

A

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## Chapter 1

Each step through the descending plane's jetway felt like a countdown. Soon he'd have to re-enter the world, resume the role of A: sharp-suited executive, master of controlled smiles and calculated responses. At six-foot-two, his height alone granted him an air of authority, a stark contrast to the internal tremor that was his constant companion.

His fingers grazed his freshly buzzed hair, the pale blond almost white against his tanned skin. An impulsive bleach job in his turbulent teenage years had become an odd signature look, a defiant statement against the expectations of the corporate world he now inhabited. The cut was severe, functional, yet those few inches of defiant platinum spoke volumes about the complexities beneath his carefully polished exterior.

Don't let the sharp suits and killer spreadsheets fool you. Underneath his calculated CEO persona lies the heart of a boy who found solace in the flashing pixels of outdated game cartridges. A world where he was the hero, where the rules were clear, and the victories satisfyingly quantifiable. Late nights fueled by cheap energy drinks still hold a nostalgic allure, a whispered promise of escape from the carefully constructed reality of his present life. Success? He's got it. Happiness? Well, that's a much harder level to beat, the final boss lurking in the shadows of his own unfulfilled heart.

The hum of the airport washed over him as he navigated his way, not toward the bustling exits, but the relative sanctuary of the restroom. Alone, he allowed the facade to momentarily slip. In the mirror's harsh glare, the exhaustion became starkly visible: lines fanning out from ice-blue eyes that had spent too many nights staring at glowing screens, the beginnings of a furrow between brows perpetually locked in mild concentration.

Home. It should have been a balm, a place to finally exhale. Yet, the very word ignited a prickle of guilt. Barcelona was his past, New York his present tense. His wife, her cool loft that felt more like an art gallery than a home, his work that consumed him more with each passing year – that was where his life truly resided. He wondered, not for the first time, how he'd ended up here, on this path so unlike anything he'd envisioned as a teenager.

Back then, A's haven was this very city, his sanctuary a cramped room filled with the glow of a vintage CRT monitor and the rapid-fire clicking of an old game console. Here was where he'd first felt truly powerful, not through wealth or social standing, but the thrill of mastering complex systems, of being the hero in pixelated adventures. Those bright, fantastical worlds held far more appeal than the gray monotony of his real life.

As he straightened his tie, a flicker of color caught his eye. A poster in the corner advertised a retro gaming convention. An absurd jolt of longing ran through him, quickly stifled. What use did a man like him have for nostalgic fantasies?

A vibration rattled his pocket—his phone, an insistent buzz cutting through the silence. A string of missed calls, all work-related, greeted him with their accusatory red symbols. Each notification ignited a familiar dread, a knot tightening in his chest. Another crisis, another intricate equation to solve to dissect and solve. It offered the illusion of purpose, the perfect excuse to dive headfirst into the world of numbers and analysis, a sanctuary from the unsettling hollowness echoing in the depths of his own soul.

His tie, once a mark of precision, now felt suffocating, his precisely cut suit a straitjacket. The meticulously crafted image of the successful CEO chafed, each well-polished detail another lie he told himself. Yet, the path back to that coldly elegant New York penthouse, to the woman whose icy blue eyes mirrored his own, held its own kind of terror.

"If you overwork again, I'll report you to HR," her sharp voice echoed in his memory. Elena, his wife, was always impeccably poised and impeccably in control. Her possessiveness masked a vulnerability he couldn't quite understand, yet it grated nonetheless. Their union was more a strategic merger than a meeting of hearts, a fact they both danced around with the expertise of seasoned diplomats.

There was no turning back, no simple escape route. Both his work and his marriage were prisons of his own meticulous construction. Was this truly the sum of his existence? The question clung to him, acrid and unshakable.

Exiting the restroom, he saw a woman across the aisle struggling with a bulging backpack. Her face, framed by vibrant turquoise hair, was creased with effort. A ludicrous urge to help—to step into another person's messy reality—rose within him and was just as quickly suppressed. He was the man with the plan, with solutions for everyone but himself.

A, the man whose meticulously crafted persona was both a lifeline and a cage. That was what he'd chosen. Wasn't it?

## Chapter 2

The taxi ride was an unwelcome blast from the past—the scent of citrusy air freshener, the driver's rapid-fire Catalan that A could still mostly follow but was too rusty to respond to. Each familiar street corner seemed to mock him, whispering of a youth he had meticulously put to rest. That boy, all boundless dreams and impulsive passions, might as well have been a stranger.

The taxi sputtered to a halt. He fumbled for his wallet, wincing at the stack of bills he handed over. A pang of guilt mixed with annoyance when he realized he'd massively overtipped, confirming his status as a foreigner out of touch with local custom. As the driver flashed a surprised grin, A felt a flush of embarrassment. Here he was, back 'home,' fumbling through even the simplest interaction like a bewildered tourist.

The journey from the airport had been a blur. Barcelona's vibrant streets, sun-drenched plazas, and the cacophony of voices in both Catalan and Castilian had washed over him unnoticed. Instead, his ears buzzed with the relentless ringing of his phone: urgent emails, rescheduled meetings, and his assistant's thinly veiled concern. It created a suffocating bubble, isolating him from the very place where he supposedly belonged. Even fleeting exchanges felt like minefields, every gesture a risk of exposure, every word and gesture laden with the potential for misunderstanding, for revealing just how out of place he truly felt.

The key felt cold in his hand. He'd only returned a handful of times since his father's passing—short, logistical visits to deal with paperwork and the eventual sale of the apartment. Stepping inside was like crossing into a time capsule, the scent of old books and worn leather clinging to everything. Each step on the creaky floorboards echoed in the stillness.

With a rusty groan, the door swung open, releasing a wave of musty air that sent a shiver down his spine. A forced himself to move, the familiar efficiency of routine a shield against the tide of memories threatening to pull him under.

Dust motes danced in the shaft of sunlight slicing through the gloom. Every surface was coated in a fine layer of grit, a testament to months of neglect. In the kitchen, a forgotten bag of sugar lay torn open, its contents attracting a trail of ants marching with relentless purpose across the cracked tiles. An old apartment, yes – a relic of the past he'd so meticulously left behind.

The narrow corridor led deeper, lined with faded photographs and crammed bookshelves that sagged under their own weight. Each closed door whispered of ghosts, of laughter and whispered arguments long silenced. He focused on the practical: the flick of light

switches confirming a working electrical system, the hiss and gurgle of ancient plumbing jolted back to life.

He couldn't block out the sounds of his neighbors—shrill bursts of childish laughter, the clatter of dishes, a snatch of music from an open window—a vibrant reminder of the life continuing all around him. His own life, in sharp contrast, felt frozen in time within these four walls. A cursory sweep, he told himself, just to ensure there was nothing worth the hassle of shipping back to New York.

His gaze landed on the ancient desktop computer tucked into the corner of the living room. It was here, hunched over this very keyboard, that his journey had diverged so drastically from that of his peers. He ran a finger across the dust-covered monitor, recalling long nights fueled by cheap soda and the thrill of digital conquest.

A vibration in his pocket startled him. His wife, no doubt. Calls usually followed missed calls, her cool tone laced with unspoken accusation. Not this time. A text, brief and to the point: "When are you back?"

He typed a response, then deleted it, unsure of the answer himself. He had a return flight booked, yes. But the idea of stepping back into that overly air-conditioned, lifeless apartment filled him with an unexpected sense of dread.

He wandered over to the window, gazing out at the vibrant tableau of the city below. A group of teenagers, backpacks slung low, skateboards in hand, zipped past with a burst of laughter. A surge of envy, sharp and bitter, caught him off guard. When was the last time he had felt that kind of unburdened joy?

The cover, frayed and bent, still bore his childhood smudges, a relic from his childhood obsession. He flipped it open, tracing his finger over the bold lines and stylized action. It was as incomprehensible as a foreign language now, and yet, the images sparked something—a flickering ember of a feeling he couldn't quite name.

His phone buzzed again. Another text, this time far less impersonal: "Don't avoid this conversation forever."

He stared at the screen. Was their marriage truly that fragile? Was his absence so keenly felt, or was this her way of exerting control from a distance? He didn't have the answers, not yet. But maybe, just maybe, Barcelona held a few clues he desperately needed to find.

### Chapter 3

The silence of the apartment was strangely oppressive. A should be seizing the opportunity to tackle his to-do list, to restore a semblance of order amidst the chaos of memory. Yet, each abandoned object seemed to whisper accusations, reminding him of the life he'd left behind.

His phone vibrated – another concerned text from his assistant, nudging him back towards the world he knew. A familiar sense of guilt washed over him, soon followed by a surge of defiance. He flipped through his contacts instead, landing on a name that ignited an unexpected spark: R.

His fingers hovered over the screen. What had begun as idle curiosity now fluttered like trapped birds in his chest. on the plane now fluttered in his chest like trapped birds. Was it absurd to reach out, a stranger in his former hometown? Barcelona pulsed with life outside his window. Perhaps a distraction was precisely what he needed.

*A: Back in BCN. Feels surprisingly foreign.*

The three dots of her reply popped up on the screen with agonizing slowness. Her response was warm, yet careful:

*R: Welcome back! A lot changes in a few years, doesn't it? 😊*

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#### R's Perspective

She stared at the message for a second longer than necessary, thumb resting on her screen.

*A. Again.*

She wasn't sure what she'd expected when she saw his name pop up. A flicker of warmth spread through her chest—unexpected, sharp. Her phone buzzed gently in her hand as she stood by the kitchenette, half-dressed, barefoot, waiting for her tea to steep.

*Foreign*, he'd said.

Of course it felt foreign. He had become a different man—different city, different life. But his message was oddly human, maybe even... lost?

Her smile was instinctive. Not forced.

*R: Welcome back! A lot changes in a few years, doesn't it? 😊*

As she sent it, something caught in her throat. Was she being too casual? Too eager?

She paced slightly, adjusting the strap of her tank top. The studio still smelled faintly of laundry detergent and the sandalwood candle she'd lit the night before. The air was crisp from the window she refused to close, despite the November chill.

When his next message came, she could see something behind it—melancholy? Nostalgia?

*A: More than I realized. Just at my Dad's old place. Dealing with memories and loose ends.*

Her fingers stilled over the keyboard. She felt an urge to say more. But she held back.

*R: Ah. That's never easy. But, hey, this city always has a way of surprising you.*

She hesitated again. Was this flirting?

No, not yet.

But her pulse quickened nonetheless.

When he asked what brought her back, she answered easily, but still chose her words with precision.

*R: Landed a teaching gig downtown. Roommate situation, cozy studio... It's been an adjustment, but I'm loving the energy.*

As they continued chatting, she leaned back against the fridge, drawing lazy circles with her toe on the tiled floor.

*A: That's great! Must be...vibrant...working with little ones. Is it what you always wanted?*

She laughed, a genuine huff of amusement. He remembered the little things—her indecision, her scattered ambitions. And still, he asked.

*R: Honestly? Not how I pictured things. But the kids are hilarious, and it's never dull 😊 And you? Have you conquered the world, A?*

His answer was classic him. Elusive. Wry.

*A: Depends on your definition of conquest.*

She felt something twist in her stomach.

And then—he was just down the road.

Barcelona, once sprawling and distant, now felt like a village.

The idea of him walking the same streets made her skin tingle.



R: *Speaking of change... I've actually moved into the city center too. Just down the road from you!*

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Back to A's perspective:

A: *No way! That's quite a coincidence. I should probably tackle the mess here, but... the city is calling.*

R: *Perhaps we should grab a coffee sometime, catch up properly* ☕

A: *I'm only here for a few days... work stuff.*

R: *Well then, should we make that coffee happen today? There's a quirky little place near me... I just want to say "welcome back" face to face.*

A: *(long pause, then three typing dots appear and disappear)*  
*Okay, quirky cafe it is. Give me an hour?*

R: *Perfect!! I'll send the address* 📍

He stared at his phone, the three dots of R's last message mocking his internal chaos. A coffee. That's all it was. A harmless act of friendliness, a way to reconnect with a piece of his past in this city that suddenly felt less alien.

His thumb hovered over the keyboard, a half-formed message to Elena – a check-in, a vague excuse about running an errand – flickering on the screen.

But a knot of guilt settled in his stomach. Was it innocent, this desire to revisit a time before the carefully built walls of his current life? Elena would disapprove, he knew. Even the hint of an emotional connection beyond her tightly controlled world would seem a betrayal. Yet, he craved normalcy, the ease of a simple conversation untainted by the unsaid anxieties that plagued his marriage.

He shoved the guilt aside. Overthinking was a dangerous game, he reminded himself. A coffee was just that – a chance to glimpse a lighter, less burdened version of himself in the company of this woman who'd reappeared as if conjured by Barcelona itself.

*"Old friend," he said aloud, testing the words—and finding them weightless.* R was more than that – a spark of possibility, a whisper of the person he'd been before ambition forged an emotional armor around him.

He recalled her easy laughter on the plane, the shared thrill of the convention center. Harmless memories, surely?

As he pocketed his phone and straightened the collar of his perfectly tailored shirt, a wave of unfamiliar recklessness rushed through him.

Perhaps Elena didn't need to know.

Perhaps he owed it to himself to explore this unexpected connection, even if only for an hour.

Perhaps, just perhaps, it would be the simple key to breaking free from the numbness that had crept into every corner of his life.

## Chapter 4

The walk to the café, a simple route R had described with carefree ease, morphed into an epic ordeal in A's overactive mind. He doubled back twice, his pulse a frantic drumbeat beneath his crisp, buttoned-up shirt. Each detour sent him down another cobblestone labyrinth, the cheerful hum of Catalan mingling with the insistent buzzing of his phone—his relentless, workaholic subconscious refusing him sanctuary. It was a battle for dominance: the clamoring voices of missed deadlines versus the ghost whispers of forgotten laughter echoing off sun-kissed walls.

His fingers twitched, instinctively seeking imperfections in the pristine tailoring of his suit. One stray thread, snagged on a chipped tile, became a symbol of his unraveling composure. Sweat, an unwelcome guest, prickled along his hairline, the tell-tale sign of cracks beginning to form in the perfectly constructed facade.

Barcelona was a city he knew like the back of his hand, or so he'd thought. Every corner held a memory, sharp as broken glass: There – the arcade where he'd spent stolen afternoons and pilfered coins; here - a hidden square where games of cops and robbers reigned supreme until dusk sent them scattering. The scents of freshly baked bread and spiced coffee mingled with the sun-warmed stone, a heady cocktail of nostalgia laced with regret. With each step, the weight of the life he'd built so meticulously felt heavier, the man he'd become more unrecognizable.

Each burst of vibrant street art, each weathered doorway hinting at the colorful lives within, mocked his own carefully managed grayscale existence. This whirlwind of a woman he was about to meet felt as antithetical to his New York reality as the wild sea was to a manicured lawn.

What in the hell would they even talk about? Work? A safe but soul-crushingly dull topic. Video games? A confession of the secret passions he'd long ago buried. His childhood here? Proof of how far he'd drifted from that impulsive, boundless boy. A wave of exhaustion mixed with unexpected exhilaration washed over him. Did he even truly want to return to the predictable rhythm of his old life, or was there a part of him – a long-dormant, reckless part – whispering that perhaps this detour was precisely what his soul craved?

R's directions led him deeper into the maze of his past. Each cobblestone beneath his feet seemed to whisper a memory. A bittersweet pang tightened his chest – this was where he belonged, wasn't it? Yet, an equally strong force urged him forward, towards the tantalizing unknown that lay ahead with R.

A figure barreled around a corner, slamming into him with a force that nearly knocked him off his feet. "Whoa! Well, if it ain't A! Fancy suit and everything – look at you, Mr. Big Shot!"

It was Jordi, his grin as contagious as ever, though a touch of silver now threaded through his dark hair. Gone was the lanky boy, replaced by a man with laughter lines and the solid build of someone who worked with his hands.

Time melted away as they talked. A, the man usually bound by schedules and efficiency, found himself lost in the easy familiarity. Jordi's questions flowed rapid-fire: America, A's life... was he married? Here, A hesitated. He offered a vague response, a flicker of guilt adding to the complex cocktail of emotions swirling within him.

The conversation flowed to Jordi's life – rooted in this very neighborhood. He worked as an office manager, the irony not lost on A. There was a long-term girlfriend, shared laughter over stories about two boisterous sons, and an ease in his own skin that made A's precisely tailored suit feel even more stifling.

A pang of envy, sharp and unexpected, cut through him. Was this what he had given up? A simple life, filled with the warmth of connection and a sense of belonging? Impulsively, he found himself asking deeper questions, drawn to the world Jordi had built. He'd meant to stay for a few minutes; instead, an hour slipped by.

As they parted, Jordi's words rang in his ears: "Good to see you, amic meu. We gotta do this properly, yeah? Drinks sometime!" Eagerness surged through A – this wasn't just a pleasantry. He longed to reconnect, to bridge the gap between the man he was now and the boy he'd been alongside Jordi.

They exchanged numbers, and only then did reality crash back into focus. His eyes darted to his watch, a jolt of panic shooting through him. He was late, unforgivably late for his meeting with R.

A burst into the cafe thirty minutes behind schedule, apologies tumbling from his lips as a vision of R, vibrant and expressive, flashed in his mind. Would she have already left, seeing his delay as a sign, as another indicator of the chasm between their worlds?

A forced a steadiness into his legs as he stepped inside. The bell above the door tinkled a cheerful greeting. It was blessedly dim, the walls a collage of mismatched art and fading photographs. A mismatched collection of chairs clustered around tables, and in the far corner, a worn velvet sofa overflowed with what appeared to be a heated discussion about the merits of Picasso.

R's voice cut through the cozy chaos like a splash of summer sky piercing through gray clouds. He spun towards the sound, heart thudding erratically against his ribs. She

occupied a tiny table tucked into an alcove, and a wave of unexpected relief washed over him.

She looked the same as he remembered, yet different. This R was softer, her wide smile unguarded, a spark of genuine warmth replacing the cautious amusement he'd first encountered. Her vibrant blue hair seemed even more striking against the faded photographs adorning the cafe's walls. She'd chosen a playful red dress with white polka dots, the cut a touch provocative, revealing a sliver of smooth olive skin at the shoulders. Black leather jacket, oversized glasses, and a flash of red lipstick completed the ensemble – a daring contrast to the subdued tans and grays of his own attire. A flicker of interest sparked in A's mind, then was swiftly extinguished as the relentless tide of work-related anxieties flooded back in.

He fumbled for composure, his usual control deserting him. This was not the R of polite text exchanges; this was a woman brimming with life, a colorful melody amidst the muted humdrum of his own existence.

"Glad you didn't get lost in the labyrinth....." she teased as he approached.

A managed a laugh, surprised by its genuineness. "Barcelona has changed a bit," he admitted as he slid into the seat across from her.

A waitress appeared, all bustling efficiency and friendly chatter. R ordered in rapid Spanish that A only half-followed; he settled for a simple "café solo," hoping he hadn't accidentally ordered something absurd.

Conversation flowed with surprising ease. R asked about his work, his life in the States, yet even the most mundane questions held a warmth that chipped away at his carefully constructed armor. Work deadlines and profit margins seemed less vital when framed by her infectious laughter. Somewhere between his stilted explanations of spreadsheets and her animated retelling of a particularly chaotic day with her kindergarteners, the image of Elena, with her cool elegance, began to fade.

When their drinks arrived, she tilted her head, studying him with those unexpectedly perceptive eyes. Her gaze seemed to linger on the crispness of his suit, the pristine knot of his tie, and he felt a now-familiar flush creep up his neck. Was she judging his formality?

"You seem different, A," she said, the directness catching him off guard. "Softer, somehow. I like it."

His eyes flickered over her: the whimsical polka dot dress, now softened by the dim cafe lighting, the vibrant blue hair tucked behind an ear, the touch of uncertainty that flickered across her face before she flashed him another smile. She'd changed, too. This R felt less

like the bold woman from the plane and more... feminine, delicate even. She looked undeniably beautiful, and the realization echoed within him like a drumbeat he couldn't quite silence.

A's usual eloquence failed him. His meticulously cultivated persona seemed to melt away under the warmth of her gaze. A part of him, the part he usually kept firmly locked down, stirred in response. The impulsive boy he'd been, the one who lived for adventure rather than profit margins, whispered that perhaps this detour into the unexpected was precisely what he craved.

"Barcelona suits you," she offered, her voice softer now, laced with a hint of something he couldn't quite name.

The compliment felt oddly intimate. He wanted to offer a casual deflection, to slip back into the easy banter that had defined their earlier interaction. Yet, before he could, R surprised him again.

"So," she began, tilting her head with a playful smirk, "are there skyscrapers in New York too?" The question was absurdly simple, yet it carried an undercurrent of curiosity that transcended the mundane.

A found himself smiling, a genuine smile that reached his eyes. "You'd be surprised," he replied, and from there, the conversation unfolded effortlessly. He told her about the frantic pace of his life, the endless parade of meetings and the thrill of closing a deal. She listened intently, her chin propped on her fist, a spark of fascination replacing the amusement in her eyes.

In turn, R painted a picture of her life: the whirlwind of tiny voices, the finger-paint masterpieces destined for proud refrigerators, the unexpected depth behind some of her students' wide-eyed questions. They shared glimpses of their current realities, hesitant but undeniably drawn toward the connection rekindled between them.

The café, once a blurry backdrop, came into focus. The mismatched chairs, the scent of coffee mingling with old paper, the hushed conversations of those around them – it all wove into a tapestry of vibrant normalcy that tugged at something deep within him.

The afternoon sunlight filtering through the café windows was fading, casting long shadows that mirrored the unease swirling within him. He'd lost track of time. R, with her vibrant laughter and easy warmth, had become an unexpected anchor in the disorienting chaos of his return to Barcelona. Yet, the relentless pull of his other life, distant both physically and emotionally, was impossible to ignore.

His phone buzzed, insistent and demanding. Elena's name flashed on the screen. A glance at his watch confirmed what he already knew: he was late, far later than he'd promised considering his planned 'quiet evening' in his father's apartment.

"Hola, querida," he answered, forcing a lightness into his voice that felt increasingly false. A whirlwind of half-truths and evasions followed: a hastily rescheduled meeting, a last-minute work crisis, an echo of an apology for yet another delay. Her cool response, tinged with a hint of disapproval, cut through his practised excuses. With each word, the gulf between his two worlds widened.

As he hung up, a mix of guilt and undeniable relief washed over him. "That was my wife," he admitted, looking squarely at R. "Things got... unexpectedly complicated," he added, the understatement of the century swirling unspoken between them.

Concern flickered in R's eyes, but was quickly replaced by a gentle smile. "Sounds like you have a very busy life, A. Perhaps another time, then? It has been lovely to see you again." A hint of vulnerability crept into her voice, just enough to make his heart ache with an unexpected pang.

The desire to chase after her, to plead with her for a second chance, warred with the relentless tide of obligation dragging him back to his old routines. Yet, before he could fully form a response, R surprised him again.

"How about this," she offered, tilting her head playfully, "we make it quick. I know the perfect spot for a sunset stroll. Nothing fancy, just a proper Barcelona welcome."

A hesitated, torn. Duty and responsibility, the pillars upon which he'd built his life, felt heavy as lead. Yet, the yearning for something as simple and unplanned as a shared sunset with this woman warred with his ingrained sense of order. His phone buzzed, Elena's name flashing on the screen yet again. The decision sharpened into painful focus.

"Listen, R," he began, struggling to find the right words, "things are more... complicated than I anticipated. I have to leave." Apology and an undercurrent of regret laced his voice.

Disappointment flickered across her face, quickly masked with a forced smile. "Of course, I understand," she said, the warmth in her eyes dimming slightly. "It was great catching up." He knew it was a polite facade, and the knowledge stung.

But then, as if to soften the blow, she added, "Maybe another time? A proper Barcelona coffee date to make up for this one."

A's traitorous heart leaped at the prospect, but he ruthlessly tamped it down. "I – I appreciate it. But right now..." he trailed off, feeling the words stick in his throat.

With startling honesty, R cut through his hesitation. "It's okay, A. It's late, and my boyfriend is probably wondering where I am." The admission, so casually dropped, landed like a weight on his chest.

The world seemed to tilt off its axis. Of course, she would have someone. Vibrant, warm, undeniably captivating – why wouldn't she? An unexpected wave of jealousy washed over him, battling with the relentless tide of guilt and confusion.

"Right," he managed, his voice barely above a whisper. "Of course. It was... lovely seeing you."

He left the café, the image of R framed by the fading sunlight burning in his mind. The city, once a beacon of possibility, now felt oppressive, echoing the narrow confines of the life he'd so carefully constructed.

"Okay, look," A began, his voice laced with a desperation he couldn't fully explain. "We could... walk a little, since we're practically neighbors, it seems." It was a feeble excuse, but even the slightest delay felt infinitely better than an abrupt goodbye.

R raised an eyebrow, amusement sparking back into her eyes. "The big city businessman, afraid of the dark streets of Barcelona?" she teased.

A managed a weak smile. Anything to avoid thinking about Elena, Jordi, or the increasingly heavy weight of his choices. They fell into step, the silence less awkward now that they were moving. Barcelona's evening glow transformed the narrow streets into something out of a painting, and he found himself sharing anecdotes about his favorite childhood haunts, his voice gradually losing its forced edge.

As they rounded a corner, a shout echoed through the twilight.

"R! Hey, I finished up that workout. Who's – "

A's words died in his throat. A tall, athletic man stood before them, brows furrowed in a mixture of surprise and curiosity. Muscles rippled beneath his tight workout shirt, a single bead of sweat rolling down his tanned neck. He looked like a personal trainer advertisement come to life.

R's previous warmth shifted. "Marc! This is A," she gestured towards him, uncertainty flickering in her voice, "an old friend from way back."

Marc offered a hand, his grip surprisingly firm. "Nice to meet you, man. R here never stops talking about her childhood in Barcelona." He shot R a playful look that held a touch of possessiveness.



A felt a jolt of... something. Jealousy? Absurd. He barely knew this woman. "Barcelona gets in your blood," he managed, forcing a smile.

The conversation was stilted, awkward. R seemed caught between worlds, the vibrant woman from the cafe replaced by a slightly subdued version of herself. Marc, though friendly, exuded an air of casual ownership that grated on A, a silent declaration of territory. As the minutes ticked by, A's initial guilt for Elena was replaced by a restless frustration.

Finally, he excused himself. The walk back to his father's apartment felt longer than any journey he'd made in years. Sleep eluded him. Thoughts of R, Elena, and his own indecision tangled in his mind, a knot he didn't yet know how to untangle.

## Chapter 5

The walk back to his father's apartment was a blur of half-remembered streets and fleeting impressions. The lively thrum of Barcelona hummed around him, an irritating background noise to the soundtrack of his own chaotic thoughts. A group of skaters wove through the evening crowd, their laughter sharp counterpoint to his own somber mood. The scents of tapas and freshly brewed coffee drifted from open doorways, a painful reminder of the warmth and camaraderie he'd experienced with R mere hours ago.

He tried to analyze the encounter: R's quick shift in demeanor, Marc's easy confidence. A wave of bitterness washed over him, an unfamiliar yet potent emotion. What right did he have to feel...what? Jealousy? Entitlement? The simple, vibrant connection he'd shared with R felt sullied, tainted by the reality of her existing life.

Reaching the apartment, he longed for the anonymity of his New York high-rise, where polite nods replaced messy encounters and emotional spontaneity was confined to the spreadsheets he meticulously crafted. Barcelona, with its relentless ability to dredge up the past, felt increasingly hostile.

Sleep came in fitful bursts. Dream fragments haunted the edges of his exhaustion: R's laughter echoing mockingly, Jordi's outstretched hand fading into the image of Elena's cool, appraising gaze. He jolted awake, heart pounding, the unfamiliar feeling of loneliness pressing against his chest.

The next morning, a bone-deep weariness had settled into him. He cancelled his vague plans, citing a sudden migraine. It was a cowardly lie, an excuse to retreat. Yet, the thought of revisiting any of his childhood haunts, or forcing another stilted conversation with Jordi filled him with dread. New York beckoned: a return to order, predictability, a life where spontaneous coffee dates and impulsive laughter had no place to take root.

An unexpected flicker of guilt prompted a visit to his mother. She lived in a modest apartment near the outskirts of the city, a world away from his father's place. His younger brother, Dani, perpetually cheerful and eternally messy, bounced around the small kitchen, already planning their lunch. Their mother, face lined but eyes still bright, peppered him with questions – his work, his life, and yes, the inevitable "So, when will you settle down with a nice girl?"

He parried the questions as best he could, offering vague answers and forced smiles. Within the comforting warmth of their familiar banter, the ache of his jumbled emotions softened, but didn't fully fade. As he hugged his mother goodbye, the scent of her

familiar perfume triggered an unexpected wave of longing for a time before ambition had driven him continents away.

His flight was early the next morning. As the taxi took him to the airport, the city lights blurred into streaks of color, a reflection of his own disorientation. Had this visit been a mistake? A necessary pain? Or the spark that would upend the life he'd spent so long meticulously building? Only time would tell.

A wave of guilt crashed over A as he retraced his steps towards his father's apartment. The encounter with R and her family had left him shaken, forcing him to confront the messy reality of life beyond professionally crafted spreadsheets and carefully engineered emotions. His instinct was to seek a respite in the familiar, the echo of his own childhood.

His father's building, though grand, held little warmth. The sterile foyer, with its polished marble and subdued lighting always felt like a stark reminder of the growing divide between them. He took the elevator to the penthouse level, his steps hesitant as he approached the heavy wooden door.

A key scraped in the lock - a jarring counterpoint to the hushed opulence. Then the door swung open, revealing his mother. As always, she was impeccably dressed, a silk scarf adding a splash of color to her cream-colored outfit. Her smile, warm yet practiced, did little to mask the underlying tension in her eyes.

"A," she greeted him, using his formal name. "I wasn't expecting you so soon." The faint questioning lilt in her voice made it clear that his unplanned visit was a disruption rather than a welcome surprise.

"I needed a walk, and realized how close I was..." he offered, acutely aware of the flimsy excuse.

Her thin, perfectly arched brow raised a fraction, but she extended an invitation nonetheless. "Come in, then. Would you like tea?"

The apartment was meticulously ordered, every furnishing exuding an expensive sense of taste, a world away from the vibrant chaos of R's world. They settled into plush armchairs – him, still damp with sweat from his walk, sinking into the luxurious softness; her, as always, perched on the very edge, radiating a restless energy at odds with her manicured appearance.

Small talk felt like a chore, and the silence between stilted questions stretched uncomfortably long. Eventually, a flicker of frustration crossed his mother's face.

"You're not well," she stated, the observation disguised as a concerned question.

He shifted uneasily. "Just... tired. The jetlag and the work. Everything," he admitted, the words falling heavy between them.

His mother's perceptive gaze held him captive. "It's more than that, A. You look... troubled."

He wanted to confide in her, to unburden himself of the whirlwind of emotions his return to Barcelona had stirred. Yet, years of guarded conversations had built an invisible wall between them – a wall he no longer knew how to dismantle.

"It's nothing, honestly. Just adjusting," he replied, forcing a reassuring smile that felt utterly false.

They were interrupted by a blur of movement and a high-pitched squeal. "Uncle A! You're home!"

A young boy barreled into the room, the image of carefree abandon in miniature. His dark eyes, so similar to A's own, were filled with excitement, and his tousled hair seemed perpetually on the verge of complete chaos. His mother, momentarily softened by his presence, ruffled his hair with a gentle smile.

"Luis, be polite, querido. Your uncle just arrived," she chided softly.

"But I drew a picture for him!" the boy insisted, brandishing a piece of paper covered in vibrant, abstract shapes.

A's heart ached. This child, his half-brother, was a stark reminder of a life he'd barely experienced. His father's remarriage after his mother left had been an unspoken wound, a symbol of the fractured family he'd never fully reconciled with.

The boy, undeterred by A's initial hesitation, thrust the drawing into his hands. "See? It has spaceships and robots. And you!" His finger pointed to a stick figure sporting a crisp suit, a comically large briefcase clutched in its hand.

A sense of bittersweet amusement washed over him. His brother saw him as this caricature, a distant figure confined to the realm of business attire and adult obligations.

"It's wonderful, Luis. Thank you," he managed, forcing a smile he hoped appeared genuine.

His mother studied him, a flicker of something unreadable crossing her face. "You should spend some time with him. He adores you," she said, her tone less a suggestion and more an unspoken command.

Guilt twisted in his gut. He knew she was right – it was hardly Luis's fault that his father's life had taken an unimaginable turn when A was barely a teenager. And yet, a wall of resentment had built between them over the years, one that A felt powerless to dismantle.

But perhaps she was right. Perhaps spending time with this child, who shared his blood but lived a world apart, could be a path towards understanding this fractured version of himself.

"Maybe tomorrow," he conceded. "If Luis likes, we could... I don't know... go to the park?"

A flicker of surprise, and then relief, passed across his mother's face. It was a small victory, a tiny step to bridge the chasm between them. For the first time that day, A felt a flicker of hope that this trip wouldn't be a complete disaster after all.

The next morning, A found himself standing at the entrance to the park, a sense of trepidation warring with anticipation. His neatly tailored life rarely involved spontaneous outings with an enthusiastic eight-year-old. A text from his mother served as both reminder and warning: *Luis is easily overstimulated. Try to keep it simple.*

He scanned the playground, a riot of colors and movement, and spotted a familiar mop of dark hair hurtling towards the swings. "Uncle Alex!" Luis squealed, launching himself into a hug that nearly knocked A off his feet.

"Hey, Champ," A replied, surprised by the surge of genuine affection that welled up within him. "Ready to show me some tricks?"

Hours slipped by in a blur of laughter, sticky ice cream cones, and dizzying rounds on the merry-go-round. Luis chattered non-stop, an endless stream of superhero adventures, playground politics, and burning questions that revealed a surprisingly astute mind. A listened intently, charmed by Luis's earnest enthusiasm, finding himself drawn into his brother's world of boundless fantasy.

As the afternoon sun began to fade, the park emptied. Exhaustion settled into Luis's limbs, and his chatter slowed. An unexpected peace descended, the shared silence less awkward than those with his own mother.

"Uncle Alex?" Luis asked, his voice small. "Are you coming back?"

In that moment, A could have lied. A vague promise of another visit, a well-crafted excuse about work and distance. Instead, he reached out, mirroring his brother's serious expression. "I want to, Luis. But it's... complicated," he admitted.

"Like big-people stuff?" Luis asked, his brows furrowed in concentration.

"Exactly," A chuckled, relief washing over him at the child's simple understanding. "But I promise, I'll come back properly. And maybe next time, you can come visit me in New York."

Luis' eyes lit up. "With skyscrapers?"

"The biggest ones," A replied, and they sealed the promise with a high-five.

The walk back to the apartment was filled with a comfortable camaraderie that had been missing between A and his family for years. When he arrived, his mother was waiting by the door, surprise evident on her face.

"The park was fun!" Luis declared. "Uncle Alex taught me how to climb super high on the monkey bars!"

A caught his mother's eye. There was a softening in her gaze, a subtle shift that felt like a bridge tentatively being rebuilt.

"You look exhausted," she observed, her tone still carrying a hint of formality. "Have you eaten?"

A meal materialized: a simple but flavorful pasta dish, a crisp salad. They ate in a silence that felt, for the first time, more like companionship than obligation. Afterwards, Luis, finally subdued by the day's adventure, fell asleep on the sofa, his fingers still clutching his crumpled drawing of spaceships and businessmen.

His mother and A lingered, the quiet broken only by the soft ticking of the ornate clock that dominated the living room.

"Thank you," she said finally, her voice barely above a whisper. "For today. It... meant a lot. To both of us."

He couldn't quite meet her gaze. "It was..." He hesitated, searching for the right words. "It was good."

The taxi ride to the airport was a blur of half-remembered streets and fleeting impressions. His mind buzzed, a chaotic mix of relief, regret, and a newfound sense of purpose. Elena's sharp, efficient voicemails berated him for further delays, each missed call adding another layer of dread to his impending return.

At the check-in counter, A paused. His flight was in two hours. He could still make a different choice, rent an apartment, send Elena an apology text that could double as a farewell... The possibilities swirled in his head.

Yet, as tempting as the fantasy was, he knew it wasn't his path. At least not yet. He checked in, passed through security, and found himself with an hour to spare. On a whim, he bought a postcard – a vibrant scene of La Rambla teeming with life. He scrawled a short message:

*Dear R,*

*Barcelona wasn't what I expected. Turns out, neither was I. Thinking of you.*

He slipped the postcard into an international mailbox and felt a flicker of a familiar feeling...hope. A wasn't ready to upend his life in New York, but he wasn't the same man who'd arrived in Barcelona a few days ago either. Change, he finally understood, didn't have to be a sudden and dramatic shift. It could be as simple as a shared laugh in a park, a rediscovered connection with a brother, a postcard sent with a mix of uncertainty and anticipation.

## Chapter 6

A's return to New York was a jarring descent from the whirlwind of emotions Barcelona had stirred. His apartment, once a haven of impersonal luxury, now felt oppressively sterile. Elena's cool welcome, her carefully chosen words filled with quiet reproach, emphasized the growing distance between them.

His first day back at the office was a blur of familiar routines – meetings, reports, and spreadsheets. It was oddly comforting, the predictability acting like a balm to the lingering chaos of his trip. Yet, beneath the surface, something was undeniably different.

The memory of Barcelona lingered like an itch he couldn't scratch. He found himself caught in moments of distraction, the image of R's vibrant smile flashing through his mind during a particularly dry budget meeting. The taste of strong coffee lingered on his tongue, a sharp contrast to the bland corporate brew that fueled his office.

Colleagues, sensing a shift in his usually unflappable demeanor, peppered him with well-meaning questions about his trip. He offered carefully rehearsed responses – vague references to family and jetlag, punctuated by a forced smile.

The once-comforting anonymity of his New York existence felt hollow. He craved the casual warmth of Jordi's greeting, the lively chatter of a crowded café, the shared laughter with Luis on a worn park bench. The life he'd built around order and ambition seemed to lose its luster in the wake of his experiences.

Here's a reworked version of that passage, aiming to heighten the emotional tension and provide more internal depth for both A and Elena:

Elena, always perceptive, noticed the change. "You were restless before you left," she observed one evening over a meticulously prepared meal. "Even more so now." It wasn't an accusation, merely a statement of fact, yet it hung heavy in the air between them.

A hesitated. Honesty was unfamiliar territory in their relationship. He'd spent years building walls of careful composure around his true self, and Elena had never been one to pry. "Barcelona..." he began, then trailed off, unsure how to articulate the whirlwind of emotions. It wasn't just the city itself, but what it represented - a life lived less rigidly, fueled by heart rather than meticulous calculation.

"I know it was more than just a family visit," Elena said, her tone surprisingly gentle. "You always return focused, determined. This time is different. Softer, somehow."



He flinched at the word 'softer'. It felt like an admission of weakness, a flaw in the armor of ambition he'd worn for so long. Yet, a rebellious part of him yearned to confide in her, to share the weight of conflicting desires that plagued him. But something held him back – fear of judgment, yes, but also the terrifying realization that perhaps she wouldn't recognize the man he was becoming.

"It's complicated," he settled for, the understatement a flimsy shield against the intensity of her gaze.

Elena, ever attuned to his moods, wisely chose not to push. The silence that settled between them was laden with unspoken questions and a flicker of vulnerability – a vulnerability neither seemed ready to fully acknowledge. Yet, it was the start of a shift. The meticulously constructed facade of their marriage was showing its first thin cracks.

Life, A discovered, had a frustrating habit of throwing curveballs just when you thought you were finally figuring things out...

As the pandemic waned, Elena, surprisingly, found a new spark. A chance encounter led to a job offer at a women-run cooperative dedicated to sustainable fashion, its ethos a stark contrast to her previous corporate life. A was both proud and unsettled. Their roles were reversing – he the listless one, she the one rediscovering purpose.

Then, his old ambition, bruised but not broken by the turmoil, sought an outlet. Connections formed, opportunities presented themselves, leading to an unexpected job offer with a small, innovative tech firm. The work was challenging, a stimulating puzzle that ignited something long dormant in him. It was also inconveniently demanding, requiring frequent overnight trips and long hours.

"Take the offer," Elena urged, a spark of the confident woman he once knew lighting her eyes. "You need the challenge, the chance to truly test yourself. And... perhaps I need some space to figure things out for myself."

The honesty cut him, a reminder of the uneasy foundation of their marriage. They'd always been more partners than soulmates, their union based on shared goals that seemed to have dissolved over time. But, he felt gratitude for her understanding, and a flicker of excitement at the chance to dive back into work he'd denied for too long.

He threw himself into the new venture, working longer hours than ever. The challenge was invigorating, the sense of creating something meaningful replacing the hollowness that had plagued him for so long. His marriage to Elena slipped into a pattern of comfortable coexistence – they shared meals, talked about practical matters, yet the spark, the deep connection, had long faded. It was an unspoken truth, one they both danced around with the practiced ease of seasoned diplomats.

The opportunity arose during a tense budget negotiation. His client, a Spanish conglomerate, suggested concluding their meeting in Barcelona the following month. An absurd logistical complication, an unnecessary expense... yet, A found himself saying yes before rational thought could intervene.

The moment he stepped back onto the sun-drenched streets, something within him unclenched. Gone was the oppressive weight of routine, the constant gnawing sense of wrongness. The air vibrated with a familiar energy, voices flowed around him in a musical language he only half understood. He was *home* in a way that New York had never been.

An unannounced visit to Jordi's family turned into a joyous hours-long reunion. Little Maria, now a chatty five-year-old, perched on his lap, her sticky fingers and rapid-fire Catalan a delightful assault on his senses. Jordi, ever exuberant, clapped him on the back and plied him with wine. "You look good, my friend! Softer, yes, but a good kind of soft."

His words echoed uncomfortably close to Elena's observation. Perhaps *everyone* could see the change in him, the man he'd left behind. It should have been alarming, yet all he felt was a strange, rebellious sense of peace.

Nights were filled with laughter and music, fueled by a shared bottle of Rioja on Luis's tiny balcony overlooking the city. Questions bubbled up – about his life, his marriage, his fading dreams. Answering felt easier here, beneath a canopy of unfamiliar stars. He spoke of his restlessness, the hollowness that success couldn't fill, the guilt of longing for *more* when he seemingly *had it all*.

Yet, as his return flight approached, dread crept in alongside anticipation. What purpose did this trip serve other than to highlight the growing disconnect from his life? Elena was right – a few weeks' escape wouldn't change their fundamental truth. He was a man with one foot planted firmly in duty, the other yearning to run wildly toward... toward what, exactly, he still wasn't sure.

Boarding the plane, A felt both lighter and heavier all at once. Barcelona had become less of a geographical place and more of a state of mind - a tempting impossibility that threatened to shatter the well-ordered life he'd spent years building.

The weight of Barcelona lingered heavy in the weeks following his return. A immersed himself in work, pushing himself harder, determined to drown the persistent ache with accomplishment. The sterile hum of the office usually drove out all unnecessary thoughts, yet now even in the midst of a complex negotiation, he'd find himself drifting, a splash of sunlight across a Barcelona cobblestone intruding on his mental spreadsheet.

Then, amidst his usual stream of emails, one subject line jolted him: "Hello again from Barcelona! - R"

His first instinct was to hit delete. Logic dictated this was a complication he didn't need, a siren call luring him toward a path fraught with disruption. Yet, a rebellious thrill sparked in him. Just an innocent reply, just catching up... what harm could it do?

"Wonderful to hear from you. Hope all is well..." His fingers flew across the keyboard, a mix of excitement and unease warring within him.

Her response arrived swiftly, friendly yet probing. Was his work trip as fulfilling as the family visit? Did he have plans to return? A pang of guilt twisted in his gut as he typed evasive half-truths.

Then, nestled in the final line, was the casual offer: "If you find yourself back this way, let's have that coffee I promised."

The invitation hung before him, both temptation and a point of no return. In the past, a simple "That sounds lovely" would be a harmless pleasantry. But now, it felt like crossing a line he'd meticulously drawn in his mind.

After days of agonizing indecision, the response he sent surprised even himself: "Actually, I'll be in Barcelona next week for work. Coffee then?"

R's quick reply was a burst of enthusiasm. She suggested a quiet cafe near a sprawling old park, a place he vaguely remembered passing with Luis one evening. The realization sent a shiver down his spine. This wasn't just idle curiosity anymore; it was actively seeking the world he'd yearned for.

As he booked his flights - telling Elena a hastily fabricated story of a last-minute client demand - it was strangely exhilarating. Yet, alongside the thrill, a voice whispered warnings. He was playing with fire, setting a course that could shatter his carefully balanced life, all for the promise of a coffee and an afternoon spent reliving a fleeting, vibrant past.

A meticulously scrutinized the flight options, his heart pounding with a strange mix of anticipation and apprehension. This time, he wouldn't sneak into Barcelona under the guise of family obligation. This was a deliberate detour, a conscious gamble against both his sense of duty and the nagging fear of what such a detour might awaken within him.

Direct routes were uncharacteristically expensive; a testament, perhaps, to the last-minute nature of his decision. In the end, he settled for a convoluted itinerary, a redeye connection through Frankfurt adding hours to the journey he both longed for and dreaded.

Sleep on the plane proved impossible. Every time he drifted off, R's vibrant smile would flash through his mind, or a snatch of Jordi's boisterous laughter would jolt him awake. The stuffy plane felt like a suffocating contrast to the open skies and salty breezes he remembered. His restlessness was mirrored by the child across the aisle, her impatient cries an oddly fitting soundtrack to his own inner turmoil.

Finally, after hours that seemed both endless and rushed, he stepped out onto the Barcelona tarmac. Even the morning air felt different here – thick, perfumed with an unfamiliar bloom, and already hinting at the day's coming warmth. The taxi ride was a whirlwind of impressions: sunlight reflecting off Modernist marvels, the bustle of outdoor cafes spilling onto sidewalks, the melodic chaos of Catalan chatter. A part of him couldn't help but feel a giddy sense of homecoming.

The cafe R had suggested nestled in a quieter neighborhood, its shaded terrace a welcome respite from the growing heat. He arrived absurdly early, anxiety propelling him to pace the cobbled street. Yet, when he spotted her weaving through the crowd, his nervousness dissolved into a surprising ease. She wore laughter as naturally as her summer dress, and her smile – genuine, unguarded – felt like a balm to a wound he didn't realize he carried.

For hours, they talked. Barcelona was an inexhaustible topic: its vibrant contrasts, its stubborn independence, its embrace of both tradition and rebellion. He confessed his restlessness, the feeling that New York's shiny efficiency paled in comparison to the messy vitality of this city. She listened, not judging, but probing with a disarming honesty that chipped away at his carefully constructed facades.

"So, what's the plan?" R asked finally, amusement and a hint of challenge in her eyes. "Another escape when your soul needs a recharge?"

A looked away, guilt snaking through him even as the words tasted false on his tongue. "A fleeting escape, yes," he managed, forcing a lightheartedness he didn't feel. "Back to my real life, you know how it is."

R's eyes held a flicker of disappointment, quickly masked by her ever-present warmth. "Shall we take that walk then? This cafe is lovely," she gestured around the quaint terrace, "but Barcelona is best explored on foot."

Something in her unspoken challenge resonated with his growing restlessness. He agreed before a more cautious part of him could protest. They strolled along a broad avenue, lined with shops he vaguely remembered from his previous visit. The air hummed with the vibrant cacophony of city life - the clatter of cafe chairs being set out for the late lunch crowd, the animated chatter of friends sharing cigarettes on the corner, the melodic call of a street vendor selling colorful bunches of flowers.

Their conversation drifted, a mixture of playful banter and unexpectedly deep dives into memories and dreams. He spoke of his childhood ambitions, long since abandoned in the pursuit of security, and R countered with tales of her impulsive decision to leave her predictable small town for the vibrant chaos of the city.

"This place," she gestured around them at a particularly lively square, the centerpiece a fountain surrounded by overflowing flowerbeds, "it gets under your skin. Makes the 'safe' life feel suffocating."

The laughter died in A's throat as the truth of her words washed over him. As the afternoon melted into evening, the idea of escaping back to his hotel room felt unbearable.

"How about this..." R's voice held a hint of mischief, "We find one of those little tapas places, get some sangria, and postpone your return to real life for a few more hours. What do you say?"

Hesitation warred with desire. Yet, deep down, he knew the decision had been made the moment he'd first clicked "reply" to her email. "Lead the way," he said, a reckless sort of thrill bubbling up within him.

They wandered off the main avenues, into a maze of narrower streets draped in laundry lines and dotted with pint-sized balconies bursting with plants. Laughter bounced through open windows, and the mouthwatering aroma of spices and seafood spilled into the alleyways. Finally, R led him to a doorway, a chipped wooden sign proclaiming "Casa Miguel - Tapas y Más".

The interior was dim and cozy, every table crammed with friends or families, voices raised in lively conversation. They squeezed into a corner beside a window, its sill adorned with a riotously blooming geranium. A harried waiter, whose wide grin made up for his patchy English, scribbled down their order with a flourish. Soon, an impossible array of small plates covered the table – crispy garlic shrimp, patatas bravas that melted in the mouth, and jewel-toned olives shimmering with olive oil.

The margaritas, a potent mix of tequila and citrus, loosened his tongue further. R was an easy, captivating conversationalist. They debated Barcelona's architecture, laughed at shared experiences of workplace absurdities, and he found himself confessing things he'd never spoken aloud before – the hollowness echoing in his achievements, the nagging fear of a life half-lived.

Darkness had long fallen by the time they stepped back onto the cobbled street. The city had transformed, lit by a soft golden glow, the air humming with a different kind of energy. It felt wrong to retreat into anonymity now. He glanced at R, the city lights

illuminating her smile, and something within him ached with a mix of exhilaration and fear.

"One last adventure?" he asked impulsively, the words blurring the line between spontaneous and pre-meditated.

R raised an eyebrow, her own curiosity sparked. "Adventure? I'm intrigued..."

Instead of meandering back toward the heart of the city, he found himself leading them in the opposite direction, a vague memory guiding his steps. Luis had mentioned the beach once, how it became a different world after nightfall.

A sense of anticipation mounted as the sound of waves began to mingle with the fading pulse of city life. And then, the buildings fell away and the beach stretched out before them, the expanse of the Mediterranean shimmering under the moonlight.

The sand was cool beneath their bare feet as they walked, the roar of the waves a welcome contrast to the lively chatter of tapas bars. The vastness of sea and sky filled him with an unexpected awe, dwarfing the anxieties that had felt monumental hours before.

He spotted what he was looking for a few hundred meters down the coast – a cluster of lights and the faint thump of music. "Looks like someone's idea of paradise," he said with a grin, leading R toward the source.

It was a makeshift sort of affair. A small chiringuito bar, usually a daytime haunt, had been transformed. Tiki torches flickered, lanterns hung from the makeshift awning, and a ragtag group of young locals and tourists mingled on the sand.

The bartender, a suntanned man with a mess of blond dreadlocks, greeted them with a boisterous welcome. Someone thrust shots of a fiery-looking liquor toward them, and A, caught up in the moment, downed his in one gulp, the burn followed by a surprising burst of citrus and spice.

Neither he nor R were dancers by nature, yet the infectious rhythm of the music, a mix of salsa and some electronic beat he didn't recognize, drew them into the crowd. Awkwardness dissolved with each uninhibited laugh and every stolen glance across the sandy dance floor.

Time blurred into the joy of movement, of being fully present in the warmth of the night, the laughter, the gentle press of bodies around them. It was as if the careful orderliness of his New York existence were continents away, replaced by a thrilling, reckless sort of freedom.

They stumbled away from the impromptu beach party, laughter bubbling up at their own uncharacteristic abandon. The tequila shots, so carelessly downed, had left a delightful warmth buzzing through them. The world blurred slightly at the edges, but in a way that felt more liberating than concerning.

"Adventure accomplished?" R asked, her voice a touch husky, eyes twinkling.

A grinned back. "Definitely. Though..." he hesitated, the thrill of the night battling a lingering practicality, "I have a *very* early flight."

"Ah yes," she smirked, "back to that real life..."

They walked hand in hand for a while, the shoreline a silvered ribbon against the dark. The roar of the waves was a comforting constant, the rhythm aligning with the gentle buzz in his head. They were both quieter now, exhaustion mixing with a strange sense of intimacy.

"Can we...just for a moment?" A asked, the words spilling out before his cautious inner voice could stop them.

R tilted her head in question, and he gestured toward the wide, empty beach. The night was still warm, the sand beckoning in the moonlight.

Wordlessly, they kicked off their shoes and sank into the cool grains. A stretched out, his eyes following the curve of the coastline until it dissolved into darkness. Moments later, he felt R lie down beside him, close enough that their shoulders brushed.

Above them, the sky was a canvas ablaze with stars. The constellations he'd learned as a child were muddled together, unrecognizable here. Yet, it only added to the feeling of being unmoored, deliciously adrift in this unfamiliar world.

"It's beautiful," R murmured, her voice breaking the silence. "Makes all the noise and worries seem very far away."

A tilted his head to glance at her profile, illuminated by the soft glow of the moon. Something in his chest ached with a mix of tenderness and longing. He'd always been so focused on controlling his own path, yet here, under this vast, indifferent sky, the choices ahead felt both terrifying and thrillingly open.

## Chapter 7

The return flight to New York was a descent into a personal maelstrom. A's mind was a relentless projector, replaying every stolen glance, every whispered word, the ghost of every touch he'd shared with R. The cramped confines of the plane cabin amplified the chaos within him. Each bump and jostle felt like a reminder of the world outside the bubble he'd constructed around their brief encounter. Her laughter, once a delightful sound, now echoed in his mind—a haunting melody that both soothed and tormented him.

The memory of their kiss was the worst. The way her lips had parted beneath his, the soft heat of her breath mingling with his own—it wasn't just attraction. It was something deeper, rawer, more consuming. A visceral hunger he couldn't shake, a gnawing emptiness that only the thought of her could momentarily fill. Every time his eyes drifted closed, the sensation surged back, leaving him restless and unmoored.

When he stepped into his apartment, its sterile perfection felt oppressive, mocking him with its order. The polished chrome fixtures, the immaculate white furniture, the panoramic view of Manhattan—all of it clashed with the whirlwind inside him. Elena's voice broke the silence, a familiar thread of concern woven through her greeting.

"You look terrible," she remarked, eyeing the dark circles under his eyes. "Didn't you sleep at all on the flight?"

"Jet lag," he mumbled, brushing past her. His mind was light-years away, lost in the warmth of Barcelona, in the echoes of R's laughter. He dropped his suitcase in the bedroom without unpacking, his movements mechanical, his gaze distant. Even Elena's gentle touch on his shoulder went unnoticed.

Sleep offered no respite. Each time he lay down, his thoughts spiraled back to R. The way she leaned in when she spoke, how she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, the scent of something floral and citrus lingering on her skin. It was maddening. A compulsion he couldn't suppress.

He clenched his jaw, pressing his fingers to his temples. *Enough*. He needed to stop. But the more he resisted, the stronger the pull became. His mind twisted reality, replaying moments that had never happened, distorting them into something darker, something possessive.

What if she had wanted him more? What if she had reached for him first, desperate, insatiable? His thoughts drifted, fevered and uncontrolled. The



memory of her lips blurred into fantasy—her hands grasping at him, her breath hitching as she surrendered completely.

A groaned, rolling onto his back, heat coiling low in his stomach. He exhaled sharply, his breath uneven. He could see her, standing in his apartment, barefoot, wearing nothing but a baggy white t-shirt. The fabric wasn't tight, but snug enough to outline the gentle curves of her body. It would ride up slightly as she moved, exposing just a sliver of her thighs. His pulse quickened.

He imagined her looking up at him, her lips parted, eyes dark with hunger. He imagined the weight of her in his lap, the way she would press against him, teasing, waiting. He clenched his fists. *Stop. Just stop.* But he couldn't. The vision consumed him.

He imagined her on her knees now, hair messy from his fingers threading through it, her mouth open, full of need. His breath hitched. His body ached with tension, with desire that blurred into something else—something almost cruel. He imagined pushing her down, his grip in her hair tightening, the faint gasp she would make before yielding to him completely. His skin burned with the intensity of it, the sheer *power* of the thought.

A's stomach clenched. A sharp exhale. The fantasy shattered, leaving him breathless, drenched in sweat, the weight of his own thoughts pressing down on him like an unforgiving hand.

His chest rose and fell rapidly, his heartbeat thrumming in his ears. *What the fuck was that?* He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing his temples as if he could scrub the images from his brain. It wasn't just desire anymore. It was something else. Something unsettling.

The guilt was immediate and suffocating. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, running a hand through his hair. He needed to clear his head, to pull himself back to reality.

He reached for his phone. Without thinking, he unlocked it, scrolling until he found her name. His thumb hovered over the keyboard. He shouldn't message her. He knew that. But the need for *something*—some connection, some proof that she was still real—overpowered reason.

*A: Barcelona feels like a dream. Still thinking about that night. Hope you're doing well.*

The moment he hit send, regret clawed at him. What was he expecting? That she'd confess she felt the same? That she'd admit to missing him, too? He stared

at the screen, the blue checkmarks appearing almost instantly. She'd read it. His breath caught. *Come on. Respond.*

Minutes passed. Then an hour. Then two. The silence was deafening.

Finally, the screen lit up. His pulse spiked as her name appeared.

R: *It really was a lovely night. Hope New York's treating you well 😊.*

Lovely. *Lovely.* A dull roar filled his ears. His grip on the phone tightened. She had moved on. For her, it was a pleasant memory, a passing moment. For him, it had been *everything*. He stared at the message, his jaw tightening.

He should let it go. He should accept the distance. But instead, a darker thought slithered in. *She doesn't understand yet. But she will.*

That night, his dreams were feverish and vivid. R stood on the beach, her turquoise hair catching the moonlight like strands of liquid silver. She wore the same red dress with white polka dots, but the fabric billowed unnaturally, as though caught in an invisible current. Her back was to him, her figure illuminated against the endless expanse of the sea.

"A," she called, her voice soft and distant, carried on the wind. He stepped forward, his feet sinking into the cool, damp sand. With each step, the distance between them seemed to stretch, the horizon bending away from him. The waves whispered her name, pulling at his senses, urging him closer.

When she finally turned to face him, her smile was radiant but strange. Her eyes, once so vibrant, now reflected the shifting light of the ocean, dark and unreadable. She reached out to him, her fingers delicate, almost translucent. He took her hand, but it felt like grasping smoke, slipping through his fingers no matter how tightly he tried to hold on.

"You're not meant to follow me," she whispered, her voice tinged with both longing and warning.

"I can't let you go," he replied, his voice trembling with desperation.

Her smile faltered, and a shadow passed over her features. Suddenly, Marc appeared beside her, his hand resting possessively on her shoulder. His gaze bore into A, unyielding and filled with unspoken challenge. R looked at Marc, then back at A, her expression unreadable. Slowly, she began to fade, dissolving into the mist like a mirage.

“No!” A shouted, lunging forward, but the world around him disintegrated. The sand beneath his feet crumbled, the waves rose to swallow him, and her laughter—soft, ethereal—echoed as he fell into the abyss.

He woke up gasping, drenched in sweat, the city skyline looming outside his window. His pulse was still racing, his skin damp with the aftermath of a dream that felt too real, too raw.

He needed to see her again. And this time, he wouldn't leave it to chance.

## Chapter 8

Days turned into weeks, and R's attention to A only grew. She reached out often, her messages light and friendly, carrying the warmth he'd first admired in her. A simple photo of a sunset or a playful comment about a new street art mural would find its way to his phone, each one laced with an eagerness she didn't seem to realize was so transparent.

At first, A answered promptly, feeding into the rhythm of their conversations, offering glimpses of his life in New York or sharing his thoughts about her photos. But as the days passed, a shift began to take hold within him. He realized something unsettling but undeniable: he held the power. R wanted to talk to him—needed to, even—and that gave him leverage.

One morning, R sent him a photo of her favorite café, its outdoor seating basking in the warm Barcelona sunlight.

It wasn't premeditated, not at first. It started as curiosity—how long would she wait if he didn't answer right away? Would she notice if he pulled back a little? Then came the realization: he held the reins. R wanted to talk to him—needed to—and that gave him something he hadn't felt in a long time: control. Amidst the blur of corporate pressure and marital disconnection, she became his secret gravity. And so, he began to experiment with distance.

R: "This place always reminds me of you. Thought you'd like to see it 😊."

A stared at the message for a long moment, his thumb hovering over the keyboard. The urge to respond was there, but he suppressed it. Not yet. Not on her timeline.

Hours passed. He imagined her checking her phone, waiting for his reply. When it finally came, it was deliberate, carefully measured.

A: "Looks nice. You've got great taste, as always."

The response was casual, almost indifferent, and he felt a surge of satisfaction imagining her puzzling over its brevity. He wanted her to wonder, to feel the imbalance. She had reached out, and he had chosen when and how to engage.

R continued to send messages over the following days—small updates about her life, photos of places she'd been, even questions about how his work was going. At first, he responded sporadically, keeping his replies polite but distant. But as her attempts to connect grew more frequent, he started to impose silence.

A day passed. Then two. He didn't reply to her cheerful "Hope you're having a great day!" or her shared photo of a colorful graffiti wall with the caption, *"Made me think of our chats about art."*

The longer he remained silent, the more her messages shifted in tone. The next one carried a hesitant undercurrent.

R: "Hey, just wondering if everything's okay? Haven't heard from you in a bit."

He read the message and set his phone aside, deliberately ignoring the faint twinge of guilt in his chest. This was necessary. She needed to understand that their connection existed on his terms, not hers. If she wanted his attention, she'd have to wait for it.

By the third day, her messages had stopped. For a moment, he wondered if he'd pushed too far, but the thought only emboldened him. Control required risk.

At work, A's colleagues began to notice the change in him. During a Monday morning meeting, his assistant handed him a report, and he realized with a jolt that he had no idea what she'd just said.

"Late night?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Something like that," A replied curtly, flipping through the document without really reading it.

During lunch, a coworker, Michael, slid into the seat across from him in the office cafeteria.

"You've been in a weird mood lately," Michael said, spearing a forkful of salad. "Everything good?"

"Just a lot on my mind," A replied, forcing a neutral smile.

"Work or personal?" Michael pressed, clearly fishing for gossip.

A hesitated, then shrugged. "A bit of both."

Michael leaned back, studying him. "You should come out for drinks with us Friday. Clear your head. You look like you could use it."

"Maybe," A said, though he already knew he wouldn't go. His thoughts were consumed by R, and the idea of pretending to care about office small talk felt unbearable.

By the fourth day of silence with R, he decided to throw her a lifeline.

A: "Sorry for being quiet. Work has been overwhelming lately."

Her reply came within minutes.

R: "No worries! I was just starting to wonder if everything was okay. Hope you're taking time for yourself, too."

The eagerness in her response was palpable, and A felt a dark thrill knowing she'd been waiting, hoping for this. He crafted his next message carefully, a mix of vulnerability and distance.

A: "I've been thinking a lot lately. About life, priorities. Trying to figure things out."

Her reply was immediate.

R: "I get that. If you ever want to talk, I'm here. Always."

Always. The word hung in his mind, both a promise and an opening. He could feel her slipping further into his grasp, unaware of the dynamic he was shaping.

But R didn't always play by his rules. A few days later, she sent another message, this time with a photo of her smiling at the camera, a bright turquoise sky behind her.

R: "Thought you could use some sunshine today 😊."

It was innocent, genuine, but it irked him. She was trying to pull him back into her orbit, to dictate the rhythm of their connection. He didn't reply.

As hours turned into a full day, she sent another message.

R: "Did I say something wrong? Let me know if I did, okay?"

A's jaw tightened as he read the words. She still believed this was a conversation between equals. She still thought she had some claim on his attention, some right to demand his responses. He decided to punish her silence with more silence.

In those quiet hours, his thoughts turned darker. He imagined her staring at her phone, second-guessing every word she'd sent, replaying their conversations in her mind. The idea of her confusion, her frustration—it satisfied something deep

and primal in him. He wanted her dependent on him, tethered to his whims. The power was intoxicating.

By the second day, her messages stopped again. This time, he let the silence stretch longer. The power of withholding, of making her question herself, filled him with a twisted sense of control. When he finally broke it, his message carried an undertone of authority.

A: "I think we need some space."

Her reply came slower than before.

R: "Space? Did I do something wrong?"

He hesitated, savoring the moment before replying.

A: "No. I just need time to focus on myself. Let's take a break from talking for a bit. Two months. We'll catch up after."

The two-month deadline wasn't arbitrary. It was deliberate. A way to ensure she spent that time thinking of him, missing him, waiting for him to return.

Her reply was hesitant, almost uncertain.

R: "Okay... if that's what you need."

A stared at her response, the faint twinge of guilt replaced by the satisfaction of knowing she'd agreed. He had set the terms, and she had accepted them. Control, he realized, wasn't just about dominance. It was about making her feel like she had a choice, even when she didn't.

As he set his phone down, a smile ghosted across his lips. She thought this was over. It hadn't even properly begun

## Chapter 9

The silence stretched across the weeks like an invisible leash, taut and unyielding. For A, it was a calculated stillness, a test of patience, a delicate game of anticipation and dominance. Every day that passed without a response was another link in the chain, another proof of his control. He hadn't touched his phone since sending his last message a month ago—not for her, at least. The decision was intentional. If she truly needed him, she would break first.

And after thirty days, she did.

The screen of his phone illuminated in the dimly lit room, casting a faint glow over the polished whiskey glass in his hand. The notification pulsed like a heartbeat, her name a flickering beacon on the screen. He took his time, letting the weight of the moment settle before lifting the device. The message was brief, hesitant, almost apologetic:

R: "Hi, A. I know you said two months, but I just wanted to check in. Hope you're okay."

He could see it clearly—her typing and deleting, hesitating, debating whether she should reach out at all. A slow, satisfied breath escaped his lips, the corners of his mouth twitching with amusement. She had cracked.

But he didn't answer.

Instead, he set his phone down deliberately, savoring the quiet triumph that coursed through him. It wasn't time yet. She needed to feel his absence deeper, to understand the hollowness of life without him. This was no longer about fleeting attraction—it was about shaping her, bending her emotions to align with his will.

In the days that followed, A refined his approach with meticulous precision, the same strategy he applied in the corporate world. Every message she had sent, every photo, every subtle insecurity she had exposed—he examined them like puzzle pieces, fitting them into a structure only he could see. Patterns emerged. She needed validation, constant reassurance. Her "Did I say something wrong?" and "Hope everything's okay with you" revealed the underlying craving to be acknowledged, to matter.

That was the thread he would pull.

But control wasn't just about giving. It was about withholding. It was about creating a void so vast that only he could fill it.

He began planting small, almost imperceptible seeds of doubt. He knew she overanalyzed words, so he left messages just vague enough to make her wonder.



A simple, "It's been a long day," without elaboration, forcing her to question what had happened. A sudden shift in tone, colder one moment, warm the next. He wanted her second-guessing herself, searching for meaning in the silence he wove around her.

One evening, as he reviewed a tense client report, Jenna, his assistant, entered his office, placing a fresh coffee on his desk. She studied him for a moment before speaking.

"You seem more... focused lately."

A raised an eyebrow, meeting her gaze. "Focused?"

"Determined." She tilted her head slightly. "Like you're building something big."

A faint smile crossed his lips. He tapped his fingers against the desk, considering her words.

"You could say that."

Jenna lingered, watching him carefully. "Just make sure it's worth all the energy you're putting in."

The sentiment stayed with him long after she left. Worth it? The question felt irrelevant. It wasn't about worth. It was about inevitability.

Two weeks later, she cracked again.

R: "A, I'm really sorry if I overstepped. I just miss our talks. Let me know when you're ready."

This time, a slow smile unfurled on his lips. She was apologizing—for wanting to talk to him. That was the first sign of surrender.

But responding too soon would be a mistake. The power wasn't in rushing. It was in making her wait, in letting her dangle on the edge of uncertainty. He let the message sit untouched for a full day before crafting his reply, each word carefully chosen.

A: "I've missed our talks too. But I needed space to think. I'm sorry if my silence hurt you."

The apology would disarm her, soften the frustration she might have felt. He needed her conflicted—torn between longing and understanding. Between pushing forward and holding back.

Her reply came in minutes.

R: "I understand. I just hope you're okay. You've been on my mind a lot."

And there it was. That openness. That raw vulnerability he had been waiting for.

A: "I'm okay. Just trying to figure things out. Your messages mean a lot to me, R. More than you know."

The words were deliberate, meant to make her feel special, like her presence in his life was profound. A hook, cast carefully. And she bit.

Over the following days, their conversations resumed, but he remained strategic. He never answered immediately, always letting hours pass, keeping her in suspense. When he did reply, his messages were thoughtful, laced with just enough depth to keep her invested.

A: "Your ability to see beauty in the smallest things always amazes me. It's... grounding."

Her responses grew more enthusiastic, more personal. She spoke of her struggles at work, her dreams, her self-doubt. And he listened, absorbing every insecurity she revealed. Each one was another tool to deepen his hold on her.

But the real test was yet to come. He needed to isolate her—subtly, gradually. He began mentioning moments from their past conversations, recalling details that made her feel understood in ways others never had. Then, the first strike: a gentle, almost offhand comment about Marc.

A: "I wonder if he really sees you the way you deserve to be seen."

It was a whisper of doubt, a single drop in the ocean of her mind. But he knew it would ripple, growing larger over time.

He pictured their conversations growing strained, their connection fraying under the weight of unspoken tensions. And when R finally sought solace, he would be there, waiting. The thought sent a shiver through him—part exhilaration, part something else. Something more dangerous.

Control wasn't just about bending emotions. It was about reshaping reality.

To temper the unease that clung to him like a second skin, A made a deliberate effort to re-engage at work. That Friday night, he met Michael and Jenna for drinks at a dimly lit bar near the office, where laughter rose above the hum of conversation and the clink of ice in tumblers. Their talk was light—harmless office gossip, vague weekend plans, the safe buoyancy of routine.

Michael lifted his glass with a knowing smirk. “You seem less wound up. Maybe that new client wasn’t such a nightmare after all.”

A managed a chuckle, the sound brittle in his own ears. “Sometimes a little distance changes everything.”

. The low hum of the jazz record filled the apartment, warm and easy beneath the hush of evening. A sat alone in the glow of a desk lamp, his silhouette sharp against the dark city skyline behind him. One hand rested on a crystal tumbler, the whiskey inside catching flecks of light like gold dust.

His phone buzzed against the polished mahogany table.

R’s name lit up the screen.

He let it ring once—twice—before answering.

“I need to see you,” she said.

Her voice was breathless. Not rushed, but caught—between wanting and shame, between control and something that felt dangerously close to surrender.

A leaned back in his leather chair, swirling the drink in his hand with a slow, deliberate motion. The ice clinked softly.

“Need?” he repeated, almost lazily. His tone was velvet and smoke.

“Yes,” she said after a pause, the word soaked in vulnerability. “I don’t know what’s happening to me, A. I just... I feel lost when you’re not there.”

He exhaled quietly, savoring the way her words wrapped around him.

“Good,” he murmured. “That’s how I know you’re mine.”

R set her keys down in the quiet of her apartment, the door clicking softly shut behind her. The day still clung to her—its noise, its faces, the weight of too many thoughts. She kicked off her shoes, loosened her hair, and padded barefoot across the cool floor toward the bedroom.

Her phone was still warm in her hand, A’s voice echoing faintly in her mind like the last note of a song that wouldn’t stop playing.

That voice. That pull.

She slid under the covers, exhaling long and deep. She wasn’t even sure when her eyes closed—only that they did. And that he was already there.

The world felt different in the dream.

Softer. Slower. Suspended in golden light.

She was standing outside a café she didn't recognize but somehow knew. The air smelled of rain and roasted coffee beans, and dusk was settling over the city like silk.

A was already waiting—leaning against the doorframe in a charcoal coat, his collar turned slightly up, a look in his eyes that said finally. No tension. No games. Just presence.

She walked toward him.

“You came,” he said, his voice lower than she remembered, like it had dropped into some deeper place meant only for her.

“Of course I did,” she answered, without hesitation.

Inside, the café was quiet and half-lit. Wooden tables. Flickering candles. A record playing something soft and distant in the corner. The kind of place where no one rushed anything.

They sat by the window. He ordered for her—like he knew. And he did. Her favorite wine. Something small to share. They talked—not like the way they usually did, circling and teasing—but honestly, openly. About music, and childhood, and regrets. About the time he was scared. About the time she was brave.

He made her laugh. Not the tight laugh she used to push things away—but that rare, full one that curled out of her before she could stop it.

And when the bill came, he didn't even look at it.

He just reached for her hand.

They walked after that. Nowhere in particular. Just through quiet streets that shimmered with lamplight and the kind of magic she'd convinced herself only existed in books.

At some point, she stopped. Looked up at him.

“You're different here,” she whispered.

He stepped closer, his coat brushing her arms. “No,” he said. “This is what I am when I'm not trying to scare myself.”

Then he kissed her.

And it wasn't like the other times—not rough or urgent or steeped in hunger. It was slow. Certain. The kind of kiss that says, I've been waiting for this.

The kiss deepened, slowly at first—his lips moving over hers with aching patience, as if time itself had stilled just for them. She felt his breath warm against her mouth, his hand rising to cradle the side of her face. When his thumb brushed along her jaw, something in her melted. Something that had been tightly held.

She leaned into him, pressing her body against his, needing to feel the solidity of him, the reality of his heat and shape. He didn't pull away. He let her come to him, let her need rise.

The city fell away behind them.

They were in his apartment now—without the logic of distance or movement, because dreams don't require doors or elevators. Only want.

The lights were low. Rain traced lines down the windows, and his hands were on her hips, guiding her backward until her knees met the edge of the bed. He kissed her again, harder this time—teeth grazing her bottom lip, tongue coaxing hers to respond.

She gasped as he slid his hands under her blouse, lifting the fabric in one fluid motion. The lace of her bralette grazed his palms. He took a moment to look at her—really look—and the hunger in his eyes made her shiver.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he murmured, voice rough now, reverent.

She reached for his shirt, undoing each button with trembling fingers, exposing the heat of his chest, the subtle tension in his abdomen. He stepped out of his slacks and watched as she lay back for him, legs parting slightly, blouse open, bralette sheer against her flushed skin.

He undressed her slowly, mouth brushing every inch he revealed—her collarbone, the swell of her breasts, the soft underside of her thighs. His hands never stopped moving, coaxing, learning her.

When he pressed his lips between her legs, she cried out—soft at first, then louder, helpless. His tongue moved in circles, slow and torturous, alternating pressure until her hips bucked against his mouth.

“Stay still,” he whispered, his voice vibrating through her. “Let me have you.”

She nodded—barely. She was already unraveling.

When he finally slid inside her, it felt like something clicked into place—like the ache she'd carried for so long finally had somewhere to go. He moved slowly at first, eyes locked with hers, one hand tangled in her hair, the other gripping her thigh.

“Tell me,” he murmured, breath hitching against her ear. “Tell me you dreamed of this.”

“I did,” she gasped, arching into him. “I never stopped.”

He fucked her deeply, deliberately, each thrust drawn out as if he was memorizing the feel of her. Her nails raked across his back. Her breath came in desperate, broken moans.

She came with his name on her lips, shuddering around him. And still, he didn't stop.

“You're mine here,” he said into her throat. “Even in your sleep.”

“Yes,” she whispered, trembling. “Always.”

## Chapter 10

The meeting had passed the two-hour mark. On the ultrawide monitor, Kevin Chen was still speaking—his tone sharp but flagging, the cadence of someone who had repeated himself a few times without realizing. A listened without interrupting, one hand resting loosely on the desk, the other absently turning his phone over between his fingers.

“So if we align the neural architecture with the node scaling proposal,” Kevin was saying, “we’d have to restructure the latency thresholds regionally. I mean, that’s assuming we—hold on.”

He blinked. Paused.

“Was that your phone just now?”

A glanced down. The screen had lit up briefly with a notification. His wallpaper had flashed for a second—just long enough.

Kevin leaned toward the camera. “That photo—what was that?”

A tapped the screen off without rush. “Nothing.”

“No, come on,” Kevin said. “That wasn’t New York.”

A let a small silence fall. It wasn’t defensive. Just unbothered.

“It’s a street in Barcelona,” he said. “I took it years ago.”

Kevin’s eyebrows rose. “You took that? It looked like a postcard.”

A didn’t answer.

Kevin tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly. “Wait... are you from there?”

A hesitated, then nodded once. “Originally.”

“Huh,” Marcus said, sitting back. “That explains a few things.”

A raised an eyebrow, not inviting more—but not resisting either.

“I don’t know,” Kevin said, smiling faintly. “You’ve got this quiet precision. Like someone who grew up around churches and stone, not steel and noise.”

A allowed the corner of his mouth to lift. “There’s plenty of noise in Barcelona.”

“Yeah, but it’s a different kind,” Marcus said. “The kind that lingers.”

The call drifted after that—still technical, still sharp, but changed. Something had shifted, even if neither of them said it aloud.

For the first time in a long while, A had let something slip.

And Kevin had noticed.

Ten minutes later, the call had eased into something looser. The edge of urgency had dulled. Kevin was leaning back now, half reclined in his chair, drink in hand. The day had clearly worn him out—but not enough to stop the wheels from turning.

“So,” he said, glancing again at the paused frame of A’s face. “Barcelona.”

A didn’t respond. He was adjusting a setting on another monitor, or pretending to.

“You ever think of going back?” Kevin asked.

A paused. “Why would I?”

“I don’t know. Nostalgia. Sunshine. Red wine. Maybe someone you forgot to say goodbye to.”

A didn’t rise to the bait. “I’m not sentimental.”

“Right,” Kevin smirked. “Just a guy who keeps old photos of alleys and shuttered windows as his phone wallpaper.”

A let a beat of silence fall. “I liked the light in that one.”

Kevin grinned. “See, that’s exactly what I mean. That’s some *Barcelona* shit. Nobody in Manhattan says they liked the light. We say, ‘great shot, what’s the resale value?’”

A’s mouth curved slightly. It was the closest thing to a laugh he gave.

Kevin sat up again, eyes sharpening with something halfway between mischief and intent. “We should go,” he said.

A looked at the screen. “To Barcelona.”

“Why not?”

“You hate jet lag.”

“I hate not knowing what I’m missing,” Kevin said. “And right now I’m missing a city you clearly know how to move through.”



A's gaze drifted to the far window. Manhattan was beginning to fade into violet. He didn't answer.

"Three days," Kevin pressed. "You walk me through your version of it. I'll pretend it's about funding rounds, you pretend it's about me."

A gave a low hum. "You think I guide walking tours now?"

Kevin laughed. "Nah. I think you've been avoiding that city for a reason. And I think it might be time to stop."

A didn't reply. His silence wasn't resistance. It was something else. Something shifting.

For now, Kevin took it as a maybe.

And maybe, it was.

The call ended just before dusk. A didn't move.

The screen went black, leaving only his own faint reflection layered over the digital ghost of Kevin's last expression—a blur of teeth, ambition, and a joke he maybe hadn't meant as a joke.

A sat there in the quiet, his hands resting lightly on the desk. The office lights dimmed automatically, softening the room into a cool wash of blues and silvers. Outside, the sky was shifting into something less precise—less corporate. Manhattan turning to silhouette.

He reached for his phone again, but didn't unlock it.

Instead, he stared at the screen.

The photograph. That street. The way the shadows fell between the buildings, long and slow like time had loosened its grip.

He remembered the moment he'd taken it—not because it had mattered then, but because it hadn't. It had been a passing moment. Something ordinary.

Which made it worse.

His thumb hovered over his travel app.

Just curiosity, he told himself.

He typed: **BCN**.

Wednesday morning. Direct. No layovers. First class. Available.

He closed the tab. Then opened it again.

He didn't book it. Not yet.

But the flicker had happened.

And he knew himself well enough to recognize what that meant.

The question wasn't whether he would go.

The question was when he'd stop pretending he hadn't already decided.

Dinner was quiet.

Elena had made something simple—grilled sea bass, fennel, a glass of white wine that caught the overhead light in pale gold. She moved through the kitchen with her usual elegance, speaking softly about a gallery opening in Tribeca and someone's new installation that "meant well but lacked center."

A listened, present in the right ways. But not entirely there.

It wasn't until halfway through the meal that he said it.

"I may need to go to Barcelona next week."

The words landed without emphasis. A gentle insertion into the evening.

Elena paused, her fork resting on the edge of the plate.

"For work?" she asked, tone even.

"Kevin wants to explore a potential opening," A replied. "Regional scaling. Connections on the ground."

She studied him for a moment, not accusing, not emotional—just aware.

"You haven't been in... what? Five years?"

He nodded. "Close to six."

She let that sit between them for a moment. Then she reached for her wine.

"Do you want me to come?"

It was the kind of question she knew how to ask—generously, almost tenderly, with just enough room to say no.

A held her gaze. “I think it’s better if I go alone. It’ll be tight. Mostly meetings.”

She smiled, soft but distant. “Of course.”

It was the kind of smile that understood everything—what was spoken and what wasn’t. She didn’t push. She never did.

She just returned to her plate. “Let me know if you need help packing.”

He nodded once, and they finished dinner in that delicate, practiced stillness they both excelled at—two people who had mastered coexisting inside their own silences.

But under the surface, something had already shifted.

Not between them.

Inside him.

He packed with precision.

Two tailored shirts, one black, one white. A lightweight blazer. His old leather watch. No tie. No cufflinks. Just the essentials of a man who never appeared to be trying too hard.

The suitcase was small. Barely enough for a weekend. But that was the point.

By morning, the city outside had thinned into fog. The kind of day New York wore like a smudge. He checked in without lingering, moved through security like smoke—fluid, invisible, practiced.

At the gate, he didn’t read. Didn’t take out his phone. Just sat.

Across the glass, the plane waited, white and sleek against the tarmac.

**BCN** blinked on the screen overhead. 07:45. On time.

He boarded early. Window seat, as always.

As the plane climbed, he leaned his head against the cool plexiglass, eyes half-closed. The skyline below dissolved into grids and glints and soft distance.

And yet, somewhere inside him, something was sharpening.

He hadn’t messaged R. Hadn’t even opened the thread. But the city would do what it always did—it would pull at her, too. The streets still held their shape. The ghosts didn’t move much.

There were meetings scheduled. Restaurants chosen for plausible deniability. A hotel with sandstone walls and a terrace no one would think to ask about.

But none of that mattered.

What mattered was movement.

What mattered was **going**.

Not for her.

Not officially.

Not in any way he'd ever have to explain.

But he would be there.

And if she still moved through the city the way she used to—quietly, sharply, like she didn't want to be seen but needed to be noticed—

He'd know.

## Chapter 11

The terminal smelled of overbrewed coffee, polished floors, and faint citrus cleaner—some chemical approximation of calm. Outside, the tarmac gleamed with condensation, slick under the low orange haze of the first arriving light. It was one of those mornings that hadn't quite decided what it wanted to be—cold, but not bitter; gray, but with a promise of color later.

A stepped into it like a shadow fitting a frame.

He wore a charcoal coat, high-collared and clean-lined, over a black turtleneck that looked effortless but had been chosen with precision. Around him, travelers moved in sluggish waves—business casuals with duffel bags and sleep creases on their faces, couples wrapped in fleece and friction, a teenage girl dragging a magenta suitcase with a keychain that jingled when she turned too fast.

Near the windows, a man in his sixties sat with a wedding band on his right hand instead of his left, checking a hotel confirmation email twice before deleting it. Across the aisle, a woman fed Cheerios one by one to a toddler in a stroller, her eyes distant, her hands methodical.

A caught none of their gazes, but he felt them. Or rather, he felt *like* them—people leaving something, or pretending they weren't.

The gate display blinked in soft blue:

**BCN 07:45 – ON TIME**

He took a seat by the floor-to-ceiling windows. The seat was too cold at first, the upholstery stiff. The glass beside him fogged faintly with breath. On the other side, the plane waited, white and patient, sleek as a secret.

He set his phone on the armrest screen-down.

He didn't check his messages.

But he knew exactly what sat at the top of his inbox.

**R**

Still pinned. Still unread.

Still asking: *What do you want from me, A?*

A man across from him shifted in his seat, adjusting the cuffs of a shirt that didn't quite fit. Maybe borrowed. Maybe from a life he no longer inhabited fully. Another traveler nearby sat with her jaw clenched too tight, tapping the rim of her paper coffee cup with one painted nail. Red. Chipped at the center.

Everyone around him carried something unseen.

Just like him.

A leaned back slightly, legs crossed at the ankle, the crisp line of his trousers catching the artificial light. A gate agent passed with the deliberate calm of someone used to being ignored, announcing the boarding group in the same voice one might use to recite weather reports. Flat. Neutral. Inevitable.

### **Group 1. First class.**

He stood. Smoothly. Without rush.

His suitcase glided behind him on near-silent wheels, its black shell matte and scuffless—untouched, like the part of him that had already decided not to look back.

Not at New York.

Not at Elena, still asleep in their apartment above the city.

And not at the version of himself that belonged to this place—buttoned, polished, and exact.

He didn't know what version of himself would step off the plane.

But he knew what city was waiting to meet it.

The jet bridge was quiet.

The muffled clack of rolling wheels, the soft shift of fabric coats brushing past—everything was hushed, like the volume of the world had been turned down. Ahead of him, a man in a tailored navy blazer paused to answer a text with his thumb held stiffly, like he'd done this a thousand times. Behind him, two women murmured in Catalan, their voices soft and affectionate, one of them holding a bag of wrapped sweets from a kiosk, the other pulling her scarf tighter against her chest as if it were armor.

A waited until they moved forward before stepping in.

The aircraft interior greeted him with the scent of pressurized air, citrus soap, and the faintest chemical trace of plastic packaging. First class was still half-empty. Muted lighting ran in a soft gold ribbon along the ceiling. Upholstery in charcoal leather. A man in the front row had already reclined his seat and draped a cashmere blanket over his legs like he didn't intend to wake up until Barcelona.

A took his seat by the window.

He placed his coat in the overhead, careful to keep it from folding awkwardly. Sat down. Adjusted the seat angle two clicks back. Buckled the belt loosely. His movements were efficient, habitual—but there was something else there too. Not tension. Not quite. Something *watchful* inside him.

The window was cold to the touch. He pressed two fingers against it briefly. Outside, the tarmac had turned pale in the shifting light—clouds still low, the plane beside theirs dripping runoff from its wing like condensation on a glass.

The flight attendant approached with a practiced smile. Blonde hair pulled into a perfect twist. Neutral lipstick. “Would you like water, juice, or cava?”

“Cava,” A said without inflection.

She poured it from a small green bottle into crystal. Placed it gently on the armrest. “We’ll be in the air shortly, Mr. A.”

He nodded once. Didn’t drink it yet.

The seat beside him remained empty. Good.

He exhaled and finally turned his phone screen-up—but didn’t unlock it. R’s thread glowed faintly through the preview. Just her name. No message. As if the app itself had learned to behave.

He knew what would happen if he opened it.

Her photo would be there. That one she hadn’t changed. The one where she wasn’t quite smiling. Her eyes not quite daring. It wasn’t the photo itself that unsettled him. It was what it had meant: *You don’t get to pretend I’m not here.*

And now, she *was* here. Or would be. Somewhere in that city.

The cabin door sealed shut with a hiss. Then the faint thud of the bolt locking in place. The flight safety video began to play on the front screen—its bright graphics and soothing voice trying to make routine feel like reassurance.

He ignored it. He always had.

Outside, the plane was being towed into position. The engine whine rose like something waking.

A closed his eyes.

He hadn’t answered her.

Hadn't warned her.

Hadn't planned anything beyond presence.

But he was coming.

And he knew—if she still walked the city the same way, if she still passed the same bookstores and bakeries and shadowed alleyways—he'd find her.

Not because he meant to.

But because Barcelona remembered.

The plane lifted into the sky with the soft insistence of inevitability.

No jolt, no drama. Just that familiar, gentle push as wheels left ground—suspension before surrender. The city below blurred into lattices of steel and geometry, Manhattan dissolving into distant grid and glass.

A didn't look down.

He let the cabin hum take over—the low drone of ascent, the sigh of pressurization sealing the world into its own artificial calm. The clink of glassware. A faint cough two rows ahead. Someone unwrapping a mint with too much care.

He sipped his cava now, slowly. Dry, slightly metallic. Forgettable.

His tray table stayed folded. No laptop. No book. The only thing open in front of him was the small blank square of the in-flight screen, offering maps, altitudes, time zones he wasn't ready to belong to yet.

He leaned his head back.

And let memory do what it always did when nothing else demanded his attention.

The sun through her window, midmorning, too warm for December. Her hair damp from a shower. The sound of traffic echoing faintly off old stone. Not even a kiss—just the moment before one. The moment when everything still held the potential to break either way.

That was what he remembered. Not the words. Not even her voice.

Just that pause.

He opened his eyes again.

Pulled out his phone. Still didn't unlock it.



Instead, he turned it over in his palm—once, twice, like a coin being weighed.

Three meetings were on the calendar. The investor brunch in Sant Gervasi. A workspace walkthrough in Poblenou. The third one—lunch at a place R used to hate. She'd called it pretentious once, for putting foam on a tomato.

He'd chosen it deliberately.

Just in case she walked by.

He wasn't chasing her. He wasn't even looking.

He just wanted to occupy the same coordinates. To let the air between them shrink naturally, like condensation on glass. If she noticed, she'd know what it meant. And if she didn't... that told him something, too.

The seatbelt sign turned off with a chime.

The flight attendant passed again. "Would you like anything, Mr. A?"

He shook his head.

He was already full—with memory, with calculation, with the low, precise ache of knowing something was going to happen, and choosing not to steer it.

He wasn't in Barcelona yet.

But he'd already arrived.

## Chapter 12

The sky loomed over Barcelona like a watercolor painting left out in the rain—muted blues bleeding into steely grays, with patches of darkness threatening to spill their contents onto the city below. As A's flight descended through the dense cloud cover, the atmosphere pressed against the plane windows with an almost tangible weight, the air so thick with humidity it seemed to bend the light itself. The clouds hung impossibly low, pregnant with rain that refused to fall, creating a pressure that matched the tension coiled tight in A's chest.

The plane's wheels kissed the tarmac with a whisper, the city sprawling before him like a familiar stranger. Barcelona in autumn was a study in contrasts—the modernist architecture rising defiantly against the brooding sky, while palm trees swayed beneath, their fronds heavy with moisture. The Mediterranean air, usually crisp and salt-tinged, felt different today—oppressive, charged with static electricity that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

A caught his reflection in the window—composed, unreadable, precisely as he'd crafted it to be. But beneath that carefully maintained exterior, something stirred. The phone in his pocket seemed to burn against his thigh, R's unread message a constant presence in his consciousness. He couldn't remember the last time he'd left her waiting this long for a response. The thought brought a slight upturn to the corner of his mouth.

The terminal greeted him with a blast of over-chilled air, a stark contrast to the humidity that followed him from the jet bridge. Outside, the temperature had climbed to an unseasonable high, creating a greenhouse effect beneath the low cloud ceiling. Droplets of condensation beaded on glass surfaces, while the pavement released waves of heat that distorted the air above it. The scent of petrichor—earth anticipating rain—mixed with the aroma of fresh-baked pastries from a nearby café and the sharp bite of automobile exhaust.

In the sleek black sedan, A watched Barcelona unfold through tinted windows. The city moved like a living organism—pedestrians weaving through narrow streets, their movements quick and purposeful beneath the threatening sky. Shadows from the clouds painted shifting patterns across Art Nouveau facades, while the distant spires of Sagrada Família pierced the gloomy heavens like a silent prayer.

The business lounge where he met Kevin and the investors was climate-controlled to perfection, but A could feel the atmospheric pressure building outside, mirroring the weight of expectations in the room. Light filtered through floor-to-ceiling windows, casting everything in a strange, submarine

quality that made the men's expensive watches and cufflinks gleam like artifacts recovered from the depths.

"Barcelona is primed for this," Kevin said, his enthusiasm barely contained. "The market indicators—"

"Are promising," A finished smoothly, his voice carrying just the right note of assured authority. He could feel the investors leaning in, their attention caught in his carefully woven web of possibilities and projections. The meeting flowed exactly as he'd orchestrated it, each point landing with precision, each concern addressed before it could fully form.

Outside, thunder rolled in the distance—a low, warning growl from the Mediterranean.

When the meeting concluded, A felt the familiar rush of satisfaction that came with a perfectly executed performance. But it was different this time, tempered by the anticipation of what was to come. In the car once again, he finally withdrew his phone, its screen reflecting the darkening sky above.

The weight of R's unread message pressed against his thumb. Instead of opening it, he composed his own:

"Where are you?"

The words hung there, stark and demanding. He waited, letting the moment stretch thin, before adding:

"I have a tight schedule, but I have a couple of hours free now. Want to meet?"

The phone's vibration cut through the heavy air like lightning. A watched R's response materialize on the screen:

"What? Are you here?"

A smile curved his lips—sharp, satisfied. The response was exactly what he'd anticipated, carrying all the surprise and barely concealed emotion he'd calculated for. He let his thumb hover over the screen, imagining her face in that moment, the way her composure would have flickered, if only briefly.

Through the car window, he observed how the threatening sky had begun to press even lower over Barcelona's Gothic Quarter, the ancient stones now a deeper shade of umber in the strange, pre-storm light. The air between the buildings had grown so dense it seemed to trap sounds, making every noise feel closer, more intimate.

"Yes, I'm here," he typed, each word deliberate. "Want to meet up now?"

The response came faster this time, a single word that carried volumes in its brevity:

"Where?"

A glanced out at the city streets, where people hurried along under the oppressive sky, some already opening umbrellas despite the rain's continued reluctance to fall. The tension in the air matched the tightness in his chest—anticipation wound like a spring, ready to release.

"In a café next to you," he replied, then added, "I can take a taxi and come to you."

The simplicity of the offer belied its careful construction. Direct, casual, as if this meeting were the most natural thing in the world—as if he hadn't orchestrated every moment leading up to it. As if his presence in Barcelona was merely coincidence, rather than the precisely planned movement it actually was.

The dots indicating her typing appeared, disappeared, then appeared again. Outside, the first distant rumble of thunder rolled across the city like a warning.

A waited, perfectly still in the back of the sedan, his reflection in the tinted window showing no trace of the satisfaction he felt inside. In the strange light of the gathering storm, his eyes looked darker, more intent. Everything was aligning exactly as he'd envisioned—the weather, the timing, the responses.

Now he just needed her final answer, though he already knew what it would be. After all, storms weren't the only predictable things in Barcelona today.

The phone's screen lit up with R's response, each word making A's carefully constructed control waver slightly:

"Yes. Let's meet at the café in the mall. We can be more private there... have a coffee or even a mojito."

R's fingers hesitated over her phone as she typed, her heart hammering against her ribs.

*R: Yes. Let's meet at the café in the mall. We can be more private there... have a coffee or even a mojito.*

The second she hit send, she exhaled, releasing the breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

She should have expected this—should have known that A wouldn't warn her, wouldn't ease her into his presence. He never did. He appeared like a sudden shift in the wind, unpredictable and impossible to ignore. Now he was here, in Barcelona, in her orbit again, pulling her in before she could decide if she wanted to be caught.

Her thumb hovered over her message thread with her best friend, Éric.

He was the only person who knew about A. Well, *really* knew.

She switched over to their chat and quickly typed:

R: *He's here.*

A second later, Éric's reply popped up.

Éric: *Wait. WHAT. Right now?? Where?*

R: *Barcelona. He just messaged me. Wants to meet. I'm going.*

Éric: *I swear to god, R, if you do this without telling me exactly where you'll be, I will drag you out of there myself.*

R rolled her eyes, but a small, grateful smile tugged at her lips. Éric had always been the overprotective one, his sharp instincts and sharper tongue keeping her from making truly reckless decisions.

R: *Relax, drama queen. I'll be at the café in the mall. You can track my phone if you want.*

Éric: *You KNOW I will.*

R: *He doesn't know I told you about him, right?*

Éric: *Babe. A barely knows what you're thinking half the time, and he likes it that way. He probably assumes no one else exists in your life when he messages you.*

R chewed her lip, a strange twist of emotion curling in her stomach. Éric wasn't wrong. A had a way of making her feel singular—like when she was with him, the rest of the world faded into irrelevance. It was intoxicating. It was dangerous.

She switched chats, opening the conversation with her boyfriend, Marc.

This was the part she hated.

Her fingers moved quickly, the lie forming easily, as if it had been waiting for this exact moment.

*R: Hey babe, I just got a call from my mom. She took a fall, nothing serious, but I want to check on her. I might be late for dinner, okay?*

The dots appeared immediately.

*Marc: Shit, is she alright? Want me to come with you?*

Guilt prickled at the back of her neck, but she pushed it aside.

*R: No, no, it's fine. She's embarrassed more than anything. I'll just go see her and let you know.*

*Marc: Alright. Let me know if she needs anything.*

*R: I will. Love you.*

She locked her phone before she could dwell on it.

Marc was good. Solid. He was everything A wasn't—stable, kind, warm. He didn't play mind games. He didn't leave messages unanswered just to make her think.

And yet, here she was.

Her stomach twisted as she stood from the café table, adjusting her jacket. The mall was only a short walk away. The air outside was thick with anticipation, the first droplets of rain finally breaking free from the sky, dotting the pavement like ink stains.

"I'll be there in twenty," he typed back, his fingers slightly less steady than usual.

Inside, the mall's climate-controlled atmosphere was a sharp contrast to the electrical charge of the weather outside. The café-bar occupied a quiet corner of the upper level, its warm lighting and wood panels creating an intimate atmosphere that felt separated from the rest of the world. A spotted R immediately.

She had chosen a corner booth, partially screened by elegant dividers and tropical plants. The setup offered a clear view of both entrances while remaining relatively hidden from casual passersby. Her choice of location was strategic—something that would have normally amused him, had his heart not been hammering against his ribs with such unprofessional intensity.

A adjusted his tie, aware of the dampness on his fingers. This wasn't like him. He'd faced down boardrooms full of hostile investors without breaking a sweat. He'd negotiated deals worth millions without a tremor in his voice. But now, watching R lift her glass—mojito, he noted, not coffee—to her lips, he felt his usual iron control beginning to slip.

The last time they'd met... flashed through his mind, the Kiss...

"You're late," R said as he approached, her voice carrying that familiar blend of authority and something else—something that made his skin prickle with awareness.

A slid into the booth, but instead of sitting across from her, he chose to sit beside her. She had deliberately picked a more secluded spot, a place where the noise of the café faded into the background, allowing a sense of intimacy to settle between them. He mirrored her move—not just to close the physical distance, but to play the same game she was playing, to see where this encounter might lead.

"Traffic," he muttered, though the excuse felt flimsy. He had planned everything down to the smallest detail, yet somehow, everything had unraveled the moment he saw her.

Through the thick glass windows of the mall, he watched the rain finally begin to fall. Droplets slid down the glass like tiny rivers, racing each other in uneven trails, blurring the neon signs and hurried silhouettes outside. Inside, the ambient café music hummed softly, mingling with the distant chatter of shoppers, creating a cocoon of quiet around them.

R stirred her mojito absentmindedly, her fingers tracing the condensation on the glass. When she finally spoke, her voice was calm, but her eyes held something sharper beneath the surface. "So," she said, tilting her head just slightly, "are we going to talk about why you're really in Barcelona?" Her gaze met his, steady, challenging. "Or are we going to pretend this is just another business meeting?"

A signaled to the passing server, ordering a mojito of his own. Coffee wouldn't be enough for this conversation. He needed something stronger, something to dull the sharp edges of what was coming.

This wasn't just a secret meeting.

This was a reckoning.

And for the first time in years, A wasn't sure he was in control.

The server placed his mojito in front of him, the mint leaves floating like tiny islands in the clear liquid. He barely noticed. Outside, the rain thickened, washing away the city beyond the glass, turning everything into a hazy impressionist painting of wet streets and distorted lights. But A wasn't looking at the storm anymore.

His focus was entirely on her.

R exhaled softly, her fingers tightening around her glass before setting it down. The weight of unsaid words lingered between them, thick as the humidity outside. Then, without hesitation, she reached for his hand, her touch light but deliberate.

"I missed you," she admitted, her voice barely above a whisper, but in the charged silence of their secluded booth, it landed like a confession.

A felt his body react before his mind could catch up. Her fingers were smaller than his, warm, threading between his own as if she had done it a thousand times before. But it wasn't just the way she held his hand—it was the way she shifted closer, the way she guided his arm between her breasts, pressing it against the soft rise and fall of her breath.

His pulse spiked.

The heat of her body seeped through his dress shirt, a slow, deliberate burn that sent a shockwave through his nerves. He could feel the steady rhythm of her breathing, the way her chest rose and fell in perfect synchronization with his own. His body tightened, a coil of restraint barely holding together. His jaw clenched, his heartbeat hammering in his throat, every nerve ending attuned to the closeness of her.

R didn't speak. She just held him there, her fingers wrapped around his forearm, keeping him in place like she needed the contact as much as the air she breathed.

A felt himself growing hard beneath the table, the realization sending a rush of control and frustration through him. He closed his eyes for a second, exhaling through his nose, forcing his body to obey him. Not yet. Not like this. He wouldn't lose control—not to her, not to this moment.

He let the air settle between them before he finally spoke, his voice steady but low. "Do you want to talk about what happened that day?"

R hesitated.

A slow, almost imperceptible shift in her posture. The subtle catch of her breath.



She didn't answer right away, but when she did, her voice was softer, less guarded. "What do you think?"

Her grip on his arm tightened just slightly, like she was daring him, testing him.

A turned his head toward her, his lips nearly brushing her hair. The scent of her—something citrusy, sharp and intoxicating—hit him like a drug. His free hand curled into a fist under the table, anchoring himself.

"What would happen if, for example, I did it again right now?" he murmured, his lips barely moving, the question slipping between them like a spark between exposed wires.

R sucked in a breath. He felt it more than he heard it.

"I... don't know," she admitted, and her voice trembled just enough for him to catch it.

A smiled—slow, calculated, dark. His fingers loosened around hers, slipping free only to trail the tips of his fingers along her wrist, over the delicate veins beneath her skin. He could feel the rapid pulse there, betraying her more than her words ever could.

His voice dropped even lower, a dangerous whisper. "I won't kiss you, R."

Her breath hitched.

He shifted just slightly, enough for the heat of his mouth to ghost over her skin, his words curling against the sensitive space between her ear and jaw.

"If you want something," he murmured, "you have to take it."

Silence stretched between them, heavy, tangible.

He didn't move. He didn't lean in any further, didn't close the final gap between them. He just let the tension coil tighter, let the weight of his words settle over her, let her feel the pull of what she wanted but had yet to act on.

R's grip on his arm was trembling now, her fingers pressing into the fabric of his sleeve like she was steadying herself. Her breathing had changed—shallower, uneven.

A tilted his head slightly, his gaze locked on her lips. "What's wrong?" he asked, voice deceptively light. "You seemed so sure a moment ago."

Her eyes flickered up to meet his, and for a brief moment, he saw it. The hesitation. The war inside her.

Then, just as quickly, something in her hardened.

She shifted in her seat, pressing into his arm again, testing him. "You think you're in control, don't you?" Her voice was soft, but there was a challenge laced beneath it.

A's lips twitched. "Aren't I?" he countered smoothly.

Her fingers tightened on his arm, her nails digging just slightly into his skin.

And then—she moved.

Not away. Closer.

Her lips brushed his jaw first, featherlight, just barely there. The ghost of a touch that sent a shiver down his spine. A sharp, electric sensation that he felt everywhere.

His entire body locked down, his fingers clenching against his knee, forcing himself to remain still, to let her make the next move.

R exhaled, her breath warm against his skin. "Maybe," she whispered, her lips so close that every syllable was like a brand against him.

A felt something snap inside him.

Control was a game they both played, a game they were both dangerously good at. But in this moment, with her pressed against him, her body practically trembling with anticipation, he wasn't sure if either of them was winning—or if it even mattered anymore.

His patience was razor-thin, his restraint a burning thread unraveling at the seams.

Then, in a voice just above a whisper, he asked, "What are you waiting for?"

R hesitated, her fingers twitching against his skin.

A smirked.

"Take it."

The fire inside A ignited like a match struck in dry air—instant, consuming, inevitable.

Control, that carefully constructed wall he had built over years of discipline, crumbled the moment she whispered against his skin. The warmth of her breath, the soft tremble of hesitation mixed with defiance—it was too much. A low growl, barely audible, rumbled in his chest as something more primal, more insatiable, took hold of him.

He couldn't resist anymore.

His hand moved before his mind could stop it, fingers finding the curve of R's neck, pressing against the delicate skin there, feeling the flutter of her pulse beneath his grip. She gasped at the contact, her body going still for half a second—just long enough for him to tilt her face up, bringing her mouth closer, deeper, into his space.

His thumb stroked the side of her throat, the motion deceptively soft compared to the iron grip keeping her still. The contrast sent a shiver through her, and he felt it as if it ran through his own spine. She wasn't resisting. No, she was melting, surrendering, her body arching just slightly toward him as if drawn by some magnetic pull neither of them could fight anymore.

And then, all reason abandoned him.

A surged forward, his mouth claiming hers in a kiss that had no patience, no calculated pretense—only heat, only need. He felt her lips part against his, welcoming him, meeting him with equal urgency. She tasted like mojito and something sweeter, something entirely her, and it was intoxicating.

His other hand moved fast, fingers tangling into the silk of her hair, gripping, pulling. A sharp gasp left her lips, swallowed instantly by his own. He tugged again, firmer this time, tilting her head back to deepen the kiss, to take more of her. A raw, possessive growl vibrated in his throat. He wanted her closer. He needed her closer.

His other hand shot down, fingers encircling her wrist, pinning it against the cool wood of the table beside them. His grip wasn't bruising, but it was unyielding—a silent command that she belonged to him in this moment, that she would stay exactly where he wanted her.

R moaned softly into his mouth, the sound sending a visceral response through him, heat pooling low in his abdomen. He pulled back just enough to look at her, to see the dazed, heavy-lidded expression on her face, the way her lips were swollen from his kiss, her breathing ragged.

"You have no idea what you just started," he murmured, his voice rough, edged with something dangerous.

Her gaze flickered, her pupils blown wide with something unreadable—desire, challenge, uncertainty. But she didn't pull away.

A smirked, his grip on her wrist tightening just slightly. "Tell me, R," he whispered, his lips brushing against her jaw as he spoke. "Do you still not know what you want?"

She sucked in a shaky breath, her free hand coming up to grip his forearm. But she didn't push him away.

Instead, her lips parted.

And she whispered, "I want you."

Something inside A snapped completely.

With a sharp tug on her hair, he brought her mouth back to his, deepening the kiss with a new urgency, a hunger that couldn't be disguised anymore. The fire inside him burned hotter, hotter—until nothing else existed but her, her body against his, her breath mixing with his, the storm outside mimicking the chaos raging between them.

And this time, there was no pulling back.

A was drowning in her.

The fire inside him raged, consuming every last thread of restraint he had left. His lips moved against hers, feverish, desperate, his grip still firm around her wrist, his fingers tangled in her hair as if he needed to hold her there, to keep her from slipping away.

But it was him who was slipping.

Somewhere, deep in the back of his mind, the voice of reason clawed its way through the heat, whispering, *Stop. Control yourself. You can't lose like this.*

It was enough to make him hesitate.

With a sharp inhale, he broke the kiss, his forehead pressing against hers, both of them breathing hard. His fingers loosened just slightly from her wrist, his grip on her hair slackening, as if releasing her would be the only way to ground himself. He had to stop before he lost himself completely, before this spiraled into something neither of them could undo.

But then—she pulled him back.

R didn't let him go.

Her hands, once passive beneath his, now clung to the front of his shirt, pulling him closer with an urgency that sent a fresh wave of heat through his blood. "No," she whispered against his lips, her breath warm, intoxicating. "Not yet."

A's restraint shattered.

Like teenagers caught in the chaos of a first kiss, their hunger spiraled into something reckless, something uncontrollable. He kissed her again, harder, his hands rediscovering her body, one slipping down to the small of her back, the other finding its way into her hair once more, tugging her head back just to expose more of her, to claim more of her.

A groaned into her mouth as she arched against him, as her fingers curled into his shoulders, nails digging through the fabric of his shirt. Everything outside of this moment blurred—the noise of the café, the storm outside, the fact that they weren't alone. None of it mattered. There was only her.

Then, R pulled back just enough to whisper something against his jaw.

"Look there," she said, voice husky, breathless.

A barely registered the words at first, too lost in the feeling of her lips trailing down his skin. But when she tugged his wrist just slightly, guiding his gaze toward where she was looking, his breath hitched.

A few meters away, tucked discreetly in the far corner of the café, was a single bathroom door.

His heartbeat slammed against his ribs.

His gaze snapped back to her, searching for hesitation, for uncertainty—but there was none. Only desire. Only need.

A swallowed hard, his pulse thundering in his ears as R leaned closer, her lips brushing against the shell of his ear. "Let's go," she whispered.

For a moment, A just stared at her, his grip still tight on her waist, his body already responding to what she was suggesting. Every logical part of him screamed at him to stop, to think, to pull away before they crossed a line that neither of them could come back from.

The tension coiled between them like a live wire, a dangerous, electric charge that neither of them seemed willing to sever. A's entire body was wound tight, his fingers still pressed into R's skin, his breath shallow as if he had just surfaced from deep underwater. The air between them was thick, the scent of mint and citrus from their mojitos blending with the warmth of their bodies, the sheer heat of their closeness making it hard to think.

It was wild. It was raw. It was filthy.

A could feel it—this moment teetering on the edge of something unspoken but deeply understood. His entire body ached with it, with the way R's knee pressed against his, with the way her fingers had traced patterns on the back of his hand, absentminded but deliberate. It was in the way her lips had parted just slightly when she whispered, *Let's go*.

His mind was spinning, lost in the reckless haze of her body leaning into his, of the slow way she moved like she knew exactly what kind of fire she was playing with. A could already imagine what it would be like—the press of her back against the cold, tiled walls of the café's small bathroom, the way his hands would slip beneath the hem of her dress, fingers mapping the softness of her thighs, the sound of her breath hitching against his ear.

But then—something pierced through the fog.

A's gaze flicked up for just a second, and he saw the door of the café's bathroom, the one they had both been eyeing. He saw the way people around them weren't as lost in their own conversations as they had been minutes before. A man sitting across the bar stole a glance in their direction, his brow slightly raised, his expression something between curiosity and amusement.

And then his phone vibrated against the table.

The sharp buzz yanked A out of the moment like a splash of cold water. His jaw tightened, the heat in his body shifting suddenly, an unwelcome intruder slicing through the tension. His fingers hesitated against R's, his body suddenly caught in two worlds—the one he was in with her, where nothing mattered beyond the next moment, and the one outside of this haze, the one that was waiting to drag him back to reality.

His phone vibrated again. A quick glance at the screen sent another jolt through him—but this time, it wasn't desire.

Four missed calls.

Three from his client.

One from his family.

A's chest constricted, his fingers curling into a fist on the table as he stared at the screen. The reality of where he was, of what he was doing, hit him with a force that made his stomach twist. The café was still humming with life around him, but now it felt too loud, too bright. His suit, slightly wrinkled from the way R had been gripping him, suddenly felt suffocating.

He should have been handling business. He should have been answering those calls.

Instead, he was here, drowning in the heat of something reckless, something dangerous, something that had almost swallowed him whole.

R shifted beside him, sensing the change in his posture. Her fingers, which had been tracing patterns on his arm, stilled. "What's wrong?" she asked, voice quieter now, like she was already bracing for something she didn't want to hear.

A didn't answer immediately. His throat was tight, his heart still hammering, but for a completely different reason now. His fingers hovered over his phone, debating, hesitating. The weight of reality had settled in like a lead curtain, the fantasy shattered in an instant.

A exhaled sharply, the tension still thick in his throat, a raw, burning thing that hadn't fully dissipated. He pushed a hand through his hair, forcing himself to find the words. To say what needed to be said.

"R, something happened. I have to leave." His voice was rough, uneven, betraying the heat that still coiled low in his stomach. He hadn't come back to Barcelona for this—he hadn't planned on letting it go this far.

R didn't say anything at first. Her gaze flickered to his phone, still facedown on the table, her expression unreadable. Then, with a small, almost imperceptible tilt of her head, she exhaled and leaned back against the seat. "Okay. Whatever you want." Her voice was calm, but A could hear the sharp edge beneath it.

That only made it worse.

She wasn't begging him to stay. She wasn't asking questions. She was letting him go. And yet, he could feel the ghost of her touch still lingering against his skin, the phantom of her body pressed against his in the café's dim lighting.

A clenched his jaw. He couldn't let himself drown in this. "I have to leave," he repeated, as if saying it again would make it easier.

R gave a small shrug, her fingers brushing against the condensation on her glass, drawing idle patterns that betrayed none of what she was really thinking. "I understand." Then, she grabbed her bag, slipping the strap over her shoulder before standing. "I'll go with you outside. I need to leave too."

A didn't argue. He couldn't. Because part of him didn't want to say goodbye while sitting at this table, trapped between the lingering scent of mojitos and the weight of what had almost happened.

They walked toward the exit together, but neither of them spoke. Outside, the storm had fully broken, the rain drizzling in soft, misty waves against the city's warm pavement. The neon lights from the nearby bars and storefronts reflected off the slick stones, casting a dreamlike glow over everything.

As they stepped out into the cool night air, the rain misting softly around them, R finally broke the silence.

"When will we see each other again?" Her voice was calm, but there was something beneath it—an edge of uncertainty, maybe even hope.

A exhaled slowly, staring out into the glistening streets of Barcelona, the golden glow of the streetlights reflecting off the wet pavement. He wanted to give her an answer, but his mind was a mess of conflicting thoughts. His body was still burning from her touch, from what had almost happened. But his phone had been ringing, reality had been clawing at him, and now his instincts were screaming at him to put distance between them before he lost all control.

"I don't know," he admitted, his voice lower than he intended. "I need to think about a lot of things."

R studied him for a moment, her lips pressing into a faint, unreadable line. Then, after a pause, she tilted her head slightly. "Can you give me a hug, at least?"

A hesitated. Something about the request unsettled him, but he nodded. It was just a hug, nothing more. A farewell, a closing act to whatever this moment had been.

He opened his arms, and she stepped in.

The moment she pressed against him, A realized his mistake.

It was terrible.



Her body was warm—too warm. She fit against him too easily, too perfectly. Her arms looped around his waist, her fingers pressing lightly against his back, and worst of all—her breasts, full and soft, pressed flush against his stomach.

A clenched his jaw, forcing his breathing to stay steady. He was taller than her, much taller, and the way she fit against him sent an entirely new wave of heat crashing through him. His muscles locked in place, his hands hovering stiffly around her back, caught somewhere between wanting to pull away and wanting to grab her tighter.

Fuck.

This wasn't just a hug. It was a brand, searing itself into his skin, a quiet, torturous reminder of everything he was trying to suppress. His body reacted before his mind could stop it, the warmth, the scent of her, the softness pressing into him—it was all too much.

And then, just like that, A pulled away.

Too fast. Too abrupt.

"I have to go," he muttered, already stepping back. His voice was tight, barely controlled, and his feet were already carrying him away, towards the curb, towards anywhere that wasn't *this*.

R blinked up at him, her expression slightly surprised, like she hadn't expected him to flee so quickly. But she didn't say anything. She just let him go.

A ran.

Not literally, but it felt like it. His strides were too long, his fingers tugging at the collar of his shirt like he needed to breathe again.

He waved down a taxi, barely waiting for it to stop before yanking open the door and sliding inside. As the city blurred past the rain-streaked windows, he clenched his fists against his thighs, still feeling the imprint of her body against his. His stomach, his chest, his skin—everything was still tingling.

His phone vibrated again. A reminder that the world outside of R still existed.

But he didn't care.

Because as he sat in that taxi, staring at his reflection in the dark glass, A realized something that made his pulse spike all over again.

He was still hot. Still restless. Still hungry.

And worst of all?

He wanted more.

The taxi moved through the wet streets of Barcelona, neon lights blurring into streaks against the glass, but A wasn't seeing any of it. His body was tense, his mind running in loops, caught between the heat still burning under his skin and the cold grip of reality settling in his chest.

His phone vibrated again. He glanced down.

A message. From his client.

Client: *A, call me ASAP. We have an issue.*

A swore under his breath. He had barely processed the chaos of what just happened with R, and now he had to switch gears.

He exhaled sharply, rubbing a hand over his face before tapping the call button.

The line barely rang once before a rushed voice answered. "Finally. Where the hell have you been?"

A leaned his head back against the seat, forcing his voice into its usual measured calm. "What's the problem?"

As the client ranted about a contract dispute, a manufacturing delay, something that normally would've commanded A's full attention, his focus kept slipping.

His pulse was still uneven.

His stomach still felt too warm, like the imprint of R's body against him hadn't faded.

The worst part? He wasn't just replaying the hug in his mind—he was replaying everything. The way her fingers had grazed the back of his hand at the table, the heat in her eyes when she had whispered, *Let's go*.

He wasn't supposed to want her like this.

And yet, he did.

Badly.

By the time the taxi pulled up to his hotel, the call had ended, but A barely remembered what was said. He threw cash at the driver and stepped out into the cool, rain-slicked air, inhaling deep, as if that would clear his head.

It didn't.

The lobby was quiet this late at night, the sound of his shoes against the marble floors unnaturally loud. He headed straight for the elevator, pressing the button with more force than necessary. The doors slid shut, trapping him with his thoughts.

What now?

His body still burned with unresolved frustration. His mind still itched with thoughts of her.

Would she message him?

Would she be thinking about him just as much as he was thinking about her?

The thought twisted in his chest, half anticipation, half something darker.

He reached his floor, stepped out into the dimly lit hallway, and unlocked the door to his room.

The moment it shut behind him, silence crashed over him.

He pulled off his tie, throwing it onto the chair, rolling up his sleeves in an attempt to shake the restless energy clinging to him like static. He paced to the window, the view of the city sprawled beneath him, shimmering in the rain.

A exhaled sharply, dragging a hand through his damp hair as he stepped into the bathroom. The cool tiles beneath his feet did nothing to soothe the heat still coiling low in his stomach, the pressure building, unbearable.

He twisted the faucet, letting the icy water crash against his skin, shocking his system. The freezing sensation stole his breath for a moment, sent a shiver racing down his spine, but it still wasn't enough.

His body ached—his muscles were tight, his skin too hot despite the cold. His stomach clenched with a need that refused to fade. He shut his eyes, but all he could see was her.

R.

The way she had looked at him tonight, her lips slightly parted, her breath uneven. The way her body had pressed against his in that hug—so soft, so warm. Too warm. Her full breasts had crushed against his stomach, and even now, the memory made his pulse spike, made his hands grip the edge of the sink as his cock throbbed painfully.

It wasn't just the hug. It was the way she had toyed with him all night, the way she had traced her fingers along his skin absentmindedly, the way she had leaned in just a little too close when she spoke. She knew what she was doing. She had always known.

A swallowed hard, forcing himself to stay under the cold spray for a few minutes longer, his hands tightening into fists at his sides. He gritted his teeth, inhaling sharply.

But it wasn't working.

His body wouldn't cool down. His mind wouldn't let go.

With a frustrated groan, he twisted off the water and stepped out, grabbing a towel and rubbing it roughly over his skin. The hotel room was dark except for the faint glow of the city outside, the neon lights casting fragmented patterns across the floor.

He barely made it to the bed before he collapsed onto it, still damp, his breath shallow. His hand drifted down his stomach, the muscles tightening as his fingers traced the waistband of his boxers.

Fuck.

He wanted her.

No—he needed her.

And since she wasn't here, he would have to settle for the next best thing.

A exhaled, his head falling back against the pillows as he slid his hand lower, his fingers wrapping around his aching length. The first stroke sent a shudder through him, his entire body tensing. He squeezed his eyes shut, and she was there behind his eyelids—her lips, her skin, the way she had breathed his name against his throat.

He imagined her beneath him, the way she would arch her back, the way she would bite her lip when he pushed her legs apart. He could hear her moaning softly, whispering his name, begging him. His grip tightened, his strokes becoming rougher, more desperate.

His breath came in ragged gasps as he imagined pinning her down, dragging his lips down the curve of her neck, feeling the way her body trembled under his touch. His stomach clenched, the tension coiling tighter and tighter, every nerve in his body on fire.

R, R, R.

The thought of her was too much. The pressure inside him snapped, a deep groan escaping his lips as pleasure crashed over him in waves. His body tensed, his hips jerking slightly as he spilled over his stomach, his chest rising and falling rapidly.

For a moment, he lay there, completely still, his skin slick with sweat, his mind dazed. The room was silent except for his heavy breathing, the cooling air brushing against his overheated skin.

And yet—

It still wasn't enough.

He turned his head to the side, staring at his phone on the nightstand. The screen was dark. No messages.

Would she be doing the same right now? Would she be in her bed, thinking about him?

A clenched his jaw, running a hand through his hair.

He needed more.

## Chapter 13

### Split Screen: New York | Barcelona

New York - A Dawn crept over Manhattan like a slow-moving tide of steel and light, the first rays catching the glass facades of skyscrapers and fracturing into thousands of golden shards. From his penthouse on the 57th floor, A watched the city awaken beneath him, its mechanical heart beginning another day of relentless rhythm. Yellow cabs dotted the streets like scattered coins, their movements creating patterns he'd watched a thousand times before.

The shower's steam still clung to his skin, his collar slightly damp where his hair dripped onto it. Dark circles shadowed his eyes—evidence of another sleepless night spent staring at his phone, reading and re-reading their messages.

R: Did you think about me? A: Yes.

Such a simple exchange. Such a dangerous truth.

The knock on his bedroom door was sharp, precise. "Mr. A? Elena left early for the gallery opening. She asked me to remind you about dinner with the Thompsons tonight at Le Bernardin."

A closed his eyes. The Thompsons. The gallery. Elena. The perfectly orchestrated symphony of his New York life suddenly felt like a prison of his own making.

"Cancel it," he said, surprising himself. "Something's come up."

In his office, fifty-two stories above Madison Avenue, A moved through his morning meetings like an actor in a familiar play. His voice carried the right authority, his gestures conveyed the appropriate gravity, but his mind kept drifting to Barcelona—to R's eyes in the mall's café, to the way her fingers had brushed against his when she'd reached for her mojito.

His phone buzzed.

R: Did you want to see me again?

The message lit up his screen like an accusation. Or an invitation.

Barcelona - R The Mediterranean sun painted Barcelona's streets in shades of honey and amber, the morning light catching on the modernist facades of the Eixample district. R stood at her balcony, coffee growing cold in her hands, watching the city come alive beneath her third-floor apartment.

The jacaranda trees were in full bloom, their purple flowers carpeting the sidewalks where couples walked hand in hand, where café workers set up tables, where life moved with that distinctly Catalan blend of passion and practicality.

Her phone lay face-down on the wrought iron table beside her, but its presence felt like a physical weight. She hadn't slept properly since A left. Every time she closed her eyes, she felt his presence—the intensity of his gaze across the café table, the slight tremor in his usually steady hands, the way the air between them had crackled with unspoken possibilities.

A knock at her door made her jump, coffee splashing onto her white blouse.

"Amor?" Marc's voice carried through the door. "Are you ready for breakfast?"

R dabbed at the coffee stain, cursing softly. "Just a minute!"

Marc. Sweet, dependable Marc, who loved her with an uncomplicated devotion she should have been grateful for. Marc, who had no idea she'd spent yesterday afternoon in a mall café with another man, drinking mojitos and dancing around words that could destroy everything.

She changed her blouse quickly, choosing a silk one in deep blue—A's favorite color, her mind supplied traitorously.

When she opened the door, Marc greeted her with his usual sunny smile and a kiss on the cheek. The guilt sat heavy in her stomach.

"I thought we could try that new place in Gràcia," he said, already heading toward the stairs.

R grabbed her phone, unable to resist checking it one more time.

Nothing.

A's silence stretched between continents, heavy with meaning.

New York - A The boardroom buzzed with conversation, executives discussing quarterly projections and market expansions. A sat at the head of the table, his presence commanding as always, but his thoughts were a hurricane of possibility.

R's message burned in his pocket: Did you want to see me again?

Want. Such an inadequate word for the hunger that had been growing inside him since Barcelona.

He excused himself from the meeting, stepping into his private office. The Manhattan skyline stretched before him, but all he could see was R—the way she'd looked at him over her glass, the slight catch in her breath when their hands had touched, the unspoken promise in her eyes.

His fingers moved across the phone screen before he could stop himself.

A: I have a proposition for you.

Barcelona - R's phone vibrated against her hip as she sat across from Marc at the trendy Gràcia café. Her heart leaped, then plummeted.

"Everything okay?" Marc asked, noticing her reaction.

"Just work," she lied, not daring to check the message in front of him.

It wasn't until Marc left for his meetings that she finally opened it, her hands shaking slightly.

New York – A

The car moved through the night, the city outside a blur of neon and rain-streaked glass. A leaned back against the leather seat, fingers drumming against his thigh, tension coiling in his stomach like a tightly wound spring.

He had spent months shaping R, molding her into something he could call his own. Every unanswered message, every pause before responding, every calculated silence—it had all been deliberate. A slow, meticulous game of control.

She had always been defiant, independent in a way that both frustrated and excited him. But in Barcelona, he had felt it—the shift. The moment her resistance had cracked, the moment she had started yielding.

And now, sitting in the backseat of his car, feeling the emptiness of the city stretching between them, he realized something he hadn't expected.

He missed her.

A clenched his jaw. He hadn't planned for that. He had spent so much time orchestrating R's unraveling that he hadn't considered the consequences of his own.

I have a proposition for you.

He had sent the message on impulse, unsure of what he even meant by it. Was it an excuse to see her? A business-related invitation disguised as something



innocent? Or was it something darker—an open door to the inevitable, to a choice she would have to make?

His phone vibrated again.

R: *What kind of proposition?*

A smirk ghosted across his lips. *Good girl.* She was curious. She was waiting.

The car slowed as it approached his building, the uniformed doorman stepping forward to open the door. A barely noticed. His fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Then, fuck it—he let the impulse win.

A: *I miss you. Send me something to remind me.*

He hit send before he could overthink it.

His heart beat a fraction faster. This was a test. Would she hesitate? Would she push back? Or would she obey?

A stepped into his penthouse, the familiar scent of expensive cologne and freshly cleaned air doing nothing to settle the restless energy in his veins. He tossed his jacket onto the sleek leather couch, loosened the top button of his shirt, and sat on the edge of his bed, phone still in his hand.

Nothing.

She had read the message, but she wasn't responding.

A exhaled through his nose, rolling his shoulders. Patience. R was proud. She didn't just give—she needed to be taken.

He knew she was sitting with the message, debating. He could almost see it—her biting her lower lip, fingers hovering over her phone, her mind racing with possibilities.

Then—his screen lit up.

Barcelona – R

R sat on her bed, the city's golden lights filtering through her window, painting soft shadows along the walls. The message from A stared back at her, a slow, pulsing challenge.

I miss you. Send me something to remind me.

Her breath hitched.

He had never asked her for something like this before. Not directly. There had always been a push and pull, an unspoken tension, but now he had said it outright.

A test.

She knew it was a game—one where he was always trying to push her one step further, waiting to see how much of herself she was willing to give.

And the worst part?

She wanted to give it.

Her hands trembled slightly as she set her phone down, moving to stand in front of her mirror. Her reflection stared back at her—bare legs, the oversized silk shirt barely skimming the tops of her thighs. It had been Marc's, once, but now it was just another piece of fabric.

She reached for her phone, swallowed the lump in her throat, and snapped the picture.

The angle was suggestive but not obvious—her legs crossed just slightly, the hem of her shirt riding up enough to tease. Her face wasn't in the frame, but it didn't need to be.

She hesitated, fingers hovering over the screen.

Was she really going to send this?

Then, almost defiantly, she hit send.

New York – A

A's breath caught when the image appeared.

The composition was deliberate—calculated enough to give the illusion of innocence, but he knew better. He knew her.

His jaw tightened as he let his thumb graze over the screen, his mind already spiraling into everything he wanted to do to her.

She had given him something—but not everything.

Not yet.

A smirk curved his lips as he typed.

*A: Good girl. But you can do better.*

He leaned back against the pillows, his muscles still tight, his body still aching with the kind of frustration that no amount of distance could erase.

He wanted more.

A stretched out on his bed, the cool sheets beneath him doing nothing to settle the heat thrumming beneath his skin. His phone sat in his palm, the screen still glowing with her.

R.

The picture she had sent was still open. His fingers traced the edge of the screen, his mind devouring every detail—the way her legs crossed just enough to hint at what he couldn't see, the silk shirt draping off her body like an invitation. It was careful—a tease, a provocation.

But not submission.

Good girl. But you can do better.

The message had been sent minutes ago, but there was no reply.

A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. Was she hesitating?

He imagined her on the other end of the screen, probably biting her lip, debating whether to push forward or retreat.

You want this, R.

She had always wanted this.

A sighed, setting the phone on his chest, his fingers drumming against the hard muscle beneath his dress shirt. His mind was restless, his body still aching, a hunger coiling tight in his stomach.

He could still feel her against him—the ghost of her warmth, the way she had crushed against him in that last hug, her breasts soft and full against his stomach.

His fingers twitched. Fuck.

Then—his phone vibrated.

He exhaled through his nose, a slow wave of satisfaction rolling over him as he lifted the screen.

Barcelona – R

R sat on the edge of her bed, her heart hammering so loud she could feel it.

A: Good girl. But you can do better.

The words burned in her mind.

It wasn't enough for him.

It was never enough.

A had spent months unraveling her, pulling her apart thread by thread, pushing her deeper into something she didn't fully understand. She had resisted. She had told herself she was in control.

But now, as she stared at his message, her fingers twitching with indecision, she knew the truth.

She wanted to give him more.

Her breath came faster as she set her phone down and stood, her reflection staring back at her in the mirror.

Her lips were parted, flushed from the heat still lingering in her body. The silk shirt she had worn before now felt like too much.

Her hands slid to the hem.

Slowly, deliberately, she let it fall.

The cool air kissed her bare skin, and a shiver ran down her spine.

She picked up the phone, her thumb hovering over the camera.

What the fuck are you doing?

A voice inside her head warned her. But it was too late.

Her body ached, the phantom of A's touch still burning in her skin.

And for the first time, she wanted to surrender.

She lifted the phone.

Her fingers were trembling.

The picture she took this time was different.

Less careful.

Less safe.

More his.

She hit send.

And then she waited.

New York – A

The second the image loaded, A stilled.

His breath stopped.

This wasn't a tease.

This was submission.

His jaw tightened as he sat up, his entire body going still, eyes locked on the screen.

She had crossed a line.

One she couldn't come back from.

His fingers flexed against the phone, his pulse pounding in his ears.

He could see everything now.

She had given herself to him.

And fuck—

A smirk spread across his lips, dark and satisfied, as he typed his next message.

*A: That's my girl.*

*A: Now, tell me how wet you are.*

His grip tightened on the phone.

Because now?

Now, she was his.

And he wasn't going to stop.

Barcelona – R

R's pulse pounded in her ears as she stared at A's message.

"That's my girl. Now, tell me how wet you are."

Her body reacted instantly, heat pooling low in her stomach, her skin still tingling from the rush of sending that picture.

She wasn't thinking anymore.

Or maybe she was thinking too much.

About his hands. About his voice. About the way he had looked at her in the café, like he was already imagining all the ways he would break her apart.

Her legs pressed together, a soft whimper escaping her lips before she could stop it.

Fuck.

She wanted him.

And she wasn't going to pretend she didn't.

Her fingers moved quickly, almost on their own.

R: I also want something now.

She hesitated for only a second before typing the next words.

R: I'm horny for you. I want to see you.

Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she hit send, her body thrumming with anticipation.

She had never asked for something like this before.

A was always the one in control, always the one demanding more from her.

But now, she was pushing back.

She wanted him to give her something too.

Something just for her.

Her screen lit up immediately.

New York – A

A was still staring at the picture she had sent when her next message came through.

"I also want something now. I'm horny for you. I want to see you."

His grip on the phone tightened.

A slow, dark chuckle rumbled from his chest, his tongue swiping over his bottom lip as he leaned back into his bed.

She was finally asking.

Finally needing.

The shift had happened—he felt it.

And fuck, it was intoxicating.

He stretched his legs out, one arm resting behind his head as he typed.

A: You want to see me?

A: How badly?

He wanted to make her squirm.

Make her desperate.

Because he knew she was already dripping for him.

But before she could reply, before she could plead, he took a picture.

Not just anything.

A was deliberate.

He left his dress shirt unbuttoned, revealing the sculpted lines of his torso, the hard muscle of his stomach. The hem of his trousers hung dangerously low on his hips, teasing, hinting—but not giving everything.

Not yet.

He snapped the photo and sent it.

Barcelona – R

R was not ready.

Her breath hitched violently when she saw the image.

A's body sprawled across the bed, his shirt open, his skin golden under the soft light of his penthouse. The sharp cut of his abs, the way his pants sat so fucking low, the way his hand was resting just beside his belt buckle, like he was waiting for her to say the words that would make him move.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

A shiver ran down her spine.

Her fingers tightened around her phone.

She wanted him.

Right now.

There, in New York.

Or here, in Barcelona.

It didn't matter.

She just needed.

Her legs squeezed together as she exhaled shakily, heat throbbing between her thighs.

Her phone vibrated again.

New York – A

A smirked as he watched the "R is typing..." appear and disappear.

He could already see her.

Could imagine her squirming in her bed, biting her lip, thighs pressed together, her breath coming out in soft little gasps.

She was suffering for him.

And he was about to make it worse.

A: Touch yourself for me, R.

He tapped his fingers against the phone, waiting, feeling the satisfaction settle deep in his bones.

Because she would.



He knew she would.

And when she did?

She would belong to him completely.

Barcelona – R

R's entire body burned as she stared at A's message.

"Touch yourself for me, R."

A command. Not a request. Not a suggestion.

She swallowed hard, her fingers trembling slightly as she read it again.

Fuck.

He wanted to watch her break.

To know she was falling apart for him, to hear her admit it.

The heat in her stomach coiled tighter, hotter, deeper.

Her breath came faster as she sat back against the pillows, one hand still clutching her phone, the other sliding down her stomach, her silk blouse barely covering anything anymore.

She didn't even hesitate this time.

Her fingers pulled at the fabric, shifting it slightly, exposing more skin, just enough to tease. The soft lace of her panties peeked from beneath the shirt, her bare thighs parted ever so slightly. Vulnerable. Inviting.

She lifted the phone.

Her body ached with anticipation, her skin still tingling from the memory of A's hands, even though he had never truly touched her.

And that was the worst part.

The thought of him—the fantasy—was already ruining her.

She tilted the phone, angling the shot to show just enough.

Her lips slightly parted. Her blouse slipping down one shoulder. The shadow of her thighs opening, the lace between them barely visible.

A promise.

A provocation.

She snapped the picture.

Send.

Then, her pulse stopped.

New York – A

A was ready when the message came through.

The moment his screen lit up, his chest tightened, his breath hitched, his entire body reacting before he even opened it.

And when he did—

Fucking hell.

She was perfect.

The image sent a jolt of heat straight through him.

The way she was teasing him, the way she was giving in but still holding back, making him want to rip away the last pieces of hesitation she was clinging to.

Her shirt was slipping off one shoulder, her lips parted like she was already breathing for him, already imagining what he would do if he were there.

But it was her thighs.

The way they were just barely parted, the lace between them mocking him.

Daring him.

His control snapped.

His fingers moved before his mind could stop them.

*A: Spread them more.*

He let the words sit there, bold, undeniable.

Then—he sent one back.

This time, it wasn't just teasing.

He had stripped his shirt off completely, his bare chest toned, defined under the dim hotel lighting. The waistband of his pants lower now, the sharp lines of his

hips leading down, disappearing into the shadows where she couldn't see—but she would imagine.

His hand rested low. Too low.

Not quite touching himself. Not yet.

Waiting.

For her.

The second it sent, he leaned back against the headboard, his jaw tight, his body aching.

Because if she obeyed?

A exhaled slowly, his grip tightening on the phone as he stared at R's latest picture.

She had obeyed.

Her legs were spread wider now, her lace barely covering what he knew was already soaked for him. The way she had positioned herself—the way she had exposed herself—was enough to make his entire body tighten with need.

His body was already aching, hard against his trousers, the heat pooling low in his stomach, demanding release.

He leaned back against the headboard, his free hand moving to his belt, loosening it with practiced ease. His phone was still in his other hand, the screen illuminating the dimly lit bedroom, her image still open, taunting him, owning him.

He should have made her wait longer. Should have taken his time, made her beg.

But his patience was gone.

His fingers slid past the waistband of his boxers, wrapping around his throbbing length, a sharp inhale escaping his lips at the first slow stroke. He shut his eyes for a moment, letting himself sink into the fantasy, letting her consume him.

She was here.

He could see it—R on her knees in front of him, looking up through those wicked, knowing eyes as she slowly peeled away her panties, dragging them down her thighs just to tease him.

He imagined the way she'd move, the soft hitch in her breath when he finally touched her.

His strokes grew faster.

The memory of her body, the curve of her lips, the way her voice had trembled when she asked for more—it was too much.

His muscles tensed, his grip tightening.

R.

The pressure inside him snapped.

A groan tore from his throat as pleasure crashed over him, sharp and all-consuming. His hips jerked, his release spilling over his stomach, his body momentarily overwhelmed by the sheer intensity of it.

For a moment, all he could do was breathe.

His pulse pounded in his ears, his chest rising and falling rapidly as the aftershocks of his climax still pulsed through him. His fingers flexed around his phone, still holding onto her picture like a lifeline.

Then, slowly, reality seeped back in.

The haze of desire cleared.

The control returned.

A stared at the screen, her message still unanswered, her picture still staring back at him.

His jaw tightened.

Don't answer.

Not yet.

He needed to remind her who was in control.

With a calculated smirk, A closed the chat without responding.

And just like that—he was gone.

Barcelona – R

R lay on her bed, the cool sheets against her bare thighs doing nothing to settle the heat still thrumming inside her.

Her chest rose and fell in uneven breaths, her phone still clutched in her hand, her fingers trembling slightly.

She had done it.

She had given him everything.

And she was waiting.

Her stomach twisted, a strange mix of excitement and vulnerability curling in her chest as she stared at the screen.

A was still online.

She could see the little status beneath his name—active now.

He had seen her.

He had been there.

But he wasn't answering.

Seconds stretched into minutes. Minutes felt like hours.

Her body, once filled with aching anticipation, now buzzed with something else—something dangerously close to doubt.

She bit her lower lip, shifting in the bed, her hands gripping the sheets to keep herself from sending another message.

Had she given too much?

Was this what he wanted? To make her wait?

She let out a slow breath, closing her eyes, willing herself to be patient.

But deep down, in the part of her that she didn't want to admit existed—

She already knew.

A had won.

And now?

She was completely at his mercy.

## New York – Back to Normal Life

A took a deep breath, stretching his arms before swinging his legs off the bed. The moment of indulgence had passed. Now, his mind seamlessly shifted gears.

He walked to the bathroom, washing his hands with cold water, rinsing away any trace of what had just happened. Then, he buttoned up his shirt, straightened his collar, and grabbed his watch from the dresser.

The phone sat on the nightstand, silent. R was waiting, but A had already moved on.

By the time he stepped into the elevator, heading down to the lobby, his expression was as composed as ever. The city outside was still the same—its streets filled with people rushing to work, yellow taxis honking in irritation, the steady rhythm of New York life continuing.

He checked his emails as the driver pulled up to the curb.

A grocery list from his assistant.

A reminder of a board meeting at noon.

A notification about a dinner reservation Elena had scheduled for the weekend.

Everything was back in order.

His next stop? The supermarket.

A pushed the thoughts of R to the back of his mind as he stepped into the brightly lit aisles. He moved through them methodically, picking up the essentials—coffee, bottled water, a few fresh ingredients for dinner. To anyone watching, he was just another businessman going about his day, nothing out of the ordinary.

Nothing had changed.

Except it had.

Because while his hands reached for a bottle of wine, his phone vibrated in his pocket.

He didn't check.

Not yet.

But he knew who it was.

And he knew that somewhere, in another city, in another bed, R was still waiting.

## Chapter 14

A had tried to delete her from his mind like an old file—drag, drop, empty bin. But she lingered, stubborn as smoke.

For days, he drowned himself in the machinery of work. Meetings, numbers, PowerPoints, late dinners that bled into early mornings. He kept his head down, hoping the distraction would cauterize whatever had ignited between them. Told himself that silence would cool it. That time would sterilize it. That control—his religion—would win.

But desire, he was learning, did not obey.  
She infiltrated the pauses between his thoughts, slipped under locked doors.

She was in the subtle things. The slope of a neckline in a subway ad. A flash of red in a crowd. A silk cuff peeking from a coat. His mind made them all her.

In the middle of conference calls, her voice whispered his name—just the breath of it—ghosting through the static. At lunch meetings, he'd forget what he was saying halfway through a sentence, eyes drawn to nothing, brain flicking to memory: the silk shirt sliding off her shoulder, the way her fingers hesitated before they moved lower.

And at night, when the city softened under its crown of lights, A stood at the floor-to-ceiling windows of his penthouse like a statue. Below him, taxis buzzed through Manhattan like cells in a living body. Inside, it was all marble, silence, and cold air-conditioning.

And her. Always her.

She lived in the quiet. In the corners of rooms he hadn't entered. She curled herself into the ache behind his eyes and the pressure knotting his shoulders. Even now, as he sat back in his chair, phone in hand, she was there. Not speaking. Just... waiting.

He opened their last thread. Scrolled. Stopped at the video.

His jaw flexed.

They'd crossed a line. They both knew it. He had drawn it himself. And then torn through it without looking back.

There was no pretending anymore. No careful silences or delayed replies.

He tapped the keyboard with two fingers. Each word felt like ignition.

*A: What we did—I liked it. And I need it again.*



He hit send.

Then waited.

The city kept pulsing below. But inside the penthouse, the stillness felt electric. Like the second before lightning.

The reply came fast.

R: *I know what you mean...*

The dots appeared, vanished. Reappeared. He watched them with an almost sick intensity, his thumb resting motionless against the glass, heart ticking faster.

R: *How do you want me?*

His breath caught—low in his chest, not from surprise, but from what that question did to him.

There was no hesitation in her anymore. No shame. Just want. Just heat.

He typed slowly.

A: *Add me on Snapchat—@Athepassenger.*

A: *We can talk more privately there.*

Pause. Then—

R: *Why there?*

His mouth twitched. A smirk, involuntary.

A: *Because there, you can send me presents.*

She took her time responding. He imagined her sitting in that Barcelona flat, curled up on her couch, biting her lip, fingers hovering above the screen. She liked the game. He could feel it.

R: *Presents? What do you mean?*

His jaw clenched. His thumb hovered before pressing send.

A: *The same kind you sent me the other day.*

He didn't move. Didn't blink.

R: *Okay. I'll do it.*

Three words. That was all it took. His breath slipped out like a sigh, deep and deliberate. She had no idea how easily she could pull the thread.

**A:** *Can you send me something now?*

**R:** *Only if you do too. I want to know that I give you something.*

Challenge. Or invitation. Maybe both.

**A:** *You want to see me?*

**R:** *Yes.*

He tilted his head back against the chair, watching the glow of the screen paint shadows across the ceiling.

For weeks, he'd been the one drawing her out, coaxing her into his orbit. Now she was reaching. Not begging. Not even seducing. Just... asking.

**R:** *I want to see how you release.*

The words hit him low, curling heat behind his ribs. He didn't answer immediately. Let the tension rise. Let her feel it.

Then:

**A:** *Say it again.*

The dots returned, and with them, a shift. Something in the air thickened.

**R:** *I want to see you lose control.*

There it was. The line she couldn't uncross.

He didn't move for several seconds, his body thrumming like a drawn wire.

**A:** *Then earn it.*

**R:** *How?*

**A:** *You already know how.*

A pause. Then—

A photo.

Dim lighting. Her body framed in shadow, the slip of silk falling off one shoulder. Her mouth slightly open, like she'd just whispered his name into the dark.

His hand tightened around the phone.

Then came the message:

R: *A video?*

He exhaled slowly.

A: *Yes. I want to see all of you. Every reaction.*

R: *I don't know if I can.*

A: *You can. And you will.*

Silence. Then—

A file appeared.

He clicked play.

Shadows flickered across her skin. She was lying back, her chest rising in slow, uneven breaths. One hand gripped the sheets, the other tracing a line along her thigh, stopping just above the edge of her underwear.

Then it ended.

Abrupt.

His breath stalled. She had cut it short. Deliberately.

He let out a low chuckle, not amused—just aroused and edged.

A: *R. Don't play games with me.*

R: *What are you going to do about it?*

His smirk sharpened.

A: *Send me something else.*

A: *And I'll show you how I release.*

This time the dots danced longer. She was hesitating. Good. She understood what this meant.

When the second file arrived, he clicked it without thinking.

She was back on the bed. The sheets a little more rumpled. Her lips darker. Her breath shorter. Her hand hovering just at the waistband, waiting.

For him.

He could feel the moment his control cracked.

**A:** *Good girl.*

**A:** *Now don't stop.*

Another video. Short. Blurry. Desperate.

Her fingers were under the fabric this time, her body tensing with each movement. A breath caught in her throat. Her eyes stayed locked on the screen.

On him.

His hand moved before he realized it. He hit record. His other hand—lower. Slower. Every nerve on fire.

He didn't think. Didn't pose. Didn't control it.

He just let go.

Then he sent it.

Waited.

Her reply lit the screen.

**R:** *Oh my God.*

He stared at those three words and smiled. Small. Dark. Dangerous.

**A:** *That's right.*

The screen stayed quiet for a beat too long. He thought she might be catching her breath. Or hesitating. Then:

**R:** *I want to see you.*

A sat still. Too still. The words rang louder than they should have, sharp against the silence of the room.

**A:** *You just did.*

He meant it as a joke. Or a deflection. But he knew—instantly—it wouldn't land that way.

**R:** *Not like that. In person.*

His stomach dropped. Not in fear. In something closer to inevitability. The kind that settles in after climax, when the noise drains and you hear yourself think.

And that was the problem. He was thinking now.

Too late.

The damage had already been done.

He was still flushed, still raw from what she'd pulled out of him—his body humming, sticky with heat and sweat and want. His cock rested heavy and spent against his thigh, and for a moment, he just sat there in the dim glow of his phone, breathing hard.

It had been a long time since someone had undone him like that. And even longer since he'd *wanted* to be undone.

She had made him give in. Not with force. But with precision. With softness. With the way she looked at the screen like it was him.

Now, she was asking for more.

And he couldn't think straight.

He rubbed a hand over his face, trying to ground himself, to reassert control. His body still pulsed from the release, overstimulated and aching, but his mind was already racing ahead. Barcelona. Her eyes. Her mouth. Her scent. Her skin under his palms.

**A:** *That's not a good idea.*

It was the first honest thing he'd typed all night.

**R:** *Why not?*

Why not.

God, if only she knew.

If only she could feel how close he was to losing the version of himself he worked so hard to preserve.

A stared at her words, trying to imagine the rational response. But the thought of her stepping off a plane, walking toward him in the arrivals hall, wearing that look in her eyes—the one she had tonight—short-circuited all logic.

**R:** *A, I don't care anymore. I want you. I need to feel you. Don't make me wait.*

Something inside him cracked.

It wasn't the words. It was the timing. The way she said it right *after* he had let go. When he was still pliable, still burning at the edges.

She had no idea how perfect her aim was.

He should have said no.

He should have told her this couldn't happen.

But instead, he reached for his phone. Not to stop it.

To make it real.

**A:** *Pack a bag.*

The seconds that followed stretched into something like vertigo. He felt unmoored, floating between post-orgasm clarity and absolute recklessness.

**R:** *You're serious?*

**A:** *I'm booking your flight now. Window seat. First class.*

Stillness. Then:

**R:** *fuck*

That was the last word on the screen, but the finality of it echoed through him.

He set the phone down on his chest. Stared at the ceiling.

His body was still humming from the tension she'd stoked and left behind—his cock thick and aching, his chest rising and falling too fast. She had peeled something open in him. Not just want. Something closer to ache.

He could have stopped. Could have waited. But he didn't.

His hand moved slowly, deliberately—fingers wrapping around himself, slick with the memory of her voice in his ear. Not a word she said, just the sound. The breath.

He closed his eyes.

Her face. That last video. The slip of silk. The way she looked at the camera like she could feel his eyes on her.

He stroked harder, hips shifting against the leather couch, the friction drawing a low groan from his throat. His other hand pressed flat over his chest, trying to ground himself, to anchor the sensation. But it was too late. He was already unraveling.

Faster now.

His breath caught. A curse slipped from his lips. His back arched.

And then—release.

It hit like a wave—violent, full-bodied, obscene. His hand clenched, his breath stuttered, his mind fractured around her name.

He lay there in the aftermath, panting. Heart racing. Skin damp. Cock still twitching against his stomach.

But instead of relief, what came next was something colder.

Clarity.

Shame.

Need.

His fingers loosened. He wiped himself absently with the inside of his shirt, still half-buttoned. His head turned toward the phone.

Her thread was still open. That last message—*fuck*—stared up at him like a dare.

And then the one before it:

**R: You're serious?**

His stomach turned.

He hadn't clicked "book."

Not yet.

His hand reached for the phone again, slower now. Less heat. More weight.

He opened the flight app.

Typed in her full name. Passport number. Barcelona to JFK. First class. Direct.

His thumb hovered over the screen.

Not yet.

He sat up. Pulled his shirt closed. Ran a hand down his face.

He should sleep.

He should delete the thread. Blame it on the hour. On the alcohol. On the tension.

But instead—

He clicked **Confirm**.

Watched the screen load.

The ticket flashed back in neat Helvetica.

And just like that, it was done.

No turning back. No soft landing.

He had told himself it was the orgasm. The timing. The need.

But the truth was simpler.

He wanted her here.

Now.

And nothing—not reason, not restraint, not even the ache in his chest—could stop that anymore.



## Chapter 15

The confirmation email was still open on the screen.

Flight 1187. BCN to JFK. Thursday morning. First class. Window seat.

A stared at it like it belonged to someone else.

The booking was done. Her name was on the ticket. The timeline was real now—not fantasy, not roleplay. Not sexting in the dark.

He had done it.

And now the silence pressed in.

He sat on the edge of the couch, shirt rumpled, pants still half-unzipped. His skin was cooling, the sweat from his orgasm drying tacky against his stomach. The afterglow had already curdled into something heavier—awareness, consequence, that sharp-edged clarity that always came after release.

He'd touched himself to the thought of her. Had come harder than he had in months. But now the room felt too still, too curated, too clean for what had just happened.

He glanced at the coffee table. The phone lay where he'd dropped it. Screen dark. Quiet.

She didn't know yet. Not really. She had said *fuck*—half panic, half thrill—but she didn't know what this meant. Not the way he did. Not the way he felt it now, in the echo of her breath still bouncing around his ribcage.

He stood, too fast. Stumbled slightly. Pulled up his pants, tightened the drawstring, then ran a hand over his face like he could scrub away what he'd just done.

But it clung to him.

She was coming.

Not hypothetically. Not someday.

In two days, she would be here.

And he didn't know what scared him more—

That she might show up.

Or that she might not.

Not the kind of silence that soothed, but the kind that echoed. Hollow. Unforgiving. Like a cathedral after closing hours, all marble and ghosts.

A sat on the edge of the couch, chest bare, sweat drying on his skin. The black leather stuck faintly to his back when he shifted, slick with heat and effort. He was still breathing a little too fast, heart not yet slowed from what he'd just done.

The phone lay screen-down on the table beside him, still warm from his hand. The light from the city bled through the floor-to-ceiling windows behind him—cold and white, casting thin shadows across the pristine floor. Manhattan sparkled below, indifferent and alive, while the apartment around him remained untouched. Empty. Almost clinical.

He looked around. The open-plan kitchen gleamed like a showroom—unused. No photos. No music. Just clean lines, cold angles, and a silence too heavy to ignore. Just him, half-naked and buzzing with post-release static, surrounded by clean lines and colder thoughts.

His pants were still unzipped, his sweatpants pushed halfway down his hips. One hand rested on his thigh, fingers slack, the other gripping the edge of the cushion as if to keep himself from floating off. He stared ahead at nothing, chest rising and falling in uneven rhythms. His skin still hummed from the intensity of the moment. But the high was already fading.

It always faded too fast.

He leaned forward slowly, elbows on knees, body folding in like he was trying to make himself smaller.

*What did I just do?*

He ran a hand through his hair, pulling it back roughly, fingers catching against damp strands. The air still smelled like sweat. Like him. Like something raw and human—and it felt wrong here, in this curated space made to impress, not to live in.

The coldness of the leather seeped into his back again, grounding him. Beyond the glass and the dying embers of his laptop screen still open on the coffee table. It displayed an email draft with nothing typed. A headline blinked on another tab about some merger he was supposed to care about.

He didn't care.

Not tonight.

His gaze drifted back to the phone. The moment replayed in his mind—not the orgasm, not the act itself—but her.

R.

The way she had looked at him through the screen. The boldness in her eyes. The breath in her voice when she said, *I want to see you*.

She meant it. That scared him more than the act itself. She had crossed a line and taken him with her—and he had let her. Invited her. Encouraged her. Bought her a ticket.

He dragged a hand down his face, jaw tightening.

His skin was cooling now, and the awareness of it brought discomfort. The sweat sticking to his waistband. The slight itch of drying salt on his chest. The ache in his thigh from tensing too long.

But none of it hurt as much as the truth.

He hadn't lost control.

He'd *given* it away.

Not in a burst of passion—but with intent. With clarity. With the part of himself that always claimed he knew better.

He pushed himself up from the couch slowly, his body heavy and reluctant, the afterglow curdling into something closer to shame. He tucked himself back into his pants, drew the waistband tight, and paced barefoot to the kitchen.

The tiles were cold against his soles. He opened the fridge, stared into the sterile light, then closed it again. No hunger. Just a habit.

Instead, he grabbed the whiskey. Poured two fingers into a crystal glass. No ice. Just burn.

He leaned on the counter, sipping slowly, and stared out across the open living room. Everything around him was flawless. Minimalist. Controlled.

It looked like success.

But tonight, it felt like a cage.

He should have stopped this. Should've slept. Should've woken up early, hit the gym, buried himself in meetings like always.

Instead, he'd booked her a flight.

To New York.

To this space.

To *him*.

He rubbed his fingers over his mouth again, jaw set hard, trying to breathe through the weight pressing against his ribs. It wasn't guilt. It was fear.

Not of her coming.

But of the part of him that *wanted* her to.

The whiskey had gone down too fast. He hadn't meant to drink it like that, but the burn had felt like penance—clean, harsh, something to cut through the noise. It didn't.

Now, the second glass was already half empty, and the edges of the room had softened. Not blurred—just tilted. Like the penthouse had shifted one degree off center, and no one told the architect.

A moved slow. Not with grace, but weight. His body was warm, limbs heavy with drink and the post-coital fatigue still hanging off him like a second skin. When he crossed back to the couch, it was with that floaty kind of dizziness he knew too well: the kind where the floor feels uneven, but not enough to stop you.

He sat down, poured the rest of the whiskey down his throat like it was a dare, then reached for the laptop.

The keyboard felt colder than it should've. The keys clicked too loud in the quiet. He didn't care.

He wasn't going to open work again. Couldn't look at contracts or numbers or the legal team's warnings.

Not tonight.

Instead, he clicked through muscle memory.

**League of Legends.**

The launcher came to life with its old synthetic chime.

He hadn't played in over a year, maybe more.

But his login still worked.

A soft laugh escaped him. Dry. Almost bitter.

*Of course it does.*

The loading screen blinked. His team assembled. And there he was—**Zed**.

Always Zed.

The shadow assassin.

The one who blinked through enemies before they knew he was coming.

The one who didn't hesitate. Who didn't feel.

His fingers began to move faster now, his posture pulling forward into the screen, into the neon glow, into the old rhythm he hadn't realized he still remembered.

Click. Shift. Cast.

The first few minutes were clumsy.

Then—

Kill.

Something clicked inside him.

Another kill.

His jaw tightened. He cracked his knuckles against the edge of the keyboard like he used to when he was 22, burning hours in front of this game with nothing in his fridge but Red Bull and a single pack of instant ramen.

*Before the penthouse. Before the boardroom. Before R.*

His body settled into the chair. Shoulders loose now. Head a little too heavy.

The whiskey was working its way through him in waves—first warmth, then fog.

His eyes narrowed on the screen, adjusting to the way the characters danced.

Each successful play delivered a quick pulse of relief.

Control.

Precision.

Cause and effect.

There were no unknowns here. No wives. No consequences. No guilt.

Just cooldowns and stats and the familiar adrenaline of outplaying someone who never saw you coming.

His champion blinked through shadows. Slashed through an enemy. Slipped away untouched.

*God, he'd missed this.*

He reached for the bottle again. Didn't bother with a glass. Just poured two fingers straight into his mouth.

The third kill came with a small rush of heat in his chest—not emotional. Just chemical. A perfect dopamine spike.

But the fourth didn't feel the same.

He blinked slowly. Realized his reflexes had slowed.

The room had softened again, the walls not quite stable. The screen flickered just a touch too bright.

His fingertips missed a key. He cursed, swayed slightly in the chair, then exhaled with something between a laugh and a growl.

He was drunk. Properly, fully, undeniably drunk.

And he didn't care.

He closed his eyes for half a second, letting the sounds of the match fill his ears. Mechanical. Hollow. Comforting in a way nothing had been for weeks.

Then she came back.

R.

Not in the game. In his mind.

A flash. Her face on the screen. That slow look she gave him before her fingers moved. The way she breathed his name like a secret.

His eyes snapped open.

The match continued.

But his focus was gone.

Another enemy moved in. He didn't react.

His champion died.

The screen blinked red.

*You have been slain.*

He didn't care.

Because all he could see now was her—arched back, parted lips, the way her eyes never left the camera. The way she said she wanted him. Not through a screen. Not in messages.

In person.

His stomach twisted. Not from the whiskey.  
From the knowledge that he'd already said yes.

He should've let the game distract him.  
Should've kept losing himself in it until he passed out.

But it was too late.

He was already somewhere else.

The laptop dimmed and went still, the game fading to a silent death screen. A didn't touch it.

He sat there in the dark, slouched low in the couch now, shirtless and sweating, his body humming with the dull, hollow heat that followed both release and drink. His vision pulsed slightly—edges soft, like someone had smeared his focus with their thumb.

The bottle of whiskey rested beside him, nearly empty. His glass was forgotten.

The apartment smelled like him. Sweat, leather, liquor, heat. There was no breeze, no movement, just the weight of the night pressing in from every wall.

The city outside was still alive, but he wasn't looking anymore.

His eyes were on the phone. It lay in his palm now. He didn't remember picking it up.

Her thread was still open. R. Her last video still visible in the preview. Just a still frame—but it was enough.

The slip of her fingers disappearing under the silk. Her lips parted. Her gaze locked on the screen like she could see him.

She was probably asleep now. It was late in Barcelona. Early, actually.

But A wasn't.

He was wide awake.

Hard again.

Drunk.

And burning.

Burning in that quiet, desperate way that felt less like arousal and more like illness. Like something had taken root under his skin and grown without permission.

He leaned his head back. Let it rest on the edge of the cushion. Closed his eyes.

He shouldn't.

He knew he shouldn't.

But his thumb was already moving.

He started to type.

Slow at first. Then faster. Then without breath.

*A: I want you here R.*

*A: I want to open my door after work and see you in my hallway.*

*A: On your knees.*

*A: Naked.*

*A: Mouth open. Ready to take me the second I walk in.*

*A: No hesitation. No words. Just submission.*

*A: Just your eyes, wide and waiting. Your body trembling. Your thighs already wet for me.*

*A: I'll drop my keys. Loosen my tie. Take my time—just to watch you squirm.*

*A: I'll run my thumb across your lips, press it down until I feel your breath catch.*

*A: Then tilt your chin. Just enough to see how far gone you already are.*

*A: And then I'll fuck your mouth.*

He paused.

His breath was heavy now. His other hand had already drifted lower—moving slow, deliberate, in time with the words.

He was completely gone.

*A: I'll take my time. Slide myself deep, until your throat clenches around me.*

*A: Until your hands press against my thighs for balance.*

*A: Until you're gagging on it—messy, ruined, mine.*

*A: I'll fuck your mouth until you forget everything but the sound of me, the taste of me, the way I don't let you stop.*

*A: Then I'll pull you up. Turn you around. Press you against the wall.*

*A: I'll fuck you there, R. Right against the glass. So hard you'll forget your name.*

*A: My hands on your hips. My teeth at your neck.*

*A: Until you cry out. Until you collapse.*

*A: And even then—I won't stop.*

*A: Not until you're nothing but my breath in your ears and my body inside yours.*

He squeezed his eyes shut. His chest tightened. His hips lifted just enough for that final edge to snap.



He came, jaw clenched, breath stuttering, muscles flexing hard beneath the sweat-slick skin.

The phone dropped onto his chest. He lay there for a second, heaving.

Spent.

His hand was sticky. His thighs damp. His mind—blank.

Then, slowly, the weight began to return.

The ache behind his eyes. The shame bleeding in at the corners of pleasure.

He reached for the phone. Looked at the thread. Read every word he had sent.

He didn't remember typing half of them.

But they were all there.

Permanent.

No edits.

No undo.

His stomach twisted.

He should delete them. Right now. Pretend the whole thing was a blackout mistake.

But his finger hovered.

Instead, he sent one last message:

*A: So tell me... are you still asleep? Or are you touching yourself thinking about this?*

A long breath. Eyes closed.

Then:

*A: Because if you come here, I won't let you leave.*

*A: Not until I've taken everything.*

*A: Every. Last. Thing.*

He didn't wait for a reply. Didn't even expect one.

He tossed the phone beside him, eyes staring up at the ceiling.

The city was still out there. The marriage was still real. The rules were still broken.

And the silence had returned—heavy, absolute, and waiting.



## Chapter 16

A woke with a skull-splitting ache lodged behind his eyes, the kind that didn't ask permission before it pulsed—rhythmic and cruel, like a warning siren in the dark.

His mouth was dry. So dry it felt lined with ash.

The taste of whiskey clung to his tongue like a bad secret.

Even breathing hurt.

The room was dim, shrouded in shadows that clung to the high walls and corners like guilt. The penthouse curtains—thick and obscenely expensive—did their job well, swallowing most of the morning light. But not all. Slivers of brightness sliced through the edges, pale and surgical, tracing cold lines across the stone floor.

He groaned, the sound rasping from the back of his throat like sandpaper.

Everything ached.

His body felt swollen with heat, like it had worked too hard for something it didn't earn.

His skin was sticky—damp with dried sweat and the heavy residue of sex that hadn't happened. At least not in person.

The couch beneath him was cool leather, but it wasn't cooling him. It was pressing against his back like a hand he didn't want. His head lolled to the side. He blinked once. Twice. His mind felt thick, like a film was playing at half-speed behind his eyes.

He ran a hand across his face and felt the grime of the night before: skin tight from dehydration, jaw sore from tension, eyes burning from too little sleep and too much screen light.

Something deeper churned in his stomach. Not nausea—**anticipation**.  
Not the good kind.

He couldn't remember everything. Just fragments.

Flashes.

That buzzing high.

The feel of his own hand.

The sound of his breath, too loud in the quiet.

Words.

Typed.

Sent.

He rubbed his temples. The dread was already blooming in his chest.

Then—

His phone buzzed.

It wasn't loud. Just a faint, restrained vibration on the marble table. But the sound carved straight into his gut.

His whole body froze.

No ringtone. No chime. Just that hum.  
One buzz. Not a call. A notification.

And just like that—  
It all came back.

Every word.  
Every filthy, reckless line.  
Every thing he had said to her.

The images snapped into place like a brutal montage:  
The messages.  
The moans in his memory.  
Her name in his mouth as he came.  
The things he had told her—things no sober version of himself would ever say out loud.

He sat up too fast.  
Pain exploded behind his eyes.  
He didn't care.

The phone was there, right where he'd left it—face down, dark, innocent.

But he already knew.

*She saw it.*

His fingers curled around the device.  
He unlocked it with a swipe, breath shallow, throat raw.

The screen flickered to life.  
He opened their chat.

And there it was.  
A monument to his collapse.  
A black stream of confessions and commands.

His breath caught.

*A: I want you in the corridor. Naked. Kneeling. Mouth open, ready to take me the second I step inside.*

*A: I'll grip your hair and shove myself deep into your throat—no words, no hesitation,*

*just me taking what's mine.*

**A:** *I want to feel you struggle. Feel you choke. Hear you break.*

**A:** *Then I'll drag you up and fuck you against the wall until you can't walk.*

**A:** *Are you still asleep? Or are you touching yourself thinking about this?*

He stared at the screen like it might combust in his hand.

His pulse pounded behind his ribs, too loud, too fast.

The air in the room thickened, heavy with regret—or was it something else?

His thumb hovered over the screen.

Delete.

Undo.

*Control it.*

But it was too late.

Beneath the last message, in small gray text:

**Read at 04:12 AM.**

He stopped breathing.

His chest went cold.

And tight.

She had seen it.

All of it.

The realization didn't just sting—it *sank*.

It buried itself beneath his ribs like a splinter he couldn't dig out.

A dropped his head back against the couch, eyes closing, hand covering his mouth.

The leather stuck to his skin again.

The silence roared.

*What the fuck did I do?*

But the more terrifying thought came a second later—quiet, seductive:

*What if she liked it?*

His breath hitched. His hips shifted slightly.

The sickness in his gut curled into something more dangerous.  
Not shame.

**Curiosity.**

He reached for the phone again.  
Opened the thread.

There was no reply.

Not yet.

And now, he needed to know.

The first thing R registered was the cold.

Her apartment was still, the morning light just beginning to push its way past the linen curtains that filtered the city into soft gold and gray. Her room smelled faintly of clean laundry, eucalyptus from the candle she'd forgotten to blow out, and something warmer—her own sleep-scent, tangled in cotton sheets.

She lay there for a few seconds, eyes half-lidded, body warm and tangled in the duvet, unsure what had pulled her awake.

Then she saw the light.  
The faint glow of her phone screen, facedown beside the bed.

She reached for it automatically, still fogged with sleep. The clock read **06:17**.  
And below that—**7 unread messages. From A.**

Her pulse ticked once.  
Then again.

The lockscreen disappeared under her thumb. The chat thread opened.

She blinked. Sat up.

And stared.

Message after message filled the screen. Black bubbles stacked with no breath between them. Long. Dense. Obscene.

She read the first line. Then the next.  
Her brain stuttered trying to process it.

*Naked. Kneeling. Mouth open.*  
*Grip your hair. Shove myself deep.*

*Choke. Struggle. Use.*  
*Against the wall. So hard you'll feel me for days.*  
*Are you touching yourself thinking about this?*

A sharp, involuntary breath left her lips.

The room felt suddenly *hot*.

Not metaphorically.

Physically.

The kind of heat that starts at the base of the spine and spreads like a bloom beneath the skin.

Her first instinct was disbelief. This wasn't A.

Not the controlled version. Not the one who measured every word, who left hours between replies, who always made her wait.

This was something else.

Unhinged.

Unfiltered.

Drunk.

She should've been offended. Maybe even scared.

Any reasonable woman would be.

But her fingers didn't move.

She didn't close the thread.

Didn't pull the blanket up.

Didn't roll her eyes.

Instead, she kept reading.

Slower now.

Line by line.

Like scripture.

And something inside her shifted.

It wasn't just the filth of it—it was the *claim*.

The language of ownership. Of *command*.

She could see it.

Her on the floor. Her mouth open.

Her knees pressed into the hardwood while he stood in front of her, breathing hard.

She imagined the weight of his hand at the back of her head. The heat of his body looming over her. The way he would say nothing at all—just take.

Her thighs pressed together instinctively.  
Tight.

*Fuck.*

She swallowed, the air in the room thick now.  
He had sent this in the middle of the night. Probably drunk. Probably alone.

She should dismiss it.  
Should tell herself it didn't mean anything.  
Should say it was just a moment of weakness.

But her body knew better.  
Her body *remembered*.

The videos they'd sent.  
The way he looked at her through the screen like he was starving.

The way she wanted to be consumed.

The ache between her legs deepened.

Her fingers clenched around the phone, jaw tight, chest rising and falling in a rhythm that didn't belong to morning.

She read the messages again.  
Slower.

Letting herself imagine it.

Not just the sex.  
The surrender.

Not just being touched.  
Being *taken*.

Her lips parted. Her pulse pounded harder.  
She dragged the duvet up over her chest, like it might shield her from the intensity curling in her belly.

It didn't.

A single thought cut through the fog, clean and clear and dangerous:



*He wants me like that.*

And worse:

*I want him to.*

She couldn't stay in bed.

Not with her skin this hot.

Not with his words still burning behind her eyes.

The air in the bedroom had turned suffocating, thick with everything she wasn't saying aloud. Her sheets were damp. Not from sweat. From the slow, persistent arousal building in her body since the moment she'd read the first line.

She needed air.

She needed cold.

She needed *relief*.

R pushed the blanket off, swung her legs to the side of the bed, and stood. The floor was cool under her feet, grounding her for half a second—then it was gone. The heat returned, a rush under her skin, tightening her chest.

The apartment was silent. Still half in shadow.

Out in the street below, the city murmured—faint traffic, distant voices, the clink of cups from the café downstairs. But here, in this room, it was just her.

Her and his voice in her head.

*I'll grip your hair and fuck your mouth until you forget your name.*

*I want to open the door and see you kneeling. Waiting. Ready to be used.*

Her breath hitched again.

She crossed the room like a sleepwalker.

The bathroom door shut behind her with a soft, guilty click.

And then—silence.

For a second, she stood there motionless, back pressed to the wall, fingers tight around her phone, her heart beating against her ribs like it was trying to escape. Her camisole clung to her chest, suddenly too thin, too revealing, her thighs brushing against each other like her body was trying to undo her.

She unlocked the phone again.

Scrolled.

Read the lines.

Every word he wrote was still there.

Like a hand around her throat.

Like fingers between her legs.

She couldn't fight it.

She didn't even try.

One hand slid under her top, cupping her breast, squeezing lightly. The other drifted lower, her fingers slipping beneath the waistband of her panties, and there—there it was.

The wetness. The *need*.

A sharp moan slipped from her lips, low and helpless. She bit it back, pressing her head against the wall, eyes fluttering shut. Her fingers moved slow at first, teasing, tracing, her body twitching with every breath.

It was supposed to be wrong.

It wasn't.

It felt inevitable.

She imagined the door opening.

The look in his eyes when he saw her there.

The sound of his footsteps as he crossed the room.

The way he would grab her. Hard.

Her back arched.

Her fingers moved faster.

Her breaths came shorter.

She was panting now.

Desperate.

And the images wouldn't stop.

A grabbing her face, pushing her mouth open.

Thrusting deep, no warning, no permission.

Fucking her against the wall like she belonged to him.

She was close. So fucking close.

*I'll ruin you.*

*I'll fuck you until there's nothing left but the sound of my name in your throat.*

The orgasm hit like a punch—fast, overwhelming, silent except for the jagged inhale she couldn't hold back. Her legs shook. Her body trembled. She let her head drop, forehead resting against the tile, as the pleasure swept through her in violent, beautiful waves.

And when it faded, she just stood there.

Breathing.

Burning.

Her hand still between her thighs.

His words still echoing in her chest.

This was dangerous.

She knew that.

But she also knew—

It wasn't over.

Not yet.

By the time R stepped out into the Barcelona morning, the city was already wide awake—sunlight pooling in puddles on the sidewalk, scooters weaving between traffic, a bakery's doors flung open on the corner, releasing the scent of warm bread and sugar into the air.

But she barely noticed.

Her body moved through the routine—shower, coffee, hair up in a loose twist, oversized sweater over soft denim, a tote bag thrown over one shoulder—but her mind was still in the bathroom.

Still in the heat.

Still on her knees.

Still with *him*.

A.

The name felt like a hum beneath her skin.

Every step she took echoed with it.

Every passing glance from strangers felt like they saw something they shouldn't—like she was still flushed, still trembling, still fucked open by words alone.

She tried to snap out of it.

Her phone buzzed twice in the pocket of her jeans—notifications from work, nothing urgent. The cafés were already full of noise, keyboards clacking through windows, waiters calling orders in Catalan. She had emails to send to families feedback about the studens and school.

But none of it mattered.

Because he hadn't replied.

Because *she hadn't replied*.

She paused at the crosswalk near Plaça Universitat, the late-morning light glinting off the glass office buildings like mirrors. She pulled out her phone with one hand, thumb hovering over the screen.

She hadn't even opened their thread again.

Hadn't dared.

But now—she did.

The messages stared back at her.

Unread, yes. But not forgotten.

He'd said everything.

Laid himself bare. Drunk, maybe. But still—*raw*.

And that meant something.

To her.

Maybe too much.

Her fingers moved before she could second-guess herself.

She stepped into the quiet of a nearby café, pushed through the curtain into the back hallway that led to the restrooms. It was empty. Dim.

She pulled out her phone fully.

Opened their chat.

Typed.

**R:** *OMG, A... you made me so hot.*

She stared at it. It felt juvenile. Shallow. Not enough.

It *wasn't* enough.

Her breath quickened.

She kept going.

**R:** *I couldn't stop thinking about it.*

*I was soaked.*

*I touched myself to your words.*

*I came thinking about my knees on your floor, waiting for you.*

She stared at the screen. Her pulse was a low throb in her throat.

Send.

The bubble disappeared.

She exhaled.

She didn't know what she expected. Shame? Relief?

But what came was something else entirely:

Satisfaction.

He had sent her the storm.

She had chosen to step inside it.

And now, she had struck the match.

Her phone remained silent for a full minute. Two.

But she knew.

Somewhere, right now—he was reading it.

And losing his fucking mind.

She smiled.

Shouldered her bag.

And stepped back out into the sun.

The rain hit the office windows in slow, rhythmic sheets—thick and steady, like the city had decided to drown itself in silence. New York looked softer through the glass, all neon smears and streaked headlights, taxis dragging reflections down the street like ghosts.

A sat at his desk, unmoving. Elbows braced on the cold marble, jaw locked. His laptop sat open, a contract glowing on the screen, unread. Unimportant.

He wasn't working.

He hadn't been all morning.

He was *waiting*.

The messages he had sent her still pulsed behind his eyes like an echo. He couldn't believe he'd typed them. Couldn't believe he hadn't deleted them. Couldn't believe—more than anything—that she hadn't responded.

His phone was face-down next to the keyboard. He hadn't touched it in twenty minutes.

That was his version of discipline now.  
Twenty minutes.

He let out a slow exhale. Rubbed his thumb along the seam of his pants, trying to ignore the tightness still coiled low in his abdomen. It didn't matter how many emails he opened, how many times he read the same paragraph.

His mind kept drifting.

Back to her.

Back to the things he'd said.

And worse—back to how she might have looked reading them.

The buzz hit the desk like a bullet.

Short. Sharp. Vibrating against the wood.

The sound was small—but it tore through him.

His hand moved instantly.

One glance at the screen and he stopped breathing.

**R.**

Five messages.

His thumb hovered for a single, strained second.

Then he opened the thread.

*OMG, A... you made me so hot.*

*I couldn't stop thinking about it.*

*I was soaked.*

*I touched myself to your words.*

*I came thinking about my knees on your floor, waiting for you.*

The last message hit like a fist to the chest.

He froze. Then laughed—once, low, ragged.

His cock hardened instantly.

His free hand moved down, pressing against the strain behind his zipper.

*Fuck.*

She'd read everything.

And not only had she *not* pulled away—she'd wanted it.

*Had acted on it.*

Had *come* for him.

A groaned, jaw tight, heart hammering. His thumb flew over the keyboard.

**A:** *Show me.*

**A:** *Send me a video.*

He didn't wait for an answer.

Didn't blink.

Every nerve in his body snapped to attention.

He could already see her—her hand sliding between her legs, her lips parted, the sweet moan she made when she let go.

The thought made him throb.

Then—

Snapchat notifications.

Three.

He unlocked the app.

Tapped.

Her face filled the screen first—hair loose over her shoulder, bunny filter flickering at the edges. Her lips parted, eyes locked on the lens like she was *inside* it.

“Hi, A,” she whispered.

The sound almost broke him.

Second snap:

Her camisole sliding down her shoulder. The delicate curve of skin. Her voice teasing.

“I was thinking about you last night...”

He palmed himself harder, breath shallow.

Third:

Legs spread slightly. The hem of her sweater barely covering her panties. Her voice low and sweet:

“Do you like this?”

A cursed under his breath.

Unzipped. Freed himself.

He was already too far gone.

The last video.

She looked straight into the lens.

Opened her mouth slowly.

Let her tongue slide out—just enough to destroy him.

His body took over.

No hesitation.

Just need.

He stroked himself, fast, desperate, watching her image flicker across the screen like a fever dream. Her mouth, her voice, the filter softening her face into something *almost* innocent.

He came hard, jaw clenched, hips lifting off the chair, cum spilling across his stomach. His vision blanked out for a second—then snapped back.

Reality.

The echo of her videos.

The mess on his skin.

His phone still in his hand.

A leaned back, breathing like he’d run a marathon.

And then—silence.

The weight of it dropped on him like a stone.

Not guilt. Not yet.

Just... quiet.

The screen dimmed.

Her snaps were over.

And he was alone again.



The office remained still.  
Outside, the rain kept falling.  
Inside, the illusion cracked.

He wiped his stomach with a napkin from the drawer.  
Adjusted himself.  
Closed the chat.

Then—slowly, deliberately—he locked his phone.

Set it down.

Didn't reach for it again.

Not yet.

Because if he did—  
He wouldn't stop.

And if he didn't stop—  
He wouldn't survive her.

## Chapter 17

R stared at her phone. Not just once. Dozens of times.

By now, it had become a ritual—unlock the phone, scroll through messages, pretend she wasn't hoping to see his name. But it never came.

Nothing. Not a word. Just silence—surgical, cold, deliberate. A silence that felt more like a choice than a lapse, more like exile than absence.

And it wasn't like him.

He always replied.

Even at his most restrained, even when he was pretending not to care—he responded. He needed control, yes. But he didn't disappear.

This? This was new.

She sat back in her chair, the hard edge of the wood pressing into her spine, her office faintly humming around her. The overhead lights buzzed. Papers rustled. Students laughed down the corridor outside her door. But none of it touched her.

*Everything else blurred. Only the unread thread stayed sharp.*

Her fingers tapped the desk, restless.

She'd expected something after last night—after the videos, after her confession. A message, even short. A command. A joke. A single filthy line to pull her under again.

But there was nothing.

She hadn't even seen him online. A breath hitched. Her body remembered before her mind did—the heat, the surrender, the rush of being seen when she sent him the last video. The way her heart had pounded, knowing he was watching

And now

Nothing.

Had she gone too far?

Had he—

She swallowed.

Had he regretted it?

She pulled her cardigan tighter, suddenly cold despite the soft heat of the room. Her thoughts began to spiral, grasping at questions with no answers.

Was he disgusted?  
Embarrassed?  
Done?

Nothing new came. And the weight of not knowing—it was unbearable. This wasn't impulse. This was survival

But this wasn't chasing.  
This was needing to *know*.

Her thumbs hovered. She hesitated.

Then—typed.

**R:** So... did you die or something?

The second she hit send, her heart twisted.  
The screen blinked.  
Nothing.

Then—  
The dots.

Appeared.  
Vanished.  
Appeared again.

She leaned forward, barely breathing.

Then—finally:

**A:** No. Just needed a break.

A break.  
Her chest tightened.

**R:** A break? From me?

The pause was longer this time.

**A:** From everything. That was... a lot.

A lot.  
The words hit like ice.  
Suddenly everything she'd done, everything she thought they were doing, felt wrong.

Her fingers trembled as she typed:

**R:** Are you okay?

Another long wait.

**A:** Yeah. Just need space for a bit.

Space.

She hated the word.

It didn't sound like "I'm done."

But it didn't sound like *stay* either.

It sounded like *go*.

She read the message again, slower this time.

Let it land. Let it ache.

Then, after a long breath, she answered:

**R:** Okay. Take your space, A.

But don't disappear completely.

She sent it before she could think too hard.

And this time—

There was no reply.

Just silence.

Again.

The first few days, A convinced himself he needed this.

It wasn't punishment. It was retreat. A way to survive the want. He'd crossed a line—too far, too fast. Let go of the leash he always held tight. Let her pull something out of him that scared the hell out of him. It wasn't just lust. It was want—raw, reckless, real.

So he did what he always did when the feeling became too sharp:

He cut it off.

Drew the line.

Created space.

He thought it would help.

He buried himself in meetings, slid back into his penthouse past midnight, let the cold skyline blur against the glass while his inbox filled and his assistant buzzed about flight

reschedules and quarterly briefings.

He made himself believe the rhythm was soothing. Safe.

But The silence had edges. And she filled every one. Every time his phone buzzed, a flicker of hope sparked in his chest—before dying the second it was someone else.

He told himself he was fine.

That he didn't care if she messaged.

Didn't care if she moved on.

Didn't care if she was—

Touching herself to someone else's words now.

He gripped the armrest of his leather chair tighter than he needed to.

That night.

The way she had looked in those videos.

The sound of her voice, trembling as she moaned his name.

The bunny ears.

He exhaled through his teeth and stood up too fast, pacing across the polished floor. His whiskey glass sat untouched by the window, the amber liquid catching the city lights like fire.

He hadn't touched himself since that night.

Hadn't allowed it.

The only control he hadn't surrendered.

Because everything else—everything *she* touched—was unraveling.

He'd thrown himself into work, yes.

He'd fucked a woman after a board dinner, a transactional blur of skin and sound and zero memory.

But it hadn't helped.

Nothing touched the part of him that she had reached.

And it wasn't fair.

Because *she* was the one who had sent the videos.

*She* was the one who whispered "I can't wait anymore" into the dark.

*She* had given him her surrender.

And now?

He was the one spiraling.

At night, when he lay alone in bed, city lights flickering on the ceiling, his hand itched toward his phone.

Just to check.

Not to message.

Not to cave.

Just to *know*.

Had she sent something?

A snap?

A text?

Did she miss him?

Was she touching herself again?

The thoughts came sharper after midnight. They always did.

But he held the silence.

Wore it like armor.

Until it didn't feel like strength anymore.

Until it felt like a cage.

It was close to midnight.

The city beyond the glass stretched cold and gold, rain pooling on the penthouse terrace, soft streaks of condensation running down the windows. A sat in the dark, his laptop open but forgotten, the blue glow casting hollow light across his sharp features.

The silence was heavier tonight.

It had weight, density.

Like her absence wasn't just a choice—it was a presence.

One that breathed in the corners of his room, coiled in the space between his ribs.

He gave in before he could talk himself out of it.

He picked up his phone.

Typed slowly, deliberately.

**A:** *Hey.*

Just that.

It felt insufficient and exposed at the same time. He stared at the screen as if it might spit back a version of himself he didn't recognize.

The dots appeared almost immediately.

Then vanished.

Then came back.

His jaw clenched.

Then—

**R:** *Wow, look who's alive.*

A huffed softly under his breath. Her voice echoed in the tone. Dry, biting, half-playful. She wasn't angry.

She had waited.

He hesitated for just a second.

Then—

**A:** *Told you I needed space.*

**A:** *That whole thing... it was a lot.*

A pause.

He could picture her reading it, expression unreadable, lips twitching into something between a smirk and a frown.

**R:** *Yeah, no shit. It was insane.*

A let out a breath. A chuckle, rough and tired.

**A:** *We should stop for a while. Keep things light.*

**A:** *But if you don't want to lose contact... we could have a call some days.*

Another pause.

Longer, now.

He waited.

And finally—

**R:** *Just a call?*

He smirked despite himself.

**A:** *For now.*

**R:** *Fine. But if I get bored, I'm hanging up.*

He shook his head, thumb hovering over the glass.

She wouldn't.

And they both knew it.

The next message came an hour later.

Just as he'd finally closed his laptop and poured himself another drink.

**R:** *Hey. Do you have time for a call?*

His thumb paused mid-scroll.

He stared at the message, heart tightening—not with emotion, but with a strange, hot anticipation. The kind he didn't want to name.

It was late.

Too late for casual.

She knew that.

She was testing him again.

He could have said no. Could have drawn the line sharp and clear.

But his fingers were already typing.

**A:** *Yeah. I have time.*

Seconds later, his screen lit up.

**Incoming call: R.**

He didn't hesitate.

Didn't second-guess.

He swiped to answer.

"R."

Her voice came through soft, almost tentative.

"Took you long enough."

A exhaled.

It was ridiculous how much lighter he felt just hearing her voice.



But he couldn't let it show.  
Not yet.

He leaned forward, elbow braced on his knee, his tone careful, guarded.

"R... it was too much."

He let the words sit in the space between them.

He wasn't just talking about the messages.  
Not even just about the videos.  
He was talking about the spiral.

His loss of control.  
His desire.  
The need that had felt like drowning.

"I needed to stop," he continued, his voice lower now. "You have your life. I have mine.  
We were pushing into something..."

"Too much?" she offered.

He smiled faintly.  
But it didn't reach his eyes.

"Yeah."

And for a moment, it was quiet.

Then she let out a slow breath.

"Okay," she said lightly. "Whatever you say, A."

He knew she didn't believe it.

But she let it go.

And just like that, the conversation shifted.

She didn't ask for more.  
Didn't push.

Just *pivoted*.

And A—  
A let her.

“So,” R said, voice softer now, almost curious. “How’s life?”

A blinked, a wry smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“That’s what you want to talk about?”

She laughed. “Sure. Isn’t this what normal people do? Small talk. Routine. No sex. No power games.”

“No chaos,” he muttered.

“Exactly.”

He swirled the whiskey in his glass and leaned back into the leather couch, the city stretching wide behind him in hazy gold.

“Alright. Let’s try being normal.”

He heard her settle in, the slight rustle of fabric, the shift of weight as she curled up on the other end. That simple sound tightened something in his chest.

“I’m at war with my students,” she began with mock seriousness. “They’re tiny monsters, all of them.”

He chuckled. “I thought you liked teaching.”

“I do,” she said quickly. “I love it. But also... imagine trying to explain multiplication to a seven-year-old who’s convinced he’s going to be a YouTube star and doesn’t need math.”

“Sounds exhausting.”

“You have no idea. Today one of them asked if I had kids. When I said no, he just shrugged and said, ‘That’s okay, you still have time before you’re too old.’” She groaned. “I nearly quit on the spot.”

A laughed—a real one.

Low. Unrestrained.

And for the first time in weeks, it didn’t feel like he was faking calm.

“Tell me more,” he said, shifting to stretch out, one ankle crossed over the other.

And she did.

R went on about her day, about the overachieving coworker who never smiled, about the teacher who hoarded snacks in her desk drawer, about the one kid who kept calling her ‘Miss Rabbit’ because he couldn’t pronounce her name properly.

She had a way of making the mundane sound alive.  
Funny. Intimate.

And A... listened.

Really listened.

He let her voice fill the room, warm and animated, let it echo off the penthouse walls that had been too quiet lately. For a little while, he didn't think about control or distance or the tight, burning need just beneath his skin.

He thought about her.

About her life, her world, the one that didn't revolve around him.

And in return, when she asked about his day, he didn't dodge.

He told her about the board meeting that dragged on for four hours. About the analyst who kept quoting outdated data. About Jenna, who raised an eyebrow at him when he stared too long at his phone during the meeting.

"She knows something's off," he admitted.

"Because you've been distant?" R asked gently.

"No," he said. Then: "Because I'm not being distant enough."

A pause.

Then R whispered, "Are we really doing this? Pretending we're friends now?"

He didn't answer immediately.

He didn't need to.

The silence said enough.

They were pretending.

But it was working.

Kind of.

This version of them—casual, clean, careful—was like walking a tightrope over fire.

No heat.

Just the threat of it.

They talked for another hour. About nothing. Everything. Old TV shows. Favorite meals. Ranting about taxes. A complaining about airport security.

And when she finally said, “I should go to sleep,” he felt the ache of it.

Not because she was leaving.

But because, for the first time, he didn’t want the conversation to end.

“Goodnight,” she murmured.

“Goodnight, R.”

He ended the call, set the phone down, and stared at it for a long time.

It was supposed to be safer this way.

But safer didn’t mean easier.

And it sure as hell didn’t mean over.

R had tried.

For three weeks, she’d followed A’s lead.

Kept it light. Safe.

Pretended her body wasn’t aching every night she put the phone down.

The first few calls had felt like oxygen. Hearing his voice. His laugh. His calm.

But that relief had faded.

It was replaced by something darker.

Desire that didn’t go away.

It built. Quietly. Relentlessly.

She never brought up the videos.

Never mentioned the things he’d said—*mouth open, naked, waiting for me.*

But they lived under her skin.

Every time he asked *how was your day?*

Every time he chuckled at something she said.

Every time she imagined his fingers around a whiskey glass, his body sprawled across that leather couch in New York—while hers curled alone in bed in Barcelona.

She didn’t touch herself at first.

Didn’t let herself.

But tonight?

Tonight, she couldn't stop.

She was lying on her stomach, phone balanced beside her pillow, listening to him talk about a glitch in some quarterly report, and all she could think was—*I want you to tell me what to do again.*

She shifted, slowly, carefully, sliding a hand beneath the hem of her shirt.

A didn't notice.

Or maybe he did.

His voice didn't change, but there was a pause. A beat too long.

"R?"

"Hmm?" she murmured, voice low, soft.

"You're quiet."

"I'm listening," she lied.

And then, without warning, she whispered, "A..."

His silence was immediate.

"I miss it," she said softly. "Not just the talking. The rest of it."

He didn't reply. But she could feel the shift through the line.

His breathing slowed. His presence thickened like smoke.

And just like that, the leash snapped.

"I think about it," she whispered. "All the time. What you said. What you made me do."

Her hand was already moving now, slowly, lazily. Just enough to tease.

"I can't stop," she breathed. "Even when we're pretending everything's normal. I still want you. Still need you."

She didn't know if he was hard already.

Didn't need to.

She could feel it in the silence.

Could feel it in herself—the ache tightening between her thighs, the slow, maddening pulse of it.

"Tell me to stop," she said. "And I will."

He didn't.

Of course, he didn't.

Then—finally—

“R,” he said, voice low, taut, trembling with restraint. “You know what this will do.”

She smiled into the pillow, breath catching.

“I know.”

Another pause.

Then—

“Take off your shirt.”

It wasn't a question.

Wasn't even a command.

It was just... truth.

She obeyed.

Her fingers moved before her mind could catch up. Shirt tossed aside. Body exposed to the cool air. She could hear the shift in his breath now, the dark hunger starting to wake inside him.

“I'm listening,” she whispered.

“Good,” he said.

And just like that, the game resumed.

But this time, they weren't falling into it.

They were *choosing* it.

They weren't slipping anymore. They were stepping—eyes open, breath held, into the fire.

## Chapter 18

R had been sending little gifts to A for days.

A teasing photo here.

A soft voice note whispering his name there.

Something just enough to keep him thinking about her.

And he liked it.

He didn't say much—A never did—but he never ignored her. Never told her to stop.

And that was enough.

For a while.

But something had changed in her.

She didn't just want to tease anymore. Didn't just want to play.

Just one line of setup: She wanted to matter. Viscerally. That she could drive him as insane as he drove her. And she had no idea how. She wasn't like him. Didn't have the sharp, filthy words that seemed to pour out of him so easily. Didn't know how to push him over the edge with just a text.

So she did the only thing she could think of.

She went shopping.

The Decision

The city was buzzing as she walked through the shopping district—people laughing, cars honking, the air warm even though autumn had started to settle in.

Her heart was pounding.

She had never done something like this before. Never walked into a store with the specific thought of buying something just to please a man.

Just to please A.

The thought alone made her cheeks burn.

But she couldn't stop.

She stepped inside a luxury boutique, the scent of perfume and delicate fabric wrapping around her the moment she entered.

A saleswoman smiled at her. "Looking for something special?"

R swallowed, nodding. "Something... nice."

Something that would make A want her.

She wandered through the store, fingertips brushing against lace, silk, satin.

Everything was beautiful.

Delicate slips in soft pastels, bold sets in deep black and blood-red, corsets that cinched at the waist, garters with stockings that whispered against the skin.

What would he like?

Her heart raced as she imagined it.

His eyes trailing over her, the way he would exhale slowly, hands tightening as he took her in.

Would he tease her? Make her wait?

Or would he snap, pull her against him, ruin her the way she had been craving for weeks?

The ache inside her wasn't just desire. It was purpose. She wanted him.

She hesitated, then finally chose something.

The Message

That night, she stared at her phone, her nerves twisting.

She stared at the bag. At the risk inside it

What if he didn't care?

What if he didn't want this?

But then, she thought about the way he always answered her.

Even when she teased him.

Even when he was trying to stay away.

Even when he pretended he wasn't obsessed.

And she finally typed the words.

R: A... *I bought something.*

The second she sent it, her stomach flipped.



She curled her fingers into the sheets, waiting, breathless.

Then—

A message appeared.

A was typing.

Her heart pounded.

She had no idea what he was going to say.

But one thing was certain—

She had just given herself to him completely.

A sat in his office, the city lights flickering outside, the hum of New York moving without him.

His phone buzzed.

R: *A... I bought something.*

He exhaled slowly, his fingers tightening around the glass of whiskey in his other hand.

She had been sending him gifts for days now.

Little things. Teasing things. Enough to keep his mind circling back to her when he least expected it.

And now, this.

His jaw clenched, his body already reacting, already burning, already needing.

What did she buy?

The answer shouldn't matter.

But it did.

Because it was for him.

Because she wanted to please him.

His grip on the phone tightened, his thoughts spiraling into dangerous territory.

She was giving herself up, little by little.

And he was letting it happen.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard before he finally typed.

A: *What did you buy?*

Seconds passed.

Then—

The dots appeared.

She was hesitating.

He smirked. Good.

He could picture her—flushed, nervous, her fingers twitching over the keyboard, debating how much she was willing to admit.

Then—

R: *Lingerie.*

His breath hitched.

Fuck.

His cock twitched at the thought, his mind flashing with images he shouldn't be thinking about.

Her, in lace.

Her, in silk.

Her, waiting for him, knowing she had worn it just for him.

He ran a hand over his face, forcing himself to stay still.

She had no idea what she was doing to him.

Or maybe she did.

Maybe that was the point.

Another message popped up.

R: *I don't know if you'll like it... but I wanted to get something for you.*

R: *To make you feel good.*

A groaned under his breath, his grip tightening.

She wanted to please him.

She had never said it outright before—never admitted how much she wanted to give herself to him.

And now?

Now she was saying it. Plain and clear.

A smirk curled at the corner of his lips, dark and slow.

She was falling deeper.

And he was going to let her.

His fingers moved.

*A: Try it on.*

*A: And show me.*

He hit send.

And now—he waited.

Because he knew.

She would.

A leaned back in his chair, his breath slow, controlled—but inside, his restraint was crumbling.

The pictures had come one by one, each one dragging him deeper, making his cock throb harder, making the hunger inside him twist into something darker.

The first had been shy.

Soft lighting. A glimpse of lace hugging her curves, barely covering her, the outline of her body teasing him, hinting at what she wasn't showing.

The second had been bolder.

Her fingers had lifted the hem of the lingerie just enough for him to see more. See her skin.

She was learning.

Learning how to give.

Learning how to let him pull her apart.

And he wasn't done yet. Not even close. This wasn't arousal. It was territory. She wanted to please him. She had said so herself.

So now?

She was going to prove it.

His fingers moved over the keyboard, his jaw tight, his control slipping.

*A: Good girl.*

*A: But it's not enough.*

He let the words sink in. Let her feel the weight of them.

Then—

*A: If you really want to please me, you'll buy something else.*

The dots appeared.

Then stopped.

Then appeared again.

She was hesitating.

He smirked.

Good.

She knew what was coming.

And she was already obeying.

Finally, she responded.

*R: What do you mean?*

His smirk deepened.

Now, he had her.

Now, he would push her where he wanted her.

*A: I want you to buy restraints.*

*A: Something for your neck.*

*A: Something to keep your hands tied.*

Another pause.

He could almost hear her breath catching, feel the heat rushing to her skin, see the way her fingers trembled over the keyboard.

She wasn't saying no.

That was all that mattered.

He exhaled slowly, his free hand brushing over his cock, teasing himself, waiting.

Waiting for her to surrender completely.

Then—

Her reply appeared.

Short.

Simple.

But it was all he needed.

*R: Okay...*

A groaned, his head falling back, his control finally slipping completely.

She was his.

And now, she was going to prove it.

A smirked, his fingers hovering over the keyboard, his breath slow but uneven.

She had agreed.

She had said *okay*.

She was going to do it.

He could already see her now—heart pounding, fingers shaking as she scrolled through bondage sets, wondering how the hell she had gotten to this point.

Because of him.

Because he told her to.

And she listened.

That was the part that made his cock throb the hardest.

Not just the idea of seeing her in restraints.

Not just the thought of her wrists bound, her neck wrapped in leather, waiting for him to tell her what to do.

No.

It was the power of it.

The proof that she was his.

That she was falling, deeper and deeper, until she wouldn't be able to stop.

And he wasn't going to let her.

His fingers moved over the keyboard again, his smirk dark and slow.

*A: And don't forget to buy bunny ears.*

The dots appeared.

Then stopped.

Then started again.

He knew she was confused.

Knew that she had been expecting him to say something else.

Something filthier.

Something cruel.

But this?

This was different.

This was deeper.

Because A knew what the bunny ears meant now.

At first, it had just been a filter—something cute, something playful.

But then, he realized.

She always wore them when she was giving herself to him.

Every time she teased him, every time she let herself slip further into submission, every time she sent him a video, or a picture, or whispered something sinful into the phone—

She was wearing those fucking ears.

It wasn't just cute anymore.

It was a symbol.

A mark.

A reminder of who she belonged to.

And now, he wanted more.

Her message finally appeared.

R: *Bunny ears?*

A chuckled under his breath.

She still didn't get it.

But she would.

He would make sure of it.

His fingers moved again.

A: *Yes. Not the small, cute ones. I want them big. Long. Elegant.*

A: *When I see them, I want to know exactly what you are.*

Silence.

A could almost hear her heartbeat through the screen.

She understood now.

She knew exactly what he meant.

She could pretend she didn't.

Could pretend this was still just a game.

But they both knew the truth.

This was so much more than that now.

A waited.

Watched the dots flicker.

And when her reply finally came, he knew—

She had just surrendered completely.

R: *Okay.*

A exhaled slowly, his cock aching, his body buzzing with the sheer fucking power of it.

She was his.

And soon, she was going to look the part.

R, I want you on the floor. When I walk in, I won't say anything. I'll just watch you shake.

Wearing the lingerie you bought for me.

Wearing the restraints on your wrists and neck.

Wearing the bunny ears.

On your knees.

Waiting.

Ready to do anything for me.

When I walk in, I want to see it in your eyes—

That you understand.

That you know exactly what you are.

That you are mine.

I won't say anything at first.

I'll stand there, watching you, letting you feel the weight of my presence, letting you tremble under it.

Then, I'll take you by the collar.

Run my fingers along your jaw.

Tilt your chin up so I can see the need in your eyes.

And then, I'll take you to the kitchen.

I'll press you against the counter, my body pinning yours, feeling the heat radiating off your skin.



You'll feel my breath at your ear, my hands running down your sides, teasing the edges of your restraint.

And then—  
I'll make you beg.

I want to hear it.  
I want you to say it out loud.

What you want.  
What you crave.  
What you're willing to give me.

And only when I'm satisfied—  
Only when I know you truly understand what it means to be mine—

Then, and only then, will I take you.

And I won't stop until you're shaking.  
Until you can't think.  
Until the only thing left in your mind—  
Is me.

A.

I'll make you lick all of me.

Every inch.

You will run your tongue over my skin, feel the weight of my body, taste the heat of my desire.

You will do as I say.

Because you belong to me.

You will obey, kneeling before me, waiting, your wrists bound, your collar snug against your throat, the bunny ears perched perfectly on your head—  
a symbol of who you are now.

Mine.

You will stay still as I run my fingers over your skin, feeling the soft lace of your lingerie, the delicate way it clings to your body, teasing me.

And then—you won't be able to hold it anymore.

Your breath will catch, your body will tremble, your thighs will press together, aching for more—aching for me.

And that's when I'll do it.

I'll drag my fingers down your stomach, lower, lower—

And I'll remove your wet panties.

Slowly.

Feeling how drenched you already are for me.

I'll press my mouth to your ear and whisper, "You've been waiting for this, haven't you?"

Inside you, I'll be controlling myself.

Holding back—just enough.

Because if I don't, if I let myself fully go, I might break you.

I don't want to hurt you.

But you need to understand—the way I want you, the way I crave you—

It's not something I can just ignore.

That's why, when I press into you, when I sink deep inside you, I'll press my hand against your back, pushing you closer, keeping us locked together.

I need you tight against me.

I need to feel you completely.

To release some of the pressure of this unbearable fucking passion that you bring out in me.

You don't realize, do you?

What you do to me.

How you make me burn.

How hard it is to control myself when it comes to you.

But I will.

Because you are mine.

And I will take you slowly, deliberately, deeply—  
Until there is nothing left of you but the way you belong to me.  
And when you can't take anymore, when you're clinging to me, trembling, lost—  
That's when I'll finally let go.  
And when you break, I'll be the one who put you there A.  
A leaned back in his chair, his eyes locked on the last words he had sent.  
The writing sat there on the screen, bold, unfiltered, a raw confession of control,  
of possession, of restraint barely held together.  
And now—  
He was waiting.  
Waiting for her to read it.  
Waiting for her to understand exactly what he was doing to her.  
Waiting for her to accept it.  
His fingers tapped slowly against the desk, his jaw tight, his body still thrumming  
with the energy of what he had just sent her.  
Because this wasn't just a message.  
It was a declaration.  
He had spent weeks holding back.  
Weeks pretending this was still a game.  
Weeks ignoring the fact that she had already surrendered to him.  
But now, she had crossed the line.  
She had told him, without hesitation, without resistance, that she was willing to  
do whatever he asked.  
That she had bought the restraints.  
That she had bought the bunny ears—  
And that was what undid him the most.  
Because those ears weren't just an accessory anymore.  
They were a symbol.

A mark of what she was becoming for him.

And knowing that she had gone out, that she had chosen them, that she had bought them because he told her to—

Fuck.

His grip tightened around the edge of the desk, his muscles tensing as a slow, dark hunger twisted deep in his gut.

She would do anything.

And that thought was so much more dangerous than any filthy message he had sent her.

Because now—

Now, he had to decide what to do with her.

His phone buzzed.

A sharp inhale cut through his chest.

She had answered.

He exhaled slowly, his thumb hovering over the screen.

Then, he opened the message.

R: A...

R: *I don't know what to say.*

A smirk ghosted across his lips.

Yes, you do.

He could see her now—sitting there, her phone in her hand, her thighs pressed together, heat spreading through her skin.

Breathless. Flushed. Wanting.

She knew exactly what to say.

She just wasn't ready to admit it.

Not yet.

His fingers moved over the keyboard.

A: *Yes, you do.*

A: *Say it.*

Silence.

His chest rose and fell, slow and deliberate.

The next message took longer.

But it came.

And when it did—

His control snapped completely.

A watched the screen, his pulse steady but deep, his patience running razor-thin.

She was hesitating.

He knew it.

Could feel it.

The way her fingers were probably hovering over the keyboard, her breath shallow, her body already betraying her.

She had read his words.

She had felt the weight of them.

And now, she was about to cross the last threshold.

His grip on the phone tightened, his cock already aching, already pressing against his pants, but he didn't touch himself.

Not yet.

Not until she said it.

Then—

His phone buzzed.

Her answer.

He inhaled sharply, his jaw clenching, his fingers moving quickly to unlock the screen.

And there it was.

R: *I want it, A.*

R: *I want to be yours.*

R: *Tell me what to do.*

Fuck.

The words sent fire through his veins.

This was it.

This was her giving in completely.

No teasing.

No hesitation.

No pretending.

Just submission.

And that meant—she was his to shape now.

A's breath came out slow, measured, his control barely holding.

His fingers moved.

A: *Put on the bunny ears.*

A: *Put on the restraints.*

A: *And take a picture. Let me see you waiting for me.*

The message was sent.

And now—he waited.

Because if she obeyed—

There would be no going back.

**She set the phone down slowly, her fingers tingling from the exchange, her breath still uneven. The silence had returned—but it wasn't empty anymore. It was loaded. Sharp. A fuse waiting to be lit.**



## Chapter 19

### The Unfolding Days

The calls never stopped.  
The videos kept coming.

Even as the weeks passed, as the air grew colder, as the days shortened and the nights stretched long—they kept feeding the fire.

R would send something late at night, a whisper of her voice, the rustling of sheets, the dim glow of her lamp casting shadows over her skin. Always wearing the bunny ears.

A would reply when he could, his voice low, controlled, teasing.  
Or sometimes, he would just watch.  
Let her unravel for him.  
Let her surrender in slow, deliberate pieces.

And even when they weren't speaking, they were waiting.

Waiting for the next moment.  
The next stolen breath.  
The next demand, the next gift, the next time one of them would break first.

But time was moving.

Winter was creeping in.

And with it—Thanksgiving was here.

### New York: A's World

The city had begun its slow transformation.

The first hints of winter clung to the air, sharp, biting, sending spirals of breath into the sky. The avenues were lined with golden leaves, but the chill was undeniable now—the promise of December creeping closer.

Storefronts had started decorating early, wreaths and garlands appearing in windows, fairy lights blinking against the steel and glass of skyscrapers. The rush of the holidays had begun.

And with it, the weight of reality pressing back into A's world.

The Thanksgiving dinner had been planned weeks ago—elegant, refined, controlled, just like everything else in his life.



His penthouse was warm, filled with the soft hum of conversation, the clinking of crystal against porcelain, the rich aroma of roasted turkey and aged wine.

His wife sat across from him, her posture perfect, her laugh effortless, talking about things that should matter.

They didn't.

Because his mind was elsewhere.

His phone sat face-down beside his plate, untouched.  
But the thought of her was there.

R.

What was she doing?  
Was she thinking of him too?  
Or was she pretending—just like he was?

Barcelona: R's World

In Barcelona, the air was different.

Crisp, but not cold.  
Cool, but not biting.

The city still moved with its own unhurried rhythm.

The terraces outside cafés were still full, the streets still alive with conversation.  
The scent of baked bread drifted from the panaderías, mingling with the faint salt of the sea carried on the evening breeze.

Thanksgiving wasn't a holiday here.

But still—she felt it.

The shift in the season.  
The shift in her own mind.

She sat in a small restaurant, her boyfriend across from her, talking, laughing, sipping wine.

He reached for her hand. She let him.

But her mind was elsewhere.

The weight of her phone in her bag felt heavier than it should.  
Because she knew.

A wouldn't message her today.

Not today.

Because today, he was playing his part.

And she was playing hers.

Two lives.

Two cities.

Two separate worlds.

But the truth was—

They were still tangled together.

Even now.

Even as winter crept closer.

Even as they tried to pretend this wasn't becoming something impossible to escape.

The wine was smooth, expensive, a deep red that caught the flickering candlelight. A swirled his glass absentmindedly, half-listening to the conversation around him—polite, measured, predictable.

The holiday season had arrived, and with it, the same routines.

Same gatherings.

Same conversations.

Same New York.

Cold, sharp, suffocating.

Across the table, Elena sat effortlessly composed, dark eyes scanning the room before returning to him, her posture perfect as always.

She reached for her wine, taking a slow sip before setting the glass down, her voice smooth, decisive.

"I think we should do something different this winter."

A's gaze flicked up from his glass. "Different?"

She tilted her head slightly, as if she had already made up her mind.

“Let’s go to Barcelona.”

A stilled, his grip on the stem of his glass tightening just slightly.

She kept talking, as if this was just a casual suggestion.

“We never spend the holidays there. My family keeps asking when we’ll visit, and honestly, I’d love to get away from the cold.” She gestured toward the penthouse window, where the city outside was already dusted with the beginnings of winter. “It’s miserable here in December.”

A studied her, expression unreadable.

Barcelona.

Her city.

R’s city.

His fingers tapped once against the base of his glass before he finally responded, voice controlled, neutral. “That’s a sudden idea.”

Elena shrugged. “Not really. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. I just didn’t know if you’d agree.”

She was watching him now, waiting.

She was the one making the decision.

She always had been.

A exhaled slowly, measuring his next words.

“It could be nice.”

Elena smirked. “So that’s a yes?”

A met her gaze. “If it’s what you want.”

Her smile was satisfied. “Good. I’ll start making arrangements.”

And just like that, it was happening.

Not because of him.

Not because he had planned it.

Because Elena had decided it.

Because Elena had unknowingly put him exactly where he wanted to be.

In Barcelona.

Where R was waiting.

The city outside was a frozen canvas of steel and gold, the first whispers of winter curling through the avenues.

Thanksgiving in New York always felt like an introduction to the chaos of December—the city alive with anticipation, streets packed with shoppers, bright displays glittering in store windows. The air carried the scent of roasted chestnuts from street vendors, the occasional gust of wind carrying dried leaves in hurried spirals before disappearing into the abyss of traffic.

From where A sat, the Penthouse was warm, insulated from the sharp bite of the wind outside. The chandelier above the dining table cast a golden glow over the polished wood, illuminating the sleek table settings, the untouched centerpiece of carefully arranged candles and autumn foliage.

Elena sat across from him, her posture relaxed but still poised, always composed.

The room smelled of wine and spices, remnants of dinner settling into the quiet hum of conversation.

A leaned back, letting her words settle, rolling them over in his mind.

Barcelona.

She had decided it.

Not him.

But somehow, it felt like the universe was aligning things in his favor.

Still, he kept his expression neutral, his fingers tracing along the rim of his glass.

"So," he said, his voice smooth, "if we're going to Barcelona for Christmas, I assume that means Thanksgiving is still ours?"

Elena tilted her head slightly, studying him. "Mmm, not exactly."

A raised a brow, waiting.

She exhaled, reaching for her wine again, taking a measured sip before continuing.

"Some of our friends have been planning something. You know, the ones you don't stand."\*\*

A smirk tugged at the corner of his lips. "You'll have to be more specific."

Elena rolled her eyes. "You know who I mean. The ones who always insist on turning every gathering into some forced social event."

A's smirk deepened, but he didn't deny it.

She continued, her voice light, but firm.

"They proposed doing something for Thanksgiving. A getaway. Some private villa. They thought it would be 'a nice way to connect before everyone gets busy with the holidays.'"

A exhaled slowly, swirling the wine in his glass. "And you want to go?"

She shrugged. "I think it could be fun. And since we'll be spending Christmas in Spain, it's a good balance."

A let the idea settle.

A private villa. A secluded space. A carefully curated experience filled with people he had no patience for.

It sounded tedious.

But he knew Elena.

She didn't just make casual suggestions.

She made decisions.

And this?

This had already been decided.

He lifted his glass to his lips, taking a slow sip before responding.

"Then let's do it."

Elena's smile was small, satisfied. "Good."

The conversation shifted, drifting into lighter topics, but A's mind remained elsewhere.

Thanksgiving in a private villa.  
Christmas in Barcelona.

Two places he hadn't planned for.

But somehow, both were leading him exactly where he wanted to be.

And he wasn't sure whether that was fate—

Or a warning.

The days blurred into cold mornings and late nights.

End-of-year deadlines.

Meetings that ran too long.

Investors demanding answers.

December was always brutal in the business world.

A barely had time to think, let alone breathe.

And R felt further away than ever.

Not because he wanted her to be.

But because there was no time for her.

The calls they used to have—once a week, sometimes more—had disappeared into the void of his schedule.

She had sent messages.

He had read them.

But he never answered.

Not because he didn't want to.

But because every time he picked up his phone, another distraction pulled him away.

And now?

Now, it had been weeks since he last spoke to her.

And something about that didn't sit right.

The Weight of Distance

New York was in full winter mode now.

The city was coated in snow, slush pooling in the gutters, Christmas lights strung across avenues, glowing in the early darkness.

His office was filled with the soft hum of year-end chaos—Jenna coordinating schedules, phones ringing, emails stacking up faster than he could clear them.

He had barely spent time at home, his wife hardly noticing his absence because she was just as busy planning for their trip.

Barcelona was waiting.

The days kept slipping through his fingers.

December was a blur of deadlines, meetings, flights being arranged, bags packed, and final negotiations sealed before the year ended.

And with each passing day, R remained unread.

Her message was still there, waiting.

But so was everything else.

Now, A sat in the penthouse, the city stretching endlessly beyond the glass walls, the skyline bathed in the dim, gray light of a winter afternoon.

Across from him, Elena was planning.

It was what she did best.

She sat at the dining table, her laptop open, her phone beside her, scrolling through messages, responding to emails, finalizing details of their trip to Barcelona.

A swirled the whiskey in his glass, watching her for a moment before finally speaking.

"I think I'll meet with some friends while I'm in Barcelona."

Elena didn't look up. "Which friends?"

A kept his tone light, casual. "Some old school friends. I haven't caught up with them in years."

That wasn't entirely a lie.

But it wasn't the whole truth either.

She finally glanced at him, arching a perfectly shaped brow. "You? Socializing?"

A smirked. "It happens sometimes."

She hummed, unimpressed. "Just don't let them drag you into something ridiculous. You know how they can be."

"I can handle myself."

Elena went back to her emails, uninterested in questioning it further.

A took a slow sip of his drink, his free hand moving to his phone, unlocking the screen.

He scrolled past R's unread message, ignoring the tight feeling in his chest.

Instead, he opened another chat.

One with names he hadn't typed in years.

Old friends from Barcelona.

People who wouldn't question why he suddenly wanted to reconnect.

People who wouldn't ask why, after years of barely keeping in touch, he was suddenly interested in meeting.

His fingers moved over the keyboard.

*A: I'll be in Barcelona soon. Let's catch up.*

He sent the message.

And just like that, he had set the pieces in motion.

Because once he was there—

Anything could happen.

A's message had been sent.

Now, it was only a matter of time.

He took another sip of his whiskey, letting the warmth settle in his chest as he watched the city outside—snow falling in slow, delicate spirals against the glass.

His phone buzzed.

Replies were already coming in.



Luis: *Finally, the ghost of Barcelona returns. About time.*

David: *You? Catching up? This I need to see.*

Rober: *Name the place. We'll make it happen.*

A smirk curled at the corner of his lips.

Easy.

Too easy.

They wouldn't ask why.

Wouldn't question why, after all these years, he was suddenly interested in meeting.

Because they already knew.

Knew that, despite everything—Barcelona was still a part of him.

Even if he had tried to bury it.

Even if his life was in New York now.

He set his glass down, his fingers moving quickly over the keyboard.

A: *I'll be in town for Christmas. It's a tight schedule, but I'll make time.*

A: *Let's meet at El Born. Friday night.*

El Born.

Familiar. Loud. Alive.

The kind of place where no one asked questions.

Where conversations blurred into the low hum of music, where secrets were easy to keep.

Where he could slip away—even if just for a moment.

His phone buzzed again.

Luis: *El Born works. Drinks on you.*

Rober: *Done.*

David: *You better not bail.*

A let out a slow breath, locking his screen.

One part of the plan was set.

But the rest of the schedule was tight.

The Plan in Motion

Elena had been meticulous in arranging their trip.

Family dinners, reunions, social gatherings—every hour accounted for.

Christmas Eve: Dinner with her family in the upper part of the city.

Christmas Day: A formal event at a family friend's house.

The days leading up? Brunches, business connections, social appearances—all exhausting, all expected.

He had barely glanced at the itinerary Elena had sent him.

But he knew one thing—

If he wanted time alone, he'd have to take it.

And now, he had.

Friday night. El Born.

A glance at his phone again, fingers hovering over another name.

R.

Still unread.

Still waiting.

Would she be in El Born that night?

Would she be anywhere near?

Would he let himself find out?

A clenched his jaw, locking the screen.

One thing at a time.

For now, the plan was set.

And once he landed in Barcelona—

Everything else would fall into place.

The trip had been a mess from the start.

A had barely finished up the chaos in New York before rushing to the airport, his mind tangled in the last-minute work issues that refused to die. Year-end closings. Unfinished reports. A business deal hanging by a thread.

It wasn't the first time work had threatened to follow him across the ocean, but this time, it was worse.

This time, he was supposed to be fully present.

For Elena.

For her family.

For the carefully arranged schedule that left little room for anything else.

But the truth?

His mind was already elsewhere.

The Flight That Refused to End

Everything that could go wrong, did.

The first delay came before they even boarded—some mechanical issue that grounded them at JFK for two extra hours. The second delay came midair, turbulence forcing them to reroute slightly, adding even more time to the already grueling trip.

By the time A finally landed in Barcelona, he was exhausted.

His suit was wrinkled from too many hours of sitting.

His tie was loose, his patience thinner than ever.

Elena looked equally drained, though she hid it better.

A checked his watch. Three hours late.

That meant no time to rest.

No time to breathe.

Straight from the airport, they had to rush to lunch with her parents, then to an evening dinner with friends, then another social engagement Elena had planned long before he even knew about the trip.

It was tight. Too tight.

And maybe that was a good thing.

Maybe that would stop him from doing something reckless.

But then—

Then, the city opened up around him.

And suddenly, he remembered why he had wanted to come here in the first place.

Barcelona in Winter

The air was crisp but never freezing.

Even in December, Barcelona didn't feel like New York.

No brutal winds. No biting cold. Just the soft Mediterranean chill, the scent of damp stone from the morning rain still lingering in the streets.

As the car pulled away from the airport, the city unfolded around him.

Winding streets. Narrow alleyways. Historic balconies draped with drying laundry.

A watched from the window, his eyes flickering over the people moving through the streets—locals wrapped in light coats, scarves thrown effortlessly around their shoulders, tourists still underdressed for the season.

A man in a tailored wool coat walked briskly past a woman selling roasted chestnuts from a small stand.

A couple in oversized sweaters sat outside a café, sharing a cigarette, their laughter echoing through the alley.

A motorbike weaved between taxis, the rider dressed in a sharp black leather jacket, his helmet tucked under one arm as he parked.

It was all so alive.

So different.

And yet—so familiar.

He had spent years avoiding this place.

And now?

Now, he was back.

And so was she.

The Secret Meeting

Elena was already focused on their schedule, her phone lighting up with messages from family, friends, the endless list of obligations waiting for them.

There was no time for anything else.

That's what he told himself.

That's what he let her believe.

But the truth?

The truth was that he could make time—if he wanted to.

And now?

Now, he wanted to.

His phone buzzed.

Another message from work. Another problem that needed fixing.

He ignored it.

Instead, he opened another chat.

One he had avoided for weeks.

His fingers hesitated for a moment.

Then, he typed.

*A: Hey, R.*

*A: I'm here.*

*A: Want to have a coffee someday?*

*A: I won't have time for more, but if you want, we could meet up.*

The words sat there, staring back at him.

A lie.

A carefully crafted, half-true excuse.

He could make time—if he wanted to.

But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was Elena.

The problem was that this would have to be a secret.

And the worst part?

That only made it more exciting.

A smirk curled at his lips as he hit send.

A smirk curled at his lips as he hit send.

And then—he waited.

The city outside blurred past him, the car weaving through the tangled streets of Barcelona, taking him toward the heart of it—toward his wife’s world, toward the carefully planned schedule he had no choice but to follow.

But his mind was elsewhere.

Would she answer?

Would she see his message and ignore it?

Would she hesitate?

Would she be tempted?

His phone remained silent.

No reply.

No dots flickering to life, telling him she was typing.

Nothing.

For the first time in weeks, he was giving her a door—an opening to see him again.

And she wasn’t jumping at it.

His jaw clenched slightly as he locked his phone, slipping it into the pocket of his coat.

Fine.

Let her think. Let her wait.

He wasn’t desperate.

Not yet.

## The City & The Schedule

The car slowed as they entered Eixample, the wide, tree-lined streets stretching out in perfect symmetry.

**\*\*The buildings here were different—\*\***grand façades of carved stone, wrought-iron balconies, arched windows glowing softly in the evening light. The golden haze of sunset bathed everything in warmth, making the city look like something pulled from a painting.

Barcelona always did this.

It made you feel like time didn't move the same way here.

Slower. Softer. Laced with something dangerous.

Elena, sitting beside him, was still focused on her phone, scrolling through their itinerary.

"We have dinner at eight," she said without looking up. "Then drinks with my brother after."

A hummed in response, barely listening.

"Tomorrow morning—brunch with the Solers. Then lunch with my parents. Then the reception in the evening."

His fingers tapped against his knee. "Tight schedule."

Elena finally glanced at him, arching a brow. "It's the holidays. People expect to see us."

A smirked slightly, adjusting his cufflinks. "Of course they do."

She narrowed her eyes, studying him for a second too long.

"And you?"

A met her gaze. "What about me?"

"You said you wanted to see friends. When?"

His smirk deepened. "I'll figure it out."

Elena exhaled, unimpressed. "Don't disappear like last time."

A chuckled under his breath. "I wouldn't dream of it."

R's heart skipped a beat when she saw his name light up on her screen.

She had been waiting for this message—even if she told herself she wasn't.

She had spent weeks wondering if he would ever reach out.

If she would ever see him again.

And now?

He was here.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she read his words, the reality of it hitting her all at once.

*A: It's just coffee.*

*A: Unless you want it to be something else.*

Fuck.

She swallowed hard, her mind spinning, her stomach tightening in ways she didn't want to acknowledge.

She should tell him no.

She should tell him she was busy.

She should remind herself that she had a boyfriend, that she had a life here, that this was dangerous.

Instead—

Her fingers moved almost on their own.

*R: You're here?!*

*R: OMG really? Why didn't you say anything sooner?!*

*R: Yes, of course! When can you meet?*

The second she hit send, her stomach twisted.

Because this wasn't just coffee.

They both knew that.

Her heart was still racing when she switched over to another chat.

Her boyfriend.

She exhaled slowly, forcing her fingers to move with more care this time.



R: *Hey, babe.*

R: *I think this week I'll make some plans with my friends. It's been a while, and I really want to meet with them.*

It wasn't a lie.

Not really.

She did have friends.

She could be meeting them.

She could make it look normal.

She just had to be careful.

Her boyfriend's reply came quickly, as expected.

BF: *Oh? That sounds nice! Which friends?*

Her breath hitched.

Shit.

Her mind scrambled for something safe, something believable.

She couldn't say the truth.

Couldn't say his name.

Couldn't say that her entire body was already betraying her at just the thought of seeing A again.

So she typed the first thing that came to mind.

R: *Just some old friends. People I haven't seen in a while.*

She held her breath, waiting.

Finally—

BF: *Okay! Let me know when, maybe I'll make some plans too.*

Her chest felt tight.

But she had done it.

She had carved out the space.

She had given herself the time.

Now all she had to do was wait for A's answer.

Wait to see when—\*\*not if—\*\*they would meet.

And once they did—

There would be no going back.

A read her messages, a slow smirk pulling at his lips.

R: *You're here?!*

R: *OMG really? Why didn't you say anything sooner?!*

R: *Yes, of course! When can you meet?*

She had taken the bait.

Eager.

Excited.

Just as he expected.

It didn't matter how much time had passed, how much she had tried to convince herself that they were just casual now.

The second he pulled back, the second he created distance, she had come running.

And now?

Now she was making space for him.

Rearranging her life, shifting things around just to see him.

Just like he knew she would.

His fingers hovered over the keyboard as he leaned back against the plush hotel chair, the warm lights of the suite casting long shadows across the sleek furniture.

Elena was on a call in the other room, her voice drifting through the space—discussing dinner plans, confirming schedules, living in the carefully constructed world they had built together.

She thought she knew everything about him.

She didn't.

A tapped his fingers against the side of his whiskey glass, considering his answer.

Finally, he typed.

*A: Tomorrow. Late afternoon. I'll send you a place.*

Short. Direct. No room for questions.

He wanted to see if she would obey.

If she would still follow his lead.

He locked his phone, setting it aside, the slow anticipation curling in his stomach.

He had her now.

It was only a matter of how far she was willing to go.

Barcelona - R's Perspective

R stared at the message, her heartbeat pounding in her ears.

Tomorrow.

It was happening.

Her hands gripped the sheets beneath her, stomach twisting with a strange mix of excitement and fear.

Because now—this wasn't just a thought.

It was real.

She had made the space.

She had given him the time.

She had lied to her boyfriend without hesitation.

And A?

He hadn't even hesitated to tell her where and when to meet.

No pleasantries. No questions.

Just control.

She let out a slow breath, her body already reacting, heat curling between her thighs at just the thought of him.

The way he looked at her.

The way he made her feel.

The way he took everything from her—without asking, without hesitation.

Her phone buzzed again.

She glanced at the screen, expecting A.

But it wasn't him.

It was her boyfriend.

BF: *Hey, what time are you seeing your friends tomorrow? I was thinking of planning something for us in the evening.*

Her stomach dropped.

Fuck.

She had to be careful. Had to be smart.

Her fingers moved quickly, her mind racing.

R: *Not sure yet. I'll let you know.*

It wasn't a lie.

Not exactly.

But the guilt barely touched her.

Because right now?

All she could think about was A.

And how, in less than twenty-four hours—

She would finally see him again.

## Chapter 20

Barcelona felt different tonight.

The sky was deep navy, the last threads of sunset fading behind the rooftops. The streets buzzed with life, but A barely heard it. The occasional car rumbled over the cobblestone roads, motorcycles weaved through traffic, and laughter spilled from the terraces of bars lining the narrow streets.

But none of it mattered.

Not when she was standing there, just a few steps away from him.

R.

For weeks, he had ignored her.

For days, he had debated whether seeing her again was worth the risk.

And now?

Now, she was in front of him.

And fuck, she looked different.

She had tried to hide it.

Baggy sweater, oversized coat, loose-fitting jeans—but he saw through it instantly.

The way the fabric hung off her shoulders, just slightly too wide.

The way her hair was tucked behind her ears, as if she hadn't wanted to try too hard—but still wanted to look good.

The way, even under layers, he could tell how full her body had become.

Bigger breasts. Fuller curves.

She had changed.

And yet, the way she looked at him?

That was exactly the same.

She was nervous.

Excited.

She had tried to play it cool, but he saw the way her hands were tucked into her coat pockets, fingers probably twitching with uncertainty.

A smirk ghosted at the corner of his lips. She was already breaking before they had even spoken.

"Hey."

His voice was calm, casual, as if he hadn't spent the last twelve hours picturing what this moment would feel like.

She exhaled, smiling. "Hey."

For a second, neither of them moved.

Then—

"So... where do you want to go?"

A glanced around. The streets were packed with people, restaurants glowing with warm light, the scent of food drifting through the air.

But nothing looked right.

Nothing felt right.

"Nowhere looks good," R murmured, glancing around, shifting slightly on her feet.

A chuckled, slipping his hands into his pockets. "Let's walk."

And just like that, they fell into step.

The Walk

The night air was cool but not cold, the perfect balance between winter's approach and Barcelona's refusal to let go of warmth completely.

They walked through El Born, the historic streets lined with old stone buildings, intricate iron balconies overlooking the narrow pathways. The soft glow of streetlights illuminated the uneven pavement, the sound of distant music drifting from somewhere.

Neither of them spoke right away.

It should have been awkward.

But it wasn't.

It was something else.

Something heavy.

Something unspoken.

A stole a glance at her, watching the way she moved beside him.

She had always been smaller than him, but now, there was more of her.

More to touch.

More to grip.

More to claim.

And she was trying to hide it.

Under layers of fabric, oversized sleeves, loose denim—but he noticed.

He always noticed.

His eyes flickered down, catching the subtle swell of her breasts beneath her sweater.

Bigger than before.

Softer.

Perfect.

She caught him looking and flushed instantly, biting her lip as she turned her gaze away.

A smirk tugged at his lips. "Something wrong?"

She rolled her eyes, but her face was still warm. "Shut up."

A let out a soft chuckle, but he didn't push further. Not yet.

Instead, they walked.

Through the narrow streets.

Past tiny bars with people spilling out onto the sidewalks, their voices loud, laughter filling the night.

Through the small plazas where the scent of citrus trees mixed with the cool air.

And the entire time—

The tension between them tightened.

Pulled.

Coiled.

Like something waiting to snap.

Like neither of them knew how much longer they could hold it together.

The Moment of Realization

After what felt like an endless walk, R finally sighed, stuffing her hands deeper into her coat pockets.

"I don't think we're going to find a place."

A hummed in agreement, but he wasn't paying attention to the bars anymore.

Because now—

Now, he was only thinking about what happened next.

What happened when they stopped walking.

When they had to look at each other.

When they had to decide—

Was this really just coffee?

Or was this everything they had been avoiding for months?

A smirked, slow, knowing.

"Yeah," he said, voice smooth. "Guess we'll have to figure something else out."

A knew exactly how this night would go.

Even before he had sent that first message.

Even before she had agreed to meet him.

Even before she had stepped into his orbit again.

It didn't matter what she chose.

Because he had already planned for everything.

The Walk & The Trap He Set

They had been walking for nearly half an hour now, the city wrapping around them, the night cool but comfortable.



Barcelona was alive—music spilling from open bars, the scent of wine and grilled seafood drifting from hidden alleyways, street performers still entertaining the tourists.

But A wasn't paying attention to any of it.

Because he was leading.

Every step they took, every turn down another narrow street—it was intentional.

Because the truth was?

He didn't have much time for this meeting.

Elena's schedule had made sure of that. His time in Barcelona was too structured, too controlled, too tight.

And yet—

He had made space for this.

For her.

But she didn't need to know that.

She didn't need to know that no matter what she chose, she was already playing into his hands.

The Illusion of a Choice

The small café was just ahead, its warm golden glow spilling onto the sidewalk.

A slowed his steps, turning to her, watching the way her breath was already uneven.

She knew something was coming.

She could feel it.

Good.

He let the moment stretch, then finally spoke.

"R, we could do two things."

Her eyes flickered up to meet his, uncertain. "What?"

He smirked.

"You can choose."

A let the words settle, let her mind begin racing through all the possibilities.

"We can stay in this café, drink coffee, talk like old friends," he said smoothly, voice low, deliberate. "And in an hour or so, I'll leave—because I have other arrangements."

A pause.

A beat.

Her breath hitched.

Her fingers curled inside her coat pockets.

But he wasn't done.

His gaze flickered toward the street ahead, where a small hidden bar was nestled between the narrow alleyways, its sign barely visible in the dim light.

Then, he looked back at her.

"Or," he continued, his voice shifting—darker now, more controlled, more like him,

"we can go to that bar instead."

Silence.

She followed his gaze.

Saw where he was looking.

When she turned back to him, her lips parted slightly, her hands twitched at her sides.

A stepped closer, invading her space, pulling her back into his gravity.

"If we go to the bar," he murmured, "anything could happen."

A pause.

Her breath shook slightly.

He smirked.

Because this wasn't a real choice.

Because no matter what she said—  
She was already his tonight.  
She just didn't know it yet.  
R's breath caught in her throat.  
She knew what he was doing.  
Giving her the illusion of control.  
Letting her believe that she had a choice.  
But deep down, they both knew the truth.  
She had already made her decision before he even asked.  
Her fingers twitched inside her coat pockets, her mind racing, her body betraying her in ways she didn't want to admit.  
She could feel the weight of his eyes on her—steady, unreadable, waiting.  
Daring her.  
Her lips parted, her voice softer than she wanted it to be. "And if I choose the bar?"  
A's smirk deepened, his hands still casually tucked into the pockets of his coat, but his posture shifted. More control. More presence.  
"If you choose the bar," he said slowly, his voice smooth, deliberate, "then you'll have to do everything I say."  
The words sent a sharp, hot pulse through her body.  
Everything.  
Her stomach tightened, her thighs pressing together instinctively.  
She could turn away now.  
She could choose the café, the safe option, the polite conversation.  
She could tell him that she had only agreed to this meeting out of curiosity, that she had no interest in playing his games again, that she had moved on.  
But it would all be a lie.

Because the moment she saw him standing there, his presence commanding the space around them, his voice curling around her like a slow-burning fuse, she knew—

She would never be able to walk away.

Not from him.

Not from this.

Her mouth felt dry as she whispered, “I don’t have much time either.”

A chuckled under his breath, tilting his head slightly. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

R swallowed, her body buzzing, her mind already made up.

“The bar.”

The words felt heavier than they should.

A’s smirk didn’t disappear, but something shifted in his eyes.

Something darker.

Something that told her she had just crossed a line she wouldn’t be able to come back from.

He exhaled slowly, rolling his shoulders back, the movement fluid, controlled.

"Good."

Then, he took a step closer—just enough for her to feel his presence completely, just enough for his voice to drop lower, more intimate.

"I still won’t have a lot of time," he said, his voice laced with something that made her shiver. "But the only thing you need to know is that you’ll have to do everything I say."

A pause.

A moment where neither of them moved.

Neither of them breathed.

Then—

“Understood?”

R's pulse was a drum in her ears.

She had already said yes.

But now, he needed her to say it again.

To confirm it.

To surrender completely.

Her lips parted, the weight of the moment pressing down on her.

And then, finally—

“Understood.”

A smirk tugged at his lips again.

"Good girl."

Then, he turned, walking toward the bar.

And she followed.

Because of course she did.

Because she always would.

R followed him.

She didn't even hesitate.

Not when he led the way.

Not when he pushed open the door.

Not when they stepped into a space that felt like it belonged to another world.

The bar was small, hidden, the kind of place that didn't rely on tourists, the kind of place where people spoke in low voices, where secrets slipped between drinks, where the lighting was just dim enough to blur the details of the faces inside.

Golden light flickered against exposed brick walls.

Dark wood, deep leather seats, the scent of whiskey and something smoky lingering in the air.

A quiet hum of jazz played from a vintage record player in the corner.

It was intimate.

Quiet.

Unassuming.

And yet, R felt the weight of it.

Or maybe it wasn't the place at all.

Maybe it was him.

A barely glanced around.

He knew what he was doing. Where he was leading her.

His coat was still unbuttoned, his black sweater fitting just right against his body, his movements slow, calculated.

He didn't need to check if she was following.

Of course she was.

They passed a few occupied tables, but no one paid them any attention.

They were just two people slipping into the shadows.

A chose a booth near the back—secluded, tucked away.

Far from curious eyes.

He slid in first, leaning back against the worn leather, watching her as she hesitated for just a second.

Then—she sat across from him.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

The silence between them stretched, thick with the unspoken weight of everything that had led them here.

This wasn't coffee.

This wasn't small talk.

This wasn't just a meeting.

They both knew that.

A let the moment settle, his fingers tapping once against the table before he leaned forward slightly, his gaze steady.

"So," he said smoothly, "you made your choice."

R's breath hitched.

Because the way he said it—low, amused, like he was already seeing how far she would go—

It wasn't a question.

It was a fact.

She had chosen this.

She had chosen him.

And now?

Now, she had to face what that meant.

A smirked.

She was already fidgeting, already shifting slightly in her seat, already feeling the weight of what she had just agreed to.

Good.

He wanted her off balance.

He wanted her to understand that, from this moment forward, she wasn't in control.

The bartender approached, a man in his mid-forties with sharp eyes and a casual stance, wiping his hands with a cloth as he glanced at them. He wasn't expecting an order like the one A was about to place.

Because it was still afternoon.

And ordering what he was about to order at this hour? A little reckless. A little strange.

But that was the point.

A leaned forward slightly, tilting his chin up.

"Four tequila shots and two beers."

The bartender raised a brow.

Before he could respond, A continued, his smirk deepening.

"And bring two extra shots. For me."

The bartender hesitated for just a second before nodding. "Sure. Coming up."

R's eyes widened slightly, her fingers twitching against the table.

"Tequila?" she murmured.

A chuckled, running a hand along the rim of his beer coaster, watching her.

"What?" he mused. "Scared?"

She rolled her eyes, but he caught the way her throat bobbed slightly, the way she shifted under his gaze.

"It's just a lot of alcohol for the middle of the afternoon."

A leaned back against the booth, his smirk slow, knowing. "We're playing, aren't we?"

R bit her lip, exhaling softly.

She was nervous.

Not because of the drinks.

But because she already knew—

This wasn't about the drinks.

This was about what came after.

The bartender returned, setting down the shots and beers with a practiced ease, barely raising an eyebrow at the inappropriate timing of the order.

A grabbed one of the shot glasses, sliding it toward R.

"Let's start," he said smoothly. "And see how far you last."

R hesitated for just a second.

Then—she picked up the glass.

And just like that, the game had begun.

The tequila burned as it went down, a slow fire curling in his chest, but A wasn't drinking to get drunk.

He was drinking to set the pace.

To let her feel the slow, inevitable descent into exactly what he had planned for her.



R licked the salt from her lips, her fingers tightening slightly around the rim of her empty shot glass.

Her cheeks were flushed, whether from the alcohol or the tension—he couldn't tell.

Didn't care.

Because she was still here.

She had chosen the bar.

She had taken the shots.

And now?

Now, it was time for the next step.

A set his glass down, tilting his head as he watched her, his gaze slow, measured, commanding.

Then—he spoke.

"Are you ready for the next step?"

Her breath caught, her fingers twitching against the table.

A reached into his pocket, pulling out a single key.

He turned it between his fingers, watching the way her eyes flickered to it, her lips parting slightly.

Then, he placed it on the table between them.

"Up the street, there's a hotel, have you bring the bunny ears and the rest?" he murmured, voice low, smooth, controlled.

R swallowed hard. I have not... I didn't know...

She knew where this was going.

She just didn't know if she was ready to admit it yet.

A continued, pushing the key slightly closer to her.

"Go to the room that matches this key."

A pause.

The tension stretched between them.

Thick. Heavy. Unbearable.

Then—

"Get naked."

R's breath hitched.

"Wait for me on the floor."

He leaned in slightly, his voice barely above a whisper now, his fingers tapping once against the key.

"Mouth open."

Silence.

Her body was already betraying her.

Her thighs pressing together beneath the table.

Her breathing shallower now.

Her lips slightly parted, as if she was already preparing to obey.

A smirk tugged at his lips.

"Text me when you're ready."

Another pause.

"And I'll come."

He leaned back against the booth, grabbing one of the remaining tequila shots, tilting the glass between his fingers.

"While I wait," he added lazily, "I'll finish up the last two shots."

It was afternoon when A left the bar.

The streets of Barcelona were still bright, the golden light of the lowering sun stretching over the old stone buildings, the rhythm of the city moving unbothered by what was unfolding between them.

But he was already ahead of it all.

He had planned this.

Every step.

## The Preparation

Before he even saw her today, before she sat across from him in that booth with her oversized sweater, before she hesitated at the key on the table—

Everything had already been arranged.

The hotel reservation had been made in advance.

The key had already been picked up.

He had walked through the narrow alleys earlier, checking every little detail.

A didn't believe in uncertainty.

If he was going to have her, it would be on his terms.

Not rushed.

Not accidental.

Deliberate.

So, while she sat there, debating whether or not she could go through with this, he was already in motion.

## The Walk to the Hotel

A walked through the city, his pace steady, unhurried.

The afternoon air was cool, crisp, the sun still high enough that the streets were filled with people.

A couple laughed over coffee at a terrace, their voices blending with the distant sound of a musician playing guitar at the end of the alley.

A businessman in a dark coat walked past with quick steps, phone pressed to his ear.

The world moved normally.

And yet, he could feel something shifting inside him.

Because in a few minutes—

She would text him.

She would do what he told her.

She would strip for him, kneel for him, wait for him.

And the thought of it, of her obedience, of her surrender, was already pulling at the edges of his control.

By the time he reached the hotel, his hands tightened into fists.

His cock was already hard, already aching.

He stepped inside, the air-conditioned lobby a sharp contrast to the warmth outside. The receptionist barely glanced at him—no questions, no suspicion.

Because this was not a place for tourists.

It was a place for affairs.

For people who wanted to be unseen.

For what they were about to do.

A took the elevator up, his heart beating slow, heavy, controlled.

A took the elevator up, his heart beating slow, heavy, controlled.

Each floor that passed only sharpened the tension inside him—tightened it like a fist closing slowly around his spine.

He adjusted the cuffs of his sleeves, ran a hand through his hair, his jaw tight as he rehearsed nothing—because he didn't need to.

He had set this into motion.

He had given her the key.

He had told her what to do.

And now, he was going to see if she had obeyed.

When the elevator chimed and the doors opened, the hallway was quiet, washed in soft natural light that filtered in through a narrow window at the end.

The carpet was thick beneath his shoes.

His steps—measured, deliberate.

He stopped at the door.

Slid the key into the lock.

Paused.

He could feel her behind it.

That tension, that pulse—that gravity she created around her whenever she submitted to him.

And then he opened the door.

The room was warm with sunlight, the sheer curtains blowing slightly where the window had been left cracked open. A breeze moved through the space, cool and gentle, carrying the scent of linen and something feminine—her.

At first, he saw nothing.

Just the silence.

The way the bed was untouched.  
The empty chair near the window.  
The robe tossed on the floor.

And then—

Her.

She was kneeling.

On the floor, exactly where he had told her to be.

Completely naked.

Her skin was flushed, her chest rising and falling fast as she looked up at him—eyes wide, mouth slightly parted.

But it was her wrists that made him stop.

She had tied them.

With the sash of the hotel bathrobe.

Not expertly.

Not tight.

But enough.

Enough to show him she had tried.  
Enough to show him she had listened.  
Enough to make him lose his breath.

A stepped inside and closed the door behind him without a word.

The air thickened immediately.

Her body trembled, ever so slightly.

But her eyes didn't leave him.

She was waiting.

Just like he had told her.

And now—she was his to command.

He exhaled once, slow and deep, feeling his control narrow into something sharp, focused, unrelenting.

He removed his coat.

Tossed it onto the chair.

His voice came low, cold, and quiet.

"You did better than I expected."

She didn't answer.

Because she knew she wasn't supposed to.

A walked forward slowly, his shoes silent against the floor, eyes drinking in every detail—the curve of her breasts, the flushed skin, the way her thighs pressed together.

And when he stopped in front of her—

He looked down.

"Open your mouth."

And she did.

Because now, she wasn't asking questions.

Now, she was exactly where she was meant to be.

A stood over her, the afternoon light from the window casting a soft glow over her bare skin. Her knees were pressed against the carpet, her hands still loosely bound in front of her with the hotel robe sash, her mouth parted, eyes locked on his.

She was trembling—not from fear, but from the unbearable weight of anticipation.

She had waited for this.  
Planned for this.  
Prepared herself for him.

And now, she was finally here, naked, kneeling, offering herself in silence.

A reached down slowly, his fingers moving with precision as he undid the top button of his trousers.

He didn't rush.

Because he didn't need to.

This was his moment.

Her eyes followed every movement, every shift in the fabric, her lips parting just a little more, breath catching as his hand slipped lower.

When he freed himself, her breath hitched audibly.

Her eyes widened—not in surprise, but in need.

Raw, pent-up, desperate need.

A watched her for a long moment, enjoying the way her chest rose and fell, the way she leaned forward ever so slightly without even realizing it.

Then—his voice cut through the silence.

"Eat."

She obeyed without hesitation.

Because this wasn't about hesitation anymore.

This was about release.

And she had been waiting for this for too long.

She moved like she had been waiting her whole life for that one word.

No more pretending.  
No more control.

Just obedience.

Her lips parted as she leaned forward, eyes never leaving his—wide, hungry, devoted.

She wanted to show him, prove to him, that she remembered what it meant to be his.

A didn't move.

He let her do the work.

Let her offer herself with trembling hands still loosely bound, let her lower herself slowly, reverently—not with hesitation, but with worship.

Her breath was warm against him, and even though he stood tall, poised, in full control, there was something in his chest twisting tightly.

Because this wasn't just lust.

This was herself, given completely.

She was starving for him.

Not for pleasure.

Not for attention.

But for submission.

He ran a hand through her hair, slow, possessive, letting his fingers slide along the crown of her head like he was claiming her in silence.

And she let him.

Because that was what this was now.

Not a game.

Not a reunion.

But a reckoning.

A shifted his stance slightly, gaze locked down on her.

Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes glazed with need, her entire body leaning into him like she couldn't bear another second of distance.

"That's it," he murmured, low and rich. "You missed this, didn't you?"

She nodded with difficulty, not even bothering to speak.

He chuckled softly.

But it wasn't amusement—it was recognition.



She was gone.

Completely surrendered.

And he hadn't even touched her yet.

Until now.

A's fingers slid into her hair, slow at first, then lower, gripping her bound wrists with one hand.

She didn't resist.

She didn't even breathe.

He pulled her up—deliberate, calm, powerful.

She rose like a puppet guided by invisible strings, and when she stood, her legs were already shaking.

He could see it—the flush in her cheeks, the tension in her jaw, the way her thighs pressed together like she was trying to contain what was already flooding through her.

Her skin gleamed faintly in the afternoon light that spilled in through the open curtain, and there, between her legs, the truth of her surrender was written in every wet, trembling line.

She was soaked.

Ruined already.

He didn't speak.

He just turned her—gently, then with more force—and guided her toward the wall.

It was cool against her flushed skin.

She gasped softly when her palms met the surface, her bound wrists pressing between her chest and the wall, her breathing already staggered.

A stepped in behind her.

So close his presence alone made her arch her back.

He placed his hands on her hips, fingers spreading along the softness of her skin, thumbs dipping low.

“Stay still.”

She nodded, forehead against the wall, her body already trembling.

At first, he moved slowly.

His hands tracing the curve of her back.

His breath at her neck.

Testing. Watching. Letting her feel the promise of what was coming.

Then—

he gripped her harder.

Her breath caught.

He pressed her into the wall, not harsh, but with authority, like he wanted her to know that this—this was where she belonged.

Between his body and the wall.

Caught in the tension between softness and restraint.

Between command and release.

A let his lips brush her ear.

“You still remember how to take what I give you?”

She shivered. “Yes...”

He smirked.

Then he pressed in.

Not rushed.

Not impatient.

But with intention.

And as her body molded to his, as he felt her melt beneath the weight of his touch—

As her body molded into his, her back against the wall and her breath trembling with each second, A paused.

Not because he had to.

Not because he lost control.

But because in that moment—something changed.

He held her there, his hands firm on her hips, their bodies locked in a tension that wasn't just about lust anymore.

He could feel it—in her breathing, in the way her fingers flexed even through the bindings, in the way she leaned her forehead to the wall like she was offering him more than her body.

She was offering him something he hadn't expected.

Something he didn't ask for.

Herself. Entirely.

And it broke something in him.

He pulled back, only for a moment, and without a word, he took her by the wrists—gentle now, leading her away from the wall, back into the center of the room, toward the edge of the hotel bed.

The light had shifted. The sun had sunk lower, and the sky outside the window was glowing in a soft amber haze, casting golden shadows across the sheets.

He turned her and looked at her—really looked at her.

Hair tousled, chest rising and falling quickly, eyes wide and vulnerable.  
Beautiful. Unhidden.

His.

He guided her down onto the bed, her bound wrists resting gently on her stomach as she sank back against the pillows. Then he joined her—not with aggression, but with a weight that was sure, and intimate, and real.

He hovered over her, one hand braced beside her head, the other brushing along her jaw.

And he looked into her eyes.

Deep. Still. Quiet.

And in that moment—it hit him.

Not just the heat. Not just the pleasure.

But the weight of something stronger.

Something far more dangerous.

Love.

Raw, unfiltered, terrifying in its intensity.

He hadn't planned for it.

Hadn't accounted for it.

But now, looking into her—into R—as she lay beneath him, bare and open in every way, he felt it rising in him like a tide.

He leaned in slowly, their lips almost touching, his voice barely a whisper.

"You're not just mine tonight."

He said it like a vow.

Like a truth he hadn't spoken aloud until now.

And then he kissed her—not hard, not commanding, but with a depth that made her breath hitch and her hands tighten around the loose tie still bound at her wrists.

The heat was still there. The desire still a storm in his veins.

But now it was layered with something more.

Love, tangled with surrender.

Control, mixed with devotion.

As he moved with her, as they came together again—slow, intentional, and lost in each other—the pleasure surged through him in waves, not just physical, but emotional, spiritual.

This was more than lust.

It was ecstasy born from connection.

## Chapter 21

The room was still, wrapped in golden dusk and the lingering heat of everything they had just shared.

The bed was unmade, sheets twisted, skin warm, breaths slow and ragged.

A lay beside her, his chest rising and falling steadily, one arm draped loosely across her bare waist.

R was curled into him, her body soft against his, her face pressed into the hollow of his neck.

They didn't speak at first.

Because there was nothing to say.

Everything had already been said in the way he looked at her, the way she had responded without hesitation, the way their bodies had moved together like they'd always belonged this way.

And for a few minutes, he let himself forget everything.

The schedule.

The city.

The life waiting for him down the hill, in a world of linen shirts, clean dinners, and polished expectations.

He let himself stay here.

Just with her.

R shifted slightly, her voice soft, unsure.

"So... what happens now?"

A didn't answer right away.

His thumb traced slow circles along her hip.

He didn't know what to say.

Because he didn't want to lie.

And the truth?

The truth was complicated.

But before he could answer—

His phone buzzed.

A low, insistent vibration on the nightstand beside the bed.

The sound cut through the quiet like a blade.

He froze.

R tensed beside him, lifting her head slightly.

He didn't have to look.

He knew.

It was time.

His fingers slid from her skin. He sat up slowly, his face hardening by instinct—the shift back into control, into distance.

Back into who he was before this room.

He grabbed the phone, checked the screen.

Elena.

Of course.

He stood, bare feet on the cool floor, his voice low, steady.

"R... I have to leave."

She sat up, the sheet clutched against her chest, her expression unreadable. Hurt? Understanding? Disappointment? Maybe all of it.

"Oh."

A glanced at her—just for a moment—and in his eyes, she saw the truth:

He didn't want to.

But he had to.

Because whatever this was—whatever they just shared—it couldn't last past today.

He turned away, moving quickly now. Clothes gathered. Shirt pulled over tense muscles. Jacket shrugged on.

The call buzzed again.

He didn't answer. Not yet.

He opened the door. Paused. Looked back.

She hadn't moved.

Still in the bed.

Still watching him.

Still his.

He met her eyes.

"You knew what this was."

Then, softly—too softly for her to answer—

"But you also knew what it meant."

And then he was gone.

Leaving behind warmth.

Leaving behind the weight of what they'd done.

Leaving behind her.

And the room felt colder the second the door closed.

The door clicked shut.

And just like that—he was gone.

R didn't move.

She didn't cry.

She didn't speak.

She just sat there, alone on the edge of the bed, the sheet gathered weakly around her body, as if it could protect her from the reality that was already crashing down around her.

The room had changed.

Where it had once been warm—flush with golden light, thick with breath and sensation and touch—it was now cold.

The late afternoon sun had vanished behind the stone buildings outside. The window, left cracked open, let in a quiet breeze that brushed across her bare back like a whisper.

It made her shiver.

Not from the air.  
But from the silence.

The scent of him still lingered in the sheets—warmth, spice, something unmistakably his.

And beneath that?

Her own scent, mingled with the memory of how he touched her, how he looked at her like she was the only thing in the world he needed in that moment.

But it hadn't lasted.

Of course it hadn't.

Her fingers curled against the sheet, pulling it tighter around her chest. Her wrists still faintly marked from the makeshift tie. Her lips swollen from the hunger she'd surrendered to.

And now—just silence.

The hum of the hotel mini-fridge.  
The distant noise of traffic from the street below.  
The flutter of the curtain against the open window.

No footsteps.  
No breath.  
No him.

Her heart still beat too fast. Her body still tingled, the memory of his hands imprinted in her skin.

And yet—she felt empty.

Used? No.  
Not quite.

Because she had wanted this.

She had chosen it.

But the truth, the part she had buried deep beneath desire, now rose like a tide she could no longer ignore:

She had wanted more.



Not just the game.  
Not just the command.  
Not just the pleasure.

She had wanted him to stay.

But he hadn't.

He had pulled himself from the bed like it was routine, like he'd done it before, like she was another room, another body, another secret folded neatly into his controlled life.

Her eyes stung—but she didn't cry.

She just sat there in the cold, quiet space, her knees drawn up to her chest, the sheet slipping lower without her noticing.

Because the warmth was gone.

The rush was over.

And now, all that was left was the ache of something that had felt like love, but couldn't survive the light of day.

R closed her eyes.

And let the silence wrap around her like a second skin.

R sat on the edge of the bed for what felt like forever.

The silence wasn't quiet anymore.

It was loud.

It echoed in her chest, filled the room like mist—clinging, invisible, suffocating.

She stared at the door as if he might come back.

As if A would realize something on the way down the hallway.

Turn around.

Open the door.

Say something.

But the handle didn't turn.

The door stayed shut.

And with it, the reality of what just happened kept sinking deeper.

She hadn't said anything.

She let him leave.

Let him slip back into his world—the clean-cut, precise, unreachable world where she didn't exist.

And now, the words burned inside her.

Words she should have said aloud.

Words she wasn't sure she had the right to speak.

She looked at the sheets tangled beneath her, then slowly reached for her phone on the nightstand.

Her fingers trembled as she unlocked it, the soft glow of the screen catching the dimness of the room.

She opened the chat.

His name.

Still there.

Still untouchable.

She hesitated.

Stared at the empty message box.

Then, slowly, she typed.

*R: I wish I had said something before you left.*

She stared at it.

It felt too small for what she was feeling.

Too soft.

But it was the truth.

She typed again.

*R: I don't know what this is between us, or if you even feel it... but I felt something. And it wasn't just the pleasure. I just... needed you to know.*

She hovered her thumb over the send button.

Everything in her was screaming:

Don't. It's too much. Too vulnerable. He's gone. He made it clear.

But another part of her—the part that still smelled him on her skin, that still remembered the look in his eyes when he hovered above her, slow and full of something deeper—refused to be quiet.

She hit send.

The message disappeared.

And now all she could do was sit there, wrapped in the fading warmth of what they'd shared, her phone resting beside her, waiting.

For a reply.

For silence.

For whatever would come next.

The screen still glowed.

His status: online.

But he hadn't opened her messages.

Not one.

R sat motionless, still wrapped in the hotel sheet, though the air had grown colder now, pressing against her damp skin like a quiet accusation.

She stared at the little green dot beside his name.

He was there.

Somewhere.

Maybe in a taxi.

Maybe with her—his wife.

Maybe already forgetting.

Maybe not forgetting at all.

But that didn't matter.

He wasn't reading.

And worse—he wasn't choosing to.

Her thumb hovered over the thread.

That trembling, raw confession just minutes old, still sitting there unacknowledged, felt like a wound left exposed.

Then—she inhaled, sharp and shallow.

And pressed:

Delete for everyone.

Gone.

The words were erased.

The risk undone.

As if it had never happened.

But the ache in her chest told her it had.

She slid off the bed slowly, wrapping the hotel robe around her like armor. Her legs were still weak, her body tender from everything they had shared.

The room had gone fully dark, the city beyond the window now wrapped in night.

She hadn't even noticed the hours pass.

The minibar hummed.

The wind pushed softly through the cracked window.

The bed was a ruin of memory and skin.

She needed to leave.

R gathered her clothes quietly, dressing without thought, without urgency, like she was on autopilot.

Then—her phone buzzed.

Marc.

A simple message.

Warm. Normal.

Marc: *Hey love, just finished dinner with Emilio. Coming home soon. All okay with your friends? Want me to pick up anything?*

Her stomach twisted.

She had to go home.

She had to walk through that door with a smile.

She had to act like none of this had happened.

Like she hadn't been on her knees just an hour ago.

Like she hadn't tied her wrists with the robe from a hotel she'd never stayed at before.

Like her heart wasn't still sitting on the bed beside that cold glass of forgotten water.

She opened the door, the hallway humming with dim lights and the muffled sound of the elevator at the far end.

Her shoes echoed lightly on the marble floor.

She didn't look back.

Because there was nothing to look at now.

Tomorrow would be another day.

And tonight—

Tonight would live only in silence.

## Chapter 22

Tuesday, 6:17 PM – Hotel Raval, Barcelona

The door clicked shut behind him.

A stood for half a second in the narrow hotel hallway, heart still pounding in his chest, the scent of her still clinging to his skin.

He hadn't spoken a word as he left.

Because if he had—he might've stayed.

And that wasn't part of the plan.

He needed to be fast.

He pulled out his phone and began to order the Uber, his fingers clumsy, unsteady on the screen. The hallway was quiet, and the soft hum of electricity in the light fixtures made his pulse feel louder.

He reached the elevator and hit the call button.

Nothing.

He hit it again.

The light blinked...  
...then went dark.

Stuck.

Of course.

"Shit," he muttered, tucking the phone between his shoulder and cheek as he turned toward the stairwell door and shoved it open.

The stairwell was narrow, cold, concrete echoing his footfalls as he descended three flights with sharp, hurried steps.

He was already typing into the ride app by the time he pushed through the side exit into the alleyway.

Outside, the light had already changed. The sun was almost gone, the streets warming into that dusky golden blue of early evening.

A sharp wind hit his face.

Reality.

And with it—a vibration against his palm.

He looked down.

Ten missed calls.

Three from Elena.

Seven from work.

His chest tightened.

"What the hell..."

The notifications scrolled up on his screen, one by one:

Elena: *Where are you? We're supposed to meet in 30 minutes.*

Elena: *Call me please.*

Elena: A.

And then

Javier (Client Lead): *Can we go over the changes before tomorrow's call? They're pushing the meeting forward.*

Javier: *Call me ASAP.*

A's eyes closed for half a second.

The ecstasy of the hotel room, of R's eyes, her mouth, her surrender, had drowned out the rest of the world.

Had he muted the phone?

Maybe.

Had his mind simply filtered out the buzzes and calls and noise because he'd been so deep in her?

Most likely.

Too deep.

He pressed call.  
Elena first.

Because that call needed to be made before anything else.  
Because she knew him too well.  
Because if he delayed any longer—she'd start asking questions.  
And he didn't have the energy for questions.

The line rang.  
Once.  
Twice.

"A." Her voice was sharp, tight, low.

He adjusted his tone immediately.

"I know. I'm sorry. I was handling something urgent. Heading back now."

A lie, dressed as work.  
A half-truth, wrapped in calm.

Because that's what he did best.

Control.  
Until, just hours ago, he'd given it away.

But now?  
Now he had to reclaim it.

The Uber rolled through the dusky streets of Barcelona, headlights streaking across stone façades and the glowing windows of restaurants beginning to fill for the evening.

A sat in the backseat, elbow on the doorframe, his hand pressed against his mouth, as he listened to Javier's voice echo in his AirPods.

"I just need confirmation on the layout changes before I forward the mock-ups to Dubai. They're moving the call to 9 a.m. CET, which means—"

"Send them to me again," A replied coolly, interrupting. "I'll approve them in an hour. If there's anything critical, flag it."

"Got it. Will do. You alright, man?"

A let a soft breath slip through his nose. "Busy day."



He ended the call with practiced efficiency, already forwarding a blank “On it” to his assistant to handle the follow-ups.

His shoulders were straight, his jaw set—the face of control rebuilt.

But then—

A gust of wind blew through the open window.  
And with it—her.

Not in body.  
Just in thought.

The image hit him like a wave.

R on her knees.  
The hotel’s golden light painting her skin.  
The robe’s tie around her wrists.  
The look in her eyes when he pressed her to the wall—not just submissive, but offering herself like it was something sacred.

And then—

his body betrayed him.

His breath caught.  
His pulse skipped.

His trousers—suddenly tighter.

Hard. Instantly.

As if no time had passed.

As if his body hadn’t understood yet that the moment was over.

As if he didn’t want it to be.

He adjusted slightly in the seat, clearing his throat, jaw clenching.

No.

Not now.

Elena was waiting.

The Uber turned onto a familiar avenue lined with well-kept trees and iron balconies—the quiet, polished part of the city where Elena’s cousin lived.

A pulled himself back.

Breath in.

Jaw set.

Tie adjusted.

Control.

He reached for that version of himself—the man who handled million-euro clients, who kept appearances, who never let personal and professional bleed together.

The man Elena knew.

The man she expected.

The man he had to be tonight.

But deep beneath the surface—

R's name still whispered against the back of his tongue.

And it would stay there.

Waiting.

Unspoken.

Burning.

As he stepped out of the car and walked toward Elena, already waving from the steps, he forced a smile.

Because reality required it.

And desire...

Desire would have to wait.

*(A's Perspective)*

Thursday, 11:03 AM – Carrer dels Petons

They had agreed it would only be coffee.

Just coffee. No games. No locked doors. No bindings. No lies.

He'd written the rules this time. And he planned to keep them.

A knew the rules this time.

He had written them himself.

It was his last full day in Barcelona.

The suitcase was already packed, the work calls behind him, the evening reserved for Elena's family dinner where he would wear a tie and pour wine and pretend he hadn't unraveled completely in this city.

But before all of that, he needed to see her.

Not to start something.

Not even to finish something.

But to acknowledge it.

To look her in the eyes and remember—just once more—what it felt like to want someone so deeply that it fractured the rest of your life.

They hadn't spoken since the hotel.

She hadn't messaged him.

He hadn't messaged her.

But when he texted, two days before, she said:

*"Just coffee."*

And now, he was walking to meet her.

Not to pull her close.

Not to test his control.

But to let the moment be what it was—short, quiet, unfinished.

A small, shaded café on Carrer dels Petons, the "street of kisses," nestled between stone walls and climbing ivy. It was too on-the-nose, too poetic.

And maybe that's why he chose it.

Because some things deserved to be remembered, even if they couldn't be kept.

She looked up the moment he crossed the street.

No wave. No smile at first. Just a subtle tilt of her head, as if to say: *So you really came.*

A approached slowly.

She was already seated at a small table near the wall, sunlight warming the terracotta stone behind her. A half-empty cup sat in front of her, and a second—untouched—rested across the table. For him.

Of course.

He lowered himself into the chair, the metal creaking slightly beneath his weight. For a long moment, they just sat there, letting the air settle between them.

The café was quiet, mostly locals. An older couple sipped cortados under the overhang. The clink of teaspoons and the soft rumble of a Vespa drifting past were the only sounds.

A exhaled slowly.

“Thank you for coming.”

R gave a small smile, the kind that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “You’re the one who asked.”

A nodded, then looked down at the coffee she’d ordered for him. It was still hot. No sugar. Just the way he liked it.

“Some habits are hard to forget,” she said, almost offhand.

He stared at the cup for a moment longer, then picked it up. “That wasn’t a habit.”

Silence again.

This wasn’t a conversation.

It was a field of memories they were both trying not to step on.

“You look different,” he said.

“I am different.”

A small gust of wind blew past them. Her scarf fluttered gently against her coat. She wore neutral colors today—earth tones, soft fabric, nothing that clung. She was shielding herself. But not from him. From what she remembered about herself when she was with him.

He studied her face carefully, trying to read what she wasn’t saying.

“I won’t keep you long,” he added. “I have to leave tonight.”

R nodded, her hand tightening slightly around the coffee cup.

“So this is... goodbye?” she asked.

A hesitated.

“No. This is just... the part we don’t name.”

She smiled faintly. “Very you.”

They both sipped their coffee, eyes glancing across the narrow street, listening to footsteps, distant laughter.

She looked at him again, slower this time. “I don’t regret it, you know.”

“I don’t either.”

The weight of those four words filled the small space between them like a tide.

He leaned forward slightly, elbows on the table. “But I can’t go back to it. To us. Not here. Not now.”

“I know,” she said, quiet. “And I didn’t ask you to.”

But her voice trembled, just enough for him to hear it.

That tremor in her voice—that almost undid him. Almost.

A leaned back, placed his cup gently down. “Will you be alright?”

She gave the tiniest nod. “I’ll forget slower than you. But I’ll manage.”

He stood up. She didn’t.

This time, there was no kiss. No touch. Just a look—a long, quiet look between two people who had once crossed a line they could never uncross.

“Take care, R.”

“Goodbye, A.”

He walked away without turning back.

She didn’t stop him.

Because if either of them looked again—

They wouldn’t let go. Not this time. Not ever.

## Chapter 23

### Two Days Later – The Coffee

New York swallowed him whole.  
It always did.

The plane cut through thick, grey skies as the skyline emerged—cold, vast, unyielding. Gone were the ochre rooftops of Barcelona, the soft roll of tiled streets and the golden warmth that glowed off old stone. Here, everything was steel and distance. Geometry and grind.

The terminal was loud.

Harsh white light bled down from frosted glass panels, casting shadows under every eye. A stood at the baggage carousel in his tailored navy coat, wool shoulders dusted faintly with lint. His scarf still smelled of rosemary and coastal wind—faint traces of a life that already felt fictional.

When his suitcase rolled past, he caught it in silence, hand tightening around the leather grip.

The driver was waiting with a cardboard sign, too loud a voice, and too much perfume.

The back seat of the black SUV was warm. Too warm. The leather creaked when he sat down, and the air smelled of citrus-slicked dashboard cleaner and faint cologne—not his.

Outside, the city loomed in flat shades of graphite and chrome.

Every block they passed, he saw fragments of what used to excite him:  
A billboard for a brand he once negotiated.  
The tower where he'd closed his first million-euro pitch.  
The street where his name used to carry weight in whispered tones.

Now?

He just watched it pass like a stranger returning to his own life.

Inside the apartment, everything was pristine.

Too pristine.

The door clicked behind him like a lock sealing a vault.

No warmth in the air. Just lavender from the timed diffuser and the dry hum of the climate control system.

The floors—marble. Cold. Reflective.  
The walls—white, almost clinical.  
His suitcases landed beside the hallway console with a dull thud.

He stood there a moment.  
Coat on.  
Scarf still looped around his throat.  
Waiting for something to greet him.

Nothing did.

Even the silence felt automated.

He walked to the window. Outside, the sky was low, like concrete pressed against glass. The Hudson shimmered like slate, and the highrises across the river looked like teeth.

He could see his reflection.  
Hair slightly mussed from travel.  
Eyes sharp. Tired.  
Mouth a straight, unreadable line.

But it wasn't really him.

Not the version that had whispered into R's hair as she arched beneath him.  
Not the man who had left fingerprints on a coffee cup beside a woman who never stopped trembling in his presence.

That man had stayed in Barcelona.  
With her.

He walked into the bedroom.

Changed slowly.

Unbuttoned the navy coat, then the crisp charcoal suit jacket beneath. The cotton shirt he peeled from his body still carried the softest hint of her perfume—the faint musk of her warmth, and jasmine, and skin.

He should've burned it.  
Instead, he hung it back up.

Not neatly.  
Not like before.

He stood at the window again, now in his undershirt, a glass of rye untouched in his hand.

He didn't sip.  
He just watched.

New York was pulsing below him.  
Unforgiving.

And inside this tower of stone and glass, he was already forgetting how it felt to be alive.

The days passed.  
Not like hours.  
More like units of measurement.

Emails.  
Meetings.  
Reports.  
Deliverables.

The calendar reassembled itself like an iron cage around him.  
And A stepped into it willingly.

Every morning: the same coffee, the same elevator pitch, the same rehearsed tone of leadership and control.

No one could tell.  
Not Javier.  
Not his junior analyst.  
Not even Elena—at first.

---

The apartment was glowing that evening with its usual curated softness: recessed lighting above the dining table, soft jazz whispering from the hidden speakers, a decanter of Syrah breathing on the sideboard.

Elena had arranged tulips in a thick glass vase. He didn't ask if she bought them or if a friend brought them over.

She was smiling, wearing that cashmere sweater he once complimented—soft rose against her skin, her hair tucked behind one ear in that easy, elegant way that once drove him mad with gratitude.

He felt nothing.



Just... stillness.

He complimented the food. Ate slowly. Asked about her cousin's newborn.  
Listened, nodded, replied on cue.

And yet—

The more he spoke, the more he felt like a guest in his own life.

Elena's eyes lingered on him longer than usual that night.  
Once, while pouring wine, she touched his hand.

He didn't pull away.  
But he didn't press back, either.

She noticed.  
He could tell.  
She didn't say anything.

Back in his office, he opened his laptop. The glow of the screen painted his face in cold light.

He worked in silence.

Until something—a breath, a twitch, a scent that wasn't really there—made his mind snap backward.

To a café on Carrer dels Petons.

To the ceramic clink of two coffee cups between silences.  
To her mouth, parted like she had something else she wasn't brave enough to say.  
To her voice when she whispered, *"I'll forget slower than you."*

He hadn't heard from her.  
Not a single word.  
Not a photo.  
Not even a shadow of presence.

It was like she'd vanished.

But that only made it worse.

Because the emptiness she left behind didn't collapse—it expanded.

He stood from his chair, paced the length of the room, pressed his forehead against the cool glass of the window.

The city lights blinked below, each one a pulse of some other life he wasn't living.

His pulse was fast.

His jaw tight.

And suddenly—his body remembered her.

The slope of her collarbone.

The tremble in her breath.

The moment her wrists tightened under the robe sash and she looked up at him like he was the only real thing in the world.

His hand gripped the window frame.

Not now.

He had to bury it.

He had to.

---

Elena appeared in the doorway.

"A?" she asked gently, her voice still coated in affection but laced now with something else—distance. "Are you okay?"

He turned slowly.

Offered a small smile.

"Just tired."

She nodded.

"Come to bed soon?"

"In a minute."

She left.

The hallway light faded.

And he stayed there in the dark, staring at his own reflection again—

Trying to recognize the man who once believed he could keep two lives separate and still remain whole.

## Chapter 24

The apartment was quiet in a sterile way—the kind of quiet that didn’t soothe, but pressed itself into the space between two people like a third presence neither invited.

A sat at the marble breakfast island, sleeves pushed halfway up his forearms, coffee cooling beside him in a stoneware cup he barely touched. The news played softly in the background from the wall-mounted screen, but he wasn’t listening.

The steam from the kettle had already faded.

The toast smelled faintly of rye.

Everything was normal.

Too normal.

Elena moved around the kitchen with the fluid grace he’d always admired. Barefoot, her robe tied loosely at the waist, she passed from counter to cupboard with the quiet focus of someone who knew this rhythm by heart.

She didn’t glance at him.

Not once.

She poured oat milk into her coffee with her back turned, then stirred it slowly—not absent-mindedly, but precisely. As if she needed her hands to be doing something, anything.

She placed the butter dish on the table. Their fingers touched briefly as he reached for it.

Warm. Familiar.

But empty.

The kind of touch that used to mean something but had now been reduced to function.

A’s thumb dragged slowly over the edge of his cup.

The ceramic was smooth, cool. He could feel the faintest chip near the rim.

He focused on that chip like it might hold his attention long enough to quiet the echo of another morning across an ocean.

He glanced at her.

Elena’s face was calm, composed, her gaze lowered to her phone. But there was something in the way she scrolled—slow, unreadable, with long pauses between flicks of her finger.

Not distracted.

Watching.

Waiting.

Measuring.

A sipped his coffee. Lukewarm now. Bitter.

He said, “How did you sleep?”

She looked up at him for the first time.

“Fine,” she said.

Then she smiled.

It was a beautiful smile.

It always had been.

But it didn’t touch her eyes.

Outside, the city was beginning to wake.

Muted horns. The soft rumble of elevators in the building shaft.

Sunlight trying to push through thick grey clouds.

The apartment smelled like lemon soap, and freshly ground beans, and the faint ozone bite of the winter air that crept in through a window not quite sealed.

A stood, grabbed his phone, checked it out of habit—no messages.

He didn’t expect one.

Not anymore.

But still, the absence rang louder than any notification could have.

Elena rinsed her mug and said, almost too casually,

“You’ve been quiet lately.”

A paused by the hallway.

“I’ve just been tired,” he replied, voice even, tone polished.

A beat passed.

The faucet dripped.

“Okay,” she said.

And that was it.

No accusation.

No probing.

Just... okay.

But A could feel it.

The distance wasn't growing.

It was already there.

Just dressed in civility.

Wrapped in familiar routines.

Still wearing their names.

But nothing else fit anymore.

Evening wrapped the apartment in quiet shadow, filtered through frosted glass and the gauze of winter dusk.

Outside, New York hummed—soft and distant, like a storm just out of reach.

Inside, the rooms glowed with a kind of curated warmth:

Candlelight flickering on the coffee table.

The dim amber wash from a floor lamp by the shelves.

The slow rhythm of a piano playlist whispering through the speakers.

Elena was curled on one end of the couch, knees tucked under a blanket, her hair tied back in a way that used to make him reach for her neck with idle fingers.

She held a book she hadn't turned the page of in fifteen minutes.

A sat beside her with a glass of wine and an untouched mind, eyes focused on a muted nature documentary playing on the mounted screen—giraffes moving slowly across an endless plain.

They were close in body, but the air between them was thick and cool.

Not cold.

Not angry.

Just... absent.

The wine was dry.

The room smelled of linen and wood polish and the faint trace of her vanilla skin cream.

Once, that smell would have softened him.

Now, it only reminded him how distant she felt—even in arm's reach.

Elena leaned her head briefly against his shoulder.

A didn't pull away.

But he didn't lean into her either.

She felt it.

He knew she did.

She asked about a colleague of his—something small, easy, something normal.

He responded with practiced calm.

Gave her enough to close the question, but nothing to build from.

Then silence again.

Not awkward.

Not yet.

But weighted.

She looked at him.

Studied his profile, as if trying to remember something that used to live behind his eyes.

He could feel her trying to find him.

And he hated that part of him wanted to be found—

While another part had already buried itself in a hotel room on a quiet street in Barcelona.

“I'm going to bed,” she said eventually.

He nodded.

Didn't follow.

“Will you come soon?”

“In a minute.”

She lingered.

For a breath.

A heartbeat.

Then left.

Her footsteps down the hall were soft. Measured.

She hadn't closed the door.

Not as an invitation.

But as a sign.

A knew what it meant.

That she was giving him space to step back in.  
Or stay out.

He didn't move.  
Didn't sip his wine.

On the screen, the giraffes had moved on.  
The plain was empty now.

And he sat in the softest kind of silence—  
The kind that fills a home when love starts to disappear, but no one says it out loud.

Sunday arrived with brittle winter light.  
The sky was a flat canvas of pale grey, the kind that blurred the line between morning and afternoon. The air outside was crisp and dry, and A's breath left short-lived ghosts as he stepped onto the street beside Elena.

They walked together in polished silence, coats buttoned, gloves on. He wore charcoal wool and leather-lined boots; she wore navy with a cream scarf tucked carefully under her collar. They looked, from the outside, every bit the New York couple—composed, successful, in sync.

But beneath the appearance, something hollowed between them.

They were on their way to lunch at a friend's apartment in the West Village. People who had seen their wedding photos. People who remembered how she used to laugh at everything he said.

People who would never ask if something was wrong—because they wouldn't believe it.

The apartment was flooded with light from tall windows framed by plants and vintage curtains. The smell of orange zest and baked rosemary wafted from the kitchen. A string quartet version of Fleetwood Mac played softly beneath the murmur of voices.

Everything was perfectly curated.  
Everything was exactly as it should be.

A held a glass of white wine, one hand in his pocket. He stood beside the kitchen island, telling a story about a difficult pitch to a London client.

People laughed.  
Elena smiled.

And for a moment, he almost believed himself.

Almost.

She leaned against the counter, smiling at their friends, her hand lightly touching his sleeve in that practiced way that suggested affection without intimacy.

To anyone watching, they were magnetic.  
Elegant.  
In control.

But A felt it.  
The distance.

Like a pane of glass between them—clear, but unbreakable.

She passed him the cheese knife.  
Their hands touched.  
He didn't look at her.

And when their host turned to refill glasses, A felt her eyes on his profile.  
Searching.  
Weighing.

And deciding not to speak.

Later, walking home along Hudson Street, the wind colder now, Elena held her coat closed at the collar with one gloved hand.

They walked in silence for several blocks, the space between them just enough that their hands didn't touch.

Then, at the crosswalk, as the signal flashed red and the city buzzed quietly around them, she said:

“Where were you just now?”

Her tone wasn't accusing.  
It was too calm for that.  
Too practiced.



A didn't answer right away.

He watched a cyclist cut across the intersection, a dog bark distantly from a rooftop garden.

"What do you mean?" he replied, voice low.

She didn't turn her head.

"You were there. But not there."

He opened his mouth, then closed it.

What could he say?

That his mind was in a café on Carrer dels Petons?

That he could still taste the silence between two coffee cups that held more truth than anything said since his return?

She didn't press further.

The light turned green.

They crossed.

And neither of them spoke again for the rest of the walk.

But the fracture had deepened.

The mask had slipped.

And though nothing had shattered yet—

the sound of cracking was now impossible to ignore.

## Chapter 25

The rain came softly that morning—not a storm, but a steady tapping that brushed against the tall windows like fingers testing glass. It made the skyline look blurred, dreamlike, the buildings half-formed behind pale mist.

A lay still in bed longer than usual.

The sheets were warm, the pillow hollowed perfectly beneath his head.

But he didn't feel rested.

He felt... paused.

Held in place by something he couldn't quite name.

From the kitchen, he heard quiet movement.

Cabinet doors. A kettle humming. The delicate clink of porcelain.

And her—Elena.

Humming softly. A tune he didn't recognize.

He sat up, pushing the duvet aside, and ran a hand down his face. His skin was cool. His thoughts were heavy.

Outside the window, the city pulsed in grey and silver. Inside, the air was filled with warmth—tea, toasted rye bread, the faint aroma of lemon balm and bergamot from the open jar on the counter.

He padded barefoot into the kitchen, wearing soft black sweats and a white T-shirt. Elena didn't turn immediately.

She was standing at the island, slicing bread with unhurried precision. Her robe was cream-colored, knotted low at the waist. A loose curl had slipped from behind her ear.

The scene was perfect. Too perfect.

Like a still life arranged by hand.

"You're up early," she said, her tone easy, almost cheerful.

A gave a faint smile. "Couldn't sleep."

She turned, her eyes flicking briefly over him.

There was warmth in her gaze, but also something quieter.

Something rehearsed.

"Coffee's ready. I added cinnamon. I know you don't take sugar."

He nodded and crossed the room to pour himself a cup. The mug was ceramic, hand-glazed. Elena's touch in everything.

As he sipped, he noticed the silence again.

There was no jazz playing this morning.  
No news channel murmuring in the background.  
Just the rain.

And her.

Moving slowly. Deliberately. Like someone preparing a room for a conversation they weren't ready to have.

She handed him a plate: two slices of toasted rye, thin honey, a wedge of blood orange.

He blinked.  
It felt like a gift.  
Or a farewell.

"It's nice," she said quietly, sliding onto the stool across from him, "having a quiet weekend for once."

He looked at her—really looked.

Her face was clean. No makeup. Just skin and freckles and the faint shadow of sleep under her eyes. She looked soft. Grounded.

But not relaxed.

She was breathing shallowly. Holding something in her spine.

A nodded. "It is."

But inside, something began to stir.  
A cold thread winding through his ribs.

Because everything felt too gentle.  
Too even.

Like the moment before glass breaks.

Elena rose from the table quietly, her fingertips brushing the surface of the counter as she walked past him.

“One second,” she said, almost as if she had forgotten something simple—like a napkin or a charger cable.

But her voice had changed.

Just slightly.

A watched her disappear into the hallway.

He took another sip of coffee, though the taste had turned bitter on his tongue.

The light in the apartment had dimmed subtly.

The clouds outside were darker now, a shift in pressure that mirrored the one in his chest.

Elena’s steps were soft when she returned.

She carried nothing in her hands at first glance—until she paused beside the island and placed something next to his plate.

It was small. White.

A pregnancy test.

He didn’t look at it right away.

He looked at her.

She wasn’t smiling now.

But she wasn’t nervous either.

She had prepared for this moment.

“I wasn’t sure how to say it,” she said softly, “so I thought maybe I’d just show you.”

A stared at the object on the counter.

Two pink lines.

Clear. Unmistakable.

He blinked once, slowly.

The sound of the rain faded.

Or perhaps it grew louder.

He couldn’t tell.

Elena sat across from him again, not touching her tea.

“I took three,” she said.

“Same result.”

He nodded, jaw tightening slightly as he exhaled.

“How long have you known?”

“Four days.”

A pause.

“I waited until the trip was over. Until Barcelona was... behind us.”

A flicker of something passed through his chest then.

Not guilt exactly.

Not panic.

Just... a weight.

A gate closing.

A line being drawn.

He looked down at the test again.

So simple.

So clinical.

Yet so final.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Elena’s fingers wrapped gently around her mug.

“I think so.”

Then, after a moment—

“It doesn’t have to change everything all at once. I just... I needed you to know what’s coming.”

What’s coming.

The words echoed.

Not a child.

Not responsibility.

Not family.

What’s coming.

A didn’t move.

Didn’t reach for her hand.

Didn’t speak.

He just sat there, still, the rain pressing gently against the windows, the faint scent of cinnamon still curling through the air like smoke from something already burned.

The apartment was silent again.  
Not peaceful.  
Just... emptied.

Elena had gone to lie down, claiming she felt tired.  
She hadn't asked him to join her.

A didn't offer.

He sat alone in his office, the soft rain outside now reduced to a mist that painted the window in pale grey hues. The city was muted, skyscrapers blurred behind condensation and reflection.

The pregnancy test was gone now.  
Elena had folded it into a drawer with quiet, steady hands.

But A could still see it.  
Not the object—  
What it meant.

He sat behind his desk, the room dim except for the glow of the screen in front of him. His fingers hovered above the keyboard, useless. His mind wouldn't settle.

There were contracts to review.  
A quarterly forecast to finalize.  
A dinner tomorrow with a client from Geneva.

None of it reached him.  
Everything felt like static.

His phone rested beside the laptop. He picked it up.

The message thread was still there.  
R.

He hadn't opened it in weeks.  
He didn't need to.  
He knew what the last thing said—  
Because it had never really left him.

He scrolled to the top of the thread.

The first message.  
Her sending a link to a song they once talked about.  
A photo of a coffee cup with her name on it in his city.  
Late night “You there?” texts.  
Her silence when he took too long to answer.

All of it.

He stared at it for a long time.  
His thumb hovered above the screen.

He could write something.  
Just one word.  
*Still here.*  
*Thinking of you.*  
*I never forgot.*

But he didn’t.

Instead, he hit “Options.”  
Scrolled down.

And tapped:  
Archive Thread.

The screen blinked.  
Gone.

Not erased.  
Just buried.  
Like everything else.

He placed the phone face-down.

Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes and let the silence stretch.

Outside, the clouds broke slightly. A sliver of weak sunlight cut through the buildings across the river.

Inside, the air was still.

And in his chest, where once there had been longing, lust, fire—  
There was only quiet surrender.

To what was coming.

To who he had to be now.

To the life that had always been waiting for him to stop running.



## Chapter 26

The snow was still falling.

New York looked suspended, like the entire city had been dipped in quiet. Thick flakes drifted past the floor-to-ceiling windows of the apartment, veiling the skyline in soft white haze.

A stood barefoot in the kitchen, wrapped in the heavy silence of early morning. He wore a dark henley and cotton lounge pants, hands curled loosely around a warm ceramic mug. The coffee inside was black and bitter, the way he always took it—but this morning, he hadn't added cinnamon.

He took a sip.

It didn't taste like much.

The radiator ticked quietly. Somewhere in the apartment, a pipe groaned as it expanded against the cold. Elena hadn't stirred yet; the bedroom door remained half-closed, and he could hear the even rhythm of her breathing from within.

His eyes drifted to the hallway drawer.

The one where the test was kept.

Tucked neatly in a zippered case with its twin and the printed instructions folded flat beneath.

He didn't need to open it.

He never did.

The knowledge was enough.

The future was real now—defined, fixed, and growing.

Still, he lingered. Staring at the drawer.

Not with regret.

Not with longing.

Just... awareness.

That something had changed.

That something else had stayed behind.

In Barcelona, the day had already begun.

R unlocked the classroom door with her scarf still looped around her neck. Her fingers were cold from the tram ride, but the sun was strong—bright through the tall windows, casting golden squares across the wood floor.

The school smelled of tempera paint, orange peels, and the faint sweetness of honey biscuits from the kitchen. She smiled softly as she stepped inside.

The quiet wouldn't last.

Within ten minutes, the children began arriving, their voices bright, their coats undone, their energy sharp and chaotic in the winter air.

She crouched down to help one of them fix a boot strap, then gently adjusted another child's collar.

"Seño, I lost my glove!"

"Let's check your bag again. I bet it's hiding."

She laughed, soft and real, and the ache she hadn't named in weeks stayed silent in her chest.

Another teacher passed and winked at her.

"How's your morning?"

"Peaceful," she answered, brushing a curl behind her ear.

And it was.

Mostly.

A sat now in his office, the blinds still drawn, the city still soft and quiet outside. His laptop was closed. His phone face-down.

He watched the steam rise from the coffee.

In another city—on another continent—she was probably smiling at something small. A child's question. A passing busker. The way the wind tugged her coat too wide.

They were both living.

They were both where they needed to be.

And yet—something between them had never fully left.

Not desire.

Not even memory.

But the deep, unspoken recognition that they had both crossed a line—together—and would always carry the imprint of it beneath their skin.

The sun had gone down by the time A finally turned on a light.

Evening draped itself over the city in muted violets and slate grey, and the snow from earlier had slowed to a fine dust that glimmered beneath the amber glow of streetlamps.

The office was still. The ambient light from the hallway pooled faintly behind him, casting long shadows across the bookshelves and floor.

He hadn't worked.

Not really.

He'd answered two emails out of obligation.

Marked one file for review.

But mostly, he'd been staring.

Out the window.

At his closed laptop.

At the silence.

He turned toward the desk and reached for his phone.

It lit up with the touch.

No notifications.

He opened the messaging app.

The thread was still there—archived but not deleted.

R.

His thumb hovered above it. He didn't open it.

But he didn't look away, either.

What was there to say?

What could possibly be said now?

They had chosen silence.

Not because they wanted it.

But because they understood each other too well.

Some things weren't built to last.

Some things only existed to change you.

He stared a moment longer, then gently backed out of the screen.  
Placed the phone down—face-up this time.

A moment passed.  
And then he turned off the desk light.  
Letting the city become a soft reflection on the glass.

In Barcelona, the streets were cooling.  
The laughter from sidewalk terraces had grown quieter, scarves pulled tighter,  
jackets buttoned higher.

R sat by the window in her apartment, curled up with a blanket and a cup of  
rooibos tea. The room was warm—dimly lit by a single reading lamp and the soft  
flicker of an old candle that smelled of cedar and almond.

A book lay open across her lap, unread.

Her phone vibrated once—a friend from work, reminding her of plans next week.  
She replied briefly, then let the phone fall beside her on the couch.

Her gaze drifted upward to the windows across the street.  
Someone was cooking.  
Someone else watering plants.  
The world moved quietly.  
And so did she.

She reached for her phone again, slowly this time. Opened the photo gallery.

Thumb brushed downward.  
Past selfies with her students. Past the video of her friend's cat. Past blurry shots  
of dinners she barely remembered.

Until—  
A napkin.

Cream-colored.  
Faint ink on it. A single name.  
A cup beside it—coffee gone cold.

A still from the café on Carrer dels Petons.

She stared at it.  
The only visual memory she had kept.  
Not of the room.  
Not the body.

Just the moment after, when everything had gone quiet and something real had lived in the air between them.

She tapped and held.

“Delete this photo?”

Her thumb hovered.

Then slowly, she tapped yes.

Gone.

And still—  
he wasn’t.

Not in her phone.  
But somewhere deeper.

The apartment was quiet again.  
New York slept under a soft blanket of snow, traffic reduced to a hush, footsteps muffled by powder and patience.

A turned off the last lamp in the living room. The apartment darkened slowly, room by room, until only the light under the bedroom door remained.

He paused outside it.  
Not for long.  
Just enough to breathe once. Deep. Controlled.

Then he stepped inside.

Elena lay curled on her side, one hand beneath her cheek, the covers pulled halfway up. Her hair spread across the pillow like a spill of ink, and the faintest smile touched her lips—the kind only found in dreamless sleep.

A moved quietly, shedding his shirt, placing his phone face-down on the bedside table. He slid under the sheets, careful not to wake her.

But when he did, she stirred.  
Eyes fluttered open.

“Hey,” she whispered, voice drowsy and warm.  
“You okay?”

He looked at her for a long moment.  
And for the first time in weeks, he didn’t hesitate.

“Yeah,” he said.

“I am.”

She smiled, barely awake, and reached for his hand beneath the sheets.

Found it.

Laced her fingers through his.

And just like that—

he let go.

Of the street in Barcelona.

Of the voice in his phone.

Of the woman who had once knelt before him with trembling lips and a soul he couldn't stop touching.

Not because she didn't matter.

Not because she hadn't changed him.

But because sometimes, love isn't something you keep.

It's something you survive.

Across the ocean, R stood on her balcony.

The wind had quieted, the stars smudged behind a thin veil of cloud.

The city below shimmered.

Faint music played from a nearby bar.

She wore a thin sweater and held a warm cup in her hands, steam rising in soft spirals.

She looked down at the cup.

Then up at the sky.

She didn't cry.

Didn't smile.

She just stood there in the cool air, skin kissed by night, heart no longer pulling in two directions.

She had loved him.

Once.

Fully.

But now, her breath was steady.

Her spine tall.

And her silence no longer empty—just quiet.

She went inside.  
Closed the door.  
And left the past behind it.

THE END

## Afterword

Some loves do not arrive to stay.  
They come like storms: beautiful, devastating, necessary.  
They unmake who we were,  
so we can become who we must be.

We do not always choose the ending.  
But we choose what we carry forward.

And sometimes, the most enduring kind of love—  
is the one we leave behind.

Hope you liked it. What you've just read isn't fiction — it's real. Every word, every moment. And it's only the beginning.  
If you're curious... if something in these pages felt familiar... add me on Snapchat.

—*@Atheppassenger*

Maybe we'll write the next chapter together.

Yours,  
A...