

# The Blueprint

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Skyscrapers brace under a ceiling of wrinkled clouds. Mist snakes down the façades. Wind rakes the fog into icy needles and rains volleys over the city. An autumn storm screams in my ears, and something in me squares to meet it. I look up. My chin lifts and my neck settles into the cradle of a rain-soaked collar. I close my eyes, breathe, and take the cold patter as a salute—not to the storm but to the towers that stand guard.

Past the fortieth floor, thunderclouds swallow the city, yet the skyline climbs higher. Spires thrust and pierce the vapour. A tower crane's boom shoulders a slow arc into view, its outline resolving into a lattice, its trusses tensing like steel sinews under load as the fog peels away then mends. Higher still, red beacons slice the shroud, pulse after pulse. The towers answer.

In half a step, I square my shoulders and nod, then move on. The condo down the block, half-built, half-naked, half-alive, rises into the mist like a steel sapling, leafless. Its concrete core climbs while floors lag behind.

I watch the crew work throughout the tower's gaunt frame. Rain whips them as they pour the next level. One worker steadies the hose at the boom tip, feeding concrete into the moulds with the precision of a nurse tending an IV line. The rest level and smooth the wet grey as it swells, then settles, like clammy skin. I trace the supply line along the boom and lose it down the elevator shaft. Below, the tower shows in sections: unfinished floors yawn between concrete ribs, starved for ductwork, conduit, and pipe. Skeletal, yes, but not a skeleton.

Below the twentieth floor, glass skin closes exposed ribs. Glaziers seat the panels on the frame like surgeons suture grafts. Its vitals steadied, the tower gives back: blunting wind,

shedding rain, sheltering the crew. Laughter erupts when a flask circles around. The façade holds the weather like a shield. Not for show. Earned.

Rain thins. Wind falls. The storm lulls. Daylight shoots through. A sunbreak drops like a comet, its tail of fog burning golden orange; mirrored glass hurls the blaze back skyward. Air shivers like a mirage. Stone and steel ripple while straight lines turn liquid for a breath. Then one final red glare.

Each tower's façade shimmers in mist, slipping into a crimson gown smoothed over steel hips. Buildings blush. Far-off thunder murmurs. I wake. My chest tightens. The blaze glides along glass curves. I follow it to her window—fortieth floor, lit. She's home.

Her window whispers an amber glow, and the fog inhales, pulsing with summer fireflies. Her shadow quivers on the glass. When she moves, the light flutters like a mating call. I don't answer that glow anymore. I stamped out my own light.

I bite my tongue. Hard. I tell myself I'm here to watch something get built, not to haunt an old doorway. As if I hadn't plotted this route. I know what I'm doing. I've walked this road enough. I chose it, so I'll own it. I hold the line.

Stopping at a red light, I pull up my hood. Rain drums on the nylon and on my eardrums as it echoes the static hiss of a storm drain gulping a full lane of water. It's the only channel running during a downpour.

“Hey you,” she calls.

Lightning jumps my spine, disc by disc. The voltage off her voice charges my body before my thoughts.

I don't turn. I know her by sound alone—soft, coy, and damn sure of herself—the way her accent rounds a word and trips when she knows the inflection's off and then bites her lower lip; the way her breath catches mid-sentence when both languages try to speak at once; the way she finishes the half-said thought with her glowing smile. That's her.

I turn. She stands a step up in the doorway, just clear of the rain. The awning spills a shallow moat at my boots. She sets herself just like she used to, when she wanted my attention, head tilted, hand on hip, weight pressed into the frame, as if she needed the pressure on her skin. And I'm stunned. It hits my gut faster than the cold. My hands are hot. My mouth is dry. My body remembers her mouth, her throat, her weight against me. I take her in. Now hits. The months behind me hum.

Then I notice her rain shell. Men's cut, shoulders a size too broad, sleeves rolled twice to clear her wrists, still holding the folds someone else left. My gaze slips before I can stop it, and she catches it on the cuff.

"It's just a friend's." Her hand slides to her wrist, her knuckles a brief shield over the cuff. The smile drops like a mask.

Friend. My eyes lift to the fortieth floor, to the glow and the shadow in the window. I know that word in her mouth. I know its shape, what it buys, what it doesn't. I was "friend" when she let me hold her hips and breathe against her neck like I belonged there. All warmth, no claim, no cover. Friend.

"Relax." She offers a small wave like a quiet oath. "It's been a while. You got two minutes?" Then she gestures toward my forearm, our old, wordless hello hovering an inch away.

She pauses mid-gesture. The wrist tilts palm-down and rain beads on her knuckles like little coronets. I could press my mouth to each delicate ridge and call it fealty.

I drop my eyes. If she stepped out of those gumboots and stood barefoot, I'd kneel in that puddle and kiss her feet until they dried. I'd be her knight again, if she'd be my queen. My queen. I'd let her command me, use me, abuse me. I'd call it mercy. Grace. Love. But it's not chivalry. And my body knows it.

My eyes climb her skintight leggings, and I pause where the fabric grips her curves, where I used to squeeze with both hands. The body wants contact, pressure, warmth, weight. The want detonates first in my sternum. My chest blooms while my ribs cave, like I've been punched and kissed at the same time. A shockwave rips my gut, drops below the belt, and sits there as a fireball with nowhere to burn. Primitive, urgent, and painfully honest. I suck in air greedily, like I've been underwater and she's the surface. It escapes in a puff through my nostrils and a deep, guttural grunt from my core. The thudding rain drowns out my confession, but the proof is the vapour of my breath, flaring in the cold.

I look back up. Her eyes haven't left mine. She notices. I hate how obvious it is, still there, still mine: my want, my need, my obsession. Months of distance, silence, self-imposed rules didn't still my ache. Nights I replayed memories until exhaustion forced me to sleep. Nights I bear-hugged pillows as if they might escape. The hunger never died. It waited.

She steps down from the threshold. The splash speckles our shins. A wet strand plasters to her temple and clings to her cheek. I notice her eyes are rimmed a little red, as if she'd been crying. I can't tell. The rain, light, and her damn smile say otherwise. Still, I want to tuck that lone strand behind her ear, tilt her chin with a finger, and caress her lips.

Her face is rain-lit. The storm pulls the light down in sheets and the traffic signal throws it back in pulses, green-amber-red. Her breath flares in the signal's wash between us. If I lean forward half an inch, I could take in her heat with my mouth and seal my mouth over that steam and pretend it's a kiss. One full inch would make it all real. One inch.

My jaw loosens. Saliva hits. My mouth is already making room for her name. I can feel the shape of it sitting on my tongue, ready to be said the way I only said it in private, the way that's half-command, half-prayer. The first consonant forms. But I can't remember its sound; it's only been spoken in my head a thousand times, mouthed in silence, but not once—not one single time—out loud.

Everything in me reaches. My fingers flex, tendons remembering the angles, as if my hands were already cupping her waist. Every tired, lonely, injured part of me says take that inch, take those two minutes—pull her in, pull her home, pull her back where we both belong. And I know—I know, I know—with a certainty so total that if I touch her right now, I won't let go. I won't walk away. I'll choose her over me, every time.

The city falls away. The rain becomes applause: cymbals on sheet metal and drumrolls in the gutter. The wind answers in chorus. For the first time, I shiver at the weather. The cold seeps to my core. And she meets me there. A breath away, an inch from losing everything. Two minutes until a lifetime of regret.

She gives me that look. Her gaze softens and melts into mine as if drifting to sleep with me as her lullaby. The muscles of her face hold an effortless poise, a smile radiant in its own innocence. She's lost in that space, like she's absorbed in a symphony: swaying in her seat, the rhythm in her shoulders, the melody caressing her ears. It's that serene moment between the last note and the first clap, when audience and orchestra commune in the hush. She's the first to clap and the last to linger. One last yes held on her face, a wordless thank-you to the conductor

—to me. We hold the hush. It isn't hunger in her eyes. They don't hunt. They rest on me, like a dove returning to set the last twig on its nest. They carry the silent recognition: *I see you. I choose you. You're home. Stay.* The two small words that bind, without ceremony: *I do.*

I built a future on that look.

It wasn't a rough estimate; it was a blueprint I treated as a contract. It read: Build here. Set your cornerstone on this smile. Draw your grid lines around these eyes. I squared my life to that fixed point. I signed alone. I kept building to a promise that wasn't real—the base never touched bedrock. When the shoring came off, gravity did the rest. I stood in the dust. The only blast was in my chest, my thumb on the plunger. It was mine—my work, my design for something that would stand, permanent at last. I devoted everything to it.

And it hurts, God, it's agony, holding her gaze, letting her eyes bore to my marrow and siphon it dry. Every second hollows me deeper. Less me, only skin, blood, bone. That same look I worshipped hasn't changed. It's serene, untroubled, as if the months apart never happened. No tremor, no worry, no plea. It's just that steady build here. It offers the old bargain again: give everything, take this moment. If only her feeling matched her face, now as then.

I know what it is now. It's not a vow. It's not forever. It's how she holds me in place when she wants me close. She means it in the moment. She always meant it in the moment, but that's all it ever was. She'll give that same look to whoever's wearing that jacket when she needs him to stay.

That inch and those two minutes are a yes to being just a friend.

My heel plants.

“No,” I say. “I’m not free to talk. Take care.”

With her hand still open, I leave her in the storm. I don’t wait to see her face. My body tries to turn, to collect proof I still matter. I refuse. I stop myself the way I stop my hand from drifting toward a live burner. Not because the flame isn’t beautiful, but because I plan to keep using this hand.

The light flips green. I crest the hill and turn. Thunderclouds pitch a tantrum, smothering the city. Fits of lightning scribble at the skyline, yet fail to cross it out. The skyscrapers stamp their mark, a man-made constellation, braced between earth and sky. In the dark, a floodlight crowns the newborn tower’s spine, upright on its own steel. Work goes on.

