



## Cover

### Kiss Me Malaga

#### Flashback

The night in Málaga smelled of jasmine and salt, so warm that the air clung to my skin like a damp film. He braced himself with his hands on either side of me, his body so close I could feel his breath. In the soft glow of the moonlight, I could see the truth in his face; the tiredness around his eyes gave way to a

1

2

3

4

8

7

9

5

and closed. Every noise was a tiny sting. bedroom, the sound of drawers being opened his gaze on my back. I heard him go into the my screen, pretending to be busy. I could feel "No problem," I muttered, turning back to share for three years.

"No problem," I replied, looking back in the room we had hand, he held an empty cardboard box. In his things," Jonas said, avoiding my gaze. In his key, "I just wanted to get the rest of my door opened. It was him. He still had a

bags two days ago. Or rather: since I asked been unusually quiet since Jonas packed his rooftops in drab colors. The apartment had outside, a gray, rainy sky painted the city's roses from my cup. The smell of cold coffee. Outside game. I was a graphic designer, a time with my growing espalier. I was always my constant companion for days thrashed in the same game. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. exactly nothing. The line went dead.

"I'll see what I can do," Ms. Richter said in a tone that made it crystal clear she would do involuntarily debt collector rolled into one. money I was owed. I was an artist and an its part of the contract."

process took place when you accepted the final design. My fee isn't a friendly request: I massaged my temples with my thumb and forefinger. The dull headache that had been urgent, then threatening emails to get the drawing. But half my time wasn't spent creative. I was a game developer, a time with my growing espalier. I was always my constant companion for days thrashed in the same game. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. exactly nothing. The line went dead.

"I'll see what I can do," Ms. Richter said in a tone that made it crystal clear she would do involuntarily debt collector rolled into one. money I was owed. I was an artist and an its part of the contract."

The actual fight, the big, loud confrontation, had never happened. Our breakup hadn't been a volcanic eruption, but the slow erosion of a rock. A steady, unstoppable drifting apart until an insurmountable chasm lay between us.

He came back into the living room; the box was now filled with books, an old hoodie, and the photo of us from our last vacation at the North Sea. He set the box down by the door.

"You look tired," he said. It wasn't an accusation, more an observation. "I'm just

chasing my money," I replied, sarcasm being my only remaining armor. "The usual freelancer life."

Jonas sighed. It was that sigh that drove me crazy. A sigh full of concern, but also full of condescension. "I always told you. This stress, it's destroying you. Get a permanent job. With a steady income, with security."

There it was again. The word that questioned my entire existence. *Security*. His life goal. His mantra. To me, it sounded like a death sentence for my soul.

9

10

11

12

months. A tiny spark. A fleeting breath of freedom. I reached for my sketchbook, which had lay untouched on the table for weeks. I had to pack. I just had to get away.

months. A tiny spark. A fleeting breath of freedom. I reached for my sketchbook, which had lay untouched on the table for weeks. I had to pack. I just had to get away.

My fingers began to type. Flight search engine. A one-way flight. Accommodation. An apartment with an inner courtyard and high ceilings. The pictures promised cohesiveness, a shoe that was too tight. I had to get out of her. Not just out of the apartment, but out of everything.

My fingers began to type. Flight search engine. A one-way flight. Accommodation. An apartment with an inner courtyard and high ceilings. The pictures promised cohesiveness, a shoe that was too tight. I had to get out of her. Not just out of the apartment, but out of everything.

apartments, but out of everything. I had to get out of her. Not just out of the apartment, but out of everything. I had to get out of her. Not just out of the apartment, but out of everything.

My fingers began to type. Flight search engine. A one-way flight. Accommodation. An apartment with an inner courtyard and high ceilings. The pictures promised cohesiveness, a shoe that was too tight. I had to get out of her. Not just out of the apartment, but out of everything.

That was the last, decisive crack. Not his words, but the realization in his eyes that he didn't just misunderstand me, he thought I

realized in that moment we had been missing. I tasted the dark, sweet wine from hours ago, the salt on my own lips, and beneath it, the unmistakable heat of a soul that had held its breath for far, far too long.

Somewhere inside, a blue light pulsed silently and watchfully on the kitchen counter.

#### The Last Crack

The tone of the woman on the other end of the line was a masterclass in feigned sympathy and bureaucratic indifference. "I

lines and the color palette. "The approval hours, no, days, into perfecting the curved screen, at the elaborately designed logo I had repelled. My voice was so controlled and calm until next week." "The innovative idea overruled," I repelled. "But this computer screen, I started at my computer screen, I was always repelled, but the internal process must first go through the internal process. Unfortunate, accounting isn't fully staffed until next week."

"Understand your urgency, Ms. Alonso," she

His future. A house in the country, a station wagon, a Golden Retriever. In that picture, there was no room for my chaotic, creative soul. I was the unpredictable variable in his life equation.

I spun around in my chair and looked him directly in the eye. "And what about my plans? What about what I want?"

"What you want is a fantasy!" he almost shouted. "A life like a bohemian from the last century. But the world doesn't work that way! You need a plan!"

gave way to an expression of resignation. He looked at me for a moment; the anger wall and the soft patter of rain against the window pane. "You should buy now, Jonas," I said, my voice brittle but firm.

Silence. Only the ticking of the clock on the wall, my voice brittle but firm.

She looked at me for a moment; the anger wall and the soft patter of rain against the window pane. "You should buy now, Jonas," I said, my voice brittle but firm.

silence, but the woman he wanted to mold me was naive and lost. He didn't love the woman who had just misunderstood me, he thought I



*prickle. A freezer truck converted into a camper, I thought. That would be the only sensible choice.*

The automatic doors of Carrefour hissed open, a gateway to a sterile, air-conditioned deli heaven. The relief was so intense it was dizzying. I moved quickly. Milk. All-Bran, the right ones, without the sugar glaze. A small cup of yogurt that promised the taste of melon, a promise I knew it wouldn't keep. The smallest bottle of sunscreen available. And an anti-mosquito plug. I wasn't going to

be a buffet. Bag in hand, I stepped back outside. The sun had finally vanished behind the buildings, but the heat remained, stubborn, refusing to leave. The sky was a deep, bruised violet. On the way back, I wasn't just navigating the streets. I was navigating the ghosts of a life I had left behind. The heat felt exactly the same, but everything else, especially me, felt different.

I saw the heavy, dark wooden door of my building ahead. Behind it lay the cool

courtyard, the fountain, the silence. And Alma, waiting for me inside.

## The Cat and the City

I hurried through the courtyard, barely noticing the scent of jasmine this time. The apartment door clicked shut behind me. The sudden silence was absolute. I dropped the bag on the floor.

"Welcome back, Clara," Alma's voice rang out.

I ignored her. My skin felt dusty; my hair clung to my neck. I needed a shower. Purposefully, I went into the bathroom and peeled off my sweat-soaked clothes. The bathroom was cool, tiled. I turned on the faucet, letting the water pelt me, first hot, then gloriously cold. It washed away the heat of the day, the grime of the city.

I dried off, pulled on an oversized T-shirt and shorts, and stumbled into the bedroom. The bed, large and cozy, swallowed me. Sleep came quickly, deep and dreamless.

Even early in the morning, the irresistible temptation of sweet-smelling, cheaply-made bars, were coming to life, their colorful, wafted through the air. I strolled along the promise of fizzing fish and charcoal grills while setting up umbrellas, joggers with relaxed smiles, and groups of friends strolling along-in-arm. There was no hustle here, just oysters. Everywhere I saw people moving with ease, sun-drenched faces; families laughing and talking, while others, more serious, were absorbed in their work.

Playfully on the pale asphalt, making distant buildings shimmer like watercolors. This was the true Málaga, full of charm, inviting you to just be. The sidewalk warmed soothingly under my sneakers, a solid connection to the vibrating street. Every breath, filled with the scent of the city, felt like an intoxication.

I drifted along the Paseo Martínez, the wide promenade stretching along the coast. To the right, the Mediterranean glittered, an endless sapphire expanse dotted with swimmers. The chirring gulls, those fantastically

The lively pulse of the city. The heat danced  
amongst the buildings, filling the air with  
sunlight and energy. The sun was  
high in the sky, warming  
the crowded tourist spots, but the real stretch  
of sand extending west of the busy port. I  
headed towards La Tremiea. The sun was  
now skin with pleasure in the sky, warming  
the crowded tourist spots, but the real stretch  
of sand extending west of the busy port. I  
headed towards La Tremiea. The sun was  
now skin with pleasure in the sky, warming  
the lively pulse of the city. The heat danced  
amongst the buildings, filling the air with  
sunlight and energy. The sun was

The next morning, the apartment felt colder than the air conditioning could justify. I avoided the kitchen table where Alma lived and crept through the kitchen. I finished breakfast quickly. All-Bran, surprisingly crunchy, with milk that tasted like milk powder than it should. I ate standing up, no bowl, pouring the flakes directly into the milk carton. Efficient. Less washing up.

I rinsed the carton, threw it away, and grabbed my small backpack. The heavy door closed with a thud behind me, and a wave of relief washed over me.

the joyful crackle of summer, the endless sea  
and the glorious sun.

I remembered countless happy afternoons on this exact beach, the tingling salt on my skin, the taste of ice-cold drinks. That version of me, carefree and sun-kissed, felt less like a ghost and more like a warm memory. A memory calling me home. I walked on, past the last humming chiringuito, then turned inland, letting the heart of the city pull me away from the glittering water.

From the vastness of the beach, the streets transformed into a charming labyrinth of residential buildings and inviting little shops. The air here was still warm, but it felt cozy, infused with the comforting scent of freshly baked bread and blooming jasmine. The sounds changed too, into a lively symphony of neighborhood chatter, the cheerful honk of a delivery scooter, and the busy clatter of a café.

My new goal was the Mercado de Huelin, a real, bustling local market. A wonderful

sanctuary, far removed from tourist expectations. The streets grew narrower, the buildings higher, creating pleasant shadows, yet the warmth continued to pulse from the living concrete. My skin felt alive; every pore soaked up the Málaga-feeling, this endless, intoxicating summer and the city that breathed it in with joy.

The old town of Málaga was a labyrinth of narrow alleys; high buildings cast sharp, cool shadows that brought brief, wonderful relief. I let myself drift, turning into alleys just

because they looked interesting. This was the Málaga I remembered, the one that caught you and confused you until you forgot where you were going. The city hummed. The clinking of espresso cups from tiny cafés, the murmur of Spanish conversations, the distant whine of a scooter, the ringing of church bells. Laundry hung like colorful flags from balconies high above, moving in the light, hot breeze. Every corner revealed a new texture, worn cobblestones, peeling paint on iron

The sun began to sink slowly, painting the narrow streets in warmer tones. It was time to return to the apartment. My legs were tired, my face hot from the sun, but my mind was clearer than it had been in days. Yet as I walked the increasingly familiar streets back to the apartment, the thought of Alma's waiting voice returned, and the locked door.

A rustle in the bushes caught my attention. Shaggy fur, the color of dust and shadows, one ear nibbled, eyes like amber beads, a survivor. He moved toward me with quiet arrogance. "Hey there, tough guy," I muttered, keeping his tense posture. The cat pattered along, as if sensing my quiet, energetic steps away. Tall and auotiously, stopping a few steps away, he just sat, his paws tucked under him. Slowly, he padded closer more slowly, concentrating on each step. Then, as if sensing my quiet, energetic steps away, he just sat, his paws tucked under him. Slowly, he padded closer more slowly, concentrating on each step.

Reclining from my walk to the beach at El Rallings, erraticora pots overhanging with Pacifico, near the apartment, I discovered a small, hidden plaza with an ancient olive tree in its center. A narrow stone bench sat in its sparse shadow. Perfect, I pulled out my sketchbook and pencil, the familiar weight calmed me. I began with the gnarled trunk of the olive tree, then let my gaze wander to the ornate wrought-iron grilles of a window opposite.



"Is that what we're calling smoke and clattering dishes now?" I asked, walking past him and casually running a finger over the marble countertop.

He sighed, throwing the toast into the sink with a resigned splash. "I'm not a morning person. Not a kitchen person. And apparently not a toast person."

"A tragic trilogy," I murmured, now close enough to smell the warm scent of his skin, spicy, a bit darker than the coffee I was about to brew. "Coffee?"

59

His eyes met mine, dark, restless, and for a moment too long to be casual. "Please. Black. Strong. So strong it could wake the dead."

I turned away, hiding my grin, and got to work. The silence between us hummed like a soft spell that hadn't been named yet. As I handed him the cup, our fingers touched only briefly, but enough to send a jolt through my arm. Neither of us mentioned it.

"Thanks," he muttered, retreating to the table with his cup, though his gaze kept drifting back toward me.

99

every brush individually. He poured himself a second cup of coffee. I began to tidy my things, slowly, deliberately, as if I wanted to say goodbye to him. He turned away and muttered. A moment passed, silent and charged. He didn't answer. Instead, he turned away and didn't turn back. "Oh yeah?" I tilted my head. Our breath met between us. "I'll wash up, I'll behave." Someone had stretched an invisible string. Close. The air tensed between us as if he stood up. Slowly. Stood in front of me.

The kitchen table was a chaos of manuals and empty energy drink cans. A chaos that was relentlessly spreading. I leaned against the stove; the fabric of my robe slipped a bit to the side, revealing the delicate lace of my nightgown. Not planned. Not entirely. Maybe it was.

"We should set some rules," I said.

His gaze immediately returned to me.

"Rules?"

"Mhm. For surviving in a shared apartment. Who gets which shelf in the fridge? How much

67

spread across the coffee table. "And the living room?" he asked, his gaze sliding to the bushes and sketches I had charred sacrifices for the kitchen-castrrophe gods. "Good. I like it clean. Especially when I'm sharing the space with someone who leaves do it ourselves." "Exactly," He nodded, his gaze wandering over me, lingering briefly on my chest. "We'll occupyancy, that would be a bit superfluous," but with the unregistered double

68

late-night programming or drawing is okay? And who cleans this post-apocalyptic battlefield?"

He grimaced. "Fair. Fridge: Me on top, you on bottom."

"I also prefer to be under you."

His hand froze; the coffee cup hovered for a moment between table and lips. Then his gaze met mine, a bit darker now. "Would you rather be on top?"

69

tours. I usually have someone, but," "Exactly," I said, starting to gather the few dirty cups. "As for programming: I try to be conscientious. Of course. What else?" "Something you should do, do out loud if you something prepared to live with me," He laughed softly, deep, throaty, like I allowed a brief pause before a smug smile appeared on my lips. "We're still talking about the fridge, right?"

"We need to organize the fridge," I said finally.

"I actually like order, systems, no surprises," he replied without turning around.

"I love surprises," I said softly and silkily. "I just never announce them."

He ran a hand over the back of his neck. "Don't underestimate me, Vargas," I said, sliding past him, my shoulder brushing his, intentionally or not, hard to say. "I might not burn toast, but I might burn you. Quite possibly."

73

His laugh was quiet but not without heat. "As long as you don't torch the apartment, Alonso."

I stepped onto the balcony. The sun caught in my hair like flames. My smile was slow and confident.

### Cracks in the Armor

A moment later, I heard the glass sliding door open. He followed me out from the kitchen. "What's that?" he asked, pointing to a sheet of watercolor paper drying on the

74

railing, based on a sketch I had made yesterday, a quick study of León lounging in a rare sunspot.

He studied it intently. "Capitán Rasguño," he murmured almost to himself.

I frowned. "Capitán Rasguño?"

"Yes," he said, gaze still on the sketch. "That cat. Everyone in the neighborhood knows him. His name is Capitán Rasguño."

"I called him León," I replied slightly defensively. "He looked like a little lion."

76

He shrugged, a dismissive gesture that couldn't quite hide the slight smile on his lips. "He's a survivor. That's Capitán Rasguño. Always has been."

For a moment, there was silence, only the distant hum of the city audible. He was still staring at the sketch, but now his gaze moved from the cat to me. The irritability that had existed since our first meeting was replaced by something else. Curiosity? Interest? Something I couldn't quite grasp, but that made my heart skip a beat. His eyes seemed

soft, honey-colored glow on the cobblestones. La Carbonera was exactly as he had cast a soft, honey-colored glow on the

frame. "Fiamenco," he said, shrugging again. "Real fiamenco. Not this watered-down version for tourists. The place is hidden in the back of a wine shop, easy to miss. Only locals know it. Go if you want," he added. "Maybe you'll find inspiration there. In the heat, the passion, the different even though my heart was racing. "Thanks," I managed, trying to sound soft than ever. "Really good."

"If you want to see the real Malaga," he said, his voice regaining its usual cynical undertone, "skip the tourist traps and go to La Carbonera." "La Carbonera?" I repeated. "What's that?" And with that, he turned around and went back into the apartment, leaving me alone on the balcony, the sun warm on my skin, the breeze smelling of jasmine. The streetlights were gone. Casual recommendation wouldn't let me go.

"La Carbonera," she said broken a spell. "I looked away as if he had broken my heart was racing. "If you want to see the real Malaga," he said, his voice regaining its usual cynical undertone, "skip the tourist traps and go to La Carbonera." "La Carbonera?" I repeated. "What's that?"

murmuring hung like a steady hum under the ceiling.

A narrow passage led me further in, past wine barrels serving as tables, until I reached a small open area. At the front was a tiny, slightly raised wooden stage. A single spotlight illuminated an empty chair. No red velvet curtains, no waiters in uniforms. It was raw. Real.

I found a spot at the bar with a good view of the stage and ordered a glass of red wine. The light was so dim that faces became

81

82

8

dark corner. Alejandro had strangled her up. This position was tense, jaw set. He was watching me and Javiar, and something lashed off in his eyes: possession, jealousy. A slow, dangerously sweet prickled unrolled inside me. I liked that he was watching. I liked that it meant something to him. I turned to Javiar with a beaming smile that Alejandro couldn't miss. "Why not?" I let Javiar take my hand and lead me onto the small dance floor. I wasn't a trained dancer, but rhythm was in my blood. I let the music pull me along, the beat driving me forward. I closed my eyes and let myself go, letting the music wash over me. I was here, in this moment, with Javiar, with Alejandro, with us all.

"The music still lives here," he said with a  
smile. "And where the music lives, I live too.  
You seem to be enjoying yourself."

As the piece ended with a final, dramatic  
chord and the dancer stood there gasping and  
drenched in sweat, applause broke out. The  
musicians began a new piece, a fast one,  
and swayed to the rhythm.

Several couples stood up  
applause *svevillana*. Several couples stood up  
and swayed to the rhythm.

smile. He just looked at me with a gaze that was intense and inscrutable.

In that moment, a guitarist took the stage, followed by a singer. No greeting. The guitarist sat down, his fingers dancing over the strings, coaxing out a melody that was both mournful and demanding. Then the singer began. His voice wasn't beautiful in a classical sense, it was raw, full of pain and deep, untamed passion. This was *cante jondo*, the deep song that seemed to come straight from the soul.

I was spellbound. The music slipped under my skin, filling the void Jonas had left and brushing over the raw nerves of my own frustration and longing. I forgot the crowd; I forgot the wine. There was only the music. After a few minutes, I ventured another glance at Alejandro. He was still looking at me. But now it was different. He wasn't just observing me, he was observing my reaction to the music. As if he were studying me, decoding me.

music carry me, following Javier's steady lead, spinning, clapping in time, my laughter bubbling up like the rhythm itself. But I wasn't dancing for Javier; I was dancing for Alejandro, who stood in the shadows.

At the peak of a turn, I looked directly at him. My smile had changed, it was no longer innocent, but knowing, challenging. He hadn't moved. He stood there like a figure carved from stone, glass in hand, gaze fixed on me with the patience and precision of a cat about to pounce. The music burned through the air,

wrapping around every body in the room, but the true dance, the one that counted, was only playing out between him and me.

The music ended abruptly, a final chord hanging in the warm air. Applause broke out, stamping feet, shouts. Javier bowed slightly, holding my hand a moment longer than necessary.

As I walked back to my seat, I felt Alejandro's gaze on me. And in that gaze was everything: disapproval, curiosity, heat.

My heart throbbed to the rhythm of the stamping applause. Javier took my other hand, his thumb brushing over my knuckles. "You have fire, Clara," he said, his voice deep and impressed. "I knew it." I pulled my hand back gently, a fleeting smile on my lips that didn't quite reach my eyes. "Thanks for the dance." My gaze immediately searched the dark corner where Alejandro had been standing. It was empty. The shadow that had hidden him was just a shadow now. A vague

feeling of disappointment surged through me, sharp and unexpected.

"I need a moment," I said to Javier, gesturing vaguely toward the back of the bar. "Just to catch some fresh air."

Actually, I wanted to go to the ladies' room to splash some cold water on my flushed face and organize my thoughts. As I came back from the narrow, poorly lit hallway of the restrooms, Javier was standing there waiting. He was leaning against the wall, arms crossed, practically blocking my path. A smile

89

9

9

"You smiled at me," he said almost differently, as if that were irrefutable proof. "That doesn't mean I want more," My voice was muffled by the lessons I had learned with my friend. The lessons I had learned with my own boundaries, about unsspoken expectations and the right to draw my own boundaries, echoed within me. I'm not interested. Accept that," The magic of the evening had vanished. Replaced by the bland taste of anger. The passionatae music drifting from the main room now sounded only like noise. I just wanted to go.

The backslide away, confusion and wounded pride in his eyes, "What's wrong?" I thought we had a moment. The dance, "I interrupted, my battement at an end. I took a step back to restore the space between us that he had so naturally claimed for himself. "A danse is not an initiation," Javier. And it's certainly not a sacrament.

"Music was good. That's all. Please understand me," he said, dabbing with his handkerchief. "I'm not a saint."

"Stop it," said the teacher. "Every word clear and sharp as a sharp old chest to teach him at a distance. "No," I replied, turning my head so his lips only bumped, but a clumsy, demanding one. "He tried to kiss me. It wasn't a gentle affection between us. You can tell the difference was intrusive. I can tell the babbocco was from mine. The smell of wine and us," he said, leaning in, his face only pressed against her cheek, and pressed a hand against his lips.

Played around his lips that now seemed less charming and more predatory.  
"There you are again," he said, taking a step toward me. The narrowness of the hallway suddenly felt threatening. "I was getting worried. You really dancend for me," didn't you?"  
He placed a hand on my arm. His touch was no longer light and guiding like one that舞者? I asked, my voice calm but icy. "What's this about," I said, but possessive. "Who's this girl?"

get out of here. I pushed past him without waiting for an answer and left the confines of the hallway. In the main room, I cast one last, fleeting glance at the empty corner where Alejandro had stood. He really was gone.

I left La Carbonería without looking back. The balmy night air felt good on my heated skin, but it couldn't dispel my inner annoyance. The ride home on the night bus was a surreal experience. The harsh fluorescent tubes bathed the few passengers.

9

I grabbed the metal railing and stared out into the night. The lights of Malaga sparked below me like a carpet of scattered stars. A faint scent of jasmine rose from the courtyard. A few seconds later, I heard the sound of my heart racing. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. The cool night air could dispel the heat from my face and the rising panic from my chest.

sliding door open and close again behind me.  
He had followed me.

He said nothing, just stepped beside me at the railing. The silence was different from the one in the apartment. It wasn't empty, but filled with all the unspoken things since our first meeting.

"He was an idiot," Alejandro said finally, his voice deep and calm beside me. "Both were idiots."

A single tear escaped and rolled slowly down my cheek. Before I could wipe it away,

10

A soft noise jolted me from my daze. A single key, followed by the soft crack of the bedroom door, jolted me from my daze. A quick scan of my sleepy eyes, I blinked and tried to ignore the apartment door. I disliked the echo of the shower. A shadow of stubble lay on his chin and jeans, his hair was still damp from the shower. free of the cynical hardness they often  
aw, and his eyes, when they met mine, were soft, free of the cynic's eyes, when they met mine, were often  
wore.

tired workers and a few enamored teenagers in an unmerciful light. The rattling of the engine and the squeal of the brakes at every stop were the antithesis of the passionate pulse of flamenco. I stared out the window at the passing city lights, but I only saw the emptiness in Alejandro's corner and felt the unpleasant echo of Javier's presumption. I wasn't scared, just infinitely annoyed. Annoyed at Javier for misinterpreting simple friendliness. And, to be honest, a little annoyed at Alejandro for disappearing. And

the tears burning in my eyes, hot and  
The words hung between us. I could feel  
they can own.”  
They wanted to control me or they think I’m a fantasy  
I just have no luck with men. Either they  
kiss me just because I smiled. Apparently,  
first guy I dance with thinks he has the right  
laughed helplessly. “To breathe. And the  
some thing I’m not. And then I come here to,”  
grown-up, He wanted to mold me into  
my hand. “He wanted me to find ‘Security’, a  
uncontrollably. The water glass trembled in  
103

0

he lifted his hand. His movement was slow, hesitant. With the rough skin of his thumb, he gently brushed the tear from my skin. The touch was electrifying, a small explosion on my skin that sent a shiver through my whole body.

I turned my head and looked at him. The moon bathed his features in silver and shadow, making the lines of his face sharper, his eyes darker. All the tension of the evening, the last week, the last year,

1

I dozed in that floating state between  
I suddenly masculine that was only Alejandro.  
It is soft sheets that still carried the faint scent of  
uniquely coffee, and some hinting  
I dozed and reality, a soft smile on my lips.  
The memory of the past night were no  
longer sharp, even though we were no  
longer there, everything images, but a soft  
dream and reality, a soft smile on my lips.

most of all, annoyed at myself for getting involved in this stupid, silent game in the first place.

## The Balcony Explosion

The heavy wooden door of the apartment closed behind me, and the silence hit me like a wall. It was louder and more intrusive than the rattling of the night bus. The anger at Javier and the gnawing disappointment over Alejandro's disappearance had tangled into a bitter knot in my stomach. I threw my keys

6

"My ex-boyfriend moved out a week ago," I blurted out, the words tumbling out  
everything.  
That last murmur hung in the air. Alejandro wasn't just about Javier. It was about  
something, something built around me collapsed. It  
didn't move, just watched me with that  
intensity, that scrutinizing gaze. Suddenly, the  
same,"  
she argued bolide up again. "It's always the  
claim for more." My voice trembled slightly as  
Ilim a dance is just a dance and not a damn

seemed to concentrate in this one moment on this balcony.

"You're not a fantasy, Clara," he whispered, and his hand moved from my cheek to my neck, his fingers burying themselves gently in my hair.

And then there was no distance between us. His lips met mine in an impetuous, desperate kiss. It wasn't a gentle exploration but a collision, a discharge. It was the taste of red wine and salty tears, the heat of his mouth and the coolness of the night air. It

The first thing I felt as I slowly emerged from the depths of sleep was warmth. A gentle, heavy warmth that came not just from the sunbeams falling through the slats of the blinds, but from within. For the first time in months, maybe years, my body didn't feel like a tensed spring, but soft, relaxed, I lay on my side, snuggled into the bedroom door.

onto the kitchen table with a loud clatter; they slid against the smart speaker, in which Alma's blue light briefly lit up, a small act of rebellion against the oppressive quiet.

I was just about to go into the bathroom when I heard the faint click of the lock. The door opened again. Alejandro stepped in. He looked tired, shoulders slightly hunched, and the dark shirt that had seemed so elegant in the bar was wrinkled. Our eyes met across the room. The air between us was thick and tensed to the breaking point.

"I saw you at La Carbonera. You were suddenly very angry when some guy got her flat and never paid off an accusation," I said. It wasn't a question but an accusation, he closed the door softly behind him. "I saw you dancing," he replied, his voice just as raspy. "Someone was embarrassing you?" "Oh, I had a headache. I don't worry," I snorted, I handled it myself a glass of water, Kitchen and poured myself a glass of water, just to have something to do with my hands. "I explained to him what a boundary is, I told

was the expression of every unspoken question, every silent challenge, every stolen glance. It was the passion of flamenco and the loneliness of the night, all united in a single, consuming moment. My hands found the fabric of his shirt, clutched tight, pulled him closer.

The kiss broke off as suddenly as it had begun. We stood there, gasping, foreheads leaning against each other, our breath mingling in the cool air. His eyes burned into mine, and in their depths, I no longer saw the

He was silent. Words would have only  
destroyed the moment. His hand let go of my  
hair, slid down my arm, and took mine. His  
touch was firm and steady. Slowly, without  
taking his eyes off me, he pulled me with  
him, away from the railing, through the open  
balcony door into the dimmed light of the  
sparking city lights, back through the open  
apartment. He led me through the living  
room, past the silent blue light of Alma in the





photos of a woman dancing in a fluttering red dress and a guitarist, I saw it.

Not printed. Handwritten, in his elegant, sweeping script that I knew so well. In pencil, almost unobtrusive, as if he wanted to hide it, but not too much.

*You are not a fantasy.*

My heart skipped a beat. Those words, spoken on a night when the stars sparkled over the city and he held my hand. He had said it to dispel my doubts, my fear that all this was too good to be true. *You are not a*

*fantasy*. My eyes searched further. Under the sentence, slightly offset, was another short handwritten poem; it was very brief, almost like bullet points.

I read the first letters of every line. My breath caught.

**Ancient walls rise.**

**Lights of the city dance.**

**Citadel looks down.**

**Ancestry of time past.**

**Zeal of beauty there.**

**All our steps.**

**Both been there.**

**Along the paths.**

**ALCAZABA.**

It was there. So clear. So unmistakable. A sharpness shot through me, cold and precise. He had known I would find these words, that I would crack this code. My head swam. The Alcazaba. The old fortress above the city. That was the next step. The Alcazaba. The truth was closer. I closed the book carefully and pressed it to my chest.

145

146

147

148

152

151

150

149

153

154

155

156

160

159

158

157