

Thirsty Thursdays

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Chapter 1

Sam McKinnon flipped open her leather folio to make sure she had enough grid paper. Although she'd used AutoCAD to design everything from high-rises to monuments, she still liked to draw rough sketches on paper. Since she'd first learned drafting in high school—the only girl in her class—she'd preferred a certain brand of mechanical pencil. She checked the supply of lead under the eraser, replaced the pencil in its leather loop, and tossed the folio on the seat of her truck.

She didn't need the GPS to find the address. Her destination was one of the biggest houses on Gull Island, a three-story Victorian reproduction right on the ocean. Whenever Sam passed it, she rolled her eyes. *Why does money make people lose their aesthetics?*

The email inquiry indicated the referral had come from the owner's doctor. Hobbs Family Practice was the only game in town. Liz Stolz, the senior partner, was always sending clients Sam's way, usually more than she could handle.

Now, Sam could really use the work. Business had been slow since the shutdown. The summer people had stayed away, and construction work had abruptly dried up during what should have been Sam's busiest season. Activity finally began to pick up around Memorial Day. People were returning to their summer homes, despite the governor's fourteen-day quarantine.

Cars with out-of-state tags jammed the roads as Sam drove through town. She was relieved to pull into her client's driveway and see a Maine plate, the pink-bow, breast-cancer series. *Does that mean something, Sam wondered, or is it just another rich girl's charity?* The people who owned the waterfront houses on Gull Island certainly had plenty of money to give away.

The paved driveway was level, but out of habit, Sam yanked up the parking brake. She opened the console and took out the mask

Maggie Fitzgerald had made from colorful quilting squares. She sewed them by the dozens to benefit the Webhanet Playhouse, but she offered the prettiest ones to her friends. Pretty wasn't Sam's style, so she'd chosen a blue-and-khaki, checked gingham.

Sam rang the bell and stepped back the recommended six feet. It took a few minutes, but the door finally opened. An elegant woman with penetrating, blue eyes and carefully styled, dark hair stood there. She wore no mask.

"Oh, you're one of those," she said irritably.

It didn't take Sam long to figure out the woman was referring to the mask. There had been a minor war in the Hobbs community Facebook group about the masks. The people who swayed right thought they were unnecessary because the pandemic was a hoax. Everyone else was trying to comply with the CDC guidelines. Sam wasn't about to get into a pissing contest over a mask, so she said, "We had an appointment for a bathroom estimate."

"Yes, but I was expecting Sam McKinnon."

"I am Sam McKinnon." Sam opened her folio and took out a business card.

The woman scrutinized it at arm's length. "Samantha McKinnon, AIA, ALA, FAIA, LEED, Licensed General Contractor, State of Maine," she read aloud. "You certainly have enough initials after your name." She peered at Sam suspiciously. "Why is a fellow of the American Institute of Architects doing bathroom renovations? Can't you get better work?"

"I'm semi-retired. I can pick and choose what I do. I like doing projects with tile work."

"You do? Why?"

"It's creative and fun. I enjoy getting my hands dirty."

The woman frowned disapprovingly. She looked like the kind who never got her hands dirty. "Well, come in." She stood back. Sam slipped by her, keeping as much distance as possible.

"I'm Olivia Enright." She offered her hand, but Sam didn't get

close enough to shake it. “Oh, come on now. This is ridiculous,” Ms. Enright said, her hand hanging in the air.

“I’m sorry, but it’s for your safety as well as mine. I hope we’re not getting off on the wrong foot.”

“I hope not either.” Ms. Enright lowered her hand to her side. “Let me show you what I want done.”

Sam followed the woman, noticing that she had a shapely backside. *Stop it*, Sam told herself. *She’s a client*. But it hadn’t escaped Sam’s notice that when Olivia Enright wasn’t scowling or challenging her about wearing a mask, she was a damn good-looking woman. Her hair was probably dyed. The color was too monochromatic to be natural. Her features were refined and so regular that her face was indistinguishable from a host of other attractive women. Like the face of a model, it was a blank canvas on which to paint.

Sam distracted herself from rating the woman’s looks by taking in the bones of the house. It was obviously a custom build. There were some nice features—not over-the-top pseudo-Victorian, mostly just a nod to the style. Sam figured the house couldn’t be more than five or six years old, given the condition of the surface materials.

Ms. Enright led her up the stairs to the second floor and down a hallway to what appeared to be the master suite. Here, the Victorian style gave way to modern engineering. Enormous windows offered a spectacular view of the ocean below, and there was a clever, cantilevered balcony accessed by a sliding glass door. Sam paused to admire the ingenuity of the design.

“This way,” said Ms. Enright, impatiently gesturing in the opposite direction. She showed Sam into a large en-suite bathroom. All the fixtures and materials were high-end, including the shower with expensive marble walls.

“Why do you want to renovate this bathroom?” asked Sam, turning to the client. “It looks great.”

“It has no tub. I like a good soak from time to time.”

Sam glanced around. There was no space in the room for a bathtub. Judging from the bathroom's location in the house, adding on could be quite a challenge.

"I've always wanted a claw-foot tub," said Ms. Enright.

"I'm sure we can find you one, but there are other styles that would fit in with the design of this bathroom."

"It's a Victorian house."

"It's a Victorian-style house, not a Victorian-era house. That means you don't need to choose period-exact details."

Ms. Enright did not look convinced by the explanation.

"I can bring some catalogs," said Sam. "You have a lot of options, including Victorian reproductions."

"Money is no object."

"That's great, but I believe in spending money efficiently."

Ms. Enright obviously sized her up. "Good to know."

Sam pulled a tape measure off her waistband. "Would you mind if I look around and take some measurements and photos?"

"Fine. I'll wait in the bedroom."

The comment made Sam uneasy. She didn't mind the woman hanging around to answer questions, but she hated the idea that she didn't trust her. Sam shrugged off the thought and opened her folio.

No expense had been spared in building the bathroom, and Sam hated to waste such beautiful materials. She tapped the walls to see where there might be room for expansion. As her knuckles moved along, the sound changed, indicating a large cavity. Tapping across the wall, she mentally measured off six feet—perfect for a tub.

Sam came into the bedroom and found Ms. Enright sitting on the bed, scanning her phone.

"Do you mind if I take a look at this wall? I think I might have found some space for expansion."

"No, go right ahead," said the woman, not looking up.

Sam turned around and saw the reason for the wall cavity. It was

a closet. “Okay if I take a look in this closet? Do you use it much?”

“It’s mostly empty. I store extra blankets in there.”

“Do you have other closet space?” asked Sam, glancing around the room.

Ms. Enright absently gestured over her shoulder. “There’s an enormous walk-in over there.”

“So, you wouldn’t miss this closet if I used the space for a bathtub?”

“I didn’t say that,” replied Ms. Enright, finally looking up with a challenging stare.

Sam’s eyes scanned the room and fell on a vacant wall. “What about other storage? Maybe a Victorian armoire? I see you have room over there.” Sam nodded in that direction.

“Now, you’re a decorator too?”

Sam had learned to hold her tongue with clients, but the woman’s attitude irked her. After a deep breath, Sam said, “Just a suggestion.” Despite the mask, Sam instinctively smiled to lower the temperature of the conversation. “I’m going to take some measurements and see what other options I can come up with. Would you consider converting to a shower-tub combination?”

“No,” said the woman flatly.

“Okay. Scratch that. One question. Why didn’t you include a tub in the original design?”

“I wasn’t involved in the construction. I inherited the house from someone.”

The woman glanced at her watch.

“I won’t be much longer,” Sam assured her.

“Don’t hurry. I want it done right.”

As Sam reeled out her tape measure on the bathroom floor, she wondered why the woman had to be so bitchy. That seemed to be a quality of the affluent, the newly wealthy in particular. Everyone else was beneath them, especially the people they hired to do work on their houses. Sam had witnessed that attitude firsthand when

she'd spent a year as a carpenter's apprentice. A contractor had told her that a building she'd designed was impractical, adding, "Architects are all theory, no practical experience. You're the air heads of construction."

At first, Sam prickled with irritation. Then, she realized the man had a point, so she asked him to take her on as an apprentice. Some people thought Sam was crazy when she took leave from her office job and put on a tool belt. Secretly, she'd always wanted to work in the trades. She loved building things—one of the reasons she had been drawn to architecture.

Sam transferred all her measurements to the grid paper, made some quick sketches, and photographed everything in the room for later reference. She went into the bedroom to measure the closet. While she was on her hands and knees to position the tape, she had the strange feeling that someone was staring at her ass, but she didn't dare look over her shoulder to see if she was right.

After making a few more notes, Sam flipped closed the folio. The sound caused the woman to look up from her phone. "All done?" she asked.

"For now. I'll drop off some catalogs and send some links to websites that sell renovators' supplies. What's your time frame?"

"As soon as possible."

Sam tried to be patient. "I mean, do you have a specific date?"

"I really miss having a tub."

"Don't you have one in another bathroom?"

"No, only showers."

"Usually, there's at least one tub in the house, in case the owner has small children."

At that, a shadow seemed to pass over Ms. Enright's face. "There are no tubs in this house," she reiterated firmly.

"Don't worry. We'll figure out how to put one in," said Sam in a reassuring tone. "I'm finishing up another job. I can be available next week, but first we need to settle on the plans. If you choose me

to do the work, I'll need time to pull a permit, which could take a while. Technically, you don't need one for an interior job like this, but I always like to get one, in case there are questions later." Sam noted a subtle look of approval on Ms. Enright's face. Otherwise, it was totally neutral. "I can send over a rough estimate by close of business tomorrow. I'll need a day or two to refine it. Will that work for you?"

"That's earlier than I expected," said the woman, looking pleased. "Yes, that will be fine."

Once Sam was back in her truck, she made a few more notes and checked the time on the dashboard clock. Estimates were free, but if the job went live, she charged for the time. In all, she'd spent less than an hour in Olivia Enright's pseudo-Victorian. She'd be in plenty of time to join the gang at Liz's place for a drink.

As soon as the weather had begun to warm, Liz had instituted "Thirsty Thursdays," a weekly cocktail hour for her Hobbs friends. The name, a nod to rowdy college parties, made them all feel silly and young, but the intent was serious.

"We're going to become weird if we don't socialize," Liz had said, "I mean weirder than we are already." Lucy Bartlett, who was a psychotherapist as well as the rector of the local Episcopal church agreed wholeheartedly. To maintain their sanity, they needed to be with other people. Liz's enormous wrap-around deck had become the setting for their weekly gatherings. The snacks were usually so plentiful and filling that eating dinner afterward was optional.

Sam didn't want to arrive empty-handed, so she called Maggie Fitzgerald. "Do you need anything?" she asked. "How about some beer?"

"Are you kidding me?" Sam could imagine Maggie rolling her eyes. Her wife, Liz, was a craft brew aficionado. Their refrigerator in the garage was always filled with beer. "Get some chips if you absolutely must bring something," said Maggie, "but we really have everything we need."

As Sam started the engine, she had the feeling she was being watched. She glanced up to see Olivia Enright standing at a second-story window overlooking the driveway.

“Don’t worry, lady, I’m leaving,” Sam said aloud as she backed up her truck.