

Ulyana Mirova

TOMORROW
MUST
BE



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«АВТОР»

2026

Mirova U.

Tomorrow must be / U. Mirova — «Автор», 2026

Based on true events. An author's interpretation. All names are fictional. Any resemblance to real persons is purely coincidental. Working at a juvenile correctional facility seemed like a coincidence — a strange, almost desperate way to start life over. But there are no coincidences. There, she will witness things no one can truly prepare for: power and helplessness, fear and cruelty, unexpected feelings, workplace intrigue, and fragile human connections in a place where every single day could be a test. Translated from Russian by Sophia Gubanova.

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Prologue

...Rage consumed the inmates. They knocked the radio from his hands and began savagely beating him with rods and clubs. Even after he fell, they didn't stop.

He tried to reason with them, shouted for them to stop, but they couldn't hear him. They beat him, beat him, kicked him.

Some inmates were replaced by others. And again, over and over. Beating, beating, kicking.

The snow began turning red with his blood, but that only excited them further. They beat him, beat him, beat him.

He was no longer resisting. The marks of boots crushed his skull until it became as soft as the ground beneath him. And still they beat him, beat him, beat him. They couldn't stop. In that moment, he seemed to them the embodiment of hell on earth.

It felt like an eternity had passed. In reality, only a few minutes had gone by.

The surveillance operator watched the murder unfold helplessly, tears streaming down her face. All she could do was frantically call the administration, call for ambulances, scream over the radio to the duty shift, and document, document, document. She could do nothing for him. She could no longer help him in any way.

He lay motionless in the snow, blood spreading beneath his head. And his tormentors, tired of kicking the lifeless body, abandoned him and rushed off in search of new victim.

Loud shouting drew inmates from the other units, and as they ran outside, they saw the duty officer's body frozen motionless on the cold ground. Seeing him, they spat on him and mocked him.

And not a single soul on that parade ground pitied him in that moment. Not one.

And at that very moment, one pair of eyes watched the savage crowd through tears so thick they could barely see.

When the back of the last inmate disappeared into the darkness, she, against every instruction, ran across the parade ground without a thought for herself. She completely forgot about herself, about what those children of yesterday, who had turned into wild beasts today, could do to her. She thought only that she might still help the man who had already lain motionless for half an hour.

Reaching him, she dropped to her knees beside him, sliding her uniform jacket beneath his head. She wiped the blood from his hair and kept stroking, stroking his head in a kind of numb trance.

Even the weather seemed to pity her grief. Large snowflakes began falling onto the blood-soaked snow, covering the blood with their delicate white purity. She stared at the scene as if hypnotized, unable to tear her eyes away. Then some force pulled her out of that stupor, and she came to her senses.

The decision came instantly. Where did such strength come from in that thin little body? She grabbed him under the arms from behind and dragged him across the parade ground. *I need to get him somewhere safe, I need to save him at all costs. He's alive – she was absolutely certain of it.*

He can't die.

The same season, the same snow, the same trees... If he died, there would be nothing: not the snow, not the trees. Nothing at all.

It was the first time she had ever seen death so close, and she couldn't accept it. She had simply worked with him; he wasn't someone close to her. But in that moment, there was no one in the world closer than him.

A hundred meters across the parade ground... If you walked it normally, it was only a couple of minutes. But dragging such a heavy, and yet so precious cargo... There's no way to leave him.

God, it feels like an eternity. The tears were gone now, frozen into icy crystals on her cheeks. Rage at the whole situation gave her strength. And finally, there it was – the desperately awaited door to the control room.

Dragging him up the stairs, holding his head, tearing the gloves off her frozen, unresponsive fingers as she moved, she slipped the gloves beneath his head so it wouldn't rest on the cold concrete floor.

Unlocking the door, she used the last of her strength to pull him into the duty office.

Now I just need to make him comfortable and wait for the ambulance. He's strong. He will definitely wait it out...

Part 1. A Shadow Behind the Back

Chapter 1. Happenstance

Employment for Federal Penitentiary Service has tons of reasons.

First of all, the possibility of employment without experience. Many people struggle to find a good job, not part-time jobs as courier, order collector, waiter but work in the specialty exactly. Who needs you without experience? Who would want to teach someone from scratch? Employers want everything at once – a “work horse”, to lock up and go.

Secondly, the stability. Reasons for being absent from work don't matter, illness or vacation, you get paid at the same time every month. Stability is the same, without any KPI. However, there is a kind of KPI, called «Wage premium for complexity and tension». Fifty percent wage premium is payable, the remaining seventy: at the discretion of management, which decides how hard you work while performing your duty.

Thirdly, the seniority. Service here counts as one and a half years for every year, making it possible to retire after twelve and a half years of duty. Receiving so-called pension for years of service and be free to work wherever the heart desires. Or don't work at all. Of course, to earn it, you have to forget your own time, forget about loved ones, and remember only where you serve, and for what cause.

Not one of those reasons was mine. I had ended up here by accident and never meant to stay for long.

The employment without experience? I had an offer to stay at the university department after graduating. At the time, I thought it was all decided. I would go to graduate school while doing what I loved.

The stability? But I don't need money.

The seniority? Huh, I didn't have any thoughts about earning a pension. I was just graduating from university, I have my whole life ahead of me. A pension? What are you talking about? Oh, please!

People around me couldn't understand me. I moved to small town, and took a job at juvenile correctional facility. How someone as promising as me could abandon plans for higher study and a brilliant future?

Only one person knew what happened. The reason of my sudden departure to the middle of nowhere.

Chapter 2. Running Away

...I was so happy a half of a year ago.

I was going to continue my education at graduate school after graduating from university. I was going to get a job at the department, it would even be more comfortable. Work and study can be combined.

The apartment I was meant to move into had just been newly renovated.

I was seeing the best man in the world, and I had real, far-reaching plans for us.

The preparation for my state exams drained me so completely that I failed to notice, at first, how Darling had vanished from my horizon.

One evening, lingering late in the library, I decided to walk home. It was warm, almost like summer, dusk was setting in, and the walk home along the embankment was pure pleasure.

I walked on, thinking about how my adult life would soon begin. I was looking forward to the adult life with eager anticipation. I was drawing colorful paintings of the adult life in my head. Then familiar voice broke into my visions. I listened closely. The voice came from the bottom of the embankment. Another voice, soft and melodic, threaded itself through the sounds of the voice.

I stopped. I've never did so. But now I had to see who have that familiar voice belonged to.

I approached the railing and looked down. On the lower level, a couple of a young man and a young woman stood with their backs to me, leaning on the railing. The scene radiated tenderness. Any other time I would admire it, I would have been happy for them. But today I stood after seeing the woman's partner. I would recognize this silhouette of a million male silhouettes.

I ran home without paying attention to the road. *How could he? How could he do this to me?* Tears streamed down my face.

How low.

How cruel.

How painful.

By the time I reached home, the only person I told that was my mother.

For so many years, she supported me, listened to me, felt sorry for me. I ran to her with all my troubles and my joys.

Now, when sky fell on me, she was the only one I told.

I didn't want to find out anything.

I simply decided to leave his life silently, without a single word.

Of course, he tried to get through, but I didn't pick up the phone. He tried to wait for me outside the university. But when I saw him I went to the library and stayed up late. He tried to find me at home. But every time my mother told him that I was away. Days passed, then weeks and it seemed to me that he had given up.

After struggling through my exams and defending my thesis, I moved to small, unmarkable city, whose beauty I had heard from my mates.

I needed a small break.

It was hard to be with him at the same city. To run into him unexpectedly somewhere and listen to his excuses would be disgusting. So, my mother supported my decision.

I rented an apartment overlooking the park. I spent hours walking through it and watching the ducks on the pond. I was watching other people's leisurely walks. I was pictured the life they must be leading – full and happy. My heart was full of joy for them, and the anticipation of something good that would surely come into my life.

With each passing day, my memories of him faded in color and took on more blurred outlines.

At first, I went away for the summer. As summer was moving into autumn, I realized that I can't bear to come back. I can't bear to see those streets that we walked in. I can't bear to stay in my room at my parents' home where I so often waited for him. I can't bear to breathe the air we once shared together.

My mother understood my condition. Of course, she was upset because I wasn't there, but my peace of mind was much more important for her.

That's how I ended up far from home, cut off from my surroundings.

A little later, deciding to stay in this city, I started looking for work. Of course, at first my first impulse was to get a job at school, but I wanted to change everything in my life. I wanted to erase the past that was somehow connected with him. That's why I began to consider some incredible options for myself.

I thought that by changing everything: city, sphere of activity and being away from Him, I might finally come to terms with what happened.

So, when I saw a vacancy in the local newspaper, I started to think about it. A job of an inspector at the correctional facility seemed like a dream. It was something entirely new to me, both alluring and frightening me at the same time. And without thinking long, I made my decision.

Chapter 3. A Stranger

Autumn as autumn. The wind, the fallen leaves caught in the frost, rustle and break under the feet. The snow isn't in a hurry this year either. It was cold and drizzled. For a sheepskin - early, for an autumn jacket - it was cold.

Warm and flushed after my morning run, I savored a crisp cheese toast, reflecting on my independent adult life.

Several months have passed since I moved to this city. I started getting used to the streams of water after the rain, rushing noisily along the green, wide streets and drying right before my eyes. I started getting used to the chorus of birds outside my window from early morning and the calm, measured rhythm of a small town.

I started getting used to the life without Him, such a dear person to me.

To keep myself busy, I visited the swimming pool several evenings a week. I liked that it was especially crowded here in the evenings. So, I felt like I'm not alone.

One of those evenings, I was returning home, strolling leisurely toward the pedestrian crossing. As soon as I stepped on it, a car passed by, splashing me with mud that hadn't yet frozen and was covered in ice.

I paused in disbelief, looking at my clothes. Confusion was written on my face. *Who is in such a hurry this evening, not paying attention to pedestrians?* Feeling uneasy, I walked along the pedestrian crossing to further down the block towards home. Before I had time to cross the road, I saw a car that had just splattered me with dirt. It was moving backwards, heading towards me with hazard lights turned on.

Well, enough is enough! I was outraged. *As if getting me dirty wasn't enough, does he also want to crash me?* I deliberately ignored him and sped up.

"Miss," I heard a voice from the side of the car. Few people nowadays use this word.

"Miss, please, wait!"

It caught my interest.

"Are you talking to me?", I said it out loud, turning my head to him.

"Yes, yes! Miss, I'm sorry!"

The tall, well-dressed man stepped out of the car and headed towards me. A light mid-line on cut temples told his age.

"I was completely awkward and splashed you," he said, his smooth-shaven face reflecting sincere regret.

"Of course, that's not an excuse! I'm sorry again!" He put his hand on his chest, slightly bowing his head.

Oh, I forgave him even when he was just starting to speak. How sweetly he sings. It's impossible not to get lost in it.

"Allow me to take you home," he said.

What? Take me home? Did I hear that right? I don't even know him, and suddenly he wants to give me a ride! No, of course not! I'll walk perfectly fine on my own! Sure, he's polite and pleasant to talk to, but...

I declined politely and, saying I was expected, walked away.

I was walking and reflecting on this man. Communication that wasn't made at the very beginning left such a pleasant memory at the end.

During breaks between medical examinations, psychological testing, and waiting for the results of various checks, I looked forward to starting work. I eagerly read specialized literature on crisis

psychology and aggression management. I believed that this knowledge could be useful when working with adolescents in detention

Back then, I couldn't even imagine what I would encounter in reality.

By November, I was already doing an internship as an inspector in the educational department of the juvenile correctional facility. Irina, whom I had met during the hiring process and who had a medical background, was interning in the medical unit.

We had less free time, but despite that, we often spent our evenings together.

Trying to drown off loneliness, we kept each other company: going out to a cafe for a meal or staying home, over a cup of tea or something stronger. We shared little women's things and secrets, discussed work matters, or simply gossiped.

At last, my life gained a calm, measured rhythm.

Settling into the correctional facility, I opened a new chapter of my life.

My new job seemed very interesting to me. I wanted to go through all the documentation, understand where each number came from, and grasp the important role our department played. There was so much I wanted to accomplish, and yet so few working hours in the week.

But staying late at work was only possible with an official order from the boss for overtime. The head of HR strictly enforces this rule. So, I had to make do with my regular working hours.

Soon, it would be New Year. In the institution, all holidays are usually celebrated by the entire staff, and this occasion was no exception. I reluctantly agreed to attend the office party, unlike Irina. She loves such events. Perhaps I agreed only because of her.

Chapter 4. Hometown Cold

In the run-up to the New Year holidays, I finally decided to visit my hometown for the first time in a long time.

In my heart, there was a strong sense of the New Year's miracle and I wanted to see my loved ones. Seeing ex Darling wasn't in my plans in that hoping for that New Year's miracle.

Mom was happy with my decision and went to make the cake I loved, and dad decided to cook fish according to a special recipe for this occasion. My family's chores were organized. Only my arriving was left. I decided to come on the weekend before the office party. And, having packed my bag, I left on the scheduled day.

Hometown met me with winter's cold and holiday-themed streets. As I stepped out of the train, it felt like I had never left this place.

My beloved city, everything feels so familiar, so close! My dad waved at me as he came to meet me. It was only a short drive home, and my mom was waiting for me there.

Such a warm welcome... how long had it been since I had seen them? Half a year? More? But none of it mattered anymore. I'm home. I'm home again. Maybe I should come back for good, if it feels this right to be here? With such bright, hopeful thoughts, I fell asleep in my favorite bed, hugging my teddy bear.

The next day flew by, and I found myself growing more certain about my decision to return. And why not? A job? I would find one back home. An apartment? It was waiting for me. Lost in these cheerful thoughts, I went out for a walk before bed.

Tomorrow. I will make my final decision tomorrow. In any case, whether I choose to continue working or to quit, I will have to go back to that small town.

As I walked, I wondered how Irina would react to my news.

I walked along, taking in the decorated houses, catching snowflakes on my lips as they fell so beautifully over the city. I passed one street, then another, then a third. I hadn't even expected to wander so far on my walk.

I looked around for a bus stop. My feet were starting to freeze, and I didn't want to get cold. Not seeing any stop nearby, I slipped into a bakery that caught my eye.

A cup of hot tea and a sweet bun would brighten my evening. As I placed my order, I looked around for a place to sit. And then my gaze fell on a familiar back. It slid lower. And lower still. I recognized the clothes, on a body I knew all too well.

Flushing, I left my tea and bun right at the counter and rushed out, not caring where I was going. I no longer needed a bus stop. I just needed to get home, to my room, to hide under the covers and drive that image out of my mind.

Of course, there was no longer any question of moving back. I left the city as soon as the new day began.

For the rest of my day off, I could think of nothing else but what might have happened if we had come face to face. I might have completely lost my composure, bursting into tears like a child. How lucky I was to slip out of that bakery unnoticed.

Chapter 5 New Year's Fuss

The dining room that located in a controlled territory of the correctional facility was allocated for the New Year's office party. The tables were arranged evenly across the hall, placing all kinds of food on them. At the end of the room, a space was reserved for dancing. In the same place there was musical equipment. Special event host was invited for the evening.

Waiting for the beginning, I went out of the dining room and headed to the window, to the opposite end of the corridor. I was eagerly waiting for Irina who was late. All workers had already taken their seats, so I could enjoy the music emanating from the dining room alone.

When I heard footsteps from the side of the stairs, I turned my head in surprise and saw a stranger I knew.

"You?", I looked in surprise at the man, who had smeared dirt on me at the pedestrian crossing and so gallantly proposed to take me home a couple of months ago.

He was no less surprised by the meeting:

"You?"

"How did you get here?", I asked.

A rather mixed crowd had gathered at the office party: people's husbands, people's wives. Perhaps he had come with someone.

"No, not at all!", he dismissed my assumption, which, apparently, I had voiced out loud.

I was ready to sink through the floor with embarrassment. He either didn't notice my confusion or chose to ignore it and went on:

"I'm here completely by chance. I was just passing by on business and ended up at your celebration."

An awkward pause followed. The head of the correctional facility, who was coming down right behind him, saved the situation. He called out to my companion and asking him to follow.

The evening was opened by the warden. He delivered a formal speech, summing up the year. After congratulating everyone on the upcoming New Year, he gave the floor to the man sitting with him at a separate table, my familiar stranger.

As he stood up to speak, Irina nudged me in the side and, leaning close to my ear, whispered: "Look who's here. It's Gorin."

I didn't know who Gorin is, what I told about. I only realized that he was from the Main Department.

"You don't know him?", Irina was really surprised.

"He comes to us all the time. It's the first deputy!", she said it as if she were revealing that he was God himself, no less.

I have no idea why we didn't meet earlier at the facility. But now, at least I understood from where he was driving, when he smeared dirt on me on that day.

A program of the evening was interesting: contests, various competitions, toasts, congratulations - everything was mixed up. It added charm to the event

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the warden and his guest engaged in an important conversation at a separate table.

A slightly drunk guy from the security department approached me, asking me to dance. Not wanting to offend him with a refusal, I agreed, though I felt no pleasure at all. He breathed heavily, reeking of alcohol right into my face.

When the dance ended, I returned to my seat, only to find him suddenly sitting beside me at the table. His presence made me uncomfortable. I got up and headed toward my office, glancing back to make sure he wasn't following me.

I almost managed to get away, but on my way back, I ran straight into him. Seeing me, he lit up and reached out for me, swaying drunkenly and inviting me to drink with him, *bruderschaft*.

I was disgusted by the smell of alcohol coming from him, disgusted by his touch, and especially nasty was his offer.

I turned to his face, bracing my hands against his chest, and firmly told that I wouldn't go anywhere with him.

He didn't understand my words and tried to hug my waist.

The mood was totally ruined.

I was looking for Irina. When I saw that she was dancing cheerfully to the upbeat music, I went over to her, and said that I was leading home.

She walked me to the exit, and I went to the bus stop.

It was already dark, and I walked slowly on the poorly lit road. Cars rushed by, blinding me with their headlights.

Hearing the call, I took the call without looking at phone screen. I immediately regretted it hearing the guy's voice.

Not wanting to continue the conversation, I wished him a good evening and hung up. But he kept calling me back. His persistence was unpleasant to me, so I silenced my phone.

Another car pulled up beside me, its headlights illuminating me before stopping. I tried to walk around it, but Gorin's voice, directed at me, made me stop.

"Good evening. So late, and you're alone," he said in a polite, routine tone. Without waiting for my reply, he continued:

"I'll give you a ride. Get in the car."

I stood there, confused, not knowing what to say. On one hand, I felt extremely uncomfortable getting into his car. On the other hand, walking alone along the dimly lit road felt even more unsettling. And so, I accepted his offer.

The warm car carried a faint scent of perfume. Soft music played in the background, and the tension slowly left me.

"You had a wonderful evening at the facility," Gorin began.

"Were you there alone?" he asked directly, then immediately added, "Is no one meeting you?"

I understood how it must have looked from the outside: a young woman making her way home in the dark, without a thought for the dangers she might be exposing herself to. Pure recklessness.

I felt the urge to explain, and so I did. I told him how my friend and I had planned to leave the party together, how an overly persistent admirer had ruined our plans, and how I had to leave early on my own so she could stay and enjoy the celebration.

"And your boyfriend? Doesn't he get jealous, letting you go off alone?"

I turned away for just a moment so he wouldn't see the tears that had suddenly welled up in my eyes and answered, "No, of course not. I don't give him any reason to."

He didn't ask me anything else after that. From time to time, I glanced at him, and it felt comforting that he had appeared on that dark road at just the right moment.

Before we parted, he gave me his business card and said I could reach out to him if I ever needed help.

Later that night, Irina called and asked if I was asleep.

Of course not. And of course, I'll be glad if she came over to stay the night.

Especially since we had the day off tomorrow, we could sleep in without having to rush anywhere.

We were talking until morning.

After thoroughly gossiping my annoying admirer, I told her about Gorin.

About how he had almost run me over the first time, and how gallantly he had given me a ride today. About what a pleasant man he had turned out to be. About how he had given me his business card before we parted.

Irina didn't share my enthusiasm. She believed it was better for people like us, mere mortals, to keep our distance from men like him.

We spent the rest of the evening in cheerful excitement, talking about Irina's news.

She told me she had taken a liking to a guy from another department. That evening, she had danced with him, talked to him, and realized how much they had in common. Of course, she added, she hadn't danced only with him, but he was the one. Exactly the one she needed. Letting him walk her home and steal a quick kiss on the cheek, she had come up to me.

She talked about him, rolling her eyes dreamily, and I found myself hoping that everything would work out for her. That he would truly turn out to be the one, the best man for her.

In the morning, we were in no hurry. We slept almost until evening and then threw together an improvised dinner, ravenous enough to eat a horse. Or rather, I cooked, while Irina sat glued to her phone. Her newly minted knight was texting her non-stop, and she replied with a blissful smile.

My admirer from the night before was texting me as well, but I couldn't understand what I had done to encourage him. Was it because I danced with him once, turning away from his alcoholic breath? Or because I refused to talk to him, making it clear he shouldn't call me again? Or was it exactly that which had intrigued my unfortunate suitor?

I wasn't looking for a man – neither for something serious nor for something casual. Not at all. Seeing my former Darling, I realized I wasn't ready for any kind of relationship.

It still hurt. I still missed him. And if he were to appear in my life now... How much strength would it take not to give in, not to beg him to stay? I don't know.

Chapter 6. Mrs. Spider

And tomorrow it's back to work, my dear little job, my beloved little job. The weekend was over.

Of all things, I had to end up working under that Madame. I had always wondered why a woman had been put in charge of the educational department. After all, even if it was a juvenile correctional facility, it was still a men's one. But people said she had connections in the Main Department.

Our department consisted of several correctional educators, senior correctional educators, and two inspectors.

The correctional educators were all interchangeable, just like us inspectors.

The inspectors' work involved compiling reports on the department's activities: briefings, summaries, responses to requests, and other paperwork. From time to time, we were also involved in giving lectures to the inmates on various topics.

Providing methodological support to the correctional educators was part of our duties as well, as was checking their documentation for each unit. However, since I was still new, both the guidance and the document checks were handled by Elena Ivanovna.

Elena Ivanovna was the second inspector, more precisely, the senior one. She had been working there for a long time and was planning to retire on her years of service at some indefinite point in the future. So, from time to time, she would take sick leave, using it to get thoroughly examined and treated.

Even Madame had grown used to Elena Ivanovna's periodic absences. *And if she came to terms with it, what am I, a mere mortal, supposed to do?*

During those rare periods when Elena Ivanovna showed up at work, Madame would suddenly have new topics for conversation. Together, they could spend hours discussing the job market "on the outside."

When she was away, the workload doubled and fell squarely on my fragile shoulders. And I found myself anxiously waiting for the day she would finally retire, because then I would be left alone in the office with Madame.

"Tricky, deceitful, manipulative." That's what her profile would say, if she were an inmate. But she was the head of my department.

She was a master of intrigue, always knowing who to say what to, how to start another rumor, how to set colleagues against each other. She always knew when and what to whisper to the warden.

When I first joined her department, I never could have imagined that outward warmth might have so little to do with real attitude.

At first, working with her, I thought I had drawn a lucky ticket. How could I not? I was working under a kind, supportive warden who was always ready to help me and teach me something new.

But one day my rose-colored glasses started to slip out of my eyes...

At that time, I had been working there for a week. Being so close to the inmates made me uneasy. I hadn't taken inside the facility yet. But even such proximity, just about two hundred meters away, beyond barbed wire, filled me with unease.

I flinched at the sound of a siren that suddenly cut through the dead silence. It was the first time I had heard that strange, unpleasant sound, and I didn't know what to expect from it.

Seeing my confusion, Madame briskly said:

"The inmates are probably attempting an escape! And through administration building, no less." Her vivid imagination poured out of her beautifully shaped mouth.

"Some will be killed, some will be raped," she narrated, savoring every word and watching my reaction. I struggled to keep my emotions under control, but they were clearly written all over my face.

Later, when I spoke to Irina about this fear that was preventing me from working calmly. She, who worked inside the correctional facility, in direct proximity to the inmates, reassured me:

“There’s nothing to be afraid of. If they escape, they’ll all run in different directions, to their own contacts, where someone will help them. Why would they waste time on something so pointless?”

Irina’s words took root in me, and from that moment on I no longer felt fear toward the inmates.

Later, I was surprised when, in my presence, Madame presented the head of the institution with documentation I had been working on for days as if it were her own, made with her own “clever little hands.” The warden praised her, while she basked in the attention, skillfully taking all the credit. I realized this wasn’t the first time. Having never encountered anything like it before, I was genuinely taken aback: *how can someone appropriate another person’s merits like that?*

Once, on my way to work, the tire on the minibus burst. I called her, my supervisor, and informed her of the reason I would be late for the weekly meeting with the warden. She assured me she would inform him and that I could proceed calmly and not worry about anything. But when I finally arrived, having switched to another minibus, the Head of the Facility requested an explanation from me, since I had been absent from the briefing without informing anyone. *Without telling anyone the reason! How is that possible?*

In tears, I met her in the office and asked why my reason for being late hadn’t reached the warden. She only smirked in response.

Situations like this multiplied, and I began to draw increasingly disappointing conclusions. Or maybe she simply didn’t like me? I spent months in such thoughts, until one accidentally overheard conversation finally put everything into place.

Chapter 7. A Voice Behind the Tree

The spring is especially warm this year. There are streams on the streets. The snow was melting right before the eyes.

Days became longer, and couples in love started to walk under my windows almost until the morning.

Irina didn't pass up this fate either. Her pleasant acquaintance at New Year's office party turned into something more. Happy and in love, she was vanishing with her admirer for nights on end.

Although I was aware who he was, but comply with the formalities, I pretended that I didn't know him during meetings.

Irina kept saying she would come over with him sometime, but somehow it never happened. And according to these wonderful evenings, it wouldn't happen for a long time. And I was happy for her.

My hapless admirer started showing up more actively too. Apparently, the spring sun has "baked his head" quite a bit.

Deciding to take matters into his own hands, he could wait for me by the gate to the facility for hours. At the site of me, he would move toward me and offer his services as an escort for my 'precious person'. I had no idea how to get away from him. But since there isn't any another entrance into institution, I had no way of avoiding it.

One day, not waiting for me to come out and noticing that Madame had gone off to the smoking area, he showed up at the doorway of my office and offered that we have some tea together. Or rather, he asked me to make him some.

Well, how can you not feed the sentinel who walks outside all day? Of course, I offered him tea. He reached for a bar of chocolate that he hadn't touched for tea.

The bright sun beckoned with its warmth, and staying inside the stuffy building felt unbearable. During my lunch breaks, I began stepping outside to breathe in the warm air of the approaching summer. Nature was coming alive, and so was my soul.

On one of those sunny days, I stepped beyond the restricted area and walked along an alley not far from the facility. I liked this place almost immediately, from my very first day there, and had never once met another person here at that hour.

But today, it seemed I wasn't alone. Hearing footsteps, I slowed down and, pausing behind one of the trees, began to watch. First, I saw slender, elegant fingers holding a cigarette. A wisp of smoke. The smell of tobacco. The quiet was broken by a phone ringing. The owner of those graceful fingers shifted the cigarette to her other hand and began to speak in Madame's voice.

My God, how lucky I haven't run into her directly! As I stood there, thinking just how fortunate I was, the conversation took a turn that caught my attention. She was telling someone on the other end of the line that she wasn't ready to take anyone on yet, as the position wasn't vacant.

"Not vacant." I wondered who she meant. *Elena Ivanovna? But she wasn't planning to retire anytime soon, you could wait forever for that. One of the correctional educators? But they were all young men, none of them about to leave, let alone retire. Maybe me?*

And with that thought, the reason for her dislike suddenly became clear.

Positions for women officers in the Federal Penitentiary Service were worth their weight in gold, especially in a small town. And it seemed she already had someone in mind for my job.

I hadn't realized I had crossed anyone's path. And if I had known, I would never have taken this position in the first place.

After all, you spend most of your life at work, and you want, if not friendship, then at least calm, respectful relations with everyone.

But I wasn't clinging to this job. At the slightest hint from her, any request to make room for someone she considered more necessary, I would, without hesitation, start looking for a transfer. Yet no such conversations ever came from her. And so, I continued to delight her with my presence.

Chapter 8. Rite of Passage

My internship was gradually coming to an end. At one of the regular staff meetings, I was presented with my lieutenant's shoulder boards. I was now a lieutenant of the internal service. It sounded impressive, almost too impressive.

I was sent to the supply warehouse to receive my uniform. It was a large, cold room, filled with shelves stacked with uniforms.

The facility manager, a pleasant young woman, brought me different sizes, and I tried them on in a makeshift fitting area in front of a mirror.

A clean, thick sack was spread out on the floor so I could stand on it barefoot. There was so much issued clothing that it was impossible to carry it all in one go.

For everyday wear, we were given a standard uniform: skirts, trousers, a jacket, and shirts. It came with shoes and a side cap. For colder weather, we were issued a warm jacket, a fur hat, winter boots, and high-laced boots.

For duty shifts and trips to the shooting range, we needed a field uniform, and for winter there was a winter version of it as well.

From then on, every morning when I arrived at work, I changed into it. The uniform smelled of dust and the warehouse, an odor that didn't go away even after washing.

I began to be involved in all kinds of activities related to the inmates.

Providing guidance to the correctional educators, participating in unit meetings, attending general assemblies of the inmates – this was far from a complete list. In other words, I was now allowed to enter the secured area.

Our facility was not large, with a capacity of five hundred inmates, housed in four units separated by metal bars.

Each fenced section was called a local unit and was separated from the main territory by a door with a magnetic lock, which could be opened either remotely from the control panel or with a master key.

Each unit had its own local area, its own sports ground, and its own designated smoking spot. Leaving the local area was only possible with permission from the administration.

Each dormitory was equipped with sleeping quarters, toilets, showers, a room for educational work with inmates, a small kitchen for evening tea, and utility rooms.

There was also a school with a large teaching staff, a vocational college, production workshops, a cafeteria, a medical unit, a club, and a library on the territory of the institution.

As part of correctional work with inmates, various activities are regularly carried out to raise their educational and cultural level and to foster respect for people, rules, traditions of our society, and for labor itself. These include football, basketball, strength competitions, checkers, chess, as well as lectures, round tables, debates, and many other events.

Several times a year, parents and other close relatives of well-behaved inmates are allowed to visit the facility and see their children's living conditions from the inside. These parent days have a very positive effect on the inmates' morale and encourage law-abiding behavior.

In addition, we were certified female staff members, meaning we are often assigned to duty shifts as "assistance." A monthly schedule is regularly updated, distributing the round-the-clock shifts. There are five to six such 24-hour shifts per month.

I don't like these duties, and not because of having to interact with inmates or being inside the secured area. The reason is different.

During the day, we are issued handcuffs and a rubber baton, a radio, and in this state, we are sent to the food warehouse to escort five "wards". While they load food supplies for the canteen inside

the secured area. The goods are loaded and transported into the zone, and I accompany them to the gate and then hand over responsibility to other staff.

Summer or winter, it doesn't matter. It is constant movement from eight in the morning until five in the evening. In both seasons, the vegetable warehouse is cold and smells of dampness.

My wards are taller and broader than me. I'm 176 cm (5'8) myself.

And I can't help wondering: if something suddenly occurs to them, what exactly are handcuffs and a baton supposed to help me with? At best, I could only report it by radio. That is, if they ran...

Every duty shift, I escort the same inmates. While working with them, I observe. For hours each day. Gestures, facial expressions, glances, movements, everything is under my watch. Observing them, I begin to understand their characters, their moods, and the relationships between them.

There are five of them, all so different. They perform their work differently, react differently, communicate differently. I understand that only inmates who have served a certain portion of their sentence and have proven themselves well are allowed to be taken outside the secured area for work. So, it's unlikely that anything truly bad would come into their heads. The risk is minimal, but still...

Later, from five to eight in the evening, comes the pleasure of so-called rest. In a warm office, with a large mug of not-so-tasty but such a desired tea. Of course, this time could be used for sleep, but what sleep at five in the evening? And a full day in the fresh air is more energizing than lulling anyway. Besides, where would I sleep? On a chair? Better to warm up and gather my thoughts, finishing the paperwork I had started.

At eight in the evening, the most interesting part of the duty begins. I go into the secured area, and being assigned to the shift, I fall under the command of the duty officer. And he does his best, freeing his "fighters" from unnecessary rounds along the track strip around the compound. I suspect he secretly wants the office staff to feel the "hardships and deprivations of service." Though the staffing shortage has hit the duty units first, and we are a useful reinforcement.

Perimeter patrols are carried out every hour. Moreover, between two and six in the morning, continuous patrol is required. And then, oh God, another strong, not-too-tired officer is assigned to me, and we split those hours between us: two hours continuously me, two hours continuously him.

The heavy gate key stuck out of my trouser pocket and would have long since pulled my trousers down if not for the belt holding them in place.

To reach the gate leading to the track strip, I have to leave the duty room and cross the parade ground. The parade ground is a fairly large open space in front of the duty building where inmates are assembled. It can easily hold a large number of inmates and staff, as it is used for roll calls and other organized events. And since our facility has a capacity of about five hundred people, I suspect it could even hold six hundred if staff were added in. Even though it is supposedly lit at night, walking across it in the dark is unsettling, because I do it completely alone. Of course, in theory, I am accompanied by a "virtual canine officer with a dog," but that is only in theory...

Along the track strip, I walk for a long time, twenty to thirty minutes, slowly and methodically, checking for any damage to the fencing.

The first rounds are even enjoyable, but by one or two in the morning all I want is sleep; my eyes literally start sticking together as I walk. Of course, there is an undeniable advantage to these shifts, I have learned to sleep practically standing up. I return from the rounds, sit down in the duty chair, and that's it, I'm gone. No thoughts at all.

The duty officer's voice pulls me out of that enveloping sleep, and I drag myself out for the next round, and then another...

Eight o'clock, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, one in the morning, damn, I'm fading. Just need to make it to two o'clock and then refresh myself on the two-hour night patrol. From four to six there is time to rest, and then again at seven, seven-thirty, another rounds.

After such shifts, I allow myself to turn off my phone and sleep a deep, unbroken sleep until evening, then wake up with a splitting headache and spend half the night trying to fall asleep again, knowing that tomorrow I have to go back to work.

Chapter 9. A Letter from the Past

Yesterday, I found a letter in my mailbox. A letter from someone who had once been especially close to me for several years. All these long months, I had tried so hard to forget him that I had begun to believe I was making progress. But when I received his letter, I cried the entire evening. I felt so sorry for myself, for him, for our relationship that had ended so suddenly. It seemed as though my tears would never stop. As if I had cried an entire ocean.

I fell asleep well past midnight and woke up completely drained. My eyes, swollen from crying, refused to open. Making myself a double portion of coffee, I sipped it slowly, recalling the details of the letter.

...My dear, my sweet girl! I truly hope you can find the strength to read this letter.

Those words stood before my eyes, echoing in my temples.

It was all in vain. The barrier I had so carefully built collapsed in an instant, and there was no one left in this world but him. I loved him. I loved him with my whole being. And there was nothing I could do about it.

...After spending so much time in uncertainty, he would sit for hours on a bench beneath the windows of my parents' apartment. And when he grew tired of sitting, or cold in his thin, neatly pressed trousers, he would pace back and forth in front of the entrance, occasionally glancing up at our windows.

My father, unaware of the situation, was puzzled. Several times he tried to invite my Darling in for tea. But my mother always found a reason why such a visit was impossible. Time passed, and he kept pacing beneath the windows with stubborn persistence until one day my mother took pity on him. She went down to him and suggested he write me a letter and give it to her to send. And the recipient, that is me, would decide what to do with it.

Before sending it, my mother told me. She offered me the choice: to send the letter or to put it away in a drawer until better times. But I, deciding to finally untangle the knots of this long-faded story, asked her to send it to me.

And yet, even expecting the letter, I was completely unprepared for it.

He wrote that he missed me, that not being able to see me, talk to me, touch me, caused him pain.

The time when he had disappeared from my life had been very difficult for him. And understanding that I was going through an important period, he chose not to distract me or burden me with his problems.

During the time we weren't in touch, a woman from his past reappeared in his life. A woman he had been involved with before me. I knew her, and I knew why they had broken up. Back then, she had considered him unpromising and had erased him from her life, choosing someone else. And now, years later, she had returned, seeking him out, waiting for him by his building, calling him. She wouldn't take no for an answer. She thought she could easily win back someone who had once belonged to her. She gave him no peace. And it began to irritate him. Still, she wouldn't stop.

On the day that destroyed everything between us, he ran into her again outside his building. He suggested to take a walk and finally settle things once and for all. He didn't want to talk near the building, because neighbors might misunderstand. He had no intention of inviting her inside or to a café.

They walked toward the embankment.

At the very moment I saw them, she leaned against his shoulder for a brief second, crying, trying to pull him back into the past... And a few minutes later, as I ran home, beside myself with grief, he pushed her away and firmly told her that he was serious about me...

His letter completely threw me off the course of my life. Everything lost its meaning. My move to this city, my current job, my carefully planned life... everything I had come to value.

I had no idea how to go on. I wanted so badly to believe the man who meant so much to me. But in the time, we had spent apart, we had become strangers. And I didn't know what it would take to change that.

How could that be? I love him with all my heart, and in his letter, he wrote that he loved me. And yet some inexplicable force wouldn't let the block of ice inside me melt, wouldn't let me open my heart to the man I loved.

Lost in these bleak thoughts, I made my way to work. I had no idea how to go on. I didn't want to talk to anyone. Least of all see Madame with her self-satisfied look.

Chapter 10. The Loss

But I had to postpone thinking about my life as soon as I came at work, at least until the evening. Since Elena Ivanovna was almost independent from our department, the task of compiling reports was ceremoniously handed over to me. Madame kept track of whether they were completed and submitted on time. The actual figures in the reports didn't interest her. Sometimes she pretended to look into them, but quickly grew bored and handed them back to me.

This week I had a business trip to the Main Department to defend our department's reports. I was the one going, because they specifically asked for the person who had prepared them, in case any questions came up. Quite reasonable.

On the way, I also had to deliver documents from various departments of the facility to the Main Department office. Everything neatly organized according to an inventory list: staff photos to the HR department and large ones for personal files and small ones for ID cards. All the photos were labeled on the back and stamped.

What you might call a personal delivery. Much faster than sending everything by mail. And cheaper, too. After all, an employee was going there anyway.

The documents from the office, carefully packed, lay on the desk in front of me. The photos, along with the staff list, were in a file beside them. I just needed to pack everything into my bag and go sort out my travel authorization and ticket. I also had to check the schedule.

Getting the Main Department is extremely inconvenient. To be there in the morning, you have to leave in the middle of the night. An early breakfast at a station cafe in the morning. Then all the business at here, and departure back around four or five in the afternoon. Arrival late at night. And the next day, you are allowed to come in later, around noon.

Today, Irina is taking the same bus as me. She has to go to the department on the other side of the regional city. She offered to buy me a ticket and rushed off, while I stayed behind to finish my work.

We agreed to meet at my place in the evening, get some rest, and then take a taxi to arrive right on time for the bus departure.

I gave the report one last careful look. Of course, it had already been signed, but the middle pages could easily be reprinted if I spotted any mistakes. No, everything was fine.

I copied it onto a flash drive, which I also packed.

Since I was leaving on a night trip, I was allowed to leave work early, which I did after informing Madame.

By four in the afternoon, I was already walking out of the administration building, planning to stroll leisurely to the bus stop.

Irina would come after seven p.m., so I had plenty of time.

But as soon as I stepped outside, I saw Valentin Ivanovich. Ivanovich was an instructor at the vocational school, and I was surprised to see him at that hour.

Usually, the instructors left shortly after two in the afternoon.

But today, for reasons unknown to me, Valentin Ivanovich had stayed late and offered to give me a ride. Not just anywhere, but right to my building.

Of course, I couldn't refuse such a generous offer.

Before Irina arrived, I managed to prepare a simple dinner. By nine in the evening we were already trying to fall asleep on my big unfolded sofa, planning to get up closer to midnight.

A little later, half-asleep and slightly groggy from the interrupted rest, we were on our way to the regional city. We rode, chatted, took a nap. By the time dawn began to break, we were already entering the city.

Breakfast at the station canteen finally shook off the last traces of sleep. We still had plenty of time, and unhurriedly, savoring the moment, we each had a cup of coffee, discussing where we would meet later and what we might manage to do before leaving. The plan was to walk around the summer city, visit a shopping center, and maybe even buy something. And even if we didn't, at least to get the mood up. In high spirits, we went our separate ways to different parts of the city.

After passing through the Main Department checkpoint, I quickly dropped off the documents at the office and headed toward HR, feeling for the file with the photos as I walked. As I was already pulling it out, I realized something was wrong. The file felt unusually light.

I took it out and saw only the accompanying list of employees whose photos I had brought. The photos themselves were gone. A sticky wave of horror dropped like a stone inside me, settling low in my stomach. *Is this a joke? What am I supposed to do?*

I stepped into the hallway and called Irina, briefly explaining the situation.

"What do I do, Irina? I honestly have no idea! Where could those photos be? I've gone through my entire bag, they're nowhere!" I was shaking. This had never happened to me before. I always approached my work with utmost responsibility.

Stop, I told myself. The sequence of events began to unfold in my mind.

Yesterday, in the office, I checked everything. I laid it all out on my desk so it would be easy to take. I remember counting the photos, clipping them together, and putting them into the file. I was worried one might slip out, because they're small, three by four, so I handled them very carefully. And now the file is completely empty. Except for the list.

"I remember!" I was so overwrought that I actually let out a gasp. "I checked everything before leaving work. Packed it neatly. Took it straight home without stopping anywhere."

"Exactly," Irina supported me. "Ivanovich gave you a ride."

"Right. Then how could they disappear? No one but me could have taken them at home, and I didn't touch the bag before leaving."

Nothing made sense. So, I called Madame. Lately, Elena Ivanovna had been absent, and the correctional workers were almost always in the units, dropping by the office for just a few minutes in the evenings. Which meant that most of the time, it was just me and Madame in the office.

Interesting.

I was trembling. A strange mix of helplessness and anger gave me a sudden surge of determination.

When I called her, I first told her that I hadn't delivered the photos and asked if she had seen the envelope on my desk, and whether anyone had come into the office while I was arranging my travel paperwork with HR.

Her response only deepened my suspicions. I had the unsettling feeling that she wasn't surprised at all. As if she HAD KNOWN it would happen.

I no longer felt like walking around shops. *Fine. I just need to submit the report as quickly as possible and head back.* I needed time to think.

After waiting in a short line of people defending their reports, I got through mine quickly and called Irina. She hadn't finished her own business yet, but supported my decision to leave as soon as possible. That settled it.

I wanted to look Madame in the eyes at the moment she would least expect it. Early the next morning. She would only be expecting me around noon. And for a conversation like that, I needed to be well-rested.

That evening, for the first time in a long while, I called Darling.

I missed him, but I understood that if he started pressuring me, it could destroy the fragile connection we had just begun to rebuild.

But everything went surprisingly well. He was happy to hear my voice and thanked me for calling. The sound of his voice calmed me, and the ice inside me began to melt. And in that moment, those long months disappeared. That foolish breakup no longer existed.

There was just him and me. And no one else in the whole wide world.

Chapter 11. The Trap

“Of course, the best decision for you is resignation,” Madame’s voice was waving at me.

“Can you imagine, what such of buzz is coming?” Service inspection, you know. And then you’ll be fired for non-compliance. Can you imagine? Where will you go? It’s “wolf ticket”!”

I was reflecting in front of the cup of tea, that was served too caring by her. I was trying to analyze the situation.

“Drink it! There are cookies and sweets, don’t be shy,” Madam’s smug face was simply radiating joy, which she couldn’t hide. The voice sounded subtle and melodic.

Madam got confused a bit, when she saw me in the morning. She didn’t expect to see me, so I was watching confusion on her sleek face.

But she got a grip too fast. And then the conversation became too interesting and unexpected for me.

I didn’t expect such suggestion nor such conversation. And it caught me by surprise.

I was trembling. Confusion and fear. A pounding in my temples, my heart racing, fear spread through me in a hot wave. My thoughts darted around, searching for a way out.

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