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Irina Poroshina

## The Contract



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## **Аннотация**

«Nina and her husband are tormented by the question of why they cannot have the children they so desperately dream of...

One day, Nina suddenly remembers a fatal mistake she made in her past. In her attempt to fix it, she faces daunting obstacles and encounters familiar faces from her former life...»

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**Irina Poroshina**

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# The Contract

# Moscow, XXI Century

Nina sat with her legs tucked up, staring at the grey floor tiles in the corridor of the women's clinic. A large lock of red hair had escaped her loose ponytail, falling over her face and shielding her from the glances of strangers. But she was not at all bothered by her slightly disheveled appearance; her mind was locked onto the tiny cracks running subtly across the expanse of the cold tile.



«You have so many cracks; tiny ones, small ones, barely noticeable at all... But this one here can be seen clearly, it's quite large... There's even dirt trapped inside it, I can see it,» she whispered softly. «I suppose when they mop the floor here, you

realize that no one will specially come over and clean you out, just a quick wipe over the top with a rag, right? But you know what — no, I'm not trying to comfort you, just sharing a thought — we all have cracks... Some are large, some have dirt in them, even if it's not obvious at first glance. And you know, when the dirt is fresh, it's visible and can be wiped away, but sometimes it just sits there, bit by bit, until it sinks in forever... And believe me, it becomes invisible after that, and nobody cares anymore anyway...»

A sudden burst of cheerful laughter snapped Nina out of her thoughts. She slowly turned her head toward the adjacent office, where three pregnant young women sat, animatedly discussing something.

Nina closed her eyes. A treacherous lump formed in her throat again, tightening its grip, demanding she let her tears flow, or else breathing would become too difficult. She wept, dropping her head abruptly. Her gaze fell back onto the tile just as a tear landed... It slowly filled the dirty little crack she had just been whispering to, making it turn sharply dark.

«Yes, I agree, you can be seen perfectly now,» Nina nodded to the tile. «But it won't be that simple with me, my dear. I don't know where my cracks are, they are hidden. I don't understand for what reason and why I can't have children, when the doctors tell me I am absolutely healthy! How do I find my crack, and how do I clean the dirt out of it? It's in there, I can feel it!» Nina cried out, and a sudden silence fell over all the women in the corridor.

Goosebumps raced down her spine... Nina turned away from the sympathetic stares that were drilling into her from all sides.

«Did it again out loud,» she sighed. «How embarrassing. I need to run away from here quickly. Though run where? I have to wait for the test results. I'm not going anywhere, nowhere.» Nina straightened her back and, taking a deep breath, adjusted her hair.

The women in the corridor grew uncomfortable and averted their eyes.

«Well,» Nina thought, «that's better. Leave me alone, I feel miserable and envious enough as it is, and it's not like I'm staring at you, after all...»

The doctor raised his hands in a helpless gesture once again.

«Your test results are good, I don't know yet... We will continue to monitor you. Don't despair, and besides, no one has canceled miracles...»

But Nina was no longer listening to him. Gathering her papers from the desk, she walked out slowly with her head lowered, not even saying goodbye.

After sitting for a while on a recently painted bench on the boulevard under the canopy of trees, she managed to ruin her expensive new skirt. When she pulled away her handbag, which had already stuck firmly to the wood, her mood lifted slightly as she poked at the green smudges of fresh paint...

«Well, look at that!» she laughed out loud. «Thank you for not writing a warning sign! I'll know better next time!»

Nina continued to laugh hysterically, but at some point, the laughter turned into tears, and then into a desperate cry that choked and stung her throat.

Calming down a bit, she sat back on the bench.

«No, I shouldn't drive in this state,» she announced out loud to herself and called a taxi.

The car moved quite slowly due to traffic, but she didn't mind at all; she quietly contemplated life while gazing out the window.

«Everything is good with us,» thoughts drifted through her mind. «We've loved each other since university, we're two brilliant programmers, we even achieved excellent results when we received that joint job offer! Such a magnificent contract, Anton and I managed it! We got both respect and bonuses... We bought an apartment! Yet once upon a time, we huddled in rented housing and barely made enough for bread, constantly sinking into debt... Everything is perfect with us! We are healthy, both tested a hundred times, so why don't we have children...»

Memories flashed one after another. There she and Anton were, exchanging glances and giggling in a university lecture hall... And there they were, swimming in the lake at their friends' dacha...

Suddenly, Nina caught sight of a familiar silhouette of a woman outside the window. She snapped awake, not yet understanding what exactly had caught her attention, and asked the driver to stop.

«Can't do it here,» the young man replied. «A bit further

ahead...»

«Please,» Nina begged. «She's heading into the subway, I won't catch her!» She tossed some money onto the front seat, never breaking her gaze from the window.

«Spotted someone you know?»

«I don't know,» Nina answered pulled-apart, «just give me a chance to get out.»

«Well, you can't exactly climb over the guardrail here, I'll pull over there,» he pointed toward a bus stop.

«I'll climb, hit the brakes,» Nina requested loudly.

«Fine, if it's that important, run along then,» he said, hitting the brakes and looking at her in surprise.

Leaping over the guardrail didn't quite work out, and Nina fell onto the ground, scrambling underneath it, completely destroying her new skirt...

Catching up to the woman right at the turnstiles, Nina grabbed her roughly by the sleeve.

«Wait, please, do you remember me? Forgive me, I forgot your name, but Anton and I rented an apartment from you a few years ago,» Nina blurted out in one breath.

The woman turned around, bewildered, and stared at Nina in surprise.

«Miss, I don't know you...»

«Yes,» Nina agreed quietly. «I don't either, I'm sorry. I was mistaken, you looked so much like her from behind... I am sorry again.»

«It's fine,» the woman smiled. «It happens.» Turning back to the turnstile, she entered the subway. Nina, slightly stunned by her own behavior, slowly walked back outside and down the street...

The insistent honking of a car horn made her turn around.

«Miss, you were in such a hurry, you forgot your bag in my car,» the taxi driver smiled.

«Oh, it's you,» she nodded pulled-apart. «Yes, right, I forgot...»

«Well, did you catch your friend?»

«No, unfortunately, I was mistaken,» Nina smiled.

«Well, never mind, you'll find her eventually then,» the taxi driver encouraged her. «Come on, get in, I'll take you to the address you ordered.»

«You are very kind,» Nina said softly and got into the taxi.

# Moscow, XIX Century. Khitrovka, the most criminal district in the city

Making her way early in the morning through Khitrovka toward the house of her former ill-fated shelter, wrapped in old, foul-smelling rags, Nina was extremely nervous... An unpleasant, strange, angry voice in her head drove her forward, though she was terrified to look into her eyes...



It had been several months since she fled that hell, and she understood that her chances of survival were slim now that she was back at the house of the landlady who had taken her in long

ago...

Her entire life flashed before eyes that were never dry from tears. Nina wiped them with a dirty sleeve and walked slowly down the cobblestone street toward her fear, against her own will...

Nina was born in a village. She barely remembered her serf parents; they had died of consumption, and she was raised by her aunt, who was kind to her and fed her until she was full. Having seen the local *marukhas* (street women) in the city on Khitrovka, who engaged in begging and prostitution from a young age, Nina understood that God had given her a truly happy childhood...

Their village was remote; people worked hard in the fields and kept a large herd of cows for the landlord's meat and milk. Everyone had their own hut, bread, and milk. The children always helped the elders, but no one took their childhood away, and she remembered how they, barefoot, ran around playing tag, swam in the river, fished, and went into the forest for berries and mushrooms...

Back then, she dreamed that when she grew up, she would marry, and her husband would be kind, sober, and caring, and would give her colorful silk ribbons for her red hair and beads on holidays...

She didn't even notice how she transformed from a freckled, cheerful girl into a young woman with fine features, a graceful figure, and long, thick golden hair... Which played a cruel joke on her when the landlord's clerk saw her one day.

He turned out to be a degenerate, and her happy youth cut short along with her dreams in a single day...

Her aunt, treating the wounds and burns on the body of her niece, whom she loved like a biological daughter, told her about runaways, but also about the punishment that awaited them if caught...

Nina recovered slowly and listened carefully... About the city, about stone houses, and the opportunity to find work by getting lost in the crowd.

«I am old now, and I won't be able to protect you from that brute, he will return. Run, daughter,» her aunt whispered to her one early morning when Nina was completely healthy.

«May the Lord preserve you, my dear, forgive me for not keeping you safe,» she handed her a large bundle with warm clothes and food. «Travel by night, and when you get closer to the city, ask for a ride in someone's cart so you can get deep inside without being found...» her aunt wept.

For several weeks, Nina walked along the roadsides at night to reach Moscow. By day, she looked for berries in the forest, and if she was lucky, caught rabbits with snares, and bathed in forest streams... Sometimes she had thoughts that she didn't even need the city — she could just live in the forest, set up a home somehow, and perhaps life would sort itself out — yet she kept walking toward Moscow...

She did manage to wait out a cart, driven by what seemed to be a kind, bearded man. She paid him a kopeck from the

purse carefully stitched by her aunt, to which he agreed to tell the guards at the city entrance, if asked, that she was his daughter traveling to help him trade at the market...

They didn't ask... It was a Sunday, a market day; many caravans had gathered, and the city guards barely had time to let everyone through, writing something down in a thick book...

Nina sat pale, wrapped in a large shawl, shaking with fear. This was her first encounter with police officers, whom she did not dare look at and feared more than death, because by law, as a runaway, she faced branding and hard labor...

The cart had been driving through the city for a long time, but Nina still could not come to her senses.

«Get down, runaway,» the man suddenly spoke, helping her down from the cart. «We've been in the city for a long time. I reckon you want to find work, well, laundresses are needed everywhere...» she heard his final words as she snapped out of it.

«Just don't get into trouble anywhere, you fool...» she heard lastly from the departing cart.

«Thank you...» Nina said quietly when he had already disappeared around the corner.

Picking up her bundle from the ground, she pressed herself against the white wall of what seemed to be a huge stone house and looked around.

«Everything is just as aunt told me, yes... He said laundresses are needed, so that's exactly what I need,» she smiled and, observing the street, houses, and passing people, went to look for

lodging and work.

She had never seen so many people in one place... And she had never seen such different people together. Finding herself in a large market square, she intuitively pressed the bundle of clothes tightly to her chest and tried to be careful, because filth, poverty, and luxury mixed like a tangled ball of yarn before her eyes... Ragged, dirty beggars and drunk, bloated faces flashed alternately with neatly dressed people, all rushing somewhere...

Gathering her courage, she approached the nearest stall where potatoes were being sold. Catching the indifferent gaze of the trader, Nina decided to ask.

«Good day, uncle,» she began quietly. «I'm looking for work as a laundress, could you tell me where to go?»

The man smiled, revealing yellowish teeth.

«Why wouldn't I tell you? Look over there, that woman in the blue shawl, ask her,» he smirked.

«Thank you, uncle, may it be easy for you to sell all your potatoes,» Nina suddenly blurted out, unexpected even to herself.

«Be off with you,» the trader suddenly grew embarrassed. «Go on, get moving.»

Feeling bolder now, she asked the same question to a plump woman in a blue shawl who was sitting on empty baskets, cracking sunflower seeds.

Casting a sharp glance over Nina, she let out a whistle that didn't sound like a woman's, and a smudged young boy appeared

before them.

«Fedka, take her to Margarita, tell her Verka sent her to be a laundress,» and rubbing her slightly hooked nose, she spat onto the ground.

«Got it,» the boy nodded and pulled Nina by the sleeve. «Come with me, pitiful girl, I'll show you the way.» He rattled off to Nina in a shrill voice. «And hold onto your bundle tighter, you fool, or you'll be left without gear in a second,» he added businesslike. Quickly moving his thin little legs, which stuck out of old, torn trousers, he dragged her away from the square.

Nina could barely keep up with him, but she did not fall behind. Soon he led her to a large house and slipped inside.

A nauseating stench of filth and stale alcohol hit Nina in the face as she entered the spacious corridor of the house, so hard that she could barely stand... Several men, dirty and clearly never sober, sat on wooden bunks along the sides, arguing loudly about something.

Many people walked down the dark corridor, some carrying basins, others with massive bags.

Nina hesitated slightly, but the boy dragged her deeper, holding her firmly by the sleeve.

Suddenly, Nina felt someone grab the hem of her dress and pull her aside. In that exact instant, Fedka deftly kicked a hulking brute in a greasy shirt with a black shiner under his eye, shouting fiercely at him:

«Get your filthy hands off her, scumbag! I'm taking her to

Margarita, for the laundry!»

The boy's words seemed to instantly sober the man up. Bowing, he stepped aside, casting a venomous look at the boy.

Nina could only gasp from fright, but the boy had already dragged her further down the corridor and, kicking open a huge door, pushed her out into an inner courtyard, into the street.

«This way, Margarita lives in that wing,» he pointed his finger at a neat, snow-white house, in front of which lay a beautiful, large, round flowerbed.

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