

INTERNATIONAL BOOK AWARD WINNER

# JOSHUA GRAHAM

*"Blisteringly paced, high-tension suspense, characters you bleed with."  
—James Rollins, New York Times bestseller of The Blood Gospel*

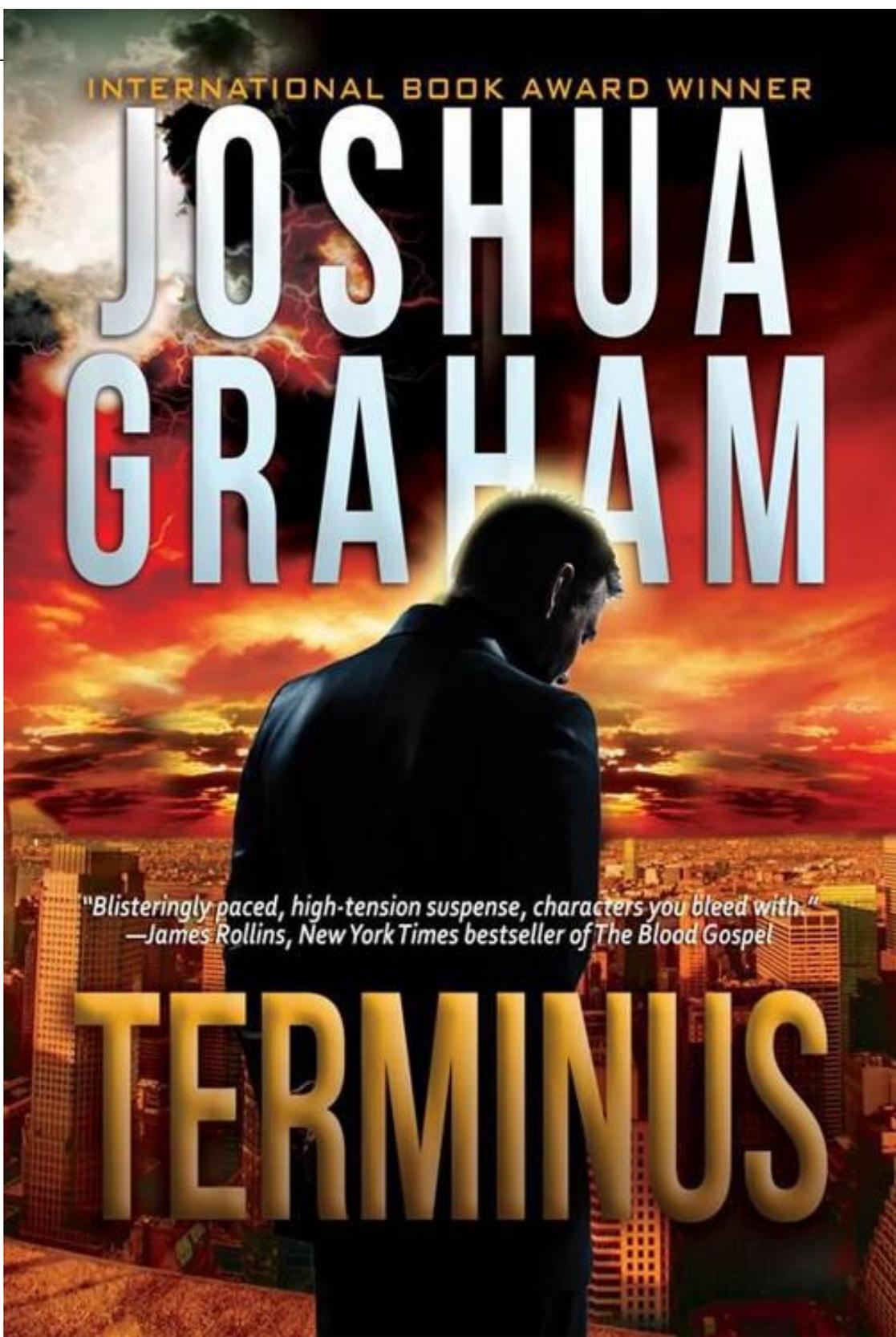
# TERMINUS

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# TERMINUS



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# TERMINUS

Joshua Graham



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"Joshua Graham's TERMINUS is a fantastic read in every definition of that word. If Tom Clancy had written a novel of fallen angels and creatures that go bump in the night, this would be it: blistering paced, high-tension suspense, characters you bleed with. I can't wait to read more!"

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...Highly recommended!

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—*International Bestseller, M.J. Rhodes*

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...The characters are richly developed

...Graham left the door open for more stories within this world, and I for one look forward to it with eager anticipation.

—*Rhodes Review*

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# TERMINUS

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*For Katie, my angel and my good thing...*

*“Death—the undiscover’d country, from whose bourn  
No traveller returns...”*

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*HAMLET (ACT III), William Shakespeare*

# PRELUDE

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THREE SECONDS. THAT WAS ALL.

The man in the black leather jacket had looked down for just three seconds to read a text message on his phone. And in the interim, his five-year-old Houdini of a stepdaughter Chloe had unstrapped herself, climbed out of her car seat, and slipped out of sight—nowhere near the doorway of the office where he was to meet his contact.

Just three lousy seconds!

His mouth went dry.

He scanned the streets, sidewalk, between cars, to the left then right then a quick three-sixty. Despite the thorough sweep, which took all of two seconds, he didn't see her.

“Chloe!”

She didn't answer, but he spotted her. Way down the street, her auburn pigtails bouncing with each step.

“Chloe! Wait!” He slammed shut the back door of his Focus. Didn't bother to lock it. Ran up the sidewalk—fast. But the little stinker was fixated on a black cat luring her across the imaginary border that separated the gentrified arts district of Carleton Village and the slums of East Brentwood.

The cat bolted around the corner at the sound of the man's agitated shouts. Both hands outstretched, Chloe giggled and ran even faster.

“Kitty!”

He nearly tripped over an uneven seam in the sidewalk as he ran, his heart going faster than his feet.

A pair of SDPD squad cars with flashing red and blue beacons raced past Birch and came to a screeching halt somewhere around the corner of Lamont.

The little girl turned the same corner and vanished behind the red bricks of the apartment building. Straight onto Lamont.

“Stop, Chloe!” He'd gained but was still several steps behind.

The sound of a policeman shouting filled his head. Could things get any worse? He ran even harder.

It all happened within a matter of seconds.

Three lousy seconds.

That's what it took for him to round the corner and make out the figure fleeing the pimped-out Honda Civic that had crashed into a hydrant. The gunman shot at the cops, who now stood behind the open doors of their angled cars.

The man in the black leather jacket leapt at Chloe.

“Get down!”

Over his shout, the shouts of the police, the screams of frightened pedestrians, came a deafening *pop!* whose impact toppled him.

Chloe screamed.

A sudden chill overtook him as a crimson pool expanded around his face, now planted on the cold concrete sidewalk. He tried to speak, stretched his fingers towards Chloe. Felt nothing but the cold pumping through his entire body.

Life didn't flash before his eyes.

He heard more gunshots.

~~The last thing he saw was Chloe lurching back, her pigtails flailing to the side. As though in slow motion, she was falling.~~

*Falling...*

He never saw her hit the ground.

AS A REAPER OF THE THIRD LEGION, Nikolai—Nick, as he preferred to be called these days—had attended to more human deaths over the last thousand years than he cared to. Countless lives and memories snuffed out like the wick of a candle. It had all become routine, meaningless.

*Vanitasvanitatum.*

The ability to traverse the entire planet in the blink of a human eye had long grown commonplace, its charm lost somewhere between King Malcolm II's victory in The Battle of Mortlach and Gutenberg's invention of moveable type. These days he spent most of his time assigned to the northern hemisphere, one of the least active territories on earth.

As for leaving the planet, he typically only did that on days when he escorted a soul to the Terminus.

A day like today.

Nick waited while the OR surgeon continued trying to save the little girl from multiple gunshot wounds.

"My husband was killed," the beautiful woman standing in the door said, her voice breaking. "She's all I have."

"We can't keep her going like this," the surgeon said gently.

"She's not even five."

"I'm truly sorry. But it's time to let her go."

"No!" The mother rushed forward, knocking over a metal tray and all its equipment as she reached out to her daughter. The nurse caught hold of her arms and held her back.

"Please, don't let the last few moments of your daughter's life end like this. Let her go with some dignity," the surgeon said.

Nick tuned out the mother's voice as she got hold of herself. Having to watch this sort of thing was perhaps the worst part of his punishment. Far worse than his demotion. Worse than when he was guardian a millennium ago. He'd seen tens of thousands die horrific deaths on battlegrounds in the physical realm—even intervened and partaken in sanctioned kills himself. But at least he'd been helping rid the planet of those who'd deserved it.

This was much worse.

Nick's reflection didn't show in the mirror, but in it he could see the surgeon calling the time of death and switching off the EKG machine, the little girl lying pale and still, the lovely mother weeping.

And now the warm golden light that only Nick could perceive filled the room, enveloping the body. It was about to happen.

The little girl's ethereal form sat up and separated from her expired mortal body. She looked to her mother, confused.

"Mama? Why're you crying?"

Her mother didn't respond. How could she?

Callous as Nick's heart had grown over the years, these moments always wrenched it.

"It's okay, little girl."

She turned to him and stepped off the operating table. Had she been older, she might have reacted with panic as most do when they see the blood on the sheets, the surroundings, the grief-stricken loved ones standing over their body. But she was too young to understand. She smiled and tried to touch

her mother's head. Her hand passed right through it. She giggled and did it again.

"That's funny, Mommy."

---

Nick hated this. He should never have to take a child this young and innocent to the Terminus. He forced a smile and approached her.

"What's your name, love?"

"Chloe." Again she giggled, now prancing around the OR passing her hands through cabinet walls, chairs, her mother. "Funny!"

Nick put his hand on her shoulder and her smile faded. This was the part he hated most. An expression common to people much older than Chloe replaced it. A look of recognition. Finality.

*She's too young.*

She looked back to her mother, still weeping over the empty shell that had been Chloe's body. Then she turned back to Nick with tears in her eyes.

"It's time to leave, isn't it?"

"Come, say goodbye to your mum. She'll feel it, and it'll make her happy—if only for a moment."

"Okay." She reached up, put her tiny hand in Nick's. Like an electrical current, a twinge that originated from the core of her spirit flowed into his. By now he should have been used to it, but he wasn't.

"Come on, then."

Chloe didn't seem to pay any mind to the fact that her mother could neither see nor hear her. She leaned over and kissed her mother's auburn hair, tried to stroke it without her hand passing through.

"It's okay, Mommy."

And in that moment, her mother stopped crying, sniffled, and looked up, her eyes incongruously hopeful.

"Sweetie?"

Chloe choked back a little sob and tried to wrap her arms around her mother's neck.

"I love you, Mommy. Have to go bye-bye now."

Her mother blinked. Nick waited a couple of seconds, then gave Chloe's shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"The last bit, love. Go on."

She nodded, understanding what he meant—spirits always seemed to know this instinctively when first separated from their bodies. Placing her forehead against her mother's, she joined her with her eyes and poured out the very last of her mortal memories, the essence of their all too brief lives together.

No matter how many times Tamara had tried to explain the human need for closure, to Nick's mind it was still sentimental. Nonetheless, he waited patiently for Chloe's spirit to converge for a moment with that of her mother's.

Her mother smiled, her eyes closed. It was only a moment, but she seemed at peace. When she began to cry again, Chloe kissed the top of her head and returned to Nick, sadness briefly tugging the corners of her mouth down. Then her eyes and face began to glow.

She took Nick's hand.

Her mother's tears and sobs penetrated the emotional barrier he tried to forge. His hand began to glow—how simple it would have been to use his healing ability and restore the little girl's mortal life. *Just one touch.*

But it was not allowed.

Nick had learned—the hard way, in England, a century ago. But what good was such an ability if it could not be used where needed?

*What's the point of my existence, for that matter?*

He started walking out of the room, an entirely human and unnecessary habit he'd developed from

mingling with mortals over the years.

“Ready, Chloe?”

“I miss her.”

“She’ll miss you a lot more.”

“How come?”

“Because mortals don’t know what it’s like on this side.” For them, time was a driving tyrant, linear, merciless, flowing in one and only one direction. Why would anyone want to go through the short pittance of a life with all its sorrows—seventy, maybe ninety years—only to grow feeble and stupid towards the end? At least Chloe had been spared that.

Yet something about this premature departure troubled him unreasonably. He’d reaped the souls of children before, never liked doing it, but in Chloe’s case the pain was quite a bit more acute.

As memories from the past surfaced, Nick without thinking released Chloe’s hand and floated freely in the room. Before he knew it, he found himself standing beside her mother. The auburn hair falling over emerald eyes shimmering with tears made her look achingly beautiful.

Her weeping subsided. Her lips moved ever so subtly.

She was praying.

Again without thinking, Nick stretched out his hand, gently reached toward her face with his fingertips, taking pains not to touch her so she wouldn’t perceive his presence.

Or would she?

She gasped with a start, her face lighting up.

Damn. Nick had inadvertently touched her hair and revealed himself.

*Idiot!*

He instantly slipped out of her perception. It had lasted only a second, but she had felt his presence. Seen his face.

She bolted to her feet and looked around the room, returned to her seat when she saw no one.

“Let’s go, Chloe.” Nick took her hand.

“What happened?”

“She’ll be all right.” He led Chloe to the door, hoping he hadn’t just lied to her.

Chloe turned back to see her mother, waved, and said, “Bye-bye, Mama.”

Nick, against his better judgment, turned and looked at the mother too. Any trace of that brief moment of euphoria mortals experience the first time they encounter an angel had been replaced by deep grief. He’d seen such pain far too often, but this was the strongest he’d felt it himself in a long time.

Human emotions.

As though they were his own.

He hated it. Hated the fact that he was starting to feel them again.

They were alien, perverse, just...wrong!

With a shudder, he held Chloe’s hand and crossed the divide.

IF QUANTIFIED IN HUMAN TERMS, the trip to the Terminus would have taken about three years several times the speed of light, a trivial fact Nick had worked out just because he could. But to Nick—and Chloe, who now perceived time and space as he did—they seemed to arrive after a few seconds in a dark tunnel.

“Where are we?” Chloe still gripped his hand.

“The Terminus.”

“It’s so dark.”

Of course it was. But this painfully obvious remark could be forgiven because Chloe was a child. Most of his other subjects would be blubbing at this point: *I lived a good life! Assuming the worst I don’t deserve this!*

The simple fact was that Nick didn’t know the final destination of any of the souls he harvested, so he’d grown immune to their pleas. And bargaining, for pity’s sake! It wasn’t as though he had any decision-making power.

Chloe wrapped her little arms—trembling little arms—around Nick’s forearm.

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

Scared? If she knew he’d once been a warrior feared by humans and demons, her fear might be understandable. But now, as a reaper of the third legion? He was nothing but a cosmic chauffeur.

Nick sighed, took a deep breath, and snapped his fingers to form a construct for her. It started with a pinpoint of light, the size of the little dot the old picture-tube tellies displayed in the last second before you shut them off. But instead of shrinking, the dot grew into a white circle through which a torrent of sensory details flooded.

A rushing wind blew Chloe’s hair back like a flag while all around them the construct perfected itself in both her perception and Nick’s: throngs of people going to and fro, steel-framed skylights, a female voice announcing endless arrivals and departures, lighted schedule boards, and everywhere the stench of humanity.

Over to the left, an old woman laughed and wept with a young woman who had run up to her. To the right, a group of high school students gathered together with high-fives and fist-bumps and big hugs that seemed decades overdue. Apparently Nick was not the only compassionate reaper.

But the sights did make him feel a bit sick.

“A train station?” Chloe said.

“I’ve created a construct to resemble the terminus at Victoria Station for you.”

“Why?”

“So you can understand where we are. What it’s like. Somewhat, anyway.”

“Why?” She *could* be annoying.

“Picture says a thousand words, doesn’t it?”

“But why?”

Something nearby caught his attention.

“Get your damn paws off of me, you bastards! This is just a dream! A freaking nightmare!” The man in a dark gray suit and red silk necktie thrashed about to no avail as two metro policemen started to drag him off. Nick winked his left eye and obscured the three from Chloe’s perception just as the man started to berate the dark reapers with language Nick really didn’t want her to hear.

“Who were they?” she said.

“Bother that, we’ve got to go, straightaway. Don’t want to miss your train, do you?”

Chloe giggled. And when Nick knelt and fixed her collar at the platform, checked that her little Tigger backpack was properly shut, she was still giggling.

“What’s so funny?” he said.

“You said *bother*.” When she got to the word she giggled just a little, as though the word tickled. “That’s what Winnie the Pooh says!”

“Right.” Winnie the freaking Pooh. Good thing she was about to leave, he was starting to feel. It was just a good thing she was leaving, was all.

Chloe launched herself at him for a hug. The train was coming in.

“It’s here, it’s here!”

“So it is,” Nick said.

“I have to go now, don’t I?” Nick hadn’t let go of her hand, and she was pulling him towards the train’s door, and her tug felt like salt on an open wound.

“Yes.”

The doors hissed open. Everyone was boarding except for some wearing black suits and dark glasses. Reapers. Angels never tarried at the Terminus, they simply brought their subjects and left. Lingered was a sign of weakness.

But Nick didn’t let go of Chloe. For some reason, he didn’t want to.

“I’m going now,” she said.

He gave her his best smile, couldn’t help it. Then he let her go. As she turned and began running toward the doors, he called out to her.

“Chloe!”

To his surprise, she stopped and turned around.

He tried to speak, but pain from that laceration in his memory inhibited him and he could only mutter a goodbye. And then, knowing where all this sentimental rot came from, he resolved to kick it out of his mind.

It *would* be here, in this construct—he’d never build one for this place again. Not this one, anyway.

The next thing he knew, Chloe had run back, wrapped her arms around his neck, and was squeezing him as hard as a five-year-old could.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

Were those *tears* in his eyes? He hugged her back.

“Goodbye, Chloe.”

She ran off again, turning once to wave.

Then the doors slid shut.

AS CHLOE'S TRAIN LEFT THE PLATFORM, Nick let the sounds and images of the construction evaporate and remained alone in the pitch blackness of the Terminus with the pain he'd resurrected and inflicted upon himself.

Victoria Station...

"Why must you do this to yourself, Nikolai?" A bright golden light outlined Tamara's frame though shadows somewhat obscured her features.

"Spying on me?" Nick said, not turning to face her.

"It's my duty to keep an eye on you."

"Then you've been remiss."

Now he turned to face her directly. She smiled and gave him a maternal look. They were now standing in his construct of the boardroom of a corporate office building, staring out the window over endless clouds.

"Don't tell me you're upset that I've been away. It's only been a hundred years. Is that what this all about, Nikolai?"

"I prefer Nick."

"Since when?"

"Mid twentieth century."

He wanted to leave. Tamara came over and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, come now, I know what's bothering you."

"Do you, really?" He didn't want to discuss what had happened at Victoria Station. Hopefully she wouldn't bring it up.

"You're getting impatient. Isn't that it?"

"Not even remotely close." Not entirely true, but at least she was on the wrong track.

"This delay is not due to neglect." She pointed upwards. "As if anything could escape our Father's cognizance. There's always a reason, a purpose. This, like all trials, is a test of character. It's His way of preparing you. You especially should know this, from your observations of the mortals."

"Do you suppose you could dial back the condescension?"

"Sorry." She laughed. "What's really bothering you, *Nick*?" Her emerald eyes bore into him.

He wanted to open the window and just fly off. But where? He couldn't hide from Tamara any more than he could hide from the commander in chief—whom he'd never seen, yet like every angel referred to as Father.

"Do you know how many reapers I've watched get promoted?" he said. "Reapers hundreds of years my junior with little experience where it counts? I used to be a highly decorated guardian, and now..." He sighed. "I think I've more than proven myself. Isn't it high time we end the games and move forward?"

"What is it you want, really?"

"For one thing, I'm tired of this holding pattern between earth and the Terminus. I'm ready to cross the divide. I'm sick of this glass ceiling. Sick of spinning my blasted wheels."

"My, you *have* spent too much time with them."

"Them?"

"Mortals." Tamara's eyes narrowed. "The facial expressions, the syntax...You're even speaking like them now."

“I’m doing nothing of the sort.” After a hundred years of probation, the last thing he wanted was for her to think he’d squandered that second chance she’d risked so much to get him. Yet before the meeting was over, he’d surely disappoint her.

“I’m concerned, Nikolai. Perhaps you should take a leave of absence. Gather your thoughts for a century or so. I’ve always found that a short break helps alleviate the effects of...oh, what do they call it down there...” She closed her eyes for a moment. “Burnout! Yes, that’s it. Take a break, and when you come back this whole issue of the delay, your promotion, it’ll all work out.”

“I’m sorry, a hiatus won’t help.”

She started to protest, but the resolve in his face stopped her.

“Then what will?” she said.

Now that it was time to actually tell her, Nick found it even more difficult than he’d imagined.

“I’m sorry.” It wasn’t easy to keep his eyes on hers. “I can’t do this anymore.”

She looked at him for a long moment. And though she had always been the maternal figure, she now seemed like the child, bravely holding back her tears.

“I feared it might come to this. You’re not the first, you know.”

“I know.”

Now her eyes were filled with sorrow—and concern for him.

“Please, won’t you reconsider? Don’t do anything in haste.”

“I’ve had almost a hundred years to think this through.”

“As I said, haste.”

“Tamara...”

“Are you absolutely certain?”

“Yes. No. I’m not sure, at least not a hundred percent. I just have to try or I’ll go through eternity never knowing what might have been.” He stepped back and tried to smile. Poignantly. “I appreciate everything you’ve done, Tamara, more than I can say. But I have to try.”

She nodded. This was every angel’s choice. She could not take this right from him, could not forbid him.

“No matter what, Nikolai, you are loved with an everlasting love. And you can always come back.”

“I doubt that.” His heart ached even as he hardened it. “It’s too late.”

“It’s never too late.”

He kissed the top of her head.

“It is for me.” And with that he walked out of the boardroom, leaving Tamara alone by the window.

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