

MEGHARRINGTON



**THE
LAVENDER
LIST**

**TRYING TO SAVE HER
CRUSH MAY JUST
GET HER KILLED.**



PROLOGUE

THE WAR'S OVER ON PAPER. Unless the combatant is a spy, an intelligence officer, or a shady diplomat. Those men and women, people like Laura Wright, never stop fighting. They're hunting down war criminals, rebuilding nations, and crowning new rulers.

Except for Laura, pre-eminent spy and leader of one of the deadliest Maquis groups in France. She's stuck managing security at a half-empty bomb factory overlooking the Hudson. The factory is in the midst of layoffs. Every day another locker is emptied, and Laura looks through the purses of exhausted and furious girls to make sure they're not taking any secrets with them.

It's not the war she set out to wage.

Her war ended a little after V-E day. British and American troops lumbered through the village she had called home for the last few years and declared it liberated. The members of the resistance cell she forged were heroes, and she was asked to return quietly to America.

"You did good work," her superiors said. As if killing over a hundred Nazis and being one of the most wanted spies in all of Europe was the same as *paperwork*.

Upon her return home, Laura found that her unique—and varied—skill set wasn't in demand. "Is that why you took the job?" Michel asked one night over coffee in a diner. Michel has never seen the point of her taking on a job now that the war's over—though he's eager to help her in any way he can.

Laura smiled into her drink. "Keeps me out of trouble, Michel. And it might be minding a factory, but it's one full of *bombs*."

He laughed. "You do love an explosively good time."

Laura rolled her eyes, because it was easier than flicking crumbs off her plate at him.

"It could be exciting, you know. More importantly it will keep me busy. Which is something I desperately need right now."

That had been a low blow, and Michel had wilted a little when she said it. Sipped his coffee and looked sullenly over her shoulder and out the window.

But it turns out, when no one is dropping the things, the demand for bombs plummets. As does the demand for stealing or sabotaging them.

The last three months have been particularly dull. Not even a trespasser. Just the steady stream of laid off girls filing out the door and Laura's own long nights quietly bemoaning her awfully boring lot in life over strong coffee at the diner.

It changes with a phone call.

She was chummy with Todd before the war. He's the intellectual sort who wears a lot of tweed and always has the cleanest fingernails. His cleverness and education kept him out of the fight and in the backrooms where his silver tongue and sharp eyes worked wonders.

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Now, while she minds the unemployed and trains security guards in New York City, he's living in a villa in Italy and hunting down old Nazis.

"I loathe *and* despise you," she says, wrapping the phone cord around her finger.

Todd's laugh is obnoxious and airy over the line. "I've been having a good run," he says.

"So, Todd, darling, what are you calling about?" Giggling girls scamper by on Laura's hall.

He chuckles. "Never mind me. Where on earth are you living, Laura Wright?"

"A hotel. For women. Very popular in big cities. Keeps all us girls safe from nasty influences. Cheap too."

"And utterly wasted on me."

"I'm sure," she murmurs. "The only reason you ever want to chat, Todd, is when you have or want something. Which is it today?"

"Bit of both dear. You know how things have been since they axed the OSS." The OSS, before Truman executed it like a foreign spy, had been Laura and Todd's official employer. Espionage agents less rigid than the stuffed suits of the War Department. She'd have dared to call it home if she were ever to call a place that.

She idly wrapped the phone's cord around her finger. "My bank account is familiar."

"Everyone's going through Dulles and the State Department, and those men are—"

"Brutes."

"The only other game in town is... less adored by those above us."

"And which gaggle of ghastly men are paying for your new lifestyle Todd?"

“Very much the latter. It’s why I’m calling. I need someone outside Dulles’s purview. You know the kind? People with tact?”

“You could call anyone of my sex, Todd. Dulles and his cronies tend to avoid us all.”

“I know. His loss. But I’d prefer you on this Laura. You’ve got a reputation.”

She gives him her flirty laugh—even though they both know it’s wasted on him. “What kind?”

“The best kind in our line of work. Particularly for something like this. You just need to go to a club. Use those wiles.”

Laura hums in mock understanding. “I see. A little Rita Hayworth and it’s all done.”

“A little Rita. Perhaps some Kate Hepburn too. You see, someone has a package that we need, and they probably won’t want to give it to you.”

There’s a dirty joke Laura could make, but Todd’s far too refined to find it funny. So Laura taps her finger on the handle of the phone. “Of course. They never do.”

“It will be easy.” Todd is trying to assure her—like a good handler giving a rotten assignment should. “You’ll just pop in and out. As simple as picking up your laundry.”

It is, in fact, not that simple at all.

CHAPTER 1

AMELIA'S DAY WAS ABOUT AS rotten as the garbage she was stuck ferrying to the back of the alley. The big dumb ape her boss calls the cook stubs his toe, and goes *splat* right into the griddle. His hand gets burned so bad the other waitress says she's gonna ralph, and the boss kicks all the customers out with an apology and a weak smile. Amelia gets clean-up duty *and* closing duty because the other girl is as green as their uniforms and the boss wears a tie. No fella in a tie is gonna sack up the trash or wipe down the griddle. No siree.

While she cleans up, Amelia glances at the entrance more than she maybe should. She didn't see Laura at breakfast that morning and was kinda hoping—as stupid as it may be—that her neighbor might stop by for a slice of pie after work.

Laura's one of the last girls still on at a factory near the docks, and Amelia's diner is on the same train line back to the hotel. So, it isn't entirely stupid to think she might slip in for something tasty on her way home. Amelia even left a slice of chocolate meringue out. Seeing as the boss had already left for the night, she could let Laura in and everything.

She gets all these mental pictures of how it would be. Her cleaning and gabbing and Laura sitting on the stool by the window, with her blonde curls haloed in the blue light of the city and those long legs crossed at the knee. She'd purse her red lips, look at the pie, and consider. "It really is too large for just one person, Amelia."

And she'd grin and say, "Eat up, Laura."

Laura's got a sharp quality to her voice. That way of talking like Kate Hepburn—sounding as if she's the smartest gal in any room. Carries herself that way, too, with this cocky attitude that's at odds with the stylish looking dresses and jackets she wears. Laura Wright's a big bundle of addictive inconsistencies. But gosh golly she's got a nice smile. The kind that just warms a girl up from toe to top.

Amelia doubles down on scrubbing the griddle because, let's face it, girls aren't supposed to get all warm while thinking about another girl's smiles. Not when they're firmly in adulthood, and the close, bosom-buddy girlfriend feelings are reserved for doing each other's nails before a date with a big galunk of a guy.

She cleans the griddle until she can almost see her face in it, and Laura still doesn't show. Same after she mops. And after she wipes down every countertop.

She leaves the pie alone while she sacks up the trash.

So, Laura isn't gonna show up and split a piece of chocolate pie with her. Who cares! She'll finish her work—and finish her pie—and still be home before curfew. Unlike Laura, who can't even bother to show up at her friend's work, just to gab and walk home in the damp.

Outside, in the ally, the night's not too warm, but it's muggy. The fog rolled in and everything is... moist, but not

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wet enough to have to use her umbrella on her walk to the train. It's clingy, like a bad date, and there's just enough to the mist to make nasty little puddles. She shivers and side steps to keep from ruining her company-issued shoes on her way to the trash.

She's so busy watching for those murky pools in the alleyway, she almost misses the figure lurking in the shadows like a creep.

Almost.

Most gals stuck in a dead end alley with a creep would run. If she pressed to the wall and screamed the whole time she'd probably get free of the lurker. But Amelia's had a rotten day and she's holding on to a bag of trash heavier than a pillowcase full of door knobs.

She hefts her bag of trash over her shoulder like a weapon. "Come on out," she says, in a way she hopes to hell sounds forceful.

But the figure, instead of stepping out, slides down the wall and hits the ground like a sack of potatoes.

The light reflects off blonde hair, and Amelia squints, trying to figure out who it is. "Laura?"

Laura is as white as a sheet and half-conscious.

Amelia creeps closer and watches the ragged way Laura breathes. Kinda like when her little sister got the flu back in twenty-eight and her last breath had just rattled out.

She drops the trash on the other side of Laura, shielding the both of them a little from the street, and reaches out to touch her face.

Cool. Clammy. "Laura," she whispers. Part of her is curious about Laura's predicament, but most of her, worried.

Laura's dark eyes flutter open. They're mahogany brown, like fancy furniture that's been polished to a shine. Tonight,

though, they are cloudy with confusion. “Amelia,” she finally whispers. Her voice is thick.

Amelia cups her face, as if her own cold hands can transfer a little warmth. “Hey, how’s your night going?” she says, and she manages to stop herself from adding a “kiddo.” “Because you know, the last guy who used the backdoor got hit upside *his* backdoor with a broom.”

Laura sort of smiles—a weak kind like a kid sick with a fever. Then she laughs, but it goes into a little bit of a wheeze. Amelia leans back on her heels, letting a little more light over her shoulder so she can see Laura better.

She hunches down and carefully tilts Laura’s head. “You’re hurt!”

Laura pats her hand. “I bumped my head at work. I think...” She sighs. “It might be more severe than I originally thought.”

“You think? You must have bled down twenty blocks!”

She smirks. “Twenty-two.”

Amelia is unimpressed. “Is now really the time to be crackin’ wise?”

The smirk falls away. “I guess not.”

“Come on. Let’s get you inside, call a cab and get you to the hospital.”

She reaches for Laura’s arm to pull her up, but Laura pulls away. “I...”

“You what?”

“I can’t afford a doctor.”

Amelia stares. “What’re they paying you with down at the bomb factory?” She refrains from asking the more prudent question, that is, why’s a girl who clearly comes from

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money—the job’s obviously Laura’s stab at independence from her family—so broke she can’t afford a doctor?

Laura’s grin is saucy. “Brandy and—” She winces, and Amelia only feels a little sorry for her. “Right. No jokes. Bad timing. I did—I did call someone. To help.”

“And you thought you’d wait for ’em in the alleyway outside my work?”

“I kind of hoped to make it inside. I just got... waylaid.”

“Because you got your clock cleaned! How the heck does that even happen to an office girl?”

“Floor’s not the only dangerous place in the factory.”

Amelia tries to laugh it off with a bad joke. “Yeah, staplers and hole punches. Real dangerous.”

That’s when Laura looks at her all earnest, which isn’t a thing Laura does often. The few times Amelia’s seen her do it, it’s kinda like watching that wolf all dressed up in granny’s clothes. But this time it feels genuine, as if she doesn’t just want, but *needs* Amelia—and only Amelia—to believe her.

“I really didn’t think it was as bad as this when I left.”

Damn it, Amelia thinks. She sighs. “Any idea how long until your pal gets here?” She’s got a good idea who the friend will be. There’s a fella who sits close to her in the diner and pretends they aren’t talking to each other, that they don’t know each other backward and forward.

Black hair, perpetual stubble.

Handsome.

Fancy, in his expensive suits and silk ties.

French.

Laura looks down at her watch, the face rotated around to the inside of her wrist, and reads the time. “He’s always been very punctual. So I would imagine any moment—”

The bright lights of a car dazzle the both of them. Laura shields her eyes and hisses in annoyance. Amelia stands and reaches for the trash bag as if she's gonna throw it at the car. Laura's cool fingertips on her bare ankle stops her.

"It's all right," she says. "That's my friend."

Sure enough it *is* the friend. Tall, Dark, and French.

"Sacre—Laura!" He stumbles out of the car. Then stops and rights himself, taking the time to smooth back his hair.

Then he does that thing he always does—smiles politely and ignores her. Fella's only got eyes for Laura, and Amelia can't blame him. It's the legs. And the splash of red she wears on her lips. And that coy quality to her smirk. And the way she looks at Amelia—

Jumpin' Jehosohaphat, the guy talks a lot of French. Enough that Amelia's waiting for him to pop a baguette out of his pocket and then bend over for the Germans.

Laura seems to understand it and is kinda blasé about the whole thing. Tall, Dark, and French is very... animated, and his hair keeps falling into his eyes as he pokes and prods Laura as if he's her Tall, Dark, and French nurse. He jerks her head to the side and gasps at the sight of blood, and then brushes his own particularly foppish locks back out of his eyes again.

Laura just nods along with what sounds like a rant. Or maybe a plan? Laura says some of her own stuff in French, and the words spit out of her mouth like bullets from a gun. Then they both seem to remember Amelia's still standing there, awkwardly clutching her bag of trash like an old lady clutches her purse.

Two sets of dark eyes fall on her and Amelia feels as if she's stuck in the headlights of Tall, Dark, and French's car.

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She hops forward. “Amelia Maldonado,” she says. She offers her hand and Tall, Dark, and French just looks at it then gives her a tight smile that must be French for “I do not care.”

“If she’s game, perhaps you can patch me up, and Amelia can take me home,” Laura says, officially bringing the conversation back into English.

“Sure, I mean, if you think you’ll be okay. I had a cousin one time who didn’t get a cut checked out on his leg and now...” She makes a cracking noise in the side of her mouth. “No leg.”

Tall, Dark, and French smiles congenially. “I assure you, Laura will retain the use of all her faculties. And,” he says as an afterthought, “her leg.” It sounds a little sultry the way he says it. His accent tinges his words but doesn’t overwhelm ’em, like some Charles Boyer fella trying to seduce Irene Dunne.

It rankles the heck out of Amelia. As bad as that mouth of his, uttering Laura’s name. Wrapping his lips around it as if it’s a candy to be savored.

They move Laura to the back of his spacious car, Amelia’s hand around one awfully firm bicep and Tall, Dark, and French’s holding up Laura’s other hand. That big graceful looking hand of his is all comfortable at the small of Laura’s back.

He gets Amelia to hold up the light so he can examine the cut, which is bloody and long but not so bad when a person can actually see it. Tall, Dark, and French’s clever fingers quickly clean and stitch it as if he’s darning a pair of pants.

Laura doesn't even flinch. Just looks straight ahead. Maybe glances at Amelia once. But turns away before Amelia can catch her eye.

Amelia, for her part as assistant, manages to not retch at the sight. Though, between this and the cook's sautéed hand, she can probably skip a meal or two now.

Then Tall, Dark, and French purses his lips. "And your chest?"

Amelia's eyes must bug ten feet out of her head. But Tall, Dark, and French is devoted to his patient and his patient is devoted to sighing. "It's not so bad."

"You've harmed your ribs, dear. It's rather obvious. Otherwise you wouldn't be wheezing like that windbag I call an uncle. You know the one. Hates stairs."

Laura glances at Amelia. "A door hit my... chest." Amelia can't stop one of her eyebrows from climbing up toward her hairline. "It was a very large door," Laura continues feebly. "With a... knob."

"Like a fist," Tall, Dark, and French mutters.

Amelia agrees with him, silently. She hopes her look gets across that she wasn't born yesterday and if Laura wanted to be honest then Amelia would welcome it.

Laura ignores 'em both. She huffs and then is very perfunctory with the unbuttoning of her shirt, and it gives both Amelia and Tall, Dark, and French access to all kinds of skin and black underthings that usually require a couple of meals and a drink or two first.

Amelia tries not to flush and pays lip service to finishing up and clocking out while they work. She thinks she hears light laughter on her way back into the diner. The two of them chuckling at the big queer joke that's Amelia Maldonado.

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She's probably imagining it. And that's what she tells herself as she shuts off every light in the diner and rummages through the drawers in the office to find the keys for the front door.

Laura's a lot of things, but she's not sitting out in that car with some kind of—of *boyfriend* just yukking it up over Amelia not being in on their little French joke.

Amelia jerks the key a little too hard in the back door when she locks it, and then pulls her flimsy raincoat tighter around herself. It's totally worthless after all her time in the back alley, but it feels like a little protection when she marches up to Tall, Dark, and French and demands he drive her and Laura home.

He looks surprised. His eyebrows flying up into his hairline. "You wouldn't prefer a cab?" he asks, his accent's thick, but Amelia can still hear the sarcasm in it.

"Michel," Laura growls from the backseat. She's all hidden in shadows, just one pale hand in the light. "Don't be an ass. We've got curfew at ten, and I'd really rather not give Mrs. Myrtle another reason to glower at me." Amelia's not the biggest expert of the human condition—despite her acting teachers telling her she should be. But she can still tell "Michel" is annoyed. Still, the guy's nice enough to hold the door open for Amelia, as she climbs into the backseat of his fancy car that costs more than her yearly rent. She knows a thing or two about cars—enough to know his is outrageously expensive.

"How's a guy afford a car like this?" she asks him when they're on the road. She doesn't get to sit in a car much nowadays and it's pleasant. And it's a much smoother ride than she remembers, too.

Cars she used to drive went too fast and made her teeth rattle.

Tall, Dark, and French stares back at her using the rearview mirror, and she can only see his eyes, hard and cool, in the reflection. It's maybe the first time he's ever really looked at her. "It's not my car, chere."

She glares right back. "Whose is it?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"My friend shows up bleeding on my doorstep, so I'm a little curious." Her "friend" is currently passed out beside her, and the weight of her head on Amelia's shoulder feels real nice.

"Your concern is noted."

And so is his lack of concern.

Laura sighs in her sleep, and Amelia resists the dumb urge to brush the hair off her face so she can get a better look.

"What'd you give her?" she instead asks softly. "Drugs?" She drops her voice an octave. "Booze?"

Tall, Dark, and French chuckles in a way that conjures up images of dark and smoky Parisian cafés. "Laura's tolerance is far better than yours or mine." Then he goes real tender. "And she really shouldn't have anything alcoholic with that lump forming on her head."

"She's gonna feel like a horse kicked her in the morning."

"She will."

"And she got hurt—"

"She was rushing a file to the other side of the office. The door stopped her."

It's the same as Laura's story, and as stories go, it's a pretty standard one. Especially for ladies who don't want

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people asking questions. No one pushes for explanations when “it was a door” or even some stairs.

But Amelia doesn't believe it. Not when she's seen Laura talking discreetly with this guy who drives an expensive car and patches Laura up as if he's been doing it all their lives. Not when she knows he thinks it was a fist too.

“She in trouble?” she asks, and she knows Tall, Dark, and French catches her drift. She's never exactly been in their particular world, but she's seen enough of it to know how to talk.

He's got the steel-eyed look again, tempered by just enough tenderness to put most folks off the trail. “I assure you, Miss Maldonado, she's not.”

Amelia doesn't believe him, because she isn't the patsy he and Laura seem to think she is. She takes Laura's hand in hers and squeezes it.

Laura doesn't mumble, but her breath is hot on Amelia's neck.

They get to the hotel, and Tall, Dark, and French offers to help take Laura upstairs. Amelia levels a good glare at him. “She doesn't talk much about her home life does she?”

“Not enough.” He smirks.

She bites back the smile that should accompany the nasty satisfaction she gets at chastising him. “No guys above the first floor. Especially not pimps patching up the girls.”

He flusters and tries to hurriedly dissuade her, but Amelia's well and truly done with the guy, so she ignores him. She awkwardly leans all of Laura's weight onto her shoulder and pinches her as they walk toward the entrance. “I need you to wake up, Miss Wright. We got a job to do.”

Behind them, Tall, Dark, and French calls her back but she shoots him the bird without looking up.

Laura shakes her head and slowly opens her eyes. Her head lolls as she looks back at Tall, Dark, and French and then toward Amelia. “What happened?”

“Your ‘friend’ brought us home. Now you got to pretend you’re A-OK so we can make it up the stairs.”

Laura half-salutes, and they march toward the entrance. Laura giggles loudly. Amelia’s never heard her giggle. It’s all... girlish. The kind of girlish giggle she and Laura usually roll their eyes at when they hear it tinkling around them at breakfast.

The Sebastian Hotel’s got a decent breakfast, affordable rooms, and nice clientele, but it’s also got one Edith Myrtle working the night shift. She’s a wiry-haired widow who loves church, cross-stitch, and ferreting out bad girls.

She stops them halfway up the stairs with a terse cry of their names. It’s worse than any what-for a mother would give. “You’re home later than usual,” she says, peering at them with beady eyes behind glasses as thick as the bottom of a pop bottle.

Amelia glances at the clock at the top of the stairs.

Ten past the hour. They broke curfew.

Amelia opens her mouth to spin God knows what, but Laura is faster.

“Oh Mrs. Myrtle,” she honest to God sobs. “You will never believe what...” she sniffs, “what just happened.”

Amelia listens as raptly as Mrs. Myrtle, because she’s curious herself.

“Our train got stuck.”

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Mrs. Myrtle has not fallen for the stuck-train excuse in over a year. She's got a number for every damn train line in the city and can fact check that whopper faster than a cop.

"So naturally we had to disembark."

Amelia just nods. Laura's clearly working herself up to tell this story, and Amelia doesn't want to interrupt a fellow actress.

"But we were so far up town. Far too far away to make it back in time. Unless—"

Mrs. Myrtle leans in. Eyes behind her glasses wide.

"Unless we ran. Amelia was even ready to do it barefoot."

Mrs. Myrtle's eyes flicker over to Amelia as if she's forgotten she was there. Then down to her feet, which are, in fact, dirty from all the running around in the alley.

"But some men, well you know how much like dogs they can be."

The enthusiastic nod says Mrs. Myrtle does know.

"Well they saw us running and gave chase!"

"No!"

"Oh yes. Just flying after us! So Amelia, brave soul that she is just ran out into the street. Got us a cab. Didn't matter that we hadn't the money to pay for it. As long as we escaped the men."

Mrs. Myrtle is a big fan of bad spending if it means less men around, and gives Amelia a fond look.

"But I'm afraid the cab driver wasn't quite as kind as all that and we've been stuck out there all this time trying to convince him not to call the police on us."

"Should I go speak with him?"

Laura shakes her head sagely. "That won't be necessary. Amelia was *very* persuasive."

Did Laura have to lean on the *very* like that? It made Amelia sound like some kind of pugilist. Or prostitute. She wasn't really sure which.

It was the dumbest story Amelia'd ever heard, but Laura spun it like one of those breathless dolls on the radio, and somehow Mrs. Myrtle bought it. Hook, line, and sinker.

"You girls should rest," she says, and then she sends them both up the stairs and starts rubbing her hands together like she always does when she's downright *fraught*.

"Just carry that story up your sleeve," Amelia mutters out the side of her mouth as she lugs most of Laura's weight up two flights.

"For a rainy day," Laura agrees.

"Got any more of 'em? We could make a fortune selling them to girls on the hall."

Laura smiles sleepily. "I'll see what I can do."

On their floor, Laura becomes completely useless again, and Amelia has to prop her up against Laura's own door as she searches her for keys.

Laura stops her with a viselike grip on her wrist and produces the keys from her pocket, dangling them in front of Amelia. "Looking for these," she asks coyly, and it occurs to Amelia that Laura might actually be drunk. Or maybe she just gets flirty when folks knock her on the head.

She snatches the keys from Laura and holds her up with one hand around her waist while she uses the other to open the door. Laura's arms find their way around Amelia's shoulders and it's just...It's a hug.

Laura Wright, smelling like garbage, antiseptic, and that perfume that's always wafting out of her room, is hugging her. Amelia almost—*almost*—doesn't want to open the door.

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But she does, and Laura steps back into the shadows of her room. As playful as she's been, it's all gone once she steps over that threshold.

"Thank you, Amelia." She's serious again.

So Amelia tries not to be serious. Even though she wants to follow her into that room, keep her safe, and send her back home on the first train to Connecticut if it will stop whatever's happening. "Take it easy Laura," she says with a crooked grin.

She tosses the keys at Laura's chest who catches them without blinking. Then she slowly closes the door. Leaving Amelia feeling like a caboose in the middle of the hallway.

She shuffles back into her own room. Hissing when she sees her ruined stockings and dirty shoes in the mirror. That'll be fun to clean up. Tomorrow. After she's had a good night sleep.

But after scrubbing her face, peeling off her clothes and climbing into bed in a shift she really ought to have laundered, she can't actually sleep.

Her stupid brain is turning over the night's events. Peering at 'em like a robber looking at the plans for a bank. Laura's just gone and told a whopper of a lie to Amelia (the one to Mrs. Myrtle doesn't count because *everyone* lies to Mrs. Myrtle).

And Amelia can't quite figure out why. Apart from insane theories about Laura being a lady of the night.

Tomorrow, she tells herself again. And she snuggles down under the covers and sighs.

She'll talk to Laura tomorrow. They'll sort it out and go right back to being pals who share smiles over the breakfast table and sneak bites of pie at the diner.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEXT MORNING LAURA LAUGHS off what happened and assures Amelia she's A-OK. She butters her toast and bites into it with relish. "I'm fine," she says. "It was just—an accident."

Amelia likes to think the look she gives Laura says she's no fool. But Laura must miss it because she steers the conversation away from their night with a wave of her butter knife.

As if Amelia can't see the line of stitches hidden in her hairline.

"Laura you're not the least bit—"

"It's fine, Amelia." She snaps. "*I'm* fine. Now let's talk about shoes. Because I think we should splurge sometime this week. I've repaired my heel three times in the last two months and I know you're needing a new pair. How about a trip up Fifth Avenue? Just the two of us?"

Things, for Laura at least, go back to normal. At least as far as Amelia can tell.

Laura comes to the diner, or she stops by Amelia's room to ask for a cup of sugar, or she invites her over for tea. At night, Amelia stares at her ceiling and wonders if maybe

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it was some crazy dream she had, because the way Laura's acting as if it never happened, really has Amelia questioning her own sanity.

Then she notices Laura's sneaking out and in most nights, wearing fancy dresses or coats so big they swallow her up.

"You okay?" Amelia asks.

And Laura waves her off with a smile that should be condescending, but really just sets loose a set of butterflies in Amelia's stomach.

A few more bruises take up residence on Laura. Little ones most folks won't notice. 'Cept the ones around her eyes, puffing 'em up on account of sleeplessness.

Amelia stops asking though. She's offered Laura every opportunity to own up, and instead the woman waves her off with an airy laugh and tells her it's all right.

Amelia tries to slot her into the category of "cute girl who won't last." It's a nasty category to have, but one Amelia's built out of necessity.

Then Tall, Dark, and French shows up at the diner, sits in the booth across from Laura, and looks up at Amelia like they're familiar with one another, saying, "Hello, Miss Maldonado."

Amelia pours him a cup of coffee and knows she can't categorize Laura so easily. The hot streak of jealousy that races up through Amelia at the sight of him is proof enough that Laura's more than some cute girl who won't last.

Amelia glares at Tall, Dark, and French, hoping just a nasty look can convey her hatred for him and whatever he's got Laura wrapped up in.

It works.

Tall, Dark, and French goes from breezy to shifty and ashamed.

Good.

Laura, not acknowledging either of them, leaves to go to the bathroom.

“I’m not what you think I am,” he assures her in a low voice as soon as Laura’s gone.

“Excuse me if I don’t believe you,” she assures right back, her whisper harsh.

“I—” He catches himself. It’s like he wants to prove he’s a good man. But a fella shouldn’t have to work to prove it. He should just be. Amelia is wise enough to know this guy ain’t. Not if he’s using Laura.

She raises an eyebrow and waits for him to finish.

But he flushes and flusters. “You’re misunderstanding the other night.”

She leans in, one hand on her hip and the other holding the coffee pot too tight. “I really don’t think I am, ‘chere.’”

He presses his fingers into the laminate so hard they turn red under his fingernails. The ‘chere’ bit got to him. Serves the Frenchie right, sounding like Charles Boyer and looking like a stubbly Gregory Peck.

Still glaring at him, she lifts her chin. “What’s your cut?”

His head snaps up, and he looks horrified. “It isn’t like that.”

“Yeah,” she spits. “It is.”

“Everything all right?” Laura’s back.

Amelia spins on her heel, plasters on a big old smile, and says, “We’re swell.” Tall, Dark, and French swallows and nods.

She goes back to work, and the two of them sit there, looking like the lovers Laura’s insisted repeatedly they aren’t.

At least this time Laura doesn’t smile when Tall, Dark, and French talks.

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“Quickly,” she hears him say. Like he’s just given Laura marching orders she can’t abide.

Amelia can just barely make out Laura saying in a low voice, “I don’t want to do it.”

Tall, Dark, and French tilts his head and looks apologetic. “We all have to do things we don’t like, Laura.”

A little later, he collects his things and leaves, stopping at the door to stare hard at Amelia. She stares hard back, never breaking eye contact, not even as she pours a cup of coffee for a harried mom with her yowling kid.

Laura’s still sitting in her booth. Her mouth is small and tight in a frown. It dissolves when she notices Amelia watching her, and Amelia makes like she’s looking away.

But she still watches Laura out of the corner of her eye. And the frown returns, changing Laura’s face until her eyes are narrow in anger and she’s taut like wire.

She gets up when she thinks Amelia’s busy with another table, and Amelia stops long enough to watch her walk out. Laura’s shoulders are rigid. Like she’s got some bad news. Like maybe Tall, Dark, and French was telling her something she didn’t want to hear. Maybe giving her a job she shouldn’t have to take.

Damn it. Amelia knows what she’s gotta do. She’s got to go be nosey and investigate what exactly Laura does for a living.

And, if need be, she’ll clean a dirty pimp’s clock.

* * *

She figures the first thing she’s gotta do, if she’s gonna help Laura get loose of the nasty life she’s leading, is figure out what the hell actually happened to Laura on the night

she slumped her way into the alley. Amelia had been too insecure to pay attention when Tall, Dark, and French was patching Laura up, so she didn't get a good enough look at Laura's beating to have an idea of how she was hurt. The only thing she knows for sure is it wasn't a door.

Laura's sitting inside the diner, perched on a stool at the counter, gorgeous legs crossed and blonde hair perfectly coifed. Long fingers clutching a pen and jotting down notes in a pad. She doesn't comment when she sees Amelia get into an embarrassingly heated conversation with a twelve-year-old paperboy outside.

Though she definitely smirks when the kid kicks Amelia in the shin.

All because Amelia needs the kid to get her a week-and-a-half's worth of newspapers without gouging her like a freaking Wall Street suit.

"All right?" Laura asks when Amelia limps back inside.

"Kid kicks like a mule."

Laura laces her fingers together and balances her chin on them. "Lot of experience with those?"

"Loads of 'em past Atlantic Avenue. You didn't know?"

"I don't find my way that deep into Brooklyn often."

"You're pullin' my leg."

"I wish I were."

"Even Coney Island?"

She shakes her head.

"You don't know what you're missing. Hot dogs. Rides. Way better than anything you'd get up in Connecticut."

"Well, of course it is."

She rattles her leg real quick to get the last sting of the kick out of it. "Hang in there, Laura. You'll get there one

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day.” It’s as gentle a tease as Amelia can muster under the circumstances.

“That an invitation?” Laura fires back.

It’s a joke, but there’s heat in her words, and Amelia hopes Laura can’t see her freeze. She swallows. “You want it to be?”

Laura’s been looking down, writing some notes in a pad, and she looks up at that. Her dark eyes fall briefly on Amelia’s mouth before she pegs her with a stare that’ll haunt for a shameful night or two. But then she smiles. The heat is gone, and it really is just a joke. Nothing too sincere. It rarely is with Laura Wright.

That’s A-OK for Amelia. Because those brief moments of belly-warming and knee-weakening sincerity between the bits of infuriating *insincerity* are enough.

* * *

That twelve-year-old paperboy drops off a week-and-a-half’s worth of newspapers at the Sebastian in a rucksack big enough that fellow Sebastian resident, Sarah Trellis, asks if there’s a body in it.

She almost tells her it’s her boyfriend, just to see Trellis fume, but doesn’t. Knowing that cow, she’d want to see inside, and the whole hotel’d start worrying about Amelia hoardin’ papers like that crazy old man that got crushed under twenty years’ worth of cat hair and back issues of the New York Times.

The first thing she learns, ensconced in her room and armed with a bright light and a big pot of coffee, is that combing through a week-and-a-half’s worth of papers for one of the largest cities in the world is boring. Back-aching and mind-numbingly boring. She can only go for twenty

minutes at a time before she's pacing the rug her mom gave her into ruins and stretching like an alley cat.

The second thing she learns is that peering at newspaper print for hours on end is painful on the eyes. So, she stops, opens the window wide, leans out, and stares at the skyline instead.

The sun's setting and the sky's red. It hits the glass of all the buildings on the horizon and when a train, a truck, or even a big breeze rattles those windows, it's like the whole city is on fire.

It's a pretty sight, and Amelia rests her head on her fist and sighs. She sounds wistful. She ought to remember that exact sigh for the next audition.

The window to her right scrapes open and Laura sticks her head out. She doesn't look surprised to see Amelia there. If anything, it's like she was looking for her. Or maybe Amelia just imagines the softening around Laura's eyes when she catches her doing her best Juliet.

"It's Sunday," she says. "I thought you'd be in South Brooklyn visiting your family."

Amelia waves her off. "They see enough of me as is. I figured I'd take a day for me for a change."

She smiles. "I quite like that idea. Taking a day for yourself." She holds onto the window sill, pointedly staring at the skyline instead of Amelia.

"What about you," Amelia asks. "Taking a day?"

"There's no rest for the wicked."

Amelia laughs. It's too soft in her ears. "You're a lot of things Laura, but I'd never peg you as wicked."

Laura just murmurs.

Neither of them talk for a while. The sun sets slowly and the drone of a whole city tickles their ears. It's just the

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second floor, but even from this high up, it sounds less like a city and more like a river. A distant, cranky river with more than one timing belt in need of changing.

“How’d you know I was in,” she eventually asks.

“I heard you pacing about. Everything all right?” Laura sounds genuine.

“Audition,” she lies.

That catches her interest, and Laura perks up. “Need help? I played a mean Hamlet once upon a time.”

“No foolin’?”

“Boarding school before the war.” She shudders comically, but then smiles softly like she’s got an old joke in her head. “Nothing worse than youths trying to be actors. Though a few have done well for themselves since.”

Amelia grins. “You know famous folks, Laura Wright?”

“Oh, all sorts.”

“Who? Specifically.”

Laura’s coy, and it feels, for a second, like before Amelia knew she was moonlighting as a prostitute. “That’s in the past, darling.”

Amelia sighs theatrically. “So’s that time I shared an elevator with Greta Garbo.”

“Did she ‘just want to be alone’?” Laura draws her face down and affects a really bad accent for the impression, and Amelia has to roll her eyes.

“Jeez. That one’s old enough to be my dad.”

“You’re quite developed for a ten-year-old.”

“We bloom early in the Maldonado family.”

“We were all late bloomers in the Wright family. Mother thought I’d never ‘blossom.’”

Amelia snorts. Laura smiles again.

It's enough to almost forget that hazy look Laura had in her eyes when Amelia found her in the alley and the gajillion pounds of newspaper taking up space on her coffee table.

Almost.

"Hey Laura, you doing all right?"

Laura's still smiling and nods. "I've 'blossomed,' if that's what you're asking."

"It isn't."

Just like that, it's like someone's stuck a knife in their tires. Any fun whizzes out in a pathetic sigh.

"I'm all right," she says so seriously, attention still on that skyline.

"And your fella?"

"Amelia..."

She's gonna tell Amelia to leave it alone, and Amelia really doesn't want to hear that. "I worry."

"You mustn't."

"Wouldn't you?" God, she can sound like a real bitter hag when she wants to.

Laura, who always has a story, can't figure out what to say. Her jaw works, but nothin' comes out, so Amelia nods and shuts the window.

A minute later, there's a knock on her door, but she isn't in any mood to answer. Not when she's looking at a little blurb in the afternoon paper just a day after Laura's attack. One unidentified woman. Two men. One guy in the hospital, but the other guy and the woman are long gone.

She stares real hard at the name of the guy in the hospital. Then she looks up at her door and sees Laura's shadow under it. And she bites her lip and regrets every choice that's ever led her to this moment. Because the guy in the hospital?

That's her cousin.

CHAPTER 3

LAURA'S WAITING FOR AMELIA DOWNSTAIRS with a spot across from her saved. Just like they normally sit for breakfast. Cozy and content even in a room of other gals. But Amelia's worried. Laura's got a smile on her face and it's like she's gonna toss off that prickly coat of "massive asshole" she normally wears to—Amelia doesn't know—ingratiate herself.

Worm her way back into Amelia's good graces without even an apology or an acknowledgment of what's happened.

"We're making this a bad habit," Laura says, her eyes on her newspaper, but her tone is real teasing. Like they don't see each other every morning and most nights. Like a quiet breakfast between the two of them isn't the best part of either of their days.

"Real easy to break this habit," Amelia fires back.

Laura purses her painted lips. She looks around, and Amelia does, too. They're alone for the moment, but a group of girls are incoming, and their little bit of quiet morning paradise is about to go up in a gale of girlish glee.

"I don't do friends easily," Laura says urgently. "And I appreciate your patience, but—"

“But you’re about as talkative as an OSS agent.”

Laura jokes, “Hopefully less.”

“See!” She catches her rising voice and glances guiltily around the room before hunching over the table and whispering, “See, that’s what I mean. You’d rather joke than talk.”

“I talk. We’ve talked, Amelia.”

“Where was I born?”

“South Brooklyn,” she snaps.

Amelia nods. “Yeah? Now ask me the same question. Guess what my answer would be?”

“New Haven,” Laura ventures.

“Or Boston. Or Princeton. How would I know?”

“Neither of those are in Connecticut.”

Amelia glares.

Laura looks down at her coffee and spins the cup on its saucer. The group of girls sit beside them and talk a mile a minute. Amelia butters her toast and listens lazily. Laura takes too big a bite of a biscuit and stares at Amelia while she chews it.

Even though Laura’s been at the table longer, Amelia’s the first one to leave. There really is an audition she could have spent her Sunday working on. Now the audition’s after work and she hasn’t prepped. If she clocks in early, maybe the boss’ll let her go early, she hopes.

The click of heels on the tile tells her that Laura followed her out of the dining room and into the foyer.

“It’s Hartford,” she calls. She’s being serious again, and Amelia has to stop walking or she might trip. “And I’ve got a family that cares for me, and I even have friends—spread across four continents, but I lost too much in that blasted war.”

Amelia can see Laura's reflection in the glass of the front door. So serious and urgent, looking at the back of Amelia's head with the kind of intensity that could melt a girl. She means she lost someone.

Amelia turns carefully. "A friend? Or boyfriend."

Laura winces.

Amelia speaks softly—which is a chore for her. "How'd he go?"

Laura swallows, and it looks like she's on a razor's edge between her status quo and what the rest of the world calls feelings. "Nazi interrogation."

"I'm sorry."

One side of Laura's mouth crooks up. "I believe that's my line." She lifts her hand up, like she's gonna run it through her hair, catches herself, and lets it drop to the back of her neck. "Amelia...I told you, I'm not very good at being a friend."

"Yeah, you're pretty lousy at it."

"But I want to change." She starts to reach for Amelia's hand and stops and smiles in that friendly way that's never quite believable. "I happen to have a bottle of brandy that needs to be emptied."

"Yeah?"

Her hands are at her side, fidgeting like they need something to do. She takes a step toward Amelia. "I can't think of anyone better to share it with."

Amelia steps closer. There's about a sliver of light between them.

"That all you're sharing?" It comes right out of her. A reflex like kicking the doctor when he taps you on the knee. She can't believe she said it and holds her breath, waiting for Laura to say something back.

Laura, when she wants to be, is a damn cipher. “Tonight,” she says, and Amelia can’t tell if she’s being set up or if Laura, standing so close she can smell her perfume, wants to kiss her.

She nods. “See you after work.”

* * *

She doesn’t get around to making the call she’s gotta make until after the post-lunch rush. The boss steps out for a smoke and that leaves the broom closet he’s christened his “office” empty.

The dial on his phone sticks on the three but she finally manages to get a call out to her cousin Al. He is, as one would expect after what the newspaper recounted, still in the hospital, but his wife seems to think he’ll be okay.

“His skull got nearly cracked in half, but the doctors are saying he’ll be talking real soon.” Al’s wife is the exact kind of optimistic idiot a fella like her cousin needs.

Then she tells Amelia to hold and doesn’t bother covering the mouthpiece as she shouts across the room to Amelia’s uncle that his niece is on the line and does he want to talk to her.

Amelia does not want to talk to her uncle, but if she hangs up, she’ll wind up with a little, bald Italian man on her doorstep and her date that night’ll be ruined.

If it is a date.

It might not be a date—

“Amelia, baby doll, it’s been too long.” Her uncle Vince got a voice that’s smooth like that last drag of a cigarette. And he’s the only man that she’s never wanted to punch when he compares her to a toy.

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“Hi,” she says. ‘Round him, she always has trouble finding more than three words to put together. There’s a kind of menace to her uncle. He’s the guy that slaps kids for having a smart mouth and can turn a grown man mute with a glare.

“You’re calling after Alfonso?”

“I saw his name in the paper.”

He hems and haws about his son and then invites her to come visit him. He misses her. He’d like to see her.

You don’t turn down a fella like Vince Pedrotti. Ever.

She tries. “Well I got an audition tonight...”

“So tomorrow.” Vince Pedrotti doesn’t make requests. He says something and it happens. He’d tell the moon to rise at noon, and there it’d be, shining in the sky.

“I—”

“You can come after work, can’t you?”

She can. She doesn’t really want to, but she can. Phone still pressed to her ear, she thumps her head against the wall and wonders, again, why she thinks she needs to save Laura Wright.

“Yeah,” she finally says. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The back door of the diner slams open, and she hangs up fast, slipping out of the closet before the cloud of pomade and cigarette smoke she calls a boss can see her.

* * *

The audition, from Amelia’s view, does not go well. Something about staying up all night reading old newspapers. Something about thinking about her family and about her next door neighbor, left Amelia so distracted that she starts by reading the other person’s lines.

Twice.

Her head and feet and everything in between aches by the time she clomps up the stairs to her room. Girls say hello and Sarah Trellis tries to talk to her like they're friends, and she's proud of herself for not shoving her over the banister.

The lights are out in Laura's apartment. Hayseed is coming out of her room on the opposite side of Laura's. Her real name's Judy something, but Amelia's not keen to remember because the gal's not real likely to make it more than a month. She smiles at Amelia all big and wide the way only people who've never seen the Atlantic can.

Amelia plasters on her biggest, broadest smile, nods, and says "yeah" a lot as the girl talks about how *big!* and *exciting!* everything is in New York City.

"Have you seen Laura," she asks, and that snaps Amelia out of her "yeah" phase.

"Not since breakfast."

Hayseed looks sad. What the hell does she think Amelia does all day that she has time to just go and see Laura?

"I just...I had a question for her."

Amelia raises an eyebrow because most girls avoid Laura with a ten-foot pole outside of breakfast. "She's all right for conversations," they say. "But you wouldn't want her for a bridesmaid."

She wouldn't want Laura for a bridesmaid either.

"If I see her, I'll tell her you're looking?"

Judy nods and thanks Amelia "soooo much," and by the time Amelia pushes her way into her room, she's ready for bed—brandy and date be damned.

"Is she gone?"

Never mind. Sleep is for idiots.

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Laura's sitting at her table, drink already poured. She's got on a black and purple silk robe and those red lips of hers are poised to smile.

"So, you say we're friends, and then you just sneak into my place?"

"To avoid that." Glass in hand, she points at the door.

"Way to jump on the grenade, soldier."

"Oh Amelia, I'd always jump on a grenade for you. Unfortunately, she's more like an atom bomb."

Amelia pops her shoes off and groans in relief because it's her own damn apartment. "A real cheerful one."

"How does she smile so much?"

"Right?" She starts unbuttoning her dress as she hip checks her closet open. "You'd think her cheeks would hurt."

As she sips her brandy, Laura goes quiet, and after Amelia's out of her uniform and into her dressing gown, she turns to find Laura staring straight ahead with her jaw as rigid as a Mount Rushmore president.

"So you gonna tell me how you dodged that atom bomb? Because I'm pretty sure my door was locked."

Laura blushes and drinks her brandy.

Amelia notices the breeze coming through her open window.

"You didn't climb through there did you?"

"She knocked. Multiple times."

"So you figured a two-story drop was worth the chance to escape." Normal people don't do that.

Laura shakes the brandy bottle. "The promised company helped."

Amelia drops into the chair opposite and accepts the proffered drink. She's always been a sucker for sincere

flattery. Even when it's meant to distract her. "That's about the nicest thing anyone's said to me."

Laura brightens.

"This week."

The way Laura deflates makes Amelia feel a little better. She knows it isn't Laura's fault she's a high class prostitute getting banged around by guys with more money than goodness in 'em, but Amelia's day's been rotten and teasing Laura helps a little.

She's not proud of it.

She drinks too much for one gulp.

Really not proud of it.

Some of the brandy hits the wrong pipe and she coughs. Laura leans forward like she's gonna pat her on the back, and Amelia has to hold up her hand to ward her off.

Laura smirks. "Thought you Italians could handle your liquor."

"Maybe, but half of me's teetotaler Puerto Rican. Besides, you try routing it down the wrong pipe." She wheezes.

"No, I'm fine sending it down the right one, thanks." To illustrate Laura sips her brandy, and Amelia tries not to watch the way her throat undulates when she does.

"And you're really half Puerto Rican?"

"What? You think I just have an especially nice tan?"

Laura shrugs, and Amelia leans back so she can appraise her own face in the mirror. It's hanging on the closet door, clear on the other side of the apartment, but it still gives a good image. She maybe missed out on some of her dad's swarthier coloring—but her hair's dark enough and her skin's got enough of olive in it that nice places would turn their nose up at her. Least she dodged her dad's hairy bullet.

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Something her sister can't say. Woman has had to shave her mustache once a week since she was twelve.

Laura honest-to-God chuckles. "I suppose I should have guessed from a last name like Maldonado. So what made your family choose Brooklyn?"

"My dad was one fella from Puerto Rico versus a whole mess of Italians boys on my mom's side. They probably would have dragged us down to South Brooklyn if he hadn't agreed."

"You make your mother's family sound..."

Amelia looks up from her drink.

"Unsavory," Laura finishes, seemingly half-embarrassed by her own words.

There's a bad joke in there about food. Amelia just shakes her head. "Most of the family is just fine."

"Most?"

"Well, every family has a bad egg, don't they? Even the Wrights, right?"

Laura pours herself another drink. "Afraid I'm the bad egg in the Wright family." She drinks half the glass and tops it off. "Twenty-eight and," she toasts no one in particular, "shamefully unmarried."

They both drink a little more and then some more, and it's only after Amelia loses count that she notices the newspapers still laid out on her coffee table. Working as a coaster for that big ol' bottle of brandy.

Laura doesn't ask about the papers. Thank God.

Instead, she talks about work—at the factory—with a hint of a grimace she fails at hiding behind her glass when she drinks. She speaks fondly of a war Amelia never hears people speak fondly of. She sips her brandy and leans her

elbows on the table, and a lot of the mystique that props her up is gone.

And it should knock the bloom right off of whatever rose Amelia's carrying for her, but it doesn't.

So, she gives them some space by rising from the table and flopping onto the bed.

"You didn't spill a drop," Laura observes. She's twisted in the chair so she's facing Amelia, and Amelia's mouth is dry and other parts of her are wet. Brandy with Laura Wright after a long day was a *bad* idea.

"That's nothing. Give me six plates and a pot of coffee and then you'll really see a show."

Laura goes cipher on her again. Face perfectly still, and only her eyes moving. Focused. Piercing. Like they could see everything. "This one's good enough."

She wonders if maybe that *isn't* Laura's cipher face. Maybe it's another kind of face. Maybe she's schooling bad thoughts too.

She chews on her lip.

Laura's eyes are quick, but Amelia still sees the way they dart to her mouth and back again.

She scoots over on the bed.

Laura makes it onto the bed too. Eventually. Amelia doesn't know how long it takes because she's not about to glance at the clock. That's how spells are broken. And whatever's happening between them is a spell. Glossy and muted like a love scene in a movie.

The brandy makes it to the bed, too, and Amelia sets it on her bedside table. "Never get liquor on the sheets," she explains. "Edith's got a nose like a bloodhound."

"Just for liquor?"

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She ticks them off with her fingers. “Liquor, cigarettes, reefer, hot dogs, cats, actual dogs, a ferret—I’m still not clear on how that got in—and m—”

“Men.” Laura finishes Amelia’s sentence with a grin. It’s the closest to a giggle she’s ever seen her.

“She can smell a guy even when he’s on the street. One time, a girl wore her boyfriend’s coat up the stairs and ol’ Edith came this close to tackling her.” She makes a tiny space between her thumb and finger and holds it up for Laura’s amused inspection.

Laura’s fingertips brush the inside of Amelia’s wrist as she pushes her hand away. She’s still laughing. “And the ferret? How on earth did she smell it?”

“No one knows! My theory is she’s got fancy training during the war. Super soldier nose.”

“Oh, they just issue those, do they?”

Because she’s had one too many, she grabs Laura’s nose and wiggles it gently. “You tell me.”

That gets another laugh and a playful hand slap. Then Laura reaches over her to pour more brandy, and Amelia catches a glimpse of all those things she’s been trying real hard not to think about. She pointedly focuses on Laura’s back. The play of muscles under that silk robe. She tries not to think about the eyeful she just got. Tries not to think about how things could be real easy.

Laura’s laughing as she’s pouring her brandy. Her back shaking with all that mirth.

She starts to right herself, and the laughter stops.

Time stops.

It doesn’t really. She’s pretty sure she can hear the tick tick tick of her clock and cars on the streets and Hayseed warbling down the hall in her room.

But on the bed. In the precise confines of that mattress and frame. Time stops.

Amelia doesn't breathe because that'll kick time back into gear. Laura doesn't either.

They're just inches from each other. Face to face. Laura's knee is pressed against Amelia's thigh. A blaze of heat right there at the point of contact. Like a red-hot fire poker. Amelia can't ignore her.

She's just too close. Too there. Too much.

Amelia's breath hitches in her throat, and Laura's all cipher again. A code Amelia just wants to read and understand. She wants to know what Laura means when her eyes dart to Amelia's lips. Wants to understand why she stops breathing too. Why she goes so still. Why her face doesn't betray any of the feelings Amelia desperately needs her to return.

Amelia just wants to know why time stops when they're both so close.

Laura supplies the answer. Not with words.

Amelia can hear the clatter of Laura's glass settling onto the table and she looks toward it—the noise a distraction from the heavy moment sitting between them.

But Laura's hand on her chin stops her.

And her lips on Amelia's are all the answers she's needed.

A hand slips into her hair, and catches on a pin, then stills.

Laura's ardent.

Passionate.

Fervent.

Laura Wright kisses her, and words Amelia barely remembers reading in high school are flooding through her head. Screw being an actor and screw being good. She could be a writer like Hemingway if Laura keeps kissing her.

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Nails scrape against her scalp and when she gasps, Laura's tongue slips into her mouth. Her fingers scratch at the smooth fabric of Laura's robe. Her finger tips rough in comparison. Her hands climb from the swell of Laura's hip, to the curve of her waist. And across the bulky bandages still wrapped around Laura's middle.

Just like that, time starts back up again. The hands of the clock grind forward with a pained gasp from Laura. Amelia pulls back and is pretty sure she'll never get the image of Laura's smudged lipstick and bruised lips out of her head.

Now Amelia's got the key to her cipher. Can read Laura clear as day. She's confused. Her breath is hot and sour with brandy. "Amelia."

She squeezes Laura's hip. It isn't the kiss. It isn't Laura. And it isn't because they've got no future being like they are. It's bandages still tight around Laura's ribs. It's the shadow of the cut behind her ear. It's her own cousin with a cracked skull.

Amelia swallows. "When you came to the diner half passed out, where were you coming from?"

Laura's not quite as breathless anymore. "Work."

Amelia wants to rub small circles with her thumb and never forget how Laura's body is both hard and soft. "What kind of work?"

And now she's all hard. She's a wolf with teeth and she's far too close. "Why are you so determined to find out?"

"Why are you so determined to hide?"

"Don't." She says it like a command. Like she's said it before and people listened.

"Laura, I like you, but any way you look at us, this is gonna hurt. And right now—" Laura's up and off the bed

abruptly, so all Amelia's words can do is chase after her. "Right now, I'm thinkin' you're gonna kill me."

Laura's whole body sinks when she sighs. "I never wanted to kill you, Amelia." Then she's out the door. It doesn't even slam. Just clicks shut as if they were in there playing bridge.

Amelia cleans up the glasses and hides the brandy away.

She doesn't think about what Laura said. Not because it hurts. As soon as Laura kissed her, she knew it was all gonna hurt.

It was the way she said it—that she never wanted to kill her. She said it like she was sorry. Not for what she'd done, but what she was going to do.

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THE LAVENDER LIST

BY MEG HARRINGTON

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