



Beachside Buddies

Story by Brandon Kosinski

Illustrated by Angel Blanco

Annie sat in the car beside her father as he drove down Hillcrest Boulevard.

“Dad, why do you have to go? I thought the convention was two month ago?”

“Annabelle, I’ve got a lot of work to do. It’s not like I’m running off to enjoy myself and leaving you behind. This is work related. And, yes, the national convention was over the summer; this is just a little business meeting.”

“But, dad...”

“No buts! You’re going to spend the weekend with Aunt Dixie. Besides, I thought you enjoyed spending time at the manor.”

Annie did like spending time with her aunt, but she had a feeling that this wasn’t going to be as much fun as usual. It was Labor Day weekend. That was three days filled with fun for everyone who didn’t have to work. For people like Brent and Dixie, however, it was just another day at the grind; usually one of the busiest of the year.

“Oh fine...” Annie pouted, “...but you better bring me back something nice from wherever you’re going!”

“My meeting is in Scranton. You want a lump of coal?”

“...No thank you.”

The car pulled up in front of Thornhurst Manor sometime around noon. The three story mansion stood proudly against a cloudless sky. This was the historic home of the Tail family. Brent went around to pull Annie's bag from the trunk while she went running for the door. She crashed into it, head on, and pushed and pushed with all her might. It wouldn't budge. She ran around to the other side and tried again.

Either door opened into the main entry way. An antique couch sat before the picture window between the doors: a place for guests to wait for their ride or, perhaps, simply to enjoy the view of the front lawns and gardens.

This small greeting area opened into the grand entry hall. This was the very center of the manor, a lavish ballroom that once hosted extravagant parties and still did, on occasion, today. Balconies overlooked the gallery on all sides, on both the second and third floors. A pair of cloistered stairways curved up at the back of the room, enclosing the hotel's reception desk.

Maxwell, who was manning the post, greeted them warmly.

"Hello, Brentwood. Annabelle. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Annie is going to be spending the weekend with her aunt."

Max smiled. He enjoyed having Annie around. She was young and a bit absentminded, but she was a good girl and didn't cause too much trouble.

"Would you like me to have a room made up?"

"No, no. She'll be spending the nights at Dixie's apartment. There's no need for her to take up one of your rooms. I'm sure you need every one for the holiday."

Max flipped open the hotel's registry. It was a heavy leather bound tome, kept more for looks than practicality. A computerized log was kept as well, but there was a special sort of feeling one gets from dipping a quill in ink and signing into a room in this old-fashioned way.

"It looks like all the rooms are taken, anyway. No harm, though. So long as Annie has a place to stay, I guess it really doesn't matter."

"Where can I put my stuff?" she asked. The adults were always leaving her out of the conversation. She wasn't a child; there was no reason she couldn't speak for herself.

"We can keep them here, behind the desk, until you're ready to go home for the night. Will that be OK?"

Annie rolled her suitcase around the desk and set it beside the bookcase so that it wouldn't be in Maxwell's way. It was just the place he would have put it himself.

"Is this OK?" Annie asked.

"That's just fine," Max replied. "Now, Sarah is upstairs, so go ahead and meet her in the office. You know where it is."

Annie smiled and said good bye to her father before dashing up the stairs, her footsteps echoing off the marble. At the top, she turned and waved once more, and then she was gone.

"You know, considering she didn't want to come, I think she'll have a pretty good time. I'll be back on Monday night. I hope you can manage until then."

"It won't be any trouble at all. Besides, she's Dixie's problem, not mine."

Brent glared at him from behind his glasses.

"Well, not that she'll be a problem. I only mean that I'm not the one you should be talking to about it... Are you sure you don't want to pay your sister a visit?"

“No, Max, I’m late enough as it is. I have a long ride in front of me and I’ll be on my way. I’m counting on you and everyone to look after my daughter. Don’t think you’re off the hook just because Dixie is her aunt. Treat her just as you would any other guest.”

Max bit his lip. He liked Annie, fair enough, but Thornhurst was not a child friendly environment. It wasn’t so much due to adult content as it was because kids have a tendency to run about and break things. The rooms were filled with fragile treasures. The manor was over a hundred years old and Mr. Wolf had done everything he could to keep it historically accurate while allowing for all the comforts of modern living.

To maintain the old world charm and romantic qualities of this timeless home-away-from-home, children were expressly unwelcome. Hotels and restaurants have the right to deny service to any individual, so long as the reason is clearly posted. Thornhurst welcomes guests of all color, creed, and species, so long as they are over 21. Besides, the fact that alcohol was readily available made a dandy excuse for those who thought “I don’t like kids” was somehow offensive.

“Don’t worry about it,” Max nodded. “She’ll be fine. You act like this is the first time she’s been here. I love Annie and won’t let anything happen to her. Have fun at work; enjoy your trip!”

“Yeah, right…” Brent huffed. “Publisher’s meetings; they’re big fun!”

Max watched the Doberman dad walk to the door. He turned around to leer at the Shepard one last time, then closed the door behind him.

“Man, glad he’s gone!”

Up the stairs from the ballroom was the second floor landing. Wrapped clear around the grand entry hall was a beautiful brass banister and lattice. There were five rooms to either side on this floor; four were for guests and the other was for one of the more permanent residents. The same was true of the third floor.

The hotel office was in the space just above the greeting room; the only area enclosed and without a view of the room below. The wall that would have overlooked the ballroom instead was lined with computer monitors and surveillance equipment. Hidden all over the manor, in the strangest of places, were tiny little cameras. Guests were informed that they were being watched, but no one would have guest that they were being watched from three angles at all times!

There was a door either side the room; one for each side of the hall. Behind Miss Dixon, tucked back into the window bevel, was the hotel’s manager’s desk. From here, Roxanne Von Drake could manage the estate’s affairs without ever leaving the comfort of her office. It was here that she felt most safe, and she felt even more so with her close friend, Dixie, working just across the room.

Dixie had been at work for hours and she would be on duty for just a few more before she could step aside and tend to her niece.

“Aunt Dixie, I’m here!”

Dixie smiled and hugged the child.

“I know; I saw you coming.”

“Hello, Miss Roxanne.”

“Hello, Miss Annabelle! My, don’t you look full of pip and vigor!”

Annie laughed. They weren’t usually so formal. She turned back to her aunt.

“Well, what now?”

Dixie bit her lip. She had been keeping an eye on guest in room number six. He was up to something, but she couldn't tell what. She groaned in exasperation as something fell in front of the camera.

"Well, you see, I'm really busy, so you're going to spend the day with... Max, right, all day with Mr. Maxwell!"

Annie gave her a dirty look. Max wasn't exactly the type to volunteer to look after her. She knew this was another of her aunt's tricks.

"And he knows about it?" she asked.

Dixie bit her lip again and looked away.

"Well, nooooo.... But he doesn't have a choice in the matter!"

Dixie threw a switch and brought Maxwell up on the screen in front of her. He looked at the screen and put his eye right up close to the camera so that only his pupil could be seen. He backed away and turned his head so that his snout elongated in the concave lens.

"Wow, I look funny!" he said, watching his own face in the feedback.

"Max!" Dixie barked. "Cut that out! Can't you ever act your age?"

"How old do you think I am?" he asked.

"You're, like, forty. Right?"

Max was thirty six, seven years older than Dixie and the exact same younger than Roxanne. He didn't like being reminded that his golden years were behind him and was fast on the road to a midlife crisis.

"Max, I need you to look after Annie for the afternoon!"

"What? As if I don't have my own work to do?"

Dixie looked over her shoulder.

"Roxie, the rooms are fully booked and all of the guests have checked in. Max wants the afternoon off; will you let him go?"

"Sure. I don't see why not!"

Dixie turned back to the intercom.

"Ms. Drake says you are to take the afternoon off!"

"But I just punched in..."

"Well, I guess you'll be free to watch Annie, after all!"

Maxwell lived in an apartment above one of the empty shops out in the village. He lived all by himself, so the place wasn't exactly fit to entertain guests. It was only a single room and bath. His bed was in the corner, left unmade from the night before. His kitchen was in another: a mini-fridge, hot-top, and microwave. There were piles of clothes all over the place and an ironing board set up right in the middle of it all.

With Annie in tow, he'd made his way home, grumbling under his breath. He had her wait outside while he changed out of his suit and pulled on a pair of swim trunks. He exchanged his Oxfords for a pair of sandals and let her come in.

"Mr. Maxwell, I'm sorry you have to waste your time like this..."

Max's face softened and he knelt down to look her in the eye.

"Sweetie, I'm not mad at you. I really do enjoy having you around and I wouldn't ever let anything happen to you. I'm just annoyed that I got all dressed up for work, only to be sent home one hour into my shift."

Annie looked around the room. She couldn't help but smile; a pair of Max's boxers were hanging from the ceiling fan, along with a few mismatched socks.

"I don't have a drying rack..." Max whispered. "Please don't tell people how I live."

“What are we going to do now?” she asked, hoping it didn’t involve staying home.

“Now? Well, I thought we’d go and spend one of the last days of summer down by the beach! How’s that sound?”

“Really! I love the beach! Can we collect sea shells? Can I build a sand castle? Can I, please?”

“You can do anything you like!”

The Thornhurst Manor overlooks the bay. A short walk down the path was all it took for guests to step out of Victorian Thornvale and enter modern day Brenor Beach. To say the least, it was a popular destination all summer long.

Annie sat on a rock and pulled off her shoes and socks. She wiggled her toes into the sand and grinned. Max knelt down and started shoveling sand out from between his knees. It wasn’t a very dignified position, but something about it just felt natural.

“Mr. Maxwell, what are you doing?”

“On a hot day like this, I rather like to lay down and burry myself in the sand. It’s nice and cool underneath. Would you like to help me?”

In a short time he had a shallow trench all dug out and ready for him to lie down in. They had made a small mound of sand already and Annie wasted no time in piling it in on top of him. The little dog went to work making sure her friend was packed in nice and tight. She soon finished up, leaving only his head and feet exposed.

Max leaned back contentedly. The cool sand felt nice all around him and a pleasant breeze blew gently by. His eyelids felt heavy...

Suddenly Dixie’s voice was booming in his ear! “Hello, Max! Wake up!”

His eyes flew open like a pair of window shades!

“I wasn’t asleep! I’m awake! I’m watching Annie!”

Dixie was sitting on his left and Annie on his right. Instead of her security uniform, Sarah wore a two piece swim suit. In contrast to the black and tan he was used to seeing her in, pink looked very good on her.

“Come on, you great big sleepy head! I asked you to keep an eye on her and you go and fall asleep! Anyone could have come along and walked off with her!”

“Aunt Dixie! I’m not a little kid! I know not to go off with strangers!”

Sarah ruffled her niece’s ears.

“I know, sweetie, but Max still shouldn’t have left it up to you. You’re safe, so I’m not mad, but let’s teach this old fuddy-duddy a lesson!”

“I am not a fuddy-duddy!” Max shouted.

“He can’t be all that bad, Aunt Dixie! Anyone who can skate well enough to beat you must be pretty good!”

Max recalled how, earlier that year, he’d enjoyed a particularly satisfying victory over her. He’d won the right to strip off her inline skates and had taken advantage of the situation by relieving her of her socks as well. They’d rolled about, laughing and tickling each other in a most undignified way, but she never admitted that boards were better than blades.

“You know, I enjoyed having my paws tickled...”

Max bit his lip as he watched the girls slide his sandals off. Dixie ran her finger up his sole and smiled as his foot reflexively pulled away.

“...but we’re going to enjoy this a whole lot more!”

Development of a Story:

This is the follow up to *Tickling Dixie* and the set up for *Silk Secrets*.

Brentwood mentions a convention having taken place over the summer. He's referring to the ALA Annual Conference, which he did not attend. Rebecca Fife went in his place, as per *Airport Insecurity*.

Character Notes:

Max is a good worker, but you can tell that he's not quite as stuffy as he used to be. Over the summer, he's really loosened up, due to his relationship with Dixie. When I go to write stories that take place before these events, I'll have to be careful and make him extra stuffy to compensate!

Maxwell Davide, Sarah Dixon, and all other related items and characters

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