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HERE THEY COME.

"—or I promise you, we'll turn right around and go back to Paterson!" the woman behind the wheel of the burgundy minivan was shouting as it pulled up beside me. She had her head turned towards the backseat, where I could see three kids, two boys and a girl, staring back at her. A vein in her neck was bulging, looking not unlike the interstate, thick and unmissable, on the map held by the man in the passenger seat beside her. "I am serious. I have *had it*."

The kids didn't say anything. After a moment of glaring at them, she turned to look at me. She had on big sunglasses with bedazzled frames. A large fountain drink, the straw tinged with lipstick, was parked between her legs.

"Welcome to the beach," I said to her, in my best Colby Realty employee voice. "May I—"

"The directions on your Web site are garbage," she informed me. Behind her, I saw one of the kids frog-punch another, who emitted a stifled shriek. "We've gotten lost three times since getting off the interstate."

"I'm so sorry to hear that," I replied. "If you'd like to give

me your name, I'll grab you your keys and get you on the way to your rental."

"Webster," she told me.

I turned, reaching into the small rattan bin that held all the envelopes for that day's check-ins. Miller, Tubman, Simone, Wallace . . . Webster.

"Heron's Call," I read off the envelope, before opening it to make sure the keys were both in it. "That's a great property."

In reply, she stuck out her hand. I gave the envelope to her, along with her complimentary beach bag full of all the free stuff—Colby Realty pen, giveaway postcard, area guide, and cheap drink cooler—that I knew the cleaning crew would most likely find untouched when they checked out. "Have a great week," I told her. "Enjoy the beach!"

Now she gave me a wry smile, although it was hard to tell if she was truly thankful or just felt sorry for me. After all, I was standing in a glorified sandbox in the middle of a parking lot, with three cars lined up behind her, most likely full of people in the exact same kind of mood. When the final stop on a trip is paradise, being the second to last is no picnic.

Not that I had time to really think about this as they pulled away, signal already blinking for their turn onto the main road. It was three ten, and the next car, a blue sedan with one of those carriers on top, was waiting. I kicked what sand I could out of my shoes and took a deep breath.

"Welcome to the beach," I said, as they pulled up beside me. "Name, please?"

* * *

"Well," my sister Margo said when I came into the office, sweat-soaked and depleted, two hours later. "How did it go?"

"I have sand in my shoes," I told her, going straight to the water cooler, where I filled up a cup, downed it, and then did the same with two more.

"You're at the beach, Emaline," she pointed out.

"No, I'm at the *office*," I replied, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. "The beach is two miles away. People will get to the sand soon enough. I don't see why we have to have it here, too."

"Because," she replied, in the cool voice of someone who had spent the day in air-conditioning, "we are one of the first impressions our visitors get of Colby. We want them to feel that the moment they turn into our parking lot, they are officially on vacation."

"What does that have to do with me standing in a sandbox?"

"It's not a sandbox," she said, and I rolled my eyes, because that's exactly what it was, and we both knew it. "It's a sandbar, and it's meant to evoke the majesty of the coast."

I didn't even know what to say to this. Ever since Margo had graduated from East U the year before with a double degree in hospitality and business, she'd been insufferable. Or more insufferable, actually. My family had owned Colby Realty for over fifty years; our grandparents started it right after they got married. We'd been doing just fine, thank you, before Margo and her sandbox or sandbar, or whatever. But she was the first one in our family so far to get a college degree, so she got to do whatever she wanted.

Which was why, a few weeks earlier, she had this sandbox/Tiki Hut/whatever it was made and put it in our office parking lot. About four feet by four feet, with waist-high walls, it was like a wooden tollbooth, with a truckload of playground sand dumped in and around it for good measure. Nobody questioned the need for this except me. Then again, no one else had to work in it.

I heard a snicker, muffled, and looked over. Sure enough, it was my grandmother, behind her own desk, making a phone call. She winked at me and I couldn't help but smile.

"Don't forget about the VIP rounds," Margo called out, as I headed in that direction, chucking my cup in the trash on the way. "You need to start promptly at five thirty. And double-check the fruit and cheese platters before you deliver them. Amber did them and you know how she is."

Amber was my other sister. She was in hair school, worked for the realty company only under duress, and expressed her annoyance by doing everything in as slipshod a way as possible.

"Ten-four," I replied, and Margo exhaled, annoyed. She'd told me ten times that it sounded so unprofessional, like trucker talk. Which was exactly why I kept saying it.

My grandmother's office was right at the front of the building, with a big window looking out onto the main road, now packed with beach traffic. She was still on the phone but waved me in when she saw me in her doorway.

"Well, yes, Roger, I sympathize, believe me," she was saying as I pushed some brochures aside to sit down in the chair opposite her desk. It was messy as always, piled with papers,

file folders, and several open packs of Rolos. She always misplaced one after opening it, only to do the same with the next, and the one after that. "But the bottom line is, in rental houses, door handles get a lot of use. Especially back door handles that lead to the beach. We can fix them as much as possible, but sometimes you just have to replace the hardware."

Roger said something, his voice booming from the receiver. My grandmother helped herself to a Rolo, then extended the pack to me. I shook my head.

"The report I received was that the handle fell off, inside, after the door was locked. The guests couldn't get back in. That's when they called us." A pause. Then she said, "Well, I'm sure they could have climbed in through a window. But when you're paying five grand for a week, you can claim certain privileges."

As Roger responded, she chewed her Rolo. The candy wasn't the best habit, but it was better than cigarettes, which she had smoked up until about six years earlier. My mother claimed that when she was a kid, a constant cloud had hung in this office, like its own personal weather system. Weirdly enough, even after multiple cleanings, new curtains and carpet, you could still smell the smoke. It's faint, but it was there.

"Of course. It's always something when you're a landlord," she said now, leaning back in her chair and rubbing her neck. "We'll take care of it and send the bill. All right?" Roger started to say something else. "Great! Thanks for the call."

She hung up, shaking her head. Behind her, another minivan was pulling into our parking lot. "Some people," she said, popping out another Rolo, "should just not own beach houses."

This is one of her favorite mantras, running a close second to "Some people should just not rent beach houses." I've often told her we should have it needlepointed and framed, not that we could hang it up anywhere in this office.

"Another busted handle?" I asked.

"Third one this week. You know how it goes. It's the beginning of the season. That means wear and tear." She started digging around on her desk, knocking papers to the floor. "How did check-in go?"

"Fine," I said. "Only two early birds, and both their places were already cleaned."

"And you're doing the vips today?"

I smiled. The VIP package was another one of Margo's recent brainstorms. For an added charge, people who were renting what we called our Beach Palaces—the fanciest properties, with elevators and pools and all the amenities—got a welcome spread of cheese and fruit, along with a bottle of wine. Margo first pitched the idea at the Friday Morning Meeting, another thing she'd instituted, which basically forced us all to sit around the conference table once a week to say everything we'd normally discuss while actually working. That day, she'd handed out a printed agenda, with bullet points, one of which said "VIP Treatment." My grandmother, squinting at it without her glasses, said, "What's a vip?" To Margo's annoyance, it stuck, and now the rest of us refused to call it anything else.

"Just leaving now," I told her. "Any special instructions?"

She finally found the sheet she'd been looking for and scanned it quickly. "Dune's Dream is a good regular client,"

she said. "Bon Voyage is new, as is Casa Blu. And whoever's in Sand Dollars is there for two months."

"*Months?*" I said. "Seriously?"

Sand Dollars was one of our priciest properties, a big house way out on the Tip, the very edge of town. Just a week would break most budgets. "Yep. So make sure they get a good platter. All right?"

I nodded, then got to my feet. I was just about to the door when she said, "And Emaline?"

"Yes?"

"You looked pretty cute in that sandbox this afternoon. Brought back memories."

I smiled, just as Margo yelled from outside, "It's a *sandbar*, Grandmother!"

Down the hallway in the back storage room, I collected the four platters Amber had assembled earlier. Sure enough, the cheese and fruit were all jumbled up, as if thrown from a distance. After spending a good fifteen minutes making them presentable, I took them out to my car, which was about a million degrees even though I parked in the shade. All I could do was pile them on the passenger seat, point every A/C vent in their direction, and hope for the best.

At the first house, Dune's Dream, no one answered even after I rang the bell and paged them from the outside intercom. I walked around the extensive deck, peering down. There was a group of people around the pool below, as well as a couple walking down the long boardwalk to the beach. I tried the door—unlocked—and stepped inside.

"Hello?" I called out in a friendly voice. "Colby Realty,

VIP delivery?" When you had to come into people's houses—even if they'd only just moved in, and then just for the week—you learned not only to announce yourself but to do so loudly and repeatedly. All it took was catching one person unaware and partially clothed to bang this lesson home. Yes, people were supposed to let it all hang out on vacation. But that didn't mean I wanted to see it. "Colby Realty? VIP delivery?"

Silence. Quickly, I moved up to the third-floor kitchen, where the views were spectacular. On the speckled granite island, I arranged the platter, chilled bottle of wine, and a handwritten card welcoming them to Colby and reminding them to contact us if they needed anything at all. Then it was on to the next house.

At Bon Voyage, the door was locked, the guests most likely out for an early dinner. I set up the platter and wine in the kitchen, where the blender was still plugged in, the carafe in the sink smelling of something sweet and tropical. It was always so weird to come into these houses once people were actually staying there, especially if I'd just been in the same morning to check after the cleaners. The entire energy was different, like the difference between something being off and on.

At Casa Blu, the door was answered by a short woman with a deep tan, wearing a bikini that was, honestly, not really age appropriate. This was not to say I *knew* how old she was as much as that, even at eighteen, I wouldn't have attempted the same skimpy pink number. There was a white sheen of sunscreen on her face, a beer in a bright yellow cozy in her free hand.

"Colby Realty, VIP delivery," I said. "I have a welcome gift for you?"

She took a sip of her beer. "Great," she said, in a flat, nasal tone. "Come on in."

I followed her up to the next level, trying not to look at her bikini bottom, which was riding up, up, up as we climbed the stairs. "Is it the stripper?" someone called out as I stepped onto the landing. It was another woman around the same age, midforties, maybe, wearing a bikini top, a flowy skirt, and a thick, gold braided necklace. When she saw me, she laughed. "Guess not!"

"It's something from the rental place," Pink Bikini explained to her and a third woman in a shorty bathrobe holding a wine glass, her hair in a messy topknot, who were looking down from the deck at something below. "A welcome gift."

"Oh," the bathrobe woman said. "I thought *this* was our present."

There was a burst of laughter as the woman who let me in walked over to join them, looking as well. I arranged my platter and bottle, put up the card, and was about to leave discreetly when I heard one of them say, "Wouldn't you just love to take a big bite of that, Elinor?"

"Mmmm," she replied. "I say we dump dirt in the pool, so he has to come back tomorrow."

"And the next day!" Flowy Skirt said. Then they all laughed again, clinking their glasses.

"Enjoy your stay," I called out as I left, but of course they didn't hear me. Halfway down the stairs to the front door, I glanced out one of the big windows, spotting the object of

their ogling: a tall, very tan guy with curly blond hair, shirtless, wielding a long, awfully phallic looking pool brush. I could hear them still whooping as I went out the door, easing it shut behind me.

Back in the car, I pulled my hair up in a ponytail, secured it with one of the elastics hanging around my gearshift, and sat for a moment in the driveway, watching the waves. I had one more stop and plenty of time, so I was still there when the pool guy let himself out of the fence and headed back to his truck, parked beside me.

"Hey," I called out, as he climbed up into the open bed, coiling a couple of hoses. "You could make some big money this week, if your morals are loose enough and you like older women."

He grinned, flashing white teeth. "Think so?"

"They'd devour you, given the chance."

Another smile as he hopped down, shutting the tailgate, and came over to my open window. He leaned down on it, so his head was level with mine. "Not my type," he told me. "Plus, I'm already taken."

"Lucky girl," I said.

"You should tell her that. I think she takes me for granted."

I made a face. "I think it's mutual."

He leaned in and kissed me. I could taste the tiny bit of sweat above his lip. As he pulled back, I said, "You're not kidding anyone, you know. You are fully capable of wearing a shirt when you work."

"It's hot out here!" he told me, but I just rolled my eyes,

cranking my engine. Ever since he'd taken up running and got all cut, you couldn't keep a top on the boy. This was not the first house that had noticed. "So we still on for tonight?"

"What's tonight?"

"Emaline." He shook his head. "Don't even try to act like you've forgotten."

I thought hard. Nothing. Then he hummed the first few bars of "Here Comes the Bride," and I groaned. "Oh, right. The cookout thing."

"The shower-slash-barbecue," he corrected me. "Otherwise known as my mother's full-time obsession for the last two months?"

Oops. In my defense, however, this was the *third* of four showers that were being held in preparation for the wedding of Luke's sister Brooke. Ever since she'd gotten engaged the previous fall, it had been all wedding all the time at his house. Since I spent much of my time there, it was like being forced into an immersion program for a language I had no interest in learning. Plus, since Luke and I had been together since ninth grade, there was also the issue of everyone making jokes about how we'd be next, and his parents should go ahead and get a two-for-one deal. Ha, ha.

"Seven o'clock," Luke said now, kissing my forehead. "See you then. I'll be the one with the shirt on."

I smiled, shifting into reverse. Then it was back down the long driveway, onto the main road, and up to the end of the Tip, to Sand Dollars.

This was one of the newer houses we managed, and

probably the nicest. Eight bedrooms, ten and a half baths, pool and hot tub, private boardwalk to the beach, screening room downstairs with real theater seats and surround sound. It was so new, in fact, that only a couple of weeks ago there had still been a Porta-John outside, the contractor rushing to finish the last inspections before the season began. While they did punch-list and turnkey stuff, Margo and I had been putting away all the utensils and dishes the decorator had bought at Park Mart, bags and bags of which had been left in the garage. It was the oddest thing, furnishing a whole house all at once. There was no history to anything. All rental houses feel anonymous, but this one was where I'd felt it the most. So much so that even with the pretty view, it always kind of gave me the creeps. I liked a little past to things.

As I came up the drive, there was a lot of activity. A white van with tinted windows and an SUV were parked out front, the van's back doors open. Inside, I could see stacks of Rubbermaid bins and cardboard boxes, clearly in the process of being unloaded.

I got out of my car, collecting the VIP stuff. As I started up the stairs to the front door, it opened, and two guys about my age came out. Within seconds, we recognized each other.

"Emaline," Rick Mason, our former class president, called out to me. Behind him was Trent Dobash, who played football. The three of us were not friends, but our school was so small you knew everyone, whether you liked it or not. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You're renting this place?" I was shocked.

"I wish," he scoffed. "We were just down surfing and got offered a hundred each to unload this stuff."

"Oh," I said, as they passed me, moving down to the open van. "Right. What's in the boxes?"

"No idea," he replied, lifting one of the bins out and handing it to Trent. "Could be drugs or firearms. I don't care as long as I get my money."

This was exactly the kind of sentiment that had made Rick such a lousy class president. Then again, his only competition had been a girl who recently moved from California whom everyone hated, so it wasn't like we had a lot of options.

Inside the open front door, another guy was moving around in the huge living room, organizing the stuff that had already been brought in. He, however, was not from here, something I discerned with one glance. First, he had on Oyster jeans—dark wash, with the signature O on the back pockets—which I hadn't even known they made for guys. Second, he had a knit cap pulled down over his ears, even though it was early June. It was like pulling teeth to get Luke or any of his friends to wear anything but shorts, regardless of the temperature: beach guys don't do winter wear, even in winter.

I knocked, but he didn't hear me, too busy opening up one of the bins. I tried again, this time adding, "Colby Realty? VIP delivery?"

He turned, taking in the wine and the cheese. "Great," he replied, all business. "Just put it anywhere."

I walked over to the kitchen, where a couple of weeks ago I had been pulling price tags off spatulas and colanders, and arranged the tray, wine, and my card. I was just turning to

leave when I caught a flutter of movement out of the corner of my eye. Then the yelling began.

"I don't *care* what time it is, I needed that delivery today! It's what I arranged and therefore what I expected and I won't accept anything else!" At first, the source of this was just a blur. A beat later, though, it slowed enough for me to make out a woman wearing black jeans, a short-sleeved black sweater, and ballet flats. She had hair so blonde it was almost white, and a cell phone was clamped to her ear. "I ordered four tables, I want four tables. They should be here in the next hour and my account is to be adjusted accordingly for their lateness. I am spending too much money to put up with this bullshit!"

I looked at the guy in the Oyster jeans, still busy with the bins across the room, who appeared to not even be fazed by this. I, however, was transfixed, the way you are whenever you see crazy people up close. You just can't look away, even when you know you should.

"No, that's not going to work for me. No. No. Today, or forget the entire thing." Now that she was standing still, I noted the set of her jaw, as well as the angular way her cheek and collar bones protruded. She was downright prickly, like one of those predator plants you see in deserts. "Fine. I'll expect my deposit to be refunded on my card by tomorrow morning or you'll be hearing from my attorney. Goodbye."

She jabbed at the phone, turning it off. Then, as I watched, she threw it across the room, where it crashed against the wall that just had just been painted on Memorial Day weekend, leaving a black mark. Holy shit.

"Idiots," she announced, her voice loud even in this big room. "Prestige Party Rental my *ass*. I *knew* the minute we crossed the Mason-Dixon Line it would be like working in the third world."

Now, the guy looked at her, then at me, which of course made her finally notice me as well. "Who is this?" she snapped.

"From the realty place," he told her. "VIP something or other."

She looked mystified, so I pointed at the wine and cheese. "A welcome gift," I said. "From Colby Realty."

"It would have been better if you'd brought tables," she grumbled, walking over to the platter and lifting the wrap. After peering down at it, she ate a grape, then shook her head. "Honestly, Theo, I'm already wondering if this was a mistake. What was I thinking?"

"We'll find another place to rent tables," he told her, in a voice that made it clear he was used to these kinds of tirades. He'd already picked up her phone, which he was now checking for damage. The wall, like me, was ignored.

"Where? This place is backwoods. There's probably not another one for a hundred miles. God, I need a drink." She picked up the wine I had brought, squinting at the bottle. "Cheap and Australian. Of course."

I watched her as she started pulling open drawers, obviously looking for a corkscrew. I let her look in all the wrong places, just out of spite, before I finally moved over to the wet bar by the pantry to get it.

"Here." I handed it to her, then grabbed the pen and paper we always left with the housekeeping card. "Prestige has

a habit of screwing up orders. You should call Everything Island. They're open until eight."

I wrote down the number, then pushed it towards her. She just looked at it, then at me. She didn't pick it up.

As I started towards the stairs, where Rick and Trent were banging up with another load, neither of the renters said anything. I was used to that. As far as they were concerned, this was their place now, with me as much scenery as the water. But when I spotted a price tag still on a little wicker basket by the door, I stopped and pulled it off anyway.