

Art Theft, Cocktails, and High Society

**FLIES
IN THE
PUNCH
BOWL**

a novel

ERIKA SIMMS

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Erika Simms

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Chapter 1

On a drizzly evening in November, Seattle's finest—dazzling enough to be seen from space—were gathered for an elegant affair in the trendy arts district, where I lingered amongst them, shamelessly out of place.

Dressed to the nines in a flirty black dress and stilettos that cost more than platinum per ounce, I was flanked by my closest comrades, Lyla Finch and Evan Neruda. There aren't enough people in the world like these two, and when things go south, there's no one you'd rather have by your side. Hurlled your car into a coin-op laundromat? Don't panic. Here's a shot of tequila. Go ahead, sink your teeth in.

Sworn members of the plebeian class, we never belonged in these affluent circles. If only we'd sought careers in technology and homesteaded the land of Silicon Valley, or discovered the cure for tomato blight. But that hardly stopped us from donning the masks when the call for a fresh thrill tugged at our sleeves.

“Should the gatekeepers of this glorious fete have doubted our overstated social status, I would have mesmerized them

with an artful tale about my privileged life as the mild-mannered grandson of a reclusive adhesives baron,” said Evan, the dimples in his Latin cheeks deepening as we entered the lively gallery.

Kaleidoscopic paintings hung from the satin-finished walls while sculptures forged from recycled materials left scuffs in the hardwood floors. Men with fat wallets and women with sparkling hunks of hardware filled in around us, the delicate aromas of antique roses and bergamot oil wafting from their skin. They chattered on like migrating geese in search of their next status symbol. Fancy waiters with dotted bow ties and silver platters swirled through the crowd, offering flutes of French champagne and hors d'oeuvres of chilled oysters and salmon mousse.

“The dump trucks must be queued up around the corner,” said Lyla, her blue eyes sparkling as she appraised the price tag for a copper sculpture of a strangler fig suffocating a smokestack. “Open the gates, people. Here comes the cash.” She adjusted the silk strap on her red cocktail dress, hemmed to a height that made her limbs look long. She turned to me. “The upper class must be minting Ben Franklins. Who’s keeping an eye on those printing plates, Annabel?”

“A prehistoric government bureau with guards who speak in grunts,” I said. “They’re fiercely armed with Confederate muskets and dental cavities.”

“You’ve been acquainted?” asked Evan. He combed his fingers through his dark hair, tucking the longer pieces behind his ears.

“Once or twice. The pleasure was all theirs.” I motioned to the open bar across the gallery, where a green-eyed barkeep was twisting the cork from an earthy bottle of Pinot Noir. “Shall we see who’s fastest off the line?”

A finicky lady with pineapple-blond curls and cheeks rouged into the next century appeared from our periphery and outpaced

us to the bar. Her pale legs were gangly, the result of subsistence on rice cakes and salad.

Evan leaned into my ear, his breath warm upon my cheek. “Sweep your fingers through your golden hair and bat your big brown eyes at the bartender so we can leap-frog this fussy dame.”

“She spends her days sucking bonbons through her teeth,” I said. “I can’t compete with that.”

“But you’re a young little peach, all twenty-seven years of you.” He pinched my cheek. “You even have the fuzz.”

“Your five o’clock shadow is the only whisper of facial hair amongst us.” I brushed his hand away and locked eyes with a server gliding toward us, a trio of crystal flutes perched upon his tray. “Forget the cocktails. This night calls for sparkling rosé.”

We luxuriated in the fizzing sensation of brut bubbles dancing in our cheeks.

I raised my glass to toast the occasion, then abandoned the notion as a painting of a milk cow patterned in Ben-Day dots caught my eye. Memories of growing enamored with Pop Art while chipping away at an art history degree revisited me, and I couldn’t help but chuckle at the satire. Certain destiny intended the painting to be mine, I glanced at the price tag and nearly swallowed my tongue. “How much can I get for my car?” I wheezed. “Do I really need two kidneys?”

Evan swatted my wrist as I reached for the canvas. “Annabel Riley, step away from the painting this instant. It is prohibited to touch the paint. The sign clearly says so.”

“Breaking the rules without fear of consequence is my greatest talent in life,” I said. “Besides, how severe could the penalty be—a night in the clink followed by an old-timey tarring and feathering?”

Lyla waved her finger in my face. “Unless you intend to walk away with that painting, don’t draw attention to us.”

Evan piled on. “What would your curator say if he could see this lapse in judgment?”

It was the curator of the modern art museum in downtown Seattle to whom he was referring, the affable man on the verge of petrification who had hired me into a position cataloging the museum’s collections after my promising career in the field of art recovery and insurance investigations ended prematurely. Our shared love of Lichtenstein’s comic strips and distant British descent had swayed him to disregard the blunder that led to my involuntary dismissal—paying out a giant settlement on a stolen Andy Warhol painting later deemed a forgery when the real one surfaced. By the time the fraud was discovered, the crook had disappeared into the wind. Few heads rolled with more finality than mine.

I shook off the memory two years expired and looked to Lyla to find a conspiratorial grin spreading across her face like unrefrigerated butter on a hot summer day. “If you want that painting, you must procure some bulky smocks to conceal it beneath as you slip through the exit a la Vincenzo Peruggia with the *Mona Lisa* at the Louvre a century earlier.” She pointed to the back door leading to the cobblestone alley.

I choked on my rosé. “That scheme didn’t work out so well for him. Two years later, police hauled him off in handcuffs.”

“Then skip the smocks, rip the painting off the wall, and make a break for the door.” She glanced to her right, then to her left, taking stock of the doughy bankers in our vicinity. “You could outrun every one of them. You’d be crossing the border by midnight.”

“Have I the skills to execute such a primitive heist without capture? I wouldn’t do well behind bars. I haven’t the faintest idea how to whittle a bar of soap into anything other than a smaller, deformed bar of soap.”

“They’ll teach you,” said Evan. “But watch your ribs. Prison kerfuffles are no picnic in the park and shivs made of chicken bones are surprisingly sharp.”

I considered the implications of that bleak truth. “As I’m less than three percent confident I could hold my own in a clam-chowder-fueled prison brawl, I suggest Lyla lift the painting instead.”

“The nonexistence of Chardonnay would make the slammer uninhabitable for me,” she said, fluffing the thick fringe of black bangs feathered across her forehead. Her features were soft, her face precious enough to sell baby food when she was a newborn. It was her stint as a Gerber baby that had motivated her career in advertising, though the rungs of the corporate ladder at the creative agency Abbesson & Trott—or Absent Thought, she called it—were occupied by stiff suits who viewed her as too wet behind the ears to emboss her business cards with any title more honorable than *minion*.

“Last week you declared Chardonnay tastes like oily linguine,” I said. “The absence of choice shouldn’t concern you.”

“Regardless of my flavor propensities, I prefer to be spoiled for choice, not restrained by it.” Pink rosé sloshed over the rim of her glass as she planted her hands on her hips in a very Lyla-like fashion. “Everyone from the Bishop of Rome to the Incas with their llama hides would agree with me.”

“The Incas were too busy throwing virgins into volcanoes to care about the plight of people facing lock-up with limited beverage options,” said Evan, rolling his almond eyes. Restless in nature and of Argentine descent, he was rarely afraid to speak his mind, clamming up only when the subject of his vanished motorcycle, Macho, was raised. With fantasies of becoming the next Che Guevara, Evan had bought a rusty Norton 850 in Tijuana five years prior, saying to hell with his journalism

degree and the dying news industry. When Macho disappeared from his hostel in Mexico City a few days later, the fuzzy glow of insurgency wore off, and he hopped the next chicken truck back to the States to beg the editor at the *Seattle Courier* to rehire him as a staff writer.

We polished off our rosé and helped ourselves to a glass of champagne. I said, “Let’s see what other paintings are on our shopping list.”

Effervescent conversations whirred in our ears as we slinked around the gallery like foxes on the prowl. Near the back, I spied a contemporary painting of an ombré fade of indigo watercolors with blocky white lettering that read: *Ooftab*. As I imagined the image with its kooky monosyllable hung above my dresser, the ear-splitting sound of a woman shrieking in disgust splintered the hum of voices. I spun on my heel to find a sour-faced mare, whose hair was crimped like an unshaved fiber goat, blubbering about a spill of champagne on her couture dress by a beastly patron with flippers for hands.

“Flies roam free in these parts,” said Lyla. “Someone should tell her to zip it.”

“You’re volunteering yourself?” I asked.

“I’m not the one who can’t mind my own business.”

“I’ll have you know I kept my New Year’s resolution to mind my own business two weeks longer than you kept yours to cut back on carbs.” I squeezed her lanky arm. “Not that you needed to. Your engine runs hot. The slab of cheesecake you gobbled at your company picnic last spring was incinerated before it left the folds of your intestinal tract.”

As the customers of the gallery became engrossed in the spectacle, the back door flung open and banged against the wall. Paint chips sloughed off the indentation it left behind as a barrel-chested thug draped in black motorcycle leathers stitched

with ornery motifs stormed in from the alley. His buckled boots pounded upon the floor. Stringy blond hair hung at his shoulders while coarse stubble blanketed his jaw. The cartilage in his nose was crooked, the crease between his eyebrows deep and mean. Acrid odors of cigarette smoke seeped from his skin as he stopped beside me and shouted from the fleshy depths of his diaphragm. "Where are the brothers who own this place?"

Silence devoured the room.

The man scanned it with cold eyes. "Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Dead air settled around us. In its undertow I trod as the man's agitation intensified. He cracked his neck, the octopus tentacles tattooed on his throat pulsating. "I will tear paintings off the walls if that's what it takes to get your attention."

Muffling a nervous squeak, a bright-eyed trust-funder with a ruby the size of New Hampshire nestled between her collarbones clutched Evan's arm and squeezed it like a ripe juice orange, sucking in wispy breaths.

Evan caressed her reassuringly. "Are you single?"

Dressed in a charcoal gray suit that fit as though he were born to wear it, a middle-aged gent with jet black hair and sapphire eyes shuffled hastily through the crowd. His skin was the color of a biscuit, his lips pursed in a way that made the apples of his cheeks seem artificially tight. A dirty martini with two green olives was gripped in his hand. "What seems to be the problem, sir?"

"Consider this your last warning, Domino," said the thug, drops of spittle expelled from his teeth. "Make things right or sink beneath the weight of cinder blocks to the bottom of Puget Sound."

Domino patted the air. "Please, calm down."

Choler filled the brutish man's eyes. "Don't tell me to calm down." He swiveled around and grabbed the crystal flute from

my fingers, slamming it to the floor. Shards of glass sprayed around my feet as it shattered upon impact, the champagne forming a small puddle that would soon become sticky if not properly addressed.

“Hey, watch it,” I said, riled by the hostile action as the stunned partygoers gasped around me.

The thug growled. “Shut your trap.” He looked to Domino, his voice thinning to a hiss. “I would hate for you to wake up in the morning to find you’ve been relieved of your ears.” He slid his fingers beneath his lobes in a slicing gesture that left little room for confusion.

“I prefer to keep my ears,” said Domino. “Let’s clear this up like gentlemen and you can be on your way.” With an anxious tremor, he pulled a monogrammed wallet from his suit coat and extracted two crisp hundred-dollar bills.

“You can’t buy me off with table scraps.”

“Two hundred dollars is hardly table scraps,” I said, finding the temptation to meddle irresistible—a fact I weakly blamed on the alcohol making my brain cells soggy. “That’s like seventy pounds of apples or half a bottle of that premium champagne you wasted.” I pointed my toe to the mess on the floor.

Lyla clapped her hand over my mouth. “Now would be a good time to stop talking.”

“You think you’re Domino’s protector?” said the thug. “I could snap your neck with a squeeze of my thumbs.”

I shuddered. “That sounds effective but violent. Allow me to clarify, I’ve never met Domino before tonight. My allegiance to him is nonexistent.” I gulped and offered the proof. “If ever he and I found ourselves wandering the shores of that bear-infested archipelago up near Alaska—what’s it called, Kodiak Island?—and a half-ton grizzly with a war hammer for a snout deemed us a threat, I’d kick Domino in the shins and run off without

remorse. I may even toss some berries and salmon fillets to the bear for good measure.”

The thug’s nostrils flared. “You sure do talk a lot. You think I couldn’t make you disappear?”

I processed the sum of his threats. “You’ve made some excellent points. I’m going to mind my own business now.”

“Too late.” The man lurched forward and captured me by my wrists. He tightened his grip, his calloused fingers pressing divots in my skin as he dragged me into his burly arms and spun me around to face the gallery owner. “No more second chances, Domino. Give me what I’m due or she’ll be next.”

Chapter 2

“Enough!” said Domino with sudden authority. “Let go of her. We’ll speak outside.” He motioned to the exit leading to the dark cobblestone alley, then spoke to his bewildered guests with forced composure. “There’s nothing to be concerned about, ladies and gentlemen. Merely a case of mistaken identity. More champagne, more salmon mousse!”

With an indelicate touch, the motorcycle thug pushed me away, then followed behind Domino, leaving the mess of broken glass and spilled champagne for someone else to clean up.

As the back door rattled on its hinges, the room began to thaw. A big-boned dame with a miniature poodle curled up inside her lizard skin handbag ordered everyone to lock the doors before the hoodlum returned to murder us all. Beside her, a refined gent whose sideburns were peppered retrieved his cell phone to summon law enforcement with their clubs and guns and walkie-talkies.

Evan and Lyla rushed to my side, champagne splashing from their glasses like seismic waves in a swimming pool.

“Are you all right?” asked Lyla, combing her fingers through my hair. “Your golden tresses look like a crow’s nest.”

“I’m fine.” I released a deep breath. “I just need to shake this off. Let’s take the floor and show these thoroughbreds what a proper foxtrot looks like.”

“In no galaxy is that a good idea,” said Evan. He threw his arm around my shoulder in an exaggerated gesture that tested the seams on his guanaco suit. A generous gift from his older brother of less athletic build who had done well flipping houses, the garment fit Evan snug, but gave him a more distinguished appearance than his twenty-nine years of age would suggest. “Don’t think we’ve forgotten how you stunk it up on the dance floor at your younger sister’s wedding last summer, jerking your arms and shaking your hips like a malfunctioned sprinkler.”

“That’s because I was doing the sprinkler. You don’t know good rhythm when you see it.”

“What the patient needs is a fresh glass of champagne,” said Lyla. She hurried off to procure the loot and returned minutes later with a clean glass and full bottle in hand. “The bartender was too preoccupied with an internet tycoon to notice my skillful sleight of hand.”

My pulse regulated as I sipped from the champagne.

“Your valor in addressing that bruiser was impressive,” said Evan. “I almost thought you were flirting with him.”

Lyla smacked his arm. “Not funny. Annabel could’ve been hurt. That tattooed ape towered over her.”

“Men who behave with the rough social skills of an early hominid are hardly my type,” I said. “Besides, Lyla would throw fists before she’d let me walk off with the lone bad boy in the room.”

She gave me a playful shove. “Only in certain circumstances.”

“What did he mean when he said *you’d be next?*” asked Evan.

“I’m not sure, though I’m certain he didn’t mean next in line

at a lemonade stand replete with Dixie cups and a banner printed in comic sans font,” I said. “Domino may have brushed off that confrontation as a case of mistaken identity, but he knew what it was about. The thug addressed him by name.” I took a long drink from my glass and gazed out across the gallery, where the glitzy patrons were dropping the notion of contacting the police in favor of debating topics more pressing: the stock market, the futures exchange, the fashion faux pas of the royal couple. Soon the room would be buzzing like a hornet’s nest, the unexplained intrusion all but forgotten.

“Let’s take a final lap of the gallery to polish off our champagne before Domino returns,” said Lyla. “By now he’s realized we’re imposters.” She shivered as the air-conditioning tickled her bare shoulders and paused to slip on a black cashmere sweater.

While I waited for her to fiddle with the buttons, my eyes wandered to an abstract art installation, where giant facial features were hung from the ceiling by thin wires: a bloodshot rubber eyeball, an eyebrow formed from broom bristles, a wax nose the size of a Jurassic mushroom. Titled *Deconstructed Capitalist*, the piece was a confusing take on a subject so overplayed, it ought to be a curiosity shop, where propaganda buttons and the shrunken heads of CEOs would sell like hot cakes.

Evan frowned at the work of art. “I pray our city council doesn’t blow our tax dollars on something so hideous for the sake of public enrichment. I’m not afraid to threaten to move to Canada.”

As Lyla gave up on her buttons to pile on with a quip about the sleep disturbances in which the piece would result for the poor sap duped into buying it, the enticing hum of a rumor mill churning nearby caused my ears to perk up. I followed the sound to find an expensive couple of mismatched ages sliding epicurean cocktails down their gullets while discussing a topic

for which I felt compelled to eavesdrop. I inched toward them, nudging Evan and Lyla to inch with me.

“Rumor has it, Byron is sweetening the reward for the return of his stolen surrealist paintings with a sizeable sum of cash and a scarce magnum of Walla Walla Syrah,” said the wrinkled man, adjusting the felt beret perched upon his gray head of hair. “As if the initial reward weren’t sweet enough. It practically exceeded the value of the paintings themselves.”

The smooth-skinned girl furrowed her tweezed eyebrows. “I fear Byron’s efforts are in vain. Three months have passed and still police have no leads.” She sighed. “Such a horror for Byron—his magnificent vacation in the Périgord soured by the discovery of the theft upon his return.”

The aging man nodded. “I heard he was inconsolable in the weeks following the crime. His wife was dosing him with a tablespoon of calf suet every night before bed. It’s a wonder he stayed so trim.”

“Is calf suet fattening?”

“No one knows.”

The girl picked at her manicured fingernails and flicked a sliver of cuticle to the floor. “Byron said the paintings were the prize of his collection. Pity he failed to put protective measures in place.” She suspired with judgment. “He fancies himself a cunning entrepreneur, yet he hadn’t the ability to lock his doors? Maybe the papers were right to label him a brainless inventor with more money than sense.”

“Don’t believe everything you read in the papers. Byron swears up and down he locked his doors and armed his alarm, and his wife swears up and down she checked twice.”

“If that’s true, how did the thief waltz into Byron’s mansion and lift the paintings from the walls of his foyer as if he were invited in?”

As the couple pondered the question, I crept several inches closer, a clandestine move proven poorly executed as my bare shins collided with a steel banana stalk jutting out from the sculpture of a dead banana tree. Knocked off-balance, I twisted like a circus contortionist and fluttered my hands, groping the hindquarters of a suited man nibbling on a crab cake. He spun around with raised eyebrows, leaving me to utter a clunky apology as Evan and Lyla dissolved into laughter.

I dragged them away by their sleeves. “Are you done splitting your sides?” We repositioned ourselves near the bar, and I dabbed up the champagne sloshed onto my satin dress with a cocktail napkin. Then I crumpled it into a ball and tossed it at Evan.

He released an evacuative sigh as it bounced off his lapel and landed at his feet. “Fortunately your legs bore the brunt of the impact with that steel banana stalk.” He motioned to my shins, where the first purpling of a bruise was peeking out. Soon it would have a pulse of its own. “Had you damaged that sculpture, you’d be hocking your soul to pay for it.”

“Three hundred grand,” said Lyla, regaining her composure. “Why would anyone spend that much on the sculpture of a dead banana tree when they could purchase the entire plantation in the jungles of Laos and still have change left over for the harvesting equipment?”

“Heavy wallets make the hips look wide.”

“Even so, what motivates one to sculpt something so uninspired?”

“According to the artist’s bio in the brochure, while studying at a distinguished institution in Manhattan, he roomed with a surly photography major of Irish descent who kept a coffee-stained copy of *The Dharma Bums* on his dorm room bookcase—”

Lyla reached across me to zip his lips. “It was a rhetorical question.”

Evan unzipped them and chucked the imaginary key that hadn't been in play. He turned to me. "Why were you intrigued by that couple's conversation? I thought that theft happened three months ago. It was all over the papers at the time."

"The crime may be old news, but if the victim ups the reward, that'll be hot off the presses," I said.

"And?" asked Lyla. She sipped the last drops of her champagne and deposited her empty glass on the bar.

"It means the crime was never solved. The victim is desperate for the return of his paintings."

"*And?*" She really managed to drag out that single syllable. I deflated.

Evan finished his champagne in a triumphant swig. "Listen to me, Annabel. It's time to silence the inner voice urging you to seek vindication for the Warhol blunder, and ignore whatever whispers of unfinished business you say linger." He wiped his palm across his mouth. "Lesser people have forgiven themselves for far worse."

"What you need is a hobby," Lyla said to me.

"I have plenty of hobbies."

"Finding new uses for avocado shells doesn't count."

"What do you call this?" I swept my hand through the air to emphasize the ritzy gallery swinging and swelling around us.

"I call it drooling over ridiculous art you can't afford in a lifetime."

"That's where you're wrong. Once Evan writes his best-seller, I'll waltz into a gallery like this and open a suitcase stuffed with cash to purchase whatever painting my heart desires." I looked to Evan and snapped my fingers before his face. "Hurry up, will you? I'm relying on you to bankroll my hunger for contemporary art."

Loosely titled *A Sophoclean Tragedy for the Urban Man*, Evan's

elusive manuscript had been in the works since the dawn of man, but had yet to present itself as little more than a chicken-scratch outline on the back of a cable bill. But what he lacked in progress he made up for with passion, a fact confirmed by the impromptu poetry recitals he would deliver, out of the blue, when his kettle of creativity took on a rapid boil.

“Before we depart this glamorous affair, I must bump into the young maiden who earlier latched onto my arm,” he said, changing the subject. “With that buttercup by my side, I could quit my job and sail the seven seas with nothing but the constellations to guide me.”

“It’ll never work,” I said. “She spreads caviar on her peanut butter sandwiches. We both know how queasy you get around fish eggs.” I puffed out my cheeks. “Besides, once Domino realizes we crashed his event—”

Heavy palms thumped down upon my shoulders from behind. Startled, I swiveled around to find staring back at me with jet black hair and sapphire eyes, the man whose name had just rolled from my lips.

Chapter 3

Few things are as spellbinding as a trio of vivid martinis in chilled coupe glasses, whispering two simple words: *drink me*. Or perhaps three simple words: *drink me, please*, because there's something to be said for manners. Lyla's Bijou with its herbaceous Chartreuse, Evan's Hanky Panky with its bitter Fernet Branca, my sweet Mary Pickford with its maraschino liqueur—standard libations from the era of debauchery that would surely address us with the sandpaper brogue of a hardened rum runner if only they could speak.

Located three doors down from the Titan Gallery in a historic brick storefront that once housed the city's first printing press, the Empire Martini Bar proved to be the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow we sought after Domino kicked us to the curb. In a manner devoid of compassion, the man had demanded we leave, pointing his finger in our faces in a gesture even children arguing over the last bites of chocolate bar on the playground would find rude. After threats to call the police were then lobbed, we agreed to remove ourselves from his gallery without protest,

save an irreverent peace sign flipped over Lyla's shoulder on the way out.

Warm lighting from ensconced sixty-watt bulbs cast a glow across the intimate martini lounge, where the faint smells of dusty books lingered in the air, like the forgotten library of a horse-and-buggy antiquarian. Soft strumming from an acoustic guitar filled in the background as animated banter amongst thirsty customers added a spirited purr. Clever twenty-somethings with horn-rimmed glasses and scarves bunched around their necks settled into stools at the bar. Bantering thirty-somethings with fitted flannel shirts and Converse sneakers gathered around the tall tables sprinkled throughout.

Handsome with surfer-blond hair, chiseled features, and slate-gray eyes, the bartender who served our martinis returned to check on us. He was Lyla's type, of that I was certain, and the fact wasn't lost on her, either.

With cheeks glowing like a neon vacancy sign on a cold, cold night, she lavished him with praise—her martini with its flavors of the forest floor every bit as heavenly as she had hoped. A dribble ran down her chin as she took a sip to demonstrate.

With a flattered grin, the bartender offered her a napkin and excused himself to produce the tab for a pair of preppies dressed in chambray shirts and khakis hemmed to their ankle bones.

I leaned into Lyla's ear. "Your heavy-handed approach to issuing praise is entertaining."

"It's impossible to be excessive in the flattery of one's bartender," she said, fishing the cherry from her glass. "It's like knowing the friend of a cousin of a senator. There isn't any downside." She looked to the bartender as he cleared the preppies' empty glasses and ran a rag across the bar. "What gives this martini its bombastic flavor?"

“Green Chartreuse,” he said. “Some say it’s an acquired taste.”

She rolled the liquid across her tongue. “I’m familiar with this taste. I acquired it last year when Annabel and I lost ourselves in Boston’s confusing solar plexus and stumbled into a speakeasy in search of directions and something stiff.” She cupped my knee. “As Annabel can attest, the cocktails were smooth but the clientele was iffy. A bed of clams could have done a better job filtering out the riffraff.” She scrunched her nose. “Half the guys there were tanning parlor regulars with skin shinier than a body builder’s biceps on competition day.”

The journey Lyla described in curious detail was one upon which she and I had embarked to visit a mutual friend from undergrad working for a craft brewery in Davis Square. We had flown the red-eye to get the cheapest price on airline tickets, rented an economy car the size of a jelly bean, and spent the evening of our arrival puttering around town while waiting for our host to extract herself from the copper kettles.

“I could never live in Boston,” said the bartender. “Between the rain that falls in inches and the hot-headed cab drivers, it’s too much for this California transplant to endure.”

“You’re allergic to the rain, yet you live in the Pacific Northwest?” said Evan, sipping from his martini. The aromatic flavors of saffron, rhubarb, and cardamom nipped at his tongue.

“The dark days of winter haven’t arrived, and I can already feel the cones in my eyes atrophying from lack of sunlight. How do you locals do it?”

“We’ve learned to worship the incinerating qualities of the sun for the few months it shines, then spend the rest of the year healing our sunburns and drowning our sorrows in unhealthy doses of vitamin D,” I said. “What brought you to Washington State?”

“A cliché romance that fell apart within the first three months,

after which time I spent the next five months weeping into my bran flakes.”

“You don’t strike me as the blubbering type.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, though I’ve decided to return to my hometown of San Diego. In two weeks, I’ll stuff all my earthly possessions into my Mini Cooper for the drive south.”

Disappointed to hear of his impending departure, Lyla frowned. “Seattle will miss you. Bigger and better things await?”

“Opportunities to put my political science degree to use with any luck.” He crossed his fingers. “Maybe I’ll lobby the Olympic Committee to add surfing to the summer games.”

“I’m sure you’ll be persuasive.” She offered a partial smile. “Say, as the bartender in a classy place like this, ever ask your customers, *Penny for your thoughts?*”

“The monetary nature of that proposition seems imbalanced. And it’s a terribly moth-eaten thing to say.”

Lyla’s cheeks tinted pink. It was a question she couldn’t have cared less to have answered, but rather than change gears and ask the bartender his name already, she opted to describe the respectable death that old phrase died when the last real outlaw shot the sheriff at a saloon with swinging doors in the ghost town of Tin Cup, Colorado.

The bartender looked confused.

Lyla corrected course. “What’s your name?”

“Dane,” he said.

Her eyes lit up. “Dane is a name of great refinement. It makes me think of those thickly-pelted rescue dogs from the Alps.”

“I believe you’re thinking of the St. Bernards, a species known less for refinement and more for heavy drooling.”

“Regardless of their drool, I hear those hounds save many lives every year. What do they carry in those tiny barrels collared around their throats?”

“Folklore says it’s brandy.”

“Pity. I hoped for Armagnac liqueur.”

There it was, the Armagnac liqueur—one of a handful of French things Lyla loved to reference when it fit neatly into conversation. She had never actually been to France, though the coastal region of Provence topped the list of destinations she most wanted to see once she procured herself a proper love interest. Anyone could go to Paris, she would say. But Provence? That was the place for lovers. That was the home of perfumed herbs and soft-curd cheeses.

A quartet of middle-aged women with the rosy glow of celebration cast across their cheeks shuffled into the martini bar, hooting and hollering and waking the dead. With ribboned gift bags in hand, they beckoned Dane for a predictable round of cosmopolitans. As he stepped away to serve them, I felt certain that if anyone came to the bar with bells on that night, it was very likely them.

Lyla’s eyes flickered as she watched him walk away. “A charmer like Dane would be the cure to all that ails me. I bet he’s a tender-hearted gentleman and a virtuoso with an espresso machine.” She swirled the liquid in her glass. “How are your shins, Annabel?”

I lied. “Never better.”

“Have you learned your lesson to mind your own business?”

“Not a chance.”

She tapped her heel on the rung of her stool. “Be honest. Were the paintings stolen from that entrepreneur even any good?”

“Depends on your taste for surrealism. A similar piece by the artist is in our collection at the modern art museum. An outspoken docent once likened it to the illegitimate offspring of an Antikamnia skeleton calendar and a Grateful Dead concert poster.”

Lyla cringed. I mean she really cringed. A Parisian waiter

offended by an Alabaman's pronunciation of the word *croissant* would take pause.

"Independent of how you feel about melting, morphing objects, the paintings were worth big bucks. Our curator valued the museum's piece at a quarter-million dollars."

She whistled. "That's a lot of chili peppers. Why is the culprit still at large? Surely the entrepreneur had security cameras that recorded the crime."

"No cameras for the paintings, windows, or doors." I resettled in my stool. "No way to verify how the thief pulled off the crime without smashing his way in or triggering the alarm."

She startled at the details. "Why didn't the guy have cameras?"

"That's the million-dollar question." I took a drink from my martini and set the glass on the bar. "The entrepreneur wasn't the only instance of such an oversight. A wealthy socialite who was robbed while hosting a private party at her estate last month—an *expo peinture*, she called it—didn't have security cameras, either. Police suspect the thief blended in with her party guests, snuck into her conservatory, lifted a rare abstract landscape off the wall, and snuck out undetected." I clicked my tongue. "Totally brazen."

"I've never heard of an *expo peinture*. Is that a mustard-based dipping sauce?"

"Technically it translates to painting expo. The socialite's application of the phrase is imperfect, but she felt it fit her glamorous soiree centered around showing off her expensive art collection while slurping raw oysters flown in from the coast."

Evan gulped the contents of his glass. "I remember when news of the theft from the socialite hit the papers. Our social columnist from the *Seattle Courier* had been at her party the night of the crime. He said the socialite commented to her guests that only their conscience and the big guy upstairs would be watching should their fingers become sticky."

“Did the news say why she didn’t have cameras?” asked Lyla.

“In an interview with the press, the socialite claimed the electromagnetic buzz emitted by the devices disturbed her yoga practice,” I said. “Particularly her plow pose.”

“Seems like an unsatisfying explanation.”

“Not everyone is meant to be inverted.”

Dane returned and leaned his elbows on the bar. “So, what’s the big occasion? You three are dressed like your next stop is a box seat at the opera.”

“Exclusive gala at the Titan Gallery three doors down,” said Lyla. She stretched her hand out like a red carpet rolling across the Hollywood stars.

Dane was impressed. “Rarefied air you must breathe. Other than the free brochures, I can’t afford anything in that gallery.”

Evan squeezed Lyla’s thigh. “Lady Finch was two breaths away from buying an eighty-thousand-dollar painting of a Spanish toreador drawing a velvety cape across his shoulders.” He could never resist a good put-on.

Dane straightened his posture. “I didn’t realize we had a *lady* in our presence.”

“Neither did I,” I said, chuckling beneath my breath. Dane seemed to be buying it, a fact that amused me given the non-royal picture of herself Lyla had painted moments ago. I wanted to ask him, do you really think a lady of nobility would know the first thing about men who frequent tanning parlors?

“The owners of the gallery must have been honored to have a lady on their guest list,” said Dane. “Why didn’t you buy the painting?”

“Sir Neruda is to blame,” said Lyla. She clapped Evan’s shoulder. “The toreador’s cape triggered a random musing from him about one compulsively peeling the layers of an onion back, only to discover nothing in their hands but a pile of peeled onion

layers.” She rolled her eyes. “Such musings run rampant in the Neruda bloodline, and my chateau in Chamonix is hardly the place for endless jabber about allium vegetables.”

Dane looked to Evan. “You’re a descendent of the poet Pablo Neruda?”

Evan shook his head. “No relation to the poet, though I am a man of great complexity myself. Often I’ve been told my genteel disposition comes second to only that of the Earl of Nottingham.” He placed his hand on his chest, coughing back laughter. “Guilty as charged.”

I smirked. “Your imagination is a thing to behold.”

He turned to me. “My most charming quality, wouldn’t you say?”

“No shortage of confidence, either.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

He straightened his collar. “Just because you hope our history will one day repeat itself doesn’t mean you must flirt with me every time you get a bit of champagne in your system.”

Whenever the mood was right, Evan loved to bring up our air-quotes history, which had been as lacking in depth as an inflatable kiddie pool. In the wake of the Warhol debacle, Lyla and I were blowing my last paycheck on expensive cocktails with ingredients we couldn’t pronounce at a bar in Belltown when Evan spotted us from across the bar. He was funny, handsome, and Latin. He couldn’t decide which of us he liked better, so he offered to buy both of us breakfast in the morning.

Evan went home empty-handed that night, though months later, we came to appreciate his brand of humor. He was dating a brunette with an attitude the size of Cleveland, who while helping him move into an apartment in Ballard, had unearthed a photograph of Evan posed with his motorcycle, Macho. Raised

under a rock, the girl had referred to the vintage Norton 850 as a scooter, and likened it to a Vespa she saw dilly-dallying through a yellow light at milkman-delivery speeds. Affronted, Evan had assured her Macho could chase banditos across the border if he were so inclined, and when this clash spilled onto the sidewalk near a breakfast joint with the best waffles in town, Lyla and I stumbled into it. Unwilling to tolerate the girl's insults, Evan had begged us for earmuffs. When recognition of our faces then set in, he suggested we revisit his breakfast offer once he was back on the market.

As to any other history between Evan and me, I can neither confirm nor deny such allegations.

Dane studied Lyla with his head tilted like a fuzzy puppy begging for a biscuit. "I've never met a noble lady before. Should I ask for your autograph or a lock of your hair?"

"A lock of hair would be creepy," she said. "But if you asked for my number, I'm sure we could find some trouble to get into."

"I can do better than that." He reached for his wallet.

"Slow down, King Charles. I'm not that kind of girl."

"You haven't seen what I have to offer." From within the folds of his leather wallet, he removed a simple white business card and held it like the queen of spades between his thumb and forefinger. "Do the words *18 Laws* mean anything to you?"

"I might have seen an oppressive sign at the royal swimming pool with such a title," she said. "Thou shalt not enter the water with a peeling sunburn, lest the shed skin cells clog the pool filters—"

"She means the words 18 Laws don't ring a bell," I said, cutting her off. "What's on the card?"

Dane offered a sly smile. "The directions."

Chapter 4

Printed on the white business card in the uncluttered font of an antique typewriter were the cryptic directions to 18 Laws. My eyes widened like pupils under the influence as I ran my fingertips across the grained papyrus. Redwood tree pulp and octopus ink were used in the production of that card, I just knew it.

Dane leaned in close and lowered his voice. “Hidden beneath the frail bones of an abandoned building in the old industrial district, a resurrected prohibition speakeasy known as 18 Laws roars to life every Saturday night with unrestrained revelry and unbridled decadence.” He paused for effect.

Our interest was piqued. “Go on.”

“Between the walls of 18 Laws, luxurious cocktails flow like a river charging its banks while every shade of intrigue drips from the rafters. Nothing worth having comes easy, though. You must unravel the clues to find it—down a darkened stairwell, where the masonry walls crumble like a forgotten headstone, and behind the rusted hinges on the boarded-up doors that invite no one but the eternally lost to enter.”

“Well...” I said, looking to Evan and Lyla as Dane’s words hung in the air. “This could provide for some fresh entertainment.”

“Or a trip down the rabbit hole,” said Lyla, studying the card. She squinted her eyes, furrowed her brow, and sucked her cheeks in tightly—an odd expression of the face if ever I’ve seen one. “These directions are as clear as a glass of buttermilk.”

“Bleh, buttermilk,” said Evan. He plucked the card from her fingers.

“You have until midnight tomorrow night to find 18 Laws,” Dane continued. “After that, this opportunity expires.” He uncapped a pen and wrote his number on the card. His penmanship was neat, his sevens hashed with a cross through the spine. “When you arrive at the speakeasy, you must charm your way past the doormen by whispering into their ears. Call me at eight tomorrow evening for the magic words.”

Lyla recoiled. “The last time I whispered into a strange man’s ears, I wound up with two burly arms wrapped around my torso like a constrictor snake sucking the last breath of life from its prey.”

I swiveled to face her. “What?”

“I thought I saw Evan standing in line ahead of me at the dry cleaners and snuck up behind him to whisper something gooey in his ear. The guy mistook it for a pickup line and latched his arms around me like it was love at first sight.”

Evan rolled his eyes. “I fail to comprehend how you confused me for that sasquatch.”

“It was a moonless night. Anyone could have made the same mistake.”

“But you were standing inside the dry cleaners beneath two-thousand lumens of fluorescent lighting.”

“Splitting hairs.”

“I’m confused. Are you two together?” asked Dane, glancing back and forth between the pair. “And what’s a lady doing picking up her own dry cleaning?”

“I’m not hairy enough for the lady,” said Evan. “She prefers her men like Afghan hounds.”

“Don’t blame your romantic failures on body hair,” I said to him, retrieving the card for safe-keeping.

Dane scratched his head and pressed forward. “The directions to 18 Laws may not be shared with anyone. If a bottom-feeder with a tribal tattoo slimes up to the door, the proprietors will have my head.” He paused and looked to Lyla. “Not that a lady would keep such company.”

“No bottom feeders,” I said. “Got it. What happens if we get stuck working through the directions?”

“Call the number printed on the back of the card for a hint.”

“The number you wrote down?”

“No, there’s another number on the other side.” Dane motioned for me to flip the card over.

“Two numbers? Seems cumbersome.” I glanced at the back of the card before tucking it inside my handbag. “If you’re the keeper of the password, why aren’t you the keeper of the hints?”

“The decision wasn’t mine.”

I finished my cocktail and ate the red cherry, tossing the stem into my glass. “Can we skip this dance and get the address? Even with a hint, it could take us all night to make sense of this gibberish.”

“Spoil the experience?”

“You’d be doing us a favor. Wrangling Lady Finch’s impatient demeanor is a challenge even greater than navigating other peoples’ nut allergies.”

“I can’t give you the address. But look on the bright side. It’s not like you have to sacrifice a goat.”

Lyla bit her lip. "I'm not sure how I feel about this."

"You would prefer to sacrifice the goat?"

"No, I'm not sure how I feel about this escapade. How do we know you aren't sending us blind into the underground lair of some ruthless Ukrainian loan shark to whom you owe an astronomical debt? They break kneecaps as payback."

Dane brushed off her concerns. "Ukrainian loan sharks are the cuddliest teddy bears in the toy store."

Carried on the wings of a gust of wind, a forty-something gent with a slick suit and gelled sideburns entered the bar. He had *smooth operator* written all over him, an observation confirmed by the tan line on his finger where his wedding band ought to be. He settled into a stool and issued Dane a familiar nod.

"One of my regulars," said Dane, returning the gesture. "He's a generous tipper."

"What happened to his wedding ring?" I asked.

"He lost it swimming with the dolphins in Tahiti. A dolphin from the pod sucked the ring into its blowhole."

"Seriously?"

"How the hell should I know?" Dane clucked over his shoulder and walked off to greet the man.



A cloud of exhaust puffing from the tailpipe of a rusty Pontiac blasted us in the face as we left the martini bar and emerged onto the sidewalk. Evan signaled for a taxi, and a yellow cruiser with rattling engine and doors spackled in grime pulled to the curb. The cheap vinyl in the backseat, which smelled of drugstore cologne, bulged beneath our tailbones.

As the taxi cut through the bustling streets of Seattle, we discussed 18 Laws and the opportunity with short expiration to

pickle ourselves in a beautiful aquarium of top shelf martinis from the storied caverns of a prohibition speakeasy. The proposition felt irresistible.

We arrived at our apartment building in lower Queen Anne—a three-story brick structure boasting the elegant flourishes of prewar construction—and stumbled out onto the sidewalk in a disorderly fashion.

Mature maple trees stretched their aging branches in a tired canopy overhead, depositing beneath them an autumnal gift of fallen leaves the size of baseball mitts. We rubbed our shoes on the door mat to avoid grinding the foliage into the carpet inside.

Taped to the interior bank of mailboxes, a handwritten note fluttered at its edges as the door swung shut and locked behind us. Lyla paused to read its contents, flicking her finger against the page. “According to section D of our rental agreements, it is illegal for tenants to prop open the doors to this building. Violators will be... *persecuted?*”

“In other words,” I said, “go ahead and shove a phone book in that door. Just don’t be surprised at the hell that rains down when a solicitor lets himself in.”

Lyla ripped the note from the mailboxes and wadded it into a paper ball. “This poorly penned reminder deserves the same fate as the authoritarian note from last week reminding tenants about the prehistoric plumbing.” She tossed it into the recycling bin. “I’ll damn well flush whatever I please.”

From my handbag, I pulled the keys to my apartment and peered up the staircase to the second floor, where my charming abode of linoleum countertops, turquoise bathroom fixtures, and pine floors was situated. The kitchen barely fit a loaf of bread, the toilet ran until the handle was jiggled, and the dual-spigot water faucet spit out a blend of lava and glacier melt. But such matters were of little concern to me. “Shall we reconvene at my

place tomorrow night—dressed to kill—and see if we can crack the directions to 18 Laws?”

“How do you define dressed to kill?” asked Lyla, kicking her toe at a nickel resting on the carpet. “Pelt of a mountain lion tossed over the shoulders—paws attached, head attached, rodent in its teeth?”

“You could never pull off that look.”

Evan gestured down the tastelessly papered hallway to his door. “Let’s meet at my place instead. There’s an unopened bottle of Stoli in my cupboard that isn’t going to drink itself.”

Lyla picked up the nickel and placed it in her pocket. “I could be persuaded by such a bribe. If the hunt for 18 Laws proves to be a wild goose chase, what shall we do instead—fan each other with lotus leaves while eating peeled grapes?”

Evan shook his head. “We’d have to swing by the market for grapes. That’s inconvenient.”

“If we’re met with defeat, we’ll retire to our favorite taproom near the arts district for a round of consolation pints,” I said. “They have a Belgian pilsner on tap so magnificent, the critics are calling it the lone Stradivarius in a symphony of spoons.”

Evan and Lyla nodded in unison. “We agree to those terms.”

“A final point of clarification,” said Lyla. “Dane said 18 Laws is located in an abandoned building. What happens if we bumble into the wrong one and find ourselves in the clutches of a salivating Count Orlok sizing us up as his next meal of peasant and claret?”

I gave her a cockeyed look.

“He hasn’t brushed his teeth in a hundred years.”

“We’ll offer him a breath mint.”