

Chapter 6

“Finally...” I sign into the vacant apartment air, letting my exhaustion rise and fill the air.

I take my boots off my feet and pull the blanket to my right over my body and allow myself a moment of solemn peace. For once in a few days, my mind finally slows as my body finally eases into a restful stupor after its relentless pursuit to never stop moving.

In prison, there was no room to move and no new sights to see. For seven years, I saw the same gray cinder blocks and dealt with the same orange-clad female inmates that had killed, stolen, and terrified me to survive in that prison. As one may predict, I was in the stealing category and one of the main reasons why I managed to survive seven years in a women’s federal prison was because I was good at what I did - more importantly, I didn’t get caught. Ironic, right? Getting caught is what landed me in cell 308. It wasn’t some grand scheming plan that allowed me to steal, it was more luck. I stuck to what I knew and relied on distraction, and in an all-female prison - those were plenty. Then, depending on what was needed, all I had to do was pickpocket a person to deliver the goods to the customer. I mean, the only real risk in that business was the contraband. The biggest thing that I ever got away with was a badge from a prison guard, you see that wasn’t the hard part - putting it back on him was even worse. That’s because once you go personal in prison, you’re done. That person you made it personal with will do anything in their power to see that you’re dead and you have no escapes in prison.

Before I can fall any deeper into the darker parts of my memory, I feel myself back in the present. I focus on what’s all around me - colors. The deep maroon-purple blanket I’ve enveloped myself in, the white cabinets paired with brass knobs that hold only a few items, and I supposed a crackling, white wall. Though I say white, what I do mean is that I believe it was originally white, but now it has grown a color that can only be described as Voldemort-esque. I only recognize and acknowledge the wall as I admired its stamina with such a frail building as it holds up to \$170,000.

That’s all my money.

Sadly, I've stooped so low to have let that thought creep in, but holy crap! That's all my money. All of the money that I had stowed away in the wall of this apartment that was leftover from paying off my lawyer and the upkeep of this place, wasn't a bad amount, but still, it was a lot considering they froze all of my assets and I still had to pay a late fee on all of my bills. You'd be surprised how expensive going to prison is. Though I still have some money stored away in little containers here and there along with some favors to cash in - I invested almost all I have in this little trick. You see, when one is desperate enough to catch a fish, one might jump into the ocean to get one.

"Not bad," I say aloud.

Though the shadows in this room may have acknowledged the claim, it seems the painting isn't. Unwavering and unmoving, the paint doesn't absorb the light and fear it as the shadows do. It isolated itself in a cloak of color that it cannot budge. The canvas almost holds the subject's breath in its woven grasp, but it also takes a hold of those who look on. The background - eclipsed by its beautiful subject - is a relief against the claiming intensity that the subject possesses. The gold spatters shine and glitter as one dances their gaze across the canvas. The royal purple and peeking turquoise come together in a waltz of control as one cannot decide which color came first or has the most importance. Nonetheless, their waltz continues to thrum at a steady rhythm as the eyes of the subject stare into the onlooker with a confident allure. Her face, almost having a shine of its own, is steadied by her mattified blush that covers her deep complexion. Unlike a statue, she seems as though she may be immortalized with layers of paint, but she still has the freedom to live with those who look upon her beauty. Her hair cascades over her shoulder in a loose frilly braid that shows off the singular flower placed just above her ear, pulling back to admire her wonderful facial structure. One can see her hands cradling and posing her face, almost as if she is looking at the onlooker with the same gaze of admiration for their beauty. In great contradiction to the rest of the composition, the dress encircling her figure has deep red, purple, and orange hues that showcase depth to her figure that show that though she is beautiful, she is still a fierce subject to be respected. Though her face may say beauty, her clothes show she is fearless of what may be debated over the meaning and what she says with her lips

slightly agape. Almost to tease the admirer, her beauty is too much for the subject to handle, she has to rest her elbows on a podium smaller than her that holds a small bouquet. Rather than engulfing the subject in a forest of blossoms for a symbolic way of showing femininity, the artist seems to have placed the bouquet theater at first, but the subject seems to have pushed those into the background and let nature's true beauty shine.

I must admit, as these details seem to illuminate even further with poor overhead lights, time is what allows one to fully be saturated with the beautiful colors as they seem to paint over one's darkest parts of their soul. The colors begin to take hold of my gaze and chains seem to form over my vision and start tying my eyelids together, allowing me to rest for once encased in a bewitching portrait gracing my presence.

And with that, I sleep sheathed in beauty.



Mmmph....VmmmpH....Mmmph

Why is my palm buzzing?

By the will of someone who most certainly isn't me, my eyes slowly start to crack open from their most peaceful state. Seeking out this strange sensation tingling my palm, I can see that my phone is quivering with an irregular beat. I move my fingers to see the sparkling screen as it illuminates with blue and white flooding my screen.

Squeezing my eyelids together and releasing them quickly with a fluttering blink, the haziness from sleep starts to fade away as words finally start to be comprehended

"Finally! Most Sought After Work Sold to an Anonymous Buyer!"

It wasn't that sought after when I bought it.

“What-? Local Artist Sells Her Prized Possession to a Rich Stranger?”

Not rich - clever, more like.

“Siobhan Ramek-Weinstock Best Work Finally Released Into The Wilds.”

Snappy title.

My grin reaches ear-to-ear as an almost evil chuckle arises within me. Like a mysterious villain cloaked in darkness as they lean back in their arms chair while petting their naked mole-rat cats, I felt truly evil. I felt this sense that I had gotten away with something so cruel, but it was like I was back to who I was seven years ago. I had this childish giggle creeping up as if I had reached my hand in the metaphorical cookie jar and picked the biggest cookie. I felt this euphoric rush that seven years behind bars couldn't tamper with. I have finally gotten this hit that I've been craving for quite some time. This wasn't stealing, matter of fact, it wasn't that bad of a crime so to speak. No one was hurt - none that I cared about of course. That Cyprus chick has already gotten a good paycheck as I have so charitably begun my endeavors into supporting the arts. I am going to be richer today than I was yesterday and I am going to build my way back to the top by any means necessary.

I pull the blanket of warmth from my body and replace its comfort with the shocking but inviting icy breeze that escaped into my home through a crack in my window. Rather than shivering at its intrusion, I shiver with anticipation of what's to come in my day. I bring my phone up to my face once more and check the time. *11:34 am. That's about three hours to prepare for our big adventure of the day.* As I had hoped, this attention to Cyprus's painting has already brought my investment doubled in price to sell at a museum downtown. It's not much, but they've been able to rent some great pieces like some Moments' which will suffice for this nice piece of art.

To begin, one must disguise any imprint of having relative challenges and hardships in life by washing away any spick of dirt or dust one can accumulate in poor conditions. By this, one has to turn on the shower and get it to a scalding temperature as a way to burn away any lasting

impacts that poverty may have on a person. Once entering the steaming linoleum cage, there is a process one must complete. During this time, one must invest properly so that their dandruff doesn't flake off like you're asking for parmesan at an Italian restaurant and can't afford to say stop. This requires applying a hair mask that sinks deep into the scalp while you ruthlessly cut and slay any remnants of hair from one's body that isn't coated in parabens. To conclude this step in becoming reasonable in this part of society, you will then smother your loofa in Dove soap while vigorously exfoliating any struggling pieces of dead skin and dirt that may linger on your body. Allow the lasting remnants of hot water from the tank to rinse away any lasting products as you will finish this last part of this step.

To begin the next stage, I am demonstrating the masking part of this ritual as I begin to layer upon layers of moisturizers, overpriced serums, oils, and lotions all over my body as a base layer for this process. After this, I begin to cake on the thick layers of tinting materials that cloak over the imperfections and acne scarring that's developed without the ridiculous spa treatments that the upper class routinely afford. Rather than leaving just a layer to hide these terrible markings, one must replace them with thick full eyebrows that people from Mars can see; painting tonal browns all over the face to replace any lacking facial structure to appear sharp and inhuman; smearing brown on the eyes along with a shimmer to give it a natural feel that you've spent too long on your makeup for anyone to care, and lastly, dotting shades of pink on your cheeks and lips to finally show that there may be a living person under this mask after all.

For the final stage of this ridiculous ritual, it is time to truly cover up any imperfections that show with an actual body that works and has done labor. First, place very uncomfortable undergarments on that no one will see, this is then covered up by a too-small-size spank that will pull any layers of fat and scarring into your body until you can taste the cruel beige fabric. Continuing, fashion is the biggest player in this whole routine as it could make or break the entirety of your plot. You see, the dilemma between a skirt, trousers, and a dress says many different things about a woman. You wear a skirt - too short, it's an invitation or if it's too long, you're a prude and need to loosen up a bit. You wear trousers - too tight and it's a distraction or if it's too loose, you're lazy and unprofessional. You wear a dress - oh my! Now you're asking

for it! My god! Too short - you might as well have a buffet for a bunch of hungry hippos. But if the dress is too long and not body contouring in the least - you shouldn't even leave your house!

With all of this in mind, I ponder over my choices and decide to go with sage green trousers with a matching blazer. Now for the non-prudish factory of this, I opt for a cropped white knit with a cleverly placed keyhole that gives my torso a little shape to it. Adorned with two rings on my left hand, a simple silver dangle along with two diamond earrings, I would say I am ready to continue to scheme and plot my way to victory for today.

With only a few sips of my thumb, a lovely woman named Maya is parked outside my apartment complex and I quickly hop in the back of her black Prius.

“Hi. Stella, right?” Her curls bounce away as Maya looks back at me in the rearview mirror.

“That’s right and you’re Maya.” I give her a tiny smile.

“That’s me!” White teeth flash into a wide grin in the mirror and she then begins, “So you’re heading to that one art museum, right?”

“I am, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to take a moment of peace before I go to work.”

I was cautious not to say, “*Please mind your damn business because I am not paying you for a little conversation.*” Luckily, Maya got the message loud and clear as her fake grin began to falter to a restful state as she turned up the music. Her car begins to pulse with the deep bases of Roberta Flack’s “Where is the Love” and I sit in a peaceful trance as I become the person I should be - a non-criminal, a citizen of the United States, mogul of the arts, and an ethically-good business woman bettering the community around me. I build the steel cage that acts like a muzzle for my inner thoughts that many would deem offensive and crude. As the car rolls to a complete stop in front of a silver building with large panels of windows, my mask falls down my face, covering the surviving cracks of the surface and as my hand grasps the door handle, I quickly utter a quick thank you to my driver and push open the door and immediately

get greeted by the stench of the city, but is quickly assuaged by the aromas of paint, wood, and privilege as a blast of air escapes from the revolving door of the museum. I close the door to the car and in three strides, I feel a rush of cold air as I break the barrier between my reality and the reality of the rich.

Immediately, I am greeted by a sea of plain colors moving and flowing abuzz with useless chatter, fake smiles, and phony chuckles. With my mask firmly in place, I look to my left and see a waitress coming up to me with an outreached tray of champagne, and simply because I can, I snatch one out and chug the bubbly champagne down my throat. As the bubbles sink into my stomach, I place the empty flute back onto the tray and make eye contact with a stunned/impressed waitress and say, "Thank you dearly."

Moving from the black and white dressed people, I move my way into the distinct blue section of the people's sea. To show some uniformity and distinction from the rest, the curators have painted themselves in blue with navy slacks and blazers paired with a cobalt button-up, but of course, both men and women are wearing uncomfortable shoes. Out of all the people that showed up to work today, the one character that stands out the most is the loud and boisterous of them all holding an almost empty champagne flute and by the way, he's walking, it wasn't his first. I move closer to fully inspect the grotesqueness of this scenario and his screeching voice booms off the tall walls of the room.

"Oh please, Diana!!! Enough with the flattery already!"

A little snort escaped the man and in a drunken episode begins to laugh even harder, bordering into a cackle. The blue button-down has come untucked from his pants slightly as a button or two is undone - a sign of discombobulation. The overall attitude exuding from this man in great comparison to the meet and well-behaved temperament of his peers shows that he has little risk of losing the job. The familiarity and connection between the patrons and this particular curator are too much as the lack of professionalism is missing from his mannerisms.

He's perfect.

As I begin to step closer and as I do, more of that boisterous and obnoxious talk begins to swell once more.

“Jimmy, dear, I do love this painting,” An older woman patron expels while gesturing to an abstract painting of a man’s figure shaped by colors yellow and purple. “But is there perhaps one joining it soon?”

“Whatever do you mean, Diana?” Jimmy slurs.

“Well,” Diana begins, “I heard a little rumor that the anonymous buyer of that old Weinstock painting might be from our side of town and has a particular interest in abstract portraits.”

A little heavy on the hint there, sweetie.

The crowd around them starts to whisper that collectively showing their mass interest in my new hobby.

A little blush arises from Jimmy’s chest as perspiration begins to shine across his forehead, obviously not sober enough to know how to deal with the overwhelming interest in Cyprus’s painting.

Luckily, he’s able to swing some sense back on himself, “Well, Diana, I told you, it would ruin the purpose of being synonyms, wouldn’t it?” Straightening himself, “When you think about it, we’re living in the next great Hollywood movie, aren’t we?” That got the whole crowd nearly jumping up and down in excitement and almost with a sense of professionalism, he excuses himself, as he does, his drunken gaze meets my buzzed one and a sloppy grin erupts over his face.

That’ll do.

Keeping my eyes locked on him, he's the one to break the gaze and make his way weaving in and out of the crowd until he moves to an abandoned part of the gallery where it is so quiet, I can hear his heavy breathing from the corner of the room.

"Hello, sweetheart." His voice crawls out of the corner of the room as his words are filled with an evident

"Hello, *honey*," I remark in a mocking tone.

"You know, when a woman follows a man to a dark room, she's asking for it. And with you, you're practically begging for it."

"Now what would that be?" My voice dissimulated with a thick layer of interest

"My attention, but don't worry - I would give it to you for free, baby." He takes his hands out of his pockets and moves to start undoing his tie as his steps start to grow closer to me.

Growing bored, I decide to end this one-sided playdate, "Really? Wow! This is quite a deal!" Slowly my face grows tired of the mask and I allow my true self to illuminate, "But I wonder how much you would give me for that Ramek-Weinstock painting."

Stopping quickly in his tracks, he starts to stumble but catches himself. "Y-Y-you have it? That's not possible Siobhan wouldn't give it to a stranger." His voice was laced with shock and almost disgust. "She's had the painting for almost 15 years! She's had the whole upper east side by their balls about her work and she gives it to you - who are you?"

I've known Cyprus for a week and I already know she rarely goes by her birth name, "To answer your questions, Jimmy, it requires you to shut up and listen." His gibbering suddenly is cut off as his face transforms into a shade of bloody tomatoes. "For one, I do have it, and technically we aren't strangers as I bought it from her. Secondly, who I am should not interest you, but what I have should."

“If what you’re saying is true, who’s to say I couldn’t get any more of her work or the work of I don’t know, maybe an O’Keefe to spice things up, maybe even a classic Pollock to bring this gallery back to its roots.”

Awoken out of his stunned silence, he simply utters, “What do you want?”

I put my hands into my pockets, and turned my head up to the sky, with a deep sigh, “500 should do it.”

“I’m sorry, what?” That freshly soothed anger seizes up again. “No way.”

“Alright,” I quickly turned around and began walking back from whence I came.

As my heels quickly crack down on the floor with each step sounding like crackling lightning, but stop as he shouts, “450.”

“495,” I shouted back to him, still facing away from him.

“465.”

“475.” Feeling his resilience fade away, I turn my head over my shoulder and look him directly in the eyes.

Defeated, he whispers, “475.”

“In cash.” His mouth moves to open once more, but I quickly cut him off, “You have two days.”

With that, confidence thunders in my chest (which may also be the alcohol), as my jewelry starts to collide together as I stomp out of the shadows, through the crowd that seems to almost part for me, and out into the streets of New York City.

I'm back, baby.