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LILIES IN
MOONLIGHT

A NOVEL

CHAPTER 1

Lilly Margolis stood, looking at yet another door. Just ten o'clock in the morning, and already she could feel the thin trickle of sweat sliding between her shoulder blades.

Head up. Big smile, chin out, she silently rehearsed.

Good morning, madam. Are you the lady of the house?

Pause, two, three, four.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lilly, Lilly Margolis. But Lilly's not just my name. It's also the name of the fabulous new body crème from Dalliance Cosmetics. Lilies in Moonlight. I use it myself.

She held out her arm, focusing her eyes on the creamy silk of her skin against the dark wood grain of the door.

Makes my skin smooth as silk and irresistible to the touch. At least that's what my boyfriend says.

Wink, wink. She didn't really have a boyfriend, but every man who's ever touched her has compared her to pure satin. Or cold milk. White and soft and pure. She, of course, didn't use Lilies in Moonlight Body Crème. She couldn't afford it. Nothing but Ivory Soap from the five-and-dime and maybe a dab of Jergen's Lotion.

May I introduce you to the other irresistible offerings from Dalliance Cosmetics? This little case right here is a regular treasure trove of beauty.

This is where she'll hold up the case, trying not to wince at the weight of it. She wore three bright red bangles on her left wrist, the one that holds the case, and they'll clank together as she lifts it. Right arm? Pure, soft, white, unadorned. Left arm? Fashion

and beauty in one grip. Lilly Margolis was everything, all wrapped up in the perfect porch-sized package. At least that's what she hoped when she rang the bell.

"What do you want?" The woman on the other side of the door wore a faded house dress. Her hair was mostly piled up on top of her head, though tendrils floated around her face.

Smile. "Good morning madam! Are you the lady of the house?"

"Oh for the love of Pete."

And Lilly faced the door again.

She relaxed her posture, letting her shoulder stoop with the weight of the tan leather case, getting no satisfaction from even the clank of her bangles. She turned and walked down the front steps, thinking the potted flowers looked a little less lovely than they did when she first walked past them just a minute ago.

"Should've opened with the flowers." Next door, she'd know.

Back on the sidewalk, she assessed the next house. Trim lawn, roses in bloom at the corner.

Chin up, big smile, shoulders squared, she strode up the walkway, looking confident lest the lady be looking out the front window at that moment. At the door, she shifted the leather case from one hand to the other, bangles rattling as she raises her fist to knock.

Door opened, and this woman looked much like the previous one, but her hair is a little neater, her dress less faded.

"Good morning, madam. Tell me, are you responsible for those beautiful roses in bloom?"

“Why yes, I am.” The woman touched her fingers to her throat, as if shocked to be confronted with such a compliment.

“Well, then, it won’t surprise you to learn that the delicate rose petal is a key ingredient in Dalliance Cosmetic’s Rose of Sharon hand crème. Just a dab worked in at night, and your hands will be as soft as the petals on your lovely flowers. May I offer you a demonstration?”

“Oh, I don’t think so, dear. Jergen’s works fine for me.”

A softer closing of the door this time, but a closing nonetheless. Back on the sidewalk, Lilly looked up the street. One house after another, all of them small, square. Trim green lawns, varied gardens, short white fences. And one closed door after another.

“Never gonna sell nothin’ in this lousy neighborhood.” She muttered under her breath, smiling sweetly at the young woman pushing a pram, followed by two sticky children.

Half-a-block behind her was a park. She’d planned to stop there and sit on one of its bright red benches to eat the cheese sandwich wrapped in wax paper nestled within the bottles and jars of Dalliance Cosmetics in the tan leather case. Now, she turned in her path and followed behind the woman and the pram and the sticky children who alternate in turning their heads to look at her. Lilly stuck out her tongue, and they did, too. The mother never glanced over her shoulder even once.

Once in the park, the sticky children ran to the swing set; the mother settled on a bench and pulled the baby out of the pram to settle it on her lap for a gentle bouncing.

“Cute baby.” Lilly chose the bench on the opposite side of the little walking path that stretched around the park.

“His name’s John.” The recollection of the name seemed an exhausting endeavor.

“I don’t have any children myself.” She crossed her leg and admires her shoe. White patent leather with a wide sea-foam green ribbon. She’d have to sell ten jars of Lilies in Moonlight to pay for them. “I’m sales girl for Dalliance Cosmetics. It’s highly rewarding.”

The mother smiled weakly, then hollered at the sticky children—June and Ted—telling them to play nice and take turns.

“Of course, motherhood is its own reward,” Lilly persisted, “but I bet you like to take yourself a long, hot bath at the end of a day.”

Baby John began to fuss, bucking straight-back in the mother’s lap.

“Or on a hot day like this, maybe a nice cool one. Not too cold—that can be a shocking. But tepid. Just enough warm to take off the edge. So when you dip your foot in, you can’t hardly tell where the air stops and the water starts, except for the wet. And then, when you lift yourself out, no matter how hot it is, you get this breeze that just chills—”

“Look, lady. I don’t usually have time to take a bath. I got three kids.”

“Haven’t you got a husband?”

“He’s a manager down at Parson’s. Sometimes he works late.”

“So you never have time to bathe?” Lilly widened her eyes, creating an image of innocent incredulity.

“Course I do.” The mother sat baby John back in his pram and handed him a bottle of milk, a veneer of resentment to her smile. “Just nothing long and luxurious is all.”

Lilly pouted. “Poor dear.” She lifted the tan leather case and set it beside her. Two clicks of the brass latches and she had a wide-mouthed jar—frosted pink glass with a silver painted lid. “There’s no reason you can’t pamper yourself with even the shortest dip. It’s not the length of the soak, but the quality of the soap, that’s what we say at Dalliance Cosmetics.”

“I use Ivory—”

“As well you should, what with the little ones and all. But, how about something like this?” She got up from her bench and crossed the path, carrying the wide-mouthed jar aloft like a treasure. Slowly, holding the jar just under the mother’s nose, she twisted the silver lid, wincing a bit at the glare from the bouncing sun. “Bath salts. Lavender. Here, just take a whiff.”

The mother closed her eyes, revealing thin lids with tiny blue branching veins. Perhaps it was the shiny silver lid that caught the attention of the now sticky and sweaty children, because they abandoned their swings and ran pell-mell towards their mother. Lilly stopped them in their tracks with nothing more than a kohl-eyed glare. “Scram, kids. This is for your ma.”

The mother opened her eyes again, transformed. Soft and content. “Very nice,” she said, but when she took a breath of non-lavender air, the edge is back.

“Not bad for a nickel, is it?”

“A nickel? Get out of town.”

“Well, the whole jar is a dollar thirty, but there’s enough in here for at least twenty-five baths, so that works out to about a nickel a bath. Don’t you think, at the end of a day, you deserve a nickel’s worth of bath salts all to yourself?”

Perhaps some innate protective sense had taken over the children, because once again they abandoned their swinging and were running—more cautiously this time—toward the benches. Now the mother, with her arms crossed, looked at them with narrowed eyes.

“Teddy and June! You two go play or I’m going to give you a spank right here and now and another when we get home!”

Teddy and June obeyed, taking sulky, backwards steps so that their selfish mother could gaze upon their sweaty, sticky, grubby faces for as long as possible.

“Put that lid back on.” The mother scooted an inch or so away from Lilly. “I haven’t got a dollar thirty to spend on bath salts.”

“Don’t forget about the beauty of the jar itself,” Lilly said, grasping. “When you’ve finished with the lavender, you can always refill it with something from the five-and-dime, and none of your friends need be the wiser. With this beautiful Dalliance Cosmetics jar on your powder room shelf, and you’ll be the envy—”

“I don’t have friends who visit my powder room.” The mother lifted baby John out of the pram again and held him close, resting her chin on top of his bald little head. Teddy and June would not be denied a third time. They scrambled onto the bench, wedging their way between the two women. Lilly leapt to her feet, barely snatching the pretty pink jar from the grimy clutches of the one she assumed to be June. Within seconds the mother is engulfed with questions while Lilly reached inside baby John’s pram and nestled the lavender bath salts within his blankets. She believed her good deed to be unnoticed, but then hears the mother call out, “Hey! I told you I can’t afford that.”

Lilly waved a hand behind her, bangles clanking. “Forget it. You qualify for the free sample of the day.”

Of course there was no such thing as a free sample. Three blocks later Lilly sat down again—this time at a drugstore counter—and filled out a sales slip. She thought back to the empty powder box on the washstand in her room at Mrs. Myrtle’s Hotel for Women. She had a little more than three dollars in there—two of which were meant for the next week’s rent. A couple of big sales would make up the difference, but she’d need to find better ground.

“Hey, lady.” The man behind the counter wore a blue-and-white striped shirt and blue suspenders. His hair was gray and thick and curly; the glasses on the bottom of his nose gave a kindly affect absent from his voice. “This isn’t your office. You going to order something?”

Lilly dug into her little beaded purse and pulled out a dime. “Two Coca-Colas.” One for later tonight with the supper included in her two-dollar-a-week rent.

The man behind the counter popped the top off one of the bottles before swiping the dime across the polished wood. Lilly quietly unwrapped her sandwich, keeping it hidden on her lap as she tore off one bite at a time, chewing slowly and washing it down with sips of the cold, dark fizzing soda.

Behind her, the bell rang, and though she doesn’t know another soul in this part of town, Lilly spun on her stool to see who walked in. Two women, probably in their fifties, wearing identical gray dresses, white aprons, ugly brown shoes.

Maids.

“Afternoon, ladies.” The man behind the counter lived up to his friendly visage.

“Afternoon, Ed.”

“Two egg salads? Coffee?”

“Oh, it’s pay-day,” one of the women said. “Make it two chocolate sodas, right Annie?”

“You read my mind,” the one named Annie said, and the two of them giggled as if it were truly funny.

“Sounds good,” Lilly said. She imagined herself part of their conversation, but they responded with a dismissive glare. She twirled back to her sandwich and Coke and sales ticket book, but listened to Annie and her friend at the little two-top behind her. Apparently their mistresses were at a weekly Country Club luncheon, meaning somewhere within walking distance there was a neighborhood with money.

Lilly tore her sandwich into smaller and smaller pieces, making it last long enough for Annie and her friend to finish their egg salads and chocolate soda. She knew Ed was not fooled for a moment; he’d come close to catching her mid-bite several times, but every time he asked if she didn’t want to order something, Lilly smiled her brightest and said no, thank you. She’s watching her figure.

At ten minutes of one, the maids slurped the last of their sodas and bid Ed good-bye until next Thursday. Lilly swigged the last of her Coke—warm and flat by now—and carefully folded the square of wax paper to put back in her leather case. It would wrap tomorrow’s sandwich.

“See ya, Ed.” She gave a little salute, bangles clanking, and set the door’s bell ringing on her way out. With the women in gray about twenty paces ahead, Lilly rolled her shoulders, refreshed her grip on the case’s handle, and took her first following step.

CHAPTER 2

Cullen Burnside reached into the bucket and took out another brand-new baseball. Stainless white leather, bright red stitching. He turned it over and over in his hand. Like this for a fast ball. Like that for a curve ball. Change-up. He gave it one or two soft tosses straight up and back, loving the feel of it landing in his open palm. He gripped it tight in one hand and grasped the barrel of the cannon steady with what remains of the other.

“A little to the left, Eugenie.” He gestured with the ball to accompany his voice, which he knew wouldn’t carry all the way across the yard. Through the scope, he saw the figure in the black maid’s uniform and starched white apron. She had one hand on her

hip, impatient, most likely because his mother waited inside with some urgent need, but it was essential to get the position just right. After all, she was the same height as Cullen—within an inch at least—and her feet roughly the same size.

He stood straight, taking his eyes away from the cannon's scope. "Bat up." He manipulated his own body, and she hers, until they made a mirror image. His arms up, her arms up. His back bent, her back bent. He couldn't help the fact that her face maintained its familiar mix of irritation and frustration.

"Choke up," he said as his final instruction before taking another look through the scope. Perfect. He tightened the bolts on either side of the scope and loaded the ball into the top tube leading down to the cannon's barrel.

"You shoot that thing at me, and you'll wish you died in France." Eugenie made this same threat every day. It lost its sting.

He ran his finger along the tube that will feed the gas into the cannon and checked the level of powder. He attached a wire leading to the remote trigger and, finally, dropped in the ball.

Eugenie knew to remain in position until he reached her. In one seamless motion, he placed his hands over her hands on the bat and stepped into her place as she let go. From inside the house, he heard the sound of the doorbell.

"Oh, no." Eugenie heard it, too. "That means Mrs. B is going to open that front door, and who knows what mischief she'll get into."

"Go ahead," Cullen said, staring straight down the barrel of the cannon. "We're finished here."

Giving no thought to what or who might be at the front door, he settled into his stance. He'd never get used to batting left, but he knew plenty of fellows who came back with no right arm at all, so no use complaining about not matching the stats on the back of a baseball card.

"Batter up," he barks, gambling that he'll still have enough breath afterwards to swing the bat full around. He stared down the barrel of the cannon, unblinking.

Why couldn't it have been a gun, Lord? Why couldn't I have been shot instead?

The trigger sat in perfect position. He could keep his heel dug in and rotate his foot to depress it. He did this now, hovering his toe over the switch. He closed his eyes, replacing the mounted machine in the middle of the yard with the image of a mound of dirt, and a man upon it, all wound up and ready to fire. Maybe a young Babe Ruth. Or Carl Mays. The scent of cut grass and flowers faded behind the imagined one of sweat and dirt and beer. In his mind, the roar of a crowd overtook the quiet sounds of his upper-crust neighborhood—which was basically no sound at all. His name over a loudspeaker: *Now batting for Pittsburgh, Cullen Burnside*. No nickname. That would come later.

He didn't want to open his eyes, but if not, he'd never swing the bat. Never hit the ball. So, when the echo of his name faded into the darkness of his mind, he once again stared down the barrel of the pitching machine.

3, 2, 1

His toe hit the trigger. Simultaneous with the explosion was the image of the red-stitched projectile hurtling straight toward him. Cullen stood, fearless and ready in its path. In the time it took for the ball to cross the distance between the barrel and the bat,

his mind moved far away from the tranquility of a baseball field. Now, he saw men fallen all around him, steam rising from torn, bleeding bodies, limbs and guns and endless, endless mud. Finally, the engulfing yellow cloud that robbed him of his life.

What had he to fear from a five-cent toy?

He swung. The muscles remaining in his right arm screamed with the effort. They screamed, because he couldn't. He channeled all his strength into the bat, bracing for the impact that he hoped would be between the bat and ball. But if not, if in fact he miscalculated, or Eugenie had grown taller, or the ball slid across some imperfection in the barrel, and the ball collided with him, what loss could there be?

And then, the sound. Wood connecting with leather. His eyes closed again at that second—a habit he's never been able to break. But he could feel a good hit. When he opened his eyes again, he saw it, long and low. Line drive, to right field, or at least into the hydrangeas. The flowers quivered with the impact. Any field in the country, that would be a single. But he didn't run. He didn't have to. He needed all his strength to return to the bucket to take out and load the next ball.

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