

The background of the page is a light, textured surface with faint, large-scale watercolor-style washes in shades of gray and lavender. The title 'LAVENDER HOUSE' is centered in a bold, 3D, metallic font. The letters have a brushed metal texture and cast soft shadows on the surface below them. The word 'LAVENDER' is on the top line, and 'HOUSE' is on the bottom line, both in all caps.

LAVENDER HOUSE



ONE

I thought I'd have the place all to myself, this early. Like church on a Tuesday—no one but you and God—or in my case, the bartender. But there's a guy and girl, high school kids or maybe just twenty, sitting at one of the booths in the back. They're trying to keep their voices low, but he's failing, getting angry. Something about wiener dogs. It's weird the things people fight over.

He pounds the table and she whimpers a little. I sigh, feel my body shifting to get up. I don't have to do this anymore. Hell, no one even wants me to. That's why I was fired. But some habits you can't break. So I down what's left of my martini, motion the bartender to pour another, and stand up and go to the back of the place, where he's holding her wrist, tight. Her arm is stretching like a shoelace as she tries to stand up, but he won't let go. On her other wrist, she's wearing a charm bracelet. Just a few charms: an eagle, that's a mascot for one of the local schools, with "1950" under it, so she graduated two years ago. A book, so she's a reader. A wiener dog, for her pet, I'm guessing, and the source of the argument. And an apple. Teacher's favorite, or she just really likes apples, maybe. Not

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enough life lived for many charms. Not enough to cover the bruise, either.

"I think the lady wants to go," I tell him. I've had enough to drink that I sound like a two-bit tough guy. Maybe I am a two-bit tough guy.

"Mind your own business, pal," he says. He talks like he's seen too many mobster movies. Or maybe he's just trying to match me.

"Miss, you want to leave?" I ask her, looking past him.

"Hey, hey, mister, don't ignore me," the kid says. I keep my eyes on the girl.

She nods, but doesn't say anything, so I reach out and I pull back his finger from her wrist, hard. He yelps in pain but she gets loose and runs out of the bar, the little bell on the door jingling as it closes behind her.

"It's too early for this, fellas," the bartender says, the words coming out of him in one long sigh.

"I was just helping the lady," I say, turning my back on the kid, walking back to the bar. I know he's going to come up behind me, so I wait till I feel him, then spin and catch the fist as it connects with my shoulder. Not that hard. Just enough I wheeze a little, which makes him smile, like he's won something. I don't like that smile. Reminds me too much of the mirror. So I grab his wrist and yank his arm back.

"Hey, hey," the kid says, "fuck you."

He swings with his other fist, so I catch that one, too, and turn him around, holding his arms behind him.

"You can't do this!" the kid says. He looks over at the bartender, who keeps his eyes on the glasses in front of him. The kid stares as I march him to the door and then turns his head

around to look at me. “You’re drinking martinis? This early? That’s cool, man. I can buy you one. We can talk this out.”

I roll my eyes, kick the door open, and push him out of it, onto the ground. He goes face first, but I know he’ll just have a scrape. I’ve done this enough—before. Sometimes it makes me feel better, helping, like I’ve done some good in the world. Not today, though. Probably for the best. Might make me reconsider my plans.

He stares at me, the sun beating down on him and the concrete, like he’s waiting for me to say something.

“Don’t be rude to women,” I announce, loud enough someone across the street looks over. It’s the best I’ve got. I hiccup. Then I grin, ’cause I’m pretty drunk and I still managed to toss him out. And because I have another martini waiting for me.

“Screw you,” he says, getting back up, but it sounds weak and he knows it. I turn around and bounce off the glass door of the bar, which has closed behind me. There goes my heroic exit. The kid starts laughing, but I step back, rub my nose, and turn the handle, walking back in, the kid still cackling behind me.

I take my seat and drink the new martini in front of me in one swallow. The bartender looks at me like I’m the sorriest sight in San Francisco, and maybe he’s right, but I try not to let it show. I lift my chin and order another, keeping my voice even, proud. I’m proud to be in this bar at 2 p.m. on a Monday. I’m proud to have thrown some kid out on the street, even though it’s not my job anymore. Hell, I’m proud to be jobless, blacklisted. I’m proud to have just ordered my fifth drink. I’m probably not fooling anyone, but I can try. He mixes it for me turned away, and if he makes a face, I can’t see it. And with the kids gone, no one else is around to judge. I tap my fingers

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slowly on the bar. I'm patient. I have all day—that's the plan: drink all day so when it's dark, and no one will notice, I'll be drunk enough to pitch myself into the bay.

I like the bay for it. It's how Jan Westman was found. I remember looking at her on the shore of [Stinson Beach](#), when we still thought it was just a case of a drunk falling into the bay. She looked peaceful. She hadn't been in the water more than a night. Her skin was pale, a little blue, her eyes closed by the old man who found her and called in the local police, who called us after finding her ID. He'd folded her arms over her chest, too, and Lou said it was morbid, but I thought she looked relaxed, at ease with what had happened. I was actually surprised when her blood came back sober and we had to look at it as murder, and then when we caught the guy and found out what had been done to her. If a night in the water can wash away trauma, make a body like hers look serene, I think it can at least do it halfway for me.

When the door of the bar opens, it rattles me out of the memory, and I'm staring at my drink again, Patti Page singing "Tennessee Waltz" from the radio, her voice soft with static. I have the record of this one. I almost wonder what will happen to it, after, but then the martini slides that thought away.

I don't even bother glancing up to see who's come in until she sits down next to me. Her lips are painted bright red. She's wearing a yellow skirt that cuts at the calf and a matching jacket decorated with a circular black-stoned brooch. Perched on her short, dark (surely dyed at her age) hair is a small hat with a small pin in it of an overlapping "WAC"—the Women's Athletic Club. Her style is dated, but very high society. I've seen plenty of women like her, their money protecting them from the change they fear so badly, like a suit made of gold foil.

She lights her cigarette, perched in a holder, and asks the bartender for a Manhattan. She has a deep, sharp voice, and it cuts through the fog of drunkenness in my mind. She's right out of a movie—she could ask me to kill her husband any second now. She swivels on the stool next to mine, and I have half a mind to tell her she's barking up the wrong tree—why not? But when I look up, she's not making eyes at me. Not like that, anyway. She looks at me like she feels sorry for me, a baby bird fallen from the nest. Well, screw her. I might be over, as far as lives go, but I'm nothing to feel sorry for. I'm doing this on my terms.

I smile at her, hoping she'll stop looking at me like that. That works sometimes—I'm a good-looking guy and a smile makes people feel at ease. But since the day before yesterday my smiles haven't fit right, and this one is no different. She's not impressed by it. But I can tell that's not my fault. She's not impressed by much, this woman. So I turn away, prepared to ignore her outright. But then.

"Evander Mills?" she asks as the bartender puts her Manhattan down in front of her. She says it like it's a question she already knows the answer to. I get the impression that's the only kind she asks.

"How do you know my name?" I try not to let the alcohol slur my words.

She sips her drink, then takes the cherry out and sets it on the bar, staring at it like it owes her money and isn't the one bit of sweetness in her drink.

"I know why you were fired from the police force," she says, eyes still on the cherry.

And just like that, whatever traces of the martinis that were left in me vanish in a shiver of ice and the acrid smell of her

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cigarette smoke. I stand up, because otherwise I'd fall off my stool. I don't look at her. I fumble in my coat for my wallet and take it out, ready to settle, but she rests a gloved hand on my arm and squeezes.

"Relax," she says. "It's a selling point with me."

I stop fumbling and stare at her hand on my arm. She drops it, but lifts her chin and now she's smiling at me. Her smile fits. It's like the ones I get and give in the Black Cat sometimes. Not the smile that's an invitation, but the one that says, "I know you, we're safe here, we're home." Even if they never worked on me, not like they were supposed to, I know those smiles.

"Oh," I say.

Her eyes are shot with strands of red, not the kind from exhaustion or reefer. The kind from crying for days. She's wearing concealer, but nothing can hide eyes like that except sunglasses.

She glances at the bartender, who, having nothing else to do, is watching us, seeing how this will play out. Then she turns to me and takes a money clip out of the black purse she's put on the bar and throws down enough cash for both of us.

"Let's go sit over there," she says, grabbing her drink and motioning with her chin at the booth farthest from the bar. I pick up my drink and follow her as she walks over, then sit down opposite her. The cheap leather squeaks under me. This is the same booth the kids were in. It still smells like the girl's perfume, too sweet.

"I know you need work. I might have a job for you." She says it softly, so the bartender can't hear—that sort of job. The booth we're in is in the corner and light from the big windows shines in, making me squint. It's hard to read her with her back to the light like that.

"What kind?" I sip my drink.

"The kind like you used to do for the police. The inspector kind." She takes a long drag of her cigarette. "You were good, right?"

"Yeah," I say. My chest gets warm with pride or arrogance or alcohol, I'm not sure which, then it gets cold again real fast, when I remember that that part of my life is over. "But look, I don't want people to think that I—" That I'm queer, I almost say. Though, of course, I am. And everyone knows it now. Or at least, everyone on the police force, which is enough.

"No one will think anything," she says briskly. "No one will say anything. That's the whole point of a private detective, isn't it? Privacy. And besides, I'm not someone people would know in that sense."

I sip again. I've never worked freelance before, but this could be good. This could be something worth hanging around for. Money. Go out with a bang—a few more nights at the Black Cat, or maybe even the Oak Room or the Ruby, fanning out cash and boys flocking around me before I'm back to waiting for sundown and a dark part of the bay to wash myself off the world. I suddenly realize I want that so bad I can taste it, smell it—lips, breath on my neck, tinged with whisky. One more night. A kiss goodbye.

A chance to help someone again, too. I don't think about that part, though. I just open my mouth.

"All right, so what's the case?"

She swirls the last of her drink in the glass. "What made you good at it? Being an inspector?"

"I like helping people."

She raises an eyebrow. "That wouldn't make you good at it."

I smile, but I can feel it looks sad, so I take it off. "Crimes are about secrets," I tell her. "And I have enough experience

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keeping secrets I'm very good at finding them." I pause. A bitter laugh spits out of me. "At least, I thought I was."

She nods. "How did you end up getting caught, then?" she asks. "If you were so good at it."

I look down at the table. Formica winks back up. Lou was out sick. He usually told me what club they were hitting—not 'cause he knew about me, but because I asked every couple of weeks, and he thought it was just us chatting like partners do. "I had a system," I tell her. "It was flawed." Flawed 'cause I asked Jim instead, forgetting he was an idiot, trusting him not to get it wrong. Since the judge ruled that gay people could gather and be served, the bars weren't illegal, not exactly. But if you found "immoral" goings-on, that was enough to shut them down. Immoral like kissing, like touching, like—"And I really wanted . . ." I stop. She reaches out and puts her hand over mine.

"I know," she says. "We all make mistakes when we want something."

"Still. I wish it had been a different kind of mistake." I remember Jim kicking open the door to the bathroom, chuckling, saying loudly he needed to check it was clean. Making everyone feel uncomfortable—that was the goal. When the door opened I was on my knees, already trying to scramble up. We were paraded out in cuffs before we could zip up our flies. The bartender claiming he had no idea, the female impersonator on stage sighing loudly, the other patrons shooting us looks—pity, anger, amusement. The bar got fined, but not shut down, at least.

"Did you tell everyone else?" she asks.

I feel a cold drop of ice in my blood. "About what?" I look back up at her.

"The police, when they were coming. Your system. Did you warn people?"

I wait too long, long enough it may as well be an answer, so I move on. "You said you had a case?" I ask her.

She pulls her hand away. There's a moment where we look at each other, so quiet we can hear each other breathing. I know what she's thinking, but I don't answer the question she doesn't ask: Why not? Because the answers are selfish, arrogant: I was too worried about myself to think of anyone else. Their own fault for not looking out for themselves. Other queers aren't my responsibility anyway. I wouldn't tell her the truth: that we're all alone in this world, and it never occurred to me to pretend like we weren't.

"Murder," she says suddenly, in the same hard tone she used to order her drink, which she now lifts and finishes in one swallow. "You've solved those before, right?"

"Sure," I say. "Plenty. This is someone close to you? The one you've been crying over?"

She frowns and touches at the corner of her eye with her thumb, pulling at the skin a little. "I thought I'd hid it," she says.

I shake my head. "Sorry for your loss."

"Thank you. It was my . . ." She glances up again, looks behind me. I turn to see—the bartender is still watching us. "Maybe we should drive. You're interested in the job?"

"Yeah," I say, licking the inside of my mouth. "Interested. But I don't even know your name."

She smiles, and then throws back her head in a loud laugh. "I haven't said it, have I?" She extends her hand. "I'm Pearl Velez."

Her grip is as hard as her voice. She smirks as we shake.

"And you were about to say—the victim?"

"Irene . . ." she says. Then glances at the bartender again.

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She stands up, tossing her cigarette into the glass. “But let’s talk more about that on the way.”

I down what’s left of my drink and follow her outside to where one of those new Packard Mayfair convertibles is waiting. It’s dark red with black leather interior and the top is down. She opens her door and slips in and when I stare, she reaches over and pops open the passenger door for me. I get in and before I even close the door, she’s burning rubber, reaching into the glove compartment for a pair of sunglasses with her eyes still on the road. The radio is already on, Rosemary Clooney singing “Mixed Emotions.” Pearl drives fast, confident, wild. She swerves around anyone obeying the speed limit and throttles the gears to climb over the hills, heading west, zipping over the Golden Gate Bridge. Some mist still lingers over the water, but the sun is bright enough I squint and slump in my seat, holding onto the door handle so I don’t fly away. Once we’re over the bridge, she really lets it out, moving so fast I can feel the wind pressing itself into my mouth and nose, like water blasting through my brain to clean the drunkenness out.

“So where are we going, Pearl?” I have to shout to be heard over the wind in our faces.

“We’re going to our home. Irene’s home. Her full name was Irene Lamontaine, and she was my wife.”

The wind is loud, so for a moment I think I didn’t hear her right.

“Your what?” I ask.

She smiles without looking at me, and I can’t quite read her expression behind the sunglasses, but I think it’s amused, the sort of thing she has to repeat a lot. “My wife.”

I lean back. Even in the clubs and bars, no woman calls another woman her wife, at least not as loudly as Pearl is. They

whisper it, or say it as a joke, or defensively, trying to start a fight. No one says it like Pearl just did, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

"Come on, Mr. Mills," she says, still smiling. "Surely my loving a woman isn't enough to shock you."

"Only that you'd say it out loud like that." I try to keep my voice casual.

"Where we're going, we say everything out loud," she responds, her voice a growl imitating the engine.

"Then why do you need me?" I ask.

She doesn't answer—I'm not sure if she heard me. The wind pulls through her hair, makes it flutter, and she speeds the car up just a bit. Around us, San Francisco has faded away into a stretch of the 101. The water is to our right, past some open fields. The light is cold and yellow.

"So everyone there . . . ?" I let the question hang.

"Yes," she says. "We're all queer. It's why we don't want the police around."

I lean back in the seat. Sure, I've been around queers in groups before. The Black Cat, the Beige Room, Mona's, plenty of places in the city, and I've been to most of them. But those are for the night. Those are for lingering looks and meetings in the bathroom, dancing sometimes, flirting, and always looking out for the cops, for a blackmailer, for something that would force you back out onto the street, into the real world, where no one would look at you the same if they knew. You'd be unemployable, except at some low-wage bar gig back in one of those clubs. Friendless, aside from the others like you. A whole other life you didn't choose—or the other option. My option, before Pearl sat down next to me.

But shacking up? Friends? Family? We don't get to do that,

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unless we're very careful, or have nothing left in the real world, are already cast out. Not someone like Pearl.

"You're smiling," she says. I realize she's right. "Why?"

"I guess, it's just, two days ago, I would have told you to turn the car around."

"And now?" she asks.

"Now . . ." I laugh. None of the guys I'd worked with for the past ten years, guys I'd called friends, who I thought would have taken a bullet for me—none of them would even look at me as they led me from lockup to the chief's office. Even he wouldn't meet my eye as he told me I was done. Conduct unbecoming, perversion, lewd acts. They said they wouldn't lock me up, though. That was their one token of my years of service. They'd just let everyone know what I was and what they'd found me doing and my life in the real world would be over.

"Now," I say, "what do I have to lose?"

TWO

The fields become trees after we leave the highway, still heading west, redwoods shooting up like prison bars all around us, becoming so dark and thick the sun is blocked out and I don't even see the turnoff before she takes it. We screech to a sudden halt in front of a pair of modern-looking gates.

"Would you mind?" Pearl asks, nodding at the gates. "Just push them open and closed. I'll send someone to lock them up later."

I step out of the car and walk up to the gate, my legs still a little wobbly under me from the booze. We haven't spoken much since the bridge, the wind was so loud I didn't want to bother asking questions I'd have to repeat. Instead I pictured what kind of place we might be headed to. I thought maybe some farm, or a little apartment in one of the towns up here. Pearl smelled like money, but I underestimated her, because this is not what I expected. The gates are at least twice as tall as me, wrought iron, a big gilded "L" on the front that looks familiar. They look heavy, but swing open easily.

The air has a smell, I realize. Not just the trees. More than

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that, something herbal and floral, but not just some wildflowers or a planter of tulips. Beyond the gate are more trees and a hill, so I can't see much. Pearl drives through and I close the gate behind her then step back into the car.

"What's that smell?" I ask.

"The flowers," she says. "Irene always liked having all the flowers around to pick new scents. Lavender was her favorite, though, so we grow that everywhere. That's why we call this place Lavender House." She pulls the car forward and laughs, deep and throaty. "Well, and for the other reason."

We crest the hill and the trees stop suddenly, showing the estate—a huge swath of land, entirely walled in, and redwoods all around the walls, lined up like soldiers. Completely sealed off, hidden. Standing in the center of it all is a large art deco house with a domed roof in the middle, and two wings curving around a white gravel roundabout, which itself is curved around a fountain. Spreading out from the mansion are fields of flowers. Pink, white, pale blue, yellow, green, but lavender is the one I see the most of, lining pathways and racing like veins through the other plants. All the blossoms stand tall and sway a little, soft and pale, and they almost seem to ripple, like rivers spreading out from the main house.

"Scents," I say. "Lamontaine—like the soap?"

"Exactly," Pearl says.

I let out a low whistle. That's big money, then. A family company, they call themselves in the radio ads. Probably would ruin them if anyone knew what kind of family.

We drive forward and she pulls the car up in the roundabout behind three other cars of different makes and colors. On either side of the house are a few narrow trees that burst into large pink blossoms at the top. The fountain in the center of

the roundabout, I notice, is scorched at the top, black, but still functioning, water pouring over the dark spot like a wavering shadow.

I look up at the house, closer now. The brick is white, but the metal is pale purple. It's three stories, plus the domed roof, with huge curved windows that remind me a little of flowers. At the top of the west wing, I see a curtain pull aside and a shadow stare down at us. I wonder how expected I am—if Pearl brought me here on her own, or by committee.

"I guess Elsie's not here," Pearl says, looking at the cars. She shuts off the motor and gets out, stretching her arms above her head. "You'll have to talk to her later."

She moves for the house but stops after a few steps, and turns slowly, looking at me, where I still sit in the passenger seat. "Coming?"

"I have a few questions first," I say, slowly opening the door and stepping out. She puts her hands on her hips and gives me one quick nod. She's impatient but needs me. "So, Irene Lamontaine is dead, and you're her wife?"

"I told you that already."

"When did she die?"

"About three weeks ago," Pearl says. She looks at one of the windows on the ground floor. The curtain there moves a little. Bringing me here was definitely *just* Pearl's idea.

"And you only hired me now?" I ask.

"You weren't available until the day before last, and I didn't hear about that until this morning," Pearl says, crossing her arms. "Before that, I was looking for someone we could trust to let in. You're someone we can trust."

I nod. "All right. But before we go in, you need to explain the situation. Who lives here?"

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She turns and walks toward the front door, and I follow. “Myself and Irene. Our son—Irene’s, technically, though we raised him together—Henry. We’re lucky enough that he also turned out to be less traditional in his wants.”

“Lucky?” I ask. The word feels like a slap. “That’s not what I’d call it.”

Pearl nods, frowning a little. “Perhaps it was selfish, but we were happy. He has a longtime companion, Cliff, who lives here and poses as his social secretary when required. When Henry took over managing the soap company, Irene insisted he marry, for appearances. Lamontaine Soap is a family company. We sell to happy housewives and the like—and bachelors make housewives nervous. So we found him a wife—Margo. She has girlfriends, but appreciates the importance of maintaining appearances. Right now she’s seeing a girl named Elsie. Everyone, of course, is very discreet outside the house.” She frowns a little. “Oh, and Margo’s mother lives with us too. Alice. She’s the only one who isn’t . . . like us.”

We reach the door just as Pearl finishes talking, and she glances up, quickly, at the third-floor window where I’d seen someone watching us.

“But she knows,” I say.

“Of course,” Pearl says, turning the knob and opening the door. “That’s the point of our home. No secrets.”

I try not to laugh at that. “What about the help?” I ask.

“Yes. Three.” She lingers, not walking inside yet.

“How do you keep them from gossiping if there are no secrets?”

“The staff are very well paid—they wouldn’t risk their jobs for a quick payday to some gossip rag.”

“That’s quite an assumption. Lamontaine is a big business.”

“Most of them are happy to have a place to be themselves, as well. Our gardener, Judy, shares a room with our cook, Dot. Our butler, Mr. Kelly, was the one who told me about you—he enjoys visiting the clubs on his nights off. We’re very careful about who we let in through the gate.”

I nod, and Pearl goes inside, me following. We’re standing in a foyer: white marble floor, dark purple carpeted stairs that lead up to a landing, then split, twisting back up above us in both directions. A huge portrait of a woman hangs at the landing, and standing under it feels like being in the shadow of a mountain, like it takes up the entire horizon.

The woman in the portrait is about fifty, with flaming red hair falling to her shoulders in gentle curls and bangs. You can tell from her expression that the painter wanted to make her seem sweet, but she wouldn’t let him. Instead, they reached a compromise: she looks severe, but amused. Superior, deigning to look you in the eye as long you know to look away immediately. Her black satin dress exposes her collarbones before rising higher at the shoulders with pleated, bat-like wings. Going down, it hugs her torso, then hangs straight. Her ears gleam with diamonds that match her ring and bracelet. From all that, she’s not the kind of woman I think of as surrounding herself with flowers, but as if to contradict me, around her, in the background, otherwise black, are baskets of flowers—roses, lavender, violets, sunflowers, and others I don’t know the names of, all cut and laid out as if in some Victorian stall.

“That’s Irene,” Pearl says, a slight tremor in her voice.

“Looks like a witch there, doesn’t she?” asks a young man sitting just below the portrait on the landing. I hadn’t noticed him before—the painting dominated everything—but I take him in now: in his twenties, with wide shoulders, a trim waist,

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and thick legs. He's wearing a peach-colored shirt with no tie or jacket, and his dark hair is parted down the side, but that doesn't tame the curls. He's handsome, and when he smirks at me, I feel a familiar tug. I can tell he sees me feeling it, because he smiles now, the kind of smile I know. He rises, slowly, eyes on me. Then I realize what he just said, and glance over at Pearl, expecting some anger, but she just stares down at her hands as she tugs her gloves off.

"Don't talk about her that way, Cliff, please," Pearl says, the conversation already exhausting her, they've had it so many times. Cliff turns away from me at her voice, his smile falling back into a look of boredom.

"I'm not trying to be mean," Cliff says, standing and walking slowly down the stairs. "I just mean the painting. She looks like she's making a potion, not selling soap." He reaches the bottom of the landing and walks close to me, so close I can feel his warm breath on my face and smell the gin on it. "So you're the private dick?"

"Evander Mills," I say, extending my hand, trying to ignore the innuendo. He smiles and takes it, his fingers circling the inside of my palm as we shake. It's like being back in one of the bars. The flirting, the gin. Like he's brought the feeling of the Black Cat into this mansion in the woods. It's comforting, that feeling, and arousing. Or maybe that's just him.

"Cliff Carbury," he says, turning away. "I'm the . . ." He pauses.

"He's Henry's boyfriend. Our son-in-law, nearly," Pearl says.

"*Nearly*," Cliff repeats, sneering slightly. If Pearl notices, she doesn't act like it.

On either side of the foyer are large doors, one of which Cliff pushes open. Beyond it is what looks to be a sitting room,

in a modern style, done almost entirely in white. Pearl follows him, and I follow her. The sitting room is bright, with a glass table in the center and pale gray sofas and armchairs arranged in a group on the white carpet. A black vase of lavender sits in the center of the table. Against the wall is a large standing record player and radio. An Admiral, can't be more than a year or two old. High-end one, the kind I'd love to have but could never afford. Across the room, with a few chairs around it, is a new television set. The room feels like a museum, but without any art on display, like something is missing, or waiting.

To one side of the television, a blond woman, maybe in her early thirties, sits in a small chair, talking into a phone, an issue of *Vogue* open facedown in her lap.

"Yes," she says in a near whisper. "I'm telling you, she's done it. He's here. You'd better hurry back." She pauses. "No." She pauses again and sighs. "Fine. Before dinner."

As she speaks, Cliff sits down on one of the sofas and tilts his head back to look at the ceiling. He fishes a cigarette case out of his pants pocket, takes out a cigarette and puts it between his lips, then snaps the case shut and looks at me. "You don't have a light, do you?" he asks, his voice slightly muffled from keeping his lips clamped around the cigarette.

The blonde hangs up the phone, stands, and puts the magazine down on the table, smiling at us in a way so practiced she may as well be posing for photos. She probably does, for the society pages. I think I've even seen a few. Her dress is white but patterned with pink and yellow flowers and cut very fashionably, with exposed shoulders, tight waist, and skirt that ends below the knee. She wears one of those wide belts that all the rich ladies are wearing now, in pale pink. Her hair ends just

below her jaw and has been curled to look effortlessly sweet, but has started to straighten out from the slight pull she gives it as she tucks it behind her ears, as she does now.

"You have matches in your cigarette case, Cliff," she says without looking at him. "Hello. I'm Margo Lamontaine," she says, extending her hand. "And you are?"

"Evander Mills," I say, shaking.

"I've asked Evander to investigate Irene's murder," Pearl says.

Margo nods, her mouth pursed. "Pearl, I know this is hard for you—"

"Don't start," Pearl interrupts. "I've hired him, and I've already told him everything."

From the sofa, Cliff barks a laugh. Margo's expression shifts from welcoming to examining, an eyebrow raising, her green eyes going sharp.

"Everything?" she asks. Her voice sounds ready to run, or maybe fight.

"Don't worry, dear," Pearl says, placing a hand on Margo's arm. "He's one of us."

"I could've told you that," Cliff says. He's fished out his own matches and strikes one, lighting his cigarette. The faint floral smell I'd grown so used to I'd stopped noticing it becomes pronounced again as it mingles with the tobacco.

"One of us doesn't mean he won't march right to the papers for a payday anyway," Margo says, dropping her pleasant smile and attempt at a welcoming demeanor. Without the veneer, her picture of the perfect wife and hostess, already frayed at the edges, comes undone, and she suddenly looks strange in that dress, with that hair, a costume she's trying to shrug off after a long night on stage. I get the impression this Margo, the real Margo, would never be caught dead wearing flowers. She

marches over to Cliff, extending a hand. Sighing, he hands her his cigarette and then takes out another and lights it. Margo inhales deeply and then blows smoke out her nose, her eyes closed. I grin at the juxtaposition—perfect society wife gone bad—but try not to show it. “Really, Pearl, we talked this over and thought it was a bad idea.”

“*You* did!” Pearl says. “*You* thought it was a bad idea! But Irene was . . .” Pearl takes off her hat and stares down into it, circling the hat in her hands. “I know she was sometimes a dragon to you. But she was my wife, Margo. She was my everything. You understand that, don’t you?”

“Not really,” Margo says. “I have a *husband*.” She practically hisses the last word. That’s two of them upset about the arranged marriage now. Strange, if it’s just for show.

“Only technically,” Pearl says. “Imagine if Elsie was pushed over a railing and left to die. Wouldn’t you want her killer brought to justice?”

Margo’s eyes flick to my face at the mention of the name Elsie, then back to Pearl. “So you really told him everything didn’t you?” She inhales again, then holds the cigarette away from her mouth and looks me over. Her free arm she crosses over her chest. She seems unimpressed by everything around her, the sort who thought they were climbing to a pile of gold and then looked around one day and realized it was trash.

“So, Evander Mills,” she asks, blowing smoke, “what’s your résumé? Or did Pearl just pick out the least drunk-looking fairy from the docks?”

“I was an inspector for the SFPD until two days ago,” I say, lifting my chin up. I’m proud of that. Was proud of it.

She tilts her head, looking slightly impressed. “What happened two days ago?”

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"I was caught in the bathroom of the Black Cat," I say.

"Caught?" Cliff asks, smiling at me. "Doing what?"

"Things men do in the bathroom of the Black Cat," I say.

He grins, like he's about to ask for more detail, but Margo speaks first and I tear my eyes away from his lips.

"You should have gone to the Ruby," Margo says. "No police there."

"I'll remember that for next time."

"And how long have you been an inspector?" she asks, looking me up and down. "You can't be older than thirty."

"Thirty-two. I've been an inspector three years. I was a beat cop three years before that." I keep my tone neutral. It's a job interview.

"Since forty-five. So you came right out of the military?" she asks.

"Navy. I was stationed here, on a minesweeper escorting ships to and from Pearl Harbor."

"I bet you looked good in the uniform," Cliff says.

"Enlisted or drafted?" Margo asks, ignoring him.

"Enlisted."

"And before that?"

"I worked for my dad in L.A."

"Doing?" She taps her cigarette over the ashtray.

"He was an insurance investigator."

"Why not go back to work for him?"

"He's dead. And I liked it here."

"Because of the thriving nightlife?" Cliff asks.

"Something like that." More the variety of it—more clubs meant if I went to a different one each night, the chances of me getting caught in a raid were slimmer.

"I wasn't here during the war," Cliff says, "but I'll bet it was a delight. The army everywhere was practically an orgy

every night. Throw in all the civilians in town . . .” He grins. “I was USO myself. A dancer in the shows.” He kicks high from where he’s sitting.

“Honestly, you’re like a cat in heat,” Margo says.

“I haven’t left the house in weeks,” Cliff responds quickly. “Let a girl have some fun.”

“Will that do?” Pearl asks, putting her hands up to stop them. “Does he meet your standards, Margo?”

Margo leans back, sitting on the arm of the sofa, and inhales on her cigarette, then blows the smoke out in a perfect circle at me, framing her face like a locket. “Tell me this, Inspector Mills—they moved the body. Pearl has kept the crime scene locked up, untouched since the police left, but the body is gone. We buried her two weeks ago. Are you going to dig her up to inspect her?”

“Of course not,” Pearl says. “He’ll get the coroner’s report from the police.”

“Ahhh.” Margo waves her cigarette. “Is that what you’ll do, Inspector?”

I look down at my feet. “I can ask them,” I say.

“And they’ll talk to you? After catching you . . . doing the things men do in the bathroom of the Black Cat?”

Pearl turns to me, and I can feel the job being pulled out from under my feet. “I have a few friends who might help me out,” I lie.

“But they know who you are,” Margo says, inhaling again. “They know *what* you are, and they’ll know you’re working our case, and then they might just wonder. Why would *they* hire someone like *him*?” She inhales on her cigarette again, blows another smoke ring, this time at Pearl. The way she drew out the “like him” makes me shiver, but I manage to hide it. “You see the trouble?”

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"Oh, that's no trouble," Pearl says. "I'll say he's a friend of the family—we're giving him charity, that sort of thing. What's your mother's name, Evander?"

"Mary," I say. Cliff snorts a laugh from the couch.

"Fine, then Mary and I were old friends. From L.A., you said? So, pen pals, then. Met during a trip. I told her I'd keep an eye out for you when you moved up here. You were drunk, drugged maybe—you know how those people are."

"Us people, you mean," Cliff says.

"And it's such a shame what happened," Pearl continues, ignoring him. She tilts her head and her expression locks into place—she's telling a story to someone now, covering up. She's practiced in this, I can tell—she probably does it a lot. "Maybe I can even get you your job back."

I rub the back of my neck. I don't know if it'll work, but being here, among these people, a last night out before I throw myself in the water, the way Cliff looks at me—I want all that. I don't want it to end, not just yet. "I guess it could work," I say.

"See, Margo?" Pearl says, chin out, triumphant. "You only see problems. I see solutions."

Margo gives Pearl a smile nastier than most glares. "Whatever you say, Pearl." She stands and leaves the room.

Pearl turns to me. "She's just a little anxious about being discovered, you know. We all are. But I know we can trust you, can't we, Evander?"

"Of course." I'm not sure what else I can say.

"Cliff, can you ask Mr. Kelly to set up the guest room for Evander? I'm going to show him the library."

"Sure," Cliff says, not moving.

"I don't know if I need to stay the night," I say. If it was mur-

der, then spending the night in the same house as the murderer I'm trying to catch seems like a good way to end up the next victim.

"You do," Pearl says, already walking across the sitting room. I follow her. "Henry won't be home until after work, and who knows when Elsie will turn up."

"Still—" I say, feeling like I should protest.

"Where will you go, Evander?" Pearl asks with an embarrassed chuckle, like I've put her on the spot making her ask me. "I tried your apartment first when I went looking for you. Your landlord kicked you out after your old colleagues told him about you. You're staying where? A hotel?"

I nod, feeling my skin grow warmer.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about," she says. "But we're cheaper than a hotel, and it'll help you with the case. Don't fuss. Besides, I drove you, and I won't be driving you back until tomorrow. If you even want me to then." She pauses, looks at the floor then back up at me. "I try to help our kind when I can. Maybe, when this is all done, I really can find you some work. We might need someone to oversee security on the estate . . . but let's worry about that later."

She smiles as she opens the door at the far side of the room. Beyond it is another marble-tiled hallway. I follow her, trying to figure out where we must be. The west wing, I think, though after a few turns, I'm not sure. We go down a narrow staircase, and she takes a key out of her pocket and unlocks the door at the bottom. "They took the body away," she says without opening it. "I've kept everything else as it was." She pulls the door open, then steps aside. "I don't want to go in. I hope you understand. The lights are just on your right."

"Sure," I say. I stop in the doorway and look at her. She looks nervous.

"You know, for a widow, this isn't what I'd expect."

"Excuse me?" she asks, without looking up. Her voice wavers.

"I mean, you've been calm and collected this whole time, cheerful even. You've been crying, sure, but . . . were you fighting with her, Pearl? How was your?"—I pause, letting the word settle on my tongue before speaking it—"marriage?" It's pushing it, I know, asking her up front like this, especially when she just hired me. But this is how I started most cases on the force—test the loved ones.

She breathes in through her nose loudly enough for me to hear it and then looks up at me. The light is dim, but her eyes flash. Her spine has gone straight.

"It was a marriage. It had its ups and downs. But I loved her."

I let that hang there, seeing if she'll say more. She takes a step closer.

"I have lived like this for three weeks not knowing what's happened," she says, her voice a whisper. "I dealt with police who didn't care and didn't think I had any rights when it came to her . . ." She looks up, her hands move to her hips. "I'm furious. I'm so angry it makes me want to cry. To take to bed and put myself under the sheets and scream until I have no voice. But I can't. You of all people should know I can't. If I tell anyone what she means to me . . . meant to me . . . no, means." She makes a fist and slams it against the wall. "I've never been able to tell anyone what we are to each other. And I can't now that she's gone. Because then people will wonder about our relationship, about the way Henry was raised, and then about Henry . . ." She sighs. I realize she's using her fist on the wall to prop herself up. "I am not calm. I am angry, and sad . . . but

I am doing what I always do—pretending. It's muscle memory. It's all I have . . . Call me cold if it makes you feel superior, Mr. Mills. But it's the last thing I am."

I nod. If that was a performance, it was a good one—I believe she's really hurt. Really angry, too. "It's just something I had to ask," I say. "See your reaction."

She leans back against the wall, rolls her eyes, then wipes at the edges of them with her thumb. "Just part of the routine?" she asks, dryly. "Wonderful. We all have our own muscle memories, I suppose."

"I'm going to follow the clues wherever they go," I tell her. "If it was a murder." On the force, that's what I would have done. Just followed the clues, found the killer, brought them to justice. Here, I realize, I'm supposed to bring them to Pearl.

She pauses, I think realizing the same thing. I wonder where her rage will go if it is a murder, if I do find out who did it—if it's one of her family.

"Fine." She crosses her arms. "That's what I'm paying you for."

"If I don't think this was murder, though, I can't help you. I'm not going to take your money if I don't think there's a case."

"Very noble of you."

"Look, you want me to do this job, I'm going to do it right," I tell her.

We lock eyes, then she nods.

"What kind of library is downstairs, anyway?" I ask, walking in and feeling for a light. It's chilly inside.

"Soap," Pearl says from outside. "I'm sorry, I really have to . . ." I hear footsteps clicking away, back up the stairs, and the door swings shut behind me, leaving me alone in the dark.