
The camera bag on Mara's shoulder was heavy. She was starving and it was long past midnight, but snow was only white in Chicago once a year. She tilted her face up to the night Unleashed: MMA Romance sky, watching the big fluffy snowflakes tumble through the air. It was an early Unleashed: MMA Romance snow, one that meant a long winter of gray slush and frigid temperatures, but for the moment it was perfect, and it was Unleashed: MMA Romance just for her.

A bright pop song started playing and blinking out of her snowflake reverie, she fumbled into her bag for her phone. She reached it just as the ringing stopped, and when she checked the missed calls, she felt her stomach clench with a familiar sick feeling.

With a sigh, she called the number back, and Phillip picked up on the second ring.

“Hey,” she said, cutting off the *babe* before it could fall out. It was better than she had done lately.

“Hello, Mara,” Phillip said. His voice was crisp and colorless, the same way he talked to his clients at the law firm, and it made her stomach turn.

“Thank you for calling me back right away.”

“Yeah, well.”

Unleashed: MMA Romance

He made a sound that was either clearing his throat or meant that he was impatient with her. She could never tell.

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know that I'm done. All of my things are out of the apartment and the storage unit downstairs.”

“Okay, thanks,” she said after a pause that was Unleashed: MMA Romance probably too long.

“I watered the plants, and I left my forwarding address if there are any problems with the landlord. There shouldn't be, though. We got my name off the lease last week.”

“Right.”

The silence stretched between them, and to Mara's faint surprise, he was the first one who broke it.

“It was... Well. It was good while it lasted.”

“That's it?” she asked, stung to temper. “Good while it lasted? That's all you have to say for five years together?”

“What do you want me to say?” he asked, and damn him, his tone was still flat as paper.

I love you, I love you more than I love my damn job, I want to go back to what we had before, I don't want to leave, I'll change, we'll do something, anything new...

The words whirled around her head, words that she had thought would fix it all, and now, five years older and a lot wiser, Mara knew that they wouldn't fix anything.

“Nothing,” she said, and she Unleashed: MMA Romance knew with a sinking certainty that it was the truth.

She hung up, because there was nothing else to say, and she looked up into the sky again. The pain was gone, if she was honest with herself. What was left was a memory of five years that she knew were wasted, a career that had been put on hold to play good housewife to a rising attorney, and a feeling that she should have known better.

Impulsively she took her phone, opened her contact list, dialed a number and raised the phone to her ear. As she continued walking, an Unleashed: MMA Romance irritated voice picked up.

“Jesus God in heaven, do you have any idea what time it is Mara Jane Clarkson?”

Quinn was irritated, but Mara knew that her sculptor friend wasn't asleep. The other woman kept odd hours, just as Mara did.

“Late. Listen, Quinn, Phillip's gone.”

There was a pause.

“Is it Unleashed: MMA Romance too early to say *hallelujah* and to take you out for celebration sushi?”

Against her will, Mara laughed. Quinn had never Unleashed: MMA Romance liked Phillip, and she had never bothered hiding it either.

“Maybe. But maybe tomorrow, we could go out for 'sorry my relationship sucked' sushi.”

“Nope, Unleashed: MMA Romance I'm only paying for celebration sushi. If it's self-pity sushi, then you can pay for it yourself.”

“Quinn...”

“Fine, I'll pay for the fish. Still, congratulations though. It's tough, but it had to happen.”

“I know.” Mara Unleashed: MMA Romance sighed, faintly aware of the sounds of distant traffic, the thud of rock music, a barking dog, and raised men's voices in the background. Chicago was a city that was always on the go, and she let it lull her as she walked.

"I'm not unhappy, I think I'm just fed up," she said. "I want something new now."

"Awesome! We'll do Unleashed: MMA Romance that new sushi place on Michigan Avenue, the one with all the weird flash-frozen stuff."

"Well, that wasn't exactly what I meant..."

"Okay, fine, we'll find you a short as hell red dress, we'll take you around to all of the fun fetish clubs in town, and we'll let all the hot studs take a bite."

"Quinn..."

"Fine, I'll get that one figure drawing model from the UChicago classes over to your place, you can blindfold him, smack him..."

"Quinn!"

"Oh come on, I've seen the leather Unleashed: MMA Romance cuffs at your place."

Mara sighed. She had called Quinn for a distraction, and she sure was getting one.

"I just need a *change*. Something exciting, and something easy."

"Sex with strangers is Unleashed: MMA Romance easy..."

"No, Quinn. Look, thanks for talking to me, but I'm still six blocks from the El stop, and I want to go home to bed."

"Okay, be Unleashed: MMA Romance safe, sweetie. Tomorrow at four, I'm gonna buy you so much celebration sushi you can't walk, okay? And listen, loosen up, okay, babe? It's Unleashed: MMA Romance a brave new world out there."

Mara laughed and agreed, ending the call. She paused to stow it her bag, and that was the only thing that saved her from being smashed to the ground.

The source of the raised men's voices became a lot clearer as the blue doors directly in front of her were thrown open and an enormous man in jeans and nothing else was thrown out.

The man hit the pavement with a snarl, bouncing up like rubber ball, but before he could rush back inside, a hard voice cut through the air like a knife.

"You were warned, and that's it. You're done."

Mara turned her head to see the speaker, and even silhouetted by the light of the room behind him, she could tell that he was an imposing figure. He couldn't have been an inch below six feet, and his broad muscled shoulders tapered to a waist that was tight and thick with muscle. She

could see it all very clearly because he was only wearing a pair of shorts, and she wondered what the hell she had walked Unleashed: MMA Romance in to.

“You don't know shit, Varela,” the man on the sidewalk snarled. He was even bigger than the man who had spoken, an enormous slab of a man who looked like he had been torn by some giant hand from a stone cliff. “You can't prove a damn thing.”

“I don't need to prove anything. My gym, my rules. Someone is getting your gear, and you're never coming back here again.” Varela spoke with a deadly certainty that held absolutely no fear in it at all.

That wasn't what the man on the street wanted to hear apparently, and with an enraged roar he charged. Mara skipped back with a frightened squawk, and as she watched, the gym owner came to meet his opponent. Where the attacker had all the power of an avalanche, Varela moved like water, stepping out into the street with bare feet and ducking low. In the space of a split second, Varela got his shoulder under the much larger man and heaved him to one side.

Unfortunately, the man was flung directly to the spot where Mara was standing, and she shouted in panic as the man's bulk flew towards her. Instinctively, she curled her body around her camera bag, and though she was knocked back three feet, she wasn't flung to the ground.

The same could not be said of the groaning man who was now stretched out full-length on the pavement. Varela stepped back from him, not even panting. With the snowflakes flying around his shoulders, he looked like some kind of vanquishing storm god.

Another Unleashed: MMA Romance man came with a bag, and Varela dumped it on the ground beside his fallen foe.

“Get Unleashed: MMA Romance the hell out of here. You've caused enough trouble.”

The man's only response was a groan, and Varela seemed content to let matters lie and to return to his gym when he caught Unleashed: MMA Romance sight of Mara. In an instant, he Unleashed: MMA Romance was by her side, and she nearly took a step back. He was not as large as the mountain on the ground, but he still towered above her.

For a moment, she was stunned, afraid of his raw power. He had heaved the other many around like a sack of feathers, and she had to crane her head back Unleashed: MMA Romance to look up at him. She felt an instant thrill course down her spine, raising goosebumps on her arms that could not be attributed to the cold.

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