

MIA

THE WOMEN WE LOVE

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MIA – THE WOMEN WE LOVE

Published in the USA and the EU
First printing 2020 (author's proof)
Reprint 2026
Internal Reference SP2021.02 | 30.08.2020 | 14:53
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To Woman, the secret measure of everything we love.

Prologue

We are all the books we read, all the women we love, and all the journeys we take.

It is a simple sentence, perhaps too simple for what it tries to contain. But there are sentences that need no display. They stay there, upright, like a door left ajar. You need only push them, and the libraries appear, the airports, the hotel rooms, the train stations, the café tables, the houses where we were happy without yet knowing that that moment would outlive so many others.

Writing a book is, in part, accepting that memory is not an archive, but rather a way of protecting us from what happened. Not because it necessarily invents the facts, but because it chooses the light in which to show them. There are events that were brief and become enormous. There are entire years compressed into a page. There is a woman kneeling on the bed, wearing a Chinese-inspired silk robe, crossed by a ray of sunlight, and suddenly that image is worth more than a decade of explanations.

This book is born from that conviction, that the books we read taught us to desire better, to lose better, to travel better; that the women we loved gave us vocabulary for parts of ourselves we did not know; that the journeys were not merely movements on the map, but changes in our inner temperature. Sometimes one travels to Paris and returns with a woman. Sometimes one goes to Monaco and comes back with the exact notion of the distance between sex and love. Sometimes one goes down the Douro in impossible heat and understands that happiness can also be a cheese board, white wine, the sound of the Douro in the background, the tiled train station in Pinhão, an iron bridge, and the right silence beside the right person.

This will not be a book about all the women in my life. That would be impossible and, above all, unfair. There are women who belong to the foundation of a life and not to its ornament. My mother. My sister. My niece, who came later, as certain forms of the future arrive. There are also the people I love today and those I loved in the past, each with her own temperature, her wound, her grace, and her importance.

And there is, naturally, a woman who crossed many years of my life, my ex-wife. For her I have affection, regard, and a gratitude that does not fit into a paragraph, a page, or even a chapter. She will deserve a book of

her own, perhaps the most complete, perhaps the most difficult. Because there were many years, because it was always very good, because there was a generosity in it that obliges me to write carefully. Perhaps in that book I will have to admit, without much heroism on my part, that she gave me more than I gave her and that much of life came to me through her hands. It will be a book of debt, in the best sense of the word; not the debt that is paid, but the debt that is honored.

This one, however, begins with another woman. Not because she is the most important. Not because she is the least important. Not because it obeys a hierarchy applied to love, as if the heart were an Excel sheet with bad formulas and colorful charts. I begin with her because this book asks for lightness, speed, perfume, and travel. Because with her there was a kind of rare joy, adult, luminous, and dangerous in the right measure. Because her presence seemed to bring with it three cities and no apology.

She was (is) Muslim, Algerian, born in Algeria, but always European in the way she moved through the world. She divided (and divides) her life between Paris, Monaco, and Tunisia, as though dividing nothing at all; simply changing balcony, sky, and sea. She had that quality that is difficult to explain and almost impossible to imitate; she belonged to places without seeming trapped in any of them.

She was (is) a woman of simple and discreet elegance, which is much rarer than the elegance of ostentation. She had an incredible tan, skin that seemed to store sunlight, toned legs, almond-shaped brown eyes, and beautiful dark-brown hair with golden highlights that framed her face with natural and exotic beauty. She did not need to announce herself. She entered and the room discreetly rearranged itself.

There was in her a true *sprezzatura*, an elegant and effortless firmness. A way of being that did not ask permission and, for that very reason, rarely needed to refuse it. She could be sweet without being fragile, sensual without being obvious, and distant without being cold. Such women exist only rarely; when they do, they leave a mark in memory that does not disappear, it merely changes in sharpness.

Perhaps this book is that, an attempt to restore sharpness to certain images. The café in Paris. The art exhibition. The house in Saint-Tropez. The apartment in Monaco. The sudden trips to Italy, to the south of France, and to Portugal. The nights when luxury was not money, but availability. I would call and say: I'm going to Italy for a few days. Are you available? And she was. Or seemed to be. Or wanted to be. Sometimes that is enough to set an entire life alight for a few hours.

MIA

I do not write to correct the past. That would be useless and, frankly, a little pathetic. I write to understand it better. To understand how certain women become countries, how certain journeys become chapters, and how certain books teach us to recognize a scene at the exact moment it is happening.

This is, therefore, the first book in an intimate series. A book about a woman, yes, but also about the man I was when I met her, about the man I believed myself to be while I loved her, and about the man who remained afterward. Because no woman we truly love remains only in herself. She begins to live also in the way we look at a city, choose a wine, enter a room, close a door, or leave early in the morning before life asks for explanations.

Let us begin, then, with Paris.

1

The woman who was already seated

Paris — Café de Flore, Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

She was already seated on the terrace of the Café de Flore when the waiter set my coffee down at her table.

— That must be his — she said, without looking at me.

She pointed to the cup with her chin.

The waiter corrected the mistake with the dry speed of someone who had already crossed that ridiculous interval between two tables too many times. The wicker chairs almost touched. My knee, if I was not careful, might apologize to hers before I did. On Boulevard Saint-Germain a bus passed with an advertisement for a Matisse exhibition. An American couple photographed their own lemon tart. Two men in dark suits pretended to talk business and listened to an English girl arguing over the bill. The Parisians performed the hardest act: pretending not to notice anyone.

She had an open book, but she was not reading. Or she read with that indiscipline of someone who does not need to follow lines or pages to understand the story. Sunglasses on the table, phone face down, and a small brown handbag leaning against the chair. She wore a simple white shirt, sleeves rolled up, and a dark skirt. Her dark-brown hair was pinned up in a way that seemed provisional and did not fall. She had a light tan, not very Parisian that afternoon.

— Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Baldwin, Picasso — she said, reading a line from the menu or perhaps repeating an old irritation. — And now Kit Carter, of course.

I answered before I had time to choose silence.

— Kit Carter only entered the Flore after being born in a badly printed guidebook.

She turned slowly. She did not smile at once. First she looked at me as if checking whether it was worth spending the answer.

— You were listening.

— The tables do not help with privacy.

Then she smiled. Slightly. The waiter understood that, for now, the two tables remained separate only by convention. She closed the book with one finger marking the page.

- Maybe I said Kay Boyle.
- You said Kit Carter.
- Then the guide really was bad.
- Or you were provoking someone.
- I was passing the time.

My cup finally arrived at my table. I stirred the coffee without sugar, more to give my hands something to do than out of taste. She noticed.

- Portuguese?
- That obvious?
- You stirred the coffee before drinking it. An Italian would have protested with the cup. A Frenchman would have protested with the waiter. You apologized to the spoon.

- That is terrace anthropology.
- That's all there is.

She spoke perfect French, but there was another sound underneath. It was not an accent. It was a fold. When she asked the waiter for more water, she did so effortlessly. When her phone vibrated, she looked at the screen, declined the call, and put it back in the same place. The call came again. She pressed a button, turned the device face down, and continued with me.

- And you? I asked.
- Me what?
- Where are you from, if you can make fun of Italians, French people, and Portuguese people in the same sentence?
- I was born in Algeria.

She did not add Paris, family, work, money, hotels, houses. She said only the origin. Later I would know some things and would continue to know little. At that moment, I did not insist.

- Then Camus is dangerous ground.
- Only when he is quoted out of laziness.
- And that happens a lot around here.
- All the time.

She leaned back in the chair. Her shirt opened slightly at the neck, without intention. She had a discreet necklace, half hidden. I saw it. I also saw the well-kept skin, the fine wrist, and the way she held the glass. It would have been ridiculous to pretend otherwise.

- Do you read Camus? — she asked.
- I have.
- Did you like him?
- Yes. Then I came to dislike some of the people who liked him out loud.

This time she laughed. A short laugh, but open.

— That's fair.

— It's a little cowardly.

— It can be fair too.

She raised her hand to call the waiter. She did not raise her voice. She did not snap her fingers. He came at once. She ordered a *café crème* and asked whether the table by the window would be free later. The waiter replied that maybe, that depended. She said a name. The maybe disappeared.

— Are you waiting for someone? — she asked me.

— A friend. Pedro Rocha. He must be lost ten minutes from here and has been for the last half hour.

— Is that a Portuguese defect?

— No. Pedro is punctual when no one has arranged anything.

She picked up the book. The cover was worn. I recognized Apollinaire, Alcools, in a French paperback edition, the kind that looks as if it has passed through several bags and with little care.

— Apollinaire is more useful to the dead neighborhood than to the living one — I said.

She looked at the book and then at the red awning of the Flore. Across the way, farther down, Les Deux Magots was receiving its quota of photographs. The church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés was nearby. A scooter came halfway up onto the sidewalk, almost touched a chair, and no one got up. The waiter insulted the driver in French.

— This neighborhood is indecent — she said.

— Because of the prices?

— That too. But I was thinking of the writers. They sell dead men to people who haven't read them.

— The dead are easy to sell. They don't correct the anecdotes.

— And you've read them?

— Some. Fewer than I should have. More than seemed prudent.

She tilted her head. Her eyes were brown, attentive without becoming hard. She looked once toward the terrace exit, as if confirming that she could leave without asking permission.

— Sartre and Beauvoir, yes — she said. — The Flore, Les Deux Magots, the tables, the staging. Camus passes through here whenever someone needs to give weight to a coffee. Breton, Aragon, Éluard, Apollinaire, each with his true or invented corner. Hemingway comes in when they want to sell a bottle. Baldwin, at least, still spoils the comfort of those who read him.

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— Picasso?

— Picasso enters any room where someone needs to prove they were close to the twentieth century.

— Are you always this patient with culture?

— When I'm alone, yes.

— You seem alone.

She did not answer right away. She drank water. The nail of her index finger touched the glass twice. She did not seem nervous. She seemed to be choosing whether to give me a simple answer.

— I am alone at this moment.

— That's a good correction.

— And you? Are you alone?

— A bit of both.

— Married man's answer.

The sentence could have been a cheap provocation. It wasn't. She said it with curiosity, perhaps with experience. I could have lied out of vanity, or put on a little comedy of absolute availability. I didn't. I don't think I am forcing the memory.

— Divorced — I said. — With a long story behind it. Treated with more respect than competence, probably.

She accepted it. She did not ask about children, lawyers, or grudges. She merely touched the closed book.

— And you still read?

— I still do.

— What for?

— So I don't get reduced to my own sentences.

Her *café crème* arrived. The waiter set the cup on the edge of the table, near me, and she pulled it toward herself without looking at him. The movement brought her chair closer to mine. I had her scent for an instant, a clean, warm perfume with a note of tea or dried flower that I could not name. I wanted to name it. I was lucky not to.

— Do you write? — she asked.

— Sometimes.

— That means yes.

— It means I'm ashamed to answer yes.

— What do you write about?

— Books. Trips when they go badly. People, when they go worse.

She became serious for half a second.

— Do people usually recognize themselves?

— The ones who shouldn't.

— And that doesn't bother you?

— It bothers me. Not enough to make me virtuous.

The answer stayed there. A taxi stopped by the curb. A lady with shopping bags tried to pass between the tables and hit the back of my chair with one of them. I apologized, although it was her fault. The woman at the next table smiled into her glass.

— Do you always apologize? — she asked.

— Only when I'm right.

— Tiring?

— Less than arguing.

She took the sunglasses from the table and put them on, not to protect herself from the sun, which was already coming in weakly from the side, but to change the distance. They suited her. On her, things seemed chosen for usefulness before beauty. Later, in other cities, I would realize that impression was only partly true.

— You called the Flore a cultural imposture — I said, though she had not used those words.

— I did.

— And you're still here.

— I like the coffee. I'm not required to like the myth.

— The cup isn't to blame.

— No. But it charges as if it were.

She took the glasses off again. The tourists beside us ordered two *croque-monsieurs* and pronounced *monsieur* as if they were asking an ancient monarchy for forgiveness. A French boy, handsome and aware of it, passed the terrace with a pack of cigarettes in his hand. He looked at her. She saw him seeing, but did not grant him the courtesy of a reaction.

— The Flore and the Deux Magots are good for this — she said.

— For what?

— Seeing who arrives and looks first at whoever is already looking.

— And you needed that?

— Today I needed a coffee and ten minutes without numbers.

She set the cup down carefully on the saucer.

The phone vibrated again. This time she answered. She spoke first in French, in short sentences, and then switched to Arabic for a few seconds. I understood almost nothing, only a woman's name, Moni or Mona, and the word *demain*. Her voice did not rise. It did not sweeten either. When she hung up, she made a brief gesture with her hand.

— Numbers? — I asked.

— Work.

— What work?

— Enough for them to call me when I'm sitting down.

— Meaning you don't want to explain.

— I don't feel like it right now.

Precise. I liked the word in her. Said by someone else it might have sounded arrogant. In her, it closed the matter.

— Do you have a name? — I asked.

— I do.

— May I know it?

— Mia.

— Just Mia?

— For now, that's enough.

— I'm...

— I know you're Portuguese.

— That isn't a name.

— Good.

I told her my name. She repeated it once, with some letters softer than in Portuguese, and left it there. I tried not to show that I had liked hearing it in her mouth.

Pedro Rocha appeared when the conversation no longer needed him. He came with his jacket open, the stubble of someone who calls lateness style, and the pleased air of a man who always finds a way to be forgiven. Under his arm he carried a folded newspaper, and on his face the expression of someone who had just won an argument with a taxi driver who did not know he was arguing.

— I'm late — he said, leaning in to greet me.

— You've already crossed into a professional category.

Pedro looked at Mia, at me, at the cups, and at the distance between the chairs. He had that unpleasant talent of friends who know us well: he understood quickly and commented when it suited him.

— Am I interrupting?

— Yes — Mia said.

Pedro was delighted.

— Excellent. Then I'll sit down.

He ordered a coffee and sparkling water before the chair stopped creaking. He greeted her politely, without turning her into an episode of mine. Mia gave him her name. He gave her his. For a few minutes, the conversation returned to the neighborhood, the cafés, the dead writers, and the living ones who behaved worse. Pedro knew that theater well. He had

worked between Lisbon, Porto, and Paris, in banks, big companies, and lunches where no one said exactly what they wanted.

— The Flore is less guilty than people say — he stated. — At least it serves drinks. There are cultural foundations that don't even do that.

— Do you work with art? — Mia asked.

— No. For that you need talent or courage. I never had an excess of either.

She laughed. Pedro realized he could go on, but had the rare good sense not to make a performance of it.

— And you? — he asked. — Are you in Paris for work?

Mia looked at the street before answering.

— I live here. But tonight I'm going to an opening.

Pedro straightened up.

— Art?

— Yes.

— Yours?

— No. A friend's.

— Painting?

— Painting and a few small pieces. She calls them objects when she's tired of explaining.

— French?

— Parisian. She spent years in New York and has just come back.

— That usually makes for a bad temper or good contacts.

— In her case, both.

— Where is it?

— At a law firm, near Iéna. Avenue Kléber.

Pedro looked at me, suspicious.

— Art in a law firm — he said. Paris still manages to surprise me with its lack of shame.

— It isn't lack of shame — Mia said. — It's a well-paid lease.

— Are you going now?

She drank a little coffee. Then she looked at me.

— Yes. You can come with me, if you want.

— Are you inviting us?

— I am. It's small. Lawyers, clients, a few collectors, two or three people who buy before they know whether they like it. My friend needs the room full.

— And what are we good for?

— So it isn't just office people.

— That is a dignified function — Pedro said.

He turned to me.

— Do you want to go?

— I was going to have a drink with Pedro and listen to his excuses.

— You can do that in the Uber.

— Then I want to.

— Do you like art?

— I like some works.

— Camille thanks you.

— Camille?

— The artist.

— Pretty name — Pedro said.

— She thinks so too. That's why she only signs C. Morel.

Pedro raised his hand to call the waiter.

— What time?

— At eight.

— Should we arrive later, to make it look like we have lives?

— We're going now.

Pedro nodded.

— Then let's go — I said.

Mia picked up her phone, wrote a short message, and waited. Traffic on the boulevard thickened. A delivery truck stopped double-parked. The waiter crossed through the confusion with a full tray and did not lose a drop.

Her phone lit up. She read the reply, wrote two more words, and put it away in her bag.

— I called the Uber — she said.

She stood up. The chair moved back just enough, her hand caught the sunglasses, the book went into her bag without losing its place, her shirt fell into the right place. Some people looked. Others pretended not to. I took longer to find my jacket than she took to leave a conversation that had only just begun.

We left the terrace for the narrow sidewalk. The Flore stayed behind us with its cups, its tables pushed close together, and its profitable dead. Beside it, a man argued on the phone by the awning. A girl tied up her hair as she walked. Les Deux Magots, on the other side, had a line. The church was farther ahead, between a parked van and a group of raised phones.

Pedro walked ahead. He spoke in French and Portuguese in the same sentence, an ability that in him seemed less like cosmopolitanism than useful disarray. Mia walked beside me. Not too close. Close enough for me to notice that her stride did not adjust to mine; it forced mine to choose.

I stopped at a crosswalk. She went one step farther and waited. The Uber she had ordered approached slowly, trapped between a motorbike and a white van.

— Do you usually invite strangers to friends' openings? — I asked.

— No.

— Why today?

— Camille came back from New York with too many people around her and too few people close.

— And are we people close?

— No. You're strangers. Sometimes that's more restful.

— Is that trust?

— It's a small bet.

The Uber stopped. Pedro opened the front door and got in. Mia stayed with me by the back door. The glass reflected us back for an instant: me with my jacket in my hand, her with the sunglasses on again, the small bag, the book inside it, the night still without shape.

She got in first. Pedro was still in the front, explaining to the driver that no, it was not to the Eiffel Tower, it was nearby, and that yes, there was a difference. I sat beside her. The door closed with an ordinary sound. Through the window, the table where I had first seen her was already occupied by two people looking at the menus.

The car pulled away along Boulevard Saint-Germain. Pedro talked toward the front. Mia looked out the window. I sat beside her, my jacket on my lap, listening to the address she confirmed to the Uber driver, after Pedro had confused the man and tried to change the route traced by the app.

2

Art Within the Law

Paris — law firm near Iéna.

The black portfolio appeared almost at the end.

Camille brought it under her arm when I had already reduced the night to a manageable sequence: the arrival, the works, Mia ordering corrections to the color proofs, the kiss in the anteroom, my badly tucked shirt, and Pedro pretending he saw nothing. The drawing was still missing.

Hours earlier, the Uber had left us between Avenue Kléber and Place d'Iéna, behind a white van double-parked. We got out and stood for a few seconds in the street.

The building was light-colored, tall, and clean. There was no movement at the entrance. Only a plaque beside the door.

French names. Two hyphenated surnames. An English acronym. Commercial law, arbitration, and international taxation.

I read everything through to the end, and so did Pedro.

Not a word about painting.

“Is this it?” he asked.

Mia was already on the sidewalk, phone in hand. She did not look at the plaque.

“Yes.”

“It doesn't look like a gallery.”

“It isn't.”

She did not press the intercom. She wrote two words. The door opened with a click.

Pedro looked at the plaque.

“Did that open by itself?”

“No,” she said. “Someone opened it.”

We went in.

The lobby smelled of scentless flowers. A receptionist stood up behind a low desk. She looked first at Mia, then at us, and in that order almost everything was established.

“*Bonsoir, Madame. Camille vous attend.*”

Mia answered her by name and pointed to us with the slightest tilt of her hand.

“*Ils sont avec moi.*”

The receptionist wrote on a tablet. She did not ask for invitations, documents, or explanations. At the back, a glass door revealed a corridor with small plaques: partners, meeting rooms, names with initials and titles in English where French no longer reached.

The elevator arrived with a ping. Wooden walls, a narrow mirror, and white light overhead. Pedro ran a hand through his hair. I noticed his blazer and the tip of his shirt outside his trousers. Mia stood between us, looking at the numbers above the door.

“Are you sure this is an exhibition?” I asked.

“Camille calls it a *vernissage*.”

“And you?”

“A full room.”

“Of lawyers?”

“Some.”

Pedro laughed.

“Do you work with art?”

“Sometimes.”

“Sometimes is a very large profession.”

“Only for people who need to explain.”

The doors opened.

On the eighth floor, another reception area, smaller. A girl handed us white cards with no logo. Mia ran her thumb along the edge of the cardstock, raised it against the light, and put it in her bag. I kept mine in my hand, waiting to understand whether it was an invitation or a receipt.

The meeting rooms had their doors open and remained meeting rooms: oval tables, leather chairs, aligned bottles of water, stacks of pads, and switched-off screens. On the walls, between photographs of partners and diplomas, recent works hung. Some seemed temporary there; others seemed to know exactly where they had entered.

The first canvas occupied the head of a large room. Dark red, white lines, and a discreet caption: C. Morel, *Étude pour une ville fermée*. A short-bearded lawyer was explaining to two women that the artist worked on the theme of return. He said return with his hands in his pockets.

Mia went closer. She did not look at the canvas for long. She picked up the catalogue lying on the table.

“Who approved this?”

The lawyer broke off.

“Excuse me?”

She turned the catalogue toward him.

“The proof. The red is dead.”

He looked at the page, then at the canvas.

“Printing always changes it a little.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

Antoine appeared behind us before anyone called him aloud. Hair gone gray too early, a blue suit without a crease, and the face of a man used to solving problems before they became visible. He greeted Mia carefully.

“Have you started already?”

“Who approved it?”

Antoine took the catalogue. The girl from reception came two steps closer.

“The printer delivered it this morning,” he said.

“The printer prints. Someone approves.”

He accepted the sentence without defending his territory.

“Call Étienne.”

The girl left.

Pedro leaned toward me.

“So who is she, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“Bad sign.”

Mia closed the catalogue and aligned it with the edge of the table.

“Has Camille seen it?”

“Not yet,” Antoine said.

“Then show it to her before she sees it herself, without anyone warning her.”

Antoine smiled, but not with joy.

— Mia, this is an opening.

— The work knows that too.

The lawyer with the short beard stopped explaining return. One of the women moved away from the canvas and began looking at Mia with more interest than at the painting.

Pedro appeared with three glasses. He handed one to Mia, another to me, and kept the third.

— To the printers who still give everyone work to do.

— Don’t drink too early — Mia said.

— Did I start badly?

— No. But pace yourself for later.

She drank only a little. I imitated her badly.

Camille Morel entered the room with a thin folder under her arm. Short hair, black dress, flat shoes. She did not look like an artist at a party. She looked like a woman who solved three problems with one word.

Mia turned to her.

Camille kissed her on both cheeks and immediately stepped back to get a better look at her.

— You came.

— I told you I was coming.

— You say many things when you want me to stop calling.

— And did it work?

Camille looked at the catalogue in Antoine's hand.

— Have you already put her to work?

— She started on her own — he said.

— Naturally.

Mia introduced us. Pedro, "a Portuguese friend." Me, by name. Camille shook our hands firmly and made no attempt to please.

— You brought men — she said.

— Two.

— Did they come to buy?

— One of them came to drink.

Pedro raised his glass.

— I don't rule out the other possibility.

— Good answer — Camille replied.

Between her and Mia there was an intimacy without ornament or delicacy. Small permitted aggressions, old demands, and a trust that needed no explanation. I had only just arrived, and already there were closed corridors behind me.

Antoine led us through the reception area transformed into a gallery. He spoke of installation, insurance, transport, the difficulty of hanging certain pieces in a place where, during the day, contracts and lawsuits were discussed. An installation of glass and copper divided the corridor by the offices. Inside one of them, I saw a clean desk, a tie left on a chair, and four files with red spines.

— This one came from Brussels — Antoine said. — Court archives, legally destroyed.

— Legally destroyed? — Mia asked.

— Of course.

— A shame.

Camille laughed.

— Finally someone says it.

Antoine summoned an assistant with a short gesture. He did not seem to be giving orders. He seemed to be preventing anyone from touching the tender spot.

We were pushed into the library. Two walls of law books rose up to a ladder fixed to a rail. *Code civil*, *code de commerce*, and a *code monétaire et financier* full of yellow tabs. Arbitration and case law in heavy volumes. Between the spines, small charcoal drawings. A waiter passed by with glasses. Another collected abandoned napkins with tongs.

Mia took a volume from the shelf. She opened it in the middle, read a line, closed it, and put the book back. Before moving her hand away, she straightened a crooked label on the volume beside it.

— Do you do that in every house? — I asked.

— What?

— Correct.

— Only when it's wrong.

There was not enough of a joke there for me to protect myself.

An older man approached Antoine. White hair, dark tie, and one hand held behind his back. He did not have to make his way through. People moved aside before he had to. When he saw Mia, her name burst out.

— Mia.

— Henri.

They shook hands.

— Are you still angry with us?

— Did you correct it?

Henri smiled.

— We're taking care of it.

— Then you didn't correct it.

He accepted it. He did not treat her like a difficult guest. He treated her like someone whose annoyance had grounds.

— Are you a friend of Mia's? — he asked me.

The question seemed banal. I had no ground for an answer.

— We met today.

Henri looked at her. She did not help.

— Then you arrived on a busy night.

— It has only just begun — Mia said.

Henri turned toward a charcoal drawing.

“Camille saved you the small one.”

Mia's face did not move.

“Which small one?”

“She'll tell you.”

He moved away with Antoine.

I stood before a drawing: a house seen from above, roofless, empty rooms and doors opening onto corridors that could not exist. A chair pushed back from the table. A bed made with three lines. A suitcase beside a door with no way out.

“Do you like it?” Mia asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because it asks for nothing.”

She looked at me. The answer did not satisfy her, but she did not throw it away either.

Camille appeared with two glasses of water. She handed one to Mia.

“Are you talking badly about me?”

“Not yet.”

“Then you’re being shy.”

Mia pointed to the wall.

“The label on the third drawing is wrong.”

Camille closed her eyes.

“Don’t tell me.”

“Nabeul.”

The assistant arrived with a tablet. He approached as if already defeated.

“It was transcribed from the old file.”

“It’s misspelled,” Mia said.

Camille calmly tore the label off the wall.

“Make another one.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

Antoine said there were blank cards at reception. The assistant left. The little word torn from the wall left a paler rectangle behind.

“Nabeul,” I said, softly.

Mia heard.

“You know it?”

“The city on the label? Yes. In Tunisia.”

I said no more. Camille didn’t either. The label stayed in her hand, folded in half.

That was when Laurent appeared.

He had the tan of someone who never explains his calendar, gray hair combed back, and a glass in his hand. He greeted Mia with two light kisses, too proper to be intimate and too intimate to leave me intact.

“I didn’t know you were in Paris.”

“I practically live in Paris, Laurent.”

“I rarely see you.”

“That’s how I still live here.”

He laughed. Then he introduced himself to me.

“Laurent Vasseur.”

I shook his hand. Mia gave only my first name.

“Laurent buys artists early,” she said. “Sometimes before they know what they want.”

“And Mia corrects before buying, before selling, and before letting anyone breathe.”

“Only when it’s wrong.”

“Then you still have a long life ahead of you.”

They talked about a blue proof, a collage, and an exhibition in Marseille. They did not talk about what I wanted them to talk about. They talked about things seen before me.

Laurent looked at the torn-off label.

“Do you still run away when Nabeul comes up?”

Mia set down her glass.

“No. Not today.”

“A miracle.”

“That must be it.”

He raised his hand, accepting the contempt in her answer.

When he said goodbye, he touched her forearm. A brief gesture, social and practiced. She did not pull away. I kept staring at the exact spot where his hand had been.

“Don’t make that face,” she said.

“What face?”

“The one trying to understand.”

The sentence irritated me because it caught me.

— It’s normal.

— Calm down. You’ll understand how things work easily enough.

She set my glass beside hers.

— Come.

We crossed a room where two women were arguing about the height of a photograph. Mia passed by without stopping.

— Two centimeters higher — she said.

One of them looked at the wall. The argument ended.

We entered a corner office. The outer wall was almost all glass. Outside, above the rooftops and the dark trees, the Eiffel Tower appeared cut

off by the window frame. Inside, a lawyer was talking about an acquisition beside a resin sculpture, without looking at it.

Mia stood by the window. The glass reflected her white shirt, her dark skirt, and her face in profile. I stopped behind her.

— You want to ask me who I am — she said.

— I do.

— Don't ask here.

— Why?

— Because you'll like an incomplete answer too much.

She lowered her eyes to my mouth. Then she looked back at the glass.

I moved closer.

— Not here.

— I didn't do anything.

— Yet.

She left before I could find an answer.

I followed her down a side corridor, away from the reception. To the right, closed offices. To the left, a service area with a coffee machine, tea, a low refrigerator, and a window with no view. Farther on, a sign indicated *toilettes* and *salle privée*. Mia pushed open the anteroom door.

— Do you know the office?

— I know doors.

The door closed behind us.

The anteroom was small, pale wood, a narrow sofa, a tall mirror, and two doors to individual bathrooms. On the console, folded towels and flowers in a low vase. The music came in under the door. Footsteps in the corridor, a voice, then nothing.

Mia stood in front of the mirror and looked at me through the reflection.

— This is stupid.

— Yes.

— Stupid things are often the most fun.

She turned around. Her hand rose to my collar, as if correcting something. I touched her wrist. She did not take her hand away.

— Mia.

— Don't talk too much.

I kissed her.

The first kiss came with no restraint at all. Teeth, ragged breath, my hand searching for permission and hers correcting the path. She grabbed me by the nape of the neck. The sofa hit the backs of my knees. We did not sit down. The vase trembled when my arm touched the console.

She stepped back half a pace. Came back. Her hand went under my jacket, grabbed my shirt at the waist. I touched her hair and undid part of what was pinned up. She bit my lip, slightly. Enough.

— Slowly — she said.

I placed my hand on her waist. She let me, then caught my wrist and took it lower. There was no pose. There was instruction. My haste became ridiculous in her hand.

Footsteps in the corridor.

We stopped.

A woman said *demain matin*. A man answered something about a signature. The voices moved away. The music returned, muffled.

Mia rested her forehead against my chin. She was breathing badly. I was worse.

— Don't try to understand me — she said.

— I'm not.

— You are.

There was not enough accusation for me to defend myself.

She kissed me again, more slowly now. Her hand rose to my face. For a few seconds, the room, the catalogues, Laurent, Henri, and the torn-off label stayed on the other side of the door. As for Pedro, I don't know where he was. Then the mirror became too clear again.

She pulled away first.

— Enough.

— Yes.

— Straighten yourself up.

She put herself back together in front of the mirror. Pinned up her hair, left one strand loose, wiped the corner of her mouth with a damp towel, and handed me another.

— You're marked.

I passed the towel over my lip. There was blood.

— Was that you?

— It was.

— Should I thank you?

— You should be quiet.

I obeyed.

She opened the door a crack.

— Library first. Then reception.

— You've got this organized.

— I know how to improvise.

The corridor was empty. In the library, the assistant was sticking a new label beside the third drawing. Camille stood with her arms crossed. She saw us come in. She looked first at Mia's mouth, then at my shirt. She understood.

Pedro appeared with a glass of champagne and handed it to me without comment.

— Did you get lost?

— In the library — Mia said.

— There are corridors in French law that never end.

— We found the way out.

He looked at my lip for less than a second. Then he introduced me to a woman in a green dress who spoke quickly about artistic residencies in the Mediterranean. She recognized Mia at once.

— The Nabeul pages were yours, weren't they?

Mia went still.

— They were Camille's.

— They looked like yours.

— They could have been, but they weren't.

The woman laughed. Camille, on the other side, did not.

I took a sip of the champagne. Pedro had guessed exactly what I needed.

Antoine came over with Laurent and the gallery assistant. They were talking about the larger piece, a possible hold for a Swiss client, and the catalogues that could no longer be sent out like that. Mia asked who retained the reproduction rights, who approved the crops, and who would send the corrected images. The assistant hesitated. Antoine answered for him. Laurent watched her like someone who had already seen her do this in other rooms.

— And you? — Laurent asked, turning to me. — Do you collect?

— A few things.

Mia looked at the glass.

— Oils? Sculpture? Photography? — Laurent asked.

— And bad decisions.

Pedro coughed under his breath. Laurent smiled without committing himself. Mia did not save me. It was the best thing she did.

Camille returned with the black folder under her arm.

The room did not fall silent, but it tightened. Antoine broke off a sentence about transport. Laurent shifted his gaze to the window. The assistant pretended to look for something on the tablet.

Camille set the folder down on the library table.

— Come look at this.

Mia came closer.

— Now?

— Now.

Camille moved two catalogues and a bottle of water aside. She took out a small drawing on thick paper. It was not framed. Another house seen from above, but this one had a bright window amid the charcoal, almost hidden.

She handed it to Mia.

— This one isn't for sale.

— Camille.

— Don't argue.

Mia held the paper by the edges. Until then, I had seen her correct, cut, enter, leave, kiss, and tell people to shut up. Faced with that drawing, she had no function.

— Is it the house in Nabeul?

Camille shook her head.

— No.

— Then which one is it?

— You know very well.

The sentence was not said loudly. Even so, a few people stopped moving their glasses. Antoine looked at the table. Laurent went still. Pedro respected the scene, a rare thing in him.

I did not understand. That was my place that night.

Mia closed her eyes for an instant. When she opened them, they were dry. Camille touched her arm in a way I did not understand. That night I understood very little.

— Take it.

— No.

— You're taking it.

— Camille.

— So you don't forget. Please, take it.

Mia swallowed something less orderly than emotion.

— Thank you.

Camille shrugged.

— I'm still going to ask you to correct the catalogue.

Mia gave a small laugh. She placed the drawing inside the folder and tucked it under her arm. Then she returned to the room, to the glasses, the technical questions, and the color of the proofs. But the table was different,

with the bottle of water shifted and the empty rectangle where the paper had been.

The reception began to empty out. Coats came out of the cloakroom. Urgent conversations sprang up by the elevator. The girl at reception kept smiling, but her shoes had already betrayed her.

Pedro received a message.

— I have a dinner that started forty minutes ago.

— That's still the appetizer — I said.

— It's with architects. If I arrive any later, they may already have decided the uncomfortable chair is a concept of mine.

He said goodbye to Mia with two kisses. He whispered something in her ear that made her laugh. He gave me a brief hug.

— Don't be an idiot.

— Can you be more specific?

— I could. But I won't, for fuck's sake.

The vulgar Portuguese lived inside him.

He got into the elevator with the woman in the green dress and a Japanese man carrying a catalogue under his arm.

I was left without my alibi.

Mia watched him leave and looked at me.

— Your friend abandoned you.

— He calls it trust.

— And you?

— Abandonment.

She set her glass down on a passing tray. She held the black folder against her body.

— Let's go.

— Where?

— Outside.

We said goodbye to Antoine. He thanked her for something he did not name. She replied that the proofs were still missing. Henri came over before we left.

— Thank you for coming.

Mia shook his hand.

— Correct the file before printing.

— We will.

— Don't let Étienne approve it alone.

Henri smiled.

— All right.

MIA

He said it like someone who signs more expensive things every day and yet gives in.

Laurent still tried to ask something about the following week.

— Write to Camille — Mia said. — She knows where I am when she wants to find me.

— And when she doesn't?

— Then no one knows.

He accepted it. Did not insist.

Camille walked us to the elevator. She hugged Mia. The folder was pressed between them.

— Don't disappear.

— Answer your messages.

— I answer.

— You answer late.

— So do you.

Camille looked at me before letting us get in.

— Don't write too quickly tonight.

Earlier, she had heard me say I wrote things on airplanes and that maybe I would edit a book about the women we love. I did not know how to answer.

Mia entered the elevator.

— He doesn't even know yet whether he knows how to write.

— Better — Camille said. — The ones who know ruin everything.

The door closed.

We went down alone.

In the narrow mirror, I looked composed, except for my lip and my shirt. Mia ran a finger under one eye, checking her makeup. The black folder was held against her chest. I did not ask about Nabeul, about the house in the drawing, about Laurent, Henri, or Antoine. Any question I might ask was already too late.

— You're quiet — she said.

— I'm trying not to ruin it.

— Keep going.

The elevator stopped. The receptionist on the ground floor wished us good night. She noticed nothing or everything. The street door opened. The air came in cold. A motorcycle started up on the corner. A couple waited for a chauffeured car.

Mia took her phone from her bag, wrote a message, and put it away. A car approached slowly and stopped by the curb. The driver looked in the rearview mirror and unlocked the doors.

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— Coming? — she asked.

Behind us, the door of the law firm closed on the artworks, the files, the empty glasses, and the corrections still to be made.

— For one last drink — she said. — At my place.

— At your place?

— Yes.

— Now?

— Now.

The driver waited.

I had known her for only a few hours. I knew her name, the Algerian origins she had mentioned at the Flore, the hand at the nape of my neck, and the way three older men lowered their voices when she opened a catalogue. I knew little, and that little already took up too much space.

I got in.

Mia sat down first and placed the black folder between us. It wasn't large. Even so, my leg ended up on the other side of it.

3

The Ray of Light

Paris — her apartment, rue du Théâtre

The photograph came out blurred.

I often said the light was to blame, the shutters badly closed, morning coming in narrow blades, the unmade bed and my shirt half open. I lied convincingly. The fault was my hand.

In the image, Mia is sitting on her knees on the bed, wearing a dark-red silk robe embroidered with pale branches. The cup is cut off at the lower edge of the screen. The sun catches one shoulder, runs along her neck, and misses half her face. Her hair falls to one side, almost loose, and a strand rests near her mouth. She looks at me. It helps the photograph.

I was half dressed, phone raised and already closer to the door than to the bed.

I had met her at the Flore, followed her to Iéna, kissed her in an office antechamber, gotten into her car and climbed the stairs of her building with her shoes in my hand. Even so, when I framed her, I still had the indecency to pretend I was merely recording a morning.

Before the photograph, there was 123 rue du Théâtre.

The car stopped in front of a black railing, set back from the street. Behind it, the building's white, glass-paneled door opened onto a short recess, between trimmed shrubs and pale walls. The driver asked nothing. Mia sat still for a few seconds, the folder on her lap, as if she might still remain outside. The street was almost empty. A crooked bicycle locked to a post, a window with a television on, the damp sidewalk.

— We're here — she said.

She got out before the driver opened the door. I followed. I did not know whether I should say goodbye, thank her, or wait for some lesser order. The night had moved forward without asking my permission, and I was beginning to resent my own availability.

— You live here?

— Sometimes.

The driver handed her a key. She thanked him in French, then said something to him in Arabic. He smiled. At the exhibition, they had treated her as someone who corrected proofs, knew artists, lawyers and older men

with proper names. Here there was a key, a code, a driver, a language and a door. I was in none of those things.

She entered the numbers. The lock opened.

In the entrance, the light took a while to come on. There were metal mailboxes, envelopes left on a narrow table and dried flowers in a vase. Mia pressed the elevator button.

Nothing.

She pressed it again.

Nothing.

A paper taped to the door said the elevator would remain out of order until morning. Signed by the syndic, with far too much authority for such a small piece of bad news.

Mia looked at her shoes.

— Shit.

— What floor?

— Fourth.

She took them off before the first flight. She leaned against the wall, removed one shoe at a time and handed them to me.

— Carry them.

I obeyed.

The staircase was narrow, with short flights and a black handrail. The shoes, light in her hands, now weighed enough for me to measure every step. Mia climbed ahead, barefoot and unhurried. On the second floor, she stopped to pin up her hair. Her shirt lifted slightly. I saw her waist, the fatigue, and the continuation of the kiss from Iéna.

She did not need to turn around.

— Don't look at me like that.

I lowered my eyes.

— I'm trying not to drop them.

On the third floor, a door opened two finger-widths. An elderly woman appeared with a white poodle in her arms. Mia greeted her by name, asked after her son, listened to an answer about a knee operation and promised to come by the next day to look at the building administration papers. I stood behind her, shoes in hand. The neighbor looked at me only once. That was enough.

— *Bonne nuit, Madame Lefèvre* — Mia said.

— *Bonne nuit, ma chère.*

On the fourth floor, Mia opened a gray door, went in and left me on the landing. She set her bag on a console, switched on a lamp.

— Are you coming in, or staying out there?

I went in.

The apartment was smaller than I expected and less neutral than I needed. Tall windows, old floors and doors that closed properly. On the console there was a blue-and-white bowl, keys, folded receipts, a lipstick with no cap, two paper samples clipped together and an old Paris–Nice ticket. I gave her back the shoes. She lined them up by the wall, toe to toe.

In the living room, the books rose almost to the ceiling. French, Arabic, English and perhaps other languages. Family photographs on a shelf: a man beside an old car, two girls in a garden, a woman standing straight, smiling, a younger Mia between a sister and a teenage boy. No one seemed interested in looking beautiful, but they were.

By the window, a long table occupied the best spot. A metal ruler, a blade, an open jar of glue, color proofs, repeated photographs with minimal differences, thick paper, an unfolded package and an unfinished collage protected by acetate. Half a face could be seen, a blue door and the shadow of a chair.

I touched nothing.

— Are you inspecting? — she asked from the kitchen.

— I'm trying to work out where I am.

— You're in my house.

In the kitchen, she was filling a small kettle. She had bare feet, rolled-up sleeves and a blue stain beside her thumbnail. There was mint in a glass, lemons in a bowl and a scarred counter.

— Do you want tea?

— I do.

She washed the mint, shook it and put it in the teapot.

— My mother made mint tea at all hours. Visitors, arguments, bad news. The same kettle.

— Did it work?

— No. But it kept her hands busy.

She carried the tray into the living room. Two small cups of thin glass with gold rims. Sugar in a jar. A spoon that did not match. She sat on the rug, by the low table. I sat on the sofa.

She looked at me.

— On the floor.

I sat in front of her.

The tea came too hot. She drank without burning herself. I failed.

— You're in a hurry.

— No.

— Good. You don't need to be.

Music started somewhere in the apartment, low piano and a female voice in French. She turned the volume down until the music was behind the cups.

I was still carrying the closed door of the antechamber, the footsteps in the hall, the marked lip, and the desire to understand where something that had barely begun would end. Mia made tea. Gave me a cup. Sat on the floor. Took the rest out of my hands. Until then, in that apartment, that had been it.

I noticed a framed photograph on the bookshelf. Mia, younger, in a dark dress, beside a woman who must have been her mother. A man in a light suit was holding a child's hand. Someone had been cut off on the left.

— Can I see?

She got up, handed it to me, and went back to the rug.

— Sidi Bou Said — I said.

— My mother. My father. My brother Sab. My sister Moni isn't in it. I was in my early twenties.

— You look angry.

— It was hot.

— Just that?

— At that age, definitely just that.

I gave her back the frame. She put it in its place, crooked. I almost straightened it. I didn't. There were gestures smaller than a kiss and more invasive than a hand on a waist.

Her phone lit up on the worktable. Mia got up, opened a page proof, enlarged an image with two fingers, wrote a short sentence in French, and shifted a strip of paper in the collage less than a centimeter. Only then did she come back.

— Work?

— A botched page.

— Yours?

— It is now.

We drank more tea. I was close to her, without touching her. There was a mother, books in Arabic, a neighbor who called her *Madame* Lefèvre, a driver who handed her keys, and photographs I wasn't in.

I asked a risky question.

— Does religion matter to you?

She looked at me, not hurt, only tired.

— That's the first time anyone's asked me that on a first date. Actually, I don't think anyone's ever asked me that on a second date, on a third... ever.

— If you don't want to answer, don't. Obviously.

— My family is Muslim. I grew up with gestures, holidays, food, phrases, and prohibitions. Some stayed. Others I pretended to accept, but didn't. It isn't a label.

— I didn't mean to put one on you.

— But you did.

— Sorry.

She drank more tea.

— Ask a better question another time.

— Will there be another time?

— You're in my house.

She got up and took the cups to the kitchen. Water ran in the sink. I stayed alone on the rug, looking at the red stain of a canvas, at a photograph of her on a boat, sunglasses, hair tied back, one hand lifted against the wind. I wanted to leave. Not because I wanted to. Because I didn't know how to stay.

When she came back, her shirt was no longer tucked into her skirt. The top buttons were open, her hair less pinned up. She stopped at the entrance to the living room, shoulder against the wall.

— Come.

I got up.

I went to her without repeating the small violence of the antechamber. I stopped close. I still had the mint from the tea and the paper from the worktable on my hands. She looked at my mouth, then at my hands.

— Don't be too careful.

— I'm trying not to be rough.

— Then listen.

She put her hand on my chest, over my shirt, and pulled me by the lapel. She kissed me first. Turned off the main lamp and left the floor lamp on by the window. The street cast a crooked light on the ceiling.

I threw the blazer onto a chair. The chair hit the wall, two books toppled over, and an ashtray fell to the floor.

She laughed against my neck.

— The neighbor? — I asked.

— She's heard worse.

In the hallway, we passed a half-open bathroom door, a pile of sheets on a chair, and a mirror that caught us from the side. Two disheveled adults, trying to reach the bedroom with some dignity. There wasn't much.

The bedroom had a low bed, books on the nightstand, an open suitcase on the floor, clothes half folded, and an unframed photograph leaning

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against the wall. On the dresser, perfume, earrings in a dish, and a glass of water. Nothing had been prepared for me.

Mia sat on the edge of the bed and pulled me by the hand.

For a while, we didn't speak.

I remember her shirt on the back of a chair. Mine on the floor, because once again I missed the chair. A button that resisted and then gave way. The buckle. Her hand correcting mine, moving it away and bringing it back. There was no shyness. No performance either. There was desire without drama.

She made me stop.

She sat on the bed, shirt open, breathing through her mouth and looking at me. I lowered my eyes first. Not out of modesty. Because I was there and, already in that instant, beginning to arrange her into an image.

She understood.

— Don't think now.

— I'm not.

— You always are.

She pulled me before I could answer.

The music in the living room might already have ended. The bed creaked badly and we laughed. She took my hand to the right place and kept it there. Then she turned her face away, breathed deeply, and came back. From the street came a motorcycle, footsteps, and the iron of the gate below. On the nightstand, her phone vibrated once. She didn't look. Neither did I.

She fell asleep with one leg over mine. I stayed awake. The pipes knocked now and then, the wood cracked, the heating tapped in a hypnotic rhythm. I counted the objects in the half-light: the book turned face down, the earrings in the dish, the shirt on the chair, the open suitcase, the small box beside the perfume, and my sock near the door.

I woke before seven.

The light came in through the cracks in the shutters, still low. For a second, I thought she had left the room. I felt relief. Then the relief turned dirty.

I saw her right away.

She was kneeling on the bed, her back to the window, in the dark-red robe. She was holding a cup of coffee in both hands. My watch was beside her, on top of the sheet. I didn't remember taking it off.

— You're awake — she said.

Her voice came out hoarse.

— Yes.

— You're leaving.

It wasn't a question.

I sat on the edge of the bed. The floor was cold.

— I've got the hotel.

— Of course.

I looked for my clothes. First a sock, then the shirt, then the pants. Mia watched me without cruelty. The robe was tied at her waist. The cup kept her fingers occupied.

— I'm no good in the morning — I said.

— That explains everything.

— Explains what?

She set the cup on the nightstand and pulled the robe over her knee.

— Fear.

— Of staying.

— And of leaving?

— That too.

She looked at me. Then she looked at the shirt in my hands.

— Then go.

I stood up.

— Mia.

— Go. Spare me the niceties. I'm an adult, older than you. I don't need them.

I dressed slowly. A button was missing from the shirt. Maybe it had already been missing. Maybe it was somewhere in the room, between the bed and the chair. I let it stay lost.

The phone was on the floor, half under the pants. I picked it up to check the time.

7:12.

The light had shifted. The ray now crossed the robe diagonally, from her shoulder to the hand resting on her thigh. Mia was looking at me, not at the phone.

I raised it slowly.

— Can I?

She lowered her eyes to the cup, then looked back at me. She didn't fix her hair. Didn't adjust the robe.

— One.

I took the photograph silently. My phone was set that way by habit.

On the screen, the image came out blurry. The robe looked lighter than it was. The cup was almost out of frame. Her face, cut by the sun, seemed less like hers.

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— Show me.

I sat beside her and handed her the phone. Our shoulders touched. She looked at the image for longer than I wanted.

— It's crooked.

— I know.

— Don't send it to anyone.

— I won't.

— Anyone.

— No one. Don't worry.

She gave me back the phone. Then she picked up the watch, which was still on the bed, and fastened it on my wrist. She did it without any visible tenderness. But the gesture was still beautiful.

— Are you free tonight?

— I am.

— Good.

She got up and went to the window. Opened the shutter a little more. In the street, someone was dragging a trash bin. A man was on the phone in a bad workday mood. Mia stood with her back to me, the robe tied at her waist and the nape of her neck bare.

— There's a place — she said. — A party. A special one. A club.

— What time?

— I'll send the car at ten.

— To the hotel?

— Yes.

— Dress code?

— Dark suit. Impeccable shirt. Good shoes. No visible labels, nothing that looks bought to impress. And don't pour a whole bottle of cologne over your head.

— Got it.

In the entryway, I put on my shoes while she leaned against the frame of the bedroom door. The apartment had returned to ordinary use: the blue bowl with keys, the books facing forward, the blade on the ruler, the open glue drying, and the collage one centimeter different. I picked up my jacket.

She saw the open place on the shirt where the button should have been.

— You should sew that.

— I don't have any thread.

— Buy some.

MIA

She came closer and kissed me. A short kiss, on the mouth. There was cold coffee on the table, mint forgotten in the glass, and her perfume on the pillow.

— Don't delete it — she said.

— The photograph?

— That too.

I opened the door.

On the landing, the staircase was still narrow, the elevator was still broken, and the light came on late again. I went down without her shoes to justify my caution. On the third floor, the neighbor's door was closed. In the street, a cleaner was washing the sidewalk. I walked as far as Boulevard Saint-Germain, forty-one minutes, before looking at my phone. The photograph was there: Mia on her knees on the bed, the red robe, the ray of sun, and the cropped cup. I locked the screen. At the corner, the phone knocked against my thigh. I moved it to another pocket. It kept knocking.

4

The black door

Paris — private club near Avenue Foch.

The driver stopped beside a black door and switched off the engine without looking in the rearview mirror.

The street was too clean for that hour. There was no line, no music coming through the walls, no neon, no doorwoman, not even two men with their arms crossed at the entrance. There was a bourgeois façade, a leafless tree, two closed windows on the first floor, and that smooth black door, with no plaque, no sign, and no visible bell. Avenue Foch was nearby, but from there you couldn't see it. You could only feel the excessive breadth of the area.

Mia didn't get out of the car right away. She picked up her phone, wrote a short message, and put it back down on her lap. She was wearing a black dress, a light coat over her shoulders, her hair pinned back, and small earrings. She didn't look as if she had come to discover anything. She looked as if she were returning to a room she knew.

— You can still change your mind — she said.

— About the door?

— About me.

I looked at the façade. A couple passed on the sidewalk across the street, the man in a blue scarf, the woman with a dog too small for the hour. Neither of them looked at us. On the other side, the shutters were still down.

— Of course you had to pick an entrance with no doorbell — I said.

— If you wanted a doorbell, you shouldn't have come.

Her phone vibrated. Mia read the reply, put it in her bag, and opened the car door. The driver got out at the same time, but she made a small gesture for him to stay. We crossed the sidewalk. She stopped in front of the black door, without knocking.

The lock made a dry noise from inside. The door opened about eight inches. The man who appeared wore a dark suit, a white shirt, and the face of someone who would work better in a clandestine embassy than in a nightclub.

— *Bonsoir, Madame* — he said.

Mia answered in a low voice, in French. I caught my name in the middle of two sentences and the word *liste*. The man bowed his head, opened the door wider, and stepped aside without looking us up and down.

— Don't make that face — Mia said, already in the small vestibule.

— What face?

— The one Portuguese men make when they've been invited to something indecent but are still judging the lighting.

— That's very specific.

— With you, it comes on fast.

The vestibule had black walls from top to bottom, a narrow console, scentless white flowers in a gold vase, and a camera pointed at the door, not at us. To the left, a short-haired woman was waiting behind a low counter. The reception was minimal and cold. The first real sign of the place was a wall with small metal boxes, numbered, each one with a slot and a keypad.

The woman pushed two open boxes toward us.

— *Les téléphones, montres connectées, stylos, clés avec caméra. Tout ce qui enregistre.*

Mia took the phone from her bag without hesitating. Then she removed a small lipstick case, opened it in front of the attendant, showed that it was only lipstick, closed it, and put it away again. She did everything as if she had already done it many times.

I kept my phone in my hand one second too long. Inside it was the photograph of her in the silk robe, kneeling on the bed and crossed by the morning sun. I had left her house too early with that image in my pocket, and now they were asking me to lock it in a metal box on a street near Avenue Foch.

Mia saw me hesitate.

— Does that phone really have that many secrets?

— It has a beautiful photograph of a woman in a red robe.

— Then relax. It'll be safe in there.

I put the phone into the box. The attendant asked me to choose four numbers. I chose the first four that came into my head and regretted it immediately. Mia didn't look. She entered her code with her hand shielding the keypad, closed the box, and waited for me to do the same.

Beside it there was a card, in French and English: of legal age, express consent, no recordings, no insistence, freedom to leave, doors never locked from the outside, staff identifiable in every room.

The attendant explained without smiling. She pointed to the card before directing us to the stairs.

- If you want to leave, say so — Mia said.
- To you?
- To me, to her, to anyone. This isn't a prison.
- And if you want to leave?
- I leave.

She said it without adding anything. She pulled the coat up onto her shoulders and waited by the stairs.

We went down a narrow, curving staircase, with an iron handrail and steps worn in the center. The music rose from below without taking shape. It wasn't a club beat; it was a low, slow line, interrupted by voices. The air changed before the end of the stairs: mixed perfumes, the dampness of stone, and a low amber glow on the walls.

The cellar opened before us with a lot of money spent on pretending at decadence. Dark stone, excessive gilding, tall mirrors, wine-colored velvet curtains, low sofas, polished metal tables, and rare bottles lined up behind a bar lit from below. In the center, against all good sense, an indoor fountain let water fall down a small wall of black marble.

It was absurd. I almost laughed.

Mia noticed before I even moved my mouth.

- It's horrible, isn't it?
- It's very expensive.
- That doesn't answer.
- It's luxury. But it's still bad taste. Very bad taste.

She laughed softly. The bartender looked at her, a woman in a green dress moved slightly aside to let her pass, and two men suspended a conversation. Mia gave them nothing in return. She hadn't come as the owner; nor had she come as prey or a dazzled guest.

We sat at a side table, with the wall behind me and the room in front of her. She chose it that way. She ordered sparkling water for both of us and a glass of champagne for herself. I raised an eyebrow.

- Don't drink if you need courage — she said.
- I was thinking of drinking so I'd have an excuse.
- That's weak too.

The main room was quieter than I expected. There were couples sitting too close, groups of three or four in brief conversation, an older woman smoking beside an extractor disguised by a golden column, two women holding hands by the bar, a girl with a shaved head laughing with a gentleman in an impeccable tie. No one seemed lost.

I was trying not to look too much. Mia took a sip of water, set the glass down, and let me struggle on my own for a few seconds.