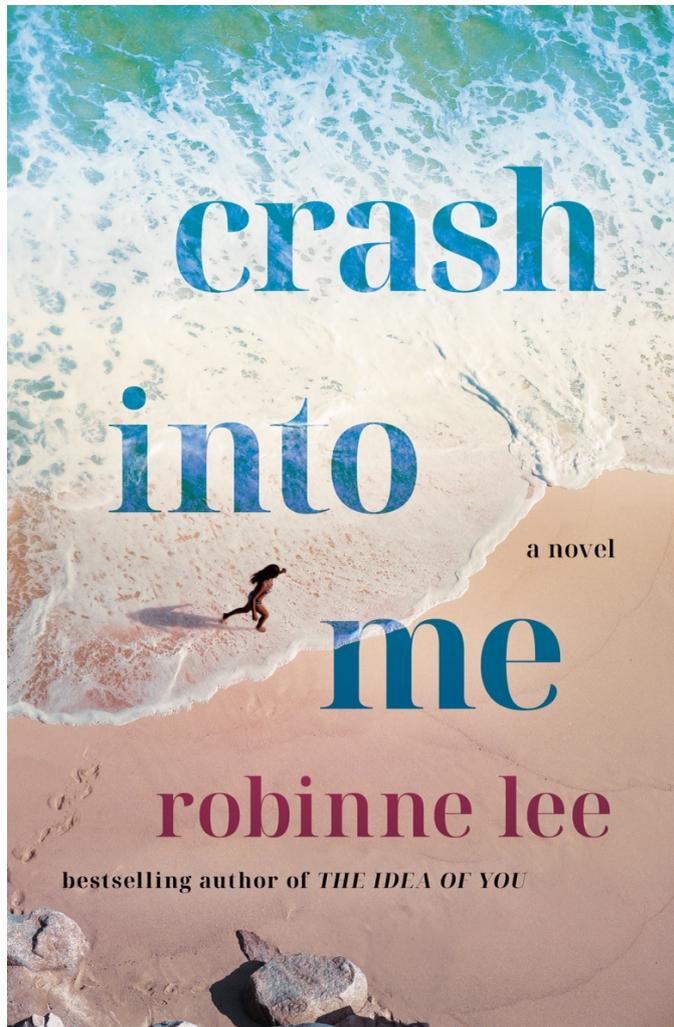


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Crash Into Me

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ROBINNE LEE



ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
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I.

INTERSECTION.

.....

LOS ANGELES.

FEBRUARY. 2015.

.....

It is her neck that I see first.

Long and poetic, a whisper of beauty. Unexpected at the side of the road on a midwinter's morning. A weekday, at that.

Winter is curious here. Sunny and sixties and warm. Rain on the rarest of occasions. And yet the people are all bundled in down. I'm not certain I'll get used to it. This nonweather weather. This identical dressing. This new life.

But there she is, faintly ethnic, with her graceful neck—wearing a stylish trench, which is decidedly not down—making her way to the street side of her shiny black electric vehicle. Much sleeker than mine. I assume she has no kids. No wrappers jammed in the door handle of the back seat. No cleats, no balls, no pointe shoes in the rear. Not with that neck.

From across the intersection, I watch as she hitches the driver's door open. She is juggling a cup of coffee, an oversized handbag, a yoga mat. The light changes and I pull up parallel to her and catch her eye. Through my sunglasses, through her impossibly large ones. *Is she vacating the spot?* She nods, the faint hint of a smile. And in that moment, I think I may know her.

. . .

I hear the noise before I feel the impact. A keen screeching, a determinative *crunch*, and then what sounds like my mother's voice. Yelling something not quite discernible in Jamaican patois. My SUV lurches once. And then a second time. Careening sideways into the open car door. Pinning it back against the wheel, an angle that seemed impossible a second before. There is glass shattering and metal twisting and coffee on my windshield. I hear the Jamaican expletives again. "*Jeezum Peace!*" It takes a good moment before I realize: the person yelling is me.

At first, I don't see her. I imagine she's fallen, trapped, her neck crushed between her car door and my fender. I imagine the worst. But when I glance back through the rear-vent glass, she is there. Standing between our cars, by her back door, mouth agape, shaking. Alive. She must have stepped aside at the last moment. I have not killed her. I have not killed her.

My sunglasses are no longer on my face and my handbag and all its contents are on the floor. My phone, which was resting in the cup holder, is not there. And yet the announcer on NPR drones on about Aleppo as if nothing has happened here on Montana Avenue. As if I just did not almost end a life. And then I realize the engine is still running.

I turn off the car, unbuckle the seat belt, and step out into the street. There's a gold sedan wedged into the rear left side of my new secondhand car. François and I had spent days picking it out the week following Christmas. Black, Lexus, hybrid, seventeen thousand miles, good for carting kids to and fro, roomy enough to hold my equipment.

A woman is at the steering wheel of the sedan. Late thirties, I think, from the little I can see of her face. A pouf of thick black hair, sculpted eyebrows, dark glasses. Her hands are covering her mouth. The airbag on her passenger side has deployed. There are two harness booster seats in the back. Empty. She is lucky.

"Are you okay?" I mouth.

She nods. And then she begins to cry. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

I can't hear her, but I can feel her anguish, her guilt. "It's okay," I say. "It's okay."

But even as I say it, I realize it might not be true.

I make my way around the front of my car to see the damage I have done to the other vehicle. The door is mangled and off its hinges. My fender seems to be the object holding it in place. There is glass everywhere. Tiny fragments spilling like water from her window, leaving angry shards behind in their wake.

The woman I might have killed is now standing on the sidewalk, just in front of the café . . . trembling. She is clutching her yoga mat and handbag, but her coffee is covering her trench, her athletic top, her white Converse sneakers.

“Are you all right?”

She shakes her head. She is tall, five nine, maybe. Enviously thin. The kind of body I have always coveted. No hips. No boobs. Her skin is a cool caffè latte. Up close, she looks to be my age. Barely discernible lines at the corners of her delicate mouth, a faint horizontal pair sweeping her forehead. Her dark hair is wet, a wavy bob. I cannot determine if she has just come from her yoga class or is on her way.

“Are you hurt?” I ask.

“No. No. I’m not hurt. I just need a moment.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m fine,” she says, and I detect the hint of an accent.

And then, moving closer to me, she gasps. “You are bleeding.”

I feel it then. A dull throbbing. Something moist on my forehead. I’d assumed it was perspiration, but it’s dripping now. On my brow.

My hand flies up and I reel at the wetness. “My face . . .”

My voice is low, but not low enough, and I am embarrassed that in the midst of this spectacle and wreckage and what could have been the loss of life, I am having a vain moment. And Swan Neck is witnessing it.

“Tip your head back,” she says, reaching into her bag to pull out a tissue.

I close my eyes as she mops my forehead, her fingers cool against my skin.

A small crowd is beginning to assemble. I can hear them. Mumbles. Storefronts opening. An irritated driver blowing his horn. The sedan-SUV mash-up is blocking traffic.

“Oh my Guhd. OhmyGuhd, ohmyGuhd, ohmyGuhd,” somebody is saying. Not her.

A peek from beneath the napkin reveals the woman from the sedan. Big hair, olive skin, tears.

“She is bleeding? This is your car? Oh Guhd, what have I done? I am calling 911.” Her voice is deep, her accent thick. Arab, I think. Or maybe Persian. No one in LA is actually from LA.

This was what François’s agent told us when he was sweetening the deal. When he was convincing us to uproot everyone and everything. That Los Angeles was cosmopolitan, diverse, a world-class city with a robust art community and all shades of the rainbow represented. He did not mention that it was staggeringly spread out. That it was notably segregated. That if I stayed in my neighborhood I could go entire days without seeing another person who looked like me.

If I wanted to see all shades of the rainbow I would have to get in my car. Which was now mangled in the middle of the road.

“It’s not your face,” the woman covered in coffee says. She is fishing in her bag once again. This time she withdraws one of those microfiber yoga towels and positions it at the crown of my head, applying pressure. Somewhere north of my hairline. It hurts. The towel is damp. It smells like her, I imagine. Like sandalwood and expensive leather.

“That’s the good news. But this part of the head bleeds a lot. You might need stitches, and they should check you for a concussion.”

I don’t feel concussed. Not that I’m certain I would recognize how concussed feels. But I am not vomiting, and the world is not spinning, and I have some place to be. Furthermore, I find the American healthcare system daunting, and I’m not sure how our insurance works through the production. I should call François.

The sedan driver is on her phone, reporting the accident. She is saying things like “a middle-aged woman is bleeding from the head.” A description I find unnecessarily reductive. Although in truth, I don’t know how she could have done better. A petite, brown-skinned, mixed-race woman, possibly forties, but doing a bloody good job of holding it together? At home they would have called me *métisse*. But here there were so many ways to botch race, probably best to avoid it altogether. Also, at home they would have been kinder about the age.

“Lie down,” the Middle Eastern woman commands. It is then that I notice she is wearing flannel pajamas, those ubiquitous sheepskin

boots, three-carat diamond earrings. A Westside mom doing the morning drop-off . . . and then this. “They say you should lie down.”

I balk at the idea. I feel fine and the ground is dirty.

Swan Neck reads something in my expression, and then leans into me. “I am going to look at it,” she says, before removing her massive sunglasses. It is then that I see her face fully for the first time . . . and it registers.

For a moment, I cannot move. I stand there silent, while she surveys the wound. A million thoughts flooding my head. Images disjointed, faded, weathered. Like black and whites from another era. The surf, the sand, gooseflesh on her taut belly, her hair tickling the side of my face. Her green eyes puffy the morning after.

She does not recognize me. Or if she does, she is doing a very good job of not letting on. And maybe that is for the best.

“It’s not wide,” she says finally. “You’ll live.”

“I need to call my husband,” I respond. This is how I will extricate myself. And before she or the Persian woman can protest, I pull away and venture back around the cars.

My phone is ringing in the SUV. It takes a second to locate it, on the floorboard, wedged beneath the gas pedal. The incoming number jolts me. My meeting. Right. I am supposed to be there . . . soon. I think.

“Cecilia. Good morning.” The lyrical accent on the other side of the line sounds vaguely like family. Soft-spoken, lilting, cultured . . . it reminds me of home. Wherever that is.

“Hi,” I say, and in the moment realize I can’t recall her name. Did she say it? It’s one of the partners from a renowned art gallery that is considering me—*that I am considering*—for representation. She’s one of the two women who run it, and I am impressed with them both. They’ve amassed an enviable list of mid-tier artists, most of them women, and from what I’ve gleaned they would make a wonderful home for Cecilia Chen, photographer. Although I am no longer certain how I will win them over, when I show up at their gallery bleeding from the head. Especially if I can’t recall their names.

I am debating exactly how to convey what has happened when she clears her throat. “Cecilia, I hate to do this to you, as we are very

much looking forward to our meeting, but something has come up at the gallery this morning that needs tending to, and I'm afraid we're going to have to reschedule."

"Oh," I say. And I let it sit there.

There are sirens approaching. I assume they are for me, a waste of time and resources because physically I am fine.

I have longed for this appointment for months. Since François first got the offer and we considered the possibility of leaving Paris. Just for a little while. Two and a half years, tops. I did not want my kids to get too comfortable in America. I did not want to bump up against my past. But if we were going to uproot, I was going to make the best of it and dip a toe or two into the Los Angeles art world. And that started with finding a reputable dealer. One who may or may not be currently blowing me off for something that needed "tending to."

"I am so very sorry. Please forgive us," she continues. "I'll shoot you an email and throw out some dates to see what works, yes?"

It's not as if I have a choice. I *am* bleeding from the head, after all. "Yes."

I am about to ring François when I notice the date on my phone. Friday, February 13. Of course it is. My hands are shaking. It's the shock, I think. Or the disorientation of seeing her. The revelation of whose life I might have ended. It's not a brain bleed. I'm sure. Still, I seek out my reflection in the rearview mirror, while the call clicks through and the sirens swell, and that is when I see it. The mirror, fractured and grossly askew, and there, clinging to the bottom: a tiny clump of hair and what looks to be some kind of organic matter. My face in the shattered reflection drains. Streaks of drying blood stain my brow and temple. The sleek low bun I took pains to construct this morning is now disheveled. I dare to lift the yoga towel and a fount of dark red bubbles midway down my center part. She was right, it's not wide. But it looks frightfully deep.

"Dear God."

"*Oui, ma belle.*" François's voice is brisk, cheery. He is at the house with his young assistant going over script notes. I imagine them by

the pool: him with his green juice and his running attire, looking very un-French. Her with a notepad and a smile.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

“*Qu’est-ce qu’il y a?*”

The sirens grow louder still and then stop. An ambulance pulling up in front of the cars, the lights still circling.

“I was in an accident. In front of our coffee shop. In Santa Monica. On Montana. Please come.”

“*Putain. Où sont les enfants?*”

“They’re at school. They’re fine.”

“Are you hurt?”

“Maybe,” I say, and then unexpectedly, I begin to cry.

“*Ma belle, ma belle.*” François’s voice is smooth over the phone, hypnotic. “Don’t move. I’m on my way.”

“Fran,” I say, as I lean back and close my eyes. “It’s Anouk. I almost killed Anouk.”

“Anouk . . . ?” He pauses, waiting for me to fill in the silence.

“Ferrand. I just almost killed Anouk Ferrand.”

II.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN PARIS.

.....

PARIS.

OCTOBER. 2014.

.....

The offer came in on a Friday in October.

It was late in the evening, and we were entertaining. Our monthly dinner with dear friends, the Sadous and the Picards. Six adults, five children, nestled tightly around our dining table, in the great room of our apartment in the ninth arrondissement. An apartment we had recently renovated precisely so we could entertain such large groups. There was lamb, wine, laughter. Jazz on vinyl. An hour in, when the kids had up and disappeared into the den, the conversation had turned to Valérie Trierwiller, the former girlfriend of François Hollande, and her recently released memoir detailing his affair and its aftermath. In France, no one is exempt from infidelity. Not even the president. My François was atypically silent, and sometime between the salad and the cheese course, he stepped away to check his messages. He returned visibly buzzing but said nothing.

“All good?”

“*Oui.*”

It wasn't until our guests had departed and Lucie and Julien were in their bedrooms, likely feigning sleep, that he came out with it.

“They want me to do the trilogy.”

“Which movie?”

“All three.”

I set down the wineglass I'd been washing in the sink and turned to look at him. Lean, lanky, forty-two, a smattering of gray dotting his chin and temples. The faint promise of lines crinkling his mercurial eyes, and now this. A three-picture deal with Sony. Everything was going to change.

"They said all three?"

"*Oui.*" He nodded, his lips widening into an unabashed smile. A child at Christmas. "All three. Shooting concurrently."

"When do you start?"

"*Janvier.*"

I did the math. Two months and one week before our lives would be uprooted, disrupted, compromised. It would not be the first time. But *three* movies: the prep time, the filming, the editing process. It could take years.

"Where?"

"In California, for the most part. Interiors and green screen in Los Angeles. And potentially the Mojave Desert, Canada, and Bolivia."

He'd said it quickly, and in French. And I wasn't certain if the intent was to confuse me or to make it less painful. Like ripping off a Band-Aid.

For a moment I did not speak, and he leaned in and held my face, his fingers playing over my earlobes. His lips at my ear. We'd been together for fifteen years. Married for thirteen. He knew my weaknesses. All of them.

"*Cette opportunité . . . c'est incroyable, Cecilia.*"

"I know. I know . . . How incredible?"

"Fifteen for the three. Plus we are asking for back end."

My knees buckled beneath me. "Fifteen? Million?"

"That is what they are offering. But we go back now and ask for more. Seems greedy, *non?*" He laughed, low, almost sinister. "*Putain.* It's the American way."

I'd met François when he had nothing. In the spring of 1999, when I was still adjusting to the move to Paris, and we were both struggling artists, assisting the same photographer. I wanted to be in museums. François wanted Hollywood.

And now, two independent films, one critically acclaimed drama, and one moderately budgeted production—cum—international hit later, it appeared he was going to get it.

It was not a surprise. They'd been dangling the project for months. A trilogy based on *Azimuth Rising*, a dystopian sci-fi book series from the '70s. There had been copious emails and phone calls and checking of quotes and availability. But nothing was definite. He'd been on edge. We both had. Waiting . . . waiting . . . for our ship.

We were not exactly suffering in France. We each had the respect of our industry peers, invitations to the most coveted parties and events, favorable write-ups in *Télérama*. But this, this was success on an international level. This was American money.

"Fifteen," I repeated. "Million."

We could buy a place in the country, a larger studio space for my work. Fly my parents in twice a year. First class.

He nodded slowly, the left side of his mouth quirking up just so. His sleepy French smile, I called it, equal parts sexy and infuriating. And the tell that he'd moved on from *We're going to be obscenely rich!* to *I need something from you*.

"What?"

"*Pourquoi tu dis 'what'?*"

"Because I know you."

He laughed then, for a moment, and then grew serious. "I want you to come with me. To California. For the entire shoot."

His request was loaded. He had never suggested I join him on location before. That I step away from my own work, from my art, from my life. That we displace the kids. Pluck them out of school. Separate them from their friends. Our lives had often revolved around François, yes. But in less obvious ways.

Then again, he'd never booked a job that would take him away from us for so long. He'd never been offered this much money. The balance had shifted.

I turned back to the wineglass in the sink. But said nothing. There was more there. He was respectful not to bring it up.

"You don't have to stop working on your project," he said. "You can shoot there, find subjects there. We can get you a rep, a gallery, even. . . . *Tu peux faire comme tu veux. Tu peux faire n'importe quoi.*"

I could do whatever I wanted.

He made it sound so simple. He, who had just been given the gift of all gifts. But Black, Asian, female, over forty, an outsider . . . I did not imagine LA would hold the same for me. There was a reason I'd left New York all those years ago. Well, two. Maybe three.

"Think about it, Cile. Please."

"We don't know anyone in Los Angeles," I said. This was not entirely true. But I did not think it wise to bring up exactly whom it was I knew in LA, and so I pivoted. "We won't have any friends."

"We will find some. *Je te promets.*"

"We can bring the cat?"

"We can bring the cat."

III.

PORTRAIT D'UNE FEMME.

.....
LOS ANGELES.
FEBRUARY. 2015.
.....

The yoga towel is ruined. Ten days after the accident when I am up and about and have been cleared to drive, I buy a similar one at a yoga spot on Montana, package it with a lovely card, and head to Anouk Ferrand's home. I do not tell her I am coming. I do not, in fact, have her number. But I have a photo of her driver's license, and assuming she is still at the same residence, I know where she lives. And that bit of knowledge feels powerful, dangerous, wild.

The house is in Brentwood, north of Sunset; and the farther I ascend, the more I feel like a stalker. A fan. A trespasser. All of Brentwood feels like trespassing, to be honest. Counting others with my complexion has become a game I play solo. At the oh-so-charming Country Mart with its high-end boutiques, farm-to-table restaurant, and handcrafted ice-cream shop, I've yet to top six. At the Whole Foods on San Vicente, there's an African American butcher behind the counter, a kind Fijian gentleman who runs one of the registers, a handful of Latine grocers. But customers who resemble me? Four, maybe. And fewer still at the restaurants. Katsuya, Toscana, Tavern . . . all wonderful eateries. But outside of the de rigueur "exotic" hostess? Next to none. I am a unicorn.

It is even worse in the Palisades.

And so, as I navigate my replacement SUV (at a tentative postaccident pace), I am already aware that I stick out here. But as the lots grow larger and the hedges higher, I begin to have second thoughts. Maybe this wasn't the best idea. Maybe I will be stopped by someone's security before I even reach my destination. Maybe she has dogs.

I rehearse the script I've spent the last two days finessing: *Sorry to drop in unannounced. Didn't have a number. Wanted to thank you profusely. It didn't dawn on me until I got to the hospital why I knew your face. . . .* The last line rings false, I realize. But I'm hoping she'll assume I was in shock and could not properly register.

At some point the road veers left and widens into a picturesque palm-lined boulevard with a landscaped median. It is charming and unexpected, and I smile a little when the GPS signals that I've arrived. I have to loop around the far end of the boulevard to access one of the two entrances to her driveway. I ring the button and wait.

"Good afternoon." The voice is male, British. I could have sworn this husband was American.

"Hello, yes," I say in a voice two octaves higher than my own. "This is Cecilia Chen; I'm looking for Anouk Ferrand. I was recently in a car accident with her, and just wanted to drop something off." Nothing about this sounds natural.

"Your name again, please?"

I repeat it. The Brit at the other end of the speaker says, "One moment, please." And again, I wait.

I am about to ring again when the gate slowly rolls back to reveal a wraparound paved driveway leading past a tennis court, around a well-landscaped cluster of olive trees, and up to an extraordinary modern architectural home. It's a sizable cantilevered structure fabricated of stone and glass, and feels more contemporary art museum than private residence. For a moment I wish François were with me to witness it all. So this is how she lives.

I pull up to the front entrance and then hesitate before putting the car into park, aware I'm blocking the driveway. There's a shallow turnoff to the south of the manse, beyond the garage, but parking there seems presumptuous, as if I intend to stay awhile, which I don't. Unless invited to, of course. Everything about this is awkward.

Before I can shut off the engine, the front door swings open and puts an end to my indecision. There, standing in a white tie and waistcoat, is a middle-aged gentleman whose posture and countenance are so erect and severe, I cannot imagine he is anyone but the butler.

“Ms. Chen.” He greets me as I exit the car, yoga-towel gift bag in tow.

“Cecilia.” I smile, reaching to shake his hand, and then in the moment wonder if that’s perhaps not the thing to do. There was a time I was up to par on my Emily Post. That time is not now.

“Ames. Do come in. Ms. Ferrand will be with you momentarily.”

I follow him into a breathtaking atrium flooded with natural light and opening into a minimalist dining hall. The view extending through the depth of the house and beyond the double-story retractable glass doors overlooking a serenely landscaped two acres. A virtual oasis. I have learned not to gasp at the homes here in LA. Just as I learned to hide my awe at the villas and the yachts on the Riviera the first time François was feted at Cannes. But part of me can’t help feeling like my much younger self; me, the summer I fell for the boy from Connecticut and gained entrée into his rarefied world. I was twenty-five then. It did not end well.

And as always, I think: I don’t belong here. I’m just visiting. I am a middle-class girl from a third-world island and I will carry that with me until I die. For better or worse.

“It’s beautiful,” I say, because one must say something.

Ames directs me through the entryway and into a living room. The décor is understated, cool. Gray and beige and shades in between. Everything pristine and in its place. Hard to believe someone lives here.

“May I offer you a drink? Water?” His accent is BBC crisp, and I wonder how someone who has mastered Received Pronunciation has ended up in the service sector. In Los Angeles, of all places.

“Please.”

“Still or sparkling?”

“Sparkling. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.” He slips out a second entrance, and I turn to take in the view. Two of the walls are floor-to-ceiling glass, the outdoors bleeding in. There’s a lounge area, a firepit, a grill, and farther down—

past the succulents and herbs and all manner of vegetation—is an austere pool house and a linear pool.

There’s someone in it. A man. His hair is silver, but his body is unmistakably fit. The speed at which he cuts through the water. His arms slicing the surface. The power of his kick . . . He moves like an athlete.

This must be the billionaire husband. Older. Aloof. Once-divorced. Heir to the Longmore dynasty. The descendant of publishing magnates. I’d only googled so much before I’d started feeling guilty.

I watch him pace through three laps before I become self-conscious of my reflection at the window and move to sit on one of the sofas.

Ames returns presently with a glass and a minibottle of Pellegrino on a lacquer serving tray. I am mesmerized by his presentation, the way he snaps the linen napkin, the angle of his wrist, the oval cuff links. So much fanfare for a glass of water.

“*Alors!* You are alive!” Her voice rings out from the entry, and I rise like a schoolgirl at attention.

She is wearing a robe. Silk, belted. Japanese, I guess as she sweeps into the room. She’s barefoot, but still taller than me, grasping my arms and kissing both cheeks in the French way. She smells divine. Cloves and rose and cinnamon and sandalwood. I decide in that moment that it is uniquely Anouk.

“How are you feeling?”

“Okay. Better. Thank you.”

She pulls back to fully assess me, and in turn I get my first real look at her. Her hair is blown straight, a chic bob that just brushes her shoulders, highlighting her elongated neck. She has on no makeup and there is something honest and revealing about her naked face. Her angles have changed since the first time we met, the time she seems to not remember. Her cheeks are less full, her lips more thin, and yet she is still undeniably exquisite. The light embraces her features. Dances over her cheekbones and the contour of her jawline. Kisses all the curves and planes of her face. It is a gift to have a face like this, I think. To move through the world bearing such beauty.

“You have stitches, no?” she asks.

I reach up to touch the wound. The scar tissue is slightly raised, but I’ve hidden it by altering my part. “Out yesterday.”

“And the concussion?”

“Better.”

“You were lucky.” She smiles then, illuminated from within. There is something about her that is ethereal and elusive and magnetic, and it is easy to remember why the whole world loved her. Why I loved her.

“I apologize for stopping by unannounced,” I begin my speech, as Ames slips out the far door, “but I didn’t have your number and our assistant—my *husband’s* assistant—had the photo of your driver’s license for the insurance company and I really wanted to thank you personally. It didn’t dawn on me until much later why I recognized you. . . .” I’m rambling now.

She nods, smiling faintly. She probably gets this a lot.

“I imagine it was the concussion. But I worked with you once, a long time ago.”

“You did?”

“In the nineties. You were . . . We were young.”

She cocks her head, trying to remember. “Here? In LA?”

“Mexico. Cabo San Lucas. I used to assist Didier Moulin.”

Something curious passes over her face. I’m not quite certain what. But it’s there for a flash and then it’s not. She smiles, recovering. “Didier. What a character . . .”

I anticipate more, but for the moment she’s finished.

Whether she remembers that week and is avoiding it or has locked it so far into her subconscious that she can’t access it is beyond me. Either way, it’s not my place to push. I reach for a much-needed sip of sparkling water and regroup.

“Anyway, I know Nadia’s insurance is taking care of everything, but I’m still haunted by the accident, and at the very least, I wanted to thank you for your kindness,” I say, grabbing the gift bag from the sofa and putting it in her hands.

“Oh, *c’est pas necessaire*. This wasn’t necessary.”

“I speak French.”

“*Ah, oui, c’est vrai*, your husband is French. He was very worried.” She struggles with the word. *Wah-reedt*. It’s endearing. I know what it’s like to speak a language every day for twenty years and still not get it right. To live in a space where you never feel fully understood.

I was seven when we moved from Kingston to Westchester County, New York. I wore ankle socks with patent-leather shoes and grosgrain

ribbons in my hair. And I spoke with an accent. Assimilating into white America was tedious. Assimilating into Black America was even more so. Something about resembling a group genetically and yet having almost no cultural ties. I was twenty-seven when I moved to Paris and did it all over again.

Anouk takes her time unwrapping the towel and reading the card, which I'd written in French, and I turn my attention back to the swimming pool, where her husband, if that is indeed her husband, is still swimming laps. He's moved on from the crawl to the butterfly.

"C'est très gentil de ta part, Cecilia. Merci."

"De rien."

I like the way she says my name. It's much more melodious in French. Most things are. But Anouk's voice is deep and languid, and there's a fullness to it now that was not there on the Cabo shoot. I suppose she was still a girl then. We both were.

"He's crazy, Frederick," she says, inclining her head toward the pool. "My husband."

"He's rather committed."

"He does this Ironman thing. It's his whole life. Running, swimming, biking. Every day. It's my fault because I told him to get a hobby. But now, it's like, come onnn, you're not thirty-three, man."

I laugh at that, American colloquialisms tumbling from her French mouth.

"Are you still in touch with him?" she asks. "Didier?"

Her sudden change of subject throws me. "I haven't seen him in years."

She nods slowly, her slender finger running over the edge of the thank-you card. And then, again, "What a character."

It feels like an opening. An invitation of sorts. But she is in a robe, and I am standing there awkwardly in her minimalist living room twenty years after the fact, and I have no idea how to move forward. I should have been better prepared.

"Are you rushing? I have a luncheon at one, but . . . you can come upstairs for a minute?"

It is not what I'm expecting. My pulse accelerates. "I can."

I am still holding my glass of sparkling water when I follow her out of the room, through the atrium, and up the stairs. The second floor is equally austere. Oak floors, white walls, glass balustrades, a bridge stretching across the atrium connecting the two wings of the house. A study in modern simplicity. It is the kind of house I could live in if I did not feel the need to hold on to so many things.

Anouk leads me to the end of a long hall and into her bedroom. It's a rambling suite, really, a series of connected rooms. Two master bedroom-sized closets, a luxurious bath, an enclosed courtyard with an outdoor shower . . . We eventually wind our way into a dressing room, where Anouk directs me to a banquette before situating herself to do her makeup. I am awed.

A series of black and whites grace the walls. There are a few candid, some family shots, but mostly there are stills of her during her modeling days, iconic. I recognize many of them. A cover Peter Lindbergh shot for *Bazaar*. A celebrated Pamela Hanson print. An immaculate glossy by Patrick Demarchelier. Signature dark '90s lips, likely Mac's iconic "Paramount." A sculptural nude against a sun-soaked wall, her oval face tilted up to the sky. This last one I've never seen but there's no mistaking the contrast, the shadows, the California light.

"Is that Herb Ritts?"

She looks up from her dressing table, a pink blending sponge in hand. "Did you know him?"

"I wish. He was legendary."

"*Vraiment*. He was really special. The best ones are always special."

It's an interesting word choice.

She returns to busying herself with her makeup, and for a moment I watch, studying her process. The contouring of foundation, the faintest smattering of powder. You can tell a lot about a woman by how she puts on her makeup. What she likes about her face, what she does not. But after a while observing feels intrusive, and I look away.

I have no idea why she's brought me here.

My focus returns to the black and whites. There is a faded Polaroid of her, young, laughing, mounted in a shadow-box frame, and accompanied by a peacock feather, a line drawing of a jagged coast, and a crumpled cocktail napkin. An abstract still life, the composition eerily

familiar. Beside it is a sublime shot of Anouk and Frederick on their wedding day. Her radiant in a diaphanous silk sheath. Long sleeves, deep neckline, bespoke tailoring. Timeless, elegant. Him beaming, his stubbled jaw nestled against her neck. A slight, raven-haired boy clutching her hand. This must be Sacha, the son from her first marriage. I recognize him from the tabloids. Where is he now? I wonder. With his father in Paris? Or here, somewhere in this palatial house? A brooding teenager, skulking about.

I check my watch. I will need to pick up my own skulking tween at three o'clock. Our new assistant, Parisa—brought on after the accident to transport the kids around town and help out as needed—is off today. Julien is staying after school for track practice, but Lucie has to be driven to ballet. I am still not used to this. The driving everywhere. The allotting for time. I have gone from somewhat-sophisticated urban professional to quasi-suburban chauffeur. Blink of an eye.

“So did you become a photographer yourself?” Anouk asks.

“I did. But fine art, mostly. Not so much fashion.”

“*Waouh, c'est génial!* And you're with a gallery?”

“In Paris, yes. I'm meeting with a few here.”

“What is it like? Your work?”

I find this response challenging, always. The idea of summing up a life's obsession in two sentences. Most people, I find, are looking for something conversational, vague, and perfunctory. But the way Anouk holds my gaze in the mirror demands more.

“It's a dialogue, usually,” I start. “A conversation I'm wrestling with in my head. Typically, it's part of a bigger theme. And then it becomes a collection, or an installation. Sometimes a film.”

“What are you wrestling with lately?”

I smile at that. “Beauty. And our consumption of it.”

She nods at me, returns to painting her face. And then says, off-handedly, “Or maybe its consumption of us.”

It lands.

For a second, I'm stuck on our reflections. Hers bright and delicate. Mine less so. Her vibrant kimono, her chicly coiffed bob. My messy bun, my face devoid of makeup, my monochrome uniform: charcoal sweater, charcoal slacks. She is a ray of light, and I am stern and serious. The opposite of California.

My eyes drift around the room then, committing little details to memory. I want to drink in every bit of her. Her furniture, her fragrance, her art. There's a sepia-tinted photo on the far wall of a young Black woman laughing, a towheaded toddler squirming in her lap. The woman wears a silk kerchief tied around her head, a halter top, large hoop earrings, a stack of bangles on her arm, to which the baby clings. She feels so much like my own mother it takes me by surprise. Self-possessed, regal. Even the veranda on which they are seated feels familiar.

It is easy to forget that Anouk is Black. She is French, first of all, and the French don't officially categorize people in such a way. Something about *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and not including race on the census since the Second World War, which did not go so well for them. Additionally, her father is white, and that kind of mixture makes her *métisse* by French standards, not *noire*. Furthermore, she is fair with Gallic features. Her skin a warm eggshell, her eyes a deep green. At most, she is racially ambiguous. But what trumps all, perhaps, is her celebrity, which has the uncanny ability to eclipse race, or at least obfuscate it. But maybe that is only in her home country. Maybe here she is Black like me.

"Is that you and your mother?" I ask.

Her eyes flit up to the photo in question. She smiles, bright. She has a French overbite. "*Oui*. In Martinique. A very long time ago. She was beautiful, *non*? My mother was this exquisite woman. She died six years ago."

"I'm sorry."

"It was time," she says.

I'm not certain how to respond to that. She doesn't give me the chance.

"And your parents? They are where? France?"

"Florida. We're from Jamaica, originally. We migrated to New York when I was little. And after I moved to Paris, they retired to Florida."

"Are you the only child?"

"I have a brother. Andrew. He's in London."

"Ah, *la Jamaïque*." She smiles, and then returns to her makeup.

"You feel like an island girl," she says, eventually.

The comment throws me.

“Your features are this beautiful *mélange* I always associate with *les Antillaises*,” she continues, using the French word for Caribbean. “But there’s complexity underneath, like strength with a *délicatesse*.” She catches my eye in the mirror then. “It’s sexy.”

I am still for a second, uncertain how to respond. Questioning what it was she saw in me that perhaps I could not see in myself. That any strength I once had was now faded.

She returns to the task at hand then, completing her mascara, swiping on a neutral lip, the faintest trace of blush. Her eyes fly up and catch mine again in the mirror. I am staring at her, transfixed. Still clutching my sweaty Pellegrino.

“I know you,” she says.

I nod.

“The shoot in Cabo. With Didier. What was it for? *Bazaar*?”

“No. It wasn’t editorial. . . .” I pause, allowing her to piece it together. Wondering what moments of that loaded trip she now remembers, what she has blocked.

I have spent the past week trying to recall the details, but some are foggy, faint. I imagine they are scribbled somewhere in a journal stashed in the back of my bedroom closet. In Paris. Which does me little good now.

But what I have not forgotten—what I will never forget—are those who were there. Those who were witness to multiple indiscretions and maintained their silence.

“It was the Carlo di Varenna campaign,” I say, finally. “In 1996. You, and Katrine Østergaard. Jaya Clark. Bas van den Broeck. And Elliot Lyons-Thorpe.”

“Oh,” she says, and I think I see her almost falter. Almost. “*That* shoot.”

Something shifts in the room then. I imagined it would. An inconvenient silence. She busies herself with closing containers, tweaking her lips, avoiding my eyes. Eventually, she pushes herself back from the table and stands to face me.

“I’m going to be late. For my lunch. But . . . you put your number in the card, yes?”

“I did.” I stand, awkward. Her robe is gaping, her perfume is bewitching, and we are in this intimate space.

“Ah, bon, comme ça, je peux te téléphoner.”

I follow Anouk then, through the maze of rooms and out into the sunlit foyer. Her husband is still swimming laps in the distance. A picture of determination. She leads me down the stairs, her kimono billowing at her ankles, like a paper kite in the wind, and I am reminded of an old photo spread. Ethereal, diaphanous; Kate Moss, a sprite in the sand. Enrique Badulescu. *Harper's Bazaar*. 1994.

“Merci encore. For the gift. And for not killing me.” She smiles and takes my glass, kisses both my cheeks, and then eases me out the door.

It is not until I reach Sunset that I realize I can still smell her on me. Cloves and rose and cinnamon and sandalwood. Anouk.

This is a work of fiction. All of the names, characters, organizations, places, and events portrayed in this work are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously.

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