



Allison Cross

Focus Point

I'm standing in my underwear when the photographer opens the door. The stylist hands me a blouse, which does nothing to cover my ass. The photographer runs his eyes over my body, stares between my legs. I drop my hands, cross them between my thighs. He grazes his lip with his teeth, steps into the room. The stylist rolls her eyes, *boys will be boys*, but she hands me a skirt and blocks his view. When he doesn't leave she turns him to the door.

"We'll be finished in a few minutes."

Outside a table offers bottled water and soft drinks. The production van is parked in front of the Spanish Steps in the Piazza de Spagna in Rome. We are shooting in front of the Fontana della Barcaccia, a well-known fountain carved in the shape of a boat. It's the middle of July, and the on-location shoot is for winter clothing. The team has a permit to park the trailer on the cobblestones surrounding the fountain and they've set up base. Bowls on the table overflow with berries, plates are heaped with ham and cheese. I'm hungry but with my makeup on, I'm not allowed to eat. The team sips coffee, smokes cigarettes. The makeup artist powders my face, the hairdresser twists my hair. The photographer bites a strawberry in half. Juice runs down his chin, and I can see the red skin caught in his teeth, crowded and tobacco-stained. He turns to the others, holds up the half-eaten strawberry, runs his tongue across the open wound. Forcing it into the center, he slurps on the juice.

"This is how you taste," he says to me. "This is how you look."

I recoil, my skin crawling. Turning away, I focus on a patch of chewing gum fused to the asphalt between my feet. His laugh is low in his throat. I raise my head, flit my eyes over him, my upper lip curled. *Creep. Hiding your darkness behind bright lights and a long lens.* Nervous

laughter from a few. His stare is heavy but I keep my own narrowed and don't look away. The stylist claps her hands. "The light is changing," she says. "We need to shoot." She fiddles with the coat on my shoulders, squares her face to mine. "Let it go. Just do your job, you're doing great." Her voice is low but her words are said to be heard, and they stir the team to action. She locks her eyes to mine, and her stare is fierce, a flash of lightning on the fringe. I feel her plea; a shared secret. Sisterhood.

"Don't let him get to you. He's an asshole, the whole industry knows it." Each syllable is measured, underscoring their importance, but I notice that her fingers tremble, her cheeks are spots of red.

"Nobody says anything?"

"He's famous. He sells. People want to work with him, they put up with it." She tilts her head, eyebrows raised. Point taken.

The sun, unrelenting now, hammers my head. Blooming white and lilac azalea flowers spill from ceramic pots that line the famous Spanish Steps. Rows of people, most sitting, their faces to the sun. The winter coat weighs on my shoulders, high-heeled boots bite my toes. Greasy sweat between my breasts. The makeup artist blots my face and holds a straw to my lips. I sip. A crowd is beginning to form. Linen slacks and wrap dresses; only the tourists with their knapsacks and baseball caps are wearing shorts. Anticipation crackles, a palpable buzz. I ignore them, see only the strawberry dripping from his mouth, the juice glittering on the stubble of his chin. My heart is racing and, in a sharp instant, my vision blurs. I grab the cup of water from the makeup artist's hand, drag the water through the straw. *Let it go.* The photographer's assistant draws an X on the sidewalk with chalk. "Your focus point," he says.

"We need to shoot," calls the makeup artist. "She's melting over here."

I stand on the X. Straighten my shoulders, relax my face. The photographer raises his camera, his finger poised. I throw my head to the left, flip my hair to the right. My mouth is open, imitating laughter. Swish forward, sway from side to side. Mechanical movements that on good days are a dance. My throat bounces when I swallow, muscles taut. I stuff my clenched fingers into my pockets and turn my body, giving him the best angles of the heavy winter coat. My chest is tight, every breath a strain.

Let it go, let it go.

I turn to the street. My hips are still swaying, and I'm holding the lapels of the coat in each hand. The photographer moves closer. The crowd circles around us, taking pictures, calling for my name. A group of young men in their twenties separate from the crowd and jump in front of the camera. An arm around my shoulder, a cheek pressed to mine. Leering faces, jabbing elbows. The photographer continues to shoot. A hand brushes my thigh, my black nylons damp with sweat. A dark cloud pushes in front of the sun, its edges tinged with an eerie light. My eyes lock onto those of the man draped across my shoulders. He's clean-shaven and square-jawed, his eyes like shards of obsidian. I bare my teeth and release the snarl that's throbbing against them. His eyes narrow.

“Bella, bella,” he hisses.

My voice cuts through the air like a blade. “Back off.”

He raises his hands in surrender, steps away. He whistles for his pack to follow, throwing behind him a leering grin and words I don’t understand. Horns are honking; whistles and catcalls are thrown from windows and into my face. A gust of hot city air, exhaust fumes, and concrete. I sense the photographer over my shoulder before I feel his sluggish heat. I move to step away, but his words, like the hand that grips my arm, hold me still.

“I guess they saw the strawberry in you too.” A wet whisper.

I straighten my back, muscles tense and coiled. The sky dons a cloak of shadow; a distant rumble of thunder, a beast stirring from slumber. On the Via di S. Sebastianello, only feet away from the crowd, a Japanese tourist bus slows to a crawl, fingers and cameras pointed out open windows. For a fraction of a second, I envision pushing the photographer under its wheels, I imagine the tourists with their cameras continuing to shoot. For a fraction of a second, I feel powerful, beautiful for the first time today.

Just then a motorcycle whips around the corner, slowing when the rider becomes aware of the frenzy. In slow motion I watch his head turn toward me. I see his eyes widen, gawking, when they meet mine; a sly smile crosses his lips. I watch, heart pounding, fingernails piercing my palms. The red light changes; he keeps his eyes on mine. The bus picks up speed. A crack of lightning, a sudden sweep of wind that whips my coat open as my hands clench and unclench by my sides. The humidity is oppressive, the sky a strange, brassy hue. I pull the wind through my nostrils, through concealed cavities, deep into my core. Smoldering embers become flames; they rise behind my ribcage, fill my throat. My eyes are narrowed, searing the world to a singular point; I can see the glint in his eye. He opens his mouth to call to me but there’s no time. The shatter of crushing metal. He flies through the air, his head still turned toward me, his motorcycle snapped in half. I release the last of the wind slowly, steam dissipating into particles of city air. The sky opens with a roar.

Allison Cross studied writing with Helen Klonaris, Roxanne Snider, and Shuly Xóchitl Cawood. She recently completed a three-year creative writing mentorship. An international fashion model for twenty years she now works as a therapist in complementary and integrative medicine in palliative care.