

CHAPTER ONE

MAZATLAN, MEXICO

Shannon Phillips

1:00 p.m. Thursday, August 26th.

I GLANCED THROUGH THE WINDOW OF GALLERY G AND SAW THE SHADOW OF A MAN WHO once weighed three hundred pounds. Little did I know, today would be the last time I would see him alive.

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"Wow, I can't get over what you've done with the place," I exclaimed, stunned by the gallery's new interior. My friend had torn down a wall and framed the bookcases with the newly-exposed structural beams. "It looks like a set from *Sex in the City*. It's too cool for you."

"Hah! You wouldn't think it was so cool if you'd seen all the roaches running for cover; took me three weeks to fumigate. Managed to get rid of some neighbors in the process," he cackled.

"Are you still living in the back?"

"Girl, why do you ask so many questions?"

"Hi, Maxi. Taking care of the boss?" I rubbed the upturned belly of Bookman's ancient German shepherd, flashing the old man a full frontal of my new boobs in the process.

"I see you've done some remodeling yourself."

"Yeah, thanks for noticing," pausing to give him an extra minute to appreciate the view. "Is that the package?" I gestured to the nearby wall.

"No, it's over there," he said, pointing to a brown paper tube leaning against the doorframe.

"Whose paintings are these?"

"Dubuque, Amsterdam, and O'Neill."

"Sounds like a law firm. How are they selling?"

He laughed, but the deep guffaw turned into a choking gag rattling the skeleton beneath his shirt. He wiped the spittle from his lips with the back of

his sleeve. "The L.A. crowd can't buy them fast enough. At twenty-five hundred a pop, these are the trading cards of the dot-com babies." He sneered, groping for my ass as I walked by.

"You staying over or blowing through?"

"In and out." I studied the art, referencing the show brochure. O'Neill's paintings depicted chalk outlines of fallen bodies on asphalt. Police caution tape lay crumpled on the floor. I walked past the hand-carved wooden box sheltering a native Mexican cloth doll in tribal dress juxtaposed to a headless, naked Barbie.

Bookman continued, "What do you think about Amsterdam's work?"

"I'm not in the mood to think."

"Humor me."

"Whatever. Amsterdam thinks all women belong in a box, a cage, or a cell."

His face contorted in a pained expression, unleashing a torrent of choked laughter. "My, my, someone's a little testy today?"

We played this mind game every time I visited him. I stood in front of Estelle Dubuque's colored-pencil hash marks on paper and read the published artist's statement out loud. "There is life in the action of making a mark on the world, but in the end, we are all just a number."

"When your number is up, it's up," he wheezed. "Time for a quickie?"

"I'm meeting Eric for lunch."

"I take it that's a 'no'?"

"Do you have anything else for me?" I asked.

"You missed the show in the back room — a hot new talent Giorgio discovered in Europe."

I followed him to the end of the gallery and into a new space created by the renovation. Several portable wall sections displayed a series of eight foot figurative images painted in gouache on hardboard. The murky, opaque colors gave the pictures an ominous, sinister feel. A sign next to one painting read: *The Mortician's Itinerary*.

A woman stood with her back to us, her hypnotized gaze locked on a diptych before her. Her gelled cowlick of auburn matched the tourist uniform of cruise attire. She shifted her weight from one hip to the other, oblivious to our presence. I leaned forward to read the title card pinned to the wall as she stepped backwards onto the toe of my new Jimmie Choo mule.

"Oww, damn it. Watch. . .," I yelled.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry. Are you hurt?" she asked.

"I don't think it's broken," I sniffed.

"Your foot or the shoe?"

"Do you want some ice?" Bookman asked, offering me a nearby chair.

"I'll be fine . . . really," I insisted, inasmuch as my toe had returned to its original color.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude. My name's DJ Singer. You look familiar; are you on the cruise ship?"

"As a matter of fact, I am. Shannon Phillips, head auctioneer for Monte Carlo House. My company conducts all the art auctions on the high seas." We shook hands.

Ignoring Bookman, DJ turned to me and asked, "What do you think of these pieces? I can't decide if they're too gloomy."

"I'm told by those in the know that this artist is very hot right now." I tested my balance on the damaged shoe.

"Sir, who did you say the artist was?"

"Christian Marqueé," Bookman muttered.

"They're so intense. I'm drawn to them, but I can't decide which one to buy. This black one, *Death*, or the red one, *Dying*."

"Why not buy them both?" I proposed, not entirely in jest.

She paused to consider my suggestion. "Great idea! I think I will," she crowed as she whipped a platinum American Express credit card from her bag. Bookman snatched the plastic from her hand.

"I'll be back in a minute," he whispered, nodding in her direction. I filed the sale price into my "easy mark" folder for future reference.

"Shannon, would you like to join me for lunch?" she asked, her shipping documents completed.

"Unfortunately, I've got an appointment before we leave port," I apologized. "Why don't you come by the auction tomorrow afternoon and I'll show you some Picasso originals?"

"I'd love that! Thanks," she said. "See you on board."

I watched her strut down the street, ass swaying, package tucked neatly under her arm.

"Do you have any messages for the boss?" I asked Bookman.

He waved me away with his hand as another coughing spasm doubled him over. "Nah. Tell Eric I said hi and to give me a call before the ship leaves port."

"Yes sir," I said, giving him a military salute.

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I pulled out my iPod and plugged into Norah Jones singing *Don't Know Why* as I strolled down the boardwalk, taking in the whimsical sculptures by Bustamante.

A bronze bench with two massive ears faced the sea. The seat appeared to melt into two oversized feet. It was twenty minutes to noon. I sat down on the warm metal and enjoyed the cool, tinkling spray of the surf on my skin. The rhythmic sounds of the waves crashing against the rocks provided the underscore to my play list.

Was this homage to the conch shells sold from the pushcarts or the work of a Dada satirist objecting to the bourgeois art elite relaxing by the water's edge? 'Shhh, listen to the siren of the sea,' Bustamante teased.

Further along the pavement, another bronze sculpture commanded my attention. A woman stood at the base of a ladder that tilted in the wind. Molten arms opened wide to the sky. Her two children clung to the ladder, far from the safety of her bosom. Was she reaching out in despair or urging them on? The one at the top leaned precariously off to the side. Holding onto the rung, the little girl reached out with open hand to touch the clouds. A frond from the nearby palm tree blew in the wind, caressing the fingertips of the child. Was momma sending them to heaven or demanding they climb down, insisting they abandon their foray? "What do you see?" I asked myself. Damn him. Credit the old man for opening my mind to a world I had never known. That could be me, reaching for something that wasn't there or letting go of the past. I walked through the patio of Pappas and Beer, scanning the diners. Eric was nowhere in sight, so I ducked into the cyber café next to the bar.

"No waiting," the young clerk called to me.

"Give me five minutes," I replied, logging onto the Net.

My minutes ticked away while the MSN home page downloaded. "World renowned art historian found dead," crawled across the screen.

"Dr. Andrés Sowlinski, internationally acclaimed art authority and historian, was found dead of an apparent stroke at his home in Palm Beach, Florida. He was seventy-nine."

"Oh my God, this can't be right," I gasped. "Please Lord, not him. Not him."

I stared at the screen. The room became blurry. Shaking off the light-head-

edness, I tried to stand. My hands grabbed the table edge to keep me from falling. Stumbling over chairs, I dragged my feet across the floor, tripping through the doorway and into the courtyard.

“Eric!” I called out as he approached. “Your father. . .”