"

Beau frowns. "Bring something? This isn't a potluck."

Beckett shakes his head. "Just bring a good attitude and a willingness to drink too much, and you'll be fine."

I chuckle and worry, but lie to cover that up. “Sounds like fun.”

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ELSIE

By Saturday, I'm nervous. I've googled the hell out of clambakes, and I'm still unprepared. When looking for what people wear to them, it's a lot of preppy clothes, and while I have no doubt that's what Beau will wear, Beckett throws me for a loop in that department. He is clearly far more salt of the Earth than Beau, so clambake attire could go in any number of directions. I settle on khakis and a baby blue sweater that almost matches my eyes. It's comfortable and practical, like most of my wardrobe.

Once that's settled, I have the task of finding the MacMillan family home, which turns out to be a massive beach mansion. I see where Beau got his taste for the traditional.

Ten thousand square feet, at least. Ivy grows up the walls of the art déco mansion, flanked by ornamental trees and bushes. Prim, proper, and everything I expected of Beau MacMillan. So how the hell did Beckett come out of this place?

I park next to the other cars near the front and walk along a stone path toward the front door. If I hadn't seen his Aston Martin there, I'd think I was in the wrong place. But I doubt anyone else has a, "Mine," vanity license plate on a dark green Aston in Somerset Harbor.

To my surprise, he pops out of the front door. Even more surprising are his clothes. His blue plaid button down and navy pants are more casual than I thought he had in him. The boat shoes are a nice touch. "Good afternoon, Elsie. Everyone is already at the beach. If you'll follow me..."

“Uh, sure.”

We walk along the front of the mansion where flowers spring near the stone walkway that leads to a pool area. He asks, “You found the place okay?”

“Yes, thanks. You have a big family? All the cars over there—

“Not sure if you’d call it big. Do you? Have a big family, I mean?”

“Not really.” Not really something I’m prepared to talk about.

“The design is coming along nicely. I brought my tablet—”

He chuckles. “Elsie, this isn’t a business meeting. I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like to keep the work talk at work.”

“Oh. Okay.” Then what the hell will we talk about? How much I want to see him naked? We walk past the pool area—which is extensive and gorgeous—to a path through a wooded spot. I can see dunes through the trees just ahead.

“It doesn’t have to be all work, all the time. You know what they say about Jack.”

Frowning, I ask, “Who is Jack?”

“That dull boy who only works all the time.” He smirks.

“Huh?”

“All work and no play makes Jack...”

I snort my laugh through my nose and giggle at myself. “That was embarrassing. On multiple levels.”

He laughs. “It’s okay. I’m just trying to get you to lighten up. You seem tense.”

“I am way outside of my element at the moment, to be honest. Walter doesn’t usually have me socialize with our clients.”

“Is that what this is? You’re just socializing with a client?”

My stomach knots. He doesn’t mean this is some kind of date, does he? “Uh, well, considering I was invited when you were in the middle of yelling at me, I’m not sure what else I’d call it.”

Beau stops in his tracks and sighs. “That’s fair. But in fairness to me, you were yelling right back.”

“I didn’t yell.”

He laughs. “You most certainly were.”

I huff. “Okay, maybe a little.”

“For today, let’s put aside the whole client/architect thing, and just be two people who are here to enjoy a clambake.”

A pair of children zip past us in swimsuits, screeching to high hell about their uncle being too slow, as they race each other for the beach.

Beau adds, “A clambake with kids who have no manners.”

“Those are your niece and nephew, I presume?”

“Franny and Aiden. They are five. Or six, I can never keep track. Franny has been out to prove she is faster than Aiden, ever since she got her cast off.”

“Cast?”

He nods. “She had an accident, falling off a trampoline and landing on a rock. Tough kid. Her father had a hell of a time keeping her from reinjuring herself—she’s too boisterous to hold still for long, and now, she wants to get faster than her brother.”

I laugh. “Tale as old as time. Sibling rivalry.”

“You have siblings?”

“Uh—

“Hey, Beau. Have you seen Franny and Aiden?” A man asks as he walks up to us. He has to be Beau’s brother—there is no mistaking him for anyone else. Unlike Beckett, this one is polished and scruff-free, wearing a linen button down and khaki trousers.

“The beach. Mom is there, so they’re not unsupervised—”

“Thanks,” he says, jogging ahead of us.

“That rude man is Cormac, their father and my older brother.”

“He’s not rude. He’s worried about his kids. I take no offense.”

Beau rolls his eyes. “I told him our mother was there. He should have listened.”

“So, you’re the middle child, aren’t you? Accustomed to being ignored, but still annoyed by it all the same?”

He laughs. “No, actually. The youngest isn’t here, my sister, Maya. She’s on a round-the-world sailing trip with her fiancé.”

“Oh right. I forgot you have a sister, too. Wow! That sounds like quite an adventure.”

“She sends word now and then, and she’s loving every minute of it.”

“Lucky girl.”

He gives me a look. “Do I detect a hint of jealousy?”

“I’m not sure. The idea of sailing around the world is appealing, but only if I’m on an extensive yacht with staff to take care of my every whim. I have stayed in too many good resorts, and I am spoiled.”

He chuckles. “Same here. The life Maya lives is...unlike ours.”

“How do you mean?”

“She is more free-thinking, a bit of a hippy, in my opinion. She’s a public school teacher, or she *was*, before she went sailing. No idea what she will do when she returns.”

The trees open up to a private beach, and it’s heavenly, minus the two screaming children in the waves being chased by Cormac with rolled up pant legs. There’s a gentle slope to the dune before it leads to the water. Long tables sit away from the waves, with a red and white checked tablecloth down the length of them. A wide strip of brown paper runs down its spine awaiting a seafood feast. Blue napkins and white plates set atop the tablecloth, off of the brown paper. Pitchers of lemonade sit scattered and coolers full of ice and beer are stowed next to the tables. Additional coolers are closed.

An older woman smiles as soon as she sees us, and her outfit makes me feel better about mine. Her chinos and white sweater over a white blouse say New England snooty, but her loose ponytail says she's not wound all that tight. Another woman—younger—grins at us. She's got a messy brunette bun and a very different look than the rest of the family. And weirdly familiar for some reason. We join them near the table, and the older one says, "You must be Elsie Braudel. I'm Hannah MacMillan. This is Lily Olson, our esteemed chef of the day, and Cormac's girlfriend."

"So nice to meet you both."

Lily says, "I hear you want to learn more about Somerset Harbor through the food. We should talk. Come with me."

I smile at Beau, then follow her. We walk to a hole near the water, and I ask, "How long have you and Cormac been together?"

She sighs, gazing at him. "Just a few months. But they've been the best months of my life."

"That's great. I understand you're an actual chef, not just cooking the clambake?"

"That's right. I'll be opening a restaurant soon here in Somerset Harbor, but I had one in Manhattan for a while."

Huh. "What made you go from there to here?"

"I'm originally from here, actually. My restaurant burned down, so—"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. Was anyone hurt?"

She shakes her head. "Thankfully, no. Anyway, my new place will open at my parents' B&B—"

"Oh my god, you're *that* Olson? I think I've been seeing your picture in the family photos where I'm staying."

She laughs. "Yeah, that's their place."

"Somerset Harbor really is a small town."

"It is, but it's also pretty great. The clambake was a popular way to feed a group of people after the Civil War, and families

up and down the East Coast keep the tradition alive. There are so few traditions that people still maintain and I love the fact that this one is about food that connects us all.” She then looks me over. “And I hope you don’t mind getting wet, because we need rockweed.”

I laugh. “I am game for anything, Lily.”

“Awesome. Let’s do it.”

We roll up our pants and wade out for the seaweed, which thankfully, isn’t too far. Twenty pounds of seaweed later, and our pants are wet by the end of the hunt. Then, she coaches me through lining the pit with rocks and firewood, and we get it burning hot. While waiting for the rocks to reach a super high temperature, we wrap the food in foil. Lily says, “This always takes the longest time, so tell me about yourself.”

“Not much to tell, really. I’m an architect. I live alone—”

“What was the last book you read?”

I smile at the question, unsure how she’ll react. “A delightfully addictive romance novel.”

She grins. “Really?”

“Yeah. It was great.”

“Ooh, tell me everything.”

I laugh and tell her the dirty plot about a girl whose debt gets paid by a mysterious billionaire who has been admiring her from afar. When we finish the foiling, we toss the seaweed onto the hot rocks, along with the corn on the cob and all the other layers. We soak canvas tarps in the sea to become a cover for the top layer of rockweed.

Lily says, “Now the fun part.”

“The food is done already?”

She laughs. “God no. We bury it.”

“Since you dug the hole, I’ll do the burying.”

She stands back. “Be my guest.”

I load it with sand until she says stop, and then we are owed some ice cold beer while we wait. Once the food is ready about an hour later, the meal begins, and all notion of gentility is out the window as the MacMillan clan digs into the shellfish. The adults are just as ravenous and messy as the kids, and it's a relief to see there's nothing snobby about Beau's family at the moment. They might all be in designer clothes, but no one is precious about a damn thing when it comes to drawn butter and seafood.

After the feasting is over, the men do the cleaning until everything winds down. Hannah says, "I'm so glad we could make time for each other today. For our guests, I am so happy you came. You are always welcome. And now, I'm going to take those sleeping rascals to bed." She gestures to the kids, piled onto each other on one end of the bench. "Cormac, would you mind carrying them?"

"Of course not, Mother." He carts his children and the responsible people of the clan leave. The rest of us meet up on some logs around a bonfire on the beach, drinking and laughing. For once, I truly see the appeal of this life. Sitting next to Beau, particularly.

Cormac returns, stealing Lily's attention as they flirt and giggle with each other. Beckett makes gagging noises to tease them, but it's obvious that he is jealous. Not of Cormac, but of them both. Of their happiness.

I don't blame him. They are clearly made for each other.

After the fire dies down, the happy couple parts, and so do Beckett and Cole, and before I know it, there's just me and Beau on the beach by a fire. "It's really nice here, Beau. I get why you love this place so much. It grows on you."

"Thought you might run screaming for the hills when Lily had you in the water."

I laugh. "It was fun. Why would I run away from that?"

"Fun? *I* would have run away from that," he teases.

"Maybe I don't scare as easily as you."

He smiles, his eyes flickering to my mouth. “I believe that about you. Even when I bluster, you don’t back down. You’re an unusual woman, Elsie Braudel.”

I’m not sure if it’s the beer or my horniness, but heat flushes through me. “You’re not so bad yourself, Beau MacMillan.”

“Is that right?”

Is it just my imagination, or is he closer than he was a moment ago? “Well, yeah. You’re a snob and a half, but you’re also funny and smart.”

“I *am* paying you for your expert opinion. Go on.”

My mouth goes dry, along with my brain. “And you’re... tall.”
Tall? That’s what I go with?

“You have a body made of curves.”

“And you’re muscular.” *Why am I telling him what he obviously knows? Is my brain short circuiting? Why is my heart pounding? What is this?*

He murmurs as he closes in, “You are so pretty that it’s hard to look at you sometimes.”

“Beau, um—”

He leans in for a kiss.

And I back off and blurt, “I should go.”

He blinks at me. “Elsie, did I read you wrong?”

“No,” I say, standing up. “I have to go.”

“Can we talk about this?”

“Goodnight, Beau.” I race to my rental car, unsure of every decision in my life.

ELSIE

As soon as I step into my room at the B&B, I am shaking. It's not like me to back off from anyone. I am firm. I give direct answers. There is no equivocation, no room for debate. It's what I am known for in business.

So why am I a befuddled mess with Beau?

Who the hell was I out there on the beach? I should have just said no and shut him down. Instead, I ran away? Since when do I run from anything?

Oh yeah. My wedding day.

Okay, there was that one time. So what? This is not that. There is no pattern here. I left Jimmy at the altar because we would have been miserable together. I left Beau on the beach because... why?

We are two adults who can share a drunken kiss, and it doesn't have to mean anything. Why would it? Two horny drunks on a beach by a bonfire. It happens all the time. To other people.

I am not other people.

I rush into the bathroom and strip down for a shower. Have to wash all this stress off me. But as soon as I'm under the water, I hear the waves on the beach. His voice, those compliments. That tone in his voice. The one that says this isn't an ordinary moment for me, either.

I shake away the thought. Of course, that was a normal moment for Beau. He's probably had dozens—no—hundreds

of moments like that. Hell, the beach is at his childhood home, for God's sake. How many girls has he kissed on that beach?

All of them, I'm sure of it. Every girl in Somerset Harbor. That's why he had to hire me. He needed to outsource for variety.

I laugh at myself and roll my eyes. So, what if he's a big ho? That's his life. He can do whatever he wants. Except me. I will not be another notch on his bedpost. That is not why I'm here. Intimacy just muddles things, and I'm not good at it. Which means kissing is off the table.

He was totally out of line to move in for a kiss like that. In fact, it's annoying that he even tried. How dare he? I'm out here to work. Not to kiss. No matter how much his mouth looks like it was made to fit mine.

Stop it.

Stepping out of the shower, I grab a towel and dry off. I don't feel less stressed, which is a disappointment. Showers usually clear my head, at least a bit. I dry my hair, which takes forever. It's the other thing that generally clears my head. Long curly hair hates to dry, but going to bed with it wet isn't an option, unless I want the frizz to be out of control. Braiding isn't a bad plan, but it's fifty-fifty on if I wake up with poodle frizz or beach waves, and—

Beach waves. Dammit. I'm back on Beau again. No. Scratch that. I will never be on Beau.

I groan at myself for being so wrapped up in this. It'll be fine. I can say I was drunk and confused and blow it off. This is not a disaster. It *feels* like a disaster, but it doesn't need to be one. I have Sunday to come up with a game plan before Monday rolls around, and that is plenty of time to think of something.

In fact...

Wrapping my half-damp hair in a towel, I race to my tablet. Maybe it's the hormones or the beer or the long day, but I'm inspired. I forget about the towel on my head and concentrate on what I'm doing. A smaller water feature in the lobby, a bigger tennis court. A crown jewel of a steakhouse. He doesn't

want a firepit in the middle? Fine. Let's see what he thinks of private booths like the sixties, but the modern acoustics pillars to reflect sound back into the booths. He's not going to know what hit him.

Looking forward to seeing his reaction, my phone rings. Who the hell calls someone at ten on a Saturday night? Did I have plans with anyone? But when I check my phone, I drop it on the bed in shock.

Why the hell is Jimmy Wayne calling me?

Cold sweat shivers up my back. This doesn't make any sense. I don't—

The call drops, and I can breathe again. Just seeing his number come up made it feel like he was in the room with me. Giving me those puppy dog eyes. Making me feel like the worst person in the world. I know I made the right decision with him, but somehow, that does not rid me of the guilt that still sits on my chest when I think of him.

Probably just an accident. Braudel is pretty high in the alphabet. I'm sure he just grabbed the wrong contact. Of course, why he still has my number on his phone is a mystery. I laugh at myself for knocking him on that, when I have his number on my phone.

You nut. Our families still know each other. If something happened to anyone in our families, it's smart to have our numbers—wait. Is that why he called? Can't be. My aunts would ring my phone off the hook if something was wrong with the family.

I blow it off as an accident and get back to work. I'm on fire and if I stop now—

A text comes through. Jimmy Wayne, "Please call me."

Shit. What the hell is going on? Why now? When I am on the verge of a huge thing at work, and when a guy has actually shown some interest in me? Does he know Beau almost kissed me? Is it some kind of psychic guy thing, where they sense another man around a woman they once had? What is it with men?

Not that I haven't had offers before. I have. I've gone on a few random dates over the years, but they bored me. Highly. Most guys who show any interest in me get very put off by the fact my career is important to me and my family is not. Or they get all weird when they find out that I'm more successful than they are.

Or maybe it's just that I don't know how to talk to people without being abrasive. I never mastered that soft skill. In West Virginia, I had little in common with anyone around me. Talking about books and design mostly got a lot of silent stares until they could figure out how to turn the conversation into something they liked. The only person who let me ramble on at length about my interests was Jimmy Wayne.

Even though we had nothing in common after I graduated, he seemed to like hearing me go on and on about Kazuyo Sejima and Jeanne Gang, and how I hoped to one day be namedropped alongside them. How the flowing structures of Theo Jansen inspired me. We'd hook up in the bed of his pickup, and then I'd talk for hours about all the things I wanted to do with my life, and he just smiled and kissed me and listened the whole time.

It took years before I realized that everyone in Sewmond did that. So many people there had dreams of leaving that shitty little town and almost none of them did it. They didn't have the money or the drive or the will. They didn't want to leave their family and friends behind. Or they didn't want to change.

Change was all I had wanted. I got it when I moved to New York.

In Manhattan, people aren't that chummy or nosy, and I don't try. I could, but people, for the most part, are a distraction, and they don't talk about interesting things. I mean, it's not their fault they are boring, but it doesn't mean I need to date them to make them interesting.

Maybe that's why Beau hit a nerve. He talks about architecture like it's his obsession, too. Huh.

Whatever the case, there will be no kissing. He is a client. And there will be no calling of Jimmy Wayne, either. He is the past.

All that matters—all that has *ever* mattered—are my buildings. And this one is going to be spectacular.

But as I sketch on my tablet, I can't help but notice the window I drew looks like Beau's lips. I laugh at myself, scratch it, and start over. This is ridiculous. I am getting a headache thinking about all of this nonsense.

Or because there's still a towel on my head.

I grunt and get up to finish my hair. It's mostly dried, but it dried in the towel, and now there is the dreaded frizz. I could start over, but I don't want to spend all night in the bathroom, so I suck it up and apply a de-frizzing agent that doesn't really work, but it makes me feel like I'm doing something productive. Then I plow ahead on my tablet.

The ideas are coming, and I'm close to that elusive flow state thing when I get another text from Jimmy Wayne. "It's important, El."

He is the only person who ever calls me El. I have hated it since I was a kid. My name is Elsie. Not El. I told him that countless times. But he persisted, thinking it was a cute way to tease me. I still hate it.

So, I turn my phone on silent and flip it over so I don't see it. No more distractions. No more men. Let's do this.

BEAU

What the hell did I do wrong?

It was the question that ruined the rest of my weekend, and it continues to haunt my Monday morning. I am not the man who mistakes a woman's interest. In fact, I have never been turned away for a kiss. I know when a woman is interested. She wanted me.

So why did she run away?

Never in my life have I been one of those men who found women to be mysterious. Women are like anyone else. They put signs out there that may differ from what a man would do, but they are readable and obvious to anyone looking for them. And Elsie put every sign out there.

There was no mistaking Elsie staring at my mouth. The way her lips curled at the corners when she did. For Pete's sake, she even scooted closer once everyone else had left. I presumed she had been too shy to make a move with my family around, and so she had waited for them to leave. It couldn't have been more obvious.

And yet, she left.

It was a mystery. She had told me she was single, so that wasn't it. With someone as straight-shooting and plain-spoken as Elsie, it seemed peculiar for her to flirt all day and night and then take off. Maybe she only enjoys flirting?

A quick Google search told that wasn't it, and that she likely enjoyed the ego boost of flirting. But that doesn't seem to be

the case either. Why flirt with me when she knows we will be working together for a long time? It doesn't make any sense logistically to risk the potential for awkwardness.

So why the hell did I do it? Because I couldn't stop myself from trying.

It didn't matter that she annoys me. Or that she's so insistent that her ideas are better than mine. Or that she frustrates me to the point of almost yelling in a business setting. How juvenile of me. But Elsie Braudel brings out that side of me. It's embarrassing how she gets to me.

She is smart and funny in a weird way, and I cannot predict what is going to come out of her mouth next. Elsie doesn't back down with me. She is so stubborn and confident and talented, and I hate that she doesn't listen, but I love that she doesn't put up with my shit.

What the fuck is wrong with me? I should hate her. Anyone else who acts like she does would piss me off, and that would be enough to dismiss any physical attraction to them. What is so special about Elsie that she gets past that for me? The question boggles my mind.

Whatever the case, today, I have to be on my best behavior. She's not going to get a flirt out of me, and she's not going to be harassed by me. The thing at the beach was a fluke, and I'm going to assume she is not interested in keeping things any more than professional. I made the first move. If she is interested, she can come to me.

As soon as she walks through my office door, though, I am drawn to her. Fuck. That innocent white silk blouse, the tight gray pencil skirt. The red heels... it's all working for me. Her hair is down today, long yellow curls like a German milkmaid. I want to bury my face in them.

"Good morning, Beau," she says brightly. Too brightly for her.

She feels awkward. Great. This is just how I wanted my morning to go. I smile. "Good morning, Elsie. Your email says you have some more ideas."

She smiles and nods as she lays her tablet out and gets comfortable. “Clambake aside, I worked the rest of the weekend on some designs you will love.”

“That remains to be seen.”

With only an eye roll for an objection to my cool response, she opens up her tablet to show me. “I took your idea about The Sagamore, the white exterior and the gabled roofs, minus the horse-drawn carriages, and I came up with this.”

I squint at the drawing to determine if I’m seeing what I’m seeing. There isn’t an inch I don’t hate. “Is that roof metal?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be.”

I sit back, folding my fingers over my lap. “Those are the only two concessions you made for what I wanted. Otherwise, that’s the same front elevation as before. Are you not understanding what I want?”

“Oh, I think I know exactly what you want, Beau.”

That sentence hangs between us for a beat too long, and she takes a nervous breath before pulling her tablet back. “Let me show you some of the interiors—”

“Elsie.”

“Yes?”

Should I tell her I made a mistake? That I was in the wrong here? It didn’t feel like I was. But I don’t want her to continue to be uncomfortable while working with me, either. “About Saturday—”

“Forget it,” she says, fiddling with her tablet.

“If I offended you—”

But she smiles and shakes her head. “You’re not the first drunk guy to get a little too comfortable, Beau. It happens. No big deal. We don’t even need to talk about it.” Then she goes back to her tablet. “Here.” She passes it back to me.

“Thank you for being cool about that.”

“Of course. What do you think about this?”

I hate it. “It’s not bad, but it’s not what I’m looking for.”

“Okay.” She takes the tablet back, searching through the drawings.

I cannot believe she is being this relaxed about everything. It feels like she’s not. Like she’s burying her thoughts in work. She strikes me as the type to do that. But if I try to pry it out of her, I’ll make things worse. So, I try to let it go as easily as she is pretending to.

“What about these? More your style?”

When she passes the tablet over this time, I’m struck. “Is this a joke?”

“What? I thought you’d be into it.”

“This looks like the Cargills’ yacht club.”

“Yes. It’s traditional and fits in with the esthetic of Somerset Harbor perfectly—”

“We are not the Cargills.”

She blinks. “Why are you so offended, Beau? You said you wanted more traditional, and this *is* traditional. Without completely ripping off The Sagamore, this is the next best design per your request. I don’t know why you’re against having similarities to the yacht club.”

I take a breath. It’s not as though she knows about our long-standing feud with that family. Nor about the fact my sister is engaged to their youngest. Thankfully, he doesn’t appear to take after the rest of them. The thought we will be bonded to them is enough to put me off my lunch, but it would be all the worse if our resort resembled theirs. “Elsie. I do not want the resort to mimic or resemble the Cargills yacht club. The similarities might confuse the visitors and make them think we are in business with those... people.”

“You say *Cargills* the way I say *traditional*.”

“And I mean it that way.”

“Oh. So, you hate them?”

I nod once, then pause. “Hate is a strong word. Abhor is more accurate.”

“Damn. I really thought I was onto something with these.”

“I must ask—how did you see their unimaginative building and think of me?”

“Because you want something boring and dull, and that building hit the mark.”

I take a breath and try to keep my temper. “I never said I wanted boring or dull.”

“You implied it.”

My jaw clenches without a thought. She is driving me crazy. “Elsie, I get you think you’re right about these things. I find a little impertinence is needed for disagreements. I’ll even allow a bit of mockery in regard to my tastes. But just because I want traditional does not mean I want boring or dull or the Cargills yacht club.”

She looks up at me, eyes a little wider than needed. Her pink lips are parted as she thinks. Then she growls, “Yes, you do. You want something that will go along with the town’s esthetic, which means boring, dull, and that yacht club, and all the other cutesy buildings downtown. You’re looking for exactly that, and you don’t want to admit it.”

I’m standing. *When did I stand?* I snap, “You are the most infuriating woman I have ever dealt with, and that is saying something, I assure you. If you think for one minute that I’m going to follow the Cargills’ trend—”

She pops to her feet. “And you are the most galling snob I have ever met! So you hate the Cargills for some reason? Who cares? They are among the buildings you’re trying to blend in with, and now, you want me to do what, exactly? Mimic them while not mimicking them? Tell me what you want, Beau!”

My heart pounds, and all I can do is look at her pink lips, and I murmur, I want...”

“I’m waiting with bated breath.”

“I want you...to take this seriously.”

She frowns. “What the hell does that mean? I take my work very seriously.”

“See, I don’t think you do. If you did, you wouldn’t come to me with this poor attempt to mollify me.”

Her jaw flexes, and she spreads her fingers out like she’s pissed off. Why is she hotter when she’s pissed off? Her voice drops an octave as she says, “Beau. I worked all night Saturday, and all day Sunday on this. I thought this is what you wanted. Clearly, I was wrong. Give me a day to tweak some things, and I will see you on Wednesday—”

“That’s it?”

“What’s it?”

“You’re not...you’re giving up. Just like that?” *Why am I disappointed?*

“What do you mean, just like that?”

“It’s not like you to just give up, Elsie.”

Through clenched teeth, she barks, “I could argue some more, but I don’t see the point. You’re just going to shoot down all my better ideas—”

“*Better* ideas?”

Her shoulders heave as she shouts, “Yes, *better!*”

I laugh. “And *I’m* the pigheaded one?”

“It’s not pigheaded when you’re right!”

I shout, “How the hell can you be so confident, so stubborn, and so hot all at the same time? It makes no sense!”

“I’m not...you think I’m hot?”

“Of course I do!” I bark. “I have eyes!”

She gulps. “Well, I’m not stubborn.”

“Bullshit! You are the most stubborn person I have ever met since—”

“You?”

“Don’t give me that! I am the client! I am supposed to get my way!”

Her sparkling blue eyes shoot to my mouth for a flash. “Fine! Tell me what you want, Beau! I’m not a mind reader! I don’t ___”

Can’t take this anymore. I hook the back of her head with my hand and pull her to my lips. *She might run away again, but I have to know.*

-

ELSIE

Everything in me stiffens up, feeling Beau on my lips. But in less than a second, I give myself over to it. This is what I have been missing, what I have never had. Someone who knows how to kiss a woman.

My breath catches in my throat, and as much as I want this, I should stop it. It's not professional. This isn't what we are supposed to be doing. What if someone catches us? His assistant is just around the corner.

But I can't pull myself away. Not this time. I don't want to stop, and I melt into the kiss. He deepens it, brushing his fingertips along my jaw and beneath my hair. It gives me shivers, and I moan. This is what a kiss should feel like.

He pulls back, but I don't want it to end and I grab onto his neck to keep him there. A little growl comes out of him, and between that and our arguing and all the tension between us, I am far too ready for what could come next. But he breaks the kiss and walks around the desk, locking the door. "Elsie—"

"Yes?"

"Is your tablet backed up?"

"On the cloud."

"Thank god," he says, before he sweeps the desk clear and pulls me onto it and kisses me again. I'm on the edge of the desk and I hitch my skirt up so I can put a leg on either side of him. Every kiss is something feral, and then he nibbles along my jaw and down the side of my neck.

I should stop this. But I can't help myself. He smells too good, looks even better, and the kisses stoke my fire. My inner self argues, But he's so annoying. So argumentative. And while that's true, if he's kissing me, then he can't complain about my drawings.

Let's keep that mouth busy.

I pull him back to my lips, feasting on him. He groans into my mouth and that sound makes me weak because I know what it means. I bite his bottom lip in response before kissing him again. His hands grope from my neck to my shoulders and then down my back just before he grabs my hips and pulls me against him. With my legs open around him, I feel it. Proof that this is more than kissing. He is hard as a rock.

This feels dangerous, and I am not stopping.

Beau's hands trace along my outer hips, before his thumbs hook my skirt hem and pull it up a little more. My mind races a million miles a minute, while my heart beats even faster. He kisses down my throat as he cups my breasts and a shock of pleasure courses through me. I whimper, too far gone to do anything but enjoy it. He murmurs against the soft skin at my collarbone, "Elsie, I want to taste you."

"Yes," I whisper.

Beau kisses my cleavage while his hands slip under my skirt. His fingers twist the sides of my panties and drag them down my legs. He tucks the red lace into his pocket before he kneels between my thighs. I can't believe I'm doing this. This is a mistake. We should stop—"

But he takes my legs over his shoulders and hoists me off the edge of the desk, and before I can say a word, Beau licks me all over. My head tosses back. "Fuck!"

Another growl from him, and he sets about his meal. His tongue sweeps over me in broad strokes and all directions, like he's hunting for something. But when I grip the edge of the desk and whimper, he knows he found the spot and parks himself right there. My legs flex and grip over his shoulders, and I'm sure my heels are digging into his back, but that only

seems to spur him on. He sucks on me there, making me shake for him.

This is so wrong. And so right. I couldn't stop if I wanted to—he has a hold on me in every possible way. My hips involuntarily jut to meet his mouth, and he buries his face against me in response. I ride his face, and he growls into me. That vibration tips me over the edge, and I come right then, doing everything I can not to scream his name. He keeps at me until I wriggle away.

Beau kisses my inner thigh and wipes his mouth as he stands. His eyes have never been so dark as they are now. His thick shoulders heave with every breath and I have never felt like prey with a man before, but I do now. Gasping, I grab his shirt and pull him to me, tasting myself on his lips. I reach down for his belt buckle and fiddle with that until it falls away. Then comes the trouser button, that has to go. As we kiss, I rip at everything between us until I find skin.

Hot, hard, thick. His cock is heavy in my hand. When I touch him, he takes a stiff breath. The skin is soft there, velvety almost. Loosely, I cup my hand around most of him, but my fingers don't meet my thumb. I stroke him like that as a tease. He thrusts against my hand, still kissing me as if he would be content with just a hand job.

I would not be.

“Beau?”

“Yes?” he pants.

“I want more.”

“So do I.”

My voice shakes, because I do not know what will happen. But I say it anyway, “Show me what you want.”

He raises an eyebrow before he pulls me off the desk and spins me around, with my feet on the floor. He reaches down, pulling my skirt up slowly. Tantalizingly slow. Making me want it. Beau nuzzles into my hair and takes a deep breath that he lets out against the back of my neck. “I want you like this.”

“Yes.”

At that, he pulls my skirt up over my ass and runs his fingertips along the outside of my hips while he looks at me. “Fuck, Elsie, you have a perfect ass.” I giggle, and he grabs me, pulling me back to him. I’m bent over his desk, and I fight the urge to wonder how many other women he’s had bent over this desk. His cock sits on my low back, but then he slides himself over my ass and lower until he nestles against me there. No more arguments inside my head now. A yearning for Beau has replaced them. “You want me to show you what I want?”

“Yes—”

He thrusts halfway in and grunts, “This is a good start.”

I work myself back at him. “Don’t stop!”

He lets out a manly laugh, like he has won an argument. Proud. Cocky. Why do I like that? When he plunges deeper on the second thrust, all thoughts short circuit. It’s been so long that it takes a moment to remember all the steps. But I glide back to him, and he takes charge of the rhythm, pounding into me. Beau’s hands grab at my hips and he uses them for leverage, as he snarls, “Fuck, you feel good.”

“You too!” I purr. With each stroke, he claims more of me, hitting long neglected places inside my body. Beau leans onto my back, holding onto the opposite side of the desk for more force. His cock grinds against my G-spot, and I’m shaking. Everything inside is molten. Heat rises and just as another climax burns through, his hand fits over my mouth.

“Can’t have you screaming,” he growls in my ear. “What would my assistant think?”

“Then slow down—”

“Is that what you really want?”

“No!”

He speeds up and makes me come on his cock. My eyes roll back and my body jerks out of control. My mind is a blank space, filled with only bliss. He drives himself deeper still, and

I shatter on him again, this time biting his hand. I am lost to him. This infuriating man. How does he make me come harder than anyone ever has? Pleasure curls around my spine and makes me weaker.

But Beau is strong. He growls and shoves into me, bruising my hip bones on the desk. He leans over me and murmurs, “You’re so fucking wet. Gonna make me come—”

“Yes!”

He hammers harder and just as his cock swells inside of me, he pulls out and comes on my ass with a muted roar of, “Fuck!” For a moment, neither of us moves. But his gasping breaths fill the room as he grabs a tissue to clean me up. I turn around and before I can say anything, Beau kisses me. His heart beats like a drum, and his breaths still fall hard. Mine, too. After, he stares into my eyes. “That was amazing.”

“Yeah,” I pant.

“How is it possible?”

“What?”

“That two people at odds can do... that.”

I giggle. “Not sure. But we did.”

He smirks. “Yeah, we did. I want to do it again.” He kisses me long and deep, and every part of me wants this. So, what if we don’t get along? Who cares about logic when I feel this damn good?

Two hard knocks bring us back to reality, and we both freeze.

“Beau, can I come in?”

“Just a sec, Cormac,” he projects. Then he grumbles, “Fuck.”

ELSIE

“**Y**our brother?” I whisper while we scramble to get ourselves presentable. Where the hell are my underwear? I want to ask, but Beau has fucked my brain out of my skull, and I’m worried I’ll say it too loud.

He nods. “Hurry.”

“I am! Stop telling me what to—”

“Everything okay in there?” The door knob jiggles. “Is the door sticking again?”

“Everything is fine. Be right there.” He whispers, “You good?”

“How do I look?”

He gives me the once over. “Good. Me?”

I reach over and zip up his trousers. “Okay, I think.”

He plasters on a fake smile and opens the door. “Cormac. Nice to see you.”

“Why don’t I believe you?” he teases, as he leans around Beau. “Hey, Elsie.”

“Hi, Cormac.”

Beau holds the door open. “Please, barge on in.”

Cormac rolls his eyes. “So dramatic. I merely want to see the presentation. See where we’re at on everything.”

But my tablet is on the floor. I try to subtly bend over and pick it up, but there is no subtle way to do that, and not wearing any underwear makes it a breezy proposition. Thankfully—

miraculously—my tablet is fine. Must have bounced on something that broke the fall. I hope his laptop is in a similar condition.

Upon seeing Beau's laptop, his pencil caddy, and other items on the floor, Cormac asks, "Beau, what the hell did you do?"

Beau looks so caught, and I take the hit and admit to Cormac, "Beau isn't the only dramatic person here."

He gives me a screwy look. "You did this?"

"On purpose?" I laugh. "Uh no. Is my face still red?"

"Yeah, kinda. What happened?"

I roll my eyes and pray this sounds plausible. "I have the world's worst allergies and was showing Beau a drawing on my tablet when my sneezing got out of hand. Beau, again, I am so sorry about your laptop. Of course, I'll pay for the repairs or replacement—"

"No need," he says, picking it up from the visitor chair seat. "Seems to have had a soft landing there. All good, I think."

"Thank goodness. I'd like to say that's the first laptop my allergies have put in peril, but nope. I've killed three of my own. It's a curse."

"Wow," Cormac says. "Well, if your sneezing is under control, could I hear your presentation and see where we're at with everything?"

"Sure. No problem." Not like I just had the three biggest orgasms of my life or anything. Present a building while my knees wobble and my heart leaps into my throat each time I look at Beau? Piece of cake.

If only I could remember how to talk.

Before I get started, Cormac asks, "Was the door locked or stuck, Beau?"

"Locked. I didn't want the presentation to be disturbed. You know how important this is to me."

"Of course." He sits in the visitor chair, while Beau takes his place behind the desk. Cormac says, "Elsie, unless you have

any objections, the floor is yours.”

“Thanks, Cormac.” I place the tablet on the desk and get into my spiel, detailing all the parts that Beau glossed over. Seems I have his attention now. Wonder why that is.

But as I go through the front elevation, Beau stops me like he did before. “And this is where you lose me. It’s too modern, too harsh.”

I take a breath. “That is what you said before, but I think that’s because you’re looking at it with Somerset Harbor in mind, and I am looking at it with the future in mind.”

“She’s right,” Cormac says.

Beau’s head jerks to face him. “She’s what?”

“Right. You know, that thing you seldom are.”

I snort a laugh.

Cormac continues, “The look of the resort will set the tone for not just the resort, but the rest of Somerset Harbor. We need to be a leader, not a follower, and we can’t do that if we’re keeping things old-fashioned, Beau.”

Beau’s lips, once so enticing, now bunch in frustration.

“Cormac, this is not the way to attract the old money types who haunt Somerset Harbor. They won’t be happy with this. They don’t go to hotels that look like this. I know you want to modernize, but I don’t think this is the best way to do that.”

Cormac sits back and thinks for a moment. He is more methodical than his brother. Far more careful. I can’t imagine him brushing his things from his desk for a place to fuck on. He’s too tidy and thoughtful.

Not spontaneous, like Beau.

He notes, “I assume you brought more than one option, Elsie.”

“Of course.” I flick over to the traditional drawings. “Thought this might be more in line with what Beau said he wanted—”

“You want the resort to look like the Cargills’ place?” he asks incredulously.

Beau huffs a laugh. “No. She did this on her own. And I already told her we do not want to look like them.”

Cormac takes a breath. “Good. But there is no reason not to incorporate some of the design elements into our resort, if you want to merge the two styles—

“You cannot be serious,” Beau objects. “Our resort should have nothing in common with their yacht club.”

But I remind him, “You’re the one who said he wanted traditional, and it doesn’t get more traditional than their yacht club.”

He grunts, before muttering, “We are not discussing that again.”

“We are, if you aren’t going to tell me what you want,” I say with too much edge in my voice.

Cormac, à propos of nothing, says, “I’m glad we didn’t get Pavel.”

Beau and I both shoot him a look. He asks, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You would have fawned over Pavel, taken all his suggestions. It would have been easy, and it would have been wrong for Somerset Harbor. Don’t make that face—I know he’s an artist, but he is so far up his own ass he doesn’t listen. He makes all his buildings about himself. Elsie listens, *and* she doesn’t put up with your shit. It’s good for you, and it’s going to make the resort all the better for it.”

“You have got to be kidding me.”

“I’m not,” he says with a smirk. “It’s about time you met your match.” Then he turns to me. “He’s a blowhard, Elsie. Keep up the good work.”

I laugh. “Thanks.” I know he doesn’t mean anything by what he said, but it was strange to hear I was Beau’s match. Most of the time, I feel like he’s running roughshod over me. It’s why I get so frustrated with him.

“Anyway, regarding the front elevation, I like the modern take on it,” Cormac says. “As far as I’m concerned, we can scrap

the other drawings.”

“Good thing the ultimate design is not up to *you*,” Beau says sharply.

“Merely offering my opinion. Not trying to step on toes.”

“Understood. And I’ll take it under advisement, but given this is the biggest project we have undertaken and everything is riding on it, I’d prefer to go with a known business model instead of an experimental design.”

I shake my head. “It’s not experimental, Beau. I have compiled the design trends of future watchers and combined that with the esthetic you claim to want to create a design uniquely perfect for MacMillan Corp. It has elements of the past, while stepping into the future, so I am just not sure why you object —”

“Because it’s not right.”

“Then you are going to have to show me what you want.”

But we both remember the last time I said that to him, and heat flashes through me while he looks befuddled. Cormac shrugs and nods. “That’s fair, Elsie. Beau, if you don’t like what she’s showing you, then you need to show her what you want.”

He takes a beat, and his eyes narrow on me as he smirks. “I *have* shown her.” That look on his face makes me all twitchy.

“Clearly, not enough, or she’d have something closer to what you want.”

Beau stands up, and I catch a flash of red in his pocket. *Oh shit. My underwear.* As he paces, I’m sure Cormac has seen my panties in his brother’s pocket, and I am mortified. “The problem is right there, on your face. The trad design is too Cargillian, and the modern design is too space-age sixties. What I don’t understand is why there can’t be a way to meet in the middle.”

“So, you want space age Cargills?” I ask.

“If I had my druthers, that name would never be spoken in my office ever again.”

Cormac huffs a laugh. “Like I said. *Dramatic.*”

“Are you done wreaking havoc, Cormac, or do you plan to stay here to annoy me all day?” Beau asks.

“I can block out my calendar for the afternoon if you’d like me to annoy you further.”

I snort another laugh. “Brothers.”

Cormac grins at me while Beau glares at him. Then the older one says, “I suppose I have taken enough of your time. Elsie, thank you for dealing with Beau. He’s a handful, but he’s *our* handful. And if you’d like, I can send you my son’s allergist’s information. She works with people of all ages, and she has been an absolute godsend for him.”

“Uh, yeah. That would be great. Thanks.” Oh right. The lie.

“Sure thing.” He gets to the door, and says, “And Beau, I think you forgot to put on your tie this morning. It’s in your pocket.”

Beau frowns and shoves his hands into his pockets. He laughs, covering. “I was in a hurry.”

“Mondays,” Cormac says with a shrug and walks out the door, closing it behind himself.

Beau closes his eyes and tosses me my underwear. I shove them into my satchel. “That was close.”

“Yeah.”

“And you’re still wrong about the resort. No matter what Cormac says.”

I laugh and shake my head. “You *are* the expert on being wrong, so I’ll have to take your word for it.”

He scrubs his hand over his face, fighting a smirk. “I think we could use a day to cool off. What do you think?”

“That sounds perfect.” I shove my things into my satchel. “I was looking forward to some sightseeing, anyway.”

He nods once. “Wednesday, then?”

“See you Wednesday.” I try not to trip over my own two feet on the way out, but my knees keep wobbling when I go down

the stairs. *Dammit, Beau.*

-

ELSIE

I keep telling myself that what happened means nothing. Beau is still pigheaded and arrogant. I am still right. Sex changes nothing. No matter how good that was. No matter how many times he made me come.

Sitting in the bath on Tuesday morning, I am at an impasse with myself. I want to ride Beau into the sunset, but every instinct tells me that is a terrible idea. Every instinct but one.

Still, orgasms are not enough to risk my career over. *Okay, maybe those orgasms were worth the risk, but in the cold light of day, I have to be pragmatic.* Fucking this up means fucking up my career, and my career is the only thing that saved me from a lifetime of changing diapers in a rundown trailer in Sewmond, so I cannot jeopardize what I have built just because Beau MacMillan makes me come screaming like a banshee.

But it's not just that with him. He pushes me. He confronts me. Every time I do something he doesn't like, he says so. Without hesitation. I have proven every other man wrong about me, but Beau isn't convinced. He is a puzzle I haven't solved. I can't let that go. It makes him the perfect client. Beau is my greatest challenge yet.

So, I'm not going to screw this up. We will talk like adults, and I will tell him it was a mistake. The hottest sex of my life, but a mistake all the same. I'm sure he will understand. I think he was feeling a bit of that before I left yesterday. We just got caught up in whatever this is, and it got out of hand. But then I

think of the weight of his cock in my hand, and I'm all confused again.

Yesterday was the most fulfilling sexual experience of my life. I have never come that hard or that many times in a row. And the way he went for it...I swallow and try not to shudder. It was all just too much—

My phone dings.

I grab it from the towel on the floor, and it's a text from a number I don't know. "Hey, this is Lily, the chef from the clambake. I got your number from Beau. Thought we could get some coffee, say, around noon?"

Oh my god, yes. That's what I need. A nice, neutral time with a fun girl who could be a friend. We set up the coffee date, and I get out to begin the hair drying process. Once I'm dry, it's time for me to dress and leave, so I race out the door as soon as I'm ready.

When I pull up to the café she directed me to, the place makes me smile. It's called Bean-Go, and while I don't go in for pun names, this one works because the whole place is adorable. A bell on the doorframe rings as I open the door.

Potted plants dot every surface. There are thrift store couches and old bookshelves that could use a coat of paint. I assume patrons donated the books—there's a sign that reads, "Take one, leave one," over the bookshelves. To the left is a tiny three seat bar and to the right are some couches and Lily.

We order our espresso drinks and sit on a far couch with them so we can people watch. Lily says, "I was hoping you'd be up for plans on short notice. Thanks. I needed to get out of the house."

"You and Cormac live together, right?"

She nods. "He's at work all day, the kids are in school, and I am bored. Still waiting on some swatches for my restaurant, so I have nothing but time on my hands, and I am going a little nuts."

"Well, I am happy to entertain you."

She laughs. “Thanks. How are things going?”

Do not tell her about hooking up with Beau. It was a mistake, and no one needs to know. I smile, so she can’t guess what’s actually on my mind. “Good, thanks. I am curious about the MacMillan family, and since none of them are around, what can you tell me?”

“Oh, a lot,” she says with a laugh. “Let’s see, uh, Cormac is the oldest. And the dreamiest.”

I giggle. “He is a catch. You did good.”

“Yeah.” Her eyes go to a happy place for a brief second before she comes back down to Earth. “He has two kids, Franny and Aiden. Then there are Beau, Beckett, and Maya. I have yet to meet her. Oh, and Everett, but no one ever talks about him.”

“Any idea why?”

She shakes her head. “Any mention of Everett shuts everyone up quick. It’s weird. Most of the time, the MacMillans are open books. I haven’t met their cousins, but outside of Everett, everyone is tight knit.”

Must be nice. “And what about you?”

“Just my parents and me. Tiny family. You?”

“I’m on my own.”

She nods without prying, and I appreciate that. “What’s it like to work with Beau? He’s always so intense.”

I laugh. “Um, yes. He is.”

“Giving you trouble?”

“He can try. But he’ll fail.”

She grins. “I knew I’d like you.”

“Same here. So you and Cormac...you said it’s just been a few months, but you’re already living with him. I don’t mean to sound judgmental, but where I’m from, that’s fast.”

“It is, definitely. But when you know, you know.”

Which is how I know things with Beau need to cool off. There is no chance things should keep going the way they did

yesterday. “I’ve heard that. Mostly from people in happy relationships.”

“What can I say? He makes me smile. All the time. We’ve had some ups and downs, but Cormac is my person.” She says it with such confidence that I am both jealous and nauseous.

“That’s awesome, Lily. I’m happy for you.” It’s odd. The café, though adorable, is quiet. We’re the only people inside, and there are just a few outside. It’s nice though. Makes it feel like we’re sitting in someone’s living room instead of a café.

“What about you, Elsie? Anyone special in your life?”

“Special...” It feels like a lie when I tell her, “No.”

“You hesitated.”

“I didn’t. Just doing the math on the matter.”

She smirks and sips her latte. “What about Beau? You two seemed awful chummy at the beach.”

“He is the only other person there that I knew. I’m not great at social things like that. He was kind enough to keep me company. That’s all.”

“Mm, hmm,” she says without a hint of subtlety. “Well, he’s single, if that’s a concern—”

“It is not.”

“And he’s quite smart.”

“Good for him.”

Her smirk grows. “Just giving you shit. I’m sure hooking up with a client is the last thing on your mind. Although I will point out how much he was checking you out on Saturday. The whole time.”

I have no idea what to think about that. “Moving on?”

“Sure.” But the thought is there in her eyes. “One more thing though—

“Go ahead.”

“If you were to be interested in Beau—

“I am not.”

“But if you were, you’d be a hell of an upgrade, from what I’ve heard.”

My brow dips in confusion. “How’s that?”

“Beau has a thing for socialites who wear DKNY, but can’t spell it.”

I snort a laugh. “Ouch.”

“Exactly. So, if he dated a woman of substance, I think the family would be relieved.”

“Perhaps one day he will find her.” And that thought offers a pang of jealousy. Ridiculous, considering everything. But it is there, nonetheless. “Any chance of you and Cormac walking the aisle?”

She smiles and shrugs. “I have no idea. Never say never, right? But I’m opening a restaurant soon, and I have way too many irons in the fire to think about putting a wedding together.”

“Shifting from the future to the past, any idea why they hate the Cargills so much?”

“It’s hard to say, but I think it stems from their parents. Anytime the Cargills come up, Robert gets all weird and stiff. Saying things like, ‘Those people should learn to respect their betters.’”

“I didn’t peg him for that much of a snob.”

She shakes her head. “Normally, he isn’t. That’s what makes it so weird. I mean, the MacMillans are privileged people—*obviously*—but they aren’t jerks about it. Only when the Cargills come up. I don’t know why. I should bug Cormac until he tells me.”

Laughing, I shake my head. “Don’t do it on my account. He helped me with Beau yesterday.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“He took my side on the design of the resort. It’s a good thing, too, because Beau was getting on my last nerve.”

“He’s like that. Seriously, I don’t know how you can work with him. I would have strangled him a long time ago.”

“And here I thought you wanted me to hook up with him—”

She laughs. “Oh, I do. It’d be good for him to get the stick out of his ass. But he is the most stubborn man I have ever met.”

“I know, right? God! He makes me crazy about that. It’s like, just listen to me. I know what I’m talking about. But no, he has to put his foot down and get his way, when he won’t even tell me exactly what it is he wants!”

She smirks again. “Sounds absolutely awful.”

“Then why are you smirking?”

“Because when you describe him, your face gets red.” She sips her coffee again.

And I feel it in my cheeks. She’s right. “I’m just warm.”

“Yep.”

“I don’t know you well enough for you to tease me this hard.”

She laughs. “Oh, I think I do.”

I laugh and roll my eyes at her, and the door hits the bell on the frame as it opens. Being in prime people viewing position, we both glance beyond the potted plants toward the door. But I can’t see past the plant in my sightline.

ELSIE

“**S**peak of the devil,” Lily murmurs.

Beau walks to the counter and orders a coffee and a sandwich. His assistant must be taking another day off.

This isn't happening. Yesterday was a mistake. We should talk about it. But I'm not ready for that conversation. Hell, maybe we should never talk about it. We're mature adults. We can avoid topics. It's our prerogative to handle this how we want. Stop panicking!

Now is not the time to handle anything, and I scoot down into the couch so he doesn't see me. It's easy to do since the springs inside the couch failed long ago. *Don't see me, don't see me—*

“He's on his phone. He won't see you.”

I frown. “How did you know I don't want him to see me?”

“Because you're hiding. Like a chicken.”

“I am not hiding—”

She silences me with a look. “Uh, huh. I know what hiding to stay out of trouble looks like. You're hiding.”

“Stop saying *hiding* so much. I'm not doing that.” I hear a paper bag crinkling near the counter and peek. He's leaving. Thank God—”

“If you're not hiding, then you won't mind when I do this.” She leans over and waves, “Beau? Over here!”

I snipe, “You suck!” earning her giggles. I might have actually been mad if Beau didn’t look so handsome today. But he does. Just like always. Which is why he’s so dangerous to be around.

Too late to run. He’s coming over. He smirks when he sees me wedged into the couch. “Oh, hey, Lily. Elsie, I didn’t see you down there. Everything okay?”

“Yeah, yes. Just, um, stretching.” I sit up.

“I’ve never seen someone crumple their body and call it a stretch.”

“Tweaked my back yesterday. *Exercising.*”

His cool demeanor slips for a moment, and Lily smirks at me. “So, Beau, Elsie and I were just talking about the clambake and how much fun it was, but I just realized I have to get going. If—”

“You’re leaving?” I ask flatly.

“I have a thing,” she lies beautifully. “Remember? I told you about it.”

“Thought you canceled the thing.”

“Nope. It’s back on.” She keeps up a ruse better than me.

“Beau, maybe you can keep her company? Show her around town? I feel terrible for leaving her all alone. Do me a favor and find some way to entertain Elsie.” She grabs her purse, winks at me, and I want to trip her on her way out. “Talk later, Elsie. Bye.”

You’re evil, Lily. “Bye.” But her exit is smoother than my fake stretch excuse, so kudos to her. He takes her seat at the other end of the couch, and for a moment, neither of us speaks. But I blurt, “You don’t need to stay.”

At the same time, he says, “I hope you’re not mad.”

I frown. “Why would I be mad?”

“Why would I leave? I just got here.”

“Fine. Stay. Why would I be mad?”

“I didn’t call you.” He pauses. “After everything.”

But I shake my head. “I’m not mad about that.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

I take a breath and absorb his cologne. God, why does he have to smell so good? Today’s button down is a dark green thing that suits him well. Fitted on his shoulders. The muscles there bulge as he moves—*stop it. Be a grown-up.*

I nervously bite my lip. “It’s pretty obvious that yesterday—”

“Should have never happened?”

I nod exaggeratedly and take a deep breath. “I am so relieved to hear you say it, too.”

“Yeah, this just—”

“Got completely out of hand.”

“Precisely.” He rakes his fingers through his hair. Those auburn streaks fall perfectly. It is downright annoying how easy it is for guys to have good hair. Or maybe it’s just annoying because it’s him, and everything about Beau MacMillan annoys me.

Okay. Maybe not *everything*.

He goes on, “Don’t get me wrong, what happened was...earth shattering, but we must be professionals about this. You are the architect. I am the client. We should have never crossed those boundaries. It was impulsive and reckless.”

“I could not agree more. On all counts.”

“So, it was good for you, too?”

My face burns hot. “Yes.”

He smiles in the proud way that is so quintessentially Beau. “Same.” But then his handsome face goes still. “For the record, I get tested every two months, and I’ve always tested negative for everything. I’m usually a stickler for protection.” He gives a sheepish shrug, encouraging me to spill.

“Me too,” I blurt. “I meant, I don’t get tested every two months—no real need when you’re not getting laid regularly.”

But I've always tested negative, and I'm on the shot, so we're good there."

"I appreciate the reassurance, Elsie." He takes a breath, and I can tell those things were on his mind. It was awkward, but I'm glad to know we're safe.

I don't want to think about what could have happened if we weren't both careful prior to yesterday, so I switch the topic back. "Obviously, we are both quite passionate about our opinions. Things are likely to get heated between us again, and we can't be doing *that* every time we get into an argument."

"I agree. On that note, I believe we should give each other whatever space we need. If you need more time on the project or simply to clear your head, take the time. I will speak up regarding my own needs as well. If things become..." He searches for the word and looks like he's struggling. "... *intense* again, I will ask for a break. Deal?"

"Deal." I'm glad to know we're on the same page, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed, too. Maybe a part of me wanted him to declare his passion or to be so smitten with me that he can't eat or some other nonsense. But we are two practical people in a potentially dangerous situation, and we are doing the smart thing. *So, why does it sting? Maybe we could just do some kissing—*

"If things were different, if our circumstances weren't what they are, then..." he shrugs. "But things being what they are, it isn't feasible to pursue even just sex between us. Right?"

"Right. Dating is a minefield, and I am not ready to be blown up."

"Gee, you make it sound so romantic."

I giggle. "It's like I told you before. I don't date. My career is hard enough without throwing that kind of confusion into the works. If word gets out that I slept with a client, I'd be out of a job fast."

"Understandable. I will keep that information to myself. Being a woman in a male-dominated career cannot be easy."

"I didn't get into it looking for *easy*."

His stare pierces into me. “So, why did you?”

I smile, thinking back. “When I was a kid, I went on a school field trip to Washington, D.C. It was the big trip for anyone in my school district. Too expensive for a lot of the kids, but I knew it was coming, so I mowed lawns all summer to earn the money to be able to go. Hottest summer of my childhood, but I didn’t care. I wanted to go.”

“So, you’ve always been stubborn?”

I laugh. “Yeah, maybe. Anyway, when the teachers talked about the history and events surrounding each monument, all I could think of were the buildings. How they’ve stood for centuries after those people did those things. The books tell the tales, sure, but it’s the buildings that are the proof. They stand the test of time. They are legacies in and of themselves. I wanted to build something that would last the test of time. Designing buildings isn’t just about that building or the people who commissioned it. It’s about reaching out to the future and saying I was here. And I created masterpieces.”

“Wow.”

“What?”

“You make every other job sound pointless.”

I laugh again, harder. “I don’t mean to.”

“Admittedly, I am jealous of that. Sure, our resort will be here long after we are, but the idea of having such a broad impact has an appeal.”

“Oh, come on. Being COO of your family’s corporation has a broad impact, too.” *Right?*

“I suppose. We do a lot of good in the world, charitable work and all that. I am rather proud of my family’s work, and I didn’t mean to sound otherwise. But the way you speak of your work, your legacy...it has an enviable quality, Elsie. You’re in love with your career. I can understand why you must protect your reputation so fiercely.”

I smile and take a deep breath, happy to be putting this behind us. Sort of. “Well, after this, I am going back to my hotel room

to work on the resort. I'll have something for you by tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

"Good, glad to hear it."

"We will go over the rendering again, the design elements, and I'll have a better idea of what the resort will look like once I've put some things down. You'll love it. I promise."

He chuckles. "I hope so."

"I got a little ahead of myself with the last design—I go ham when I work all night like that, and—

"And I am sure going home after I tried to kiss you didn't help matters."

I gulp. "Um, no, but kind of."

"How's that?"

"It flummoxed me, to say the least, but that nervous energy kept me going all night."

He smirks. "Then maybe I should try to kiss you again."

As much as I'd like that, I can't let that happen. "Beau, we just talked about this—"

"I was teasing. Sorry. Too soon?"

I roll my eyes and laugh. "Yeah, maybe a little."

"Won't happen again."

But I wish it would.

BEAU

I should stay on point. I should keep talking about the resort. But all I can think of is how much I want to kiss Elise right now.

Even as a teenager, my hormones were never this out of control. Sure, I let a cheerleader ruin my life by doing double homework for years, but that was just an infatuation that never led to anything real.

Yesterday was real, and it was the hottest sex I have ever had in my life.

Shifting uncomfortably on the shoddy couch, I try to ignore the swelling in my cock. It keeps happening every time I think of yesterday. The way she tastes, how she bit my hand to stop from screaming—

Stop. Stop, or you'll take it all back. I want to take it all back. To tell her I don't want to be professional with her. I want to tell her I want to bend her over the sink in the café's bathroom. Elsie Braudel is what I want.

But not enough to jeopardize the resort. Which is what telling the truth could do.

As she talks animatedly about the next steps of the project, I try to pay attention. Site plans, floor plans, all of it is critical. But it all feels like nothing compared to what happened in my office. Still, I try. "In regard to keeping plumbing costs low, what do you suggest for guest rooms insofar as low flow toilets versus traditional?"

“Low flow has come a long way since its introduction, but the bigger concern is pipeline.”

“I thought we’d go slim—”

“You cannot go slim in a massive structure like a resort, Beau. Slim is notorious for call outs, pissed off guests because all they did was pee and the line still got clogged—it’s a nightmare and a half.”

I nod. “And the state regulations—”

“I prefer to go above and beyond state regs for these things. With energy efficiency a growing concern, I think it’s better to start ahead of the curve on the matter. Beat them to the punch, so to speak.”

“Sounds good.” As much as I enjoy arguing with Elsie, agreeing with her has a pleasant side effect. She smiles, and her smiles make me want to kiss her. Which is confusing, since the last time I kissed her, we were arguing.

Fuck. It’s not just the heat of arguing that’s getting to me. It’s *her*.

Why do I have to have a crush on our architect? This isn’t right. I take a breath and tell myself to stop crushing on Elsie. But she speaks on about electrical plans, and she smiles when I nod along, and that smile starts the cycle all over again. This is ridiculous.

If she weren’t our architect, Elsie Braudel would be perfect for me. She’s smart as a whip. Doesn’t take my shit. Our conversations have an unpredictable quality to them that is addictive. She has a stellar career, too. Her bombshell looks are a bonus. The way her lips curve as she smiles sends a thrill to my cock that I have never had. In fact, I have never felt this way about anyone.

Usually, once I have sex with a woman, the spell is broken. It is the rare woman who maintains my interest for any length of time. I have dated my fair share of the fairer sex, but it goes nowhere. Perhaps my siblings are right about my tastes. I tend toward those for whom a decent conversation is a challenge. I

presume that is why Beckett invited Elsie to the clambake. He saw me arguing with her and decided she was the one for me.

Clever bastard.

Wait, what did she say? “I’m sorry. Can you repeat that?”

“Solar panel roofing has become a viable option for buildings such as your resort, which will significantly cut power costs.”

“Is that...tacky?”

She smiles. “It’s no tackier than low flow toilets, LED lighting, or any other energy efficient feature. These are selling points for many people, Beau. Guests want to know that you are addressing these concerns. It doesn’t have to be a huge part of the marketing, but it should be a highlight on the website. When people think *resort*, they do not think *environmentally friendly*. But we can change that.”

“I have a feeling you’ll have me changing a lot of things.”

“That’s the idea. Somerset Harbor is growing on me, but there is always room for improvement. As far as the 3D model goes...” She continues, but all I can think of is how much I want to experience her unleashed. In my office, we both had to hold back for fear of Shelly hearing us. Considering yesterday was restrained, how much more life changing would it be if we’d had the privacy to really get into it? Hell, even just having a bed to work on would have been a game changer.

And now, I’ll never know.

“...so, if I’m going to have something ready for tomorrow, I should probably get going. Unless there was something else?”

“I think that covers it, Elsie. Thank you.” No clue what she said. But I’m sure it’ll be fine. “I should get going, too. I need to hit the city admin office for some of our permits.”

“Great, okay.”

I walk her out of the café. Part of me feels the urge to hug her before parting ways, but I am not a hugger, and I wouldn’t know how to start that. It’s just...I want to feel her pressed up against me again. Best not to, though. “See you tomorrow? Two good?”

“Sounds good. See you then.” There is something on her mind—she’s dawdling.

“Everything okay?”

“Yeah, um—we’re doing the right thing, right? Being professionals and everything?”

No! “Of course. Let’s keep things on the level.”

She smiles. “Right. Of course. See you tomorrow.” She gets into her rental and drives away, leaving me with a knot in my gut and an ache even lower.

Why did she have to ask that now? Why bring it back into the fore? I huff and walk back to my office to get my car. No sense in hoofing it to the city administration office—my Ferragamo’s are stellar to look at, but they pinch, and I’m not walking two miles in them while they devour my toes.

I park out front and before I go in, I take a moment to cool down. Elsie’s question gnaws at me. It leads me to believe she is wondering if we are doing the right thing, and if she’s wondering that too, then why in the hell are we wondering about this separately, when we could figure it out together, naked in my house? Driving my head against the headrest, I groan at myself. I am frustrated and horny, a poor combination if ever there was one. Especially when I am about to speak to the permitting office. I need my focus back.

But it won’t come back unless one of two things happens. One, Elsie tells me she is not interested in me. Or two, I seduce her again. The question is, how?

Never once did she express disinterest. She only said that we shouldn’t be fooling around, and she said that while agreeing with me on the matter. But none of that means anything if she’s determined not to fall into my arms again. Elsie is stubborn as hell, and if she’s decided not to sleep with me again, there is no changing her mind.

But I can make her regret it.

The first time we had sex, I thought what I had begun would end at a kiss. But once I had that, I needed more. Elsie kissed

like she had been touch-starved her whole life. She fucked like it, too. Like she craved everything I did to her. I know I did.

So the question becomes, how do I make her crave me again?

I take a breath and let it out slowly. It's wrong to fuck with Elsie like this, and I know it, but I need to touch her again. To taste her. Feel her. There is something between us and professional or not, I want more.

She was spending time with Lily, and the two of them seemed quite chummy right off the bat at the clambake. I could ask Lily for some information about Elsie...but Lily might not be open to sharing that sort of thing with me. Women aren't big into helping men get— wait.

Lily left in far too much of a hurry today. She was trying to make us spend time together. Why? What did Elsie tell her? God. If Cormac knows she and I hooked up, I will never hear the end of it. But, then again, he did distinctly call her my match. Is he in on this, too? And Beckett is the one who invited Elsie to the clambake...

Is my family conspiring to get me a girlfriend? I laugh at the thought. They've never tried to set me up before, though that is likely due to the fact I've always told them not to. Long ago, I told them not to try because marriage is not for me and I am not the commitment type. So, they've never inserted themselves into my love life.

But when it comes to Elsie, it seems we are all acting out of our character. There is something special about her, so I understand why they would do it. And the only reason to stop them would be if I weren't genuinely interested in her. I suppose that is the real question at hand.

Am I interested in her? Yes.

Am I interested in her enough to risk all the possible things that could go wrong? Unsure.

The first time I took the leap, I kissed her without thinking of what it could do to her career if word got out that she kissed a client. What came next was a pleasant surprise, but I was

thinking only of myself and what I wanted. But now, looking at the whole picture...is it worth the risk?

-

BEAU

The city administration office is a two-story brick building with a green roof and too many trees out front. Bright yellow flowers line the sidewalk from the parking lot, and summer songbirds swoop from flower to tree. My dour mood bristles at the persistently cheerful sights. It feels like being told to smile when I'm already irritated, and it doesn't help that the convertible next to the only open space is a little nicer than my car.

I cannot pursue Elsie. It could damage her reputation, and therefore, her career. The situation is unfair, but that is adulthood. One unfair thing after another. I will handle this with grace and aplomb.

So, when I walk into the city admin office and I'm greeted by stale air conditioning and fluorescent lighting, I suck it up. The old flat gray-brown carpeting does not bother me. Standing in line for twenty minutes will not get on my nerves. I will not think of the half dozen ways I could improve the flow of customers, and I will simply accept that waiting my turn is good for me. It builds character. Thinking of what might have been is a pointless exercise, and accepting things as they come is the mature thing to do.

"MacMillan."

I blink, thinking the man at the counter has called me forward in line, but the voice came from behind me. But when I turn, my spine stiffens. I snipe, "Cargill."

It's Sawyer Cargill, the oldest of the sons in my generation. He is taller than me, but I have more muscle. Like most of the Cargill sons, he has dark hair and blue eyes some might mistake for handsome, but all I see in them is arrogance. He's good-looking and carries himself well. The best part of seeing him is seeing me appears to have ruined his mood.

Mine was already ruined.

He's behind me in line, where he belongs. "What a pity your tailor has gone near-sighted."

"I should have known it was you behind me. I thought I smelled failure."

He chuckles. "I hear you're building a cute little motel in the sticks."

I snort a laugh. "Is that the best you've got?"

"Hardly, but I thought I'd try being vaguely civil for once. Given we are about to be brothers-in-law, I thought I should make the effort. But I don't think it's going to take."

"Neither do I." I shrug and turn back around. "And our cute little motel, as you call it, is going to shut your charming boutique yacht club down, so I'll be sure to send a formal apology to keep the peace between our families."

"Charming and boutique? What a delightfully spiteful way to call us small."

"Yes, well, I tried that vaguely civil thing, and I don't see that working out for me, either."

"Astounding," he says sarcastically. "And how, pray tell, would you shut us down? No yachts on land, Beau."

"Come now. You don't think yachts will be enough to keep you in business, do you?"

"We've been in business for three generations. If you think we'd be dumb enough to rely on a single stream of income, then you have another think coming."

Rolling my eyes, I count the people ahead of me in line. Five to go. This is taking too long. They could open a second

window and have this line humming.

“A pity they don’t have another window open,” Sawyer grouses. “Then I wouldn’t have to be stuck here.”

I will not point out I was just thinking the same thing as him. In fact, “What’s the matter, Sawyer? Too good to wait in line? You Cargills really are all alike, aren’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Parker thinks he’s too good to give my sister a normal life. You think you’re too good to wait in line—”

“Waiting in line is just fine by me, but I do not savor the thought of spending another minute with *you*.” He pauses. “And Parker *is* too good for a normal life. Hopefully Maya can accept that, and they can build a happy life together.”

“She deserves a man who will dote on her and take care of her and build a real life. Something with roots and stability. Not a sail and going wherever the wind takes them.”

Sawyer’s jaw tenses. “They are sailing around the world together. Before the wedding, she will know precisely what it means to be married to Parker. She can make her own choices.” He is right, but I don’t have to admit it.

Why is the guy at the front taking so long?

“Or are you Chief Operating Officer of your family, as well as your corporation? Are you the one making Maya’s choices for her?”

I laugh. “There is no one in Maya’s life who makes her choices except for her. I hope Parker can deal with that.”

“He’s the same way,” he says. “Always been hardheaded. And a little different from the rest of us.”

I nod. “Maya, too.”

“Perhaps they are a good match. Unlike the rest of us.”

“Trouble in paradise? You and the missus....?”

He huffs a laugh. “No. Willow and I are great. What I mean is, the rest of our families. I’m sure it would make Parker and

Maya happy to see us getting along. Unfortunately, I am not an actor, nor a liar. So, come the wedding, I will do my best to be polite and brief in my interactions with you and yours. Will you agree to do the same?”

“The wedding is a long way off, Sawyer. I won’t make promises this far in advance.”

He rolls his eyes and looks away. “Our siblings getting married does not make us family, and it doesn’t make us friends, but we *can* be respectful around them, can we not?”

“I suppose that depends on whether you keep opening conversations with blatant insults.”

“My apologies, Beau. I didn’t know you were so sensitive about the size of your *resort*.”

I laugh and see there are only three more ahead of me now. “My resort is going to dwarf your yacht club, Sawyer. Take whatever shots you want. I have nothing to worry about.”

“Gonna be big, eh?”

“So far, we’ve been approved for over four hundred and fifty rooms, so—

He lets out a low whistle. “Sounds like someone is overcompensating.”

I laugh again. “Keep up this comedian act at the wedding, and we’ll get along just fine.”

He smirks. “And you think Somerset Harbor has the infrastructure to support such an endeavor?”

“According to our analysis, we’ll be just fine. Worry about your yacht club, Sawyer. Our analysis isn’t looking great for you.”

A flash of tension in his eyes makes me smile. “Our analysis says the same for you, so I guess we will soon find out who is right.”

“Indeed.”

We’re both quiet for a minute before he asks, “Who is the design team on the project?”

“Klein and Associates.”

“Hmm.”

“Why *hmm*?”

He shrugs. “I’m just surprised you didn’t go with Hamilton and Sons.”

Don’t tell him that’s where we went first. “Why is that?”

“They’re more conventional, and they’ve designed a quarter of the buildings in Somerset Harbor. Seems the obvious choice, but you wouldn’t go for that, would you? You wanted someone different. Someone... Pavel Cerny. He’s the only reason you’d pick Klein and Associates. Nice choice.”

“Cerny is old hat.” Let him wonder. “K and A have a slew of better talent than him.”

Faux sympathy takes over his tone. “Couldn’t get him, eh? That’s too bad.”

“I cannot imagine settling for Cerny. Though I suppose, if you want something absolutely predictable, he’s a safe bet. We’re going modern.”

Sawyer’s brows jump. “Oh, really?”

“We can’t all be as mundane and common as your yacht club.”

“Good luck getting something modernist approved by the city, Beau. They’ll eat you alive for screwing with the town’s aesthetic.”

Shit. He’s right. “I suppose we will see.”

“We will, and I’ll be watching the whole show as it falls apart. It’ll be fun to watch you picking up the pieces. Don’t worry. I won’t rub it in Maya’s face. Unlike the rest of your family, she seems great.”

“Next,” the city employee with the nasal voice says to the man ahead of me.

One more to go. This cannot be over soon enough. Instead of trading barbs with the eldest Cargill, I pull out my phone and

see something that makes me smile. “What a shame your business lives and dies on the weather, Sawyer.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t imagine much sailing occurs when it rains.”

“No. So what?”

“Don’t pay attention to the local news, do you?”

He frowns harder. “Is it supposed to—”

“I hope that’s not your convertible out front with the top down.” I show him the local weather map and the bright red blob heading straight for us, just as thunder claps. The thunder’s timing makes me grin as he runs out of the building to save his precious car. The local weather app says it’ll rain on and off for a few days. If only I could call up a rainstorm every time Sawyer Cargill annoys me.

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ELSIE

Under normal circumstances, a drizzly day would keep me inspired and chugging through an assignment. Today, however, is not a normal day. Not by a long shot.

I've spent the better part of the morning hip deep in AutoCAD, and I'm going out of my mind, trying to get this model to look right. When I tweak one window, then the doors are off center. Lifting the awning—which should bring an open feel to the entryway—makes it look like the building is winking at me.

Mocking me.

Nothing is going right, and I am supposed to meet with Beau at two, but I am at wit's end. It's wrong. All of it. But I can't scrap the hours I've put into the drawings, and I don't want to start over *again*. I place a DoorDash order, before texting Beau an update. "I won't be able to make the two deadline, but I have been working all morning, and I will have something to show you tomorrow. Is two a good time tomorrow?"

My stomach sinks as I press send. Disappointing a client is the last thing I ever want to do, and it feels like I'm disappointing myself, too. I should have had this in the bag. It should have come to me easily. Resorts are dream jobs, which means I have spent months dreaming of how to craft a resort. But this one is eluding me.

Thankfully, all the stress of not being able to make the elevations come together has muted some of the stress of

yesterday's awkwardness in the café with Beau. Hard to still be sexually frustrated when I am creatively frustrated.

My creativity has always come first, both figuratively and literally. When my creative flow is on, sex—or in my case, masturbation—has been a great way to relax. But when my creative flow is off, my sex drive is dead. It's like all my signals die when my creativity is on the fritz. Hell, even the DoorDash I ordered didn't sound appealing. I just ordered it because I know I need to eat. Probably. I'm not even hungry, really. Too much to do.

I'm halfway into shifting a soffit by a quarter inch when someone knocks at my door. My head pounds as I get to the door. Good thing lunch is here. Or is it breakfast? Did I eat breakfast?

But when I open the door, it's Beau. In casual wear. A short sleeve white Henley and jeans. It's a good look on him.

"Um, hi," I say, gathering my robe around me. I'm not even wearing a bra. What the hell is he doing here? He's got to be extra pissed off about the message for him to just show up at my door. Shit.

He smiles and lifts a pair of coffees. "I thought—"

"I'm sorry it's not ready. It's the damn proportions. They're throwing things off, but I swear, I will have it sorted and ready for tomorrow—"

"Might I come in?"

Holding the door open for him, I'm grateful he's waiting to yell at me until he's inside my room. I'd hate for the other guests to hear him, so I close it once he's inside. "Beau, I hate to disappoint—"

"You never could. Take this." He passes me a coffee.

And I frown at it. "What's this?"

"A mint mocha, extra whip, extra cocoa powder on top."

I let out a strange laugh, because I am not sure what to say next. "How did you know my order? You weren't there when I placed it yesterday."

“I asked Ms. LaCasse at Bean-Go what you ordered.”

“Oh. How did she even remember me?”

“You saw what the traffic was like in there yesterday. Not exactly a Starbucks. And you sat with Lily Olson, one of her favorite customers.” He pauses. “Besides, you’re quite memorable.”

I don’t know what to do with that, so I sip my mint mocha.

“It’s perfect. What do I owe you?”

He laughs and sees that I’m just waiting. “Were you serious?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not paying me for your drink, Elsie.”

I sip it again to give myself a moment to think. But I come up with nothing. “Beau, if you’re not here to yell at me in person for not being ready, then what’s going on?”

“Your text said that you’d been working all morning, and knowing you, that means you’ve been working all night nonstop, too. By the look of you, I’d wager I am right. So I thought you could use a break and probably some caffeine.”

“Uh, yeah, wait, by the look of me?”

“The pajamas.”

I glance down. “Oh, yeah.”

“How about you come with me for a walk by the marina to get out of this little room and see the sun while it’s still out?”

“I just ordered food—”

A knock at my door makes me jump, and I nearly spill my drink. Setting it down, I pop open the door and get my food from the delivery guy. It’s just a sandwich, so it would keep, but I’m shocked Beau is being this considerate. “I would have thought you’d want me to get back to work immediately—”

“Being stuck in this place is going to stifle your creativity, Elsie. By your own admission, you’re a traveler. Seeing new things is inspirational for you. The break will help. Come for a walk with me.”

I sigh and smile. “Okay. You talked me into it. Just let me get dressed.”

He turns his back to me.

“Thanks for the thought, but I’ll just go to the bathroom to change.”

“Ah.” He turns back around. “Lily has always had the nicest things to say about this place. Good to know the only thing she exaggerates about is my brother.”

I grab my clothes and pop into the bathroom, leaving the door cracked so I can hear him. “She exaggerates about Cormac?”

He huffs and, in a mocking tone, says, “Cormac is so great. Cormac is the best. I’ve never met anyone like Cormac.”

“Someone sounds jealous.”

“To be honest, I am glad he has found someone who thinks so highly of him. I would like to hear less about it, that’s all.”

I tease him, “Yeah, you still sound jealous.”

He chuckles. “They have a good thing. Can you blame me?”

“No,” I say, walking out in my beige sweater and white shorts. “I’m happy for Lily, too. They seem very together.”

“Shall we be off, then?”

“Yes.”

The stroll to the marina is only a few minutes, but I can feel it already. That connection with Beau. The way he looks at me when he speaks, like he’s on the verge of smiling. If I didn’t have my coffee to keep myself occupied, I would have accidentally tried to hold his hand. Out of instinct. It is too easy to be with him.

We fight like cats and dogs, and that gets me hot. But even when we’re not fighting, I want to hold his hand. To be close to him. Angry or not angry, I like him. And he’s my client.

This is a fucking mess.

The sidewalk next to the marina is the perfect place to see the schools of hickory shad and the occasional gray triggerfish.

Seabirds huddle ahead on the sidewalk, keeping out of the sky between storms. The sky is hazy from humidity and the static in the air. It's been rainy for the past day and likely to be again soon. But for now, I get this.

"Thank you for this."

"Hmm?" he asks.

"The walk. You were right. I needed—"

He clutches at his chest. "Did you just admit that I was right about something?"

I laugh and roll my eyes. "I can admit when I'm wrong."

"Are you sure about that?"

"I'm not good at it because I don't get as much practice being wrong. Unlike some people, present company included."

He laughs. "And she comes out swinging."

I laugh, too. "Yeah, well, I wasn't about to let that go."

We follow the sidewalk along the water, and it hooks right around the base of a tree. Beau smirks. "I had my first kiss here."

"Oh? Who was the lucky girl?"

"Jessica Rabbit."

I snort a laugh. "Huh?"

He chuckles. "Her name was Rita Hernandez, but she looked almost just like Jessica Rabbit. You know, the long red hair, blue eyes."

"True love?" I ask facetiously.

"Oh sure. Everyone finds true love at fourteen."

"Well, what happened?"

He shrugs. "Not much. I'd had a little crush on her since junior high, and a friend of mine paid her to kiss me—"

"Oh my god!"

“To be clear, I didn’t know he did. But he felt bad for me, and he wanted me to be able to say I had kissed someone.”

“Wow. Good friend. Did you ever find out how much?”

“Five dollars.”

I giggle. “I’d pay five dollars to kiss you.” But then my cheeks heat. *This is not a date, you idiot. Don’t flirt!*

He laughs. “Being my first kiss, I wasn’t exactly great at it, so she earned her money. What about you? Your first kiss?”

“Jimmy Wayne Davies.” It pops out before I can stop myself. It’s so odd—I don’t hate the idea of Beau knowing a little about me. The connection between us is impeding my mysterious persona, but I’m not mad about it. In fact, it could be nice for him to know more about me.

“And how was Jimmy?”

I smirk. “Jimmy Wayne is what he goes by. You ever play that game where the boys chase the girls and if they catch the girls, then they get to kiss them?”

“No, that sounds like hide and go seek with a dash of sexual harassment.”

“Oh, it is. It’s also the stupid game I grew up playing. That was how Jimmy Wayne was my first kiss. He ran faster than me.”

“Almost as romantic as mine.”

I laugh. “At least I know he wanted to kiss me.”

“Ouch!” he says, laughing. “That was a rough one.”

“Sorry.” But we both know I only half mean it.

“And did your father have words with his dad?”

“It was the first day of kindergarten and we were six, so I never mentioned it. But I’m sure my father wouldn’t have been upset by it. He met my mom the same way.”

Beau laughs. “A family tradition, then?”

“Of sorts.” My parents had thought it was kismet when Jimmy Wayne and I began dating, so if I’d told them about how we

met, they would have planned my wedding to him starting in kindergarten.

“My parents did not have such an eventful first meeting. Their first date was a double date with another couple. They’ve been inseparable since. Nothing as magical as sexual harassment tag.”

I elbow him and he laughs. The breeze picks up. “I didn’t say it was magical.”

“Are your parents still married?”

“Going on forty years pretty soon.”

“Then maybe it was magical. Who meets their soulmate at six?”

I sigh. “Not me.”

“What are they like? Your parents. You met mine, so I’m curious about yours.”

“Mom is your typical southern housewife, except that she works.”

He frowns. “How’s that?”

“She takes pride in her home but works two jobs, so it’s hard for her to keep the house up. Although she might be retiring soon from one of them. I’m not sure—

“How do you not know when your own mother is going to retire? And two jobs?”

I nod. “She’s a supervisor for 911 dispatch. But that’s the job I think she’ll retire from soon. She also volunteers at the animal shelter.”

“And your father?”

“He is the manager of a lawn care company. Mom’s been trying to get him to retire for years, but he’s too stubborn. He ___”

“So, it runs in the family?”

I glare at him. “You know, one good nudge, and you’re going in the water.”

He grins. “Continue.”

“Dad is the kind of guy who is determined to do everything himself. Doesn’t trust anyone else to do it.” The only person he ever trusted to help with house repairs was Jimmy Wayne, but Beau doesn’t need to know that. “He, even still, does his own gardening.”

“But he works for a lawncare company.”

“Yep. No one can touch his grass, blah, blah, blah. But it’s been a long time since I talked to either of them, so who knows? He might have given in on that.”

“What do you mean?”

I sigh. “I don’t really talk to my parents much. It’s complicated.” Which is my code for, “Please don’t pry.”

To my surprise, he rolls with it. “My family pisses me off more than most people can, but I cannot imagine not being in contact with them. I’m sorry, Elsie. That sucks.”

Before I can say anything, thunder and lightning crack the air, which smells like corn. Rainstorms always smell that way to me. “It’s about to rain.”

“We should probably hurry back.”

“Yeah.” So, we turn back for my place, but it’s too late. The summer rain hits fast and we’re caught in it until we get under an awning near the B&B. I laugh at the situation, but I am soaked to the bone and shivering. The awning is barely blocking the rain from us.

Beau wrings out his Henley. “I think we’re fighting a losing battle.”

“Yeah, I’d say so. The rain is almost blowing sideways.”

We huddle closer beneath the store’s awning, and his warmth helps. But then his hands are on my shoulders, rubbing up and down. “Better?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Suddenly, his hands slow to a stop, and he stares into my eyes. He’s wet and handsome and giving me that look, and I know

what's coming. And I'm not going to fight it. I want this. He leans in just a little, but then stops himself. His hands drop away. "Maybe we should just be cold. Safer that way for us. I think."

But I grab his collar and pull him to my lips. He tastes like summer rain, and I cannot get enough. Between kisses, I murmur, "I don't give a fuck about safer, Beau." He takes me in his arms and presses my back against the brick wall, before kissing me dizzy.

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ELSIE

I'm not sure who started it, but we hold hands as we run through the rain toward my place. No words are spoken, and all I can hear is the downpour along with the slap of wet shoes on puddles. We get to the B&B and rush through the main door to get to my room. As soon as I close the door, he lifts my hair and kisses the back of my neck. His warm lips on my cold wet skin sends my racing pulse even higher.

Beau turns me around to face him and kisses my mouth, my chin, my throat. I hold him to me, longing to feel his body on mine. He leans close to my ear and whispers, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yes." There is no hesitation, no second thought. Whatever the consequences, I'll take them. I need this.

He stands back and peels off his Henley. Not that the wet white garment concealed much after being soaked through, but even so, I did not expect him to be quite as ripped as he is. His thin layer of dark chest hair suits him.

I step forward and yank my sweater over my head, tossing it someplace. He charges at me, eyes all over my body. Beau kisses me again and carefully walks me backwards to the bed until the back of my knees touch the edge. I lie down and realize my white shorts were a mistake. Hopefully, no one but Beau saw how sheer they became in the storm. My pale blue panties are on full display now.

Beau takes his jeans off and stands naked in front of me. I lunge for him, but he shakes his head. With his eyes on mine,

he unbuttons my shorts and drags them down my legs. He plants kisses on my thighs as he comes back up, and as he does, I lie back. He kisses my stomach and ribs until he reaches my lips again. He lays on top of me, and the weight of him feels so good. But I'm still in my underwear and bra, and I deeply want not to be.

To my surprise, Beau nibbles his way down again, licking the tops of my breasts, the only exposed part. I murmur, "Let me take it off," but he smiles and shakes his head. He kisses me there one more time, before he rears back and rolls me onto my stomach. As the rain comes down, he gently presses his lips to my back and neck while he unclips my bra. Once it's undone, he kisses the newly available skin and transitions to my low back. He pinches the sides of my underwear and pulls them off of me and stands up.

I hadn't expected him to pull away once I was naked, so I turn around onto my elbows. He stares down at me for a breath. I can't take it. "What is it, Beau?"

"You're so damned beautiful."

I smile and in an instant, he's on me again. Only this time, his mouth is on one nipple, while his fingers are on the other. I go molten, writhing for him, begging, "I need you inside me."

He groans and grabs my legs to belt them around his waist. I cling to him that way and hold onto his neck, as he nudges into me. Beau takes his time—there's no rush now. No plunging. He rocks his length in and out while we kiss and stare and moan together. The filling stretch of it makes me quake in his arms, and every time I shake harder, he kisses me deeper. Finally, he's all the way inside, and I am on the verge.

This isn't Jimmy Wayne in the back of a pickup truck, and this isn't a casual singular hookup in an office. This is two adults, knowing exactly what is at stake and going for it anyway. This means something. I'm just not sure what exactly that is.

Beau scoops beneath my hips and drives us up the bed until my head hits the pillow. Once there, he slows down even more. His thrusts aren't reckless and wild like the first time. Each movement is tender, sweeter. He touches my cheek and

watches my face as he rolls himself into me. It's like he's fascinated by what he sees. I don't get it, and yet I do.

When I cock my hips up at him to meet his thrusts, his lips part and he groans, and I could get addicted to watching him make that face. But I pull him back to my mouth, and when the thunder rolls in the distance, I feel it in my bones. Something big is coming.

It's hard not to get up in my head during sex sometimes. Most times. But with Beau, he has all my attention. Watching his lip curl when something feels good, tasting his sweat as we kiss. I memorize his face when I gently push his shoulder, and somehow, he knows what that means. He wraps his arms around me and rolls until I'm on top of him.

I like this view of him. Flat on his back, his muscles pop out even more. But better than that, he looks elated for me to be on top. My hair is doing that mermaid thing when it hangs in front of my breasts, and he grabs my hips to drive me back and forth on him. But I take his hands and lace my fingers between his, and he uses that to pull me down to him. I lie on his chest, and we kiss more while I ride him.

I am enamored of this man, and it doesn't scare me like it should.

He holds me to him as he thrusts up into me. When he looks in my eyes, he knows I'm close. He cups my jaw and his fingers brush beneath my hair to hook around the back of my head. My whole body vibrates as his cock hits that spot deep inside over and over. Beau keeps me pinned to his mouth, and when I come, I gasp and steal the air from his lungs. He devours my moans as waves of ecstasy wash over me. My body clenches around him over and over, and soon, I feel him swell up.

Just as I think he might finish, he rolls me over again. I'm dizzy from the orgasm and from spinning. My head is on the pillow as Beau hurries down my body. Before I can speak, he has my thighs wide apart and kisses me there. He growls as he tastes me, and he throws my legs up over his shoulders. I run my fingers through his hair as he consumes me. It's all too much. It should be illegal to feel this fucking good.

His tongue twirls on my clit, and a finger plunges inside. I cry out and tremble and all I want in the world is for Beau to make me come again. No other thoughts. There is nothing but him and me in this bed. Another wave of rain pounds the window, and as it gets louder and louder, I get closer and closer. He is so delicate about his work that it makes me burn for it. This is nothing like what I'd expected for our second time, and I'm not sure what to think.

I'd thought he'd be a hard and fast go-getter like he was in the office. But this isn't that. This is gentle and sweet and so tender that I am going out of my mind. But I'm too breathless to speak right, so I whisper, "Beau, please!"

I don't think he can hear me with my thighs blocking his ears, so I spread them further, and he dives in, licking and fingering with more access and more passion. I break on his tongue and grip his hair as I howl, my head digging into the pillow. He keeps at me and drives me over the edge again. I can't take much more of this, and the moment I get another breath into me, I manage to gasp, "Beau—"

He leaps up my body, plunging into me. I'm still coming, only now, I'm coming around his cock, and it's too much all over again. Beau groans in my mouth as he works me over harder this time. He scoops his hands beneath me to keep me closer. I loop my arms around his neck to do the same. Our kisses are hits and misses, but we don't slow down. Each stroke builds that pressure inside, until finally, he swells bigger and I feel his pulse there. I kiss him deeply and when I come again and sob, he roars into my mouth as he comes, too.

ELSIE

In the morning, Beau kisses the back of my neck, and it still gives me shivers. He spooned me all night—something I’ve always fantasized about and never had. Came close once. Jimmy Wayne and I went camping. But he was a hot sleeper and the spooning soon became overheating, so that was out.

Beau’s muscular arm sits over my waist, and I run my finger in a figure eight over the skin. He murmurs, “Good morning.”

“Yes, it is.”

His morning wood presses against my low back. “Indeed.” He stretches and yawns. “You have a superb view of the marina from your bed. No wonder you don’t want to leave Somerset Harbor. It’s not me. It’s the view.”

I laugh. “It’s the job.”

“Yes, well, since I am the job, I’m going to pretend you’re here for me.”

I giggle again, and in the gray light of morning, a sinking feeling wipes my smile away. “Beau?”

“Elsie?”

“Was this a mistake?”

He swallows. “How so?”

I roll over to face him. “It’s just...all the things I said before are true. If this got out—”

“It won’t.”

“Because B&B owners are notorious for keeping their mouths shut?”

He kisses my forehead. “They are Lily’s parents. I doubt they’d gossip about her friends to anyone.”

I sigh. “Even so, maybe this should just be a onetime thing?”

“I propose a different course of action.”

“What?”

“I roll you onto your back and make you glad you’re a woman.”

I laugh, and he kisses me again, before grinning like the cheeky bastard he is. Rolling my eyes, I assert, “There are more important things to think about than sex.”

“Really? Like what?” His fingertips trail around my nipples and down my stomach before planting between my thighs. “Go on, Elsie. Tell me what is more important than what I am doing to you right now.”

But I rock against his talented fingers instead. “Mm, fuck.”

“Exactly.” He massages my clit. “So, I think we should keep working together, but also do this.”

As much as I want to keep going, I wriggle from him. “I can’t think when you do that.”

“That would be the point,” he says before kissing me. “You think too much.”

“I thought you liked that about me.”

“I do. Your busy mind fascinates me. I never know what you’ll say or do next, and I love that. But you also think yourself out of the things you want, and being one of those things myself, I thought I would help you get out of your own way by making you come.”

“How generous of you.”

He grins. “I thought so.”

“Before we do anything else that might flatline my brain, let’s think this through—”

“What did I just say about you and thinking, young lady?”

I giggle. “Shut up.”

“You’re less bossy when I’m inside of you.”

“Exactly the problem.”

He sighs. “Fine. Let’s think.”

“I want this. I do. But it’s the logistics that are getting to me right now.”

“What logistics?”

“I think we should keep fooling around, but let’s be very clear about what it is we want. I want orgasms, not feelings. You?”

A flicker of something goes through his eyes, and I can’t tell if he’s on board. But then he smirks. “Orgasms, not feelings. We can make that happen.”

“We are not dating, and this is not romantic.”

His lips tighten for a flash, before the smirk returns and he thrusts his hand out. “Wanna shake on it?”

I take his hand, but he uses my hand to pull me on top of him. Giggling, I ask, “That was a sneaky trick.”

“I asked if you wanna shake on it. I didn’t say the *it* in question was my hand.”

Laughing like an idiot, I kiss him and straddle his lap. Beau reaches between my legs again and his fingers glide around until one settles at my entrance to work its way in. I’m glad we’ve settled everything. This isn’t romantic—*how could it be? He drives me nuts. There is no way we could be a thing. Oh, but he knows how to do that.*

When he hits my G-spot, I see fireworks in my head. A second finger joins the first, and I can’t catch my breath. I sit back and roll myself on his fingers, and he bites his bottom lip, watching the show. I’m a little sore from yesterday, but this

feels too good to stop. His thumb hits my clit while the other two fingers work me over there, and he has me shaking again.

“I need to be inside of you when you come.”

Quickly, I nod and pull away from his hand to take his cock in me. We gasp together when I grind down on him. He sits up, holding me to him, and it feels more intimate, being face to face like this. We kiss long and slow, while he makes little thrusts up and I work tiny movements side to side.

I’d thought we’d be in a race to see who comes first after the no-feelings declaration. Thought it might turn this into a game or take the pressure off. But right now, up close and personal with Beau, this isn’t that. I know sex can blur boundaries, but I didn’t think it would happen this soon.

He grabs my ass and scoots to the end of the bed before he stands with me, still on his cock. I pant, “What are you doing?”

“This.” He backs me up to the wall and uses it to hold me up as he pounds into me. Beau watches my face as he drives me to the edge. The pressure builds inside, and I quiver on him, hanging onto his shoulders and digging my nails in there. He growls, “I love that face you make when you’re close. Like I’m making you lose control.”

I whimper, “Yes!”

“You’re gonna come for me—”

“Yes!”

Beau hammers harder until I climax, screaming my head off. He groans, “Fuck yes,” and keeps going. The man is an unhinged animal, and I’m helpless in this position. His cock hits my G-spot roughly, and every thrust makes me lose what little breath I had. It’s amazing, and I never knew I could feel this way.

But I can’t take it. I’m going to pass out. “Please—”

“Please what?” he pants, still fucking me.

“Too much.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah.”

He backs off, letting me down just long enough to pick me up and carry me back to the bed in his arms. He lays me down.

“Are you alright?”

I smile and nod. “Just can’t come again. Almost passed out. You were squishing the air out of me.”

“Oh.” He lies next to me. “I feel like I ought to apologize, but you appeared to enjoy it, so I hesitate to do so.”

I giggle. “No apology needed. Come here—”

“I thought you needed a break.”

“That was long enough. Get over here.”

“So bossy,” he says with a smirk and climbs on top of me.

“Yes, but you like that about me.”

“I like so many things about you,” he murmurs, before he thrusts into me. His voice is tight. “Like that.”

“Yes.” I jut my hips up to meet him, and fuck, he feels so good.

Beau lets his weight down on top of me, and I wrap my legs around his narrow waist while holding him close. Every kiss slows, and eventually, he plunges all the way inside of me and holds still. His thumb runs along my bottom lip as he studies me. “You are amazing, Elsie.”

Something about this feels too intimate. Too close. So, I bite his thumb, and he laughs before kissing me again. When I grind up to him, his speed picks up. Whatever that moment was, we have to stay away from it. Just sex. Just two people having fun. Nothing more.

I ignore the little voice inside that says I’m lying to myself, and I angle myself up at him just right, so that every thrust hits where I need it. He sees it and scoops beneath me to keep my hips up for me. Beau pounds into me like that and makes me come so fast I never see it coming. The orgasm takes over and

pleasure shoots through every muscle. He growls and kisses me before he comes, too.

-

ELSIE

After weeks of hookups at my place, I'd gotten used to Beau showing up at my door. But usually he texted first. This time, I'm in my frumpy pajamas and I braided my hair in an effort for beach waves. I am not ready to entertain. But screw it. If he's down for this when I look like a mess, cool.

I grab his collar and pull him into my room, but as soon as I close the door, he takes my hand in his instead of kissing me. "As much as I like where your mind is headed, I have other plans tonight."

I shrug and pull my top off. "I'm down for something new."

He gives me a cursory glance, before saying, "I can't believe I'm saying this, but not that. I want you to get dressed. We're going out."

"Getting dressed is the opposite of what I do when you show up, Beau."

"Yes, I know. Now go on. Where something slutty?"

I laugh. "I don't own anything slutty."

"We should work on that. In the meantime, put on something presentable."

"But I thought this was the point of us. We are low key. We order DoorDash. You don't have to take me out, and I don't have to wear a bra."

“Yes, and I fear we are in danger of becoming an old married couple, minus the marriage, plus too much sex. But not tonight. Tonight, we’re going to a nice restaurant.”

“Oh. Why didn’t you say so?” I strip on my way past him, and slip on a black sweater and pants. “This okay?”

“You look great. Come on. We’re running late.”

“Wouldn’t be if you had texted ahead of time.”

“But then I couldn’t surprise you.”

Once in his car, I ask, “Where are we going?”

“This great little out of the way joint. Marie’s. It’s a French bistro-style place.”

“Sounds good, but what got you all hyped up for a supper out? I usually see you this excited only for sex or for those turkey sandwiches from Bean-Go.”

“We have become friendly, and friends do more than one activity together.”

“I don’t mind being whisked away for mysterious dinners out, but what about the other people there? Someone could tell your family they saw us together.”

“And we can call it a business dinner. Or we will tell my family whatever they need to hear. It’s not a big deal, Elsie. But if you want, we can go back to your place.”

Nodding, I shrug. “You’re right. I should stop being so paranoid. We are two colleagues having a business dinner.”

“Precisely.”

We park in front of the bistro, and it’s adorable. We’re in a different part of downtown, and though the bistro still fits in with the shops on the left and right, there’s also a black-and-white striped awning, wooden outdoor café tables and chairs, and a chalk menu board out front. Warm lights shine from chandeliers inside, bathing the outdoor seating in the glow.

Marie’s is cozy and clean inside. Tiny white tiles on the floor are engulfed in black grout, and the tables and chairs are the same as those outside. Whoever Marie is, I presume she’s a

hobby photographer. The black and white seascapes on the walls look local.

We take a seat in the corner, and it's then I realize we are here alone. The server comes by for our drink orders, and after she leaves, I ask, "Why isn't anyone else here?"

"Because I didn't want you to feel uncomfortable about being out in public with me."

"And you knew this place would be empty?"

He picks up his menu. "No."

"I'm so confused."

He tips the edge of his menu down to look me in the eye. "I rented out the restaurant so we would not have onlookers who might make you uncomfortable, Elsie." He pulls the menu back up. "What looks good to you?"

I'm astonished. That had to cost a fortune, and here he is, acting like it's no big deal. "Why did you say all that about lying to your family if they caught us out?"

Beau sighs and sets his menu aside. The drinks come, and they are great, but I'm still hung up on this. He says, "Because I wanted to see if I could get you out of that room."

"I don't understand."

"We have no romantic intent, but you deserve more than hotel sex, Elsie. You deserve to go out and have an enjoyable time, and I know you're not seeing anyone, so you don't have someone who does that for you. I wanted to."

I smile. "Thanks, Beau. It's probably good for me to get out sometimes."

He nods and smiles. "Now, are you ready to look at the menu and—

"Moules frites. I already saw it on the menu, and that's my favorite thing to order in France. I figure I'll see how they compare to the authentic version."

He smirks. "Huh." When the server comes back for our food order, he says, "I'd like the moules frites, please."

I order mine, and after she leaves, I ask, “Why did you get the same thing?”

“It’s one of my favorite things when I go to Cannes. There’s this great place there, Astoux et Brun, and they’re known for their langoustines, but I still prefer the moules frites.”

“I haven’t been to Cannes, but the beaches in Marseille are to die for.”

He nods enthusiastically. “I am partial to L’atelier des,

“Goudes?”

He laughs. “Yes! You, too?”

“Oh my god, it’s the best hotel in Marseille. Yes! I mean, it’s pretty far out of the way, but that’s a selling point to me. How did you find it?”

“I had gone to Marseille with a woman I was seeing, and after she ditched me to go shopping, I rented a Vespa and went riding around the city. I ended up there and fell in love with the place. It’s so much simpler and calmer at that end of the city—no influencers mad that you got in the way of their pictures.”

I laugh and nod. “That end of the city has a totally different feel to it. You’re right. And I’ve seen no one there for clout or whatever. It’s just people who want a quiet holiday. Have you walked along the creeks—

“Yes. And I tried to get her to come with me, but she looked at me like I had two heads when I suggested it.”

“Poor baby.”

He laughs. “I’m whining about not getting a model to go on a nature hike along one of the world’s prettiest places. I don’t think that qualifies me for sympathy.”

The food comes, and it looks and smells like Heaven. But I’m kinda hung up on this little detail. “You dated a model?”

“Yes, I’ve dated a few.”

Weird to think about whether I stack up next to models. But we’re not dating. So, I shouldn’t care. Right? I dig into the

food, and it's fantastic. "This is just as good as anything I've had in France. Maybe better."

He nods. "I thought you'd like this place."

"So, as far as work goes, you were happy with the augmented reality visualization of the site?"

"Yes. It's really coming along. I know it's premature, but I am already looking forward to hosting a New Year's party at the resort."

"Why New Year's?"

"It's my favorite holiday. The air is full of possibilities. There's excitement and fireworks. It's the chance to start fresh. Like the world wipes the slate clean at midnight."

I smile and gobble another garlicky mussel. "A clean slate is why I moved to Manhattan in the first place. I get why you'd like that. My holiday is Arbor Day."

He laughs. "That is no one's favorite holiday."

"Well, think about it. Almost every country in the world has their own version of a tree planting holiday, from Niger to Australia, Canada to Sri Lanka. The dates fall differently everywhere, but people across the world recognize how valuable trees are to everyone, and we planted them out of a love of nature." I shrug and smile. "I think there is something beautiful about that. Plus, it's hard to build buildings without lumber."

He laughs again. "That's the real reason you love that holiday, isn't it? You and your buildings."

I grin. "I am what I am."

We finish supper, and afterwards, he asks, "What would you think about coming back to my place?"

"Your fortress of solitude? Sure."

He chuckles. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've never been to your place, and I'd love to see it."

“Very well.” He drives for twenty minutes down some dark, winding roads until a house emerges from the darkness. Surrounded by hydrangea bushes, the gray Cape Cod-style home is a stunner. Large, but not overbearing. A wooden porch hosts rocking chairs and a swing. White trim lines the black front door, and I am speechless. He asks, “Are you alright? You haven’t spoken in two minutes, and I’m not used to silence with you.”

“This place is gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” He opens the door, and he has tastefully decorated the inside with pale gray, beige, and the occasional black accent piece. “Would you like the tour—”

But I kiss him instead. He tastes like wine, and I want more of that. This place is nothing like what I’d expected, and I’m glad he brought me here. It makes me think he’s gotten more comfortable with me. He takes my hand and leads me to his bedroom. The dark charcoal gray sheets beckon, and we kiss on our way there.

Once our clothes are off, I press him back to the mattress. I slide down his body, kissing all over the way he usually does to me. Then I take him into my mouth and savor the taste and textures of him there. In the weeks we’ve been hooking up, I’ve never done this for him, so his reactions are new to me. I love making him gasp with my tongue. It makes me want to do it again and again.

Soon, he’s pumping into my mouth, and I love making him feel good. But he groans, “Elsie, get up here.”

I oblige, and he pulls me on top of him just before he rolls us onto my back. He thrusts into me, and we cry out together, before falling into a new rhythm. His passion fills me up, and it’s as though I could live on it. On him. His energy and all his desire for me. It nourishes me and surrounds me, and it is everything I could ever need.

He stokes my fire with every move, and I am lost to the pleasure inside. When I come, he nibbles my throat, and it’s almost as though I come there, too. Wherever he touches me, I burn for him. Bliss cascades through my everything, and Beau

clutches me tightly as he comes, too. As our passion winds down, he greedily kisses me, ready to start all over again. It's hours before he lets me sleep, but when I do, I am dead to the world.

I don't know what time it is when he wakes me, but it's still dark outside. "Mmf?"

"Elsie, your mom is on the phone."

My eyes pop open, and he passes me my ringing cell. "Hello ___"

"Elsie, baby, I need you to come home quick," Mom frantically blurts. "There's been an accident."

"What—"

"Your father, he fell off the roof and had a heart attack," she sobs. "It's not looking good."

-

BEAU

My heart races as Elsie gets the details from her mother in a calm, almost robotic way. Then she hangs up and shops for flights.

“Are you alright—”

“It’s... it’s fine. It’ll be fine.” She scrolls through, her eyes darting all over the pages. “I just need to figure this out.”

“Did I hear her right? Your father had a heart attack?”

“And he fell off a ladder,” she says monotone. “Okay, I think I’ve got it. I hate to ask, but can you drive me to LaGuardia?”

“That’s almost an hour’s drive.”

“I know but if I fly from LaGuardia to Philly at three, then I can catch the flight from Philly to Columbus, and Columbus has a flight to Braxton, which is a short taxi ride to my mom’s house, so I’ll be there by seven. If I drive it, it’ll be almost nine hours before I can get there, but this gets me there in five, so...” She shrugs.

“This is an emergency, Elsie. We’ll take my Cessna and be there in two hours. Maybe less. Get dressed.” I jump out of bed and throw my clothes on.

“What— no. Don’t trouble yourself—”

“I’m not asking. I know you’re not close with your parents, but I’m not letting you delay getting there any longer than you have to. Get dressed. I’ll grab some snacks—”

On my way out, I hear sniffing and turn around. Tears trickle down her cheeks, and I panic. “I’m sorry. Do you need to handle this yourself? Will that be better—”

“No. I just... ” She cries in earnest, and I sit on the bed and wrap her in my arms from behind until she calms down. “I need a tissue.”

I pass her the box from my nightstand. “If I overstepped, I’m sorry.”

“No, you didn’t. Well, no more than usual. How long until we’re at the airport?”

“Not long at all.”

“Okay.” She goes to the bathroom, clothes in hand.

So I gather some protein bars and bottles of water in a go-bag I keep for emergencies. When she meets me in the kitchen, she looks so despondent and my heart hurts for her. “Ready?”

She only nods.

I take her hand and lead her to the backyard. I’m startled when she laughs. “What?”

“Of course, you have a hangar in your backyard. I don’t know why I expected anything less.”

We load up into my Cessna Mustang, and I take us up. She tries to sleep during the flight, but I see her fidget a lot. By the time we land, she’s haggard, and I don’t blame her one bit. A quick taxi ride takes us to a shack they call Sewmond General Hospital.

We race in, and her mother is right there near the entrance waiting area. At four in the morning, we’re the only people there, besides the staff. Her mother is the spitting image of Elsie in a quarter century. Her blond hair has faded to ash, and her blue eyes are tired. But she smiles the instant she sees her daughter, and that smile breaks down into blubbering just as fast. Elsie rushes to her mother and tries to glean information from her.

“...he fell. He just fell.”

“You said he had a heart attack.”

“That’s what the doctor’s said. They don’t know if he fell off the roof before the heart attack or because of it. They’re saying we should be *prepared*. That I need to get my affairs in order.” Her voice breaks when she says, “Elsie, I’m not ready for this.”

I can’t take not knowing genuine answers. There has to be something that can be done. “Where is the doctor?”

“He’s in his office again, just around the corner. But I don’t think—”

“Excuse me.” I run to his office and knock. An older man comes to the door. “Hello, you’re the doctor attending Mr. Braudel?”

He frowns up at me. “Who are you?”

“Is he going to be alright?”

“I’m not at liberty to—”

“Yes, you are,” Elsie says, catching up to me. Her mother catches up a few steps later. “Dr. Warren, I need to know about my father.”

“Thought we might see you here,” he says with affection. “Peter isn’t doing well. To be honest, we don’t have the resources for a case like his. And I am not qualified to handle it, either. None of us here are. The blunt cardiac injury from the fall has bruised his heart muscles. It’s like I told Beth. I don’t hold out much hope, Elsie. I’m sorry.”

“Any hospital around here with those capabilities?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I’m afraid not. There’s a Level I trauma center, but it’s in Charleston about two hours away. I don’t think he’ll make the trip.”

I nod once and walk away while Elsie and her mother question the doctor some more. After a few phone calls, I ask Dr. Warren to release the medical records to a friend in Manhattan.

“Why would I do that?” he asks.

“He’s one of the best trauma surgeons in the world. If anyone can save Peter, it’ll be him.”

“Alright then.”

After my friend John looks at everything, we video conference and he looks like shit. “Sorry for waking you with all this, but —”

“Not at all. It’s an excellent case for my team. We can take care of him. You said you have transport already figured out?”

I nod. “A medevac is on the way now.”

“Perfect. I cleared the surgical schedule for two hours from now. We will be ready when you get here. And Beau?”

“Yes?”

“This makes us even.”

I laugh once. “Yeah. It does.”

We hang up, and I find Elsie and Beth in Peter’s room, silently crying at either side of him. Dr. Warren is with them, and he looks just as tired as the rest of us. Peter, hooked up to wires and tubes, reminds me of my father when he had his heart attack. Only my father wasn’t bruised and battered after a fall on top of it. His heart attack scared the hell out of our family, and seeing Peter like this now brings all of that back.

I clear my throat. “A medevac is on the way, and we are taking him to Manhattan, where my friend and renowned trauma surgeon, Dr. John Roberts, will do everything possible to save him.”

“Thank you,” Elsie says as she wipes a tear.

Beth frowns up at me. “Manhattan?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Okay.” She looks spacy. “I’ll have to water the garden first—

“Mom,” Elsie says, grabbing her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, dear. Just...someone has to take care of the garden. Peter works so hard on it. I can’t let anything happen to the

garden while he's..." She breaks down again, and Elsie holds her mom while she crumbles.

Elsie barely keeps it together, and it kills me to see her go through this. She snuffles and forces a smile on her face to keep her mom calm. "Mom, when was the last time you ate?"

"I had breakfast—"

"Yesterday?"

"I think so."

I pass her a protein bar and a bottle of water from my go bag. "That should help."

Her mother nods absentmindedly and eats, while her eyes are locked on Peter. It's not long before the medevac arrives. They struggle to find a place nearby to land, but everything after that happens fast. The transfer to the AirMed plane, the flight there, all of it is quick. Once we land, it goes even faster, and they whisk Peter away for surgery. I give John a nod of thanks, and he reminds me, "We're even, right?"

"Save Peter and we will be."

He smirks. "I'll do my best." Then he vanishes into the labyrinthine halls of NYU's Langone Hospital.

We settle in for the wait of a lifetime, and Elsie clutches my hand the way she did on the plane. "Thank you for this."

"There's no guarantee—"

"I know that. But this is more than I could have asked for. So, thank you."

"Of course. I... I'm here for you, Elsie."

She gives a slight smile, before turning to her mother again, and it's all I can do not to say what's on my mind. I don't. Now isn't the right moment for it. But for the first time in a long time, I had to fight telling someone I love them.

ELSIE

I finally settled Mom down, and now she's mostly just looking at her phone. It's a relief. She and Dad have been together since they were children. I don't know how she would function without him. That thought rolls around in my head. I need a distraction.

Beau is dozing with his head on the wall behind him. There are only a few people around the waiting room, which is nice. No one else is chatty, either. Everyone is here because a loved one is in surgery. It doesn't breed conversation. Each time a lab coat walks by, heads pop up like prairie dogs. But when the lab coat passes the doors without stopping, there's a feeling of disappointment and relief in the air. We all want news, but no one wants bad news.

I need conversation, even if it's just in hushed tones, so I nudge Beau awake. "Hey."

"Is he out?"

I shake my head. "What favor did you do for the surgeon?"

He yawns and smiles. "I introduced him to his husband."

It makes me smile, too. "And that's the favor you called in for this?"

"He told me on their wedding day that he owed me." Beau shrugs.

"Thanks for that."

“Never knew what would happen when I introduced that pair. Certainly not this. But I’m glad I did it.”

I chuckle. “Me too.”

“If anyone can do this, it’s John. He’s done a lot of amazing—
“

“Please.” I shake my head. “I don’t want to think about what’s happening in there right now. If you don’t mind.”

“Anything you need, Elsie, I’m your guy. You want to play Twister, I’ll find a mat. You want to watch a movie? I’ll bring one up on my phone. If you want a bakery cake, I’m on it. Seriously, whatever you need. Okay?”

“Have you been to this hospital before?”

He swallows. “Yes. A few years ago.”

“It didn’t go well?”

“It went great. Just very stressful.”

“What happened to you? If you don’t mind telling me.”

“Not me,” he explains. “My father. He had a heart attack.”

“Oh. Then this is old hat for you?”

“Not hardly. Dad didn’t fall off a ladder because of it. He felt some indigestion on the golf course and was playing a round with his cardiologist at the time. His heart attack happened on the way here.” He pauses. “It was tenuous at the start. But he pulled through well and after rehab, he’s back on the green with his cardiologist.”

I sigh. “It’s good to hear survivor stories, I think. Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

“Making good on your offer of help, if I can push a little more
—”

“Whatever you need, Elsie.”

“Do you think you can get me and Mom some coffee? If—“

“Sure. Mint mocha for you, and what does your mom drink?”

Mom pipes up, “If they have it, anything caramel and chocolate.”

He grins. “I can make that happen. Something to eat?”

Mom shakes her head. “Thank you.” Then she grabs her purse and digs in the behemoth. “Just a second, and I’ll get the money for it—“

“It’s on me, Mrs. Braudel.”

“Are you sure? Those drinks are expensive.”

“No worries.” He teases me, “I see where you get it from.”

I smile at him, and as he leaves, I count my lucky stars to have Beau helping us out.

Mom says, “I know things are... what they are between us, Elsie, but now that it’s just the two of us, am I allowed to ask questions?”

“Sure, Mom.”

“Who is that young man, and how long have you two been dating?”

“I introduced you to him—that’s Beau MacMillan—”

“What I mean is, who is he to you? Boyfriend or fiancé? And I know you did not get married without me there, so I refuse to think he’s your husband.”

I laugh. “Uh, none of that, actually. He’s just a client.”

“What kind of client?”

“I’m an architect and I’m helping him and his family design a resort.”

“A client you were with at two in the morning...?”

“Mom.”

She shrugs. “I’m not judging you for sinning before marriage, honey. That’s between you and whatever beliefs you have these days. I am merely trying to get a better picture of what your life is like here. It’s hard, you know? Not having you around.”

“I miss you two. A lot. But you remember how miserable I was in Sewmond, right?”

She nods once. “And I remember how you used to dream of moving to this concrete hellhole. Though I have to say, Manhattan is a lot nicer than I expected.”

“What did you expect?”

“Oh, you know how it looks on the news. Shootings and robberies and the like. Thought it would be Armageddon here.” She smiles and glances at the other people in the waiting room. “I haven’t been held up yet, so I don’t think it’s as bad as they say it is.”

I laugh. “Pretty sure there aren’t any pickpockets around here. But I could be wrong. Best to watch your purse.”

“Good to see Manhattan hasn’t taken the smart aleck out of you.”

“If anything, it’s only gotten worse.”

She chuckles. “Glad to hear it. I didn’t want this place to change you.”

I frown before I can stop it. “What are you talking about? You always wanted me to change.”

Mom huffs. “When you were little, I thought you were going to grow up to be just like me. So, it was a shock when you weren’t. I’m sorry I tried to change you.”

Something hot sticks in my throat. “Thanks for that, Mom.”

She adds, “I said a lot of stupid things back then, and I had hoped you’d forgotten them. But for all those things I said that made you feel you disappointed me, I am sorry. You should know that I love you. Weird quirks and all.”

I laugh and wipe my eyes on the back of my sleeve. “I love you, too.”

“And what about Beau? Do you love him?”

“If he gets here with my coffee soon, yeah.”

She gives me a look. “Seriously, Elsie. I know he’s not just a client. No one does this much for someone without there being feelings involved.”

I open my mouth, but then Beau returns and as he passes Mom her caramel mocha, I’m struck by him. How he’s cared for me and shown it without making a fuss. How he’s taken care of my family, even though he’s never met them before. It is something someone does for a significant other. Not for a fuck buddy.

He hands over my mint mocha. “All they had was spearmint syrup. Not peppermint. I hope that’s okay. If not, I can go outside the hospital, but that will take longer.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. Thank you, Beau.”

The surgeon walks through the waiting room door and heads straight for us. Smiling. I want to be relieved, but I can’t until I hear it.

“Your father is doing well. The surgery was a success.”

“Oh thank God,” Mom says before she clings to the surgeon in a clumsy hug.

He laughs and pats her back. “Understand, there will be a lot of rehab for him, and given where you live, I’m afraid you’ll have to do a lot with him, Mrs. Braudel. But I expect him to make a full recovery from the heart attack and the fall, provided you keep him on his rehab schedule.”

“It sounds like a perfect retirement hobby for me, Doctor.”

It hits me at once. What Dad went through. What Mom went through. The rehab they will have to do together and what that will entail. How much work it will be, and how, knowing them, neither of them will feel like it’s work. It is how they show their love by being there for each other.

And then there’s Beau. The way he took charge, and never made it seem like work to him. He was there for me at my worst. But even before that, I knew this wasn’t just a no-feelings situation. I am falling for him.

ELSIE

After a whirlwind of a week, me and Mom get to take Dad home. Which is a blessing and a curse.

Their house is a small two-story, and their bedroom is upstairs, which is a no-go for Dad. With Beau's help, we've been able to buy a wheelchair ramp to cover the front steps and a hospital bed in the living room, complete with monitoring equipment and a traveling nurse to visit twice a week to monitor his progress.

The first words out of Dad's mouth when we wheel him in are, "I thought you brought me home. Not to another hospital."

Mom rolls her eyes and sighs. "You could be grateful. Or you could be you."

He laughs and takes her hand. "Thank you, Bethie. And Elsie."

She kisses the top of his head. "You're welcome, you old grump. I'm just sorry I won't be able to sleep next to you until you're recovered."

He sighs. "Hadn't thought of that."

"As it stands," I say, walking toward the kitchen, "I have filled your refrigerator with heart healthy only foods. And Mom knows she cannot make you anything that tastes good. No gravy, no cheese, no butter, no—

"The heart attack was from the fall," Dad whines. "Why can't I have anything with flavor?"

Mom says, “Because we don’t know if the heart attack was from the fall or the other way around, and either way, if you want to live a long and healthy life, we need to make these changes. We should have made them a long time ago, Peter.”

“And that means you will eat green things every day for the rest of your life, and do not give me that look, Dad. I don’t mean things *dyled* green. I mean naturally green. Cabbage, lettuce, kale, arugula, broccoli, that kind of stuff.”

He huffs. “I like cabbage.”

“Dad, I don’t mean Coleslaw. I mean plain.”

“Oh, well, that’s just ridiculous. Cole slaw has other vegetables too. That makes it balanced.”

“Mom?”

She smiles at Dad. “I promise the healthy stuff will taste good.”

“Alright,” he pouts. Then he smirks up at Mom. “Can I get a sponge bath from the prettiest nurse in the ward?”

“Ew,” I balk and turn away.

He laughs. “Missed you, Elsie. Who else can I gross out with how much I love your mom?”

I roll my eyes. “Missed you, too, Dad. Glad you’re feeling better. What were you doing on that ladder, anyway?”

“Well, I was halfway on the roof and the ladder so I could clear the gutters. We had a good rainstorm the other day, and the oak leaves clogged the gutters all to hell. I—”

“We could have avoided all of this if you’d just called one of the lawn guys to do it?”

He huffs. “I like to do things myself.”

“And one of those things is having a heart attack and falling?”

“Coulda happened to anyone.”

“Mom,” I say firmly.

She smiles at him again. “Peter. You’re not a spring chicken anymore. We can let other people do for us.”

“Doesn’t seem right.”

“Doesn’t seem right?” In the sweetest voice imaginable, she says, “Neither does coming home from work and finding you unconscious on the ground and bleeding with the ladder on top of your half dead body. So, you will eat your heart healthy foods. You will ask other people for help. And you will say thank you when help is given. Because if I come home and find you like that again because you didn’t ask for help, I will take you out myself, Peter Braudel. Do not test me. My heart cannot take it, and I will not put up with finding that again because you are a stubborn old fool. Do you hear me?”

He takes a deep breath of resignation. “I hear you, Bethie. I’m sorry you found me like that.” He gulps as his eyes glisten. “If I ever found you that way...” Dad wipes his eyes. “Elsie, get us both some of that kale shit. I need your mom to live forever.”

I fight some tears myself. “On it.” But I have no clue how to make kale. I always just order a kale salad. Can’t be too hard...I grab my phone to look up some recipes, but there’s a text from Walter to call him when I get a chance. “Uh, Mom, can you take over kale duty? I need to make a work call.”

“Of course, honey.”

I walk outside for the call. “Walter, hey. What’s going on?”

“I don’t want to bother you right now, but I thought you could use some good news.”

“Sure, always.”

“Things went sideways for Pavel in Dubai—there’s some unforeseen delays in funding for that project. Since Mr. MacMillan heard he was available, and given what you’re going through, he’s pushed ahead with Pavel.”

Did the ground just fall out from under my feet? “What?”

“He’s requested that Pavel take over their resort. When you return—whenever things with your father have settled down—you can take over as head architect for the Apple Store project. Isn’t that great? You’ll be back in Manhattan and back on the project you want.”

I don't understand...anything. "Uh, yeah. Great."

"You're shocked, right? I was, too."

"Did he say anything about me? Any complaints? My professionalism? Anything like that?"

He laughs. "Not at all. Actually, he liked your work and had the best things to say about you. But I guess he still wanted Pavel's name on the resort. Whatever the reason, you have your dream job back and everything is set for your return. I updated Apple on your situation, and they are happy to wait. They love you, Elsie."

Sure. *Apple* loves me. But Beau? I thought we were going somewhere. That things were really good between us. Was I too needy about everything with Dad? Can't be that. He offered his help.

My head is jumbled. "Um, thanks, Walter."

"You got it. And please give your family my best."

"Oh, and thank you for the flowers you sent. They were beautiful."

"Happy to. I hope they brightened your day. Talk later." He hangs up.

My next call is to Beau, but he doesn't answer. I try a few more times, and nothing. So, I text him, "Call me. It's important."

After waiting a few minutes and getting nothing back, I'm so confused. How could he ghost me like this? Firing me, and then not answering or texting back? Did I read him wrong?

Maybe everything he did for me, he would have done for a friend, too. Beau is passionate about his friends and his family, so would everything he did for me be out of the realm of what he'd do for anyone? Am I just anyone to him?

I hope not. Because that feels an awful lot like being no one to him.

Everything else aside, he is a professional COO. Why in the hell wouldn't he fire me to my face like a grown-up? Is it too

much to ask to have the dignity of an in-person firing? Instead, I get my boss doing his dirty work. It's cowardly, which is nothing like Beau. He's like me—he prefers to face things head on.

So, what in the hell happened?

Am I just too much drama for him to handle? Dad's stuff was too much for him? Maybe. He got very upset when he spoke about his father's heart attack. If this brought that trauma back for him, I guess it's possible he can't handle being around me...but lots of people have heart attacks. He can't avoid them all. No. That doesn't track. What about me is so unbearable that he can't speak to me? What is wrong with me?

Oh, screw this. Two can play this game. He wants to ignore me? Fine. I can ignore him, too.

Not that he'll even notice, since he's ignoring me.

-

BEAU

On the drive to the office, I realize just how tired I am. I'd gotten back home just last night and slept in my own bed, which was nice. But sleeping in it without Elsie feels wrong. We had only a few hours together in my bed, but they were magical. I have never slept so soundly as I did next to her.

That should have been my first clue that I have fallen for her.

Her wit, her brilliant mind, her sense of humor, all of it would have been enough for me to launch into a crush to last the ages. But that wrapped in a stunning package is enough to drive a man to a chapel. Those factors had done the trick of hooking me, but then I saw how she was with her estranged mother.

No matter their history, she was kind and loving and gentle. Whatever had driven them apart in the past was nothing when it came to what was important. Elsie kept Beth calm and as composed as she could, while trying to communicate with the medical staff. The ire I'd seen her eyes at the mention of her parents had been replaced by an undying affection for them. She didn't let bitterness stand in the way of being a good person, and I respect the hell out of her for that.

Too many people in estranged relationships would have just sent their mother's calls to voicemail. I try not to judge—every situation is different—and some people have good cause not to be in contact with their family. But I was glad to see

Elsie was able to get past the past and focus on what was important.

I hope she can do the same with me.

Things between us didn't start in a conventional sense. But that doesn't mean they started wrong. And now... now. I sigh. Nothing will feel right until she is back in Somerset Harbor. I'm happy she is spending time with her parents. Perhaps this will heal the rift between them. But with her gone, food doesn't taste as good. The sky is less blue. The town is colder.

I need Elsie back. I have to tell her how I feel. If she's ready to hear it.

I don't know how she will react. She might be upset or run away. She might think I'm joking, and that would be worse than an outright rejection. Or, she might say it back. And that is the thought that makes the other reactions worth the risk.

Downtown parking is always at a premium during tourist season, so getting a spot in front of our building can be tricky. One of the nice things about living here is all the exotic cars that come through because of the tourists. When people come to a summer town, they like to live it up. So, it's not unusual to see Rolls Royce, Bugatti Veyron, or other expensive and exotic cars.

But today is the first time I've ever parked next to a Mercedes 300SL Gullwing.

I take a minute to fully appreciate the beauty of the car. They are rare, though I'm not sure how many exist. Certainly few in this condition. It's either incredibly well-restored or has been treated like a baby for six decades. Perfect, every detail. I get chills just looking at this silver piece of art. I love my Aston, but she does not have the same appeal as a vintage car.

Who the hell is driving this thing around for vacation? Lucky bastard. Whoever they are, I hope they treat her well.

I jog up the stairs, and while heading for my office, I poke my head into my assistant's. "Good morning, Shelly. No calls until ten. I didn't sleep much."

But she has the oddest look on her face. “Um, sure. No problem.”

“Everything alright?”

“Everything is great.”

“Coffee. Lots of coffee, please.”

She smiles. “Coming right up.” But that is not her usual smile.

“Are you sure you’re good? Things with the doctor—”

“Clean bill of health. It was just some strange readings from the lab. Thanks for asking.”

“Yeah.” Still not a normal interaction with Shelly, but I’m too tired to dig into it. As soon as I walk into my office, I jolt. There’s a man staring out my window. “Uh, I think you’re lost.”

He turns around and tells me what I already know as he sticks his hand out for mine. “Pavel Cerny. And you are Beau MacMillan, my new client.”

I do not know how to react, other than to shake his hand. “I am your what?”

He smiles. His salt and pepper hair is tousled stylishly, and he has dark eyes that look right through me. Pavel looks as though he would be comfortable on the pages of a first class airport lounge magazine modeling European watches. He has a hint of a Russian accent. “You are my new client. I am to be a surprise—”

“Oh, I’m surprised, alright.”

Just then, Cormac and Beckett burst into my office, and Cormac says, “Tada!”

I don’t want to be rude in front of Pavel, so I keep my voice level, but I am freaking out on the inside. “Cormac, Beckett, can either of you tell me what is going on?”

Cormac, grinning ear to ear, says, “I caught wind that Pavel’s Dubai project had a financing issue—”

“Nothing to worry about,” Pavel says. “These things happen. I will continue with them once their money troubles go away after I complete the resort.”

Cormac continues, “And so I made some calls to get him for the resort.”

My stomach drops. “You did what?”

“No need to thank me—”

“No worries there.”

“But knowing what Elsie is going through and the fact you wanted Pavel from the beginning, I wanted to do this to help everyone. It keeps Pavel busy—

“I am always busy,” he says haughtily.

Cormac smiles at him. “That’s why I had to beat out three other people for this time slot. But a little bribery does wonders. Anyway, I knew this would be a brilliant solution for everyone.”

“Yeah. Great.”

Beckett laughs. “He’s in shock.”

“Something like that,” I mumble. “Why didn’t you tell me ahead of time? Either of you?” When I could have told you not to do this...

Cormac says, “Dude, I tried. I know you’re busy with everything for Elsie, but I would have thought you’d text your brother back.”

“I didn’t get a text from you.”

“Then check your phone. I sent like twenty texts about this. I even tried calling you. No answer.”

I feel around my pocket, and it’s not there. Check the other pockets—nope. *Where the hell is my phone? Where was the last place I had it...I used it to call John. Had to go back to my plane before we left, because I had dropped my wallet. Did it fall out when I crawled around the cockpit for my wallet?*

Searching my memory, I cannot think of a time I used it in the hospital. Or since.

Fuck. That would explain why I haven't heard from Elsie since I left New York.

"It's not on me—"

"Your phone isn't on you? Your pocket girlfriend is missing?" Beckett teases.

"No. It's not."

Pavel brushes that aside, "Phones are merely tools. But a resort is full of possibilities." He pulls his iPad from his bag. "Let me show you."

I could not be less interested in a Pavel Cerny design than I am right now. But he is here, and if Elsie has to stay in Sewmond for a long time, we will have to move on without her. I hate the thought of it, but I have dozens of guys onsite who need to keep working. There will be hundreds of people employed at the resort. This is the project that will show our father he can be less involved in the business and fully retire. The sooner we open, the better for everyone in Somerset Harbor. I cannot afford to delay this project.

So, I smile and nod politely. "Sounds good."

"Very good, yes, here we are." He turns his iPad around to show me. It is Somerset Harbor chic with a modern twist. More angular, less genteel. A spitting image of what I'd asked Elsie for the first few times we met. It's everything I wanted.

And I don't want it anymore.

-

BEAU

Thirty-One-Beau

AS PAVEL GOES over the preliminary sketches, I tap my foot. I cannot sit still. I want him gone. This isn't happening. I feel like a hostage to politeness.

I cannot piss Pavel off by firing him myself. That will be Cormac's job, once Pavel leaves. He hired him. Not me. I'll let Cormac handle the call, and I will figure out a way to get in contact with Elsie. Until then, I can play nice with the man who is now Elsie's understudy.

Perhaps I should ask some questions, so it looks like I'm giving him my attention. "And what's that there?"

Pavel frowns at me. "A decorative bush."

"Oh. Right." I'm an idiot.

"As I was saying..." he yammers on about doors, and I am ready to scream.

But I don't. I hate wasting someone's time, but I don't have much of a choice at the moment. Kicking him out—which is all I want to do—is not an option. Still, I can't stand to listen to him brag about his designs. It's grating. The worst part is, they are what I wanted. And they are boring beyond belief. Nothing as interesting as Elsie's work. Walter was right. She is the next big thing.

So, instead of focusing on the drawing, I interrupt him to ask, “There is a Mercedes 300SL Gullwing parked out front— it wouldn’t be yours, would it, Pavel?”

He smirks the way a man who enjoys being envied smirks. “Da. A present from a friend.”

“That’s one hell of a friend,” Beckett notes.

“I have had the good fortune of having many generous friends,” he brags. “The Gullwing once belonged to a prince. I designed his post-divorce home, and he gifted the car to me out of his gratitude.”

Cormac laughs incredulously. “A million dollar gift of gratitude? I have got to make better friends.”

Pavel laughs with him. “It is good to have friends in high places. One never knows when they may come in handy.”

As they chat about whatever, I am counting the seconds before Pavel leaves. I need my phone so I can check in on Elsie and her family, and every minute spent talking with this bozo is a minute wasted. I knew I should have gone with her to Sewmond. But when I’d asked, she told me not to worry about it. She understood I had things to do in Somerset Harbor.

Right now, all I want to do is take care of her.

Cormac’s tone is winding down, so I clue back into the conversation. He says, “. . . can drive around so I can show you more of Somerset Harbor, and you can get a feel for what we’re looking for in our designs.”

“That sounds like a splendid plan,” Pavel says. “Beau, are you coming with us?”

“No. I have some things around here to handle. I’ll catch up later.”

“Very well. Cormac, want to take the Gullwing?”

“Can I drive it?” Ballsy of him to ask.

Pavel laughs. “No.”

“It was worth a shot. I’ll be happy just to ride in it. Beckett, are you coming for the ride?”

Again, Pavel laughs. “There are only two seats in the car, Cormac. Beckett would have to follow us.”

Cormac grins at Beckett. “Sucks to be you.”

As the three of them head out, I grab Beckett’s arm. “Hang back a second.”

He nods, then says after the other two, “I’ll catch up. Go on without me.” They leave, and he asks, “What’s up?”

“This isn’t what I want.”

“What are you talking about? This is everything you argued for. Your design and your architect. Ever since you thought Pavel was available, he is all you talked about for a month.”

“Yes, I am aware of that, but I don’t want to work with him anymore. Elsie’s designs are better, and I want to continue to work with her.”

His eyes widen. “Are you kidding? Do you know how much work Cormac put into this? How much I helped?”

“And I am grateful to you both— I swear. If things were different, this would have been the most incredible gift you two had ever gotten me. But her designs are better. They will take the resort into the future. Pavel’s half-measures are just that. He’s got a foot in the past and the future, and that won’t cut it. I won’t work with him... unless we have no choice.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If Elsie’s father needs more care or something, if she has to ditch on the project...” I gulp. “But only if she is the one to say she’s out. It has to be her choice. Not because Cormac hired Pavel behind her back.”

He frowns. “I thought we were helping.”

“And I get it. Under normal circumstances, this would have been great. But this could make things so much worse for Elsie right now. She *loves* her work. If she gets fired from this project while she’s already dealing with everything with her dad, this is—”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Exactly. And I’m worried she has already heard about the Pavel situation, but I don’t know because I don’t have my phone.”

“Here, man, take mine.” He passes me his phone after he unlocks it.

“I don’t know her number. I programmed it in after her boss gave it to me.”

“So, call him.”

“Right.” I call Walter, who gives me the number, and I hang up before he can ask too many questions. Then I dial her up. One ring. Two rings. More, until it goes to voicemail. “Hey, Elsie. It’s Beau. This is Beckett’s phone. I just figured out mine is missing. Uh, call us or send a text to let me know you’re okay.”

I stare at his phone for a minute. “Why isn’t she responding?”

“Give her a break. She’s probably dealing with her dad.”

“Yeah.” I huff at myself.

“You’re wound pretty tight over this.”

“I am. This is a lot of pressure for her—”

“For her or for you?”

I blink at him. “What do you mean by that?”

“The resort is the biggest thing you have ever done in your life, Beau. And you ditched us all to go help the architect on the project with a family matter.” He runs his fingers through his dark hair to stall. “I’m not saying her family matter isn’t important. But I am saying it’s unlike you to ignore the biggest thing in your life for someone who amounts to a business acquaintance. Is there something going on between you and Elsie?”

Unfortunately, I don’t lie to my brothers. Okay, I lie to Cormac sometimes because he can be a bit of a prude, but not Beckett. Never Beckett. “Keep it to yourself, yes?”

“Always.”

“I’m in love with her.”

He pauses. “It’s like that?”

I nod once. “And not being able to contact her is getting to me.”

“Hey, here’s a question I never thought I’d ask— do you need to go to West Virginia?”

“I do not know if she is en route to here or where she is. It’d be pointless to go if she’s on her way here.”

“It’s West Virginia. Isn’t it kinda pointless, anyway?”

I huff a laugh. “Honestly, it’s not as bad as I thought it would be, minus the obvious lack of upkeep. And the lack of facilities, but that’s any small town.”

“She left for a reason.”

And I still don’t know it. “Moving on. For now, I must wait to see how this all shakes out. I presume Cormac and you worked this out with Walter?”

“We did.”

I let out a hot breath of frustration. “Which means she likely thinks we fired her. That *I* fired her. Fuck.”

-

ELSIE

It's good to be home, gabbing with Savannah at my apartment. It has felt like a hundred years since I saw her cheery butt. Sipping tea on my couch, she says, "I, for one, am glad you're back in Manhattan. It hasn't been the same without you."

"Thanks for that."

"And your dad is doing okay?"

I nod, relieved by the fact. "He's going to drive Mom crazy, but she likes it. She retired, so now, she spends all her time doing his rehab with him, and occasionally FaceTiming me."

"That's great." She sips her tea. Stalling. Savannah always looks like she's thinking too much, but when she's stalling, she gets this line between her perfectly manicured eyebrows. "The Beau thing—"

"No wonder you stalled. You know I don't want to talk about that."

She sighs. "Is he still texting you?"

"And calling, leaving increasingly desperate voicemails. I just erase them."

"He could have something important to tell you."

But I shake my head. "I don't need to hear him apologize for firing me. He'll only do it to make himself feel better, and I am not here to make him feel better. The damage is done."

"There could be extenuating circumstances—"

“And I solidly do not care about them. His reasons don’t matter. I care about results. He wanted to work with Pavel this whole time, and now he has what he wanted. I don’t know if Dad’s medical stuff was the reason—maybe Beau thought the situation made me too unreliable or something—but I don’t care. I’m on the Apple account again. They love me there, and I don’t need his drama to get in my way.”

She sips and stalls again before saying, “I know you liked him. Do you think that’s why you’re taking this so personally?”

“He fired me. That *is* personal.”

“They shifted you to a new account when you didn’t have the time for Beau’s. I’m not saying it was right— he definitely should have told you himself, at least. But from a business perspective, I can understand why he might need to move forward on the project. How many jobs is the resort projected to bring to that tiny town?”

“Several hundred,” I say with a shrug. “I’m not heartless regarding the people of Somerset Harbor, Savannah. They need jobs. I get moving forward. It’s ubiquitous in business. The problem is, he should have told me in person, instead of making Walter deliver the news. It was a dick move. He should have handled it himself. For God’s sake, he’s a COO. I can’t be the first person he’s fired.”

My phone goes off yet again. I’d left it face down on the console table behind my couch, so when it vibrates, we both hear it. But I ignore it for my tea.

“Could be important.”

Sighing, I ask, “You’re not going to let that go until I look, are you?”

“You know me well.”

“But Mom doesn’t text, so it’s not her, and that’s the only situation I’m willing to interrupt girl time for.”

“Please. For me.” She bats her eyes at me.

“Oh, fine.” I grab my phone and look. “Yep. Beau. Told you.”

“Indulge me further and read it.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel bad for the guy, and if people are alive, then they deserve a second chance to make things right.”

“Okay. I’ll read it.” Just to get her to stop harping on it, I read the text out loud, “I don’t blame you for not responding or picking up when I call. But I want the chance to explain, and since you’re not picking up, then I’ll explain it here. It—”

“See?” she asks. “Sounds perfectly reasonable to me.”

I roll my eyes and read on. “It was Cormac who hired Pavel. Not me. He set it in motion to take something off your plate and to get me the designer he thought I wouldn’t fight with. He believed he was helping us both, and he did it while I was with you and getting your father sorted out. I didn’t know anything about it and I had nothing to do with the decision. If you hate me, then you hate me. But I wanted you to know everything. I am so sorry about how things happened.” I roll my eyes and set the phone aside to drink my tea.

Savannah gives me big puppy dog eyes.

“What?”

“What are you going to tell him?”

“Nothing.”

She gasps. “Elsie Braudel, you have to respond to that! He didn’t know!”

“It’s an excuse to get himself out of trouble with me. That’s all.”

“But he said—”

“He always wanted to work with Pavel, Savannah. From the start, I was the replacement. The substitute. I was never what he wanted.”

That last sentence stings way more than it should. But it’s true. As much as I thought things between us had escalated, I was obviously wrong about the depth of his feelings for me. This is why I don’t get involved with people. They’re not worth it. But my career won’t leave me behind.

She sighs. “You don’t think he changed his mind after working with you? You said he liked what you’d shown him last.”

“It doesn’t matter. Obviously. I am shifting my priorities back to where they should have been all along. My career is the only thing that matters, and Apple is thrilled with me, so I’m taking that win instead of focusing on my losses.”

“But he said—”

“Quote, ‘and he did it while I was with you and getting your father sorted out.’”

“So?”

I take a breath and wonder if what I’m about to say is true.

“This text shows me exactly how he thinks of those couple of days. When he was with me and getting a medevac sent to us and getting his doctor friend to help us and all the rest of it, he didn’t so much as bat an eye about the expense or the effort.”

“Because he didn’t want you to feel bad about everything he was doing for you.”

I shake my head. “He did it like he does these things every day. It was momentous for me, but for him, it was Tuesday. It didn’t mean anything special. He was just a rich guy, throwing money at a problem until it went away. The same way he solves all his problems. I meant nothing to him. I was just another problem to be fixed.”

Savannah is quiet for a moment, only this time, she doesn’t stall. She’s thinking. Eventually, though, she quietly asks, “How long were you two sleeping together, Elsie?”

I grip my mug a little tighter. “What makes you ask such a silly—”

“You said that thing about meaning nothing to him with way too much emotion for it not to mean more than that. Spill it.”

“Sometimes, I hate that you know me so well.”

She shrugs meekly. “Now you’re the one who’s stalling.”

“The first time happened right during my first real presentation with him.”

“The day I was there? I knew it! Your shirt—”

I laugh. “No. That was a genuine wardrobe malfunction. It was shortly after that.”

“Was it serious?”

“We tried that thing where you lie about your plans going into it and say, ‘it’s just sex’ and—”

“Friends— or I guess *coworkers*— with benefits?”

I nod. “It was stupid. We should have never done that.”

“But you don’t sound like you actually regret it.”

Sighing, I admit, “I don’t. Not really. I just wish things had ended differently.”

“Or not at all?”

“I don’t know about that. But we had a connection. Or, I thought we did. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I just saw what I wanted to see.” But that didn’t feel true at all. “I don’t know, Savannah. Things had been going really well. He even took me back to his place, which is a rarity for him, I think. Beau made me feel like the second most important thing in his life, and—”

“You deserve more than that.”

I laugh. “I didn’t mean that as a bad thing. The resort has eaten up a lot of his life, and I’m the same with my career, so I don’t hold that against him at all. But then everything with Dad went to hell, and he dropped the resort to help me... I don’t know what to think about any of it.”

When Beau calls again, though, Savannah sees his name on the caller ID and looks up at me.

I turn the phone over on the console table. “It’s girl time. Not Beau time.” Never again.

ELSIE

No matter where I'm at in my head, a walk through Central Park does me good. It's early evening, and I've just left the site of my soon-to-be-built Apple Store, and I am on cloud nine. Everything is coming together the way it should. No arguments over the smallest details. No fighting about windows. The past two weeks have been wonderful.

There hasn't been any office sex, either, but that's just fine by me.

Sure, the sex with Beau was the best I've ever had. I'll miss it. But that's all. I definitely don't miss the arguments over nothing. Or the way he used to make that face when he was thinking about his argument. That sexy smirk of his got on my nerves.

But enough of that. Beau MacMillan's bullshit is neither here nor there. I am free of him and the work of that gigantic project. Apple has been good to me, too, keeping things flexible for when I fly down to West Virginia to see Mom and Dad. This is exactly what I need. Just like this walk to clear my head.

I've spent more time in Central Park lately, going for walks here every day this week after work. Light plays in the leaves as they blow in the warm breeze. The angles and shadows spark something in my brain.

Something that would be perfect for Beau's resort.

I shake my head and bank the idea for a future project. Silly that he's still on my mind. But I can't deny the pain in my

chest when I think of him. Without Savannah around, I don't have to be brave for anyone but me, and I know it's an act. The situation hurts. But it's over, and it's time to move on. Move forward. A deep breath settles me back down. The walk home will help—"

"Elsie."

I turn around, and Beau is there. My heart is sick. In the afternoon light, he looks like a dream in jeans and a white tee. But this is definitely my nightmare. "I have nothing to say to you." I whip back around and stomp forward, picking up the pace.

But he grabs my arm and turns me back to him in a swift movement. "Elsie, just listen to me—"

"This guy botherin' you?" a middle-aged jogger asks me. He's got a thick Brooklyn accent and a defiant glare aimed at Beau.

I raise my eyebrows at Beau and smirk before turning to the stranger. "He is, but I'm fine. Thank you for asking."

"Yeah, okay," he says, still glaring at Beau. "I'm gonna be on that bench over there, if you need anything."

"You're sweet, but—"

"Thank you," Beau says to him, and the two of us give him a quizzical look. He explains, "I'd do the same thing in your shoes, sir."

"Sure." He walks to a bench twenty feet away, monitoring us.

Beau smiles at him with nothing but gratitude on his face.

"Good guy. You know him?"

"I pass him on my walks through the park once a day, but that's it. You know, my mom thinks Manhattan is full of crime and danger. She'll be floored when I tell her about that guy."

"Yeah, she will be. Can we go somewhere and talk?"

"No. You have one minute before I leave, and you will not follow me, Beau."

He takes a beat, then agrees with a nod. "Thank you for the minute. You've been ignoring my calls and texts for long

enough that I'd think I earned *two* minutes of your time—”

“Then you think too highly of yourself. Fifty seconds.”

“I'm not sure if you've read my texts or listened to my voicemails, but I had nothing to do with getting you off the project, Elsie.”

“Old news. I read that in a text.”

He huffs. “The whole Pavel thing, it completely caught me off-guard about that. Truly, I had nothing to do with it.” The truth of it is in his eyes.

But I don't care. “It's too late, Beau.”

“Admittedly, it's a delightful change to work with an architect who isn't a giant pain in the ass—”

I laugh. “Ten seconds.”

“But I don't care about that. I want to work with you. I want you back. On the project.”

“You are really something.” I march away.

But he catches up to me. “So are you! After everything between us, you give me a *minute* to explain? Are you kidding me with this?”

“Not at all. I was serious. Especially the part when I said you wouldn't follow me.”

“I'm not following you. I'm walking through Central Park. You're on my path.”

I laugh and roll my eyes and keep walking. “Of course you want me back for the project, Beau. I'm better than Pavel. But you—”

“I want you back because you're better than him, and because I miss the fuck out of you.”

That stops me in my tracks. I will not let him emotionally manipulate me. I fight the tears welling up. Stupid emotions. “You don't miss *me*! You miss the *sex*! That's all we were, remember? If you think—”

He takes my face in his hands and kisses me, and I can't stop the tears then. I want this, and I hate myself for it. I should be stronger than this, but Beau's kisses make me weak. No matter how angry I am, his lips still feel right.

He pants, "It was never just sex. I love you, Elsie Braudel. And I'm not giving up on us. Not ever. Not unless you tell me to leave you alone."

I look up into his eyes, and it's there. That connection. He meant every word he ever said to me. I know it in my bones. But I need to hear it again. "You love me?"

"I love you. More than I knew I could love anyone."

I tease, "More than your Aston?"

He laughs loudly. "Yes. More than the Aston, my house, my clothes, my job, my—"

I kiss him hard and luxuriate in the feel of him pressed against me. "Beau, I love you, too."

He takes a quick breath. "Really? You just said that?"

"Yeah. I love you."

He groans in relief and kisses me again, holding me close.

"I suppose you're alright then?"

We break this kiss, giggling as we turn to the jogger. I nod.

"Yes. But thank you for sticking around. It means a lot."

He shrugs. "I just hope someone would do the same for my sisters. You two have a good night." He continues on his jog.

Beau smiles down at me and takes my hand in his. "Will you come back to Somerset Harbor, Elsie? Be my architect."

"I am in the middle of Apple—"

"Walter says you'll have that wrapped up in two weeks."

I laugh. "You asked Walter what I'm doing?"

"I asked when you'd be available. He told me you've got two weeks left with Apple. I wasn't trying to overstep. "

I nod once. "You can wait for me?"

“I’d wait forever for you.”

I can’t stop myself from smiling. “Then I suppose I can be your architect again.”

He smiles, then nervously asks, “What about being my girlfriend again?”

“I wasn’t your girlfriend in the first place. Just your secret piece of ass.”

He shakes his head. “You were never just a piece of ass, Elsie.”

“So, all that talk about keeping things no-feelings—”

“Was utter bullshit. At least on my end of things.”

I giggle. “I *might* have felt a little something for you—”

“Oh? Just a little?”

I kiss him again, and this time, it’s slow and deep and every sense is lit up. “Okay. More than a little.”

He laughs and takes my hand, and we finish my walk together. The way I want to finish all my walks forever.

BEAU

Walking into Elsie's apartment is a revelation. Everything is cool grays and blues, with little art on the walls. I only need seconds to take in the view before I can't stop myself from kissing her again. She tosses her keys somewhere and yanks at my tee while I fumble for the tie on her wrap dress. It's tricky—there's also a button. But I am no quitter, and I need her skin right now.

I kick off my shoes as she unbuttons my jeans, and we both bend to scoot them down my legs, almost hitting our heads together. She laughs at us while I take them off. "I really don't want to end up at your friend's hospital because we were too clumsy during sex."

"Getting naked isn't sex."

"I've been fucking you since you said my name."

I laugh and nod once. "Yes, you have been." I pick her up and belt her legs around my waist. "Where's the bedroom?"

Elsie points, then kisses that spot just below my ear that sends a pulse of excitement through me. Gripping her ass, I carry her to her bedroom, and she grinds on me over her silken panties. Her bedspread is silver with some kind of dark embroidered pattern on it, but all I see is her eyes. Brighter than the sky and bluer, too. My heart feels full when I look at her. Like this is where I am supposed to be. With Elsie. Always.

She peels off her bra, and I lay her back to steal her panties away. Once she's naked, too, I'm lost. I have pined for her

since I saw her last, and I want to take my time, but I can't go slow. It's been too long.

So, I lick up her thighs until I find myself between them. She's so wet and I drink every bit of her that I can while she digs her fingernails into my scalp. When she shakes and curses like a sailor, I think about using my fingers. But I can't wait anymore. I need this.

I need her.

Kissing up her body, I drag it out as long as I can. I nibble her stomach and suck on her nipples until she's whimpering for it. "Beau, baby, please—

I kiss her lips and wriggle between her thighs. She holds me close with them, pulling me to her wet pussy. She doesn't want to go slow, either. As soon as I nudge in, she cocks herself up to receive me and we come together in a perfect moaning union.

I hadn't dared hope to end up here so soon—I didn't know if she'd take me back. Not that I blamed her for being angry. She had every right to her anger. But, over the weeks apart, I hoped that our love was stronger than anger.

Fitting into her tight body, I might actually lose my mind. Nothing has ever felt this good. She laces her fingers with mine and kisses my fingertips, before I drive myself against her G-spot and make her eyes roll back again. I love making her make that face. I want her to have all the pleasure I can give her.

The tension in her body builds, and her cheeks redden. She's torn between groaning and licking the sweat off my lip while I take my time to earn her orgasm. There is no *not* loving this woman. She is too sweet, too angry, too much, and I love every part of her. I want her sweetness, her anger, all the parts that make her Elsie. She makes me feel found.

Soon, she gasps right before the drop, and I kiss her mouth. Her body arches beneath me, pressing her against me tight. She can't lie still—it's too good. She rocks on my cock as her

pussy pulses against me. It drags my orgasm close, and the pressure rises in my cock. I groan, “I love you.”

She whimpers, “I love you, too!”

It feels so right to hear it and to say it while we’re in bed. I’m not sure if I’ve ever done that before Elsie. And now, she’s the last person I want ever want to be with.

As much as I want to make this last, I can’t hold back. My body goes rigid before it hits, and I groan into her mouth as I come deep inside of her, pumping and grinding until there is nothing left.

We gasp in each other’s faces between our kisses and eventually, they slow down, too. After, we clean up and climb into bed again. I spoon her and she rests her head on my arm. Her curly blonde hair falls in all directions, like my own personal dirty angel. She laces her fingers with mine and sighs. “I missed you, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. A lot. I was so angry with you I didn’t want to miss you, but I did.”

“From the bottom of my heart, I am so sorry—”

“I know,” she says with a giggle. “I think I understand how everything happened, except one bit. Why didn’t I hear from you before everything fell apart?”

“Remember when I had to go back to the plane for my wallet before the medevac took us?”

“Yes.”

“When I got my wallet from the cockpit, I dropped my phone, climbing around the seats.”

A hint of remaining tension falls away from her shoulders.

“Oh.”

“I didn’t realize it until I was back in Somerset Harbor and had a surprise meeting with Pavel. I freaked out when I realized I couldn’t call you to get this all straightened out, but I think Walter had already called you about everything by then.”

She nods. “That makes sense. You are not allowed to leave your phone behind any more. For that matter, carry two.”

I laugh. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Oh, I enjoy hearing that out of you.”

I laugh again. “Don’t get used to it.” I kiss her bare shoulder. “Any chance you have good delivery Thai food here? I’ve been eating at Cormac’s a lot lately—”

“He knows everything now? That you want me, not Pavel?”

“And he knows not to interfere again, yes.”

She sighs. “Good. And yeah, there are a few wonderful Thai places around here that are fast.”

“Perfect. Are you ready for supper?”

“Because we’re ninety-year-olds looking for an early bird special?”

I chuckle. “Because I’m famished. I haven’t eaten all day.”

She rolls over to face me. “How come?”

“Because I didn’t know how this was going to go, and my stomach was in knots all day.”

She smiles at me. “That’s so sweet.” Elsie kisses me, and it would be so easy to let that continue if I had any kind of energy left.

I pull back. “If you want to see where that kiss can go, I’ll need food for fuel first.”

“I got some of those protein bars you like so much, if you want a snack first.”

I laugh. “You’re gonna be the death of me. Where do you keep them?”

“Cabinet by the fridge.”

I saunter out there and grab two before bringing them to Elsie. I toss her one.

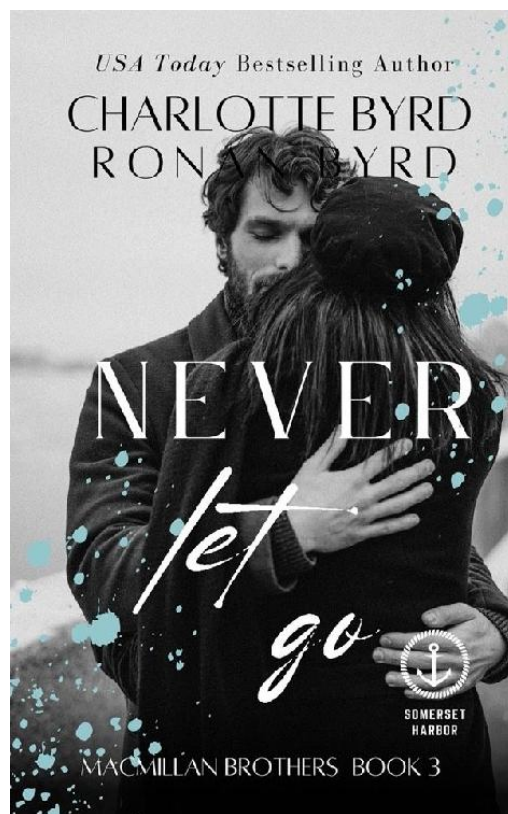
“What’s this for? I’m not hungry.”

“You’re going to need your energy to keep up.”

She smirks and opens the bar. “Promise?”

“Promise.”

THANK you for reading Say You’ll Stay! I hope you enjoyed Beau and Elsie’s story. Do you want to dive back into another Somerset Harbor romance? Check out Beau’s younger brother Beckett and Sophia, Beckett’s best friend’s sister in [Never Let Go](#). [Get it here](#).



Meet Beckett Macmillan, the mastermind behind the construction of Somerset Harbor Resort, and Cole Kendrick, his best friend and site foreman. They’ve been through thick and thin together, but when **Sophie Kendrick, Cole’s annoying little sister, returns to town as an emergency room doctor, everything changes.**

A workplace accident brings Beckett and Sophie back into each other’s lives, but this time, it’s different. Sophie blames Beckett for her brother’s injury, and the tension between them ignites like a spark in dry timber. But amidst the anger and

resentment, something unexpected begins to bloom – a connection neither of them saw coming.

Cole, the protective big brother, has always wanted to shield Sophie from Beckett’s playboy reputation. He knows the risks involved with a man like Beckett, and he won’t stand by while his sister gets hurt.

Meanwhile, Beckett, who kept his distance from Sophie out of respect for his friendship with Cole, finds himself drawn to her in a way he never expected. **Long-buried feelings resurface as he sees her in a whole new light, and the once-annoying little sister becomes an irresistible woman.**

As Beckett visits his injured friend in the hospital, he can’t help but connect with Sophie while she practices medicine. Forced proximity brings them closer together, and the sparks between them ignite a passion that neither can deny.

But can they overcome their past and the disapproval of a protective brother to find love in the most unexpected of places?

- ✓ Brother’s Best Friend
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Join Beckett and Sophie as they navigate the twists and turns of fate, battling old grudges and newfound desires. “Never Let Go” will keep you captivated from start to finish, with emotions that’ll tug at your heartstrings. Grab your copy today and embark on rollercoaster of drama, steamy scenes and an unforgettable story!

[One-click Never Let Go today!](#)

ABOUT CHARLOTTE BYRD

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