

# everafter

*by*

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**valentine**

## CHAPTER ONE

It was a perfect evening for romance. The early October air was refreshingly crisp after a warm afternoon, and wisps of cirrus clouds the color of cotton candy wafted slowly westward before a gentle breeze. Even the omnipresent car horns sounded musical, somehow. I slipped my right hand into my pocket and rested my fingertips on the surface of the suede box nestled inside. It felt soft and warm, like a living thing. I had to work at keeping my lips from curving up. It might be safe to walk around Midtown Manhattan sporting a full-blown grin these days, but the Lower East Side was still a different story.

Even so, how was I supposed to stay staid and serious when tonight was the night—the night when I would propose to the love of my life? The smile broke free after all as I thought of her. Alexa. Quick-witted, silver-tongued, tempestuous Alexa—graceful as a dancer, with hair the color of smoldering ashes. My love. She was probably just leaving her Torts class now. I liked to imagine Alexa in class—sitting in the second row, focused intently on the professor, occasionally raising her hand to ask a question or volunteer an answer. But right this moment, she would be walking quickly down the steps of NYU’s law school, hurrying toward the bus stop in her eagerness to get home for dinner.

I always cooked on Tuesdays. While Alexa was slammed with back-to-back classes, I only had Anatomy in the morning, leaving me ample time for both studying and playing chef. I enjoyed cooking and liked to experiment. But even on Tuesdays, I didn’t usually go so far as to make my own fettuccini and vodka sauce from scratch. And I certainly didn’t make a habit of running out to the liquor store with the

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intent to buy an expensive bottle of champagne. Tonight was no normal Tuesday. Tonight was going to be one of the best nights of my life.

I turned right on Avenue D and walked for a few blocks, past the projects on my left and a variety of small, ramshackle stores on my right. Alexa would be on the bus by now. The bus ran right past the Niagra, where I had bartended last year. Where we had first met, almost ten months ago. I could remember that night so clearly, still: something—a change in the air, an electricity—had prompted me to look up when she entered at the front of a group of already-intoxicated women. She was wearing deep red leather pants that precisely matched the color of the cloud of hair framing her face. Tiny sequins in her silver tank top shimmered slightly as she moved toward the bar. Toward me. I remember her gaze dropping first to my name tag and then lower, an unseen hand caressing the swell of my breasts before moving back up, ghosting over the hard muscles in my upper arms and finally coming to rest on my face. She flushed, but her voice was steady.

“Valentine,” she said, holding out a credit card. Her nails were that same shade of deep burgundy. “Seven lemon drops, please. And one Coke.”

My fingertips slid over hers as I took the plastic. It was an unconscious move—she was irresistible. With an effort, I turned my back to run the card, taking careful note of the name beneath the VISA logo. Alexa Newland. “Would you like me to keep it open?” I asked over my shoulder.

“Yes, please.”

I poured the Coke first, before getting to work on the seven shots. When I glanced back at her face, our eyes met. Hers caught the light like finely cut emeralds. Suddenly, it was hard to catch my breath. I remember shaking my head slightly, nonplussed at the force of my attraction. Beautiful women came into this bar all the time, and I flirted with them adeptly. Sometimes I took them home once my shift was over. None of them had ever made me feel like this—dizzy and winded after the briefest of exchanges. Fighting the vertigo, I broke eye contact. That’s when I noticed that she was sipping on the soda.

“I don’t trust a woman who doesn’t drink.”

Her thin eyebrows lifted at my challenge. “Why is that?”

I answered while expertly coating the rim of each shot glass

with sugar. “Not indulging in a simple vice implies that you’re saving yourself for something much more extravagant.”

Alexa laughed. It was a beautiful sound, clear and ringing. “It’s obvious that you don’t know me.”

I poured the shots, filling each precisely to the rim. “I’d like that to change. Let me take you out to dinner. Tomorrow.” In my three months of work at the Niagra, no one had ever turned me down. But when I returned my attention to Alexa’s face, she shook her head.

“You’re very smooth. But no, thank you.”

The rejection twisted in my gut, but I managed to pull off a nonchalant shrug in the process of arranging the glasses on a small tray. “All right.” I smiled at her as she took the drinks. “Enjoy your night.”

I remember enjoying the slight crease that appeared across the bridge of her nose at my apparent lack of disappointment. I could tell what she was thinking: that I was the consummate player, fickle and hotheaded. But she had judged too quickly, failing to bank on my capacity for patience. There was no reason to push right now. I had her name. This wasn’t over.

I smiled again at the memory of how Alexa had put that patience to the test, making me pursue her for almost two weeks before finally agreeing to a date. Two weeks of waking early each morning to wait for her in the hall outside of her first class. I came bearing a venti cappuccino the first day, and learned that she had given up coffee in college. Every day thereafter, I brought chai lattes. She was reticent, but I was persistent. And now, I was about to ask her to make an honest woman of me.

Would she say yes? I wasn’t certain. Technically, I was rushing into things—we hadn’t even celebrated our first anniversary yet. I wasn’t opposed to a long engagement, if that was her preference—years, if necessary. I just needed her to know that I meant it whenever I said “forever.” And I wanted her to be mine—not my girlfriend, but my fiancée. I wanted my ring on her finger.

I was so deep in thought that I almost passed the liquor store that was my destination. A tall, burly guy wearing a leather jacket and knit cap loitered a few feet away, smoking the last inch of a cigarette. I shouldered open the door and walked in quickly, hoping that his smoke wouldn’t cling to my hair or clothes. Normally, I would take pleasure

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in browsing the selection, but this time, I headed straight for the portly, balding man hunched on a stool behind the cash register. He looked up tiredly at my approach. His name tag dubbed him Stan, and the manager.

“So,” I said, extracting my beat-up leather wallet from the back pocket of my jeans and withdrawing every last bill inside it. I tossed them down onto the grimy counter top. “I just cleaned out my checking account, and I have...eighty-seven dollars. Oh!” I jammed one hand into my left jeans pocket to fish up some change. The coins clinked against the glass. “And forty-nine cents.”

“Good for you?” Stan offered. He was looking at me warily.

I rocked back on my heels, picturing the common room of the small, fourth floor apartment that I shared with Alexa, as I had left it just a few minutes ago. Miles Davis was playing softly through my desktop’s speakers. The plain wooden table that we had chosen at a secondhand furniture store last week was now covered by a white silk cloth and decorated with a pair of crystal candlesticks. A trail of rose petals—plucked by hand—started from the front door and circled the table before leading into the bedroom. There was only one thing missing.

“I need the best bottle of champagne I can get.”

Stan sighed and stiffly got to his feet. He shuffled around the counter, gesturing for me to follow. I trailed behind him obediently, watching as he paused halfway down the second aisle and selected a bottle two-thirds up the shelf.

“J Schram, 1999. Eighty-six dollars and ninety-five cents.”

I took the bottle from him and turned it over in my hands. J Schram, I remembered, was served at the White House whenever a new president was inaugurated. It wasn’t the \$475 per bottle Dom Perignon that my father liked to serve at his parties, but it was fancy enough to drive home my point to Alexa.

“I’ll take it.” I tried to keep my mouth closed and play it cool, but the words came out anyway. “I’m proposing to my girlfriend.”

“Congratulations.” Stan’s voice was monotone as he slipped the bottle into a paper bag and shuffled my bills into a neat pile. His fingers were ringless. Had he never found someone? Not for the first time, I contemplated how easy it would have been to miss Alexa that night at the Niagra, so many months ago. I had been there by chance, subbing

for a coworker. By all rights, we should never have met. I shuddered at the thought and reached into my pocket once again to stroke the box reverently, as though it were a talisman. She had to say yes. She just had to.

“Thanks,” I told Stan, grabbing the neck of the bottle with my free hand. The clock behind the counter read 7:46, and Alexa’s bus was due in at 8:00. I had just enough time to put the champagne on ice and start boiling the noodles. I hadn’t prepped a dessert—not of the conventional variety, anyway—but in extremis, there was most of a pint of strawberry Häagen Dazs in the freezer. I smiled faintly as I imagined us lounging naked in bed, feeding each other ice cream in the early hours of the morning.

Outside, dusk had faded into twilight. I retraced my steps past the shuttered storefronts emblazoned with graffiti. Still focused on the daydream, I automatically threaded my way around the piles of garbage bags heaped on the edge of the sidewalk. How would Alexa want me tonight, in the wake of my proposal? What would her mood call for? Would she want me to be slow and sweet, tenderly compelling her to succumb to the gentle strokes of my fingers? Or would she want me to take her, hard and fast—to unveil the full force of my desire and claim every inch of her? Or perhaps...perhaps I would simply remain on one knee to bury my face between her legs and let my tongue slip-slide across her warm, wet heat.

I was so caught up in the fantasy that I didn’t register the sensation of someone walking close behind me until I had to pause at the first cross street. Suddenly anxious, I forced myself not to look over my shoulder. I quickened my pace, silently berating myself for not running this errand during the daylight. Parts of Alphabet City were becoming gentrified, but this wasn’t one such section. Petty crime and drugs were still a problem, and—

*Shit.* The footsteps were no longer even with my own. They were faster. I tried to tell myself that the person behind me was simply in a hurry, but my instincts knew better. A hot rush of adrenaline flooded my body, bringing me to the balls of my feet. There was an all-night supermarket two blocks ahead, dingy but well lit. I could make it. My stalker wouldn’t dare try anything if I reached that corner.

I clutched the neck of the J Schram tightly and balled my right hand into a fist in preparation for a sprint. This would not happen. I

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would not be a victim. Not tonight of all nights—not when the noodles were drying next to the sink and the freshly made sauce was simmering on the stove. Not with Alexa’s ring in my pocket. No. Fucking. Way.

I ran. In a burst of speed that would have earned praise from my high school track coach, I leapt forward, put my head down, and pumped hard with both arms. Gravel scattered beneath the soles of my Doc Martens. I pushed off from the pavement explosively, focused on the goal...only to be shoved sideways into a narrow alley between two buildings before I had taken more than a few steps. I landed hard on my left side, grunting as the impact knocked the wind from my lungs and the bottle from my hand. It shattered in a spray of glass shards and fizzing liquid. Barely two inches from my face, a torn garbage bag leaked pale fluid. The smell of rot was overpowering. Choking on the stench, I tried to scramble to my feet. Scream. I had to get my breath back and scream. Someone would hear me.

But before I could open my mouth, a hand, rough with calluses, clamped over my face. I tried to jerk away, but another arm snaked below my ribs. The sharp scent of tobacco chased away the odor of rot as my assailant pressed me tightly against his body. My sudden shock made me momentarily passive. It was him. The man who had been smoking outside the liquor store. He had been lying in wait.

He was breathing heavily into my ear, and I could feel him hard against my lower back. Panic turned to refusal. No. I would not be mugged. I would not be raped. I would not be killed. No. Alexa’s face was clear in my mind’s eye, and the edges of the box in my pocket dug hard into my right thigh. I imagined again the subtle weight of the platinum band in the palm of my hand, its round diamonds winking mysteriously up at me in the softly modulated light of the Tiffany’s showroom. *Etoile*. The ring was precious and elegant and beautiful. It was meant to sit on Alexa’s finger. Where she was concerned, I believed deeply in destiny. Nothing would come between us—not ever.

I bit down hard on his middle finger. He yelled hoarsely, caught off guard just enough for me to twist free of his restraining embrace. I took off again toward the open mouth of the alley, planting my right foot down hard as I skidded around the corner...but a sharp pain blossomed in my hamstring and my leg gave out, on the edge of freedom.

I crumpled to the ground and stared disbelieving at the knife protruding from my jeans. Its handle was glossy and black. I hated

it desperately. Closing one palm around it, I grit my teeth and pulled, managing to fling the weapon out of my body. The knife's clatter against the asphalt was drowned out by the rasping scream that escaped my lips, gushing from my throat as the bright red blood flowed from my leg. God, it hurt—but with the agony came another rush of adrenaline, bringing the edges of the night into sharp focus. Clarity returned in the form of a single imperative. Run.

The sound of slow footsteps approaching galvanized me. I had to get up—to get up or die here. Bracing myself on both hands, I pushed up hard with my left foot, only to fall back to the ground under the weight of my useless right leg. Immediately, I tried again, but he was already looming over me, face obscured by the shadows. He raised one hand and a flash of color caught my eye—something reptilian slithering across his knuckles, briefly illuminated by a thin sliver of light before he cut off my second shout with a vicious backhand to my cheek, so hard that my head slammed against the pavement.

Pain exploded behind my eyes, dazzling my vision with glowing specks as bright as the diamonds in Alexa's ring. *Get up. Get up, Valentine.* The thought belonged to someone else. It seemed important, but when I tried to raise my head, a wave of nausea forced my jaw open in a wrenching gag. A heavy weight settled on my thighs. Someone groaned in the distance, low and tortured.

And then another bolt of agony, this one lancing through my shoulder, hot and sharp like lightning. The world was blood. I could feel it leaving me all in a rush, pulsing past the lips of the wound in time with my heartbeat. It hurt too much to turn my head, but if I moved my eyes to the right I could just barely make out the dark pool gathering against the darker asphalt. So much blood. I was going to die.

Weakness pervaded my body, insidious and totalizing. I could only twitch feebly as a cold hand slipped under my shirt, palming my stomach and pushing up the fabric. *No*, I tried to say. *No, I am not yours. No, I belong to her. Alexa.* I needed to apologize to Alexa, but one of his hands closed around my throat while the other pushed up my shirt and his mouth was cold and wet on my sensitive skin like the tongue of a snake and it hurt...oh God, it hurt.

All lights were fading. I could feel them being extinguished, one by one—the stars and the street lamps and the cheerful squares of yellow that checkered every skyscraper. Gone. The curtain fell. Darkness like a

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gun barrel, black as my father's mercenary soul, narrowing to swallow me—the darkness of dead things underground. If I called her name, would she follow?

My lips moved silently as red ribbons anchored my body to the earth. *Follow me, Alexa. Bring me back. Marry me, Alexa, marry me please I'm sorry I swear I meant forever but I waited too long to tell you and now you'll never know.*

Mercifully, the pain receded then, leaving me beyond all sensation.