

## **The First Two Pages: “Art Attack” by Heather Weidner**

From *Deadly Southern Charm: A Lethal Ladies Mystery Anthology*

Edited by Mary Burton and Mary Miley (Wildside Press)

“Move the amethyst goblet more to the left,” gallery owner and curator Harvey Owens demanded, pointing to the right.

Jillian Holmes, Harvey’s personal assistant, was balanced on a ladder in front of the glass cabinet. “Better?” She slid the goblet about four inches to the right and farther away from three green urns.

“I liked it better where she had it before,” said Ilsa Prescott, owner of the featured glass and stoneware collection. As she stepped nearer to the display and shook her head, her silver bob shimmered under the gallery lights.

“Here, let me do it.” Harvey hardly waited for Jillian to step down from the ladder before he moved the goblet back to where it was originally. “Hand me the green urns,” he said, snapping his fingers.

“Be careful with those, Harvey!” Ilsa shouted. “Those pieces are the cream of my collection. My late husband and I bought them on our travels, and I expect them back in one piece after the exhibit ends.”

“Thank you for reminding us again that you loaned them,” Harvey said peevishly.

“They are be the perfect addition to your gallery opening on Friday,” Ilsa added.

“Right along with Da’rel’s collection of acrylics and Marilyn Culpepper’s watercolors,” he countered.

“Your entire collection is lovely,” Jillian added. “But that goblet is especially stunning—the way it fades from purple to violet to white. And that metal filigree design of wolves and the moon—gorgeous!”

“That’s the blood goblet,” Ilsa said. “My husband and I acquired it from a dealer in Romania. The dealer said whoever drinks from it and has an impure heart will be cursed. Those who drink and have reckless courage will be gifted with abundant success and great wealth.”

Harvey rolled his eyes.

Ilsa winked at him. “It worked for me. It’s my good luck charm. And my favorite piece.”

Unconvinced, Harvey turned to Jillian. “Hand me those ruby-colored flutes. I want them under the blood goblet.”

“They look so gothic and magical.” The comment came from behind them. Angie Webb, the receptionist, hung over her circular desk for a better view of the display. “I can’t keep my eyes off all the pieces. The lighting is perfect over there.”

“I’m hoping your guests will enjoy them as much as I do. I’ll see you all on opening night.” Ilsa slung her Gucci purse over her shoulder and tossed a wave at Harvey and his staff.

Just as the older woman stepped toward the gallery door, Marilyn Culpepper, the featured artist, barreled in, pushing the door with enough force for it to hit the jamb. The rotund woman waved several sheets of paper at Harvey and said, “I need to see you about this. Now!”

“I’m working here, Marilyn,” Harvey said. “Can’t whatever it is wait?”

Jillian shelved a set of Ilsa’s delicate perfume bottles and crystal decanters.

“No, it most certainly cannot,” Marilyn sputtered. “These figures you sent me for last month’s sales and consignments are off. You sold four of my large paintings, and your report only shows three.”

“I’m sure it can be explained. Step into my office, and we’ll look at it.”

“Harvey, I’m getting tired of this,” Marilyn said. Her voice got louder as she shook the papers again at the portly gallery owner.

He grabbed them, licked his fingers, and paged through them. “Come with me.”

“This is the second time that the numbers and your checks have been off. I seriously doubt you want me to spread the word that you cheat artists. Richmond is a close-knit art community. We all talk to each other.”

Ilsa Prescott frowned and slipped out the front door. Harvey followed Marilyn to his office and shut the door.

Jillian closed the ladder and stuck it in the corner. While she was putting the finishing touches on Ilsa’s stoneware display of fiery orange and red sunset-patterned plates, Harvey’s door burst open. Marilyn stormed out through the gallery and slammed the front door.

Angie Webb raised her eyebrows and returned to the papers on her desk.

Harvey strode out of his office and stopped in front of the glass cases on the long wall of the main gallery in the refurbished antebellum warehouse. He looked transfixed by the glassware exhibit.

“Everything okay with Marilyn?” Jillian asked.

“That old bat has a greater sense of her talent than actually exists. It was just an accounting error. I don’t know if we’ll show any more of her stuff here.” He started rearranging the plates and cups on the first shelf. Then he snapped his fingers. “Ladder.”

Jillian dragged the stepladder back in place. He climbed up and rearranged the goblets. Green, red, and royal blue gemstone-colored glasses surrounded the blood goblet. He picked up the amethyst one again and admired it under the spotlight. He turned it around and tilted it to catch the light. Harvey looked mesmerized by the Romanian glass.

“Harvey. Harvey!” Angie called out from the reception area. “Kathy from the catering company is on line one. She wants the final count on the attendees for the opening. And she needs a check to cover the balance.”

He put the glass back and climbed down the ladder. “I’ll take it in my office.”

The next morning, Jillian found Angie standing on the sidewalk in front of the gallery smoking. “Morning. How are you?”

“Dreading the exhibit tonight. There is still so much to do, and it looks like the rat bastard isn’t even here.”

“Does that surprise you?” Jillian asked.

“We don’t need him anyway. You’re the one who holds everything together around here. Ol’ Harvey would be in a world of hurt if you ever left.” She dropped her cigarette on the sidewalk and crushed it with her pointy-toed shoe.

“Thanks. I want to learn everything I can while I’m here. I want to be a curator someday.” Jillian unlocked the door.

“It looks like Harvey ran off and left the lights on again,” Angie said as she dumped her purse and coffee mug on the counter. “This place is a wreck. People—even the rich ones—are slobs.”

“Harvey. Hey, Harvey!” Jillian yelled. She walked through the gallery and pushed open the partially shut door to his office. A foul stench smacked her in the face.

The requirements for submission to the Sisters in Crime—Central Virginia anthology *Deadly Southern Charm* were that the location needed to be in the southern United States, the sleuth had to be a strong female, and the story had to be cozyesque.

As a native Virginian, I write where I know. I love to share the history, landmarks, and fun restaurants of my adopted hometown with readers. “Art Attack” is set in a fictitious gallery in the Shockoe Bottom section of downtown Richmond, known for a variety of galleries, stores, and eclectic restaurants. The neighborhood is vibrant and reflective of the creativity of the community and is the heart of the city’s nightlife. Street murals and pop-up art exhibits dot the landscape. The art scene is everywhere.

“Art Attack” opens with the team setting up displays of glassware and pottery for a special gala and art opening. I wanted to show the dynamics between the two workers, Jillian and Angie, and the overbearing and often unappreciative gallery manager, Harvey. To combat the unbalanced worker/boss dichotomy, I added the wealthy Isla Prescott, owner of the art on loan to the gallery. With age comes experience and confidence, and Isla puts Harvey in his place when he needs to be reined in or taken down a peg or two. I wanted to juxtapose the younger women at the beginning of their careers with the wealthy widow who doesn’t hesitate to speak her mind. The two younger women are also on opposite ends of

the spectrum. Hard-working Jillian has goals and strives to learn everything she can about the art scene, while Angie lives for the moment and doesn't show any initiative to better her situation. In the story, each of the three women learns something about and from the others.

In the opening pages, Isla tells Jillian, Angie, and Harvey about the amethyst blood goblet, the showpiece of the collection, and its curse. Harvey scoffs at the idea when she provides anecdotal evidence of how it changed her life. The folklore of the cursed or charmed goblet and the sudden death of one of the characters give readers opportunities to decide if the death was an accident, a horrific murder, or something caused by otherworldly influence before the reveal at the end.

I like my stories to be traditional and often humorous, and this is the first one where I have toyed with the idea that the root cause might have been tied to a curse and not to explainable, earthly facts.

When I'm reading, my favorite mysteries always have a twist, and I hope the one in this story keeps readers guessing until the end.

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Originally from Virginia Beach, Heather Weidner has been a mystery fan since Scooby Doo and Nancy Drew. She lives in Central Virginia with her husband and a pair of Jack Russell terriers.

Heather's short stories appear in the *Virginia is for Mysteries* series, *50 Shades of Cabernet*, and *Deadly Southern Charm. Secret Lives and Private Eyes* and *The Tulip Shirt Murders* are her novels in the Delanie Fitzgerald series. Her novella "Diggin' up Dirt" appears in *To Fetch a Thief*. She is a member of Sisters in Crime—Central Virginia, Guppies, and James River Writers.

Heather earned her BA in English from Virginia Wesleyan University and her MA in American literature from the University of Richmond. Through the years, she has been a cop's kid, technical writer, editor, college professor, software tester, and IT manager. She blogs regularly with the Pens, Paws, and Claws authors.