

JAKE DESIRE

HARD SEX REAR ENTRANCE



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Waves of love

Jake Desire

Hard sex. Rear entrance

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Desire J.

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Любовная драма с тёмным эротическим сюжетом. Она никого не оставит равнодушным. Таня оказывается в эпицентре смертельной игры, где каждый шаг может стать последним. В мире, пропитанном тайнами, предательством и тёмными страстями, она борется за правду, балансируя на грани жизни и смерти. Секреты прошлого оживают, враги подстерегают в тени, а неожиданные союзники могут оказаться опаснее противников. Сможет ли она раскрыть правду об Ане и Ирине, или тьма поглотит её навсегда? Захватывающий триллер, полный напряжения, страсти и непредсказуемых поворотов, не отпустит до последней страницы. Книга на английском языке.

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Глава

Prologue

The office on the twenty-fifth floor was her personal ice rink. Glass, chrome, and polished surfaces mirrored her—Tanya, flawless and cold, like a diamond carved without a single flaw. Her heels struck the mirrored parquet with a sharp, almost militaristic rhythm, each step a gunshot that made her assistant, Olga, flinch. Tanya's gaze slid over the reports, ignoring the numbers. It wasn't the text that mattered to her, but the fear in her subordinates' eyes. She fed on it, like a predator savoring fresh kill. It was her breakfast, lunch, and dinner—bitter, but essential.

Once, she was feared for different reasons. For her ringing laughter, the spark in her eyes, the magic that made men lose their minds and women burn with consuming envy. Her body wasn't just flesh; it was a weapon, a master key to any heart, a tool to unlock any desire.

Today, like yesterday, she prowled the hallway with deliberate slowness, seeking an excuse to drop by the offices of her male colleagues. To remind them of her presence, her power, the way she reveled in her dominance like a cat toying with its prey.

She felt a dull ache between her thighs, an echo of last night. Her memory held only fragments—the cold of a marble floor beneath her as she first knelt on all fours, then sank to her knees, surrendering to unfamiliar hands. She couldn't recall the place, the time, or the name of the man whose friends later joined in. Just the cold and the hunger she quenched, dissolving into that act of submission. Today, she wore black trousers to conceal the traces of that night—scratches and bruises, dark stains on her otherwise impeccable armor.

Tanya approached the panoramic window, unaware that she was in Boris's crosshairs. He was in love with her, but he'd never dare ask her out. Instead, he secretly filmed her on his phone whenever she passed by. Later, in the solitude of his cramped office, surrounded by boxes and outdated printers, he indulged in his fantasies. On rare occasions like this, he could catch a glimpse of her in the flesh through a half-open door, even if it was across the vast expanse of the luxurious office, and touch himself. If she ever found out, she wouldn't flinch. Not with her face, not with her heart.

The city sprawled at her feet, and she had no idea that someone was greedily devouring the sight of her form-fitting silhouette with their eyes.

A myriad of lights below—each a tiny life, brimming with foolish hopes and pointless emotions. She caught her reflection in the glass. A beautiful face. Perfect features. A mask beneath which nothing remained. Nothing but a hollow, chilling emptiness that gnawed at her from within, like acid.

It was in this emptiness, like the depths of an ocean, that fragments sometimes surfaced. Fragments of the other Tanya. The girl who could laugh until she cried, who believed in love at first sight, who held hands with her first love and swore they'd be together forever. Tanya turned sharply from the window, as if struck. Ghosts had no place in her world. Her world was power, control, and cynicism, built like a fortress that no light or warmth could penetrate.

Chapter 1: Velvet Shackles

Tanya drained her third cup of coffee, finished tweaking the script, and leaned back in her black leather chair. A pleasant exhaustion spread down her spine, like warm honey trickling through her body after a long, tense effort. “The end of a small task is like that sweet climax you crave when you surrender to passion. It’s my weakness and my strength,” her thoughts tangled, reality dissolving into a strange cocktail of lust and the anticipation of reward.

Her office was a perfect reflection of her essence: expensive, impeccable, cold. Glass, metal, glossy surfaces—no unnecessary details, no hint of vulnerability. She ran her hand over the silky fabric of her dress—dark emerald, clinging to her like a second skin. These were her armor, shed only when a man’s ego triumphed, eager to pierce her with its strength, like a spear hungering for its target. The thin black lace thong, barely perceptible yet so tight it accentuated every curve, reminded her of her own nature—always ready, always on the edge.

“My brain works overtime, so my body should too. I can’t handle it all alone,” she told herself when she didn’t feel like dragging herself to a meeting where she’d have to give herself to someone she despised but needed for business. “Men booze for deals; women fuck,” her mind constantly churned out such mottos to justify her “ero-breaks,” as she liked to call them. A quick screw, often right in her office, had become almost a ritual. The higher-ups knew about her appetite for male attention and didn’t resist. Anything beneficial to the business was permitted. The law of three-hundred-percent profit applied indirectly here, but career and power, especially after landing a position with growth potential, had become her only goals that mattered.

She loved to dominate, and not just at work. But the weakness within her was also her strength. Nature had gifted Tanya with long legs and firm curves that were weapons in themselves, capable of breaking anyone. In her desk drawer, she kept her secret toys, turning to them when she’d gone too long without attention, when desire became almost painful, demanding release. She liked maintaining balance, scheduling her passions just as meticulously as her work plans.

Tanya considered locking her office door to indulge in one of those toys, but the door creaked open. Her assistant Olga’s anxious face peeked through the crack.

“Tanya, Sergey Igorevich is requesting you at a meeting. He says it’s urgent.”

Tanya slowly turned her head. Her heavy, indifferent gaze made Olga shrink as if struck.

She was beyond annoyed at having to deal with that asshole she’d had to sleep with a few times just to keep him from turning feral and causing trouble. But their business relationship ended there. She saw him as a rival, gunning for the same higher position as her.

“Tell Sergey Igorevich,” Tanya’s voice was quiet but commanding, “that if his deadlines are burning, he can put them out himself. With his own damn ass. My time is worth more.”

“Should I say it exactly like that?”

Olga, blushing, nodded and disappeared.

The corners of Tanya’s lips twitched in something resembling a smile. Sergey. An old bastard who still thought his past achievements and middling status meant something. He’d long been in her way, and today she decided enough was enough. You can’t win a race by helping your opponent. The corporation created conditions for everyone to clash, preventing alliances. Otherwise, they might grow too strong, cause trouble, or slip out of control. No business owner wanted that. No one knew who the main shareholder was. Rumors floated that it was someone from middle management. The intrigue fueled curiosity, but verifying the truth was impossible—legal ownership vanished into offshore accounts, a secret locked behind seven seals, inaccessible to a regular employee.

She picked up her phone, scrolled through her contacts, and found the name she needed. “Seryozha.” She dialed. He answered almost instantly, his voice strained but attempting friendliness.

“Tanyush, I heard you sent my messenger packing. What’s the problem?”

She didn't bother deciphering his slang; she didn't care.

"The problem, Seryozh, is that the old clunker of a car you're used to driving isn't in our fleet anymore," she said in a sweet, venomous tone. "Times have changed. Or do you want me to remind the board about your 'creative' budget reports from last year? The numbers in there could make accountants weep."

A heavy silence hung on the line.

"Are you kidding? This is blackmail, Tanya."

"This is business, darling," she unbuttoned the top of her dress, feeling adrenaline start to burn pleasantly in her veins. "But there's another option. Remember how we celebrated my promotion? In that hotel room?"

He cleared his throat. She pictured him sweating.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"It's got to do with the fact that I'm alone in my office right now. And I'm... bored." She deliberately made her voice sultry, hushed, the kind that made men's breath catch. "Come up. Let's discuss your future. Off the record."

She hung up without waiting for a reply.

While waiting for him, she used the time to prepare, applying a bit of gel to ease the upcoming encounter. She didn't care for foreplay, considering it a waste of time, and Sergey was hopeless at it anyway. That flaw—or perhaps virtue—connected them.

Ten minutes later, Sergey stood in her office. He tried to maintain a professional posture, but his eyes darted, and his hands fidgeted nervously with his phone. Tanya sat on the edge of her desk, one leg crossed over the other. The heel of her stiletto swayed to an imaginary tune.

"Well?" he muttered.

"Well," she echoed, rising and slowly approaching him.

She stopped just an inch away, forcing him to step back. He smelled of expensive cologne and fear.

"Do you want to keep your cozy office with the view of the avenue? Or would you rather look for a job at some provincial TV station?"

"Tanya, let's not play games..."

"I'm not playing," she traced her index finger along the lapel of his jacket. "I'm setting the terms. Tomorrow, you write your resignation. 'For health reasons.' And I... I'll make sure you don't regret it."

Sergey's eyes clouded with a rush of emotions. He felt like a delinquent about to be punished. "Resignation? What the hell is she talking about?" he thought, but her gaze, sharp as a blade, shattered his resistance. It popped like a soap bubble. Now, his eyes held only one thing—raw, primal desire mixed with hatred. And that was exactly what she wanted.

She turned and walked back to her desk, knowing he'd follow.

"Close the door, colleague. We're starting a private meeting."

Her dress didn't require much effort to remove. She chose practical designs, saving time on undressing and redressing for critical moments. But often, she simply hiked up the hem, revealing the thin lace of her thong, black as night, nearly invisible against her pale skin. His hands were rough, hurried, afraid to miss the moment. He sought to possess her, like a parched traveler reaching an oasis in the desert. His lips crashed into her neck, then slid lower to her chest, seeking revenge for the humiliation, though it felt more like a continuation of his downfall than a counterstrike.

Sergey had tried to build a career but couldn't play the game of corporate intrigue. He was straightforward and naive, even if his business skills outshone hers. But now, she awaited his next humiliation. Tilting her head back, she stared at the ceiling, thinking about the figures in tomorrow's report to avoid losing herself in the act too quickly, to stretch the pleasure for at least a few minutes. Her body was her tool, and she wielded it to gain advantages that were otherwise hard-won.

He entered her abruptly, without a hint of tenderness, with a guttural groan, like a beast breaking free of its chains. His movements were furious, as if trying to assert dominance in this situation. She responded with reflexive hip movements, feigning passion, making the right sounds. Her body, perfectly honed, was deceptively warm, but inside, there was emptiness. Cold, clear calculation. She could have given herself to a random man in a park, but doing it with someone she despised, here in this office, was a special kind of game. Closing her eyes, she pictured someone else—someone her soul yearned for, but who was too insignificant to even stand beside her. It added a sharp edge, igniting a spark of pleasure within her.

Her skin, covered in a fine sheen of sweat, felt silky under his rough fingers. The black lace thong, barely covering her, was the last barrier he tore away with greed, exposing her curves, soft yet firm, like marble warmed by the sun. She felt his breathing grow heavy, his body tense, battling itself. A strange warmth built inside her, not so much from passion as from the realization of her power. She was the spider, and he was the fly, ensnared in her web. Her long legs, wrapped around him, tightened like velvet shackles, refusing to let him escape.

When he reached his peak with a stifled groan, leaving a hot trace within her, she immediately pulled away, as if from a machine that had served its purpose. Her voice was cold as ice:

“And don’t forget the resignation. On my desk by nine tomorrow. Don’t worry, once it’s done, I’ll bring you back, better than ever. But we both understand... You get it, if it’s not this way...”

Without a word, he shuffled to the door, hunched and pathetic. He had good reason to be. The video she had—compromising footage of her dominance—had played its part.

Tanya walked to the window. Rain had started. She pressed her palm against the cold glass, feeling the vibration of the drops drumming on the surface. Suddenly, she felt an overwhelming urge to shatter the glass and scream. To scream so loudly that she’d be heard over the city’s roar. In that moment, she disgusted herself—but only in that moment. Taking a deep breath, she tried to muster some self-pity, adjusted her hair, and went to wash her hands, cleansing herself of the touch of yet another person who’d become a pawn in her game.

The game had begun.

Chapter 2: Cement in Velvet

The morning started with a phone call that pierced her consciousness like a splinter. Tanya, without opening her eyes, groped for the phone on her bedside table.

“Speak,” her voice rasped from lack of sleep and the cheap cognac from last night, leaving a bitter taste on her tongue.

Scattered on the floor were crumpled towels she’d used to wipe herself down after a wild night with a security guard from internal surveillance. She needed him as a sleeper agent, someone to snoop around the offices. The chances of catching compromising dirt were slim—everyone knew cameras were everywhere, except in her office and a few other bosses’ sanctuaries. But she liked keeping men like him on a short leash, just in case.

“Tanya, it’s Olga. Sergey Igorevich... He didn’t submit his resignation. And he’s currently in Kirill Vladimirovich’s office.”

A chill gripped her insides. Instant, razor-sharp fury sliced through her exhaustion like lightning tearing across a dark sky. “That bastard. That old, pathetic bastard decided to fight back,” raced through her mind.

“I’ll be there in twenty,” she snapped and ended the call.

Of course, she wouldn’t make it in that time, but she needed to project resolve. If Sergey crossed paths with her in the hallway, she’d lay into him like a desperate slut looking for anyone to sleep with just to get a good word in for next month’s bonuses. Everyone had their own interests, and everyone had their price.

She lay there, staring at the ceiling. Beside her on the pillow slept Alex. His muscular back, slick with a faint sheen of sweat, faced her. Last night, after Sergey left, started off dull until she called Alex to kill time. But even his presence didn’t fill the void; it only irritated her.

She yanked the blanket off him.

“Get up. Get the fuck out, Alex...”

He rolled over, his sleepy eyes meeting hers. There was no subservience in them, like with the others. Just exhaustion and a dog-like loyalty that pissed her off even more.

“Tanya, how about coffee? You had a lot last night...”

“I said get out. I don’t have time to babysit you.”

He silently got up and started dressing. She watched him pull on his jeans, feeling nothing but emptiness. Not a drop of shame, not a gram of tenderness. Just irritation. Another witness to her degradation, another body that meant nothing. His movements were sharp, almost mechanical, as he tucked himself into his pants, not bothering with underwear. She looked away, not wanting to see more than necessary.

As soon as the door closed behind him, she bolted out of bed and stepped into the shower. Hot water scalded her skin, jets pounding her shoulders as if trying to break through her armor, but they couldn’t wash away the sticky feeling of helplessness. Sergey dared to defy her. It was a challenge. And she needed to respond in a way that ensured no one else would ever entertain such thoughts. She clenched her fists, feeling rage mix with cold calculation as steam swirled around her like ghosts of her past victories.

Forty minutes later, she strode into the TV channel’s building. Her heels clicked a staccato rhythm on the marble floor, the sound echoing through the lobby as employees parted like prey before a predator. She didn’t look at anyone; her face was a stone mask, her eyes two shards of ice ready to shatter anyone who stood in her way.

Olga was already waiting by the elevator, holding a tablet and a cup of cappuccino.

“Kirill Vladimirovich asked for you as soon as you arrive.”

"I know," Tanya took the cup and sipped. The hot, sweet coffee slightly cleared her mind but didn't douse the fire within. "Where's that bastard Sergey?"

"In his office, I think..."

"Not his office, mine," Tanya corrected and stepped into the elevator.

She didn't go to Kirill. Instead, she headed straight for Sergey's office. The door was closed. She didn't knock. She shoved it open and stormed in like a tempest breaching a calm harbor.

Sergey sat behind his desk, pale but trying to maintain some dignity. Seeing her, he flinched as if struck.

"Tanya, I..."

"Shut up," her voice was low and taut, like a string about to snap. She approached the desk, slamming her hands down and looming over him like the shadow of death. "You thought Kirill would save you? You thought your pathetic, worthless integrity meant anything?"

Tanya slowly straightened. An icy smile played on her lips, colder than a winter gale.

"What do you want?"

"I want you gone. Today. I don't want a trace of you here. Your resignation on my desk in fifteen minutes. Otherwise..." she leaned in so close she could smell his sweat mingled with fear, "I'll call your wife. And I'll paint her a vivid picture of how her husband begged me to keep his job. On his knees. With tears in his eyes. Do you think your mortgage and two fancy private schools will survive your divorce? No need to remind you of that night with me at the Grand Tommy. I'll destroy your career and your family."

He turned a sickly shade of green and sank silently into his chair. He was broken. Completely. His empty, crushed gaze told her that any resistance died in him that very second.

Tanya turned and left without looking back. Mission accomplished. But inside, rage still churned like a volcano ready to erupt. She felt control returning, but it wasn't enough. She needed more.

The day passed in a frenzy of work. She approved budgets, led meetings, her word was law. But inside, everything boiled, and to smother that fire, she retreated to her office twice, using her secret toys to inflict pain that distracted her from her thoughts. She sat in her chair, sharp sensations piercing her like lightning while receiving visitors. None of them suspected what lay behind her impenetrable mask. Pain was her ally, her way of regaining control.

That evening, she summoned Sergey to her office again. She needed to cement her victory, to grind him into the dirt for good.

He entered, trying to appear casual. Tall, fit, in an expensive suit, but his eyes betrayed the fear he hid behind false confidence.

"Tatiana, I'm glad that..."

"Close the door," she cut him off. She stood by the window, back to him, staring at the city lights as cold as her heart.

He obeyed.

"On your knees."

He stared at her, uncomprehending, as if the words didn't register.

"What? Tanya, this is..."

"I said, on your knees!" her voice cracked like a whip, sharp and merciless.

And, to her surprise and wild, intoxicating delight, he complied. His smug, always self-assured face twisted with a mix of fear and arousal, like a beast caught in a trap. Her heart pounded faster, not from passion, but from the rush of absolute power coursing through her veins, hot and sticky like molten wax.

She approached him slowly, savoring each step, dragging a leather belt across his cheek as if caressing him, but with a promise of pain.

“You thought you could challenge my decision? Thought your friendship with the chairman of the board would save you?”

“No... Tanya, I...”

She didn't let him finish. With a sharp motion, she unfastened his trousers and pulled his head toward her, under her skirt, to the warmth hidden by thin black silk panties, barely visible against her pale skin. Her fingers dug into his hair, roughly guiding him.

“Lick. And make me believe you want it.”

His movements were clumsy, almost unbearably humiliating, but that only fueled her fire. She stared at his graying crown, feeling power return to her, enveloping her like a warm cloak on an icy night. She directed him, humiliated him, forcing submission, rough and without ceremony. Her body responded not with passion but with triumph. Her skin, lightly damp with sweat, felt hot under the fabric of her skirt, and the delicate lace concealing her curves only underscored her control over him. She was a queen, and he was a pitiful subject crawling at her feet.

When she decided it was enough, she pulled away, wiping herself with his expensive tie as if it were nothing more than a rag. Without adjusting her clothes, she pointed to the door, her voice cold as steel.

“Get out. And remember—next time you think of defying me, it'll end much worse for you.”

He shuffled out, eyes down, hunched like a beaten dog.

Tanya was alone. She walked to her desk. On it lay Sergey's resignation. “For health reasons.” She picked up the paper and slowly, with relish, tore it into tiny pieces, watching them fall to the floor like snow covering the ruins of his resistance. Victory was hers, and she savored it like a rare wine, relishing every sip.

Chapter 3: Game in the Shadows

Rain poured outside the window, turning the city's night lights into blurred smudges, like tears on glass that couldn't wash away the darkness. In the conference room on the twenty-eighth floor, a different atmosphere reigned—stifling, thick with expensive perfumes, alcohol, and feigned merriment. The corporate party celebrating the successful end of the quarter was in full swing. It was a masquerade of vanity, where everyone smiled, hiding fangs ready to tear into a rival's throat.

Tanya stood by the bar, slowly sipping a martini, her lips barely brushing the glass's rim, like a caress promising more. Her deep burgundy dress, with a plunging back, drew the eyes of male colleagues like a magnet pulling iron filings. The fabric clung to her curves like a lover unwilling to let go, the slit revealing her back, pale and flawless, like marble carved by a master. She was calm, like a predator who'd already cornered its prey in a tree, now lazily watching it squirm in anticipation of the inevitable.

Her target sat in the far corner of the room—Viktor Petrovich, silver-haired, with intelligent, weary eyes, the head of HR appointments in the holding company. He held the key to the coveted position of head of the new creative department. A position also eyed by Kirill, her eternal rival, whose smile concealed venom.

Sergey, with whom she'd "negotiated" to keep his compromising photos in the shadows, had withdrawn from the race. He chose the bird in hand, fearing she'd forget him entirely if he chased the crane in the sky. Cowardice was his choice, and Tanya only smirked, recalling how easily he broke.

Kirill, noticing her gaze on Viktor, approached with his signature condescending smile that made her want to claw his face.

"Tanyusha, admiring the old man? Waste of time. He can smell your kind from a mile away. He needs serious people, not just pretty pictures."

Tanya slowly shifted her gaze to him. Her dark, deep eyes, like an abyss, seemed to absorb light rather than reflect it, making anyone feel insignificant.

"And you're sure, Kirill, that you know what he really wants? Men his age... They often crave what they're too afraid to admit even to themselves," her voice was soft but sharp, like a blade hidden in velvet.

Kirill snorted, sipping his whiskey, but his gaze faltered for a moment as she languidly stretched, her breasts, barely covered by the dress's fabric, rising as if inviting him to touch the forbidden.

"Keep dreaming. That position is mine. I've got connections, experience. You can try, but we're businesspeople. We should speak the truth, have the guts to admit it. That's more accurate."

"Connections break, and experience..." she paused, her lips curling into a smile full of hidden promise, "experience can be too predictable. Boring. And I, you know, know how to surprise."

She walked away, leaving him angry and rattled, with the taste of defeat on his tongue. His thoughts churned with desire mixed with rage. He wanted her but figured he'd only dominate once he secured the new position. "Then she won't dare defy me. She'll do whatever I want," he thought, adjusting his suddenly tight clothing, strained by inappropriate tension.

Tanya, glancing back, had already forgotten him. Her mind was cold and sharp as a scalpel, ready to cut through any obstacle. Her plan was simple and cynical, like life itself. No groveling, no bribes. She intended to give Viktor Petrovich something he'd likely been denied for years—the illusion of passion, the thrill of forbidden fruit, the chance to feel not like a boss, but a man whose heart could still race.

She waited another hour, patient as a spider weaving its web. She watched Viktor fend off pushy managers, his gaze growing more detached. He was tired of this circus, of fake smiles and empty words. Finally, he stood and headed for the exit, likely to the smoking lounge or elevators, away from the noise and lies.

Tanya followed like a shadow gliding through the dim light. He turned into a deserted corridor leading to the emergency exit and executive offices. Pulling out a pack of cigarettes, he paused, searching his pockets. He'd forgotten his lighter. This was her chance. She'd planned to play it differently, but the bird had wandered into the cage on its own, and Tanya couldn't let the moment slip.

"Viktor Petrovich," her voice sounded in the corridor's half-darkness, soft, almost tender, like a whisper of wind caressing skin.

He flinched and turned. Seeing her, he looked slightly embarrassed, like a boy caught in mischief.

"Ah, Tanya... Sorry, I..."

"Looking for a light?" She approached, her steps slow and hypnotic, pulling a delicate gold-plated lighter from her small clutch. A click. The tiny flame illuminated his weary, wrinkled face and her youthful, perfect one, as if carved from ivory. Shadows danced on her cheekbones, making her gaze even more alluring.

He leaned in to light his cigarette, his fingers trembling slightly, betraying inner tension. She didn't look away, her eyes ensnaring his like a net from which there was no escape.

"Thanks," he exhaled smoke, trying to mask his awkwardness. "Hiding from the noise?"

"More like seeking silence. And... interesting conversation," she smiled in a way few women could—promising yet carefree, as if opening a door to a world of forbidden pleasures. "I think we could find common ground."

"Oh?" He looked at her with interest, not as a boss to a subordinate, but as a man to a woman whose gaze hinted at more than just words.

"Your speech today on development prospects..." she paused, choosing her words like precious gems meant to dazzle, "was the only one with substance, not just corporate clichés. That's impressive."

Viktor Petrovich swore to himself that her charm wouldn't sway him, that he'd remain principled in choosing a candidate. The board would demand results, or he risked losing his own position. Big business didn't forgive missteps or failures. But her words, her voice, soft as silk, and her gaze, full of hidden promises, were already eroding his resolve.

They started talking. She caught every word, nodded, interjected clever remarks, laughed at the right moments, her laughter ringing like a crystal glass, stirring something deep within him. She saw his shoulders relax, a spark of long-forgotten interest ignite in his eyes. He spoke of business, while she thought of cornering him in a dead end where there'd be no business, no corporate hierarchy—just two people bound by an invisible thread stretched to its limit.

"You know, Viktor Petrovich," she lowered her voice to a whisper, stepping so close he caught the sweet, intoxicating scent of her perfume, like forbidden fruit, "it's so stifling within these walls. All this talk... It's so artificial."

"What do you suggest?" His voice softened, as if afraid to shatter the moment.

"I suggest forgetting who we are here, just for half an hour. Just a man and a woman," she glanced at his office door, mere steps away, her look laden with a hint impossible to ignore. "Your office is probably the only place without prying eyes and ears."

He hesitated for a second. Just a second. Then nodded, pulling out his key card with sharp movements, as if afraid he'd change his mind.

The office was vast, dark, scented with expensive leather and old books lined on long shelves like silent witnesses to his power. As soon as the door clicked shut, Tanya knew the game was won. She didn't drag it out, her movements precise as a predator delivering the final blow. She pressed against him, feeling his stiff, aging body tense, then respond, like a long-forgotten instrument sounding again under skilled fingers.

Her hands unbuttoned his expensive jacket, untied his tie with practiced ease. She guided him to the massive oak desk, sweeping papers to the floor like clearing all barriers between them. Her

burgundy dress, soft as velvet, slid against her skin, baring her shoulders, while the thin black lace of her lingerie, dark as night, barely covered her curves, promising more than just a glimpse.

“Tatiana... Maybe we shouldn’t...” he tried to protest, but his hands were already sliding down her back, under the dress, greedily exploring her warmth.

“We should,” she whispered in his ear, her voice like sweet, deadly poison, her hand dipping lower, finding his readiness beneath the fabric. “Forget ‘shouldn’t.’ You want this. I can see it.”

She was rough and commanding, like a storm that knew no bounds. She lifted the hem of her dress, revealing just a hint of the forbidden beneath thin lace. No tenderness, no foreplay. Just pure, animalistic dominance masked as passion, burning like an unquenchable flame. His breathing grew heavy, his movements jerky and awkward, filled with long-forgotten excitement, as if he’d returned to a youth where anything was possible. She faked moans, clawed at the polished desk, her body arching like a taut bow, but her gaze was fixed beyond his head on the dark plasma screen on the wall, cold and calculating.

Her pale, silky skin seemed hot under his trembling fingers, her curves, soft yet firm, like sun-warmed marble, lured him, promising a paradise he hadn’t known in years. Inside, she felt no fire, only icy calculation, but she played her role flawlessly, letting him drown in illusion while her thoughts were clear as a winter morning: “Contract. Position. Victory.” Her long legs, wrapped around him, tightened like velvet shackles, refusing to let him escape her control, and her heavy, sweet perfume enveloped him like a net with no escape.

When it was over, he sank into his leather chair, panting, looking dazed and aged, as if the years he’d tried to forget returned in an instant. Tanya, unhurried, adjusted her dress, the fabric gliding over her skin like a caress she didn’t feel, and picked up her clutch from the floor.

“About the appointment...” he started, but she interrupted, approaching and gently tracing a finger along his cheek, her touch cold but full of promise.

“I know, Viktor. You’ll make the right decision. You’re a smart man.”

She left the office without looking back, her steps confident, like a victor leaving the battlefield. In the corridor, she pulled out wet wipes and meticulously cleaned her hands, face, and neck, erasing his touch, his scent, the feel of his weary flesh. She dropped the used wipe on the floor, a symbol of a discarded mask no longer needed.

Three days later, the appointment order came. The new head of the creative department was her, Tanya. Victory was hers, sweet and bitter, like wine drunk alone.

Kirill, upon hearing the news, flew into a rage. Finding no better outlet for his anger, he secluded himself in his office, letting his fury spill out in solitude, under his desk, where no one could witness his defeat.

Tanya sat in her new, even more spacious chair, gazing at the rain outside, which seemed to mourn her triumph. She had won, using her body as a key to unlock the door to power and control. Love was weakness, sentimental trash she’d long discarded from her life. And passion... Passion was the simplest, most effective tool in this cruel world. She vowed to use it as long as it worked. And it worked flawlessly, like a razor-sharp blade.

But deep within, in the darkest recess of her soul, something small and long-forgotten still lived. Little Tanya, kind and naive, who believed in fairytales and dreamed of something greater than cold games of power. That Tanya whispered of pain, of the emptiness corroding her from within like acid. But Tanya silenced that whisper, locking it behind a door no one could open. As long as she was on top, nothing else mattered. Nothing but victory.

Chapter 4: Queen Without a Throne

Her new office was larger than the last, expansive like an arena for the battles she fought every day. Floor-to-ceiling panoramic windows revealed the city sprawled at her feet, a conquered territory under the rule of a savage tribal chief. The designer desk, heavy as her ambitions, weighed three hundred kilograms, and the chair, priced like a used foreign car, was a throne befitting her power. A deathly silence reigned in this sanctuary, broken only by the rustle of papers and the ticking of a floor clock, counting down to her next triumph.

Tanya sat enthroned in her regal chair, reviewing a report on ratings. The numbers gleamed like diamonds on velvet—brilliant, perfect, like everything that emerged from her iron grip. She calculated her moves like a chess player plotting checkmate several steps ahead, fully aware that somewhere in the depths of the departments, an unnoticed but ambitious young woman might be lurking, ready to claw at her throne. But her sharp, blade-like thoughts were interrupted by Natasha, a friend from university days whose presence once felt warm but now irritated her like an old scar aching in bad weather.

Natasha entered without knocking, merely tapping her knuckles on the office door as a half-hearted apology for the intrusion. Her face was tense, as if she carried a burden she couldn't shake off.

"Tanya, can I have a minute?" Her voice was cautious, like footsteps on thin ice.

Tanya didn't lift her eyes from the monitor, her fingers gliding across the keyboard with cold detachment.

"I've got a meeting in fifteen minutes. Make it quick."

"It's about Olga. Did you really fire her?"

"Do I have a habit of joking about such things?" Tanya finally looked at her friend, her gaze sharp as a scalpel, ready to slice through any illusions. Natasha stood clutching a folder, her usual cheerfulness evaporated like morning mist under a scorching sun.

"Tanya, she worked with you for five years! She cut her maternity leave short so you wouldn't need a replacement! And you threw her out over a single typo in a presentation?"

"Not a typo," Tanya corrected coldly, her voice like ice that refused to melt even under a heated stare. "Unprofessionalism. In our line of work, there are no small details. One typo is a stain on the reputation of the entire department. My department, our department, after all, whose results also earn you quarterly bonuses."

"Your department?" Natasha stepped forward, her voice trembling with restrained emotion. "Tanya, wake up! Look at yourself! You're mowing down everyone in your path like a bulldozer. Kirill went on a binge after the appointment fiasco, Sergey walks around like a broken man, speaking to no one, and now Olga... People are afraid of you!"

"And they should be," Tanya stood and walked to the window, her reflection in the glass like a statue carved from marble—cold and unyielding. Beyond the glass, the city stretched out like a map of her victories, but in her reflection, her eyes were empty. "Fear is an excellent motivator. It works far better than bonuses. I'm not a chocolate bar to be liked by everyone. Anything else?"

"This isn't you talking!" Natasha's voice quivered, like a string about to snap. "I remember the Tanya who stayed up all night working on her thesis, who cried when Daniil left her, who laughed until she teared up over stupid jokes! Where did she go?"

Tanya turned. Her face was utterly calm, and for that reason, all the more terrifying, like a mask hiding neither pain nor regret.

"Do you enjoy being a monster? I'm starting to fear you myself."

Natasha nervously ran her hands over Tanya's desk, as if trying to show she wasn't rattled, that she was saying this half in jest, half in earnest, just in case her words struck a nerve. She clung to

the remnants of their old friendship, when they were equals, sharing guys on dates, laughing over trivialities, and crying on each other's shoulders.

"My life is my business. And my department is my business too. If you don't like my methods, the door's right there. You can follow Olga."

Natasha froze, her breathing heavy, as if the air in the office had suddenly thickened.

"You're kicking me out? Your only friend? The one who pulled you out of that black hole after Daniil? Who stayed with you for a week when you couldn't stop crying?"

"That girl you 'pulled out' is dead," Tanya said ruthlessly, her words cutting like shards of glass, sharp and cold. "And I don't need reminders of who I was. I'm sorry, Natasha. But that's the price."

As Tanya spoke those words, for a fleeting moment, she herself feared the abyss opening before her, the situation unfolding now that continued to corrode her from within. But deep inside, another Tanya began to awaken—an unfamiliar, dark version with sharp claws and an icy heart, one she had yet to fully meet. This new Tanya knew no mercy, no weakness, and her voice drowned out all doubts.

They stood facing each other—two women once bound by genuine friendship, warm as a summer sun. Now, a wall of glass, power, and cynicism stood between them, transparent but impassable. They could see each other but couldn't take a step to bypass this barrier before it grew taller, thicker, stronger, until it became an unbreakable fortress dividing them forever.

Natasha didn't know what else to say to break through this wall, to bring back the old Tanya, to avoid losing her own job, which was her anchor in this cruel world.

"Fine. I get it."

She left the office, adjusting her hair and running her hands over her hip, emphasizing her attractiveness as if reminding Tanya that she, too, wasn't to be underestimated, that she could play these games if forced.

The door closed with a soft click, but the sound reverberated in Tanya's chest like a hammer strike. The deathly silence of the office suddenly pressed on her ears, as if the walls were closing in, cutting her off from the world. She approached her desk, her hand involuntarily gripping an expensive pen so tightly her knuckles whitened like marble. The harder she squeezed, the less she felt the pain, but the emptiness inside only grew, a black hole swallowing everything left of her soul.

On her phone, she reviewed footage from the night before in a roadside motel room, where, playing a dark game, she recruited another man to her team. He was her secret weapon, a pawn for critical missions if the need arose. His gaze in the video was empty but loyal, bringing her a grim satisfaction. Control. Power. That was all that mattered.

Suddenly, the door opened again, shattering the silence like thunder on a clear day. Alex, her lead cameraman, entered, his face serious, a flicker of concern in his eyes.

"Tanya, everything's ready for the shoot. We leave in ten minutes."

She spun around sharply, all her pent-up anger erupting like lava finding a new vent, spewing forth with unstoppable force.

"Who gave you permission to enter without knocking? Do you think just because we fuck sometimes, you've got special privileges? Knock, I said! Get out and come back properly!"

Alex didn't flinch. He looked at her with that strange mix of stubbornness and pity she despised with every fiber of her being, as if he saw the Tanya she had buried deep inside.

"Tanya, are you okay?"

She couldn't bear it. Pity was like poison to her, corroding the armor she had so carefully built around herself.

"Get out!" she hissed, her voice laced with fury, sharp as a blade. "Or I'll throw you out right after Natasha!"

But Alex didn't budge. He closed the door, turned the internal lock with a quiet click, sealing them off from the outside world, and began to undress slowly, his movements confident, almost defiant.

“I’m going to calm you down now, my queen.”

His presence, his gaze full of inexplicable strength, worked on her like a spell, and in that moment, all her feigned despotism, all her armor of words and threats melted away like wax under a flame. She felt her anger recede, replaced by something deeper, more primal, something she couldn’t control but didn’t want to.

Alex stepped closer, his strong, warm hands pressing her against the massive desk, a movement both commanding and gentle, as if he knew how to ignite the fire she tried to extinguish. Their bodies collided like a storm against a cliff, in a clash brimming with hidden passion, where words had no place, only a rhythm that drowned out everything—pain, anger, emptiness. Her dress, strict yet form-fitting, slid upward, revealing the delicate lace of black lingerie, like a spiderweb barely concealing her pale skin, alluring as forbidden fruit. Her curves, soft yet firm, responded to his every move, her breathing grew heavy like the air before a thunderstorm, and her skin glistened with a faint sheen of sweat, like dew on a morning flower.

He pushed her beyond the edge, to a place with no power, no control, only raw, untamed energy that burned everything in its path. Her fingers dug into the polished surface of the desk, leaving invisible marks, and her body arched like a bow stretched to its limit, ready to release an arrow. Inside her raged a storm, a mix of fury and release, and for those ten minutes, she forgot she was the head of a department with over a hundred employees, a queen whose word was law. She was just a woman, drowning in waves she couldn’t stop, nor did she want to.

When it subsided, her breathing was still uneven, her heart pounding like a drum, echoing in her temples. Alex stepped back, his gaze warm but tinged with a concern she didn’t want to see. She adjusted her dress, the fabric sliding over her skin like cold silk, pulling her back to reality, to the mask she wore as armor. But something inside trembled, a crack in her walls that she immediately tried to seal, refusing to allow herself weakness.

Chapter 5: Falling Mask

Deep in the night, her personal phone rang with a persistence capable of piercing any armor, even the one Tanya had built around her heart. She slept lightly, as always, ready to leap up at any moment like a predator sensing danger. The alcoholic haze from the evening meeting had dissipated, leaving only a bitter taste on her tongue and a heavy throb in her temples, like echoes of a distant storm. She glanced at the screen. “Mom.” Her heart, long trained not to falter, clenched for a moment, like a fist gripped by pain. Her mother called rarely, and certainly never at three in the morning, when the world was steeped in darkness and silence.

She picked up the phone, her fingers cold as ice.

“Mom? What’s wrong?”

From the receiver came a soft, broken sob, followed by a voice she hadn’t heard like this since childhood—weak, trembling, full of unbearable anguish.

“Tany... Leni...”

No more needed to be said. A cold, steel needle stabbed into her chest, under her ribs, and lodged there, freezing her soul. The world didn’t collapse. It froze. It simply ceased to matter, as if someone had switched off the lights, leaving her in utter darkness.

“Lena...?” Her own voice sounded foreign, flat, devoid of emotion, like an echo in an empty room.

“Accident...” Sobs drowned out the words, tearing through the silence. “Ambulance took her... In the hospital... It’s bad... Tanyusha, come...”

She hung up, her movements mechanical, like a puppet pulled by invisible strings. She got out of bed. Walked to the window. The night city burned beyond the glass as if nothing had happened, its lights flickering, indifferent to her pain. Somewhere out there, in one of those hospitals, her sister was dying. Her Lenochka. The only person whose calls she always answered, without irritation, without calculation. The only one she sent money to without a single sarcastic remark, as if trying to atone for her dark, poisoned soul. The only ray of light Tanya had so carefully hidden in the furthest, most guarded corner of her heart, to keep it untainted by her darkness, by her endless battle for power.

She drove to the hospital on autopilot, like a machine programmed for motion. Parking lot, elevator, endless white corridor reeking of death and antiseptic, the scent seeping into her skin like poison. The doctor, weary and detached, spread his hands, his voice dry as autumn leaves. “Traumatic brain injury, internal bleeding... We did everything we could.” Those words sounded like a sentence, like a heavy stone dropping into an abyss.

She entered the ward. Her mother, hunched over, instantly aged by twenty years, sobbed into the blanket, her tears silent but heart-wrenching. And on the bed lay Lena. Her Lena. Weightless, pale as a porcelain figurine, with tubes in her mouth and veins, like a web holding her on the edge of life. A bruise on her cheek, a dark stain on a clean page. But still beautiful. Still that little girl with dimples, who trailed after her, calling in a clear voice, “Tanya, wait for me!”

Tanya approached and took her hand. Cold. Lifeless. She waited for a wave to crash over her. For her to scream, to be torn apart by pain, to collapse to her knees, crushed by grief. But nothing happened. Inside was the same icy emptiness as always, bottomless as a chasm where no light could penetrate. Only the needle under her ribs stirred, causing a dull, aching pain that wouldn’t let go but didn’t break her either.

She stood there, unmoving, not crying, like a statue carved from marble, until the monitor emitted a long, steady beep. A sound, flat and merciless, like a stone falling into mud, announcing the end. The end of everything that tied her to something human.

The funeral was gray, like her soul. The sky wept for her, drizzling a fine, irritating mist that soaked through her clothes and skin, as if trying to awaken something alive in her. At the fresh grave,

relatives and acquaintances gathered, their faces twisted with sorrow. Everyone cried. Her mother sobbed, her tears silent but heavy as lead. Aunts whimpered, their voices blending into a mournful chorus. Even her perpetually drunk uncle Igor wiped away a rare male tear, hiding his face in his sleeve.

Tanya stood motionless, like a stranger at this festival of pain. In a strict black suit, dark sunglasses concealing her eyes, she was impeccable, as always. A cold marble monument amid human grief, surrounded by a sea of tears, yet dry as a desert where nothing grew but thorns.

Natasha approached her. The same Natasha she'd kicked out of her office, whose words about friendship still rang in her memory like shards of broken glass. There was no reproach in Natasha's eyes, only endless pity and pain—the things Tanya hated most in the world.

"Tanya..." She gently placed a hand on her shoulder, her touch warm but unbearable. "Cry. It'll help."

Tanya slowly turned her head. She looked at Natasha's hand, then at her face, and in her gaze, there was nothing but icy emptiness.

"Take your hand off," she whispered. Her voice was quiet, but it rang with steel, sharp and cold as a blade ready to cut.

Natasha recoiled as if stung, her hand trembling, but she said nothing, only stepped back, dissolving into the gray crowd of mourners.

Tanya stared again at the coffin being lowered into the earth, into the black maw of the grave that swallowed everything she had left. She tried. Tried to force herself to feel. She remembered Lena, so small, giving her a clumsily drawn card, her fingers sticky with glue, trembling with pride. How they laughed together over some silly movie, lying on an old couch, sharing a blanket. How Lena, grown up, spoke to her with gentle concern: "Tanya, you've become so prickly. I love you no matter what, but... be careful, okay?"

Nothing. No tears, no lump in her throat. Just the same emptiness. Deafening, numbing, absolute, like an abyss she kept falling deeper into. And a realization, terrifying and final, like a verdict: she couldn't cry. The mechanism for tears, for pain, for grief, had broken in her. It had atrophied over the years she trained herself to feel nothing but anger and contempt, when she built walls of ice and steel around herself so no one and nothing could break through.

She hadn't just lost her sister. She discovered she'd lost herself. The part that could mourn. The part that could love. And that loss was more terrifying than any grave, because she was alive, yet dead inside.

When the coffin disappeared into the ground and people began to disperse, Alex approached. He silently handed her a white rose, its petals cold as her heart. There was no fear or subservience in his eyes. Only understanding. And that was unbearable, like sunlight striking eyes accustomed to darkness.

"Leave," she told him, and her voice finally cracked. Not from grief. From rage. Rage at herself, at this emptiness devouring her from within, leaving nothing but ash.

She stayed at the grave alone. The rain soaked her expensive suit, her hair, her face, its drops cold as her soul. She removed her sunglasses, letting the water stream down her cheeks like counterfeit tears she couldn't shed. But it was a deception. A cheap imitation, like everything in her life.

She bent down, took a handful of wet, cold earth, and clenched it in her fist. Dirt lodged under her perfectly manicured nails, staining what always remained flawless.

"Forgive me, Lena," she whispered into the void, her voice hoarse like the wind over a grave. "Forgive me for not even being able to say goodbye like a human being."

But there was no answer. Only the wind, the rain, and the same icy, silent emptiness inside, which had become her only companion. A part of Tanya died with her sister, but how large that part was, she couldn't grasp in this tragic moment. She knew only one thing: what remained was merely a shell, a shadow of who she once was, and that shadow didn't know how to live on.

Chapter 6: Mirror for a Hero

Time, once frozen, could not be filled with anything, and the tools that had once sustained her—power, control, cold calculation—had ceased to function, like a broken mechanism. Tanya returned to work a week after the funeral, rising like a soldier from a trench after a crushing defeat. That same week, she had spent in a daze, drowning her solitude in expensive whiskey within the empty, cavernous expanse of her apartment, where every corner was steeped in a silence as heavy as a gravestone. She strode into the television channel's building with her head held high, clad in an impeccable black suit, her makeup concealing the traces of sleepless nights and the dark shadows beneath her eyes. She was Tanya—the chief producer. Unbreakable. The Iron Lady, whose armor bore no cracks. Or so she believed.

But something had shifted, subtly yet irrevocably. The employees didn't merely part for her as before, with caution and reverence—they turned away, hastily shutting office doors, their whispers fading as she passed by. Yet in this silence, there was more than just fear. The air was thick with something new, acrid like the scent of betrayal—a malicious glee that hovered around her, like a toxic fog.

Olga, her new assistant, greeted her pale and trembling, as if facing not a person but a specter whose presence chilled the blood. She had heard of Tanya, of her cold, ruthless nature, but when met with that gaze—sharp as a blade—she was momentarily paralyzed.

"Tanya Vasilyevna... You're expected in the chairman of the board's office. Immediately."

"For what reason?" Tanya asked coldly, shedding her coat with a nonchalant grace, as if her heart hadn't clenched with a dark premonition.

"I... I don't know," the girl stammered, lowering her eyes, her voice quivering like a fragile thread ready to snap. "But... the entire holding's leadership is there."

Tanya felt a shiver run down her spine, thin but piercing, like a needle. Yet she crushed the sensation, clenching it in her fist as she always did. She had endured worse—the loss of Lena, the emptiness gnawing at her from within. What could they do to her? What could they possibly do—kill her? The thought, dark and bitter, flickered through her mind, but she brushed it aside like an annoying fly. Her armor was strong. Or so she thought.

The chairman's office was crowded, the air heavy as before a storm. Everyone was there: Viktor Petrovich, avoiding her gaze, hiding his eyes as if ashamed of her very presence; Kirill, whose lips curled into a barely concealed smirk; and other important figures whose names she scarcely remembered but whose private moments with her—in the silence of offices and hotel rooms, where power mingled with something darker, more dangerous—she recalled vividly. At the head of the table sat the chairman himself, a stern man in his sixties, his face carved from stone, his gaze cold as a winter wind.

"Tanya Vasilyevna, take a seat," he said without preamble, his voice hard as a hammer's strike.

She sat, maintaining her mask of indifference, her back straight as a steel rod, her hands resting calmly on the armrests. But inside, something trembled, like cracked glass.

"How can I be of service? If this is about the quarterly report, it will be on your desk by noon."

"It's not about the report," the chairman replied, pushing a tablet away from himself and turning it toward her with a cold, almost theatrical precision. On the screen was a video, crystal clear. Her office. Her, on her knees before Kirill. Her humiliating posture, his triumphant face, brimming with grim satisfaction. "This is about reputation. The reputation of the channel, which you, it seems, treated as your personal brothel."

Tanya froze, her blood turning to ice in her veins. She stared at the screen, disbelieving, her mind refusing to accept what her eyes saw. This was impossible. This was her weapon, her secret, her power. And now it was displayed for all to see, like an enemy's trophy.

“This... it’s a fake,” she forced out, but her voice betrayed her, trembling like a string stretched to its limit.

“Unfortunately, it’s not,” Kirill couldn’t suppress a smirk, his eyes gleaming with malice, like a predator scenting blood. “Sergey Igorevich, before he left, gifted us an entire collection of such... homemade videos. Quite educational. Here you are with Viktor Petrovich in his office, and with that young cameraman... What’s his name? Alex. And a few other... vivid moments.”

She shifted her gaze to Viktor Petrovich. He stared out the window, his neck and ears flushed a deep red, whether from shame or fear, but he didn’t dare meet her eyes. Traitor. Coward. She clenched her fists under the table so hard her nails dug into her skin.

“We’re not moralists, Tanya Vasilyevna,” the chairman continued, his voice cold as a draft in an abandoned house. “But we are a business. And when compromising material on a key employee circulates through all media, it hits the holding’s stocks. It hits trust. You’ve become a threat to stability.”

“I raised this channel’s ratings by thirty percent!” she shouted, leaping to her feet, her voice quaking with rage, wild and helpless, like a beast cornered. “I turned it into a goldmine! And you... you judge me for my personal life?!”

“Your ‘personal life’ was a tool for career advancement, and we understand that,” the chairman countered coldly, his gaze like a knife piercing her armor. “But now that tool has turned against us. Against you. The dossier is already with all major media outlets. By noon, everyone will know. We cannot take the risk.”

He placed an envelope on the table, his movement slow, almost ritualistic, like a executioner’s verdict.

“Your resignation letter, by your own request. And a signed non-disclosure agreement. You have one hour to clear out your office. A security guard will escort you.”

The world tilted, spinning as if in a nightmare. She stood, gripping the back of the chair, feeling the ground slip from beneath her feet, her empire crumbling like a sandcastle under crashing waves. She had lost. Lost to the very Sergey she had deemed insignificant, whom she had crushed like an insect. Her weapon—her body, her power, her ability to manipulate—had turned against her, a poisoned blade. The mirror in which she had so loved to admire her perfect reflection now showed her a grotesque, pitiful image, one she wanted to turn away from but couldn’t muster the strength to.

“Everyone is dismissed,” the chairman said, his voice the final blow. People began to leave, avoiding her gaze, their footsteps echoing like a drumroll at an execution. As Kirill passed by, he whispered, his words dripping with venom:

“I hope the throne was worth it, queen.”

She was left alone in the vast office. The silence was deafening, like the aftermath of an explosion, when emptiness rings in your ears. Her heart pounded, not from fear, but from a searing, corrosive humiliation that burned her from within.

She walked to her office as if in a dream, her steps heavy, as if her legs were filled with lead. The door was already open, as if awaiting her, as if her downfall was inevitable. A security guard, a grim man with a stony face, stood nearby, like a sentinel at the gates of hell. Olga, without lifting her eyes, packed Tanya’s belongings into a cardboard box, her movements quick, almost panicked.

“I’ll do it myself,” Tanya whispered, her voice hoarse, as if after a long scream.

Olga nodded and left, leaving her alone with the guard, whose presence weighed on her like a heavy burden.

Tanya slowly surveyed her office. Her empire. Her throne. Her fortress, built over years at the cost of everything—friendship, love, humanity. Now it was just an empty space, cold and alien, like an abandoned temple where no one prayed to the gods anymore.

She packed her things into the box. Expensive pens, designer trinkets, a few documents—all of it suddenly seemed foreign, useless junk, like shards of a shattered crown. Her hands trembled, but she refused to break, not here, not now, not in front of this silent witness to her fall.

With the box in her arms, she stepped into the corridor. The guard followed two steps behind, like a shadow, a reminder of her powerlessness. Employees passed by, their faces blank, their eyes averted. No one met her gaze. No one said goodbye. She was a ghost, invisible, erased from their world, like a mistake to be corrected.

In the elevator, she pulled out her phone, her fingers trembling like autumn leaves in the wind. She dialed Natasha's number. The call was rejected after the first ring, the sound like a slap across her face. She dialed Alex, her last hope, her final straw. He answered, but his voice was cold and distant, like a winter day.

"Tanya, I'm on a shoot. What do you want?"

"Alex..." Her voice cracked, like breaking ice, revealing the abyss beneath. "I... I need somewhere to go."

"I don't think that's a good idea. After everything... After you threw me out on the day of your sister's funeral... I think it's better if we don't talk."

He hung up, and the sound was like the final nail in her coffin.

She stood on the street under the cold autumn rain, clutching the cardboard box, like the heroine of a cheap movie after a firing, where everything collapses in an instant. Rain streamed down her face, mingling with the bitter salt she couldn't shed. A taxi? To where? To her empty, lifeless apartment? To the mausoleum she had built for herself, where every corner reeked of loneliness, where the walls echoed her past victories but couldn't shield her from pain?

She gazed at her reflection in the wet glass of the door. A blurred, distorted face. Not a queen. Not a victor. Not even a beauty. Just a woman. Alone, broken, discarded as useless, like an old thing that had lost its value.

She was utterly alone. Without a job. Without friends. Without family. Without love. With only her impeccable, terrifying emptiness inside, her sole companion. And for the first time in years, she felt not rage, not burning hatred, but fear. A quiet, piercing fear, like a cold wind seeping under her skin, from the realization that the mirror had finally shown the truth. And the truth was ugly, like a scar that couldn't be hidden, like a wound that would never heal.

Chapter 7: In Search of a Ghost

Days blurred into a single gray smear, shapeless and heavy, like wet asphalt under autumn rain. Tanya awoke in her empty apartment, staring at the ceiling where shadows from the curtains traced patterns of loneliness, finding no reason to get up. She still had money—substantial severance pay and savings, tucked away in the cold digits of bank accounts. But there was no purpose in spending it. Her world, built with such effort, had collapsed, exposing a desert where nothing grew but thorns of pain and regret.

A flicker of that stubbornness, which had once lifted her from the ashes like a phoenix, still lingered within her. If she couldn't die, then she had to try to live. But how? How does one live when inside there is only the echo of emptiness, and the heart is like a frozen lake, unstirred by any wave?

One morning, after hours of mechanical intimacy with yet another old acquaintance who knew her only as a “painter”—a mask she wore for status, to hide her true nature—she lay in tangled sheets, feeling only physical exhaustion, not of the soul. In desperation, she typed into a search engine: “psychologist, emotional numbness, depression.” Her fingers trembled like autumn leaves, but she persisted, clutching at this last straw.

She found a website with a pleasant design and a photo of a man in a white coat, about forty, with intelligent, calm eyes that seemed to see everything yet judge nothing. Eduard. She booked an appointment. Not out of faith in success, but out of hopelessness, as a final resort, like a confession before an inevitable end.

Eduard's office smelled of coffee and lavender—a scent that gently enveloped her but oddly contrasted with his strong jawline and steady gaze. Soft light poured from a desk lamp, books on the shelves created a sense of coziness, and a comfortable chair invited relaxation. Nothing clinical. Nothing intimidating. This place was like an island in the raging sea of her chaos, and Eduard felt oddly familiar, though she couldn't fathom why.

“Tell me, Tanya, what brought you here,” Eduard said. His voice was quiet but devoid of subservience or pity, carrying a steady, almost hypnotic depth.

He spoke evenly, without sharp intonations or emphasis, almost in a whisper, as if afraid to startle her honesty. Tanya, seated in the chair, her hands clenched on her knees until her knuckles whitened, tried to speak detachedly, as she did in boardroom reports—about her career, betrayals, survival tactics, her sister's death, the emptiness that had become her only companion...

“I can't cry,” she suddenly blurted out, surprising herself with the words, as if someone else had spoken them for her. “My sister died. I stood at her funeral and couldn't squeeze out a single tear. I... It's like I'm watching a bad movie. I know it should hurt, but... there's nothing.”

“And what do you feel instead of pain?” Eduard asked, his gaze attentive but not oppressive, like a beam of light piercing a dark room.

“Nothing. Emptiness. Sometimes... anger. At myself. At everyone. But mostly—nothing. As if I'm looking at the world through thick glass,” her voice wavered, but she quickly reined it in, refusing to let weakness break through.

“You mentioned using sex as a tool. What about now? Do you feel a need for closeness?”

Tanya gave a bitter smirk, her lips twisting into a cynical grimace.

“A need? No. But I read that it... that it might help. Hormones, endorphins. Maybe if I try with someone... it could wake something up in me. Like an adrenaline shot to a stopped heart.”

Eduard looked at her intently, his eyes like a mirror reflecting her exhaustion but not judgment.

“Tanya, closeness built on desperation rarely leads to healing. It can be another form of self-destruction.”

“And do I have other options?” Tanya snapped, her voice ringing like a taut string. “Wait for it to resolve itself? I’ve waited. It only gets worse. I’ll be dead soon,” she said with such raw anguish that Eduard immediately offered her a glass of water from the table, as if trying to soften her pain.

“Thank you,” she murmured after a sip, attempting to continue, but her words dissolved into the void, like smoke.

In a surge of desperation, she parted her legs, attempting to seduce the psychologist, testing if her old weapon could work even here. But Eduard, meeting her gaze, showed no emotion, his face an impenetrable stone wall. This was such a blow to her already cracked armor that she instantly pulled herself together, straightened up, and feigned innocence, but even that didn’t sway him.

“This guy’s tough, seems like he’s seen plenty of desperate women, knows all the tricks,” she thought with bitter self-mockery, feeling humiliation sear her from within.

She stepped out onto the street with a strange sensation—as if she’d been turned inside out, exposing everything she’d so carefully hidden. Sex, which she had used as a key to everything—power, control, the illusion of life—had failed her. Her weapon misfired, and it hurt more than she’d expected.

But she wasn’t one to readily accept another’s opinion. She hadn’t been healed, but she’d been given a name for her ailment. “Emotional burnout.” “Post-traumatic stress disorder.” It sounded so scientific, so impersonal, like a label to slap on her forehead and forget. But it changed nothing. She was broken, and no label could piece her back together.

That same evening, she went to a nearby bar where she’d once sealed contracts and where there was always someone to meet, someone to drown her emptiness in cheap flirtation and expensive alcohol. She wore a short black dress, clinging to her figure like a second skin, and applied flawless makeup, painting a seductress’s mask on her face. But behind that mask, there was nothing. She was hollow inside, like a burned-out house, still waiting for someone to ignite a fire within her, to fill her with new life, not just fleeting heat.

A man approached her almost immediately. Sturdy, self-assured, with an expensive watch gleaming on his wrist like a symbol of his power. Igor. Owner of a chain of restaurants, who, as it turned out, enjoyed visiting others’ establishments to pick up new ideas. They struck up a conversation. He was assertive, straightforward, his words like blows, but devoid of malice. He was drawn to her coldness, mistaking it for mystery, a challenge he wanted to unravel.

Tanya played the role of an innocent, inexperienced girl dumped by her boyfriend with finesse—her voice trembled at the right moments, her eyes lowered demurely, her smile soft yet promising. She performed her old part like an actress who knew every gesture, every line. She smiled, nodded, cast ambiguous glances, touched his hand at the perfect moment. Internally, she observed herself from a distance, like a director watching an actress, noting detachedly: “Touch his hand now. Lower your gaze seductively. Say this. Do that.”

They ended up in his penthouse apartment with a view of the night city, where lights flickered, indifferent to her inner darkness. Everything was as it had been before. Expensive, stylish, soulless, like a set for a scene of empty passion.

“You’re incredible,” he whispered, peeling off her dress, his hands rough but skilled, like those of a man accustomed to taking what he wanted without hesitation.

Tanya responded with passionate kisses that were as empty as her soul. She let out moans that were quiet cries of despair, disguised as desire. She led him to the massive bed, her body moving on instinct while her mind screamed: “Now. Now something will stir. Something will come alive.” Her black lace lingerie, thin as a spiderweb, slipped down, revealing pale skin, alluring yet cold as marble. His fingers traced her curves, the soft yet taut lines of her body, but she felt only the touch, not warmth, not a spark, not life.

He took her like a storm crashing against the shore, and she wrapped her legs around him as she had done countless times before, to give pleasure and gain control, to feel something, anything. She

moved like a well-tuned machine, her hips rising and falling in a rhythm honed over years. Her skin glistened with a faint sheen of perspiration, like morning dew, her breath quickened, her body reacted on autopilot—all the physical signs of arousal were there. But inside was only emptiness, black as an abyss where no light could penetrate. She stared at the back of his head, at the ceiling, at her reflection in the mirrored wardrobe—a beautiful, writhing doll whose movements lacked soul. Her chest rose and fell like waves under the wind, but her heart remained still, like a stone at the ocean's bottom.

He reached his peak with a loud groan, collapsing onto her, his body heavy, hot, but alien. Tanya lay there, gazing at the ceiling, waiting. Waiting for something to awaken in her—tenderness, disgust, shame, anything. Any emotion, any spark that could ignite life within her.

Nothing. Only a cold emptiness, like a winter wind howling through her chest.

He propped himself up on an elbow, grinning, his eyes shining with self-satisfaction.

“So? How was it?” He awaited compliments, validation of his masculinity, a trophy for his conquest.

Tanya looked at him, her gaze empty as a scorched desert. And suddenly, she broke. Not with tears, but with words. Bitter, honest, unadorned, like a knife slicing through the silence.

“Nothing. Absolutely no feeling. I just played my part. Like a prostitute. Only free.”

His smile slid off his face, replaced by offended confusion, his brows furrowing like dark clouds.

“What? Are you sick or something?”

“Yes,” Tanya said quietly, rising and dressing with sharp, precise movements. “Yes, I’m sick. And you didn’t help. Not even a little.”

She left his apartment without looking back, her heels clicking on the marble floor like a drumroll announcing the end of yet another illusion.

Tanya thought endlessly about herself, about being utterly alone, and a chilling fear, like a cold claw, gripped her heart, compelling her to walk home instead of calling a taxi, through a dimly lit park where only the central alley was illuminated by pale pools of lantern light.

“Hey...”

She kept walking, thinking it was just the wind or the rustle of leaves.

“Heyyy...” came a louder voice, rough as scraping metal.

She turned and saw two young men sitting on a bench, their cigarettes glowing in the darkness like predatory eyes. Their stares were sticky, heavy, laden with grim curiosity.

“Where you rushing to?”

What might happen next was easy to guess, but Tanya, instead of running, decided to take control, as she always did, even when control was an illusion. Her desperation and hopelessness erased all boundaries of what was permissible, and she surprised herself with what she was about to do.

“What are your names? Never mind, doesn’t matter. You’ll be first, and you’ll be second. I’ll tell you what to do.”

They clearly weren’t prepared for this turn of events; their bravado faltered, a flicker of uncertainty passing through their eyes like a shadow on water.

“What, you scared?” she taunted with cold mockery, walking further and leaning against a tree, her pose provocative yet devoid of passion, only steeped in the darkness of despair. “Come on, first, straight into the dark entrance. Miss, and it’s your problem.”

What she could do to two sturdy men in their mid-twenties, she didn’t fully grasp herself, but the fog of desperation clouded her mind, dissolving all barriers. She had always been cautious with men, never allowing critical danger to herself. But now, in the night, the park, the darkness—it was all a stage for her self-destruction.

The first attempted to take her but failed at first, encountering her resistance like an invisible wall. His failure gave her a strange confidence, and she smirked inwardly, bitter and cynical: “I believe in you, come on, cowboy, try again.” She even assisted, her movements mechanical yet precise, like

someone accustomed to controlling everything, even chaos. He entered her like a storm through a narrow strait, and her body tensed, not from passion but from cold calculation.

“And what are you standing there for, second?” she snapped, her voice sharp as a whip.

He approached awkwardly, shuffling his feet, taking too long to figure out how to position himself, his uncertainty almost comical if not for the darkness of the situation.

“Are you crazy or something? Take my mouth.”

Such words, apparently, he had never heard spoken aloud, and for a moment, his resolve wavered, but Tanya, not waiting for him to muster courage, reached for him, her movements sharp, almost aggressive. She pulled him closer, her lips and hands moving with a hunger devoid of feeling, like a machine programmed for action. Her breathing was heavy, not from desire but from inner tension, like a cornered beast. She brought him to his peak, her actions precise as a surgeon’s but cold as ice, and when he released with a loud groan, she merely pushed him away, her voice cutting like a blade.

“Go, rest.”

At that moment, she began moving on the first with such force that he nearly stumbled backward, barely holding himself up with widely braced legs, his body trembling from the strain. She felt his rhythm quicken, clenching around him like a vise, trying to wring out everything, to feel something, even an illusion of control. But inside was still that same emptiness, an abyss swallowing everything, leaving nothing behind.

Straightening up, she leisurely pulled out a tissue, wiping herself with cold methodical precision—first in front, then behind—and handed it to the second, who sat on a nearby bench, staring at the stars as if trying to comprehend what had just happened. Then she walked away, her steps firm, though inside, everything was collapsing.

She realized Eduard had been right. This wasn’t a path to salvation. It was another act of self-destruction, another step into the abyss she was falling deeper into. And she had just confirmed it, feeling her soul—or what remained of it—crack further.

The urge to return to Eduard for another session struck her the moment she stepped onto the lit street outside the park, where the lanterns seemed the only light in her darkness. Her heart, cold and heavy as stone, still beat, and she knew she had to try again, even if it was the last attempt before surrendering completely.

Chapter 8. The Wrong Patient

Tanya despised this place with every fiber of her being. She loathed the scent of lavender that wrapped around her softly, yet irritated her like a counterfeit kindness, a mockery of care. She hated the cozy cushions scattered across the couch, as if their plush softness could somehow cushion the raw, jagged edges of her inner pain. Most of all, she detested Eduard's calm gaze, which seemed to strip her bare—not of clothes, but of the fragile armor around her soul, exposing every crack, every hollow void within her. She sat in the waiting room, flipping through a glossy magazine, her eyes blind to the words and images, her fingers mechanically turning pages while her mind swirled in a dark, inescapable whirlpool of despair. The door opened, and her heart, taut as a violin string, trembled.

Alex walked in, accompanied by someone else—a young, lanky boy with a distant gaze, his eyes fixed on some invisible point beyond reality.

“Hello, we have an appointment with Eduard Viktorovich at five. Alex and Semyon,” Alex's voice was steady, yet warm, like a ray of sunlight piercing through storm clouds.

Tanya couldn't tear her eyes away. She watched as he helped his brother shrug off his jacket, his movements gentle, almost tender, as he murmured, “Sema, sit here, okay?” The boy obeyed, sinking onto the couch, resuming a quiet hum, a melody that seemed to be his sanctuary from the world. Alex sat beside him, resting a hand on his shoulder—a gesture so natural, so full of quiet, brotherly care, that something inside Tanya lurched, like ice cracking beneath her feet. She couldn't decipher it—was it irritation, envy, or something deeper, something she hadn't felt in so long it was almost foreign?

She expected him to speak to her, to throw a barbed remark, sharp as a thorn, to prick at her pride. To ask what she was doing here, with that familiar smirk in his voice. To attempt to rekindle their old, dirty, soulless connection, where passion was nothing but a mask for emptiness. But he didn't look at her. His entire focus was on his brother. He whispered something in Semyon's ear, and for a fleeting moment, the boy smiled, his face lighting up like a pale glow in a dark room. That simple, human moment cut through Tanya sharper than any words could.

A venomous irritation, sharp and toxic, rose within her like a hissing serpent from the depths. Who was he to ignore her? This former cameraman, one of many who had lain in her bed, a mere pawn in her games of power and control? He should have been groveling for her attention, chasing her gaze, desperate to reclaim what once was, when she was the queen and he, just another subject. Yet there he sat, with his fragile brother, looking... whole. Grounded. As if his world hadn't shattered in an instant, as if he hadn't been crushed by her icy betrayal. It was unbearable.

The door to the office opened, and Eduard emerged, his figure in the doorway like a lighthouse in a storm, though to Tanya, he was just another test to endure.

“Semyon, come in, please. Alex, will you wait here?”

Alex stood, guiding his brother into the office, his movements confident yet soft, as if carrying something delicate. When the door closed, he finally turned to Tanya. His gaze met hers directly, calmly—a mirror in which she saw herself not as a queen, not as a seductress, but as a broken, lost woman.

“Hey, Tanya,” his voice was even, devoid of mockery or malice.

“Hey,” her reply came out hoarse, as if the words were stuck in her throat. She braced herself for a jab, a reproach, anything that would give her an excuse to lash back with venom.

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