Ulyana Mirova

TOMORROW MUST BE A SECOND CHANCE



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The bright lights of the big city were supposed to offer her a fresh start, but you can never run away from yourself.Office gossip and the betrayal of the man she loves fade into insignificance when she finds herself once again surrounded by furious inmates. Now, with her rescuer facing a dangerous investigation, she must make an impossible choice: follow the demands of duty or listen to her heart.A novel inspired by the author's personal experience.All names and events are fictional. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

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Prologue

…When he entered the dormitory, Andrey Petrovich froze.

"Stop this immediately!" His voice disappeared into the general roar and chaos. Straining his voice, he tried to shout over the noise, but it was useless.

"Stop it!" He grabbed one of the inmates by the arm and tried to pull some kind of stick out of his hands. *Where have these sticks even come from?*

But the inmate was stronger. Tearing his weapon away from Andrey Petrovich, he kicked him with such force that Andrey Petrovich was thrown several meters away.

As he got up, he saw Konstantin lying on the floor. Curled on his side in an unnatural position, he looked dead. Tears instantly welled up, forming a painful lump in his throat. Reaching him, Andrey Petrovich dropped to his knees and, turning him onto his back, began shaking him by the shoulders.

"Get up, wake up! You can't just die like this!" he begged him.

Tears rolled down his cheeks, and he no longer heard the chaos around him, listening only for the barely perceptible sound of Konstantin's breathing.

God, what a relief! – slowly dragging him across the floor toward the wall, behind the piles of overturned furniture, Andrey Petrovich repeated to himself.

I need to call an ambulance, urgently, without delay! I need to get to the duty station immediately!

And he rose to his feet and carefully, moving along the edge and trying not to get caught in the middle of the chaos, made his way toward the exit.

An inmate ran past him, swearing under his breath. Seeing an officer, he widened his eyes in surprise. Of course, it was late. There were no staff members in the unit at this time of night. Unless someone from the duty shift had come in for a round.

As he was already approaching the entrance door, he saw that it had been blocked: a stool had been wedged into the door handle so tightly that it could not be opened from the outside.

Grabbing the seat with both hands, he pulled with all his strength, feeling the veins on his neck bulge. At that moment, a voice came from behind him. It sounded mockingly calm:

"Where do you think you're going, officer? Missing freedom already?"

Andrey Petrovich spun around sharply. Three of them. More shadows were emerging from the dormitory. Before he could pull the stool free, he felt their hands grab him under the arms. Twisting his body sharply, he put all his strength and all his fear for Kostik into his elbow strike. The crack of a broken nose, splashes of hot blood across his face...

He staggered back and took a fighting stance, preparing for the confrontation. His heart was pounding somewhere in his throat, and his lungs burned from lack of air. He understood that the odds were against him.

But all he could see was the pale face of the young lieutenant.

Hold on, son, – he pleaded silently and prepared to fight until the very end.

Part 1. Shadow of the past

Chapter 1. The call

Morning flew in through the open window with the voices of various birds.

I was sitting in the kitchen wearing pink pajamas with one leg ticked under me. Shivering, wrapping myself tightly in a fluffy blanket, I was going through my morning ritual. The smell of coffee spread throughout the apartment. Enjoying my favorite scent, I was holding the mug with my hands.

For a moment, I smelled something different. The sharp blend of cheap laundry detergent and the pungent sweat from prison uniforms. Inside me, everything knotted with vile fear. Darling's voice

said something banal. I flinched. Looking up at Darling, I forced a smile. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was just imagining it.

Darling put on an apron on his bare, wide torso, positioned himself next to the table and started to peel an onion. He was trying to make me laugh, too. He was usually laconic, but today he was in the groove.

A lock of curly black hair fell on his face, and he tried to blow it away, making a funny face. Unable to resist, I reached out and gently tucked it behind his ear. He stayed silent for a moment when he caught me looking at him. The corners of his lips twitched into a smile.

A bitter drop of onion juice splashed on my face, and my eyes immediately watered. Opening my eyes wide and brushing away tears, I did my best to smile at Darling's latest little joke. On his manly face, covered with a slight bristle, appeared a satisfied smile.

Today was one of the very few weekdays that we could spend together.

Somewhere in the distance a phone rang. It kept ringing and ringing without stopping. It burst into our quiet morning for two so unceremoniously, shattering it completely.

I put the mug with unfinished coffee on the table. Drops splashed on the tablecloth. I froze, annoyed – now to wipe it off.

A vague sense of foreboding stirred inside. The screen showed an unknown number. My hand stopped dead above the phone.

Maybe not picking up? Pretend that I didn't hear it? But the unknown was more frightening, so I pressed the button.

"Hello…" It was a quiet voice from the past.

I expected to hear anyone, but not him. I gasped for air as tears broke free from my eyes, and a rush of memories swept over me.

"Hello?" I shouted into the phone. "Hello?"

But he hung up. *How could that be? Is it him? Or am I wrong? It could be anyone, maybe it was just similar voice?*

My hands were shaking. My fingers dialed the number on their own.

A metallic voice on the other end answered, "Subscriber is not available". I called again. And again, and again. But the voice repeated "Subscriber is not available" over again.

No way! How is that possible?! It was him! Now I'm pretty sure of it!

As if those months had never happened.

The fear locked deep inside rose from the depths of my soul, drowning me in its vile, hateful muck. Out of the very center of my soul, pity came crawling. Guilt suffocated me, crushing my chest.

But I stood there and gripping the phone tightly. *What if he calls right now? I had to keep the phone free.*

Darling's voice drifted in from the kitchen, and I flinched and came back to reality. He asked me who had called. I quickly told him it was a wrong number and got trapped in my thoughts again.

He called from the facility. Not from the payphone – he knew perfectly well that all outgoing numbers were being checked. So, it was a mobile phone. There was no guarantee the phone was his.

All that remained was to wait. Wait for him to call back.

I needed to tell someone immediately. I couldn't keep it to myself. I called Irina and gasped out "He called." But other than the fact that the call ended and I couldn't reach him, I had nothing else to tell her.

Waiting for the call made me go crazy, driving all other thoughts out of my mind. Clutching the phone, I had the same thought in my head: *why did he call if he didn't talk?*

Chapter 2. "Never" wall

After the accident in the compound, I hadn't been at work for almost two months. All that time I tried to recover. And two months later I was physically healthy. I couldn't say so about my mental state.

On that terrible evening for me, standing barefoot on the cold floor of the admin's public restroom, I felt my uniform burning against my skin. I tore it off and threw it into the trash can without the slightest regret. In that moment I had only one wish – disappear forever. Dissolve into the air and never come back ever again. The thought of becoming a byword was worse than any physical pain.

I was sure that I would never again cross the threshold of my office, I would never put on that uniform, I would never go in the compound… So many "never". I built a high fence of those vows around myself. I was like a taut string. It felt as though everyone around me – at work, in the city – did nothing but gossip about me. I was terrified to even show my face outside my apartment, fearing I would be recognized.

But after discharge from the hospital, Irina told me what they were whispering about in the duty shifts. I was so afraid of gossip! But it turned out, nobody was even thinking about me. I was afraid of mockery but nobody even thought to mock me. Everybody wished me speedy recovery and waited for me at work.

This planted a tiny seed of doubt about my decision to quit.

But at night, it would all come back. After all, I was given a course of antidepressants. They left me completely numb to the world. Day after day, I lay in bed, staring vacantly at the wall… When Darling returned from work, I sat next to him with that same indifference. Sometimes he took me outside and I walked there without having particular emotions.

Only at night would I come alive, returning to where I had screamed in fear and humiliation, and then scrubbed my skin raw under the hot shower, screaming and crying. Darling was always around. My favorite person.

Darling was so frustrated by the lack of emotion during the day and the screams at night. He tried his best for me. He was waiting for me to return from sick leave, I would turn this page of my life and move back with him to our hometown. He tried to raise the topic a couple of times, but invariably ended it himself, realizing that it was not time.

Days passed, and pain gradually went away, making more room for determination. I had to handle this! I had to prove to myself that that night didn't break me.

Quit? That means accept defeat!

While I was on sick leave, an official inspection was assigned by the warden of the Main Department. I clearly understood that when I came back to work, I would be asked to write a report. But I pushed those thoughts away, though I realized this couldn't be avoided.

I took my uniform from Irina and came back to work. My "never" was left in the past…

My first day back at work marked a turning point in my life. I forced myself to write that damn report I had hated with every fiber of my being. On that very first day, I came up with an excuse: to make myself go back into the secure zone. I had to prove to myself that I could do it.

From the outside, it looked as though that terrible evening had never happened. Every morning before work, I would stand in front of the mirror for a long time, studying my reflection. Then I'd put on my mask, hiding everything that churned inside me, eating away at me like acid.

But my new life was built on fear. My days at admin, tucked away inside the secure perimeter, followed a steady rhythm of paperwork and routine. Yet every time the duty roster came out, dread settled in my stomach as I waited to see when I'd have to go back into the compound.

The anxiety always started the night before. Sleep became impossible. My heart hammered in my chest as I forced myself to walk toward the checkpoint. The magnetic locks had finally been repaired, but the chronic shortage of male officers on duty hadn't gone anywhere. During the day there was at least the illusion that someone had your back. By nightfall, that illusion disappeared. Once your night shift began, you were alone with your fears all over again. The K-9 officer and his dog was still little more than a comforting myth.

Every time I walked out of the compound after a shift, I let out a long breath of relief. One more tiny step toward respecting myself. I was proud of myself. I had done it.

Sometimes a strange thought would creep into my mind. *What if I walk away from all of this and start over?* But I shoved it aside. The thought stayed lodged somewhere deep inside me like a splinter, festering every now and then.

Eventually, the internal investigation was closed. My name wasn't listed in the final report. Another "mass grave" of signatures where no one person was held responsible.

At first, the nightmares wouldn't leave me alone. Little by little, the fear dulled. It became familiar. Routine, even. I almost convinced myself I'd learned to live with it.

...But now, standing there with the phone pressed to my ear, hearing his voice – the voice from my past, the voice from the deepest corner of my soul – I was there again. Back in that moment when he left me outside the duty office and walked straight into the furious crowd, trying to draw them away from me.

Back where I stood with my spine pressed against the wall, watching and watching and feeling every savage blow of their fists and boots as they struck him as though they were striking me instead.

As if all those months in between had never existed.

Chapter 3. Break down

A mass of bodies crashed down on top of me…I was suffocating under their weight and their smell – a nauseating mixture of foul sweat and cheap laundry detergent that made me want to throw up.

I tried to scream, but all that escaped my dry throat was a hoarse rasp… I struggled to push that living weight off me, but it only pressed me harder against the cold, wet asphalt…

Darling leaned over me, anxiously stroking my shoulder with his broad palm. A silent question lingered in his eyes. I looked away.

Several months of silence – and suddenly, everything came rushing back. I felt embarrassed. He had to wake up early tomorrow, and here I was, dragging him into my nightmare.

I buried my face against his armpit, breathing in his familiar, cherished scent, trying to drive away the stench of that nightmare with it. He wrapped his strong arm around me, and the awful trembling that had taken hold of my body slowly began to fade.

I stared into the darkness of the room and listened to Darling's steady breathing as he slept. I was afraid to close my eyes, afraid that I would end up back in my nightmare. I lay there almost until morning, until, completely exhausted, I finally drifted off.

The morning greeted me with one horrifying thought – I had overslept. I glanced at the clock and froze – I was disastrously late. The alarm had either never gone off, or I simply hadn't heard it. My heart dropped into my stomach. I jumped out of bed and started rushing around the room, pulling on my clothes as I went. My hands wouldn't cooperate; my fingers got tangled in the sleeves of my blouse.

Darling stood in the hallway, already dressed and ready to go. He silently watched me, leaning against the wall. His calmness irritated me. It only made it harder for me to get ready. I kept urging myself to hurry, but I couldn't move any faster.

Irina was waiting for me by the checkpoint. When she saw Darling's car, she stepped toward me and, grabbing my hand with her icy fingers, pulled me aside, away from prying eyes. The silent question in her eyes was impossible to miss, but I didn't have the strength to answer it.

"Well? Did he call?" she asked, barely able to contain her impatience.

"No, he didn't. I waited the whole evening," I breathed.

"I keep thinking… why did he call?" My voice broke. "Does he need help? But how can I help him if I don't even know where he is? I don't even know his last name."

Irina didn't stay silent for long. Holding my breath, I waited for her answer. In the silence that followed, the only thing I could hear was the dull, rapid pounding of my own heart.

"I remembered. The head of the unit where he was held back then told me his last name. It was when we wanted to talk to him in the medical unit. Remember?"

How could I possibly forget?

"We can try to find out where he was transferred through the special department. Documents like that are kept for at least a year," she said quietly, but firmly.

That was where we left it: find him first. And then… we would see.

The entire day I carried out my duties, but my thoughts were far away from them…

Chapter 4. It is my decision

By evening, the tension inside me had reached its breaking point. I was waiting for his call, but it never came… The guilt I felt toward him was tearing me apart from the inside.

If he called, then he wanted to tell me something. But what? Why has he been silent for an entire day?

Darling kept glancing at me anxiously, but I couldn't explain anything to him. I sat on the couch with my legs tucked beneath me, flinching at every sound. The spring inside me kept tightening, tighter and tighter.

Trying to drown out the endless stream of thoughts, I turned on the TV. I switched between the channels without even understanding what was playing. Finally stopping on one, I stared blankly at the screen. I was waiting… The phone lay beside me.

Suddenly, it chirped, calling for my attention. Everything inside me went numb. It felt like I had fallen into some bottomless pit. I grabbed it with trembling hands. The numbers blurred and jumped before my eyes. Struggling to make out the caller's number, the same number that had called me yesterday, I finally pressed the button.

"Hello?" I breathed.

The fear that he would disappear again gave me strength, and I blurted out the words that had been tormenting me for so long:

"I'm sorry… I've wanted to tell you this for so long."

"You have nothing to apologize for. This was my decision." His tired voice trembled slightly.

"I'm okay. Really, I am. Listen… I know you stayed. But you shouldn't have. Your place isn't there… Leave. Start over with a clean slate… And… just be happy." He hung up.

A wave of cold washed over me from head to toe. Tears spilled out on their own. My heart was pounding, fast, too fast.

Why did he call me?

The phone slipped from my weakened fingers.

Did he burst in my life like a hurricane only to destroy everything I had worked so hard to build?

His call reopened wounds in my soul. It stirred up everything I had been trying to forget all this time. It made me wonder: maybe it really was time to start over? To take off the mask I had been wearing, to allow myself to be weak? To finally stop returning to the place where it hurt so much. To breathe freely again.

"Leave… leave…" – the words kept echoing in my temples.

My eyes drifted across the screen as I tried to focus on the movie. But my thoughts kept pulling me back to that conversation.

The evening fell apart completely. *Why did he call me?*

Darling fell asleep beside me, his face buried in the pillow. I tried to fall asleep, knowing I had to wake up early and go to work. Completely drained, I finally slipped into sleep.

Hands reached for me, pushing me, pressing down on me… I fell… I screamed… But my scream drowned in the deafening roar around me… Someone's hands suddenly grabbed me, tearing me away from that hell.

I shot upright in bed, breathing heavily. My heart was pounding as if it was trying to break free from my chest. I clenched my teeth, trying to stop the trembling that ran through my body.

Darling woke up. His sleepy eyes were filled with worry. He wrapped his strong arms around me and pulled me tightly against him, trying to calm my shaking. And that sudden tenderness broke something inside me.

"I can't do this anymore," I whispered, burying my face into his shoulder.

"It's unbearable."

Until dawn, we lay there holding each other, talking about the future. I timidly suggested that we start over. Somewhere new. My heart began pounding with anxious anticipation. Our future depended on his answer. Darling fell silent for a moment. Then he suddenly squeezed my hand and quietly said:

"Let's do it."

There wasn't a trace of doubt in his voice. And in that moment, I felt an incredible sense of relief – so overwhelming that my nose tingled from the rush of emotions.

Under the faint glow of a streetlamp filtering through the half-closed curtains, that night – filled with fear and hope – became the happiest one I had experienced in months.

The kitchen smelled like coffee and toast that morning. We smiled at each other. We were so happy. A lightness settled in my soul. There wasn't a single shadow of doubt about what we had decided the night before.

To start over with the person I loved, the person who felt like home. No fears. No ghosts from the past. What could be better?

Chapter 5. He finally called

Darling drove me to the checkpoint. My phone rang the moment I stepped out of the car. Irina's name appeared on the screen. I knew what the conversation would be about, and for a moment I closed my eyes, gathering my thoughts. I exhaled and pressed the button.

Irina immediately bombarded me with questions. Her voice crackled through the speaker, full worry: "Did he call? What did he say? Why did he call?" I could hear her breathing heavily into the phone and imagined her biting her lip impatiently.

There wasn't much to tell. He wished me happiness and asked me not to look for him. What irony. He could have just not called at all. Now, I was looking at that call more rationally and honestly couldn't understand the point of it.

But, on the other hand, I was grateful to him. That call had been the push I needed. And I finally made up my mind to change my life.

I gripped the phone tighter. The decision I had made during the night gave me strength, but for some reason my palms were still cold and damp.

"Darling and I have decided to leave," I said, and my voice sounded surprisingly steady.

Irina fell silent. A strange, unpleasant feeling of guilt stirred inside me. *How can I leave and abandon my friend?* But my inner determination outweighed that irrational feeling.

We agreed that we would talk everything through later and said goodbye. I took a deep breath, feeling an incredible sense of relief that this step had been taken and that she now knew about my departure.

After all, the decision had been made. There was no turning back.

The morning conversation with Irina left a bitter aftertaste. The joy of breakfast with Darling dear disappeared, giving way to heavy thoughts.

The inmate's call had been the final straw. It stirred up everything I had tried so hard to bury. He was pushing me away from this city. Pushing me toward the place where I could finally be happy.

But where? Where could I find happinness, erasing the past from my memory? Return to my hometown? No. Absolutely not. I wasn't ready to face sympathetic looks and answer uncomfortable questions about why I had come back. Let people pity me? Oh, absolutely not.

And my job… I wanted to stay in the system. Quitting would mean admitting defeat. After everything I had been through, it was important for me to prove to myself that I wasn't broken. Leaving would mean admitting that night had won.

I was incredibly grateful to Irina, who had convinced me to stay.

So. The system, then. But not here. Not in this city, where everything reminded me of that night.

I can call Gorin. He had offered me a transfer to the Main Department.

A new place, a new life. In a big city, no one would care about my past. I could start over with a clean slate.

Without putting it off any longer, I dialed his number. He was happy with my decision to leave my hopeless "field" job and move to "civilization." His condescending tone bothered me.

But the "fields" were where the people I cared about stayed. They weren't heroes from movies, but they were real. Honest.

To Gorin, it was a "dead-end job." To me, it was the place where I felt like I was part of something important. But I kept that opinion to myself.

Chapter 6. In front of last feature

Gorin didn't keep me waiting and called back a couple of days later.

Out of all the options he offered, I chose the familiar path without hesitation – educational work. There was an open position for an inspector in the department.

All day, I thought about moving away. Only now, realizing that soon I would lose all of this, did I understand how precious this city and these people had become to me. The thought made me sad, and tears welled up in my eyes.

I wonder what Irina will say about my transfer to the Main Department? Will she support me, or will she try to talk me out of it?

Her opinion had always mattered to me. Over lunch, I poured out all my thoughts to her. Surprisingly, we saw things the same way. Except for one tiny little detail.

"How are you going to work with Gorin? He's in love with you, isn't he?"

Of course, her remark was flattering, but I brushed it off. *What makes her think he's in love with me?*

Yes, he kept calling me. And I was drawn in by the sincerity with which he told me about his life and work. In those moments, I felt that a special kind of trust was growing between us.

But love? I don't think so.

It seemed like the decision had been made. All that was left was to discuss it with Darling.

That evening, I was nervous, waiting for the conversation ahead. How would Darling react to my news? I didn't know.

Before he arrived, I managed to prepare a special dinner, chill a bottle of white wine, and now I waited for him in the living room, glancing at the clock. Soft music played quietly in the background.

I kept replaying the phrases I had come up with the night before, but they tangled together in my mind.

When Darling came home, I greeted him with a smile. During dinner, we talked about little things. The tension of the workday slowly dissolved into the quiet charm of the evening. After pouring tea into our mugs, I finally gathered the courage.

"I was offered a job. At the Main Department. As an inspector."

Darling froze. He slowly put down his mug and looked at me. Surprise and worry mixed in his eyes.

"I thought we were going back to our hometown. You wanted to leave the system."

I moved closer and sat beside him, taking his hand.

"I can't go back to our city defeated. And leaving the system now would mean admitting that everything I went through was for nothing. The position I was offered at the Main Department doesn't involve working with prisoners. There aren't any there at all."

He stayed silent for a long time, looking down at our intertwined fingers.

"Can we not make a decision in the heat of the moment?" he finally suggested.

"We have time to think."

And in that moment, I understood: I wasn't afraid of losing this job. What scared me much more was losing him.

Chapter 7. Pancakes in the silent

I woke up to the aroma of something cooking, spreading throughout the entire apartment. I poked my nose out from under the blanket and sniffed.

Hmm, in our little duo, I'm usually the one who does the cooking.

Darling has never been known to have any talents like that. Surprised, I headed toward the kitchen.

A wonderful sight met my eyes. Darling, wearing nothing but his underwear and my lace kitchen apron, stood by the stove, humming something under his breath. Trying not to make a sound, I sat down on a chair and watched this scene unfold. He was expertly frying pancakes, tossing them in the pan with practiced ease.

Well, would you look at that. How little I know about the person I live with.

At some point, he turned around and noticed me. His face lit up with a happy smile, and after moving the frying pan to the another burner, he crouched down in front of me and hugged me.

This is happiness! So warm and so homely. Why do people search for it somewhere else when it's right here, beside them? All they have to do is reach out their hand.

While I brewed coffee, Darling finished frying the pancakes.

Absentmindedly tearing off a piece, I didn't hear his question right away. But he repeated it:

"Is it good?"

I nodded, realizing that, lost in my thoughts, I could barely taste anything.

I saw the smile fade from Darling's face – he must have noticed. I felt embarrassed and started eating the pancakes with exaggerated enthusiasm, praising them between bites. I knew I was pretending, but I couldn't help it.

"I've thought everything through. If this is what you want, I'll support you."

I couldn't believe my ears. When Gorin offered me the job, I was happy that such an opportunity had appeared so easily. But yesterday evening, when I didn't find support from Darling, I had already mentally said goodbye to it, knowing that between the job and him, I would choose him, of course.

When he suggested taking some time to think, I assumed he would try to persuade me to consider another option, and I was ready for that.

Darling continued:

"I'll figure things out with my job. I'll go there, look around, find an apartment to rent, and then I'll come back for you."

Unbelievable. I definitely didn't expect him to move so quickly.

I needed to call Gorin immediately and find out how soon my transfer could happen.

There was a lot to do, and everything had to be arranged in time.

That morning, I called Gorin. After asking him a few questions, I realized that no one was setting a deadline on me – transfers like this didn't happen quickly.

First, I had to go to the Main Department for a meeting with my future supervisor. And that, by the way, was the deputy head of the Main Department responsible for this particular area. Of course, it was just a formality, but it still had to be done.

After the interview at the Main Department, my transfer report, approved by my future supervisor, would have to be signed by the head of the facility where I currently served. Only then could it be submitted to the personnel department for further processing and sent to the Main Department's personnel office.

There was no need to rush with renting an apartment. Darling could calmly finish his responsibilities at his current job.

What a relief it was not to have to hurry anywhere! During such a lengthy transfer process, I could finally become completely certain that this was the right decision. Or, on the contrary, realize that it wasn't. Although once the transfer machine had started moving, there was no stopping it.

The Madame, having somehow found out about my transfer, started fawning over me day after day. Now she no longer controlled my movements, and I could enter the zone whenever I wanted and stay there for as long as I needed.

My salary began to rise because the "hardship and stress allowance" had somehow magically increased to the maximum one hundred and twenty percent. Miracles, and nothing else.

I enjoyed the calm atmosphere that had finally settled at work and dreamed about my transfer. Those dreams absorbed me so completely that nothing else could upset me anymore.

I became calmer, my sleep returned to normal, and Darling, watching these changes, became increasingly convinced that the transfer was necessary.

Part 2. A new life.

Chapter 1. To start over.

The big city greeted us with a heavy downpour. After parking in the courtyard of a nine-story apartment building, Darling and I jumped over puddles and ran into the building, covering our heads with our hands.

Once inside, soaked and happy, we burst out laughing as we looked at each other.

The cozy apartment with large windows overlooking the park welcomed us with gentle morning sunlight. Located not far from the Main Department, in a quiet part of the city, it captured our hearts at first sight.

Of course, I had been offered a service apartment, but it was located far away from my new workplace, so my dear and I didn't even consider that option.

During the few days left before I started my new job, we spent the entire days disappearing into the park, only occasionally running home for a quick bite. Sitting on a soft blanket spread out on the grass, we listened to the silence, occasionally broken by the voices of birds.

Everything around us was filled with such peace, such a gentle calm, that both of us wished these beautiful moments would never end.

At the morning operational briefing, I was introduced to the staff of the Department of Educational Work.

Everyone looked at me with curiosity, and it seemed to me that among the quiet whispers of my coworkers, I heard my own name and Gorin's. *Looks like they know whose connections got me here*, the thought unpleasantly scratched at me, but I pushed it away. Maybe I had only imagined it.

The department occupied an entire wing of the building, and as I walked down the hallway toward my future office, I looked around with curiosity.

I was offered a workspace in a large, spacious office with a view of the park.

The office was designed for six employees, with each workstation equipped with a computer and a printer. Judging by that, there was clearly a lot of paperwork here.

Each employee in our office was responsible for a specific list of institutions and periodically traveled there to inspect their documentation.

Almost on my very first day, I learned that business trips were also part of my new job. Since I had transferred from an educational facility, I was assigned to oversee it, along with several additional facilities added to my list.

I was curious how Madame would react to the news that I would now be overseeing her department and, more importantly, periodically checking her work.

I vividly imagined her twisted expression when she found out, and I couldn't help but laugh. Life really was strange sometimes. Yesterday she had been controlling me, and starting that day, the roles were reversed.

While sorting through the documentation, I realized that, in reality, I would be doing almost the same thing as before. The only difference was the scale: previously, I had handled the paperwork for a department at one facility, but now I had to collect figures on a specific area from all the facilities and enter them into a single database.

Of course, there were things I would have to learn, but that didn't scare me – I loved discovering something new. I threw myself into my work completely.

After a month, I had fully settled into my new position, and my days began to resemble one another. I spent entire days dealing with paperwork: preparing reports, writing statements, filling out spreadsheets, and requesting information from the facilities.

During that month, as part of an inspection team, I visited one of them in order to learn the finer details of this new area of work.

Sometimes my professional routine was interrupted by a call from Gorin inviting me to lunch. But I always refused, keeping my distance and settling for a quick meal in the Main Department's cafeteria.

Before long, Darling found a job that suited all his requirements, and during our rare evenings together, we would take slow walks through the park beneath our window, making plans for the future. We decided not to rush into marriage just yet.

I liked my new job. With all the new responsibilities that had piled onto me, I completely stopped thinking about the events of the past.

The days passed one after another.

Chapter 2. A chance encounters

One weekend, Darling left to take care of some work-related matters, something that had been happening quite often lately.

To keep myself occupied, I wandered aimlessly through the city, studying the shop signs.

It was a beautiful autumn day. The trees carpeted the gray stone sidewalks with colorful leaves, while a light breeze swept them into a slow, graceful dance. I carefully stepped between them, afraid to disturb the beautiful pattern.

I was so absorbed in it that I didn't immediately hear someone greeting me. When I finally looked up, I saw him – the last person I expected to run into on my day off.

Gorin stood before me, smiling warmly. I was genuinely glad to see him, but along with that came a faint, nagging sense of guilt. He was dressed casually, yet even in sportswear he carried himself with effortless style.

As he approached, he struck up a conversation about the weather – easy, tactful, with no strings attached. He asked whether I was cold and, without waiting for an answer, suggested we warm up with a cup of coffee at a nearby café.

I hesitated. But his invitation sounded so sincere, and refusing would have felt unnecessarily rude, so I agreed.

Gently taking my arm, he led me toward the café. He seemed to know the neighborhood well, walking with quiet confidence.

After we checked our coats, he led me into the dining room.

"Where would you like to sit?" Gorin asked, gesturing around the half-empty café.

I hesitated. The whole situation made me uncomfortable, but I pulled myself together and pointed to a cozy table by the window.

"Good choice, Alyona." Turning to face me, he added, "Would you mind if I called you that?"

For the first time, he dropped my patronymic. Hearing my first name in his voice felt strangely unfamiliar. The warmth in his tone left me with no graceful way to say no, so I simply nodded.

Sitting across from him, I caught myself stealing glances. I couldn't help thinking how fortunate I was that the table separated us. His closeness made me a little self-conscious.

But Gorin was so courteous, so effortlessly charming, that I gradually relaxed. The tension melted away, and our conversation began to flow naturally. Over excellent coffee and pastries, we completely lost track of time.

The shrill ring of his phone abruptly shattered our little bubble, bringing me back to reality.

Gorin glanced at the screen, declined the call, and continued talking, but something had changed. The easy warmth was gone.

I checked the time and shifted uneasily in my chair.

Trying to hide his disappointment, Gorin offered to drive me home, explaining that his car was parked nearby.

But imagining what Darling might think if he had already gotten home, I politely declined.

As we said goodbye, I held out my hand. He gently enclosed it in both of his, and I felt the slightest tremor in his fingers.

Chapter 3. Cold dinner

When I came home, I was surprised to find that Darling still wasn't back. Another day off spent apart.

I didn't call him. I didn't want to distract him from work. More than anything, I wanted him to come home sooner, and that was exactly why I left him alone.

Wanting to surprise him and make him happy, I prepared a special dinner.

Time dragged by unbearably slowly, and he still didn't come. I began to worry and dialed his number. The only thing I heard was the endless ringing. I called again. This time, Darling answered and promised he'd be home soon.

I relaxed.

Of course, I understand that a new job demands complete dedication, at least at the beginning.

Of course, that's why he sometimes stays late at the office and occasionally has to work weekends.

I travel on business trips too. He accepted that without complaint.

I turned on a movie, settled comfortably into an armchair, wrapped myself in a blanket, and closed my eyes. I listened with half an ear, paying more attention to the sound of footsteps on the staircase than to what was happening on the screen.

The sound of the front door opening woke me. I must have drifted off. Throwing the blanket aside, I glanced at the clock and froze. Eleven at night. *What kind of work kept someone at the office until that hour?*

But should I even ask him that?

If he really was working late, he might be hurt by the question.

And if he wasn't at work... No. I don't even want to think about that. He loves me. It can't be anything else.

Firmly pushing those foolish thoughts away, I walked out to the hallway, where Darling was taking off his jacket.

"I missed you." Smiling softly, I lifted my face for a kiss.

He brushed my lips with his in a quick, absent-minded kiss before walking into the living room, where he noticed the beautifully set table.

"What's the occasion, Alyona?" he called out.

I remained standing in the hallway, absentmindedly looking at my reflection in the mirror.

"Alyona!"

When I didn't answer, he came back.

"Is something wrong? You seem... different tonight." He looked at me with quiet concern.

"No, no. Everything's fine," I said, snapping out of my thoughts as I followed him into the living room.

A little later, watching him eat the salad I'd made with obvious enjoyment, I tried to brush aside the persistent feeling that something in our life together wasn't quite right.

Chapter 4. Coming back to the compound

My thoughts about my own troubles were interrupted by a business trip to the facility where I had started my career.

Even though things had finally settled down in the juvenile correctional facilities, inspections there were still a regular occurrence.

I was genuinely happy about the trip. It felt like a breath of fresh air in the middle of the uncertainty my life had become. I wanted to see Irina again and immerse myself in the atmosphere of my past – back when everything had seemed so simple and so clear.

Since I wasn't traveling alone but as part of an inspection team, under orders from the head of the Main Department, we were assigned a government vehicle.

As I stepped out of the car onto the painfully familiar secure grounds of the juvenile facility, I noticed Madame already waiting for me on the front steps, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. She hurried toward the car and, forcing a smile, greeted me.

"How was the drive, Alyona Yuryevna?"

Stretching my shoulders after the long ride, I watched her carefully. Incredibly, there was nothing left in her behavior that reminded me of the woman she used to be.

When we entered the office, I looked around. A few things had changed since my transfer. Elena Ivanovna had submitted her retirement papers after completing her years of service and was only working her final days. The department had also gained a new employee.

Sitting at my old desk was a colorless woman about Madame's age. The moment I walked in, she hurriedly stood up, trying to give me the seat. I politely declined and settled at Elena Ivanovna's desk instead.

Someone offered me tea, and at the slightest nod from Madame, the new employee immediately began pouring it into mugs.

So, this is exactly the kind of employee Madame had always wanted.

Carefully sipping the hot tea, I found myself drifting into memories. I remembered my ordinary workdays – and the day Madame had served me tea and candy while gently trying to push me into resigning.

I wonder if she remembers that day too. It feels like it happened only yesterday... and yet a lifetime ago.

The memories tightened around my chest until it became hard to breathe. My heart started racing at the worst possible moment. The last thing I needed was for Madame to notice.

I called the medical unit and asked to speak to Irina. Right then, I simply wanted to hear her voice. We arranged to meet during lunch, and I returned to the inspection. Just thinking about seeing her again was enough to calm me down.

We had spoken on the phone the day before and agreed to spend the evening together. I had booked a room at a hotel so I wouldn't intrude on the cozy little nest she and Dima had built for themselves. But the entire evening would be ours.

My eyes wandered over the neatly arranged folders covering the desk. I had to go through all of them. Only three days allocated for the inspection, and I had to make sure everything was done in time.

Madame slid a bowl of candy toward me, and I smiled at her eagerness to please.

I wonder what Madame is feeling now, swallowing her pride like this?

Chapter 5. Tears in wine

After going through part of the documentation, I ignored Madame's invitation to have lunch in her delightful company and headed off to meet Irina.

The air was crisp. Leaves caught by the first frost crunched beneath my feet. Irina was already waiting for me, bouncing from foot to foot with excitement. Shivering in the cold and pulling her oversized uniform jacket tighter around herself, she threw her arms around my neck the moment she saw me.

What a joy it was to be back here again: to sit on this battered old bench and gossip with Irina about everything and nothing!

Lunch flew by, and with a touch of regret, we had to part. She insisted I stay at her place, paying no attention whatsoever to my objections. Truth be told, I wasn't trying very hard to object. After not seeing each other for months, neither of us wanted to waste a single minute.

On my way back to Madame, I pictured her waiting for me, her jaw clenched, impatiently tapping her freshly manicured nails against the desk.

The rest of the day was spent inspecting the informational displays in each housing unit. That evening, Irina and I settled into the back seat of Dima's car and headed to their place.

We had so much to catch up on. Dima tactfully found something else to occupy himself with, leaving us to our own devices. We poured ourselves a couple of glasses of wine and settled in for a long conversation.

She told me about the plans she and Dima were making together. I told her about my new job, about how, sometimes, I found myself wanting to go back, about the rare evenings I spent with Darling, and about the foolish suspicions that had begun creeping into my mind about him – all the things you could never fit into a brief phone call.

Time slipped away unnoticed as we exchanged months' worth of news, we only realized how late it had become when Dima poked his head through the doorway to remind us that it was getting late and we both had to be up early.

As Irina walked me to the room she'd given me for the night, she asked an unexpected question. I stayed silent for a moment before answering.

"Has he called?"

Several months had passed since we'd last spoken about him. *Of course, somewhere deep down, I'd been waiting for his call.* But I would never admit that to another living soul – not even to Irina.

"No, he hasn't called. I just hope he's doing okay," I said, forcing a cheerful tone and looking away.

Talking about him was painful. Irina glanced at me and understood everything without another word.

With the lights off, the glow of a streetlamp barely slipped through the gap in the heavy curtains, tracing pale ribbons of light across the ceiling.

Staring up at it, I lay awake thinking about myself, about the strange distance growing between Darling and me, and about the inmate who had probably been released by now and started a new life somewhere far away from these places.

Those three days passed in the blink of an eye.

Goodbyes were always painful, so I said farewell to Irina that morning outside the administration building. It was easier that way – better than tearing my heart apart later. Better to preserve the comforting illusion that we'd see each other again that evening.

As I traveled back home to Darling, I realized just how desperately I'd missed him. I wanted to spoil him a little, especially since I'd have plenty of time to cook.

After buying groceries, I set out to create a special dinner for the two of us. A candlelit dinner and a bottle of white wine – what could be more perfect for two people in love?

That evening, I welcomed Darling home with dinner and soft music. After several days apart, every part of me longed to be close to him. I fussed over him, trying to make the evening special, but he merely poked at the meal I'd prepared with the tip of his fork, looking utterly bored.

As he blew out the candles, he asked the obligatory question about my trip and then, with unmistakable irritation, added, if nothing happened this time.

Chapter 6. What is wrong with me?

From that day on, I began noticing things I had never noticed before.

Or maybe... I simply hadn't wanted to.

The phone Darling used to leave lying around the apartment was now either carefully tucked out of sight or kept on him at all times.

And every time it chimed with a new message, he would immediately check it, wearing a soft, private smile that was clearly meant for someone else.

Whenever I asked about it, he always gave the same answer:

"It's just the phone company."

I nodded, pretending to believe him. But inside, everything tightened. How could anyone possibly believe something like that? With each passing day, my suspicions grew stronger.

One day I asked him to show me the message that had just come in. Looking me straight in the eye, he calmly said he'd already deleted it.

Unable to make sense of what was happening, I wanted to ask him outright. But I didn't know how to do it without making myself look like a complete fool.

After all, once before he'd managed to convince me that my suspicions were baseless. What was stopping him from doing the same thing again? So, I stayed silent, continuing to pay attention the things I had never noticed before.

And the more I noticed, the less I understood how something like this could be happening in my life. *Here he is – the man I love. He lives beside me. I see him every single day. And yet the closeness we shared, so tender, so delicate... turned out to be heartbreakingly fragile…*

The situation never let me go, not even for a minute. Every waking moment, my thoughts revolved around the man who was both so dear to me... and somehow so painfully distant. I couldn't understand what I had done to deserve this. *What is wrong with me?*

I tore myself apart, finding more and more flaws in myself. And every time I found another one, I wondered why Darling was still with me at all.

Chapter 7. The metamorphosis

One weekend, while Darling was, as had become his habit lately, off dealing with work-related matters, I sat in an armchair reading a book.

It was a book on social psychology, written in dry academic language. It wasn't particularly engaging, but it was undeniably useful. With nowhere to rush, I tried to absorb the unfamiliar terms and ideas.

Slanting autumn rain lashed against the windows, tracing winding paths down the glass. Outside, the wind stirred the bare branches of the trees.

As I waited for Darling to come home, I realized I almost didn't want him to. Our conversations had dwindled into polite, empty exchanges, and they exhausted me. Not being able to wrap my arms around him, not being able to share my thoughts with him, weighed heavily on me.

I wished with all my heart that this was nothing more than a dream. That tomorrow I would wake up, and everything would be as it used to be: that I loved him, and he loved me.

I began to feel chilled. Wrapping myself more tightly in the blanket, I curled up on the couch and stared at the open book.

Why am I so trusting? Why did I believe him back then? How could I possibly have believed him? I wasn't thinking about the book at all. A wave of self-pity washed over me. I set the book aside, wrapped my arms around myself, curled into a ball, and buried my face in the couch.

Through my sleep, I heard the front door close. I lay there wondering whether I should open my eyes and go greet Darling, knowing the same painful cycle would only repeat itself: me, speaking to him through the haze of my feelings... and him, distant and cold.

Seeing no point in getting up, I pretended to be asleep. I lay there thinking that, as he usually did these days, he would retreat to the bedroom and disappear into the glow of his phone. Then I could quietly get up and go about my own business, and there would be no need for another strained conversation.

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