



# Mistake Under the Mistletoe

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**Category:** Romance

**Description:** A broken heart shouldn't beat for a criminal...

Gwen: I left so I never had to risk seeing him again. I left because everything in this damn town reminded me of him. I left because he chose prison over us. He made a choice, so I made one too, I moved across the country. But when my mother calls me home for Christmas, I was terrified I'd run into the man who broke my heart. When we finally come face to face, I can feel him all over my body like a shiver I can't get rid of. I thought I was over him. . . I never expected my heart would still beat for him.

Yuri: She thinks I gave up on us, that I asked for all of this. What she doesn't realize is that it wasn't a choice, I did what I had to do. I served my time, closing that chapter of my life. Everyone deserves a second chance, even a criminal like me. I'm not the bad guy she thinks I am, I'm just a man who wants his girl back.

**Total Pages (Source):** 37

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*Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 4:35 pm*

## Prologue

Where the hell is he?

Looking out my window for the billionth time, I paced in the living room. Yuri was supposed to be there over an hour ago, we were going to have to leave without him if he didn't show up soon.

Pulling out my cell phone, I sent him another text. I stared at that screen, I stared at it, wishing he would just send me a message back telling me where he was.

That message never came.

"It's time to go," my father said as he stood in the doorway. "We can't wait any longer."

"But he said he'd be here."

"I know, and I'm sure he has a good reason for why he's not. But if you want to make it to your graduation, we need to go."

Grabbing my hat and gown, I followed my father to the car. Climbing in the front passenger seat, I pulled the seat belt across my chest as he started the engine. My eyes were full with water, making it hard to find the buckle clip, the clear view a fuzzy haze from the bubbles creeping over the surface.

"Maybe he'll meet us there, and maybe he doesn't have any service to text you and

tell you.” My father spoke softly as he watched the road.

Turning to look at him, the tears started to fall. “He was supposed to be here at five, that was an hour ago. Where could he be?”

My father didn't answer, simply giving me a look that said he had no clue, but he wasn't as worried as I was. “Things come up, Honey, but I'm sure he'll be there.”

Yuri had always done what he said he would. He was where he said he would be, he finished everything he started, he did exactly what was expected.

Except for today.

This was a big day for me, it was my high school graduation. Yuri was two years older, deciding to skip college and go to work for his father at his moving company.

He wasn't your average kid. He was responsible, he had determination, he had wanted to help his family by keeping the business going. It was what I loved the most about him.

Resting my head on my hand, the car rolled to a stop at the red light. My eyes searched around, staring at everything and nothing at all.

That's when I saw him.

Throwing my body upright, I glared out the window. The car started to roll forward, so I threw my hand out towards my father and yelled. “Stop the car!”

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Slamming on the brakes, our bodies jerked hard, forcing the seat belt to lock in place. Pulling the car over to the side of the road, my father stared at me, his face pained with worry and confusion.

“What? What is it?” he asked, his eyes huge.

“Oh my God. . .” The words slipped weightlessly out of my mouth as I looked at the liquor store parking lot.

Yuri was sprawled across the front of the hood of a cop car, his brother was in cuffs, sitting on the front step of the store. Red and blue lights flashed frantically as sirens still blared, approaching from the distance.

The cop was holding Yuri's face down, his elbow locked in place as he sifted through his pockets.

“What's going on, Gwen? What are you looking at?” My father tried to lean forward to look past me and out my window. “What's going on over there?”

Hanging my head, I waved my hand. “Nothing, it looks like a couple kids getting into trouble. I thought it was someone I knew, but it's not.”

His body rocked and twisted, trying to get a better look. “That's a lot of cops for a couple kids. They must have done something, move so I can see.”

“Dad, we need to go, I don't want to be late to my own graduation.” Pouting my lip slightly, I arched my brows. “Mom's going to get worried if we don't show up soon.”

I wasn't sure why I didn't just tell him the truth, that it was Yuri and his brother they were arresting, that all those cops were rushing into the parking lot to arrest my boyfriend.

My heart cracked as the tires crunched against the pavement, spitting rocks up into the wheel wells. That wasn't who he was, that wasn't the person I had fallen in love with.

But that's exactly what my eyes were absorbing as I watched the lights splash off the surrounding trees, and the store fade into the distance.

He was suppose to come right to my house after getting off work. He was going to get cleaned up and changed so we could drive to my graduation together. Except he wasn't at work, he wasn't at home. . .

Yuri was getting cold metal slapped around his wrists as a hoard of police swarmed around him.

It didn't make sense to me, none of it fit into the mold of the man I knew.

Maybe he's not the person you thought he was?

I could never have imagined that his actions would force us apart forever.

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### Chapter One

Gwen

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“What? When?”

The phone went silent and I could hear my mother sifting through papers. She was mumbling to herself, inaudible words I couldn't make out.

“Mom,” I said, taking a moment to glance out the window. A guy in the building across the street, was outside on the small fire escape platform of his apartment, pinning up a string of lights. The firm tap of his hammer was hitting the wood around his window as he tacked his Christmas lights in place. “Mom, did you hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you, Honey.” Papers crinkled in the background as she sighed to herself. “It's in here somewhere.”

“When did they send it?”

“The other da—ah ha!” Her voice was loud and shrill, forcing me to tug the phone quickly away from my ear. “Here it is.”

“What does it say?”

“It says that they put a lien on the house, Gwen. What does that mean?”

“It means you didn't pay something, Mom.”

Scoffing, I could almost hear her rolling her eyes through the speaker. “Well that's just ridiculous.”

My father's voice grumbled in the background. “Those damn pricks don't know what the hell they're talking about.”

“Shut up, Ron, I can't hear Gwen with you talking over her. What did you say, Honey?”

“I didn't say anything.” My eyes scanned outside again, just in time to see the first snowflakes of the year fall.

“Well, can you fix it? You're a lawyer, you can fix this right?”

“I can take a look at it when I get there, but I can't make you any promises, Mom. I'm an IP attorney, this isn't my area of expertise.”

“But you can fix it right?”

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Pinching the bridge of my nose, I closed my eyes. "I'll look at it, alright?"

"When are you coming?" she asked impatiently. "I don't want them showing up out of nowhere and trying to force us out. I won't leave, Gwen, they'll have to drag my ass out of here kicking and screaming."

"It won't come to that, Mom, it doesn't work that way. My flight leaves at seven tomorrow morning, so I should be home about twelveish, give or take."

"Do you need Dad to come get you?"

"No, I'll just grab a cab, don't worry about sending Dad."

"Does she need me?" my father asked over my mother's shoulder, his voice raspy as he coughed loudly into the phone.

"No, she's grabbing a cab. Will you back up, you're making me nervous."

"Nervous, you're too old to be nervous."

"Shoo," she said, and with her tone, I could picture her waving her hand in his face to get him to back up. "Okay, Honey, I'm going to let you go, I'll see you tomorrow."

Hanging up the phone, I stood in my window, watching the sky flicker with bright white speckles. The snow wasn't much of a change from where I grew up, but I never really left Colorado to get away from the snow.



There was only one thing that forced me to leave and it had nothing to do with the weather.

Checking over my bag, I made sure I had everything I needed. It had been three years since I'd been back home. I left right out of college, taking the first offer I got from a firm out of New York City.

It was perfect timing.

I was able to bypass the last few Christmas celebrations by claiming work was too busy to get away from. But this year, I couldn't say no.

My father had some medical issues pop up this past summer, and now with this crap with their house, it felt like I just needed to be there.

Climbing into bed, I made sure my alarm was set. Even as I turned the dial, I could feel my nerves starting to grow, making my heart beat faster. Sweat was already turning my skin clammy and warm, and my mind was running wild.

What if I see. . .

Don't do this, you'll never get on that plane if you think about him.

Resting my head on the pillow, I rolled onto my side, staring at the clock until I finally blacked out.

I only had to make it five days, five days and then I could fly back to my life.

Away from everything I wanted to forget.

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### Chapter Two

Gwen

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The tires squealed on the runway as the plane skidded across the pavement, coming to a long stop. Taxiing over to the gate, I stared at the mountains covered in a thick layer of snow.

The plane was an hour later than expected, due to an icy runway they had to soak in de-icing fluid until it was safe to land.

The captain popped on the speaker, thanking all of the passengers for flying on board. Waiting for the seat-belt light to turn off, I gathered my purse and computer, and held them in my lap.

As soon as the light dimmed, everyone around me began to stand, pulling out their carry-on bags. But I still sat there, my gaze fixed out the small oval window, watching the clouds as they swirled over the mountain top.

“Miss, are you all set? Do you need anything?”

Pulling me out of my daze, I looked up to see a stewardess at my side, her hand resting on the top of my seat.

“No, thank you,” I said, giving her a small smile and getting up. Pulling my bag out

of the overhead compartment, I tugged it up my shoulder and walked off the plane.

The terminal was full of people hugging and laughing, their smiles making me even more nauseous. Everyone around me looked happy to be there, excited to be home for the holiday.

And all I could think about was walking to the ticket counter and exchanging my ticket for the next flight back to New York.

Five days. . . You can make five days.

Zippering up my jacket, I made my way outside and found my taxi waiting. Climbing in, I gave the driver directions, slinking down as much as I could into the back seat.

I had this urge to stay hidden, to keep myself as small as possible. It was silly, I knew that, but I refused to let more than my nose and forehead show above the bottom of the window.

Familiar buildings rushed past the window. The library I spent every night in while studying for the bar exam, the coffee shop I spent countless hours in writing papers. The familiarity should have been warm and welcoming, but all I felt was unsettled and nervous all at the same time.

Comfort was a strange thing. Most people went home because of that feeling, because the nostalgia gave way to memories they enjoyed. They could think back as they drove past that coffee shop and laugh or smile because of a single memory they had.

Not me.

That coffee shop, that library, the small hardware store on the corner of Dunkin drive—the liquor store—it all brought back too much for me. I felt pain, not joy or

happiness.

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Closing my eyes for the rest of the drive, I didn't open them again until the taxi came to a stop and the driver told me we were there.

“Twenty-five,” he said, holding his hand between the front and back seats. “Do you need any help with your bags?”

“No, I got it, thank you.” Handing him the cash, I picked up my stuff and climbed out.

Staring up at my parents house, I adjusted the collar on my jacket to block the sharp wind, and took in a deep breath of frosty air.

Here we go.

Standing at the front door, I knocked gently and opened it up, poking my head inside. “Hello!” I called out into the quiet house. “Mom, Dad, I'm home.” Stepping inside, I closed the door behind me and dropped my bags to the floor.

“Gwenie,” my mom said loudly, a broad smile on her face as she came around the corner with her arms out, embracing me instantly. “I'm so glad you're home, Gwenie.”

“Please don't call me that, I'm not ten anymore.” Hugging her back, she chuckled as she snuggled me tighter.

“Oh stop, you might be all grown up now, but you're still my baby.”

Patting her back, I pulled away. “I know, I know. Is Tyler here yet?” I asked, taking off my coat and hanging it on the rack by the door.

“No, he'll be here tomorrow with Jill and the kids.” Waving her hand for me to follow her, she walked towards the kitchen. “How was your flight?”

“Not bad, a little rough because of the weather, but I made it.”

“Are you hungry? I know that airplane food is horrible, how about some leftovers?” Opening the fridge, she bent inside and took out a glass dish. “I made lasagna last night, and we both know your father doesn't need the rest of this.”

“What's that? Don't you dare feed the rest of that to her, I claimed it first.” My father walked in, latching his big hands around the top of my shoulders and giving me a squeeze.

“Hey, Dad,” I said, turning to give him a hug.

“Hey, kiddo, how's life treating ya?”

“It's good, busy, but good.”

“Well—” Kissing me on the top of my head, he gave me a warm smile. “I'm glad you finally made time for us little people.” Winking, he walked to the silverware drawer and pulled out a fork. “And don't think you're going to eat all that alone, half of it's mine.”

Giggling, my mother plated us both some of her famous lasagna. “You two are going to be the death of me, you know that.”

“Us,” I said, my mouth half full of food. “I thought Tyler already killed you years

ago?"

"Oh don't even get me started with him. If it wasn't for Jill, I don't know where the hell he'd be right now."

"Probably prison," my father chimed in while swallowing a big bite of food.

"Ron!" my mother snapped, giving him the stink eye. "Don't say things like that."

Laughing, I started to feel a little more at ease, and a bit silly for being so resistant on coming back.

It actually felt really good to be home.

Maybe I've just been worrying about nothing. . .

I could handle five days of this, no problem at all. So long as I didn't have to leave the house.

I spent most of the afternoon just catching up with my parents. My father was supposed to be on a diet, my mother was supposed to be the one keeping him in line.

It wasn't going well.

I watched him eat a whole bowl of lasagna, a piece of banana bread, a pudding cup, and then actual dinner. His gallbladder was probably screaming bloody murder.

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“Do you have those papers for me to look at?”

“I do, but not right now. You just got here, you don't need to go worrying yourself with it just yet.”

“Okay, so what's the plans for the weekend?”

“Well, it's been hard to keep it a surprise, but we are having a Christmas party.” My mother's eyes lit with excitement. “It's going to be just like when you were little, I invited everyone—Mr. Glynn, Barbara Dean, your Aunt Mary and Uncle Jeff. . .” Pausing, she closed her eyes and tipped her head up as she thought. “Your cousin Tina and her kids, Mrs. Cardigen is coming, and a bunch more people.”

Is she serious right now?

“You're joking right? Please tell me you're joking.”

“Joking? Why would I be joking?”

“Mom, come on, don't act like you don't know. If you invited all these people, then there's a chance that—”

“What?” she asked, cutting me off. “That Yuri might show up here too?” Cocking her head into her shoulder, her eyes danced back and forth between mine. “You don't know?” she asked. Shaking my head, I waited for her to tell me. “He's long gone, Gwen, he moved away the same year—” Cutting herself off, she gave me a look. “You know.”



Yeah, I know.

The news painted their own picture of Yuri, but I didn't actually accept any of the truth until a little while later. There was enough shame I had to live with for not recognizing his true colors, for being gullible and absent minded to the obvious.

I kept blaming myself for not seeing it, I often thought that if I had just paid more attention I could have at least saved him from making that horrible choice.

"I don't want to talk about this anymore." Holding up my hand, I stopped her from saying anything else about Yuri. "I just wish I knew before hand is all."

"Gwen, I invited friends and family, I don't think his mother has even heard from him since all of that." Softening her expression, she leaned over and rubbed the top of my knee. "Do you want me to call Nilla tomorrow and ask her about him?"

"No, no, no," I quickly replied. "You don't need to do that, I don't want her saying something to him, and him thinking that I'm wondering about him. Because I'm not. I don't want to know about him, I don't want to talk about him, and I don't want to ever see him again."

"It sounds to me like you want to see him." My father gave me a side-eyed glare, flipping the page of the newspaper he was holding.

And that's my cue to end it there.

"Okay, I'm going to go to bed. I had a long day, I think it's time to get some rest."

You don't need to worry, he's not in town. And even if he was, he knows better than to try and talk to me. Especially after I told him I never wanted to see him again.

Dropping onto the mattress, I fell flat on my face against the downy comforter. A headache was brewing behind my eyes, making it hard to keep them open.

Yuri kept popping into my head, both good and bad memories. His smile was one I used to crave, his touch was something I used to desire. He had the greenest eyes I had ever seen and when he would look at me, I could feel it all over.

My skin would tingle, my heart would jump, and my stomach would get all knotted up. I thought he was the one, I thought we were going to be together forever.

Then one day it all changed—who I thought he was changed. Nothing was the same after that.

And then my heart tore open, bleeding the future we were supposed to share all over the floor.

Inhaling a deep breath, hidden notes of his cologne seemed to be weaved in the blanket. Jerking my face up, I gripped the blanket and smelled it again. It was gone, the lingering aroma only a figment of my imagination.

But I couldn't deny the sudden surge of butterflies that rumbled in my belly or the way my heart skipped a beat when I thought I could smell him.

What the hell is happening here?

That part of my life is over.

### Chapter Three

Gwen

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“Good morning, Gwenie.” I felt the weight of my mother on the edge of the bed as she leaned over and looked down on me. “Rise and shine.”

“Mom,” I said, my voice dry and crackling.

“Yes, Honey?”

“What are you doing?” Opening one eye, I glanced up at her over my shoulder.

“It's your morning wake up call, same as always.”

“That was when I was in school and needed to get up early. I have no reason to get up at. . .” Pausing, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and checked the time. “Seven in the morning.”

Standing up, she walked over to the windows and yanked open the curtains. “Actually you do.” Turning around, she cupped her hips and smiled. “We have some shopping to do for the party, and there's not a chance on this earth that I'm doing it with your father.”

“You mean you don't want to spend the whole time shopping by yourself while he

laps in the car?" Pushing up in the bed, I rubbed my eyes.

"Exactly, besides, he's on airport duty for your brother." Clapping her hands together, she gave me a big toothy grin. "Okay, breakfast is in twenty, get dressed and come down when you're set. Us girls have a busy day today."

"Yay," I said sarcastically, shaking my fists in the air.

"Don't start, you're not too old for me to ground you."

"I'm twenty-seven, Mom."

"The rules don't change," she said with a smirk, wagging her finger in my direction. "My house, my rules. Twenty minutes, get moving."

Closing the door as she walked out, I gripped the blanket and tugged it over my head, snuggling back into the darkness.

Within seconds my door flew back open and the heavy thud of my father's feet stepped inside. "Get your ass out of bed." His voice was tough but playful.

"I'm up, mom was just in here."

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“Yeah I know.” I heard him walking across the carpet, stopping at the window.

Staying under the blankets, I pulled up the end so I could look out. “Then why are you here?”

“Because your mother is up.”

“I don't understand.” Making an opening large enough for him to see my face, my brows arched high. “You're here because she's out there?”

“Exactly.” Turning on his heels, he pointed at me. “You're in my quiet spot, this is where I hide when I don't want her harassing me about going out for a walk.”

Thirty years my parents had been married. I couldn't help but think it had to be normal for people to crave some solitude that was just for them.

Throwing the covers off my head, I sat up. “Fine, I'm getting up.” Climbing out of bed, I dug through my bag and got out some clean clothes. “I'll go shower and let you have your quiet time.”

“Damn right you will. And when you're done, you can do me a favor and go keep your mother busy.”

“You know she's not wrong, you should go for that walk, it'll do you some good.” Holding my clothes against my chest, I started for the door. “Mom told me about your gallbladder, she also told me the doctor said you're a borderline diabetic. A little exercise could help with that—”

Cutting me off, he started laughing. “And lose all this?” Grabbing his gut, he gave it a little shake. “Never, this is the new sexy. Haven't been keeping up on what's hot anymore. Miss. New York?”

“Obviously not,” chuckling, I shut the door, leaving him alone.

Taking a quick shower, I dried off and got dressed. Doing my best not to think about the impending shit show I might have to endure. I was not looking forward to the party. I should restate that; I was not looking forward to the very slim chance that Yuri might pop up somewhere.

The party might be great, I might actually have a good time. But the idea of possibly running into Yuri, regardless of how slim of a chance it might be, made my heart ache.

Stop worrying about him! Mom said he moved away, he could be anywhere. . .

Which also means he could be right here.

Shaking the thought out of my head, I went down stairs. The scent of pancakes and sausage hit me before I made it to the bottom. Turning the corner into the kitchen, there was a full plate sitting at the table with a cup of orange juice and a steaming mug of coffee.

“I couldn't remember how you take your coffee, so I left the sugar and the cream on the table.” My mother was washing my father's dish, setting it to dry in the rack. “Eat up, we'll leave when you're done.”

“Are you telling me that the places around here started opening before nine in the morning?”

“They do at Christmas time.” Wiping her hands on a dish rag, she pulled a piece of paper off the fridge and started going through our list for the day. “We need to hit Gloria's bakery to get the croissants your brother likes, I have gifts on layaway for the kids that I can pickup today.” Taking a seat at the table, she sipped her coffee as she kept reading. “Mable has decorations waiting for us over at Clark's Little Country store, and I need to hit the supermarket for food.”

“Sounds easy enough.” Eating breakfast, I watched my mother as she cleaned up the kitchen and swept the floor. “When we get back, I want to look over those papers you got.”

Waving her hand, she scrunched her face. “Gwen, we have plenty of time for that, you're here until next Tuesday.”

“Yeah, but I have no idea what I'm going to need to do to get the lien off. I don't want to wait until the last minute, Mom. Not to mention, it's Friday, everything will be closed through the weekend and Christmas is Monday. So. . .”

“I know, I know, and you'll have time for that.”

Pushing away from the table, I tilted my head as I looked at her. “Why do I get the feeling you're trying to hold me off from looking at this?”

Shrugging her shoulder, she wouldn't let her eyes connect with mine. “I don't know, Gwen, maybe it's because you're really good at making a big deal about nothing. . .” Letting her words trail off, she took a big gulp of her coffee. “That's why you're such a good lawyer.”

Biting my tongue, I didn't give her any fuel to keep going and turn this in some type of argument. Setting my fork down on the plate, I drank the last of my coffee, picking up everything and putting it in the sink.

“Okay, let's go get this stuff done.”

The first stop wasn't so bad. I had to deal with a lot of questions from Mrs. Colletta about where I've been and why it had taken me so long to come home. I was prepared for that, my answers a running list that I had stored in my brain.

'Work is really busy, it's hard to get away.'

'Being a lawyer requires a lot of time and effort on your part for the client, it's not something you can just walk away from.'



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“So, I hear Yuri and you were still in touch while he was in prison.” Mrs. Colletta's face soured, her lips puckering up tight. “How does that work when you're a lawyer?”

“Excuse me?” Furrowing my brows, I stared at her with my mouth hanging open.

Flicking her finger in my direction, she smiled. It was a slimy, rumor filled smile that made my blood boil. “This is a small town, Gwen, eventually word gets around.”

This fucking lady. I never liked her.

Stiffening my shoulders, I parted my lips to rip her a new one. Touching my elbow lightly, my mother stepped in, taking the reigns.

“Denise, tell me how your son is doing. Is he still on work release?”

And that's how you shut up a woman who calls the kettle black.

Backing away from the counter, my mother tilted her head and gave her a smile, grabbing the bundle of croissants in her arms.

“What the hell was that?” I asked my mom as we stepped back out onto the sidewalk.

“That was someone who doesn't know when to put their foot in their mouth.” Opening the car door, she set the pastries on the floor, standing up to look at me across the roof. “People say things, Gwen, you know that. And around here, people like to create drama. That's all that was, it was rumors that don't mean a thing.”

My mother plopped into the driver's seat, ready to move on, while I stood still, unsure how far the rumor mill had gone with Yuri and myself.

Opening the door, I sat down, letting out a long sigh. "How far do these rumors go, Mom? I mean what are people saying?"

"Oh lord, Gwen, don't do this. You of all people should know better than to worry about what other people are saying."

"I just want to know so I can be prepared for it. If everyone we see is going to start asking me questions like that, I think I have the right to know what's being said."

"It doesn't matter, none of them are true, right?"

"Of course they're not true."

"Then don't worry about it. You know the answers already." Thinning her lips, she patted the top of my thigh. "Who cares what people are saying, it doesn't change anything."

She was right.

At the center of everything, at the pure heart of it all, the only thing I lost was my first love. I had my career, I had my family, I had an entire life ahead of me. He was just a boy, a boy who had no place in my life anymore.

Then why does it still hurt so much?

Arriving at the store to pick up the decorations, I decided to sit this one out. My mother wasn't too pleased with the idea, but I promised her I'd go food shopping with her. Slouching down, I laid my head back, staring out the windshield into the sky.

From the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a familiar shadow. Twisting to look, a man was holding a door open to the hardware store. He was turned away from me, with shoulder length hair pulled back into a low ponytail.

Twisting to his side to make room for a customer coming out, I could see his face perfectly.

Yuri.

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. It felt like all the air inside the car had been sucked out, leaving my lungs to struggle. I wanted to drop out of sight, I wanted to melt into the seat and disappear.

And yet, I couldn't take my eyes off of him, I couldn't move my muscles. I was frozen, trapped inside myself, unable to look away.

He looked the same, but different. His hair was longer, his face leaner and sharper. Every muscle he had was now ten times bigger and firmer. My skin buzzed as I watched him smile at the woman who had just left the store, his grin enough to make my stomach tumble.

Twisting his face in the direction of my car, he squinted his eyes and lifted a hand to his face to block the sun.

Oh fuck!

Ducking down, I hid from view as my heart pounded so forcefully I thought it was going to jump clear out of my chest.

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He didn't see me—he didn't see me—he didn't see me.

The mantra played over and over in my head as I clutched my hands to my chest and sealed my eyes shut.

“What the hell are you doing?” my mother asked as she sat down beside me.

Opening my eyes wide, I said, “He's here, he's right over there.”

“Who's here?”

“Yuri, Yuri is here.”

“Where, Gwen? I don't see him.”

Sticking my head up, he was gone. “He was right there, I saw him.”

“Honey, I think you just imagined it. I talk to his mother from time to time, and he hasn't been home almost as long as you. I highly doubt that it'd be that coincidental you'd both show up at the same time. Seriously, what are the odds in that?”

“I know what I saw.” Pushing myself all the way up, I shook my head. “I didn't imagine it.”

“Maybe you just saw what you expected to see. You expect to see him here, your eyes probably played a trick on you.”

“No, he was there, I swear it was him.” Glancing back at the store, I tried like hell to see inside the front window. But the glare was too much, making it impossible to see inside. “It was him.”

Reaching out, my mother took my hand. “Honey, I know deep down that you think you're over everything, you've said it before. Obviously, you're not, and that's okay. He was your first love, that never goes away.” Giving my hand a squeeze, she brushed some loose strands of hair out my face. “But you can't do this to yourself, you have to stop thinking about him. You have to stop worrying about whether or not you'll see him here, because I'm sorry, your father and I aren't moving. And we would really love it if you came home more.”

“I know, but I told you, work—”

“Gwen, I know you,” she cut in, giving me that motherly stare. “And I know why you haven't come home all these years. But you can't live your life in fear of something that may or may not happen. Even if you did see him, so what? What does it change?” Not giving me time to answer, she barked. “Nothing, it changes nothing. You have your life, you're living your life, but you're not really living if you're constantly paranoid you might see him. You know your father and I aren't going to be around forever, stop letting his ghost dictate what you do.”

Sitting silent, I didn't have anything to use against what she was saying. She was right.

I avoided this place like the plague. But I had a good reason. . .

Didn't I?

I wanted to believe that I was right, that I could validate the choices I made; moving to the other side of the country, not coming home because he had roots here to too.

But when I really thought about it, I don't think my biggest problem was Yuri.

It was me never forgiving him for the choice he made all those years ago. I held that vision of him in my mind like an evil trophy. I let it consume me, I allowed it to turn my stomach with the thought I might see him again.

And that fear dug its nails into my skin so deep it hit the bone.

My mother was right. I had to stop living my life like I was going to see him at every corner if I came home.

Maybe it wasn't even him to begin with?

It was hard for me to admit being wrong, but this time, I couldn't ignore it.

“You're right,” I said, bouncing my eyes between my mother's. “My mind is probably playing tricks on me. I'm done with him, I've been done with him for years, I have to stop doing this to myself.”

Leaning over, my mother wrapped her arm around my neck and pulled me in. Kissing my forehead, she whispered. “I never thought I'd hear you say that.”

“What? That I'm done with him?”

“No.” Grinning, she put the key in the ignition and started the car. “That I'm right.” Driving away from the store, she kept her eyes on the road. “I really wish I had recorded that on my phone.”

Laughing, I felt my body relax. I was ready to free myself of all the burdens I carried around that man.

This was my life, and he had no place in it anymore.

### Chapter Four

Gwen

---

“Well look who it is.” My brother Tyler said as I entered the house.

Dropping the bags onto the floor, I smiled. “Long time no see, Tyler.” Holding out my arms, my brother stepped in and gave me a hug.

“Good to see ya, sis,” he said, then ruffled my hair just like he used to do when we were kids.

Tyler was two years older than me. He wasn't a perfect brother or son, he got into trouble, he ran with the wrong crowd at times, but I had to give him credit, he always looked out for his little sister.

“Where's the Jill and the kids?” I asked, backing up and bending over to pick up the bags.

Tyler dropped to my side, picking up a few of the heavier bags. “Dad has them out back probably showing them how well new grass took to the soil.” His tone was dry as he made a woo sound and chuckled. “I'm sure she's wishing for me to come out and save her right now.”

“Well aren't you going to? You can't leave her like that.”



“Nope. She's going to have to learn how exit with grace on her own.”

“Real nice.”

Our mother came through the door, stopping short and allowing the bags on her arms to drop instantly. “Tyler!” Throwing out her arms, she embraced him in a strong hug. “You're home,” she said, her words muffled as she buried her face into his shoulder. Taking a step back, she wrapped an arm around each of us and squeezed. “Both my babies are here, I'm so happy.”

Tyler looked down at me, rolling his eyes as he pulled her arm off his neck. “Yes, Mom, this is wonderful, but can we do this visit without you going all emotional on us?”

“No, no you can't. When your kids grow up and move hundreds of miles away, and never come home, and barely call, and don't return messages—you'll know exactly what I feel.”

“I doubt that, I'm ready to kick the boys out now, they're both a pain in the ass.”

“They're ten, Tyler, you have no idea what's coming. Come talk to me when they hit sixteen and find the pot.”

“The pot?” he asked, eyeing her with a smirk on his face.

Waving her hand in the air, she huffed loudly. “You know what I'm talking about. Don't think I was oblivious to you and all your shenanigans as a teenager.” Holding her hand to her chest, her lids lowered. “I was a kid once too, we all were. You'll see what I'm talking about.” Resting her hand on her hip, her lips pulled back into a satisfied grin. “You know I heard that people get it back five times worse than what they did their own parents. If that's the case, you really are screwed.”

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Tyler's jaw hung open as his lips drew taut. "Oh come on, I wasn't that bad."

Glancing at my brother under hooded lids, my mother didn't say a word. Her eyes said it all, the look on her face told Tyler exactly how much stress he had caused her.

"Really? I was that bad, huh?" Frowning, he shrugged his shoulders. "Hm, who knew."

"Alright, you two take this stuff into the kitchen. I'm going to go find my gran-babies." Walking off towards the sliding glass doors that led into the backyard, she kept talking. "You know where it all goes. Some things never change."

Tyler's eyes connected with mine as we looked down at the hoard of things at our feet.

"You heard her," I said, "Get to it."

"Uh uh uh." Shaking his head, he pointed down at the floor. "You're not getting out of this one."

"Oh, yeah, says who? You?" Taking a long step to the side, I tried to walk around him, but he blocked me by holding out his arms and putting his large frame in my way.

"I don't think so, Toad."

"Don't call me that," I snapped, cocking my head into my shoulder. "You know how I

feel about it.”

“Then don't ask for it. Grab some bags, let's go.”

Hanging my head, I turned back around. “Fine, you win this time, but don't get used to it.”

“It's too late for that, I'm already use to winning.” Chucking, Tyler headed into the kitchen and started putting away groceries.

I felt like I had stepped back in time, as if we were teenagers again, bickering about a household chore neither one of us wanted to do.

“Aunt Gwen!” both boys yelled in unison as they ran into the kitchen.

Grabbing them both, I tugged them into my arms and gave them a big hug. “Hey guys, look how big you both got since the last time I saw you.”

Max and Jax or the Axe's as my father liked to call them. Tyler and his wife were floored when they found out they were having twins. They hadn't been dating long, Tyler was only twenty, Jill was nineteen. They were both far too young to be parents when it happened.

But those boys changed my brother, they gave him direction in his life. If he hadn't met Jill and fallen in love, if she hadn't gotten pregnant, my brother wouldn't be the amazing man he had become.

“So, how's New York?” Tyler asked as he pushed the canned olives into the cupboard.

“It's crazy, totally different than this place that's for sure.” Opening the fridge, I

started putting away the milk and other cold items.

“And?”

“And what?”

“I don't know, but there has to be more.” Giving me curious look, he turned away as he spoke, not looking me in the eyes. “Is there anyone I need to meet? Maybe give the big brother speech too?”

Oh god. . . Is he trying to ask me about my love life?

Giggling, I laid my arms over the top of the fridge door, and stared at the back of his head. “If you're asking me if I'm dating anyone, the answer is no. I hardly have time for myself, I don't have time for someone else too.”

“Are you sure?”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean, Tyler?”

Twisting around, he leaned against the counter. “I don't want to be that person, Gwen, but you know how it is around here. Most rumors aren't true, but some of them are.”

Dropping my head back, I looked at the ceiling. “Are you serious right now? Please tell me you don't believe anything that you've heard?”

“I just needed to ask, that's all.” Holding out his arms, he frowned. “I don't want to see you get hurt again. The thought of you going back to Yuri after what he did. . .” Pausing, he stroked his jaw. “I'd kill him this time.”

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The twins were digging around in the bags, pulling out items and setting them on the counter. Max stopped, sitting back on his heels as he looked at his father. “Kill who, Dad?”

“No one, don't worry about.”

Jax popped his head up and glanced between us. “Then why did you say it?”

“It's nothing,” Tyler said, his voice growing annoyed. “How about you two go find grandpa and bother him. He loves it when children bother him, maybe you can go through his war chest and try on his old uniforms?”

The boys whipped their heads to look at each other. I couldn't help but think that the two of them had some weird connection where they could talk telepathically. They did it all the time. Someone would ask them a question, or there would be something that they needed to decide together, and that's what they would do.

They would stare at each other, neither one speaking, and then suddenly, as if they had some type of discussion in private, they would answer at the same exact time, with the same exact answer, using the same exact words or mannerisms.

It was wild.

Simultaneously, both boys turned their attention to Tyler. “Alright,” they said together, climbing to their feet and running off. Their quick heels pounded against the floor, moving up the stairs, and disappearing down the hall to the other side of the house.

Standing in silence, Tyler went to speak, but I stopped him. “Look, I know people are saying things, Mom won't tell me what exactly, but I know enough to imagine. But none of them are true. You should know me better than that.”

“I do, I do know.” Dipping his chin into his chest, he ran his hand through his hair. “I just had to make sure. I don't want to be that person that never asks, I'd be so angry at myself if you needed my help, but you were too afraid to come to me, and I never took the time to ask.”

“Tyler, I appreciate the gesture, but I'm not in trouble, I'm not afraid of Yuri, and I know better than to associate with him anymore. So you don't have to worry, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, his voice matter of fact, with no hints of uncertainty.

Finishing up in the kitchen, I carried the bag of decorations into the living room where my mother and Jill were sitting and talking.

“All done with the food, all that's left are these.” Holding out the bag, I placed it at my mother's feet. “Hey, Jill.”

Rising to her feet, she stepped in and gave me a hug. “Hey, Gwen, it's good to see you.”

“Yeah, you too. I can't believe how big the boys have gotten. It's wild.”

“Tell me about it, they're both about to pass me in height, I'll be looking up at them in no time.” Sitting back on the couch, she crossed her leg, setting her hands delicately in her lap. “Congrats by the way, Tyler told me you closed a big case recently? What was it with—the Greenier company?”

“I did, yes, and thank you.”

“Maureen!” my father yelled down from upstairs. “You got to come see this!”

“What?” she screamed back, as if the entire floor between them didn't exist.

“Your grandsons, you gotta see them!”

My mother and Jill stood up, both of them following the sound of his voice. Taking advantage of the empty room, I threw myself onto the couch, settling into the cushions.

I could hear laughter coming from upstairs, and I knew I should probably go see what was so funny. But I felt exhausted. I hadn't slept well since I decided to come home for the holiday, just being in this town again had been the only thing on my mind.

It drained me, completely consuming my brain until I couldn't think about anything else. I was surprised I had even been able to function at the firm with the anxiety I felt about this trip.

The weight on my eyes drew my lids down, causing me drift between sleep and consciousness. Every so often, I'd open my eyes, only to have them yanked back down.

Sleep had taken over, my body so emotionally tired that exhaustion had won.

I could hear voices around me, some were soft and some were loud. Opening my eyes, I looked out the window to see that the daylight was gone and night had taken over.

Pushing myself up on the couch, I looked into the dining room and saw everyone sitting around the table, all of them stringing popcorn onto thread.

Rubbing my eyes, I threw my legs off the couch and sat with my head in my hands, trying to wake up.

“Look who finally decided to get up.” My father was laughing as he threw a piece of popcorn up to catch it in his mouth. “Good evening.”



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“Sorry, I must be tired from the jet lag still.” On shaky legs, I stood up and walked to the table. “What are you guys doing?” I asked, pulling out a seat and sitting down.

“What does it look like, Einstein?” Tyler asked, pushing a dull needled through a popcorn kernel.

“Ha ha.” Pulling a bowl towards me, I grabbed a handful and started munching on it.

Slapping my hand, my mother gave me an angry look. “No more, this is for the tree.”

“Man, I haven't done this in ages.” Reaching out, I picked up the end of Jax's strand. “You did a lot already.”

“You would have had the chance to if you ever came home for Christmas after you moved.” My mother didn't look at me as she said it, simply stringing popcorn with a serious expression on her face.

Another jab.

“Can I help?” I asked, looking around the table.

“Of course you can.” Passing me a bowl, my mother cut me a long piece of thread and handed me a needle. “You were always the one who insisted we do this every year.”

“Yeah, this was always your fault.” my brother winked at me, giving me a little grin.

“Don't you start, this is supposed to be fun.”

“Grandma,” Max said, his eyes extremely serious for a kid his age. “You're his mother, why don't you just ground him like Mom does to us?”

Everyone at the table busted out in laughter as Max and Jax sat there completely oblivious to why it was funny.

“What? Why is that funny? I'm right, she is his mom.”

My father tugged him in for a hug, ruffling his hair. “You are right, Max, but it doesn't really work that way when you become an adult.”

“I want to be an adult then.”

“No you don't. Trust me, being an adult is no fun.” Patting his back, my father laughed.

And as I sat there, just watching my family, the different generations of us all stringing popcorn until our fingers were red and there was no more thread, I realized how much I had been missing out on.

I missed my nephews and watching them grow up. I missed my brother and the relationship we could have had if I had stuck around a little bit longer.

Yes, Tyler moved away too, but not until last year, and that was only because his job transferred him.

But he still took the time to come and visit twice a year, once in the summer and once at Christmas. I had made no effort at all.

I ran from this town because of Yuri.

And that caused me to run from my family.

I was a fucking idiot.

### Chapter Five

Yuri

---

I caught a glimpse of her in town. A fleeting glimpse that lasted only seconds. But it was enough to drum up everything we had once felt for each other.

She was in her mother's car, driving away from Clark's. I was tempted to stroll up to her window and say hello, but I stopped myself. A lump had formed in the back of my throat, filled with a million words I had wanted to say to her over the years.

I wrote her a letter last year, only to crumple it up and throw it in the trash. I called her mother's house once, ready to confess everything and beg her to give me Gwen's number, but I hung up before anyone answered.

Why is this so hard?

Because she hates me.

Driving back to my mother's, I walked in the house, carrying the bag of light bulbs and the extension cord she needed.

“Here you go,” I said, handing it over to her.

Taking it from my hands, she opened it up and looked inside. “Change?” she asked,

talking into the bag. She had barely looked me in the eyes since I got there.

When she spoke to me it felt like she was talking to a stranger. She was so removed from the role of her being my mother and me being her son.

Pulling her change from my pocket, I dropped it into the bag. “Here.”

Cocking her head up, she arched a brow. “Excuse me?”

“There's your change, right in the bag for you now.” Lowering my tone, I gave her an angry look. “Jesus, Mom, you don't need to treat me like I'm an asshole.”

“Then how should I treat you?” Keeping her eyes firmly on mine, she threw her hand to her hip as she straightened her back. “After everything that happened—you run off, you don't tell me where you are, you hardly call, and then you show up out of nowhere and expect me to act like I'm happy?”

“No, but you could show me a little compassion.”

Didn't I deserve that at least?

If nothing else, you would hope that the one person in the world who was supposed to love you unconditionally, would be the one person who would be willing to listen. She stopped listening after the police informed her of what I had done.

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“Compassion?” she said, her tone high and full of disbelief. “Don't you talk to me about compassion.”

Hanging my head, I ran my hand across my jaw as I peered down at her. “I'm not doing this right now, I just got here. I didn't come here to cause any trouble, I just wanted to see my family is all.”

“Family? You ruined our family.”

“Can't you let it go? I did my time, I paid my dues, I don't need you reminding me of that shit anymore. Why do you think I left to begin with?”

Veering her stare, her eyes turned to slits. “Are you putting this on me right now? Are you seriously putting this on me?”

“I didn't mean it that way. But you can't blame me for everything.”

“Then who should I blame? Your brother? I should blame your brother who was sixteen at the time? I should put all the blame on a boy and not the man who was there?”

“I'm not doing this right now,” I barked, throwing my hand up and stalking away from her. Letting my voice trail off, I spoke under my breath. “Maybe coming back was a mistake. . .”

“There's no maybe, you're right, it was.”

That one hurt.

I wasn't a man who got hurt easily, especially not after spending a few years in prison. But that was a long time ago, I thought by now she would have been ready to move past it and have her son back. It was a stupid thought really, she was never going to forgive me for any of it.

She'll never believe the truth.

Heading out the door, I climbed in my car and sped off. I didn't have to stay with her, I could crash in a hotel or sleep in my car, but deep inside I wanted to go home. I missed this place, it just wasn't the same after they released me.

People looked at me as if I was a disease. They would cross the street if I was walking, just to not have to pass me. Women would clutch their purses and men would double check their wallets.

Even after all this time, I could still feel people staring at me when I was in town today. It sucked.

That was one of the reasons why I moved away. It had nothing to do with wanting to run, it had everything to do with wanting a fresh start.

I would never get that there. The town was too small, people talked too much, and no one would ever see me as anything other than a criminal.

Rolling to a stop, I could see the house across the street. Putting the car into park, I shut off the lights and sat in the dark. I could see figures moving across the lit windows, and I tried to pick out which one was probably her.

God I miss her.

It was hard to admit, but I never stopped loving Gwen. She had been in my mind every day since that horrible night. And I hadn't been able to forgive myself for hurting her.

I never should have gotten involved.

The front door opened and a shadowed figure stepped outside. Moving across the yard, under the dim light of the outside bulb, I watched the silhouette bend and twist in front of the bushes.

“Okay! Light it up!”

It's Tyler.

Bright Christmas lights popped on, covering the front bushes and around the windows. I watched as the rest of her family came out of the house, all of them unaware of the lingering eyes in darkness. Gwen came out last, causing my chest to tighten and my stomach to clench.

She was just as beautiful as the last day I saw her.

Her curly brown hair flowed like silk over her back, her smile was huge, lighting up the yard more than all the hundreds of Christmas lights put together.

I'm so sorry, Gwen. I really am.

Tapping my fingers against the wheel, all I could think about was jumping out of the car and running to her. I wanted to wrap her in my arms, feel her against my chest, smell her skin and touch her body.

But I didn't move.



She was clear the last time we talked. Gwen was done with me, it was over.

I had one phone call after I got arrested and I chose to call her. She wouldn't listen to a word I had to say, she refused to let me speak. And she was so upset that I didn't even try to calm her down. I let her be mad, I let her crush my heart in her palm and hang up on me.

I gave up on us.

Starting the car, I turned on the lights, pulling a u-turn in the street and driving away. Seeing her brought back all the emotions I thought I had left in the past.

I tried so hard not to love her anymore, but it just didn't work.

### Chapter Six

Gwen

---

Standing in the darkness, I heard the faint rumble of an engine. Glancing over my shoulder, I watched a car as it made a sharp turn in the road and headed away from us.

The taillights flickered like a firefly on a hot summer night, dancing against the horizon until they finally disappeared.

“Gwen?”

“Hm?” I said, turning to look at my brother.

“What are you looking at?” he asked, searching the darkness behind us.

“Oh, uh, nothing. It was just a car, probably one of the neighbors or something.” I wasn't sure why, but even as I said it, I didn't believe that it was just a neighbor.

There was a feeling sitting in my chest, like that car had been watching us. Looking back over my shoulder, I stared into the empty street, expecting to find more than just silence.

“Okay, well you coming?” Tyler asked, starting for the door. Rubbing his hands

together, he blew hot air into closed fists. “It's cold as hell out here.”

“Yeah, I'm coming.” Stepping into the house, the smell of gingerbread filled the air. Taking in a deep breath, I followed it into the kitchen. “Gingerbread, now it really feels like Christmas.”

“You can't have Christmas without Gingerbread,” my mother said, slipping her hands into the potholders, and opening the oven.

Leaning against the door frame, I tucked my hands into my pockets. “I'm sorry it took me so long to come home, Mom.”

Resting the cookie sheet on the stove, she looked at me over her shoulder. “It doesn't matter, you're here now. You found your way back to us, that's all that counts.” Smiling, she waved her hand over the silver tray. “So, how about some cookies?”

\* \* \* \*

My father stood at the stereo, turning up the music as my mother walked through the living room, carrying a tray of appetizers over to the table.

People were starting to filter into the house for the party, causing the room to explode with laughs, smiles, and stories from the past. My uncle Jeff started with his tall tales of the days he spent traveling around Europe. . .

My mother's brother was a compulsive liar, he had never left the country, but no one ever called him out on it. We all smiled and nodded, letting him talk himself into a slurry of nonsense.

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In reality, the closest he ever came to being in another country was visiting Epcot every summer for the past twenty years.

“Did you know that in France they consider a grilled cheese with tomato a delicacy?”

Sipping my beer, I tried to sound interested. “No, I didn't know that.” Backing away slowly, I quickly said, “Excuse me, Uncle Jeff, the ladies room is calling.” Walking away, it didn't take him long to rope in another set of ears.

Crossing the room, I smiled at familiar faces, never once giving anyone the opportunity to speak to me. I needed a break, a moment to myself to collect my thoughts.

I thought I'd be able to handle this, but it was a little overwhelming. My mind was starting to wander to a time where I was happy, where my smiles were real and heartfelt. Back when I had everything I ever wanted.

You need to let go, Gwen.

Turning the corner that leads into the hall, I was looking at my feet, trying to avoid the eyes of everyone around me. Hitting a wall, I took a quick step back, and looked up.

“Hi.”

My eyes expanded to the size of saucers as all the air in the room seemed to get sucked out. I couldn't speak, I couldn't think, I couldn't move.

Forcing myself to breathe again, I blinked rapidly. “Hi.”

That was all I could get out, one simple word to match his. Yuri had taken my breath away, the same as he always had.

Smirking, he raked his fingers through his hair, his eyes twinkling with little fireworks. “How are you?”

Swallowing hard, I didn't answer right away. I wasn't sure what I wanted to say. My brain fired off in a million directions, but only a few words came out.

“What are you doing here?” Stepping backwards, I put some distance between us. He was too close. I could smell his cologne, I could feel the heat off his body, I could hear the air as it seeped into his lungs.

And all of that did things to me that it shouldn't anymore.

Yuri let his gaze drift around my face, riding the length of my body. “God, you're still just as beautiful now as ever, Gwen.”

The compliment seared my ears, making my blood bubble with a strange mix of excitement and anger. I wanted to scream at him to leave, I wanted to hug him and feel his arms engulf me.

There was pull, a magnetic sensation that kept tugging on my muscles, trying to force me into his grasp. It was wrong, a trick of lost time and unfinished business that wanted to build a new foundation.

But it wasn't real.

“I asked you a question.” Letting my arms dangle at my sides, I looked around to see

if anyone else noticed the intruder. “What are you doing here?”

Yuri took a soft step forward, his eyes never leaving mine. “I’m here for the party.”

The way he said it sent my body up in flames. His tone was deep, husky, playing every muscle in my body as if he owned them.

He did own them, once upon a time.

“You should go.” Darting my eyes between his, I tried to figure out why he would just show up here this way.

“I saw you the other day in town.” His feet brought him closer, making me all too aware of my own body and the rush of adrenaline that had started to pump through my veins.

It wasn’t my eyes playing tricks on me.

My heart was beating erratically, my chest was tight, my nipples hardened as the space between us dwindled down to nothing but a few inches.

Yuri lifted his hand to my face, sweeping his thumb across my jaw. “You know I never stopped thinking about you all these years, Gwen, not once.”

Tipping my head into his hand, I closed my eyes instinctively. It was a reflex, something I had done so many times before. I felt his lips as they traced the shell of my ear, making goosebumps explode over my skin.

You know who he is, you know what he’s done. . .

Don't let him do this.

Opening my eyes, I peered up at him under hooded lids. "But you didn't think about me that night."

"You have no idea how much I regret what happened. But we can start over, right here, right here now. A new beginning for both of us."

"It doesn't work that way, Yuri."

"It could if you let it."

"Is this why you came here? Because you saw me in town and thought that you could get a do over?" Pursing my lips, my brows furrowed. "There is no second chance here, there never will be. You made a choice, and I won't ever be able to forget it."

His thumb drew light circles across the curve of my throat, causing my breath to hitch. "I'm not asking you to forget, Gwen."

"Then what are you asking?"

Thinning his lips, his large palm scooped my cheek. "Look up."

"What?"

"Look up." His gaze shot to the ceiling, returning to my face. "Go on, look up." Tilting my head back, I eyed the mistletoe above us. "I want you to know that I

understand. If you want me to leave, I will. But I want my kiss before I go.”

My eyes danced between his and the mistletoe. There were two voices in my head. One telling me to just turn and walk away, the other telling me take this kiss as a parting gift, to accept it and kiss him one last time.

No, he doesn't deserve it.

“I'm not kissing you, Yuri.” Pulling his hand off my face, I folded my arms across my chest. “What we had was a long time ago, it's over now.”

“Is that right?” he asked, his smile turning into a wolfish grin.

Flaring my nostrils, I rolled my eyes. “You chose prison over me, so yeah, I'd say it's done.”

“It was nothing like that.”

“I don't want to get into this right now, I think you should just go.”

Leaning forward, he let his lips hover dangerously close to mine. “I'm not leaving without my kiss, it's bad luck to not give a kiss under the mistletoe.”

Our eyes froze on each other, his sultry and dark, mine wary and confused. “If I kiss you, do you promise to leave and never come back?”

Holding his hand to his heart, he quietly whispered. “I promise to leave, but I can't promise I'll stop trying to win you back.”

Memories of how his mouth felt on mine, of how his hands possessed my body, of how he controlled the pleasure that surged through my veins came flooding back.



Yuri had been my first everything. There's something about your first that sticks with you. But it's more when all you ever wanted was that first to also be your last.

His breath washed over my face as his lips softly grazed mine. Sucking in a gulp of air, my body began to shake as he closed the final gap. Pressing his lips to mine, my body took control, willingly accepting his kiss as if I had been suffocating and he was the air I needed to survive.

The tip of his tongue teased the slit of my lips as his hand swept around, capturing my nape and holding me in place. I didn't fight him, I didn't try to stop him, I didn't tell him no.

Every muscle in my body turned to mush as the years between us seemed to wash away, bringing me right back to where we left off eight years earlier.

I couldn't smell the food anymore or hear the other people at the party, I was numb from the neck down.

Yuri's kiss deepened, my lips parting to make room for his tongue. He tasted sweet, like honey and Bourbon. Our tongues twirled and licked, turning a simple kiss into something more.

My stomach tumbled with butterflies as his fingers worked their way into my hair, digging at the roots. Pushing his lips harder onto mine, Yuri wrapped his other hand around my waist, pulling me in.

Taking strong steps forward, he walked me backwards into the laundry room and closed the door behind us. Our mouths never broke apart, they only devoured more.

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My brain had shut down, being run on pure need. I had needed this for a long time, even if I didn't want to admit it.

It always felt like we were never truly done, no matter how much I tried to convince myself we were. Yuri was on my thoughts constantly, there wasn't a day that went by where I didn't think about him several times.

Some days it was anger that fueled my thoughts, other days it was sadness or wonder, but he was always there one way or another.

"I've wanted this for years, Gwen," he said between kisses as his hands held me tight. "I don't think I ever really let you go."

My fingers found his back, digging into his muscles. Raking my nails down his jacket, I gripped the arms and pulled it off.

I didn't speak, simply letting my body do the talking for me. I was needy, lost in him and the moment. Driving my lips harder onto his, I threw his jacket to the floor. Yuri's fingers traced my spine, sweeping around and squeezing my breasts.

Hidden in the darkness of the room, he kept pressing us in deeper, until my back hit the washing machine. Scooping me off my feet, Yuri set me down on top, spreading my legs open with his waist as his lips found my neck.

Nibbling the delicate skin, his hard bulge pressed against my sex, making it throb. Working his hands up my thighs, he pushed my skirt up, exposing my panties. I felt his thick finger as it slid down my slit, teasing my clit.

Growling, he placed his mouth to my ear. “You're so fucking wet, I love that I still make you so fucking wet.” The tip of his finger teased the seam of my panties as his teeth gently plucked at my lobe. “You've always loved a little danger, like that time we fucked in the pool during a cookout.” His finger slipped beneath the fabric, gently spreading my juice up and down. “And that time we made love in my car at the drive-in.”

Moaning as his finger found my clit, Yuri pressed the sensitive button with his thumb as he slid a single finger into my pussy. Rocking his hips, his hard cock pushed against my inner thigh.

My moan grew louder as he drove his finger in faster and harder. Gripping my head, he pulled it against his chest. “Shh,” he said, slipping a second finger inside. “We don't want to get caught.”

His hand moved faster, his thumb swirled and stroked my clit, causing my belly to swell with need. I couldn't see him in the pitch black room. It was as if my other senses had shifted into high gear.

I could hear him, I could smell him, and I could feel him. His breathing was heavier, his heart was pounding like a drum inside his chest. His skin was hot, beading up with sweat as his hips gyrated.

The sound of metal pinged in the air, and I knew exactly what it was. Lowering the zipper on his jeans, Yuri curled one hand under my ass and moved me to the very edge of the washer.

Pushing my thighs open wider, he moved my panties to the side. I felt the tip of his cock as he slipped the crown up and down over my lips, soaking it in my arousal.

“Have you thought about me all these years? Have you thought about how good we

were together, how great it felt when we were together?” Tracing the shell of my ear with his tongue, he followed the curve of my jaw, licking down my throat. “Because your pussy has been all I could think about.”

With one hard push, Yuri drove his cock deep inside. The hair at the base tickled against my skin as he paused, staying still for a brief moment. I felt his cock pulse as my walls gripped his shaft, refusing to let him go.

Grunting, he pulled back slowly, then thrust back hard. Curling my legs around his waist, I buried my face in his chest, doing my best not to scream.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I met his pace, rocking my hips so my clit hit his lower belly. I could feel the orgasm as it started, a tingling in my core that turned into an explosion.

Goosebumps jumped across my skin, my muscles shook and trembled. Biting his neck, Yuri groaned as he thrust once last time. Stilling, his cock jerked inside my pussy, filling me with warm come.

Leaning his head against mine, we were both breathing hard, our chests rising and falling in unison. Sitting up straight, I ran my hand through my hair, unable to really grasp what had just happened.

I felt like I was in one of my dreams and at any moment I would wake up in my bed in NY, hundreds of miles from this place. Pinching myself, I quietly said, “Ouch.”

“Are you alright? What happened?”

“I’m fine, I just pinched myself.”

“Why the hell did you do that?”

“To make sure I wasn't dreaming.”

Chuckling, Yuri helped me off the washer, making sure I was steady on my feet before letting go. “You're definitely not dreaming.” Buttoning his pants, I could hear him feeling around on the floor for his coat.

I could see shadows in the room now from the slight light that was creeping in from under the door. Reaching my arm out, I touched his face as he stood back up, softly running my fingers over his jaw.

“So what now?” I asked, allowing myself a second to just touch his skin.

“Now I get you back to your party.” I could tell by his tone that he had a smirk on his face. Even after all these years, I felt like I still knew him.

But you don't, you don't know him.

Walking to the door, I opened it slowly, peeking my head out and checking to make sure no one was around. The light from the hall was bright, forcing me to blink several times to adjust.

“It's all clear.”

Turning to face him, I curled my arms around my ribs, just peering up at him. I wasn't sure what to say to him. This had all taken me by surprise. His being here, my feelings out weighing rational thinking, it was too much to process.

None of this was supposed to happen.

His eyes penetrated my body as he took a firm step forward, wrapping his arms around my waist and yanking me in. Pressing his lips to mine, he kissed me one last time.

And as quickly as it all happened, it was over.

Yuri unlatched his arms from my body and took a step back. Running his fingers across his lips, he smiled. “I'm pretty sure an angel just got their wings tonight.”

I tried so hard not to smile, but I couldn't stop it. “I bet you're right.” My lips folded up as the kiss we shared spread down my muscles, making my body warm and tingly.

“See ya around, Toad.”

“Don't call me that,” I said, holding up my finger in protest. The smile still kept spreading, making its way down to my toes. “You know how much I hate it.”

“I thought you loved the little nickname?” he asked, his tone playful.

“You know, I thought if I saw you again that you'd be different. But you haven't changed at all, have you?”

“I've changed a lot, Gwen, but that doesn't mean the person I was is gone.” Yuri kept his eyes on mine as he gave me one last smile. “Tell everyone I said hello.”

Turning around, he walked down the hall, exiting out the patio doors to the backyard.

My heart skipped in my chest as I softly touched my lips. They were tingling, the sensation strong and bold as if I had just eaten a hot pepper.

“Hey,” my brother said, coming around the corner and gripping my shoulders. “I figured you went to hide out in your room.”

Shit.

“Oh, no, I just. . .” Pausing, I wondered if he could see that my cheeks were flushed and my skin was dewy from just being with Yuri. “I was going to, then I changed my mind.”

“Good, we would have missed you.” Juggling my body a little, he stepped around me. “I'm going to hit the can, I'll be right back.” Glancing up, Tyler stopped short and turned back to face me. Giving me a quick kiss on the cheek, he shrugged his shoulder. “Mistletoe,” he said, pointing up. “I don't want you to mistake that kiss as kindness.”

Laughing, I rolled my eyes. “Of course.”

Walking back into the party, my mother came up and stood beside me. “Where did you disappear to?”

“Geese, is everyone keeping tabs on me or something?” Nervously, I raked my fingers through my hair. I felt like a kid again, being interrogated about where I had been and who I had been with.

“Don't be ridiculous, it's just you were gone for almost thirty minutes. I sent Tyler to find you, did you see him?”

It was that long?

Time had stopped for me. Being with Yuri had always done that. I used to get into trouble for being late for curfew because of it. Whenever we were together, it always felt like it was just the two of us.

“I did.”

Laying her head on my shoulder, my mother closed her eyes. “This is the best Christmas in years.”

My smile arched high, filled with a rekindled love that I had never really given up, only lost along the way.

“It really is, Mom.” Laying my head on hers, I watched my father as he sat with my nephews, both of the boys all snuggled up under his arms. “It really is.”



### Chapter Seven

Yuri

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Closing the glass door, I walked around the front of the house. Standing out on the sidewalk, I watched the party for a moment.

I wish I could have stayed. If life had taken a different path, I probably would have been there with the girl I loved.

But she was right, I had made a choice. And I regretted every single move I made that night. It altered everything, what I wanted had been stripped from my hands in the blink of an eye.

At the time, I thought it was what I had to do, but in reality, it only changed who I was.

I had gone from loyal son to convict, from trusted boyfriend to lying criminal. My father ended up having to close the doors to his business, his entire empire now a pile of dust because of me.

Hanging my head, I climbed into my car and drove back to the motel. For a brief moment in time, I felt normal. I could touch her, smell her, feel her pulse as her heart went crazy inside her chest.

That was what I'd been missing all these years, the woman who owned my soul. I hated having to walk out that door, but I had to leave.

I only knew about the party because I over heard my mother talking on the phone. When I asked her about it, she told me point blank not to even think about going.

There was no way in hell I was going to miss a chance to sneak in undetected and see her. After spotting her in town, I had this urge come over me. It was more than an urge, it was a need I couldn't shake off.

Flopping down onto the mattress, I rested my hands under my head, keeping my eyes on the ceiling. I had come back with a small hope my mother would welcome me with open arms, but now. . . Now I wasn't leaving until I told Gwen and my mother the truth.

She gave herself to me with little resistance, as if we had been separated by war and I had just returned home.

She had that same fire in her eye I remembered, she had that same flare that drew me to her in the first place. My heart was beating in my chest, but it wasn't to keep me alive anymore.

My heart was beating because it had found life again.

Opening my eyes, the sun was poking through cracks in the curtain.

What time is it?

Checking the clock by the bed, it was ten in the morning. I wasn't sure exactly when I fell asleep, it snuck up on me, whisking me away without me even realizing it.

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Throwing my legs over the side of the bed, I gripped the edge of the mattress, taking a second to catch my bearings. Dragging a hand over my head, I rubbed my hair and shook my head back and forth, trying to wake up.

Standing up, I grabbed some clean clothes and took a shower. Making the water a little cooler, I ducked my head into the stream. The cold water trickled down my shoulders and over my back, creating goosebumps on my skin.

Pressing my palm into the tiles, I closed my eyes, allowing the water to run over my face. Gwen was all I could think about. The way it felt when I slid into her pussy, how warm and wet she was as I fucked her in the dark.

It brought me back years in my mind, making me forget all the time that had past between us. There wasn't any time missing, it felt more like days, as if we had only been apart for a week.

Gripping my cock, I started to stroke my length just thinking about how good she felt wrapped around me. Pumping faster, I jerked my dick, gently squeezing the crown as I hit the tip.

I couldn't help myself. The image of her body in my mind was enough to turn me rock solid. Faster and faster I stroked my shaft until the orgasm drew my balls up, making my toes curl.

Warm cum spilled over my hand as it gushed from the tip. The water washed it away, erasing any sign of my self gratification. Relaxing a little, I finished the rest of my shower, toweling dry and getting dressed.

Stuffing my phone and wallet into my pockets, I grabbed my keys and left the motel. I had one goal in my head, make Gwen mine again.

I wasn't sure how I was going to do it, but I knew that I would never give up. We were meant to be together, I had known that since the first moment I laid eyes on her.

Nothing had changed over the years. I still felt the same heat in my gut when I was with her, I still felt prickles on my skin when we kissed.

That meant something. And I know she felt it too.

I just had to make her see it. There was no way I could lose her again.

She was mine and mine alone.

That's how it was always suppose to be.

### Chapter Eight

Gwen

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The doorbell rang causing me to pop my head up from the pile of papers my mother had laid out on the table.

After a whole lot of convincing, she finally let me take a look at the lien issue her and my father were having.

My mother stood up, ready to go answer the front door. “Let me get—”

“I’ll get it, “ my brother called out as he came down the hall.

“Never mind,” my mother said, sitting back down. “So, can you see the problem?”

It was hard to focus on what I was doing. All that was on my mind was Yuri and how good it felt being with him again.

“Not yet, I just started.” Scanning one of the papers, I read the highlights, doing my best to see where the lien had come from.

I was hoping the answer would be kind and jump out at me. This wasn’t the type of stuff I was used to looking over. Most of the paperwork that landed on my desk involved a trademark logo or phrase that a company wanted to protect.

“Looks like someone has an admirer.” Tyler walked into the kitchen, holding a giant bouquet of yellow roses.

“How pretty.” Standing up, my mother reached out for the flowers.

“Uh uh, not for you.” Passing them in my direction, my brother smiled.

“Me?”

“You are Gwen Lieheart, right?” Jiggling the flowers, he said, “Take them already, they're actually heavier than they look.”

“You're showing your age, you know that?” Grabbing the bundle, I started laughing. “Weakling.”

“Don't start, I'll drop your ass right here, I don't care if I'm suppose to be a responsible adult.”

Sticking my tongue out at him, I plucked the card off the bouquet, and started to open it, unsure who the hell would have sent me flowers. The thought crossed my mind that maybe they were from my boss for winning the Greenier case right before I left to come home.

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He typically did something for his employees if they got the job done, most of the time it was a fancy lunch or dinner with the whole office, but since I was away, I expected this was his thank you.

“Well, who sent them?” my mother asked anxiously, leaning in and smelling the perfect yellow blossoms. “God, they're gorgeous.” Taking a single stem in her fingers, she pulled it free. “Regardless of who they're from, this one is for me.”

Giggling, I pulled the card from the envelope and opened it up.

Life doesn't always go as planned, but that doesn't mean you can't find beauty in what you find. June sixteenth, two thousand-seven.

Taking in a shallow breath of air, my eyes started to water. Sniffling, I tried like hell to not cry.

“Who sent them, Gwen?” Snipping the end of the stem, my mother put the single flower into a thin vase, setting it in the center of the table.

Blinking quickly, I dried them before she noticed the glossy sheen. “Oh, my boss, they're from my boss for winning that case.” I lied, I lied through my teeth.

They were from Yuri. And he wanted to see me again.

But was I ready for that?

We shared one moment, a small glimpse of what we used to have. Yuri was the only

man who knew how to get over my walls, and he was damn good at it. That didn't mean we were a thing now or that I was even willing to accept him back into my life with open arms just because he made my eyes roll back and my body explode with pleasure.

It was a weak moment, a mistake under the mistletoe. I folded so easily, and the fact I had given myself to him as if nothing had ever forced us apart scared me to death. I might have just opened the flood gates to exactly what I had run away from.

“That's so nice of him.” Taking her seat, she cupped her hands in front of her. “So back to this pile of crap, what can you do to fix it?”

Shaking my head, I pushed all the emotions down, doing my best to focus on what was important right then.

“You haven't paid your fire taxes all year, Mom.”

“What? Yes I have.”

“That's not what this says.” Turning the paper so she could see the print, I pointed to the spot where it was explained. “Can you prove you paid them? Do have receipts or bank statements that show you have?”

“Can I prove it. . .” Letting her words trail off, she rolled her eyes. “Of course I can. I have all of that somewhere around here.”

“Okay, so if you have them, I'm going to need them. We should be able to fix this easily, it's probably just an error in their system.”

“It might take me some time to find all the statements, but I know I have them.” Quickly, she rose to her feet and walked away, making her voice louder the further



away she got. "I'll go look now, and I'll let you know when I have them all!"

"Alright!" I yelled back to her as I heard her moving up the stairs.

Touching a petal on one of the flowers, I ran it between my fingertips as I reread the small card. Yuri's note was one that only I would understand. It was coded with a date that was special, one that I couldn't believe he still remembered.

Should I go?

Tapping the sharp edge of the card stock, I scrunched my lips in thought. Fuck it.

Grabbing my purse, I snatched my mother's keys off the counter. "Mom, I'm borrowing your car for a little bit, I have an errand to run!"

"Okay!" she called back, her tone uncaring as she busied herself with hunting down more papers.

Jumping in the car, I started driving, heading for the spot I knew he was talking about. I wasn't sure what I expected from going or why I was even so ready to go there. It wasn't two days ago that I feared seeing him again, now I was running to him.

There was no explanation for my actions the night before or even right then, it was just a feeling. It felt right, it felt like I had to go. Either it was going to end any chance of a relationship completely or it would rekindle where we left off years before.

And I wasn't sure I wanted either of those.

I had to reach down deep and find my inner strength. He had robbed a store, he had

beaten a guy almost to death. I couldn't let myself forget that just because these lingering feelings were coming back like a growing inferno.

What the hell does he want from me?

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All I knew was that I had to see him to know what I truly wanted.

When he showed up at the party, sweeping me off my feet and seducing me, it flipped a switch in my brain. We weren't done, we had never really been done, no matter how much I tried to convince myself that we were.

Pulling down the dirt road, I parked the car and climbed out. Hiking through the woods, I followed the faded path deep into the trees.

It was easy to see that no one had been down there in a really long time. The path was overgrown, sharp thorns were sticking into my skin, making it difficult to press on.

What if this isn't what he meant?

What if he was just bringing up the memory?

Stopping short, I raked my nails through my hair, wondering if I was reaching for something that wasn't there to begin with. Had I just run to an invisible invitation?

I'm a fucking idiot.

Turning around, I started back towards the car, then stopped in my tracks. Yuri was walking up the path, carrying a small bag. He looked so damn handsome it took my breath away.

His dark brown hair was blowing in the soft breeze, gently brushing his brows. His arms were firm and muscular even under his jacket, creating bulges as he adjusted the

bag. A strip of sunlight broke through the treetops, making his olive colored skin glow. The hard lines of his jaw caused my skin to prickle, making me shiver.

God, how does someone I'm supposed to hate, look so damn good?

Seeing me, his mouth instantly shot into a wide grin. "I wasn't sure you'd actually come."

"I wasn't sure it was an invitation."

"See, you still know me."

Laughing, I felt my cheeks blush slightly. "Yeah and that scares the shit out of me."

"It scares us both." Yuri stopped once he was about a foot away, shifting the bag up on his shoulder. "You remember why this place is so special?" he asked, tilting his head as his eyes glinted like gold.

I felt the warmth of my cheeks spread like fire down my body, coalescing into a throbbing need between my thighs.

Damn it! Why does he still make me feel this way?

"Of course I do, I was actually surprised you remembered it."

"Are you kidding me?" His mouth pulled back as he licked his bottom lip. "It's where I saw you for the first time. . ." Pausing, his smile turned sultry. "And it's where I took your virginity. I could never forget that."

My cheeks heated, causing me to smile with embarrassment. "Yes, yes you did." The memory of that day flooded into my brain, making my heart hammer inside my chest.

I had gone with a few of my friends from school to a party in the woods—these woods. We were hanging out with some older kids, and my parents would have killed me if they knew I was there.

Yuri was standing by the fire, laughing with a few guys. When I saw him, it was an instant attraction. He happened to look up right at that moment, our eyes locking, drowning out everything else around us.

I remember the butterflies in my gut when he started walking over to me, the way my hands became clammy, and how a cool sweat started to trickle down the back of my neck.

'I haven't seen you here before, you're Gwen, right? Tyler's little sister?'

The second he opened his mouth to speak and I heard his voice, it felt like the air had been drained from my lungs. His voice was melodic, deep and thick, making my body do things it never had before.

We spent the night laying on a blanket under the stars, with his arms keeping me warm, holding me tight. He made love to me under that clear sky and we were inseparable after that.

Everything was perfect. Most girls want that, they want the perfect moment for their first time, and most don't get it.

I was one of the lucky ones.

“Come on,” Yuri said, braiding our fingers together and pulling me deeper into the woods.

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We walked in silence, the only sound around us were the birds and the crunching of leaves under our feet. My stomach roared with those familiar butterflies as his fingers tightened around mine.

The woods opened up to a small clearing by a stream. It looked almost the same as it had when I was a kid. Yuri stopped, slipping the bag off his arm and letting it drop to the ground.

Letting go my hand, our fingertips swept over each other, the touch filled with a sensation of not wanting to let go. Our hands fit perfectly together, they always had.

Bending over, he unzipped the bag and pulled out a blanket. Flipping it open, he knelt on top and started pulling stuff out of the bag; a bottle of wine, two sandwiches, a bag of chips, and some cherries.

“Sit,” he said, patting the blanket.

Sitting down, I curled my legs up, watching him put the food onto paper plates.

“I have turkey sandwiches with mustard and lettuce, the mustard is between the layers of meat, just like you like it, it's not touching the bread.”

“You remember that too?”

“This might surprise you, Gwen, but I remember everything about you.” Sitting next to me, he filled two wine glasses and handed me one. “I remember how you eat your sandwich in a circle, saving the center for last, I still remember that you hate

tomatoes and that your favorite food is macaroni and cheese. I remember how much roller coasters scare you and how you bite your nails when you get nervous.” Laughing, he flicked his eyes between my hands and my face. “Just like you're doing now.”

Pulling my finger out of my mouth, I giggled. “I guess you do remember everything.”

Watching Yuri unwrap the sandwiches, I couldn't get over how much he hadn't changed, despite going to prison.

I guess I thought he'd come out and be angry, maybe even evil. I pictured him with a teardrop tattoo under his eye and horrible art decorating his body because his skin was stained with prison ink.

In my imagination I saw him as this vile excuse for a man, someone who would only know how to take and not know how to give anymore.

But that wasn't what I was seeing.

He might be sweet right now, but you know what he did. He isn't all good.

Yuri kept his eyes on mine, his lips pulling up into a seductive grin. “I have you alone again, just like that first time.”

Instantly my sex began to pulse, the soft throb a match to my heartbeat. “It looks like you do.” Crawling across the blanket, he loomed over me, causing my throat to swell, making it hard to swallow. “What are you doing?” I asked, my voice cautious and playful.

“I'm taking what's mine.” His body lowered, pinning me to the blanket. Using two fingers, he brushed loose strands of hair out of my face.

“I never said I was yours.” Smirking, my belly went wild as I watched the animal inside him claw its way out.

I used to love when he would take control, when he would take me the way he wanted to. It was sexy, it made me feel sexy, it was pure bliss to watch him get aroused when he looked at my body.

“You don't need to say it, I can see it in your eyes.” His hands moved dangerously slow down my ribs, softly tracing the outside of my breasts. “I still remember how you would melt when I kissed your neck and how you would moan when I pinched your nipples at the same time.”

Moving his face, he lowered his lips to my neck and kissed the tender skin. Slipping his hand up my shirt, he pinched my nipple, turning it stiff. The moan fell out with ease, built on nothing but air.

“There it is,” he said, smiling as he spoke. “Don't hold it in, you don't need to. No one can hear us out here.” His hand moved over my chest, pinching my other nipple as he nibbled my throat. “And I want to hear you, I need to hear you. It's been too long since I've gotten to hear you scream my name.”

“Mm, Yuri.” Closing my eyes, I let him work my body.

Fingers touched and groped, lips kissed and suckled. Tongues danced and hips rocked. And as we got lost in each other, as the battle with this sexual hunger slowly dissolved, a ravenous greed took hold.

I needed him inside me, I needed to feel him again. He was my past being reintroduced to my present. He was power in the form of pleasure.

Strong fingers tugged my pants down my thighs, peeling away my panties with them.



The cool air blew over my exposed skin, creating waves of goosebumps. Yuri kept kissing my neck and face as he pulled out another blanket and pulled it over us.

“I’ll keep you warm, I’ll always keep you warm.”

The heat between us was enough to start a fire. Taking my shirt off, he threw it to the side. Yuri tugged his shirt off his head, baring his muscular chest and abs cut from marble. The cold outside the blanket had vanished as we laid skin to skin.

His hard cock nudged against my entrance, making my pussy clench the air, eager to feel him inside. Resting his forearms up by my head, he looked down on me, his eyes yearning to feel my heat.

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“Take me, Yuri.” Pressing my hips up, I rubbed his erection with my pussy. “Please, take me.”

Growling, he thrust hard, driving his length in deep. My walls tightened around his shaft, milking his cock as he pulled back, refusing to let him free. Pistoning his hips, Yuri never took his eyes off of mine.

Even then, even after all the years we had been apart, being with him felt right. I felt whole again, I felt like this was what my life had been missing. The thought made my heart seize, unable to remember what life was like without him.

And as he fucked me so hard I could feel him in my lower belly, my body trembled and my nerves fired off electric sparks. The orgasm was violent, making me quiver from head to toe.

Yuri gave one firm, final push, stilling inside me as his cock released pump after pump of hot cream. I could feel the hard muscle as it twitched, pulsing against my walls, enhancing the euphoric pleasure that was coursing through my body.

Rolling onto his side, Yuri passed me my clothes so I could get dressed. Sitting up, he put his clothes on and laughed quietly.

“What's so funny?”

“I've never done it outside in the winter, I thought there'd be more shrinkage.” Looking down at his manhood, he furrowed his brows. “Uh, there it is.”

Giggling, I wrapped myself up in my jacket and put my shoes back on. “Don't worry, I won't judge.”

Yuri grinned, shaking his head. “Now it's time to eat, I really worked up an appetite.” Getting the plates he had started before, he opened the chips.

“Can I ask you something?” Sipping the wine, I let my eyes connect with his. Yuri nodded, going back to putting the food on the plates. “Where have you been all these years?”

“What do you mean?”

“After. . .” Rolling my hand, I said, “You know. Why did you leave here? Why didn't you stay?”

“Well, after I got released, I did come home for a bit.” Passing me a plate, he sat down beside me, resting his plate in his lap. “But things were different. People looked at me differently, my mother treated me differently, it all changed.”

“What did you think it would be like?”

Shrugging his shoulder, he took a bite of his sandwich. Speaking with his mouth half full, he looked off into the woods. “I don't know, I guess I just thought people would have moved on, but they didn't, and some still haven't.”

Popping a chip into my mouth, I twisted my waist so I was facing him straight on. “So where did you go?”

“I floated around, taking odd jobs here and there. I wanted a fresh start, someplace where people didn't know who I was.”

“Did you get it, did you get your fresh start?”

Shaking his head, he swallowed his food. “No, it never felt right anywhere I was. It wasn't home, it wasn't this place. . .” Taking a big gulp of wine, he looked me right in the eyes. “You weren't with me, nowhere ever felt like home.”

Tracing the rim of my glass with the tip of my finger, I had to do everything I could to not nibble what was left of my nail. His eyes captured mine, holding me still, trying to speak all the words he was thinking.

But he didn't say them, he held onto his thoughts.

“What about you?” he asked, picking through his chips and grabbing a folded one. “Why did you leave?”

“Honestly, because I thought you'd be here.”

“So you ran because of me?” Nodding, my brows arched high. “Did I really scare you that much?”

“It wasn't that you scared me, I was afraid of who you had become. I didn't know that person, I had never seen him before.” Swirling the liquor in my glass, I watched the funnel as it took shape. “I knew you as one person and then someone totally different emerged.”

“But that doesn't explain why you left.” Setting his plate down on the blanket, he rested back on his palms, stretching his legs out straight. “It tells me what you thought of me, but it doesn't tell me why you left.”

I left because I still loved you. . .

And I hated that I still loved you.

The words sat on the tip of my tongue, but I couldn't get them out. I was afraid to say it out loud, afraid that it would turn from a thought back into a rush emotions that were still living inside me.

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I never stopped loving him.

“None of that matters, Yuri. I left because I had to. This place was too small for us to live side by side and not run into each other. After what happened, I wasn't sure I could ever see you the same way again.”

“Gwen, what happened was a mistake. I shouldn't have gone there that night, I never should have stepped foot in that store and I'd take it all back if I could.”

“Then why did you do it? That wasn't who you were. Tell me why? Tell me so I can understand.”

I watched his eyes dull as he went back to that night in his mind. He was looking at me, but he wasn't with me right then. His eyes looked like he was in pain, as if the memory hurt worse than actually doing it in the first place.

“I don't want to talk about this. Can we just have lunch together and enjoy this, enjoy right now?”

Taking in a slow breath, my lips thinned as I felt the anger I had been holding in bubble to the surface. “Don't I deserve an explanation? Can't I get that?”

“I tried to explain myself to you back then and you told me to get fucked. You didn't want to hear it then, why do you want to hear it now?”

“Maybe I wasn't ready then, maybe I was too young to want to know the truth. But you've affected every single day of my life for years, Yuri. I loved you, I loved you

and you destroyed the future we had planned together.”

Reaching out, he laid his hand over mine. “I didn't do it on purpose to hurt you—”

Cutting him off before he could say anything else, I snapped. “But you did, you did hurt me. You broke my heart, Yuri, and nothing has been the same since.” Yanking my hand out from under his, I pushed myself to my feet. “I haven't been able to trust anyone else, because I don't know if they're being real. I haven't been able to open up to anyone and have a normal relationship, because I end up wondering what secrets they have.” Stalking in a small circle, I clutched the back of my head. “I didn't see that person in you and I'm afraid I won't see it in someone else.”

His glare hardened as he looked up at me. “I'm sorry for what I did to you and how it made you feel, but you have no idea what I went through.” Climbing to his feet, he took long steps toward me. “That night changed everything for me too. And none of it was supposed to happen that way. But I'm not going to stand here and apologize over and over for shit I can't change now. You say you loved me, but what you don't realize is that I never stopped. I still love you, even after all these years, I still love you just as much as I did that day.”

Holding my breath, I scrunched my brows, trying to figure out what the hell he was doing. He couldn't love me, because if he loved me, he wouldn't have robbed that store, jeopardizing our entire future.

If he loved me, he wouldn't have gone out with his brother to take what wasn't theirs. If he loved me, he would have done what he promised me he would do.

He didn't.

“Stop,” I said, holding up my hand. “Just stop. You don't love me, and I'm not sure you ever really did love me.”

Pressing his toes to mine, Yuri loomed over me, his mouth folded into a deep frown. “You don't think I loved you?”

Sighing, I curled my arms around my ribs and took a step back. “I don't know what I think anymore, all I know is what I feel.”

Reaching his arm out, he cupped my cheek, drawing circles across my skin. “Can you honestly tell me that you feel nothing for me?”

“Don't, Yuri, this isn't about a quick fuck because we have a history and you took me by surprise. This has to do with choices you made.”

“You made a choice last night, you chose to let me kiss you. Can you really say you felt nothing when I kissed you? When I spread your thighs open and took you as if you were still mine, did you feel nothing?” Closing the gap between us, he wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me into his chest. “Can you look me in the eyes and tell me you felt absolutely nothing right now?”

Holding his gaze, I felt tears start to well up in my eyes. “I felt like we missed out on so much, I felt like what we had was worth more than what you gave it up for, I felt like last night was just a mistake, Yuri. That's all it was, it was a mistake, and so was this.”

“None of this was a mistake. A mistake is dialing the wrong number, a mistake is accidentally signing your name when you're suppose to print it. You're wrong about this, things happen for a reason, Gwen. ”

“I need to go.” Backing away from him, I felt his fingertips as they slipped free off my waist. Heading back for the car, I didn't look over my shoulder at him.

I didn't want to. Because I knew if I did there was a chance that this strength I felt



would dwindle and I'd go running back into his arms.

We were shadows of our past, shadows that were trying to find a light that didn't exist anymore. Even if I still loved him, even if those feelings were real, we could never be together.

My life wasn't here. I lived a world away, I had responsibilities and people that relied on me. I left this place to start over, to escape the memories that ate away at me inside.

I shouldn't have come here, I shouldn't have come home.

I should have stayed where life was predictable and love didn't exist.

### Chapter Nine

Yuri

---

Grazing the door with my knuckles, I opened it up and stuck my head inside. “Mom, can I come in?”

My mother was sitting on the couch reading the paper. She kept her eyes on the page, not bothering to look up at me. “You’re halfway there, might as well go the rest of the way.”

“Merry Christmas,” I said, taking a seat in the recliner across from her.

“Is it? Is it really merry, Yuri?” Her voice was hard and angry.

She’s never going to forgive me if I don’t tell her the truth.

Gwen had really gotten to me yesterday. I couldn’t stop thinking about what she had said. She felt like I never loved her, she thought I gave up on us just to make a quick buck.

She was wrong.

It just didn’t feel right telling her the truth before telling the one person that deserved to know first—my mother.

I lived with this secret, this burden for all these years, carrying it like a boulder on my shoulders. Not once had I told the truth, I kept my mouth shut because I thought it would save someone else.

But in the end, it changed nothing.

“Can we talk?” I asked her, leaning forward and folding my hands together.

“About what? You need money? Because I don't have any to give you, you should know that.”

“No, I'm not looking for money.”

The ripple effect that happened from that horrible night was more of a tsunami. Not only had I lost the only person I ever loved, but it destroyed my parents life.

My father did everything he could to get me off with as little time as possible. He sold his business to hire me the best attorney, he took out a second mortgage on their home to help pay all the legal bills.

By the time it was all said and done, my family went from living in a huge house in a new plat, to a small two bedroom apartment on the lower end of town. A year into my sentence, my father had a heart attack, which my mother blamed on the stress I caused, and he died in his sleep.

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Gwen had no clue about the torment I lived with. I missed my father's funeral because of that choice I made, I wasn't able to be there for my family when they needed me. I never got to say goodbye to the one person who believed in me. And I broke the heart of the only woman I ever loved.

That was what I carried with me everyday. All the pain I caused everyone else.

“Then what is it?”

“Can you put the paper down?”

Huffing under her breath, she closed the paper and tossed it onto the coffee table.

“There, better?”

“Mom, this is important, and I'm not sure how to tell you.”

“Then just say it, Yuri. There's nothing you can tell me that will surprise me or disappoint me, you've already done that.”

The resentment in her tone for my very existence was point blank. She didn't try to hide how she felt about her oldest son, and she didn't try to hide the fact that she blamed me for every bad thing that has happened to her since.

“I want to talk to you about that night, the night I got arrested.”

Her eyes turned to pinpricks as she glared at me. “There's nothing to talk about, it's done.”

“No, it's not done, I never told you the truth, I want you to know the truth.”

“The truth,” she said, rolling her eyes as she let out a cynical laugh. “I know the truth, and I know how it affected all of us. I know how what you did led your brother down the same road.” Leaning forward, she bared her teeth. “That's why he's in jail right now, because you showed him how to get there.”

Shaking my head, I frowned. “That's where you're wrong and that's what I need to talk to you about. That night, I wasn't there with him to get him to help me, I was there to stop him.”

“Stop him—” she barked, her eyes opening wide in disbelief. “Let me get this straight, now that Ares is locked up, you want to come here and throw him under the bus to downplay your roll?”

“Can you just listen for once?” Biting the inside of my cheek, I was trying so hard to not get up and yell at her. “Just listen and don't talk, can you please just do that, just this time?”

“Fine, keep going.” Pressing her back into the couch, she folded her arms across her chest.

“I was at work that night, and I heard Ares talking on the phone to someone about hitting that liquor store. I tried to talk him out of it, but he laughed it off and said it would be fine, and to mind my own business. I went there to stop him, but when I walked in, Ares was stuffing the cash into a bag and the other kid he was with was holding a knife to the clerk.”

I watched my mother as I spoke, waiting to see if what I was telling her was sinking in or if she had already pulled up her wall and wasn't really listening.

“I surprised them when I walked in, causing the other guy looked away at me. The clerk grabbed a gun from under the counter, aiming it at the kid with the knife. So he took off out the door, leaving Ares alone behind the counter. The clerk turned his gun on Ares and I reacted, I jumped over that counter and knocked him out cold. What I didn't realize was that there was a customer hiding in one of the aisles that had called the cops. The lights hit the windows and Ares panicked, he started freaking out and talking about how he couldn't go to jail and how he was afraid. . .”

Pausing, I hung my head, looking down at my feet.

“Go on,” she said, her tone soft, almost motherly like when I was younger.

Looking back up at her, I searched her face for understanding. “I took the blame for it, I let them arrest me so Ares could go free. I told them I convinced him to come and he had no idea what I was going to do. He was only a kid, I thought he was just being stupid and I wanted to protect him. But he learned nothing, that fear didn't stay with him and now he's in prison for the next twenty years for a rash of robberies.” Dragging my hand across my jaw, my voice lowered. “And I lost everything to save him.”

“Are you really being honest right now, Yuri?” she asked.

“Yeah, Mom. I never told you because Ares was seventeen, I thought I could protect him. But then I saw on the news that he was arrested last month for a string of robberies up in Providence, and it cut me like a serrated blade. There's no point in me carrying this secret anymore, I did it all for nothing.”

Standing up, my mother stepped to my side, resting her hand on my shoulder. “I'm sorry for putting this on you all these years, Yuri. You're my son, and I love you, that never changed. I've just been angry, an anger that as a mother, it hurts to the point you can't even imagine. But I never stopped loving you, and I'm so sorry I've been

treating you the way I have. I haven't handled any of this the way I should, I should have been there for you no matter what, and I wasn't." Squeezing my shoulder, she kissed the top of my head. "I just wish you had told me sooner." Tears were streaming down her cheeks, falling onto my arm.

"I did it for my little brother, but when I saw Gwen yesterday, she made me realize how much I really lost not being honest in the first place."

Arching a brow, she tilted her head. "You saw Gwen?" Pulling a handkerchief from her pocket, she wiped her eyes.

"Yeah, I did."

"I wasn't sure she'd actually come. When her mother told me she was coming, I almost didn't believe her, then again, I didn't expect you to show up either." A small smile teased her lips as she said, "Sounds like fate to me."

"Fate—I don't think she sees it that way."

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“You still have feelings for her?” Squinting her eyes, my mother smiled the first smile I had seen in almost a decade.

“It doesn't matter, what I did screwed up any chance with her at all.”

“How do you know that? Have you told her the truth?”

“No, I wanted to tell you first.”

“I think you should tell her, she deserves to know the truth too, Yuri.”

“What does it matter? She hates me because of it.” Looking up at my mother, her eyes softened as her smile spread. “Why are you smiling like that?”

“Because you don't understand women.” Standing behind me, she curled her arms around my neck, hugging me and whispering in my ear. “If there's one thing I know, that girl still loves you.”

“You can't know that.”

“That's why she hasn't come home in years, Yuri, because she still loves you and everything around here reminds her of you.”

“How do—”

“Go talk to her, tell her everything, you'll see.”



It felt surreal. I was sitting with my mother getting lady advice just like when I was a teenager. We hadn't had an actual conversation in years, she hadn't given me more than one word answers or plain shit before right then.

I felt like I had my mother back, I felt like a small piece of my world was falling back into place.

But I still didn't have what I wanted. I just wasn't sure she'd ever be able to see me again, to see me as the man I've always been. Because I didn't change, I only got lost for a little while.

There's only one way to find out.

Pressing the doorbell, I rubbed my hands together anxiously. Not wanting to wait, I knocked hard, making sure it was loud enough to be heard throughout the house.

I heard footsteps as they approached, the door cracking open, then opening wide.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Tyler was holding the handle, knitting his brows together. “You're not welcome here, get the hell off out property.”

“I need to talk to Gwen, is she here?”

“I said get the fuck out of here.” Letting go of the door, Tyler lunged forward, shoving me back. “Go! Get out of here!”

“What's going—” Mrs. Lieheart stopped short, cupping her hips. “Yuri, what's going on? What is this?”

“It's nothing, Mom, he was just leaving.” Tyler veered his stare, growling under his breath. “Right, Yuri?”

“Mrs. Lieheart, I need to talk to Gwen, is she here?”

“Is everything alright? Is your mother okay?”

Tyler kept his eyes on me, but I ignored him. “She's fine, I just, I really need to talk to Gwen, it's important.”

Softening her eyes, she gave me a light smile. “She isn't here, she's on her way back to New York.”

Dipping my head into my chest, I raked my hand through my hair. “So she's gone gone, huh?”

“I'm sorry, Yuri,” her mother said, leaning against the door frame. “But. . .” Pausing, she checked her watch. “Her flight doesn't leave for another hour and a half.” Smiling, she winked at me.

“Mom, why are you telling him that?” Tyler asked through gritted teeth. “Gwen doesn't want anything to do with this asshole, you know that.”

“Shut it, Tyler, you don't know what Gwen wants. Only Gwen knows what she wants.”

“No, he's right, she probably doesn't want to see me.” Taking a step back, I tucked my hands into my pockets. “Thanks though.”

Gwen made her choice. If she wanted to see me again, she would have.

We weren't meant to be, I had to just live with that. There was nothing I could to make her love me again, there were no words I could give her that would make this right.

Even the truth might not be enough for her.

I lost her, I lost her long before I was ready.

### Chapter Ten

Gwen

---

“Now boarding group three.” The woman's voice crackled overhead, barely audible.

Grabbing my bag, I pulled out my ticket and got in line. Turning my phone onto airplane mode, I waited for the line to move forward.

I was so ready to get the hell out of that place. I had enough emotional trauma to last the rest of my life. Yuri had done a number on me, making it almost impossible to function.

After leaving the woods, I went home to my mother's house and cried. I cried harder and longer than I had in a long time. My poor mother couldn't figure out what was going on, all she could do was rub my back as I sobbed uncontrollably.

I tried to tell her what had happened, while leaving out the part about him taking me in her laundry room and under the cover of trees.

Her advice; 'Life doesn't always make sense, Gwen, you just have to find a way to understand it. And once you do, you'll know what you want.'

She asked me if I still loved him, and I couldn't give her an answer. I wanted to say yes and I wanted to say no. I was screwed in the head. When I couldn't tell her

straight out what I felt, she told not to think about it and to just spit out the first answer that came to my mind.

I said yes.

But my time was up, it was time to go home.

It didn't really matter what I felt, I had to get back to reality. And my reality wasn't here with him.

Taking a step forward, I fiddled with the ticket as I looked out the giant glass window, watching the planes as they took off.

“Gwen! Gwen!” His voice struck a chord, making my heart stop in my chest.

Spinning around, Yuri was standing in the center of the gate, his eyes filled with sadness. His arms were hanging by his sides, his expression pained.

Everyone around me stopped what they were doing and stared at us. The voices slowly turned to murmurs as eyes scanned and whispers floated through the air.

Stalking towards me, I stepped out of the line, walking to him until we were inches apart. My lips parted to speak, but he held up a finger, hushing me silent.

“Don't say anything, I just want you to listen.”

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Sucking in a gulp of air, tears were already filling my eyes, teetering on the edge of my lids. “Okay.”

Taking my hands, he braided our fingers together. I watched him take in a deep breath as his eyes settled on mine. Licking his lips, he swallowed hard. “I lied to you, I lied to everyone. I couldn't tell you the truth because I didn't think I could tell anyone, and when I needed to tell you, I couldn't because I thought my mother should know first.”

Yuri told me all about that night and what really happened, how he was protecting his brother and how he lost so much to save someone who ended up being unsavable.

I felt stupid for thinking that he was anything other than the man I had loved. He wasn't the person I had created after that, he wasn't a criminal. He was still my Yuri, and he gave up his life to help someone he loved.

That was the man I knew.

His thumbs traced my knuckles, making the blood rush through my veins. His touch was electric, it made me feel alive. I hadn't felt that alive in years. I had been sulking through life, walking around like there were cement anchors secured at my ankles.

Lifting a hand to my cheek, he grazed his knuckles across my skin, scooping his fingers around my nape.

“You deserve to be happy, Gwen, but I want us to be happy together. I don't want you getting on that plane, I don't want to think about my life without you in it. It took me

almost ten years to tell you the truth and if I have to spend ten more trying to prove to you that we're meant to be together, I will. . .” His voice trickled off into air as he kissed my forehead. “I’d do anything for you.”

My heart swelled in my chest as tears I couldn't control streamed down my cheeks. “I've missed you, Yuri, I shouldn't have doubted you.” Wrapping my arms around his sides, I laid my head on his chest.

I listened to his heart, the beating loud as it thumped against my ear. “You hear that?” he asked, pressing open palms against my back. “It beats for you, it's always beat for you. I love you, Gwen, and I'll love you forever.”

“I love you too.” Tipping my head up, Yuri pressed his lips against mine.

I lost myself in that kiss.

But in the same breath, I also found myself again.

Epilogue

Yuri

Six months later

---

Resting my head in my hand, I peered down on Gwen as she slept. Her hair was tousled to perfection, thick locks of brown curls twisted and draped across her face. Softly caressing her cheek, I smiled to myself as she closed her mouth and began to make this rumbling noise in the back of her throat.

I tried not to laugh, but it was funny to me that she still made that same noise in her sleep after all these years. The laugh came out as more of a cough, causing her to open one eye.

“What's so funny?” she asked, her voice dry and cracking as she rolled on her side to face me, snuggling up against my chest.

Wrapping my arm around her, I rubbed her back. “It's nothing.”

“It must be something.” Speaking into my chest, she wriggled herself closer.

Running my fingertips up and down her spine, she moaned softly. “It's nothing, I swear.”



“I was croaking again, wasn't I?” Tipping her face up, the corner of her lip lifted into a smirk.

“You were, yes.” Holding in my laughter, I did my best to not bust at the seams. “But it's so cute, I can't help that it makes me chuckle.”

Slapping my chest, she rolled away from me. “Do not call me toad. If you do, I promise you won't see my vagina for a month.”

“Is that right?” I said playfully, pushing my body over hers and poking her in the ribs. “You do realize that you'd be hurting yourself too, right?” Pressing my morning wood into the small of her back, I rested my chin in the crook of her neck. “You would be missing out on all of this.”

“You underestimate my inner strength.”

“No, I just know your hormonal sex drive wouldn't stand for it.” Cupping her belly, Gwen twisted her head and eyed me with a sleepy gaze.

“Just because I've had a higher sex drive lately, does not mean that I'm pregnant.”

Smiling, I bit my lower lip and bounced my eyebrows against my hairline. “I think you are.”

“Are you saying I'm getting a belly? Do I look like I've put on weight to you?”

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Shaking my head no, I made sure to choose my words carefully. “That's not what I said at all.” Tracing a single finger up and down her arm, I kissed her softly. “You've been different lately.”

“Different how?” she asked, stretching her arms over her head and yawning.

“What did you have for lunch yesterday?”

“A sandwich.”

“And how did you make that sandwich?”

“What are you getting at?” Furrowing her brows, she eyed me curiously.

She really couldn't see the differences I could.

“You just threw the mustard right on that shit, and then you gobbled it down without your ritual of eating the crust first.”

“So?”

“So?” My jaw hung open, waiting for her to put the pieces together. “That's not how you do it. And then, you cried last night when I forgot to make garlic bread.”

“I think you're reaching here, Yuri.” Smirking, Gwen turned to look out the window.

A glimmer of sunlight was creating bright yellow arms as it stretched between the

buildings, making the New York City skyline glisten.

Gwen didn't get on that plane that day, we got the next flight we could together. I couldn't love without her, not ever again. Even the thought of it hurt. I had spent too many years without her already.

“Will you just take a test to see?”

“Yuri, I'm not even late yet.” Swooping her arm up over her head, she gently stroked my jaw. “It's too soon to know for sure.”

“I don't think it could hurt to try anyway.”

We decided together that if she was meant to get pregnant, we'd let it happen. We weren't taking any precautions to prevent it, and we didn't want to. I had never felt so certain about something in my life like I did about Gwen.

I wanted a family with her, I wanted to get married and live our happily ever after. For the first time in years, I could actually see a future for myself. She was my everything, we were meant to find each other in this fucked up world.

After getting to New York, Gwen made a few calls to some lawyer friends she had, trying to see if she could get my record expunged. But it would be a long process. It was going to require a lot of work and a confession on my brother's part if I wanted to clear my name.

So far, all I had done was write him a letter asking for him to tell the truth. I hadn't heard back from him yet, and I wasn't sure I would. All I could do was hope that he at least had a fraction of compassion for what I had done for him, that he felt some remorse for letting me take the fall and then going on to ruin his life anyway.

Only time would tell if he had the ability to be give when all he knew how to do was

take from others.

Gwen flipped onto her back, her eyes soft and slightly sad. “I did take one, it came back negative.”

“What?” I asked, darting my eyes between hers. “When? I thought we said we were doing this together?”

“I know.” Pulling her eyes off of mine, she looked up at the ceiling. “I was thinking I was too, and I thought if I found out I was pregnant, I could surprise you with the news. You know,” she said, allowing her eyes to drift back to mine. “Just like those people that serve baby everything for dinner or a present that's a baby outfit or tiny shoes.”

“Babe, I love that idea, I think it's really nice. So. . .” Climbing on top of her, I brushed her hair out of her face. “Lets keep practicing to make sure we're doing it right until it does happen.”

Taking in a deep breath, her nipples poked through the fabric of her nightgown, making my cock thicken. “You want to practice?” Her hands worked their way up my back, curling around my neck.

“Practice makes perfect—Isn't that the saying?”

Gwen let out a coo that made my heart speed up and my dick turn stiff. Running my hand down her thigh, I squeezed her hard, leaving fingerprints in her skin.

Like a wild animal, I drove my lips onto hers, kissing her with every emotion I felt inside. I loved this woman. I never stopped loving this woman. She owned me; mind body and soul.

And as we made love, I knew the child we would have one day would be blessed with

parents that loved each other unconditionally.

We were going to create one hell of a life together.