

Bast & Immie
A Short Story
Amy Saunders

Smashwords Edition

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~***~

Sebastian felt ridiculous having to ask his friend for help to ask out a girl. He was 32 and really shouldn't need anyone's advice. He was intelligent, exceptionally so in some respects. As a scientist, he could analyze and dissect complicated and chaotic information and bring it to order. He had advanced far in his career in a short time and at a young age. But he had to admit to himself that he didn't know how to ask out Imogen Bell.

He squirmed on the fiberglass top of his boat as the craft bobbed over the ripples created by a passing speedboat. It was mid-May in Whitesea, Rhode Island, and not quite warm enough to draw crowds during the week. It was, however, warm enough to zip out during lunch and bask on the bow while anchored in one of the popular swimming coves. Sebastian had spent over thirty minutes pondering the different ways to ask out Imogen.

Admittedly, Sebastian had always been preoccupied with other things and had never really learned much about dating. He knew as a young teenager that he wanted to be an underwater archaeologist and had spent most of his time pursuing that goal. After college, he took a calculated risk and followed one of his teachers back to the East Coast to work independently of a university.

Sebastian smiled up at the sun warming his face. Becoming Peter Bishop's lieutenant had been one of his better decisions. Peter respected and trusted him and gave him the freedom and flexibility he needed to do his work his way. But none of that helped him with his current problem.

C.J. padded back up to the bow with a bag of potato chips, his dirty blonde hair sticking out in all directions. He plopped down next to Sebastian, leaning against the windshield. Sebastian wouldn't usually bring him along when he wanted to think, but he'd asked him to come in case he decided to ask for his advice. C.J. didn't seem to mind the quiet that day and had kept to himself.

"What if you wanted to ask out a woman?" Sebastian said, examining a chip. "What would you say to her?"

C.J. grinned at Sebastian's care-free tone.

"So you want to ask Immie out?" he said. "It's about time." C.J. laughed as Sebastian narrowed his almond eyes. "I'm sorry. It's just...this is kinda funny. You can list every type of ship made through the centuries but you don't know what to say to a girl you like."

"Never mind." Sebastian glowered, turning his body the other way.

"No, no. I want to help." C.J. leaned forward, resting an elbow on his bent knee. "It's just, you need to stop treating it like one of our expeditions, you know? You're sitting here thinking of one hundred ways to ask along with the two or three hundred possible responses she could give." He shook his head. "It's too much thinking. You know each other, you talk all the time. She likes you. I'm sure of it. So just ask her."

Sebastian sighed. "You have more experience with this than I do," he said. "What should I do?"

C.J. stretched out, leaning his head back on his hands.

"You talk enough so you must know what she likes to do."

Sebastian thought back to some of his conversations with Imogen since they met.

"She likes to dance."

C.J. laughed. "You'd never survive."

"Then what?"

C.J. shrugged.

"Movies, museums, concerts. That sort of thing. Somewhere you'll be comfortable too."

Sebastian scratched the back of his head, his dark, ragged layers of hair resting on the back of his neck.

"She likes the theater," he said slowly. "She mentioned a while ago that it had been a long time since she did anything like that."

"There ya go! Look at what's playing in Providence or Boston." C.J. smiled.

"That still doesn't answer how I'm supposed to ask her."

"Just tell her you have tickets to a show you thought she'd like and that you'd like her to go with you. It's pretty simple."

"Simple for you."

"Simple for you too. You just need to stop thinking and do it." C.J. slapped the side of Sebastian's shoulder. "You won't regret it. Imogen likes you. I'm sure of it." C.J. stood up, his buff torso glistening in the sun.

Sebastian looked off into the horizon. *Stop thinking and do it.* His head raced and for a minute he wished his mind worked as simply as C.J.'s.

That night Sebastian sat on the floor of his screened-in porch, entertainment sections from the Providence and Boston papers spread out around him. He draped his right arm on the wicker seat behind him and popped the cap on the highlighter he held on and off, pondering his options. Comedy? Musical? Maybe a dance? Or something more cultural? Should he invite her to an early show and then go to dinner afterward? He flipped through the rest of both papers looking for the food sections. Or, maybe they should eat first, then go to a show, and then go for coffee and dessert. That would mean finding a

good cafe. Sebastian tossed the remaining papers onto the other side of the porch and stood up.

Stop thinking and just do it. But do what? Dinner, a show, then dessert? A show then dinner? Just a show and go out for coffee? Or skip everything and just do a show? Or skip the show and do everything else? He closed his eyes but that didn't help. His thoughts only got louder. Sebastian sighed, staring at a snapshot of Imogen he'd printed out and stuck to the fridge with a Woods Hole magnet. It was a close-up and you could clearly see her green eyes sparkling. Looking back, he was incredibly grateful to Peter for having brought her on board.

Imogen worked as a marketer for their private marine archaeology institute. Sebastian didn't see the point of having such a person involved at first. But Peter and their main financier, Mackenzie Attwood, did. Mackenzie met Imogen shortly after she had moved into the small harbor town of Whitesea and immediately passed her on to Peter. Peter called Imogen an "idea person" and thought her enthusiasm would suit their enterprise.

Sebastian remembered the first time Peter and Shazi had her over their house for dinner to meet the whole team. The five of them squished around the glossy oak dining room table, which they had cleared of books and charts so they could eat there. When he sat down, a woman with short auburn hair that flipped out a little on the edges and sparkling green eyes smiled at him. Sebastian mostly wanted to see what kind of idiot they would be dealing with. She was animated, waving her hands around as she answered everyone's questions, and was rather well-spoken with a decent vocabulary. But that wasn't enough to size up someone's intelligence.

"What do you know about marine archaeology?" Sebastian had said, deciding to skip the chatter and get down to the important questions.

Imogen looked up from her salad as if she'd forgotten he was there. A sculpted reddish-brown eyebrow curved up and she looked back at him placidly, except for something in her eyes that caught him off guard. He didn't know exactly what to make of it at that moment. She didn't betray the anger or irritation he expected in that situation. She was...amused. He could see Shazi shooting daggers at him out of the corner of his eye. Imogen just smiled.

"I've read up on things so I know a little of what's going on," she said.

"What's an amphora?" Sebastian could see Shazi give Peter a "make him stop" look but ignored it.

"A clay vessel used in ancient civilizations to carry things like wine and olive oil." She smiled. "I have a little bit of an interest in history so I knew that anyway. And I have a thing for water and pirates."

Sebastian pushed his plate forward and leaned his forearms on the table.

"What's the ship's ballast?"

Imogen looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm not a hundred percent clear on that, but it was stone I think and had something to do with balancing a ship loaded with cargo."

Sebastian raised an eyebrow.

"Why did they call them 'buccaneers?'"

Imogen laughed.

"Because they raised pigs before turning pirate. There are a bunch of other details that I can't remember that led to the name but it has something to do with the pigs. And that term technically applies only to the pirates from Hispaniola. That I know for certain."

Peter clapped, giving Sebastian a warning glance. "That's quite the piece of trivia," he said and smiled at Imogen, his blue-gray eyes glittering like diamonds under the light.

Imogen sat back and met Sebastian's steady gaze. "I enjoy this thing they call reading."

Sebastian smirked. Peter quickly changed topics to something lighter but Sebastian barely heard a word anyone said after that unless Imogen spoke.

Sebastian learned that behind those sparkling eyes was a mind that rarely slowed down. He still had doubts about the reasons she worked for them but he couldn't say he minded having her around. She could speak on a range of topics intelligently and was eager to learn new things. They didn't always agree but he respected the fact that she wouldn't change her opinions just because his were different. And he had adapted to her teasing, which he realized over time was just her way of trying to lighten him up. He was surprised by the fact that her smiles and general lightheartedness didn't irritate him. In fact, he found himself working hard not to be too serious around her, which from the look in her eyes, he didn't always succeed at.

But the major turning point came when Imogen left for a week to visit her family in Massachusetts. Within two days of her absence he felt irritable and kept to himself even more than usual. He snapped at C.J.'s constant chatter and had trouble focusing, even on things he normally couldn't tear away from. He woke up one morning with one thing on his mind: Imogen. Her apple cheeks and sparkling green eyes. And her laugh. That laugh that echoed off the white walls of the lab even when he couldn't understand what she thought was funny. He had laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering what he was supposed to do about it. He wished desperately that he knew how to flirt. Or could at least tease the way she did.

Did that mean she liked him too? He was never really sure about girls and had learned to distrust what he thought were good signs in that department. The few times he had reached out of his comfort zone to at least try to date had not gone so well. But Imogen was not like those other girls. She wasn't a flirt, even with C.J. who was notorious for that. She did stop by the lab a lot, even though it didn't always seem like there was a particular reason she came. And she never seemed in a hurry to end their conversations or get away even if he waxed on about topics she wasn't as familiar with.

None of that was conclusive but it could be encouraging. He went over some of their interactions, somewhat shocked by the minute detail he could conjure up. How she pushed strands of her hair behind an ear while they talked; the green shirt she wore that sort of dipped in front, exposing her slender neckline; the way she chewed on her pinky nail when she was thinking.

A few days had passed and he had only come up with one solution: ask her out on a date. The thing he had been least successful at his entire life. But there was no other way. And there was no way to turn back now that he knew how he felt about her. It was Saturday and Imogen would be home on Monday. Sebastian chugged the last of his beer and went back on to the porch to decide where to take her.

* * *

It was crazy to think of work as an escape from vacation. But when vacation was actually visiting family it was just that. Imogen sighed, happy to wake up in her own bed. She twirled a piece of hair, tracing the swirls on the ceiling she sometimes followed to fall asleep. She giggled realizing it wasn't actually work she looked forward to. She didn't bounce out of bed every morning to work on the institute's blog or website. Imogen wanted to see Sebastian. Sebastian with his brown eyes that danced when he was amused; Sebastian with his quick thinking and take charge attitude; Sebastian with his sharp sense of humor and intelligent conversation.

Imogen hurried through her morning routine and drove to the institute's lab, where they analyzed data from a new exploration site right in their own bay. Imogen felt a rush of glee and worry as she pulled up behind Sebastian's blue Jeep. He had removed all of the plastic covering the moment it had hit sixty degrees. She took a moment to collect herself before climbing out of her yellow VW Beetle, smoothing down her white capris and adjusting the fitted navy blue T-shirt with the puff sleeves she'd thrown on when nothing else seemed to look right.

Soundgarden played inside so Imogen knew Sebastian was around. She followed the music to a smaller room on the side of the building where they kept their computers and other equipment. Sebastian sat in the swivel chair, resting his chin on his hand, enthralled with something on the computer screen. He mouthed the words to the song and didn't notice Imogen standing right next to him. She waited a moment, thinking he would come to and realize someone was standing there. But he was working. And Imogen had learned that he lost touch with the world around him easily when he was concentrating.

Imogen dropped her purse on the desk beside her. Sebastian looked up as if he knew she was there all along, surprise only crossing his eyes briefly. Imogen smiled apologetically and waved. Sebastian put a hand on the back of his head and stood up, the swivel chair propelling into the side wall. His face stayed the same but his eyes danced, which Imogen took to mean he wasn't unhappy to see her. Her cheeks glowed pink and she tried to stop the sudden rocking back and forth on her feet that started. Sebastian patted the hair on the back of his head, and they stood there staring at each other.

* * *

Sebastian struggled to come out of the cocoon he'd crawled into for the last couple of hours. The reason for all the thinking and realizing and planning he'd done over the last week stared at him wide-eyed and glowing. He tried not to just stare at her while he composed himself, though her figure was to great advantage in what she had on. He didn't expect to see her so soon after she came home and wished he'd had a minute to think of something intelligent to say. What was he saying? He'd had an entire week!

"How is the new exploration coming?" Imogen said. Sebastian's eyebrows shot up.

"About the same. Did you have fun with your family?" He wanted to kick himself for not asking her that first.

Imogen shrugged. "Nothing exciting happened but we had a nice time." She smiled and pulled down on her shirt hem for the hundredth time. Again, Sebastian wondered if all these little things meant she liked him.

"Your family's in Western Mass.?"

"Yeah, but I went to see my sister in Boston too."

Sebastian thought quickly to the tickets he'd bought.

"So you like Boston?" he said, his voice rising an octave.

Imogen smiled, bewilderment crossing her face.

"Boston's great. So...what are you working on?" She pointed at the computer screen.

Sebastian exhaled and they talked more easily after that.

That night, he stood in his room in front of the mirror attached to the dresser on the wall across from his bed. He ran his fingers through his hair, trying to convince himself that he did not look ridiculous.

"I got these tickets to a show in Boston next weekend," he said to his reflection, "and I thought you might want to go with me." He frowned. It sounded as if he had asked another person and she couldn't go. He cleared his throat and tried again.

"I read about this show in the Boston paper and I thought you'd like it so I got tickets. Would you like to go with me?" He paced back and forth, stroking his chin. That sounded like an awkward high schooler. He returned to the mirror. "I have tickets to a show in Boston next weekend that I thought you would like. Will you go with me?" He smiled. It was succinct and honest without all the awkwardness. Of course, he had to remember it and then say it that way with Imogen in earshot.

He repeated it a few times with his eyes closed, then flopped onto his mattress, trying to imagine what she would say. He pictured her from that afternoon, flushed and fidgeting. Was it because of him? And was that a good sign? He rubbed his forehead. As nervous as asking Imogen out made him, he really wanted to stop asking questions he couldn't answer for sure. At least now he had a definite plan, which was more than he'd had last week at the same time. In fact, he was just realizing how much he wanted to ask her out then. Funny how quickly things happened sometimes. The next day he would stop by her cottage in the afternoon and ask her...not just his reflection.

He woke up in a panic. Sebastian reminded himself that this scenario was different and the end result would be different. And, if not, he was going through with it anyway. He swung his long legs over the side of the bed, and stretched to his full height. Gray light glowed outside as Sebastian sipped espresso on the porch, reviewing his plans to speak to Imogen that afternoon.

The morning dragged. As hard as Sebastian tried to concentrate and get lost in his tasks, he just couldn't. He sat at the computer, staring at the same paragraph of an old document he had read about five times. Peter tapped him on the shoulder.

"Getting any where with that?" Peter said, a twinkle in his eye.

Sebastian rubbed the back of his head.

"Sort of," he said. "I'm just a little distracted."

"So I've heard."

"C.J.?" Sebastian scowled.

"Honestly, Bast, he didn't have to tell me. I already knew." Peter's eyes crinkled around the edges as he smiled. "So when are you asking her out?"

Sebastian glanced around as if she could appear out of thin air any moment.

"Today," he said. "This afternoon, I hope. That's why I'm a little unfocused right now."

"Well, that's a good thing to keep you unfocused." Peter smiled but he looked more serious. "I think she's good for you. She's the only person I've met who seems to think you have a less serious side. And I fully believe she'll find it."

Sebastian grinned in spite of himself.

"She does," he said. "I don't know how but she does."

"Where are you taking her?"

"A show in Boston. And dinner before at an Italian restaurant. Then coffee after at a nearby cafe if she wants to."

Peter chuckled. "Well, you're prepared."

Sebastian reddened.

"She's fortunate," Peter said, slapping his shoulder. "You'll be fine."

Sebastian smiled and took a deep breath. It was time to do this. He left the lab with Peter's confidence bolstering his own, striding toward Imogen's cottage. He walked in the shadow of some of the street's pastel Colonials, their doorsteps right on the sidewalk. It was a quiet Tuesday afternoon, the town's residents at work or in hiding. Of course, each house could have exploded as he walked passed and he wouldn't have noticed. He was too concerned with silently rehearsing the speech he had practiced in the mirror the night before. He hopped over the white gate to avoid the crazy beagle who always tried to escape. Someday he would help Imogen train that stupid mutt to stay inside the fence.

Sebastian stood on her stoop, staring at the white paneled door with the tarnished brass lion's head knocker. He curled his slender fingers around the handle and slowly brought it up and down. He knocked twice and waited, reminding himself to breathe. He heard footsteps and the door opened. Imogen stood there, confusion on her face, then something else Sebastian couldn't pin. She smiled but her green eyes looked afraid. Or worried maybe.

"Is this a bad time?" Sebastian said, his heart racing.

"No...I just...I-"

"She has company. Unexpected company."

Sebastian's eyes went wide for a moment, then darted from the intruder to Imogen. Imogen rubbed the back of her neck, her cheeks flushing. Derek Levinson stood next to her, his blonde hair combed to the side, sweeping across his pale forehead. His blue eyes met Sebastian's and he smiled, holding out a hand. Sebastian accepted it, forcing a smile to cross his own lips. It felt like a dream. No, a nightmare. Like a nightmare he should have had the night before.

Levinson was another young marine archaeologist making waves. A match to Sebastian, if he was being honest. He had also chosen the independent route, not working with a university or museum, but led his own team out of San Francisco. They saw each other about once a year at trade conferences and though they weren't exactly friends, they respected each other's work. That is until a few months before at the last conference they all attended in Florida.

It was Imogen's first conference; Peter invited her mostly so she wouldn't feel left out. They got stuck at the same table with Levinson during one of the dinners, and Levinson and Imogen talked through most of it. Even when the conversation turned occupational,

Levinson made a point to include her. Sebastian sat across from them, his insides burning every time Imogen laughed at something Derek said. Levinson wasn't exactly suave or even well-liked in general. He was outspoken and goal-oriented and didn't mind telling people off. But he did know how to start and carry on a conversation with someone he barely knew. A skill that had eluded Sebastian his entire life.

Seeing Levinson inside Imogen's home made Sebastian want to break the man's jaw. Of course, Levinson forewarned him at the end of the conference that he liked Imogen. They all waited on the sidewalk in front of the hotel, piling suitcases into taxis and other cars. Sebastian stood alone, waiting for the rest of his group. Levinson strode up to him, a black messenger bag slung across his shoulder.

"Now that I know who my competition is," Levinson said calmly, his blue eyes like steel, "I can squash you." Derek shook his hand, smiled, and disappeared into the back of a taxi.

Sebastian initially thought he meant work. It was only on the way home that it hit him. Levinson was talking about Imogen. And, honestly, the threat had only encouraged Sebastian at the time. If Derek considered him to be a threat that meant he stood a chance with Imogen.

But now Derek was in Whitesea inside Imogen's house. As far as Sebastian knew, no one had heard from him since the conference. Had Levinson been in touch with Imogen all this time?

"Didn't know you were in town," Sebastian said icily.

"I'm just around for the week," Derek said. "I'm in Providence for a family wedding."

Sebastian glanced at Imogen who shifted on her feet, the awkwardness she felt plastered on her face. She met his eyes and smiled, but it was strained.

"What did you stop by for?" she said.

Sebastian kept his eyes on Imogen though he could feel Derek's eyes burning into him.

"Nothing that can't wait," he said, swallowing. "I should've called first." Sebastian took a step back off the stoop. Derek held his hand out again.

"Good to see you," he said, his blue eyes mocking him.

Sebastian took his hand, his jaw locking, and backed away, forcing a smile for Imogen. His nostrils flared as he marched back to the lab, fists clenched.

* * *

Imogen watched Sebastian's long and lean figure stalk away from her house. She wanted to bolt across the yard and catch him and explain everything. She had no idea why he had come over but something told her he had a good reason and Derek Levinson had just ruined everything. How and why Derek had picked that day to intrude was beyond her.

She sighed and closed the door, really wanting to just kick him out. Derek smiled, clearly pleased with the situation. Imogen didn't mind Derek aside from circumstances. And if she didn't know Sebastian, she might have liked Derek. But she did know Sebastian and Imogen had told Derek at the conference back in the winter that she liked someone else, after he made it plain that he wanted to get to know her. She hadn't said who she liked but it was obvious he had made an accurate guess.

Derek hadn't seemed the least bit deflated by her rejection at the conference. In fact, he seemed more confident than if she'd just agreed to keep in touch. Imogen had thought that was weird but blew it off, figuring she wouldn't see him until the next year anyway. And anything could happen before then. She never counted on him just appearing at her front door that spring.

While Imogen felt flattered, her interest in Sebastian had only grown since the winter and she really didn't want Derek messing up her chances of Sebastian making a move. Sebastian and Derek shared similarities. But she knew she would have to give Sebastian time to come around and ask her out. He didn't move like lightening the way Derek apparently did. Now Derek was the one standing in her cottage and Sebastian was walking away.

Imogen turned to face Derek, who sat next to her on the couch. He leaned back against the cushions, glancing around him.

"I'd call you a crazy cat lady," Derek said, "but you don't have any cats."

"The border isn't mine," Imogen said, waving at the wallpaper border of different colored house cats. "I rent and it's too much trouble to take down."

"Well, you've done a pretty decent job working around it." He rubbed his chin. "But I didn't come all this way to talk about cat borders." He leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "Imogen, I want you to go out to dinner with me."

* * *

Sebastian was happy to find the institute's lab empty by the time he walked back. He was afraid what he might do or say if he ran into anybody. He went back to his chair in front of the computer and stared at the screen, now flashing random images from their various expeditions. He watched the photos, thinking of how sure he was when submerged beneath the water sifting through silt. He knew a precious artifact from the rocks and shells and crusted over debris. He could bring it to the surface and clean it off and examine it, then place it alongside the dozens of other small pieces and figure out their combined story. But he often felt like he was losing his footing when it came to dealing with people. He ran his fingers through his hair. There were reasons he stuck to his career. Maybe he should have done that this time.

There was no point in trying to go back to what he'd been doing earlier. Sebastian left the lab and headed out to his Jeep. He looked up from his keys to find Imogen leaning on his car. He shook off his surprise and groped for something to say.

"I don't know why you came by earlier," Imogen said, her voice wavering, "but I just wanted to explain what happened." She took a breath and walked forward. "At the conference, Derek said he wanted to stay in touch but I told him I wasn't interested. So he found out where I lived through other means. Anyway, not that you care, but nothing's going on there...with him and me that is. He left and I'm not going out with him." Imogen blushed and tried to keep her eyes on his.

"I just got these tickets...to a show," Sebastian said, saying the words before he realized what he was saying. "It looked like something you'd like. It's a musical and I don't know if you like a lot of singing and dancing but the story sounded good. Otherwise, I wouldn't have bought the tickets." He cleared his throat, trying to get a grip

on what he was saying. "So I was just wondering if you would go with me?" He wanted to sink into the ground. All that rehearsal time had done absolutely nothing to help him.

Imogen's eyes sort of...melted. She smiled and nodded enthusiastically.

"I'd love to," she said, her pink lips breaking into a smile. "I love shows. And musicals."

Sebastian smiled, feeling his confidence rise.

"So this Saturday then. I'll pick you up."

"I'll see you then. Probably before, but you know what I mean." Imogen laughed then took some steps back and turned to head home. Sebastian watched her walk away, smiling to himself. C.J. was right. He had just asked and she said yes.

Saturday came faster than Sebastian anticipated. He left work early, took a hot shower and downed a beer. He pretended it was a normal night where he would sit down on the porch with a book or magazine until about ten o'clock and then go to bed. But as he stood in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at his wet hair matted to the sides of his face, he realized he was in trouble. He'd parted his hair and combed it, droplets of water sliding down his bare chest and back. In hindsight, it might have been a good idea to get a hair cut. He had tried slicking it back but felt like a 1940s gangster. So it would have to stay as is.

He threw his blazer across the back seat of his Jeep and drove off toward Imogen's. In less than five minutes, he parked in front of her house, glancing in the rearview mirror to straighten out his wind blown hair. Sebastian stood on her stoop again, wrapping his fingers around the knocker. If Derek Levinson was in there he would in fact punch him. He rapped the knocker against the door, holding his breath. He heard feet stamping across the house and the door flew open. Imogen's face glowed in the early evening light.

"You're here already," she said. Sebastian looked at his watch. "Just give me five more minutes." She shut the door before he could respond.

Ten minutes later, the door opened again. Sebastian stood a little ways away in the yard, hands in his pockets. Imogen stood in the doorway in a short black dress that made his heart pump faster. He realized he was staring and shook himself out of it.

"I'm ready," she said, closing the door behind her. Sebastian stepped aside for her to go first. Looking at the Jeep, she stopped short.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"Could we take my car?"

Sebastian glanced at her and then at the Jeep and then back to her. He shrugged.

"It's my hair," she said. "You don't have the siding up."

He blinked.

"The wind will destroy my hair," she said.

Sebastian smiled as he ducked down into her Beetle, determined not to taint the evening in any way. Imogen smiled back, her eyes sparkling. Sebastian forced his eyes on the road.

"I didn't realize you liked musicals," Imogen said.

"I don't." Sebastian cursed himself for answering so fast. "I mean, it just looked interesting is all. By itself. Not because it's a musical per se."

Imogen faced away from him for a moment, but he thought he saw her smile in the reflection in the window.

"So did you finish that book you said you were reading?" he said, trying to relax.

"I read it in two nights. I know novels aren't your favorite reading material, but you might like that one. It was short and action-packed. And the main character is male."

Sebastian smiled. She knew what he liked.

"You could read it between working on that tower of archaeology magazines next to your couch," Imogen said.

"Those are old."

Imogen pictured the stack as high as the side table.

"You know you could sift through them and rip out what you want to keep."

"Too much trouble. Give it a few months, they'll all be outdated and I can toss the whole thing."

"Surely some of it's worth holding on to."

"It's all industry news for the most part. It goes stale. If the info is important enough, I just keep the whole magazine."

Imogen looked up at the roof, screwing her mouth up.

"Come to think of it, the whole ripping out business never does me much good. I sit for an evening filtering through magazines so I can recycle them. But I never look at the articles I ripped out again. They just go from sitting untouched in the magazine to sitting untouched in my file folder. It's a complete waste of time."

"That's my theory."

"And eventually the same information shows up again anyway." Imogen crossed her arms over her chest. "That's it. I'm just tossing the entire magazine from now on. Do you know that I still had one box I hadn't unpacked since I moved here? Today, I finally had it with stepping around the stupid thing to get to my living room. Guess what was in it? Fashion magazines from a year ago."

Sebastian looked puzzled and Imogen laughed.

"They're useless!" she said, throwing her arms in the air. "In that amount of time, the entire fashion industry could have blown up and started a revolution. It disgusts me that I dragged those things from California to toss them in my recycling bin in Rhode Island. Am I nuts?" She glanced at Sebastian sideways. "Don't answer that. I just couldn't believe I've been tripping over a box of outdated fashion for all this time. Should've just tossed the whole box." She sighed. "Oh well. I won't do that again."

Sebastian smiled, all his worries about the evening dissipating.

They made it through dinner with very few interruptions in their conversation and survived the musical, which Sebastian had to admit he kind of liked. Imogen laughed at his reluctance to confess that he felt emotionally stirred by certain numbers. They walked passed the row of theaters, the Common on the other side of the street. People dispersed from the theater, some running to the T, others walking one way or another toward a destination. Sebastian steered Imogen to a coffee shop he'd found online. She seemed like she was enjoying herself and Sebastian was in no hurry to end the evening. They walked into the cafe, grabbing a two-seater by the window before all the after-theater goers caught up to them. Sure enough, a few minutes after sitting down, people crammed around the entrance like sheep.

Sebastian and Imogen watched for a few minutes, the noise level suddenly escalating. She grinned and picked up the menu, scanning it before appearing to study each item in

depth. Sebastian forced himself to do the same, though studying Imogen appealed to him much more. She'd taken off her jacket, revealing her slender neckline and shoulders. She'd had the jacket off inside the theater as well but between the dim lighting and distractions he didn't have a chance to really absorb it. Now, sitting across from her, he dearly wanted to kiss her. Imogen looked up from the menu and met his dark eyes, not exactly staring at her, just gazing.

"Espresso?" she said, raising an eyebrow after they ordered. "That's very...*moderne*." Sebastian laughed.

"My family is Mediterranean. I grew up drinking espresso."

Imogen nodded.

"Is that why you got into marine archaeology?" she said. "I mean, the Mediterranean, not the espresso."

Sebastian grinned.

"Shipwrecks litter the Aegean Sea and my uncle would take me diving every summer around some of his favorites," he said, struggling to get out of his jacket without hitting anyone. "I wanted to know everything about them. What they were doing there, what they were carrying, and where they came from and were going. I got obsessed and started reading every book I could find on the subject." He shrugged. "I knew what I liked so it didn't take too long to figure out what I wanted to do. What about you? When did you know you wanted to go into marketing?"

"I didn't. Working for you guys happened by accident. I really like what I'm doing but I didn't set out in life intending to do this. In fact, I've never really set out intending to do anything specific. It's taken a long time to find a place to settle. In more than one way."

Imogen aimed her fork at one end of the chocolate cake in front of her. She took a chunk off and closed her eyes, sliding the fork out of her mouth slowly. She smiled at Sebastian who hadn't taken a bite out of his dessert yet.

"So why did you end up in Rhode Island if your family is in Massachusetts?" Sebastian said, slicing off a piece of his dessert finally.

"Inez Lemar," she said. "I think you know her. She's an old family friend. Inez invited me to stay with her when I said I wanted to move back East. So I did. Everything just kind of fell into place from there."

Sebastian watched Imogen lick icing off of her fork and thought he might call Inez later and thank her.

"Does your family still go to Greece every summer?" Imogen said.

"My parents do. Nick has kids so they don't go every year anymore. I haven't been in a couple of years. I do talk to my uncle sometimes though."

"He must be excited to see you diving wrecks for a living."

"He told me recently that he follows what we're doing on the website."

Imogen's cheeks glowed and she burst out laughing.

"Did you tell him that you think the website's a waste of time?" Her eyes sparkled the way they had the first night he met her. She wasn't the slightest bit affronted. In fact, she was amused.

"I'm starting to think differently," he said sheepishly. "You have some good ideas."

Imogen laughed.

"Just watch," she said, "I'll have you writing blog posts before long."

"I don't think so."

"We'll see."

The way she looked at him, Sebastian thought he might give in to almost anything she asked.

It was already the next morning by the time Sebastian parked her car in front of his Jeep. They strolled to her door, neither of them in a hurry to separate.

"I'd invite you in for coffee but we already had some," she said. "And it's kind of late for that I guess."

"I should go anyway."

"Early start tomorrow?"

"Probably not as early as usual."

Imogen smiled.

"I had a fantastic time," she said. "I'm writing that restaurant down. And that chocolate cake at the cafe was superb."

Sebastian glowed, pleased with the results of his research.

"I'm glad you had fun."

Imogen stared at him curiously.

"Of course I had fun. I was with you."

Sebastian stood on the ground at eye level with her.

"Fun is not usually a word people use to describe me."

"I'm not 'people.'"

Sebastian took a step closer, their noses almost touching.

"No," he said, "you're not."

Imogen pressed a finger against his lips, her eyes locked on his.

"Goodnight," she whispered. She walked inside, her finger sliding off of his mouth. Imogen turned and smiled, her cheeks pink, and closed the door.

Sebastian stood there a moment and caught his breath, then sauntered back to his Jeep. He sat there before turning on the engine, just staring down the lamp lit street. He wanted to whistle. He couldn't but he wanted to and he'd never desired that talent in his whole life. He wanted to dance down the town streets like Gene Kelly in that rain movie and whistle. He'd never really understood the point of movies constantly interrupted by singing and dancing but he was starting to. The people who wrote them must have had a night like his. They must have known someone like Imogen. He sat there, his heart on fire, replaying the last several moments in his mind. His world was a new place. Imogen Bell liked him. Sebastian stared at the ceiling of his bedroom the rest of that night, humming until he fell asleep.

###

About the Author



Amy Saunders is an indie novelist and short story writer. This story features characters from her debut mystery novel, *Dead Locked*. When she's not writing, Amy loves trying out new recipes and watching movies.

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...and now for a sneak peek of *Dead Locked*

Chapter 1

~*~

Whitesea, Rhode Island

Saturday, August 21

Imogen Bell waited for Sebastian at his house, planning to attack him with good looks and charm. She propped open her pink cosmetic case on the toilet seat and examined her options for the evening. About the time she slid on a second coat of brown tinted mascara to accentuate her cat eyes, the outside screen door slammed. He didn't bother to bomb in on her, which meant he was opposing her silently. She smirked at her reflection, her apple cheeks now glowing pink, amused by the whole game. The imperfections on her round face smoothed over, she latched her cosmetic case and unzipped the garment bag slung over the bathroom door. Sebastian didn't even have a hook to hang it on.

She dressed and lingered in his bedroom, until she heard the fridge door shut. Imogen slunk into the living room, her body wrapped in a strapless black dress that curved down to her calves. She walked by Sebastian casually, who munched on chips on the couch in front of the TV, relishing his brown eyes following her across the room. She

took her time leaning over to pick out a beverage from the fridge, letting him absorb all the benefits of suffering in a tux for a few hours. She smiled to herself, remembering the way Caroline Ferrars had studied her earlier, and she had to admit having more than just an impressive mind didn't hurt.

She walked back around to the living room and carefully sat down next to him on the olive green couch.

"It's all yours," she said, pointing to the bedroom. Sebastian's eyes flitted over her figure. Imogen imagined him calculating what spending an evening with her in that dress was worth. He stuffed another chip in his mouth and chewed slowly.

"What do I get in return for doing this?"

Imogen met his gaze.

"You're bargaining with me?" she said.

"Aren't you?"

Imogen looked up at the ceiling and shrugged.

"What do you want?"

"If I go tonight," he said, pointing at her, "I get to skip the next lunch, dinner - event - that comes up."

Imogen raised an auburn eyebrow.

"That's it?"

"That's all I was asking for tonight."

Imogen mulled over that for a second. "Good point. Sounds like a deal to me. Now go get ready before it gets any later."

Sebastian vanished behind the bedroom door. He reappeared a short time later, and Imogen appraised his long, lean figure against the doorway, hands dug into his pants' pockets. Everything about Sebastian was long and lean. From his nose and jaw line to his palms and fingers. He was sinew and muscle and little else. And all that dipped in a black tux made her mouth water.

"For all your insistence that this is a waste of time," Imogen said, a gold glint in her eyes, "you've cleaned up nice."

She noted that he'd even made an effort to tame his almost-black hair by gelling it back away from his face. She thought she actually preferred it the way he usually styled it - or didn't rather. He walked forward, the heels on his square toe dress shoes clicking against the wood floor, with a pen and two yellow legal-size papers in his hand. He set them on the coffee table.

"What's that?" she said.

"Our bargain. I go tonight, the next event that comes up I don't have to go to. Pretty basic. I already signed."

Imogen laughed then stopped when his eyes didn't so much as hint at a smile.

"You're not seriously making me sign a contract?"

Sebastian looked her square in the eyes, still no sign of amusement.

"There are two copies to sign there so we each have one," he said.

She laughed again and pulled the cap off of the black pen on top of the papers.

"Well," she said as she signed, "I'll be sure to put this in my security box first thing on Monday."

Imogen stuffed her contract into her black satin clutch and balanced against the wall to squeeze her feet into a pair of pointy-toed black heels. Sebastian folded himself into

Imogen's yellow VW Beetle after she protested that the wind would destroy her chin-length red hair, now perfectly flipped out at the edges, if they rode in his Jeep. In about ten minutes, they pulled into the yacht club parking lot and Sebastian surrendered the keys to the valet. The sun shimmered over the harbor, orange and pink hues rippling over the water's surface. Imogen admired the calm for a moment, still giggling, then walked through the glass door, Sebastian on her heels.

A hundred voices echoed in the vaulted ceiling of the yacht club ball room. Imogen took a deep breath to let out her excitement, wrapping her hand around Sebastian's.

Just beyond the yacht club in the bottom of their own bay rested the remains of a local legend. Stories passed down through the centuries claimed that *The Freelove* - a pirate ship captained by Isaac Crewe - sunk in the bay during a storm in the summer of 1720. After months of remote scanning and exploratory dives, Peter Bishop and his team of underwater archaeologists, including Sebastian, found a site that looked promising. The clincher came when they unearthed the ship's bell, inscribed with the ship's name -- *Freelove*.

Imogen smiled wide as a familiar face emerged from the crowd.

"You came!" Mackenzie Attwood said, clapping Sebastian on the shoulder. "I had a bet going with C.J. and I believe I just won." His saggy skin puffed out as he smiled.

Sebastian cringed but forced a half-smile.

"It's not that big of a deal," Sebastian said, taking a step backwards. Imogen knew physical contact was not his favorite thing. At least, with most people.

"Nonsense!" Mackenzie said, waving it off. "You're one of our stars tonight. If it weren't for your hard work and expertise, we'd have no reason to celebrate."

Imogen grinned, looking from Mackenzie, whose wrinkled face lit up with a smile, to Sebastian, who looked like he was going in for surgery.

"You have Peter to thank, not me," Sebastian said.

Mackenzie ignored him and took both of Imogen's hands, pecking her on the cheek.

"You look exquisite, my dear," he said. "Keep your eye on this one; don't let him slip out the back." He winked.

"Is Carol here?" Imogen said, scanning the mass of bodies behind Mackenzie.

"She did come though I'm still not sure she's up for it." Mackenzie frowned. "She just had a treatment yesterday but insisted on coming anyway." He stood up straighter, glancing around nervously. "Well, I must attend to some things before we get started. Get a drink and enjoy yourselves." He winked at Imogen again and walked back into the stream of guests.

"I like the sounds of that," Sebastian said.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"No, the drink."

"You know you could just sit back and revel in all of this," Imogen said. "You have worked for it."

"I'd rather be out diving the site."

Imogen rolled her eyes.

"You wouldn't be out there right now anyway. And before you list off all the other things you could be doing, you can't because you're here. So do what the man said - get a drink and enjoy yourself."

Sebastian snorted and walked away, weaving his way towards the bar. Imogen watched him to make sure he didn't go anywhere near an exit. When she saw him at the bar and ordering she felt safe to mill about.

Sebastian waited for his vodka and tonic, drumming his fingers on the bar. The voices bouncing around the vaulted ceiling pounded in his head. If Imogen didn't look the way she did, he would have bolted out the emergency exit next to the stage. He looked at the gold and red "Exit" sign longingly. He should never have signed a contract obligating him to stay. He took a swig of his drink then searched heads for his auburn-haired mischief-maker. He spotted her with Shazi and nodded approval. If only she didn't look that good.

Caroline Ferrars slid in next to him. Even with what looked like five-inch heels, he still dwarfed her. She smiled enthusiastically, flipping back her thick blonde waves behind a bare shoulder. Sebastian looked on indifferently, wondering how much longer until the actual procession started. Caroline licked her puffy lips, her pale gloss shimmering.

"So this is exciting," she said nervously. "Are all of your colleagues here tonight?"

Sebastian noticed something odd in how she asked the question and took another sip of his drink.

"As far as I know," he said flatly.

"Well," Caroline said, "I look forward to getting to know all of you better."

"Peter appreciates the financing. *The Freelove* might stay buried otherwise."

Caroline didn't look particularly thrilled with that response. Working with her would probably be a pain, Sebastian realized, but she had money and they needed it.

"I thought you could meet at my place for lunch on Monday," Caroline said, ignoring his last remark, "and work out all the financing details."

Sebastian studied Caroline, her expression a little too...hungry.

"I'll check with Peter later to see if he's available and get back to you."

Caroline smiled consent, but again, she didn't look thrilled with his response. Sebastian's eyes wandered in Imogen's direction, wondering when on earth she'd return.

Imogen found Shazi Bishop tucked into a corner with a martini. She was more dressed up than Imogen had ever seen her in a slim-fitting strapless navy gown that draped to the floor. The color set off her cream-colored shoulders and her dark hair pulled back into a bun. Her hazel eyes lit up when she saw Imogen and she motioned for her to sit down at the table.

"So they stick the VIPs where no one can see them these days?" Imogen said, relieved to give her feet a break as she maneuvered into a chair.

"Peter's in back getting ready to give his speech," Shazi said in her New Zealand accent, "and I'm tired of being introduced to people."

Imogen glanced around behind her to make sure Sebastian was still in the building. Sure enough, he was hovering around the bar.

"Is that Bast?" Shazi said incredulously.

Imogen turned back around and nodded proudly.

"What did you do to get him here?" Shazi said. "Tie him to the roof rack?"

Imogen laughed.

"I thought about that," she said, admiring the exposed rafters above her, "but then I decided seducing him would take less arm strength."

"Incredible," Shazi said, biting into an olive. "C.J. will be delighted."

Imogen smiled wickedly, then spotted Sebastian in conversation with Caroline Ferrars. She pursed her pink glossed lips. Shazi watched her expression, caressing the rim of her martini glass.

"You don't strike me as the jealous kind," Shazi said with a smirk.

Imogen frowned and crossed her arms. "I'm not. And it makes me mad that I feel that way."

"I really don't think you have anything to fear," Shazi said, glancing at the two talking. "Sebastian looks all business."

"He always looks like that."

Shazi raised an eyebrow. "Not with you."

Imogen softened a little, letting her arms drop to her lap. "Really?"

Shazi smiled, her eyes shimmering.

"I've known Bast for years," she said. "I know the difference."

Imogen sighed, involuntarily glancing back in Sebastian's direction. Shazi snickered and shooed her away, claiming she didn't need the company. Imogen made her way to the bar, telling herself she just wanted a drink. It didn't matter in the least that Sebastian conversed alone with Caroline.

She bumped shoulders with C.J. Cox, her other colleague and favored wheel man for the team's expeditions. His face beamed as they stood almost eye-to-eye. He'd shaved his light brown scruff, but kept his hair in jagged spikes. Imogen smiled at how much C.J.'s surfer boy attitude contrasted with Sebastian's stiffer demeanor.

"Thanks for reelin' in SeaBass," C.J. said with a grin. "Mackenzie owes me twenty bucks."

Imogen laughed. "I'm happy someone has faith in me," she said. "But Mackenzie seems to think you now owe *him* money."

C.J. looked her up and down, his eyes twinkling.

"Oh, I had faith in you."

Imogen punched his bicep, which she guessed hurt her knuckles more, though he grabbed his arm in jest.

"Mackenzie is going senile," he said. "I would never bet against a hot red head."

C.J. winked as the crowd wedged between them. Imogen focused back on the bar near the stage, standing on her toes to see Sebastian. Someone grabbed her arm, pulling her back down, and she turned to face Chad. He smiled, displaying a shining set of even teeth, and pulled her in for a hug.

"You have a lot of nerve," Imogen said, pushing him away.

He laughed, his tan skin creasing around his mouth.

"Sebastian beats the crap out of me," he pointed at the blue bruises on his jaw line, "and you say I have a lot of nerve?"

Chad glanced beyond Imogen, his smile disappearing. Sebastian slipped a slender hand across the small of her back, sending shivers up her body. Imogen wrapped her arm around what she supposed was his waist, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He smiled but his eyes were hard.

"We'll have to catch up later, Im" Chad said.

Sebastian tightened his hold on Imogen's waist, his smile evaporating.

"Beat it," Sebastian said icily.

Chad nodded to Imogen and slunk back into the crowd, his blonde head a foot or so above everyone but Sebastian. Sebastian loosened his grip around her waist and pulled out a chair for her at a table near the stage marked "Reserved" with individual place holders. He kissed her temple and sat down.

"Lookin' good SeaBass," C.J. said, appearing out of the crowd. He winked at Imogen and crashed next to Sebastian.

Imogen reviewed the crowd now taking their seats. Caroline Ferrars sat at a table diagonally from them next to Denny Wilson, a local expert on Captain Isaac Crewe. As usual, Caroline wore her giant oval locket. Imogen wondered if she slept with it. Carol Attwood, Mackenzie's wife sat at their table, her head wrapped in a silver scarf. Imogen smiled when their eyes met, noting how tired she looked. Not surprisingly, she couldn't find Chad anywhere. But as she scanned the circles of guests, she thought she caught Martin Velazquez hiding in the shadows near the stage. But when she doubled back to look closer, he'd vanished.

The voices receded as everyone took their seats. Mackenzie glanced around the room from the podium. The gala was his event and despite the financial switchover, he still presided over the affair with a broad smile. Imogen supposed his inability to continue financing the project didn't necessarily dampen his zeal for it. But he still seemed a little too happy to be there.

"Welcome!" Mackenzie said. "We're all here tonight to celebrate a remarkable achievement in local and world history."

Peter Bishop came to the stage to applause. Imogen glanced around her, wondering where Chad lurked, when she thought she saw Martin flit through the shadows on the side of the stage again. Peter set his speech in front of him and cleared his throat, the audience waiting in hushed anticipation.

"I think it's safe to say we all know the stories about *The Freeloze*," he said. "We know the love story. The buried treasure story. And even the ghost story. Until now, those were the only stories we had." Peter looked out at his audience, his blue eyes on fire. "We're here tonight because we all appreciate how the past affects us now. Finds like this one are very important to our understanding of the present and future. And, ultimately, of ourselves."

Sebastian swiveled his glass around on the table, lost in thought. Shazi smiled to herself, and C.J. yawned.

"But what about the treasure?" Peter said.

Imogen held her breath, wondering what he would say next. She could feel everyone at her table tense up and worried what would happen if he said something similar to the press conference. Peter paused and looked around the ball room. His blue eyes, crinkled at the corners, rested on Imogen. Just as he was about to finish his thought, the lights went out.

Gasps and a woman or two shrieking pierced the silence. Others whispered and chairs squeaked.

"There's no need to panic," Peter said without the aid of the microphone. "Just stay seated."

"When are the lights coming back on?" Imogen whispered.

"Afraid of the dark?" Sebastian said.

She turned to glare at him, then realized he couldn't see her.

"I just like to see my hand in front of my face," she said with more irritation in her voice than intended. Apparently she still felt annoyed about his earlier conversation with Caroline.

Imogen gripped the tabletop, blinking to see at all when a tiny light flashed near the stage. Then she heard a thud. She could feel her heart speed up and wished for light. It felt like forever before a loud rumble brought back some of the lights.

When she could see again, Imogen saw who made the thud. Shazi jumped from her seat, and Sebastian leaped over a plant onto the stage while C.J. helped Shazi up the stairs on the other side. Imogen followed, kneeling next to Peter. He gasped for air, blood soaking his white shirt. Sebastian pressed on Peter's wound with a cloth napkin, which soaked through in seconds. C.J. tossed him another one, panic dimpling his forehead. Sebastian concentrated on stopping the bleeding from the bullet wound in the side of his chest. At a glance, he looked perfectly calm, except for the worry darkening his chocolate eyes. Mackenzie hovered over Sebastian, his face drooping. Imogen thought she'd heard him call the police.

As if in a dream, Imogen heard screams, chairs squealing and crashing on the wood floor, and a sudden chorus of voices as word spread of what had happened on stage. But her heart pounding in her ears veiled the roar and she could only see Peter. Even the chaos in their little circle went on without her notice.

Shazi held Peter's head, stroking his hair with a shaking hand. Peter's eyes locked on Imogen's, sending spikes through her body.

"Stay with me," Shazi said, gripping his hand. His eyes never wavered from Imogen, and she fought the urge to look away. Peter's breathing slowed and his grip on Shazi relaxed. Sebastian clung to his wound, his eyes fierce. C.J. looked in panic from Shazi to Sebastian. Imogen stared motionless at Peter, his blue eyes still boring into hers. Peter Bishop was dead.