The night was running away from them.

Sighing in frustration, Sybil Clarion abandoned her sketchpad and the sofa where she’d been sprawled for the last hour. Ten clangs shook the apartment Sybil shared with her best friend, Esme Rimbaud, sending most of their cats skittering under the closest couch, rattling teacups, knocking pictures off the walls, and making candle flames quiver. Even after a year, Sybil still wasn’t used to living in a clock tower. But then, did one ever really get used to such things?

As the last peal sounded, Sybil paced in stockinged feet to the clockface. She stared past the ticking hands and into the night. Rain slicked the streets below, turning them into shadowy rivers. Sybil leaned her forehead against the cool pane, drumming her fingers against the glass. Her other hand clutched the bronze key she wore on a chain around her neck. The key was about the size of her longest
finger, thin through the middle, with a crown of metal flowers and vines twisting together at the top. Eager to feel anything other than boredom, Sybil pushed her index finger into the seven teeth at the end of the key, letting them nip into her flesh.

Even with the rain and the late hour, the city was busy. Horse-drawn carriages and cabs clattered over the cobblestones, hurling arcs of dirty water that sent pedestrians scrambling. A bit farther down the block, three people came out of a brightly lit café. They huddled together under a single umbrella, laughing, cupping their cigarettes to keep them dry, and clearly having a marvelous time.

Sybil twisted the key through her restless fingers. Beyond her neighborhood, the gaslit signs of nightclubs and the glowing boulevards near the opera house painted the Vermilion and Lapis Districts in a soft light.

There was so much happening in Severon tonight! So many new rare posters going up, so many other gangs of poster thieves, beating her to them, and here Sybil was, stuck at home. Again. With no money to go out. And this month’s rent due soon.

Sybil’s stomach grumbled. Releasing her key necklace, she prowled from the window to the kitchen, looking for anything to snack on. Bread box, empty. Cabinet beside the sink, empty except for a tin of tea and a roach that skittered away as Sybil peered inside. Fruit bowl, empty except for one small tired-looking apple, but that would have to work. Sybil grabbed the apple and bit into it. Mealy, but at least chewing was something to do while she paced back to the window.

Tonight her impatience was almost as terrible as it’d been during those interminable nights in her father’s country house, where she’d
been stuffed into corsets and silk dresses and made to play the piano or listen to potential suitors drone on all evening. She’d run away to the city to escape this very boredom, and the weight of it sat heavy on her chest.

“Esme?” Sybil said through a bite of apple. She left the window and threaded her way to the kitchen table, where her best friend sat.

Since it was on the top floor of the clock tower, their entire apartment was one big room, not counting a tiny bathroom that mercifully had walls and a door. The apartment was crammed full—two threadbare sofas that served as their beds were pushed against one wall, a kitchen table and chairs sat in the middle of the room, dozens of half-empty paint tubes and not-quite-finished canvases that Sybil had forsaken rested against the walls, Esme’s many books were lovingly organized on shelves, a dressing screen Sybil had painted with a forest scene took up one corner of the apartment, clothing was draped over lots of other thrifted furniture, and cats were everywhere.

Really. There were so many cats.

Esme was always finding them on the streets and bringing them home. Which, fine. One cat was lovely; two could be cozy; but seven was certainly too many.

Not that Sybil would say anything about it. After all, like the cats, Esme had taken Sybil in—it wasn’t her place to whine about other strays living there.

Sybil moved past the biggest, meanest cat—Jean-Francois, a tabby with only half a left ear—and slumped into the rickety chair opposite Esme. It creaked beneath her, and Jean-Francois hissed, giving her a look of absolute disdain.
“Esme?” Sybil scowled back at the cat and then took another bite of the apple. “Hello?”

Esme didn’t look up from the antique clock she was dissecting. In her lap dozed an enormous black cat—Jolie—who looked like a lump of the night itself. “Mmmm?”

Sybil couldn’t keep a smile from her lips. Esme was so lovely and meticulous, it made Sybil’s heart do funny things. Like the clock in front of Esme, Sybil longed to take her friend apart and figure her out. Maybe then she’d understand why being around Esme made Sybil feel so safe.

Esme’s long black hair was pulled into a low bun with a pencil stuck through it. Her thick eyebrows drew together as she carefully lifted the clockface and removed a tarnished bronze gear. A triumphant noise escaped her lips as she did so. Springs, gears, screws, and other clock parts Esme had scavenged littered the table. Set between the parts was the cup of mint tea Esme had made for herself and then promptly forgotten. Beneath the tea was Esme’s Plan for a Good Life list, which she always kept close, no matter what she was doing, as if she needed a reminder at all times of where she was headed.

Sybil had read the list many times before, but now she skimmed it again, her eyes roving over Esme’s careful handwriting.

**PLAN FOR A GOOD LIFE**

✦ SAVE UP ENOUGH MONEY TO ATTEND SEVERON UNIVERSITY.
✦ GET JOB AT THE GREAT LIBRARY. KEEP THAT JOB FOR LIFE.
✦ BUY A SMALL COTTAGE BY THE SEA.
✦ RAISE CATS, DO RESEARCH, ADOPT ORPHANS?
That was it. All Esme wanted in life. Sybil couldn't imagine anything more boring, but who was she to judge? Granted, Esme had barely started item one, but there were lots of notes jotted under, around, and beside each step. Sybil figured these small plans within plans helped Esme feel more in control of the future, even while their lives teetered on the edge of destitution. Sybil hated to plan even an afternoon or a sketch, much less her entire life. She wanted to see things, do things, and be out in the world, experiencing it all.

Which was not happening by sitting around the apartment.

“We have to get out of here,” Sybil said, finishing half the apple and putting the rest of it beside Esme’s list.

“Why?” Esme said, still not looking up.

“I’m bored.” Sybil twirled her key necklace again, snaking it through her fingers. “Let’s go somewhere.”

“Can’t, sorry. I have to fix this clock.”

“Why?”

“It’s broken.” Esme shrugged, as if that explained it all. She reached for her half of the apple and took a large bite without looking up from the clock.

Sybil glanced up at the three other clocks on the mantel, all of which kept different times and chimed randomly throughout the day, only very occasionally matching with the clock tower. Clearly they didn’t need another clock, but there was no sense in trying to convince Esme.

“If we don’t go now, it’s going to be too late.” Sybil dropped the key against her chest and twisted her long curly brown hair up into a high bun, securing it with one of Esme’s pencils.

“Too late for what?”
“Everything! All of it! The whole entire evening.” Reaching across the clock parts and Esme’s list, Sybil grabbed a wine bottle she’d left on the table the night before. She shook it and smiled to hear the slosh of wine still at the bottom. After uncorking the bottle, Sybil tipped the alcohol into her mouth, finishing it in one long slug.

Familiar warmth filled Sybil as the wine hit her belly, settling her restless nerves for a moment.

Esme frowned, then turned her attention back to the clock. “What’s there to miss?”

“Dancing, drinking, meeting other artists. Poster stealing. . . .”

Esme stopped poking at the clock and raised an eyebrow at Sybil. “I thought you weren’t stealing anything tonight? Because of the rain?”

Sybil shrugged. She’d mentioned that earlier, when the sun was setting and Esme was fixing them sandwiches. But that had been hours ago, when all Sybil had wanted was a night at home with Esme. Now the minutes ticked away, crawling like roaches under her skin.

“Rain won’t stop the other thieves.” Sybil picked up Oliver, a tiny gray kitten Esme had found in a trash bin last week. He purred under Sybil’s hand and she rubbed his tiny nose against her own. Yes, he was definitely her favorite of the many cats in the apartment.

Esme finished the apple, core and all, a habit Sybil still couldn’t bring herself to replicate, no matter how poor they were, and reached out a hand to rip a leaf off the mint plant on the closest bookshelf. Esme’s dedication to chewing mint was why there were so many mint plants growing in clay pots on nearly every surface of the
apartment. Sybil had never given a thought to mint plants before meeting Esme, but now the scent was forever associated with her friend.

“I’m not going out with you tonight.” Esme ran a hand over Jolie’s head. The cat stretched on her lap and then hopped down, moving toward the couches.

“You promised.”

Esme picked up a screwdriver and turned her attention back to the belly of the clock. “Wrong. I said I’d consider it, maybe. If it stopped raining. And I was done fixing this, which I’m not.”

“You’ve been working for hours.”

“And I plan on doing so for much longer.”

“Ez. . . .”

“No.”

“Please?”

“No.”

“Do I have to beg?”

This got Esme’s attention. A vaguely wicked smile curved her lips. “You can try.”

That smile shot a bolt of adrenaline through Sybil.

This girl.

The things this girl does to me.

The things I would do for this girl.

Ignoring her racing heart, Sybil set Oliver down on her chair and dropped dramatically to one knee in front of Esme. “Please, oh, please, most charming and gracious Esme. Please come with me tonight.” Sybil flung a hand across her forehead, like a forlorn heroine in the serialized novels Esme loved so much.
Esme arched an eyebrow, considering, and then shook her head. “Good try, but still no.”

“Evil thing!” Sybil flung a balled-up piece of paper at Esme. “It’ll be quick, and I need a lookout.”

Esme batted the paper away, knocking it toward Oliver, who caught it eagerly between his paws. “It’s still raining.”

“It’s already stopping. Come on.” Sybil stood and paced back to the couch. She grabbed her boots and coat from where she’d flung them earlier.

Esme put her screwdriver down and took a long sip of her cold tea. She let out the weariest of sighs. “No. And, besides, I’d truly hoped you weren’t doing this anymore, regardless of the weather.”

This meant Sybil pulling on her thief’s coat—the one with the deep pockets—and heading into the city long after most respectable people in Severon were in their beds. This also meant stealing things—specifically, the colorful posters that cropped up every Friday night all around town. Half marketing and half art, the posters sold commercial products like booze and clothing, or they advertised clubs and theaters. Since they were created by famous artists, they were also coveted by collectors. And collectors had pockets even deeper than those in Sybil’s thief’s coat.

“We have to steal a poster tonight because we need the money to round out my portion of rent,” Sybil said. Their landlady had made it clear her patience was at an end. And Esme couldn’t lose her beloved apartment just because Sybil couldn’t keep a job.

Not that Sybil said any of that. She finished buttoning her coat and grinned at Esme. “Plus, there are supposed to be some really rare prints going up this week. Come on. Please. It’ll be an adventure.”
Sybil craved adventure in equal proportion to Esme’s hatred of it. She knew this, but she still had to ask Esme to go with her. If only because she had no other friends in Severon.

“I’m not dressed for adventure.” Esme gestured to her skimpy nightgown and loosely tied robe. “Besides, I’m having quite an adventure figuring out this clock.” She picked up her screwdriver and began poking again at the contraption’s insides.

Sybil rolled her eyes and tried not to stare at Esme’s long bare legs. Esme wore the same thing every day—a gray working dress of which she had four identical copies—but she took off most of her clothing the minute she got home from her waitressing job, preferring to cook, read, snuggle cats, knit, and tinker with broken clocks in her pajamas. Not that Sybil had noticed or spent too many moments thinking about her gorgeous friend lounging around their place barely dressed.

For half a second, an image of running her hand up Esme’s leg filled Sybil’s mind. She immediately shoved it way down, locked it in a vault, and threw away the key. She wasn’t going to lose her friend for the chance of a smile. Or a kiss. Or anything else. No matter what Sybil had done with other people in the past, she and Esme weren’t like that together. Not at all.

Sybil picked up the pile of clothing Esme had discarded earlier. “Please, Ez. Get dressed and come with me. You don’t want me to get caught, do you?”

Esme set her screwdriver down forcefully. “Of course I don’t want you to get caught! But I don’t want you to do this at all. I heard at the café that a bunch of other poster thieves were hauled off to prison last week. Do you want that to be you?”
“It won’t be me. I’m too good, and you’re going to be watching the street. We’ll have the posters down before anyone even knows we’re there, and they’ll be sold by midnight.”

“Won’t they be ruined by the rain?”

“Not if we hurry.”

Esme let out a weary breath. “Fine. But this has to be the last time, Syb. Promise me. It’s too dangerous.”

Sybil just shrugged.

Esme cast the dismantled clock one last longing glance and then stood and slipped out of her silk robe and nightgown. She was as shameless about her body as only a girl raised in a cabaret and then an orphanage where there was never any private place to change could be. Heat flooded Sybil’s cheeks at the way the candlelight played over the planes of Esme’s stomach and the hollows beneath her collarbones. As Esme pulled on her dress, Sybil hurried toward the other end of the apartment, where she kept her trunk and her thief’s kit behind the dressing screen.

Hastily, Sybil stuffed a small knife, a glass bottle of water, a long piece of butcher’s paper, and a ball of string into her pockets. Her hands shook as she did so, and she wrapped her fingers around her key necklace and exhaled sharply.

Why was she so jittery? Was it just the nerves that came before a job? Was it what Esme said about the other team getting caught? Or was it the fact Esme was half naked on the other side of the room? Whatever it was that made Sybil’s hands shake, it had to stop. She needed steady, quick hands because she couldn’t afford to get caught. Or to pay for a lawyer. And it wasn’t like her family would—
“I’m ready,” Esme called out, her delight in Sybil’s embarrassment lacing her voice. “You can stop skulking like a prude.”

“I’m not a prude!” Sybil took a deep breath and strode around the dressing screen. “Artists aren’t prudes, and I’ve seen loads of naked models at the studio. Also, your buttons are crooked.”

Esme looked down at her coat and swore. Shoving a screwdriver, a book, and her life-plan list into her pocket, she started to rebutton her jacket, but Sybil nudged her.

“We don’t have time for exact buttons. Let’s go.” Sybil grabbed a bowler hat and smashed it over her curls.

“Wait.” Esme’s hand snagged on Sybil’s elbow before she could open the front door.

Sybil turned around, catching sight of the two of them in a mirror hanging by the door. Esme was tall and lovely, but a lifetime of not enough food had carved her into sharp angles. A long scar—the product of some childhood injury—cut across the pale white skin of her left cheek, puckering it slightly.

Sybil smiled at her own reflection. She stood almost a head shorter than Esme, and her skin was also white, but freckles covered it. She had curly brown hair that never wanted to stay under a hat and green eyes that were “like a fern glen in springtime,” her mother had always said. The Sybil in the mirror beside Esme was no longer a creature in conservative dresses or face paints, guarded and timid, as a proper young lady should be. Now, in her thief’s coat and a bowler hat, she looked reckless, artistic, and a little wild. She loved it.

Esme frowned at their reflections, her sea-storm blue eyes darkening.

“What is it? What’s the matter?”
“You didn’t promise yet.” Esme’s fingers dug into Sybil’s arm. Her nails were bitten all the way to the quick, but her grip was still intense, even through Sybil’s coat.

“Promise what?”

“That this is the last time you’ll steal posters.”

Gently, Sybil uncurled Esme’s fingers, rubbing at the spot where they’d been. A combination of pleasure and pain raced up her arm. It was still strange sometimes to be cared for like this. She’d never had a best friend, and it took some getting used to, even after a year.

“You worry too much, Ez.”

“Promise me this is the last time, or I’m not going.” Esme’s voice held a frayed note, something that carried with it the tragic story of how she had lost her mother and her years at the orphanage after that loss. That hint of pain cracked Sybil’s heart wide open and made her never want Esme to feel any hurt ever again.

“Fine, you old worrier.” Sybil flung an arm around Esme’s waist. “I promise this is the last time I steal posters. Does that reassure you?”

“ Mostly not, but thank you for the promise.”

Sybil squeezed Esme in a quick hug, inhaling her mint-and-metal smell before releasing her. “And now, really, let’s go. I’m going to be furious if we miss out on the best posters because you’ve kept me here, lounging about like a rich woman and extracting promises.”

Guilt spread through Sybil at the words, and she wished she could take them back. She knew exactly what it was like to lounge about like a rich woman.

Esme barked a laugh, oblivious since Sybil had never told her any details about her family or how different her upbringing had
been from Esme’s. “We’re so far from wealthy, I almost considered eating a roach that crawled out of the cupboard this morning. Thank goodness I was able to bring home food from the café for dinner.”

Sybil groaned. “Eating roaches truly is foul.”

“I’ve eaten a roach before, you know,” Esme said cheerfully. “When I was a child, before the orphanage, I had a cat—Leviathan—who would bring them to me as gifts. I was little and in a phase where I really wanted to be a cat too. One day, I thought I’d try a roach, to help with my cat nature, and let me tell you, they taste like—”

“Enough! Please, I beg you!” Sybil gave Esme a small affectionate swat on the arm.

Esme’s guffaw filled the stairway as they descended to the street, and Sybil’s heart soared, as it always did when she made her best friend laugh.