Either Very Clever Or Very Stupid

by MaplePaizley, thewhiskerydragon

Summary

In which it's a complicated high school drama and the Kuragin siblings are doing a tap-dance on Pierre's last nerve.

Notes

Thanks for reading! We love kudos/comments!
In Which Everything Is Perfectly Fine

Pierre was content. It was rare that he felt so uninhibited, but his girlfriend—his stupidly hot girlfriend—had finally staked out a drawer in his apartment, implying that whatever it was that they had had some kind of longevity attached to it. All was right in the world, it seemed—Hélène was lounging indolently in his bed wearing that skirt he really liked, with some soft music playing in the background and a bottle of wine (courtesy of Fedya) perched on his dresser.

“Having fun there, sport?” she called teasingly.

Pierre held the bottle in one hand, weighing it approvingly. “Are you kidding?” he said with a rakish grin. “The fun hasn’t even started yet.”

Hélène gave him a heavy-lidded glance and Pierre rushed over to her, just slowing down long enough to kick off his shoes and grab the corkscrew. The mattress creaked in protest under his added weight. He tumbled onto the sheets, reaching out and gently pulling Hélène over. She giggled as she twined her arms around his neck, reaching up and pecking his lips. Pierre smiled into the kiss and tangled his hand in her hair, gently tilting her head back to deepen it. He had just begun to trail his hand up the back of her smooth, bare legs when she broke away with a breathy gasp.

“Easy there, tiger,” she hummed. “We should drink first.” Pierre groaned, but nodded in acquiescence, releasing her and turning his attention to the wine.

Hélène’s phone went off just as Pierre had uncorked the bottle, and Britney Spears’ Toxic began to blare over the speakers. “Ugh, sorry, let me just take this call real quick,” she said, pulling away from him.

Pierre raised an eyebrow and sat back. “Who’s calling you this late?”

“Relax, Heathcliff, it’s just my little brother.”

“I never knew you had a brother.”

Hélène shrugged nonchalantly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world, and disconnected her phone from the speakers. “You never asked.”

Pierre blinked. Hélène was prone to being taciturn at the best of times. It was alluring in a lot of ways; she pulled off being mysterious and aloof with a confidence that Pierre personally couldn’t imagine. It was endlessly frustrating, however, that his girlfriend seemed driven to keep as much of her personal life private from him as possible.

“What’s his name?” he pressed.

“Anatole.”

Anatole Kuragin. What was it, Greek? French? Some combination thereof? It was a nice enough name, Pierre supposed. A nice name, fit for a nice kid.

Well, as nice a kid as a Kuragin could be.

“How old is he?”
Hélène rolled her eyes. “Old enough.”

Pierre went stony-faced. “Lena.”

“Nosy. He’s seventeen.”

“Still in high school, then? A junior? Or a senior?”

“Jesus Christ, Petrushka, what is this, an interrogation? Just give me a minute; I have to take this call.”

Hélène scooted off the bed, phone pressed to her ear. “It’s 11:30 on a Monday, Anatole,” Pierre heard her scold as she left the room, closing the door behind her.

Pierre blinked. Were all families this dysfunctional? He had seen enough of Andrei and his mouse of a sister to know how that there simply wasn’t enough wildness in one family to stretch between two siblings. Anatole must have been the boring one, he reasoned. It seemed the only logical conclusion: after all, all that recklessness and bravado must have been spent on Hélène, bottled up and concentrated into one place, leaving her brother with the leftover scraps of her cunning and guile. The cunning and guile that, while incredibly sexy and exciting, had a tendency to give Pierre undue amounts of anxiety.

From the animated way he could hear Hélène chatting, he was already sure that his hypothesis was fundamentally flawed. The walls here weren’t thin, but even so, he was able to catch snatches of conversation.

“When’s the first deadline? You have plenty of time to submit it,” she said, her voice indistinct and hazy. “Stop—Toto, listen—don’t worry about it.” A long pause. Hélène let out a sigh. “We’ll figure it out on Saturday, how does that sound? It’ll be fine; I’ve been through this this before.”

She said something inaudible at that point. Pierre shifted against the sheets, craning his neck. It was wrong of him to eavesdrop and he knew it. But, in his defense, he reasoned, Hélène probably wouldn’t have any qualms about doing the same to him. They both had a tendency to be rather unscrupulous in that regard. Was it unhealthy? Probably, but mutually so, and—at least in Pierre’s estimation—these things tended to cancel out.

“Look, you have me and you have Fedya. We’ll get through it together, alright? Alright?” She laughed brightly, and something in the hallway went thump. “No, I’m okay,” she said. “Just bumped into the table. No, I’m not drunk, you brat.”

Hélène’s footfalls always had a way of announcing her presence; the click-clack of her heels echoed loudly as she stormed back down the hall. She pushed the door open with her hip, running her spare hand through her hair. Pierre sat up a little straighter.

“Alright, Toto,” she said, and despite the annoyance in her voice there was an undeniable streak of fondness there. “Yup…yes, I will. Now, have you finished your homework yet? Hmm? That’s good to hear. Stop fuss—no, listen to me, won’t you?—stop fussing, let me worry about that. I’ll tell Fedya you said hello. Now get to bed; it’s a school night.” Pierre heard the voice on the other end shout something muffled and indignant-sounding, and Hélène pulled a face. “Because I said so, you dweeb! Ok, love you too. Bye.”

She clicked the call off, throwing herself down on Pierre’s bed with a dramatic, long-suffering sigh.

Pierre smirked. “Toto?”
Hélène snorted and lobbed a pillow in his general direction. “Shut up.”

“Everything alright?”

“He’s gotten himself worked up into a panic again over college applications.” Pierre furrowed his brow, and Hélène waved her hand dismissively. “He always does this—procrastinates and then panics when he realizes what he’s put off. Don’t get your panties in a twist; it’s nothing major.”

“Are you guys close?”

“Of course.”

Pierre folded his hands awkwardly in his lap. “I’d really love to meet him.”

“And I’m sure you will. Eventually.”

“When is eventually?”

“Pierre,” Hélène said warningly.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Hélène!” he snapped. “Look, your father is one thing,—Hélène shot him a poisonous glare—“but this is your brother we’re talking about. Does he even know about me? About us?”

She tilted her head pensively. “I’m sure it’s come up in conversation once or twice.”


Hélène took his hand, gently stroking his knuckles. “You know my family life is…complicated. Can you really blame me for wanting to compartmentalize?”

Pierre sighed. It was sometimes difficult to remember that Hélène had a soft spot buried somewhere, deep beneath the bravado and snark. “I know, I know,” he muttered. “But you’re so important to me, and I want to know the people that are important to you.”

Hélène smiled, and Pierre pressed a gentle kiss to the back of her hand. “I know you do.”

“So what do you say we hang out sometime, me and Anatole?” He prodded her side playfully. “Boys’ night out?”

“Please, for the love of all that is good and holy, never use that phrase again.”

Pierre frowned, and his face grew hot. “Well, what’s wrong with it? A brotherly bonding day, is that so much to ask for?”

A wicked grin curled the corners of Hélène’s mouth and she flopped over onto her side, propping her head up on an elbow. “Oh my God. Are you serious?”

Pierre threw his hands up in defense. “I just thought it might be a nice thing to do. I’ve always wanted a little brother. We could go to a movie or a concert or a baseball game or Six Flags or whatever it is teenagers like nowadays.”

At that, Hélène clutched a pillow to her stomach and began to howl with laughter. Pierre glared, crossing his arms. “Anything you want to share with the class, Hélène?”

Hélène wiped her mascara-smudged eyes, fighting back a grin that threatened to split her face in
two. “God, you’re so old. Six Flags? Have you ever even been on a roller coaster before?”

“I went on the carousel at Coney Island when I was six,” he said, more than a little miffed. “Does that count?”

She took a swig from the bottle of wine perched between the two of them, smirking like she had just been let in on an inside joke to which Pierre was not privy. “Six Flags,” she mused, trailing a perfectly-manicured nail along the rim of the bottle. “Yes, I think he’d enjoy that very much.”
In Which Pierre Is A Nervous Wreck

Chapter Summary

Anatole has a blast. Pierre does not.

It was not Pierre’s fault, he thought sourly, that his mother had never brought him to an amusement park as a kid. Money had been tight then, and besides, he hadn’t had any time for fancy trips to Disney or Universal or wherever the hell it was people went to ride roller coasters. He didn’t see the appeal, frankly, and the very thought of being strapped into a metal-and-plastic cage dangling fifty feet above the ground hurtling in loops and curlicues at a hundred miles per hour was nearly enough to send him into hysterics.

_Have to be brave_, he told himself sternly. _What will Anatole think if you break down in the middle of a ride? And even worse: What will Hélène think?_

Pierre pushed his worries to the back of his mind, quashing down the sneaking feeling that he had made a very stupid decision. It was going to be a fun day, dammit, no matter how badly Hélène’s snide comments made him want to find the nearest bridge to jump off. His hands tightened involuntarily around the steering wheel, a rather worrisome tic he had developed driving with Hélène and Fedya and their gang of miscreants. No, that was a bit harsh of him—it wasn’t entirely their fault he was such a nervous wreck. Which wasn’t to say that they were entirely innocent in that respect—far from it, but it seemed that even from birth Pierre had always been inclined towards a more high-strung disposition, which had only worsened in recent years.

_Remember your breathing exercises_, he thought, sucking in a wheeze through clenched teeth. It helped sometimes, he found, to give himself a little pep-talk before going anywhere or doing anything even mildly stressful.

His therapist would be so proud.

“Heart a grip, Pyotr,” he said under his breath. “How many people ride on roller coasters every day? Every year? Everything’s going to be fine; they don’t let engineering school dropouts design these things.”

He circled the block for a third time before finally working up the guts to pull into the Kuragin’s driveway. The gate had been left open, as it always was, and Hélène’s convertible was parked in front of the garage, though Pierre doubted she was home. She rarely was. The house was beautiful, but cold and imperial-looking, more like a museum than a home—he couldn’t imagine anyone actually living in it, couldn’t picture a young Hélène sitting on the steps or playing on the street. Pierre’s childhood home may have been small and shabby, and the roof may have leaked and the heating may have been unreliable at best, but at least he had never felt like an intruder simply for existing there.

He wondered what it must have been like, to have been born into disgusting wealth like the Kuragins. His own father had taken his sweet time acknowledging him, and Pierre had fought for everything he had up until he had graduated high school. He was grateful for it, in a weird way; it had made him value simple pleasures, like how incomparably special retreating in a corner with a good book was. On the other hand, perhaps he would have been better off had he learned the easy
confidence that Hélène naturally exuded.

Pierre had almost talked himself into believing that he had pulled up at the wrong address when a tall, skinny boy came strolling out of the house, a backpack slung over his shoulder and a spring in his step that could only be described as jolly. Anatole—at least, he presumed it was Anatole—with his shock of white-blonde hair, bright blue eyes, and translucent complexion, didn’t look like he could be Hélène’s cousin, much less her brother.

Pierre rolled down the window as he pulled up in front of the porch. “You’re Hélène’s brother?”

“I should hope so.”

Are you sure about that? he almost wanted to say, but he pushed the thought aside before he blurted out something stupid or offensive. Instead, he opted for a much more articulate: “Oh! You…I-I just thought…I meant no offense whatsoever, I was just a little surprised to see…you just look so…”

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “So different?”

“Well, yeah.”

“She is four years older than me,” Anatole said mildly. “And also, like, a girl.”

Pierre floundered, his face burning. Was this kid really that oblivious? Or was he being purposefully obtuse? “N-not like that, what I meant was…well, what I had thought originally…I was just trying to—no, forget I said anything at all.”

Anatole’s look of bored amusement was so patently Hélène that Pierre’s doubts vanished almost instantaneously.

“I’m just messing with you,” he said with that signature Kuragin smirk, and Pierre sighed, deflating like a month-old leftover party balloon, the kind that floats, sadly and alone, forgotten, in the corner of the living room until it begins to leak and slowly sinks to the floor.

“And you’re Pierre?” Anatole asked.

Say something witty. Something funny. Show him what a Cool Adult you are. “That’s my name, don’t wear it out,” he said, regretting it almost immediately.

“Cool.”

Pierre raised an eyebrow as Anatole pulled a key from his pocket and locked the front door, tucking it in his backpack when he was done. “Are your parents home?”

“Not right now.”

“Where are they? Do they know you’re going out?”

“Relax. I’m fine so long as Hélène knows where I am.”

Pierre frowned at that, but ultimately decided to let it go. As much as it irked him to see the Kuragins’ utter indifference towards the wellbeing of their children, he knew better than to press the matter any further. Months of noticing how prickly Hélène was about her home life had taught him that much.

“Alright, if you say so.” He unlocked the car doors, gesturing to the passenger seat. “Wanna hop
Anatole raised his eyebrows and let out a low whistle as he took in Pierre’s Lexus, pulling the passenger door open and sliding inside. “This is one sweet ride.” He ran his eyes over the dashboard, utterly enthralled.

Pierre scratched the back of his neck. Money was still an uncomfortable topic, and he felt awkward and ill-fitted in his newfound wealth, almost like he was wearing a suit several sizes too small. It was different, he supposed, for a kid like Anatole, having been born into what passed as “high society” nowadays. Pierre had long since decided that he wanted nothing to do with anything of the sort. “Eh,” he said, “it gets me from A to B in one piece; that’s enough for me.”

“I wish I had a car this nice,” Anatole continued. “I’d drive everywhere in it. You’d never see me again!”

Pierre laughed uneasily. “Easy there, Bueller.”

Anatole grinned. “Thanks for this, by the way. It’s a nice way to end the summer—one last day of fun before school starts again.”

“Hey, it’s no problem. I just thought it would be nice if we could hang out and get to know each other, now that I’m involved with your sister. You know, man-to-man.” He emphasized that last phrase with a painfully awkward shoulder bump that nearly toppled Anatole out of his seat.

Anatole snorted, clinging to the armrest as he regained his balance. “‘Involved’? That’s a funny way of saying that you’re fu—”

“Okay, we’re gonna stop that one right there.”

“Sorry,” Anatole said with a grin that was anything but. “I’ll try go easy on the rude language today.”

“No,” Pierre said, more flustered than he really ought to have felt. “Not that.”

“Oh, you mean the sex?” Anatole raised an eyebrow and smirked at the blush that was quickly rising in Pierre’s cheeks.

“And to think I thought you were the quiet one.”

“Hey, man, no worries.” He clapped Pierre soundly on the shoulder. “Hélène and I don’t keep secrets from each other.”

“This is not a discussion that’s supposed to happen with your girlfriend’s little brother,” he said, more to himself than Anatole.

Anatole shrugged, leaning back in his seat. “Like I said, no secrets.”

Pierre couldn’t help but wonder what it was Hélène said about him when he wasn’t around. Everything always seemed fine when they…no, he decided, best not to venture too far down that rabbit hole. He forced himself to let it go, shaking his head and turning back to Anatole, determined to find anything else to talk about. He turned the radio on, and NPR began to blast over the speakers. “So what kind of music are the kids into these days? Eminem? Kanye West? Tupac?”

Anatole raised that eyebrow again (Pierre was beginning to notice a pattern), the faintest hint of a smirk curling the corner of his mouth. “I like Broadway. But I’ll listen to just about anything
besides country.”

Pierre desperately latched onto that tidbit, eager to make conversation. “Ah, a theatre kid?” he said. “I used to do a bit of theatre back in my day too.”

“Really? Like what?”

Pierre faltered for a moment. “Well, I mostly stuck to set construction, but I was Barnacle #3 in the Little Mermaid when I was a freshman. Very exciting.”

“High school?”

“Oh, no,” Pierre said affably. “That was in college.”

Anatole’s mouth opened in a small ‘o’. “I can’t say I was expecting that.”

Pierre shrugged. “It wasn’t for me. I’d much rather stick to behind-the-scenes.”

“Yeah, I get that vibe from you.”

Pierre nodded dumbly, unsure how to respond to that. He quickly changed the subject instead. “Are you buckled in?”

Anatole looked mildly surprised at that. “Whoops. I forgot.”

“Don’t ride in a car often?”

“Oh no, I do. Just not with the belt on.”

Pierre’s hands tightened spasmodically around the wheel.

“Hey, dude, could you pass me the aux cord? I just downloaded the Hamilton soundtrack—you gotta have a listen to this!”

Parking was a nightmare, but, Pierre supposed, that was to be expected on a Saturday morning at the tail-end of summer. The drive had been fairly uneventful; they had mostly talked about school and the stress of impending college applications. Anatole, Pierre had found, was an exuberant talker who was more than happy to fill up dead air with empty chatter. It was so pleasant that Pierre almost forgot how much he was dreading this excursion until they reached the gates.

He craned his neck, his heart sinking lower with every passing second as he stared up at the towering rides. They had seemed a lot smaller and less frightening from the parking lot.

“Toto, I’ve a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore,” he murmured. Anatole shot him a confused look.

“What did you say?”

Pierre shook his head. “Nevermind.”

Anatole gave him a carefully analytical once-over. “I wasn’t sure what to expect. But you’re just like Hélène described.”
Pierre frowned, unsure what to make of that. “Just out of curiosity, what has Hélène said about me?”

“She said that you were a massive dork,” Anatole grinned, “but that you were sweet.”

That…actually wasn’t as bad as he had expected. “I guess that’s fair,” he mused.

“What does she say about me?”

“Not much.” Anatole frowned, and Pierre quickly backpedalled. “You know how she is. She doesn’t talk about stuff like this a lot. She’s always been very private about her family life.”

Anatole raised his eyebrows disbelievingly. “Right,” he chuckled.

Pierre cocked his head in confusion at that before deciding to just ignore it. He squinted, wishing that he had remembered to bring sunglasses. “It’s really bright out,” he said, shielding his eyes. “Like, really bright. Are you wearing sunscreen? You should be wearing sunscreen—God, look at how pale you are; you’ll burn in a minute flat. Please tell me you have some on. I have a tube in the car if you need any. You know what? Let’s try stay in the shade anyway; it’s so easy to get sunstroke in this weather if you’re standing outside all day and Hélène will kill me if—”

“Pierre,” Anatole said, more than a little amused. “I can take care of myself.”

“Okay, okay, fair enough, I’ll back off. Let’s go have fun!”

Had Pierre known what was waiting for him, he would have taken off in the opposite direction as fast as his legs could carry him.

Pierre’s head was spinning like a top. He gripped the rim of the trash can so hard that his knuckles went white and his arms trembled, as if it was the only thing keeping him from keeling over into a shivering huddle of vertigo and nausea. “Oh, God,” he muttered, and placed a hand on his churning stomach. He felt like he had been run over by an eight-wheeler, which, after mowing him down the first time, had promptly reversed and run him over again. “I think that thing gave me whiplash.”

“That’s a very interesting shade of green you’re turning,” Anatole said bemusedly. Pierre tried to shoot him a foul glare, but it appeared there now were two—no, three—Anatoles where there had been only one before, and he wasn’t sure which to look at.

“You should take a photo,” he snapped as the world spun around him like he was on one of those horrifying teacup rides, the thought of which only made bile rise in his throat. “It’ll last longer.”

“You do realize that Nitro isn’t even one of the scarier rides?”

“It was scary enough for my stomach.”

Anatole slapped him on the back affectionately and Pierre nearly heaved. “Ah, well, you’re still alive, and that’s the main thing, isn’t it?”

“That’s debatable,” Pierre moaned, and his stomach lurched threateningly.

“And the photo came out fantastic! Look at your face in this one!”
“I would really rather not, thanks.”

Anatole grimaced, looking down at him sympathetically. “Do you wanna take a break?”

Pierre nodded, squeezing his eyes shut. “That would be good, I think.”

“You want to grab something to eat? It’s nearly time for lunch anyway.”

Pierre wheezed, doubling over and giving Anatole an utterly pathetic thumbs-up. “You go ahead. I think I’m covered.”

“About that…” he began cautiously. “I kind of…didn’t bring my wallet. Lend me twenty bucks?”

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Pierre’s head was still spinning as he pulled up in front of the Kuragin’s house. He had not puked, miraculously, but it had been an uncomfortably close call. Roller coasters, he decided, were not for him. Anatole seemed like he’d had an okay time, though, if the broad smile and slight sunburn were anything to go by.

“Hey, today was really fun,” Anatole said, pulling his keys out of his backpack.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Pierre said weakly.

“I’ll see you around?”

“Yeah.” He smiled. “I’d really like that. Just maybe somewhere else next time. Somewhere on solid ground.”

“Dope.” Anatole grinned and slid out of Pierre’s car.

“Take care, kid.”

Anatole gave him a mock-salute. “You too, old man.”

Despite the nausea, Pierre couldn’t help but grin as he watched Anatole stroll into the house. The first major hurdle had seemed to be an unexpected success.

Hélène would be so proud.
In Which Sonya Is Too Good For This Lousy, Rotten World

Chapter Summary

Andrei isn't here. Our two fave gals have their first day at school.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the lovely comments! As a disclaimer, both of us went to Catholic schools, so we are relying heavily on our imaginations and tropes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

6:52

Natalka: bonjour mon petit chou chou <3 <3 <3

Natalka: (did I say that right?)

Natalka: happy first day of school!!!!

Natalka: is France as beautiful as you thought?

7:08

Natalka: ugh i have class in exactly an hour ew gross

Natalka: I really miss you I hope u know that

Natalka: it’s not gonna be the same without you

Natalka: and moscow is as boring as you said. Nothing but cornfields as far as you can see in every direction.

Natalka: you’re probably in the middle of class rn arent you?

Natalka: i’m sorry i’ll stop blowing up ur inbox

Huddled under her massive pile of bedsheets, blankets and pillows, Natasha sighed and locked her phone. She couldn’t fault Andrei for being slow to respond—they had known that communication would be sluggish with the 7-hour time difference—but it didn’t make her feel any less lonely. She’d had a nervous knot wearing a hole in her stomach all morning, and she’d been banking on a ‘good luck Natalya :)’ text from her boyfriend to cheer her up.

God, what a drag all of this was. Moscow, Idaho. Moscow, Where-Andrei-Wasn’t. Moscow, The-Middle-of-Goddamn-Nowhere. It was enough to put anyone in a foul mood.
Well, *almost* anyone.

Sonya, ever the early bird, had already dressed and done her hair when she poked her head through the doorway of Natasha’s bedroom. Natasha could hear music blasting from across the hall, something muffled and cheery-sounding. Far too cheery for a Monday morning.

“Good morning!” Sonya chirped. “You ready for school?”

Natasha gestured to the unmade bed, the pile of books and papers sitting on her dresser not yet organized and sorted in her backpack, the outfit still laid out over the chair by her desk. “Almost.” She wriggled a little under her sheets, drawing the quilt up to her chin and rolling over on her side so that she was cocooned in a Natasha-bedsheet-burrito. “Just give me five more minutes. I need my beauty rest.”

Sonya sighed. “Well, the bus is coming in, like, twenty minutes. Just thought you should know.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

“And it’s only a half-day. Come on, it won’t be that bad.”

“I know.”

“Nat, are you okay?”

Natasha nodded, biting her lip. “I’m fine.”

Sonya gave her a sympathetic smile, tilting her head and leaning against the doorway. “No word from Andrei?”

“Nothing. Not even a ‘bonjour’.”

“Don’t stress out about it,” she said firmly. “It’s the afternoon there—he’s probably in class.”

“I know,” said Natasha, deflating a little. “I’m not stressed. I know that he loves me. I just hate this.”

“What’s ‘this’?”


Sonya’s shoulders drooped a little. “Do you mind if I come in?”

Natasha nodded.

Sonya dropped her backpack against the doorway and Natasha threw off the sheets and scooted over so that she could sit next to her.

Sonya took her hand and squeezed it three times. “I’m sorry Nat. I know it’s not Seattle, but it’s only for a year, and then we’re off to college.” She saw Natasha bite her lip anxiously and quickly steered the conversation in another, cheerier direction. “Think of how much you’ll have to tell him about our first day at school, though! And when we get back it’ll only be, like, eleven in Paris, so he’ll definitely still be awake.”

Natasha smiled and Sonya allowed herself a tiny sigh of relief. “You’re right, you’re right,” she said. “I think I’m just nervous.”
Sonya grimaced, raking a hand through her auburn hair. “Yeah, same.”

“It’s bad enough to have to move away from all your friends, but transferring your senior year?” Natasha muttered. “I don’t even know anyone in this lousy town.”—Sonya raised an eyebrow—“Oh, you know what I mean. Are they going to like me?”

“Natasha.”

“They have to like me,” she continued, and Sonya rolled her eyes. “Everyone has always liked me. I’ve always been a good friend, I’ve always been popular, I’ve always been—”

“Humble?” she offered.

Natasha stuck out her tongue, wrinkling her nose adorably. Sonya cracked a smile, despite herself. Natasha could be a major brat at times, but she was a good friend and she had always been liked.

“Look,” Sonya said, “you’re not going to be the only new kid. And I’m going to be there with you as well.”

“Not for everything.”

“Two classes, Nat. Two lousy classes and that’s it. I think you’ll be fine.” Sonya playfully bumped Natasha’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get you some breakfast. Your mom made pancakes.”

Natasha perked up a little at that. “Pancakes?” she said, and Sonya nodded vigorously.

“Let’s go eat before they start getting cold. You with me?”

“Okay,” Natasha grinned. “Let’s do this.”

The two of them sat together on the bus, just like they had every day since Kindergarten, crowded onto the two-seater in the very last row. Sonya had kept a nervous eye on bus driver since he had pulled into the curb. Every part of him seemed to bristle with a manic energy that was deeply unsettling and thrilling in the worst way possible. The whole bus was raptly focused on him in a way that Sonya couldn’t help but feel signalled impending chaos.

Natasha leaned over. “Still nervous?”

Sonya nodded mutely, tugging at her collar like it was trying to strangle her. “It’s really hot in here.”

“Then take off your jacket.”

Sonya smacked Natasha playfully. “Hot tip, Nat.”

Natasha opened her mouth, about to respond, when the bus driver let out an ear-splitting whistle and the bus fell silent.

And then:

“It’s Balaga!” someone shouted.

“The famous school bus driver!” echoed a chorus of students.
“WHOO!” the driver—Balaga, Sonya assumed—shouted, flooring the accelerator. That was the end of it. The bus shot forwards as if it had been fired from a cannon, and the students erupted in a riotous storm of shouts and screams and whistles and hollers. Balaga blasted the horn several times in rapid succession as they tore down the street, the tires shrieking in protest. Natasha whooped, while Sonya gripped the seat belt so tightly that her knuckles went white. “Oh my God,” she hissed, to nobody in particular. “This guy is certifiable! Where do they find these drivers? What’s the speed limit on main roads here?”

Natasha giggled, holding onto the headrest in front of her as the bus bucked over a speedbump and bounced them clear out of their seats. “Where’s your sense of adventure, Sonyushka?”

“It was evicted by my desire to live.”

Natasha just tossed her head back and laughed wildly, but Sonya winced as she felt the bus speed forwards and lurch over potholes and speedbumps, and the chaos and hubbub began to die down into an indistinct haze of static and noise. She clenched her fists and dug her nails into her palms, mindlessly swinging her legs in a vain attempt to burn off some of her excess anxiety. Or rather, she was until a head poked over the top of the seat in front of them.

“Hey,” the strange girl snapped, her head bobbing up and down as the bus rocked, “will you please stop kicking my seat?”

Sonya blushed all the way to the roots of her hair—which, as a ginger, was truly a sight to behold—and shrunk back in her seat. “I’m sorry.”

The girl rolled her eyes, evidently unimpressed. Sonya felt her cheeks redden further. “Just watch your feet next time.”

“Hey!” Natasha snapped. “She apologized. You don’t need to be so rude.”

“Natasha, relax” said Sonya.

“You know what? I’m sorry,” the girl said to Sonya, disregarding Natasha, and even though her tone was more spiteful than apologetic, Sonya shifted awkwardly in her seat. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Don’t worry about it. I’m just a really clumsy person; I should’ve paid more attention to my—”

“I’m Mary,” said the girl, not even batting an eyelid. “And you?”

Sonya blinked. “Oh, Me? I’m Sofia. But you can call me Sonya. Everybody calls me Sonya.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes, unaccustomed to being ignored in favor of Sonya. Mary was a stern-looking girl, with her grey North Face jacket zipped all the way up to her chin even though it was only September and the corners of her mouth turned down in a seemingly permanent scowl. Her mousy hair had been pulled into a tight, thin braid, and the bags under her eyes were considerably darker and larger than Natasha had ever seen on a teenager.

Natasha disliked her instantly.

“And I’m Natalya,” she added pointedly. “But you can call me Natasha.”

“Good for you,” Mary said flatly, before turning her attention back to Sonya. Natasha’s mouth swung open into an indignant ‘o’, but if Sonya noticed her building temper she didn’t make any sign of it.
The two of them were chatting now, evidently having forgotten that she was sitting right next to them. Natasha waited for Sonya to interject, to try to include her, but Sonya just ignored her and kept blabbering away, almost as if she was purposefully ignoring her. Natasha was not the sort of person who was left out of things, and she damn sure didn’t intend on changing things up. But it was too late to gracefully butt into their conversation without making a fool of herself. Dejected, she slumped back in her seat and popped in her headphones, turning her face to the window and the miles of farmland and cornfields stretching by.

The rest of the ride passed in a blur, and she didn’t even notice that the bus had stopped until she felt Sonya’s hand on her shoulder. Natasha pulled out one earbud.

“Huh?”

Sonya smiled. “I said we’re here.”

Sonya crossed her ankles under her stool, nervously tapping her pencil against her sketchbook. She was desperate to start AP Art on a good note, but she had no clue what to draw.

A figure appeared at the side of the table. Sonya looked up.

“Mind if I sit here?” Mary asked. She was still wearing her grey jacket, zipped up all the way despite the stifling warmth of the art room. In her hands she carried a stack of books, which would have been comical had it not been nearly half her height. Mary didn’t seem to be struggling, however. She just seemed bored, as if being at school was the greatest inconvenience she had ever been forced to endure.

Sonya raised her eyebrows. “Oh, yeah, sure! Knock yourself out.”

Mary’s eyes drifted to the empty seat across the table. Sonya realized, with a pang of guilt, that with her books and papers spread all over the entire countertop, there was no room left for anyone else. She reached over and pulled her things to her side of the table.

“You’re not sitting with your sister?”

“Cousin,” Sonya corrected. “She took music instead of art.”

Mary gave her a shy smile and dropped her stack of books onto the table with a massive bang. Sonya jumped, nearly dropping her pencil.

“Jesus,” Sonya said. “Do you need a backpack or something? You’re going to break your arms carrying around all those books.”

Mary shrugged and pulled out a seat, unzipping her jacket and laying it over the back of the chair. “It doesn’t bother me,” she said. Sonya frowned, but Mary was already digging through the pile of books, flipping open a black sketchbook.

It was rude to stare, and Sonya was well aware of that, but Mary’s drawings were beautiful. A meticulously detailed trellis of roses crawled up one page, while a treehouse under a brilliant, starry sky took up another. Mary reached into her pencil case and pulled out a piece of charcoal, absently beginning a new sketch. Within minutes, giant bear with coal-black eyes and grizzled fur lumbered across the spread pages of Mary’s book.
“That’s really good,” Sonya said shyly. “Like, really good.”

Mary raised an eyebrow, looking more confused than flattered. “Oh. Um, thanks?”

“Seriously!” she said, a little louder than intended. “It’s incredible, honestly. I can’t sketch for shit.”

Mary smiled. “What do you do?”

“I’m a painter,” Sonya said, gesturing to her acrylic-splattered jeans. “I’m trying to learn how to work with charcoals, though.”

“They’re fun but—gah!” Mary hissed. The charcoal had smudged all along the side of her hand and wrist, staining the sleeve of her blouse a dark grey. “My dad’s going to kill me.”

“Oh my God!” Sonya gasped, and Mary flinched. “You’re a lefty!”

Mary blinked, and Sonya wasn’t sure if she imagined the faint blush that crept along her cheeks. “Huh? Oh, yeah. I guess I am.”

“I’m a lefty too,” said Sonya, eagerly nodding her head and holding up her left hand, the side of which was already stained with graphite. “Well, I mean, I guess I’m technically ambidextrous, but I can only write really sloppy with my right hand because I wanted to be right-handed when I was younger so I tried teaching myself. It didn’t work out, obviously. But yeah.” She blew her bangs out of her eyes. “Go southpaws.”

Mary smiled bemusedly. “Are you always this chatty?”

If the tips of her ears got any hotter, Sonya thought, they were just going to spontaneously combust. “Sometimes. I don’t know. It depends.” God, she was rambling again. Sonya resisted the urge to slap her forehead. “I’m sorry if I’m talking too much. Or too fast. I do that a lot. If I’m irritating you, just let me know. I won’t be offended, I swear.”

“It’s not irritating,” Mary laughed. “It’s actually really refreshing. No one in this town talks to me.”

Sonya frowned. “Really?”

Mary shrugged. “It’s a small place and rumors get around fast.” Sonya waited for her to elaborate, but Mary had clearly said all that she was willing to.

“Do you want some help getting that stain out?”

Mary shook her head. “No, it’s alright. I’ve got it.”

“Don’t be silly. There’s no shame in asking for help.”

Mary hung her head with a half-hearted smile and sighed. “Oh, alright.” She held out the offending sleeve to Sonya.

“I think this is above the pay grade of the classic ‘spit-’n-rub’,” said Sonya.

“Soap and water, then?”

“That should do the trick.” Sonya surveyed the room with narrowed eyes. “There’s a sink in here, right? Any art studio worth its salt should have a sink.”
Mary pointed to the back of the room, where a double sink was crammed in between upturned tables and paint racks. Bubbles welled up in the sink as Mary scrubbed furiously at the cuff of her sleeve.

“You know,” Sonya said, “it might help if you try using warm water.”

Mary paused. Sonya was afraid for a moment that she might become irritated or snappish. “Yeah,” she said, and to Sonya’s relief she sounded more pensive and embarrassed than aggravated. “I think you’re right.”

They lapsed into an awkward silence as the water heated up. Mary directed her gaze towards the floor, looking anywhere but Sonya’s face, and Sonya felt the pressing urge to avert her own stare out of politeness.

God, she thought. Finally, another person as awkward as me. It’s a match made in Hell.

“You know,” Mary said after a while. “I thought it was really sweet that you and your cousin sat together on the bus.”

Sonya shrugged. “Well, it’s been the two of us together since as long as I can remember. We’re practically sisters. And we’re new here too, so I guess it’s easier to stick to what you know.”

“My brother and I used to be that close, too,” Mary said. “I miss that a lot.”

Sonya froze. “Oh my God. I’m so sorry to hear that, Mary. Is he—?”

“He’s not dead or anything,” Mary added quickly, seeing the horrified look on Sonya’s face. “But he may as well be sometimes. He’s in college, that’s all.”

“What year is he in?”

Mary sighed wistfully. “He’s a sophomore. He was one of those brainiac kids, you know? Just when I thought we’d have a little more time together, he skipped a year ahead. It’s so weird, not having him around anymore. I hate it, honestly.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” Mary said firmly. “So, you guys are new to town?”

Sonya nodded. “Yeah, I moved with Nat’s family from Seattle.”

Mary’s eyes brightened almost immediately. “My brother goes to the University of Washington!”

“Oh, no way!” Sonya grinned. “Small world!”

At that, the five-minute warning bell rang over the intercom, obnoxiously loud and high-pitched. Mary turned off the tap and examined the cuff of her sleeve. The soap and water hadn’t made much of a dent in the stain. If anything, they had made it worse, an ugly brownish-black where it had previously been just dark grey.

“Oh dear,” Mary murmured under her breath.

Realization dawned on Sonya slowly, sinking its icy claws into her heart. She felt her stomach sink all the way to the basement as a sick sense of dread pressed against her throat. “Shit,” she said, and Mary’s eyes went wide. “I—oh, Jesus fuck! Oh my God, Mary, I’m so, so sorry! I completely forgot that you’re not supposed to wet a charcoal stain.”
Mary’s face reddened. “What?’’

The words tumbled out faster than Sonya could process them. “It only makes it worse. You’re just soaking it into the fabric. You have to vacuum the charcoal out first and even then it’s only a last resort if you put it in the wash and Jesus Christ I’ve just ruined your nice blouse and now you’re going to hate me for it!’’

Mary’s face scrunched up and Sonya panicked, thinking that she was about to cry, when all of a sudden, Mary grinned and began to laugh hysterically, infectiously. Sonya couldn’t help the chuckle that bubbled out of her until the two of them were both doubled over, wheezing.

And then it happened.

The dreadful, terrible snort.

Sonya clapped her hands over her mouth and nose in embarrassment, but it was too late, and Mary completely lost the plot. She crumpled to the floor, laughing so hard that no sound came out, and Sonya clung to the sink as if for dear life as she snorted again and again and Mary laughed harder and harder.

“Oh my God, Sonya!’’ Mary wheezed once their fit had died down. “Are you trying to make me have an asthma attack?’’

Sonya held up a hand to signal a pause as she caught her breath. “I swear,’’ she said between gulps of air, “I was gonna make a better impression.’’

“You’ve done a fabulous job,’’ Mary said, albeit a little drily. “I’ll be sure to come to you for advice on everything from now on.’’

Sonya guffawed. “Oh my God. Are you being sarcastic with me?’’

Mary shrugged, but she couldn’t hide the conspiratorial grin that snuck its way onto her face. “Guilty as charged.’’

And then the first-period bell blared over the intercom, and they trudged back to their seats, Mary wringing out her still-dripping sleeve.

“Thanks for that, by the way,’’ she said, opening to a new page in her sketchbook. “I haven’t laughed that hard in a long time.’’

“Me neither. And I just want to apologize for the sleeve. It was stupid of me to—’’

Mary shrugged her off. “Don’t worry about it. It’s just a shirt. It was old anyway.’’

“It was my fault either way,’’ said Sonya.

“Sonya, really—’’

Beneath the table, Sonya clenched her hands into fists and summoned all the courage she could muster. Now was not the time to get cold feet. “How about I make it up to you?’’

Mary seemed genuinely surprised at that. “Make it up to me? Honestly, Sonya, it’s not that big a deal.’’

“Lunch,’’ Sonya said, stammering it out before her bravery fled. Mary raised an eyebrow. “I-I mean, do you want to grab a lunch after school today? Like, a burger? Or maybe some pizza? I
don’t know. Whatever you like. It’s all your choice. I need to scope out the good eateries in this town anyway.”

Mary gave her an equally nervous, but nevertheless lovely smile. “I’d really like that. But I can’t do today. My dad’s expecting me home and he won’t be happy if I’m late.”

Sonya barely faltered. “Tomorrow, then?”

“It’s a date.”

And for the rest of the day, Sonya could not wipe the smile from her face.

“How was your day?”

Natasha gave Sonya a tight smile. Her day had been, to put it mildly, complete and utter crap. She had had all but one class with Sonya, and for rest of the morning she had been left completely alone. Everyone in this godforsaken town had known each other for years, and making friends had been a lot harder than she had anticipated. She’d sat by herself with nobody to talk to, just knowing that everyone must be whispering about her. “It was alright,” she said once the pause had become too long and suspicious. “Yours?”

“Actually, really good,” Sonya smiled. “Make any friends?”

Natasha gave her a tight smile. “Some girls in my music class were nice, I guess.” She could see Sonya opening her mouth for a follow-up question and quickly cut her off, changing the subject. “I do not like that Mary. Did you hear the way she spoke to you on the bus? What an insolent brat.”

Sonya shrugged halfheartedly, a faint blush creeping onto her cheeks. “I dunno. She was alright after I apologized. I thought she was okay.”

“Well, I think she’s awfully arrogant for someone so plain-looking.”

“Don’t be rude, Nat,” Sonya sighed.


“She’s really not all that bad.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow.

“We have AP Art together,” Sonya said, tugging at the hem of her shirt, “and we got chatting in class. She’s actually pretty cool. And a really good artist.”

Natasha snorted. “Whatever you say.”

“Whatever you say,” Sonya mimicked, hoping for a laugh or at least a smile. But Natasha neither laughed nor smiled, in fact, she looked more irritated than ever, and took off down the hallway to her room. “Aw, come on, are you—Natasha, I was only teasing. It was just a joke. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, it’s fine, I’m being silly.”

Sonya cocked her head inquisitively. “Silly about what?”
“Just drop it, Sonya, I’m fine, really.”

Sonya gave Natasha’s hand three short squeezes in rapid succession—their secret sign. “Hey, talk to me. What’s on your mind?”

“It’s been a long day. I’m just tired. I need a nap or something.”

“Nu-uh. You’re not getting away that easy. This isn’t ‘just tired’.”

Natasha’s eyes suddenly filled with tears. “Everything just feels wrong. Andrei isn’t here and you’re off hanging out with Mary and I’m all alone. I thought it would be you and me this year, but it’s not.”

“I’m allowed to make new friends,” Sonya said, “and nobody’s stopping you from hanging out with me and Mary! You don’t have to be alone, Natasha. There’s people here that care about you. I care about you. I’m always going to be here for you, whether you like it or not.” She squeezed Natasha’s hand again. “We were planning on going uptown for a bite to eat after school tomorrow. Will you come with us? How does that sound?”

“You already made plans with her?”

“What’s your deal with Mary?”

“I don’t have a deal with her, and I don’t want one!”

Sonya stared at her, open-mouthed, as something like realization came over her face. “Nat...are you jealous?”

Natasha turned her head away and muttered a tiny, and utterly unconvincing, “No.”

Sonya frowned. “What is there to be jealous of? You said it yourself—you don’t even like Mary.”

“I’m not jealous!”

“You sure as hell aren’t acting like it.”

Natasha made a move towards her room again, but Sonya pressed on. “What’s gotten into you? Did somebody say something to you? Is it Andrei again?”

“Please, Sonya, I just want to be left alone.”

“No, Natasha, I want to talk about this.”

“I don’t want to talk,” Natasha said, her voice cracking. “If I say another word, I think I’m going to start crying.”


Natasha all but ran into the bathroom, turning on the shower to cover the sound of her overwhelmed tears. The water was hot, too hot, and burned her skin and left her pink and stinging, but it still made her muscles relax, almost against her will. She slumped against the wall, taking a moment to collect herself, forcing herself to breathe steadily. Everything was fine, she reminded herself. And even if it wasn’t fine right now, it would be in the morning. Sonya would never abandon her. Andrei would text her soon. Maybe there was already a message waiting for her now.

She stepped out, wrapping herself in a towel and walked into her room, determined to put on a nice
outfit, do her makeup, and apologize to Sonya.

At the foot of her bed sat a small ceramic plate with a cookie on top and a piece of paper tucked beneath. Natasha allowed herself a grateful smile as she read Sonya’s note.

*Peace offering?* it read.

Natasha smiled through tears and bit into the cookie. Chocolate chip. Her favorite. Not like that oatmeal-raisin crap her mother always insisted on buying instead.

“Oh, Sonya,” Natasha whispered to her empty room. “What would I do without you?”

It was either very late at night or very early in the morning when Natasha’s ringer went off. She blinked in confusion, fumbling for her phone, and unlocked the screen.

**Frenchboi:** hi nat sorry I’m so slow to write back

**Frenchboi:** it went alright I guess

**Frenchboi:** paris is very loud

**Frenchboi:** and big and busy

**Frenchboi:** campus is gorgeous though

**Frenchboi:** miss you too <3

**Frenchboi:** how was your first day of school?

Natasha smiled sleepily.

**Natalka:** <3 <3 <3

**Natalka:** it went okay i guess

**Natalka:** you will not *believe* the bus ride though

**Natalka:** i think the driver is insane

**Natalka:** and then this bitch sitting in front of us started chewing sonya out for something stupid and wouldn’t accept her apology

**Frenchboi:** wow jeez

**Frenchboi:** that’s balaga for you i guess

**Frenchboi:** he’s always been a very…interesting character

**Natalka:** ugh ikr idk how you survived him for four years

**Frenchboi:** did you run into my sister?
Frenchboi: she’s the year under you

Natalka: i didn’t know your sister went to school with us

Natalka: i’ll keep an eye out for her

Frenchboi: i’ll tell her to look out for you too

Frenchboi: wait nat isn’t it like 2 am your time?

Natalka: …maybe

Natalka: :3

Frenchboi: i’m so sorry

Frenchboi: go to sleep love

Natalka: i wish we could keep talking forever

Frenchboi: i know i know

Frenchboi: but you need some rest

Natalka: oh, alright

Natalka: if you insist

Frenchboi: love you <3

Natalka: ehh you’re alright i guess ;-

Natalka: i love you <3 gn

Frenchboi: gn

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Comments and kudos make our lil hearts sing!
In Which Our Protagonists Engage In Pursuits Of Questionable Legality

Chapter Summary

Anatole and Fedya are up to no good. Pierre is a reluctant enabler.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all your kind words, we love hearing from you! Kudos and comments are lovely, and very appreciated!

Anatole Kuragin: heyo
Anatole Kuragin: what are you doing tonight?

Barnacle #3: nothing really

Barnacle #3: and for the love of god, pls don’t turn this into an innuendo

Anatole Kuragin: haha well now that you mention it
Anatole Kuragin: jk jk ;)
Anatole Kuragin: look fedya’s hanging at my place and i was wondering if you wanted to swing by this evening

Pierre paused and looked up from his phone. He supposed that it shouldn’t surprise him that Anatole knew Fedya Dolokhov. Dolokhov and Hélène were practically attached at the hip, had been for as long as Pierre had known both of them. He didn’t care for Dolokhov on a good day, but Anatole seemed a nice enough kid, and Pierre wasn’t oblivious enough to ignore the significance of Hélène’s little brother asking him to hang out.

He unlocked his phone and began to type.

Pierre Bae-zukhov: Hey, can we take a rain check on tonight?

Lena: ?

Pierre Bae-zukhov: your little brother wants to hang out

Lena: -_-  

Lena: Seriously?

Pierre Bae-zukhov: I TOLD you the boys’ night out would work
**Lena:** Pierre

**Lena:** We agreed never to call it that again.

**Lena:** Please

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** so rain check?

**Lena:** Fine

**Lena:** But you owe me a really nice date at a fancy restaurant

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** that sounds about right :/

**Lena:** Oh, and thanks for the HILARIOUS photo, by the way

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** pardon?

**Lena:** sixflags.jpg

**Lena:** Anatole sent it to me

**Lena:** You look great. I think I’ll use it for the Christmas cards

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** oh my god

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*DING-DONG.*

It was Anatole who answered the door, sipping a glass of something fizzy and wearing a grin that seemed much too cheerful for a teenage boy about to start his first full week of school in less than twelve hours. “Heya!” he said. “Glad you could make it.”

“Hey Anatole,” Pierre smiled back.

He slipped off his sneakers before stepping across the threshold. He knew how picky Hélène could be about wearing shoes inside the house, and he didn’t imagine Anatole would be all that different in that respect.

“Good thinking,” Anatole said as they walked inside. “Dad still flips his shit if he finds any dirt inside the house.”

The Kuragin living room was larger than the house Pierre had grown up in. Well, not really, but it sure seemed that way at first. It was deceptively small, he decided, made to feel more spacious by its sheer emptiness. For a living room, it sure didn’t feel like a place where anybody actually *lived.* In the far end of the room was a massive stone fireplace that looked like it hadn’t held a fire since before Anatole was born. Above the fireplace there hung a massive television screen. Three black leather couches were arranged in a semicircle around a glass coffee table on top of which sat several glossy hardback books that, judging from the pristine quality of the spines, had never actually been read or even opened. But most startling of all was the very pointed absence of any personal effects: no art hung on the walls, no report cards magnetically pinned to the fridge, not even a family photo perched on the mantel.
No, actually, there was something. On the side table, balanced against the lamp. A framed picture of a little girl, no older than seven or eight, with a mess of dark curls and an impish grin. Young Hélène, he realized with a start. She was holding on to an older man’s hand, a man with the same tawny skin and dark, glittering eyes as her. Her father, Pierre surmised.

“Make yourself at home!” Anatole said, and strode over to where Pierre was standing to take his jacket. “We’ve got Doritos, we’ve got chips, we’ve got guac, we’ve got pizza, we’ve got Coke—the whole shebang!”

“Thank you, Anatole, that’s very nice of you,” Pierre said, averting his gaze, but Anatole had already seen where his attention was focused.

Anatole’s eyes drifted towards the photo. His smile faltered, and something like sadness flickered across his face, but it was gone not a second later. “Hélène was a pretty cute kid, wasn’t she?” he said, much too brightly.

“Yes,” Pierre said, sparing another quick glance towards the photo. “Yes, she was.”

A smile curled the corner of Anatole’s mouth, and he looked so much like Hélène for a moment that Pierre had to do a double take. “You can see where she gets that amazing complexion from. I wasn’t as lucky in the genetics department, unfortunately.”

“Well, you do look very similar at times.”

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “I can’t say I’ve heard that one many times before.”

They did though, Pierre mused. While their coloring was startlingly different, their features were almost identical. They shared the same pointy features, the same full lips, and the same sharp bone structure. It was bizarre to see their shared mannerisms, the way Anatole tilted his head in a way that mimicked Hélène, the matching angles of their eyebrows when they looked irritated or confused. He wondered if Anatole was left-handed, too.

“Hey, Pierre,” said a voice.

Pierre jumped in surprise. He hadn’t even noticed Fedya lounging against the wall. “Hey Fedya,” he said, trying to regain his composure. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Fedya said coolly.

“Great,” Pierre said, giving him a tight smile. The two of them lapsed into an awkward silence until Anatole chimed in again.

“Have some pizza,” he said. “There’s a pie on the kitchen counter.”

Pierre helped himself to a slice of pizza. Would it look greedy, he wondered, to take second? And more importantly, would Anatole even care?

*Screw it,* he thought, seeing Anatole’s plate piled high with chips, and took two more slices for good measure. He sank into one of the couches, awkwardly crossing his ankles. Sitting across from Fedya and Anatole, he couldn’t help but feel like he was being interviewed.

“So, what schools are you looking at?”

Anatole rolled his eyes. “Christ, Pierre, can we please not discuss that right now?”
“Yeah, way to kill the mood, old man,” Fedya snapped.

“I’m only two years older than you, Fyodor.”

“Oh, relax, you grouch,” said Fedya. Then, to Anatole: “Don’t worry, kid. You’ve got some time to go before you become an old fart like us.”

Anatole covered his eyes with his hands and threw himself down on the sofa. It was so reminiscent of Hélène that Pierre nearly snorted.

“I don’t want to hear about it,” said Anatole. “I don’t want anybody to mention the c-word ever again.”

Pierre shot Fedya a confused glance. “C-word”? he mouthed.

College, Fedya mouthed back.

“I just want to enjoy my senior year while I can,” Anatole continued. “Well, at least while there’s a few hours of the weekend left.”

“Okay, so let’s go then,” Fedya grinned. “No time like the present.”

“You ready?”

Fedya nodded, looking up from his watch. “Yeah.”

Pierre blinked. “Hmm? Ready for what?”

Anatole reached into his pocket and lobbed something shiny and metallic in Pierre’s general direction. Car keys.

“Balaga couldn’t make it tonight,” he explained, “so I guess that makes you our getaway driver.”

Pierre raised an incredulous eyebrow. “I’m the what now?”

Fedya slapped his back in what was probably intended to be a brotherly gesture of affection, but it knocked the wind right out of Pierre’s lungs, and he nearly doubled over under the blow. “Forgot to turn on your hearing aid this morning? You’re the getaway driver.”

Pierre stared blankly at the keys in his palm. “What do you two need help getting away from?”

“Just a little fun,” said Anatole, and he and Fedya shared a conspiratorial grin that sent a twinge of dread through Pierre’s stomach. “We’re borrowing my dad’s car tonight.”

“And you didn’t think to ask Fedya to drive?”

“No can do, pal,” Fedya said, and he held up his half-empty bottle of beer as proof. “Even I’m not above the law.”

Pierre shot Anatole an accusatory glare. “You’re seventeen. Don’t you have your license yet?”

Anatole hung his head. “No. I’ve failed the test six times,” he admitted, and Pierre pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh.

“Come on, old man!” Fedya said with the sort of animated vigor that only a half-inebriated frat boy could muster. He took another swig from the bottle. “Live a little.”
“I can’t believe you’re asking me to do this.”

“Oh, Pierre,” Anatole whined. “Don’t be such a crank.”

Pierre grimaced, evaluating his options. Every part of his being wanted to drive home and have nothing to do with whatever Fedya and Anatole were planning. On the other hand, he mused bitterly, he didn’t doubt that they would carry out their plans regardless, and it was better that they did it with a sober driver. Besides, he thought to himself, this could be fun. Anatole and Fedya couldn’t possibly be doing something that bad, or they wouldn’t have asked him to participate.

“Fine,” he muttered.

Fedya guffawed. “That’s the spirit!”

Anatole turned to Fedya. “Where’d you leave it?”

It. Now, what could that be?

“It’s in the back of my truck.”

Pierre followed them downstairs to the garage, where Fedya’s pickup truck was parked, with a growing sense of foreboding. A wire cage had been wedged into the backseat. And crowded into the far corner of that cage was an extremely pissed-off-looking raccoon.

“Oh my God,” Pierre said. “What the hell are you doing with that thing?”

Fedya’s smirk was positively devilish. Pierre shuddered. “We’re leaving a little back-to-school present for Marya Dmitrievna. Cute, isn’t it?”

“I beg your pardon.”

“It’ll be fun!” said Anatole.

“Yeah, live a little! No harm, no foul.”

“No harm?” Pierre snapped. “What are you gonna do, set a raccoon loose in the high school? You think that’s ‘no harm’?”

“But it won’t be loose,” said Anatole. “We’ll be locking it in Ms. Dmitrievna’s office.”

Pierre threw his hands in the air, a gesture of exasperation. “Oh, well that makes everything better!”

“If it helps, you can just wait in the car. You don’t have to be an accomplice,” Fedya offered.

“No, I’m sorry,” Pierre said. “I can’t do this. I take it back. I don’t want any part in this.”

“Pierre!” Anatole protested.

“What if it’s carrying rabies? You don’t know where that thing has been.”

“We do know where it’s been,” said Anatole. “We caught it in my backyard earlier today.”

Pierre exhaled deeply and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Where’s your sister?”

Anatole shrugged. “She said she was staying at the library to study. I dunno when she’s getting
back.”

“And does she know about this?”

He smiled blithely. “What she doesn’t know won’t kill her.”

“Besides,” Fedya cut in, “you know how stressed she gets about midterms. We thought we’d give her a break. Hence why you’re being included in this caper, Petrushka.”

The nickname rubbed him the wrong way, but Pierre opted to not mention it. “Anatole, I really should let Hélène know about this.”

“Chill, Bezukhov. You wouldn’t want to ruin the fun, would you?” Fedya said with a simpering grin. “Hélène has enough on her plate as is. Do you really want to be the reason she has another meltdown?”

Pierre glared at him. “Don’t be an ass, Fyodor.”

“We’re doing this either way. Make of that what you will.”

Pierre cursed under his breath. “Fine, whatever.”

Fedya clapped him on the back. “Good man.”

“I just…have so many questions,” Pierre sighed. “Like, why Ms. Dmitrievna specifically?”

Anatole’s shoulders drooped and he rolled his eyes. “It’s our first week back at school and she’s already overloading us with homework. And we have a quiz on Wednesday! A quiz!”

“Oh no, that’s not the end of it,” Anatole said obstinately. “You know, she took twenty points off the summer homework all because I forgot to write my name on it. And then there was that…that thing with Fedya and my sister.” He snapped his fingers, clearly digging through his mind for something. “Right, Fedya? What was it, again?”

Fedya blushed a violent shade of red. “You must be misremembering,” he said, pointedly avoiding Pierre’s eye contact.

A light went off in Anatole’s eyes. “Oh!” he said, rapidly backpedalling. “Never mind, you’re right, I think I am remembering wrong.”

“No,” Pierre said, very calmly and slowly, “do tell, Fedya.”

“Hélène and I have been friends for a while. We got into trouble together a lot back in high school.”

Pierre narrowed his eyes, but elected not to press the matter any further. “And have either of you geniuses considered that you might get caught?”

Anatole snorted, as if Pierre had just suggested that the moon was made of cheese. “Caught?” he drawled. “Nobody’s gonna be there to catch us.”

Pierre raised an eyebrow. “Security cameras?”

“You act as if that place can afford cameras,” said Fedya.
“How are you two even getting in? Don’t they lock the doors at night?”

Anatole shrugged. “They never lock the windows.”

Pierre held his head in his hands. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

It was already dark by the time they pulled into the school driveway. Not a soul in sight. Pierre’s stomach hung heavy with dread. From the trunk, he could hear the irate raccoon hissing and snarling.

“Stop here,” Fedya said, “in front of the gym.”

Anatole turned to face Pierre, deadly serious. “Keep the engine running. We’ll be back in five.”

“Why don’t we just rethink this?” Pierre asked desperately. “I’ll take you guys to a movie or something instead. How does that sound?”

“Nah, I think we’re good,” Fedya said coolly. He popped the trunk open and grabbed the cage. “See you on the other side, old man.”

Pierre stared numbly as they shut the doors and took off towards the school. He was being weak-willed again, and he knew it. What was it that Hélène used to call him? A rug. He was a rug, and he was letting Anatole and Fedya walk all over him with their dirty shoes and underhanded persuasion.

He could always drive off, he reasoned. That option was still there. Drive off, and let Hélène kill him for leaving her baby brother and best friend stranded miles away from home in the middle of the night. Or, alternatively, stay put and let Hélène kill him for letting her baby brother and best friend hurt themselves or get in trouble carrying out their stupid mission. Neither option was looking particularly appealing, and he wondered, for what felt like the millionth time that night, why he was so awful as saying no to people.

“I’m such a loser,” he moaned, pressing his forehead to the steering wheel.

And suddenly, there they were again, sprinting down the driveway as fast as their legs could carry them, Fedya holding the empty cage aloft. Anatole’s white-blond hair shone like a beacon under the headlights.

“Drive! Fucking drive!” Fedya shouted as they dove into the car. Pierre floored it on instinct, wincing when he heard the tires squeal against the pavement.

They took off down Route B50 like a bullet fired from a gun. Anatole tossed his head back and laughed wildly. “That was sick, man!”

Fedya chuckled, grasping Anatole’s shoulders. “This kid really held his own. You shoulda seen him, old man. In and out like lightning! Dmitrievna’s not gonna have a clue what hit her.”

There was a small cut on Anatole’s cheek, still fresh and bleeding. Pierre blinked. How had he not noticed it before? “Anatole, what happened to your face?”

Anatole’s hand drifted to his cheek. “Oh, this? This is nothing. The raccoon got a little scratchy once we dumped him on Marya’s desk, that’s all.”
Pierre’s heart thundered in his ears. “I’m gonna pull over,” he muttered. “And then I think I’m gonna be sick.”

“Hey,” Anatole said warningly, “no yacking in my dad’s car. Or he’ll kill me. And I do mean that literally. Besides,” he added, “we’re almost back at my place.”

Pierre nodded woozily, and it was only by the grace of God or whatever divine powers that may have been that he made it back to the Kuragin’s driveway without emptying the contents of his stomach all over the dashboard. He slumped back in his seat, letting out a deep breath that he hadn’t even known he’d been holding. “We’re here,” he croaked.

Anatole leaned over and tapped Pierre on the shoulder. “Hey, can I borrow twenty bucks?”

Wordlessly, Pierre reached into his wallet and passed Anatole a rolled-up wad of bills. Anatole grinned. “You’re the best,” he said, clapping Pierre on the back. “See you ‘round sometime!”

Pierre watched as Anatole clambered out of the car and headed into the house. Dolokhov made a move to follow him when Pierre locked the doors.

“Fyodor,” Pierre said, fighting to keep his tone pleasant, “what do you say we have a little chat, just the two of us?”

Fedya raised an eyebrow and straightened his back. “Problem, Pyotr?”

“What happened tonight,” Pierre said, attempting to maintain his bluster under Fedya’s stare, “it can’t happen again.”

“Can I ask why?”

“This is unsafe, Dolokhov. And quite possibly illegal too. Anatole shouldn’t be part of your schemes, and I know Hélène would agree. What would you have told her if that raccoon had taken his eye out?”

“You don’t know anything about them, Bezukhov,” Fedya snarled, “so please stop acting like you know what’s in their best interests. It’s incredibly tiresome.”

“I’m just trying to look out for Anatole—”

“No, you aren’t,” Fedya said calmly. “You’re trying to convince Hélène that dating you is worth her time, and you’re using Anatole to do it.”

Pierre’s mind went blank as an overexposed photograph and his hands tightened around the steering wheel. “That’s ridiculous,” he spluttered.

Fedya rolled his eyes. “If you’re going to bleed insecurity every time you hang out with her, the least you could do is try to hide it.”

“I’m not insecure about my relationship with Hélène,” said Pierre. He wasn’t sure who he was trying harder to convince.

“You should be,” Fedya said, casual cruelty dripping off each word. “She’s smart and fun and sexy as hell. She’s miles out of your league, my friend.”

“Is there a point to any of this?”

Fedya shrugged. “If you’re trying to impress her, there are better ways to go about it. Anatole is
seventeen. He’s not a little kid, and he doesn’t need you or me or Hélène babying him.”

“No,” Pierre said firmly. “What he needs is for you to stop enabling him.”

Fedya barked out a harsh-sounding laugh. “Remind me, Pierre,” he said. “You’ve known Anatole for how long, now? Three days?”

“It’s not about how long I’ve known him. It’s about behaving like an adult.”

“I’ve known Anatole and Hélène for six years,” Fedya continued, disregarding him. “So why don’t you keep telling me how you know more about his needs than I do?”

“I care about him, Fyodor—”

“And I don’t?” Fedya snapped. He shook his head, leaning back in the seat. “God, you’re a fool. I swear I’ll never understand what Hélène sees in you.”

“You don’t have to,” Pierre growled.

“Lucky for you.” Fedya waited for Pierre to respond, shaking his head in disgust when he didn’t say anything. “I’ll see you around, old man,” he muttered, sliding out of the car.

_I should hope not_, Pierre thought as Fedya slammed the door. He sat back in his seat, his heart still wildly hammering against the inside of his ribcage. Was this the onset of a panic attack? No, he decided, he just had to relax. Take a few deep breaths. Go to his happy place. Remove any and all distractions or interruptions that might—

_BZZZ BZZZ. BZZZ BZZZ._

Pierre’s face fell flat and he reached for his phone, unlocking the screen.

2 missed calls from **Lena**

**Lena:** You didn’t pick up.

**Lena:** Everything alright? How’s it going?

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** please tell me you don’t have any more brothers that you haven’t told me about

**Lena:** ???

**Lena:** lmao

**Lena:** I promise, there are no more secret little brothers

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** oh thank god

**Lena:** Is everything okay?

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** it’s been a long day let’s just leave it at that

**Lena:** how’s Anatole? Is he home safe?

**Pierre Bae-zukhov:** of course
Lena: Good

Anatole Kuragin: you are the BOMB, dude

Barnacle #3: please dont thank me
In Which Natasha Is An Adorable Brat

Chapter Summary

Marya is angry and Anatole is still hot.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the comments and kudos! They mean so much to both of us, and we're so glad to know you guys are enjoying this! Any feedback is both welcome and appreciated :)

It wasn’t unusual for an assembly to be called on a Monday morning, as several students had assured Sonya, but never this early in the year, and never with Ms. Dmitrievna in this foul a mood. Sonya had known Marya since she was little, and her temper hadn’t grown any milder since then, back before the Rostovs had moved out to Moscow and Marya had driven out to Seattle to visit every Christmas. To this day, Sonya still had no idea how her aunt and uncle had first met Marya, nor was she aware if there was any blood relationship between them, but it didn’t matter all that much, not when Marya fit into the family like a piece in a well-ordered jigsaw puzzle. Sonya knew that Marya was warm and kind for the most part, but she also had the capacity to be terrifying. The thought of seeing her every day, much less the prospect of having her as the principal of her new high school, hadn’t done wonders for Sonya’s anxiety prior to the move.

“I wonder what’s going on,” Natasha whispered as they filed into the auditorium.

Sonya brushed her down. “I’m sure it’s nothing.”

It was decidedly anything but nothing. Marya was clearly not feeling warm and kind this morning, and with her auburn hair was pulled back into a bun so tight that it lifted the skin of her forehead, her face looked like that of a marble statue. A terrifying marble statue. “Somebody,” she began in that dangerously soft voice of hers that usually preceded screaming and shouting, “took it upon themselves last night to lock a raccoon in my office.”

Natasha let out a tiny, nervous giggle which, to Sonya’s chagrin, echoed through the assembly hall. Marya shot her a glare for a heart-stopping second before continuing. “I don’t know who the party responsible is as of now,” Marya continued. “But rest assured that they will be found and punished severely.” She glanced out across the rows of students, narrowing her eyes. “If anyone has any information, they are to report to my office immediately to disclose it.”

When no one stepping forwards she crossed her arms, shooting them all one last death glare. “Get to class,” she said with finality, and stormed off the stage.

Natasha leaned over to where Sonya was sitting. “Second week of school,” she said, failing to hide her grin, “and there’s already so much fun going on.”
“Maybe it’s fun for you, but you have to keep more quiet during assemblies,” Sonya said. “Just because she’s your godmother doesn’t mean she’s above giving you a detention.”

“Oh Sonya, stop worrying. It’s Marya. You know that she’s all bluster.”

“Yeah, well, I can say from personal experience that there’a a real bite behind that bluster,” Sonya said with a grimace.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “If you so so, Sonyushka. Look, I’ve gotta get to class, so I’ll see you later.” She began to head off into the hallway, but Sonya caught her by the sleeve.

“Nat,” she said, “will you sit with me at lunch?”

“Sonya.”

“Please.”

But Natasha had never been very good at resisting Sonya’s puppy-dog pout, and not a second later her shoulders fell and she hung her head with a fond sigh. “Oh, alright.”

It took maybe seconds for Sonya to zero in on that familiar mousy head in the lunchroom. “Hey, Mary!” she said, pulling up the chair across the table. “Where were you this morning?”

“Oh, hi, Sonya. I slept in and missed the bus so I had to walk instead. I got here a little late.”

“Jesus, that must be one hell of a trek.”

Mary shrugged. “I’m used to it. It’s a good workout, at least.” Sonya bit down a chuckle at that, and Mary leaned in, grinning. “I sleep in a lot. You should see how ripped my calves are.”

“I’m sure I will sometime,” Sonya giggled, a flush rising to her cheeks. Was Mary actually flirting with her? And was she actually trying to flirt back? She tilted her head down, trying to emulate that demure, sidelong look that Natasha had practically perfected back when they were in middle school. “You know, I missed you on Saturday.” When Mary blinked in confusion, she added, “For our lunch date.”

“Oh. That.” Mary grimaced. “God, Sonya, I’m so sorry. I don’t normally bail on people, I swear, but my dad had an… episode and he really needed me at home.”

“Hey, no worries. Want to try again this Saturday?”

Mary smiled. “I’d really love that.”

“Great,” Sonya smiled. “Any places in mind?”

“There’s a really nice vegan café downtown called Matreshka’s. My brother and I used to go there all the time. They do this amazing soy burger.” Sonya furrowed her brow, and Mary continued, “I know you might not be vegan but you’d never know the difference, I promise. Andrei’s a hardcore carnivore and even he—”

Sonya nearly choked on her sandwich. “Andrei?!”

“Oh my God, Sonya, are you alright? Do you need me to slap you on the back?”
“No, I’m fine,” she said, coughing the remains of her sandwich into a napkin. “It’s just that Natasha’s boyfriend is also an Andrei who’s away at college. In Paris, specifically.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “What’s his last name? Bol—?”

“Bolkonsky.”

She sat back in her chair, looking as if the world had just tipped upside-down. “No way. This is too much of a coincidence.” And then: “Andrei never told me he had a girlfriend!”

“Small world,” Sonya said.

Mary pressed her hands to her forehead. “And I was so mean to her that day on the bus. Oh my God, what have I done, Sonya?”

“You’ve already apologized for that. Don’t let it ruffle your feathers. I’m sure Natasha is completely over it by now.” Mary shot her a skeptical look. “Okay, maybe not, but she’s really a decent person. I’m sure she won’t hold it against you.”

“If you say so.”

Sonya’s brain went into autopilot as she tried to steer the conversation in another direction. “So, Matreshka’s?”

Mary allowed herself a smile. “Sounds good. Can I get your number? Just in case something else pops up.”

“Yeah, sure. I actually meant to ask you for yours last week.”

“So,” Mary said, shifting in her seat as Sonya punched her number into her contacts, “what else did I miss this morning?”

“Marya D called an assembly first period. Apparently, some genius broke in and locked a raccoon in her office last night.”

Mary’s eyes widened. “How did they get in?”

“Through the gym windows.”

Mary tutted disapprovingly. “Every year I file a complaint with the administration and tell them to get a proper security system, and do they listen to me? Not a bit.”

“She was pissed.”

“You don’t say.”

“I wonder who did it,” she whispered. “I wonder who the Coon Caperer is.”

Mary snorted. “That’s what they’re calling it now?”

“Do you have any ideas?”

Mary quirked an eyebrow. “Oh, I have some ideas, alright.”

“Care to elaborate?”
“Snitches get stitches, Sonya,” she said in a sing-song voice. “And besides, I’m no tattle-tale.”

Sonya snorted. “Are you serious?” Mary gave her a cryptic smile and Sonya theatrically groaned. “Mary, that’s so lame. You can’t just dangle it in front of my face and then not tell me.”

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to kill you.”

“You’re a jerk,” Sonya grumbled.

Mary grinned angelically, taking her phone back from Sonya. “Where’s Natasha? I thought you said she was going to sit with us for lunch today.”

Sonya shrugged. “I haven’t seen her since Calculus.”

It was at that precise moment that Natasha walked in, a sour expression plastered to her face. She slammed her lunch tray to the table next to Sonya, who merely raised an eyebrow.

“Oh, hello,” said Mary.

“Why the long face?” Sonya said. “You look like somebody just insulted Sondheim.”

Natasha flexed her fingers, trying to calm herself. “I’ve just been told that homecoming is Friday. No, not three weeks-in-the-future-Friday, Friday-Friday. As in, at the end of this week.”

Mary raised her eyebrows. “And?”

“How am I supposed to pick out a dress by then? Homecoming is meant to be at the end of September, not the beginning.”

“That’s Moscow tradition for you,” said Mary.

Natasha scowled. “Just another backwards thing about this backwards place”

“You have plenty of nice dresses,” Sonya said. “Who says you need to go out and buy a new one?”

Natasha plopped herself down on the seat, muttering something under her breath about ‘this stupid, hick town’. Sonya rolled her eyes affectionately. “You don’t have to go, if it upsets you that much.”

“I do want to go, though. I just wasn’t expecting it to be so soon.”

“Homecoming’s not a really formal thing here,” Mary added. “A lot of the seniors don’t even go. It’s prom that’s the big one here.”

Natasha deflated slightly at that. Sonya looked for an opening to change the subject quickly, before they upset her even more. “Are you going, Mary?”

Mary looked up in surprise. “Oh, me? No, I never go. I’m not really a party sort of person.”

Natasha gasped, bolting upright in her seat with a renewed sense of vigor. “Why not?” she said. “You’re a senior, aren’t you? How can you not go when it’s your last year here? You deserve to have some fun and make some memories before college.”

“I don’t have anything nice enough to wear to a dance.”

“We’re probably about the same size, give or take. Well, I mean, you look a little taller than me but I’m sure we could find something that would fit you. And—” she leaned in, grinning ear-to-
ear, “—I could even do your makeup!”

Mary angled herself back in her seat, drawing her shoulders up high. “That’s very kind of you, Natasha, but I’m afraid I’ll have to decline your offer.”

Natasha shrank back into her seat with a pout.

“Mary and I have made a rather interesting discovery,” Sonya interjected, despite the cutthroat gestures Mary was currently sending in her direction.

Natasha tilted her head. “And what might that be?”

“Remember how Andrei told you to look out for his sister?”

“Yes of course.”

“Well…” Sonya jerked her head in Mary’s direction.

Natasha’s eyes widened comically. “No way,” she breathed. “No, you’ve got to be kidding me.” She leaned forwards. “Are you serious? I really had no idea; he never mentioned—”

“I should probably go now,” Mary said quietly, very red in the face.

“Mary what’s wrong?”

Natasha reached out towards her as she stood up from the table and began to gather her things. “Was it something I said? No, Mary, wait, please—”

“I’m already late to Japanese club anyway. I’ll see you guys around.” And without another word, she turned and walked out into the hallway.

“Did I do something to offend her?” Natasha asked. “I’m trying to be nice but I think I’ve only made her hate me more than she already does.”

“Don’t be silly. Mary doesn’t hate you.”

“It sure looked like it. Did you see how fast she left once I got here?”

“She’s just shy. Give her a few days and she’ll warm up to you.”

Natasha pressed her forehead to the table. “Everything’s such a mess.” And then: “Shit. I called her a bitch over text to Andrei.”

“You what?!”

“I was in a bad mood, okay? And I didn’t even mention her name.”

“Natasha.”

“It’s just the principle of it that bothers me,” she said.

“You’ve been dating him since sophomore year and you’re telling me that not once did he ever mention that he had a sister?”

“He mentioned a sister, alright? Not a specific name.” At Sonya’s deadpan stare, Natasha threw up her hands in mock-surrender. “It didn’t really come up in conversation much. He doesn’t like
talking about his family. Can’t say I blame him much, seeing as—"

“Natasha!”

“I’m sorry,” she whined. “It’s been a rough day.”

“You’ve been saying that every day since Andrei left.”

“Because it’s true.”

Sonya leaned in with a half-smile. “I think I know something that’ll cheer you up.”

“And what is that?”

“Apparently, since first period, five people have already stepped forward claiming to be the Coon Caperer.”

Natasha giggled, but she didn’t look up from her lunch tray. “Is that what they’re calling it now?”

“That’s just what Mary said!”

“Can you believe she’s not coming?”

“Where?”

“To the dance.”

“Oh, right. The dance.”

“Well, I guess I have to switch to Plan B now.”

“Plan B?”

“For the dance!”

“For homecoming? What about it?”

Natasha grinned impishly. “Mary may not be going, but you can still be my makeup guinea pig. Isn’t that right, Sonyushka?”

---

Sonya wanted to curl into a ball and die.

Parties were hard enough with her being an incorrigible introvert at the best of times, but now, with the music cranked up full volume and the bass booming so loudly she could feel it rattling in her bones, she was overcome with the urge to run to the nearest bathroom stall and lock herself inside until it was over. But Nat had pleaded her, begged her to go, dragged her through an entire closet of dresses and done her makeup and hair and looked at Sonya’s reflection in the mirror like it was the most amazing thing she had ever made in her entire life.

So that was how Sonya wound up huddled in the corner of the gym, wearing ballet flats that she hadn’t worn since freshman year (Natasha had insisted on heels but she had at least fought back in that respect) and a dress that was the tiniest bit too tight in the bust and just a little too loose around the waist. She did feel pretty, she had to admit, but surely not as much as Natasha, who seemed to
radiate light in her little white dress and her little white kitten heels. Sonya wasn’t normally a jealous person, but she couldn’t help but feel the slightest twinge of envy at her effortless confidence and beauty. Natasha made everything look far too easy, but then again, hadn’t she always?

“Is there anything to drink here?” Sonya asked, but her voice was drowned out by the music.

Natasha blinked. “What did you say?”

“Are they serving any drinks here?” she shouted.

“There’s a refreshments table on the other side of the gym. They have punch.” Natasha held up her red solo cup for example and downed it in one gulp. “It’s pretty good!” she said. “You wanna try some?”

“Do they have anything not-fruity? Like, I dunno, water?”

Natasha shrugged. “There’s always the fountain.”

“Alright, I’ll be a minute,” she said, before slipping out through one of the side doors. Even in the hallway she could still hear the booming bassline and the incessant ringing in her ears.

Sonya stumbled down the hallway as her shoes threatened to slip off her feet. There was a reason, as she now remembered, that she always wore sneakers, and she was beginning to seriously regret taking Natasha’s fashion advice. Still, somehow, she managed to straggle over to the water fountain without falling flat on her face. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand after she finished drinking, not caring that she smudged her lipstick across her chin, when her phone buzzed in her wristlet.

Mary Bolkonskaya: Having fun? :)

Sonya Rostova: ehh its alright i guess

Sonya Rostova: itd be better if u were here

Mary Bolkonskaya: I’m there in spirit. <3 <3 <3

Sonya Rostova: yeah but its not the same

Read at 9:04

Sonya Rostova: wow leaving me on read really???

Sonya Rostova: some friend u are

Mary Bolkonskaya: Sorry, I was in the shower.

Sonya Rostova: smh excuses excuses

Mary Bolkonskaya: Someone’s in a grouchy mood. :(  

Sonya Rostova: this music is so goddamn loud i think im gonna have an anusyrm

Sonya Rostova: *aneuryism
Mary Bolkonskaya: Wow, A+ typing skills. I’m very impressed; this is a new achievement in misspelling.

Sonya Rostova: shut the duck up

Sonya Rostova: duck

Sonya Rostova: duck

Sonya Rostova: fcuk

Sonya Rostova: ugh you know what i mean

Sonya Rostova: we peasants cant all type fancy and proper like you

Sonya Rostova: who the fuck uses a semicolon over text, honestly

Mary Bolkonskaya is typing…

“Are you okay, Sonyushka?” came Natasha’s voice from the end of the hallway. Sonya’s head snapped up from the screen.

“Oh, yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

“You were gone a long time and I just got a little nervous. Everything alright?”

Sonya shrugged. “Yeah.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “You look really pissed. Was it something I said?”

Even though her phone kept buzzing with more messages from Mary, Sonya tucked it away into her clutch. “No,” she said, smiling gamely, “you’re good, don’t worry.”

Natasha didn’t seem totally convinced, but she dropped it. “Come on,” she said with a smile full of mischief. “The dance is waiting and I put in a request for Come On Eileen!”

“You’re joking.”

“Hey, it’s an improvement over the Cha-Cha Slide.”

The music was still just as loud back in the gym, but the buzzing in Sonya’s ears had faded to a more tolerable noise level. Natasha turned to look out over the crowd. “Can you believe we’re graduating?” she sighed. “It’s so weird to think that we’ll be leaving soon when we’ve only just arrived.”

Sonya bumped her shoulder playfully. “Nervous?”

Natasha beamed. “I thought I would be, but I’m not,” she said, fiddling with her locket. “Once I submit my application to U of W, the rest of this year is just gonna be fun.”

“You’re…not gonna apply anywhere else?”
“Why would I?” Natasha asked. “I want to be with Andrei once he gets back from Paris. Long distance sucks.”

Sonya sighed. Her cousin’s relationship with Andrei Bolkonsky was good and nice and she was happy for both of them, but Natasha lacked perspective at the best of times. Giving her a boy to orbit around didn’t help, even if Andrei was pretty grounded and mature. Telling Natasha this wouldn’t do anything either, so Sonya just smiled half-heartedly and said, “Fix your dress. I can see the edge of your bra.”

Natasha rolled her eyes dramatically, yanking up her neckline. “Maybe that was my plan. It’s a bra. It was expensive. Let people see it; God knows I paid enough for it.”

Sonya shook her head indulgently and turned her phone back on to check if she had any new messages from Mary. She considered unlocking her phone and writing out a reply, but Natasha was already leaning over her shoulder, trying to see her texts.

“Who are you texting?”

Sonya switched the screen off immediately. “Nobody.”

“You’ve been texting this ‘nobody’ a lot.”

“Leave it alone, Natasha.”

“Ooh, is it a boy?” she squealed.

Sonya kept her face blank, knowing better than to give Natasha anything she could work with. “It’s none of your business.”

Natasha shrugged. “Alright, alright, I won’t pry—” Sonya snorted at that, “—but if you ever want any advice—”

“Natasha, please,” Sonya said firmly.

“Sonya,” Natasha whined. “Let me help!”

Sonya smiled fondly at her, shaking her head. “You’re being ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous? This is your love we’re talking about! It’s anything but ridiculous.”

“Love?” Sonya said, cocking an eyebrow. “I’m too busy with college applications to think about love.”

“Oh, don’t be such a pessimist.”

“A realist, you mean.”

“Yes!” Natasha cried, clapping her hands together. “That’s your problem. You’re too practical.”

Sonya snorted. “Only you would consider that a problem, Natasha.”

“Life’s more fun if you don’t take it too seriously,” Natasha said, nodding sagely.

“Have you told your boyfriend that?”

Natasha giggled. “It’s a work in progr—”
She was cut off as the gym doors were flung open with a resounding *bang* that made Sonya and Natasha both jump. A tall blond boy strolled in casually, hands in his pockets, seemingly without a flicker of self-consciousness about his lateness, or the fact that everyone’s eyes were now on him. Under the intense glare of the gym lights, he seemed to radiate electricity. Natasha seized Sonya’s hand and pointed towards him.

“Oh my God,” she whispered, her cheeks flushed a high, bright pink. “Sonya, he’s *cute*!”

He *was* aesthetically pleasing, she supposed, with his fluffy blond hair and high cheekbones and sharp features, the kind that women in movies tended to swoon over. But Sonya was not a woman in a movie, nor did she have any fondness for arrogant-looking pretty-boys who only bothered to show up an hour into their own homecoming dance. Besides, she knew her cousin well enough to know that encouraging Natasha’s infatuations was a sure-fire disaster waiting to happen. “He’s not Andrei,” she reminded Natasha.

“Relax,” Natasha said defensively. “I’m allowed to look, aren’t I?”

“He’s also late,” Sonya said testily, and Natasha swatted her shoulder.

“Don’t be mean. Maybe he got stuck in traffic.”

Sonya smirked—“Maybe he got stuck in all that hair gel.”—and Natasha would have likely smacked her again had Marya not walked by at that precise moment, a red solo cup in hand.

“Enjoying yourselves, girls?” she said.

“Yes,” Sonya said gloomily.

“We sure are,” Natasha said, unable to tear her eyes from the boy’s lean figure. Sonya snapped her fingers in front of Natasha’s face.

Marya raised an eyebrow as she caught sight of the boy. “Right, well, have fun. And be responsible.” This addendum was emphasized with a narrowing of the eyes and a stern glare that could only be described as matronly.

“Yeah, Natasha,” Sonya mimicked once Marya was out of earshot. “*Be responsible.*”

“When am I *ever* anything less?” Natasha giggled, sipping her drink.

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Sonya waited for Natasha’s fake-indignation, but she was already back to staring at the boy.

“Do we have any classes with him?”

Sonya shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“I feel like I would have remembered him,” Natasha mused with a dreamy sigh, “if I’d seen him before.”

“Natasha?”

Natasha blinked. “Sorry?”

“You’re staring. It’s rude. He’s not a piece of meat.”

Natasha latched onto Sonya’s arm. “But he’s *looking* at me, Sonya.”
“Is he?” Sonya craned her neck for a better view, but Natasha quickly moved to block her line of sight.

“Don’t look now!” she hissed. “He’ll see.” And then, a little quieter, with a hint of impish amusement: “They’re all talking about me.”

“Who’s ‘they’?”

“I don’t know! The people hanging out with him!”

“He’s in line for the refreshments, Nat, he’s not hanging out with anyone.”

“I want to go up to him,” Natasha whispered.

“You’re nuts.”

“Maybe just a little!” she laughed. And then: “You’re not going to say anything?”

Sonya shrugged. “I’m not your mother. I’m not going to tell you where or where not to go. I will tell you that I think it’s a bad idea to go chasing down that rabbit hole when you already have a boyfriend.”

“Relax, I’m not gonna try make out with him or anything. And I’m allowed to talk to boys, aren’t I? Andrei talks to girls all the time, I’m sure, and it doesn’t mean a thing.”

“Fine, then. Go up and talk to him if you want.” Sonya narrowed her eyes. “Unless you want me to stop you, that is.”

Her phone buzzed again.

2 missed messages from Mary Bolkonskaya

Mary Bolkonskaya: I just enjoy typing like this, okay?

Mary Bolkonskaya: Also, you do know if you don’t like the music you can always put in a request with the DJ, right?

“When did you put in that request for Come On Eileen? Shouldn’t they be playing it by now?”

When Natasha didn’t respond, Sonya looked up and whipped her head around, but she had disappeared from sight.

“Natasha?”

She caught sight of her cousin in the corner of her eye, trying to worm her way into the refreshments line. Right by the tall blonde boy. She unlocked phone and began to type furiously.

Sonya Rostova: MARY

Mary Bolkonskaya: Ah, look who it is, back from the dead.

Mary Bolkonskaya: I thought you’d left me forever.

Mary Bolkonskaya: How the turns have tabled.

Sonya Rostova: ???
Sonya Rostova: mixing up ur metaphors a little there?

Mary Bolkonskaya: It’s an Office reference, you fake fan.

Sonya Rostova: pshhhh parks and rec is waaaay better

Sonya Rostova: ill fight u on this

Sonya Rostova: OK ANYWAYS

Sonya Rostova: i have a question for u

Mary Bolkonskaya: Yes?

Sonya Rostova: if i describe someone can u tell me who they are

Mary Bolkonskaya: ….okay.

Mary Bolkonskaya: I can try. No guarantees.

Sonya Rostova: okay think super tall

Sonya Rostova: very blonde

Sonya Rostova: like weird blonde

Sonya Rostova: we’re talking draco malfoy

Mary Bolkonskaya: Oh, good grief.

Sonya Rostova: you know him???

Mary Bolkonskaya: Yeah, his name is Anatole Kuragin.

Mary Bolkonskaya: He was my “boyfriend” in the fourth grade.

Mary Bolkonskaya: I cringe just thinking about it.

Mary Bolkonskaya: What about him?

Sonya Rostova: have a wild guess who JUST showed up

Mary Bolkonskaya: I swear, in the ten years I’ve known him I don’t think he’s been on time to a single event.

Mary Bolkonskaya: “Fashionably late” is what he calls it.

Sonya Rostova: WTF

Sonya Rostova: SJFBIUEGBKJAABC

Sonya Rostova: ASDFHJLJSBDKAJ

Mary Bolkonskaya: Uh-oh. Keyboard mash; that can’t be a good sign.
Natasha barely registered that she was drifting closer and closer to the beautiful, mysterious stranger. She had, despite Sonya’s rolled eyes, splashed a liberal amount of vodka into her punch, and she was more than a little tipsy already.

“It’s Natasha, right?” he asked politely.

Natasha squirmed. Hearing her nickname in his voice made her feel a warm glow that she wasn’t totally sure she should be encouraging. “Natalie, please. I’m sorry,” she said, blushing, “I don’t think we’ve met before?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “Anatole. Anatole Kuragin.”

“Anatole,” she repeated quietly, unsure what else to say. Screw what Sonya had said, he was stunning. Nobody had the right, she thought distantly, to be as dazzling as he was.

“How do you like the party?” Anatole asked, apparently picking up on her discomfort. “Would I be wrong in assuming that you’re new here?”

“Yeah,” she muttered. “We just moved here from Seattle.”

“That explains it,” Anatole said with a gentle smile.

“Explains what?”

“I’d have remembered you if I’d seen you before,” he said warmly.

Natasha smiled despite herself. “Likewise,” she said.

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**Mary Bolkonskaya:** What’s the issue if he’s talking to Natasha?

**Sonya Rostova:** mary u dont understand it looks like theyre FLIRTING

**Mary Bolkonskaya:** Anatole will literally flirt with anything that has a pulse. I wouldn’t be too concerned.

**Sonya Rostova:** wtf do i do???

**Sonya Rostova:** she cant flirt with someone else when she already has andrei

**Sonya Rostova:** im sorry i know he’s your friend and all but NO ME GUSTA

**Mary Bolkonskaya:** I’m sure it’s perfectly innocent.

**Mary Bolkonskaya:** Relax, before you burst a blood vessel.
Anatole was flirting with her, Natasha realized with a pang of mixed shock and horror, but she felt none of the nerves or tension that had marked her and Andrei’s conversations before they became a couple. He was remarkably easy to talk to, sweet and attentive. His tone was casual and blandly pleasant, but Natasha could hear the naked want in his voice as well. She pictured him coming up behind her and grinding against her, leaving a stark bruise on her neck. She quickly blinked those thoughts and the excited thrill of them away. Natasha felt herself swaying giddily, blushing when Anatole placed a hand on her waist to steady her.

“Are you alright?” he said. “You’re super wobbly.”

“Oh, it’s just these shoes.” He raised an eyebrow. “I’ve never been comfortable in heels,” she explained. She didn’t bother to mention the liquor she had poured into her drink.

He smiled again, all dazzlingly white teeth, and Natasha went weak at the knees. “You could take them off, you know. My sister’s just like that—she can’t wear heels to save her life.”

She laughed a little too loud at that, but Anatole didn’t seem to mind. If anything, he seemed even more enchanted with her.

“Where’s your date?”

Anatole shrugged. “I’m going alone this year. Almost all of my friends graduated already. And you?”

How sad it is, Natasha thought, to be dateless at your senior homecoming. “I haven’t exactly had time to make enough friends to ask someone to be my date,” she admitted. “It’s a little weird how early you guys have homecoming here.”

“One of those old Moscow traditions, I guess,” he said with a shrug. “It’s an old, weird town with old, weird customs.”

“Yeah, I gathered as much.”

“I don’t particularly care for it,” he continued, “and the people can get pretty boring, but you do meet the odd interesting person occasionally. Like yourself, for instance.”

Natasha’s face flushed hotly. “That’s very sweet of you, but we hardly know each other.”

“We could get to know each other better, if you’d like,” he offered. “You have no idea how refreshing it is to see a fresh face around here.”

“Well, you know,” she said, “seeing as neither of us brought a date, we could always be each other’s honorary dates. As friends, of course.”

Anatole laughed. “I’m lucky then,” he said softly, “to have such a beautiful date.”

“Deal?” Natasha held out her hand and he shook it firmly. His hand was warm and soft, and she felt her heart flutter inexplicably. He was so close now she could have counted his individual eyelashes. Under the soft lights, his hair glinted silver, and Natasha was overcome with the inexplicable urge to run her fingers through it.

Not Andrei, she reminded herself.

She took a deep breath, steeling her nerves. “Hey, before I forget, could I maybe get your number? I’m still trying to get everyone’s—”
“Hi, guys!” Sonya squeaked as she appeared out of nowhere, her voice about an octave higher than usual. She sidled her way in between Natasha and Anatole, bumping his hip with her elbow in a way that was just a little too forceful to be accidental. “How are things going?”

Anatole raised an eyebrow and shot Natasha a curious look.

“Good? Everything’s good? Nice, that’s awesome. I’m Sonya, by the way,” she said, gesturing broadly to Anatole. “And you must be?”

“Anatole Kuragin. Nice to meet you.”

“We were just talking,” Natasha said, shooting Sonya a meaningful look. “About school and stuff.”

“That’s nice,” she said curtly. “By the way, your mom just texted me to tell you that Marya’s driving us home tonight.”

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “Marya? As in ‘Marya Dmitrievna’?”

Natasha nodded. “Yeah. She’s my godmother, actually.”

Perhaps it was her imagination or just a trick of the light, Anatole seemed to pale slightly at that. “Oh,” he said, very softly. “I-I had no idea!”

“I still can’t get over that thing the other week. My God.” Natasha gestured dramatically in imitation of Marya, contorting her face into that signature scowl. “She looked so mad in the assembly I couldn’t stop myself from laughing. Sonya looked like she was ready to strangle me and then Marya actually heard me giggling and the look on her face had me scared shitless.”

Anatole laughed a little, and Natasha lightly slapped his shoulder. “Marya’s hilarious when she’s angry,” she continued, “just so long as it’s not you she’s angry at.”

“I still can’t believe they haven’t found the Coon Caperer,” said Sonya.

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “That’s what they’re calling it now?”

Sonya rolled her eyes. “Why is that everyone’s first question?”

“I think it’s funny,” Natasha giggled. “Marya hates animals, especially ‘vermin’.”

“Funny you should bring that up.” Anatole began, when suddenly Maneater began blaring out of his phone. He grimaced and Natasha covered her mouth as she giggled. “Sorry. It’s my sister calling.” Anatole turned off to the side, but Natasha could still hear him as he spoke. “What do you mean, you’re outside? You have got to be shitting me. No, Lelya, it was supposed to end at ten.”

Anatole pulled a face. “I’m sorry! I forgot, okay? Look, I know what I said, but the permission slip—which you signed, might I add—said ten, so I really can’t be held accountable for—fine, fine, I’m coming!” He hung up with a grimace, turning back to Natasha and Sonya. “I hate to cut this short, but my sister will bite my head off if I keep her waiting any longer. I’ll see you around sometime?” Natasha nodded dreamily and Anatole gave her a dazzling smile. “It was really nice meeting you.”

“You too,” she said with a smile, and she didn’t take her eyes off of him until he had disappeared through the gym doors, the same way he came in.

“What the hell was that?” Sonya said.

Natasha blinked, breathless and half-dazed. “I’m not sure, Sonyushka. I’m really not sure.”
“Did you girls have fun?” Mrs. Rostova asked when they got home.

“Yeahmomthanksihadagoodtime,” Natasha blurted, before taking off down the hallway for her room. Mrs. Rostova blinked in confusion and Sonya shrugged.

“Everything alright, Sonya?” she said.

“I’m just tired, that’s all. It’s been a long night. Where’s Uncle Ilya?”

“Still at work. He’ll be home in the morning.” Mrs. Rostova gave Sonya a sidelong glance, gesturing towards Natasha’s retreating figure. “I hate to ask, but do you mind…?”

“Checking in with Nat? I’m on it,” Sonya said, giving her aunt a weary smile, and trudged off down the corridor after Natasha. She discarded her dress in favor of her pajamas, picking it up, and walking over to Natasha’s room.

Sonya tossed her borrowed dress onto Natasha’s bed, where she sat still in her party wear, her face glued to her phone. “Thanks, Nat,” she said. Natasha gave her a thumbs-up, not even looking up from her phone, and Sonya examined her reflection in the mirror over the dresser, wiping away a bit of mascara that had smudged onto her cheek. “How do I get this off now?”

“Use the makeup wipes in the bathroom. They’re in the little basket thingie on the counter next to the—Oh my God, I found his Instagram!” she squealed suddenly.

Sonya frowned disapprovingly, but even so she leaned over her shoulder to take a peek. It was impressively well-curated, she noted begrudgingly. Lots of black and white photos, almost all of them with one-word captions.

“That’s what you’ve been doing this whole time?”

Natasha smiled guiltily. “Come on, can you blame me? You interrupted us before I could get his number.” She turned back to her phone, scrunched up her nose and tilted her head to the side. “What does ‘imbibe’ mean?”

“Heck if I know. You’re the one in AP Lit, not me.”

Natasha’s face lit up lit up like a Christmas tree. “Oh my God, Sonya, he’s a theatre kid too!”

“Dear lord,” Sonya groaned.

Natasha nodded eagerly as she scrolled down his page. “He even plays violin and piano. Man, I’ve hit the jackpot!”

“You haven’t hit anything because you have a boyfriend,” Sonya reminded her.

“Chill,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. “It looks like he has a girlfriend anyways.” She tilted the screen so that Sonya could see the leggy brunette that was featured in many of his photos.

“She’s pretty,” Sonya said offhandedly.

Natasha pressed her mouth into a thin line. “Yeah, well, I suppose it’s a good match then.” She frowned, flicking through the photos. “It looks like they go way back. I wonder if they’ve been dating for a while?”
Sonya pursed her lips. “That’s kinda weird. He’s our age, right?”

“Well, he’s a senior, so I’d assume so.”

“She looks a little old for him.”

“You think so?” Natasha tapped on a photo of the girl, bringing up her profile. “Sonya, she’s really pretty.”

Sonya leaned in closer. Natasha was blushing slightly now, one hand covering her mouth. She had pulled up a workout video, and was raptly watching the girl deadlift. She clicked away quickly as Sonya raised an eyebrow, instead pulling up a photo of the girl posing in front of the University of Idaho sign, a broad, infectious grin on her face.

“Oh my God, Sonya,” she whispered. “This woman’s a cradle snatcher. She’s in college!”

“Andrei’s in college,” Sonya said pointedly.

Natasha waved her down. “That’s different. He skipped a grade.”

“Wait…” Sonya murmured. “His last name is Kuragin, right? Nat, I think they’re related.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” She frowned, zooming in on a picture of the two of them. “They don’t look much alike. Like, at all.”

Sonya shrugged. “It happens. Genetics are funky.”

“Maybe they’re half-siblings? Step-siblings? Adopted?”

“Does it matter?”

Natasha shrugged. “I’m curious.”

Sonya sighed. “Nat…”

“Totally innocent interest,” she said seriously. “Scout’s honor.” At Sonya’s doubt-filled expression, Natasha squeezed her hand. “You don’t have to worry. I love Andrei. I’m not gonna do anything to mess that up, I promise.”

Sonya smiled, wrapping her arm around Natasha’s shoulders. “Text him tonight. I think you’ll feel better.”

“I’ll feel better once he actually responds,” Natasha grumbled. She took Sonya’s advice and texted Andrei, dutifully letting him know how much she missed him. But even after she had showered and washed off her makeup and exchanged her dress for pajamas, and she was lying in bed half-asleep with her phone cradled to her chest, Natasha couldn’t seem to shake the memories of Anatole’s deep blue eyes and silver-blonde hair.

Chapter End Notes

Just a small disclaimer that Moscow, Idaho is an actual town that does indeed exist. Neither of us have ever been or lived there so anything we write is completely made-
up and is in no way a reflection of the real place!
In Which There Is Booze And Bad Decisions And Anatole Is A Giant Drunk Baby

Chapter Summary

The Kuragins drag Pierre out to the club. It goes about as well as anyone would expect.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pierre had almost gotten halfway through his notes on Aristotle when he was startled by the sudden sound of the front door opening.

“Hey,” Anatole called, plopping himself down on the couch. Pierre pinched his nose lightly and closed his laptop. Giving Hélène’s younger brother a key to the apartment had seemed like a good idea at the time—an easy way to let Anatole know that Pierre was a Cool Adult—but he had an unfortunate habit of seriously overstaying his welcome. Anatole elected to ignore the boundaries that Pierre had set, and immediately shifted closer, perching over his shoulder. “Studying?”

“Yeah,” Pierre sighed, pushing up his glasses. “How was the dance?”

“Fun,” said Anatole. “I met this new girl, Natasha. She just moved from Seattle.”

“Oh, cool. I used to know a Natasha back when I lived there.”

Anatole shrugged, unsure what to do with that information. “Dope. Look, Fedya, Hélène and I are going clubbing. Wanna come?”

Pierre considered Anatole thoughtfully. “You’re underage,” he noted. A statement, not a question.

Anatole shrugged, utterly indifferent. “So?”

At that, Pierre made a strangled choking sound. “You understand of course,” he began cautiously, “that it would be crazy irresponsible for me to take my girlfriend’s underage brother to a club?”

“I don’t see why,” Anatole said petulantly. “Hélène’s gonna be there too.”

Pierre’s shoulders sagged in defeat. As much as some of her choices could be...questionable, Hélène was a good sister. She wouldn’t let Anatole do anything too stupid. And after all, he rationalized, wasn’t it better that Anatole did his drinking where they could keep an eye on him?

Anatole squared his shoulders and rubbed his palms together excitedly, looking much younger than his seventeen years. Pierre bit down a twinge of guilt. “So? You game, old man?”

“Oh, alright,” he conceded with a heavy sigh.

Anatole’s face broke into a good-natured smile and he held out his hand for a fistbump. “You’re the best, Pierre.”
“When are we leaving?”

Anatole checked his watch. “Um…how does five minutes sound?”

Pierre cast a half-hearted glance over to his laptop and his unfinished notes. He could always finish his work in the morning, he reminded himself.

“Hey,” Anatole said as they headed to the door, “can you spare twenty bucks?”

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Pierre slammed his foot on the brakes as the car in front of him took an unexpected sharp right turn. “That’s an amazing use of your indicators,” he said, sarcasm dripping off of every word. “Truly an exemplary standard of safe driving.”

“You are so goddamn passive-aggressive,” Hélène snapped.

Pierre’s hands tightened around the steering wheel. “Would you rather I be aggressive-aggressive?!” Then, to Anatole: “Feet off the dash.”

Anatole pouted but complied without a word of complaint, and Hélène rolled her eyes.

“I can’t believe you let him sit in the front,” she griped, touching up her lipstick.

“I called shotgun,” said Anatole. He yelped as Hélène reached up from the backseat and ruffled his hair affectionately.

“Do you really still need this, Princess?” Fedya asked irritably, holding up Hélène’s phone so she could see her camera. “You look fine.”

“I look better than ‘fine’, Fedya,” Hélène said coolly, and reached into her purse for eyeliner.

Fedya rolled his eyes. “Anatole, tell your sister to stop being such a diva.”

Pierre chuckled, ignoring the withering glare Hélène shot him in return.

“That’s rich coming from you, Mr. Guyliner.”

“Pothole dead ahead!” said Anatole, and sure enough, not a second later the car lurched downwards with a horrid groan and Hélène’s hand slipped, smearing kohl across her cheek. She muttered something indignant and vulgar-sounding under her breath, much too quiet for any of them to make out.

Fedya smirked, gesturing to her face. “You’ve got a little something—”

“I know!” she hissed. “God, Pierre, could you have picked a bumpier road?”

“I did warn you,” Anatole said mildly.

“Don’t worry,” Fedya purred. He wet the tip of his thumb and dragged it across her cheekbone, wiping away the errant makeup. “See? Good as new.”

“No thanks to you,” she said, and gave Pierre’s seat a kick.

“Careful where you put those shoes. Do you know how much these seats would cost to replace?”
Fedya tossed his head back with an exasperated groan. “Can you just shut up and drive?”

Pierre’s grip tightened on the steering wheel. Happy place, happy place, he chanted internally. “Maybe next time I won’t offer to chauffeur you around,” he shot back, fighting to keep his temper in check. “How does that sound?”

“Come on, old man!”

“I will turn this car around!”

Hélène reached over the seat and placed her hands on his shoulders, gently rubbing them. “We’re just giving you a hard time, lover,” she said sweetly. Pierre groaned as she wrapped her thin arms around his chest, leaning up to give his ear a tiny, playful nip.

“Oh, okay,” he muttered. “Sit back down.”

“So what should I expect?” Anatole asked.

“What do you mean?”

“In the club. What do you do there?”

Fedya and Hélène exchanged a glance, snickering. From her reflection in the rearview mirror, Hélène shot Pierre a look that clearly said, ‘Do you see what I live with?’.

Anatole grinned. “Hey,” he said suddenly, “can we do shots?”

Borodino’s was in the seedy end of town, nestled between a tattoo parlor and an auto-repair shop. Pierre drove a few extra blocks and parked in a garage, unwilling to leave his car unattended in the street, lest it be stripped down to scrap metal.

Fedya helped Hélène out of the car, courteously extending a hand. She took it as she stepped out onto the sidewalk, somehow managing to make walking in four-inch heels look effortless. Pierre knew it would be a different story in a few hours, when he would be carrying her shoes (or, if this was one of the nights she got her way, Hélène herself). It was hard to complain, though, when she looked so radiant. Hélène had left her hair down, letting her curls fall loose in a dark, chaotic cloud down her back, and her tight black dress left almost nothing to the imagination. She gave Pierre a bright smile, and he possessively wrapped an arm around her waist, squeezing her into his body, grinning at her bell-like laughter. He must, he rationalized, have imagined the appreciative up-and-down Fedya had given her, or the way Hélène held onto his hand for a second longer than necessary.

Anatole bounced back and forth on the balls of his feet like a wind-up toy set loose. “Man, I dunno about you guys, but I am so ready for tonight.”

“Not with your shirt all twisted,” Hélène said. She tugged at the hem of his top, pulling out the wrinkles. “C’mere, you idiot.”

Anatole rolled his eyes as she straightened his collar. “Lelya, you’re embarrassing me,” he whined.

“You don’t need my help for that,” she said with a fond grin, and ruffled his hair once more for
good measure. Anatole swatted her hands away.

“This is your ID,” said Fedya, handing Anatole a square slip of paper. “It’s a driver’s license from Georgia. They will not question it, so for the love of God, don’t do anything stupid like an accent.”

Anatole’s face lit up. “Don’t tempt me.”

Fedya snorted, and affectionately slapped his shoulder. “If you want to spend the whole night out here on your ass, Kuragin, by all means, be my guest.”

“Yeah,” Hélène said, “you could stand guard by the car. Be our little watchdog.”

“Like you guys would leave me here alone.”

“Don’t tempt us,” she echoed.

They grinned, catlike, and Pierre wondered how it was possible for two people to look so different yet so similar at the same time.

“Alright, y’all,” Anatole said in an awful imitation of what Pierre assumed was meant to be a Southern accent. “Let’s roll out.”

Hélène pressed her hands together and looked up at the sky. “God help us all.”

If Borodino’s was gross-looking from the outside, it was even worse indoors. The music had been cranked up so loud that Pierre could barely hear himself think and the floor was sticky with glitter and spilled drinks and Pierre-didn’t-even-know-what. Fedya and Hélène had wasted no time hitting up the bar, but Anatole had vanished into the crowd not long after they had set foot inside. Hélène didn’t seem too concerned at her brother’s disappearance, which, depending on how you looked at it, could have been either comforting or unnerving.

Pierre decided that it was unnerving.

He looked over to the bar and saw that Anatole was leaning casually against the wall and talking to a tall, redhead woman, a glass of something in his hand. From the look on his face, Pierre could tell that the conversation was more than casual. He elbowed his way to the edge of the crowd, stumbling over other people’s limbs and feet. Anatole jumped in surprise when Pierre’s hand descended on his shoulder. “What exactly do you think you’re doing, young man?”

Anatole’s smile was pure guilt. “Just having some fun. You do know what that is, don’t you?”

“He’s underage, you know,” Pierre informed the redhead through gritted teeth.

“Pierre!” Anatole said indignantly, shrugging off his hand, and the woman’s eyes went wide.

“Oh my God,” she sputtered. “I’m so sorry, I had no idea.” And without another word, she took off.

Anatole blanched. “No, Katya, come back!” He made a move to chase after her, but Pierre caught him by the collar. “What’s the big deal? We were having a good time together.”

“You are going to stay where me and Hélène can keep an eye on you, you understand?” he said, feeling very much like a scolding father, and began to drag Anatole along behind him.
“Where are we going?”

“To find your sister.”

“But she’s over at the…” Anatole trailed off as they passed by a cluster of leather sofas that had been crammed into the far corner of the club where Hélène and Fedya were sitting. “Oh, hi, Lena.”

Hélène’s face broke into a grin when she caught sight of them. “Ah, there he is! Having fun, Toto?”

“Your little brother was just being chatted up by grown woman at the bar,” said Pierre, deadpan.

Her expression soured. “Toto,” she snapped, “we’ve been over this; you can drink if you want, but if an adult—”

“It was nothing,” Anatole protested.

Pierre scowled. “It was him being an idiot.”

Fedya playfully grabbed Anatole and held him in a headlock. “Must be all that gel and pomade,” he said, ruffling his hair. “It seeps through his skull right into his brain.”

“You watch your mouth,” Anatole snapped, unwrenching himself from Fedya’s grip, but there was no venom in his words. He swayed woozily like a man newly acquainted with walking on land, and had it not been for the chair he was leaning against he probably would have collapsed in a drunken heap, face-first onto the couch.

Pierre sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead, and turned to Hélène. “How much has he had to drink?”

“Hell if I know,” said Hélène, and she waved her hands with flourish. “I’m not my brother’s keeper.” At Pierre’s horrified expression, she added, “He’s fine, don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, man,” Anatole echoed. “Don’t worry about it!” He snorted loudly and burst into a fit of giggles, collapsing into the chair when his legs finally gave out beneath him.

“I thought you were supposed to be keeping an eye on him.”

“He doesn’t need a babysitter.”

“He’s seventeen,” Pierre said. “Seventeen. What was I doing at seventeen? Something sensible, probably. Reading at home. Watching a movie. Browsing Wikipedia. Not going off to the club at one in the morning.”

“Would you relax?” Hélène snapped. “He’s okay, he can handle himself.”

“This is breaking more laws than I have fingers to count on. If we get caught—”

Fedya wrapped an arm around Pierre’s shoulders, sloshing a red solo cup of something strong and foul-smelling. “Lighten up, old man!” he slurred. From the controlled confidence of his gait, Pierre suspected he was more sober than he was letting on.

“Please, Fyodor, don’t call me that; we’re only two years—”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Pierre!” said Fedya. “Were you born with a stick up your ass?”
Pierre held up his hands in defense. “I’m trying to be the responsible adult here, seeing as the both of you have opted out.”

“Look,” Hélène said in that poisonous, honeyed voice of hers, running her fingers down his chest. “We’re here, we’re having a good time, and that’s all that matters. Can you please try to stop overthinking this? For me?”

“Fine,” he grumbled.

Hélène gave him a bright, cheerful smile, reaching down to grab his hand. “Let’s get you a shot, lover,” she grinned, tugging him along with her.

“But I’m the designated driver,” he protested pitifully.

“We’ll call a cab.”

“But my car—”

“Pierre!”

Four shots later, Pierre was leaning against the wall, quietly nursing a beer. Hélène had left his side about half an hour ago, and she hadn’t come back yet. He had moved away from the bar to look for her, unsure whether or not he really even wanted to see her. She had been more than a little distant tonight, in a way that he couldn’t chalk up to her wanting to keep an eye on Anatole. A little sharper too, but he wasn’t sure whether that was his imagination, especially seeing her be so sweet around her brother.

He finally found her, across the room, having an animated conversation with Fedya. Hélène tossed her hair, bracing a hand on Fedya’s chest as she threw her head back and laughed. Pierre narrowed his eyes as he saw Fedya’s hand dip low, coming to rest on the small of her back. The throwaway comment that Anatole had made about the two of them the other night was still bothering him. There was a weird brand of comfort between Fedya and Hélène; something that went far beyond adolescent friendship. Pierre hated to admit it, but he was jealous of Fedya. Jealous of the ease he had around Hélène, jealous of the casual physical intimacy they shared. He saw Fedya start to gently rub her back and he pushed himself off the wall, lumbering towards them. They jumped apart when he approached them, and he frowned, glaring at Hélène.

“Pardon us,” Pierre said to Fedya through clenched teeth. “I have to speak to my girlfriend for a second.”

He grabbed Hélène’s arm, pulling her away from her conversation to a more secluded corner. “What is wrong with you?” she snapped.

“Why did you have to invite him?”

“Pierre, we’ve talked about this. Anatole’s fine—”

Pierre glared. “Not Anatole.”

“Fedya? What’s your problem with him?”

“I don’t like the way he looks at you.”
Pierre registered that that last sentence may have been a mistake when Hélène’s eyes widened and then narrowed in fury. “So I shouldn’t have invited my childhood friend to come have fun with me because the way he looks at me upsets you.”

“You know what I mean,” Pierre said, scrambling to smooth things over.

“No, I really don’t think I do,” Hélène snarled, crossing her arms. “Why don’t you explain it to me?”

“The way he touches you, the way he talks about you…that isn’t what normal friends do Lena!”

“What do you know about normal friends anyway?”

“Enough to know that whatever you two have is way past friendship.”

Hélène’s voice became dangerously quiet. “Are you trying to accuse me of cheating on you?”

Pierre stared at her. “I didn’t say that,” he said softly. “But you aren’t denying it, are you?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Hélène hissed. “We are not having this conversation right now!”

“Hélène…”

“Just keep drinking, Pierre,” she said, pushing a beer into his hands.

“I knew it was a bad idea to come out here in the first place,” he snapped, already more drunk than he cared to admit. There was an angry headache pounding at his temples, in sync with the blaring staccato of the bassline. The lights were too bright, the room too hot, his collar too tight.

“Pierre,” she said exasperatedly. “You’re fine, you’re just being maudlin.”

“No, it’s not that,” he mumbled. “There’s this feeling in me…”

“Oh, piss off and go do some of your breathing exercises,” Hélène said, turning away from him. “Fedya,” she called across the room, “want to buy me another drink?”

Fedya emerged from the hordes of dancers, wordlessly handing Hélène a vodka cranberry. She kissed his cheek in thanks, a gesture that was ambiguously friendly enough that Pierre wouldn’t have been suspicious were it not for Fedya’s self-satisfied smile and the way he squeezed Hélène against his chest. Pierre grimaced. Fedya was everything he simultaneously disdained and wanted to be: hyper-masculine, aggressive, calculating, and intimidating. He, in many ways, was far closer to the male equivalent of Hélène than Anatole was, including the stunningly good looks that had a way of making Pierre feel incredibly insecure like nothing else could.

Hélène finished her drink and left Fedya to go dance. Fedya vanished for a second and returned, brandishing two glasses of whiskey, one of which he offered to Pierre. “A drink, old man?”

He tried not to bristle at the nickname. “Sure.”

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” Fedya murmured, raptly watching Hélène swing her hips.

“She is.” Pierre took a swig of his drink. It burned his throat, but it was a good sort of pain, the kind that could take his mind anywhere else but here for at least a few seconds.

Fedya smiled mockingly, bumping Pierre’s shoulder. “All the good ones are taken, eh?” He raised his glass and delicately clinked it with Pierre’s. “Here’s to beautiful women everywhere, but
especially Hélène Kuragina.”

Pierre nearly choked on his mouthful of whiskey. He clumsily detangled himself from Fedya’s grip, his face hardening into a glare. “What are you trying to say, Fyodor?”

“That you don’t deserve her,” Fedya said, “and you can’t love her.”

Pierre stared in shock. “Fuck you, Dolokhov,” he snapped. “You don’t know anything about what me and Hélène have. You have no right to—”

“You know, she tells me that sometimes she pretends it’s me,” Fedya said, his voice full of quiet malice. “When you’re fucking her.”

Pierre whipped his head around, staggering a little at the sudden movement. “Excuse me?”

“Because when I’m fucking your girlfriend, she’s never had to fake coming.” Fedya’s snakelike grin sent chills down Pierre’s spine.

“You’re lying.”

“She has a tattoo of a sunburst on the left side of her ribcage,” he continued, “and an adorable freckle on her right breast. When you touch her properly, she makes the sweetest little sounds; it’s almost like she’s sighing—”

Pierre’s fist made a painful cracking sound when it connected with Fedya’s face and sent him tumbling to the floor. Pierre stared in shock as a weird but not entirely unpleasant rush of adrenaline shot through him. He vaguely registered Hélène’s scream before she surged forwards and made a grab for his arm. “Pierre, stop, you can’t—”

He shook her off as he advanced towards Fedya, whose face had morphed into something calm and hard and cold. “Well, I guess it’s my turn now,” he said, half-laughing, but there was no trace of humor in his eyes anymore.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” Hélène said hoarsely.

Pierre’s face twisted into a snarl and he shot her a furious glare. “What the fuck do you care?”

He tried to ignore the way Hélène’s face crumpled at his remark, the ugly look of misery that replaced her hateful sneer. But there was no guilt inside him anymore, only a terrible, unstoppable rage.

Anatole stepped out of the crowd. “Fedya, think about this.”

“Shut the hell up, kid,” he snapped.

“Oh, this is horribly stupid,” he moaned, and staggered off to the side with his face in his hands.

Pierre was no fool; he had at least half a foot and fifty pounds on Fedya. Still, he couldn’t help but balk as the sight of the younger man as he rose to his feet, hands clenched into fists and looking for all the world like a hawk about to devour its prey. Fedya had always been a clean fighter, but he fought rough and hard. And when he fought, he always won.

Fedya wiped his bloody mouth on the back of his hand, panting. “Come on, old man,” he said softly. Pierre stumbled towards him, fists raised. Before he could even blink, he felt a blinding
flash of pain explode across his face, and teetered backwards.

“Motherfucker!” he hissed, clapping a hand to his throbbing eye. Something underfoot crunched loudly as he readjusted his footing. Glasses, his brain supplied. Damn it all to hell, he had smashed his glasses. Pierre cursed under his breath, blinking away floaters as his head spun in a dizzying blur of oversaturated colors. He vaguely registered shouts and screams, Hélène clinging furiously to his wrist and yelling something in his ear.

“Come on, you old fool,” Pierre heard Fedya say, but his voice was tinny and muffled, as if he was listening from underwater. “Unless you’re not man enough to fight back!”

Pierre tripped forwards, but managed to intercept the second punch before he could process what was happening, pinning Fedya’s wrist in his own grip. Shock registered on Fedya’s face, then fear, then rage. He surged forwards, but Pierre reacted instinctively, letting his fist fly. He felt a sickening crunch, and suddenly Fedya was staggering backwards, clutching his nose and swearing violently under his breath.

Another blow struck him across the cheekbone, and Pierre lost his balance, toppling to the floor. He struggled to prop himself up on his elbows and found his breath coming in short, panicked bursts. His head was spinning too much to hold himself upright and he collapsed again in a breathless heap.

“The cops are here!” shouted somebody. Pierre bolted upright and whirled around, searching the crowd for Anatole, Fedya, and Hélène, but they had vanished from sight. In the distance, he could hear police sirens blaring and people shouting in panic. He thought distantly of his notes on Aristotle lying forgotten on his desk back at his apartment.

“Shit,” he murmured, and promptly collapsed again onto the floor.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your support! Comments and kudos make our lil hearts sing!
In Which Fedya Is A Giant Teddy Bear

Chapter Summary

Fedya, despite initial appearances, is actually a very good friend.

Chapter Notes

Mentions of some PG-13 stuff in this chapter!

Thank you for all the support! We <3 feedback lots and lots!

The ride home was awkward, to say the least.

They had bounced as soon as the cops had shown up, leaving Pierre behind to do God-knew-what, but fortunately Hélène had had the wherewithal to call a taxi. She sat shotgun, which was fair enough, seeing as she was paying for the ride, leaving Anatole and Fedya to occupy the backseat. Fedya’s nose had stopped bleeding shortly after they left Borodino’s, but the pounding in his sinuses had migrated to his forehead and around his eyes, like the world’s worst head cold. Pierre’s punch, he had to admit, had been impressively well-aimed, and though he’d never say it aloud, the throbbing pain of his bruise had him nearly regretting goading the drunken old oaf into throwing a fist in the first place.

Still, it had been worth it, even if only for the furious look of disbelief on Pierre’s face. Even if Hélène seemed hell-bent on never uttering a single word to him ever again.

Anatole fidgeted in the seat next to him, clearly picking up on the tension between Fedya and Hélène. “Is it always like that there?” he asked in an obvious attempt to stimulate small talk. Anatole had never been comfortable letting silence remain silent, and while his incessant chatter usually grated on Fedya’s nerves, he couldn’t help but find it at least a little endearing.

“I don’t know,” he said, self-consciously rubbing the back of his neck. “This probably wasn’t our wildest night at Borodino’s. What do you think, Lena?”

Hélène didn’t even bother to spare a glance over her shoulder. “Anatole, would you please tell Fedya that I’m not speaking with him right now?”

Anatole grimaced with an apologetic shrug. Fedya raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. “There was that one night,” he said coolly, “when that group of guys convinced you to dance on the bar, but I don’t think anybody called the police.” Hélène’s head whipped around to shoot Fedya a poisonous glare. He responded with a pleasant smile, ignoring the muttered expletive that was undoubtedly targeted towards him.

Anatole’s eyes went wide and a smirk curled the corner of his mouth. “Oh my God. Is that true?”

“Of course not,” she snapped.
Anatole raised an eyebrow at Fedya, who winked conspiratorially. “Don’t be mad, Lenka,” he said with a teasing grin. “You looked so cute up there.”

“And you looked so cute the night I took your virginity,” she said sweetly. “I don’t think I’d ever made a boy cry before.”

Fedya closed his mouth with a hot flash of embarrassment. That particular memory, while far from unpleasant, wasn’t one that he had intended on sharing with anybody other than Hélène herself, much less her little brother. Anatole blushed a vibrant red and leaned back in his seat, refusing to make eye contact with either of them.

Fedya sighed. He felt for Anatole, he really did. It couldn’t have been any fun, having to serve as the mediator between his sister and her—what would the word even be? ex-boyfriend? ex-sidepiece?—well, ex-whatever-Fedya-had-been.

“What the literal fuck,” Anatole whispered, his face a mix of disbelief and horror. Less a question, more a statement. “I don’t even want to know if that one’s real or not.”

Fedya half-wanted to deny it, but that would have basically been an admission of defeat, so instead he opted to shut up and stay shut up for the rest of the ride. Hélène smirked in victory and folded her hands in her lap with the smuggest grin he had ever seen.

It wasn’t long before they pulled up at the Kuragins’ house and stumbled out of the cab. Hélène pressed a fifty into the driver’s hand, whispering for him to keep the change in a voice so low that Fedya nearly missed it altogether—the Kuragins may have been many things, but stingy was certainly not one of them—and decided to forgo her heels about halfway up the driveway as they staggered up to the porch in a dazed, drunken progression. She dropped her keys, muttering incoherently under her breath as she struggled to unlock the door, until Fedya reached over and grabbed them from her, ignoring her badly-aimed swat, and finally let them into the house. They kicked off their shoes in the doorway and congregated in the kitchen, where Hélène immediately flopped down in a chair, flipped her head down and scraped her hair into a loose bun.

Anatole sat across from her, wordlessly fiddling with the zipper on his jacket. There was a look of mild consternation plastered on his face, Fedya noticed, something that Hélène had clearly picked up on as well.

“Toto?” she said, cupping his cheek. “Everything alright?”

Anatole nodded. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just think I left my contacts in a little too long. My eyes are starting to hurt.”

Fedya gave the clock a sideways glance. The time currently read as half past one in the morning, but this particular clock had always run an hour slow. In all the years he’d known the Kuragins, not once had anybody ever bothered to fix it.

“Time for bed, kid,” said Hélène, poking the leg of Anatole’s chair with her bare foot. “It’s late.”

Anatole’s head snapped up. “You expect me to sleep after all that excitement?”

“Yes,” she said with a stern look.

Anatole bumped Fedya’s shoulder as he dragged himself from his seat. “Well, it was fun while it lasted. See you ‘round, Feddy Bear.”

“G’night, Tolya,” he said.
Anatole kissed Hélène on the cheek. “Night, Lena. Love you.”

“Love you too,” she said. “No electronics, just sleep.”

“Alright,” he drawled as he started upstairs, trailing his feet against the carpet at much as humanly possible.

Fedya waited until Anatole had made his way to his room before rounding on Hélène. “What the fuck was that?” he snapped.

“Pardon?” she asked innocently.

“You know what you said.”

Hélène raised an eyebrow. “Well, did I say anything that was untrue?”

“That’s not the point.”

“You started it.”

Fedya exhaled through his nose. “Do you not know where to draw the goddamn line? Or do you just not care?”

“I don’t know, Fedyushka,” she said coolly. “I think I draw the line at punching people out.”

Hélène rummaged through her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Fedya watched as she opened a window and took a seat on the countertop, fiddling with her lighter.

“I thought you’d quit,” he said.

Hélène brought the lit cigarette to her lips and took a long, slow drag, closing her eyes.

“Anatole’s going to smell it.”

“So?”

Fedya shrugged. “You were the one worried about secondhand smoke. What was it you used to say? ‘It’s not good for the growing teenage body, Fedya’. ‘Don’t smoke around the house, Fedya’.”

“I am stressed. And I am stressed because of you.”

Fedya gestured towards the sink. “Mind if I...?”

“Whatever,” she said, waving him down with the hand that wasn’t holding the cigarette. Fedya rolled his eyes. Hélène was playing taciturn now, but if he knew her, her rage would build into a crescendo in a few minutes. Arguing with her when she was being cold and distant was an exercise in futility. It was best to bide his time until she decided to yell at him.

Fedya wetted a cloth under the tap and recoiled in pain when he experimentally touched the bridge of his nose. “I think he broke my nose, the son of a bitch,” he hissed, pressing the cloth to his upper lip.

Hélène raised an eyebrow impassively, putting out her cigarette and flicking it out the window. “Are you looking for sympathy? Because you’re not going to find any here.”

Fedya shot her a glare. “Jesus, Lena, have a heart.”
“You were such a jackass tonight.”

“Need I remind you that he punched first?”

“He was a jackass too. That doesn’t excuse what you did.”

“And what was it that I did exactly?”

“I know you riled him up.” Hélène snapped. “If you go looking for someone to hit you, Fedya, you’re gonna have to accept that sometimes they’re going to oblige you.”

“Didn’t expect it from Bezukhov,” he muttered, wiping away some blood. “I don’t think he was expecting it either.”

“You’re not funny.”

“I wasn’t trying to be.”

“Shut up.”

Fedya threw up his hands in exasperation, returning to the sink and dabbing at his face with a washcloth. Hélène exasperatedly watched him for a second before grabbing his hand and yanking him over to the table, taking the washcloth from him. “You’re hopeless,” she said, none-too-gently wiping away some of the dried blood. Fedya hissed in pain and cringed away.

“Fuck, Lena, where’s your bedside manner?”

“I left it at Borodino’s,” she snapped. “Now stop winging, you big baby. You’ve still got blood on your—”

“Just leave it,” he said, prying her hands away from his face and grabbing the washcloth from her. Fedya turned to his reflection in the fridge door. The bloodstain on his shirt, now faded to a rusty red, stretched halfway down to his navel. He tutted disapprovingly as he dabbed at the fabric. “This was new,” he muttered.

Hélène walked through the open doorway to the living room and threw herself down on the couch with an exasperated sigh. “I just don’t get it,” she said. “Would it really kill you to be civil with him for once?”

“I don’t like him,” he said simply.

“You’re not the one dating him. You don’t have to like him.”

“He doesn’t treat you the way you deserve to be treated.”

“That’s not up for you to decide.”

“I just don’t understand what you see in him, Lena,” said Fedya. “The guy’s a complete tool and he makes everyone around him miserable.”

“I’m not asking you to be best friends,” she growled. “But it would be nice to go out without worrying that you’re going to kill each other.”

“Ah, well,” Fedya grunted, “that’s too bad.” He began to unbutton the front of his shirt when she shot him an irate glare. “What?”
“What are you doing?” she snapped.

He pulled the shirt off over his head. The blood, at least, hadn’t seeped through to his undershirt. “What does it look like I’m doing?”

Hélène rolled her eyes, turning away from him. “Is subtlety a concept you’ve ever encountered, Fedya?”

“The fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“If this is your idea of seduction, it’s seriously lackluster.”

“Get your head out of the gutter. I’m just trying to wash my shirt.”

Hélène muttered something that sounded suspiciously like ‘I’m sure’ under her breath. Fedya ignored her, wringing out his shirt until she piped up again. “Is your stupid feud with Pierre some kind of ploy to get back with me? Because it’s not going work.”

“It’s not,” he protested. “It’s just…weird to see you with someone else. What happened to my staunchly anti-monogamy feminist?”

Hélène snorted. “She realized that monogamy had its benefits. And that she still isn’t yours.”

“What happened to us, Lena?”

“‘Us’?” she said. “There was never an ‘us’, Fedya, don’t kid yourself.”

“We had something.”

“We had fun together, but that’s it.”

“That’s more than you can say about you and Bezukhov.”

Hélène’s glare was downright murderous. “Look, if you think I’m going to dump my boyfriend because you’re still hung up on me, then—”

“I never mentioned anything about you dumping him!”

“How the fuck else am I supposed to interpret you beating the shit out of him?” she snapped, and Fedya held up his hands in mock-surrender.

“He’s not the one with a broken nose.”

“Yeah, well he’s the one probably sitting in a jail cell right now.” Hélène sighed, raking her fingers through her hair. She rolled over onto her back and propped her feet up on the arm of the couch. “God, Fedya, you do understand what an awkward position this puts me in, right?”

“I never meant for this to happen.”

“Spare me the platitudes.”

Fedya raised an eyebrow but didn’t look up from the sink as he turned on the tap and began to fill a basin with cold water. “Struck a nerve, have I?”

“At any given moment you are always striking at least, like, five of my nerves.”
He snorted. “You’re a witty drunk.”

“And you’re an asshole drunk,” she muttered, but there was barely any anger left in her voice, just hollow frustration and an undercurrent of playfulness.

Fedya sighed fondly. Now, **there** was the Hélène he knew and loved. “Guilty as charged.” He turned off the tap and left his shirt to soak in the basin, plonking himself onto the sofa next to Hélène, who scooted over to make room for him before repositioning herself so that her feet sat in his lap. “Is it too late to apologize?”

“Fedya, you’re one of my oldest friends and I love you to bits,” she said, “but you can’t antagonize every guy I date.”

“I’m sorry, Lena,” said Fedya.

“You’re only sorry because I’m angry with you.”

“Look, I know I screwed up, I just…I just want you to be happy, whoever you’re with.”

Hélène softened a little at that. “I appreciate your intent, but I’m a grown woman. I can take care of myself.”

“It’s okay to let yourself be taken care of for a change, you know. You don’t have to be so damn self-reliant all the time.”

She smiled sadly. Fedya took hold of her hand and squeezed it lightly. “Stop being sweet. You’re freaking me out.”

He laughed at that. “Ah, well,” he said, stroking her knuckles with his thumb, “I’ll keep that in mind for the next time we fight.”

“There’s still a **this** time,” she grumbled, but there was no heat left in her tone.

Fedya lowered his voice. “Are you going to pick up Pierre?”

She pressed her mouth into a tight, thin line. “I don’t have the heart to see him right now.”

“I’m sure that’s a sentiment he’s familiar with.”

Hélène smacked Fedya playfully and he chuckled. “You really are an asshole, you know that?”

“I know, Lena. I know.”

Hélène leaned her head against his shoulder. They sat together in silence for a long while, staring at the empty fireplace. “Oh, Fedya,” she sighed. “What am I going to do now?”

Fedya looped an arm around her shoulders, pressing a soft kiss to her temple as he inhaled her warm, familiar scent. Perhaps if he closed his eyes and wished hard enough, he could go back to their teenage years, when the world and everything between them had seemed so much simpler.

She was so close now that he could have counted each and every freckle on her face, every eyelash, every fleck of gold and hazel in her eyes. Hélène was a beautiful woman under normal circumstances, but now, in the half-dimmed lamplight, with her mascara still running in rivulets down her cheeks and her eyeliner smudged to oblivion and her hair a tangled mess of curls, he thought that no human had ever looked so stunning.

Fedya forced himself to avert his gaze. That bridge had been burnt to cinders a long time ago, he
reminded himself. “I don’t know,” he said. Hélène gave him a small, sad smile and he squeezed her a little tighter. “I’m sorry I can’t do more for you. But I’ll always be here for you to lean on, no matter what.”

She had just opened her mouth to say something when they heard floorboards creaking upstairs. Fedya raised an eyebrow and craned his neck to the ceiling. Anatole appeared on the stairwell wearing only a pair of boxers and a ratty old Moscow Polar Bears T-shirt and holding a half-empty glass of water in his hand. “Am I interrupting something?” he said.

Hélène’s face fell flat. “Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

“I have a headache and I need some Aspirin and I ran out of water,” Anatole whined as he plodded over to the fridge and refilled his glass.

Hélène raked a hand through her hair in exasperation. “This is why you have to get up to pee a million times a night!” Anatole stuck his tongue out at her and she waved him down. “Go to sleep or I’ll turn off the Wi-Fi.”

Fedya waited until Anatole had gone back upstairs and was sufficiently out of earshot before leaning in and whispering, “How much do you want to bet he was eavesdropping on us?”

“The joke’s on him. I can’t wait to kick his hungover ass out of bed tomorrow when we go for our early morning jog.”

“You two do early morning jogs?”

“We do starting tomorrow.”

“I’m sure he’ll love that.”

Hélène gave him a wicked smile, all pearly-white teeth and mischief. “That’s half the fun.”

“And you call me an asshole.”

She yawned loudly, pressing the heel of her hand against her temple as if to stave off an oncoming headache. Hélène may have been a prodigious drinker, but no matter how much she liked to think of herself as being invincible, even she wasn’t immune to hangovers. “I’m his big sister,” she said. “Being an asshole is the best part.”

Fedya disentangled himself from her, sitting up and pulling out his phone. “You look tired.”

“Thanks, Fedya. Just what every girl wants to hear.”

“Go and get some sleep. I’ll see you around.”

“Where are you going?”

Fedya lowered the phone. “I’m calling a cab, of course.”

He stood up to leave but Hélène grabbed his wrist and yanked him back down. “Don’t be dumb. You can crash on the couch.”

“Really?”

“If you want,” she said, shrugging. “I’m going to bed either way.”
“Thanks Lena,” he murmured.

“I’m still mad at you, you know,” she said, but the bite had left her words.

Fedya allowed himself a soft smile. “Of course. I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

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**Lena:** i’m serious about the wi-fi

**Lena:** go to bed already, you little brat

**Toto:** :P
In Which Pierre Has Screwed Up Bigtime

Chapter Summary

Pierre has a fun time in county jail.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for all your lovely feedback! We <3 comments.

It was that familiar, awful pounding in his head that he first registered.

Pierre had known that he would have a killer hangover when he woke up, but he hadn’t anticipated just how badly it would hurt. Whatever he was lying on was cold and hard—had his mattress always been this stiff?—and his back creaked as he sat up, running a hand through his hair. Even now, he could still feel the ghost of Fedya’s knuckles slamming into the side of his face with a sickening crunch. Pierre blinked against the fluorescent lights that burned his eyes even when he scrunched them shut. His tongue was disgustingly dry, and the sour taste of his own stale breath filled his mouth. It had been a long time since he’d woken up in a state like this.

“Morning, sunshine,” said a gruff, tired voice. A brief pause. “Or should I say midday? I gotta say, I think you’ve broken the county record for sleeping in.”

Pierre’s head darted towards the sound of the voice, but his neck ached in protest and he immediately recoiled from the painful brightness of the light. “Where am I?” he croaked. The words grated against his raw throat like broken glass.

“Moscow County lock-up.”

Pierre bolted upright at that, ignoring the heady rush of nausea that followed. He placed a hand on his churning stomach. “Wait, what?”

“You got arrested, son,” said the voice.

His vision had returned. Blurred, but it was vision nonetheless. Pierre surveyed his surroundings with a sinking heart. He was lying on a metal bench inside a cell—an actual jail cell, dear God—and on the other side of the bars there was a heavyset, mustachioed man sitting at a desk and sipping from a coffee cup, a six-pointed sheriff badge pinned to his shirt pocket. Pierre’s breath left him with dizzying speed as the events of the previous night rushed back to him. “Arrested?”

The man—well, the sheriff, Pierre supposed, if that was the right word—nodded, taking a long sip from his cup.

“What are my charges?”

The sheriff sighed and flipped open his log book. “Disturbing the peace, public intoxication, and misdemeanor battery. Your standard big three.”
Pierre let out a horrified wheeze at that. “Oh my God,” he whimpered, and nearly cringed at how pathetic and tiny his voice sounded. All this over a dumb bar fight, if you could even call the pathetic few punches he and Fedya had traded a bar fight. Why had he let himself get so riled up?

The sheriff sighed again, crossing his arms. “Son, what are you doing getting mixed up with a bunch of college kids in the first place?”

“Y-you don’t... you don’t understand,” he blubbered. “I-I am a kid.”

The sheriff looked Pierre up and down, noting his beard and expensive watch. “Sure you are.”

“No, really, I’m in college, I’m a senior at U of I.” Pierre registered the sheriff’s impassive face. He gulped. “I promise, I normally don’t do things like this, I’ve been trying to lay off the drinking, but my girlfriend and her friend dragged me out, and I think I had too much and then her friend was —”

“Hey, I don’t care,” he said calmly, and returned to his newspaper.

Pierre frowned and crossed his arms. “Aren’t you supposed to read me my rights?”

“We’ve already read you your rights twice. You were completely passed out. It took two officers to get you to the car.”

Pierre squinted his eyes and was barely make out the name etched into the tag on his pocket. “Officer Denisov, I—”

“Deputy Denisov,” he corrected, and took another swig of his coffee.

“Deputy Denisov, please, I can pay a fine or do community service, I just really need to get home. I have a paper to write and—”

Deputy Denisov raised an impassive eyebrow. “Not until your bail’s been paid.”


“You get one phone call.”

Deputy Denisov opened the cell door and led him to the ancient-looking dial-up phone mounted to the wall. Pierre’s hands shook as he clumsily punched in Hélène’s number. She picked up after a few seconds. He could hear her breathing on the other end of the call, although she didn’t say anything. Pierre gulped, before launching into an appeal for mercy. “Hélène, baby, please, I got arrested and I’m really in trouble—”

CLICK.

Pierre’s heart sank like a lead weight and he swallowed heavily. He shouldn’t be surprised, he thought with grim resignation. Hélène’s ire, when provoked, was terrifying. He hung up the phone, desperately trying to avoid Deputy Denisov’s sympathetic eyes.

“Lady troubles?” he offered.

Pierre inhaled deeply. “Something like that.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

Pierre blinked. “I’m sorry?”
“It helps, talking about it,” said Deputy Denisov, laying his newspaper flat. “I don’t have anything better to do around here anyway.”

Pierre sighed. “Everything’s fine, and she’s great.”

Deputy Denison raised an eyebrow. “But?”

“That’s the problem,” he chuckled mirthlessly. “She’s beautiful, and funny, and smart, and there’s no reason for her to stick around with a loser like me. I guess I shouldn’t be surprised that she’s been sleeping with this other guy.”

Deputy Denisov choked on his coffee. “Fuck, that’s rough.”

“Tell me about it,” Pierre groaned.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, son,” Deputy Denisov said. “There’s more to life than dating. A good-looking guy like yourself—surely you’ve got other prospects.”

“But I don’t want other prospects,” he said. “She drives me crazy, and we always fight, but there’s something about her that I can’t shake.” Pierre couldn’t help himself. He let out a loud sniffle, pressing the heel of his hand to his eye to wipe away the tears that threatened to spill over. Deputy Denisov shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Tough luck.”

He nodded. “Yeah.” Pierre blinked, remembering where he was. “Shouldn’t I be back in my cell by now?”

Deputy Denisov looked confused for a moment before a light went off in his eyes. “Oh, yeah.” He walked Pierre back to the cell, clapping him on the back before he locked the door. “Don’t worry, son. I’m sure someone’ll be by soon.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not holding my breath,” Pierre grumbled.

Deputy Denisov walked away with a shrug. Pierre collapsed onto the bench and held his head in his hands, trying to control his breathing. Everything would be fine, he told himself. Hélène knew where he was, and she’d come to get him eventually. She wouldn’t just leave him here, would she? No, he reasoned. Hélène may have had a horrible temper, but she usually didn’t stay angry at him for long.

Usually.

Come to think of it, had he ever seen her this angry before? Not that he had actually seen her. She had bailed as soon as the police had shown up. Maybe she wasn’t angry at him, then. Maybe she had just gotten nervous and ran. Maybe she didn’t know where he was. Maybe—

No, Pierre thought rebelliously, he was done making excuses for her. He had called her, ready to plead on his hands and knees, and she’d hung up on him the second she’d heard his voice. So she did know where he was, then, and was just too pissed to care. Maybe she wanted him to stay in jail. Maybe she wouldn’t care if he spent the rest of his life rotting in this dark, musty cell. Maybe—the thought struck him with a sudden pang of dread and rage—that had been her plan all along. Were she and Fedya laughing at him now? Laughing at the thought of how utterly screwed over he was?

It was all too much for his hungover and overwrought brain to process. Pierre found his breath coming in short, shallow bursts. His palms broke out in sweat and he tilted his head towards the
ceiling and squeezed his eyes shut in hopes of quelling his oncoming panic attack.

Pierre had almost forgotten how to breathe when Deputy Denisov stopped by the cell a few minutes later, unlocked the door, and said, “You’re free to leave. Let’s go.”

“What?”

“You’re bail has been paid. We’ll be in touch with you to arrange your court date. Someone’s here to pick you up.”

Pierre nodded impassively as Deputy Denisov led him to the lobby. Where there had been panic before, there was now numbness, and he wasn’t sure which was worse. He expected to see Hélène at the front, looking characteristically made-up and unflappable, but it wasn’t her waiting for him in the doorway.

Pierre blinked, desperately wishing for his glasses.

It couldn’t be.

Oh, Jesus Christ.

There stood Anatole, his hands in his pockets, leaning against the wall and chewing a piece of gum like he had all the time in the world.

Pierre’s jaw fell open. “Anatole. How did you know where to find me?”

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “Dude, there’s like, one lock-up in this town. You think this is the first time I’ve had to bail out a friend?”

“I didn’t think minors could bail people out.”

Anatole held up his fake ID from the night before. “Fedya makes really good fakes,” he said. “I’m gonna have to hold on to this one.”

“Oh my God,” said Pierre weakly. “That’s so illegal it’s not even funny. Please tell me you’re joking.”

Anatole grinned, but he didn’t deny it. Nor did he seem overly concerned when Pierre slumped back in his seat with a look of utter disbelief and horror.

“How did you get here?”

“I walked,” he said, deadpan. “No, I’m just messing with you. I called a cab, of course. Only way I can get around this damn town without someone to chauffeur me. It’s a real pain, not having your license, you know? I’d love to see just how much we’ve spent on cab fares since moving here. I’ll bet it’s—”

“Anatole, please,” Pierre said, holding a hand to his pounding forehead. “Not all at once.”

Anatole’s mouth opened into a wordless ‘o’. “Ah. Hangover. Right. I completely forgot that those are a thing.”

“You’re not…?” Pierre gestured to his temple and Anatole shook his head.

“Nah. Not too badly. Hélène says I have this ridiculous metabolism that just burns everything so I guess that helps. You should see the way she goes on about it; it makes her so jealous.”
“You’re acting a little strange. Is everything okay?”

Anatole tilted his head contemplatively. “I may have forgotten to take my meds this morning.”

“Oh, dear lord,” Pierre muttered.

“It’s not my fault. Hélène woke me up way too early and forced me to go on a run with her. Has she ever made you work out with her? Because she’s relentless.”

“I really need to talk to her,” Pierre said.

“No can do, my friend.”

“Anatole,” Pierre growled, his impatience building. “Where is she?”

“Pierre,” Anatole said in an uncharacteristically stern tone, “I actually like you a lot. Like in a friend way, not just in like a ‘you’re hooking up with my sister so she makes us hang out with you’ way.”

“Thanks, that means a lot.”

“And that’s why,” he continued, “I’m gonna have to ask you to reconsider whether you really want to try to talk to an angry Hélène.”

Pierre nodded grimly. “She’s still mad?”

“You have no idea,” he said. “You’re lucky you’re still alive. She was practically homicidal.”

“But I was in the right,” Pierre protested. “She cheated on me.”

Anatole rolled his eyes. “Fedya’s been her best friend since we moved here. She isn’t cheating on you.”

“But the way she acts around him—”

“Is the way she acts around literally everyone.”

Pierre scowled. His stomach prickled uncomfortably, but whether it was from hunger or exhaustion or nerves, he couldn’t tell. “Then why was she so defensive?”

“You made a scene, and she was embarrassed. Trust me, I’ve heard the semantics about this at length.”

“That’s fucked.”

Anatole shrugged. “If it makes you feel any better, she’s mad at Fedya too,” he said, but his words were hollow and utterly insincere.

“It doesn’t, but thanks,” Pierre muttered sourly.

“Best not to think about it, old man. You’re still alive and that’s the main thing.”

“Yeah, well, that’s going to do me a load of good, isn’t it? I haven’t even told my mother about this. What’s she going to think of me now?”

“Pierre, it’s probably not as bad as you’re making it out to be.”
“I can’t have a felony on my record,” he wheezed, fighting down the new wave of hysteria that was quickly rising in his chest. “They can kick you out of school for this sort of thing. Oh God, I’m never going to be able to get a job now, am I? I’ve ruined my life. I’m going to end up a homeless, unemployed felon and it’s all because of one stupid fight.”

Breathing exercises, he told himself as his heart began to thunder again.

“If it helps, Fedya’s not pressing charges.”

That caught Pierre’s attention. “He’s not?”

Anatole shrugged. “He said he doesn’t want people to know that Hélène’s nerdy boyfriend beat him up.”

Pierre felt a heady rush of shame at that. He couldn’t believe that he’d hit someone, much less wanted to hurt them. Anatole must have seen the guilt written on his face but, true to form, he misinterpreted it. “You might get charged with disturbing the peace,” he said thoughtfully, “but you don’t even get a record for that.”

“I’m such a moron,” Pierre moaned, and held his head in his hands.

Anatole shot him a vaguely sympathetic glance, clapping him on the shoulder. “Come on, old man. The cab’s waiting. Let’s get you home.”

The cab ride passed in awkward silence. Pierre pressed a hand to his black eye, sorely wishing for an ice pack. He had tried Hélène’s cell a few times since they had left, but she was still refusing to speak to him. It would be one thing, he mused bitterly, if she wanted to yell at him, but the stony silence was somehow more disconcerting.

He wasn’t sure how to feel about this whole situation. On the one hand, he understood why she was angry—he had absolutely behaved badly, and he was sure that having her younger brother bear witness to two grown men bar-fighting was a headache that she didn’t want to deal with—but on the other hand, she hadn’t done anything to deny Fedya’s claims. It was possible, plausible even, that they were sleeping together. Fedya had always had a weird level of intimacy with both of the Kuragin siblings, and he and Hélène had known each other for years. Was he really being paranoid about this?

The silence had become almost unbearable when Anatole said, “It was really something to watch.” Pierre turned his head, blinking in confusion, and Anatole pantomimed a fighting stance. “You can really throw a sick punch. You’ll have to teach me sometime.”

“I really shouldn’t,” said Pierre with a great shuddering sigh.

“I’ve never seen Fedya go down so fast,” he continued. “And I’ve seen him get the shit kicked out of him more than once.”

Pierre furrowed his brow. “When?”

Anatole shrugged. “I mean, that wasn’t the first time Hélène and Fedya snuck me in somewhere. And it definitely wasn’t the first time Fedya’s made a complete ass of himself.”

Pierre let out an angry exhale, silently cursing Fedya and Hélène’s apparent inability to treat
Anatole like a seventeen-year-old. “Where are your parents, Anatole?”

“Vasily—Papa, I mean—he’s on some fancy business trip. Dunno where. I don’t really care, to be honest. The house is a lot nicer without him in it.”

Pierre decided not to push his luck on that one. Hélène didn’t like alluding to her family life, but he had picked up enough to suspect that their father was hard on both of them. The night that Hélène’s father had found out that she’d changed from a business major to women’s studies had been awful, to put it mildly. Vasily had called her while she was in Pierre’s apartment, and she had fled to the bathroom without preamble, locking herself inside. Pierre had spent hours outside the door, entreating her to just talk to him, but she hadn’t responded. She had come out eventually, after what felt like an eternity, sliding wordlessly into bed with him, and although he never asked her about it, he had seen how swollen and damp her eyes had been. Hélène was so strong, an expert at keeping herself in check. The thought that someone could provoke such a raw display of emotion from her deeply disturbed him.

“What about your mother?”

Anatole stared at him, confused. “Did Hélène not tell you?” he said with a curious tilt to his head. “She passed away a long time ago.”

Pierre froze. “Oh my God. I had no idea. I’m so sorry.”

Anatole shrugged. “There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

A heavy silence fell between them, punctuated by the creaking of the windscreen wipers and the jostling of potholes. Anatole sank back into his seat, playing with the zipper on his windbreaker.

“I was a real mama’s boy, you know,” he said after a while.

Pierre turned his head. “Oh?”

Anatole stared at the zipper, his lips curling into a half-smile. “I was only little, so I don’t remember much. Mom was the one who taught me to play violin. She could play so well, Pierre, you have no idea. And she made it look so easy. Everything came easy to her—violin, piano, cello, accordion, you name it, and if she didn’t already know how to play it, she’d teach herself and have it down pat in a day. She loved music so much.” He blinked, swallowing heavily. “Everyone always says that I take after her.”

Pierre nodded and pressed his lips into a thin line. “And your sister?”

“Hélène’s always been a lot like Papa,” Anatole said quietly. “It’s hard for her to admit it at the best of times. That’s why she…tries so hard.” Pierre frowned and Anatole shook his head. “I know she can be demanding and she’s a chronic perfectionist, but she does it for the right reasons. She cares a lot about the people she loves.” He sighed fondly. “You know, she practically raised me on her own.”

Pierre nodded and pressed his lips into a thin line. “And your sister?”

“Hélène’s always been a lot like Papa,” Anatole said quietly. “It’s hard for her to admit it at the best of times. That’s why she…tries so hard.” Pierre frowned and Anatole shook his head. “I know she can be demanding and she’s a chronic perfectionist, but she does it for the right reasons. She cares a lot about the people she loves.” He sighed fondly. “You know, she practically raised me on her own.”

“Wait, what?”

Anatole nodded plainly at Pierre’s look of confusion and horror, as if it were the most perfectly natural thing in the whole world. “Our older brother left for school when I was nine and our dad isn’t around a lot. It’s pretty much been me and Hélène on our own since then.”

“She would have been thirteen?”
“Yeah, I guess.”

Pierre made a move to push his glasses up his nose before remembering that they were probably lying crushed in the middle of the dancefloor back at Borodino’s. He sighed, pressing a hand to his forehead. “She never told me any of this.”

“Any of it?”

Pierre stared at his shoes. “I only learned that you existed a few weeks ago. She never mentioned your mother or—what’s his name again?”

“Ippolit?”

“Ippolit,” he murmured. “She’s never said a thing about him. Hélène told me that you were her only brother.”

Something like sadness flickered across Anatole’s features, but it was gone not a moment later. He began to play with his zipper again, bouncing one leg up and down. Pierre wondered to himself whether Anatole had always been this fidgety or if he just hadn’t been paying enough attention until now to notice. “She’s never liked him all that much. I feel bad for even thinking it but I can’t say I blame her. Even before he left, they always butted heads. Every little thing had to be an argument. He’s in New York now. He never visits, never calls. I think he sees Papa more than we do. Not that I’m complaining.” Anatole paused. “I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

An almost clairvoyant moment of realization. Pierre didn’t quite have the energy to be impressed, but it was a pleasant surprise nonetheless. “A little.”

“I must be losing my mind.”

“I think you’re just hungover, Anatole,” he said.

Anatole tilted his head back and closed his eyes, laughing silently. “Nonsense.” They pulled up to Pierre’s apartment building, and his mask of a smile faltered for only a second. “Well, looks like this is your stop, old man.”

“Where are you headed now?”

“I’m coming in, if that’s cool with you.” At Pierre’s confused expression, he added, “Hélène’ll send me over to get her stuff at some point anyways. May as well do it now.”

Pierre paused, evaluating Anatole. “Is this her breaking up with me?”

Anatole shrugged. “Honestly, she probably just needs some time to cool off. Chill with the calls.”

“But she hasn’t—”

“Don’t smother her,” he said. “I promise you, she won’t appreciate it.”

Pierre nodded, accepting what was probably uncharacteristically sage advice. Anatole, he had slowly come to realize, had the unfortunate tendency of talking with such oblivious self-confidence that he gave the impression of being either very clever or very stupid and nothing in between. Pierre had yet to decide which one to settle on.

Even though his apartment was only on the third floor, Pierre decided that his hungover self was in no fit condition to handle the stairwell. They rode the elevator in silence. Pierre was relieved to find
it empty, relieved that his neighbors wouldn’t see him in such a state of pathetic disarray, relieved
that he wouldn’t have to explain away Anatole’s presence. It had been bad enough the past few
years, back before he’d manage to put his drinking habits under some semblance of control. He’d
lost count of the nights and mornings he’d spent staggering home in a drunken heap, all flailing
limbs and dropped keys and garbled curses.

Pierre made a beeline for his front door the second they stepped off at the landing. He turned the
door knob, but it refused to give.

“You leave your door unlocked?” Anatole said incredulously.

Keys. In his hungover stupor, he had forgotten about those. “No,” he admitted. “Thanks for
reminding me.” Pierre dove into his back pocket, only to find it empty. “Shit.”

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “Forgot your keys?”

Pierre’s face went pale as his stomach sank in dread. “I always keep them in my pocket. Always.
Unless…” He patted his pockets once more for good measure, before hanging his head. “Dammit.”

“No prob,” Anatole said calmly, holding up his. “I have the spare.”

“Of course you do,” he groaned.

Anatole reached past him and unlocked the door. He kicked off his shoes at the threshold and
followed Pierre into the living room. “So, where should I start?” he asked. “Does she have a
drawer?”

Pierre blushed, remembering some of the more…colorful items Hélène had left behind. “I can
always get everything together myself and drop it off. Don’t you have homework to do?”

Anatole waved him down. “There’s always Sunday. Can I use this box?”

“No really, I insist,” he said, moving subconsciously to block Anatole’s path to the chest of
drawers. He didn’t even want to begin to think of what Anatole might find, digging around in his
personal effects. “You’re my guest; I’m not going to let you do all the work.”

“If it bothers you that much, we could always do it together,” Anatole countered, and before Pierre
could say anything, he began to rifle through his drawers one by one. Pierre dashed across the
room, his face burning hotly.

“I’ll take care of the dresser, really, you don’t need to—”

But he was too late. Anatole wrinkled his nose in disgust as he held up a lacy black corset by one
strap. “Oh my God,” he muttered.

“Sorry,” said Pierre.

Anatole shook his head and gingerly dropped it into the box, his cheeks bright red. “I don’t even
wanna know.”

While Anatole’s back was turned, Pierre reached into the next drawer and discreetly slid the
matching garter belt and panties into the box.

“You know,” he said, “maybe you’re right. I’ll let you sort her things out.”

“Her toothbrush and shampoo are in the bathroom,” Pierre said, gesturing down the corridor. “You
could grab those.”

While Anatole headed down the hall, Pierre quickly gathered Hélène’s things from his bedroom and tossed them into the box: the nightshirts stuffed down the sides of his dresser; the books and magazines perched on top of the coffee table; the bras not-so-discreetly stashed away in his sock drawer. Odd bits and bobs—makeup brushes, hair clips, fuzzy socks, perfume vials, scarves, and half-empty tubes of chapstick. He paused for a second when he came across her hidden cache of cigarettes, before tossing them in the trash. For a woman who prided herself on being a neurotic neat freak, he mused bitterly, she had left behind quite a mess. Perhaps this was her way of marking her territory.

Anatole padded back into the room. “I wasn’t sure if this moisturizer was hers or yours—” he began, when Maneater suddenly began to blare from his pocket. His eyes widened and he fished out his phone and unlocked the screen. “Oh, shit,” he murmured.

Pierre raised an eyebrow. “What is it?”

“It’s Hélène,” he said with a grimace. “I told her I’d be back home, like, twenty minutes ago.”

Pierre pinched the bridge of his nose. “Oh, Jesus Christ.”

“Sorry, but I think I should take this,” Anatole muttered, and skirted back into the hallway with a timid, “Hi, Lena.”

Pierre could almost hear Hélène shouting on the other end. He sank into the old armchair by the television, the green plush number that always seemed to smell like an odd combination of mothballs and his mother’s house, and rubbed at his pounding temples with his fingertips.

“I’m just at Pierre’s,” he heard Anatole say. Hélène yelled something incoherent on the other line, and Anatole let out an exasperated sigh. “He needed help, alright? And I thought you were the one—I’m sorry, the driver was late and…look, you were pissed and I didn’t want you to bite my head off and—because I knew you wouldn’t let me if I told you!” Anatole exhaled loudly.

Pierre tried to ignore the sharp twinge of guilt that speared his gut at that.

“Of course he knows,” he continued. “I wasn’t going to leave without—what, do you think I’m stupid or something? Don’t answer that.” He paused. “I’m not a baby anymore, Lena. I don’t need you holding my hand everywhere I go. No, I called a cab. Did you really think I was gonna just walk the whole way? I’ve got my own money, thank you very much; I’ll be f—well, come pick me up then, if it bothers you that much!” There were a few moments of silence before Anatole’s voice picked up. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll get your stuff while I’m here. See you in five.”

Anatole walked back into the room, shaking his head. “You really did a number on her,” he grumbled. “She’s probably gonna put a tracking app on my phone now.”

“You didn’t tell her you were going out?”

“Oh, I did,” Anatole said. “I always do. Only, I may have fudged the exact location. Just a little.” At Pierre’s bemused expression, he added, “Look, if your big sister kept you on a goddamn leash anytime you wanted to go out on your own, you’d learn to get creative with the details too.”

“You really didn’t have to do that,” Pierre murmured awkwardly. “I never thanked you properly, by the way.”

“No problem. Think of it as payback for the whole put-a-raccoon-in-the-principal’s-office thing.
Just try not to murder Fedya next time.”

“I’m sorry about this,” Pierre sighed. “All of this. She shouldn’t have dragged you into it.”

Anatole shrugged. “I dragged myself into it. I was the one who nagged her and Fedya to bring me along in the first place.”

“Still, though, she’s being—”

“Look, man, I’m not gonna talk shit about my sister with you,” he said firmly. “I get that you’re upset, but so is she. I mean, you did punch out her best friend. And accuse her of sleeping with him. And get the cops called. And—”

“But I’m her boyfriend. Shouldn’t I be her best friend?” said Pierre.

“Listen,” Anatole said, “as much as I love pissing her off—and trust me, I’m her little brother, it’s my job to piss her off—she’s allowed to have friends who aren’t you.”

“And I get that,” Pierre said quickly. “But the stuff with her and Fedya…don’t you think there’s something weird about it?”

Anatole raised an eyebrow, dropping his head. “I really don’t know what you want me to say. If you have an issue, take it up with her. Later, I mean,” he added. “Like, when the sight of you doesn’t send her into a blind rage.”

Pierre frowned. “And you’re sure she isn’t breaking up with me?”

Anatole snorted. “And miss the opportunity to stomp on your heart in person? Not her style. If anything, I think—”

BZZZ BZZZ. BZZZ BZZZ.

Anatole looked down at his phone and his face fell flat. “She’s outside.”

“Already?”

“I should probably go. Or I’ll be in for an even worse telling-off than I already am.”

Pierre nodded. “I’ll walk you outside. You want any help carrying that box?”

“Nah, I’m fine.” Anatole lugged the box under one arm and tilted his head in a mock-salute as he strode to the door. “See you ‘round, old man.”

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**Barnacle #3:** did you get home alright?

**Anatole Kuragin:** yeah im still alive

**Anatole Kuragin:** shes pissed @ me but could be worse

**Barnacle #3:** that’s good to hear

**Barnacle #3:** hey just a question
Barnacle #3: do you by any chance know where my car is?

Anatole Kuragin: tbh finding it wasn’t top priority last night

Barnacle #3: oh dear god
In Which Life Is Good At Moscow High

Chapter Summary

Moscow continues to be a drag, and Sonya and Mary are cute.

Chapter Notes

New chapter! Thank you for all the lovely support! Kudos and comments fill our lives with joy!

A few notes!

While one of us (@thewhiskerydragon) is excellent at french, she is not a native speaker, so there may be some translation issues

Part of this chapter takes place in a Sex Ed class, so there is some discussion of some adult-ish things

This chapter pokes a fair bit of fun at Slav culture, but rest assured that one of us (@MaplePaizley) is genuinely Slavic, and this is drawn directly from her experiences

Sonya, much to the collective dismay of the entire Rostov household, had always been a ridiculously early riser. Natasha knew it was wrong to fault her for having a healthy sleep schedule, but it certainly didn’t make it any less frustrating when she was woken up at 6:00 in the morning by the sound of Sonya singing obscure folk music in the shower and padding about the hallways—for all her many qualities, Sonya was undeniably heavy-footed.

“Monday morning!” she chirped, flinging the curtains wide open. “Time for school!”

Natasha groaned, pulling a pillow over her head, and silently thanked her lucky stars that they no longer shared a room. “You’re too excited about this.”

“Well, why shouldn’t I be?” said Sonya, irritatively chipper as ever. She was like the damn Energizer Bunny, Natasha thought. To her knowledge, they both went to sleep at roughly the same time, but it took at least three coffees for Natasha to have anywhere near the kind of energy Sonya had in the morning.

“Because it’s a Monday morning and—surprise, surprise—we have another full week of school,” Natasha grumbled, reaching for her phone. “You’re just excited to see Mary again.”

“Maybe I am, maybe I’m not,” Sonya said teasingly, and reached over to yank the comforter off the bed. Natasha whined and made a grab for the blanket, but Sonya had already draped it over the footboard and walked over to the closet.

“You didn’t even coordinate an outfit for the day?” Sonya turned around, balancing herself against the doorframe. “But you always do that.”
“I was too tired to bother last night. I’ve been tired every day since September began.” She sighed. “God, I can’t wait for summer to come again.”

Sonya gasped in mock-horror. “But we’ve only just gotten back from summer.”


“You can have fun here as well!”

Natasha rolled onto her back dramatically, kicking her feet up onto the headboard and reaching for her phone. “What fun? What could anybody do here for fun? All I do is study and commute and study and eat and study and sleep. I’m dying here, Sonyushka.” Natasha’s phone went off with a loud ping. Her head snapped up from the screen with a wide grin. “Oh my God!” she squealed. “He followed me back!”

Sonya frowned. “Who?”

“Anatole!”

“Nat,” Sonya sighed, “this is just asking for trouble.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, letting her head loll back against the pillow. “You said it yourself. I’m allowed to make new friends.”

“I don’t think that boy wants to be your friend.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I saw the way he looked at you,” she said quietly. “I don’t like it.”

“Could you trust me? It doesn’t matter what he thinks, I’m not gonna do anything dumb. Leave it alone.”

Sonya sighed. “I don’t like him, Nat. I just get this…vibe.”

“And I didn’t like Mary at first either,” Natasha said. “Well, I’m still not convinced that she doesn’t hate me, but I’m trying to patch things over and move on. You just need to hang out with him. Maybe you’ll end up getting along. He was so sweet to me, Sonyushka; you’d love him if you got to know him.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Sonya said, draping a pair of jeans and a blouse over the chair by Natasha’s desk. “I’ll back off.”

“Will you at least give him a chance?”

“I’ll be nice,” Sonya grumbled. “But I don’t have to like him.”

“Look, so long as you don’t, like, get into an actual fistfight, I’m fine with that.”

“I could take him,” Sonya insisted, putting up fists. “I’m scrappy.”

Natasha nodded theatrically. “Oh, definitely. I’ll let him know to watch out.”

“He wouldn’t know what hit him.”

“Come on, Slayer,” she said, dragging herself out of bed. “Let’s go get some breakfast.”
Moscow High, like many schools in the area, had been built during the Cold War, and as such, its basement doubled as a bomb shelter. Not much about it had changed since then, it seemed—at least, that was the conclusion that Natasha had quickly drawn within the first week of school. The paint on the walls was still falling off in giant cracks and splinters, the air still reeked of antiseptic, and the flickering lights still cast a dim, ugly yellow in the halls, like a scene from some low-budget horror movie. She had once heard Sonya describe something called “liminal space”, and though she still didn’t quite understand the term, she imagined it would be something like this: a Twilight Zone of a high school, like a looking-glass straight into the fifties.

If this was anything like what the shelters had looked like, well, Natasha privately decided that she would have rather taken her chances with a nuclear wasteland. And as gross as the hallways were, they still weren’t half as bad as some of the lower-level classrooms. Mrs. Mikhailovna’s in particular was an achievement in unpleasantness, and no matter how much air freshener the janitor sprayed, it always smelled of an odd mixture of retirement home, hand sanitizer, and borscht.

Not to mention the class itself. Sex Ed. Dear God.

As depressing as the classroom was, Natasha’s heart skipped a beat as her eyes landed on a familiar shock of white-blond hair. Anatole was sitting with his long legs crowded into the last seat of the back row, twirling a pen in his hand, looking like he would have rather been anywhere else than in Mrs. Mikhailovna’s musty, windowless classroom.

“All right, all right,” Mrs. Mikhailovna said with a phlegm-filled cough as she wheeled an ancient-looking projector to the front of the room. “In your seats! The bell rang five minutes ago.”

He still hadn’t noticed her staring. Oblivious, Natasha thought, but endearingly so, and she quietly slid into the desk next to him.

“Hey, stranger,” she whispered, poking his calf with her foot.

Anatole’s face lit up. “Natalie!”

Natasha grinned back beatifically. “What’s new?”

Anatole shrugged. “Not much. That’s a common theme in Moscow.”

“Yeah, I kinda picked up on that.”

“What’s new with you?”

“Pretty much the same,” she said. “There isn’t anywhere to go for fun around here.”

Anatole gave her a cryptic smile. “It’s about knowing the right places to go. I’ll show you around sometime.” He winked, and Natasha’s stomach fluttered.

“I’ll hold you to that.”

Anatole leaned back in his seat, unfolding his legs in front of him. “It’s the least I can do.”

Mrs. Mikhailovna still hadn’t noticed them talking. It helped, Natasha supposed, that they were in the far back of the room. It helped even more so that the rest of the class was also engaged in conversation—hushed whispers and giggles and comments that were probably just too quiet for her
old ears to hear. The sound of Mrs. Mikhailovna’s droning voice was enough to put anyone to sleep, and not even the gory images projected onto the chalkboard were enough to keep anyone’s attention.

A tiny water droplet fell from somewhere up above onto a page in Natasha’s open notebook. She craned her head towards the ceiling, where a dripping leak had sprouted between the foam tiles. Surrounding the leak she could see the beginnings of a muddy brown stain and a mottled patch of mold that had bloomed along the tiles and gas pipes. Natasha wrinkled her nose.

“This room is disgusting.”

“Scooch a little closer,” Anatole said, and he helped her drag her desk towards him so that the leak dripped onto the floor and not her notebook. “There we go.”

“Thank you,” she said, and tore the wet page out of her book. And then: “Does it always smell of borscht in here?”

“That’s super specific,” he said.

Natasha shrugged. “It’s a super specific smell.”

Anatole’s eyes went comically wide and he sat up a little straighter in his seat, looking for all the world like a three-year old on Christmas. It was cuter than she cared to admit to see him so excited. “You too?”

Natasha blinked. “Me what?”

“Your Slav is showing.”

“Oh!” she said, finally catching his drift. “Yeah, you got me. Sonya and I are Russian.”

“A Nice Russian Girl,” he said, and Natasha could practically hear the capital letters in his voice. “Glad to know that they actually exist. I thought it was something my grandparents made up.”

Natasha laughed. “My parents moved us out here so we could reconnect with our ‘roots’.”

“Well then, you came to the right place,” Anatole said with a wry grin. “Everyone—and I mean everyone—in this whole town is Russian. Well,” he added, “maybe there’s a few Ukrainians in the mix. And then there’s Balaga, but nobody knows anything about him anyway.”

“That weirdo who drives the bus?”

“There’s a reason,” he said drily, “that my sister drives me to school every morning. Love the guy, don’t get me wrong, but I enjoy having my head intact with the rest of my body.”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. “You know him? Like, outside of school? Is he like a family friend or something like that?”

Anatole snorted. “Something like that.”

Natasha shook her head. “This school is a disaster. Where do all the taxes go?”

“To putting more potholes in the roads,” he said. “That’s what my dad says, anyway.”

“Pretty sad when a school is so strapped for cash that they have to resort to digging fossils out of the ground to get teachers.”
“God, tell me about it. This class is a trainwreck every year. Sex Ed. With the crankiest old bat in this whole damn town,” he grimaced. “This oughtta be good.”

Natasha’s face went hot. “It’s a stupid class.”

“It is,” Anatole said seriously. “I heard they tried to get Mr. Kutuzov to take over again this year but I think last year’s seniors really traumatized him.”

“Just our luck, isn’t it?” she said. “The one class we have together and it’s—”

“The one class?” He tilted his head and began to dig through his binder for his schedule. “You’re not even in AP French?”

“I took Spanish,” she said. “My parents thought it would be more useful.”

Anatole nodded. “Ah. Quelle dommage.”

“I don’t speak any French.”

“Eh bien, il faudra qu’on change ça.”

“Anatole,” she said, giggling, “I can’t understand what you’re saying.”

“No matter. I could teach you, if you’d like.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Right here? In the middle of class?”

“Nobody’s going to be paying attention anyway. No one ever listens to Mrs. Mikhailovna.”

Natasha sighed and cast a glance to the front of the room, where Mrs. Mikhailovna droned on obliviously with her back turned to the rest of the room. “I can’t say I blame them.”

“We’re just lucky Fedya and Hélène already graduated—now that class was a riot.” Natasha cocked her head inquisitively. “My sister and her friend,” he explained. “Honestly, it’s a miracle Ms. Dmitrievna didn’t kick the two of them out. She came pretty damn close, actually. Twice, if I recall. They got busted for smuggling booze into junior prom, and then apparently there was some incident with a car in their senior year, but Hélène won’t tell me a thing about that one.”

Natasha grinned. “Does it run in the family?”

“Perhaps,” he said with a charmingly roguish smirk.

“Anything to liven up this class would be a godsend.”

Anatole laughed. “Is Moscow sucking the life out of you that fast?”

Natasha yawned, pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes. “I’m just so tired all the time,” she moaned. “First month of school and I’m already giving up.” She pressed her forehead against the desk, tilting her head sideways to face him. “At least it’s lunch next period. God, I’d do anything for a free right now.”

Something shifted in Anatole’s eyes, like a light switch in his head had been flipped on. “I can make that happen for you,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m sure you totally could,” she said, and despite the sarcasm dripping from her words, she couldn’t help but smile at his eagerness.
Anatole smiled back. “Is that a challenge?”

“Maybe it is,” she said with a nonchalant shrug.

He cracked his knuckles dramatically. “Sit back and watch le maître at work.”

Natasha failed to suppress the snort that ripped out of her at that, and Mrs. Mikhailovna’s attention snapped to the back of the room. “You two in the last row!” she said sharply. “Care to share anything with the class?”

“Yeah, actually, I have a question,” Anatole said, fighting down a diabolical grin, “Is it true that you can’t get a girl pregnant if you do it standing up?”

Natasha clapped a hand to her face to muffle another snort as the class burst into nervous laughter. Mrs. Mikhailovna’s face turned bright red.

“Mr. Kuragin,” she sputtered, “that is hardly an appropriate question!”

Natasha pressed a hand to her stomach and she doubled over wheezing, tears in the corners of her eyes. Anatole must have seen just how amused she was, because he shot her a sideways wink and pressed on. “It’s a serious concern. I really feel like knowing is key to my sexual education,” he said calmly. All throughout the room, students had erupted into fits of snorting and snickering and howling.

Mrs. Mikhailovna took in a deep breath, as if to steel her nerves. “It won’t be a concern so long as you practice abstinence. And that goes for all of you.”

“Maybe I’ll just ask my sister, then,” Anatole said loudly, and Natasha laughed even harder, much to the ire of Mrs. Mikhailovna. “I’m sure she’ll have a proper answer.”

“Mr. Kuragin!” she began, and the rest of the class had begun to shout out their own questions.

“How do you aim?” asked one student.

“What’s a condom?” asked another.

“That’s enough!” she shrieked, but it was too late, and the class was too far gone. She fought to gain control for a few minutes, but it was clear that there was nothing she could do. Instead, Mrs. Mikhailovna threw her hands in the air and stormed out the room, slamming the door shut behind her.

“Oh my God,” Natasha whispered in an odd mixture of horror and amusement.

Anatole leaned back in his seat, stretching his arms over his head. “Works like a charm,” he said with a roguish grin. “And there you go. Now we have a free.” The look on Natasha’s face must have been horrified, because he quickly backtracked. “Don’t worry. We’re not gonna get in trouble or anything. Literally everybody messes with her. Fedya—he’s a friend of me and my sister—told me she nearly had a heart attack two years ago when he asked her what the clitoris was.”

Natasha’s eyes went wide. “Are you serious? How did she respond to that?”

“She told him it didn’t exist.” Natasha guffawed, and Anatole nodded seriously. “Hélène damn near staged a riot when she heard. She decided to hold her own Sex Ed class in the lunchroom. I mean, she got detention for it, but I heard it was awesome.”
“Oh my God,” Natasha said. “Your sister sounds fearless.”

Anatole chuckled. “She is. I swear, Fedya’s, like, ninety-five percent of her impulse control. And vice versa as well.”

“I’d love to meet her someday,” Natasha said shyly.

“I’m sure you will.”

And because she was feeling bold, she leaned in and said, “Does that mean I’ll be seeing more of you?”

He gave her a sidelong grin. “I’d like that.”

“I was wondering if you wanted to swap numbers? I meant to ask you at homecoming but I never got the—”

Anatole already had his phone out. “Totally!” he said.

“Great,” Natasha grinned, passing him her phone. She smiled to herself when she saw that he had put his name as ‘Tolya’. Never one to back down from a challenge, she edited the name she had typed in from ‘Natalie’ to ‘Nat’ before she handed his phone back to him.

“Do you wanna get out of here? Since we have a free.”

“Where would we go?”

Anatole shrugged. “Uptown, maybe? We could go grab lunch. There’s a coffee place a few blocks away. Pavlovna’s. We might as well start the Moscow highlights tour now.”

Natasha paused for a second, considering, before she grabbed her backpack. “Lead the way.”

Mary, it seemed, had claimed the table in the far right corner of the lunchroom as her own. Even in the bustling chaos of the cafeteria, she sat alone with nothing but her little gray lunchbox to accompany her. Sonya made a beeline for the table and slid into the seat opposite her, precariously balancing her lunch tray. “What’s new?”

Mary dour face broke into a smile and she sat up a little straighter in her seat. “Not much. Sorry for cancelling again.”

“No problem! Should we aim for this Saturday?”

“I dunno,” Mary said grimly. “I’m beginning to think it’s a cursed day for us.”

“Okay, so maybe during lunch someday? What if we, like, walk uptown or something?”

“I can’t,” she sighed. “My dad wouldn’t sign the off-campus permission slip.”

“Gotcha,” said Sonya. “We’ll just have to be creative then.”

“And what exactly do you mean by that?”

Sonya grinned mischievously. “Let me worry about it.”
Mary shook her head indulgently, but dropped the subject. “Where’s Natasha?”

Sonya shrugged. “I invited her to sit with us, but she said she had other plans.”

“Did she tell you where she was going?”

“No, but she’s been kinda off lately. I think she just needs some space.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Mary said pensively. “Did I upset her? With the whole homecoming thing?”

“Nah, I don’t think it’s you,” Sonya said quickly. “I think she’s just weirded out about you being Andrei’s sister, you know?”

“Yeah, well, there’s not much I can do to change that,” Mary muttered.

“Just give her some time. She’ll come around eventually.”

“I hope so,” Mary sighed. “I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen Andrei this serious about a girl. I don’t want to mess that up for him.”

“Nat loves Andrei,” Sonya said firmly. “And she wants to have a good relationship with you, I promise.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive! You guys just need to talk, and I know that she’ll love you.”

“Thanks,” Mary said quietly. “That means a lot.”

Sonya smiled at her. “What can I say? I’m a great judge of character.”

“Okay, you dork,” Mary said, playfully swatting her. “You don’t know me that well.”

“So?” Sonya began, wiggling excitedly in her seat.

Mary raised an eyebrow. “So?”

Sonya grinned. “Tell me about yourself, then!”

“There isn’t much to tell,” Mary said. “I live with my dad, Andrei’s my only brother, and my favorite class is math.”

“Favorite color?”

Mary paused for a moment. “Gray.”

“Seriously?”

“What? It goes with everything.”

Sonya snorted. “You’re such a grandma.”

Mary chucked a carrot stick at her. “Am not!”

“It’s true!” she insisted, pointing to her lunch tray. “Everything about you screams ‘babushka’. You’ve even eaten the same meal every day since the beginning of school. What is this even,
“rabit food?”

“It’s salad!”

“Where’s the flavor? Where’s the taste?”

Mary pouted, hiding her tub of hummus beneath a napkin, and leaned back in her seat. “Carrots are tasty,” she said quietly.

Sonya cleared her throat. “Anyways, let’s get back to the topic at hand. Favourite Disney movie?”

“I’ve never seen any.”

At that, Sonya nearly choked on her sandwich. “What do you mean, you’ve never seen any?”

Mary shrugged. “Andrei and I were never allowed to watch cartoons growing up. My father doesn’t believe in movies. He thought that they would ‘corrupt our minds’. Especially the ones with all the singing and dancing and—”

“No musicals?” Sonya gasped.

Mary nodded. “No musicals.”

“No even…oh, but why, Mary? Your father—no offense—sounds crazy. Not even Charlie Brown during the holidays?”

Mary shook her head. “‘Too frivolous’. And my dad hates jazz.”

“Nightmare Before Christmas?”

“‘Satanic’.”

“Spirited Away?”

“‘Witchcraft’.”

“Right,” Sonya said, resolutely slapping her hand against the table for want of a gavel, “that settles it.”

Mary sat back in her seat and raised an eyebrow.

“You’re coming over to my place and I’m digging up ever Disney film I can get my hands on and we’re having a musical marathon,” she continued. “They’re classics, Mary, you can’t not have seen them.”

“I’ve gone nearly eighteen years without seeing them. I think I’ll survive. And besides, my father doesn’t allow me to go out to other people’s homes.”

“Then I’ll come to your house,” Sonya suggested.

Mary snorted. “Sure you will.”

“Sure I will!”

“I’m not supposed to have visitors over. My father’s a complete grouch, Sonya, honestly, you wouldn’t even want to come over in the first place.”
“Then I’ll sneak in,” Sonya said, a mischievous flicker in her eyes. “I’ll go through the backyard, up to the porch or something and—”

“We don’t have a porch.”

“—up to the back door and I’ll give you our secret sign and you’ll come and let me in.” She rapped her knuckles against the table to the tune of Shave and a Haircut, and Mary tossed her head back and laughed.

“How could I say no to such a foolproof plan?”

Natasha didn’t hear back from Andrei for a week. And then it was two weeks. And then three. And before she knew it, a month had passed without him responding to any of her texts.

He finally messaged her on a lazy Saturday morning in early October.

**Frenchboi:** How are you doing at the new school?

**Natalka:** Fine

**Natalka:** I’ve been here over a month, so things are finally settling

**Frenchboi:** I know Nat, I’m sorry for not texting sooner

**Frenchboi:** Everything’s just been crazy

**Frenchboi:** And the time difference doesn’t help

**Natalka:** I know, don’t worry

**Natalka:** I’ve just missed you

**Natalka:** So much

**Frenchboi:** I miss you too

**Frenchboi:** Love you

**Natalka:** Love you too

He didn’t write back.
October blurred into November in a haze of schoolwork, college applications, and uptown treks to Pavlovna’s with Anatole. Natasha looked forward to their lunchtime meetings more than she cared to admit, and she began to stop bringing packed lunches in hopes of encouraging them. Anatole was fun and disarmingly easy to speak to, even as Sonya’s suspicious side-eyes became more and more frequent. It was easy to brush it off as her typical paranoia at first, but Natasha found that her patience was rapidly wearing thin.

“Who’re you texting?” Sonya asked one rainy Thursday morning as they ate breakfast together in the dining room. When Natasha didn’t respond, she leaned across the table and tapped the rim of her bowl with a spoon. “Earth to Nat! Are you still with us?”

Natasha’s eyes remained glued to the screen, her bare feet tucked onto the seat as she idly picked at her waffles. “Pardon?”

“Who’re you texting?”

“It’s just Anatole.”

Sonya pursed her lips. “I don’t mean to pry,” she said in a tone that indicated that she was going to do nothing but pry, “but you seem to be messaging him an awful lot.”

“Your point being?”

“Don’t you think you should at least tell Andrei about this guy?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “And why is that?”

“Um, because Anatole is flirting with you? And even if you don’t do anything, Andrei should know?”

“He’s not flirting,” she snapped, and popped a strawberry into her mouth. “And I don’t need Andrei’s permission to talk to another boy.”
“I’m not saying you need his permission,” Sonya said carefully. “But wouldn’t you want to know if Andrei was speaking to other girls?”

“I’m sure he is,” Natasha said. “But I wouldn’t know because he never answers my texts.”

“I’m sure he’s just busy, Nat.”

“Yeah, I know,” Natasha sighed. She turned her phone off and laid it on the table, screen-side down. “But I would have thought that I’d still be a priority, you know?”

Sonya pressed her mouth into a thin line. She didn’t know how to respond to that, and Natasha could see it spelled out clear as day on her features. There were few things in the world that Sonya detested more than not having a word of advice to give, and Natasha knew from experience that even when she didn’t know what to say, she knew how to waffle her way through a situation. So it came as no surprise when Sonya laid a gentle hand on her shoulder and said, “Well, I suppose that his academics have to be a priority now that he’s in college.” Natasha shot her an annoyed look, and Sonya raised her eyebrows. “Look, I’m not saying that he doesn’t care about you. Because he does. But even Mary says that he’s god-awful at keeping in touch.”

“Yeah, well,” she huffed, “I thought the whole point of long-distance was keeping in touch. Shows how much I know, I guess.”

Sonya absently stirred her Cheerios. She had hardly eaten a bite, which wasn’t unusual on a school morning, but it perturbed Natasha all the same. “Don’t get so blue, Nat. Look, if it bothers you that much, why don’t you give him a call—”

“But when, Sonya?” Natasha said, not so much annoyed as exhausted. “Now? He’ll be in class. And if I call him when I get home from school, he’ll be getting ready for bed. And if I call him after I finish my work, he’ll be asleep. Did you know that he didn’t text me back all of September?”

Sonya pursed her lips. “I don’t know what you want me to say,” she said after a long moment, and Natasha was almost taken aback. “But I will tell you that Andrei loves you very much and he at least deserves—”

“Girls!” called Mrs. Rostova from down the hall. “You do realize that the bus is coming in ten minutes?”

Natasha’s head snapped up. “Crap,” she hissed, and made a mad dash for the bathroom before Sonya could sneak another word in edgewise.

Natasha wondered whether she should have been concerned that they had a table at Pavlovna’s. Not just any old table, but their table, their regular spot: the booth in the far-right corner, with its window eternally fogged-over and the stuffed leather seats nearly bursting at the seams. It was a lovely café, if a little shabby, but the food was good and the portions were generous. Like clockwork, she and Anatole traced smiley-faces on the glass with their fingertips as they waited for their food, huddling against the side of the radiator for warmth. That was the one bad thing about Pavlovna’s, Natasha realized—no matter how high the thermostat was cranked, you’d freeze the second you took off your coat and hat.

It didn’t seem to bother Anatole, but then again, nothing truly did. If he happened to step in a puddle during their uptown trek and completely soak his shoes and socks—which he did with
alarming frequency—he would keep on walking without so much as batting an eyelid. If Pavlovna’s had run out of his favorite pumpkin bread, he would simply shrug and order something else. Even when Natasha had tripped and spilled her espresso down the front of his shirt, he had just cracked a joke about hand-eye coordination and uneven floor-tiles and then helped her clean the whole mess up.

It may have been one of her most embarrassing memories to date but, if anything, Anatole only seemed to have grown fonder of her since then. Their once-a-week uptown trip became twice-a-week, then thrice-a-week, and before she knew it, they were ditching cafeteria food every day for Pavlovna’s and its coffee and crêpes and cutesy sandwiches.

Lunch couldn’t come soon enough most days, and today was no exception. Natasha waited impatiently for Anatole by the doorway, her umbrella slung under one arm and her raincoat draped over her shoulders. The rain had only picked up since that morning, and Anatole, true to form, had neglected to bring either an umbrella or a jacket.

“Are you crazy? You’re going to get soaked!” she said, aghast.

Anatole shrugged. With every passing day, Natasha was more and more convinced that he was, in fact, crazy. That, or a figment of her imagination. “It’s alright,” he said, “I don’t mind. We’ll just walk fast.”

“You’ll catch your death out there.” Natasha blinked, shaking her head in bewilderment. “Oh my God. I’m turning into Marya D. Do you see what you’re doing to me, Anatole?” He laughed and she unfolded the umbrella. “Come on. We’ll huddle under it and you won’t drown in the rain.”

“We could always order takeout if the rain bothers you.”

She shook her head. “I like the walk. Gets my cardio in for the day. Now come on, or we’re gonna have to leave right after we get there.”

“At least let me hold it for you.”

“You didn’t strike me as the chivalrous sort.”

Anatole smiled lazily. “Manners are universal. Everyone should be the chivalrous sort.”

“I already signed us both out,” she said, handing him the umbrella. “There’s my chivalry.”

“Thank you.” He unfolded the umbrella, slung it over his shoulder, and offered her his arm. “Shall we?”

Natasha looped her arm through his with flourish. “We shall.”

“No Natasha again today?”

Sonya shrugged and shoveled another forkful of lasagna into her mouth. “She’s been buying lunch off-campus. I don’t know where.”

“Alone?” said Mary. “That’s horrible.”

Sonya snorted. “It’s Moscow, not, like, New York. She’s not gonna get snatched off the street or anything.”
“That’s not my point,” Mary said, laying a gentle hand on Sonya’s forearm. “Do you think she’s avoiding the cafeteria because she doesn’t have anyone to sit with?”

“Natasha is Miss Popular. She always has been, Mary. If she’s sitting on her own, it’ll be because she wants to.”

Mary tilted her head and furrowed her brow. She was too cute when she looked concerned, Sonya realized. It was more than a little distracting, and so she decided to glower at her lunch tray instead of making eye contact. “Are you sure about that?” said Mary.

Sonya shrugged. “If she didn’t, she would sit with us.”

“Maybe she wouldn’t,” Mary said softly. “I think I make her uncomfortable.”

“It’s not you,” Sonya said.

“I think it is,” Mary murmured. “It’s a weird situation and I was so rude…I don’t blame her.”

“You were rude on the first day of school,” Sonya said firmly. “If she can’t let that go, maybe she should be alone until she sorts through her feelings.”

“It just sucks being alone. Do you think she’s found a new friend group at least?”

Sonya gave her a dry smile. “Well, she’s found Anatole Kuragin, at any rate.”

Mary raised her eyebrows. “Knowing him, I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

Natasha took a sip. “The coffee’s really good today,” she said. “Actually, it’s the best coffee I’ve ever had.”

Anatole considered his cup thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t know. I don’t drink it.”

Natasha snorted. “Really? But then what’s in your—”

“This is just a hot chocolate,” he said with a conspiratorial grin that was so adorable she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Oh my God, you’re such a dweeb.”

“Hey!”

“It’s true!” Natasha sputtered. “What kind of high-schooler doesn’t drink coffee?”

“The kind that doesn’t like the taste! Hélène says I’m jittery enough without caffeine anyway.”

“Sweet tooth?”

“You have no idea. And I need the sugar rush to make it through the rest of the day.”

“What class do you have after lunch?”

Anatole paused for a moment. “I think I have French. French or physics.” He blinked, clearly deep in thought. “One of those two. It begins with an ‘f’ sound, at any rate—” Natasha laughed again, “—but I can’t remember which one. How about you?”
“I have AP Lit with Mrs. Scherer,” Natasha said, her face crumpling into a dour look. “Oh my God, the amount of homework she assigns is unreal.”

Anatole nodded and took a sip of his hot chocolate. “I’ve heard she’s awful as a teacher.”

“You don’t know the half of it. Julie Karagina asked to use the bathroom during an in-class essay and she screamed at her so badly that the poor thing started crying.”

“What a bitch,” he said. “I had her for homeroom my sophomore year and for some reason she always used to pick on Mary—you know Mary Bolkonskaya?”

Natasha forced her face to remain neutral. “We’re acquaintances.”

“We used to be big buds when we were kids but I don’t really see much of her nowadays,” said Anatole. “She’s always been super quiet, but then she, like, completely ghosted me in grade six.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “I think I’ve pretty much blown any chances I have at being friends with her.” Anatole tilted his head to the side in confusion. “I’m dating her brother,” she explained, “but I had no idea about it for the longest time. Neither of us did. And I guess I must have given her the wrong impression when I found out, because she avoids me in the hallways and she won’t talk to me at all in class.”

“Mary does that to most people anyway.”

“Not to Sonya,” she said bitterly.

“Your cousin?”

Natasha nodded, idly fiddling with the coffee stirrer. For some strange reason, she found herself unable to make eye contact with him. “Yeah. She’s having an easier time fitting in here than me.”

Anatole looked genuinely bewildered at that. “You seem like you’re fitting in just fine.” Natasha snorted disdainfully and he reached across the table for her hand. “Seriously! You’re such a cool person, I can’t imagine anyone not wanting to hang out with you.”

“Well, the whole school seems to have taken that route.”

“Their loss, then.”

Natasha gently pulled her hand back. “Thank you.”

“I mean it.” He smiled softly. “Is there anything I can do to make Moscow suck a little less?”

“You’re doing more than your part.”

“I wish we had more classes together at least,” Anatole said. “How’s Spanish going?”

Natasha shrugged. “I think I want to take another language credit. Is French hard?”

“I dunno. I was fluent already, so it was just an easy A.”

“Are you serious? Come on, man, that’s unfair! Is your family, like, part-French or something?”

Anatole smiled fondly. “No, just super-traditional Russians. My mother always spoke it to me growing up. She thought it was important for us to be bilingual. French I picked up really quickly. Russian, not so much.”
“You’re so lucky,” Natasha sighed. “I wish I could speak another language.”

“You know, the offer for French lessons still stands.”

Natasha laughed. “Are you this accommodating to every new student?”

“Only the beautiful ones,” he said, with an air so casual he may as well have been speaking about the weather.

Natasha blushed and averted her eyes, eager to change the subject. “Is your sister fluent too?”

Anatole shrugged. “Languages aren’t her thing.”

“What is her thing, then?”

“Besides sarcasm and making my life difficult?” Natasha snorted, and Anatole waved her down. “Nah, I’m just teasing. She’s a fitness freak. She’s into shopping. Political discourse. That, more than anything.”

“Sounds like fun.” Natasha blinked, realizing how blunt her tone had been. “That wasn’t meant sarcastically, I promise.”

“Surprisingly, it is. She makes everything fun. Especially family gatherings.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Anatole’s grin widened. “Our dad’s a strong Republican and Hélène was not having any of it. I mean, she was always vocal about it when we were growing up but she takes it to another level when she has an audience. And boy, did she get her audience.”

Natasha’s eyes went wide. “What did she do?”

Anatole smiled at the memory. “She told our dad that she was pregnant in the middle of this one campaign donor party a few years ago that he was hosting for a pro-life candidate. She wasn’t really knocked up,” he amended at Natasha’s horrified squeak, “but she lives to provoke him.”

“Oh my god,” Natasha breathed. “I can’t imagine what my dad would do if I tried something like that. What—I mean, after it was all over—how did your dad react?”

Anatole snorted. “Him and Hélène are practically the same person. He went along with it to try to get her to cave, like a really twisted game of chicken. It ended with her and her boyfriend trying to fake a shotgun wedding, but they had the worst fight. Her and her boyfriend, that is, not her and my dad. Well, they had a fight as well, of course, but it was more passive-aggressive than aggressive-aggressive, if you know what I mean.”

Natasha chuckled and the tips of Anatole’s ears flushed a bright red. He was very cute, she decided, when he blushed. A little too cute for their collective good. “I’m rambling, aren’t I?”

“You do that sometimes. A lot like Sonya, actually.”

Anatole chuckled. “It’s something Hélène says I need to work on.”

“Did she leave for college?”

Anatole’s face shifted slightly into an emotion she couldn’t quite pinpoint. “She decided she wanted to commute instead. I think she’d miss home too much. And I think I’d miss her too
much.” He smiled softly. “But you didn’t hear it from me.”

“I think that’s sweet. I’m the same way with my cousin. Her parents died when we were little and she’s been living with us ever since. She’s more like a sister to me.”

Anatole nodded. “That’s really cute, that you’re so close.”

“I’m a family girl,” she admitted. “Honestly, I don’t know how I’m going to handle leaving for college. I can’t imagine ever not being with Sonya or my mom or dad.”

“Family’s important,” said Anatole.

“Are you close to your parents too?”

“Not really. My dad’s always, like, away on business trips and stuff so I never see him around.”

“And your mom?”

Anatole’s smile faltered. “She died a few years ago.”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “Oh! Oh my God, I’m so sorry, I had no idea.”

“Don’t apologize. There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

Natasha hesitated, searching for words. She didn’t want to upset him, but she found her curiosity beating out any sense of tact. “Were you two close?”

“She was the best person I’ve ever known.”

“We don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,” Natasha said quickly.

“No, it’s alright.” Anatole pensively traced the rim of his cup. “It helps. I don’t remember much but they’re all good memories. She took me to see my first Broadway play, back when we lived in New York.”

“Oh my God,” Natasha breathed, the ghost of a smile on her lips. “What show was it?”

Anatole grinned. “You really wanna know?”

She nodded.

“It was Cats,” he said, and his cheeks went pink when she burst into laughter. “I know, I know. I must’ve been, like, four or five. But I loved it. That was our thing, Mom and I. She’d bring me to see a show every year for my birthday. That stopped when we moved out here. I miss it a lot.”

Anatole’s eyes went glassy and he began to blink quickly. Natasha laid a hand on his wrist.

“We can talk about something else if you want.”

Anatole smiled softly, pressing a hand to his eye. “I’m sorry. I just get a little sentimental, especially around this time of year.”

“I understand.”

Anatole placed his hand over hers. “You’re a wonder,” he said quietly.

“You know,” Natasha said, “it’s really refreshing to see a guy who can be so upfront about his
Anatole shrugged. “There’s nothing un-masculine about being emotional.”

Natasha nodded pensively. “You’re right.”

“My sister always taught me stuff like that. She’s a super-feminist.”

“She sounds amazing.”

Anatole laughed. “She’s not all fun and games! Especially when I was little. God, she used to drag me out to the mall all the time. If she couldn’t find a babysitter or leave me home alone I’d have to go shopping with her.”

“Sonya’s the opposite. I swear, getting her to go shopping is a chore. The only shop she’ll go to willingly is the bookstore and even that’s a stretch.”

“We’ve got the matching set,” he said. “If you ever want to take Hélène off my hands, I’d appreciate it.”

“I’d be keen to take you up on that offer,” she said, smirking. “It’s been a while since I’ve had a shopping buddy.”

They laughed, took another sip of their respective drinks, and lapsed into a comfortable silence.

“So…” said Anatole, with the sort of tone that generally indicated that the conversation was beginning to die off.

She raised an eyebrow. “So?”

“Are you going to the winter formal?”

Natasha felt her face grow hot. She thought of how he had paid for her coffee, the polite gestures they had traded, the teasing and casual ribbing, and wondered if she had missed something obvious. “Is this your way of asking me to be your date?”

“It can be if you want.”

“Anatole…”

“If it was, would you say yes?” Anatole saw her hesitate and quickly added, “We could go as friends. Strictly platonic. Just like you said at homecoming.”

“Just as friends?”

“Promise.”

She gave him a small smile at that. “That would actually be pretty fun.”

“Great,” he grinned. “It’s a date.”

“A platonic, friendly date,” she said.

“Of course,” he said smoothly. “Whatever you want.”

“I’ll have to get a dress,” said Natasha. “I don’t have anything really appropriate for winter. But I
don’t think my mom will have time to take me shopping, and Sonya definitely won’t come along.”

A light went off in Anatole’s eyes. “Why not ask Hélène to take you? She’d love it, Nat; she lives for this sort of stuff.”

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly,” Natasha said. “I’ve never even met her Anatole! I don’t want to impose —”

“Don’t be ridiculous! She’s been dying to have a little sister to do this sort of stuff with for, like, forever.”

Natasha flushed a vibrant shade of red. “Only if she wouldn’t mind.”

Anatole whipped his phone out of his pocket and began to type. “God, Nat, you’re going to make her day. No, nevermind her day, this is gonna make her whole damn year.” He looked up from the screen, grinning. “I wonder if this counts towards Christmas.” He had barely put his phone down when it buzzed. Anatole unlocked the screen. “She said yes!”

BZZZ BZZZ. BZZZ BZZZ.

“And that she’s super pumped to meet you,” he added.

Natasha smiled shyly. “I’m pumped to meet her too.” And then: “You’re sure this isn’t weird?”

Anatole looked genuinely bewildered. “ Weird? Why would it be weird?”

“I dunno,” she said, shrugging. “We haven’t been friends for that long?”

“That doesn’t matter,” Anatole said firmly. “We have fun together, right?”

“Of course.”

“Then that’s all that matters. Besides, it’s not like I’m asking you to be my girlfriend or something. Right?”

Natasha found herself nodding vigorously. “You know, you’re absolutely right.”

“See? You’re allowed to have fun. There’s nothing wrong with it at all.”

“Absolutely! We aren’t doing anything wrong.”

“Exactly! We’re just getting to know each other better.”

Natasha cast a backwards glance towards the clock. “Dammit,” she muttered. “It’s already time to head back.”

Anatole shrugged. “You only have one more class this afternoon, right? Just blow it off.”

“I really can’t, Anatole, it’s an AP. And my parents would kill me if they found out I was cutting class.”

He seemed to relent at that. “Oh, alright. You goody-two-shoes. Let me walk you back?”

Natasha looped her arm through the crook of his elbow as they stood up and made their way to the door. “Lead the way.”
Natasha had barely set foot outside the front door when a sleek convertible pulled up in the driveway and a tall young woman stepped out.

Hélène, she realized not a second later.

Natasha knew that it was rude to stare, but she couldn’t help herself—Hélène was absolutely gorgeous. There was something vaguely familiar about her that she couldn’t quite put her finger on. Perhaps it was the familiar tilt to her eyebrow, or the sculpted ridge of her nose, or the heart-shaped face—a recoloration of Anatole’s features. They both carried themselves with a similar air of confidence, but where Anatole moved with a casual, naïve charm, Hélène seemed tighter-strung, like every action was a calculated decision. The resemblance was deceptively uncanny.

Despite the chilly November air, Hélène wore only a loose t-shirt, and beneath that, a very visible bralette. Everything she wore was casual, except for the string of pearls looped around her throat, which would have seemed out-of-place had it not looked so right. Natasha also noticed, with some surprise, that there were intricately detailed ink designs running up and down Hélène’s forearms.

She focused on what appeared to be a delicate constellation on her wrist, trying to decipher which one it was, when Hélène stuck her hand out. “Hey, I’m Hélène,” she said, “Anatole’s sister.”

God. Even her voice sounded familiar. Musical and lilting, just like Anatole’s, but huskier. If cats could talk, Natasha thought, this was what they would sound like. She took Hélène’s hand and tentatively shook it. “I’m Natasha.”

Hélène’s grip was firmer than she had expected. “It’s so nice to finally properly meet you.”

“Yes!” Natasha exclaimed, wincing at the eagerness in her voice. “Anatole always talks about you.”

“Only good things I hope,” she said with a languid smile.

“Oh, of course! He’s told me so many stories.”

Hélène laughed at that. “I don’t know if that’s good or bad.”

“I don’t know which ones to believe,” said Natasha. “He mentioned one about a sham wedding?”

“Oh, Jesus,” Hélène grimaced. “He really shouldn’t be spreading that one around.”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “So it’s true?”
Hélène gave her a tight, uncomfortable smile. “Anatole’s dramatic.” Natasha blushed, picking up on Hélène’s unease, and they lapsed into a slightly awkward silence.

The drive to the boutique wasn’t long, but the silence made it feel painfully drawn-out. They parked and Natasha scrambled to say something else. And because she was too nervous to stop herself and because she so desperately wanted to forget about how embarrassed Hélène had looked, she blurted, “I love your tattoos.”

Hélène raised an eyebrow, pensively running a thumb over a tiny cursive $f$ on her inner wrist. “Thanks. I used to have to cover them all up with concealer before family events.”

Natasha laughed nervously. “That must be a lot of concealer.”

“You have no idea.”

“Are they for anything?”

Hélène tilted her head with a polite smile that was so similar to Anatole’s that Natasha nearly did a double take. “What?”

Her face went hot. *What a dumb question to ask,* she scolded herself. But she had already said it out loud, and she couldn’t exactly take it back now, so she decided to press on. “Like, do any of them mean anything?”

“Oh, of course! This one here,” she said, pointing to the sunburst along the side of her ribcage, “is for Anatole. Our mother got into a theme with light when she was naming us, and his name means ‘sunrise’. It was my first.”

“How old were you?”

Hélène paused thoughtfully. “Maybe fifteen?” At the look of horror on Natasha’s face, she amended, “No, sixteen, probably.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “My parents would kill me if I ever got one that young.”

Hélène grinned. “Hence the concealer.”

Natasha’s eyes drifted back to the constellation inked on her wrist. “This one was for my boyfriend,” said Hélène. “He’s a major astronomy nerd, so I thought it’d be cute to do his zodiac sign. He thought it was crazy that I’d put something permanent on my skin, especially since it was for him.”

“That’s so sweet,” Natasha gushed.

“Yeah,” Hélène chuckled drily. “I thought so too.”

“My boyfriend hates tattoos,” she said. “I think he’d flip if I got one.”

“And do you want any?”

Natasha shrugged. “I dunno. I hadn’t really given it much thought. They look cool, though.”

Hélène grinned. “It’s worth doing. If you’re ever thinking of getting some, give me a ring and I’ll hook you up with the right artist. Wanna see some more pics? I’ve got a whole ‘inspiration gallery’ in my photos.”
“Yeah, for sure!”

Hélène pulled up her photo library on her phone and passed it to Natasha. On the screen was a close-up photo of two wrists, one unmistakably Hélène’s if the tiny f inked onto it was any indication, cropped into a tight square frame. And on the other, heavily-veined and half-hidden by the wristband of a watch, was an equally small, cursive h. Natasha began to flick through the gallery, trying to find the other person’s face, but she had no luck. “Is this your boyfriend?”

Hélène smiled drily. “No, best friend.”

“Fedya?”

“Where did you hear that name?”

Natasha shrank back, wondering if she had said something wrong. “Anatole talks about him a lot.”

“That would make sense,” Hélène muttered. “Anatole talks too much.”

Natasha frowned, turning again to the phone. The next image was a picture of a tall, stout man with a dark beard, crooked glasses, and a kind, awkward smile. He was giving Hélène a piggyback ride, and her head was tossed back in what Natasha assumed was laughter.

“Whoops,” Hélène said, a note of embarrassment creeping into her voice, and she made a move to grab her phone back. “Sorry, I don’t know why that’s in there.”


“We go to college together.”

“You’re dating him, right?”

Hélène gave her a tight smile. “Where did you hear that?”

“I’ve known him for a while,” Natasha explained. “He lived in Seattle before he went to college and our families know each other. We’re friends on Facebook. I thought I recognized you from somewhere!”

She raised an eyebrow bemusedly. “Pierre still uses Facebook?”

Natasha laughed. “Not really. You’re in his profile picture, but it’s super old.” She nodded at the tattoo on Hélène’s wrist. “I don’t think that was in the photo.”

“He should probably change it,” Hélène muttered to herself.

“It’s been so long since I’ve seen him. Maybe the four of us could do something sometime?”

“I’ll get him to text you.” They lapsed into a slightly awkward silence until Hélène piped up again. “Are you excited for the dance?”

“A little nervous.”

“About what?”

Natasha sighed. “I don’t know what Anatole…wants from me.”
Hélène seemed a little taken aback by that. “I’m sure he just wants to have a fun night with his friend,” she said.

“Are you sure that’s all he thinks of me as?”

“Was he wrong to ask you?” Hélène asked, concerned. “He seemed to think that you two were getting close.”

“Oh, no, it’s not that!” Natasha said. “It’s just that I have a boyfriend. He’s studying abroad in Paris this semester.”

Hélène laughed. “That shouldn’t stop you from taking someone to the dance!”

Natasha frowned, biting her lip. “But I’m dating Andrei. I don’t want to give Anatole the wrong idea.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You can take a friend to the winter formal. People do it all the time.”

“Did you?” Natasha registered the look of surprise on Hélène’s face and cringed. The question had sounded way ruder out loud than she had meant.

But instead, Hélène chuckled, seemingly nonplussed. “I didn’t end up going,” she confessed with a fox-like grin. “My friends and I drank too much and we ended up stranded in a cornfield, but that’s a story for another time.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows in disbelief, but Hélène didn’t offer anything more on the subject. “Wait,” she asked, blushing. “Has Anatole…spoken about me a lot?”

“No-stop,” Hélène said, rolling her eyes. “The poor thing can barely eat, he’s so excited, and he’s picky enough as is.”

If it was possible, Natasha flushed an even darker shade of red.

Hélène shot her a conspiratorial grin. “Between you and me, I think he has a little crush. It’s so cute. But that doesn’t leave the car,” she added with a wink.

Natasha bit her lip. “Maybe this was a bad idea.”

“Don’t be silly! It’s perfectly innocent, and he knows that you have a boyfriend.” A brief pause. “He does know you have a boyfriend, right?”

“Of course,” Natasha said, a little more defensively than she meant. “It’s just…are you sure I’m not making a mistake here?”

“You’re a beautiful woman, Natasha,” Hélène said sweetly. “Having boys throw themselves at your feet is just part of the deal.”

Natasha giggled self-consciously. “Thank you.”

“And that’s why you should live a little!” Hélène said. “I’m sure this Andrei would want you to have fun.”

“Ah, well, you don’t know Andrei all that well, I’m afraid.”

Hélène shrugged. “You should be with someone who makes you happy.”
“Andrei does make me happy.”

“Then why should there be an issue? He’s off in Paris, and you’re stuck here in Idaho. Don’t tell me he’s not going off to parties and enjoying himself.”

Natasha frowned a little at that cryptic remark, but elected to ignore it.

“Besides,” Hélène continued, “it’s your senior year. You should go make some memories before you leave for college.” She gave Natasha a sad smile. “I always regretted not making it to the formal when I was your age. Life’s too short to worry when you could be having fun.”

“I just don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“I don’t think you will,” Hélène said pensively. “But there’s an easy way to check. What’s your star sign?”

Natasha blinked. “Like my horoscope?”

“Yeah!” Hélène said it as if it were the most perfectly normal thing to ask the friend of your little brother. Natasha had to restrain herself from laughing. “What is it?”

“I’m a Virgo I think?”

“You think?” she said. “Well, when’s your birthday?”

“October 1st.”

Hélène shook her head. “Not a Virgo. You’re a Libra, darling.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Oh my god, huge! The personality profiles and compatibility are totally different.” She pulled out her phone again. “See, if you’re a Virgo, you’re compatible with Pisces and Cancer. If you’re a Libra, you’re compatible with Aries and Sagittarius.”

“Is Anatole into this stuff too?”

Hélène huffed, locking the screen of her phone. “Not as much as he should be. So typical of an Aries.”

Natasha tried her best to stifle a grin as Hélène scrolled down her phone. “Your horoscope for today says that you should be open to new experiences.” Hélène nudge her elbow with a conspiratorial grin. “Sounds like a good plan, doesn’t it?”

Natasha giggled. “Okay, fair enough.”

“So should we go try stuff on?”

“Sure thing!”

The dress, in hindsight, had seemed much prettier hanging on the rack. Not that it was ugly or anything, but the fabric had looked less cheaply-made under the boutique lights, and Natasha hadn’t expected the back to dip so low. It was a dress made for a girl a good few inches taller than
her, and it showed in the way the skirts pooled around her ankles and the sleeves nearly hung past her wrists. Natasha fumbled for the zipper but her arms were too short and inflexible to reach. After several minutes of awkward shimmying, she admitted defeat and poked her head out of the dressing room. “Hélène?”

From down the hallway, Hélène turned her head with a grin. “You ready?”

“I just need some help zipping it up.”

“Of course, darling.”

Natasha couldn’t help the bright blush that crept up her neck as Hélène came up close behind her and zipped up the dress.

“There we go,” she said, leading her to the mirror at the end of the hallway. “Now, give us a twirl.”

Natasha did so, and Hélène drew her face into a sympathetic frown.

“No,” she said instantly. “It’s cute, but it’s not you.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows. “Are you sure? I think it could be okay?”

“You can do better than ‘okay’. Have a look.”

Natasha tugged awkwardly at the collar as she caught sight of her full-length reflection in the mirror. The dress seemed to swallow her up, and suddenly she felt all wrong—her arms too skinny, her torso too long, her shoulders too bony, her legs too short. And under the bright lights of the hallway, her skin seemed sickly and dull, like somebody had de-saturated a photograph.

“It looked so nice on the mannequin,” she said, deflating.

“You’re a human, not a mannequin, Natasha.”

Natasha’s face fell flat.

Hélène seemed equally unimpressed. “Hey, it’s not the end of the world! You’ll feel better once we find you something more flattering.” She held out her hand and Natasha took it, allowing Hélène to lead her around the boutique. Natasha hiked up the hem of her gown, pointedly avoiding making eye contact with the irate saleswoman as Hélène began to rifle through rack after rack. “How about this one?”

Natasha frowned. “White? Wouldn’t, I dunno, like, a jewel color look better?”

“Trust me on this one; it’ll look gorgeous with your complexion. Just try it on!”

They found a dressing room in the back of the boutique. Hélène waited outside as Natasha shimmied into the gown.

“I love it!” said Hélène, running her hands over the fabric. “What do you think?”

Natasha fiddled with the skirt. “Are you sure the color’s okay?”

“I think it looks amazing.”

“But I wear white to everything.”
“It’s your color! You have a right to rock it.” Natasha cocked her head, considering, and Hélène came up behind her, putting her hands on her hips. “You don’t like it?”

Natasha bit her lip. “It’s beautiful, it’s just,” she gestured awkwardly to her chest, “I’m too small to fill it out.”

Hélène’s mouth opened into a silent ‘o’. “I see. Well, you shouldn’t let that stop you. It’s an easy fix.”

“What do you mean?”

“We could always get you a padded bra,” she offered, tugging at the skirt of the dress. “It won’t look all that unrealistic. Or maybe a touch of bronzer would do the trick.” Natasha considered her reflection skeptically. “Here,” Hélène said, “lemme show you.” She reached into her purse for some bronzer and a brush, and gently dabbed some in an arc on Natasha’s chest. “See? Pair that with a better bra, and no one will know the difference. Better?”

Natasha grinned. “Better.”

“Now have another look in that mirror.”

Natasha turned on one foot and spun like a ballerina. “Oh my God,” she breathed as the skirt unfurled in a glittering blur of white and silver. She felt radiant, lighter than air. “Hélène, it’s beautiful.”

Hélène smiled proudly. “What did I tell you? You should get it.”

“You think so?”

“I know so. It’s stunning. You just need to find a better necklace to wear with it.”

Natasha frowned, touching the locket around her throat. “I always wear this,” she said softly. “Andrei gave it to me.”

“It doesn’t look right with that dress,” said Hélène. She deftly unclasped it, ignoring Natasha’s startled gasp, and reached for her pearls. “Try this instead.”

Hélène draped them around Natasha’s neck. The clasp fastened with a quiet click.

Natasha stared at her reflection, wide-eyed. She looked startlingly mature, not a little girl anymore but a young woman. “It looks beautiful.”

“You look beautiful,” Hélène said, sweeping the hair back from Natasha’s shoulders. “You and Anatole are going to be perfect together.”

Natasha couldn’t help the hot flush that rose to her cheeks at that. “You think so?”

Hélène placed a hand on her shoulder. She grinned, catlike and proud. “I know so.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! We are young and love comments and kudos with all our
hearts!

If you want more of this 'verse, check out our oneshot series 'The Starlight I See'!
Chapter Summary

Life in Moscow continues to suck and Hélène and Pierre are not super clear on the whole "healthy relationships" thing.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Pierre frowned as he opened his apartment door. It was unlocked, for starters, which was never a good sign. He was sure that he had locked it when he left for class that morning, but with everything that had gone on the last few days he was more than a little scattered, and he wouldn’t put it past himself to have forgotten something like that. Most concerning of all were the muffled noises echoing down the hallway from what he presumed was the living room. Shuffling and sniffling. Liquid sloshing in a container. Cardboard being ripped apart. It wouldn’t have been the first or even the third time he’d walked in on a burglar, but he’d never encountered one making such weird sounds. Nevertheless, he took an umbrella from the stand by the doorway, curling his hands around the handle as if he were holding a baseball bat, and made his way into the apartment treading as lightly as he could, which, admittedly, was not very lightly at all.

He would have preferred a burglar to the sight that greeted him as he entered the living room. Hélène was sitting on the floor with her legs splayed out across the carpet, leaning against the couch, surrounded by crumpled-up tissues and torn-up tissues boxes, a half-empty glass of wine sloshing around in her hand. Pierre stared in shock and dropped the umbrella to the ground. “What are you doing here?”

“I let myself in,” she said pathetically.

The spare key. What on Earth had possessed him to give any of the Kuragins the spare key? “You can’t be here.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Pierre spluttered, “I thought we were still fighting.”

Hélène shrugged. “I have a lot of people to be angry at. You aren’t my first priority anymore.”

“Hélène,” he sighed, “I really think you should go.”

Her forehead crinkled and she cocked her head. “No, I really think I should stay.”

Pierre noticed the slightly ungainly way she was swaying side to side and rolled his eyes, plopping himself down next to her. “You’re totally smashed, aren’t you?”

She giggled and took a swig from her glass. “Maybe a little.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Anatole’s being difficult and I needed a distraction,” she muttered through a mouthful of wine.
“We had a bad fight.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, Hélène, but—”

“You know what he told me?” she said with a laugh that was utterly devoid of humor. “He wanted to go fly to New York. All to visit a stupid grave.” She tipped back the glass and drained it in one gulp.

Pierre froze. “Hélène?”

“Ten years to the day,” she said. “Ten years, and only now does he want to go. What kind of logic is that?”

Pierre let out a shaky breath. “Your mom?”

Hélène nodded silently, fidgeting with her glass. “He got mad at me when I told him what a stupid idea it was. And then he said he’d just get Ippolit to take him instead.” She shook her head in disgust. “I don’t want to visit her. I don’t care how much he idolizes her, I’m not going.”

“Hélène, it’s normal to be a little on edge, especially—”

“You’re missing the point,” she snapped. “It’s not her that’s bothering me, it’s him.”

“I’m assuming you two weren’t close?”

Her voice was very quiet when she spoke again. “Let’s just say that the woman Anatole remembers as our mother is very different to the one that I knew.”

Immediately, Pierre softened. He took Hélène’s hand in his own, and, meeting no resistance, began to run his thumb over her knuckles. Hélène ever so softly squeezed his hand. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

“No,” she said resolutely. “I think I wanna be drunker.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Pierre asked.

She frowned at him, shaking the empty bottle. “Yeah, I really think so. There’s more wine in the fridge.”

Pierre sighed, but stood up and fetched it all the same, unwilling to argue with her. He retrieved the bottle and two glasses, setting them down between them. “At the very least, you aren’t drinking alone,” he said firmly. Hélène pouted but said nothing, allowing Pierre to pour out two glasses.

“What are we drinking to?”

Pierre chuckled. “Fuck if I know, this was your idea.”

Hélène snorted, burying her face in her hand. “Oh yeah, true.” She hoisted her glass up high. “Here’s to shitty parents. May we be drunk enough to dance on their graves.”

“You know, we don’t have to talk about this if you don’t want to,” he said, in a desperate attempt to change the subject. “I know that this must be a hard day for you.”

“It really isn’t.” Hélène said, pensively tracing the rim of her glass. “I never liked her, to be honest.”
“You don’t mean that,” Pierre said, shocked.

“No, I do,” she said. “I should be sad, I should miss her, but I can’t, Pierre. What does that say about me?”

“Hélène,” Pierre sighed, reaching for her hand again. He was hurt but not surprised when she recoiled from him, discarding her glass in favour of the bottle. “You’re upset and kind of out of it. You’ll feel differently about this when you sober up.”

“You know what the worst part is?” she slurred, listing from side to side. “I—I don’t even know how to feel sorry for it all. I want to feel bad about it, I do. But there’s nothing. Nothing left in here.” She gestured clumsily to her heart, and the bottle slid out of her grip and shattered against the floor, spilling wine all over the carpet. “Oh, fuck,” Hélène hissed. “Just making a fucking mess of everything today, aren’t I?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Pierre said firmly. “It’s a carpet. It can be cleaned.” It probably couldn’t be cleaned, and Hélène was more than likely well aware of that, but mentioning that wouldn’t do either of them any good. He padded over to the kitchen to grab the broom and dustbin. “Just stay there while I clean it up. There’s broken glass there; I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

Hélène nodded, curling in on herself as Pierre swept up the glass. “You’re a good person,” she murmured. “I’m sorry I got mad at you.”

Pierre couldn’t help the chuckle that bubbled out of him at that, despite everything. It was just such a patently Hélène sentiment to express. “I’m sorry you got mad at me too.”

“I don’t think I’m mad anymore,” she said softly.

“Really?”

She sighed. “I don’t have the energy. I’m just…tired. Are we okay?”

“Yeah of course, love,” Pierre said, pressing up against her. “We’re okay.”

“Good,” she breathed. “That’s one less thing I have to worry about.”

Pierre fumbled awkwardly for words. “Is Anatole alright?”

Hélène shrugged. “Probably not. He’s never okay, not on this day. This, and her birthday. I don’t think a day goes by that he doesn’t miss her.”

“Do you want to talk to him?”

She laughed bitterly. “He won’t want to talk to me. It’s a touchy subject for him.”

“Hélène,” Pierre murmured softly, and his hand reached for hers. Hélène leaned into him, the curve of her back straightening along his arm as she slumped against the sofa.

“She was never a very affectionate mother. Not to me, at least. But with Anatole? He was always the favorite. Her favorite,” she said miserably, resentfully even. “Her perfect little baby boy. And—and he looks just like her, too, Pierre. I see her every time I look at him. She can’t just rest in peace and leave me the hell alone.” She laughed mirthlessly.

“Did you tell him any of this?”

“Of course not. It would crush him.” She pressed her eyes shut, exhaling heavily through her nose.
“And me? Papa’s favorite. Daddy’s perfect little princess. Some fucking consolation prize.”

Pierre thought of that lone photograph back in the Kuragins’ living room. Little Hélène and her mischievous smile. The mirror image of her father. Was there a matching picture of a young Anatole, buried somewhere in a sealed-off, forgotten place?

“I hate him too,” Hélène said distantly, “just so we’re on the same page.” Her face crumpled again, and she turned away from Pierre. “Most of the time.” And then: “I’m a horrible daughter.”

The way her voice broke over the word ‘daughter’ nearly sent Pierre into tears. She was crying now, but silently, sniffing and gasping for breath between sobs.

“No, of course you’re not,” Pierre murmured, awkwardly pulling her into him. He released the breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding when the tension drained from her muscles and she leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I just don’t understand,” she said distantly. “Why me? Why us? Why can’t we just be a normal family?”

Pierre frowned. “Every family is messed up in its own way, Lena. That doesn’t mean—”

“No, you don’t understand. My father, he’s…he’s difficult to get along with.”

“Is he back in town?”

“No, thank God, but the things I said…” She sniffled, pressing the heels of her hands to her still-wet eyes. “He’s so awful to Anatole,” she said numbly. “And I let him be that way. And I was awful, too, and I didn’t mean any of it but I think I’ve really hurt him this time. I don’t want to turn out like him, Pierre.”

“Him, being—?”

“My father.”

Pierre gently ran a hand up her back, breathing in her familiar smell. He frowned when he picked up traces of cigarette smoke, a metric of how stressed she really was. She had quit, she’d told him, but he elected not to mention it.

“We can’t be judged on our one-offs,” he said firmly. “Maybe you made a mistake today, but that’s all it is. One mistake.”

“It’s one mistake on top of a million.”

“What exactly did you say to him?”

Hélène shuffled guiltily. “I don’t remember completely. And it doesn’t even matter anyway. Anatole probably hates me now.”

“No, don’t be ridiculous. Anatole could never hate you. Never.”

Hélène buried her face in the crook of Pierre’s neck. He felt her tears dripping against his collarbone. “I’m so scared of fucking him up,” she whispered. “He’s the only half-decent thing our parents ever made and I’m gonna ruin him.”

Pierre hesitantly placed his hand on the back of her neck, stroking her dark hair. “That’s too much to put on yourself. You’re amazing with him.”
“No,” she moaned. “I—I’m a screw-up. I was so mean to him, Pierre. So mean. I can’t believe myself. He’s just a kid and he just wants his mama back and I can’t do anything to help him.”

“You’re doing as much as you can. You can’t judge yourself for things that are out of your control.”

“I hate him sometimes,” she said, and her voice was so ragged and hollow that it made Pierre’s heart sink like a lead weight. “And th-then I hate myself for hating him. He called me ‘Mom’ once by mistake, you know?”


“How am I supposed to raise him?” she sobbed. “I can’t be his mother; I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

“Hey, you’re doing fine,” he said firmly. “Better than fine. You’re smart, and driven, and you care so much about the people you love. You’re gonna be okay. Everything’s gonna be okay.”

Hélène shook her head, drawing her knees under her chin and hugging her shins. She felt so tiny, so fragile in his arms. “No it’s not. It’s never gonna be okay.” She sniffed loudly and pressed the heel of her hand to her eye, and Pierre smoothed a stray curl back from her forehead. “I’m so afraid, Petrushka. I don’t want to lose him.”

Pierre drew her into a tight hug, resting his chin on the top of her head. He could feel her shoulders heaving, hear her muffled whimpers. She flung her arms around him, holding on as if for dear life, and pressed a sloppy kiss to the side of his neck. Pierre groaned as he felt her reach for his inner thigh, absently stroking, before she swung her leg over him and seated herself in his lap, straddling his hips.

“Hélène,” he said warningly.

Still teary-eyed, Hélène gave him an arch smile before leaning down and kissing him, bracing a hand on his shoulder. Pierre kissed her back for a fraction of a second before pulling away, gently pushing her off of him. “Hélène, we can’t do this right now.”

“But I want you,” she whined, with that signature Kuragin puppy-dog look.

“You’re drunk, love.”

“Pierre.”

“Later,” he said, prying her hand off his hip. “When you’re sober.”

Hélène pouted, and Pierre worried for a moment that she might burst into tears again. “Don’t you want me?”

“You know I do,” Pierre mumbled. “But we still need to talk about a lot of things. Again, when you’re sober.”

She sniffed loudly, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. “Do you hate me too?”

“Nobody hates you, Hélène.”

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, and her shoulders drooped and her chest deflated. She looked so utterly defeated that Pierre couldn’t help but pity her. She stumbled to her feet and grabbed her
jacket, wobbling unsteadily. “You were right, I shouldn’t be here. I’ll go.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Pierre said. “It’s almost midnight and you’re drunk. You can just crash here.”

“I’ll call a cab.”

“Hélène,” Pierre said, in a voice that brooked no arguments. “Please just stay for my sake. I don’t want to have to worry about you.”

She frowned, but nodded sullenly, crossing her arms over her chest. It was only then that Pierre noticed how her jeans and sweater were spattered with wine. “Oh, Jesus Christ,” he muttered, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Go shower, or you’ll stink of alcohol in the morning. I’ll see if you left something here that you can wear.”

“Oh,” she murmured, padding down the hall to the bathroom. Pierre heard the spray of the water and Hélène quietly humming to herself, something he was sure she wouldn’t be caught dead doing if she were sober. He felt his stomach drop as he remembered Anatole’s visit, how he had collected all of Hélène’s things. He ransacked his room, but Anatole had been uncharacteristically thorough, and all of her clothes were gone. Instead, Pierre grabbed one of his own shirts at random, leaving it balled up outside the bathroom door. This, he quickly discovered, was a mistake. The shirt only hit Hélène at her mid-thigh, leaving little to the imagination.

Hélène realized what he was thinking, if the slow, downright wicked smile she gave him was any indication. She pulled her arms up over her head, languidly stretching. Not her most subtle performance, Pierre mused, but it was nevertheless effective. “Are you coming to bed?”

“Y-you take the bed, I’ll take the couch,” he stammered.

Hélène rolled her eyes. “Don’t be stupid.”

“Hélène, you’re still drunk. I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

“Come on, Petrushka,” she chided, sidling up to him. “It’s not like I’m blacking out. I’m sober enough to know what I want.”

Pierre tried to inch away from her, but she followed where he went, until his back was pressed to the armrest of the couch. “I still don’t like this.”

“I need something to distract me.”

“This isn’t the sort of distraction you need.”

Hélène slipped her arms around him and pressed her head to his chest. Pierre opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off with a look that was so pitiful and sad that his heart hurt. “I can’t be alone,” she whispered. “Please.”

Her eyes were still red-rimmed and puffy and he could see faint traces of the mascara she hadn’t been able to wash away. When was the last time he had seen her this beaten-down and exhausted? “You don’t have to be alone,” he said. “But you don’t have to seduce me to convince me to stay with you. Okay?”

She nodded robotically. “Okay.”

Pierre looped a hand over her shoulders and she leaned into his touch. “Alright,” he sighed. “Let’s
Hélène smiled, more grateful than victorious, and he took her hand and led her into the bedroom, crawling under the sheets with her. Pierre was grateful when she didn’t try to flirt with him again, opting instead to cuddle up against his chest. He hesitantly wrapped his arms around her and rubbed slow, lazy circles into her back.

“Pierre?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you. For everything,” she murmured. “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

“Hey, no need to thank me.”

“I love you.”

Pierre stared at her in shock, feeling his heart flutter in his chest. She had never told him how she felt about him before. He had chalked it up to her personality—Hélène didn’t do feelings or long, emotional talks. They had fun together and she kept him around, and that, for the most part, was enough. He turned away from her slightly, determined to hide the way his eyes were suddenly very watery and the giant lump in his throat that was making it very hard to speak.

“I love you too, Lena,” he said numbly. “So much.”

Hélène smiled and leaned forwards, kissing him. Pierre cupped her cheek and gently tilted her head back, deepening it. He groaned as Hélène tangled her hands in his hair, gripping her waist a little tighter as he pulled her into his chest. Her fingers splayed across his chest, searching for leverage, but he turned away and kissed the tip of her nose. “Later,” he promised. “When you’re sober.”

Hélène rolled her eyes and burrowed into his chest without argument. “G’night,” he heard her mutter.

Pierre kissed her forehead one last time before he closed his eyes and a warm, sleepy kind of contentment overtook him. “Good night, beautiful.”

Pierre smiled as he looked over at Hélène, still fast asleep. When her face was relaxed like this, without any makeup on, she looked so young. The bed creaked as he leaned over, pressing a soft kiss to the base of her throat. She blinked her eyes open sleepily at the contact, confusedly glancing around the room and Pierre gently tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she turned to him.

“Good morning, sweetheart,” he breathed.

Hélène frowned. “Pierre?”

“Yeah?”

She pressed a hand to her forehead. “I feel like shit.”

“Stay in bed, I’ll grab you some aspirin and water.”

Pierre clambered to his feet and cast an awkward glance over his shoulder. Hélène was staring absently at the ceiling, twisting the corner of the bedsheets over and over in her hands. She looked miserable. Or maybe it was just the hangover. She drained the water and the aspirin when he
returned, turning away from him when he crawled back into bed.

“Thanks,” she muttered. Before he could say a thing, she had placed the glass on the bedside table and got to her feet, pulling on her stained jeans and hunting for her boots.

Pierre furrowed his brow. “Where are you going?”

“Out.”

“We aren’t going to talk about this?”

One sock on. She reached for the other, pulling it up her shin. “We have nothing to talk about.”

“Hélène, you told me that you loved me—”

“I was drunk, Pierre,” she snapped. “I can barely remember a thing from last night.”

“Convenient,” he muttered.

Hélène halted in her tracks to shoot him a glare. “Excuse me?”

“Stop acting like you’re above having feelings,” he said sharply. “It’s getting really old.”

Her face twisted into something sour. “People say a lot of things when they’re drunk. You of all people should know that, if my memory of sophomore year holds true.”

“That’s not fair,” he shot back. “I’ve been good. I’ve cleaned up my act.”

Hélène sneered coldly. “Yeah, it sure seemed like that at Borodino’s.”

“So you are still angry,” he said, throwing his hands up in mock-surrender.

“Of course I am!”

Pierre scowled. “You don’t get to be mad, and then come over as soon as you need a shoulder to cry on, Hélène. I’m not your emotional support pet.”

“I’m sorry, I thought you were my boyfriend,” Hélène spat.

“I thought so too. I didn’t realize that I signed up to be your personal therapist.”

“So should I only come over when you want some? Because God only knows that’s rare enough.”

“Don’t be mean,” he said.

“Mean?” she said. “I’m being perfectly fair. If you can’t give me what I need physically, the least you could do is let me complain to you once in a fucking blue moon.”

Pierre laughed drily. “Emotional blackmail doesn’t work on me anymore, Hélène. You’ve used it a few too many times.”

“It isn’t blackmail to say that you don’t care enough about me.”

“Well, I’ve tried,” he said, throwing his hands up in mock-surrender. “But you make it fucking impossible. It doesn’t matter how good someone is to you, you’ll always find something wrong with them.”
“**Good** to me? You aren’t **good** to me, Pierre.”

“I thought we were happy!”

“You want me to pretend that everything is perfect? Because it’s not. You’re so damn self-righteous sometimes it makes me sick. You get jealous if I so much as **look** at another man, you blow up when anything goes wrong, you’re an alcoholic—”

“That’s rich coming from you,” he snapped. Hélène arched an eyebrow.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“Have a wild guess,” said Pierre. “I could smell it coming off you in waves last night.” He sniffed at the air. “I can still smell it now.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The **cigarettes**, Hélène. You promised me that you were going to quit and you lied.”

Hélène, admittedly, had much better control of her temper than he did, but even she was unable to completely mask the way her hands began to tremble in fury. “I’ve had a lot of stress these past few weeks, a good deal of which is entirely your fault,” she said tightly. “Forgive me for indulging myself in one of the few things I actually enjoy nowadays.”

“So it’s fine when you want to indulge yourself.”

“See, the difference here is that I don’t start bar fights or get arrested when I go out for a smoke.”

“No, instead you’re just poisoning yourself.”

“What I decide to do with my body is **none** of your business.”

“Would you be singing the same tune if it was Anatole?”

Hélène’s eyes flashed dangerously. “You leave him out of this.”

“I’m not the one who brought him into this and you know that,” he said. “Don’t you deny it. Who was it that **insisted** on dragging him along to Borodino’s?”

“Pierre,” she said warningly.

“At least he came to bail me out when you wouldn’t.”

“Yes, you got a minor to bail you out of prison, and I’m the irresponsible one,” she snapped. “Explain to me again how every stupid choice you make is my fault.”

“I would have never have been that bad if you hadn’t forced me—”

“**Forced** you?”

“—to keep drinking.”

“You weren’t complaining if I recall, **darling**, Hélène spat.

“I shouldn’t have to complain to get you to stop feeding me shots! Jesus, Hélène, what the hell were you trying to accomplish?”
“I don’t know, Petrushka,” she said, her voice bordering on sickly-sweet, “maybe I just got sick of watching my boyfriend moping around and trying to ruin all our fun?”

“I was trying to be responsible. For Anatole’s sake.”

“Responsible?” Hélène laughed bitterly. “What the hell do you know about being responsible?”

“More than you, evidently.”

“I am responsible,” she snarled.

Pierre raised an eyebrow. “Bringing a seventeen-year-old to a nightclub? Letting him drink, letting him wander off into the crowd? You call that responsible? He was being chatted up by a grown woman when I found him, for Christ’s sake.”

“And I handled it,” she snapped. “Like I always do. You don’t have to pretend to be worried about him.”

“You should be worried about fucking him up,” Pierre spat. “And God, with the way you keep running things—”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know, why don’t you tell me?” he said. “Seeing as how everything I say today is wrong —”

Hélène balled up his shirt and tossed it in his face. “It’s nice to see you being so self-aware, Pierre. Truly an admirable sight.”

“Put a shirt on, please.”

“What are you, twelve?”

“I’m not going to stand here arguing with you while you’re half-naked. You’re an adult, Hélène. Act like one.”

She spread her arms, gesturing to her bare torso, arching her eyebrows threateningly. “Am I missing something? Is there an issue here?”

“God, you’re impossible.”

“You’re acting like such a prude,” she snapped.

“Only because you’re acting like a slut.”

Pierre regretted his words the second they left his mouth. Hélène’s face fell flat. “Oh my God. You’re unbelievable.” Her voice was cold, completely devoid of any emotion.

“Hélène—”

“No, honestly, fuck you, Pierre.”

“Hélène—”

“Do you have any idea,” she began, her voice cracking hoarsely. “Any idea how it feels to hear that? You can’t toss that word around like it doesn’t mean anything.”
Pierre frowned, reaching for her. “Fuck, I’m sorry, Lena,” he said, and opened his arms wide. “Come here. Baby, please, I’m so sorry.” He was surprised when she didn’t recoil away from him, and wrapped his arms around her. Hélène let out a deep breath as she relaxed into his embrace. “It’s just so hard when I see the way you act around other guys—”

He felt her stiffen in his arms. “I beg your pardon.”

“Just with Fedya,” he amended quickly. “The way you talk to him, the way you touch him…it makes me uncomfortable.” Pierre realized this may have been a mistake when Hélène’s face hardened and she pushed him away.

“What is wrong with you? Why are you so determined to believe I’m sleeping with him?”

“I never said I thought you were sleeping with him,” Pierre said quietly. “Are you?”

Hélène’s mouth dropped open in shock for a second before she managed to coach her expression into blankness. “I don’t know what your complex is with Fedya, but you need to stop projecting your insecurities on him.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

“I’m not on trial here,” Hélène snapped, “and I don’t have to dignify your stupid questions with answers.”

“Just say no,” Pierre spat. “Christ, why is that so much to ask of you?”

“Is this because of Fedya? What did he say to you at Borodino’s? What is he—”

“It isn’t about Fedya!” he exploded. “It’s the way you behave around him!”

“You know, I’ve had enough of you and your acting like you have any right to tell me how to behave,” she snarled. “I didn’t even have to do anything to make you think I was cheating on you. Do you realize how fucked that is?”

Pierre sucked in a deep breath through clenched teeth as if to calm himself. “You make it very hard for me to trust you,” he said, deliberately soft. “Can you blame me?”

Hélène’s brow furrowed and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Yes.”

She stared at him, as if daring him to say something else, before she shook her head in disgust and turned away, grabbing her sweater and shrugging it on. “Thanks for helping me realize what a mistake this was. Don’t call me.”

And then she left, slamming the door so hard that Pierre felt it rattling in his bones. He collapsed onto the sofa, one hand clapped to his forehead, and stared blankly at the ceiling. A heavy weight settled on top of his chest, cold and immovable, like he was being crushed beneath a boulder. His hand drifted to the side table for the half-empty wine bottle and his fingers closed around its neck.

“A burglar,” he said to nobody in particular. “Why couldn’t it have been a burglar?”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks for reading! Comments and kudos make our hearts jump for joy! <3
It was around seven o’clock in the evening when Anatole popped his head around the door into Hélène’s bedroom with a fistful of dress ties and a jacket slung over the crook of his arm. “Hey,” he said, shaking the ties. “Can you help me?”

Hélène’s head snapped up from her book at the sound of his voice. “Yeah, of course.”

Anatole waltzed into the room and seated himself at the foot of her bed. Things had been a little residually tense since their argument, but he had softened towards her when he had seen how upset she had been coming home from Pierre’s. That didn’t stop her from feeling guilty, however, and, being a little more sentimental than usual, she elected to not snap at him for forgetting to knock before disturbing her.

“What’s up?” she said.

He held up the ties—one black, one white, one powder-blue. “Which one should I wear?”

She cocked her head, considering. “The black. It’s classier.”

Anatole shrugged on his jacket distractedly. “You think Natalie will like it? Her dress is white, right? I thought you were supposed to coordinate these things.”

“White goes with everything.”

“So I should wear the white one?”

“No, silly, I meant the white in her dress.”

“Well, what about the blue? To go with my eyes?”

Hélène sighed. “I don’t really think it matters, Toto.”

He turned to face the mirror hanging over her vanity and began doing his tie. “I just want everything to be perfect.”
“Then it will be.” Hélène took a deep breath, steeling her nerves. “Listen, Anatole, I never properly apologized for what I—”

“Lena,” said Anatole with growing impatience, “for the millionth time, it’s fine. I get it.”

Hélène sighed. “I shouldn’t have projected my issues with her onto you.”

He shrugged, his back still turned to her. “No one’s perfect. And it was a dumb idea anyway, flying out to New York.”

“It wasn’t dumb,” she said. “Well, maybe it was a little dumb. But you were emotional and sometimes that matters more than common sense.”

Anatole’s shoulders slumped as he fiddled with the tie. “We should visit her.”

Hélène gave him a tight smile. “We will eventually.”

“I know,” he said. “But it would have been nice to be there for the anniversary.”

“Look, if there’s any way I can make it up to you—”

Anatole exhaled in frustration and turned away from the mirror, the tie twisted in a clustered knot at his collar. “You can make it up to me by helping me fix this goddamn tie.”

Hélène smiled to herself. Anatole’s inability to hold onto a grudge for longer than fifteen minutes was one of the best things about him. “Nearly eighteen years old,” she clucked with a grin, “and he still can’t even do a tie properly.”

“S’not my fault they’re so stupidly complicated.”

With a final tug, she straightened his tie. “There you go. All ready for the big dance.”

“Thank you,” he said begrudgingly.

Hélène tilted his chin up, cupping his cheeks. “My little baby brother,” she fake-sniffed, “almost all grown up.”

Anatole wrinkled his nose as she leaned up on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Did you just get lipstick on me?”

“Relax, Romeo, you’re fine.”

Anatole narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously regardless, and rubbed at the spot she had kissed. “Can I ask one more favor?”

“Sure, kiddo,” she said. “Whatcha need?”

He looked almost embarrassed. “I was wondering if you’d help me put on some cologne.”

Hélène raised her eyebrows. “Like, tell you which one to wear, or apply it to your person?”

“I just need to know which one to put on. I can take care of the rest.”

She stifled a snort. “Okay, what are the options?” Anatole pulled out a bottle and uncorked it, passing it her. Hélène took one whiff and her face twisted into a look of pure disgust. “God no,” she choked out. “You’ll have her running for the hills. Where the hell did you get this stuff?”
Anatole’s shoulders slumped guiltily. “The drugstore.”

“What is this, Axe?” She turned the bottle around to read the label “Ah. It is Axe. Well, that explains it.”

“Aw, man.”

“I’m throwing this out, Toto,” she said primly. “It’s for your own good. What else do you have?”

Anatole held up another bottle, this one a dark blue. “How about this one?”

Hélène uncorked the bottle and took a delicate sniff. There was something deeply and oddly familiar about it. It smelled of something earthy and musky and woodsy—like Fedya. “Where did you get this?”

“Fedya gave it to me,” Anatole said.

Ah. That explained it. She corked the bottle and passed it back to him.

“No, I don’t like this one either.”

“But Fedya said it would be good.”

“Fedya, my darling, is an idiot.”

“I like how it smells,” he said petulantly.

“That’s because you’re nose-blind. We’re getting you some proper cologne.”

“Where?”

Hélène shrugged. “Papa has some upstairs.”

Anatole wrinkled his nose. “I don’t want to smell like Papa.”

“Yeah, well, you don’t want to smell like Axe either. His cologne is nice.” She saw him hesitate and crossed her arms. “Natalie will like it better.”

That seemed to do the trick. “Oh, alright, if you say so.”

They ransacked the medicine cabinet in Vasily’s upstairs bathroom, the one attached to his bedroom, taking care to replace everything as they had found it with surgical precision. After minimal bickering, Hélène found an acceptable cologne, allowing Anatole to apply it with a heavy hand. He overdid it, just the teensiest bit, but she didn’t quite have the heart to tell him.

“Right,” she said, once he was suitably perfumed, “We’re almost all set. Now, where’s the corsage?”

Anatole blinked. “The what now?”


“I thought those were just a prom thing?”

Hélène rolled her eyes. “If she’s wearing a nice dress for you, the least you can do is buy her flowers.”
Anatole frowned at that. “Didn’t you tell me that women get dressed up for themselves?”

Hélène smiled. With Fedya being his only consistent male role model, she was determined to intervene as often as she could to prevent Anatole’s development into a sports-obsessed frat-boy chauvinist. “Yes, they do, but this is a special occasion. You want her to feel pretty, right?”

Anatole looked suitably abashed at that. “Of course.”

She had already grabbed her purse and keys and begun to head for the door. “I’ll go run uptown quickly and see if I can find some flowers in time.”

“Just be quick, please. Natalie said she’d be over in an hour,” he said.

Hélène waved a hand dismissively before plodding down the stairwell. “Don’t worry,” she called. “I’ll be back in a flash.”

“I Feel Pretty’?” said Sonya, wrinkling her nose in disapproval. “Oh my God, Nat, you’re such a diva.”

Natasha pressed a button on her phone and the music stopped. From her seat in front of the vanity mirror, she twisted to face the doorway and gave Sonya a cheesy grin. “What can I say? It gets me in the mood.” With the push of a button, Marni Nixon’s flutttery soprano began to blare through the speakers again.

Sonya drew the blanket a little tighter around her shoulders. The house was always freezing at this time of day, but Natasha, in her sleeveless dress and open v-neck, didn’t seem to mind one bit.

“Are you still sure you don’t want to come?”

Sonya rolled her eyes. “I’m sure.”

“You know, it’s not too late to change your mind. I don’t think they’d mind squeezing in an extra person—”

“Nat,” she said with a tired smile, “I appreciate the intent, but I’m fine.”

Natasha pouted. She was absolutely adorable, Sonya had to admit.

“You look amazing.”

Natasha bit her lip. “You think so?” She turned back to the mirror and began to dust a soft powder over her cheeks, something glittery and sheer that sent up a cloud of sparkles whenever she lifted her brush. “I’m so nervous, Sonyushka. Can you see how my hands are shaking?” She set the brush down, smoothing back a stray tuft of hair. “I don’t think I can do winged eyeliner like this.”

“You don’t need to do the big fancy wings. You’re stunning already.”

“Does my lipstick look okay at least? My hand slipped while I was putting it on and I don’t know if I’ve gotten it all off yet.”

There was a small splotch of pinkish-red smudged at the corner of her mouth. Sonya dabbed it away with a tissue. “There. Now you’re good. Just a little mascara and then you’re all set.”
Natasha was already curling her eyelashes. “It gets so hot in the gym. I just hope I don’t sweat off my foundation.”

“With this weather?” Sonya giggled. “I’d be more concerned about it freezing to your face.” She idly ran a hand through Natasha’s hair and swept it back from her shoulders. “Are you leaving your hair down?”

“I was thinking of that.”

Sonya twisted the length of hair in her hand into a high, elegant knot and reached over across the vanity for the box of bobby pins she knew Natasha always kept in the left-hand drawer. “You know,” she said, placing the pins between her teeth and combing her fingers through Natasha’s hair, “I could do your hair if you want. We could pin it up all fancy like I did at Nikolai’s graduation.”

Natasha’s face lit up beatifically. “You’d do that? But it took you forever to do it then.”

“If I start now, I should have enough time.”

“Oh, Sonya, you’re the best.” And with that, she threw her arms around Sonya and wrapped her in a crushing hug. Sonya laughed and dropped the bobby pins.

“Come on, Natalya Ilyinichna,” she said, deepening her voice and pulling her face into a proud scowl in imitation of Marya Dmitrievna. “Let’s get you ready for your big debut. Now, let me find some hairspray and ties, and then we’re going to make you a star.”

True to form, Hélène returned not even twenty minutes later. Anatole bounded down the stairs when he heard her car pull into the driveway, one sock half-on, the other clutched in his hand.

She came in through the back door, and Anatole met her in the kitchen. “I come bearing gifts,” she said, holding the corsage aloft.

Anatole sighed in relief. “You’re the best.”

“Are you almost ready? Isn’t she coming soon?”

“I’ve got some time. She’s not coming until eight.”

Hélène glanced at the clock, before remembering that that particular clock had been broken for the past ten years, and instead glanced at her phone screen. “It’s seven thirty, Tolya,” she said testily.

Anatole only rolled his eyes. “Relax,” he said. “I’ll be fine. It’s not like I’m in a rush.”

Ten minutes later, and Anatole was in a rush. That it was stupidly predictable didn’t make it any less annoying as she listened to his footsteps padding along upstairs and the incessant creaking of the floorboards.

“Do you know where my shoes are?” he said, panicked. “I’ve been looking all over for them and I can’t—”

“Your nice dress shoes? Toto, they’re in your closet where they always are.”

“They aren’t.”
Hélène rolled her eyes, already starting up towards his room. “Let me check.”

Anatole trailed after her. “I told you Lena, I already checked—”

She emerged from his closet, holding his shoes aloft. “What would you do without me?”

“God, you’re a lifesaver.”

“And you’re a dweeb.” Hélène ran a hand through his hair as he stumbled into his shoes. “You’ve gotten too tall and grown-up for your own good.” She cupped his face in her hands and squished his cheeks. Anatole tried in vain to swat her away. “My little prince. Remember when you just came up to my shoulders? You used to be such a cute kid. What happened to my baby brother?”

“Lena.”

“I’m just teasing.” She gave him another kiss, on the cheek this time. “I hope you have a blast tonight. She seems like a charming girl.”

“She is,” Anatole said seriously. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt this way about anyone before.”

Hélène resisted the urge to roll her eyes at that. Since reaching adolescence, Anatole had fallen hopelessly in love with more people than she could count. His infatuations seemed to transcend age, ethnicity, or gender—the only consistent factor was that they always vanished just as quickly as they had come about.

Well, with few exceptions.

“What about that nice Bolkonsky girl?” she asked innocently. “You used to be hung up on her too.”

Anatole pulled a face. “Doesn’t count. That was like, in grade three. And Mary and I barely talk anymore.”

Hélène snickered. “Well, what about Weronika? Or Amelie?”

“Natalie’s different from all of them,” he insisted. “She’s sweet and funny and smart and she really gets me, Lena. And she’s really beautiful. You’ve seen her; you’d know what I’m talking about. It’s those eyes. And that hair. And she has the best smile, it’s like looking at the Sun.” Anatole wrung his hands together, incessantly tapping his toes. “I’m nervous. But excited.”

She smiled blithely at him. “I’m sure she feels the same.”

Anatole’s face lit up. “You really think so?”

“Of course!” she said.

“And you’re still good to drive?”

“As long as you two don’t get gross in my backseat,” Hélène said. “You get so annoying with PDA when you’re dating someone new.”

“I’m not dating her! And besides, I’m nowhere near as bad as you and Fedya used to be.”

Hélène rolled her eyes. “We were never that bad.”

“Tell that to all the family dinners you spent sitting on his lap.”
“That was just to get a rise out of Papa. It doesn’t count.”

“And I’m sure that that time I walked in on you in the wine cellar doesn’t count either, then.”

Hélène grinned and playfully smacked him on the shoulder. “You take that back, you little brat.”

Anatole laughed. “I wish I could. I’m scarred. You two have forever tainted my perceptions of sex and relationships.”

Hélène felt a twinge of guilt at that. He was right, even if he was only joking—she hadn’t been an adequate role model for how relationships should function. “You could do a lot worse than Fedya.”

He looked away. “I know that.”

Hélène sighed. She had seen the way he looked at Fedya, even as Anatole denied that he had any interest in him. And as tempting as it was, she knew better than to push the subject any further. “So what are your intentions with Natalie?”

Anatole grimaced at her. “What are you, fifty?”

Hélène shrugged. “I’m curious.”

“I’m not telling you anything.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s weird, Lena.”

Hélène raised an eyebrow. “If you’re having sex, you don’t have to keep it from me. It’s perfectly natural. I’m not gonna judge.”

“It’s not that,” said Anatole. He fidgeted awkwardly, clearly searching for words.

“Well, what is it? Are you nervous?” She laid a hand on his shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. “It doesn’t have to be scary, Toto, it can actually be really special.”

“You’re making me uncomfortable,” he said, shrugging off her hand, “and I don’t want to continue this conversation.”

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Anatole made his voice firm and brittle. “Leave it alone, Lena. I have to finish getting ready.”

“Fine,” she sighed. “Leave me in the dark. All I did was raise you and convince your date to go out with you.”

“That’s not fair.”

“I just want to make sure you’re being safe, Anatole.”

Anatole’s face had gone a bright pink. “I’m not as dumb as you like to think I am. I know what I’m doing.”

Hélène narrowed her eyes. “Are you saying you’ve already—”
“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“That’s too bad, because I want to talk about it. How could you keep this from me?”

“Because it’s not any of your business!” he spluttered. “Oh my God, Lena, do you have any idea how crazy you sound? If Ippolit was giving you this interrogation, wouldn’t that be just as—”

“It’s not an interrogation; I’m looking out for you. It’s not like you can talk about this with Papa or Ippolit, and it’s important that you talk to an adult about this.”

Anatole’s face only reddened further. “I’m not a little kid. Jesus, Lena, I’m seventeen; I’m practically an adult already.”

“But there are things you need to know to make sure you’re being safe. And if you’re not mature enough to talk about sex, you’re not mature enough to have sex.” Hélène softened, seeing how uncomfortable he looked. “Would it be easier if you were talking to another guy? How about Fedya?”

“Stop!” he cried, covering his eyes with his hands. “God, just forget I even said anything.”

“It’s okay, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind—”

“Screw what he thinks—I would mind!” said Anatole. “You just want an excuse to snoop.”

“I’m not snooping, you brat, I’m trying to make sure you don’t make the same mistakes I did.”

“You already gave me the talk,” he snapped. “Stop acting like you’re worried about me. You’re just being a control freak.”

“It’s for your own good.”

“You sound just like Papa when you say that,” he said glumly.

Hélène’s breath caught in her throat. She expected Anatole’s face to wilt in regret, for him to frantically offer an apology, but, for what was probably the first time in his life, he didn’t. “Anatole.”

He opened his mouth to say something else, but they were interrupted by the sound of a car—Natasha’s car, no doubt—pulling into their driveway. His eyes widened and his head whipped around to glare at her.

“We aren’t doing this in front of Nat,” he hissed. “We’re gonna smile and act like nothing ever happened. Don’t ruin this for me. Everything has to be perfect.”

Hélène narrowed her eyes for a second before she regained her composure. “Fine,” she said coolly. And left unspoken: You’ll pay for that.

Radiant. Natasha was positively radiant.

Anatole couldn’t tell whether her dress was white or silver or gray or cream, but whatever it was, it radiated a sort of ethereal light. Her hair was pulled away from her face in an updo and he thought that he could smell lavender—was she wearing perfume, too?
She looked like a goddess, he thought. Like some fairy princess, something beautiful and utterly inhuman. “You look amazing,” he said. Natasha blushed furiously.

Her eyes wandered appreciatively over his jacket. She must have liked what she saw, if the look on her face was anything to go by. Anatole stood up a little straighter and she said, “You too.”

“How cute,” Hélène said, as she gestured to Anatole’s white jacket. “You’re even matching. Now,” she added, giving Anatole a smile, “I’m going to need pictures before you go.”

“Fine,” Anatole muttered, passing her his phone.

“Oh no, I think we need the camera.”

“I really don’t think that’s necessary.”

“But we’ll get better pictures with the camera!” she said. “Isn’t that right, Natasha?”

“I guess…” Natasha said, turning to Anatole. He forced a pleasant smile.

“Perfect,” Hélène grinned. She maneuvered them together in front of the fireplace. “Smile! God, you kids are just too precious together. You’re making me feel so old.”

“Lena,” Anatole groaned, “you’re being embarrassing.”

“You’ll thank me for these one day. Now put your arm around your girlfriend.”

Natasha blushed furiously. “Oh…I’m not…we’re not—”

“She has a boyfriend,” Anatole said at the same time.

“My mistake,” Hélène said with a sickly sweet smile. “Still though, you two should get closer together. This looks awkward. I don’t want to see any hover-hands.” Then, to Natasha: “He doesn’t bite, darling!”

Natasha gave Anatole a hesitant smile as he stepped closer, wrapping an arm around her waist. He revelled at the comfortable ease with which she leaned into him and squeezed her a little tighter.

“Perfect,” said Hélène.

(CLICK)

Hélène cradled the camera in her hands. “Oh,” she said, with all the sappiness of a middle-aged mother, “this is just the most darling thing. Well, Tolya, you’ve got a bit of red-eye going on—”

“Lena.”

“—but we can always retouch it, and Natasha, you look absolutely lovely. I think I’ll use it for the Christmas cards.”

“God, now you’re sounding just like a PTA mom,” Anatole said.

Hélène’s head snapped up from the screen. For the briefest moment, something like anger flickered across her features, but it was quickly replaced with her signature Kuragin grin. “I think it’s time we headed off,” she said brightly, “or you two kiddos are gonna be late to your big dance.”
Natasha, as Hélène was quickly realizing, was a sweet girl, but dear God was she awkward. And a little too perceptive for her own good. Hélène always prided herself on her ability to conduct herself with utmost dignity and grace, but she couldn’t deny that the tension between her and Anatole was anything less than palpable.

And Anatole, too, was being uncharacteristically quiet.

“Are you kids excited?”

Anatole scowled. “Could you just drive?”

“You don’t drive, Anatole?” Natasha asked with a furrowed brow.

He wilted into his seat and muttered something about “dumbass instructors”.

“I’m afraid not,” Hélène said, ignoring the murderous look Anatole shot in her direction. “He still has yet to pass the written test. A little embarrassing, I know.”

“Oh, it’s nothing to be embarrassed about” said Natasha. She patted him on the shoulder gently. “I mean, I failed my road test twice.”

“That’s not bad,” Hélène said coolly. “What is this going to be for you, Tolya? Five? Six?”

“Four,” he snipped, straightening his shoulders, “and again, you don’t have to talk to us.”

Hélène’s eyes narrowed. “You know, Natalie, he’s been dying waiting for tonight. Isn’t that right, Toto?”

“Lena.”

“Toto?” said Natasha

Hélène adjusted the rearview mirror so that Natasha could see her eyes. “Oh yes! Did Anatole ever tell you how he got that nickname?”

Natasha smiled, shooting Anatole a sidelong glance. “No, I don’t think it’s ever come up in conversation.”

“Well,” Hélène said, a mischievous grin working its way onto her face, “our mother used to be really into group costumes for Halloween.”

Anatole caught onto her gambit and immediately flushed a bright red. “No, Lena, please, anything but that one—”

“When we were little—now this must have been when I was about four or five years old, because this one was still just a baby—she dressed the three of us as the Wizard of Oz.”

“The three of you?” asked Natasha, tilting her head.

“Ippolit,” Anatole grumbled. “My older brother.”

Hélène waved him down. “Ippolit was our Tin Man, and I was Dorothy. I had the dress and the pigtails and the shoes and—”
“Lena!”

“—my little doggy as well!” she said, jerking her head in Anatole’s direction. Natasha’s face broke into a wide grin.

“Oh my God. Are you serious?” She elbowed Anatole lightly in the ribs.

“It was so cute,” Hélène continued, ignoring how Anatole looked like he wanted nothing more than to open the door and dive right out into the traffic. “He had a tail and everything!”

Natasha giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. “Anatole! How could you keep this from me?”

“I still have the picture!” Hélène said. “Here, let me show you.”

Anatole intercepted her phone as she passed it to the backseat. “I really think you should keep your eyes on the road, Hélène.”

“Don’t be such a spoilsport,” Natasha jibed, holding out her hand. “C’mere. Let me see.” Anatole begrudgingly passed the phone over and Natasha gasped when she saw the photo. “Oh my God! You were such an adorable baby,” she giggled.

“Don’t let the cutesy goo-goo eyes or chubby cheeks deceive you, Natalie,” said Hélène. “He was an awful baby. Leave him alone for five seconds and he’d start bawling.”

Natasha’s thumb slipped across the screen and she accidentally swiped right. “Oh my God! What’s this from?”

Hélène chuckled. “That was the time Anatole decided to give himself a haircut.”

“Hélène!” Anatole shrieked. “Why do you still have these photos on your phone?”

Hélène shrugged innocently. “Why not? They’re good memories.”

He crossed his arms, fixing her with a sharp glare. “You’re the worst.”

Hélène grinned back but didn’t say anything as they pulled up in front of the school by the gym doors. “I’m meeting Fedya for coffee, but text me if you want a ride back.”

“Thanks,” he muttered, not sounding thankful at all, and clambered out of the car.

“Alright you crazy kids!” she said. “Have a wild time. Just not too wild.”

“Hélène, please,” Anatole wheezed.

“Love you too, Toto,” she said with a wink, and drove off.

Anatole rubbed his forehead. “God, I am so sorry,” he groaned. “I swear, she lives to embarrass me.”

“Please don’t apologize!” Natasha gently bumped his shoulder. “I think it’s sweet. I’m sure if Sonya was old enough to remember my baby antics she’d do the same. And besides,” she added, leaning in a little closer, “you were a really cute baby.”

Anatole went very pink. He offered her his hand, and she instead looped her arm through the crook of his elbow, drawing herself up a little straighter as they made their way to the front doors.
“You ready to go in?”

“Just a moment,” he said, and drew a bottle from the inner pocket of his jacket.

“What’s that?”

“It’s vodka,” Anatole explained. “I just had to put it in a water bottle so Hélène wouldn’t see it.”

Natasha blinked. “Oh. I didn’t know you brought alcohol.”

“Sorry,” said Anatole. “Do you not drink?”

Wordlessly, she produced a small silver flask. Anatole’s face split into a cheesy grin.

“No,” he said, shocked, but clearly happily so. “You didn’t.”

Natasha nodded proudly. “I sure did.”

“Shall we?”

Natasha raised her flask. “We shall.” She took a deep swig and wrinkled her nose. “God, I hate vodka.” Anatole’s eyes tracked a drop that ran down her chin and he quickly reached out a thumb to wipe it away. Natasha pulled away, covering her mouth. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Don’t apologize,” he said. “It’s cute.”

She hoped that he wouldn’t see the way she blushed at that. “You ready to go in?”

Anatole pocketed his bottle. “Sure thing.”

She took his proffered arm, wrapping a hand around his bicep. “Let’s do it.”

It took only second for Natasha to spot that familiar head of flame-red hair across the gym. She squeezed Anatole’s hand. “We should hide. Before Marya D tries to talk to me.”

He nodded. “That’s a good plan.”

“Where should we go?”

“We don’t have to go anywhere.” Before she could blink, he had led her out into the center of the gym, where a crowd of teenagers danced. “She won’t interrupt us if we’re busy. Do you want to dance?”

Natasha smiled up at him, giving him her hand. “I’d love that.”

Anatole wrapped his other arm around her waist, pulling her close. Natasha distantly noticed that they seemed to be waltzing than slow-dancing as she hesitantly placed her hand on his shoulder. “Where did you learn to dance like this?”

“My mother used to make me take ballroom dancing lessons,” he said.

Natasha’s heart fluttered. Was this boy even real? Did he have any idea of the effect he had on her? He must have, she concluded, because he leaned in so close that she could have counted each and every eyelash and said, “That’s another thing I could teach you.”
Natasha blinked. “What?”

“Ballroom dancing,” said Anatole, with such naïve confidence she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Are you a Disney prince or something?”

“Maybe,” he said with a smirk. He leaned in a little closer. “If that’s what you like.”

Natasha’s face began to burn and she felt her palms go slick with sweat. He was teasing her, she realized, and here she was, getting all flustered and playing right into his hands. Well, she thought, feeling bolder than she knew she knew she really ought to have, two can play at that game. And because she was giddy and reckless with nerves, she leaned in and said, “Why do you care what I like?”

Anatole laughed at that, and Natasha felt no small sense of pride when his cheeks flushed a delicate shade of pink. “I knew you had a good sense of humor. You’re a very witty person, Natalie.”

“You flatter me.”

“I’m only being honest. Sometimes it’s difficult to be honest with you.”

Natasha tilted her head. “It is?”

Anatole’s smile was gentle. “If I could be as honest as I wanted to be, I would have told you how I felt about you the moment I met you.”

Her stomach flipped. He was too much, his gaze too intense, his hands too warm, his presence too solid. Natasha bit her lip and averted her eyes.

Anatole chuckled, squeezing her hand. “There’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Natalie.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” she snapped defensively. “But this isn’t right.”

“What’s wrong about it?”

Natasha nearly let out a nervous laugh. “I have a boyfriend. I love him.”

“So?”

“‘So’?” she spluttered, pulling away from him. “Oh my God, do you realize how thoughtless you sound right now?”

Anatole’s mouth fell open. “I…I’m sorry if I upset you.”

She crossed her arms hesitantly. “It’s fine.”

“Natalie?” he murmured. He put his hands on her shoulders, gently rubbing them. “I truly am sorry,” he sighed. “It’s just difficult when you’re so irresistible. I’ve never felt this way about anyone before.”

Natasha felt an odd twinge of satisfaction at that, at the idea that she might have some small power over him. She had never felt this way with any other man before; there was an odd brand of intimacy in every word and gesture they traded, and he looked so completely enraptured with her that she could do nothing but stare back him, caught in the dazzling tension that crackled between them. Natasha distantly wondered whether Andrei had ever looked at her like that, with such
helpless adoration and open tenderness.

Anatole, as she was quickly realizing, was a very strange boy indeed.

“Really, Natalie,” he laughed, self-deprecating. “You leave a dying man without recourse. You have no idea, do you? The effect you have on people?”

Natasha blushed, tilting her head down. “Shut up.”

“It’s true!” he said. “You’re a wonder.”

“And you’re an incorrigible flirt.”

A shrug. “Guilty as charged. I like appreciating the beautiful things in life.”

“Oh, Romeo,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes. “Let’s just dance.”

“Lead the way,” he said with a grin.

Anatole’s hands wrapped around her waist, pulling her up against him. She swayed, off-balance, and braced her hands on his chest to stop herself from falling.

“You’re hurting me,” she said.

Anatole’s jaw went slack and he immediately loosened his hold on her. “Oh. Oops. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she murmured, quickly pulling her hands away.

“You look so beautiful tonight,” he murmured, tilting his head down.

Natasha put a hand on his chest, stopping him. “Anatole,” she said sharply.

Anatole sighed. “You deserve someone who makes you happy, Natalie. Can’t you let me be that someone?”

“No,” she said sharply.

Anatole, I don’t know what you want me to say—”

“Don’t say anything. Just do.”

Natasha frowned, staring into his eyes. They were so beautiful; wide and blue and generously lashed. They were eyes you could fall into, eyes that willingly told her everything she needed to know about Anatole Kuragin.

It was too easy to fall into them, she realized. He was an open book for her to peruse. Not like Andrei. Cold, distant, unreadable Andrei. No, she told herself, that was mean of her.

But it was true, her inner voice countered. Andrei had never been comfortable letting his guard down in front of anybody, even her. Especially her. Not like Anatole, who so freely wore his heart on his sleeve, who had no hesitation about showing affection. Showing how much he wanted her.

But Andrei was her boyfriend. And she had made him a promise.

But then again, he had also made her a promise. A promise to keep in touch. And he’d broken it.

But two wrongs didn’t make a right. Natasha was better than this.

But she really wasn’t.
But Andrei—

But Anatole—

But.

Andrei wasn’t here. And Anatole very much was.

So she blinked, trying to inject some confidence into her voice as she met Anatole’s gaze again. “And what do you want me to do?”

It did not escape her notice how his eyes flickered down to her lips.

Natasha wasn’t sure which of them leaned in first, but that didn’t matter. Not when Anatole’s lips were so soft and warm against hers. She stumbled forwards and he wrapped his arms around her, steadying her. Andrei had never kissed her like this—not with this passion. She sighed and Anatole chuckled breathlessly, gripping her even tighter.

Natasha broke away from the kiss first, catching her breath with a gasp. “Oh,” she murmured, touching her lip.

Anatole paled. “I’m so sorry, Natalie, was that not…okay?”

Natasha reached over to cup his jaw with one hand, gently running her thumb over his bottom lip. She felt him stiffen under her touch. “It was more than okay,” she said quietly.

Anatole laughed nervously, as if he couldn’t believe that she hadn’t slapped him or something—and to be fair, Natasha supposed, she couldn’t quite believe it either—and took her hand, brushing his thumb over her knuckle. “Then I’m glad.”

Natasha furrowed her brow. “What does this mean?”

“Whatever you want it to mean.”

She rolled her eyes. “Am I going to get a straightforward answer out of you at all tonight?”

He smiled gently. “I’m yours, Natalie. However you want me.”

The breath left her lungs. They had stopped dancing, she realized with a jolt. When had that happened? How had she not noticed? Natasha swallowed heavily, raking her eyes up and down his face. “What if I wanted you in every way?”

Anatole’s cheeks went red. Natasha decided that she very much enjoyed seeing him blush and that she would enjoy making him blush even more. “Natalie? What are you saying?”

“Do you want to get out of here?”

Had she actually just said that?

Anatole’s eyes went wide. He looked just as shocked as she felt. “Natalie…do you mean…?”

Natasha’s heart thundered in her ears. She nodded, curling her fingers in the lapels of his jacket and drawing him close. In that moment, her mind was far beyond made up. “Yeah. Right now.”

Anatole pressed his forehead to hers. “Come on,” he said. “I know somewhere we won’t be seen.”
The house at 1867 Nikitsky Boulevard must have once been beautiful, but it had long since fallen into disrepair. Along the crumbling walls that ringed the front yard swaths of ivy grew in creeping tangles, and the grass looked like it hadn’t seen water for the past century. But it was still a gorgeous work of architecture, even if the tiling along the roof was chipped and missing in certain spots and the little fir tree out front had long since dried and wilted and the curtains were drawn tightly shut behind the warped, yellowing glass of the windows.

*Queen Anne*, Sonya thought instantly. *No, it’s probably Victorian.*

Pebbles and stones crunched beneath her feet as she padded up the driveway until she stood in the front yard. There was nothing at the door, not even a welcome mat, no buzzer or knocker, but if the light on in one of the top-floor windows was anything to go by, somebody was home. She only hoped that it was Mary or one of her parents and that she had actually come to the right house. Unwilling to embarrass herself by knocking at what was possibly a complete stranger’s door, Sonya whipped her phone out of her pocket.

*Sonya Rostova:* helloooooo

She waited a minute for a response, and when there was none, she began to type again.

*Sonya Rostova:* u there? Anyone there?

*Sonya Rostova:* earth to mary

*Sonya Rostova:* i think im in your front yard? Like im pretty sure im right outside your house

*Mary Bolkonskaya:* I beg your pardon.

*Sonya Rostova:* heya!!!!!!

*Sonya Rostova:* you said you were in “the shabbiest house on the most obnoxiously expensive street”

*Sonya Rostova:* (your words, not mine)
Sonya Rostova: i am currently outside the shabbiest house on the most obnoxiously expensive street

Sonya Rostova: the one with the cute lil charlie brown christmas tree out front

Mary Bolkonskaya: I’ve never seen Charlie Brown.

Mary Bolkonskaya: We’ve been over this before.

Mary Bolkonskaya: And what exactly are you doing outside my house?

Sonya Rostova: waiting for you to open the door

Sonya Rostova: its cold as balls out here pls come quick

Mary Bolkonskaya: I’ll be just a minute. Go around the back and I’ll meet you there.

Mary answered the door wearing red-and-green flannel pyjamas. Her hair was tied and twisted on top of her head in a damp towel, and she had a ratty old dressing gown draped over her shoulders like a cape. Even though her feet were blue in the cold, she didn’t have on so much as a pair of socks. “Oh,” she said, mildly surprised. “I didn’t actually think that you’d actually be here.”

Sonya tilted her head. “Why’s that?”

“Moscow kids love ding-dong ditch.”

Sonya didn’t know why, but her face burned at that.

“Well, it’s a nice surprise,” she added with a too-bright smile. There was a faint dot of face cream smudged over her left eyebrow. She quickly wiped it away, slipping her arms into the sleeves of the dressing gown and tying the sash around her waist. “I’m sorry. I must look like a mess right now. I just got out of the shower and I wasn’t expecting any visitors.”

“Well, it’s a nice surprise,” she added with a too-bright smile. There was a faint dot of face cream smudged over her left eyebrow. She quickly wiped it away, slipping her arms into the sleeves of the dressing gown and tying the sash around her waist. “I’m sorry. I must look like a mess right now. I just got out of the shower and I wasn’t expecting any visitors.”

“Did I interrupt something?”

Mary waved her down. “I wasn’t doing anything.”

“Okay, that’s good.” Sonya held up the comically large stack of DVDs in her hands with a grin. “I come bearing gifts.”

Mary blinked owlishly. “Why?”

“I had nothing better to do. Besides, we never hung out.”

“You didn’t want to go to the dance?”

Sonya shrugged. “It wouldn’t have been the same without you there.” She tilted her head mischievously. “I brought Disney.”

Mary glanced over her shoulder at the long, dark hallway that led into the house proper. “We have to keep quiet. My father doesn’t like guests.”

“That’s okay. He won’t even know I’m here.” Mary raised an eyebrow skeptically and Sonya put a
hand on her heart. “I can be quiet! Scout’s honor.”

Mary snorted. “Fine, just come in. We’ll go to the den. Just try not to make any noise on the stairs. Stay close to the walls—the floorboards creak less there.”

Together, they tiptoed through the parlor and down the hall and then crawled upstairs to the den, treading only in their socks for fear of making the floorboards creak and waking up Mr. Bolkonsky. He slept in the master bedroom on the first floor, Mary told her. Sonya noticed that Mary failed to mention a mother or what, if anything, her father did for a living, but as nosy as she was, Mary had clearly shared all that she wanted to, and Sonya elected not to press the matter any further.

The corridor along the second-floor stairwell was just as dark and austere as the front hall. Dark wood floors under darkened lights, dust along every spare surface. It was like a mausoleum, some withered skeleton of a home, and though it was beautiful to look at, there was something undeniably vile and oppressive lurking in the air.

Mary locked the door as soon as they were in the den. Of all the rooms Sonya had seen so far, this one was the most well-lit and the least dusty. A blue shag carpet had been spread along the floor but it wasn’t quite large enough reach the walls. There was an ancient-looking television perched on top of the coffee table and wedged into the corner of the room. Mary immediately settled into one of the overstuffed sofas, and the cushion springs groaned in protest when Sonya joined her.

“Alright,” said Mary, rubbing her hands together. “We can talk now if you want. You don’t have to keep your voice down, just don’t start shouting or anything. And I have to wake him up for his meds and dinner at eight-thirty.”

Sonya elected to ignore that last part and instead began to rifle through her bag. “I have all the classics,” she said. “We’ve got Little Mermaid and Mulan and Beauty and the Beast and Atlantis—talk about an underappreciated masterpiece—and Tarzan and Emperor’s New Groove and Lady and the Tramp and—”

“Sonya,” Mary said, holding up a hand. “That’s a lot of words to process.”

“Sorry, I’m rambling aren’t I?”

Mary’s smile wrinkled the corners of her eyes. “Just a smidge.”

Sonya tilted her bag upside down and allowed the DVD cases to spill onto the carpet. Mary’s eyes went wide.

“That’s…a lot of films. I’m not sure it would be physically possible to make it through all of these in one night.”

“Well, we’ll never know if we don’t try!” said Sonya.

Mary shook her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m ambitious. But we’re never gonna get through these if we don’t start.”

She eyed the pile apprehensively. One hand drifted back to her dressing gown, pulling the sash tighter, worrying at the already-frayed hem. Was this a nervous tic? It was an adorable one, if it
Sonya tilted her head in contemplation. “Normally I’d suggest going straight to the classics, but I want to pick one that’ll suit you. Is that weird?”

“A little,” said Mary. “But it’s also sweet.”

Sonya tried to hide the way her cheeks blushed furiously at that by sliding off the sofa into a crouch and starting to rifle through the pile of DVDs one by one. As she worked her way through the inventory, she split them into two neat stacks. “Maybe we’ll start with a musical. What sort of music do you listen to?”

Mary paused, clearly deep in thought. “A lot of Ivan Rebroff and Klavdiya Shulzhenko. Marusia Georgevskaya too.” Sonya’s expression must have telegraphed her bewilderment, because she quickly added, “The only music my father really likes is classic Russian stock.”

“I understand,” Sonya said in a tone that indicated that she did not understand at all. She returned to the DVDs. “Well, I know you have an eye for beautiful art. You kind of strike me as a surrealist, if your drawings are anything to go by.”

“That’s very kind of you,” Mary said with a timid smile.

At last, Sonya had narrowed the pile down to two selections. She held the cases, one in each hand, weighing them with a critical eye. “Let me think. Are you a ‘Fantasia’ person? Or an ‘Alice in Wonderland’ person?”

Mary’s head perked up a little at that. “‘Alice in Wonderland’? They adapted C.S. Lewis?”

Sonya popped the casing open and held it up so that Mary could see the cover. “Yeah! It’s a cute flick. You want to have a look?”

She handed the DVD over to Mary, who promptly flipped it over and began to read the blurb. Her brow furrowed into a frown of concentration. “Can we watch this one?” she said once she had finished.

“Sure thing.”

Mary powered on the television and popped the DVD into the console. “We don’t have any popcorn, I’m afraid,” she said. “Sorry if it’s not very cinematic.”

“That’s an easy fix.” she gestured to the open curtains. “Mind if I?”

“Oh, sure thing!”

But even with the lights turned off and the curtains pulled shut, the room was still bright and the TV screen dim. Irony of all ironies, Sonya thought, that they had chosen the only room in the whole damn house that wasn’t dark.

“You know,” said Mary as she switched the television screen over to the DVD channel, “I just realized that it’s freezing in here. Are you cold at all?”

Sonya saw that Mary’s feet were still blue and realized just how chilly she herself already was. Her cardigan was a little too skimpy for the frigid winter air, and goosebumps already ran up and down the length of her arms. “A little,” she confessed.
Mary returned to the couch and pulled a blanket off the arm of the chair, fluffing it out and draping it over the two of them like half a tent. She grinned mischievously.

“This any better?”

_Damn_, thought Sonya. _This girl’s as warm as a furnace._ She swallowed past the lump in her throat and nodded. “Much.”

The two of them leaned back against the couch, huddled together. Mary scooted a little closer until their hips touched and then swept the remainder of the blanket over to cover their laps. She wiggled a little—God knew what for, but it only flustered Sonya all the same—and pressed ‘Play’.

“Alright, Sonyushka,” she said, grinning. “Let’s get this film started.”

Mary stared at the screen the whole time, her eyes wide, only moving to turn the volume down when the music became too loud. She laughed at the funny parts, clutched a pillow to her stomach tightly during the scary parts, even shed a pearly little tear or two when Alice began to cry. It was adorable and even hilarious in an innocent, childlike way. Sonya couldn’t help but notice tiny details that she’d never picked up on before, like how deep Mary’s smile lines were, or the pale splattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks, or the faint streaks of gold in her hair, or the way the corners of her eyes wrinkled when she laughed. She looked like a painting or some antique sepia photograph, but she was _warm_ and so close.

The movie was over in what felt like the blink of an eye. Mary stared slack-jawed as the credits rolled. “That was amazing,” she breathed.

Sonya grinned. “Yeah? You get the hype now?”

Mary nodded and turned to face her, and her eyes twinkled with merriment and unshed tears. “Can we watch it again?”

“Really?” she said. “Why not try another one? Alice in Wonderland isn’t even one of the better movies. Heck, it’s not even a full-fledged musical.”

Mary snorted as if to say, _Don’t be ridiculous._ “What, you’re telling me that there’s better ones than _this_?” When Sonya only raised an eyebrow, she smiled. “Wait, you’re not just yanking my chain?”

“My God, you really are sheltered, aren’t you?”

Mary laughed and whacked Sonya’s shoulder with one of the pillows on the couch. “You’re a jerk.”

Sonya reached her arms over her head and stretched with a loud yawn. The blanket slid off her shoulders. “God, I’m stiff. I’m too young to be this achey.”

“Bad posture?”

“Awkward posture,” she corrected, and twisted her torso side to side until her back cracked audibly. “God, I still can’t believe that was your first Disney film. I practically grew up on these things. Me and Nat both.”
Mary shrugged. “My dad’s always been strict with us—Andrei and I, that is.”

“Is that like a religious thing?”

“I don’t know. Could be. Probably not, though. He’s strict about everything—music, food, bedtimes, you name it. It wasn’t so bad when we were younger but it’s gotten worse the older we’ve gotten.”

Sonya bit her lip awkwardly. The conversation was taking on a decidedly somber tone. She already regretted bringing up the topic again in the first place. “That must be rough.”

Another shrug. “I’m used to it.” She fiddled with the hem of the blanket and turned back to Sonya. The television screen cast her face in a blue light. It was slightly eerie but there was something beautiful about it at the same time. “How about your parents?” she said.

If she was trying to steer the chat in a cheerier direction, it was the wrong question to ask, but Sonya elected to not put an even heavier damper on the mood. “I live with my aunt and uncle,” she said. “They’ve always been pretty chill with everything. I think they know Nat and I are mature enough for that.”

“That sounds nice,” said Mary. “And it’s nice that you have Natasha.”

Tears had edged their way into her voice. A pang of sympathy speared Sonya through the heart and she shifted a little closer. “Andrei?”

Mary nodded. “I miss him a lot. But mostly I miss my dad. How he used to be.”

“How about your parents?” Sonya asked.

Mary seemed to hesitate for a moment. She took a deep breath, clearly bracing herself for what she was about to say next. “He’s been unwell for a long time. He’s not a bad person, it’s just that his mind isn’t what it used to be and it makes him…disagreeable at times.” She swallowed. “Early-onset Alzheimer’s.”

Sonya’s breath left her. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “Oh, Mary, that’s awful.”

“It’s alright. It was silly of me anyway.”

“You know,” said Sonya, “talking about this stuff helps.” She squeezed her hand. “And I won’t ever judge. Promise.”

Mary seemed to hesitate for a moment. She took a deep breath, clearly bracing herself for what she was about to say next. “He’s been unwell for a long time. He’s not a bad person, it’s just that his mind isn’t what it used to be and it makes him…disagreeable at times.” She swallowed. “Early-onset Alzheimer’s.”

Sonya’s breath left her. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “Oh, Mary, that’s awful.”

“It’s nothing to be sorry for. He still recognizes me, at least. I don’t think the same can be said for Andrei.” Mary’s eyes welled with tears at that but she quickly blinked them away. “People in this town think I’m some sort of freak. I’m just ‘Mary-with-the-crazy-dad’. We—my brother and I—we used to try taking him out in public, back when he was a little more himself—you know, out to the movies, out to dinner. But he just got worse anyway, no matter what we did.” She wiped her eyes on the back of her hand and the pink flush began to fade from her nose and cheeks. “I don’t blame Andrei for leaving. I love my father, but sometimes I just wish I wasn’t chained down like this. How awful is that of me?”
Sonya shifted a little closer so that the edge of her shoulder was pressed to Mary’s. “It’s not awful of you at all. You’re a good soul, Mary. You deserve better than this.”

“Thank you.” Mary placed her hand on top of Sonya’s and squeezed softly. “I’m sorry, can we just forget I ever said anything? I don’t usually get this emotional, I just don’t know what came over me.”

“If that’s what makes you happy.”

Mary smiled at that and wiped her eyes on the sleeve of her dressing gown. “Any emotionally-repressed baggage you want to share?” she said, laughing.

Sonya let out nervous giggle. “Oh my God, Mary, you’re too much.”

“Thank you for making this such an amazing day. I still can’t believe you actually came.”

Sonya shrugged. “I’m a woman of my word.”

“Sonya…” Mary tilted her gaze towards the floor. “I think is the nicest thing a friend’s ever done for me.”

Sonya gave her a gentle smile. “Then you need better friends.”

“I think I already have one.”

Sonya’s smile wilted just a tad. “Oh. You do?”

Mary rolled her eyes. “It’s you, silly.” Her cheeks flushed a delicate pink when Sonya smiled again. “I’m really glad I met you.”

Sonya intertwined their fingers and squeezed. “I’m really glad I met you too.”

Mary looked down at their joined hands. Her blush had darkened from a soft pink to a dark, splotchy red. “Sonya, I…”

Without thinking, Sonya leaned forward and kissed her. Mary’s lips were warm and soft, and Sonya hesitantly reached out to touch her hair. She wanted to run her fingers through it, to tease out the tangles near the bottom and play with it, but Mary pulled away before she could do anything else, touching her bottom lip. “Oh,” she breathed.

Sonya flushed a brilliant red. Had she actually just done that? “Oh my God, I’m so sorry. Was that not okay?” She ducked her head down, pressing her hands to her cheeks. Her ears may as well have been on fire, they were so hot. “I’m sorry. That was stupid of me. I never should’ve—”

“Have you…ever…?”

If possible, Sonya blushed even further. “No. Well, that’s not true. Once, with some boy in the sixth grade. I don’t remember his name. It was pretty gross, honestly, I don’t know why I thought it would be different this—”

“Are you saying that it was gross to kiss me?” Mary gasped, but even so the hint of a teasing smile lurked in the corner of her mouth, and Sonya’s eyes went wide.

“N-no! That’s not what I meant at all—it was actually kind of nice—”

“So you liked it?”
“—which I obviously shouldn’t have even said in the first place because you don’t like me like that and you probably don’t even like girls like that and—”

Mary laid a hand on her forearm. “But did you like it?”

In that moment, Sonya wanted nothing more than for the ground to swallow her up so she could disappear from sight, from existence. “It was…I mean it was good, but I mean, I don’t really have much of a baseline to compare any of this to, so—”

“Sonya,” Mary said firmly, but her eyes twinkled with mirth, “shut up for once, please.”

Sonya nodded quickly. “Sorry, sorry, shutting up now.”

“I don’t know how to feel about this,” Mary said carefully.

Sonya deflated a little at that. She began to stand up. “You’re right, this was a mistake. I’m sorry, I’ll be on my way.”

“No.” Mary grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back down until she was sitting on the floor again. “I didn’t mean it like that. I just…this is all so new. But I care about you, Sonya.”

“I care about you too,” Sonya said softly.

“And this is weird and new, but I’m not…opposed to it.”

Sonya’s head shot up. “Really?”

“But I don’t think we should change anything,” she added quickly. “Just kind of see what happens?”

Sonya found herself nodding along. “Yes, that’s a plan, that’s a good plan.”

“I really enjoyed the movie,” she said shyly. “Thank you for that. You made this evening really special.”

Sonya’s cheeks went hot again. “Keep it,” she said before she could stop herself. “I practically have it memorized, anyway, I’ve watched it so many times.”

“Thank you.” Mary cast a quick glance at the clock. “Darn it. I have to wake up my dad in a few minutes to give him his meds.” She turned back to Sonya with a look of grim defeat. “I think the universe is conspiring to keep us apart.”

Sonya felt her heart deflate a little. “I should probably make myself scarce.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Sonya said. “I’ll see you on Monday?”

“You know, I’m free after church,” she offered. “Only if you want to do something, of course. I’m not supposed to leave the house but if my dad is asleep, then—”

“I don’t want you getting in trouble!”

Mary shrugged. “I’m only in trouble if he finds out. And he won’t find out, not if he’s asleep.”

“Are you sure? I’d love to hang out but I don’t want to risk—”
“Sonya,” she said firmly, “I haven’t left this house to do anything fun with a friend since middle school. I’m seventeen years old and I’ve never even so much as snuck out to go to the park. I want to change that.”

Sonya’s eyes widened. “You’re sounding awfully adventurous.”

Another shrug, this one more dramatic than the first. “You make me feel adventurous.”

God. Sonya’s face was hot enough to fry an egg. Was it Mary’s goal to make her blush like a tomato? “We could watch another movie,” she offered, pressing a hand to her cheek—boiling hot, as expected. “But, like, at my place this time. So we don’t have to worry about keeping quiet.”

The look on Mary’s face was so filled with ecstatic, childish glee that Sonya had to restrain herself from doing something dumb like laughing or blushing even more or worse, kissing her again.

“That…that would be awesome, Sonya, I’d really love that.”

“It’s a date then!”

Their hands touched again; whether it was intentional or inadvertent, Sonya had no idea, but it made her heart flutter wildly all the same.

She walked home in a dreamy daze, only half-paying attention to her surroundings.

And for the rest of the night, all she could think of was the firm warmth of Mary’s hands and the feel of Mary’s lips against hers.
In Which Our Protagonists Engage In Pursuits Of Questionable Morality

Chapter Summary

Anatole and Natasha continue to make bad choices. They aren't alone.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who has read this fic! As of this chapter, we've hit over 1k views and 70 kudos. We never thought that we would get this much support, and we'd like to thank you all so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Pavlovna’s Café was a cozy and cheerful place, wedged in between the town library and a craft store. It was always packed with too many people for Hélène’s taste, but it was a short walk from the high school and a convenient place to meet, so she resigned herself to drinking her coffee in Fedya’s car.

He parked outside, left the engine running, and nipped into Pavlovna’s to fetch the coffee. Hélène idly flicked through the notifications on her phone to see if she’d gotten a text from Anatole, but there was nothing. She forced herself to swallow her irritation as Fedya made his way back to the car, precariously balancing a tray with her drip coffee and his latte in one hand.

“Sorry it took so long,” he muttered. “People in this town really don’t have anywhere better to be on a Friday.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking the coffee from him. “You didn’t have to buy, you know.”

Fedya shrugged and slid into his seat. “It’s nothing. So, is the kid excited about the big dance?”

“Extremely.” She shook her head with a look that was somewhere halfway between fondness and annoyance. “I swear, he hasn’t talked about anything else for weeks.”

“Typical Anatole, then?”

“Typical Anatole.”

They settled into a comfortable silence, sipping their respective drinks until Fedya said, “What did Pierre do this time?”

Hélène nearly choked on her coffee. “I’m sorry?” she sputtered.

Fedya was silent for a moment as he took a languid swig of his latte. His face, blandly pleasant a few moments ago, had shifted into something smug, as if he was enjoying an inside joke that she wasn’t a part of. “You only ever call to meet me for ‘coffee’ when you’re fighting with him.”

She crossed her arms defensively. “Maybe I really did just want coffee.”
Fedya snorted. “I’m sure. And you definitely haven’t put on that weird perfume you think I like. I’m also willing to bet you haven’t deep-cleaned your room or matched your bra and panties. Since you just want coffee.”

Hélène flushed as she realized, for probably the millionth time since they had first met, that he knew her far too well. “Can you blame me?” she said sweetly. “You’re such good stress relief.”

“What’s got you stressed?”

“Pierre’s being such an ass. I think we’re done for real this time.”

“You always say that.”

She crossed and re-crossed her ankles. “Well, I mean it.”

“What did he do?”

“He basically asked me if I was hooking up with you.”

Fedya chuckled. “Did you tell him you were?”

“That’s not the point. He should trust me.”

“You can’t play innocent, Lena. You are cheating on him.”

Hélène’s face soured.

“Don’t get mad at me because I’m telling you things you don’t want to hear. If you’re going to cheat, then you should at least be able to hear the word ‘cheating’ without having a stroke.”

“This isn’t cheating,” she said coolly, and wedged her coffee into the cupholder. “For me to be cheating on him, I’d have to be dating him. And I’m not. Not anymore.”

Fedya raised his eyebrows. “Sound logic.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with this when we started,” she said.

“I still don’t have a problem with it,” he said calmly. “It’s your hypocrisy that I have a problem with.”

Hélène rolled her eyes. “Well, that’s never stopped you before.”

“I’m shameless, I won’t deny it. But the difference is that you can’t even admit that.”

“Christ, you’re a prick,” she snapped, reaching over for the lock. “Let me out, I’m going home.”

Fedya smirked and caught her wrist in his hand. “No you aren’t.”

Hélène yanked her arm out of his grip. It was more than tempting to backhand him across the face, but she resisted the impulse. “Oh, fuck you.”

“Is that a promise?” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

She rolled her eyes. “Original.”

“What does it say about you that you hate my lines but you still fall for them?”
Hélène sighed. “That I’m a masochist. And you’re lucky that you’re cute and I’m desperate.”

He frowned, reaching for her hand. “Lena, if you don’t want—”

She leaned forwards and seized his jaw to kiss him. Fedya made a surprised noise in the back of this throat but he quickly reciprocated. “I want,” she murmured, breaking away.

Fedya nodded, looking slightly dazed. “Okay. Where should we go?”

“My place.”

The keys. It was always the stupid keys that tripped her up. Hélène was damn near ready to break down the door when Fedya reached around her, snatched the keys from her hand, and unlocked it himself.

“I need to get you a key,” she muttered. “Why haven’t I done that already?”

Fedya raised an eyebrow. “Is this gonna be a regular thing?”

Hélène laughed as she pulled him inside with a caustic, “Don’t push your luck.” She closed the door, immediately pressing Fedya against it, and fisted her hand in his collar to pull his face to hers. The kiss was aggressive and demanding, more so than usual, but then again, she was in a worse mood than usual. Fedya growled under his breath and flipped them around until her back slammed against the door and she grinned.

“Feeling a little feisty today, Feddy?”

“Less talking, more action,” he grunted.

Hélène nodded urgently, snaking her arms around his neck. She hopped, ungainly and off-balance, until he got the hint and helped her wrap her legs around his waist. Fedya walked them into the living room, waddling awkwardly under her height. He was many things, bless him—strong and handsome and stubborn as an ox, but, no matter how much he protested otherwise, tall was not one of them.

At last they made it to the couch. Hélène released her arms from around his neck and flopped onto the armrest with a wicked grin. Fedya raised an eyebrow as she grabbed his shirt and pulled him down with her. They tumbled into the seats together, hopelessly tangled.

Fedya propped himself up on his elbows as she crawled into his lap, pressing kisses to his neck and jaw. His hands were already snaking up her back, settling on her waist.

“Your room?” he said. Why he asked was beyond her—God knew he knew the way well enough. Hélène shook her head and began to pry apart the buttons of his shirt. “No,” she said, breathing heavily. “Too far. Here.”

“Are you really that lazy? Honestly, it’s—” His voice cut off with gasp as she nipped his earlobe, not too hard but jarringly all the same. “Jesus, Lena.”

Hélène laid her palms flat against his chest and pushed down until his back was flush with the couch. She straddled his thighs, yanking her sweater over her head. He knew this routine but his eyes went wide in surprise anyway. It was cute, she thought, and more than a little endearing.
“Comfy there?” she teased.

Fedya folded his arms behind his head, raking his eyes down her torso appreciatively. “Oh, fantastic. The view’s amazing from down here.”

Hélène laughed before leaning down and kissing him again, slow and languorous. “Such an appreciative audience. That’s why I love you, Fed. You make these things so simple.”

“Simple?” he murmured.

She grinned as their noses brushed against each other. “No questions, no strings attached, just the two of us.”

Fedya’s breath hitched for a second before he pulled away suddenly, his face shifting into something guilty. “We can’t keep doing this,” he said.

Hélène blinked incredulously. “Why? We have fun, don’t we?”

“It’s not enough.”

“What do you mean?” she said. “Fed, what more could you want?”

“I want you.”

Hélène chuckled and moved towards him again. “I want you too.”

But he dodged her kiss, putting up a hand to push her off his lap. “No, stop,” he said, and Hélène froze. “Not like that. Not like this.”

She glared as she rolled onto her back next to him, but the sofa wasn’t quite wide enough for the two of them and it wasn’t long before she admitted defeat and slumped onto the carpet in an irritated slouch. “What’s wrong with you? Is it Pierre? Because I swear, Fedya, I’m done with that.”

“It’s not that, it’s just…”

“Spit it out,” she snapped. “Is it me? Do you not think I’m sexy anymore?”

“Of course not—”

“Then why get cold feet now of all times? Is it something I said? Something I did?”

“It’s what you won’t do,” Fedya said. “I get that we couldn’t date before, that you wanted to stay with Bezukhov. And I didn’t understand, but I dealt with it, because I figured that any scraps of your attention that I could get were better than nothing, but I can’t do this anymore.”

Hélène furrowed her brow and seated herself on the ottoman across from the sofa. “What do you mean?”

Fedya sighed. “I’ve always believed in being honest about my intentions. I care about you a lot—”

“And I care about you too.”

“Let me finish please. I just want to know why we’ve never dated. Now,” he said, holding up a finger as she opened her mouth to speak, “before you leap down my throat, I just want to clarify that this isn’t me acting entitled to you or your time. I just want to know why Bezukhov and not
She paused to recollect her thoughts. “I don’t love him the way I love you,” she said finally.

“And what way is that?”

Hélène felt the words die in her throat, and she folded in on herself, drawing her feet under the seat and stiffening her spine. Fedya furrowed his brow in concern and reached over for her hand to give it a soft squeeze so that he was half-draped across the armrest. “Whatever way you answer, I’m not gonna be upset,” he murmured. Hélène ran her thumb over the pulse point on his inner wrist. Fedya’s hands had always been big and strong, rough and calloused. His hands were those of a fighter, but they were also capable of being comforting. It was easy to forget that, sometimes.

“I don’t know,” she sighed. “I care about you, Fedya, but it’s simpler this way. With other people. If things go bad, I can always cut them out. And I don’t want to have to cut you out. You’re, like, the only half-decent male role model Anatole’s ever had.”

“Don’t use Anatole as an excuse,” he said curtly. “I’m asking how you feel about this.”

“It’s not an excuse. Now, if you can’t respect my reasons for not wanting to—”

“Hélène,” he said, a little softer this time, “it’s not selfish to make a decision based on what you want.”

Hélène gave him a small, tired smile. “You’re my best friend. I don’t want to mess you up.”

“Again with the excuses!” Fedya said. “I’m tougher than you give me credit for.”

“What if things end badly?”

“What if it they don’t? What if we make it work?”

She laughed. “You make it sound so easy.”

“You know,” he said, brushing a strand of hair out of her eyes, “relationships don’t have to be a difficult thing. They don’t always have to end in a screaming match.”

“In my experience they do.”

They lapsed into an awkward silence until Fedya cleared his throat. “If you want to talk about it—”

“I don’t.”

“Okay,” he said. “But you know that this isn’t normal, right? People in healthy relationships aren’t at each other’s throats half the time.”

“Leave it alone, Fedya,” she said sharply.

“Do you ever think you might not be setting the best example for Anatole? He’s going to think that cheating and hating your partner is normal.”

“I don’t want to talk about Anatole.”

“Oh, Jesus,” Fedya muttered. “Are you two fighting again?” At Hélène’s raised eyebrow, he shook his head. “He tells me everything. Too much.”
She leaned forward. “Did he tell you what his game plan is? He’s being uncharacteristically evasive when I ask.”

“With that girl? Yeah, they’re definitely gonna hook up,” he said.

She leaned back. “That sneaky little shit.”

“You didn’t know?”

“No,” she said bitterly. “I think he’s decided that sex is too shameful and disgusting to talk about.”

Fedya laughed. “Or he’s embarrassed to talk about that stuff with his big sister.” He raised an eyebrow as Hélène glared at him. “Come on, Lena, you can’t seriously be offended by this.”

“But why would he tell you and not me?”

He shrugged. “He’s a teenager. He needs his privacy. I think you should be glad that he’s comfortable enough to talk about this with anybody, even if it’s not you.”

“But he’s my little brother,” she protested. “I can’t keep him out of harm’s way if he’s just going to plug his ears and run out of the room every time I try teaching him important stuff. Do you know what I would’ve given to have had an older sister to guide me when I was going through all this?”

Fedya rolled his eyes. “You’re being too controlling. Anatole wants advice, and he’s asking for it. If you’re really trying to do what’s best for him, it shouldn’t matter that it isn’t coming from you.”

Hélène pouted, and he laughed. “Lena, I love you to bits, but there’s a fine line between ‘mothering’ and ‘smothering’, and right now you’re playing jump-robe with it.”

“I just don’t want him making the same mistakes I made.”

“He’s going to make a bunch of different mistakes because he’s an idiot teenager and that’s what they do. I know that you know that. So stop acting like you’re pissed off because you’re concerned. He bruised your ego. You’ll survive. It’s not the end of the world.”

“Stop telling me things I don’t want to hear,” she muttered.

Fedya snorted. “You know I’m right.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

“He’s gonna be fine,” he said. “He relies on you for, like, ninety percent of his day-to-day existence. Is it really a big deal if I help him out with the other ten?”

Hélène let out a long-suffering sigh, pressing her forehead to the crook of her elbow. “God,” she said. “Only you could turn a hookup into a therapy session.”

Fedya pulled a pillow over his stomach and began to stroke his beard. “Maybe I should start charging hourly rates.” Hélène shot him a foul look and he rolled his eyes with a conspiratorial grin. “I’d give you a discount off the first few sessions.”

She tipped her head back against the armrest. “Maybe a therapist is what this family needs. Anatole, at any rate.”

“I’d be lying if I said I disagreed. For both of you.”

“It’s not even about the whole prom thing, I just feel like he’s getting distant, you know?”
Fedya tilted his head to the side. He really did look the part of a therapist, she mused distantly. Add a pair of glasses and he could open his own practice. “What do you mean?”

“I dunno. We’ve been fighting a lot. And he’s hiding things from me.”

“This is normal, Hélène. You just hit your rebellious streak a few years before he did. Be thankful he isn’t getting tattooed or faking pregnancies like you were at that age."

Hélène sucked in a deep breath. “Jesus, I was a terrible kid.”

Fedya shrugged. “Self-awareness is important.”

“It’s almost enough to make me feel sorry for Papa.”

“Okay, don’t be dramatic,” he said. Hélène sighed again, and Fedya placed a hand on her knee. “Anatole’s gonna be fine. He sees you as a parent. It’s completely natural for him to get distant for awhile.”

“I can’t believe you dodged the ‘parent’ bullet,” she grumbled. “You were there for everything too.”

Fedya grinned. “I’m too fun to be his parent.”

“I’m fun!” she protested. Fedya raised an eyebrow skeptically and she slapped his shoulder. “I’m so much fun.”

“Yes you are,” he said, “but more in an ‘Amy-Poehler-in-Mean-Girls’ kind of way”

Hélène rolled her eyes. “You’re such a dork.” She shook her head irritably. “I can’t believe Anatole is mom-zoning me.”

“I mean, you literally gave him the Talk, Lena. I think you mom-zoned yourself.”

“Oh my God, I’d almost forgotten about that.”

Fedya’s grin wrinkled the corners of his eyes. “We scared him pretty good, didn’t we?”

“I did. You sat in the corner blushing and glowering.”

“Moral support?”

“You did your best.”

“I knew I’d never be more intimidating than you.”

“Fair.”

“We’ve probably traumatized him enough without the sex talk.”

Hélène laughed. “How so?”

Fedya raised an eyebrow. “The handcuffs?”

She let out a snort. “That was a fun day.”

“Maybe for you it was.”
“Don’t act like you didn’t enjoy it too.”

“I could have done without your brother bearing witness. I don’t know how I’m ever going to live that one down. You know, I didn’t regain sensation in my hands for a whole day.” He wrung his wrists as if in demonstration.

“Well, maybe it’s time for some payback.”

Fedya quirked an eyebrow, a smirk lurking in the corner of his mouth. “Oh, really?”

“You know I didn’t mean you and me.”

“What, Anatole?”

Hélène shrugged in faux-innocence. “I mean, he knows how easy it is to accidentally walk in one somebody…well, I mean, somebodies.”

Fedya chuckled at that.

“I’m serious!” she said. “I think it’s high time we return the favor.”

His face fell flat. “You’re joking.”

“I’m dead serious.”

“Are you still mad at him?” Hélène didn’t say anything and Fedya crossed his arms. “This is a stupid idea.”

“Chill, it’ll be fine.”

“Lena,” Fedya said sternly, “I really don’t think intruding on his privacy is the best way to make him trust you.”

“I don’t know this girl or if he even knows what he’s doing,” said Hélène. “How do I know they’re being safe?”

“You don’t. But at this point it’s none of your business anyways.”

“Of course it’s my business.”

“Do you even know where he’d go?”

Hélène frowned for a second, thinking. “Car.”

Fedya blinked. “How do you know?”

Hélène shrugged. “He takes after me. That, and I warned him specifically not to, so of course he’s going to do the most Anatole-esque thing possible and go against any and all instructions.”

“I know that you’re pissed, but you have to calm down.”

Hélène sighed irritably. “He said that I was like our father.”

“In fairness—”

The look on her face was downright murderous. “Do you really want to finish that sentence, Fyodor?”
“You do know, though, that a key part of your relationship with Anatole is that one of you has to be mature.”

“But why does it always have to be me?”

“Because he’s a kid, Hélène. He’s allowed to make stupid decisions.”

“And I’m not?”

Fedya threw his hands in the air in mock-surrender. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I do want to go on record as saying this is a mistake, though. A pretty intrusive mistake.”

“So I take it you’re not coming?”

“I don’t want to be involved. Having him feel like I’m not actively trying to torpedo his sex life is important to me.”

“They’re creative kids, I’m sure they’ll figure out someplace else to go.”

Fedya sighed. “He’s not going to be happy about this, you know.”

Hélène shrugged. “Well, maybe it’ll teach him to think twice before trying to lie to me about this stuff again.”

“You’re the worst control freak I’ve ever met,” snapped Fedya. Hélène snorted dismissively and he raised an eyebrow. “Am I missing something here? Because there’s nothing funny about any of this. It’s unhealthy, Lena. Like, borderline-creepy-unhealthy. You’ve got to learn when to hold back and let go. You can’t pull stunts like this and then complain when he won’t open up to you.”

“I’m just gonna give them a little scare, I’m not going to emotionally scar him or anything.”

“You’re going to drive him away is what you’re going to do.”

Hélène’s hands curled into fists in her lap. “Well, he’s my little brother, not yours. And if you don’t like how I’m raising him—”

“‘Raising him’?” Fedya curled his lip in disgust. “You’re not his mother, Lena. Hell, you’re barely four years older than him—you’re hardly more of a responsible adult than he is.”

“I’ve done a decent enough job with him. He’s normal and well-adjusted.”

“It’s not him I’m worried about,” Fedya said.

Hélène raised an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t be worried about me. I’m fine.”

“Are you?” Hélène looked away, and Fedya reached over and took her hand. “I am saying this because I love you deeply and I’m concerned for you. Your relationship with Anatole isn’t normal. You know that, right?”

“We’re not normal, Fedya. We never were and we never will be. What else am I supposed to do?”

“Fuck, I don’t know, Lena, just…just set some boundaries or something. Pick a relationship to have with him.”

Hélène furrowed her brow. “And what exactly do you mean by that?”
“You can act like his mom, or you can act like his sister, or you can act like his drinking buddy, but you can’t be all three.”

“I’m trying to be his sister now, Fedya.”

“Really?” he said, tilting an eyebrow. “Because that wasn’t what I saw at Borodino’s.” Hélène opened her mouth to protest, but Fedya held up a hand. “I’m not trying to start a fight with you. If you want to be his sister, do what you want. If you want to be his mother, give him some space.”

Hélène sighed. “I never wanted to be his mother. I don’t think that’s what he wants either. Jesus, Fedya, I’d never live up to Mom in his eyes, not in a million years.”

Fedya wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “There’s been too much that’s been put on you. But you don’t have to be his mom, Hélène.”

She laughed mirthlessly. “If I don’t, who’s going to?” She pulled away, raking a hand through her hair. “I’m sorry, I know that this isn’t how you wanted this night to go.”

Fedya laughed. “No offense, but your family’s a mess. And not in the cutesy we-put-the-fun-in-dysfunctional way.”

Hélène was about to retort when Fedya’s phone buzzed, drawing both of their attention. “Sorry,” he said, “it’s my mom. I should take this.”

“Yeah, of course.”

He turned off to the side, pressing the phone to his ear. “Hi, Mama. How’re you doing?” Fedya’s brow wrinkled as worry tightened his features. “Oh my God, what happened? Are you in any pain?” Hélène frowned in concern, placing a hand on his forearm.

“Fedya?” she whispered. He waved her down.

“Do you think it’s a break? Or just a sprain?” There was the briefest of pauses and the hand that wasn’t holding his phone tightened into a fist. “Nevermind, I’m coming over to get you now…well we should go to the hospital just to make sure. No, of course it’s fine—don’t be silly, I’m leaving right now. Okay, I’ll see you soon. Love you too. Bye.” He clicked off the call.

“Is everything okay?”

“My mom hurt her wrist,” he said with a pained look. “I think I need to go make sure she’s okay. Sorry to cut this short; I was enjoying this conversation.”

Hélène snorted. “You really don’t have to lie, Fedya.”

“It was a disaster and I’m glad it’s over, but I do hope you’re gonna be okay. And that you won’t try to upset Anatole any more.”

She gave him a tight smile and elected to ignore the last part of his statement. “I’m completely fine. Go check in with your mom.”

Fedya sighed. “Thanks. Maybe this will finally convince her to let me deal with the heavy-lifting at home.”

“Does she still like the perogies from that sketchy corner store? I can come by later and drop some off.”
Fedya smiled tiredly. “Yeah, I think she’d really like that. It’s been a while since she’s seen you.”

“I miss her.”

“She misses you too. She keeps asking me what happened to ‘that nice Kuragin girl’. I don’t have the heart to tell her how deeply flawed her analysis of you is.”


“Do you want me to drop you off at Pav’s?”

“The school’s fine.”

It took longer than Natasha would have liked to find the car. Anatole led her by the hand as they ducked out of the gym as quickly and discreetly as they could, giggling like children, and made their way around the back of the building to the parking lot.

“Your sister’s car?” she said, raising an eyebrow.

Anatole shrugged, giving her a lopsided grin. “If I know her—and trust me when I say that I know her way too well—she won’t be back for hours.”

Natasha nodded, biting her lip. It was freezing outside, and she couldn’t hide the shivers running up and down her body as a cold wind blew past them. Anatole noticed, evidently, and he tilted his head in concern.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m just a little chilly,” she confessed, curling her arms around her chest and rubbing her upper arms. “Probably wasn’t the best idea to wear a sleeveless dress in—”

But before she could finish, Anatole had already shed his jacket and draped it over her shoulders, which, seeing as what they were about to do, was a little pointless but touching all the same. Natasha pulled the lapels around her, huddling into the jacket. It smelled of him. She tucked her face into the collar and inhaled its scent—was he wearing cologne? The thought made her smile a little, despite her nerves.

Anatole’s hands shook as he fiddled with the lock. It endearing, really, to see him in such a nervous, awkward state.

_Not all that suave after all, are we?_ she thought with a grin.

Anatole yelped in surprise when Natasha wrapped her arms around him from behind and pressed a biting kiss to the pulse point beneath his ear, sucking and scraping her teeth against the skin. He’d have a hickey in the morning for sure. The thought made her smile. Finally, the door gave and he all but yanked her in.

“The back,” he said raggedly. “Go to the back. The windows are blacked out.”

It was too cramped in the backseat for Natasha’s liking, and Anatole’s long skinny legs bumped against the front seat when he tried to unfold them. _What a sight we must make_, she thought, but it hardly bothered her at all. No, nothing mattered anymore. Nothing but her and Anatole, even as their knees knocked together awkwardly when they tried to adjust positions. Anatole was panting,
his cheeks flushed. “Too damn tall,” he muttered. “We could push the seat forwards if it helps. That might—”

Natasha launched herself at him before he could finish, flinging her arms around his neck, and kissed him so hard that their teeth clicked together painfully.

“Shit!” she hissed, clapping a hand to her mouth. Her gums throbbed in protest. How much more awkward could this possibly get before she died on the spot of embarrassment? “Oh, God, Anatole, I’m so so so sorry!”

Anatole laughed and leaned his head back against the window. “Are you alright?”

“I think so. I don’t think I chipped a tooth or anything.”

Anatole cupped her face in his hand. “Let me see,” he said quietly. He traced her bottom lip gently with one finger, before leaning forwards and kissing her softly. Natasha moaned as he sucked on her lip, pulling away. “C’mere,” he said roughly, and that was all she needed to hear.

Natasha swung one leg over the other side of the seat so that she straddled his hips, her hands bearing her weight against his heaving chest, and pushed down until his back was flush with the seat. She could feel his heart pounding wildly beneath her palm.

“Natalie,” he murmured hoarsely. “Are you sure you want to do this? Like, a hundred percent?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Anatole reached around her, fumbling for the zipper at the back of her dress. When he couldn’t find it, he impatiently yanked her neckline down to her waist, pressing bruising kisses to her shoulders and chest. Natasha shivered as his teeth scraped her collarbone, and she fiddled distractedly with the buttons on his shirt. Anatole responded by snaking his hands up her back, pulling her even closer, and tangling his hand in her hair to kiss her.

Suddenly, Natasha broke away from him with a gasp. “Are those…footsteps?”

The doors unlocked with a loud click and the horn sounded as if to announce their presence to the entire parking lot. Anatole tensed beneath her. “Shit,” he hissed.

The front door swung open and Natasha flattened herself against him on instinct. Hélène poked her head into the car, wearing the biggest shit-eating grin Natasha had ever seen in her life. “You guys need anything?” she asked innocently. “Snacks? A condom? Let me know.”

Anatole’s face went blood-red. “HÉLÈNE!” he howled.

Hélène leaned against the front seat and casually her hands into her pockets. “I admire your initiative, little bro, I really do, but your choice in location leaves something to be desired. The parking lot, really? Déclassé.”

“I cannot believe—stop looking! Will you please go away?”

“I need my car,” she said calmly, “so you kids need to scram.”

Natasha’s jaw fell open. This was quickly becoming the most mortifying moment of her entire existence. “I—I’m so sorry, Hélène, I promise—I really didn’t mean to…I never—”
Hélène waved her apologies away, seemingly unbothered by the fact that Natasha had her little brother half-undressed and pinned down against the backseat. “This car has seen a lot of... mileage. Don’t worry.” She turned to Anatole and shot him an impatient glare. “I’m expected elsewhere though, so do try to be snappy about it. Shouldn’t be too difficult for you.”

If possible, Anatole reddened even further, and Natasha worried that he might burst every blood vessel in his face if he didn’t cool down. “Get Fedya to drive you,” he snapped.

Hélène raised her eyebrows. “Toto, you’ve got a pretty girl with you. Do you really want to stand here and debate this with me?”

Anatole glared at her as he sat up, careful to cover Natasha with his own body. “Fine,” he muttered. “We’ll move.”

“Good choice,” Hélène drawled as she slid into the front seat. “Now, put yourselves back together, unless you want to give the whole parking lot a show.” She waited until Anatole and Natasha had scrambled out of the car, hastily re-buttoning and re-zipping and tripping over their own feet, before turning the engine on. “Be safe!” she said cheerfully. “And I do mean that literally.”

Anatole gave her the finger as she drove off. “Sorry about that,” he muttered. It was a small mercy that he at least looked as embarrassed as she felt.

Natasha nodded numbly, crossing her arms over her chest. Her heart was pounding in her ears. This is so stupid. What am I doing? I barely even know him.

Anatole furrowed his brow. “Everything alright?”

“Your fly is down,” she whispered.

“Oh, shit, sorry,” said Anatole, his cheeks a magnificent pink. He reached down to fix it before shooting her a quizzical glance. “Or should I just keep it down?”

Natasha couldn’t help the nervous giggle that bubbled out of her at that. “Oh my God.”

“It’s a legitimate question.”

“You, Anatole Kuragin, are really something else.”

“I try,” he said with a grin.

Anatole’s hand fumbled to hers. His fingertips sent arcs of electricity coursing through her arm. Natasha nearly jerked her arm away in shock.

“Sorry, I’m a little staticky,” he said. So it wasn’t just her imagination then.

“’S alright.”

“Are you okay?”

She nodded mutely.

“I know you’re nervous,” Anatole murmured. “But I promise I won’t do anything you won’t like. Do you trust me?”

Natasha pushed her fears away, nodding as she leaned against him. He felt so warm and solid, safe.
Natasha grimaced, pushing the thought to the back of her mind. “Yes,” she said.

He shot her a grin and grabbed her hand. “Then let’s go.”

Natasha grinned as she raked a hand through her ridiculously mussed hair. She was going to have to figure out how to fix it and cover up the bruises that ran up and down her neck before she got home, but in that moment, she couldn’t have cared less.

The boys’ locker room wasn’t exactly the classiest place to have your first time but, she supposed, it was better than nothing. And with Anatole lying beside her, practically glowing under the flickering lights, all seemed right in the world.

“You’re beautiful,” he murmured.

Natasha blushed. “So are you.”

He really was, she thought dreamily. Anatole’s eyes crinkled as he grinned, idly playing with a strand of her hair. He leaned his head against the crook of his elbow, exposing the pale column of his throat. Natasha noticed with no small sense of pride how she had completely marked up his neck with bruises and bite marks. She wondered for a moment how they were going to hide their hickeys, before deciding to worry about that later.

Anatole raised an eyebrow, tucking the strand of hair behind her ear. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m just…happy.”

“Then I’m happy too.”

Natasha smiled back shyly. “And what are you thinking?”

“That I love you.”

Natasha’s heart fluttered at that. He felt so warm against her, so strong, so present, and even in the dimness of the room he seemed to radiate soothing light. She caught his hand and brushed a light kiss to his knuckles. “I love you too.”

Anatole gently kissed her again, before pulling away and groaning. “As much as I’d like to stay here all night, we should probably get dressed before someone finds us. Again.”

Natasha thought of Hélène’s amused smirk and nearly cringing. “Oh God. That’s a good idea.”

They redressed as quickly as they could in a clumsy tangle of sleeves and buttons and zippers. How ironic was it, Natasha wondered, that she felt more awkward redressing in front of Anatole than undressing? At least he seemed entirely unfazed by the whole ordeal. She looked over at him, with his shirt half-tucked into the waistband of his pants, hopping on one foot as he struggled to pull up his socks.

What a dweeb, she thought. And just like that, none of this felt scary or uncomfortable anymore.

“Help me with my dress?” she said.
Anatole zipped up her dress, pausing to kiss her shoulder blade. “You’re a wonder,” he murmured against her skin.

Natasha flushed, praying that he couldn’t feel how hot her skin was. “So are you.”

Anatole’s grin was positively irresistible as he tilted her chin up and kissed her. Natasha leaned into him, trying to absorb as much of his warmth as possible.

“What now? Do we go back?” she said.

Anatole shrugged. “I suppose.”

“If you don’t want to—”

“Only if you want to—”

“—we don’t have to; it’s up to you and—”

“—and I’m absolutely fine either—”

“—I’m honestly happy to go wherever you—”

“—way. I just want to hang out with—”

“—go so long as I’m with—”

“—you,” they both finished in unison.

And now Anatole was blushing again, and now she was blushing again too, and the whole damn thing was too much, and Natasha burst into laughter. “God,” she said, breathless and giddy, leaning back against the lockers, “we’re like two characters in a crappy rom-com. Are we gonna ride off into the sunset next?”

Anatole’s head suddenly shot up in alarm. “Wait—if Lena took the car, then how the hell are we getting home?”

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Toto: i hope you realize that you are paying me back!!!!

Toto: cab rides don’t come cheap!!!

Lena: if you wanna chip in for all the gas i’ve used on you, sure

Toto: stingy

Lena: did you have a fun night with your ladyfriend? ;)

Toto: >:(

Toto: i cant believe you

Toto: you completely EMBARRASSED ME infront of natalie!!!

Lena: it’s not my fault you’re shit at choosing places to get it on
Lena: protip, dumbass: find somewhere that’s not in the middle of a high school parking lot

Lena: you should ask fedya for some tips ;)

Toto: ugh a mental image i could have gone my whole life without having

Lena: i mean it wouldn’t be the first time someone’s gotten caught in that car

Toto: wait

Toto: what the fuck

Toto: what the literal, actual, genuine fUCK

Toto: HÉLÈNE I’VE BEEN RIDING IN THAT BACKSEAT FOR YEARS

Lena: think of it as a fun new fam tradition

Toto: YUCK

Toto: EW GROSS OH MY GOD

Lena: you didn’t seem to have an issue when it was you and nat junking up my backseat

Toto: I HATE YOU

Toto: i am going to MURDER fedya

Lena: just be grateful that it wasn’t marya d that found you

Toto: you’re the worst :( 

Lena: love you tooooooo

Blondie: YOU DISGUSTING PIECE OF SHIT

Blondie: IM GOING TO KILL U WITH MY OWN TWO HANDS

feddy bear: …

feddy bear: can i help u

Blondie: THE CAR FEDYA

Blondie: THE FUCKIGN CAR

feddy bear: oh she told you?

Blondie: YOURE OFFENSIVELY BLASÉ ABT THIS

feddy bear: your sister has literally murdered my capacity to be shocked
Lenka: they’re good memories fedya

Lenka: i thought they should be shared ;)

Lenka: do you remember that time by the school when marya caught us

Fedya: i try not to

Lenka: pls stop acting like you weren’t begging for it thnx

Fedya: has anyone ever told u that vanity is a sin

Tolya: i am so so so so sorry about what happened

Tolya: i really am im still cringing just thinking of it

Natalie: oh my god please don’t worry about it!

Natalie: i had an amazing time with you :)

Natalie: i love you <3

Tolya: i love you too <3 <3 <3

Natalaka: hey andrei?

Frenchboi: hey nat, what’s new?

Natalaka: we need to talk

Frenchboi: sure

Frenchboi: is everything okay?

Natalaka is typing…

Chapter End Notes

We love comments and kudos dearly!
Chapter Summary

Anatole and Natasha are bad at being, ya know, rational people.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for all the love! Comments make our DAY (seriously, we literally text each other as soon as we get one and freak out), and are super appreciated!

With Hélène and Fedya now in college, Anatole had been left to his own devices, the seats in the far left corner of the lunchroom they had previously occupied now empty. Getting an invitation to eat at the senior’s table had been an unheard of coup as a freshman, and even if it had only been because he was Hélène’s little brother, it had given him enough social capital to eat alone without being branded a loser even three years later.

Which was helpful, especially considering that on this particular day he had forgotten to bring his wallet. Anatole couldn’t decide which would be worse—foregoing the uptown lunch run altogether or admitting defeat and borrowing money from Natasha—and since the weather had grown too cold for his taste to justify the trek to Pavlovna’s, he decided instead to carve out a spot at his old lunchroom table. Hélène’s pre-packed sandwiches were unpalatable at best, but he had at least had the wherewithal to grab a granola bar and an orange off the kitchen counter the previous morning.

So he wouldn’t starve. It would be a miserable lunch, but he wouldn’t starve.

“Hey, stranger.”

Well, perhaps not so miserable after all. Anatole’s head jolted upright at the sound of Natasha’s voice. He hadn’t even noticed her standing across from him, a cafeteria tray balanced on one hand. “Hey, you,” he said with a grin.

“We’re not going to Pav’s today?”

Anatole shrugged and stretched his legs out under the table. “It’s super cold and I really don’t feel like walking today.” He decided not to mention the wallet. “Is that alright with you?”

“Sounds fine to me.” She gestured towards the table with her tray. “Mind if I take a seat?”

“Of course, chérie.”

Natasha rolled her eyes affectionately as she slid into the seat across from him. “God. You and your French.”

“Pet names are better in French.”

Her foot brushed against his under the able, a conspiratorial smirk creeping onto her face. “Is that
“The kind who wants to be cute with his girlfriend,” he said.

She flushed. “Your girlfriend?”

Anatole nodded eagerly and slid even even closer to her. “Mon trésor, mon ange, mon amour, and most of all, ma petite amie.”


“My girlfriend,” he amended. “Petite amie is girlfriend. Well, technically it’s ‘little female friend’, but it sounds much nicer in—”

“So,” she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, “would that make you my boyfriend?”

Anatole gave her a lopsided grin. “I’m always yours.”

“You’re cute,” she said quietly.

He tilted his head to the side and stretched his arms over his head. “I try.”

“Are all you New Yorkers this suave?”

Anatole tipped his head back and laughed. “No. Most of us are just loud and rude. I’m the exception, of course.”

Natasha snorted into her milkshake. Beneath the table, she bumped his foot with her toes. “You’re too much.”

“So I’ve been told.” And then: “You’ve never been?”

“What?”

“To New York?”

“Nope,” she said, popping the ‘p’ with a glum look. “We—me and Sonya, that is—we’ve lived in Seattle our whole lives.”

“Well, until now, I guess,” said Anatole. “What brings you guys to Moscow?”

Natasha idly wound a strand of hair around her fingers. “My dad’s job moved and rent in Seattle isn’t cheap. And I think my parents want a fresh start, now that me and Sonya are gonna go off to college soon.”

“Any ideas where?”

“Oh, God,” she said, putting her face in her hands. “I don’t know anymore. I don’t even want to think about it.”

Anatole’s eyes widened as he took a bite of his sandwich. “I mean, I completely get you, but it’s December, Natalie. The Common App’s due in, like, twenty days.”

“I know, it’s just that I’ve had to change a lot of plans,” she said. “My parents heard I was only applying to U of W and they freaked and made me add a whole bunch of other schools to my list. Honestly, I don’t even know where I’d want to go anymore. And that’s assuming I get in
anywhere."

He raised an eyebrow. “Out-of-state, I’m guessing?”


“The state? Or the city? Because there’s a big difference.”

“City, of course,” she said, giggling and swatting him lightly on the shoulder. “I’m a city girl, born and bred.”

Anatole stood up a little straighter. “I’ll expect to see your name in marquee lights on Broadway next time I visit. ‘Natalia Rosto’—wait, do you have a patronymic?”

“My dad’s name is Ilya.”

“Right. Then: ‘Natalia Ilinichna Rostova’!” he said, holding out his hands and gesticulating dramatically. He shot her a sideways glance. “If they can find enough lightbulbs, that is.”

Natasha practically melted into her seat. “Oh, I’ve always wanted to be on Broadway,” she said dreamily. “It’s been my dream ever since I was little. Is that silly?”

“Not at all.”

“Is it really like how it is in photos? The City, I mean, not just Broadway.”

Anatole’s face split into a grin. “It’s beautiful,” he said. “And it’s loud and exciting and there’s nothing there you can’t see or find.”

“So tell me, my suave New Yorker,” she said, leaning across the table and propping her chin against her steepled fingers, “what’s a guy like you doing all the way out in the backwoods of Idaho?”

He shrugged. “My old man thought that the countryside would be a ‘nice change’ after Mom died. He still does most of his work there, though.”

“That sucks,” she said quietly.

“It’s okay. It’s mostly just me and my sister.”

“Does it ever get lonely?”

“It does at times,” he said, “but it’s better than nothing. So long as I’ve got Hélène and Fedya, I’m good.”

Natasha reached for his hand, squeezing it gently, and leaned into him. “Maybe I could make it a little less lonely for you?”

Anatole grinned at her as their fingers intertwined. “I’d like that a lot.”

The conversation carried on from there—shared interests, collective complaints, dread about college and midterms. Anatole’s lunch lay forgotten in the bottom of his bag as the clock ticked on, the two of them too wrapped up in themselves to even notice anything but each other.

After a while, Natasha rubbed her thumb over his knuckle and tilted her head up to kiss his cheek.
Anatole pressed his fingers to his cheek in wonderment. “We’re that disgustingly affectionate
couple, aren’t we?” he said with a grin.

Natasha blushed. “I’m not complaining.”

Anatole entwined their legs under the table. He had just begun to lean forwards to say something else when the bell rang, causing them to jump in their seats, and students began to pack up their lunches and file out of the lunchroom to their next classes.

“I should get going,” Natasha groaned. “Where does the time even go?”

He really should have headed off to Calculus—God knew he was already having a hard enough time with that class, but he found himself unable to care. All that mattered now was him and Natasha.

“Why don’t you skip?” he asked, idly fiddling with her fingers.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “Where would we go?”

“Do you wanna go get coffee?”

She sighed. “I really love spending time with you, but that’s getting old. And it’s freezing outside.”

“Then let’s find somewhere else.”

“Any ideas?”

“We could go for a walk in the park?” he said, and nudged her elbow with a cheeky grin. “Sneak into a movie?”

“We’ve done both of those in the last week.” Natasha pressed her hands to her forehead and allowed herself to slide back in her seat with a great sigh. “I miss Seattle so much. There’s nothing to do here.”

“I know, I know.”

Another sigh, this one louder and more dramatic than the first. “I’m telling you, Anatole, I’ll die if I have to stay in this godforsaken town any longer.”

Anatole straightened his back, planting his hands firmly on the table. A wonderful idea had been set alight in his mind. A far-flung, idiotic, and dangerous idea, but a wonderful one nonetheless, one that was so far-flung and idiotic and dangerous that it just might be viable. And so, he leaned in even closer and said to Natasha: “Who says you have to stay here?”


“But what if none of that mattered? What if we decided to take matters into our own hands and live life on our own terms?”

She smiled shyly, looking up at him through her long, dark lashes. Something like an amused grin lurked in the corner of her mouth. “What are you trying to say?”

Anatole’s eyes glittered, childlike and full of excitement. “I’m talking about running away. Together.”
Natasha’s jaw fell open. “Like…an elopement?”

“You could call it that.”

Natasha snorted, turning away from him. She held a hand to cover her face, but Anatole could still see the smile that wrinkled the corners of her eyes and dimpled her cheeks. “That’s crazy. You’re crazy.”

“Maybe,” he laughed, “but maybe a little crazy is what we need right now.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not?” Anatole said. “We’re both almost eighteen, we have somewhere to go…”

“We don’t have anywhere to go, Anatole.”

“My dad owns a ton of properties in New York. We could always squat in an apartment. Nobody will bother us there.” His hand found hers under the table. “Think of it, Natalie: no more family drama, no more cliques or catfights. Just the two of us against the world.”

“Anatole, I…” her voice trailed off with a frustrated groan. “How would I explain myself to my family?”

“Who says you have to explain? You’re almost of age. You don’t have to answer to parents once you’re an adult.”

“But Sonya and your sister—”

“—would understand,” he said.

Natasha faltered for a moment before recollecting herself. “College? Jobs? Our future?” She planted her hands firmly on the tabletop. “Anatole, as much as I want to—”

“You want to?”

“—there’s just too many variables at play here.”

Anatole gestured theatrically. “People come from all over the world to go to school in New York. You could always, like, apply to NYU or Columbia or something.”

“I do like NYU,” she admitted. “It’s probably not too late to apply.”

“See? What did I tell you?”

Natasha bit her lip pensively. “When would we go?”

“Today,” Anatole said. Natasha gawked, and he quickly backtracked. “No, not today. Next week. Next month. However long it takes to get plane tickets and a cab and to pack.”

“But so early in the year?” she said. “Anatole, look—and this isn’t me agreeing to anything; it’s all just hypothetical—but think of how much we would miss. We wouldn’t be able to do the musical. Or go to prom. Or even graduation.”

“But that’ll all be irrelevant! Who needs a crappy school musical when you have Broadway out your back door?”
Hook, line, and sinker. Natasha’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Broadway,” she murmured. “God, I’d kill to go see a Broadway show.”

“You could see all the Broadway shows you want. Hell, you could star in one.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she said, but it didn’t sound like she meant it.

“Life’s more fun if you don’t take it too seriously,” he said.

“Hey,” she said with a grin, and playfully jabbed him in the side, “that’s my line.”

“Well then, why don’t you start living by your own words?”

Natasha gave him a bright smile. “Okay.”

Anatole blinked. Was that really all it took? “Seriously?”

She shrugged. “I love you. I want to be with you. Let’s do this.”

Because he was giddy and flushed with excitement, Anatole leaned over and kissed her, just a quick, light peck on the mouth. Natasha’s cheeks flooded with pink, and before he could even react, she had flung her arms around him and pressed her lips to his, bracing one hand on the back of his neck and the other along his jaw. Anatole grinned into the kiss and he felt her smiling, too, and the very thought of it made his skin buzz with a warm, fuzzy sensation.

Natasha was the first to break away. “You’re a wonder, you know that? An absolute wonder,” she said, blushing and beaming with her hair in disarray.

“I love you,” said Anatole, and Natasha went even pinker.

The bell rang again. Natasha glanced idly at her backpack and pencil case, still tucked under the table. “Dammit,” she said. “I really should go to class. I was hoping we’d have more time together.”

“Text me?” Anatole said, resting his hand on top of hers.

Natasha nodded and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek. “Love you.”

Anatole raised the hand he was holding and brushed a kiss across her knuckles. “Love you too.”

Natasha’s stomach dropped as she caught sight of that familiar mousy head approaching her from down the hallway. She turned on her feet and moved to veer in the opposite direction or duck into a nearby classroom, but it was too late.

“Hey, Nat!” Mary called.

Natasha cringed. Of all the hallways she had to choose from, it just had to be the one Mary had picked as well? “Oh, hi, Mary,” she said, trying to swallow her nerves and nearly cringing again when she heard how shaky her voice sounded. “Where’s your other half?”

Mary tossed a quick glance over her shoulder as if to make sure they were alone. It may have just been Natasha’s imagination, but she thought she saw Mary go a little pink in the cheeks. “Sonya’s headed off to AP Art,” she said. “I think she wanted to get there early and start mixing paints. But
anyways, I need to talk to you about something. I was gonna ask you in the lunchroom but you were so busy talking to Anatole that I…well, what I’m trying to ask is if you have time to talk now.”

Natasha furrowed her brow. Her palms had gone slick with sweat, and her heart began to thunder in her ears. “Yeah, for sure. What about?”

“I guess about you and Andrei?”

Shit.

Natasha swallowed heavily and attempted to rein in her breathing. Andrei was heartbroken. No, worse—he was furious and never wanted to talk to her again, and he was using his little sister to cut her out of his life forever. Was that why he had stopped responding to her messages? Did he hate her now? She mentally itemized everything that she would need to collect and return to Mary—the sweater he had given her, the theology book he had lent her that she had never even opened, the silver locket that he had bought for her sixteenth birthday. The one she had never taken off until the winter formal.

Mary, at least, looked just as nervous as she felt. *The poor thing*, Natasha thought, and the phrase ‘don’t shoot the messenger’ came to mind. It would be difficult to shoot such a timid, shy little messenger, especially one who was currently inhaling deeply and wringing her hands together and twisting the fraying hem of her blouse between her fingers. “I…I think I owe you an apology,” said Mary.

Natasha blinked, startled, and her heart sank in an odd mixture of relief and dismay. “What, for the thing with the bus or something? Mary, honestly, that was ages ago and—”

“I know we got off on the wrong foot,” Mary said, “and I’m really sorry for that. I was wondering if we could start over?”

“Um, yeah, of course.”

Mary sighed in relief. “Thank you so much, Natasha. It really means a lot, seriously.”

Natasha gave her an uneasy smile. “It’s nothing, really.”

“I get why Andrei loves you,” Mary said. Natasha went stiff as her face began to burn, but Mary, of course, completely misinterpreted her look of embarrassment. “It’s okay,” she said, “and I’m really sorry for acting so weird when I found out about…you two. But I’m really glad you guys are together. Andrei’s always been a really lonely kid and I’m just happy that he’s finally found someone he can be close to.”

Natasha opened her mouth to say something but the words lodged in her throat and died.

“You know,” Mary continued, “if you ever want to sit with us at lunch, we’ve always got a seat reserved for you.”

“I…” Natasha swallowed down her misgivings and attempted to give Mary an honest-looking smile. “That’s really nice of you, Mary. Thank you.”

“I just want to let you know that I really do like you. And I want to consider you a friend.”

“I’d like that too.”
Mary wrapped her arms around Natasha and pulled her into a tight hug. Natasha tensed up, but squeezed Mary’s hand as she drew back.

“Thanks again,” Mary said softly. “For everything.”

Natasha gave her a tight smile, clutching her books to her chest. “Don’t mention it.”

Mary’s smile was too sweet and genuine to bear. It would have been less painful, Natasha thought, to be impaled on the business end of ballpoint pen. “I’ll see you around?”

Natasha nodded, quickly turning away to walk to class. Her feet couldn’t seem to carry her fast enough.

About halfway down the hallway, her phone buzzed in her pocket. She ducked into the girls’ bathroom to unlock the screen.

4 missed messages from Tolya

Tolya: you wana talk about this more this afternoon?

Tolya: i’m so excited for us

Tolya: love you chérie

Tolya: <3 <3 <3

And beneath that:

5 missed calls from Frenchboi

With a heavy sigh, Natasha turned off her phone and headed to class.

FROM: Pierre Bezukhov <pierre.bezukhov@aol.com>

TO: Andrei Bolkonsky <abolkonsky@u.washington.edu>

Hey Andrei. How are things going in France? Sorry Ive been so out of touch but Ive been so busy with work this semester especially now that midterms are coming up. Hope theyre not slamming you with so much work over in Paris. It’s hell over here. I think I’m on the verge of murdering my phenemology professor. Everything’s going just wonderful. I’m drowning in work, this morning I found another gray hair, and I’m newly single again. I think Helene and I are done for real this time.

Honestly, I just can’t wait for winter break. Are you coming home for the holidays?

Sorry I missed your call earlier. I was in court (long story) and I had my phone on silent. Just check your voicemail once you have some time. Also, your Xmas gift is on its way in the mail. I wanted to send it early in case it arrived late so if you get a package from me DO NOT OPEN IT until December 25!!

Well, hope to hear back from you soon. It’s been too long.
Best,

Pierre
In Which Sonya Is Too Nosy For Everyone's Collective Good

Chapter Summary

Sonya is a godsend, even if she snoops.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mary Bolkonskaya: Amazing!

Mary Bolkonskaya: I think we’re actually friends now?

Mary Bolkonskaya: I mean, she seemed confused that I was apologizing but she was very gracious in accepting it.

Mary Bolkonskaya: And she *hugged* me, Sonya.

Mary Bolkonskaya: So I think we’re on good terms.

Mary Bolkonskaya: :-D

Mary Bolkonskaya: So am I.

Mary Bolkonskaya: Do you think she’s finally going to start eating with us?

Mary Bolkonskaya is typing…

“So,” said Sonya as she waltzed through the open door into Natasha’s bedroom. “I hear you and Mary are okay now?”

Dead silence. Sonya looked up from her phone, furrowing her brow, and scanned her surroundings.
Natasha was nowhere to be seen.

“Nat?” she called out to the empty room. “Nat? Where are you?”

BZZZ BZZZ. BZZZ BZZZ.

Sonya looked back down at her phone, but the screen remained blank.

BZZZ BZZZ. BZZZ BZZZ.

Her head snapped towards the other side of the room. There it was—Natasha’s phone, perched on top of her vanity with the screen turned face-down. Sonya wandered over. She must have been home, then, Sonya thought. Natasha never went anywhere without her phone.

“Nat?” she called again. “Aunt Natalia?”

Again, no response. Maybe she had been a little forgetful, then, and gone out and accidentally left it behind. The phone buzzed again—it must have been left on silent—and Sonya pressed the home button to power on the screen.

5 missed messages from Tolya

Tolya? Sonya tilted her head to the side. Since when does Nat know a Tolya?

Experimentally and perhaps a little unthinkingly, she slid her thumb along the screen, expecting to be met with a password prompt, but instead, the phone unlocked with a quiet electronic click.

Sonya blinked. She shouldn’t have been surprised, she told herself. On a scale of one to over-trusting, Natasha had always leaned towards the side of naïveté. But, then again, even this was innocent for her, to not have her phone locked with a password.

And then again, what Sonya was doing was a little nosy.

But because she was Sonya Rostova and therefore by extension a staunch stickler for rules, she began to rationalize the situation. All she wanted was to know who this Tolya was—for Natasha’s own sake, of course.

There on the screen, in the lower left-hand corner, was the message inbox. Sonya cast a quick glance over her shoulder into the hallway. The house was completely empty, she realized, save for herself. No harm, no foul, she thought, and just as she was about to open the inbox, her own phone buzzed again.

Mary Bolkonskaya: Hey, it’s late, so I’m going to go to sleep now.

Mary Bolkonskaya: See you tomorrow!

Sonya returned her attention to Natasha’s phone, and, biting down a twinge of unease, opened her messages.

8:26

Natalie: im so excited

Natalie: ive never done anything this crazy before
Tolya: me too???

Natalie: ok ill brb in just a bit

Natalie: gonna go pick up some stuff

Tolya: have you ever been on a plane before?

Natalie: no

Tolya: chewing gum is great to keep ur ears from popping

Tolya: also baby wipes are a must

Tolya: planes can be DISGUSTING

Natalie: ok perf!!!

Natalie: alright ill ttyl!

Natalie: ily <3

Tolya: love you too <3 <3 <3

Tolya: alright i know this sounds cheesy

Tolya: but im a cheesy person

Tolya: and im just so glad i met you

Tolya: youre such a wonder ;)

Anatole, Sonya realized with a sinking heart. It had to be him—there was no other logical conclusion. As if anything about this situation was logical at all. Why was Natasha talking to him like this? What had happened between her and Andrei?

Damn him, she thought, unsure if the sentiment was directed more towards Anatole or Andrei, and as she swiped upwards, the rest of the conversation from earlier in the day began to unfold on the screen.

6:47

Natalie: packing is gonna be a real bitch

Natalie: i have an old suitcase in my closet

Natalie: but its tiny

Tolya: hmmmm i might have an extra bag?

Tolya: i think helene might

Tolya: yeah i just checked she does

Natalie: ok perf
Natalie: could you bring it to school tomorrow?

Natalie: theres an empty cubby in the girls locker room that i cold hide it in

Tolya: sure thing

Tolya: ok im gonna have to duck out for dinner for a bit

Natalie: ttyl!!!

Sonya’s heart sank even further. Surely this was a prank. Surely she was horribly misreading the situation. Surely there was something here she was missing.

But no. The messages were clear as day, and as she scrolled on, the words began to blend and bleed together into a dreadful haze.

8:03

Tolya: im baaack :D

Natalie: hi!

Natalie: i just realized

Natalie: how are we going to book the tickets

Natalie: i mean i have money but i dont have a credit card

Tolya: its okay i have one!

Natalie: when can we get them?

Natalie: what works for you?

Tolya: i mean i dont think this week is gonna work because my sisters been kind of breathing down my neck

Tolya: ever since the dance

Natalie: ugh yikes :( 

Natalie: no offense

Natalie: your sister’s rlly sweet and all

Natalie: but YIKES

Tolya: lmao tell me about it

Tolya: oh idea!!!!

Natalie: ???

Tolya: ok so lenas thesis proposal thingie is due next week
Tolya: she'll be cramming for it and she's probably gonna camp out in the library like she does for finals

Tolya: so she's hardly gonna be around AT ALL

Natalie: omg that might actually work???

Tolya: how about next friday then?

Natalie: let’s do it

Tolya: awesome :D

Natalie: what’s our plan for getting there?

Natalie: i mean i know you don’t drive

Tolya: :P

Natalie: and i can’t exactly take my mom’s car

Natalie: and i don’t think walking all the way is gonna be an option

Natalie: like with luggage and everything

Tolya: we could get a cab

Natalie: that’s a lot of money though

Tolya: or i could ask fedya to drive us

Natalie: …

Natalie: are you sure?

Natalie: you don’t think he would tell anyone?

Tolya: i’ll make him promise not to ;)

“Hey, Sonya,” Natasha called from the hallway.

Sonya froze to the spot. How had she not heard the garage door opening? The front door creaking and closing? The footsteps plodding up the stairs?

“Sorry we took off without you,” she said. Sonya considered dropping the phone and running off, but she found her limbs completely petrified. “I just needed to pick up some stuff so Mom and I did a quick CVS run and…”

Her voice trailed off as she reached the doorway and took in the sight of Sonya, phone in hand, leaning over the dresser table and trying but failing miserably to look innocent.

“Hi, Nat,” she said, her face burning hot with shame. Too late to turn back now.

Natasha frowned. “What are you doing with my phone?”
“I’m sorry. You left it unlocked.” Sonya almost cringed at the lameness of her excuse.

“Sonya!” Natasha snapped, marching towards her. “Don’t you have any concept of privacy?”

“Natasha, I’m sorry about that, but, we need to talk—”

She snatched the phone from Sonya’s open hands. “Yeah, well, *you* need to learn to mind your business!”

Before she could even stop herself or pause for rational thought, she said, “I know what’s going on with you and Anatole.”

She half-expected Natasha to deny it, but instead she stared at her for a second in confusion, before breaking out into a wide, relieved smile and reaching over to squeeze her into a tight hug. “Oh, Sonya, I’m so sorry for not telling you! You don’t understand how hard it’s been to hide this—”

“Natasha—”

“—hide how I feel about him—”

“Nat—”

“—but now you know that we love each other.” Natasha’s smile was positively beatific. “Oh, Sonya, I’m so happy I can finally tell you.”

Sonya spluttered incredulously. “But you’ve barely even known him a semester!”

A wild, delusional laugh escaped her. “And that’s the funniest thing—I feel…I feel like I’ve known him a thousand years! He’s my soulmate, Sonyushka. We were made for each other.”

Sonya shook her head with an exasperated sigh. Natasha had always been prone to daydreams and fantasies, but never anything this outlandish. “You’re just being dramatic,” she said. “It’s just a stupid *crush* that’ll disappear in a week, I’m telling you—”

“And I’m telling you that that doesn’t matter. I’ve never felt this way for anyone, ever.”

“You said that about Andrei too, once,” Sonya said quietly.

She saw a flicker of uncertainty in Natasha’s eyes before it was quickly extinguished. “It’s not the same. You don’t understand. I love him. More than I’ve ever loved anything before.”

“And what about Andrei?”

Natasha faltered. “What about him?”

“Does he know about this? About Anatole?”


“He wouldn’t care? He’s your boyfriend, Natasha—how could he *not* care?”

Natasha fell silent at that and her eyes darted back to the now-blank screen of her phone. “It’s not any of your business.”

“Don’t tell me you’re cheating on him.”
“I’m not,” she snapped. “I broke it off ages ago. I texted him and told him that long-distance was too much for me.”

“And has he responded yet?”

“What does it matter?” she said, and Sonya could see from the rising color in her cheeks just how flustered she was becoming. “That’s all behind me. And now I have Anatole to look forward to.”

Sonya shook her head. “Do you hear even yourself? Do you even realize how crazy you sound? What you’re planning—whatever it is you’re planning—”

“How much did you read?” Natasha said, her eyes flashing dangerously.

Sonya hesitated for a moment. “Enough,” she said finally. “Enough to know that you’re making a really dumb decision.”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” Natasha said resentfully. “It was stupid of me to even think you would.”

“Is that why you’ve been avoiding me and Mary? Have you been keeping this a secret this whole time?”

Natasha bristled at the very mention of Mary’s name. “I haven’t been keeping anything secret,” she said through gritted teeth. “How could I keep a secret when my own cousin is too distracted by her new best friend to even pay any attention to me?”

Sonya’s mouth went dry. This whole conversation felt like some sort of nightmarish hallucination. She pressed her mouth into a thin, tight line. “I know you’ve been feeling lonely, but we have offered to sit with you. And you seemed perfectly fine with Anatole—”

“Oh, so now you approve of him?”

“I still don’t, especially not when you’re trying to run away with him,” she fired back.

Natasha froze for a heart-stopping second. Her eyes widened in what seemed like horror, and no sooner had she let her guard down than she doubled down again and her face hardened and her lip curled in disgust and fury. “This is not any of your business. You’re just out to get me, aren’t you? You haven’t liked him from day one and you’re just looking for any excuse to—”

“I’m not looking for an excuse to do anything. I’m trying to protect you.” Natasha snorted disbelievingly. “I’m not the bad guy here, Nat. I’m only looking out for your best interest. You’re seventeen; you can’t just go run off with some boy you barely even know!”

Natasha folded her arms across her chest with an impertinent huff. “I can, and I will. I’m not going to let you stop me.”

“Then I’ll tell,” Sonya said gravely, deathly quiet and daring.

Shock registered on Natasha’s face, but it quickly gave way to cold fury. “What did you say?”

“I said I’ll tell. If you keep this up, if you’re so arrogant as to think you can—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” she snapped, tossing her hands in the air, and Sonya flinched. “Do you have to ruin everything? Do you want me to be miserable?”

“I’m worried about you. Please, for me, think about this.”
Natasha’s eyes blazed with fury. “It’s not your life, it’s mine, and I don’t need your permission to do what I want. And even if it ends badly, it’s not any of your damn business. It won’t be you—it’ll be me who’ll suffer.”

“Natasha—”

“Just leave me alone!”

Natasha made a move to close the door, but Sonya intercepted her, wedging her hip across the threshold and bearing down against the door with her forearms braced across the frame.

“But Natash—”

“Out of my room,” she said.

“Please, just list—”

“I said get out of my room!”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Oh my God!” Natasha cried. “I hate you, Sonya! You’re ruining my life!”

Sonya felt a sick wave of nausea hit her and she crumpled against the doorframe, her knees trembling. “You don’t mean that,” she whispered.

“I do,” Natasha said. “Now leave me alone!”

Sonya stumbled back into the hallway just as Natasha turned on her heels and slammed the door shut behind her.

To Sonya’s credit, she at least made it halfway to the bathroom before bursting into tears. Unwilling to be seen or to have to explain to her aunt exactly why she was crying her heart out, she promptly locked the door behind her and pressed her hands to her mouth to stifle her sobs. When she looked in the mirror, her eyes were puffy and bloodshot and her face was a garish shade of pink.

“Nice job, Sofia,” she said with a shuddering sigh. “Really well done.”

Sonya turned on the tap and began to splash her face with cold water. All the while, her hands continued to shake pathetically. She had wanted to wake herself up, to distance herself from this horrible nightmare, but the frigid water only made her feel on-edge and sharpened her senses further. It was grounding, in that awful way that was the exact opposite of what she needed. No, forget reality, forget the present—Sonya wanted to be anywhere but the present.

The din of the water pelting against the basin had become unbearably loud. Sonya turned off the tap and smoothed a hand over her face to wipe away the stray hairs that had come loose from her ponytail. From the hallway, she could hear the floorboards creaking as her aunt and cousin went about their lives as normal, and she was suddenly struck by how alone she felt. She and Natasha had fought before, but it had never been this bad. Something small and petty and selfish in her almost wanted to forget the whole thing. If Natasha wanted to ruin her life, let her.

And perhaps if she closed her eyes and ignored it all, she would wake up and realize it had all been a dream.
Before she could even process what she was doing, her hand had drifted into her pocket and brought at her phone. It seemed to take forever to type in the passcode with her trembling fingers, but at last, the phone screen unlocked with a quiet click. Sonya took in a slow, calming breath, seated herself on the edge of the bathtub, and began to type again.

**Sonya Rostova:** hey

**Sonya Rostova:** are you still awake

**Sonya Rostova:** im sorry i know u dont like texting this late but i really need someone right now

**Sonya Rostova:** mary i fucked up

**Sonya Rostova:** please respond

**Mary Bolkonskaya:** Are you alright?? What happened?

**Mary Bolkonskaya:** Talk to me.

**Sonya Rostova:** its not me, its natasha

**Sonya Rostova:** and i dont know what the hell im supposed to do now

**Sonya Rostova:** i really need your help

**Mary Bolkonskaya** is typing…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the love! We love kudos and comments dearly (seriously, we look at them when we're sad, make our day)!!
In Which Preparations Are Made And Fedya Really Ought To Grow A Spine

Chapter Summary

Andrei is finally here. Anatole is trying to leave.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

FROM: Andrei Bolkonsky <abolkonsky@u.washington.edu>

TO: Pierre Bezukhov <pierre.bezukhov.@aol.com>

Pierre,

Sorry for taking so long to respond. I’ve been very busy these past few days and I don’t think the different time zones are helping. I’m doing alright. You, my friend, sound like you need to take it easy. Are you still seeing that therapist? You’re going to give yourself an ulcer if you keep stressing like this.

You wound up in court? That’s not good. I hope it’s not because of Hélène.

Please don’t kill your professor. Beyond short-term relief, I don’t think it would help much in the long run.

I’m actually coming home this week, so I’ll probably just miss your package by a day or two, but I can always open it once I get back to France. I booked an early flight because I wanted to surprise Mary. Truth be told, I considered staying here for the holidays, but I don’t think I could let her down like that. Maybe we could get a coffee? Or a drink? We’ll talk more once I’m in the States again.

Hope to see you soon,

Andrei

It was on nights like this, when the sky had been threatening snow all week and the temperature had taken a sharp nosedive around sunset and the heating finally decided to crap out that Pierre was most grateful for the space heater his mother had bought him several Christmases ago. With the door wedged shut and the heater plugged in and turned on at full blast, the room wasn’t exactly warm, but at least it wasn’t quite cold either.

Ah, the joys of university housing, he thought sourly. That his apartment, like all the others on this street, was dirt cheap even by Moscow standards was somehow both the best and worst thing about it.

On this particular evening, he had holed himself away in his bedroom, wearing a dressing gown layered over his sweater and pajama top and undershirt, and if the temperature didn’t start to climb
soon, he swore he’d go for his winter coat next. It may have been a little dramatic, but it was easy to be dramatic when you were cold, and even easier when you had a research paper due in the morning, and even easier still when you had spent most of the past twenty-four hours staring at your computer screen hopped up on more caffeine than was probably medically advisable. Pierre had almost finished putting the finishing touches on his paper when he was startled out of his stupor by the sound of someone knocking at the front door.

“Coming!” he shouted in the general direction of the living room, and slammed his laptop shut with a little more force than was probably necessary. The knocking only continued, louder and more demanding this time, and Pierre rolled his eyes as he stumbled along the hallway so clumsily he may as well have been drunk. “Jesus Christ,” he snapped, “I’m coming!”

Pierre’s eyes smarted against the harsh yellow glow of the living room lights. He flipped open the deadbolt but his fingers must have been tired from typing, because when he went to unlock the door chain they went numb and stiff. More knocking.

“God dammit,” he said under his breath, and with a massive tug followed by a string of garbled curses, the chain finally gave. Pierre opened his mouth to snap at the intruder, but the words died on his tongue when he finally saw just who was that was standing in the doorway.

Andrei looked slightly dishevelled; his hair was curling over his forehead in a way that suggested he had gone a little too long between haircuts, and the bags under his eyes were more pronounced than usual, but the small smile in the corner of his mouth was exactly the way Pierre had remembered it.

“Andrei looked slightly dishevelled; his hair was curling over his forehead in a way that suggested he had gone a little too long between haircuts, and the bags under his eyes were more pronounced than usual, but the small smile in the corner of his mouth was exactly the way Pierre had remembered it.

‘Long time, no see, Pierre,’” he said. Even his voice sounded tired.

Pierre’s face split into a brilliant grin. The lights no longer seemed to bother him, and the headache that had been building at his temples all afternoon abated entirely. “Hey, man,” he said, surging forwards to wrap Andrei in a bear hug. “How are you?”

Andrei laughed. “Ah, well, I’ve been better.”

“Can I offer you a beer in these trying times?”

“That would be greatly appreciated,” he said, smiling. “Austerlitz?”

“The classic.”

Pierre headed over to the cabinet above the fridge where he kept the beer bottles. From down the hall he could hear the metallic shwip of a zipper and the shuffling of fabric as Andrei kicked off his boots and hung up his coat and seated himself on the sofa. He looked so natural, sitting there in the living room, as if it were his own home instead of Pierre’s.

“I didn’t realize you were flying in today.”

“Surprise?” he said with a shrug.

Pierre chuckled. “It’s a nice surprise, at any rate. Sorry for almost biting your head off back there. You don’t have your bags with you?”

Andrei held out his hand for the beer as Pierre came back into the living room. France, it seemed, had changed him—he looked older, more tired and beaten-down somehow in a way that couldn’t be explained away as simple jetlag. And despite it all, he hadn’t lost his air of collected calm, the stern coolness that Pierre had so long both admired and envied.
“I dropped them off at home before I came here,” he said.

“That’s nice to hear. How’s Mary doing?”

“She’s doing alright,” said Andrei. “Yourself?”

“I feel almost as tired as you look.”

“What can I say? It was a long flight.” Andrei extended his arms over his head and stretched until his back cracked audibly. “So, I hear you’re newly single?”

“That’s right,” Pierre said with a grimace as he twisted the cap off the bottle. “Back on the market. Not by choice, of course.”

“Oh?”

He shrugged. “You know how Hélène is.”

Andrei raised an eyebrow with a knowing but disappointed frown. “I mean, I was the one who warned you about how she is in the first place.”

“I do remember that,” he said quietly.

Andrei took a swig of his beer. “So, what did she do this time?”

Pierre’s voice was flat and deadpan to the point of almost sounding sarcastic. “She left me for the guy she was cheating on me with.”

“Fuck, that’s rough,” he said. “Let’s drink to that.”

“To our loneliness and misery,” said Pierre, holding up his glass.

They clinked their glasses together and tossed back a gulp each. “You’re fine,” Andrei muttered. “You aren’t gonna be lonely for very long.”

“What makes you say that?”

Andrei shrugged. “You’ll find someone new. And it’s not like there isn’t a precedence for this. What is it, the seventh time you guys have broken up?”

“Dunno,” said Pierre. “I haven’t exactly been keeping a tally.”

“Well, I have, and you should probably start too. Because maybe then you’d realize that she always pulls shit like this, man. I don’t know why you keep going back to her.” Andrei shook his head in disgust. “Will you promise me that you guys are done for good this time?”

Pierre sighed. “It’s complicated.”

“How is it complicated? She cheats and lies and she’s a complete bitch to you. It’s as simple as that.”

“Andrei…”

Andrei’s voice went flat. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking of making up with her.”

“I’m not,” he said. “It’s just that…well, she can be completely insufferable but she’s not some
“soulless demon.” Andrei opened his mouth to say something, but Pierre cut him off with one raised finger. “Look, I know that you can’t stand her—”

“For good reason!”

“—but I’ve been—well, I dated her for three years. How can it have been that awful if I stayed with her for so long?”

“You get depressed whenever you date her,” Andrei said coolly. “She makes you feel amazing for a few weeks and then in a month you’re back to hating each other’s guts.”

“Jesus Christ, Andrei.”

“It’s true!” he said, righting himself against the armrest, and the Austerlitz sloshed dangerously. “You used to be so full of life. You used to be happy, Pierre. And then you went and got together with that soul-sucking leech and it’s been downhill ever since. She’s a bad influence, she makes people miserable wherever she goes.” Pierre let out a pained sigh at that and Andrei’s face softened. “It’s not your fault. But you would be a lot happier if you finally just cut her out.”

“She’s changed since the last time you’ve seen her.”

“Really? Because I remember last time I saw her she was cheating on you too.”

Pierre fell silent and elected to turn his attention to his Austerlitz rather than respond to Andrei’s jibe. It wasn’t his favorite beer but it was a distraction all the same, and any distraction was enough. “Maybe you’re right,” he said after a long while.

Andrei’s head perked up. “Oh?”

“You know,” he said, unsure of why exactly he was even telling Andrei this, “she used to leave all her crap all over my apartment. And then after we had this fight she sent her little brother over to get her stuff, and the worst part is she didn’t even bother to return any of my things.” Pierre let out a low, hollow laugh and took another swig from his bottle. “To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s dumped it all in the trash. Everything. My books, my socks, my scarf—my nice cashmere sweater. I liked that sweater, Andrei. I don’t think I’m getting it back now.”

“Go over and ask for it.”

Pierre snorted. “As if. She’d kill me or sic Fedya on me or something.”

Andrei raised an eyebrow. “Who’s Fedya?”

“The guy she was cheating on me with.”

Andrei tutted in disgust. “What a bitch.”

“You know what?” he spat, resentment bubbling up in his chest and festering in his voice. “Fuck Hélène. Fuck her, honestly.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Andrei. “I knew you’d come around eventually.”

“I should’ve listened to you. You always seem to know how to handle these things.”

Andrei raised his eyebrows and took in a deep breath. “I’m not so sure about that.” In one clean gulp, he drained the remaining beer. “Natasha and I broke up.”
Pierre allowed his head to loll in Andrei’s direction. “Are you okay? What happened?”

“It sucked,” he sighed. “She broke up with me over text. Over text—can you believe it?”

“Jesus,” said Pierre. Though he knew it was ridiculous and probably just his anxiety speaking, his own gripes with Hélène suddenly felt childish, petty even. “I think you’re gonna need something stronger than Austerlitz. I have some scotch?”

“Anything,” he said.


He wasn’t drunk yet, just bone-tired, and now that his headache was beginning to return with a fierce vengeance, the stretch between the sofa and the kitchen seemed like an insurmountably long distance. Pierre pushed himself upright with a grunt and, swaying and stumbling a little too noticeably for his taste—damn his limbs; exhaustion seemed to have stripped him of the little coordination and balance he had had to begin with—he walked over to the cupboard to pull out a bottle of scotch and some tumblers.

“What do you want to talk about it?” he said.

Andrei shrugged, tipping his head against the backrest of the couch with a loud exhale. “There isn’t a lot to tell.”

“Take all the time you need, my friend,” said Pierre. He righted himself against the sofa and poured out two tumblers. The wine stain on the rug, courtesy of Hélène’s latest meltdown, still hadn’t come out in the wash, and he had no desire to add another to accompany it. It had been a nice rug, he mused sadly, before that stain.

“I’m just confused,” Andrei said, and a frown creased the worry lines on his forehead. He was too young to have worry lines, thought Pierre. They didn’t suit him, but strangely enough, they didn’t look entirely out-of-place either. Pierre elected to drop the thought entirely before he drunkenly slipped out with something stupid or offensive. “I thought that we were okay. I didn’t know she was lonely.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t that she wasn’t happy, Andrei.”

“Oh, it was—she told me so. In exact words. Told me she was sick of long distance, that I was being cold and unresponsive and making her feel lonely.” Andrei shook his head defeatedly. “She was lonely, Jesus Christ. Forget about me, all alone in a new city in a country whose language I don’t even speak. She’s been over in Moscow with her family and I’ll bet she’s made a ton of new friends since I’ve left and she’s the one who’s lonely.” Andrei shook his head again, with more conviction this time. “God, I must sound like a total jackass. I’m sorry, I’m just upset.”

“That must be the scotch talking,” Pierre said. Andrei squeezed his eyes shut as Pierre poured himself another glass. “I just can’t wrap my head around it,” he continued, furrowing his brow, and after refilling Andrei’s glass, promptly returned his gaze to his feet. “Natasha always seemed like such a sweet girl.”

Andrei shook his head balefully. “I thought so too.”

The scotch made the room spin around Pierre in dizzy circles, made the floor tilt drunkenly beneath him like a ship at sea. He leaned into it, allowing himself to sway rather than attempting to hold himself upright. “Christ, we picked some bad ones,” he muttered. “It’s like Lise all over again.”
Andrei cringed at the mention of that name, and Pierre instantly knew that he had said too much, stepped over a line that he should have never even touched in the first place. But Andrei didn’t seem offended or upset at his slip-up, and much to Pierre’s relief he quickly changed the topic, saying, “Natasha just seemed so different, though. So sweet. Such an angel.”

Pierre pressed his mouth into a thin, regretful line. “That’s how they get you,” he said bitterly. “They’re nice once in a while like it makes up for all the shit they pull.”

“But that’s the thing—she never pulled shit,” Andrei slurred. “We were perfect together.” He smiled, tracing a delicate line along the grain of the coffee table with his fingernail. “I remember—there was this one time, a school night, I think, that she called me at two in the morning. I ran over because I thought there was an emergency. You know what it was? It was a blue moon.” His voice hitched painfully, tearfully even. “She just wanted to look at the moon with me. She was always doing stupid cute stuff like that.”

“Lena got a tattoo of my zodiac sign,” Pierre said, happy, for once, to wallow in the misery of someone other than himself. It made him feel like a part of something, even if that something was just him and Andrei and the bottle of scotch, and suddenly the apartment seemed a lot less lonely and cold. “For our one-year anniversary. She bought me a fancy telescope for my birthday too. She loves the stars. We used to go stargazing together, on her roof.”

Andrei smiled regretfully. “Natasha bought me two watches before I left for Paris. One to keep time in France, one for the time back in Moscow. ‘So we’ll always be in synch,’ she said.” He held up his left wrist, tracing the bezel with a wistful look. “That’s—well, that was Nat. Always so thoughtful.”

Pierre chuckled. “Hélène was never thoughtful. God, she was fun, though. One time, she convinced me to ditch class for a week and go on a road trip.”

“Nat never did anything like that. She was a stickler for rules, myNatalka. Wouldn’t hurt a fly. I’ve never heard her say a mean word to anybody who didn’t deserve it.” Andrei’s face stilled and then soured. “How did it all go so wrong?”

“Hell if I know,” Pierre said. “Do you think I’d be in this mess if I did?”

Andrei cradled his head in his hands with an exhausted sigh. He had never been good at holding his liquor—perhaps the scotch was starting to get to him. Pierre could hear him sniffling softly, his shoulders rising and falling sharply with ever shaky breath.

“There, there,” he said, and laid a hand on Andrei’s shoulder, a little more heavily than he meant to, but the sentiment was there nonetheless. “Plenty of fish in the sea and all that.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” said Andrei. “She was perfect and then out of nowhere she decided to ghost me!” He shook his head angrily, blinking away tears. “I shouldn’t be surprised. She’s always been immature.”

Pierre nodded. “Yeah, this was a pretty fucked thing for her to do.”

“I just don’t understand. I thought she was happy with me. I knew long-distance was rough but I thought we were managing.” Andrei slumped back against the sofa. “Would it really have been so hard for her to just wait for me?”

Pierre frowned. “If this happened to you…what does that say about my odds?”

“It doesn’t say anything. Don’t let Hélène make you feel like that.”
“Can’t help it,” he said, now more than a little teary himself, and he dabbed at his eyes with the hem of his sleeve. “I know I wasn’t enough for her. Can you really blame her? I mean, if I was dating me, I’d probably end up cheating too.”

Andrei paled at that. “Do you think Natasha was cheating?” he said, his voice dangerously quiet and soft, the way it used to get before he would explode.

Pierre had only seen Andrei truly lose his temper a scant few times, and he had no desire to see it again. He pursed his lips uneasily as he thought of how best to diffuse the tension that was rapidly rising between them. There was no right way to answer this question, and the worst part was, he wasn’t even sure what to think of it. Natasha hadn’t struck him as the type to cheat, but then again, she also hadn’t seemed like the type to break up with her boyfriend of a year over text message. “It’s a possibility, I guess,” he managed after a painfully long pause. “But she’ll be—what is she now, a senior? She’ll be off to college soon. Maybe she wanted a fresh start.”

“She told me she wanted to come to U of W with me,” said Andrei. “We had a plan.”

Pierre nodded. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “It’s probably best not to think about it.”

“How did you know? With Hélène?”

He let out a bitter laugh. “With Hélène? God, where do I even start? The way she’d dress, the way she’d act around other men—you’d have to be blind not to see.”

Andrei crossed his arms. “Well that doesn’t fucking help at all, now, does it?”

Pierre shrugged. “I don’t know what you want me to say.”

“I don’t know either,” he snapped, and Pierre nearly balked at the rising volume of his voice. “I just want to know why she did this. And I want her and I also never want to talk to her again. Fuck it, I don’t know. I don’t even know anymore.”

“Christ.”

Andrei scoffed. “Wonder how long it’ll take her to regret this. Leaving me.” His face twisted into something irate, and Pierre hated that his first thought was of how similar he looked to his father. “She’s in for a rude awakening when she realizes that she can’t just walk all over people and then drop them whenever it suits her.”

Pierre sighed. He had almost forgotten what an angry drunk Andrei was. “Yeah, of course she will.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, I guess.”

“Maybe you should talk to her?”

“How can I?” he said. “She won’t even answer my calls.”

“Maybe you should…I dunno, talk to her in person? It sounds like talking over the phone caused a lot of problems for you guys.”

“I’m done with her, Pierre,” said Andrei. “She isn’t worth the energy.”

“That’s a bit mean.”

“It’s the truth. She’s impatient, immature—”
“She’s a kid,” Pierre said. “She’s a kid, you’re a kid, we’re all immature, Andrei. You need to cut her some slack.”

“Oh, like how you cut Hélène slack?”

“Different kind of problem,” Pierre said coolly, tipping the rim of his half-empty glass against his lip. “I cut her too much slack.”

Andrei seemed to sink even further into the couch cushions with a stern look.

“You know, you once told me that you shouldn’t judge idiot teenagers for being idiot teenagers.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think that would extend to excusing cheating.”

Pierre frowned. “But you don’t know if Natasha was cheating or not.”

“I wasn’t talking about Natasha,” said Andrei.

Pierre’s breath caught in his throat. “Oh,” he said quietly, and once more, they lapsed into an uncomfortable silence.

It was truly incredible just how good Andrei was at making Pierre feel like a stranger in his own home. Or perhaps he was being unfair, or perhaps it was the scotch talking. Either way, he didn’t have to dwell on his unease for long, because a minute later Andrei sighed and replaced his glass on the coffee table and said, “I really should get going.”

He couldn’t say he hadn’t seen it coming. Pierre wasn’t sure whether to take it as more of a disappointment or a relief. “Yeah, sure,” he said. “I’ll see you around?”

Andrei stood upright, groaning, his back cracking again in protest, and began to gather his things. “Sure.”

“It was nice seeing you,” he called, but Andrei was already halfway out the door and not a second later he had slammed it shut behind him. Pierre let out a pained sigh, drained the last dregs of his scotch, and promptly fell asleep where he was sitting on the couch.

Fedya was beginning to grow concerned.

He hadn’t agreed to the plan initially—if you could even call this half-baked daydream a plan—at least, not until Anatole had turned on the waterworks and forced him to swear up-and-down pinkie-promise that he wouldn’t breathe a word of it to Hélène. The only reason he had said yes at all was because he knew that there was no absolutely way in hell that Anatole could possibly follow through with this. Soon, he’d realize what an idiot he was being and put a stop to it before things got out of hand.

At least, that was how Fedya had rationalized it.

But that was the issue—Anatole wasn’t stopping. No, if anything, as the days went on he only seemed to grow more stuck on this stupid idea of his. It wasn’t right, it wasn’t natural. Nevermind running away, Anatole barely had the mental fortitude to decide what flavor ice cream to order. In all the years they had known each other, Fedya had never seen him so stubborn and hellbent on anything.
Of all the times to get some follow through, he thought sourly. And now, there they were, the day before everything was set to go in motion. Anatole had had Fedya print out the tickets at his house, lest Hélène come home and see them on the computer or lying on the desk.

Screw ‘concerned’. They had long since smashed past that checkpoint at breakneck speed. No, what Fedya was currently feeling was closer to regret or terror. His heart sank slightly as he loaded Anatole’s suitcase into the back of his truck. He had thought that he would have returned the tickets by now. The last thing he had expected to be doing was helping him pack.

Hélène had long since vanished to the library to cram in some last-minute work for her thesis proposal. Fedya and Anatole had gone out for burgers that afternoon—Fedya’s treat for his “last night in Moscow”. Now that they were back at the Kuragins’ house, Anatole had holed himself up in the first-floor bathroom with the door flung wide open so that Fedya could see him from the living room. He stood in front of the mirror combing his hair, a forgotten patch of shaving cream smudged on his cheek. Why he had shaved at all was beyond Fedya—the kid didn’t even have enough facial hair to constitute peach fuzz in the first place. Perhaps it was nerves, then, which seemed a pretty illogical conclusion, but then again, Anatole was an illogical person. Logic didn’t suit him. Nor did nerves, actually, but that still didn’t explain the shaving cream.

Fedya leaned against the back of the sofa directly opposite the bathroom, where his pacing had begun to wear a hole in the floorboards. “Tolya,” he began cautiously, “you have, uh, something on your…” He gestured to the side of his face.

Anatole didn’t seem to register that Fedya was speaking to him for a good few seconds. “Oh, thanks,” he said, and wiped away the cream.

“Are you okay?”

“Just a little distracted.”

Fedya sucked in a breath through clenched teeth, mulling over how best to delicately phrase his concerns, before finally settling on: “So. You’re really going through with this, huh?”

“Of course,” he said.

“No second thoughts?”

Anatole shook his head, oblivious to Fedya’s mounting frustration.

“Have you considered that this may not be the best idea?”

Anatole rolled his eyes with a laugh. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he said.

“Look,” said Fedya, running a hand through his hair, “you’re tired and stressed and it’s way past your bedtime. I think you need some sleep.”

“Sleep is the last thing I need right now.”

“You’re not thinking this through.”

Anatole snorted. “Yeah, well, you’re literally helping me.”

“I know I am. I mean, I’m only the one who organized the rides and booked the flights and got the papers in order and—”
Anatole pursed his lips. It was uncanny at times how similar he looked to Hélène. Now was one of those times. And Fedya, even after God-knew-how-many years, still had to fight the urge to do a double take every time. “Are you calling me ungrateful? Haven’t I thanked you enough?”

“That’s not the point, Anatole,” Fedya snapped, and even though he knew it would only irritate Anatole even more, he began to pace the length of the room again. “This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have even gotten involved in the first place.”

Anatole’s shoulders slumped in dismay. “Don’t tell me you’re getting cold feet.”

“There’s a difference between having cold feet and growing a spine.”

Anatole tutted disapprovingly, but he didn’t snap back.

“You know, your sister could be here any minute.”

He shook his head. “She won’t. I wouldn’t be surprised if she ends up sleeping at the library.”

Anatole let out a laugh at that, but, seeing Fedya’s wooden expression, promptly returned his focus to the mirror and his hair with a concentrated frown.

“What if she decides to come home early?”

Anatole rolled his eyes. “Dude, you practically live here. Do you seriously think she’s gonna be surprised to see you?”

Fedya decided to drop the topic altogether. “Have you even considered the legal implications of this whole thing?” he said, hoping to steer the conversation back into some semblance of control. “They’re not going to let go of two underage runaways so easily.”

“They can’t arrest us. It’s not against the law to run away.”

“But it’s illegal to aid or house a runaway. You’re crossing state lines, kid. Do you want—” Fedya snapped his fingers with a burst of realization, “—do you really want the feds to get involved? Huh?”

“It’s not going to come to that,” he said tersely.

“And if it does?”

“It won’t.” Anatole caught sight of Fedya’s clenched jaw and sighed. “My dad won’t notice until it’s too late and you’ll talk Lena down before she spirals.”

“Well then, what happens when it’s ‘too late’?” he said, his blood pressure rising with every passing moment. “What happens when he comes home and realizes that you’re missing? He’s gonna call the cops, kid, that’s what’s gonna happen. He’ll report you as a runaway if the school doesn’t report you as a truant first. Have you thought this through at all? Or do you just not care?”

“I have thought it through,” he snapped.

“And what happens when you get caught? Huh? What’s your genius escape plan?”

Anatole snorted as if it were the most outlandish prospect he had ever heard. The stubborn brat. Not for the first time that evening, Fedya found himself on the verge of tearing his hair out. “We won’t get caught,” he said simply, with such wholehearted insistence that Fedya instantly knew it would be absolutely useless to argue against that particular point.
“Well, what about when you run out of cash? What’s her family gonna think? Jesus Christ, Anatole, have you even considered how her goddamn parents are gonna react to this?”

“We’ve already discussed this,” Anatole said pointedly, with a look that clearly suggested he would rather not discuss it again.

“Look,” Fedya said, and this time it was truly a fight to keep his voice level, “I know how much you hate the whole ‘dumb blonde’ stereotype, but right now you’re really playing into it.”

Anatole’s head snapped away from the mirror, his eyes burning furiously. It was one of the few buttons Fedya knew how to push, one of the few that consistently yielded outrage in response. “You take that back.”

“I won’t because it’s true,” he snapped, and from the way Anatole’s face reddened he could tell that he had hit his mark. “You’re acting like a dumb blonde.”

Anatole seized a pillow from the closest couch and lobbed at him, but his aim was terrible and he missed by a margin of a good ten feet or so. “Don’t call me that!”

“Jesus, kid, grow up.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” he said petulantly—probably the snarkiest possible comeback he could think of—and turned away with one hand in his hair.

“Listen to me, Anatole.” When Anatole wouldn’t even look back in response, Fedya let out a frustrated sigh and grabbed him firmly by the shoulders to turn him around. “I’m only saying this because it’s for your own good. You are acting like a child right now.”

“God, you sound just like Lena,” he snapped as he wrenched himself free.

“At least one of us does,” Fedya growled. And then: “Anatole, what’s she gonna think?”

Anatole turned away again. The hurt in his voice was palpable when he said, “She’ll understand.”

“She won’t. This is only going to hurt her and you know it.”

“Then she’ll get over it,” he said, and Fedya wasn’t sure which of the two of them he sounded like he was trying harder to convince.

“Is this you trying to get back at her?”

“You don’t get it,” Anatole said, softening. “She’s always so stressed taking care of me. It’s not good for her, Fedya. It’s not fair. I know she’ll be upset at first, but she’ll get that this is what’s best.” He sighed. “I’ve wanted this for a long time, Fed. I’m not happy here.”

“I don’t understand why. You have me and Hélène and this girl. You don’t need to run away to be happy.”

“And you don’t need to have no friends to be miserable.”

The naïve honesty of his words sent Fedya’s heart sinking to the pit of his stomach. “But this isn’t the right way to fix this. Hélène…she isn’t going to forgive you for doing this to her. She isn’t going to forgive me.”

“She’s always wanted what’s best for me,” Anatole murmured.
Fedya sighed. “I’m not trying to fight you on that. I’m just asking you to consider that this isn’t what’s best for you.”

“How could it not be? I love Natalie, Fedya, more than I’ve ever loved anyone. How could choosing to be with her ever be wrong?”

“You’re both seventeen. You’re gonna get sick of each other after a week and regret the whole thing.”

Anatole shook his head. “It was stupid of me to think you’d ever understand.”

“You know, you’re right,” Fedya said. “I can’t understand. And I can’t do this. Not to you, not to your sister. I’m sorry.”

Anatole’s eyes went wide and his face crumpled into a look that Fedya recognized all too well.

“Oh, give me a fucking break, he thought. He’s going to cry again.

And the worst thing was how effective it was. “Please, Fedya,” said Anatole, and his voice was thin enough to splinter and crack and so sad-sounding that Fedya nearly caved right then and there.

“You’re upset, you’re emotional, you’re not thinking right and—”

“She doesn’t understand,” Anatole said quietly. “She doesn’t know what it’s like to be afraid in this house. She doesn’t know how it feels to be scared of your own home. I can’t stay here, Fed, not when I can finally leave.”

Fedya stiffened. “I thought your dad wasn’t around much anymore. He’s been away, hasn’t he?”

“Yeah, well, he makes up for it when he is here.” Anatole’s face darkened and he drew his arms around himself. “And Hélène doesn’t do jack about it.”

Fedya sighed. “Anatole, it seems like it’s a complicated situation. I’m sure she does what she thinks is best.”

“You don’t know that. You don’t live with her—or him. She could say something, Fedya, he actually listens to her.”

“From the stories she’s told me, I’m not sure how true that is.”

Anatole’s frown only deepened. “What has she told you?”

Fedya folded his arms across his chest. “Enough.”

“So you understand, then?” he said. “Why I want to leave? Why I have to leave?”

Was this how Bezukhov had felt, he wondered, that night with the raccoon? He quashed his guilt under the wave of nausea that was rapidly rising in his throat. “Anatole…”

“Fine,” Anatole snapped, his voice stiff and so bratty that Fedya nearly rolled his eyes. “I get it. You don’t have to sugarcoat it. I won’t nag you anymore, but if you won’t help me, then I’ll have to go ask Balaga instead.”

Dear God, anyone but Balaga, thought Fedya, and his resolve folded like a house of cards in a hurricane. “Fine,” he said, holding up his hands in surrender. “Fine, you win. You’ve worn me down. I’ll do it.”
Anatole blinked in surprise, as if he couldn’t believe his ploy had actually worked. Fedya, in fairness, couldn’t quite believe it either. “Really?”

“Get your bags packed,” he growled. “If you’re late, that’s on you. And if she’s late, then I’m leaving both of you idiots behind.”

Anatole let out a relieved sigh and hugged Fedya tightly. “Thanks, man. I knew you’d come around eventually.”

Fedya’s stomach twisted itself into a painful knot. Whether it was from guilt, irritation, fear, or some awful combination of all three, he couldn’t tell. “Don’t thank me yet.”

Chapter End Notes

The love and support you all give us means the world! Thank you for reading!!

Kudos and comments are always appreciated!
School mornings in the Kuragin house usually began with Hélène’s alarm going off bright and early at five forty-five in the morning. It had taken her until sophomore year of college to realize, but she almost always felt more rested for having lain in bed for those extra fifteen minutes than if she had just woken up at six o’clock in the first place. Anatole, being the stupidly, maddeningly deep sleeper that he was, could ignore just about anything besides being physically dragged out of bed. It was a stroke of luck if he was awake by seven most mornings.

So, naturally, it came as quite a surprise when she was woken up by the sound of her brother’s footsteps padding up and down the stairs before her alarm even went off.

Hélène let out a loud yawn and pulled the duvet under her chin. It was tempting to stay in bed and just lie there for the rest of the day. Her paper was almost done and she could probably finish it in the half an hour before she dropped it off at her advisor’s office. But she had been up most of the night working on it, and she knew that what she had written around three in the morning was probably incoherent.

*Five more minutes*, she told herself. *You get five minutes of rest, and then you get up.*

She heard the shower handle turning in the upstairs bathroom, followed by running water. Hélène tilted her head back against the pillows, staring at the ceiling. When was the last time Anatole had bothered to have a morning shower? Next came the sound of him singing, something jazzy and theatrical that she recognized but didn’t have the energy to pinpoint, and she smiled to herself as his voice echoed down the hallway.

Well, if even Anatole of all people was awake at this hour, then that left no excuse for her. With a deep groan, Hélène stretched her arms over her head until something in her spine popped and then swung her legs over the side of the bed. By the time she had gotten dressed and made her way downstairs, Anatole was already in the kitchen eating breakfast at the counter.

“Morning, Tolya,” she said, padding over to the fridge.

Anatole raised his eyebrows “Are you okay? You look sick.”

“You’re full of compliments this morning, aren’t you?” she snapped, and slammed the fridge door shut.

Anatole held up his hands in mock-surrender. “Just asking.”

“I’m not sick, you brat,” she said. “I’m just tired. I’m a college student. It’s part and parcel of the trade.”
“Well, I made you some tea,” he said quietly, and before she could even blink, he had slid off the stool and pushed a mug into her hands. The tea was already lukewarm and it was milkier and weaker than she preferred and she was sure he had popped a sugar cube too many in there, but the gesture touched her all the same.

“Um, thank you?”

Anatole shrugged. She could see that it was taking him a great deal of effort to keep a straight face. “Do you want breakfast? I could make you something.”

“No, it’s okay, but thanks,” she said. Anatole’s face crumpled slightly at that and she frowned, giving his shoulder a light squeeze. “Toto, is everything alright?”

Anatole nodded a little too vigorously. “I’m fine. Just tired as well.”

Hélène sighed. “I told you not to stay up watching Netflix. You’re not going to be able to pay attention in class now.”

“Really, Lena, since when have I ever been able to pay attention in class?”

“Go get ready,” she said. “I know you hate coffee, but I’m gonna get you some anyways. You really look like you need it.”

Anatole took off up the stairs, grumbling under his breath. Hélène chuckled to herself and turned to the coffee pot to fill up her travel mug. She recognized Fedya’s footsteps trudging towards the back door before he even let himself in. He entered without knocking and kicked off his shoes at the threshold.

“Morning, Fed,” she said, not even bothering to turn around.

There was a metallic clicking sound and a grunt as he replaced the key, no doubt sticking it back beneath the doormat. “Hey, Lena,” came his voice from the back of the kitchen.

“Isn’t this a little early for you?”

“I was getting coffee and I remembered that you sounded kind of frantic over the phone last night and I got you some too,” he said.

Hélène grabbed the cup and took a sip. “You’re amazing. The coffee I made is way too weak and I already have a headache.”

“How much sleep did you get?”

“Yeah, let’s not go there.”

Fedya rolled his eyes. “I told you the thesis would be stressful.”

“I know, you’re right, I should have listened to you and taken that stupid art appreciation class instead.”

He snorted at that. “See? What did I tell you?”

“Oh, shush.”

“You’re stressed,” he said. “You’re overwhelmed. You’re—”
“Already irritated and willing to fight?”

Fedya barely missed a beat before finishing with, “Which is why I thought I’d take the kid to school today.”

Hélène paused, raising her eyebrows. “Wait, seriously?”

He shrugged. “It’s been awhile since the two of us hung out.”

“You literally took him out for burgers last night.”

“Doesn’t count. They were terrible burgers. Too greasy. Besides,” he continued, running his eyes over the wrinkled blouse that she had hastily thrown on and the awful mess of tangles in her hair and the bags under her eyes that were no doubt a horrific purple by now, “you seem like you could use one less thing to think about.”

Hélène nodded. “College is stressful.”

“Exactly.”

Fedya turned to walk into the living room but she caught him by the shoulder with a murmured, “Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know that your thesis proposal is due this afternoon. Work on that instead.”

“You’re a godsend, Fed” she said, and pressed a quick kiss to his cheek.

The grin on his face was so smug she was tempted to slap it off altogether. “Aren’t I just?”

Hélène playfully swatted him on the shoulder. “Don’t get cocky. Seriously, though, this is super helpful.”

“No problem,” he said. Something indecipherable flickered in his eyes for a split second before it disappeared and he reached over to give her hand a firm squeeze. “I love you guys a lot. I’ll always try to do right by you.”

Hélène raised her eyebrows, desperately wishing for more caffeine. “Okay, weirdo, I know.”

It was at this point that Anatole came plodding back down the stairs. Not a minute late, and he was already dressed with his backpack slung over one shoulder and his binder stuffed under his arm. If Hélène had gotten more than two hours of sleep the night before, she may have even had the energy to be impressed. “Hey, Fedya,” he said casually. “What’s up?”

“Not much. I’m taking you to school today.”

“Cool beans. You okay, Lena?”

Hélène nodded with a loud yawn and stretched her arms again. “Jesus, I’m beat,” she said. “After I finish this proposal I think I’m just gonna sleep for the rest of the week.”

“You’re welcome for the coffee,” said Fedya, bumping her shoulder with his. “Try not to stress too much. Take a nap before you hand it in.”

“I’ll try. No guarantees.”

Fedya leaned forward to kiss her cheek. “Bye, Lena. Take care of yourself, okay?” He turned to
Anatole and raised his eyebrow. “You ready to go, kid?”

“Sure thing,” said Anatole. He and Fedya made brief eye contact—never a good sign—and Anatole threw his arms around Hélène so tightly that he knocked the air from her lungs.

She frowned. “Toto? Everything alright?”

He pulled back, smiling at her, maybe a little too brightly. “Yeah, of course.”

“You’re never this affectionate unless you want something. What’s got you in such a tizzy?”

Anatole shrugged. “Just happy. Good luck on your paper.” He drew her into another hug, this one even tighter than the first. “Love you, Lena,” he murmured.

Hélène laughed and ruffled his hair. “Well, this is a nice surprise. Love you too, you goof.”

Fedya’s car was smaller than Hélène’s, and messier too, but it didn’t seem to bother Anatole one bit. He sank into the passenger seat with his backpack cradled in his lap. It was stuffed full of clothing and other personal items, no doubt. He had emptied out his school books the night before, leaving them piled in a haphazard heap on the desk in his bedroom. It was a sound idea, in fairness—a suitcase was only capable of holding so much—but even so, Fedya couldn’t help but wonder how long it would take for Hélène to stalk upstairs to her brother’s room, see the textbooks and notepads and odd bits and bobs scattered about, and put two and two together.

Anatole stared out the window as Fedya reversed the car into the road and then began to steer down the hill, watching the house until they rounded the corner and it disappeared from sight altogether. He had never been any good at hiding his emotions, but now, with his hands splayed calmly in his lap and his eyes focused on the rearview mirror, his face was a blank as a slate, entirely unreadable.

Until, that is, he sniffed and pulled out his phone. Fedya was no snoop—or, at least, he had never considered himself one—but Anatole, like everybody, had his tells, and they were painfully obvious. As he stared down at the screen, his gaze became so intense that Fedya was almost worried he was going to burn a hole through it.

“What’re you looking at?” Fedya offered in an attempt to break the painful silence.

Anatole swallowed heavily and switched off the screen. If Fedya didn’t know him as well as he did, he may not have noticed the way Anatole’s eyes were beginning to shine wetly, or the way his fingers twitched nervously around his phone. “Just a text from Lena,” he said. “I was supposed to have a test in English today. She wished me luck.”

The knot in Fedya’s stomach twisted even tighter, even more painfully, and his hand came to a rest on Anatole’s shoulder as they rounded onto Nikitsky Boulevard. “It’s not too late, Tolya. We can cancel the tickets. Lena never even has to know.”

Anatole shook his head. “I’m fine,” he said. “Everything is perfectly fine.”

Fedya let out a long-suffering sigh and resisted the urge to press his forehead to the dashboard. “I know that this is hard. You’re really going to miss her, aren’t you?”

Anatole nodded slowly. “Will you talk to her after I’m gone? I don’t want her to blame herself.”
“Of course I will. Can’t guarantee how much she’ll want to listen.”

Fedya’s heart sank as Anatole’s shoulders went slack. “I know.”

“She’s gonna be really lonely without you here, you know,” he said.

“She’ll have you.”

“I’m not her little brother. And she won’t want to talk to me.”

Anatole frowned. “Of course she will. You’re her best friend.”

“She isn’t going to forgive me for this, Anatole.”

“She will,” he said, with such conviction that Fedya’s heart plummeted even further. “Just you wait and see. She’ll realize that this is for the better.”

“You aren’t worried she’s gonna jump on a plane and come get you herself?”

Anatole shrugged. “I don’t see why. I haven’t told her where I’m going.”

Fedya let out a choking sound at that and almost drove the car off the side of the road. “You what?”

“I didn’t put it in the letter,” he said, raising an eyebrow. “I mean, isn’t the whole point of running away that you don’t want to be found?”

“So you have no contingency plan. Nothing at all. She has no way to find you.”

Anatole nodded slowly, as if Fedya was the idiotic one here. “Now you get it?”

Fedya blinked and refocused his gaze on the road ahead. “Oh my God.”

“Well, you know where I am. And I know where I am, which is the main thing.”

“And if you get hurt?”

“I won’t.”

Fedya tightened his hands around the steering wheel, and as he eased his foot from the accelerator, the car began to slow. There was a gas station not too far ahead and, next to it, a convenience store and a small parking lot. An easy place to turn around. An excuse. A way out.

“I have to take you back,” he said after a long while.

Anatole’s neck snapped upright. “Don’t you dare.”

“Anatole, she’s gonna be so worried about you.”

“She’s always worried about me. She worries about me more than Pierre worries about… well…everything.”

Fedya rolled his eyes. “Because you do dumb shit like this.”

Anatole huffed. “Are you gonna lecture me again? Because I’m not gonna listen if you are.”

“Anatole—”
Anatole’s hand darted into his back pocket for his phone. His face lit up ecstatically as he unlocked the screen.

Fedya resisted the urge to lean over his shoulder and see for himself what he was looking at. “Who is it now?”

“Natalie,” he said, grinning, and Fedya’s stomach made a move to escape his body by way of his esophagus. “She’s just telling me how excited she is.”

Natalie. Now that he could attach a name to this anonymous girl, even if he couldn’t picture a face, the whole situation suddenly felt a lot more real—and the reality of the situation was that he was helping Anatole, a seventeen-year-old, run away with another seventeen-year-old. A kid. Two kids. What kind of responsible adult was he?

“Well, what if she gets hurt?”

“Just how exactly are we gonna get hurt, Fed?” he said impatiently. “We’re going on a plane, it’s not like we’re hitchhiking across the country or something.”

That was a mental image Fedya really could have gone without ever having. Anatole’s overly-casual tone was not helping his nerves in the slightest. Oh my God, he thought with a pang of horror. I’m turning into Bezukhov.

“You know, you’re sounding just like Pierre right now,” said Anatole, and it was only by a herculean feat of willpower that Fedya didn’t hang his head in shame and drive off into the nearest ditch.

What would Hélène think, he wondered. I can’t believe you, Fedya, she would say. Someone call National Geographic. We’re witnessing the reverse evolution of a mammal into an invertebrate.

They had missed the gas station, driven past it altogether. Fedya’s head barely turned as it sped by. It wasn’t too late to back out, but the idea suddenly seemed insurmountable, terrifying, even. He pressed his mouth into a thin line, and, hating himself, kept on driving.

3:27

Lenka: THE PROPOSAL IS IN

Lenka: and my advisor thinks it’ll be good!!

Lenka: Can we go out to celebrate? I need a drink

Lenka: or 12

3:31

Lena: TOTO YOUR BIG SIS SURVIVED COLLEGE!!!
Lena: okay i still have to actually write the paper

Lena: but be excited for me

4:03

Lenka: can you pls stop ignoring me

Lenka: i did a cool thing and would like to be praised

Lenka: did you pick the kid up from school?

4:04

Lena: yikes tough crowd

Lena: what’s a girl gotta do to get a ‘congrats’ these days???

4:26

Lena: are you hanging out with fed?

4:48

Lenka: hey are you driving

4:55

Lenka: do you have Anatole with you

Lenka: he’s not pickign up

5:17

Lenka: fedya???

6:08

Lena: have you and fed gone to the movies or something

6:21

Lena: anatole this isnt funny
6:22

**Lenka:** where are you????

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! We love the support (we also love kudos and comments)!
In Which Pierre Is Actually Helpful, For Once

Chapter Summary

Anatole is in trouble, Hélène is a mess, and Pierre is an incredibly understanding ex

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They had ignored her texts. They weren’t answering her calls. They weren’t at Ms. Dolokhova’s and they were nowhere to be seen at Borodino’s. Pavlovna’s had proven to be equally as useless, as had the pizza parlor and the arcade.

Hélène didn’t even bother to take off her shoes before she collapsed onto one of the armchairs in the living room. She switched on her phone, hoping to have received a text, a call, something, in the minute or so that had past since she had last checked, but the screen remained maddeningly blank.

Nothing. Nothing but dead ends and unanswered messages and not a single lead. Surely there was something she was missing here. Surely there was something she had forgotten…

Hélène’s heart sank as she realized that there was one place she hadn’t checked yet. Before she could even process what she was doing, she had dialled his number.

He picked up after what felt like an eternity.

“Hélène?” he said.

Hélène swallowed heavily, licking her lips. “Hi, Pierre,” she said, and nearly winced at how frightened her voice sounded. Hélène Kuragina didn’t do frightened, dammit.

At least, if she could only convince herself of that.

There was a moment of silence on the other end. Perhaps he didn’t want to talk to her. Perhaps he was still angry. Perhaps he was going to hang up on her. She couldn’t blame him, if that was the case. It would have been fair. Painfully ironic, but fair.

She was about to switch the call off herself when she heard Pierre clear his throat and say, “Um, hi, Hélène. How are things?”

“Sorry,” she said, forcing her voice into a tone of practiced confidence, “but this isn’t a social call.”

“Oh?”

“Anatole’s not home and he’s not answering the phone. Neither is Fedya. I don’t suppose they might be with you?”

Pierre exhaled with a rush of static. “Um, no, they’re not here. I haven’t seen either of them in ages. Are you sure they’re not at Fedya’s?”
“That was the first place I checked.”

“Borodino’s, maybe?”

Even though she knew he wouldn’t be able to see her, Hélène shook her head. “Not there either. And he would have told me first. Anatole never goes anywhere without letting me know.”

“How long has he been gone?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I haven’t seen him since this morning when he was leaving for school.”

“Didn’t you drive him?”

“No,” she said, her voice climbing in volume. “Fedya knew how busy I was with my thesis proposal so he offered to take him to school this morning.”

“Hélène, I need you to stay calm. Everything’s going to be alright.”

“I am calm!” she snapped, and her hand tightened around the phone. “I just need to know where my brother is.”

Pierre’s voice remained frustratingly calm. “Have you tried calling the school? Maybe he’s staying late for band practice or something.”

“He’s not, I’m telling you. He would let me know. He always has.”

“Maybe his phone ran out of power.”

Hélène scoffed. “Anatole brings a charger with him everywhere.”

“Maybe he just forgot to text?”

“He wouldn’t do that.” And then, because the floodgates of panic were opening and she could feel herself beginning to hyperventilate: “Oh my God, where could they be?”

“Look, we’re going to breathe together, alright? In, two, three, four, out, two, three—”

“I don’t need your fucking breathing exercises!” she shrieked.

She heard Pierre sigh heavily on the other end, followed by the sound of fabric jostling and something metallic. “Hold on, I’m coming over.”

“No, Pierre, don’t…” but he had already hung up.

Hélène’s heart sank even further as she collapsed back into the seat and stared blankly at the now-black screen of her phone.

“Fuck.”

Hélène heard him knocking at the door not even ten minutes later. She huffed an irritated sigh and
continued looking for her keys. “It’s open.”

Pierre walked in and self-consciously closed the door behind him. “Hey,” he said, shuffling uncomfortably. “What’s new?”

“I really wish you hadn’t come over.”

“Well, you sounded like you needed help.”

“Not from you.”

Pierre looked dismayed. “I know things ended…badly, but I still care about you, believe it or not.”

Hélène grabbed her purse, pushing past him. “I don’t have time to talk about your feelings, Pierre. I’m leaving right now to go to the high school.”

He caught her by the wrist before she could make it to the door. “I really don’t think you should be driving.”

Hélène pulled away from him, and Pierre let his hand drop. “I don’t want Anatole to ask questions if he sees us together.”

“Will you just let me help you?”

“You’re not helping me at all, Pierre.”

“At least let me drive you there,” he said. “You’re stressed and frantic and I don’t think you driving right now is a good idea.” Hélène opened her mouth to argue and he quickly cut her off. “We can take your car. If you want, I’ll take a cab back.”

“Fine,” she muttered, throwing her keys at him. “Only because I don’t have the energy to argue with you.”

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The parking lot was a deserted wasteland by the time they arrived. Pierre pulled up in the space closest to the main building before chancing a glance at Hélène. She sat huddled in the passenger seat, staring blankly at the asphalt ahead of them.

“Are you ready to go in?” he said.

A shrug.

He seemed to consider placing a comforting hand on her shoulder, but decided against it and instead said, “Everything’s gonna be fine.”

Hélène’s hands wound themselves around the seatbelt and clutched so tightly that her knuckles went white. “What if he isn’t there?”

“He will be.”

“Wouldn’t they have called me?”

“It’s an underfunded, understaffed high school,” he said. “Maybe they didn’t have your number?
You’re listed as his emergency contact, right?”

Hélène went very still and silent in her seat.

“Hélène?” said Pierre, shaking her arm. “Hélène, what’s wrong?”

“Fuck,” she hissed, for what seemed like the millionth time that day.

Pierre raised an eyebrow. “Is that a no?"

Hélène slapped her forehead with both hands and folded in on herself with her elbows braced against her knees. “Oh my God, I’m such a fucking idiot! How the hell could I forget?”

“Is it still your dad?”

She squeezed her eyes shut and nodded.

“Well,” Pierre began, “we don’t even know if anything’s wrong. Your dad probably won’t get involved in whatever this is.”

“This could get bad. I’m frightened, Pierre.”

She felt his hand tentatively land on her back. Pierre began to rub in small circles, just like he used to do whenever she had worked herself into a panic. His touch was nervous but warm. “Hey,” he murmured, “it’s gonna be fine. Everything’s gonna be fine. How bad could it get?”

Hélène shook her head, her voice rising to a panicked crescendo. “No, you don’t know my dad like I do.”

Pierre frowned. “What do you mean, Hélène?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said quickly, and just as quickly began to backpedal on herself. “You’re probably right, everything’s probably fine, I’m just overreacting.”

He didn’t buy it, though, and she could tell by the look on his face. If anything, he looked even more concerned. “Hélène,” he said seriously, “I think you need to take some deep breaths or you’re going to have a panic att—”

“I’m not having a fucking panic attack, Pierre!”

“Okay, okay, you aren’t having a panic attack,” he said in a tone that was clearly trying to be mollifying. “Let’s just take a breath so we can get our thoughts together before we go inside.”

“Don’t patronize me,” she muttered.

“I’m not trying to patronize you, but I’m sorry if it sounded that way,” said Pierre. He was so calm, so collected and so maddening that Hélène felt her blood pressure kick up another few notches. And even though she knew it was pointless and probably counterproductive, she wanted nothing more than for him to snap back at her so she could lash out and fight. An outlet—that was what she needed, and if he was going to stay this infuriatingly quiet, then she was going to do her damned best to get him to rise to her bait.

“Why are you even here? Don’t you have anything better to do?”

Pierre shrugged. “I don’t mind.”
“You should,” she spat. “Running after your ex-girlfriend is pathetic, even by your standards.”

“You called me,” he said mildly.

Most infuriating of all—she couldn’t think of a suitably scathing response to that.

Pierre reached out and took her hand. “I know you’re afraid. But things will be okay.”

“What if something happened to them? What if they got in an accident? The highway’s always so awful at rush hour and it’s dark out and—”

“If something had happened, we would have heard by now.”

“You don’t know that. What if they’re somewhere where they can’t get help or reach out?”

“Hélène, let’s be rational,” he said, and now his voice had taken on a stern quality that almost made her roll her eyes. Since when did Pierre Bezukhov of all people command authority? “They could have gotten into an accident, or they could just have forgotten to check their missed calls. What’s more likely?”

“Both of them, though?”

Pierre must have realized just how pointless it was to argue back, because his posture wilted and he pressed a hand exasperatedly to his forehead. This was his Done face. Hélène has grown very familiar with it over the course of the past few years. “I really don’t know, Lena,” he said quietly. “But I don’t think worrying about it is helpful right now. Not until we know more.”

Something bold and determined gripped her. Hélène unbuckled her seatbelt and all but kicked open the passenger door. “Alright, then,” she snapped. “I’m going in now.”

Marya Dmitrievna’s office hadn’t changed a bit since Hélène had graduated. In her time at Moscow High, she had grown familiar with this place and its burgundy-painted walls and the doilies and trinkets and potted plants that covered every square inch of desktop space and the way it smelled of sauerkraut and heavy perfume and how it always, no matter the season and no matter how high the thermostat was cranked up, felt at least ten degrees colder than the rest of the building. It was a place she had planned on never visiting again.

“Hi,” she said to the bored-looking receptionist. “I’m Hélène Kuragina. I’m here to pick up my brother Anatole. Is he here?”

“He’s currently with Ms. Dmitrievna.”

Hélène almost collapsed against the desk in relief. “So he’s okay?”

The receptionist bit the tip of her pen. “In a manner of speaking.”

Hélène’s gut dropped. “What do you mean by that?” she said, forcing sweetness through gritted teeth. It was difficult enough to act pleasant under normal circumstances, but now, with her heart still thudding in her ears and her palms slick with sweat, she found herself on the verge of losing it entirely.

The receptionist seemed entirely unmoved. “I can’t release any information about student affairs. You’ll have to wait for Ms. Dmitrievna.”
Pierre took her hand and turned back to the receptionist. “I get that you can’t tell us what’s going on, but we really need to make sure that he isn’t hurt. We’ve been worried sick all afternoon.”

“I’m sorry,” said the receptionist, now more than a little irritated, “but there is nothing more I can do for you. You’re welcome to wait here until they’re finished.”

With a huff and a shaky sigh, Hélène allowed Pierre to walk her over to the waiting area, where a dozen or so plastic chairs had been haphazardly arranged around a coffee table piled high with magazines and local newspapers.

“Magazine?” he offered as they sat down.

Hélène shook her head, tapping her foot against the carpet. “No thank you,” she said curtly.

Perhaps it was her nerves that drove her to it, or boredom, or maybe some combination thereof, but she found her gaze drifting around the room, cataloguing everything she could see and recognize. Plaques, certificates, charters, framed photographs, generic artwork—nothing out of the ordinary, until she spotted something on the wall out of the corner of her eye. A patch of paint, slightly brighter and more saturated than its surroundings. Beneath it, she could make out faint, ragged indentations, as if an animal had taken its claws to the drywall.

“Raccoon,” said the receptionist.

Hélène shook her head. The more she saw of the day’s events, the more convinced she was that the whole thing was just some absurd daydream. “Pardon?”

“Someone let a raccoon in Ms. D’s office this September. That’s what you’re seeing there.”

Pierre blushed a startling shade of red. “Oh my God,” he said. “That’s…that’s horrible.”

Without missing a beat, Hélène replied, “I’m sure it’s not the worst thing this office has seen.”

The receptionist raised an eyebrow as if to say, *Give me a break*, but quickly returned to her paperwork. Not even a moment later, the door opened and an exasperated-looking Marya Dmitrievna stepped into the waiting room.

“Hello, Miss Kuragina,” she said once she caught sight of Hélène. And then, shifting her gaze to the next seat over: “Pierre.”

“Hi, Marya,” he said, shifting awkwardly in his chair.

“Hello,” said Hélène.

Marya turned her attention back to Hélène. “You have excellent timing,” she said primly. “We were just about to call you to come take your brother home.”

Hélène let out a relieved breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. “Is everything okay? I’ve been worried sick about him all afternoon.”

“May I speak with you? In private?”

Hélène found herself nodding along without thinking. “Of course,” she said once her brain caught up.

Marya opened the door and Hélène followed her as they walked into her office. “Please, take a seat,” she said, gesturing to the chair opposite her desk. In the relative darkness of the office, it
seemed to Hélène that the walls were closing in on them both.

She elected not to continue that train of thought any further, and instead sat herself down with as much dignity as she could muster with shaking hands and a pounding heart.

“I’m assuming you don’t know what happened today?” said Marya.

“No one’s told me anything,” Hélène said coolly. “Where is my brother? What did he do? Is he alright?”

Marya’s face twisted into her signature scowl. It had been a long time since Hélène had seen that scowl, and she hadn’t missed it at all. “In a manner of speaking.”

Hélène blinked. “What do you mean?”

Marya leaned back in her seat, steepling her fingers with a stony face. She hadn’t changed a bit, Hélène realized, and if anything, she had only grown even more stern-looking since she had graduated. “Anatole was caught leaving school property during class with another student. We’ve interviewed both of them, and some serious accusations have been levelled against him.”

A cold wave of dread and nausea washed over Hélène, but she fought it down. “I wouldn’t have thought that cutting class would merit an interrogation.”

“Cutting class is the least of it. He was coercing other students off of school grounds, compromising their safety.”

Hélène’s back went ramrod straight. “Idiot teenagers being idiot teenagers. I don’t see why this is any——”

“I should clarify,” Marya said stiffly, “that they were caught leaving school property with luggage and tickets for the next flight from Moscow to JFK.”

Hélène felt the blood go cold in her veins and the wind rushed out of her. “I’m not hearing this.”

Marya shook her head. “Despite your feelings on the matter, Miss Kuragina, we have no choice but to take disciplinary action against Anatole.”

“Based on what one student——”

“Two student’s testimonies.”

Hélène squeezed her eyes shut, silently cursing Anatole’s stupidity. “Did he explain himself at all?”

“He refused to cooperate or tell us anything. Had he complied, we could be more flexible with his punishment, but at this point——”

The words tumbled out before she could even stop herself. “This isn’t going to affect his graduation, is it?”

“I’m afraid I can only disclose details to a parent or guardian,” Marya said calmly.

“I’m his sister,” Hélène spat.

“We have the other student’s confidentiality to consider,” she said, running her eyes down Hélène’s jeans and dishevelled hair. Hélène shifted self-consciously in her seat and moved her hair
to cover the old coffee stain on her collar. “We’ve already reached out to your father, Miss Kuragina, and I will only be discussing our next steps for Anatole with him.”

Hélène’s hands tightened into fists in her lap. “Ms. Dmitrievna, I understand that there are rules in place, but you also have to understand that—”

“Those rules are in place for a reason. They are meant to protect the safety of our students.”

“And I’m trying to act in my brother’s best interest. For his own safety.”

“If I recall,” Marya said coolly, “you were never particularly good at following instructions when you were in high school either.” Hélène flushed a bright red and Marya leaned back in her seat. “You may take your brother home now, but we will be waiting to discuss his future at this school with your father.”

Hélène felt her heartbeat pounding in her ears. “What do you mean, his future at this school?”

“Cutting class. Compromising the safety of our other students. These are very serious offenses, Miss Kuragina.”

“Did you speak to my father?”

“We’ve been in contact and he’s aware of the situation. For now, however, we’ll be placing Anatole under suspension until we can resolve the matter.”

“Ms. Dmitrievna, I don’t think you understand—”

Marya leaned forwards. “Were this solely my decision, Anatole would already be expelled.”

Hélène took in a shaky breath. “Does that mean that he isn’t?”

“It means that the board hasn’t decided how to address this situation. But I wouldn’t worry,” Marya said coldly. “Your father’s donated enough to the school to ensure that Anatole can hurt as many young girls as he’d like without consequence.”

Hélène’s heart sank in realization and the remaining air left her lungs. Natalie, she thought instantly, and hated herself because she knew she was right, and oh God, why did everything always have to go so wrong? “Natasha Rostova?” she said. “Is she okay?”

If possible, Marya’s face hardened even further. “I thought you said you didn’t know what your brother did.”

“I don’t, because no one at this school will tell me anything.”

“And we aren’t discussing it any further. You may take Anatole home now. He isn’t welcome on school property until a decision has been made.”

Hélène stood up and pushed back her chair. “Fine,” she said flatly. “Thank you for your time.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! We love comments and kudos and they're v appreciated!
Hélène’s heart thundered in her ears as she stepped back into the waiting room. Pierre caught one look of her tight, pale face and stood up in his seat, quickly striding towards her. His hands came to a rest at her elbows.

“What’s happening?” he said. “Is everything okay?”

A month ago, the gesture may have touched her. Now it only darkened her mood. Hélène shook him off impatiently. “You can go now.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Everything,” she snapped, raking a hand through her hair.

“Look, I don’t care what went on between us, whatever it is, I can help you, I can try to sort things —”

“This doesn’t involve you,” said Hélène.

Pierre furrowed his brow and sat back down in his seat. After a long, stilted pause, he said, “Is it Anatole? Is he alright?”

Hélène laughed bitterly. “Oh, he’s fine.”

“Well, what about you?”

“I don’t need your help. I can figure this out. On my own.”

The receptionist’s head snapped up from her mountain of paperwork. Eavesdropping, clearly. But Pierre didn’t look surprised so much as resigned. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? I can give you two a lift back. It’s the least I can do.”

“I don’t want you to.”

“I don’t think you should drive,” he said. “You’re angry and you get irrational when you’re stressed.”
Hélène schooled her expression into something stony and blank. It was a miracle that she managed to hide the way her hands were shaking. “This is a family matter, Pierre. Please go.”

“Aren’t you worried about what Anatole will think? Because we don’t have to say anything. You can tell him whatever you want.”

Hélène sighed. “I really can’t deal with anything else right now. I’ll be fine, but I need to handle this on my own.”

He didn’t look convinced, but he didn’t bother arguing with her. “Will you at least text me to let me know you got home safely?”

“Sure, sure,” she said. “Just go. Please.”

Pierre nodded and gave her hand a squeeze. Hélène until he had left and closed the door behind him before she collapsed into one of the ugly plastic chairs outside the office, wrapping her arms around herself with an exhausted, exasperated sigh.

Not even a minute later, Anatole and Natasha were marched out into the hallway by Marya, followed by a short, pale girl with flushed cheeks and auburn hair. All three looked shell-shocked.

Anatole’s eyes went wide when he caught sight of her.

“Lena,” he began, his face crumpling into something pathetic and tearful, as if he was expecting sympathy. He clearly wasn’t expecting the fury that seized Hélène and made her seize him by the upper arm a little more forcefully than she intended. It took all her strength to resist yanking him in close and screaming in his face.

“Thank you, Ms. Dmitrievna” Hélène said curtly. Then, to Anatole: “We’re going home. Now.”

Anatole withered. He cast a glance over his shoulder to Natasha, who had sat herself in a chair in the corner of the room and was pointedly refusing to make eye contact with anything other than her shoes.

“Don’t look at her,” Hélène said, one hand on his back, already ushering him out the door. “Eyes forward. Let’s go.”

She waited until they were in the car before she turned to face Anatole, carefully schooling her face into controlled blankness. “What did you do?”

Anatole let out a shuddering sigh. “I’m sorry, Le—”

“Answer the question. What were you two planning on doing?”

“We were going to run away,” he said miserably. “Natalie and I pooled our birthday money and I got the tickets for the plane and Fedya was going to give us a ride to—”

Hélène went cold with fury. “So Fedya was in on this?”

Anatole, ever the slow thinker, must have realized his mistake just a moment after she had, because the little color that remained in his face was gone within a second. He frantically backtracked. “No, he barely knew a thing, he was just the one driving us because Balaga couldn’t make it and—”

“Don’t try to cover for him.”

Anatole stared at his feet. “He booked the tickets for us. We needed a credit card and he was the
only one we could ask. He was going to drive us to the airport. That’s why he offered to drive me to school today—he had my luggage.”

“So you got Fedya to lie to me too.”

“He didn’t lie, he just…” His voice died off when she raised one eyebrow disbelievingly.

“New York,” she said quietly, mulling the word over in her mouth. “Running away to New York.” Anatole nodded pathetically, mutely, which only incensed her further. The pent-up rage in her chest burst with all the sting of a snapped elastic band, and Hélène slapped her hands against the steering wheel. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“I’m sorry—”

“You,” she began, breathless with fury, “are a selfish, short-sighted, ignorant, spoilt little brat. Do you have any idea what you could have done? Does it never enter into your head that there are other people besides you in the world?”

Anatole seemed to utterly deflate at that. He sank back into the seat, looking so helpless and confused and dumb that it only incensed her further. “I never meant—”

“No, of course you didn’t,” she snarled. “You never mean anything because you never think!”

“Lena—”

“What did I do to mess you up like this?” she asked incredulously. “How did I fail you so much? I’ve tried, I really have, and I know I haven’t always been the best big sister, but Jesus fucking Christ, how and where did I go so wrong?”

“This isn’t your fault, I—”

“Then whose fault is it, Anatole? Whose?”

Anatole’s lower lip wobbled. He was on the verge of tears, Hélène knew, but strangely enough she found herself utterly indifferent. “I made a mistake,” he said, his voice close to cracking.

She let out a hollow-sounding laugh. “That’s the most honest thing you’ve said to me in days. Tell me, how long have you been planning this? Lying to me about this?”

“I never lied about anything.”

“I’m not stupid, Anatole,” she growled.

“Please don’t hate me.”

“Don’t try that one with me.”

“I’m sorry,” he repeated pathetically.

Hélène jammed the key into the ignition and turned a little harder than she probably should have. “It’s too late for ‘sorry’. Marya just called Papa to tell him about the whole situation.”

Horror registered on Anatole’s face. “No, Lena…he can’t know about this.”

“I don’t know what you want me to do,” she said. “I must say, though, you’ve done an absolutely fabulous job of completely fucking things up.”
“There must be something. You could talk to him, tell him that this is all a mistake.”

“It’s out of my hands now.”

Anatole was quiet for a moment. “Do you think he’ll come home?”

“I don’t know!” she exploded. “I hope for your sake he doesn’t. But if he does, you’ve dug your own grave.”

Anatole’s face went pale and he fell silent for the entire drive home. He kept his face forward, his empty gaze focused on the horizon, not daring to look in her direction or try to sneak another pointless apology in edgewise. Hélène had half a mind to say something nasty and scathing, but she couldn’t quite bring herself to look at him either.

“You are grounded,” she said once they pulled into the driveway. “No phone, no computer, no video games, no friends, no nothing.”

Anatole clenched his jaw. “For how long?”

“Until I say so.”

“Fine.”

“And Anatole?”

“Yeah?”

Hélène’s voice became deathly cold and quiet. “You are never talking to that girl again, do you understand?”

Anatole went white, and then red. “No. You can’t do this to me,” he said, and where there was pathetic misery before there was now dread and building outrage. “Lena, you can’t.”

“I can and I will.”

“No. No, Lena, that’s not fair!”

“It is completely fair,” she said. “You’ve proven to me that you cannot be trusted to keep yourself out of trouble.”

“You don’t understand.”

“I clearly don’t!” she said, throwing her hands up in exasperation. “Do you even care how much you hurt this girl? You could have ruined her life, Anatole!”

Anatole’s mouth fell open. “We both knew what we were signing on for.”

“Evidently not! I thought you understood, I thought you knew how to treat women—”

“I didn’t do anything wrong! We both agreed to it, we both wanted it.”

“What did you want?” Hélène stepped out of the car just as Anatole did. “What more could you ask for? Aren’t you happy here? Is this not enough for you? What am I missing?” Anatole flinched as the volume of her voice spiked. “How could you do this to me?”

“I love her, Lena.”
Hélène slammed the car door shut. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she snapped. “How could you actually believe that this would work out? Or were you just stringing her along for fun? You didn’t even know this girl until few months ago. This isn’t love, you idiot, it’s infatuation. It’s not healthy.”

“Like you know anything about healthy relationships,” he shot back, suddenly bold and angry. “Though, given your *exemplary* track record—”

Hélène went cold. “Go to your room.”

“Or what?” Anatole sneered. “You’ll go cry to Pierre again?”

“Don’t you dare raise your voice at me.” She reached over to grab his wrist. “Do you want the all the neighbors to hear?”

“I don’t give a crap what the neighbors think.”

“Get in the house,” she snapped through gritted teeth.

Anatole ripped his arm out of her grip. “No!” he shouted. “You don’t have any authority over me.”

Hélène chanced a glance at the street and the houses surrounding them. “Anatole, we are not doing this out here.”

Anatole tilted his head to the side with a look of stubborn indignation. “No, actually, I think we are.”

Hélène grabbed his arm again, but he didn’t attempt to wrench himself free this time. “Oh, for Christ’s sake,” she muttered as she steered him through the front door.

“Let go of me,” he said.

“Now, listen here—”

“You’re hurting me.”

Hélène let go of his arm. She hadn’t even realized how tightly she had been holding him. Her anger seemed to obscure everything, all common sense, all thought of anything but how furious she was. When was the last time, she wondered, that she had been this mad?

Never.

Anatole took a few small steps away from her, and Hélène’s stomach sank like a sack of stones. She recognized the look in his eyes all too well.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snapped.

Anatole flinched. “Like what?” he said, and she already, could hear a note of petulance worming its way back into his voice.

“Like—” she gesticulated towards his face with a frustrated exhale, “—like *that*."

Anatole scowled. “I can’t help how my face looks. Sorry if it offends you.”

“Just forget it.”
“No,” Anatole said with growing impatience. “You always do this. You’re always telling me what to do, what not to do. Well, guess what? You’re not my mother, Hélène, no matter how much you like to pretend you are.”

“Do you think I’ve liked doing this? Taking care of you ruined my childhood.”

“Nobody asked you to do it!” Anatole said. “So you can drop the goddamn martyr complex and stop playing the victim.”

“And what would you have done without me? You’d never survive on your own, you idiot. I’m the only reason that—”

“Well then, I’m sorry if I inconvenienced you by existing!”

“You’re sounding just like Mom,” she said, shaking her head. “Just as selfish and passive-aggressive.”

Anatole bolted upright at that, his eyes blazing furiously. “You take that back. Don’t you say that about her.”

“God, it’s always the mommy issues with you, isn’t it?”

“It’s always the daddy issues with you, isn’t it?” he shot back.

Hélène sucked in a deep breath, unsure of how to respond. “This isn’t about me.”

“But it is!” said Anatole. “You make it all about you! Jesus, Lena, why do you even think I wanted to leave so much in the first place?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re so damn smothering, you’re always snooping over my shoulder, and if I do something you don’t like, you freak the fuck out! It’s like Papa is still here.”

Hélène’s jaw swung open in a mix of fury and shock. “That’s completely unfair.”

Anatole sighed with a scowl. “If it upsets you that much to hear the truth, you could always go back to using Fedya to work through your shit. I don’t think you’ve totally destroyed his self-confidence yet.”

“Anatole!”

“That’s what you do with people. You use them up, you dump all your issues onto them and then when you’re done with them you just drop them like trash. You did it to Pierre and now you’re doing it to Fedya again.”

“You’re completely out of line. What I do in my private life is none of your business—”

“But you make it my business!” Anatole cried. “You tell me everything about them, whether I want to hear it or not! Do you think I want to know about your sex life? Do you think I want to hear about it every time you have some stupid argument?”

And because her mouth was running on autopilot and she couldn’t think of anything else suitably scathing in response, Hélène said, “I think you live for any information I give you about Fedya.”

“The hell is that supposed to mean? Just because I don’t want to hear every single detail about
what my friend—"

“Friend?” she scoffed. The one good thing about fighting with Anatole, she mused, was that she knew all his weak spots, every possible way to hurt him. And it was so laughably easy, too. “You know,” she said, “the only reason he puts up with you is because of me. You think actually he likes hanging out with a high schooler? You think he enjoys you insisting on tagging along with him wherever he goes?” Anatole’s jaw dropped, and though she knew she might regret what she was about to say next, she pressed on all the same. “He knows about your little crush. We used to laugh about it together.”

Hélène hated herself for the sick sense of satisfaction that swelled in her chest when Anatole’s eyes filled with tears. It was a lie, but he would believe it all the same. He believed every word that came out of her mouth. Always had, always would. “What do you mean?”

“You’re not nearly as subtle as you like to think. He’s known for years. He thinks it’s cute. Silly. And that’s all he’ll ever think of you as.”

“I don’t have a crush on him,” he protested, and Hélène could hear the tears threatening to choke off his voice.

She shrugged coldly. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“I never…it’s not…” Anatole fumbled for words before settling on: “Oh, fuck you.”

“You’re not allowed to be upset with me!” she shot back. “You brought this upon yourself.”

“You’re ruining my life!” he yelled.

“You wouldn’t be anything without me.”

“I’d be a lot happier without you, for one thing!”

“Believe me, little brother, the feeling’s mutual.”

Anatole stared at her in shock for a moment before bursting into tears. He had always been an ugly crier, and now was no exception—his face went a blotchy red, his breath came in short, heaving pants, and tears streamed down his cheeks. Hélène dug her nails into her palms, willing the tears to come, but all she felt was a terrifying blankness.

And then:

“I hate you!”

The blood froze in Hélène’s veins like ice. *Hate*. Anatole never said ‘hate’. Anatole didn’t have the capacity to hate anything, much less her.

And now he was glaring at her expectantly, his hands curled into fists at his sides. He was looking for a fight, she realized, waiting for her to bite back, to fire off with something just as awful and hurtful if not more so, but she couldn’t muster up the energy to respond.

“Say something!” he cried. “Don’t just stand there! Fight back!”

“I’m done. I don’t want to talk to you anymore,” she said coldly.

Anatole didn’t seem to know how to respond to that. He had never been good with silence, never known how to handle being ignored. But if she argued back and dragged out the fight any longer,
she knew sooner or later she’d say something even worse, something that she’d regret more than anything she had said already.

And without a word more, Anatole turned on his heels and fled like a wounded animal.

Hélène waited until he had stormed upstairs and out of earshot before she collapsed against the counter and curled in on herself, feeling nothing but numbness. She heard his bedroom door slam shut, so loud it seemed to shake the house right down the the foundation.

_BZZZ BZZZ, BZZZ BZZZ._

Hélène allowed her phone to vibrate in her pocket for a few lazy seconds before unlocking the screen.

7 missed calls from **Fedya**

**Fedya:** What happened?

**Lenka:** I don’t want to talk to you.

**Fedya:** Is Anatole okay?

**Lenka:** Fine.

**Lenka:** No thanks to you.

**Fedya:** Lena, please, just let me explain

**Lenka:** How could you possibly explain this?

**Fedya:** i did what i thought was best for him

**Lenka:** That wasn’t your decision to make.

**Fedya:** im sorry i upset you

**Lenka:** sorry???

**Lenka:** you’re fucking sorry???

**Lenka:** sorry doesn’t cut it

**Lenka:** You put my little brother in danger, Fedya.

**Lenka:** How could you do this to me?

**Fedya:** i didn’t do anything to you

**Fedya:** this isn’t ABOUT you

**Lenka:** if it concerns Anatole it concerns me

**Fedya:** you always do this, everythig has to be about YOU

**Fedya:** dont you see how you’ve been driving him away?
Hélène’s hands trembled as she typed.

**Lenka:** how DARE you

**Lenka:** you don’t understand anything

**Fedya:** he is miserable here

**Fedya:** maybe if you weren’t such a control freak he’d have told you that

**Lenka:** you have no fcuking right to intervene like this

**Lenka:** its not ANY OF YOUR BSUINESSS

**Fedya:** he’s my friend, it absolutely is my business

**Lenka:** Not when he could get hurt

**Lenka:** do you even care about his wellbeing?

**Fedya:** oh my god

**Fedya:** do you have any self-awareness at all

**Fedya:** helene YOU’RE hurting him

**Lenka:** oh fuck you

**Lenka:** i didnt think you’d be this petty and low but i guess i was wrong

**Fedya:** I’m not saying any of this to hurt you Lena

**Fedya:** but you need to hear the truth

**Lenka:** is this your idea of revenge?

**Lenka:** is it because i wont date you?

**Fedya:** what the actual fuck is wrong with you

**Fedya:** I can’t believe you think i’d do that to him

**Lenka:** But you DID

**Fedya:** god are you a sociopath

**Fedya:** or just a narcissist

**Lenka:** im done with you

**Fedya:** fine.

**Fedya:** i wish anatole could say the same

**Lenka:** stay the hell away from me and Anatole
**Fedya:** believe me, i won’t

Hélène slammed her phone down against the counter with almost enough force to shatter the screen. Above the thundering of her heart and the rush of her own breathing, all she could hear was the erratic ticking of the broken clock the room over and the gentle creaking of the floorboards as the house settled down for the afternoon and from upstairs, Anatole’s quiet sobbing, muffled but still audible.

Her heart dropped through her stomach as something pressing and choking and cold lodged in her throat. This was all Anatole’s fault, she thought stubbornly. No, scratch that, it was Fedya’s fault, and Pierre’s, and Papa’s, and still Anatole’s, and **fuck**, it was everybody’s fault that things had gone so wrong. Six more months and they would have been okay. Six more months, and Anatole would have been off to college somewhere far away, with no more Vasily breathing down their necks, and she wouldn’t have to have kept babysitting him anymore, and everything would’ve been alright.

But no. Typical Kuragin luck for her plan to go to the dogs just when it was so close to fruition. Her anger had abated into something numb and frigid and far worse, something she didn’t recognize at all.

Hélène collapsed into a chair, leaned her head back, and pressed her eyes shut, willing for it all to have been some sort of nightmarish hallucination. She desperately wished that she could cry like Anatole, scream and sob until she exhausted herself. But no matter how hard she tried, she remained cold and numb, and worst of all, awake.

Chapter End Notes

(extra points if you can guess who our fave character is)

We <3 comments and kudos almost as much as we <3 all of you for reading!
Chapter Summary

Sonya and Natasha are still fighting. The third Kuragin sibling makes an appearance.

Chapter Notes

The angst train continues rip

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sonya couldn’t remember a time when Natasha had been this furious.

In all their years of knowing each other, she had only seen her truly lose her temper twice. Once, when they were six years old and Vera had “accidentally” bumped her off the swingset. Another time, then in seventh grade, when she had caught the flu during tech week and had had to let her understudy perform instead. But those hadn’t been serious and her anger had boiled away just as soon as it had come to a head.

Now was different.

“Natasha—” Sonya began for what felt like the hundredth time that evening.

Something hard and solid slammed into the door from the inside. It didn’t sound fragile or breakable, but she winced all the same.

“I’ve already told you I don’t want to talk to you,” Natasha spat. “Leave me alone.”

“Nat, please, I was only trying to help.”

Silence. Sonya waited a moment before she tentatively stepped into the room, holding the plate out in front of her as a peace offering. “Can we talk? I miss you.”

Natasha looked like an absolute wreck. Her eyes were puffy and bloodshot, tears and mascara streaming down her cheeks. She had scraped her hair back into a bun, but by now half of it had fallen out and it hung at her shoulders in a frizzy tangle. Most unusual of all, she hadn’t even bothered to get into a change of clothes.

“I told you not to come in,” she began, but her protest died in her throat as she caught sight of the cookies. Chocolate chip, homemade. Her favorite.

“What’s that for?” she said.

Sonya inched her way over to the patch of carpet at the side of the bed where Natasha was sitting. “It seemed to work last time,” she said with a shrug. “And it’s difficult to stay angry when you’re eating cookies.”
“Mom said you weren’t supposed to talk with me.”

“She’s not here right now. Besides,” Sonya said, giving her a crooked grin, “when has that ever stopped you before?”

But Natasha’s expression only soured. “You seriously think a plate of cookies is going to make up for what you did to me?” she said.

Sonya was caught off-guard. “I’m not trying to make anything up to you…I just want to talk.”

Natasha shook her head. “You’re supposed to be my best friend. I trusted you. And you went behind my back. How could you do that to me?”

Sonya felt her heart splinter into a million jagged, painful pieces. And the worst part was that there was no proper answer. None that would satisfy Natasha, at least; none that would make her hate her any less.

She sighed and leaned against the dresser. “I was scared for you,” she said softly.

Natasha snorted disdainfully and blew her nose. “I’m sure you were,” she said, sarcasm burning in her every word. “And I’m sure it had nothing to do with the fact that you hate Anatole’s guts and —”

“Jesus Christ, Nat, this had nothing to do with him!”

“It had everything to do with him!” she thundered, and ripped into the tissue box again. “If I’d wanted to do this with Andrei, you wouldn’t have said anything!”

Sonya spluttered incredulously. “Of course I would have!”

“Bullshit.”

“It was dumb, Natasha,” she said. “Objectively speaking, this is, like, one of the dumbest things you’ve ever done—tried to do, I mean.”

Natasha huffed. “You’re such a goddamn snoop,” she said hoarsely. “Sneaking around my room, looking through my phone, following us in the hallways—”

“I was only trying to protect you.”

“By getting me grounded? Suspended? By ruining my life?”

Sonya sighed again. “I’m sorry you feel that way. I really don’t know what you want me to say here. I really—look, Nat, I’ve tried, but clearly you don’t understand where I’m coming from.”

“You don’t understand anything,” Natasha hissed. She lobbed the tissue box at the door. “How lonely I felt. How miserable I’ve been since we came here. He was the only good thing about this whole place.”

“Of course I understand, Nat! I know how terrible it is to feel that way. But Anatole isn’t the only person here who cares about you!”

“Everyone else seems to have a funny way of showing it, then.”

Sonya huffed an irritated breath. “If this is about Mary—”
At that, Natasha let out a wild, hysterical laugh. “Oh, Mary. It always comes back to Mary, doesn’t it? Well, if it’s so pointless to talk to me, why don’t you go and gossip with her instead?”

Sonya sucked in a sharp breath. “Nat, don’t.”

“You’ll confide in her, won’t you? I’ll bet you two have been talking about this behind my back the whole time and—”

“You’re being paranoid! It’s nothing like that!”

“Then what is it ‘like’?”

Sonya’s face began to burn hotly and her palms went slick with sweat, as if she were the one in hot water and not Natasha. It was unfair, she thought, how easily Natasha could flip the tables on her. Even less unfair when she felt her tongue go heavy and useless in her mouth. “It doesn’t matter,” she said finally. “This isn’t about me. This is about you and the fact that—”

“Oh, go and cry to your girlfriend,” Natasha spat.

Sonya went quiet.

“What?” she said. “Did I step on a nerve or something?”

Sonya stood up slowly, keeping her back straight and stiff. “You’re unbelievable,” she said, and without another word, she turned on her heels and took off down the hallway, slamming the door shut behind her, the plate of cookies lying forgotten on the carpet.

“Sonya?” Natasha called after her. “What did I say?”

Hélène supposed she shouldn’t have been surprised that Ippolit greeted her with an offer for coffee first instead of, say, a hug or a Hello, how are you? City life, evidently, hadn’t changed him that, and if having lived with him for thirteen years hadn’t taught her that, then what would?

Well, she had never been one to turn down free coffee, especially when it meant racking up Ippolit’s tab. He could afford it, anyway.

“I’ll have a redeye,” she said as they approached the counter.

Ippolit, as always, looked like he belonged in a business meeting on Wall Street rather than the waiting line in Pavlovna’s. He had lost weight since she had last seen him, and it showed in the way his suit hung a few sizes too large on his already-thin frame. Hélène wondered what hotel he was staying in, which fancy, expensive car in the parking lot he had rented for his trip.

She didn’t bother to wonder why he wasn’t staying at the house—he never did—nor could she blame him. You could only live under Vasily Kuragin’s thumb for so long without going mad. And Ippolit did just that: lived under his thumb, worked in his office, hell, probably even took the same subway on their morning commute. This, for him, was like the equivalent of a vacation.

“Lots of caffeine,” he commented, though he looked like he needed the redeye even more than she did.
“Lots of midterms.”

“At least it’s good coffee,” he said mildly as they took their seats at the rickety little table in the far corner of the room.

Hélène chuckled and raised her cup. “The only good thing in this town is the coffee.”

Ippolit gave her a tight smile. “It’s been a while since I’ve been here,” he said, a pointed *Can’t say I’ve missed it* evident in his tone.

“How’s the city?”

“Everything’s good. And you?”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. After a while Ippolit cleared his throat and leaned forwards. “I think you know why I’ve come here.”

“Why don’t you spell it out for me anyways?”

Ippolit inhaled deeply through his nose, as if bracing himself for impact. “I think it might be best if Anatole comes and lives with me for a while.”

Hélène went silent as a rush of cold dread coursed over her. She looked down at the coffee cup nested between her hands, the crocheted pattern of her tights, the polished leather of her boots, anything to avoid meeting Ippolit’s gaze. “So that’s why you’re here?” she said after a long while, her voice soft but level. “To take my little brother away from me?”

“Why don’t you spell it out for me anyways?”

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“He’s my little brother too,” said Ippolit. He reached across the table for her hand. “And you’re my little sister, and I’m worried about you. This is too much for you to deal with alone.”

Hélène snatched her hand away. “I’ve dealt with it. I’ve been dealing with it for the past ten years.”

“You shouldn’t have to, though. You’re too young to have to handle this.”

“I’m not a kid anymore, Lito.”

“You may not be, but Tolya still is. Don’t you think he deserves a normal childhood?”

She let out a laugh, bitter and cold and utterly mirthless. “It’s a little late for that, isn’t it?” Ippolit’s face softened, as if to placate her, but it only pissed her off even more. “You don’t know Toto like I do. You don’t get him. He needs me.”

“Tell you what, why don’t you come with us?” he said. “You’re smart. You could transfer to NYU. I have a townhouse in the Village. We could be a normal family again”

“You say that like it’s so easy, like you can snap your fingers and make it all better,” she spat.

“Elena—”

“We’re never going to be a normal family again,” said Hélène. “We weren’t one to begin with.”

“Then we can make one. On our own, just the three of us.”
“You had a chance to do that a long time ago,” she said quietly. “You didn’t take it.”

“And that was clearly a mistake,” Ippolit sighed. “I apologize for that, and I’m trying to make
amends now. Look, you’re stressed, Anatole clearly has some issues—”

Hélène arched an eyebrow. “He doesn’t have issues.”

“You aren’t his mother, Elena; you don’t have to defend him.”

“I know I’m not his mother,” she said through gritted teeth. “And I don’t want to be his mother
either. But one of us had to parent him, and seeing as you opted out—”

“Are you still on about that? I don’t know what more you want me to—”

“I was thirteen when you left, Ippolit,” she snapped. “Thirteen. I’ve made mistakes, yes, but what
the hell were you expecting?”

“Papa seemed like he was doing better, like he was going to be more involved and—”

Hélène snorted. “What a fucking lie.”

“Language, Elena.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“My point still stands. Anatole would be better off with a responsible adult to look after him.”

“I am responsible.”

Ippolit’s face twisted into a scowl. “Under your responsible supervision, Anatole attempted—and
nearly succeeded—to run away.”

“I’m not a fucking dictator, okay? I don’t have him on a leash. What he did was dumb but you
don’t get to pin that on me. You don’t get to criticize how I raised him when you abandoned us.”

“I didn’t abandon you, I went to school.”

Hélène laughed bitterly. “You think U of I was my first choice? I stayed for him.”

“Nobody asked you to.”

“Are you saying I should have left him to fend for himself?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what, in your opinion, should I have done?”

“I don’t know. But I’m trying to help you now.”

Hélène rolled her eyes and made a move to stand from the table, but Ippolit caught her by the wrist.

“This is serious, Elena,” he said. “Papa’s really pissed. He wants to come home to deal with this.”

Hélène sucked in a deep breath and quickly sat back down in her seat, her eyes wide. She felt her
heart begin to race. “He’s coming back? When?”

“He didn’t specify. But I think we can both agree that it’s in Anatole’s best interest that he isn’t
around when Papa comes looking.”

“That’s too soon,” she whispered. Her face hardened. “How long have you known?”

“He called me into his office after he got the call from the school.”

“And you didn’t think to give me a heads-up?”

“This is your heads-up,” he snapped.

“Jesus, Ippolit, what do you want me to do with this now?”

“I want you to let me help you. Help me to help you; it’s not that complicated.”

“You’re not trying to help me though! This is just some weird power trip to make yourself feel better about not being involved with Anatole.”

“What else do you want me to do, Elena?”

“I want you to back off and let me take care of this.”

“You’re not his mother,” Ippolit repeated.

“Conveniently enough, neither are you.”

“I thought I’d tell you now, because I know that you can be mature when you want to be. I’d really like us to come to an agreement about this. But if you can’t realize that I’m acting in Anatole’s best interest, then I’ll have to get Papa involved.”

Hélène’s composure slipped for a second at that. “You wouldn’t,” she hissed. “No—it’s not fair. You can’t do this to me—to him.”

Ippolit raised an eyebrow. “Do you realize how selfish you sound right now? I’m not doing anything to you. This is for his own good.”

Hélène tossed her hair and sat up a little straighter in her seat. “And what makes you think Papa’s going to listen to you over me?”

“I’m a gainfully employed adult and you’re a twenty-one year old who’s still in school and living at home.”

“But I have a gambling chip that you don’t.”

“And that would be?”

Hélène smiled, sickly sweet. “No matter what you do, Papa is never going to love you as much as he loves me.”

Ippolit pressed his lips into a thin line. “Elena—”

“Hélène.”

“Hélène, I understand that you’re upset—”

“Perceptive as always, Lito.”

“—but you’re acting like a spoiled little girl.”
Hélène shrugged, pulled her chair back, and stood up. “We all play the cards we’re dealt. Thanks for the coffee, big bro.”

Ippolit grabbed her wrist again as she turned away to leave. “This conversation is not over.”

“I’m done talking about this,” she said, pulling away from him.

“Anatole is coming home with me,” he snapped. “You can make your peace with it now, or you can be angry and make it harder for him, but like it or not, this decision has already been made.”

Hélène whipped her head around and glared at him. “Made by who?”

The look on Ippolit’s face made it clear he had said something he really shouldn’t have. “That’s beside the—”

“Ippolit Vasilyevich.”

“Papa,” he said stiffly.

Hélène’s shoulders dropped. “I can’t believe you,” she said. “After everything…everything that man has put us through, why do you still listen to him?”

“Because right now, he’s the only one in this family who’s making any sense.” Ippolit sighed and sat back in his seat with a frown. “Lena, it’s the best solution we have. And he won’t even be with Papa—he’ll be staying with me, until he’s off to college and—”

“You seriously think that that’s the best solution? Bringing him back to New York, just so he can live under Papa’s thumb?”

“I don’t think it’s any worse than leaving him here with an unstable guardian, no.”

“You try taking Toto away from me,” she snarled, and now there was something truly threatening in her voice. She had never been fond of public fights, but with every passing second, it was looking more and more like a desirable option. “Just try. And see how he reacts.”

“Hélène—”

“He will hate you, Lito, mark my words.”

“He is not yours, Hélène,” Ippolit said firmly. “You don’t get to decide what is or isn’t good for him.”

“Neither do you.”

“Is this your version of revenge?” he said. “Because it’s not going to work. The only person you’re hurting here is Anatole.”

“I’m done,” she repeated.

“This isn’t over.”

“No, I think it is.”

Ippolit scowled. “Whatever happens next, it’s on you. I gave you an out.”

“You’ve never given me anything but pain and trouble,” she snapped. “And I’m not interested in
talking to you anymore.”

“Hélène, really—”

Hélène made a rude gesture with her hand, took her coffee cup, marched out of the store, and took off down the street before he could say anything else.
Chapter Summary

Things get worse between Nat and Sonya. Anatole comes up with a new plan.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading! If you dig this 'verse, we have more one shots set in it in our fic 'The Starlight I See'!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sonya Rostova: hey

Sonya Rostova: are u there

Sonya Rostova: i rlly need to talk to someone

Mary Bolkonskaya: Sonya? Are you alright?

Sonya Rostova: i don’t know

Sonya Rostova: nat was awful

Mary Bolkonskaya: What happened???

Sonya Rostova: she said something about us “gossipping behind her back”??

Sonya Rostova: and then told me to “go cry to my girlfriend”

Sonya Rostova: mary it’s like she was making fun of me

Sonya Rostova: im worried that she might know already?

Sonya Rostova: but then why would she be so mean about it?

Sonya Rostova: what if i can’t ever come out to her?

Mary Bolkonskaya: Oh, Sonya…

Mary Bolkonskaya: Have you tried telling her how you feel?

Sonya Rostova: i dont even want to see her right now

Sonya Rostova: idk what to do
Sonya Rostova: i just feel so tired and frustrated with her

Sonya Rostova: im done

Sonya Rostova: ive tried to be nice to her but every time she finds a way to make me the bad guy

Sonya Rostova: i just dont understand

Sonya Rostova: i have no idea what the hell i did to make her treat me this way

Unknown Number: hi mary im sorry to bother you

Unknown Number: but what the hell did i do to set sonya off

Unknown Number: is there somethig im missing here?

Mary Bolkonskaya: I’m sorry, who is this?

Mary Bolkonskaya: And how did you get this number?

Unknown Number: oh

Unknown Number: sorry

Unknown Number: its nat

Unknown Number: sonya gave me ur #

Mary Bolkonskaya: from school?

Unknown Number: i dont think there are too many natashas or sonyas in moscow

Mary Bolkonskaya: Sorry.

Mary Bolkonskaya has added Natasha Rostova to Contacts

Natasha Rostova: thats a little formal

Mary Bolkonskaya: Is there something wrong with it? I keep all of my contacts formal.

Mary Bolkonskaya: At the risk of sounding rude, how are you texting me? Sonya told me you were grounded.

Natasha Rostova: my mom doesnt keep a close eye on us

Natasha Rostova: anyway

Natasha Rostova: is sonya okay?

Natasha Rostova: idk what I said but she seems really upset

Mary Bolkonskaya: She is.
Natasha Rostova: did she tell you why?

Natasha Rostova: i know we’re fighting but i swear i didn’t mean to upset her that much

Mary Bolkonskaya: I’m not sure if it’s my place to talk about it.

Natasha Rostova: please mary i don’t know what else to do

Mary Bolkonskaya: Just give her some time. Try talking to her.

Natasha Rostova: but i don’t even know what to talk to her ABOUT

Natasha Rostova: she just freaked without warning

Mary Bolkonskaya: It’s what you said.

Natasha Rostova: what did i say????

Mary Bolkonskaya: About us dating.

Natasha Rostova: but that wasn’t anything?? I was just saying you guys are close?

Mary Bolkonskaya: We ARE dating.

Natasha Rostova: O_O

Mary Bolkonskaya: Technically, it’s only been one date.

Mary Bolkonskaya: But still.

Mary Bolkonskaya: Does that explain things a little?

Natasha Rostova: oh my god….

Natasha Rostova: i had no idea

Natasha Rostova: oh fuck

Mary Bolkonskaya: Look, if you have an issue with us, keep it to yourself please.

Mary Bolkonskaya: And don’t tell anyone.

Mary Bolkonskaya: I don’t even know why I’m telling you this in the first place.

Mary Bolkonskaya: But it’s very new for both of us.

Natasha Rostova: no no no its nothing like that at all

Natasha Rostova: i had no idea she was gay

Natasha Rostova: oh god, ive fucked up

Natasha Rostova: i never meant to upset her
Natasha Rostova: i was just so thoughtless

Natasha Rostova: im sorry for everything

Natasha Rostova: ive been so horrible to you both

Natasha Rostova: but what do i do now???

Mary Bolkonskaya: It’s not me you should be sorry about.

Mary Bolkonskaya: Natasha I don’t have an issue with you.

Mary Bolkonskaya: But Sonya’s really upset now.

Mary Bolkonskaya: I think you should try to apologize.

Natasha Rostova: how can i when she wont even speak to me?

Natasha Rostova: would you please tell her for me

Natasha Rostova: she might listen to you

Mary Bolkonskaya: I can try.

Mary Bolkonskaya: But I think it would mean more coming from you directly.

Natasha Rostova: but shes literally barricaded herself in her room

Natasha Rostova: mary shes not listening to me at all

Mary Bolkonskaya: Give her some space.

Mary Bolkonskaya: When she’s ready, if she’s ready, she’ll open up.

Mary Bolkonskaya: But I’ll see what I can do.

Natasha Rostova: thank you

Natasha Rostova: im so sorry

Natasha Rostova: i should go now

Natasha Rostova: i think i hear my mom coming

feddy bear: are you okay???

feddy bear: jesus kid please answer me

feddy bear: is everything alright?

Blondie: sorry Lena took my phone
Anatole was sitting on the sofa when Hélène came in, with his arms folded across his chest and a face like thunder and even though he really should have known better, his feet up on the coffee table. When he saw her, he shrank back in his seat, but moved over to make room for her, and she sat down with an exhausted sigh.

The two of them sat in silence for a few moments until Anatole cleared his throat and, without turning to her, said, “Are you still mad at me?”

Hélène rubbed her eyes. Her hands came away smudged with mascara and eyeliner. Surprisingly, she found that it didn’t bother her at all. “I’m not angry, Anatole. Not anymore. I think we both said a lot of things we regret.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, and his voice was so small and soft and quiet she could hardly hear him. “I’m sorry about everything I did. Everything I said. I don’t hate you. I could never hate you.”

Hélène slid over until they sat hip-to-hip, Anatole sandwiched against the armrest, and pressed a kiss to his temple. “And I’m sorry too. The stuff with Fedya—”

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Anatole said quietly. He pulled his feet up onto the sofa and tucked his knees beneath his chin. Folded-up, shrinking into the cushions. Had the circumstances been different, she would have thought it was adorable, but now it only made her feel even guiltier than she already did.

“Yeah,” she said. “I think you’re right. We’ve both said enough.”

Anatole took in a deep, slow breath, and then exhaled just as slowly. He was silent for a moment, and then said, “They’re gonna try take me away from you now, aren’t they?”

“Ippolit told you?”
“Oh, he told me alright,” Anatole said sourly. “He came to the house a few hours ago, tried giving me the whole spiel. You were still in class. I told him to go shove it, of course. He didn’t look happy when I said that.”

Hélène cracked a smile despite herself and looped an arm over his shoulders. “I was kind of hoping we could’ve talked about it before he brought it up himself.”

“God, he can be such an asshole.”

“I guess it runs in the family,” she jested, and gave his shoulder a squeeze, as she always did when they shared inside jokes. But Anatole didn’t even smile at that, and she pulled him a little closer. “What are you thinking, kid?”

“That this whole thing fucking sucks,” he said, ignoring the murmured ‘language’.

“It could be okay,” she said softly. “You’d be in the city again.”

She wasn’t sure which of them she was trying harder to persuade. Either way, Anatole didn’t look convinced. Instead he frowned and said, “You wouldn’t be there.”

“I’d visit.”

“It wouldn’t be the same and you know it.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” said Hélène. “I don’t think he’s messing around about this. He wants to get Papa involved.”

Anatole bit his lip. “What do you think Papa would do?”

“I honestly don’t know. I don’t know him well enough to say anymore. But Ippolit doesn’t think that you should be in his crosshairs when he gets home. I can’t say I disagree.”

He smiled tightly. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you guys agree on anything before.”

“We both care about you,” she said. “I think that’s about the only thing we agree on.”

“Still.”

“Look, I know he’s been kind of distant the last few years, but he does care about you, Toto. I think you should consider going with him.”

Anatole’s shoulders slumped and his frown became a pout. “But you wouldn’t make me go?”

“It’s your decision, not mine. Besides, I don’t think I can make you do anything anymore.”

“I’d miss a lot, though,” he said.

Hélène gave him a small, sad smile. “You’d only miss the last few months. You’ve got all your applications in anyway.”

Anatole frowned and turned away to stare at his feet. “Might not matter now, what with this stupid suspension on my record.”

“They won’t care about that,” she said firmly. “Trust me, I’m speaking from experience.”

“Are you sure?”
Hélène tilted her head to the side and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Look, if a wild child like me can get accepted to Duke, you should be fine.”

“You could’ve left,” he said. “You wouldn’t be having to deal with all of this crap now if you’d’ve left.”

“But then I’d’ve missed you.”

There followed a pregnant pause. Anatole bit his lip, clearly mulling something over in his mind. She could practically see the gears and cogs turning in his head, and her heart sank a little. Good things generally didn’t happen when Anatole was deep in thought.

“Lena,” he said after a while. “If I tell you something crazy, do you promise you won’t repeat it to anyone?”

Hélène paused. There it was—the dropped penny, the kick in the teeth, the thing that would no doubt send her for a loop and only make her feel more stressed than she already was. It was Anatole’s signature specialty.

“Depends on how crazy it is,” she said carefully.

“Please.”

“Alright.”

He inhaled deeply, readying himself. “I want to file for emancipation.”

Hélène went rigid. “I’m sorry?”

“I said I want to file for emancipation.”

She let out a nervous laugh. Anatole did not look amused.

“Well?”

“Tolya, don’t be irrational—”

“I mean it, Lena,” he said, his voice firm “More than anything. I’ve never been this serious about anything in my entire life.”

Hélène raised an eyebrow. “More than Natasha?”

Anatole looked genuinely upset at that, and a pang of guilt speared Hélène through the heart. She took his hand in her own and squeezed it softly, reassuringly. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

He swallowed, blinking back tears.

“Oh, Toto, you know I didn’t mean it. Come here.” Hélène opened her arms invitingly, holding Anatole tight as he stumbled into them. He didn’t look seventeen, she thought. He looked seven again, the little boy who would run to her when he was frightened of the dark or a nightmare or a mother who would never return. Her little brother was brilliant, effulgent. Seeing that light burnt out made her feel sick, and it made her hate their father even more than she already did.

“If I can't stay with you, then I don’t want to stay with anyone,” he said petulantly.
“But you love the city. Wouldn’t you be happier there? Wasn’t that the whole point of the plan?”

“The plan was dumb. And I don’t think I could stomach living with Ippolit.”

“Tolya.”

“What? I’m not being mean, I’m just being honest. He hasn’t wanted anything to do with me for the past ten years. Why should that change now? It was bad enough being stuck here with Papa, but at least there’s people in this town that I like. What would I have if I went back to New York? No you, no Fedya, no…” His voice trailed off for a moment and he swallowed heavily. “No Natalie.”

“Okay,” she said softly. “You’ll stay here, then. I’ll talk to Ippolit and get him to back off. But if he comes back, if I’m not in the house, call me. Right away.”

Anatole furrowed his brow. “But you said no phone.”

“I said a lot of things. I didn’t necessarily mean all of them. Besides,” she added, “I think this whole situation is punishment enough. And I want to know you can call me if something happens.”

“Ok,” he murmured, and snuggled up to her again. “Will you still help me, though?”

Hélène smoothed back a tuft of blond as she ran her fingers through his hair. “Why are you doing this? You’ll be eighteen in just a few months. Is it really that long to wait?”

“I can’t take it anymore, Lena. I’ll go crazy.”

Hélène sighed. “I don’t know what you want me to do,” she said quietly. “I can’t support you if you go through with this. I want to, but I really can’t. Please, just tough it out with Papa for a few more months and then I promise you don’t ever have to see him again.”

“I’ll do anything,” he said, and his voice was ragged and tear-choked.

“Tolya,” Hélène said, a little more stern than she meant. “Think about it. Where would you even stay?”

“I could couchsurf. Maybe Ms. Dolokhova would let me stay at her place for a while.”

Hélène bit her lip, unsure what to do. What to say. She hated this, feeling so at a loss for words, and against her will she found herself wondering what Fedya’s response to the situation would have been. Rational, sensible, level-headed Fedya.

*Forget that*, fired back the voice in her head. *Rational? Sensible? Level-headed? Whose fault do you think this whole situation is?*

No. Reckless, idiotic, foolish Fedya. A man so spineless that even Anatole had been able to convince him to fold. Was she still angry at him? It was hard to tell, but it seemed to her that most of her fury was beyond burnt out. The question still stood, though, as to whether he was still angry at her. Probably. Pierre was one thing, but the thought of losing Fedya as a friend hurt deeply and sharply, like a newly-opened wound.

“Okay,” she conceded, swallowing down the lump in her throat. “Let’s assume you had a place to stay. What do you need me for?”

“The counsellor said that you might need to come to family court,” Anatole said. “And testify.”
Hélène’s expression went flat. “And what exactly do you think Papa’s gonna do to me once I air out all of our family’s dirty laundry?” she said.

Anatole faltered, his jaw working silently as he swallowed. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “This was a mistake, you’re right.”

He turned to get up off the couch and leave, but Hélène caught him by the wrist.

“Please don’t go,” she said. “I don’t want you to leave upset with me.”

Anatole allowed her to pull him back down onto the cushion and fold her arms around him. “I know what a bad position this puts you in,” he said, and when his voice cracked for a heart-stopping second, Hélène was overcome with such a great sense of tenderness and sorrow that she almost doubled over on herself. Anatole would never bend, he would only break, shattering into a million pieces, and Hélène knew she’d never be able to put him back together again.

Hélène pressed a soft kiss to his hairline, hoping that he wouldn’t see the way her lower lip was trembling. “I can’t,” she said. Anatole let out a shaky breath and she wrapped her arms around him even tighter than before. “I’ll support you in whatever you want to do, but I can’t do that.”

Anatole nodded against her shoulder. “It was a stupid idea, I’m sorry.”

“No, it isn’t stupid, it’s just—”

“It’s fine,” he said with a tight smile.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “Are we okay?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Hélène sighed. “Maybe Ippolit’s wrong. It’s been awhile since Papa’s been home.”

Anatole’s face crumpled into something miserable again, and Hélène worried that he would burst into tears. She began to rub slow, lazy circles between his shoulder blades, the way she used to do when he was little and sick or tired or upset. He relaxed into her touch with a quiet sigh, and she rested her chin against the crown of his head.

“You’re almost too tall for this,” she said.

“Only ’cause you’re too short,” he murmured into her sleeve. “Pipsqueak.”

“Noodle,” she replied.

Anatole’s shoulders shook as he laughed quietly. “Not my fault you stopped growing at fifteen.”

“You were cuter back then too,” she said.

“Shush. I’m still cute.”

“Debatable. You were such a good eleven-year-old, though. Remember that stray cat you tried to adopt?”

“Cat. How could I forget her?”

Hélène smiled as the memory came flooding back. They had found the scraggly little thing on the side of the road walking home from school one day in late autumn. It had rained the night before
and it was freezing cold and the noise of the highway was unpleasantly loud as always, but Anatole had zeroed in on the quiet mewling coming from the gutter like a bee drawn to honey, dragging Hélène along behind him. Hélène had hated the cat at first sight—filthy, flea-infested, and half-wild—but he had taken such a shine to the damn thing that he had insisted on bringing it home.

And then he had named it, of course. Cat. Not the most creative choice, but then again, he hadn’t been the most creative eleven-year-old either. Even now it made her laugh.

“You were so good with her. It was sweet.”

Anatole smiled. “I miss her.”

Hélène didn’t. But what she did miss were those two weeks of contented bliss during which they had intermittently hidden the cat in the upstairs bedrooms, ferrying it along the hallways in laundry baskets and backpacks, sneaking cat food under their beds and laying newspapers all over the floors and gathering shed hairs in the wastebasket before Vasily could see. Little Anatole, stubborn as a mule and a surprisingly good caretaker—“No, Lena, I’ve already fed her, I’m not a complete idiot.”

Vasily had found out in the end, of course—Hélène had known better than to be hopeful he wouldn’t have—and that was where the memory began to taste sour. She had expected him to be disappointed. She hadn’t expected him to call Animal Control, hadn’t expected the ensuing fight with Anatole, hadn’t expected the three weeks of silent treatment that followed.

Anatole’s mind must have been following the same path as hers, because his face wilted into a frown and he sighed, leaning into her, and she squeezed him a little tighter, like a promise, like a reassurance.

“What’re we gonna do, Lena?” he said sadly.

“We’re gonna be okay, kid. Everything’s gonna be okay. We’ve made it this far, and we’re almost at the finish line.”

Anatole let out a ragged sigh. “But what are we gonna do about Papa?”

Hélène’s heart sank, and she felt something in her stomach go cold. He was frightened. Trying to hide it, but he had never been any good at hiding his emotions, and she knew him too well not to see it anyways. “Let me worry about Papa,” she said with as much confidence as she could manage. “I’m not going to leave you alone with him, alright? I promise you. I’m here with you every step of the way.”

He swallowed heavily. Hélène gave him another squeeze.

“I’ve got you, Toto. Everything’s gonna be just fine,” she said quietly, wishing with every ounce her being that it would be true.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! We can't believe our baby is a whole 23 chapters long! Thank you so much for all the comments and kudos, we love them dearly!
In Which Pierre Has Had Enough

Chapter Summary

Anatole turns to Pierre for help.

Chapter Notes

Please note that this chapter contains discussions/ the after affects of child abuse

Despite the multiple emails he had sent and the countless phone calls he had made, Pierre’s landlord still had neglected to call in repairmen to fix the heating. This was unfair for a number of reasons, the most infuriating being the fact that by all accounts, Pierre had been a perfectly good tenant. He had always paid his rent on time, kept up-to-date on his bills, never even, despite his occasional drinking binges, disturbed the neighbors.

And yet the damn heating still wouldn’t turn on.

After making yet another call (straight to voicemail, as usual), Pierre bundled himself up in a sweater and a dressing gown and pottered over to the kitchenette to heat up yesterday’s leftovers—Chinese takeout, half-eaten—and the remains of the burrito he hadn’t finished for lunch. Not the most appetizing of combinations, but a trek to the grocery store seemed like an impossible hassle, and all he wanted to do was eat something hot and greasy for dinner and then curl up on the couch to catch an episode or two of Jeopardy.

He had just settled into his seat when he heard a sharp knock at the door. Pierre’s head shot upright. Was this the landlord? Had he finally gotten through?

There came the sound of someone jamming a key into a lock—the landlord, no doubt. Or a very well-prepared burglar. Hardly a difference between the two, anyway. Pierre switched the television off and leaned over the armrest for a better view of the front hallway. Slowly, a little hesitant at first, the knob turned and the door swung open.

“Hiya, pal,” said a familiar voice.

Anatole, for once, actually looked scruffy. His hair was in need of combing, and his jeans looked distinctly rumpled. Most disconcertingly, he was wearing a hoodie. An honest-to-God hoodie. When had Anatole ever let himself set foot outside the house wearing something as casual and sloppy as a hoodie? The sight of it was so unnerving that Pierre almost dropped his plate of food.

“What are you doing here?” he said.

Anatole scratched the back of his head, pulling his hood down even further. A hoodie. Jeans and a t-shirt and flimsy sneakers and a hoodie. You’d have to be mad to go out in this kind of weather in an outfit like that. He was going to freeze in here without a proper coat, the skinny thing. And he
was shivering already by the look of it.

“My house was getting old and boring,” he said casually, a little too casually for Pierre’s liking. “I’m kind of on lockdown.”

Pierre raised an eyebrow. There was no need to ask why. He remembered how distraught Hélène had been over Anatole’s disappearing act. Perhaps she had finally snapped, then, and decided that letting her little brother run loose wasn’t the most responsible course of action. Anatole, for all his odd calm, certainly wasn’t behaving like being ‘on lockdown’ was something he was used to.

Served him right, Pierre thought stiffly. Maybe he’d learn a lesson or two, now that he had actually gotten into trouble.

“Where’s your sister?” he said.

Anatole shrugged. There was something frantic in the way he bounced his leg incessantly and fiddled with the strings on his hoodie. “I was kind of hoping you could tell me that.”

Pierre sighed. “I haven’t seen her in a while. I’m not sure if you know this, but we aren’t together anymore.”

Anatole tilted his head to the side. “That makes this what, the sixth time?”

“Don’t be such a brat,” he snapped, feeling more emboldened than usual. He was tired and cold and hungry. Anatole was distracting him from his dinner, and he didn’t have any more energy to be polite, especially with someone who had always been anything but. “You’re a child, Anatole. Maybe you should think twice before talking disrespectfully to an adult.”

Anatole’s eyes widened and he held his hands up in mock-surrender. “Jeez, man, I’m sorry. Didn’t mean to step on a nerve.”

“Look, is there something you want?”

He looked away sheepishly. “I was wondering if I could use your phone. To call Lena. My dad’s taken mine away.”

“Maybe I should just drive you home,” Pierre said. “I don’t want to be involved in this. She’s only going to get angry if I meddle, and I don’t think your dad would be happy about this either.”

“I promise she’ll understand. Please, I really need to talk to her.”

Something in his tone made Pierre pause. “Fine,” he sighed. “But if she doesn’t pick up, I’m driving you home.”

Anatole seemed to relax a little at that. Pierre unlocked his phone and brought up Hélène’s contact information before handing it over to him, not trusting him not to snoop through his phone.

“The volume settings got a little busted at Borodino’s,” said Pierre. “When Fedya…when I fell. It was in my pocket. It’s stuck on speaker now. Hope it doesn’t bother you.”

“Thanks,” he murmured, and pressed down on her number.

The phone rang for a few moments, and then switched over to voicemail.

“Hi,” said a voice, falsely bright and unmistakably Hélène. “You have reached the inbox of Hélène Kuragina. If you’re here, I’m either asleep or screening my calls. Bye!”
Anatole switched the call off with a defeated sigh.

“No response?” said Pierre.

A shrug. He handed the phone back. “Yeah, I guess not. She’s probably still in class. Thanks anyway.”

Pierre frowned. It was as if a fog had been cleared and he could now see what he couldn’t before. And what he could see was a poorly-concealed smudge of purple on Anatole’s cheek. He pointed towards it and asked, “What happened here?”

Anatole turned his head to the side and swatted away Pierre’s hand. “Nothing’s happened.”

“It looks…”

“Pierre, seriously—”

“It looks like you’re doing a pretty bad job of covering up a bruise.”

Anatole’s face crumpled. “It was an accident. That’s all. You know how clumsy I get. I tripped and fell over my desk and then I landed funny on the—”

“Anatole.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Talk to me, kid. What’s going on?”

“I really should get going now,” he said in a tone that could almost be described as apologetic, but Pierre intercepted him before he could turn to the door. “Listen, buddy, it’s been nice catching up with you and all, but I’ve got homework to finish and a room to clean and—”

“Did Hélène do this?”

Anatole seemed genuinely startled by the question. “What?”

“You don’t have to cover for her,” said Pierre. “I know that she gets angry sometimes—she’s always had a hard time managing her temper—and I know how mad at you she was, that day in Marya’s office.”

Pierre knew that he had let slip more than he should have when Anatole’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. “What do you mean? You weren’t there that day.”

Shit.

He shouldn’t have said that. He really shouldn’t have said that, but he was unnerved and flustered and his mind had kicked into autopilot and overridden any semblance of common sense. He was really going to hear it from Hélène now, if he ever did hear from her again.

There was a moment of tense silence while Pierre’s mouth caught up with his brain. “I drove your sister,” he finally managed to say. “I was worried about her and I didn’t want her on the road. I saw how upset she was, how angry she was at you. If she did this to you—if she hit you—you can tell
Anatole, for once, seemed completely at a loss for words.

“I promise I won’t tell her anything you don’t want me to,” he said quickly. “Anything you tell me stays between the two of us. You don’t have to be afraid of her.”

“Oh my God,” Anatole said finally. “I literally can’t believe you. That you’d think…Jesus, Pierre, she’d never do something like this.”

“I know what she’s like.”

“You clearly don’t,” he said, shaking his head. “Holy shit, man, I know you two aren’t on good terms, but to hurl that at her?”

“Anatole, kid, I’m sorry, I just—”

“That’s low. That’s real low. You know, I used to think she was unnecessarily harsh on you, but Jesus Christ, I can’t believe you’d think that badly of her.”

Pierre balked. “It wasn’t meant to offend. All I wanted was to know—”

“You want to know?” he snarled. “You really want to know?” When Pierre could do no more than stutter in response, Anatole tossed his hands in the air, his cheeks a brilliant, furious pink, and said, “My dad got pissed when he heard about what happened with Natasha and then he took my phone away and I talked back to him so he slapped me. Alright? Are you happy now that I’ve said it?”

The wind rushed out of Pierre’s lungs in one sharp exhale. “Anatole,” he began, but Anatole cut him off with the wave of a hand.

“I don’t want your pity, alright? I can handle this.”

“Then I’m not going to pity you,” he said simply. It wasn’t easy to maintain a level tone, but then again, he supposed, it must have been even harder for Anatole. And if one of them had to be brave, it was only fair that it was Pierre himself. “Does Hélène know?”

Anatole shook his head. “Papa only got home today. Lena’s still at school.”

“Is that why you came here?”

A shrug. “I had the spare key. And Fedya’s was too far away to walk.”

“You walked here?”

“Well, I couldn’t exactly call a cab, could I?” he said indignantly, as if Pierre were the one being ridiculous. “No phone, remember?”

“Does your dad know where you are?”

“’F course not. I’m supposed to be grounded, anyway. I waited till he left to go pick up some groceries or whatever the hell it is he does on his errands. He won’t be back for a couple of hours, at least.”

“How long has this been going on?”

“A few years,” Anatole said quietly. “It’s only gotten bad recently though.”
Pierre’s heart sank. “And Hélène?”

He shook his head. “No, never. She’s the favorite. He actually likes her.”

“Does she know?”

“She’s never actually seen it happen,” he sighed, “but she does.”

Pierre felt a hot rush of anger course through him. “And she’s never done anything about it?”

“She does all that she can.”

“Anatole.”

“It’s not any of your business anyway,” he snapped. “And I’ve already told you, I can take care of myself.”

“You shouldn’t have to.”

Anatole laughed, something harsh and caustic. “It doesn’t matter.”

“You’re a child—”

This was clearly a mistake, as Anatole bristled in offense. “I’m seventeen, Pierre,” he said. “I’m not a child. You don’t have to talk to me like one.”

“I’m trying to help you. This is too much for you to deal with alone.”

“Yeah, because you can definitely deal with this,” he said. “You don’t know anything about me, Pierre. You don’t even know anything about Lena.”

Pierre went quiet.

Anatole shook his head in disgust. “You wouldn’t understand. You’ll never know what it’s like.”

He folded in on himself, wrapping his arms around his knees. “I don’t know what I did. I don’t know why he hates me. Anything—everything I do gets compared to Lena. He’s chewing me out, and then he starts going on about what a disappointment I’ve been and how much better would my grades be if I put half as much attention into school as I did to ‘that Natasha girl’, and why, oh, why can’t I just be more like Lena?”

“Anatole—”

“And you want to know the best part?” he said raggedly. “Now he wants to send me to some corrective boarding school for troubled teens all the way in St. Petersburg for the rest of senior year.”

Pierre’s heart skipped a beat and a sour taste filled his mouth. “He’s sending you to Russia?”

“Even worse. Florida.”

“What does Hélène think of all of this?”

“What does it matter?”

Pierre blinked, confused. “She’s your sister. She could talk to your father, help him understand.”
“She can’t do anything.”

“You keep saying that,” Pierre said angrily, “but you’re just a kid. Leaving you to deal with this alone is unfair of her.”

“Don’t say that,” Anatole spat. “You don’t understand. Hélène’s worth more than ten of you put together.”

“Anatole—”

“I should go now. Before I say something else I regret.”

He started down the corridor, and Pierre reached out after him. “Anatole, come back here,” he said sharply. “Talk me through this, what have you been through?”

But Anatole only proceeded to clam up. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said.

Pierre huffed a frustrated breath. “Fine. I get it. We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

Anatole evaluated him suspiciously, but came back inside and sat down regardless.

“Can I take you somewhere? We could go to the police station, I’m sure they’d help you file a report—”

Anatole shook his head. “There’s no point. And I just want Lena.”

Pierre’s chest went tight. “Do you want to try calling her again?”

“It’s not like she’s gonna pick up.”

“Let’s just try. Second time’s a charm, right? And if she doesn’t pick up, we’ll leave a message.”

Anatole nodded and took the phone back. His thumb hovered nervously over her contact icon for a moment, before he pressed down.

She picked up on the third ring.

“For Christ’s sake, Pierre, I thought I made it clear that I didn’t want you to call me,” came the sound of Hélène’s voice.

“It’s me, Lena.”

He heard her suck in a sharp, deep breath. “Toto?”

“Yeah.”

“But you’re—”

“I’m borrowing Pierre’s phone.”

“Where are you? What’s going on?”

Anatole swallowed heavily. Pierre gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I’m at Pierre’s,” he said. His voice became quiet and flat. “Papa’s home.”

“Fuck,” said Hélène. “Are you alright?”
Anatole let out a sniffle and Pierre turned away. “No.”

“Hey, hey, it’s okay. Do you want to talk to me?”

Anatole nodded, wiping his eyes on the hem of his sleeve. Pierre suddenly felt like an intruder, an outsider, and he took several steps back until he stood in the doorway, well within earshot but no longer crowding over Anatole’s shoulder.

“I need a yes or a no,” she said gently.

Anatole took in a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes, please.”

“Okay,” Hélène murmured. “I’ll be there soon, I promise. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

“He was mad,” he said after a long while.

There was a rush of static on the other end as Hélène exhaled softly. “Are you in any pain?”

“Not really. Not anymore.”

“I’m just walking to my car. I’ll pick you up in less than ten minutes.”

“I can always drop him off,” Pierre offered.

Hélène was silent for a minute, and Anatole’s gaze darted awkwardly between the doorway and the phone. “Thank you, Pierre,” she said coolly, “but that’s not necessary. Tolya, I have to hang up now, okay? I just got to the parking lot, but I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

He hung up quickly, probably out of fear that she would first. Once the phone went silent, he let out a long, shuddering sigh and collapsed into the chair closest to him.

Pierre hovered awkwardly, unsure how much space to give him. “Do you need anything?”

Anatole shrugged.

“Are you warm enough?”

“I’m a little chilly,” he admitted, fiddling with the zipper of his jacket.

Pierre bit the inside of his cheek. “I’m sorry,” he said. “The heating crapped out last week and my landlord still hasn’t gotten around to getting the repair guys in. Let me get you something warm to drink. How does tea sound? Or coffee?”

Anatole shook his head. “I don’t drink caffeine.”

Pierre ran a hand through his hair as he rifled through the cabinet. “Well, I have hot chocolate. Is that alright?”

Anatole nodded slowly. For once, he didn’t seem particularly inclined to chat, and Pierre was in no
frame of mind to try make small talk. Wordlessly, he trudged over to the kitchenette to heat up the hot chocolate. Anatole stared blankly at the wall, twisting the hem of his sleeve between his fingers like a nervous tic. He looked small and pale and lifeless.

“Here you go, kid,” Pierre said as he walked back into the living room with two mugs.

Anatole took the drink with a nod and sipped at it in silence, occasionally pausing to fiddle with his zipper or tug at the strings of his hood. Pierre’s stomach was churning too much to drink his. He left it on the counter instead, little curlicues of steam rising from it as it slowly went cold.

The room may have been silent, but Pierre’s mind was abuzz, racing against his will at a million miles per hour. How many times had Anatole done this? With the sullen silence, the beaten-down slump of his shoulders, it was clear that this wasn’t anything new. The boy sitting across from him hardly seemed like the one he thought he had met.

Pierre remembered the sole photo at the Kuragin’s house with a sinking heart. He thought of Hélène—“I hate him too, just so we’re on the same page. Most of the time. I’m a horrible daughter.”—and his breath caught in his throat as realization sunk in and all the pieces began to fall into place. Hélène’s secrecy about her family life, the fallout from changing her major, her recklessness with Anatole. The club. Anatole running wild like a dog off a leash. Afterwards, their conversation in the cab. His argument with Hélène at the apartment. The meeting in Marya’s office. And now this.

Not even ten minutes later there came the sound of someone pounding at the door. Hélène, no doubt. This was more than a little alarming, considering that the school was, at minimum, a twenty minutes’ drive away from the apartment, not taking traffic into account, but Pierre didn’t have time to voice this concern, because no sooner had he opened the door than she cut him off with a sharp, “Where’s Anatole?”

Anatole’s head snapped up immediately. “Lena?” he said.

Hélène didn’t wait for a response before she pushed past Pierre and ran over to the living room and squeezed Anatole in a tight hug. “I’m sorry I wasn’t over sooner. I just got out of class.”

“S’okay,” he mumbled as she scooted onto the seat next to him. “You’re here now.”

Hélène pulled him even tighter, resting her chin on his shoulder. Pierre could see now that her eyes were bloodshot and teary and her face was pale. She rocked back and forth, rubbing a slow circle between his shoulder blades, running her other hand through his hair and whispering, “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry, it’s—”

“Shush. Don’t you dare apologize.”

Anatole nodded and buried his face back into her shoulder.

Hélène’s gaze sharply locked with his. Pierre realized, with a great rush of embarrassment, that he had been staring. Like an intruder. Like some sort of nosy, bumbling idiot. Jesus. How much more awkward could he even get?

“Thank you,” she said stiffly, and disentangled herself from Anatole. “For looking after him.”

Pierre gave her an equally terse smile. “Really, it’s the least I could do.” He paused for a moment, fidgeting awkwardly with his own hands, before saying, “I just want to let you know how sorry I
am. For—"

Hélène cut him off with one raised hand. “This really isn’t the time for that.”

Pierre blinked. More surprising than the fact that she hadn’t immediately leapt to gloat over his apology was how distinctly not-angry she sounded. No, if anything, she just looked sad and worn-down. She was frayed to bits, he realized, and the sight of her in such a state made his stomach twist with guilt.

“I didn’t know,” he murmured. “I should have helped you deal with this.”

“You said it yourself,” Hélène said. “You didn’t know. Most people don’t. It’s not your problem.”

“Still.”

“Don’t tear yourself up over it. We’ll figure this out on our own.”

“I’m always a call away if you need any help.”

Hélène nodded curtly, coldly almost, before turning back to Anatole. “Come on, kid,” she said, reaching over to give his hand a squeeze. “Let’s get going.”

“I don’t wanna go home,” he said, panicked, and Pierre’s heart throbbed painfully.

“That’s fine,” Hélène said calmly. It was an act, Pierre could tell, one that had probably been perfected through years of practice. Years. God. She squeezed his hand again, tracing small circles against the skin between his thumb and forefinger. “We can go to the library or the arcade or Pavlovna’s. Whatever you want.”

“You guys could always spend the night here,” Pierre offered. “There’s room, I could crash on the sofa.”

Hélène gave him a careful once-over. “Not a good idea, unless you want to get slammed with kidnapping charges.”

Pierre gulped.

“Thank you, though,” she said, and turned back to Anatole. “How about a movie? How does that sound? That’s fun, right? I think they’re still showing the new Star Wars in that theater on Prechistenskaya.”

“Sounds fun,” said Anatole.

Hélène smoothed back the hair that had fallen across his forehead. “Alright. Let’s go.”

“Thanks, Pierre,” Anatole murmured, and Hélène slung her handbag over the crook of her elbow and ushered him out the door.

Even though he knew they wouldn’t be able to hear him, Pierre whispered a quiet, “Good luck.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading! We LOVE feedback if ya have any!
In Which Our Protagonists Move Onwards

Chapter Summary

Anatole and Natasha make new plans.

Chapter Notes

CW: discussions of child abuse

We're going on a bit of a hiatus with this and our other work 'Of Dust and Dæmons'! We apologize for that! (we don't apologize for the angst in this chapter)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The driveway had never seemed so long or so dark and cold. Hélène’s hands were numb and shaking, which mean that it took a good few minutes for her to unbuckle her seatbelt, and even when she reached for the door, Anatole remained frozen in his seat with his eyes focused on the windshield. He wasn’t ready to go in. She wasn’t either, but she was better at hiding it. The movie had worked—for a while, at least. It had distracted them, calmed him down for a few hours, but they couldn’t stay away forever.

“It’s gonna be alright,” Hélène said once the silence had become unbearable. “I’m not going to leave you alone with him.”

At that, Anatole began to fidget with his sleeves, twisting the cuffs over and over in his hands.

“He won’t want to fight,” she continued. “You know how much he buys into the whole nuclear family thing.”

Anatole nodded but refused to meet her eyes. “I know.”

Hélène reached over and gave his hand another squeeze. “I’m with you, kid. We’re a team, remember? I won’t let anything happen to you, promise.”

“I just need a few more moments,” he said quietly. “And then I’ll be okay.”

“Alright. That’s alright. We’ll wait together, and then we’ll go in together.”

He took a deep breath. “Okay.”

“You’re good?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“Alright,” she repeated. He squeezed her hand softly. “Let’s do this.”

Vasily greeted them at the front door before Hélène could even reach into her bag for her keys.
“Hi, Papa,” she said. She leaned up and kissed his cheek, forcing a smile onto her face. “How was your trip?”


Anatole trailed behind Hélène as she toed off her boots and stepped into the living room, all but clinging to the crook of her elbow. She instinctively moved to stand between him and Vasily.

“And you,” Vasily said, directing his attention towards Anatole. “Have you learned your lesson?”

Anatole nodded slowly.

“You have a perfectly good voice, Anatole. Use it.”

“Yes, Papa,” he murmured.

“Good. Then we won’t discuss this any further.” Anatole nodded again, and Vasily ruffled his hair affectionately. “Alright? Don’t look so glum.”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Good boy. Now, come in, you two. Dinner’s ready, and it’ll get cold if we don’t start soon.”

“Dinner?” Hélène said with a raised eyebrow as she hung up her coat in the hallway closet.

“It’s been awhile since I’ve been home. I was hoping we could have dinner as a family.”

Hélène chanced a glance at Anatole, who hovered anxiously by the front door. “That’s really nice, Papa, but I’m not hungry.”

Vasily frowned. “You need to eat something, Elena,” he said disapprovingly. “You look thin. Have you lost weight again?”

Hélène ground her teeth together as discretely as she could. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Anatole shuffling around the perimeter of the room until he stood at the foot of the stairwell. “I’ve been eating fine,” she said. “It’s just been awhile since you’ve seen me.”

“You still ought to eat something. You’re looking a little peaky.”

“Alright,” she said.

“Anatole?”

“’M not feeling so good,” Anatole mumbled, a hand over his stomach.

Hélène tilted her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Gonna go lie down,” he said. “Or puke. Or both.”

Vasily rolled his eyes with a sigh, and Anatole skirted out of the room and up the stairs with a hushed ‘sorry’. “Is he alright?”

“Probably just tired,” she said numbly. “The last few weeks have been hard for him.”

Vasily didn’t look too happy about that, but he didn’t protest either. “Alright, then. I suppose we’ll be eating without him.”
Hélène nodded and followed him into the dining room, crossing her ankles as she sank into the chair opposite from Vasily. Three plates had been set out on the table, and there was a glass of water at each seat. She waited until her father had sat down too before she delicately popped a forkful of pasta into her mouth. He had made it with alfredo sauce. She hated alfredo—she always made her pasta with marinara—but there was no point in starting a fight.

“You’re home sooner than I expected,” she said instead. “Ippolit told me you were busy at work.”

“I was,” he said, and now there was a hint of annoyance in his voice. “Until I got the call about your brother.”

Hélène’s hands tightened around her cutlery against her will.

“It’s no matter now,” he continued. “I’ve spoken to Anatole and I’m confident he’ll make better choices in the future.”

“I certainly hope so.”

“Hopefully he’ll be more careful about who he chooses as his friends.”

Hélène almost choked on her pasta, but she hid it well. “Oh?”

Vasily frowned. “Did you ever meet the Rostov girl?”

“Once,” she said carefully. “She seemed nice enough.”

“Your brother could stand to learn a thing or two from you about acceptable company.”

“Nobody ever accused Anatole of being a fast learner.”

Vasily cracked a smile at that. “And how is Pierre doing?”

“Oh, him? He’s alright, I think. We aren’t seeing each other anymore.”

“T’ve sorry to hear that,” he said, furrowing his brow. “I was quite fond of Pierre.”

Hélène shrugged. “We’re on okay terms. It’s fine.”

Vasily looked mildly hurt. “When did this happen?”

“About a month ago.”

“You didn’t think to tell me?”

“We haven’t spoken in a while. I didn’t think it was that important. Especially when compared to…the other things that have happened.”

“I see,” he said quietly. “It’s my own fault, I suppose. I should call you more often.”

“That would be nice,” she said, marveling at how easily the lie rolled off her tongue. “How long are you staying?”

“I’m not planning on staying long. My flight is next Thursday.”

“So soon? You’re not staying for the holidays?”

Vasily gave her a bittersweet smile. “Business calls, angel. I’m lucky to be able to stay even this
“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Well, when you live a lifestyle like this, certain sacrifices have to be made.” Vasily cleared his throat and bit down a piece of chicken. “So, have you started studying for the LSAT yet?”

“Not yet. I’ve been too busy with school.”

Vasily raised his eyebrows. “You’ll need to start soon,” he said. “Columbia is difficult to get into. Especially considering that you’re applying from a state school. Had you gone to Duke, it would be less important.”

It was difficult to force a smile through clenched teeth, but she did so anyway. “I have the books. I’ll start over winter break.”

“That’s good to hear. How are your classes?”

“They’re fine.” Hélène took in a deep breath as she straightened her back. “I just submitted my thesis proposal.”

Vasily smiled. “Oh, Elena, I’m so proud of you.”

She was disgusted at how her heart fluttered proudly. All this, everything he had done, and she still craved his approval. “Thank you, Papa.”

“It’s hard to believe you’re almost finished.” He reached over to touch her hand gently. “Where’s my little princess? How have you grown up so fast?”

“I still have another year. I also still have to actually write it.”

“It’ll be over sooner than you realize. And then you’ll be in grad school! I’ll be so excited to see you in the city again.”

“I’m excited too. I’ve missed New York.”

“You’ll need to keep your grades up.”

“I know, Papa.”

“Though I’m sure that won’t be a problem for you. You’ve always had such good self-discipline.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s a shame your brother doesn’t take after you more.” Vasily sighed heavily, and his voice took on a softer, more paternal tone. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t concerned for him. College is a big enough transition, but he doesn’t have your fortitude. I’m worried about what he’ll do when he doesn’t have you to guide him.”

Hélène pursed her lips. She couldn’t deny that she had had the same concerns, but something in his phrasing set her on edge. Such a stark contrast to his earlier coldness. Nothing good ever happened when Vasily Kuragin tried to sound pleasant. “I think he’ll be okay,” she said carefully. “He’s getting more independent.”

“Considering recent events, Elena, I’m not so sure about that.” Hélène looked away and Vasily sighed again. “It’s not your fault, princess. I don’t blame you at all. It’s taken me a long time to
realize, but I think Anatole’s issues are a more pressing matter than I thought initially.”

“He doesn’t have issues, Papa,” she murmured.

Vasily ignored her. “I know he’s never been fond of school, but this is bordering on dangerous. This could have repercussions on his college admissions, on his career, on his future, even.”

Hélène bit her tongue before she could say anything.

“It’s time we made some changes. I don’t know how much your brother has told you about what we discussed.”

She straightened her back on instinct, pulling her shoulders back and her neck upright. “Not much.”

“Our current arrangement is not working. Anatole is clearly in need of more discipline, more than I’m capable of giving him when I’m not here. More than you”—here, he turned to fix her with a pointed stare—“are willing to give him.”

Hélène frowned. “Are you talking about…moving back here?”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, given my current career position.”

“Then what do you mean?”

Vasily placed a glossy brochure on the table and slid it across to her. “Kutuzov’s Academy. It’s a boarding school for boys like Anatole.”

“Yes like Anatole”? she said, frowning, and speared a piece of chicken on the end of her fork.

“Troubled young men, Elena. Anatole needs a place with structure and character development. He’ll be much better off for having attended.”

Hélène turned the pamphlet over in her hands. The photos seemed pleasant enough—smiling teenage boys, a beautiful ranch house surrounded by grassy fields and rivers and lakes. “Where is this place?”

“It’s in Florida,” said Vasily, and her breath caught in her throat.

“That’s far away.”

“The distance will be good for him. He needs to learn how to function without you.”

Something cold and heavy sank its claws into Hélène’s stomach. She felt her pulse begin to thrum frantically, felt her knees go slack beneath the table. “Is that…is that really necessary, though?”

“It’s the best option for all three of us,” he said. “I’ll have ease of mind knowing that Anatole will be receiving the structure he needs, and you won’t have to worry about looking after him while you’re in school.”

“I don’t mind looking after him,” she said quickly. “He’s my little brother. I love him.”

“Lenochka, princess, you don’t have to defend him. I know it’s difficult, but sometimes you need to do what’s best for those you love, even if it upsets you.”

Hélène swallowed down a wash of guilt along with her last mouthful of pasta. “But is this really what’s best for him?”
Vasily reached over to give her hand a squeeze. “I’m his father, sweetheart. I’m doing this because I know it’s what’s best for him.”

“I just…” She scanned her eyes over the papers again. “It’s so far away, though. Tolya’s never been away from home before, he’s never been without me, and I—”

“Enough, Elena. This discussion is over.”

Hélène bit her lip and she deflated with a sigh. “Sorry, Papa.”

Vasily sat back in his seat. “I’m telling you this because I know you’re mature. Much more so than your brother. Which is why I know you won’t make this difficult for him.”

“Of course not,” she said as smoothly as she possibly could with a lump in her throat and trembling hands.

“Good girl.” And with that, he stood up and began to gather the plates off the table.

“Do you want me to wash?” she said.

“I’ll take care of it, princess. You look like you could use some rest.”

Hélène leaned over and kissed his cheek, biting down the knot of nausea and dread that had risen in her stomach. “Thank you, Papa. That was delicious.”

“You’re welcome,” said Vasily. “Get some sleep, Elena. And check on your brother, would you? I heard there was a stomach bug going around at the school. If he’s still feeling nauseous, get him a basin from the bathroom. I don’t want to have to come upstairs tonight to clean if he gets sick.”

When Hélène arrived upstairs, Anatole was waiting for her in her room. He had changed into a pair of pyjamas and a bathrobe, and his hair was damp.

“Sorry it took so long,” she whispered. “Papa wanted to talk.”

Anatole sighed. “He told you?”

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t—”

“Please,” he said quickly. “Not that. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Oh, we won’t talk about it. Can I look at your cheek?” Anatole bit his lip and she squeezed his hand. “Please, I just want to try to help. Promise.”

“Oh, Toto,” she murmured, and folded her arms around him. She held onto him tightly, as if she were afraid he would slip away and disappear if she let go. “I’m so sorry.”
He frowned into her shoulder. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about.”

“I should have done something. I could have said something to him.”

Anatole gave her a small, sad smile. “What would you have said?”

Hélène laughed shakily. “I would have told him to go shove it.”

“You wouldn’t have.” There was no malice in his voice—it was as if he was stating a fact, and it hurt far more than it should have.

Hélène went cold. “What did he say to you?”

“Oh, the usual. That I give the family a bad name. That I embarrassed him. That I should learn to be more like you and Ippolit.”

“You know that’s not true, Toto.”

Anatole shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Does it hurt?”

He shook his head. “I’m beyond that right now. I’m just done, Lena. I’m done with all this.”

“We’ll cover it up” she said and patted his cheek. “You won’t know the difference.”

Anatole nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Hélène repeated. “Where’s the concealer?”

“Backpack.”

Hélène frowned as she retrieved it. “You’re nearly out.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t had to use it in a long time.” His face crumpled at that. “I don’t want to have to use it again.”

“I know, Tolya, I know.”

“No, I mean it this time,” he said.

“You know how Papa is,” she said quietly. “He’ll be gone in a few days and then he probably won’t be back for another month at least.”

Anatole exhaled loudly at that and raked a hand through his hair. “Where am I gonna go while he’s here?”

“Just stay in your room, stay out of his way. I’ll try to keep you out of the house when I don’t have class.”

“You don’t understand.” Hélène opened her mouth to argue but Anatole held up a hand to stop her. “You don’t, Lena.” He gave her a dry smile. “You’re the good one.”

Hélène couldn’t help the giggle that bubbled out of her at that as she gently dabbed concealer on his cheek. “Shows what he knows. Careful, close your eyes. I don’t want to get any in your—”

“It’s alright,” he said. Hélène began to blend it it out with her fingertip, smoothing it into his skin.
“How’s it looking?”

She twisted her mouth to the side. It wasn’t perfect. She could still see a faint purple shadow and the swelling hadn’t fully gone down, but saying that would probably only upset him even more, so instead she said, “It looks good.”

Anatole lightly touched a fingertip to the side of his face. “If you saw me in the street—like, if you didn’t know me, if you’d never seen me before—would you know—?"

“No, I wouldn’t know,” she said, running a hand through his hair. “Promise.”

He grinned at that, and Hélène pressed a kiss to his forehead. “Thanks.”

“Anytime.”

His smile sagged. “We’re getting too good at this.”

“I know.”

“Papa’s a complete asshole.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“I could be in New York right now,” he said distantly. “I could be there with Natalie and I’d never have to see his face again.”

Hélène sighed. “Anatole…”

“I know, I know, it was a stupid plan. But it was a nice idea.”

“So this wasn’t entirely about Natasha, was it?” she asked quietly.

Anatole shrugged. “A lot of it was about her. At least, like, forty-five percent.”

“Toto…”

“There are too many bad memories here.”

Hélène sighed again. She felt dead-tired suddenly, right down to her bones, and it was more than tempting to sink into the bed and fall asleep right then and there.

“Can I stay here tonight?”

Hélène looked up. “Of course. Grab your duvet. You can crash on the floor.”

Anatole nodded and padded off down the hall to his room. A few moments later he came back in, trailing his quilt behind him, and spread it out on her carpet. Hélène gave him some time to settle in before she turned to him and asked, “What did Papa tell you about the school?”

Anatole shrugged. “That it would be a good change for me. That I need some structure and discipline in my life.” His face crumpled. “That I’ll probably be leaving within a week.”

“Shit,” she muttered, her heart plummetsing to her toes. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He stared at his feet miserably. “You were already really upset. I didn’t want to make things worse. I’m sorry.”
“You don’t need to apologize.”

“You need to,” he whispered. Hélène swallowed past the lump in her throat and reached over to hold his hand. “I might be okay. We don’t know.”

“Can you talk to him?” Anatole said in a small voice. “Please?”

“It’s not going to do anything. You know that. I’ve never been able to change his mind.”

“Please, Lena, will you just try?”

“It’s a waste of time. And it’ll just make him angry.”

Anatole sighed and rolled over onto his back, staring at the ceiling. “Alright,” he murmured. “I get it. I’m sorry.”

Hélène’s heart sank a little further. “Toto…”

“Forget it.” He shook his head, closed his eyes, and drew the duvet under his chin. “I’m just gonna try get some sleep now.”

“Okay,” she whispered. “Goodnight.”

Anatole didn’t respond.

‘Love you,’ she tried to say, but the words caught in her throat before she could get them out. Anatole didn’t look like he was listening anyway. He turned over onto his side, facing away from her, and Hélène let out a shaky breath and wrapped her arms around herself. She wasn’t going to sleep tonight. That much was obvious.

The house was dead silent. No creaking floorboards, no muffled conversation, no music playing behind closed doors, no clock ticking, no phone buzzing, no tap running, not even the sound of Vasily padding about downstairs. It set her on edge. She wondered how much quieter it would be here would be without Anatole in it. How lonely she would be without him around. He had been a constant in her life for as long as she could remember, so why hadn’t she fought harder for him?

And then there came the soul-crushing realization that she had been absolutely spineless, that she had let Vasily walk all over her like a goddamn doormat, just like she always had. Just like Ippolit always did. That was it—she was behaving like Ippolit. Spineless, cowardly Ippolit, who would’ve jumped off a bridge if Vasily told him to. She thought back to the dinner conversation and cringed. What the hell had she just agreed to? Why the hell had she agreed at all? She had been nice, pleasant, while Anatole had cowered upstairs.

She should have stayed at Pierre’s apartment, she thought bitterly. No, screw that—she should have taken Anatole and driven off to a motel somewhere far away. Bringing him back here had been a mistake, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

“No,” she thought. Dammit—there is something I can do.

“I’ll testify,” she said suddenly, before she could lose her nerve.

Hélène heard the blankets on the floor shift as Anatole squirmed and sat upright. “Huh?”

“We can call up a lawyer and I’ll help you file for emancipation. We’re gonna fix this, and I’m
gonna help you.”

Anatole looked confused for a moment, and then disbelieving. “Are you serious?”

“I’m dead serious. We’ll figure this out.”

Before she could even open her mouth to say anything else, Anatole had flung his skinny arms around her neck and wrapped her in a crushing hug. “Oh, God, thank you, Lena! Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you—!”

“Oh, Tolya,” she murmured, stroking his hair. “You don’t have to thank me for this. I should’ve done it long ago.”

Anatole’s cheeks were flushed. “What do you think they’ll say? Should we call them now and leave a message or—?”

“Well, right now, we’re going to go to sleep and get a good night’s rest,” she said sternly. “We can’t do anything tonight, but we’ll call first thing tomorrow, I promise.”

The light in his eyes dimmed a little at that. “Are you sure?”

“Promise.”

“Okay.” He burrowed back under his sheets, reaching up to squeeze her hand. “Love you, Lena.”

“Love you too, Toto.”

Hélène lay there awake, long after he had fallen asleep. She listened to his breathing and stared at the wall, terrified and overwhelmed and hoping that if she wished it hard enough, she would never have to leave this moment and everything would be perfectly fine.

Pierre almost did a double-take when he saw Natasha standing on the porch of Marya Dmitrievna’s house the next afternoon. She had grown a good few inches since he had last seen her in Seattle, but you could spot a Rostov from a mile away, and four years hadn’t changed the charming tilt of her eyebrows or her stubborn nose or the way she carried herself with an odd yet endearing mixture of whimsy and worry.

“Natasha?” he called as he came trudging up the front lawn. The second car parked in the driveway must have been hers, then—the one that was neither his nor Marya’s. “What are you doing here?”

Natasha startled. “Oh! I’m sorry, who—Pierre?”

“Long time, no see,” he said. “Nice to see you again.”

“It’s been a while. I didn’t know you would be coming over,” she said, blushing vibrantly.

Pierre fiddled with his glasses self-consciously. “I didn’t really either,” he said. “Marya called me last night and asked me to come clean her gutters.”

“Ah.”

“And you?”
Natasha looked down at her feet. He hadn’t noticed it until now, but she was holding a large brown paper bag in her hands. “My parents wanted me to bring some wine over.”

“Oh, okay.”

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence. Pierre debated taking a seat next to Natasha on the porch bench, but it was clear that she didn’t want to speak to him anymore. Luckily, he was spared from further contemplation when Marya opened the door for them not even a moment later. It didn’t escape Pierre’s notice how Natasha shrank back in on herself, drawing the lapels of her coat more tightly around her shoulders.

“Pierre,” she said, and stepped forwards to kiss his cheek. “Come in, darling, it’s freezing outside.” Her eyes flicked over to Natasha. “And Natalya. What a lovely surprise.”

Natasha gave her a tight smile and handed Marya the brown bag with a quiet, “Hi, Marya.”

“What might this be?”

“Just a gift,” she said, flushing. “From me and my parents. For all the trouble with last week. I wanted to come over to properly apologize for—”

“How nice. Well, come inside, both of you, before we all catch our deaths out here.”

Marya beckoned them into the living room. Her house was stuffy and cramped, but there was an undeniable feeling of elegance in every doily and curtain and lamp and rug. She had them sit on the giant, overly-plush couch crammed against the wall between two side tables and an assorted medley of potted plants, while she sank into the armchair across from the coffee table, where she placed the bottle of wine and left it unopened.

“It’s been too long since I’ve seen you,” she said pointedly to Pierre. “Are you well? You look like you haven’t had a proper meal in a year.”


“Have you been eating right? Sleeping well?”

Pierre gave her a tired smile. “Trying my best. I’ve been very busy lately.”

Marya clucked. “You need to make more time for personal care. And for relationships. I don’t imagine Hélène is very happy with how you’re treating yourself.”

Natasha’s head shot up at that.

“Hélène and I are no longer together,” he said bashfully.

Marya raised her eyebrows. “How disappointing,” she said, not sounding disappointed in the slightest. “Probably for the best.” And then: “Is the heating in your apartment still not working?”

Pierre rubbed the back of his neck. He didn’t even remember telling her that, and he vaguely wondered how she had heard about it, before deciding that it was easier not to question it. “Yeah, but the repair crew should be coming in sometime later this week, and—”

“You can just stay here until it’s fixed, then,” she said, steamrolling right over him as she always did when she had a point to make. “I have a guest room. You’re more than welcome.”

“Marya, really, I can’t—”
“Pyotr Kirillovich,” she said sternly, but with a playful twinkle in her eye, “didn’t your mother teach you better than to refuse hospitality? I’ve said that you’re more than welcome and you are.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said meekly.

Marya looked very pleased with herself. “That’s a good boy. Now, I’ll go put the kettle on, and dinner should be ready in ten or so minutes. Make yourselves useful while I finish up, would you? You can begin by tidying up in here.”

Pierre and Natasha nodded in silent unison.

“Good,” Marya said, satisfied. “Are you alright, Natalya? You look absolutely distraught. Is cleaning that big a hassle for you?”

“No,” Natasha muttered.

“Alright, then. I’ll call when the food’s ready.”

With that, she swept out of the room, leaving Natasha and Pierre sitting there in awkward silence.

“How have you been?”

Natasha shrugged, keeping her back turned to him. “Fine.”

Pierre pushed his glasses up his nose. “Um, I really don’t mean to intrude or pry, but Anatole mentioned that something happened with you. At the school, I think.”

Natasha whipped around. “You’ve heard from Anatole?”

Pierre floundered, wondering how best to answer. “Kind of.”

Natasha sank onto the couch with a huff. “What did he say?”

“Not much. And nothing specific.”

“I think he’s mad at me,” she said, and smoothed her hands over the doily on the backrest. “He won’t answer any of my calls or messages. I don’t blame him. It was my fault that everything went to shit.” Her eyes widened suddenly, and she clapped a hand over her mouth. “I’m sorry. I don’t usually swear a lot, and my godmother hates cursing and—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Pierre said. “I’m not offended.”

Natasha sighed. “I’m sorry. I’ve just got a lot running through my head right now. First I blew it with Andrei, and now I’ve blown it with Anatole too.”

“The situation with Anatole is…it’s more complicated than you think. It’s not all on you.”

Natasha shook her head. “You don’t understand. I was the one who blew our cover. It was so dumb, too. I stupidly left my phone out and Sonya saw all our messages, and then during the disciplinary hearing I tried to keep quiet but Marya gave me that scary look of hers and I just spilled my guts.”

“What were you two even trying to do?”

She pressed her lips together into a thin line, and her cheeks flushed a dark pink. “We were going to run away,” she whispered. “We just wanted to be together.”
“Oh, Natasha,” he sighed.

“I know how stupid it was,” she snapped. “In case you were going to lecture me. I’ve already heard it a million times.”

“I’m not gonna lecture you.” Natasha shot him a skeptical look and Pierre held up his hands in mock-surrender. “Seriously, I’m in no position to judge. I’ve done a lot of seriously dumb shit. What you—what you and Anatole—tried to do, well, it’s not all that far a stretch from what his sister and I used to get up to. And we were older than you two then, for crying out loud.”

“What do you mean?”

Pierre’s smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes behind his glasses. “It’s funny now, looking back, but it wasn’t really funny at all, then. Hélène and I had been dating for a bit, and we were at a party her dad was hosting, and he had invited a politician she, well, neither of us could stand him, but her especially—and she made a fake pregnancy announcement in the middle of her dad’s speech.”

Natasha’s head shot upright. “Oh my God. I think Anatole’s told me a bit of this one.”

“Of course he has,” Pierre huffed. “Did he tell you what happened after?”

“Someone proposed to someone and then they got sham-hitched.”

“Oh, no,” he said, “the marriage was legitimate. The divorce was, too.”

Natasha gawked disbelievingly. “Are you serious? So he didn’t make that up?”

“Unfortunately not.” Pierre folded his hands in his lap and turned to face her again. “So, there you have it. What you did was dumb, but what we did was objectively a lot dumber. And we turned out alright, for the most part. And you will too.”

“It’s not me I’m concerned about,” she said. “It’s everyone around me. Everyone I’ve hurt with my dumbness.” She shot him a curious look. “Do you and Andrei still keep in touch, by any chance?”

“On occasion.”

Natasha took in a deep, shuddering breath. “Did he…did he talk to you about this?”

“Andrei always talked about you,” Pierre said quietly. “He really cared about you.”

Natasha’s eyes filled with tears and she wrapped her arms around herself. “I know. Will you tell him I’m sorry? For everything that I said—well, for everything I didn’t say—to him.”

Pierre sighed. “Natasha, I don’t think he’s interested in getting back together with you.”

“No, that’s not what I meant,” she said. “I know that’s all over. I’ve blown any chance I have with him.” When she turned to face Pierre again, her face was so sad and pitiful he found himself on the verge of tears. “I just want him to know how sorry I am. I was awful to him, Pierre, and I regret it so much now. Will you tell him that?”

“Of course. Of course I will.”

Natasha nodded. “Thank you. You’re a good friend.”

“I just need to know…why?”
She blinked rapidly, her eyelids fluttering like the wings of a butterfly. Pierre could see tears clinging to her lashes. “What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“Why would you do this? You have family, friends who care about you—”

“And Andrei,” Natasha finished quietly.


“I was lonely,” she said. “He made me feel…oh God, I don’t even know anymore. I’m such an idiot.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true. I’ve ruined everything,” she moaned.

“You have so much potential, so much to give. Please, be kind to yourself.”

Natasha began to cry at that. Pierre leaned forwards in alarm as she cradled her head in her hands, her shoulders shaking and heaving.

“Oh my God,” he said. “I’m so sorry, did I—did I say something wrong?”

She sucked in a deep breath and sat up a little straighter. Her eyes were red and overflowing with tears, yet the hint of a smile curled the corners of her lips. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“You’re a good person, Natasha,” he said. “How could anyone not be nice to you?”

“I’m not a good person. A good person wouldn’t have done this to Andrei.”

Pierre laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. “You shouldn’t judge a person for their one-offs. You can’t. We’re all fools, we’re all idiots stumbling around and trying to make it through life intact, and sometimes we screw up even when we don’t mean to.”

“Then what’s the point?” she said. “If we’re all just awful idiots, what’s the point? If we’re all just going to keep going on being horrible to each other?”

“It’s what you make of it. And I think if you’ve even brightened someone’s life for one day, if you’ve made them smile or helped them through a tough time, then that’s worth it. And God knows you’ve brightened every life you’ve ever touched, Natasha.” She sniffed and wiped her nose on the back of her hand. Pierre handed her a box of tissues. “You’re going to be fine,” he said. “I promise.”

“God, I hope so.”

“You have people who care deeply about you,” he said. “Your parents, your godmother, your cousin. I know you two were close. They’ll help you.”

“I’m not so sure of that,” she sighed. “Sonya won’t even talk to me anymore.”

“Maybe it’s time to try apologize and make amends, then,” he said softly.

Natasha’s shoulders drooped. “I think it’s too late for that.”

“It might be. It might not be. But I think it’s worth the effort.”
She looked up at him again, unsure but hopeful. “You think?”

Pierre shrugged. “I think so. You’ll never know until you try. If your friendship is worth the risk, I think you should talk to her.”

“I was so terrible to her,” Natasha said. “I don’t think she wants anything to do with me.”

“So you did something terrible, and you were wrong. Everyone’s done that at some point. That doesn’t mean you don’t deserve forgiveness.”

Natasha’s eyes began to tear up, but she didn’t look nearly as distraught anymore. If anything, she looked relieved. “Thanks,” she said. “I think I really needed to hear that.”

“I’m glad I could help. Don’t sweat it. Everything’s gonna be perfectly fine.”

Natasha allowed herself a real smile. “You think so?”

Pierre smiled too, softly and sweetly and genuinely, and said, “I know so.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! We <3 comments and kudos and all of y'all for the support!
Hélène’s heart sank as her eyes landed on the familiar black sedan parked in the driveway. Damn it all to hell. She had been so careful, practically living at the library for the past week, only coming home during the day to periodically check on Anatole and shower. Vasily was supposed to be long gone by now. He never stayed longer than a few days, never longer than absolutely necessary.

Well, all she could do now was improvise.

Hélène slid her phone out of her pocket and into her bag as she trudged up to the porch and stepped through the doorway. The house was silent when she entered, until she rounded the corner to the main hallway and heard a firm, “Hello, Elena.”

Hélène stopped dead in her tracks. Her head turned, as if moved by clockwork, to the sound of the voice. Vasily was sitting at the dining room table, clad in the three-piece business suit he only wore to meetings and funerals, a look of polite indifference plastered to his face.

Whether this would turn into a meeting or a funeral would hinge entirely on how she conducted herself. She sucked in a sharp breath, steeling her nerves, and stepped into the room.

“Papa,” she said primly. “It’s nice to see you.”

Vasily gestured to the chair across from him. “Have a seat,” he said.

Hélène wiped her face blank and corrected her posture, using her composure as a shield. Talking with her father had always been like a chess game. She’d long since learned how to play, thinking out her moves ahead of time, watching for pitfalls and traps, leaving him no ammunition to use against her.

“Is there something wrong?” she asked, and almost winced at her poor word choice.
Don’t say wrong, she told herself. Nothing is wrong.

Vasily must have picked up on her gaffe, because he leaned forwards and said, “Why would anything be wrong, sweetheart?”

Hélène forced herself not to flinch. “Nothing. I just thought you would’ve left by now.”

“So did I.” His face softened, just a tad, and he offered her his hand. She accepted it without a word. “You and I have always been close, Elena, haven’t we?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So why don’t you tell me,” he began, tightening his grasp on her, “why I received a subpoena summoning me to family court.”

She swallowed heavily. Her heart pounded against the inside of her ribcage with all the force of a sledgehammer. Surely he could feel the way her hand was trembling, see how her pupils were dilated, hear the nervous grinding of her teeth.

“I-I don’t know, Papa,” she said. Damn it all to hell, she had stuttered. Her mask was slipping. She fought violently to pull her composure back together. “I’m sure it must have just been a misunderstanding.”

Vasily’s eyes narrowed. “A misunderstanding.”

“Yes,” she said. The key to this was certainty and concision. He had no reason to believe that she was being untruthful, she reminded herself, and if she didn’t give him an opportunity to catch her in a lie, everything would be fine.

“That’s odd, then,” he said drily, “that they were able to detail your brother’s injury so specifically.”

Before she could even register it, her hand had begun to migrate to her hair by sheer force of habit.

Vasily sighed and let go of her. “You’ve never been a very good liar, Elena.” He gestured to the ringlet she was absently worrying between her index and middle fingers. “We all have our tells, but it’s important to learn how to hide them.”

A wave of nausea washed over her, but she kept her face cool and calm. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t play ignorant. It’s unbecoming.”

Hélène self-consciously folded her hands in her lap, silent, and Vasily raised his eyebrows.

“Someone alleged that I was to blame for your brother’s unfortunate accident. I believe that it was you.”

She swallowed. “I don’t know what would give you that idea, Papa.”

Not a lie.

“This is serious, Elena. I’m not in the mood for games. Answer me honestly. Did you testify against me?”

“Papa, really—”
“Yes or no.” When Hélène didn’t respond, he shook his head. “Loyalty is important, princess. It’s the only thing that matters, at the end of the day. A man can be driven and intelligent, but if he isn’t loyal, he isn’t worth anything. Do you understand?”

How often, she wondered, had she heard this speech? She nodded blankly, unwilling to incriminate herself any more than she already had.

“How often, she wondered, had she heard this speech? She nodded blankly, unwilling to incriminate herself any more than she already had.

“Answer me when I’m speaking to you.”

“Answer me when I’m speaking to you.”

“Good. In business, loyalty is important, but in family, it is everything. That means that I expect you to respect me and our family.” He stared at her with cool disregard. “I refuse to be made a fool of by my own daughter.”

Hélène’s eyelids fluttered. “I never meant—”

“What you mean and what you do are two very separate things.”

“But, Papa, I didn’t—”

There was the briefest flash of anger in Vasily’s eyes, and his voice went hard. “Stop lying to me, Elena. Now, answer the question. Did you testify against me?”

Hélène lifted her chin. Her chest contracted painfully with every heartbeat. “I did.”

Vasily sat back in his seat, his face once more impassive. He was silent for a long while. It was somehow worse than the scolding.

“I see,” he said finally.

“Are you angry with me?”

“I expected better of you. But I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. Your judgement has always been flawed where Anatole is concerned.”

She took in a shaky breath. “Where is he?”

“CPS has taken him into custody before the trial.” He slammed his hand down on the table, making Hélène jump. “The trial, Elena. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

“No, I never meant for that to happen, I just—”

“No, I never meant for that to happen, I just—”

“Then what the hell did you think you were doing?”

She kept her eyes downcast, studiously avoiding his gaze.

“Elena,” he said, slowly and coolly, “they could take him away. They could put him into foster care and we might never get him back. Is that what you want to happen?”

Nobody was able to make Hélène feel like a helpless little girl as easily as Vasily could. She felt hot, burning tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, though she tried to blink them away. “You hurt him, Papa,” she said, her voice so small and terrified and choked-off that it only frightened her even more.

“It isn’t your place to criticize how I choose to discipline my children.”
“So you admit that you did it?”

“Elena!”

“He was so scared,” she said. “He begged me, and I didn’t know what else to do. It’s not fair, Papa. He shouldn’t be frightened to come home.”

Vasily’s face hardened for a fraction of a second, and then seemed to collapse in on itself as he sighed. “Oh, my sweet girl,” he murmured, and Hélène let out a sob as the tears finally began to spill.

He pulled her into a tight embrace, and she relaxed into him and the familiar warmth of his arms and the way he smelled faintly of cologne, his solid strength and the brush of his stubble against her forehead. It was as if she was twenty years younger and two thousand miles away.

“My beautiful, sweet little girl. There’s so much you still don’t understand.”

“I’m not little anymore, Papa,” she said, struggling for a firm tone.

Vasily gently wiped away her tears with one thumb, squeezing her hand. “But you’ll always be my little princess, you know that?” He ran his hands through Hélène’s hair, just as he used to do on school mornings when she was a little girl, and the memory was more tender and comforting than she knew it should have been. “You’ve always been my favourite,” he murmured. “My Elena, my perfect angel.”

“Papa…”

“Which is why I know that you’ll recant your testimony and put this whole affair to rest. I know you don’t want to disappoint me.”

Hélène’s heart sank to the pit of her stomach. “Recant?”

Vasily nodded. “This doesn’t have to end in disaster. Once you clear up the situation, we can put this all behind us and go on being a family again.” Hélène frowned and Vasily gently tucked a dark curl behind her ear. “Think about it, princess. Do you really want to be the reason this family falls apart?”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Vasily held up a hand, cutting her off.

“I’ve always seen so much potential in you, Elena. So much of myself. I don’t want you to see you continue to squander that potential. You give so much of yourself to people who don’t deserve you. I know it’s tempting, but it isn’t sustainable.”

Hélène blinked. “Don’t deserve me?”

“You’re special, princess. You need to be more selective about who you share your gifts with.”

She furrowed her brow. “If you’re talking about Anatole…”

“Let me deal with him,” he said smoothly. “You’ve done so much for the family already. You need someone to take care of you, too.”

“But Anatole still needs me. I have to take care of him.”

“He isn’t worth your time, sweetheart.”
Hélène felt herself go cold, as if something inside of her had been switched off. “Papa.”

“It isn’t his fault or yours. Some people are just beyond our help. You can only do so much, Elena, and you’ll spend your whole life learning that if you don’t learn it now.”

Hélène clenched her hands into fists. “Why do you hate him?” she said. “What did he ever do to you to make you treat him this way?”

“Elena—”

“You don’t know him, Papa,” she said desperately. “This is too much for him. Maybe you think that you’re making him better, but you aren’t.”

“Enough, Elena,” he ordered.

She fell silent.

Vasily sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Just as stubborn as your mother. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

“This isn’t about Mom,” Hélène said, probably a little more sharply than she normally would have.

“It is,” he snapped. “Anatole would never have tried to pull off a stunt like this if he was more like you. More like us. We’re sensible, you and I, but they’ve always been more ruled by their emotions.”

“Papa…” Hélène said, flabbergasted. “That makes no sense.”

“When I see you acting the way you do, dressing the way you do, when I see her in you, it frightens me. The way you behave…that’s how women get hurt.”

She ground her teeth together. “Papa—”

“I see her in Anatole, too. Too much of her.” He shook his head disapprovingly. “And I don’t want him to end up like that. Do you see now why I have to be firm with him?”

“Then I won’t let it happen,” she said. The words left a numb feeling in her mouth. “But I can’t let you keep treating him like—”

“Don’t talk back to me.” He raised a hand, and Hélène instinctively shied away. He stared at her for a second, before he slowly dropped his arm. “I have tolerated you and your brother’s insolence for far too long. That stops now.”

Vasily began to move away from the table. He halted in his tracks when Hélène stood up. “Haven’t I been a good enough daughter?” she said. “Haven’t I done everything you’ve ever asked of me? I don’t understand. What more do you want me to do?”

“Show me that you can be loyal when it matters. Recant, Elena.”

“But—”

“This isn’t a debate.”

She squared her shoulders. “No. I won’t.”

Vasily fixed her with an almost disbelieving look. “I beg your pardon.”
She took in a deep breath. “I didn’t want to testify, but I felt like I had to. Don’t you care at all that I felt that way?”

“No.” He stepped back towards Hélène, towering over her, and she hated how she shrank in on herself on instinct. “You are nothing but a spoiled, thoughtless little girl. I couldn’t care less about your feelings on a matter that doesn’t concern you.”

Hélène’s cold shock melted away into a boiling fury, and she clenched her fists so tightly that her nails drew blood from her palms. *Stand tall,* she told herself. Vasily’s words, the words he had repeated so many times to her as a child, echoed through her mind: *What does an animal do when it’s backed into a corner? It fights the hell back.*

“Then why are you even here?” she snapped.

“Because I care about this family,” he hissed. “And I will not have it fall apart because of you.”

Hélène shook her head slowly. “What kind of family would that be? Is that really what you want? Is it what *Mom* would want?”

“There are a lot of things in life that you’re still too young to understand.”

“Evidently, the same can be said for you.”

Vasily’s eyes flashed dangerously. “I don’t want to hear any more of your back-talk. If you can’t conduct yourself in a mature and responsible manner, then—”

“What are you going to do? Send me to my room? I’m a grown woman, Papa, not a little girl.”

“Young lady, this is my house.”

“I couldn’t tell,” Hélène growled. “You’re never here.”

She expected him to snap back at her, but he fell silent, pressing his mouth into a hard, grim line. “The life I’ve made for you and your brothers,” he said coolly, “comes with sacrifices. I had hoped you were mature enough to understand that by now. I see now that I was wrong.”

“Are you calling me ungrateful?”

“You’ve certainly been acting like it.”

Hélène’s breath left her. “Papa, I’ve given up so much.”

Vasily scoffed. “I wouldn’t know it, not with the way you behave. The partying. The drinking.” He paused, giving her skirt and boots a dismissive up-and-down. “The sleeping around.”

She felt her whole body stiffen. “How did you—?”

“Word gets around. You thought I wouldn’t catch wind of your escapades eventually? Everyone knows the kind of woman you are, Elena. You embarrass me.”

Hélène had nothing to say to that, and Vasily sighed sadly. “I expected better than this. I didn’t raise a slut.”

*Slut.*

Hélène inhaled sharply as the word struck her, somehow more sharp and painful than any blow to
the face. Vasily continued to talk, but all she could hear was the roaring of static in her ears. It wasn’t the first or even the hundredth time she’d had that word volleyed at her, but hearing it from her own father was a new level of insult. She felt the room blur around her, and she squeezed her hands into tight fists as she tried to ground herself.

“And that ridiculous major,” she finally heard him say, once words returned to her. “Women’s Studies? You had a shot at a successful career in business or finance, but you’re going to be dependent on me for the rest of your life if you don’t get your act together. I admit that I haven’t always been a perfect father, and I know we went through a rough patch after your mother left us, but despite my best efforts, you’re screwups, the lot of you.”

“If we’re screwups,” she said, mustering every ounce of courage she could summon and struggling to keep her voice level, “then it’s because you made us this way.”

“Elena, listen—”

“No!” she erupted. “You listen to me, for once in your life! I was a child and Mom was gone and you were gone and you didn’t care because you never have cared. Do you realize how overwhelming and terrifying it was to have someone so dependent on me? Maybe I did raise a screw-up, but at least I raised him at all, and that’s more than you’ll ever be able to say.” Her lip curled in disgust. “It’s your own fault he’s never had a proper childhood. That he was so desperate to leave. I wasn’t ready to look after him, Papa. What were you thinking?”

“Everything I do,” he said softly, dangerously, “I do for you and your brothers.”

“Everything? Like dragging us all the way across the country to the middle of nowhere? And then leaving us here on our own?”

“The only reason we moved was because of you,” he said. She flinched. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I’m talking about, Elena. Your little outbursts, your…issues. The way you were behaving, it was a wonder we didn’t leave sooner.”

Her jaw went stiff as she struggled for words. “I was depressed.”

“You were out of control.”

“If being sick makes me out of control, then what does that make you?” she said. “You hit my little brother and you don’t feel any regret for it at all, do you?”

“I don’t,” he said softly. “I’m making you and your brothers the strongest possible versions of yourselves.”

“But we aren’t stronger. Anatole’s terrified of you and I hate what you’ve done to us.”

Vasily’s mask faltered for only a second. “You and I have always been close. Closer than I’ve been with either of your brothers,” he said, clearly fighting to keep his tone level, “but that can change very quickly.”

“So what, you’ll hurt me? Treat me the way you treat Anatole?”

“Careful, Elena,” he snapped.
“It’s no wonder Ippolit left the second he could. If it wasn’t for Tolya, I’d walk out of this house right now and never look back.”

Vasily fell silent, his face a blank slate, and Hélène felt her fury building as he remained entirely impassive and unreadable. It was maddening how easily he slipped into this cool demeanour, a skill she had so desperately admired and envied when she was younger and more naïve. But now it sent anger coursing through her veins at the injustice of the whole situation, and she wondered how a man this cold to the touch could be so easily provoked to violence. What must Anatole have endured, she thought, living with this monster of a man?

Vasily cracked, then, just a slight tilt to the eyebrow. “You really feel that way? After everything I have done for you?”

Hélène nodded slowly, watching as a vein pulsed in his forehead and the muscles of his neck and jaw tightened. He was fighting, she realized. Fighting to maintain his composure. The thought that she had pushed him so close to the edge of breaking sent a small thrill of fear and excitement through her. “I do.”

“Then get out,” he said coolly.

Cold washed over her again. Hélène stared in confusion. “What?”

“I said get out!”

She flinched, despite herself, as he raised his voice to a shout. “But Papa—”

There was no stopping him now. “Out of my house, out of my family, out of my life.”

“Papa, please,” she cried. “You aren’t being rational—”

“OUT!” Vasily slammed his fist into the doorframe and Hélène screamed. She grabbed her bag and made a mad dash for the door, ransacking her purse for her keys.

Vasily didn’t follow her out to the car, but even so, she didn’t waste a second starting the engine and flooring it down the driveway. She drove aimlessly and pulled into the closest parking lot, forcing herself to take deep breaths. The beginning of a panic attack sent her heart racing and her lungs pumping so hard and fast her diaphragm began to ache.

With shaking hands, Hélène took her phone from her bag, unlocked the screen, and pressed Stop Recording.

Marya Dmitrievna would have recognized that red convertible anywhere.

Of course, the garish paint job aside, it wasn’t exactly hard to spot when it was the only car left in the whole parking lot, beside her own. She had left the office early that day, earlier than she normally did, and there was a new episode of her favorite soap opera waiting on her DVR for when she got home. For all intents and purposes, it should have been an easy, obvious decision to get in her car and drive off, but something in her gut compelled her to instead walk towards the convertible.

Marya’s intuition had never been wrong. Not once in her life. There was no reason for now to be any different.
She tapped at the window, raising her eyebrows when she saw who was in the driver’s set. The car she had recognized. She hadn’t remembered exactly who it was that owned it.

“Hélène Kuragina?”

Hélène looked like an absolute wreck. She sniffed loudly when she caught sight of Marya, wiping away the rivulets of mascara and tears that ran down her face with the back of her hand. “Oh, hi, Ms. Dmitrievna,” she said with a smile that was so patently false Marya almost rolled her eyes. “I’m so sorry, am I in the wrong parking lot? I came to pick up Anatole and I was in such a hurry I completely—”

“Miss Kuragina, Anatole has been absent for the past week, as I’m sure you’re well aware.”

Hélène squeezed her eyes shut, taking a moment to collect herself. Her voice was brittle, tear-choked, though she was doing a valiant job of trying to hide it. “Of course. The suspension. I’m sorry, I’ve been so busy with school and my thesis that I forgot—”

“Pardon my French, but spare me the bullshit,” Marya said, and Hélène’s eyes widened, as if she couldn’t believe little old Ms. Dmitrievna had just uttered a swear word. She was going to have to get used to it, if the conversation was to continue any further. “I’m sure you’re very talented at many things, but lying clearly is not one of them.”

Hélène gave her a wry smile. “So I’ve been told.”

Marya leaned against the doorframe. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I really should be heading off now. Anatole’s probably waiting for me.”

“I doubt you want your brother seeing you like this,” Marya said. “And, as you, therefore, have nowhere to be, I’ll ask you again what’s wrong.”

She smiled again, all teeth and no sincerity whatsoever. “I’m afraid it would be a lot easier and faster to tell you what isn’t wrong.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing that it’s a Friday afternoon and I have all the time in the world.” Before Hélène even could open her mouth to protest, Marya had walked around to the passenger door and slid into the seat beside her. “Now then, let’s hear it.”

Hélène glared at Marya when she showed no inclination to leave. “This seems ridiculously inappropriate.”

Marya shrugged. “You’re a grown woman. It’s not like you’re a student here anymore.”

“Then I don’t have to answer to you,” Hélène said and reached over to open the passenger door. “Please, get out of my car.”

“If you don’t want my help, then I’ll have to assume you’re trespassing on school property.”

Hélène pressed her lips into a thin line. “I’m fighting with my boyfriend,” she muttered finally. Marya raised an eyebrow. Between Hélène and Pierre, it was difficult to tell who was worse at lying. “I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to believe me,” she snapped.

“You know,” Marya said coolly, “some people find that talking about what’s bothering them is
Hélène inhaled deeply, her eyelids fluttering, her hands flexing in her lap. “I’m fighting with my father.”

Marya leaned back in her seat. Now, that had some truth in it. “I’m assuming it was about Anatole?” Hélène blinked at her in surprise, and Marya crossed her arms. “I’ve noticed that you’re always the one who drives him to and from school. You’re very invested in him, aren’t you?”

“Of course. He’s my little brother.”

“But it’s more than that, isn’t it?” Hélène pursed her lips. Marya tilted her head with a stern look. “Oh, come on, Hélène. How oblivious do you think I am?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen your father at a single parent event since you graduated. Why is that?” When Hélène didn’t respond, Marya softened. “I know you think I don’t see, but I do. I see that you’re the only one who ever signs his permission slips or health forms. You aren’t his mother, Hélène. So why do you act like it?”

Hélène shrugged. “He needs me,” she said, but her voice caught on the lump in her throat and trailed off, and her face crumpled and her cheeks flushed a garish pink. She was on the verge of bursting into tears again, Marya could see—and on the verge of cracking.

“But why is it always you?”

“Because there’s no one else!” she snapped, finally exploding. “What, do you think I do all of that just for the hell of it? Because I like taking care of him?” She took in a deep breath to collect herself. “My father works hard. He’s a busy man. He…he’s stretched thin.”

“So he leaves you, a teenager, in charge of raising and taking care of your teenage brother?”

“It’s not like that,” she said.

“Then what is it like? Enlighten me. I’m curious.”

“I’m not a teenager,” Hélène snapped. “I’m an adult—”

“Hardly.”

“—and I don’t need you prying—oh, fuck off.”

Now it was Marya who frowned. “What’s wrong, Hélène?”

Hélène sucked in a deep, ragged breath, and after a long moment’s silence, said, “My father hit Anatole for trying to run away,” she said numbly. “He’s been doing it for a while now, but I guess this was just the final straw. And now he’s going to court for it.” She paused, clearly, unsure of what to say next.

“Keep talking,” Marya said. “We have all the time in the world.”

She took in another breath. “This is all my fault. I should have done something sooner. But it was so bad this time.” Marya’s face was impassive, but comfortingly so, and Hélène continued, her voice choked off by tears. “I don’t think I can go home anymore.”
“So you won’t.”

Hélène blinked. “What?”

Marya shrugged. Some may have mistaken the shrug for indifference, but it was far from it. “You’re in a bad situation. It’s probably best to steer clear of it, especially if your father’s been physically violent, as you say.”

Hélène let out a bitter laugh. “You make it sound so easy. Like I have somewhere I can stay. I don’t have anything outside of home. I have no idea what the fuck I’m doing.”

Marya didn’t even flinch at Hélène’s profanity. “You’re a student at the University, right?”

“I am.”

“There’s student housing.”

“Not for me,” she said. “I commute. I stayed home for Anatole. I didn’t—I don’t trust my dad around him. I was supposed to look out for him, to keep an eye on him. That was the plan.” Hélène redirected her gaze towards her feet. “Well, I guess you can see how well that turned out. And I wouldn’t be able to afford it, anyway. Not without my dad paying.”

“So you’ll find a job,” Marya said. “And you’ll start doing things by yourself.”

She wiped her eyes on the heels of her hands. “I’m scared,” she said quietly, almost brokenly. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to Anatole. I don’t know where they’re gonna take him.”

“Who?”

“CPS.”

“Is he somewhere safe?”

“They took him into custody,” she said, nodding. “So I’d hope that’s a ‘yes’. But I haven’t seen him since.”

“Then that isn’t a worry for today.”

Hélène nodded, drawing her arms around herself. “I’m sorry. This isn’t any of your business. I shouldn’t have told you all of this.”

“You wanted to tell me this,” Marya said plainly, as if it were the most simple and obvious thing in the world. “Why else would you come here?”

Hélène glared at her. “I wasn’t exactly seeking out your company.”

Marya scoffed. “Well, I can’t imagine what else you were seeking out, coming back to the school. I’m not angry, Hélène,” she added when Hélène sank back into the seat defeatedly. “In fact, I’m very glad that you did come to me. I’m glad that you felt safe enough to tell me what you have. And I want you to know that you’re going to be alright.”

She sighed. “I don’t know about that.”

Marya rested a hand on her shoulder, a knowing smile curling the corner of her mouth. “You will. I’ve never seen a sixteen-year-old with as much tenacity and... creativity as you.”
Hélène laughed. “God. I was a real terror, wasn’t I? I’m sorry for all of that.”

Marya snorted. “No you aren’t.”

“I’m not.” Hélène frowned, considering Marya thoughtfully. “Why are you doing this?”

“You looked like you needed help. We may have had our differences, Hélène, but I’m not completely heartless.”

“Thank you.”

Marya gave her shoulder a firm squeeze. Her hand was like ice, but it was reassuring all the same. “Come home with me. You look like you need some rest.”

“I couldn’t possibly.”

“You could and you should. Where else are you going to go?”

Hélène bit her lip. “Only for tonight.”

Marya smiled that overly confident smile of hers that seemed to terrify most people. Hélène didn’t even bat an eyelid. “You should plan for a long stay.”

Hélène sighed and crossed her arms. “I suppose you’re right.”

“Excellent,” Marya said, straightening the lapels of her jacket. “You can follow me home. It’s not a far drive from the school. And let’s be quick about it. I’ve got my soap opera on the DVR for tonight. You’re more than welcome to join me—after dinner, of course. I’m making borscht tonight, so you’d better eat up.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank y’all for reading! If you enjoyed, consider leaving a comment or kudos! We love both!
In Which There Is Forgivness, Kind Of

Chapter Summary

Ippolit is trying his best, dammit.

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! We are both busy with life stuff in addition to our OTHER WORKS! If you like our writing, check out 'On the Lam' and 'Of Dust and Dæmons'!

Please be advised that this chapter contains references to child abuse, although nothing graphic.

(The two of us would die for Ippolit Kuragin)

If it was difficult to remember what it had been like living with Ippolit all those years ago, it was even harder to make anything of how it was now.

But, Anatole supposed, it could’ve been worse. Ippolit’s place was spacious and downtown, and it was preferable to any of the other options CPS had presented to him. He had only seen the living room so far, but what he had seen, he liked. The floors here were wooden and not carpeted, the furniture was tasteful and well-coordinated, and even if the walls were painted a boring off-white, the whole affair gave off a distinct feeling of cleanliness and sophistication. And, most importantly, it didn’t feel as sterile as the house. This, he could trust.

Ippolit had excused himself to go run a few errands, the only rule being that he ‘make himself at home’. Anatole sighed. He supposed he could flick through the TV’s channels, but he really wanted his phone. The phone that was probably still locked in Vasily’s desk.

Ippolit’s definition of ‘making oneself at home’ probably didn’t include snooping through every room until there was nothing new left to see, but Anatole’s did, so once the front door clicked shut and Ippolit’s footsteps shuffled along the hallway until he couldn’t hear them anymore, he sprang to his feet and went to rummage through the bookshelves.

Empty. Utterly bare, unless you counted the dust. Bleh. New, too. Ippolit probably hadn’t even unpacked any of his books, and that was assuming he had brought any in the first place.

Forget the living room, then. He had already seen enough of it to have committed it to memory. The front hallway was equally as dull, and the bathroom was nothing to marvel at. When he poked his head into the room closest to the front door, he was greeted with the sight of a counter sprawling with haphazardly unpacked cookware that clearly hadn’t found enough time to make their way to the cupboards. The kitchen table was piled high with cereal boxes and fast food wrappers, clearly used and empty and still covered in grease. Anatole wrinkled his nose in disgust before realizing that there wasn’t a single trash can in the whole room. And it was a boring room, at any rate, and he couldn’t stand the thought of such a mess, so he took off back down the hallway
to the other end of the apartment.

The corridor ended in a three-forked prong: a linen closet, and two bedrooms, only partially furnished, their doors wide open. Ippolit clearly hadn’t lived here for a very long time, and his luggage still lay scattered about the rooms and hallway in duffel bags and cardboard boxes.

On one table in the left-hand bedroom, there was a shoebox, tied shut with several rubber bands, far more battered-looking than anything else Ippolit owned. The corner of the lid had been bashed in, and along the side was a water stain and something scrawled in permanent marker, though the writing had bled in some places into an aged puddle of grey and blue. Photos, it read.

Anatole’s curious hands began to drift over to the box before he even registered that they had moved at all. The rubber bands almost snapped and tore against his fingers as he pried them off. Once he had, he immediately understood why they had been there. The lid sprang open under the force of the papers that had been stacked beneath it, and before he could even set the box aside, they spilled out over the tabletop and onto the floor.

“Shit,” he hissed, and dropped to his knees to re-stack the photographs. He sifted through them, ready to stuff them back in the box and clamp down on the lid with all of his strength until it went shut again, when one caught his eye and refused to let go.

Anatole frowned. The picture had to have been fairly recent, if the length of his hair was anything to go by. Not just fairly—startlingly. In fact, the longer he looked at it, the more sharp the memory behind the photograph became. Junior year. The Les Misérables cast party. It had been the only good photo of the night, because it was the only one that had been taken before he had snuck a beer with some of his friends by the pool and Hélène had insisted on dragging him home early.

Next to it was another photograph he remembered, this one a little less distinctly than the first. Him and Ippolit, in their suits and nice shoes. Hélène in a graduation robe. She was holding the cap in her hands. She had refused to wear it, he remembered now. Had protested that it looked stupid, that it would ruin her hair. Her curls weren’t mussed in the photograph, which must have meant that she had gone through with her threat of not wearing it.

Vasily was there too. Smiling. Proud. He had his arms around the three of them. They looked happy. If you didn’t know them, or if you only looked for a moment, they may have even been mistaken for a normal family.

More photographs, all events Ippolit hadn’t been there for. Birthdays. Confirmations. School photographs. Hélène’s first day of college. Anatole’s school musicals. And then, of course, there were the baby pictures, but these were all on developed film and not gloss paper, which must have meant that they had been taken before they had bought a digital camera. He had to dig almost all the way to the bottom of the box to find them: Hélène giving the camera a big grin; a blonde-haired infant who he could only assume had been himself frowning in concentration as he stacked wooden blocks; a gap-toothed Ippolit, balancing the two of them in his lap; Vasily, less grey, in an old red sweater, reading a book to a young Hélène.

And then.

Anatole’s breath caught in his throat.

“Oh,” he murmured.

He didn’t recognize her at first. He should have—her face was almost a mirror image of his own. Almost. Older, slightly wrinkled around the corners of her eyes. Impish and playful. Her hair was
blonde, a little darker than his, a little grey at the temples, swept back into a neat bun. She was smiling at the camera with all her teeth, though her arms were reaching for something that had been cropped out of the frame, and she looked younger than he had remembered her. The left side of the picture had been smudged with something round and fleshy. Vasily, no doubt, had accidentally put his finger over the lens.

Anatole sucked in a deep breath and shoved the photos back in the box. But there were too many of them and the box was too small, and they swelled out, threatening to spill over again. He hastily placed the lid back on and re-tied the band, replacing it on the table.

Ippolit had been gone for a long while by now. Anatole slid onto the couch and turned on the television, trying his best to assume an unaffected air as the lock turned and Ippolit stepped into the apartment.

He looked even more tired than he remembered, which was really saying something. Tired, and just the slightest bit guilty, though it was difficult to tell if that was genuine guilt or just his natural facial expression—Hélène may have inherited Vasily’s resting bitch face, but Ippolit just looked sad all the time.

“Sorry I’m late, buddy,” he said as he shucked off his coat and hung it on its peg. Blue wool. Expensive-looking. Almost certainly something Vasily had picked out.

Anatole almost cringed. Buddy? What was this, the fifties? He began to wonder exactly how old Ippolit was, before realizing that he couldn’t remember.

“It’s fine.”

Ippolit rubbed the back of his neck abashedly. “I didn’t really plan for dinner. Sorry about that.” He walked over to the kitchen. Anatole could see down the hall as he stuck his head into the fridge, then the freezer, and then the fridge again. “Forgot to go for groceries too, what with all the…” His voice trailed off awkwardly. “Do you want takeout? I could order pizza?”

Anatole shrugged.

“How about burgers? I know how much you love burgers.”

“Lena would flip her shit if she caught wind of you letting me eat junk food,” he said flatly. Ippolit gave him a tiny smile. “Lena isn’t here. What she doesn’t know won’t kill her.”

Anatole’s head snapped up instantly at that. “Are you serious?”

“Of course I am.” He pulled his phone out of his back pocket. “What do you want?”

“Burgers sound good.”

“Any place in mind? Is there a Shake Shack nearby? Would you like that?”

Anatole rolled his eyes. “Not unless you want to drive all the way to Colorado. This is Idaho, Lito, not New York.”

Ippolit cringed. “Right. Sorry.”

“There’s always Pavlovna’s.”

“That dingy little place?”
“It’s nice,” Anatole said. “Nicest place in Moscow.” And then: “Since when have you been?”

“Hélène took me. When I first arrived in town.”

“Ah.” Anatole sank back into the cushion and shuffled around a bit. “Can we have Pav’s, then?”

“Yeah, sure thing. I’ll call and place an order.”

The food didn’t take long to arrive.

“Did you try their fries last time?” Anatole asked.

Ippolit smiled and pulled out the styrofoam containers. No doubt, they’d end up on the trash-table with the rest of his garbage. Anatole tried hard not to think about that as Ippolit handed him a soda.

“Nope, just coffee.”

“Gross,” Anatole said, and wrinkled his nose. The trash-table suddenly seemed less unappealing in comparison. “You went to the best place in town, and you got the worst thing on their menu.”

“I thought it was nice.”

“Blech.”

“Not a fan?”

“I don’t drink coffee. It’s disgusting.”

Ippolit blinked and held his cup with both hands. It looked so formal and stiff that Anatole almost laughed out loud. “I could have sworn you liked coffee. Not even when you were in middle school?”

“No, that was Lena.”

“I knew about her. I just thought—”

“I’ve never liked it. I always get a hot chocolate instead.”

That seemed to ring a bell with him. “Ah,” he said. “I think I remember now.”

“Good for you,” Anatole muttered.

Ippolit cleared his throat self-consciously. “So, how are you doing? With…everything?”

Anatole paused in mid-bite. “Okay, I guess,” he said through a mouthful of burger. “Lena said she’d help me.”

“I’m sorry about all of this,” Ippolit sighed. “We’ll get it figured out soon, don’t worry.”

“Can we not talk about it?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said. “Sorry.”

“And you don’t need to keep apologizing,” said Anatole.

“Sorry.” He winced, once he had said that, and Anatole rolled his eyes mockingly. Ippolit, it seemed, hadn’t changed much at all from the awkward, apologetic mess he had been as a teenager. Taller. A little more thin in the face, and if it wasn’t just Anatole’s imagination, he had sprouted a
few grey hairs around his temples and a straggly bit of stubble that he probably had missed during his morning shave. Apart from all that, he looked almost the same—still like an older, more worried version of Hélène.

And then, almost as if Ippolit was following his train of thought, he asked, “Where is Lena? Is she still at the house?”

Anatole wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “Probably not. She was practically living at school when I was last at home.”

Ippolit frowned. “Does she have anywhere else to go?”

Anatole thought of Pierre and his last meeting with Hélène. It still felt cold, even now. And Fedya was probably out of the question too, and since apart from those two, Hélène’s friend tally amounted to a grand total of zero, the answer to Ippolit was probably a resounding no. But because he was trying to be optimistic and by nature never enjoyed answering anything with a no, he made his voice as firm and confident as he could and decided to respond with a more neutral: “That’s a good question.”

“Can you text her and find out?”

Anatole made a big show of rifling through the pockets of his jeans and his jacket, and he almost knocked over his soda onto the coffee table. “Last time I checked, I still don’t have a phone.”

Ippolit sighed. “I suppose I should check in with her.”

“Good plan.”

Unknown Number: Hi, Lena.

Unknown Number: Is everything alright?

“You type like an old person,” Anatole said, scoffing.

“‘Old’?” he said, clearly miffed. “What do you mean, ‘old’?”

Anatole pantomimed typing on a touchscreen with only his index finger. “Like this. Bip, bip, bip.”

“Is there a problem with that?”

“You’ll take forever to write anything.”

Elena: im sorry who is this?

Unknown Number: Ippolit.

“See?” said Anatole, pointing at the screen. “It took you, like, five seconds to write that out.”

“Tolya, please, just let me type.”

Elena: ah

Elena has added Traitor to Contacts

Anatole’s eyes widened. “Ouch.”
**Traitor:** Really?

**Traitor:** Very mature, Hélène.

**Elena** has changed **Traitor** to **Ippolit**

**Elena:** what do you want.

**Ippolit:** I wanted to make sure you were okay. I know Papa is at the house as well.

**Elena:** look im driving right now i really cant talk

**Ippolit:** Don’t text while you’re on the road!!!

**Ippolit:** >:-(

“God,” said Anatole, “you even write emojis like an old person.”

“Tolya, please.”

“Okay, okay.”

**Ippolit:** Can I call you? Do you have Bluetooth?

**Elena:** im busy

**Elena:** maybe later

**Elena:** im looking for anatole

**Elena:** in case you were concerned

**Elena:** cps took him in

**Ippolit:** He’s with me right now.

**Ippolit:** The court put him with me until the trial.

**Elena** has left the chat

“Jeez, that’s harsh,” Anatole said.

Ippolit’s shoulders utterly deflated with his sigh. “Yeah, well, nobody’s every accused Lena of being—”

BZZZ BZZZ. BZZZ BZZZ.

Incoming call from **Elena**

“Oh,” Ippolit said, frowning. He picked up the call and held the phone to his ear. “Um, hello?”

“Why wouldn’t you tell me?” Hélène spat, so loud that it almost made the speaker scream with static. “Do you know how worried I’ve been?”

“Are you still driving?” said Ippolit. “Please tell me you’re using Bluetooth. It’s not safe to—”
“You self-righteous prick!” she shrieked.

“Lena, please—”

“Why the fuck would you keep that from me? Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through today?”

Ippolit shot Anatole a panicked look. Anatole slapped him on the shoulder, the same way he had seen Fedya do to Pierre when he wanted to be condescending or funny. “Oh, you’re in for it now, Lito.”

Judging by his expression, Ippolit clearly didn’t find the situation nearly as amusing as he did.

“I almost wish I could say I was surprised,” she continued. “But you’ve probably been planning this with Papa, haven’t you? Finally got what you wanted?”

Ippolit’s face darkened. “That’s not fair, Elena. None of us wanted this.”

At last, Anatole piped up. “I’m okay, Lena. You don’t have to bite his head off.”

Hélène went quiet. Did she think he hadn’t been listening? Had she thought he wasn’t even there at all?

“I mean, it’d be nicer if I actually had my phone, but unless you wanna try to talk to Papa and get him to give it back, I don’t think there’s much fixing that.”

Ippolit raised an eyebrow.

“I see,” she said, and cleared her throat with an awkwardness so palpable it almost made them both cringe. “Ippolit, are you still staying at the Fairfield?”

“Um, I’ve actually got an apartment now,” Ippolit said, scratching the back of his neck.

“A what now?”

“An apartment, Lena. I don’t like hotels.”

Hélène scoffed. “This’ll be the shortest lease in the history of real estate. Or are you planning on uprooting your cushy self to the middle of nowhere with us?”

Ippolit huffed impatiently. “I still have my place in New York. I just thought it’d make visiting easier. I’m at Main and Fifth. If you want to come by. No pressure, just an invitation.”

“Please,” said Anatole, before she could snap back with something snarky just to spite Ippolit.

“Fine. I’m on my way.”

She hung up with a dull click.

Ippolit sighed and turned to Anatole. “I’m sorry about that. I wasn’t thinking. I’ve just been so busy and discombobulated with this whole kerfuffle that I guess it—”

“S’okay.”

Ippolit smiled, despite himself. “She really hasn’t changed at all, has she?”
Anatole raised his eyebrows. “Are you kidding? She’s uptight as fuck. You know, on the night of the Winter Formal, she practically stalked me and my date the whole time.”

Ippolit snorted. “I’m not sure ‘uptight’ is the right word for Lena.”

“Well, it is now.”

“I remember when I was a senior, she conned me into taking her to a highschool party.” Ippolit laughed and shook his head. “God only knew how. It was my first house party. Her millionth, probably. I had to take her home twenty minutes into it. Drunk as a skunk. She puked, you know.”

Anatole snorted.

“So, if she ever tries to boss you around, just remind her that at least you can handle yourself.”

“She never told me about that.”

“I can’t blame her. She was very embarrassed about it. It was a fun night.”

“No,” Anatole said softly. “She never told me that you guys used to go out together.”

Ippolit sighed and leaned back in his chair. “We were a lot closer when we were younger. I don’t know how much of that you remember.”

“No a lot,” Anatole said. “Lena doesn’t bring it up much.”

“No,” Ippolit sighed. “I don’t suppose she would.”

“Did you ever miss us?” he said quietly. “While you were away?”

“All the time,” Ippolit said.

Anatole thought of the photographs. Stuffed in a musty old shoebox, but he had kept them, at least, which must have meant something. What exactly that was, he couldn’t say.

“You never called.”

Ippolit sucked in a sharp breath. “Things were complicated, Tolya. I didn’t even know if you’d want to talk to me.”

“I did. We both did.”

“I’m sorry. For what it’s worth, I really am. Leaving you was a mistake.”

He cared. He had always cared, even when he had left—that was what they meant. Anatole looked back up at his brother with a sigh. Something in his chest lightened and lifted. “I forgive you.”

Ippolit blinked. “Huh?”

“Don’t know if Lena will, but I do.”

Ippolit laughed mirthlessly. “Lena might be a lost cause.”

Anatole frowned. “No, don’t say that.”

Ippolit cleared his throat again. His face went red, which, given his complexion, was truly remarkable. “I love her too, you know. The both of you. And I thought things would be fine with
Papa when I left, but I now see that I was wrong.”

Anatole shrugged. “They are. Mostly. He’s nice when he’s in a good mood.”

“I know.”

“Hélène thinks I should be angrier,” Anatole said quietly. “I didn’t want any of this. I just wanted to be on my own, you know? If I hadn’t goofed off, then none of this would’ve happened.”

“Being on your own doesn’t fix everything, Tolya.”

Anatole lowered his head.

“I know it’s hard,” Ippolit said softly.

“No, you don’t.”

“Trust me,” he sighed. “I really, really do.”

“Was he ever like that with you? Or Lena? Or was it just me?”

“He’s never hit me,” said Ippolit. “But I’m no Lena. He’s made sure I know that. He always has.”

“She doesn’t even have to try,” Anatole said. He scowled at his shoes and crumpled up his napkin. “It’s not fair.”

Ippolit sighed and slid an arm around his shoulders. Anatole surprised himself by not stiffening up. “She does try, Tolya. Very, very hard. And even that isn’t enough for him sometimes.”

“What was he like,” Anatole asked, so quietly Ippolit had to lean in to hear, “before Mom died?”

Ippolit was silent for a long while. “Better,” he finally said. “Kinder. He’s never been patient, but he was less short-tempered then. And he was always good with you and Lena, when you were little.”

“Why does he hate me?”

“Anatole, you know he doesn’t,” Ippolit said.

“But why am I never good enough for him?”

“That’s a question I’ve been asking myself for a long time. There’s no good answer. It’s just the way he is.”

Anatole sighed and slumped against Ippolit’s shoulder. “All of this sucks.”

“It fucking sucks,” Ippolit muttered.

Anatole bolted upright, blinking.

Ippolit blanched. “Did I say something wrong?”

“You cursed. Like, the full-on f-bomb.”

The way Ippolit rolled his head back against the armrest made him look a lot older than he probably was. “Look, I’m not that big a stick-in-the-mud anymore, okay?”
Anatole felt himself grinning before he could stop it. “I’ve never heard you do that before. I never thought I would.”

“Yeah, well things change, kid. In fact—”

They both jumped when they heard someone banging at the door.

“Did you order more food or something?” asked Anatole.

“Ippolit!” came the sound of Hélène’s voice. “Let me in!”

Ippolit snorted, rolling his eyes. “I guess that answers that.” He gave Anatole a small pat on the back. An almost paternal gesture. Something Vasily never would have done. “Why don’t you go let her in before she breaks down my door?”

Grinning, Anatole leapt up from the couch and tore across the apartment to the doorway as fast as he possibly could run. That he almost upended a side table and the coat rack along the way didn’t stop him.

“Lena!” he shouted, and plowed right into her arms, almost knocking her over with the force of his hug.

Hélène laughed and pulled back, ruffling his hair. “Cool your jets, kid.” She raked her eyes over him carefully. “How are you feeling?”

“Why do you smell like borscht? Or am I going crazy?”

Hélène wrinkled her nose. “Long story.”

“Hi, Lena,” Ippolit said quietly as he stood from the sofa.

“Hi,” she said. Before he could say anything else, she turned back to Anatole. “Everything alright with you two?”

“Yeah, we’re fine.”

“Good,” she said, before she rounded on Ippolit. “Why the fuck didn’t you tell me he was okay?”

Ippolit raised his hands in surrender. He had almost half a foot on her in height, but you wouldn’t have known it, the way he backed up until he almost collapsed onto the sofa again. “I’ve been busy, alright?”

“So have I.” She tossed her bag and coat onto the floor. “I’ve been driving around town for hours trying to figure out where he could be. I was about to head to Boise, you jackass.”

“I’m sorry,” he spat. “It isn’t as if you gave me any notice. I had to hear about it from Papa and the lovely folks at CPS.”

Anatole winced.

“Of course Papa put you up to this,” Hélène snarled. “Come with me, Tolya.”

She held out one hand to him. Anatole didn’t take it.

“I’m supposed to stay here,” he said quietly. “I’m not allowed to be at the house anymore. That’s what they told me.”
“For the record,” Ippolit said, pinching the bridge of his nose, “Papa didn’t put me up to anything. He doesn’t even know I have Anatole with me yet.”

Hélène ignored him entirely. “Who said anything about going back to the house?”

“Well, where else would you bring me?”

“Elena, if you would just listen—”

“I’m staying at Marya’s for now. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind another guest. She has a few already.”

“—to me you’d know that this isn’t about—”

“Marya’s? Why are you staying at Marya’s?”

“—Papa picking favorites; the main focus here is making sure—”

“I didn’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Well, why not?”

“—that Anatole is taken care of, and I know—”

“Papa kicked me out.”

“—that this isn’t the most ideal situation but—I beg your pardon.”

Dead silence fell.

“Huh?” said Anatole.

“What did you say?” said Ippolit.

Hélène sucked in a deep breath. “Papa kicked me out,” she repeated.

Ippolit’s face went pale and his brows drew together. “Oh my God.”

“Look, I don’t want to talk about it,” she snapped. “And I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it later.”

“Are you alright? Do you have somewhere to stay?”

“I’ll figure it out,” she said.

“Oh Lena,” Ippolit sighed, reaching for her.

Hélène violently recoiled and slapped his hand away. “Don’t you fucking touch me.”

Ippolit raised his arms again, but he looked more frustrated than contrite this time.

“Lena, please,” said Anatole. “We just wanna know if you’re okay.”

She raked her hands through her hair, and then propped them on her hips, as if she couldn’t decide which posture would better convey just how pissed off she was. But they both only made her look more nervous and frayed. “I was fine. Until I had to spend two hours driving around looking for you. Jesus, Anatole, I was so worried.”
“I didn’t mean to—”

“This is the third disappearing act you’ve pulled since this whole shitshow began. Are you trying to give me an ulcer or something?”

“Enough, Elena,” Ippolit said firmly.

Hélène whipped around and glared at him. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

“Yes, well, this isn’t about you,” Ippolit said, in a cold, hard tone that Anatole didn’t recognize, one that was just the slightest bit too similar to Vasily’s. “He didn’t have a say in the matter anyway. Would it kill you to be civil for once? For his sake?”

Hélène flinched, and her face crumpled. “Sorry, Tolya,” she muttered.

“It’s o—”

“No, it wasn’t okay. I apologize.”

The three of them, each feeling too awkward and embarrassed to speak next, went silent.

“Could you give us a second, Lito?” Anatole said quietly.

Ippolit frowned, but his face melted into blankness when Hélène shot him a venomous glare.

“Alright,” he murmured, and shuffled off down the hall to where Anatole supposed his bedroom was.

“Lena,” Anatole said, “how are you? Really?”

“I’m sorry. It’s been a bit of a rough day,” she said, and swallowed heavily. Her voice was ragged. Her eyes were watery. It was the kind of vulnerability she usually kept to herself, the kind she never let anybody see or overhear. Certainly not him or Ippolit, at any rate.

“Did Papa really—?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, God, Lena,” he began, but she cut him off with a tight hug, pressing her face into the shoulder of his jacket. “I’m so sorry,” he breathed. “This is all because of me.”

Hélène waved his apology away. She didn’t loosen her grip on him. “I’d choose you over him any day. But I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“We’ll figure it out, somehow. Together. We always do,” Anatole murmured, running a hand down her back.

Hélène met his eyes, nodding wordlessly, but Anatole could practically see her mind racing, trying to figure out their options. She never seemed able to stop chronically over-thinking, laying out strategy and calculating risk with an efficiency that was frankly shocking. He was the opposite; barely able to follow a thought through to its completion, and he still hadn’t quite figured out who was the worse off for it.

“Thank you, by the way,” he said softly. “I know that talking about…everything couldn’t have been easy.”

“I should’ve done it earlier.”
“Maybe.”

“I regret not doing it earlier now.”

“It doesn’t matter. We finally have something.”

Hélène sighed. “It’s still a longshot, Tolya. I’m not promising anything.”

“I know,” he said. “Either way, I’m glad you’re on my team.”

She kissed his forehead. “Always.”

“We need Lito on our side as well,” he said firmly. “I’d’ve been fucked without him, Lena. And I don’t have anywhere to go but with him.”

“I don’t like this.”

“You don’t have to. You’re not the one who’s gonna end up with him.”

Her face fell flat. “Tolya, no, don’t talk like that.”

“It’s really okay. He’s…he’s not bad.”

If possible, her face fell even further.

“I prefer him to Papa,” Anatole said. “And he’s trying, Lena. He really is. I don’t think I’d mind.”

“What are you saying?”

Anatole sighed and tried to slow his breathing. It was more difficult than it should have been. “Can you just try to get along with him? For me?”


Anatole walked towards the hall. “Lito? You can come back.”

Ippolit did not seem very taken with being told he was allowed to come back into his own living room, but he didn’t say anything.

Anatole turned back to Hélène. “When did Papa call you?”

Hélène chuckled mirthlessly. “He didn’t call this time. He was waiting for me at the house when I got back from class.”

Anatole raised his eyebrows, trying desperately to conceal his surprise and concern under a mask of dedicated blasé. “No shit.”

Hélène gave him a slightly watery smile. “Papa was furious. You ought to have heard some of the things he said.”

“I’m not sure I’d like to know,” Anatole said, blanching.

“Well, the court will hear it at any rate,” she said, holding up her phone and opening up the recording she had taken.

Anatole’s eyes narrowed for a fraction of a second and then went wide. “You’re joking.” Hélène allowed herself a smile as she nodded. Before she knew it, Anatole had flung himself on her in a
bear hug, squeezing so tight that it knocked the wind right out of her. “Lena, you’re a fucking genius!” He paused, pensive and cautious. “Is that even legal?”

“Irda’s a one-party consent state,” she said with a wry grin. “The one good thing about this place.”

Ippolit sucked in a deep breath. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

Hélène shot him a suspicious look. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Forget it,” he huffed.

“You don’t have to listen to it right now,” said Hélène, turning back to Anatole. “Is it that bad?”

Hélène bit her lip. “It’s bad.”

Anatole sucked in a deep breath. “I want to hear it. I want to know what he said.”

“Tolya,” Ippolit said quietly, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

Anatole shrugged him off. “Please, Lena.”

Hélène’s thumb hovered over the ‘play’ button. She turned her head to Anatole. “Are you sure about this?”

He swallowed heavily with a nod. “Yeah. I’m ready.” And then: “Would you hold my hand?”

Hélène took his hand in her own and squeezed softly as she pressed ‘play’.
Natasha had made the down-the-hall trek to Sonya’s bedroom probably a few hundred times since they had moved out to Moscow. It couldn’t have—shouldn’t have—taken her more than five seconds to walk from her room past the linen closet to Sonya’s door.

Not now.

She loitered there at the end of the corridor for what felt like hours, trying to muster up the courage to go in. In her hands, she held a large plastic box, which she jostled about, brimming with nervous energy. It wasn’t a good habit. She was going to damage the contents if she kept up like that, but her arms and legs simply couldn’t stay still.

Finally, she steeled herself and knocked twice on the doorframe.

“Come in,” said Sonya.

She was sitting on her bed when Natasha walked in, folded over a pillow with a book in her lap and her hair streaming across her face, cocooned under a pile of blankets. They used to huddle together like that as small children, on cold winter evenings like this. It was unusual and unnerving, seeing her all alone.

Natasha cleared her throat.

Sonya looked up. “What do you want?”

“Could we talk?”

She laughed mirthlessly and turned her attention back to her book. Little Women. Natasha couldn’t help but wonder whether her selection was more a coincidence or intended to make a point. Probably a bit of both, knowing Sonya. “There isn’t much left to say.”
“I know you’re still mad, and I totally get it. But I hate it when we’re upset with each other.”

“Funny,” Sonya said, turning a page much too aggressively. “I hate it when my best friend blows up at me for trying to protect her and makes homophobic jokes about my love life.”

Natasha’s lower lip began to tremble dangerously. All the confidence she had mustered up melted like ice cream on hot summer pavement, and she felt a lump rising in her throat. It wasn’t fair, how easily Sonya could reduce her to tears. It was even less fair that everything she had said was true, that she deserved it.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in a choked-off voice. “You were right about everything.”

Sonya looked up at her through the hair that had fallen in her face. Her bangs were in need of a trim. It made it difficult to see her eyes, which made it even more difficult to gauge her reaction. “Huh?”

Natasha ducked her head. She took in a deep breath and braced herself for what she had to say next. “I just wanted to come apologize.”

Sonya lowered the book to her lap. That was a good sign. Right?

“I figured one cookie wouldn’t be enough for everything I’ve done”—Natasha held up the box shyly—“but would a dozen be a good place to start?”

“Fine,” Sonya said coolly. “What did you want to talk about?”

Natasha’s eyes immediately welled with tears. “I’m so sorry,” she said, and as she spoke, her voice progressively became weaker and more ragged, until each word scraped against her throat painfully on its way out. “For everything. I was horrible to you, and you were only looking out for me. I shouldn’t have exploded at you. I shouldn’t have pried about you and Mary, and I shouldn’t have been so mean about it. I know you’re probably still mad, and you probably hate me, and I don’t blame you at all if you do, but I really regret it all now. All of it. I just don’t want to lose my best friend, and I—”

Sonya swept her into a bone-crushing hug before she could even finish. Natasha gasped, but immediately buried her face in Sonya’s hair, flinging her arms around Sonya’s shoulders.


If the floodgates hadn’t been wide open before, they sure as hell were now. Natasha dissolved into tears at once, and the box fell from her hands to the floor.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “I love you. I love every part of you.”

“I love you too.”

Natasha sobbed even louder at that. Sonya began to rub slow, soothing circles between her shoulder blades, and the two of them rocked back and forth as Natasha hiccuped and sniffled and Sonya murmured reassurances under her breath.

Finally, Natasha pulled away. “Are you sure you’re not still upset?”

Sonya rubbed her upper arms and looked down at her feet, the way she always did when she wanted to appear smaller than she really was. It didn’t work very well. “Sort of. Kind of. I dunno anymore, to be honest.”
“I’m sorry.”
“I know. I’m not upset with you. I’m just…upset. About this whole thing.”

Natasha sighed and leaned her face against her hand. “Me too.”
“It was dumb.”
“So dumb.”
“I really don’t know how you managed to make honor roll, if that’s your idea of a runaway plan.”

She snorted. “It could’ve been worse. We could’ve actually gone through with it and gotten away.”

Sonya rolled her eyes fondly.

“Could you imagine that? Me and Anatole, on our own in New York.”

“Jesus,” Sonya murmured. Something mischievous twinkled in her eyes, and she leaned over to pinch Natasha’s cheek. “You two would’ve been so in over your heads.”

“The subway. Dear God, I’d’ve died on the subway.”

“If you didn’t get mugged first.”

“Jeez.”

“Or run out of cash. Or get on the wrong train and wind up in Connecticut or something.”

“You can’t do that on the subway,” Natasha scoffed, swatting her hand away.

Sonya grinned. “You would’ve found a way to do it.”

“I think we would’ve turned ourselves in as runaways first.”

“Probably.”

Natasha pulled away and wiped her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Shit,” she sniffed. “I must look like an absolute wreck right now.”

Sonya snorted. “You look like a sad raccoon.”

A laugh bubbled out of her. When she pulled her hands away, the hems of her sleeves were stained with mascara. She surprised herself with how little she cared. “I probably should’ve known better than to do my makeup before going in for a tearful apology.”

“Your mom’s gonna wonder what happened.”

“Teenagers,” said Natasha. She allowed Sonya to tug her over to the vanity and dap at her face with tissues and makeup wipes. “That’s what she’ll think happened. Hormonal, angsty teenagers being their usual hormonal, angsty selves.”

“Your face looks like a tomato.”

Natasha laughed again, and so did Sonya.

“Come on. Let’s splash some cool water on you before you bust a blood vessel.”
They snuck down the hall to the bathroom together, Natasha holding *Little Women* over her face to cover its redness and her puffy, watery eyes.

“Sonya?” Natasha said, after she had finished washing her face.

“Mm?”

“I want to meet Mary again. Properly.”

Sonya raised an eyebrow. “I think that ship’s already sailed.”

“But she’s important to you. I want to try again. A fresh start, if she’d let me have one. If she’s still not furious at me over Andrei or…or the other thing.”

“She’s pretty forgiving. You might be surprised.”

Natasha gave her hand a squeeze. “I’m sort of banking on that.”

“I’d really like that,” Sonya said quietly. “Thank you. For trying.”

“It’s kind of the least I can do after being such a jerk. I just want you to know that I’m really happy for you. And I’m behind you, no matter what.”

“That means a lot.”

“It’s only the truth.”

“Love you,” she murmured, ruffling Natasha’s hair. “Even if you’re an idiot sometimes.”

Natasha laughed. “Love you too, you snoop.” She gave Sonya a kiss on the cheek, and Sonya brushed the hair out of her face.

“There are a lot of cookies,” Sonya said with a conspiratorial smile. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to finish them all on my own.”

“I really shouldn’t. They’re for you and I don’t need—”

“Natasha,” she said, shoving the box back into her hands. “Eat a goddamn cookie.”

Natasha cracked the lid of the box open. She could smell them already. Sugar, not chocolate chip this time. Sonya’s favorite. Her mouth began to water, and she realized with a lurch of her stomach that she was absolutely starving.

“Your parents won’t be home from work for ages,” said Sonya. “Cookies for dinner. How does that sound?”

“Cookies for dinner.”

“Mhmm. It’s on my bucket list.”

“You think?”

“We’ll tell her we just ate a salad or something boring and healthy.”

“Cookies for dinner,” Natasha repeated. Her smile grew by a few inches. “Well, if you’re down for it, then so am I.”
Sonya grinned as she bit into the cookie. “Jesus,” she said, laughing through a mouthful of crumbs. “It’s so good.”

“You know we’re probably gonna have an awful stomachache in a few hours.”

“Oh, Nat,” she chuckled. “Live a little. What’s it you like to say? Life’s more fun if you don’t take it too seriously.”

“You make a very good point.”

Sonya elbowed her lightly in the ribs. “Just have fun. It’ll be worth it.”

It was.

It was some twisted sort of justice, Fedya thought, that Hélène was the one who broke the silence first. He had been good at keeping his no-contact promise, and he wouldn’t have responded had he not missed her so badly.

That being said, he didn’t not have his doubts about her sincerity. The address she gave him was one he didn’t recognize. It was downtown, for starters, in the nicest apartment building in all of Moscow, on a street he had never even walked down. He had almost convinced himself that this was just a prank, that she was only going to ghost him to twist the knife a little further, when the door opened in front of him.

There stood Hélène, looking even more disheveled and tired than he had ever seen her before, which was truly saying something. Her face was blank for a moment, and then her eyes went wide when she realized who he was. “Oh,” she said.

“Hi.”

“You’re here.”

“I am.”

“I didn’t think you…”

Fedya rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m just surprised you actually gave me a real address.”

“It’s my brother’s place,” she said quietly. “He just moved in.”

“What’s the occasion?”

The look she gave him was so flat and dead-eyed that he realized instantly what a stupid question it was. “Probably our dad getting accused of child abuse.”

“Oh.” He turned his head down and hoped that she wouldn’t see how red his face had gone. This, he decided, had to be the single most awkward conversation they had ever had together. “I heard about that. I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

“Are you gonna invite me in, or am I gonna keep waiting at the door like the postman?”
Hélène had already started off down the hall with a huff. “Since when do you wait for invitations?”

“Since you moved in with your brother.”

She waved him down and gestured for him to follow her. “He won’t care. He’s out furniture shopping. You’re a friend, anyway. Not like I’m inviting in some stranger.”

He certainly felt like a stranger, taking those first few steps into the living room. It reminded him eerily of his mother’s house, but a bleached-out version, with half the furniture and all the color missing. Not all that far a stretch from the way Vasily chose to decorate his home.

Hélène wrinkled her nose, as if she had read his mind. “I know. His taste is appalling.”

“I dunno. I’m digging the whole pastel mortuary vibe.”

“Jesus,” she said, shaking her head. “Is it bad that it makes me feel at home?”

“Is that something you want to feel?”

“Dunno.”

“Where’s Tolya?”

“In his room. Well, the guest bedroom. It’s his for now, I guess.”

“My condolences to Ippolit.”

They both laughed. Hélène blushed and averted her eyes, looking down at her hands. “Thanks for coming,” she said softly. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

Fedya shoved the tupperware box into her hands. “My mom wanted me to drop this off. She made a casserole for you guys. I know how much you love her cooking.”

“Thank you,” Hélène said quietly. “That was sweet.”

“You should thank my mother, not me.”

“Tell her I said thanks, then. How is her wrist doing?”

“Better.”

“On the mend?”

“Mostly.”

“That’s good to hear.”

The silence that followed was torturous at best, each of them waiting for the other to say something first. Fedya wondered briefly why she had invited him at all in the first place, since she so clearly had no idea what to do now that he had actually shown up.

She had probably thought it was pointless, he realized with a sinking heart. She had probably thought he would have blown her off. It only made him feel even guiltier than he already did, but that was quickly followed by a white-hot flash of indignation. When hadn’t he come when she needed him? What did he have to do to get her to show a modicum of faith in him?
But then again, countered the irritatingly righteous voice in his head, she had probably had faith in him not to help her brother run off to New York. And look where that had wound up.

But then again again, wouldn’t it have been in Anatole’s favor to get out of the house? Not to have to bide his time until graduation?

But then again again again—

“I guess I should be on my way,” he said, his face burning.

Hélène grabbed his arm as he turned away. “Wait. Please, don’t go.”

Fedya turned back with a scowl on his face, but he didn’t try pull away or head for the door. “What do you want, Hélène?”

She crossed her arms self-consciously. “I really needed you. Well, Anatole mostly, but I needed you too.” She swallowed. “I’m surprised you even came at all. With…everything.”

Fedya shrugged. “I don’t have anything left to say to you. I know that nothing I say will make a difference either way.”

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry,” she said. “I know you were only trying to look out for him.”

“I can’t believe,” he snapped, “that you would ever think I didn’t care about him. That you’d think I was using him to get to you.”

“I was upset.”

“So was I.”

“I was wrong,” she said finally. “But so were you. You shouldn’t have kept that from me.”

“We’ve both done a lot of things we shouldn’t have done.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“It was mostly you, though,” Fedya said haughtily.

Hélène laughed at that. She couldn’t have been that angry or upset, then, not if she was laughing. “I suppose I’m not really in a position to argue.”

Compromise. If this was his forgiveness, or her apology, or a bit of both, then he would take it with open arms.

“I’m sure you’ll try anyways,” he said.

“Ass.”

“Guilty as charged.”

“I know I really fucked up, but I can’t do this without you. I miss you, Fed.” Her eyes darted to the door in the corner of the room. “And he misses you too.”

Fedya gave her a small smile. “I miss you too, Lena. Friends?”

Hélène hung her head, but she wasn’t entirely serious about it. “Of course. After all, what’s a girl
to do without her only friend?”

“She shrugged. “There’s a difference between friends and people you tolerate.”

“I think Anatole and I have been playing jump-rope with that line for the past six or so years.”

“Oh, God, Anatole,” she groaned. Together, they slumped onto the sofa. “I’m going to have to talk to him later. Ippolit’s been freaking out about it all day.”

“What?”

The look on her face told him that she had forgotten to tell him something, something she had expected him to know. As if he had been with her throughout the whole debacle. In fairness, he thought, it was probably the first time since they had met that he hadn’t had to wrangle her through a shitshow every step of the way.

“He got off,” Hélène said, very quietly and shakily, but Fedya could see that she was trembling in fury, not fear. “The bastard got off.”

“Oh, Lena,” Fedya sighed. “I’m so sorry.”

“It didn’t even make it to court,” she said. “‘Insufficient evidence’. More like no one wants to piss off the local mogul.”

He wished he could’ve said he was surprised, but he would’ve only been a liar to say so.

“We haven’t told Tolya yet,” she said. “I don’t know how to.”

“There’s no good way to do it. It’s how you deliver it.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“You just have to get it over with.”

“I know.”

“You just have to be blunt, like ripping off a bandaid,” he said.

“I’ll just phrase it gently and slowly,” she said, at the same time.

Hélène couldn’t seem to help the giggle that bubbled out of her at that. Fedya was surprised for a moment, but he laughed as well, eventually.

“Jesus Christ,” she muttered, wiping her eyes. “This is a fucking mess.”

“I had no idea,” he said sarcastically.

“It fucking blows.” She tore off one shoe and threw it at the wall. Fedya winced. Ippolit wasn’t going to appreciate that, not once he saw the scuff mark it left behind on the boring beige wallpaper, assuming he would have the guts to speak up about it in the first place. Given that Ippolit, from the stories Hélène had told him, didn’t strike him as a particularly gutsy person, especially around his younger sister, Hélène and Anatole probably weren’t going to get much grief about their houseguest tact.
God. They were going to drive him insane, these two.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she continued. “I have nowhere to live, and when he cuts me off, I’m totally fucked. I won’t be able to support Tolya and he’ll get taken away from me again and I’ll have to drop out of school and then my life is royally fucked, all because of my stupid fucking dad and his stupid fucking—”

“I should’ve put out a swear jar,” Fedya grumbled. Hélène glared at him and he rolled his eyes. “Let’s be realistic, Lena. You’ll find somewhere to live. Worst case scenario, you sneak back into the house when your dad leaves. Or you stay here. Or you move in with me, because my mom already loves you. Tolya has three months left and then he leaves to go to college anyways. You’ll apply for scholarships, and if you don’t get those, you’ll get student loans.”

“And kill myself paying back those loans for the rest of my working career.”

“Join the fucking club,” he muttered. “We don’t all have a rich dad who’s coughed up the cash for our educations thus far.”

Hélène lowered her eyes. “Sorry. That was a stupid thing to say.”

Fedya sighed. He was more frustrated than angry, but it quickly melted into sympathy. It couldn’t have been easy, he supposed, putting things into perspective when you had had as dysfunctional and unusual an upbringing as Hélène had had. “What I’m trying to get at is that you’ll figure it out. Eventually. So stop freaking out about that stuff, and focus on the right now.”

“I’m just so…so angry. He doesn’t deserve to get off scot-free, not after what he did to Tolya. And who’s to say he won’t do it again?”

“What?”

Hélène and Fedya whipped around at the same time. Anatole was standing by the hallway door, his backpack—unzipped and half-open, as it always was, the absolute idiot—still dangling in his hands.

“I was going to tell you later—” Hélène started.

“Don’t bother,” he snapped.

“Tolya, please,” she began, but he had already torn back down the hallway and slammed the door shut behind him.

“Shit,” she muttered, starting to her feet. “I should go talk to him.”

“Let him have some time on his own,” Fedya said quietly. “This is a lot for anyone, and he’s just a kid.”

Hélène sank back into her seat, her eyes hollow and defeated. “I can’t believe this. I don’t know how we went wrong, how they could dismiss something like that.” She ran a trembling hand through her hair. “We had photos, Fedya. A goddamn recording. I was so careful. I documented everything I could.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“I shouldn’t have agreed to do this,” she said miserably. “It’s going to make things so much worse for him.”
“You did what you thought was best. No one’s gonna fault you for that.”

“I will,” she said. “Papa will, when he comes home. Anatole should.”

“He won’t,” he said gently. “You know he won’t.”

“He should.”

“No, Lena—”

“What was I even thinking?”

“You were thinking that you wanted to protect your little brother.”

She shook her head. “Great job I’ve done of that. Every goddamned thing I’ve done since September has just made things worse for us all.”

“Hey,” Fedya said firmly. “What was the alternative? Not doing anything?”

“Putting him in a room lined with bubble wrap.”

“You would be more upset if you had let this continue. I know that you know that.”

Hélène let out a long, ragged sigh. Fedya, testing the waters, laid a hand on her shoulder. When she didn’t slap his hand away or snap at him, he silently wrapped his arms around her and pressed a gentle kiss to the crown of her head. Her hands found their way to his shoulders and she nuzzled her face into his neck, shaking and heaving with silent, tearless sobs. Hélène wouldn’t cry in front of him—she would fight against it with all her might or die trying.

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

“What the hell are we gonna do?” she said. “He’s out, Fedya. He knows I testified against him. What’s he gonna do to me—to Anatole?”

“You can’t think about this right now. You know what happens when you start spiralling.”

Hélène’s face crumpled. “But I can’t not think about it,” she said, and pulled her feet up onto the seat and wrapped her arms around her shins, burying her face in her knees. She looked so young, so small and afraid that Fedya was overcome with the urge to hug her again. He resisted it, knowing that it would probably only startle or upset her further.

“You’ve done all you can do. You guys are going to be okay, I promise.”

Hélène shook her head insistently. “You don’t know that.”

“You will. There are so many people who care about you. We’ll figure this out.”

Hélène didn’t say anything, just leaned her head against Fedya’s shoulder, finally allowing the tears that she had suppressed for so long to flow free, and intertwined her hand with his.

“What if I talked to him? Do you think that’d help?”

“Can’t exactly hurt, can it?” She looked back at the doorway. “Can’t upset him any more than he already is.”

Well, she was only half right.
“I already told you, I don’t wanna talk, Hélène,” Anatole called from behind the door.

Fedya let out a heavy sigh and shuffled his feet back and forth. “It’s not Hélène.”

There was a pause, and then Anatole said, “Fine. Come in, then.”

It didn’t look anything like a room Anatole would have chosen for himself. There were no posters on the walls, just the same bland off-white color that the rest of the apartment had been painted, and the desk and bookshelf were bare. Anatole lay sprawled across his bed, staring at what Fedya recognized as the mp3 player Hélène had bought him before he had gotten his first phone. He was wearing a set of headphones, but he had angled them so they only covered one of his ears,

“Hey, Tolya,” Fedya said, seating himself on the edge of the mattress. “How are you feeling?”

Anatole turned off the mp3 player and tucked it in the bedside table. “Stupid question,” he muttered.

Fedya almost cringed. He managed to hide it with a shrug. “Fair enough.”

“What do you want?”

“It’s not what I want. It’s what you need. And what you need is to cut your sister some slack, man. She’s trying her best.”

“Yeah, well, her ‘best’ kinda sucks,” Anatole snapped.

“The situation sucks. That’s not Lena’s fault.”

He tipped his head back against the headboard, pale and drawn. “I just want this all to be over with. I wish I’d never even done anything in the first place. If I hadn’t gone to that stupid homecoming dance, this never would’ve happened.”

*No, if you hadn’t tried to run away this never would’ve happened, you idiot,* Fedya thought.

“It’ll be over soon,” he said instead. “You’re almost eighteen, and once you are, he can’t tell you what to do. He can’t tell you jack.”

Anatole snorted. “Try telling Lena that.”

“It’s true, no matter what she thinks.”

“Not when Papa’s the one footing the bill for everything.”

“I know you’re scared and upset,” Fedya said evenly. “But you can’t be angry at Hélène. Not after everything she’s done for you.”

“Lot of good that did me.”

“She stuck her neck out for you, Tolya. This wouldn’t have gone anywhere without her.”

Anatole pouted. “I know.”

“She’s pretty upset too,” Fedya said. “Just thought you should know that.”
“I know that too,” he said quietly.

“Do you wanna talk to her now?”

“Yeah.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah.”

Hélène looked almost nervous when Anatole and Fedya finally came back into the living room. She had had an air of tenseness about her since the whole mess had begun, but the borderline shyness was new and unsettling.

“Hey, Tolya,” she said quietly.

Anatole slid into the seat next to her. He put his feet up on the coffee table and then, reconsidering, put them back down on the floor. “Hi.”

Hélène sighed and looked down at her shoes. “I’m sorry, kid. I was going to tell you tonight, I swear.”

“It’s fine,” Anatole said. “I’m sorry too.”

Hélène drew him into a tight hug. “I’m in your corner. No matter what happens with him, I’m on your side.”

“What’s gonna happen now?”

“I don’t know, Tolya,” she sighed. “I really don’t know.”

Fedya clapped his hands together, startling the two of them. “That’s it,” he said. “We’re done worrying for today.”

Hélène frowned. “Fedya?”

“What’s done is done, and neither of you can do a thing to change it right now.”

“Thanks,” Anatole said drily.

“Which is why,” he pressed on, “I’m taking you two out to the movies. Or dinner. Or both. It’ll be a nice distraction. Go and get your coats.”

Anatole’s eyes lit up almost instantly. “Really?”

“Fed, you don’t have to do this,” said Hélène.

“I want to. C’mon.”

She kissed his cheek as she slid past him. “Thank you.”

“Yeah, thanks, man,” Anatole added.

Fedya smiled and ruffled Anatole’s hair. “Anything for you two.”
It was dark by the time the school bus pulled up at 1867 Prechistenskaya Boulevard. The straps of Mary’s backpack—it seemed to get heavier every day; she’d be carting around her bodyweight in books by the end of the year—dug into her shoulders as she made her way up to the porch, wondering if the Sun ever shone at all when it was winter in Moscow, and why Mr. Dokhurtov felt the need to assign so much work for the weekend.

That didn’t matter, though. It was Friday, and homework was a problem for Sunday.

She had better, more important things to think about, anyhow.

Before she could unlock the front door, her phone buzzed in her pocket. Mary smiled on instinct and unlocked the screen.

**Sonya:** Good luck bae!!!! its gonna be okay i promise

**Masha<3<3:** ‘Bae’?

**Sonya:** dont be rude im trying to be cute and girlfriend-y

**Sonya:** if you dont like it i can find other names?

**Sonya:** hey you

**Sonya:** boo thang

**Sonya:** girl from art class

**Masha<3<3** has changed Sonya to Sonyushka

**Sonyushka:** !!!

**Sonyushka:** well this is an improvement!!!

**Sonyushka:** :D

**Masha<3<3:** I’m glad you like it.

**Masha<3<3:** :

**Masha<3<3:** Alright, I’ll ttyl!

**Sonyushka:** youre using ABBREVIATIONS now????!!

**Sonyushka:** someone call the press!!! XD

“Hi, Andryusha!” Mary said as Andrei came down the stairs.

“Hi, Masha,” he said flatly, and shouldered his way past her to the coat closet.

Mary dropped her bag to the floor, by the side table to the right of the door. It landed with a massive bang. Nikolai, fast asleep in his armchair, didn’t so much as flinch.

“So,” she said, “I was thinking I could go grab a quick shower and get changed, and then we could head over to Pav’s at, like, four-ish? The movie doesn’t start until five o’clock, so we might be in a crunch for dinner, but if we eat quickly, we can still make it. How does that sound?”
Andrei sighed. “Sorry, Masha. I think I’m gonna have to call a rain check on tonight. I’m crazy busy.”

Mary’s smile collapsed into a frown as he stalked across the room to the door. “With what?”

“Andrei.”

“Papers.”

“But you’re on break.”

“I’m still busy.”

“Well, what about tomorrow? I wanted to—”

“Mary, please.”

“But we already bought the tickets.”

“You can go on your own, if you want. Call up a friend. I’m not stopping you.”

“I just feel like I haven’t seen you in so long,” she said quietly. “I miss the way we used to talk. Tonight was supposed to be the two of us.”

Andrei seemed on the verge of tearing his hair out. “I just need some peace and quiet. Is that so much to ask for?”

“Yes,” she snapped. “We haven’t spoken for months, and I just want to have a conversation. Why is that so much to ask for?”

“I’m not going to argue with you about this.”

“Andrei, please.”

He had already started off for the stairwell.

“Andrei.”

“Mary, seriously—”

“Would you listen to me for once in your life?” she shouted.

Nikolai stirred with a faint snore. Andrei stopped in his tracks.

“You’re going to wake Dad up,” he said stiffly.

“You,” she began, almost breathless with anger, “didn’t even answer a single one of my emails.”

Andrei sighed. He looked bored and dismissive. “I’ve been busy, Masha. I have school to focus on.”

“You’re not the only one still in school. And I had Dad to handle on top of everything.”

“Look,” he said, raising his hands, but she cut him off before he could finish.

“Not one email. Not one text. Not a single phone call. How hard would that have been? I was worried about you! Do you have any idea how much I missed you?”

“Wassat?” said Nikolai, from his armchair in the corner of the room.
“Nothing, Dad,” Andrei said.

Nikolai, apparently satisfied with that, nodded and let his head drop back to his chest. He was snoring again a second later.

“I’ll bet you were calling and texting Natasha every day,” she said resentfully.

Andrei frowned. “I wasn’t—how did you know about her?”

“I’m her classmate. In case you didn’t think to make the connection. Tell me, Andryusha, do you even know what grade I’m in?”

“That’s not fair, Mary,” he said.

“I don’t care anymore. None of this”—she gestured around, at the wall, at the ceiling, at their father—“is fair, and I’ve never complained about it.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” he asked. “Drop out of school? Move back home?”

“Of course not,” Mary said. “But would it be so much to ask for you to call me? I need to talk to someone and I feel so trapped here and no one understands and I’m lonely.”

“I don’t understand? I just moved to a foreign country, Mary. Do you think I had anyone to talk to?”

“You have your girlfriend.”

“Natasha and I,” he said tightly, “have broken things off. Though I’m sure she’s told you that already, given how close you two sound.”

“You could’ve told me,” she snapped.

“It wasn’t any of your business. I don’t go snooping into your love life, and I don’t think you want me to either.”

“I would if you’d talk to me. We used to tell each other everything, Andrei. I hate that we don’t do that anymore.”

Andrei’s face softened for a moment, but it hardened just as quickly. “People grow up, Masha. It doesn’t mean I don’t care, it’s just that we don’t need to be in each other’s back pockets. We’re not little kids.”

“But there are things I want to tell you. Are you saying I can’t anymore?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. Let me guess—you’re stressed about college? You didn’t make the cheerleading team? You didn’t get the homeroom teacher you wanted? We’ve all been there. It’s nothing special.”

“You’re being mean.”

“Boy troubles? Did that Kuragin kid blow you off again? Didn’t get the date you wanted for the winter formal?”

“I’m gay, you asshole,” she snapped. “I was supposed to tell you tonight at dinner, but I guess I couldn’t even have that. I’m figuring this out all by myself, and it’s scary and new and overwhelming, and I don’t have anyone to talk about it with. Do you even care how lonely I’ve
felt? How often I wished I could talk to you?” She crossed her arms and scoffed. “Of course you
don’t.”

Andrei raised his eyebrows in surprise. Even Nikolai turned his head, though he didn’t seem to
have caught a word of what she had said.

Something hot and wild ran through her veins. She had never yelled at anybody like that, much less
her brother or her father. She had imagined it before, but whenever she ran the idea through her
mind, it alway left a foul taste in her mouth and a sickening sense of guilt in her stomach. But what
she had just said didn’t feel foul or sickening or guilty at all. She was glad, relieved, now that she
had said it.

The stiffness between her shoulders began to leak out. It was as if an enormous weight had been
lifted off her chest. She felt herself shaking.

“I’m going to the movies now,” she said. “On my own. Because I haven’t had a break in months.”

“Masha, I’m so sorry, I didn’t realize,” Andrei began, reaching out a hand after her.

Marya hitched up her shoulders and stormed over to the stairwell. “Thank you for understanding,”
she said curtly, and sprinted up the stairs, not caring, for the first time in years, about how loud her
footsteps were.
“Where’s the outlet?” Hélène said, groping under the desk for a socket. “My battery’s about to die on me.”

Ippolit, from behind a stack of unopened Ikea boxes, gestured to the opposite wall and said, “Other side of the room.”

Hélène scowled as she uncoiled the adaptor. The master bedroom was still an atrocious mess, made even worse by the new furniture Ippolit had picked up on his shopping trip. If it was meant to make the apartment feel more homey, it only made it look tacky and cramped. Why he had bought furniture at all was entirely beyond her—it wasn’t as if he was going to stay, and even if he was, it would only be for a short time. But, she supposed, it was the polar opposite of how Vasily had always kept the house, and she couldn’t exactly say she blamed him for wanting a reprieve from the magazine-ready rooms they had grown up in.

God only help him when it came time to actually assemble the furniture.

“Prime location for a desk, bro,” she said.

Ippolit rolled his eyes. He didn’t even look up from the manual. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re too critical?”

“Has anyone,” she grunted, kneeling as she plugged the adaptor into the outlet with a creak, “told you”—creak—“that you’re an idiot?”

“You have. Frequently.”

_Creak._

“You could always use my laptop, you know,” he added.
“I don’t like Macs.”

“I do,” Anatole said, flopping onto the bed and dislodging a pile of plastic-wrapped nails and screws in the process. “I like them a lot. I wouldn’t mind one for college, you know, seeing as how my laptop is—”

“Don’t be such a spoilt brat,” Hélène snipped.

“The spacebar’s all jiggly and there’s a scratch on the cover.”

“And whose fault might that be?”

Pouting, Anatole went back to twiddling his thumbs.

“Hey, kid, do you want to go watch some TV in the living room?” said Ippolit.

Anatole muttered something under his breath about wanting to watch TV on his phone, and Hélène swatted him on the shin.

“Go make yourself useful,” she said. “Put a nightstand together or something.”

“I’m not a carpenter.”

She pressed a pamphlet into his hands. “You are now. Now, go make us a Björksnäs or whatever the hell it’s called.”

Scowling, Anatole took one of the boxes from the stack and wandered off down the hallway to his room. He held it at an awkward angle so that it thumped against the wall with every step. Hélène would have told him to be more careful with it if she cared, which she didn’t have the energy for right now.

“Tolya’s looking well,” Ippolit said, once he was sufficiently out of earshot. There came a bang as the door to his room swung shut and another thump against the wall. “Considering everything.”

Hélène jiggled the charger in its jack when its icon disappeared from the screen. “He’s a resilient kid. I don’t think Papa realizes that.”

“And you?”

She shot him a sharp look. “I’m not the one he hurt.”

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “It’s just... the stuff he said to you...I know that it must’ve been hard to hear.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” she snapped.

“And you know none of it’s true.”

If she had planned to fire back to that with something snarky, the urge quickly wilted just as her face did.

“It doesn’t matter if he meant any of it or not,” he continued. “Because I know you think he did. Not just the stuff about Tolya. About you as well.”

Hélène let out a ragged sigh. “Thanks.”
“It’s true. You can’t take it to heart. He’s beaten down on me like that for years. You just have to learn to zone it out.”

“I know.”

From the room over, they heard something loud and solid clatter to the ground, followed by an indignant, “Ah, fuck it.”

The two of them laughed for a brief, happy moment, but then it was over.

“He knows about me,” Hélène said quietly, with her head still tilted to the floor. “He’s known since I was seventeen.”

“How about you?”

She lowered her head again. “He didn’t. You wouldn’t have to be a genius to know.”

“Ippolit’s face became tight and flushed. “No. God, I could never tell him. I think he knows, though. Some of the comments he’s made. Not about me, just around me. Work associates and the like. But I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“That makes three of us, I guess,” Hélène said.

Ippolit frowned.

“Tolya. He’s…like me. Papa doesn’t know,” she added, before he could ask. “I don’t think he does, at least. He probably suspects, with the whole theatre thing.”

Ippolit let out a bitter laugh. He sighed, tipping his head back against the wall. “God. At least he’s not trying to drag him out on fishing trips like when I was his age. When did Tolya tell you?”

She raised her head again. “He didn’t. You wouldn’t have to be a genius to know.”

“Ippolit rubbed at his forehead. “Christ, he’s a piece of shit,” he muttered.

Hélène thought of Fedya and almost cringed. “I think it already has.”

“At least you two can hide it. Papa never has to know.”

“He’d probably think it was just attention-seeking. You might actually be better off than him, for once. The way Papa sees things like that.”

Ippolit let out a surprised laugh.

He raised an eyebrow and gave her a small smile. “What?”

“It’s just…it’s surprising to hear you talk about him like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re angry.”
He shrugged. “I’m a human. I get mad on occasion. It happens.”

“Yeah, but not at Papa.”

“Lena,” he said, shaking his head, “I think I’m still eighteen and spineless in your head.”

Hélène pulled away “You’re still spineless. Just older. You only came in the first place because he told you to.”

“It’s not as simple as you think it is. Not everything he suggests is bad just because he’s the one who suggested it.”

Before she could think of a response to that, Hélène’s laptop made a loud pinging sound, and a tiny green icon flashed in the corner of the browser window. She clicked open her inbox.

“It’s from Papa,” she said, surprised.

“Should I get Anatole?”

There was no need. He had already stumbled into the bedroom with a half-assembled nightstand lugged over his shoulder or, what Hélène supposed was once meant to have been a nightstand.

“Hey guys, I, uh, I think I’ve done something wrong here,” he said, which was the understatement of the century. “The manual didn’t have any words in it and—oh, what’s that you’re looking at?”

“Papa emailed me,” said Hélène. She slid into the seat in front of the desk, and the other two crowded around her shoulders as they read. It occurred to her, in a darkly comedic moment, that this was probably the closest the three of them had been as siblings since Ippolit had graduated.

Together, they read:

FROM: Vasily Kuragin <vkuragin@kuragindustries.net>

TO: Hélène Kuragina <kween_kuragina@gmail.com>

Elena,

I hope you are doing well. It’s unfortunate that we left on such a bad note, but our last conversation was eye-opening for me. I see that we might be in need of some separation. I will be staying in New York until this matter is completely resolved.

We will be making some changes in the next few months.

I trust that you will be responsible with your brother until I return. Pursuant to our last discussion, I am sure you have begun looking for a new apartment. You are welcome to stay at the house to keep an eye on Anatole until I’m able to come home.

And to Anatole (since I have no doubt you two are reading this together), I hope you know that there are no hard feelings between us for this misunderstanding. We will continue our discussion when I return.

Regards,

Papa

“Look at this clown,” Hélène snarled, tilting back the screen so that the other two could see better.
“Jesus Christ, the man’s lost it. ‘Regards’. Who the fuck ends an email to their children with ‘regards’?”

“That’s how he ends all his emails,” Ippolit said vaguely. “He used to write it on my birthday cards.”

Hélène shot Ippolit an irritable glare, unsure whether or not he was joking, equally unsure whether to laugh or cry.

Anatole leaned over her shoulder as he finished reading. “Is he…is he telling you you’re kicked out?”

Ippolit exhaled sharply through his nostrils.

Hélène shrugged. “I mean, he technically already has kicked me out. At least he’s letting us back into the house.”

“So we’re not staying with Lito?”

Ippolit and Hélène caught each other’s eye, as if on cue.

“No, we’re not,” she said, before he could even open his mouth to respond.

Ippolit looked more than a little crestfallen, but he didn’t protest. “I mean, you can if you want, Tolya.”

Anatole considered that for a moment. “It’s okay. Thanks, though.” He turned back to Hélène. “Are you gonna write him back?”

“You have to write back,” said Ippolit. “He’ll expect you to.”

Hélène drummed her fingernails against the desktop. “I’m thinking about it.”

“Just be prudent about it, please. We want to stay in his good graces.”

“Are you gonna be snarky?” said Anatole.

“As fuck.”

“Lena,” Ippolit said sternly.

Ignoring him, Hélène stretched her fingers across the keyboard and began to type.

FROM: Hélène Kuragina <kween_kuragina@gmail.com>

TO: Vasily Kuragin <vkuragin@kuragindustries.net>

Hi.

“Misunderstanding” is a nice way of phrasing it. How long did it take your team of lawyers to write this email? Even if Anatole has forgiven you (which I doubt he has), I haven’t. Hope you rot in hell.

Fuck you,

Your daughter
Anatole let out a low whistle.

Hélène looked up from the screen. “What do you guys think?”

“It’s…I mean, it’s absolutely savage—”

“Good, I was going for that.”

“Do you want to get him angry again?” said Ippolit. “For God’s sake, Lena, we have to be delicate about this, or he might change his mind and come back to Moscow instead.”

With a sigh, Hélène deleted the first email and began to write again.

FROM: Hélène Kuragina <kween_kuragina@gmail.com>

TO: Vasily Kuragin <vkuragin@kuragindustries.net>

Papa,

I’ll be going back to the house later this week. Perhaps some distance would be good for us. It’ll be hard not having you around, but then again, we’re used to it.

Hélène

__________________________________________________________________________________________

Sonyushka: so???

Sonyushka: how did it go with andrei???

Masha<3<3: It didn’t.

Masha<3<3: He didn’t have time to talk.

Sonyushka: awwww im sorry :(’

Sonyushka: are u alright? Do u wanna talk?

Sonyushka: need to vent?

Sonyushka: im always here for u

Masha<3<3: I’m okay.

Masha<3<3: Don’t worry.

Sonyushka: really?

Masha<3<3: I’ll just tell him another time.

Masha<3<3: There’s no deadline.

Masha<3<3: I literally have the rest of my life to tell him.
Masha: It’s all alright.

Masha: I’m not upset, I promise.

Masha: I’m sure.

Sonyushka: u sure?

Sonyushka: u sure ur sure?

Masha: -_- 

Masha: Promise.

Sonyushka: alright

Sonyushka: <3

Masha: <3 <3 <3

Masha: How’s everything with you and Nat?

Sonyushka: better actually

Sonyushka: so much better

Sonyushka: we had a nice long chat

Sonyushka: there were tears

Sonyushka: and cookies

Sonyushka: Mama Rostova took us out for burgers

Sonyushka: which was super nice

Sonyushka: we’re all on good terms now

Masha: That’s nice to hear.

Masha: I’m so happy for you.

Sonyushka: thanks love <3

Masha: Do you guys have anything planned over winter break?

Sonyushka: yeah we’re going to see some fam back in Seattle

Sonyushka: hbu?

Masha: I was hoping to hang out with Andrei.

Masha: I don’t think he’s in the mood for that though.
The first thing that Anatole did after moving back into the house was take a long, piping-hot shower in the upstairs bathroom across the hall from his room.

The second thing he did was microwave a box of macaroni and cheese for dinner, with neither Hélène’s knowledge nor her permission, of course.

The third thing he did was ransack the drawer of Vasily’s desk for his cell phone.

*Priorities,* he thought. Those, at least, were still in order.

Once he unlocked the screen, he was met with a barrage of notifications—missed calls, unread messages, unopened emails, un-updated apps, and so on and so forth—in a list longer than he cared to look at or spend much time thinking about. He could worry about those later. There were more important things to fuss over.

Like the first person he intended to call, for example.

She picked up after the second ring.

“Hello?”

Anatole ran a nervous hand through his hair, fiddling with the volume controls on the side of the phone. “Natalie?”

He heard Natasha suck in a deep breath. “You got your phone back?”

“Technically. My old man’s not here to tell me off if I’m not supposed to have it, anyway.”

“I see.”

“Yeah. Still grounded?”

“Yeah. But my suspension ends in a few days.”
“Nice.”

“How about you?”

Anatole pursed his lips. “No word on that yet. I think Dmitrievna’s still deciding how much she hates my guts.”

“Well, you have your phone back, at least.”

“At least.”

“You know, for a while, I was worried you were mad at me. And that was why you weren’t answering my messages. I didn’t know you’d had it taken away.”

“Why would I be mad?”

She sighed. “It was my fault we got caught.”

“No, it wasn’t. Your cousin found us in the hallway, right?”

“Yeah, um, about that—”

“Look, Nata—”

“I left my phone out the night before and she saw our messages. So she knew. Which was why she went to Marya that morning.”

Anatole frowned.

Natasha wasn’t done. “And then when Marya came in to speak to me I just…oh, God, I cracked, Anatole. I know I shouldn’t have but she’s my godmother and she can be so scary and she gave me that look and I just told her every—”

“I did too.”

“What?”

“I spilled my guts. I was scared shitless.”

“Oh my God.”

“She’s fucking scary, man. It’s the eyebrows, I think.”

“I know. I grew up with her.”

“I thought you would’ve held out.”

“I thought so too. You, I mean. Not me. I couldn’t handle it.”

“Neither of us did, I guess.”

The silence between them stretched out so awkwardly and painfully that Anatole grimaced on reflex. It was like talking to a stranger.

You almost ran away with this girl, said the voice of his internal monologue. You almost threw both of your lives away on a whim. A stupid, selfish whim.
Broadway. Oh, God, how embarrassing it all was. He wanted nothing more than to stick his head in the ground and not surface again for the rest of time.

Natasha sighed again. “Still my fault we got caught, though.”

Anatole found himself rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet without even realizing it. His hand, the one not holding his phone, had already migrated to his shirt to worry at its hem. “I think that may’ve been a good thing.”

“I was worried you’d be mad at me.”

“I’m not. It was my dumb idea anyway.”

“It was.”

“Hm?”

“The plan. It was a dumb idea.”

“It was.”

“And I think it was a good thing that it didn’t work out, too.”

“I agree.”

“Do you think things will still be…okay between us?” she said. “Like, not, that way. But in general? As friends?”

“I think so. I—I don’t know. It’s been a lot.”

“It’s just that I’m trying to get into the habit of making amends,” she continued, almost bashfully. “I think it’s working so far. You might like to try it out sometime.”

He ducked his head in admonition. “That sounds like a good idea.”

“Maybe the first good idea the two of us have ever agreed on.”

“In that case, I owe you an apology for being a complete idiotic dickbag and thinking that running away was a good idea and getting you in on it.”

Natasha laughed. “Now, there’s a start.”

“A start? That was a damn good apology. Best one I’ve made in my life.”

“You have the rest of your life to practice.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

“Are you…um…” She cleared her throat. “Will you be coming back to Moscow High?”

Anatole flopped back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. “That’s a good question.”

“They didn’t expel you, did—?”

“No, no, no. Lena woulda thrown a fit.”

“Well, what about after winter break?”
He dragged one hand down his face with a heavy sigh. “God, I don’t even know. There’s been a ton of legal shit with my dad and my brother wants me to come live with him in New York but I dunno if Lena—”

“Wait, what?”

He waved one hand in the air, a dismissive gesture. She couldn’t see him, and he knew that, but it came on instinct. “Oh, it’s a long-ass story. I’m surprised the rumor mill hasn’t already leaked it to the school yet.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Anatole, you can’t just drop a bomb on me like that.”

“You asked. How else should I have delivered it?”

“Are—are you alright though? Sonya said people were saying things at school. About…like, your dad and your sister and stuff. Really shitty things. I didn’t think they were—”

Oh. That stung a lot more than he had expected. His heart skipped a little, not in the pleasant, giddy sort of way, and his face went hot and his stomach tightened uncomfortably. For the first time in his life, the prospect of talking about himself, or what other people had to say about him, was more abhorrent than it was exciting.

“You know,” he said, squeezing his eyes shut, “can we not talk about that actually?”

Natasha paused. “Oh.”

“I’ll tell you everything later. When I’m a bit more together.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not you, it’s just a lot and—”

“Oh, God, I’m sorry, I never meant to upset—”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Don’t be.”

“Still.”

“And I’m sorry. For everything.”

“You know,” Natasha said softly, “even if it ended in a real shitshow, I’m just glad that I got to meet you.”

He smiled despite himself. “Yeah, me too. Me too.”

Once, when Hélène was eight years old, she read in a book whose title she could no longer remember that bad and good things come in three. She wasn’t sure how true that was in the real world, but it seemed to have played out quite neatly in the past week—Fedya’s mother dropped off another casserole, Ippolit hopped on a flight back to New York, and she and Anatole moved back
into the house.

If she remembered the saying correctly, three bad things were to follow, but she hardly had the mental energy to think of that now. The way she saw it, their lives thus far had been a culmination of bad things in three by the names of Vasily, Aline, and Ippolit, and it was damn time their luck started to turn for the better.

But mostly, it felt good to sleep in her own bed again, in her own room, knowing that Anatole was just across the hall. Vasily, at least, had made good on his promise to scamper off back to New York, if his pointed absence was anything to go by. It didn’t exactly reassure her, but then again, nothing about the situation really did. Nothing but Anatole and Fedya and maybe even Pierre, and the reassurance that they were still firmly in her corner.

Late one night, a few days after they had moved back in, after she and Anatole had finished off the last of Ms. Dolokhova’s casserole for dinner, Hélène was woken up from her sleep by the sound of her ringer.

**Unknown Number**

She blinked a few times, clearing the floaters from her eyes. It was probably only scammers. Or Balaga, calling from one of the stupid burner phones that he insisted on using. She could have hung up on it and gone back to sleep—God knew she was tired enough—but something compelled her to answer instead.

“Who is this?”

She heard a rush of static as the person on the other end laughed drily. **“Your father.”**

Hélène sat up straight, feeling a cold thrill of dread rush through her. “Why are you calling?”

**“Your voice sounds raspy. Please tell me you’re not smoking again. It’s very unladylike.”**

If there were any doubts remaining about the identity of her caller, they dried up instantly. Hélène resisted the urge to remind him that he was a smoker as well, and that she didn’t give a damn how unladylike he thought it was, but she didn’t have the energy to incite another fight. “It’s raspy because it’s three in the morning here, Papa.”

“Ah, yes, of course. The time difference.”

“What do you want?”

Vasily tutted. **“Watch your tone, Elena.”**

Hélène gritted her teeth. “What do you want, Papa?”

**“You and I need to talk.”**

“Evidently. Why are you calling me from this number?”

**“I can’t get to my cell phone and the office is closed. It doesn’t matter.”**

“What do we need to talk about?”

She heard him sigh on the other side. **“I’m sorry for the way our last conversation ended. I behaved...poorly.”**
Hélène bit her lip at that. Perhaps he had softened after all. She’d been surprised when they’d finally gone back to the house that the alarm code hadn’t changed and the spare key wasn’t hidden anywhere other than its usual spot beneath the welcome mat.

“I admire the way you stood up to me,” he continued. “Few of my colleagues will do that, let alone a young woman still in college. You’ve always protected the people you love. It’s one of the most special things about you. I was wrong to criticize you for that.”

She nodded, almost forgetting that he couldn’t see her. “You were,” she breathed.

Had she ever, she wondered, been this frank with him before? A thrill of fear and excitement shot through her, and she shivered.

“Will you forgive me, lapochka? God knows I don’t deserve it but, for what it’s worth, I am truly sorry for what I said to you.”

This wasn’t like him, protested the nagging voice in the back of her head. He didn’t deserve it. In all the years she had known him, he had never apologized for anything, not truly, not sincerely. No, nothing was ever his fault. Vasily’s apologies were back-handed jabs, sly insults, guilt-trips.

But he had called her first. Perhaps it wasn’t too late for a change of heart.

Vasily seemed to sense her hesitation, and when he spoke again, his voice was even softer. “I couldn’t live with myself if I knew I’d pushed you away, princess,” he murmured. “I was in a bad frame of mind and I lost control of my temper. I don’t want to lose you over something as trivial as that.”

Hélène pressed her eyes shut. Even as she tried to push them away, memories flooded her senses, overwhelming and disjunct. Vasily speaking Russian to her in a low voice, sweet endearments rolling off his tongue almost without thought. He had given her a knowing grin when she had complained about Anatole and Aline speaking French to each other, she remembered. You and I will just have to have our own language, Lenochka.

His arms, smelling ever so slightly of smoke, wrapped tightly around her as she wept over a skinned knee.

His hand resting on her shoulder as she stared numbly at Aline’s grave, heavy and comforting. It had been a sunny day, she remembered, especially for November, but still cold. He had given her his jacket, and she and Anatole had burrowed into its residual warmth in the backseat of the car. Ten years later and she could still recall that moment with perfect clarity, still smell the faint traces of the cologne he had stopped wearing shortly after the funeral had been held and the goodbyes had been said.

It was difficult at times to remember that he felt as well. Maybe he was still hurting.

Maybe things were still salvageable.

“Please, Elena.” She heard his voice break. His voice never broke. “I can’t lose the best part of myself.”

How many times had she been told that she was her father’s daughter? So much of who she was was inextricably tied to him.

“Yes, Papa,” she whispered. “I forgive you.”
She heard him exhale on the other line. “Thank you, princess.”

“Thank you for calling me.”

“Of course,” he said distantly. “I don’t like it when we argue.”

Hélène bit her lip. Affection, somehow, seemed more awkward to hold than hatred. But she couldn’t bring herself to hang up, and all the same, she found the thought of continuing the conversation equally unbearable. “I don’t either.”

Vasily laughed. “Your mother used to say that you and I were cut from the same cloth.”

She smiled. “I think she was right.”

“She was. We disagreed on a lot of things, but I loved her, Elena, I really did.”

“I miss her.”

“I do too. But we can’t let that tear the family apart. It’s not what she would have wanted. I’m going to try to do better.”

“Promise?”

“Obeschchayu, dorogaya.”

I promise, darling.

Hélène nodded as she swallowed past the lump in her throat, now suddenly painful beyond words. Realizing that he couldn’t see her nodding, she stopped.

“Blagodaryu vas, Papa.”

“Your Russian is better than I thought.” She could practically hear his smile, even through the speaker. “We’ll have to practice together once I’m home. Keep it sharp.”

“I’d like that. Are you coming home soon?”

“I don’t think that would be for the best. I trust you to handle things on your own.”

Hélène nodded wordlessly. When she couldn’t bring herself to answer, he sighed on the other line.

“I know that this has been difficult, sweetheart. And it’s only possible because of who you are. Because I know that I can trust you. That you won’t let me down.”

She almost balked at that. Still hungry for his attention and praise. It was impossible to decide whether it was more sad than it was laughable. “Thank you,” she finally managed to say.

“Could you do me a favor, luchik? I’ve been so out of it that I forgot a few things at home before I left.”

“What is it?”

“I need you to go into my study,” Vasily said. “There are some papers in the top drawer of my desk.”

Hélène nodded blankly and padded over across the hall to the room opposite hers. “Okay.”
“Good girl. Do you see them?”

It was too dark. Her hand fumbled to the light switch and flicked it on. The drawer was already cracked open by the time she reached it.

“I think so.”

“Perfect. I need you to shred them for me. Can you do that, lapochka?”

“You want me to shred them?”

“Please. It’s very important that you shred them. They can’t just be thrown out.”

Hélène idly flicked through the papers, frowning when she picked out a few words. “Papa…these documents look important. What are they for?”

“Don’t worry about it, princess. I know it’s late. I won’t keep you for long.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to wait until you’re home? I don’t want to shred the wrong papers.”

“It can’t wait.”

“Not even until morning?”

“It has to be done now, Elena.”

“Why?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“No,” she said, gripping the papers tightly. “I don’t think that’s true.”

“If I say it doesn’t matter, then it doesn’t matter.”

Hélène’s voice become cold and hard. “What have you done, Papa?”

“It isn’t any of your concern, Elena. Do as you’re told.”

“What is it that you always used to say?” she said, pursing her lips. “‘Never agree to anything before you know how it could benefit you’?”

She could tell her retort had had its desired effect when Vasily fell silent. “Everything I do,” he said, in a tightly controlled voice, “I do for your benefit.”

“Don’t you trust me anymore?”

“This is for your own safety,” he said, and despite his cool tone, Hélène could hear his mounting frustration.

“I don’t see how.”

“If you were acting in good faith, you can’t be prosecuted—”

“Prosecuted? Papa, what’s going on?”

She heard him suck in a deep breath. He hadn’t meant to say that, she realized. As soon as the temporary satisfaction of catching his misstep ran through her, so did a genuine tremor of fear. He
never made stupid mistakes like that.

“Elena,” he said quietly, and the very sound of her name made her flinch, “do as I say.”

“Tell me what’s wrong, or I’ll take these to a lawyer and find out for myself.”

He sighed. “A misunderstanding with the company’s finances. That’s all.”

“They fix those by shredding any evidence and documentation nowadays?” she said faux-innocently. “Shows you how much I know.”

“Don’t be smart with me. I have nothing to hide. This will just simplify the process.”

Hélène narrowed her eyes. “You’re lying. Just tell me, Papa, how bad is it?”

“It won’t be bad so long as you—”

“Papa.”

She heard him let out a shuddering sigh. “It’s bad.”

“What’s happening?”

“I made a mistake,” Vasily said. “I got sloppy, I let myself slip, and if I don’t take care of things soon, there’s going to be consequences. For you and your brothers, not just me.”

“What kind of consequences?”

“We could lose everything.”

“Ippolit’s living on his own, Anatole’s trying to emancipate himself, and you’ve disowned me. Forgive me for thinking that we don’t have much to lose.”

“You went back to the house as soon as you were sure I was gone,” he said. “I’d be willing to bet that Anatole is there too. You’re still both dependent on my success.”

Hélène fell silent.

“I got involved with the wrong crowd. I don’t want you three to suffer for my mistakes.”

“Meaning?”

“We could lose more than just the money.”

Hélène’s breath left her in a shuddering gasp. “Papa, are you saying that you’re in danger? What’s going on? Talk to me.”

“It’s not just me. The three of you could be hurt as well.”

Hélène’s hand drifted to her hair. She paced back and forth along the length of the hallway, worrying her bottom lip between her teeth. “Why didn’t you warn us before?”

“Can you blame me for not wanting to involve you or your brothers?”

“I can blame you for putting them in harm’s way. Does Ippolit even know?”

“Of course not. I don’t trust him the way I trust you.”
Hélène sighed. “And it didn’t occur to you to ask him, someone who’s actually working in finance, for help instead of your twenty-one-year-old daughter?”

“There is a difference between being experienced and being loyal. I don’t need someone to tell me what I’ve done wrong.”

“But Papa, if people could get hurt—”

Vasily cut her off. “Nobody will get hurt if I can resolve this situation. And I need your help for that.”

“Can’t you talk to someone about this? Your lawyer, maybe the police—”

“Everything will be fine as long as you do as I say. No one else needs to know about this.”

Realization sank its icy claws into her chest, and Hélène felt her breath leave her in one shuddering exhale as the world began to teeter back and forth around her. “You’re lying to me.”

“Elena,” he said sternly.

“These are tax forms. Right?”

“Very observant of you.”

“And why would someone be threatening you over your tax records?”

“You have to trust me, princess,” Vasily said. “Please, I swear, this isn’t what you think.”

“I’m not going to be an accomplice to a literal crime!” When she was met with nothing but silence on the other end, she slumped back against the wall. “Oh my God, do you have any idea what would happen to me if I got caught? Forget college, forget my career. You want me to risk all of that just so you can walk away scot-free from whatever it is you’ve done?” She exhaled heavily, pressing a hand to her forehead. “I can’t believe you. You only wanted me to do your dirty work. You don’t care about me at all, do you?

“Lena—”

“No,” she snapped, “actually, I take it back. I can believe you. God, this is so fucking typical. I was an idiot to think it might be any different this time.”

“Language, Elena!”

“Don’t you tell me what to do,” she growled.

“I am your father, young lady.”

“But that doesn’t make me your pawn. None of us are, not me, not Lito, not Tolya. Do you even care at all what would happen to me if you got charged and I had helped you?”

“Nobody is getting charged with anything because I’ve done nothing wrong,” he hissed. “Now if you would just—”

“You never even apologized for hurting Tolya,” said Hélène. “And I’ll bet you’re only sorry now for what you said to me because you’re afraid I won’t bail you out.”

“Elena, listen to—”
“Oh, *fuck* you!” she said, and before he could respond, she hung up and slammed her phone onto the dresser.

Blondie: hey are u still awkae?

Blondie: awk

Blondie: *awkke

Blondie: fuck it you know what i mean

Blondie: i cant type for shit today

Blondie: this is what hppaaens wehn you dont get to use ur phone for a long time

Blondie: youu get out of practive

Blondie: practice

feddy bear: what the fuck

Blondie: hi hi

Blondie: tolya here

Blondie: in caaes u deleted my number frmo ur contact

feddy bear: i didnt delete ur number

feddy bear: but dude

feddy bear: it’s like three in the morning

feddy bear: why the fuck are u still awake

Blondie: still suspended, not a school night

Blondie: lenas shoutinf at smoeone on the phone

Blondie: woke me up

Blondie: i was wonderign if it was u

Blondie: i guess not thanks

feddy bear: why dont u ask her???

Blondie: are you srs???

Blondie: shell kill me if she realizes im still awake

Blondie: you know lena
Blondie: liek
Blondie: slowly
Blondie: painfully

feddy bear: well
feddy bear: she hasnt msgd me back yet

Blondie: hmmmmmm :/
Blondie: oh y i k e s

feddy bear: ???

Blondie: shes really shouting now
Blondie: ok its probs lito then
Blondie: she only ever shouts like that at lito
Blondie: and telemarketers
Blondie: srry to bug ya

feddy bear: kid
feddy bear: i love u but could u pls pls pls
feddy bear: just go to bed at a reasonable hour
feddy bear: for once in ur goddamn life

Blondie: :P

It was bad enough that Hélène refused to call him outside of birthdays and Christmases and Thanksgivings. Even worse was that when she did bother to give him a ring, it always had to be at her convenience, whenever it suited her, which, given the time difference, invariably never suited him.

Needless to say, Ippolit was irritated when the sound of her ringer dragged him from his frankly well-deserved sleep. His hand upended his glass as he felt for his phone along the surface of the dresser, knocking it to the ground.

“Shit,” he hissed.

The mattress shifted as Olly groaned and rolled over next to him. “Just let it go to voicemail.”

It was incredibly tempting to listen to him. Ippolit did, at least for a few minutes, before remembering that his inbox was full. Well, he reasoned, if it was really important, she could call him later. And at a reasonable hour.
The ringer continued to blare out.

Dammit all. This was an outrage. He was jetlagged, he was exhausted, now he was pissed off, and he was most certainly not going to take any more of Hélène’s crap if she decided to continue chewing him out over the phone.

Grouchily, he answered the call and rolled over on his side to hold the phone to his ear.

“Lito?” came her voice.

“I hope you realize that it’s five-thirty in the morning here,” he snapped.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

Ippolit sighed, “What do you need? Is everything alright?”

“We need to talk.”

“I just flew back last night. I’m dead beat. Can’t this wait?”

“It can’t. It really can’t.”

Ippolit sat up a little straighter and leaned against the headboard, frowning. “Is everything alright with Tolya?”

Olly grumbled something bleary and indignant into the comforter. He flopped onto his stomach to glare at Ippolit.

“He’s fine, he’s fine. Fast asleep in his room.”

“What’s going on?”

“Who’s Tolya?” Olly slurred, still half-asleep.

Ippolit ignored him.

“Where’s Papa?” said Hélène.

“Home,” he sighed, running a hand through his hair and wincing when his fingers caught on a tangle of knotted curls. “Probably. Most people would be at this hour.”

“You need to go to the office. Right now.”

Olly reached over and tugged on the end of his sleeve. “What’s going on?”

“Shush,” Ippolit snapped.

“Did you just shush me?” Hélène said in a voice like ice.

“No. It doesn’t matter. What’s wrong?”

He heard her sigh. “I think Papa’s up to something.”

“Oh, we already know that.”

“No, not that, you dumbass.”
Olly raised his eyebrows. Ippolit wondered if he had heard Hélène through the speaker.

“If you’re gonna be hostile, then I’m just gonna hang up and go back to sleep.”

“No!” she said, and now there was something desperate in her voice that made him frown. “Please, Lito, you need to listen.”

“Okay, okay, Lena, what’s wrong?”

“Who’s Lena?” said Olly.

“Little sister,” Ippolit muttered.

“Since when do you have a sister?”

“I have the rest of the forms. He might try to come down and get them. You need to stall him until they can start an investigation.”

“Lena, you aren’t making sense.”

“The taxes,” she said. “He’s lying on his tax forms. Or something like that.”

“How old is she?” Olly pressed on.

“For God’s sake, will you shut up?”

“I’m going to assume that wasn’t directed at me,” Hélène said drily. “Who’s there on the other end?”

And since Ippolit was more pissed-off than he was tired, and even more so reluctant to introduce her to his boyfriend at five-thirty in the morning over an impromptu emergency phone call when she hadn’t bothered reaching out to him for a good ten or so years, he said, in the flattest, sternest voice he could manage, “None of your business.”

“Wow, okay then,” Olly snipped.

Ippolit scowled. “No, not you.”

“Would you listen to me? I think he’s done something really bad this time.”

“Are you positive about this?”

“I am,” she said. “You have to trust me, Lito.”

“And you think he keeps them in the office?”

“Where else?”

Ippolit didn’t bother to change out of his pajamas before he pulled on his raincoat and a pair of shoes. He went for his backpack next, the one that always sat at the foot of his desk. “Alright,” he said, “I’ll hail a cab. I’ll let you know what I find.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. Get some sleep, okay?”

“I can’t. Not after this.”
“Try, please. Don’t you still have classes in the morning?”

“That’s sort of been bumped down on my ladder of priorities.”

His wallet. Where had his wallet gone off to?

“Please,” he said, “if you value my cardiac health, you won’t tell me things like that.”

“I’ll sort out my sleep schedule once this whole mess is sorted out. Now—”

“I’m going to hang up now,” he said, scrabbling blindly along the ledge of his dresser. He was almost certain he’d left it there. It couldn’t have moved. It couldn’t have grown a pair of legs and wandered off on its own.

Hélène hung up before he could even reach for the button. Ippolit shook his head. She hadn’t changed a bit.

“Here,” Olly said flatly. The wallet was in his hands, as were his office keys.

Ippolit dumped them into the backpack with an almost frantic speed. “What would I do without you?”

“What’s going on?”

“I’ll tell you later. Once I get back from the office.”

“Why not now?”

“Oleksander,” he said sternly, shucking on his backpack. “Now really isn’t the time.”

“Don’t you ‘Oleksander’ me, Ippolit Vasilyevich.”

“I don’t have time to deal with this right now. I need to go.”

“So it wasn’t a business trip after all, was it? You sneak.”

“It was a family emergency. Same difference. And I need to—”

“What sort of family emergency?”

“Olly, for Christ’s sake—”

“So you have two siblings, right? Unless there’s anything else you’ve been hiding from me.”

“—I have to—I wasn’t hiding anything, I just—”

“Lena and Tolya. I heard you mention those names.”

“—didn’t really know how to bring it up in conversation.”

Olly, stubborn as an ox, was relentless. “How old are they? Where are they?”

“She’s twenty-one and my younger brother is seventeen and they live out in Idaho and I really don’t have to time to keep talking with you.”

Ippolit made another move for the door, but Olly caught him by the elbow. “You’ve never told me about them.”
“It’s complicated.”

“Try me.”

Ippolit held his breath, stalling. It occurred to him that he had never shared with anyone just how dysfunctional—if that was even the proper word for it—his family was.

A moment later, it also occurred to him that there was no one else in this world who he trusted as much as Olly, who he had ever been as open and vulnerable and honest with as Olly. And at the same time, no one who could see through him just as easily as Olly could.

And so he told Olly everything, in the most rapid-fire, detached voice he could manage, paraphrasing on occasion and no doubt forgetting a few major details.

The cracks in his parents’ marriage, evident even to a young child. How they had played favorites with his younger siblings, using them against each other. Aline’s overdose, his own graduation overshadowed by her funeral. The move to Moscow, Idaho, his decision to stay behind in New York for school. The ten years of near-radio silence that had followed.

And then, the latest incident and everything that had come to pass since then.

By the time he had finished, it felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his chest.

But when his attention turned back to Olly, he saw that he looked more angry than sympathetic.

“What?” he said flatly. “Didn’t my sob story impress you?”

“You left them alone?” was all Olly had to say.

“Christ, Olek, what was I supposed to do? It’s not as if they wanted me there anyways.”

“No wonder your sister’s angry with you. Christ, Ippolit, it’s a miracle she still calls you.”

“That’s just her personality,” he snapped. “We were closer when we were younger until she decided she was too good for sentimentality.”

“No, no, no!” Olly shot back. “Jesus, don’t you even get it? That’s not personality, you utter fucknut, it’s upbringing. It’s trauma.”

“Our father never hit her. I made sure of that.”

Olly blinked. “‘Made sure’?”

Ippolit’s face went hot. “Look, she mouths off a lot, but she’s the favorite, so he goes easy on her. I swear, I never would have left them if I thought they wouldn’t be safe.”

“And what does ‘safe’ mean? Happy? Well-adjusted?”

“Oh, come off it, Olly, nobody in my family has ever been any of those things. Hélène is tough, way tougher than me or Anatole.”

“The youngest?”

“Yeah. He’s…too soft. He’s like me that way. Hélène looks out for him, better than I ever could.”

“And who looks out for her?”
“I’ve tried. She won’t let anyone. But he’d never hurt her, honestly.”

“Just because he hasn’t hit her doesn’t mean he hasn’t hurt her, you moron. If—” He paused for a moment and reached for his phone, still on the nightstand.

“What?” said Ippolit, frowning.

Olly began to read, in a disturbingly monotone voice, “Drinks alcohol regularly from an early age, is concerned for younger siblings without explaining why, becomes secretive and reluctant to share information”—he shot Ippolit a hard look—“talks of running away, and shows challenging and or disruptive behaviour at school.” He looked up from his phone. “Does any of this sound familiar at all? In the slightest?”

Ippolit ducked his head. His face must have been red as a tomato by now. “Yes.”

For the both of them. And that was the worst part of it all.

Olly glared at him. “Those are the symptoms for kids who’ve experienced emotional abuse or neglect.”

“Oh.”

Correction: the worst part of it all was how unsurprised he was to hear that.

“And you never thought to ask your boyfriend, a fucking family lawyer, for help?”

Ippolit crossed his arms and sank back into his chair. “I didn’t know if you’d help.”

“Oh my literal fucking God,” Olly said, rubbing his forehead. “I can’t believe this. I actually can’t believe this.”

“Was it that unreasonable for me to think that it was a big ask?”

“Yes,” he snapped. “Because it wouldn’t have been about you, you jackass.”

And with that, he turned on his heels, still wearing his pajamas, snatched his coat off the rack, and started off to the front door.

Ippolit frowned. “Wh-where are you going now?”

“Your dad’s office. And then we’re going to call your sister and apologize.”
In Which Things Get Better

Chapter Summary

Pieces start falling into place.

Chapter Notes

This is the second last chapter! We’re waiting until the next post to get hella sappy, but from the bottom of our hearts, thank you for all of the love this story has gotten. We can't express how much it means to us that you guys CARE. Hope you enjoy!

Tax fraud. Child abuse he could dodge, battery he could evade, but it was the tax fraud that had done him in.

Had it been anyone else’s father, Hélène may have been able to find something darkly comedic in the whole situation. Vasily had been making bank as things stood, which must have meant that whatever he had done was out of pure greed. Appropriate, she thought. She still hadn’t fully been able to untangle the legal jargon that the whole situation was wrapped in, but what she had been able to parse together was satisfying enough.

It would have been more satisfying had the ramifications been limited to Vasily himself.

They were going to lose the house. Vasily was to go to prison, depending on how the trial went. The matter of Anatole’s custody was still up in the air, but it wouldn’t be for long—he was only a few months shy of eighteen, and he’d be off to college in August anyway.

Slowly, the dust began to settle. Ippolit set up camp at the office to sort through the mountain of paperwork Vasily had left behind. The awkward tension between her and Fedya began to peter out, but she’d expected that. Pierre hadn’t spoken much to her beyond the occasional text to see how things were going. She was polite, if a little formal in her responses. Anatole seemed to be on the road to returning to his usual chipper self, now that he and Natasha had made clumsy amends. When you put it all on paper, it seemed like a happy ending in the works.

But they were still going to lose the house, and something had to be done.

Hélène took a minute to steel her nerves before putting in the number, her heart pounding so heavily she could feel its every beat in her ears. “Hi, Lito,” she said.

She heard him gasp on the other end, but he regained his composure quickly. “Hi, Hélène.”

“How are you?” she said.

“About as well as can be expected.”

“That’s fair.” She winced at how stilted and awkward she sounded, a far cry from the confident, practiced tone she usually took with him.
Ippolit sighed. “Whatever it is you want, can you just cut to the chase? I’m still sorting through Papa’s tax records.”

“Anatole was accepted to NYU. Early decision.”

“That’s great.”

“It is,” Hélène said softly. “I’m very proud of him.” She sucked in a deep breath and told herself to go forwards, no matter how much it might sting. “I think it would be good for him if he got used to the city before school starts.”

There was silence on the other end for a few moments before Ippolit spoke again. “Are you asking —?”

“Does your offer still stand?”

“Oh course it does. I’d love to have him.”

“Great,” she said, willing her voice to hold steady. “I’ve looked into some schools he could transfer to halfway through the year. I’ll send him during winter break so he can get acclimated.”

“You’re not coming?”

Hélène ground her teeth together. Already, tears pricked in the corners of her eyes. May as well bite the bullet, she reasoned, and spit it out before she got too choked up to go through with it. “I don’t think that would be for the best.”

“I see,” he said quietly.

“I want to come visit,” she added, “but I think a clean break would be better for him. And I still have school to finish.”

“And is that what’s best for you?”

“Probably.” There was a pregnant pause, like he was waiting for her to say something else. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“That’s okay,” Ippolit said. “Do you think he’ll be alright with that?”

Hélène sighed and leaned her head against the wall, pressing a hand to her brow. “He’ll be fine. I’ll work on him.”

She heard him take a sharp, deep breath, as if bracing himself for what he was about to say next. “Would he be happy here? Without you?”

Hélène’s shoulders dropped. It hurt more than she had expected, hearing those words, hearing how even after all that they had been through, he still cared. Perhaps there were still some vestiges of the big brother she had once known and loved left in him.

“Lito,” she began, but her voice fell flat as a sob lodged itself in her throat.

“I know I haven’t been the best brother,” Ippolit continued shakily, “and I know that nothing I can do now will make up for it.”

“No, Lito, just—”
“Please, Lena. You don’t need to make excuses for me. I wasn’t there when I should have been, but I want to be there for him now. You’re an adult, I understand that, but you’re both my little siblings and I’ll always love you, you know that?”

Hélène let out a choked-off giggle as tears began to spill down her cheeks. “Stop being sentimental. It’s nauseating.”

“I’m just making up for lost time.”

“Lito…”

“I’m not going to ask him to be all buddy-buddy with me,” he said. “He has every right to hate me —”

“Don’t be silly. He doesn’t hate you.”

“— but I just want him to be happy here.”

“He will be. He loves the city.”

Ippolit chuckled. “Do you remember when we were kids, when we used to go to Grimaldi’s for pizza on Fridays? By the pier? And then—”

“And then he’d insist on dragging us to the Brooklyn Ice Cream Factory. Vanilla, every single time.”

“He was such a brat.”

Hélène could hear the smile in Ippolit’s voice, and chuckled despite herself. “Was?”

“Hasn’t changed much, has he?”

Even though she knew he wouldn’t be able to see her, she shook her head. “Not a bit. Well,” she added, “he did get taller.”

“About time, I guess,” Ippolit said lightly. “I knew the little pipsqueak wasn’t going to stay a pipsqueak forever.”

“I’m sure he’d be thrilled to hear that.”

There followed a brief pause. Finally, Ippolit asked, “Have you spoken to him about this yet?”

“About that…” Hélène’s voice trailed off.

Ippolit’s tone went flat. “Lena.”

“He likes the idea,” she sighed. “He doesn’t know I called you.”

“Tell him, please? The last thing I want is another family falling-out.”

“I know, I know. There’s just been so much that’s been dumped on him lately. It’s a lot for anyone to deal with. He’s still just a kid.”

“He won’t be for much longer.”

The words dried up in Hélène’s mouth. She swallowed heavily, one hand reaching up to wind a
ringlet around her fingers. “God, you’re making me feel so old right now.”


She nodded numbly. A heavy lump pressed against her throat. “I miss it too. I miss having my big brother.”

“I’m sorry, Lena.” His voice cracked over her name. “I miss him, too.”

Hélène’s mouth twisted into something of a smile. “Why don’t you give him a call after this? Just chat, ask him a little about his interests. Maybe re-introduce yourselves to each other.”

Ippolit exhaled shakily. “That’s probably a good idea.” He took in a deep breath. “I’m nervous. Is that weird?”

“He’s pretty forgiving,” she said. “More than I am, at least.”

Ippolit snorted. “That’s not saying much.”

“Since when has Tolya ever been able to hold a grudge?”

“Fair point.”

Hélène absentmindedly ran her fingers along the wall. “I’m excited for you. You guys are gonna have a lot of fun together.”

“I’m excited too. But are you gonna be okay?”

She nodded again out of sheer force of habit, and her lower lip began to wobble. “I don’t know.” She let out a laugh at that, wild and manic and nervous. Her hand drifted back to her hair. “God, I sound like such a mother, don’t I? I’m not ready to let him go. But I don’t think I ever will be.”

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re making the right decision.”

“That means a lot. I don’t think you realize how much.” Hélène wiped her eyes with the heel of her hand as she collapsed into a chair. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m such a wreck right now.”

“It’s alright to be upset.”

“I know he’ll be okay with you, but will you let me know when he gets settled in?”

“Of course.”

“And if you need help with him you’ll call me?”

“Yes, I promise.” There was a pause, and Ippolit cleared his throat. “He’s a tough kid. He’s going to be fine.”

“I know.”

“And you will be, too.”

“I hope so.”

“You will. And he’s only gonna be a phone call away.”

“I know.”
“The apartment’s yours, by the way,” he said quietly. “If you want it. It’s under my name, not Papa’s.”

“Oh, Lito, I couldn’t. I couldn’t accept something like that.”

“Please. I’ll feel better knowing you have somewhere to stay.”

“Lito.”

“Try think of it as a makeup present. For ten years of birthdays and Christmases.”

“Christ,” she said, laughing. “Feel free to skip a few more, if this is how you make it up to me.”

She heard him laughing too. “Will you accept it, then?”

“I will. Thank you.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

“I think you have a very contrived definition of ‘least’.”

Ippolit sighed again with a rush of static. “I love talking to you, but I really have to get back to work.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“Thank you,” she said.

“We’ll talk later. The keys are in the mailbox, when you want to move in.”

“Okay.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Bye, now.”

“Bye.”

He clicked off the call before she could. She was thankful for that. She wasn’t sure if she would have been able to do that herself.

Hélène let out a ragged, shuddering sigh. Something in her chest felt lighter, like the knot of tension between her shoulders had finally snapped, like something had folded, like something had given. She looked down at her contacts page, and a sea of faces looked back at her—there was Ippolit, still a stern, glowering thirteen-year-old in his high school yearbook portrait; Pierre, awkward and camera-shy, his face half-blurred by his fingertip on the lens; Fedya, clean-shaven and grinning, the top of her own head nudged into the corner of the image; Natasha, smiling sweetly, her hair done up for the Winter Formal.

And then there was Anatole. His icon was a selfie of the two of them, mid-laugh, and behind them she could see the shiny red of one of the booth seats at Pavlovna’s.
Hélène ran one hand down her face. No. Now wasn’t the time to get sentimental or sappy. That wasn’t her. She was made of tougher stuff than that.

Instead, she flipped over to her contacts page, sat up straighter in her seat, and decided to make another important, long-overdue call.

“Hi there, Marya,” she began. “How are things going on your end?”

The last day of school before winter break was always an insufferable affair, to say the least. That it happened to fall on a Friday this year didn’t help, and between the stale coldness of the classrooms and the antsiness of the cafeteria, it was only by a herculean feat of willpower that Mary didn’t smash open a window with her chair and take off running for the nearest snow-filled lawn.

But it hadn’t snowed yet either, so the weather remained a dismal grey, just as it did every December in Moscow. Once the sky finally did open up, she knew she’d be stuck shovelling the driveway, but after that was over, she could make herself a cup of hot cocoa and sit in the sunroom with a mug and a cookie or two and her phone and Sonya on the other line.

Besides, it wasn’t as if Andrei would want to hang out with her this year.

“You know,” Sonya muttered, halfway through her sandwich, “the more I think about it, the more I’m sort of convinced that Dr. Arakcheyev is, like, some ageless cryptid.”

That, of all things, finally startled Mary out of her sleepy daze. She snorted. “You think?”

Sonya’s grin was downright rakish. “Yeah. In yearbook, Julie dug out some photos from the eighties or the seventies or whenever. The guy hasn’t changed a bit. Not even the glasses. Same sweater vest and loafers and everything.”

“I buy it.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.”

“Everyone else is convinced. Makarin got detention in AP U.S. History for asking him what it was like to have lived through the Great Depression.”

The two of them laughed at that, and for a moment, Mary forgot about Andrei and college applications and the emptiness that would follow for the next two weeks when she no longer had Sonya to look forwards to every morning in homeroom.

“Hey, um, would you guys mind if I sat here?” said a familiar voice.

Mary’s head snapped upwards. She almost didn’t believe her eyes for a minute.

Natasha was standing in the middle of the lunchroom aisle with a flushed yet steady face and a tray balanced between her forearms. The slouch of her shoulders was unrecognizable. She looked nervous, shy, apologetic even. Like she was afraid Mary would bite her head off if she took a seat without an invitation.

Sonya opened her mouth to say something, but Mary was faster. “We’d love that.”
Both Sonya and Natasha turned to her with twin looks of surprise. Mary smiled and pulled out the chair beside her.

“You seriously—?”

“Of course,” Marya said. She couldn’t have been more sincere if she tried. “Please.”

Natasha lowered her eyes, smiling, and slid into the seat with a quiet, “Thanks.”

Under the table, Sonya reached over to give Mary’s hand a squeeze.

Natasha’s eyes flickered between the two of them. “So, how long has this been going on?”

“I’m sorry?” said Sonya.

“Hm?” said Mary, at the same time.

Natasha shifted awkwardly in her chair. “This. The two of you. Together.”

Sonya’s eyes widened in realization, her sandwich frozen midway between the tray and her mouth.

“Oh,” Mary said. “That’s a good question.”

“Haven’t you been keeping track?”

“I didn’t know this was the sort of thing you kept track of.”

Sonya shot Natasha a sharp look. “Your mom doesn’t know, right?”

Natasha shook her head immediately. “No. Haven’t told a soul. I swear up and down and on my grandma’s grave.”

“Alright,” Sonya exhaled.

“It must have been October,” Mary said finally. “Was it October when you came over and we watched that movie?”

Sonya’s cheeks went from white to pink. “I mean, I think? But we were sort of a thing before—”

“You think so?”

“Well, I mean, we didn’t put a label on it till then, but—”

“Unless that was in November.”

The two of them paused for a moment, brows, furrowed in concentration, and then almost in perfect synchronization, Mary shrugged, and Sonya said, “We can’t remember.”

“This is cute,” Natasha said. “Really cute.”

Sonya ducked her head, blushing.

“Thank you, Natasha,” said Mary.

“I just wanted to—look, I know it’s a little late in the game for this—but I wanted to talk to the both of you and apologize for being so weird about—”
“About everything?” Sonya said with a cheeky grin.

“Yeah,” said Natasha, thoroughly abashed. “Everything. But I hope it’s not too late for a fresh start. Maybe not, like, right now, but once we get back from winter break. I just”—she looked back down at her lunch tray, smiling through tears—“I’m so happy you two found each other. It’s what you deserve.”

“Thanks, Nat,” Sonya said.

Mary’s smile threatened to split her face in two. So, she thought, this was what it was like to have friends in the plural.

“I think we should call a truce,” she said. “Like you said. A fresh start. A blank slate. Whatever…weirdness there was, we’re gonna forget about it. It’s done. Capisce? This is how it should’ve been since day one. The three of us. Friends. Pals.” With a cheesy grin, she leaned over to tickle Sonya beneath the ribs. “Old chums.”

Sonya swatted her hand away. “Don’t be gross.”

Natasha laughed. “I like the idea of us being friends.”

“So do I.”

“Me too.”

“Hey, Mary, you know,” Natasha said, “you should come over to our place and watch a flick sometime over break. We could do a marathon. Or a sleepover. Anything.”

Mary shot Sonya shy glance. “I’d like that a lot.”

“Seconded,” said Sonya.

“We could do stuff like makeup and manicures, if you’re down for that,” Natasha continued. “And we could order from Pav’s. But only if you’d like.”

“Natasha,” Marya said, laying a hand on her forearm, “I’d love nothing more.”

And so they sat together, the three of them, for once all perfectly content, and mindlessly chatted the rest of the period away.

The landlord had finally had the heating fixed after another one of the tenants had threatened to file a lawsuit, so while it wasn’t freezing anymore, it was now mid-December and Pierre’s apartment was cold as an icebox.

Slowly but surely, just as he did every year before winter could really set in, he set out to clean the place, top to bottom. His mother would want to visit for Christmas, if not sooner than that, and the last thing he wanted was her seeing the mess he had allowed to accumulate since August. It was long overdue, anyhow—everything he owned and a few things he didn’t remember owning seemed to be covered in half an inch of dust, and when he shifted the rug in his living room aside to vacuum, he saw a rectangle-shaped discoloration on the floorboards.

By the time he had gotten about halfway through emptying out his first bookshelf, he heard the lock clinking and clanking, and the doorknob turned. Pierre started towards the hallway, ready to
let the landlord have an earful, when Anatole stepped in.

“Hey, man,” he said airly.

Pierre stopped dead in his tracks, so abruptly that he almost upended a stack of books. He wasn’t sure if this was better or worse than the landlord.

His gut began to churn, which probably meant it was the latter. Good things never happened when Anatole showed up at his apartment unannounced.

“Oh,” he said anyway. “Hi, Anatole.”

“You look cozy.”

Pierre looked down and realized that he still hadn’t managed to change out of his pajamas. Flushing, he grabbed his bathrobe off the armrest of the couch and shrugged it on with as much grace as possible, which wasn’t much at all. “Well, it is the weekend.”

“Fair.”

“What’s the matter now?”

An eyebrow shot up. “Does there always have to be a matter when I’m around?”

“Considering the precedent you’ve set?” There was a beat, and when Anatole didn’t seem to register what he had meant, Pierre sighed and said, “Yes.”

Anatole held up the spare keys—the ones Pierre had made the grave mistake of giving to him—with a smile. “Well, I thought I should just swing by to give these back to you. I’m not gonna need them anymore.”

Pierre slipped the keys into his robe pocket like he was afraid Anatole would snatch them out of his hands. He would never give away those keys again, he decided. Not to any Kuragin, not to any resident of Moscow, not even to Marya Dmitrievna herself.

“Thank you, Anatole,” he said. His stomach began to un-knot itself. No news. No news was good news. It was just the keys.

“You’re welcome,” came Anatole’s equally awkward reply.

“How are things going with you?”

Anatole nodded, running his hands up and down the straps of his backpack. “Good, thanks. Sorta. Everything worked out in the end, I guess.” He rubbed his nose, and for a moment, he looked embarrassed. “I’m leaving for New York today. Lena’s going to drop me off at the airport. My flight’s in a few hours.”

Pierre blinked. It took a minute or so for his brain to parse that together. “Huh?”

Anatole rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet. “I’m going back to the city to live with my older brother.”

“But what about—?”

“I’m finishing high school there. After winter break ends.”
“Ah.”

“And then staying for college.”

“I see.”

“I’m going to NYU.”

Pierre raised his eyebrows. That, of all things, surprised him the most. He hadn’t pegged Anatole as being particularly smart.

Perhaps he had been wrong in his initial judgement, then. Perhaps there were enough brains and wit in one family to stretch between siblings.

Just not common sense, evidently.

“Congratulations,” he said, a moment too late. “That…that’s really good. You’ve done good. You should be proud of yourself.”

“Thank you,” Anatole said. He sounded humble about it, which was both surprising and unnerving.

And then, something even more surprising and unnerving:

“I think I owe you an apology.”

Pierre frowned. This wasn’t Anatole. It must have been a dopplegänger. A polite, rational, quietly-spoken dopplegänger who had enough sense to return the keys that he shouldn’t have been given in the first place.

Anatole stared down at his feet. “I know I haven’t exactly been a good…person,” he said slowly, “and I’m sorry for that. I just wanted to thank you for being a good friend to me even when I wasn’t one to you.”

That hurt more than it should have. It shouldn’t have hurt at all, but Pierre was the sentimental sort, and his heart twinged all the same. “No, Anatole, it’s—”

“It’s true. I mean, we—I did put you through a lot of shit. Like the raccoon thing. And then Borodino’s. And you helped me out anyway. So I’m here to apologize and thank you for that.”

Pierre’s face burned. “That’s very mature of you.”

A shrug. “Ah, well, I turn eighteen in a few months, so it’s about time, I guess.”

“I appreciate it.”

“I should go now,” he said, his head still low. “Lena’s waiting for me in the car downstairs.”

“Did you come up here alone? Let me walk with you.”

Anatole waved him down. “S’alright. Thanks, though. I really appreciate it.”

With that, he started off towards the hallway, and something sank into Pierre’s gut like a lead weight. Before he could stop himself, he called out, “Hey, kid.”

Anatole stopped and turned back with a bemused look on his face.
Pierre cleared his throat heavily. “How many seats does your sister’s car have, again?”

Mary had heard that Pavlovna’s was usually bustling on Saturday mornings, but now, the café was almost completely empty.

That was, with the exception of herself and Andrei.

After they had ordered and collected their food, the two of them found a table in the far left corner by the window and next to the heat vent, and every time the thermostat clicked, it blew warm air across their legs.

“What are you having to drink?” Mary asked. It was, she realized awkwardly, the first thing she had said to him since he had told her to hop in the car ten minutes ago before they had set off. Andrei had always been too comfortable with silence, and she had been almost afraid to disturb the dead air with chatter. Even ordering her food, she had felt as if she were disturbing him by speaking aloud.

She took a bite of her burger while waiting for him to respond—veggie, of course.

Andrei shrugged. “Soda? Do you want some?”

“Dad says it rots your teeth.”

“It won’t. Just brush them when we get home, and it’ll be fine. All in moderation.”

Mary considered this for a moment.

“Andrei pushed his glass towards her. “Try it.”

Mary took a cautious sip and quickly pulled back. She hadn’t expected it to taste the way it did. Unusual, but not entirely unpleasant. “Oh, I like this,” she said, and took another sip. “I like this a lot. It’s very bubbly.”

Andrei laughed. “See?”

Mary scrunched up her nose as her nose and throat went hot. “Eugh. It burns on the way down.”

“Burns on the way back up, too.”

“The way back up?” she said, aghast.

He laughed again.

Mary frowned and considered the glass carefully. “Are you sure this is okay?”

“Jesus, Mary, it’s just soda, not…not crack or anything.”

“Alright.”

“How’s the burger?”
“Nice. Better than Matreshka’s, actually. Yours?”

“A little overcooked, to be honest. But the fries are nice.” As if to prove his point, he dipped one into the ketchup bowl and took a bite. “Are you still keeping up with the whole vegetarian thing?”

“Mostly, I guess. It’s harder to do at home.”

“You don’t get food like this in France. I almost missed it, to be honest.”

“I’ve missed this a lot,” she said distantly, munching on the end of a French fry.

Andrei nodded. “Me too. And I’m sorry that I was so weird when I got home. If I’d known what you—”

“It’s alright, Andryusha. Really. I’m not upset anymore.”

Andrei reached across the table and took hold of her hand. “I love you so much, Masha. You know that?”

Mary ducked her head so low that her nose almost collided with the top of her burger. She wasn’t going to cry. Not now. She wasn’t some giant, weepy baby. She refused to. “Love you too.”

“And I know I’m lousy at showing it, but I support you no matter what. And if you want to talk to me about anything, ask me for advice, I promise that I’ll try my hardest not to be a total stick in the mud about it.”

Oh, God, the tears were coming now. She couldn’t help it.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “That means a lot. I don’t think you know how much.”

Andrei ran a hand down his face. The stubble along his jaw had grown in thicker and darker than she remembered, and it made him look startlingly old. “I was worried. About you. And Dad.”

“We’re a bunch of worriers, aren’t we, Andryusha?”

“That we are.”

They lapsed into silence for a minute or so. Mary took another few sips of Andrei’s soda and a bite from her burger, while Andrei picked at his fries and lined them up on his napkin as if sorting them out by length.

With obvious hesitation, he cleared his throat and said, “So, who’s the lucky girl?”

Mary didn’t even bother to keep the smile off her face. It would have been pointless to try. “You assume that there is one?”

Andrei’s face reddened slightly at that. “Well, I mean, I assumed, since you’d figured this out—there must have been something, or someone, I guess, and—”

“It’s Sonya Rostova.”

Andrei almost choked on his fry. On instinct, she reached across the table to slap him on the back. “Sonya Rostova? As in Natasha Rostova’s cousin? That Sonya?”

“Well…um…yeah? Unless you know any other Sonya Rostovas.”
To her surprise, Andrei burst into laughter. “I’m happy for you. I’m really happy for you, kid. I mean that.”

“I hope this doesn’t make things awkward.”

“Hm?”

“With you and Natasha.”

Andrei sighed. “Yeah, about that, we…we broke things off a while back. Her decision.”

Mary frowned. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Don’t be. I didn’t tell anyone. Besides Pierre. And you, now.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly, more to her tray than to him. “For telling me now.”

Andrei cleared his throat again, the way he usually did before launching into a big, long-winded speech. “Look, Masha, I’m sorry I didn’t. I’m sorry for not messaging. I’m sorry that I’ve been so distant lately. I was in a funk, and I isolated myself, and it wasn’t right of me, and I’m sorry for that most of all. I miss how we used to be. I know I was a complete ass, but if you’re willing to forgive me for that, I was hoping we could go back to how things were before I left.”

Mary took in a deep breath. “You’re starting to sound like the old Andrei now.”

Andrei looked as if he might burst into tears. He ducked his head to the side, wiped at his eye with a napkin, and when he turned back to her, he was smiling his old smile, and his eyes were wet. “You know, the theatre on Prechistenskaya is showing some old Spielberg films. Indiana Jones, Jaws, that sort of stuff. We can go get tickets after this, if you’d like. If you still want to hang out.”

Mary smiled. “I’d really like that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“That…” He laughed again, shaking his head. “That sounds like a plan.”

“Can we get popcorn?”

“Of course. Anything you’d like.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me. It’s the least I can do to make things up to you. I’ve been away for ages. I think it’s long overdue.”

“It was a long time. But you’re back now, and that’s the main thing. So,” she said, grinning, with a fry held between her teeth like a Cuban cigar, “tell me about France.”
“Everyone okay in the backseat?” Hélène said, still adjusting the rearview mirror even though they had been on the highway for a considerable amount of time at this point. “Cool enough? Warm enough?”

“Enough enough,” Anatole muttered.

He didn’t look too happy, stuck on the hump with his legs bent almost in a crouch and his backpack stuffed in his lap. Pierre wondered for a moment why they hadn’t put the suitcase on the hump instead of the right-hand seat, but seeing as there probably wasn’t a good explanation for this anyway, he didn’t bother asking.

Hélène rolled her eyes at him in the mirror. “Don’t be a brat.”

“As much as it pains me to sound like Anatole,” Fedya drawled, “are we there yet?”

Anatole shot him a dead look and gestured out the window beyond the highway, where a corn field dotted with silos stretched all the way to the horizon. “Yes, Fyodor. This is the airport, and that’s the parking lot, and there’s the landing strip, and we’re just driving in circles to piss you off.”

Pierre caught a glimpse of the GPS app on Hélène’s phone, mounted to the dashboard, and said, hoping to settle the oncoming argument before it started, “We’re not that far off, actually.”

“And you’re sure you’ve packed everything you need?” Hélène said.

Anatole glanced down at his backpack. “Yes.”

“Everything? Your phone’s charged?”

“It’s at seventy percent.”

Hélène clucked, shaking her head. “What did I tell you?”

“There’s charging outlets at the airport,” Pierre offered.

“ Toothbrush? Toothpaste?”

“ Packed them and, even if I didn’t, I could get them there.”

“Wallet?”

“In the front pocket.”

“And you’ll call me as soon as you land?”

“Promise.”

“Alright.”

Pierre didn’t miss how her hands tightened around the wheel, or how her eyes shied away from the mirror for a second.

It was only another ten or so minutes before they arrived. They bustled through luggage and security as quickly as they could and hurried to the terminal.

Ahead of them stood the gate, the queue, and the screen displaying incoming flights.
“I guess this is it,” Fedya said.

Anatole worried at the hem of his sweater, a ragged-looking navy blue number, one that seemed to be fraying apart at the edges. Pierre had never seen him in anything remotely as scruffy-looking, not even that awful, frantic night at the apartment. Perhaps it was something sentimental, then. A testament, he supposed, to how nervous the poor kid was.

“I guess so,” he said.

“We had a good run, didn’t we?”

Anatole laughed and finally looked up from his sweater. He wrapped Fedya in a hug. “It was a lot of fun. A lot of chaos, but a lot of fun.”

“Gonna miss you, Blondie,” said Fedya, thumping him lightly on the back. He stepped back, holding Anatole by the shoulders. “Don’t be a stranger, alright? You’ve got a phone. I know you know how to use it.”

“Okay.”

“Just don’t go blowing up my messages at three in the morning.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he said with a rakish grin.

Fedya ruffled his hair. Pierre was surprised to see that his eyes shone with unshed tears, and he realized, in a burst of guilt and sympathy, how close the three of them were to cracking.

“Take care, Anatole,” he said.

“Thanks, Pierre.”

They shook hands. It was awkward, but less awkward than he had dreaded.

Anatole turned to Hélène last. He didn’t say anything, just threw his arms around her waist and hugged her tightly. Hélène held onto Anatole as if for dear life, running one hand through his hair, and whispered something in his ear. Pierre couldn’t make out what she was saying, but he saw the nervous wobble of her lip and the way Anatole tightened his arms around her and buried his face in her shoulder. One of them—or maybe it was both of them; he couldn’t tell—let out a muffled sob.

“I love you so much,” Anatole murmured.

Hélène sniffed and pressed a kiss to his cheek. “C’mon, Toto.” She reached for his hand. “Let’s get you to the gate before they leave without you.”

“Lena, I can’t—”

“You can,” she said firmly. “Everything is going to be alright. It’s going to be different, but Lito’s going to take great care of you, and I’m only a call away if you need me. The both of us are here for you. We’re a team, okay? Team Kuragin. It’s all going to work out in the end. I promise. Alright?”

“Alright.”

“And I expect you to FaceTime me as much as you can and tell me all about the amazing adventures you’re having. Got it?”
He cracked a smile at that. Hélène tousled his hair and made it stand on end, and he didn’t even bother to swat her hand away. “Alright.”

She pulled him into another tight hug, before abruptly shooing him away. “You should get going. They’re waiting for you.”

“Lena—”

“Love you.”

“Love you too. I—I’ll text. I promise.” He started off towards the gate now, walking backwards to keep eye contact and raising his voice so they could hear him as he drifted further away. Then, to Fedya and Pierre: “Thanks for everything, guys. I’ll see you around sometime.”

And with that, he was off.

Hélène sat down on the bench between Fedya and Pierre, but her eyes were far away, tracking Anatole until the last possible moment. He tossed a quick glance over his shoulder to catch her eye and smile.

She smiled back, waiting until he had passed through the gate and disappeared from sight, and then immediately dissolved into tears.

Pierre stared in horror, unsure of what to do, afraid that doing something would provoke a louder reaction and just as afraid that not doing anything would make him look like a heartless asshole. Hélène folded over on herself with her face in her hands. Her shoulders heaved and shook. It was a loud, ugly sort of crying. Every eye in the terminal must have been on them.

Pierre looked up at Fedya helplessly. Their eyes locked, and for the first time since they had met, there was no malice or disdain in it.

A moment of silent understanding passed between them. Fedya nodded, Pierre nodded back, and they sank to the bench and wrapped their arms around her.

“He’s going to be okay, Lena,” Fedya murmured. “He’s a tough kid.”

“I’m sorry,” she gasped.

Pierre gave her shoulder a squeeze. “It’s alright.”

“I can’t. I can’t.”

“Okay,” Fedya said. “Do you want some air?”

She shook her head. “I don’t want him to go.”

“We’ll give him a call when he lands. And then you can start planning trips to go see him.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m—”

Something deep and tender twinged in Pierre’s heart. It wasn’t love. It wasn’t pity. It was something different entirely, something he had never felt for her before.

“Oh, Lena,” he sighed.

“No apologies,” Fedya said sternly.
“What if this isn’t the right decision? What if he hates it there? What if something happens to him?”

“Then we’ll go from there and figure things out, and it’s all going to be okay. I know you know that this is better for him.”

“It’s gonna suck,” she said quietly, numbly. “Not having him here.”

“I know that. But you aren’t alone. You have me. And you have your brothers. And Pierre. And Marya.”

“Not the same,” she muttered.

“It won’t be,” Pierre said. “But you’ll find a way to make things work. We’re all here for you.”

“Ah, well,” Fedya sighed, rubbing small circles between her shoulder blades, “it only took three years, but you finally got your dream threesome.”

Hélène let out a surprised, genuine laugh at that, much to Pierre’s shock, but before he knew it, he was laughing too, and so was Fedya, and the three of them clung to each other, swaying back and forth like drunken sailors, howling until it hurt their stomachs.

“Thank you,” Hélène murmured, wiping her eyes.

Fedya gave her hand a squeeze. “Just give it time, Lena. Everything’s gonna be alright.”

Pierre rubbed her shoulder. “We’ve got your back.”

“What did I do to deserve you two?”

Pierre and Fedya chuckled.

“God only knows,” said Fedya. “It’s probably your preemptive punishment.”

“I guess we should go,” she said.

“That’s probably a good idea,” said Pierre. “Before airport security kicks us out for making a scene.”

“Can’t be the worst outburst this terminal’s ever seen,” Hélène said. She wiped off the last of her mascara with her sleeves, leaving them black and stained. Her eyes were still red-rimmed and watery, and her face was pink and puffy, but she was smiling now. “I don’t know about you two, but I’m starving.”

At that, Pierre’s stomach let out a massive growl. They laughed again, the three of them, and for a moment, they could have just been normal college students hanging out and having a fun, normal time.

“Pav’s?” suggested Fedya. “I’ll buy you pancakes.”

“Pav’s,” Hélène said, nodding in agreement. She stood up and slid her hand in Fedya’s, and the two of them started towards the exit.

Look at them go, Pierre thought idly. He sighed and slid back in his seat. Ah, well. If it ends that way, then it ends that way.
“Aren’t you coming?” came the sound of Hélène’s voice.

Pierre’s head shot up. “Huh?”

“You’re coming with us, right?” said Fedya.

Pierre craned his neck to face them. They hadn’t, in fact, gone to the exit. Now they were standing behind the bench instead, and strangely enough, it looked like they were waiting for him.

“What’s that?” he said.

“I mean, I drove us,” said Hélène. “I don’t imagine you want to walk all the way back home. And it’s nearly lunchtime anyway, and I really don’t want to eat airport food.”

“C’mon, old man,” Fedya said, bumping his shoulder with his fist. “Don’t keep us waiting.”

“Oh,” Pierre said, more touched than he cared to admit. “Oh, okay, let’s go, then.”

Hélène smiled, sniffled, and wiped her eye with the heel of her hand. “Alright, boys,” she said, nodding in the direction of the parking lot, “let’s hop to it.”

They set off, the three of them, like friends, a strange and unexpected detente that Pierre didn’t want to question. He wasn’t sure if it would last, he wasn’t sure why they had taken this sudden turn, he wasn’t even sure exactly how to feel about it, or anything that had happened between them.

But if there was one thing he was certain of in that moment, it was this:

Everything was going to be perfectly fine.
Balaga’s van didn’t look any less untrustworthy than Anatole had remembered it four years ago. Hélène had offered to drive them, but something had come up, Balaga had been quick to volunteer, and the last thing any of them wanted to do was piss off Moscow’s cheapest booze supplier by turning him down, even if he drove like road markings were more suggestions than rules. And besides, he always got them where they needed to go, and thus far he hadn’t killed anyone along the way, so he was fine in Anatole’s book.

Hence the van.

All the color drained out of Pierre’s face as it pulled into the parking lot. Anatole restrained himself from laughing. Fedya didn’t bother.

“This doesn’t look safe,” Pierre said. “Are you sure this car is roadworthy?”

As if on cue, Balaga blasted the horn, and La Cucaracha blared out so loudly they must have heard him all the way in the airport.

“It’ll be fine,” Anatole said breezily.

“I’m not quite convinced of that,” said Pierre.

“Do you really think Lena would’ve let him drive us if she thought there was the slightest chance we might get hurt?” said Fedya.

Pierre opened his mouth, about to respond, when the front window rolled down with a bone-rattling crunch and a horrendous squealing noise. It was a manual crank, hanging on now by only a few screws that were threatening to come loose altogether. Balaga leaned his head out the side. He had let his hair grow out, though most of it was tucked into his knitted beanie—a goddamn beanie, even when the weather was pushing eighty degrees and Anatole knew for a fact that the air conditioning in the van hadn’t worked since before he had been born.

“Hi there, friends,” Balaga said with a tooth-gapped grin. “I’m your chauffeur for the day.”

Pierre gulped. “Oh my God.”

Fedya slapped him lightly between the shoulders. “You’re gonna be fine, Pierre. Safety in numbers and all that shit.”

The three of them ducked into the car. Fedya took shotgun and left Pierre and Anatole to the backseat, where Balaga had decided to heap a pile of fur coats, an empty bottle of Smirnoff, and what looked suspiciously like a box of fireworks.
Balaga raised his hip flask, as if about to toast. Anatole strongly suspected—and hoped—that the flask was just for shock value, but you never really knew with Balaga. “Nice of you to come and visit us, kid,” he said to Anatole. “We thought we’d never see you again.”

“You too,” said Anatole, thumping the back of Balaga’s seat with his foot. “How’s it hanging?”

“Same as always,” he said, and took a heavy swig from his flask.

Balaga turned to face the back seat and popped a cassette into the deck. It was something terrible, heavy metal and in a language that may have been vaguely Slavic but certainly wasn’t Russian, the sort of stuff he used to play when he drove the schoolbus. “Everyone buckled in? Arms and legs and assorted appendages safely in the vehicle?”

“All good,” said Anatole.

Pierre leaned over and gingerly pushed the firecrackers beneath Fedya’s seat with the side of his foot. “Remind me again,” he whispered, “why your sister isn’t the one driving us.”

“Emergency with one of her undergrads,” said Anatole. “Balaga’s stepped in to help.”

As they pulled out of the parking lot, the front bumper almost swerved into the fender of a slow-moving SUV. Balaga leaned on the horn for entirely too long. Anatole was unsure if this was to make a point to the other driver or to listen to La Cucaracha again.

“Does he need gas money?” Pierre whispered.

“Oh, no,” said Anatole. “Lena sends him a bottle of Canard-Duchêne every year. That’s all he’ll take.”

“I could’ve called a cab, you know.”

“Too expensive.”

“But Fedya and I took a cab to the airport.”

“Twice as expensive.”

After a minute or so, the SUV moved out of the way. Balaga cranked the music system up a little louder and the van shot down the I-30 like a bullet fired from a gun. They tore past cornfields, past endless rows of empty land and silos and the occasional cow, and every time they hit a pothole, Pierre’s head smacked into the ceiling.

“So,” Anatole said, clearly hoping to stimulate conversation, “how’s the new house, Pierre?”

“Too big and too fancy,” Fedya cut in. “You guys were almost neighbors.”

“Missed you by a couple of years,” said Pierre.


“He’s dead, Anatole. Has been for a while now.”

Anatole’s face went red. It looked for a moment like he had been badly sunburnt. “Oh. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Pierre said quietly. “The inheritance money came in and I figured I should start putting down roots.”
“In Moscow?” Anatole clucked and shook his head. “You could’ve gone back to Seattle and you chose to stay in Moscow?”

Pierre smiled. “After everything that’s happened, it’s starting to feel like home.”

Finally, they arrived in the town proper, and the buildings began to replace farmland in the skyline. The van slowed as Balaga turned onto a residential street. Up ahead, past a sprawling row of hedges and a stretch of newly-surfaced road, Anatole recognized his old house.

It looked exactly as he had remembered it, and yet it was entirely different.

There were children playing on the front lawn. There were parents sitting on the porch. There were bicycles leaning against the garage wall. There were chalk drawings scrawled along the driveway. Even in the stickiness of the early summer evening, the door had been left open, and they could smell something grilling from the garden.

“Nice place,” Balaga said mildly.

“Yeah it’s nice,” said Anatole. “Nice to see people happy here.”

Fedya reached back, offering his hand. Anatole took it, and then a moment later, they had reached the end of the road and turned onto Prechistensky Boulevard, and the house disappeared behind them until it was no longer visible in the rearview mirror.

“The family’s from Boise. They moved in about two years ago,” Pierre said.

“You know them?” Anatole asked.

“Not well. I’ve run into them in the grocery store a few times. Nice people. They were really excited about the house.”

“I’m glad someone else has it,” Anatole said. “It’s just weird.”

Softly, Fedya gave his hand a squeeze.

“I’m fine, though,” he said. “It hasn’t felt like home for a while.”

“Yeah, that’s fair,” Pierre said. “How’s the City?”

Anatole’s eyes lit up. “It’s amazing. I love it so much.”

“I’d love to come and visit sometime,” Balaga said good-naturedly, “only I’m banned from the state of New York. Long story.” He turned to the backseat with a devilish grin. “Actually, you know what? We’ve got time. We’ve got time.”

“God help us all,” murmured Pierre.

Balaga’s story, as it turned out, seemed to have more contradiction than sense, and by the time they pulled up in front of a nice white house with blue shutters at the end of the cul-de-sac, Anatole hadn’t absorbed a single word of what he had said.

The four of them disembarked and trudged up the driveway, and as they did, Balaga’s rambling tale finally came to an end with a matter-of-fact, “And there you have it.”

“Looks nice,” Anatole said to Pierre.
He wasn’t being generous. It was probably the smallest house on the street, and the least expensive-looking at that, though this only added to its charm. In one window, Pierre had hung a U of I banner, and out in the front lawn, in obvious need of a trim, there was a miniscule fir tree, probably the height of his hip.

“Thanks,” Pierre said. Seeing where Anatole’s eyes had landed, he smiled. “Oh, you like the tree? Tiny, I know, but I just planted it a few weeks ago. I thought it’d sort of spruce the place up a little.”

“‘Spruce’,” Balaga deadpanned, and then stared at the others as if expecting them to laugh.


Balaga groaned and slapped his knee.

Fedya shook his head. “That was actually somehow worse than the ‘spruce’ pun.”

Anatole tipped to the side to bump Pierre’s shoulder. “The more things change, the more they stay the same.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Balaga said, and took another swig from his flask.

Pierre led them up the porch and into the living room. It wasn’t especially cramped, but with the bookshelves casing in three walls and the heavy Persian rugs spread across the floor, it certainly wasn’t too spacious either. Music was playing from a speaker on one table, where refreshments and a few bags of chips had been laid out. There were couches, clearly secondhand, all arranged in a semi-circle around the coffee table, covered almost entirely with magazines and potted plants.

The four of them kicked their shoes off in the hallway closet, which Anatole noticed already contained several pairs of high heels, sandals, and sneakers, all far too small to have been Pierre’s.

“Are we late?” he said.

Pierre looked down at his watch. “Probably. The others might be here already.”

Anatole blinked. “Have you given out spare keys to half of Moscow now?”

“Oh, no,” Fedya said. “He just leaves the front door unlocked.”

“I should go call my mother,” Pierre said. “It’s her birthday in a few days. I’ll catch up with you guys later. Just make yourselves at home.”

And with that, he ducked back into the hallway.

“But he’s the host,” Fedya said, vaguely amused.

Balaga shrugged. “He’s still Petrushka. Now, where does he keep the booze?”

Through the open doorway to the kitchen, Anatole spotted a familiar head of curly dark hair. Her eyes locked with his barely a second later.

“Tolya!” Hélène cried, sprinting across the hallway. “Oh my God, you’re home!”

Anatole allowed Hélène to sweep him into a hug, so tight that she almost lifted him clean off his feet. “Lena,” he wheezed, “you’re squishing me.”
Laughing, Hélène let her arms go slack. “I’ve missed you.”

Anatole hugged her back. “I missed you too.”

“You got taller,” she gasped, having only just noticed that he now stood an extra inch or so above her. “I don’t believe it. You got taller. What has Lito been feeding you?”

“Olly’s a good cook.”

“Good enough to make you eat veggies?”

Anatole snorted. “Better than you, at any rate.”

“Hey, Lena,” Fedya called from the front.

“Hey,” Hélène said, not breaking eye contact with Anatole. “So, tell me everything. What’s new?”

“Since graduation?” Anatole grumbled. “What could be new?”

“A month is a long time!”

Anatole rolled his eyes. “I packed up my dorm room, put some stuff in storage, and started looking for apartments. That’s literally it.”

“Which boroughs are you looking at? When do you want to move in? Have you found roommates yet?”

“Lena,” he said testily, “you’re doing it again.”

Hélène sighed and hugged him again. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You know how I get.”

“Let’s get a drink,” he said, squeezing her hand. “And I’ll tell you everything.”

Why the party—if you could even call it that, when it was only going to be high school classmates and a few drinks—was being hosted at Pierre’s new house was entirely beyond Natasha. She vaguely wondered how much of a say he had had in the matter, and then who had been able to strongarm him into actually taking part in something social. He hadn’t changed that much since graduation.

Even at his own event, he was nowhere to be found.

What made even less sense was the motley and minuscule crew of guests who had shown up. In one corner, the ex-bus driver had busied himself with a large bottle of something indistinct but clearly alcoholic; Hélène and Anatole were lounging together on the couch with a few slices of pizza; a short, dark-haired man who she vaguely recognized but whose name she didn’t know was sulking at the kitchen counter with his phone; Marya was floating in and out between groups of people to gossip and eavesdrop; and Mary and Sonya had claimed the loveseat, where they sat practically curled in each other’s laps.

“Could you two stop being cute?” Natasha said. “You’re going to give me cavities.”

Sonya stuck her tongue out and, as if to spite her, snuggled in even closer to Mary.
“I’m third-wheeling here,” said Natasha.

“You know, you really are,” Mary said.

“I’m out of sangria,” said Sonya, holding her half-empty glass aloft. “Could one of you, since you adore me so much, kindly go to the kitchen to refill it?”

“Are you turning my cousin into an alcoholic?” said Natasha.

“She’s just lazy,” Mary said.

“None of you are turning into alcoholics,” Marya snapped, from halfway across the room. “I don’t want to hear that word uttered again in my vicinity."

“Oh, you’ve gone and set her off now, Nat,” Sonya whispered.

“Have any of you seen Pierre?” Natasha said.

Marya raised her eyebrows. “Speaking of alcoholics,” she murmured out of the corner of her mouth.

Sonya gasped and slapped her shoulder. “Oh my God, Masha, you can’t just say stuff like that!”

“He’s gotten better,” said Natasha. “I’m proud of the progress he’s made. He’s almost a year sober now.”

“Maybe you should talk to him?” Sonya said gently.

“That’s sort of the plan. If only he’d show up.”

It was clear more than anything, despite Sonya’s politeness, that this was a request for their privacy. Natasha wouldn’t have minded this had Pierre been here for some conversation, so she turned back to face the room and the hallway, hoping to spot a familiar face and find company elsewhere.

As she did, she noticed that Hélène had disappeared from the couch and Anatole’s plate was now empty, though he didn’t seem to be making much of an effort to interact with any of the other guests. Every so often, he would toss a glance over to the dark-haired man standing in the kitchen, and it was obvious to Natasha that he was aching to get up and speak with him.

It was equally obvious that something—whether it was fear or embarrassment—was preventing him from doing just that.

Feeling a little braver and more altruistic than usual, Natasha drifted across the room, plopped herself onto the cushion next to him, and said, “Hi, Tolya.”

Anatole startled. He paled a little when he registered who was speaking to him, but quickly regained his composure. “Oh, hi, Natalie.”

“How’ve you been?”

He shrugged and smiled at her. “Can’t complain. It’s good to be back.”

Natasha touched his hand lightly. “Well, it’s nice to see you as well.”

“You too.”
“How’s New York?”

Anatole rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s been good. Better than good, actually. I just graduated and I thought I’d spend some time visiting Hélène before I move into my new place. How’s Moscow been treating you?”

Natasha shrugged. “It’s still Moscow.”

“Fair. What are you up to these days?”

“I took a gap year, so I still have some time left. I’m just finishing up my teaching degree.”

Anatole laughed, crossing his arms. “No shit.” Natasha raised an eyebrow, and his face cracked into a grin. “I just finished up my teaching degree too. Music. My first placement starts in September.”


Anatole winced. “About what happened…Natasha, I just—”

“Anatole,” she said sternly, but the smile on her face contradicted the tone of her voice. “Let it go, okay? That’s all behind us now. We were idiot teenagers—”

“Well, me more so than you.”

“—and it doesn’t matter anymore. I’ve forgiven you. It’s probably time you forgave yourself.”

“You’re really a wonder, Natalie,” he said fondly, “and I hope you find someone just as wonderful as you are.”

“You too,” she said.

Though he probably didn’t realize that she was even watching, Natasha saw his eyes flicker over to the dark-haired man whose name she didn’t know, who was leaning against the kitchen counter and glaring at his phone.

“That’s very kind of you,” said Anatole.

Natasha nudged his shoulder. “Go on. I think he’s looking a little lonely over there.”

Anatole looked like a deer in headlights. She thought of his face on the night of the winter formal and nearly laughed at the memory. “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me,” she said, smiling, and before he could open his mouth to respond, she sprang from the couch and started off down the hallway.

Mary was too bony to really be a comfortable snuggling companion, but that didn’t matter much in Sonya’s opinion. If she had wanted something soft to curl up with on the loveseat, she would have shacked up with Pierre, and the pillows were enough to tip the scales from tolerable to heartwarmingly enjoyable.

“I like these pillows,” she announced, though it was probably the sangria speaking more than her. “We should pick some up for the living room.”
“I’m not filling the apartment with cutesy crap,” said Mary.

“It’s not crap. It’s elegant.” Sonya curled one pillow to her chest and leaned sideways until her head landed in Mary’s lap, almost dislodging her glass. “And it’s comfy too.”

Mary set the glass aside and combed her fingers through Sonya’s hair with a content hum. “The cats will shred them, you realize.”

“Pshhh. No they won’t. I’ll train them not to.”

“I think you’re overestimating your abilities, my dear.”

“Rude.”

“Not rude. Sensible.”

They lapsed into a peaceful quiet for a few minutes. Mary took to massaging Sonya’s scalp, which itched at first, until her fingertips hit that spot that felt really good, and Sonya smiled and hummed in the back of her throat and turned her torso so that she was lying face up and Mary was looking down at her.

“Hey, Masha,” she said, before she could stop herself.

Mary’s hand stopped at Sonya’s bangs. “Hm?”

“You’re perfect.”

There was a quiet pause as Sonya’s words sunk in, and then Mary cracked up, tipping her head against the backrest. The sangria left in her glass sloshed dangerously. She leaned forwards and kissed Sonya on the forehead, then on the nose, then on the lips.

“Sonya,” she giggled as she sat up straight again, “you’re drunk.”

“We both are.”

“I think you’re drunker than me.”

That, for some reason, seemed like the funniest statement in the world. Sonya giggled into Mary’s skirt until it hurt her stomach. “I’m not that drunk,” she said.

It was at this moment that Marya floated by, carrying a glass of water in one hand—she must have been the designated driver for tonight—and a plate of salad in the other.

Shit, Sonya thought, and was thankful that her tongue didn’t follow suit.

“Enjoying yourselves, girls?” said Marya.

“Yes, thank you,” Mary said.

“No drunk, just tired,” Sonya blurted out, before the rational side of her brain could jump in and tell her better.

Mary buried her face in Sonya’s hair to hide her snicker.

“Mary, dear,” Marya said, “can I trust you to make sure she doesn’t get into any trouble?”
“Yes, ma’am,” Mary said, even as Sonya pouted.

Marya winked. “Good girl.”

She sauntered away, and Mary looked back down at Sonya with a wicked smirk.

“You hear that, Sonyushka? No funny business. I’m the boss now.”

“Oh my God,” Sonya muttered.

She slapped her forehead with her hand, or rather, she tried to, but Mary’s nose came in the way.

“Oh,” Sonya said. She reached up again to pet Mary’s face. “Hi, you.”

Mary’s nose was slightly pink from where Sonya had whacked it, but that didn’t seem to bother her much at all. “Hi, you, too, you dweeb.”

Sonya giggled and wrapped a strand of Mary’s hair around her finger. “You’re pretty.”

Mary shook her head bemusedly. “You’re pretty too, Sonyushka.”

“Masha.”

“Yeah?”

“Love you.”

Marya smiled sweetly and kissed her again. Now she took her time. “Love you too.”

“I didn’t think this would be your kind of party.”

Fedya’s head snapped up from his phone screen at the sound of Anatole’s voice, as if he had forgotten that Anatole was even in attendance at all.

“Do you even know most of these people?” Anatole continued.

Fedya snorted and shoved his phone into his back pocket. “I figured I owed it to Pierre after all the shit we gave him. Besides,” he continued, clapping Anatole on the shoulder, “if I know your sister, someone’s gotta be the designated driver for tonight.”

Anatole’s spirits soured a little at that and he turned away. “Yeah, you’re probably right.”

It was more awkward speaking to Fedya again in person than he had imagined it would be. Oddly enough, things had been easier over text—he hadn’t had to worry about blushing or sweating or his voice cracking or anything of that kind.

But now all of that was harder to ignore. And even worse, he wasn’t entirely sure if Fedya would have paid enough attention to notice at all.

“So, what do you think?” Fedya said. “How’s it feel to be back home?”

Anatole raised an eyebrow. “It doesn’t really feel like home anymore, but don’t let Lena hear that or she’ll have my head. Nothing seems that different.”
Fedya shrugged nonchalantly. “Not really. Balaga got fired. Mikhailovna finally retired. No, actually—did you hear about Pav’s?”

“What about it?”

“The cops busted in one day and put the whole place on lockdown. The wildest part? It was a money laundering operation. The Russian mafia in Idaho, if you’d believe it. They marched out cute little old Mrs. Pavlovna in handcuffs.”

Anatole’s eyes went wide. “You’re kidding me.”

The corner of his mouth curled up in a roguish grin. “Yeah, I am.”

Anatole slapped his arm, laughing. “You piece of shit.”

Fedya thumped Anatole’s back. His hand stayed in place a second longer than was normal. “Gotta keep you on your toes, Blondie. Can’t have you feeling too comfy here.”

Comfy? Comfy? Dear God, what planet was Fedya living on if he thought Anatole was feeling anything near comfortable? What he was feeling now was an irritatingly fast pulse and irritatingly sweaty palms and an irritatingly, nauseatingly roiling sensation in his chest.

“Where’s your sister gone off to?” Fedya said idly.

That snapped Anatole’s focus back. “Huh?”

“I haven’t seen her since we got here. And she’s not at the booze table with Balaga either.”

“She’s somewhere,” Anatole said, a little more sharply than he meant. “It doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Hélène told me she was taking a break from dating.”

Fedya didn’t even look up from his phone. “Your point being?”

“You’re wasting your time.”

Fedya raised an eyebrow at that. “Is that so?” he said drily. “Why would you say that?”

“I know you want her. Don’t bother. She won’t be into it.”

“Who says it’s Hélène I’m after?”

“What?”

Fedya’s voice became slow and deliberate and just the slightest bit teasing. “Who says that it’s Hélène I’m after?”

Anatole’s mouth dropped open.

Fedya grinned.

“But I always thought…you and Lena—”

A shrug. “We gave it a shot. It didn’t work out.”
Anatole closed his mouth. He shook his head a few times to make sure he wasn’t just daydreaming, but all it did was make him dizzy and a little more flushed than he already was. “What am I supposed to do with this information?”

“Jesus, Blondie, do you want me to give you a step-by-step guide on flirting? I thought you were supposed to be the smooth one here.”

It took a stupidly long time for Fedya’s words to sink in, and when they finally did, Anatole’s face went a brilliant red.

“Oh.”

By now, Fedya had begun to look somewhat flustered. “What do you mean ‘oh’?”

“Holy shit, Fed—”

“Am I, like, completely oblivious? Am I misreading something here?”

“I don’t know,” Anatole spluttered. “God, I just wasn’t expecting—”

“Well, what did you want to hear?”

“I wanted this, but it’s weird.”

“What’s ‘this’? What’s—wait, what’s weird? Am I—look, I promise you, Lena and I are completely—”

“Are you messing with me or something?”

Fedya stared at him. “No.”

“What do you want from me then?” Anatole asked.

Fedya never did answer him. Instead, he reached for Anatole and gently cupped his cheeks, pulling him closer until their chests bumped. And since Anatole knew what was coming next, it made no sense that suddenly his mind turned to static. Fedya felt warm and familiar, as if they had kissed before, as if they had been doing this for years.

When they pulled away, it was too soon.

“Is that okay?” Fedya asked. He sounded almost nervous, which Anatole couldn’t help but feel was absolutely ridiculous.

Anatole nodded numbly, petrified of how idiotic he knew he would sound if he actually tried to speak.

Then out of the corner of one eye, he saw something moving rapidly, like a bird flapping its wings. He turned his head to follow the movement and saw that Natasha was leaning over the backrest of the couch with a massive grin, waving with one hand to catch his attention and giving him a thumbs-up with the other.

It was that little reassurance, oddly enough, that gave him the courage to speak again.

“You know, Fed, you’re not as bad a kisser as I thought you’d be.”

Fedya rolled his eyes and whacked Anatole’s shoulder playfully. “Still a brat.”
This time, it was Anatole who moved in first.

It felt good. It felt *stupidly* good. Anatole wondered how his brains hadn’t turned to mush by now.

And then, in an equally stupid moment of giddiness, he said, “Do you wanna get out of here?”

This struck him as somewhat forward not even a moment after he had said it. Anatole decided that he didn’t mind, and Fedya, judging by the look on his face, didn’t seem to care either.

“Already?” he said.

“What do you mean, ‘already’? Half the guests are gone. Unless you want to keep standing here with your phone—”

“The car?” Fedya suggested.

Anatole felt his face burn hotly in a way that was entirely not to do with how Fedya had tangled one hand in his hair. Oh, God. That triggered a whole host of horribly embarrassing memories that he really didn’t want going through his mind at a time like this.

“Not the car,” he said through clenched teeth.

“Why not?”

“Because!” he snapped.

Fedya chuckled, nonplussed, and tugged at his sleeve. “Come on, then, Blondie. We can drive somewhere more private.”

In all the years Pierre had known Hélène Kuragina, he couldn’t remember a time he had ever seen her this happy while sober. Well, the sobriety wasn’t a guarantee, but her car was parked in the driveway and she didn’t seem to be swaying on her feet, so he could draw inferences from there. Even more unusual was seeing her without Fedya or Anatole in tow, but strangest of all was that she actually seemed excited to see him.

“Pierre!” she said when she caught his eye. In several large strides, almost knocking into a very intoxicated Balaga as she went, she bridged the gap between them and kissed his cheek. “How are you?”

“I’m doing good,” he said, surprised at how happy it made him to see her again. “And yourself?”

“I’m alright,” she said. In one hand she held a flimsy pink favor bag stuffed with tissue paper, the sort of thing his mother would have loved. “Housewarming gift?” she offered, and shoved it into his hands before he could properly answer.

Pierre peeled away one layer of tissue paper and looked inside. It was a bottle of Merlot.

She knew Pierre-three-years-ago too well.

“Oh,” he said, quickly setting it on the table and well out of reach. “Thank you. That’s very kind of you.”

“It’s nice to finally see you.”
Pierre shrugged. “I had to give my mom a call. We missed you at the airport.”

“Undergrad emergency,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Ah. Anatole told me.”

“You know how it goes. Their term paper is due tomorrow and they didn’t know a thing about formatting or credible references.”

Pierre frowned. “But you enjoy being a TA?”

Hélène shrugged. “It’s alright. I like them. Even if they’re a royal pain in the ass sometimes.”

“You’ve already gone full mama hen, you do realize?”

She shrugged again, this time with a little more flourish. “I can’t deny it, I guess. I needed something to fuss over and I couldn’t keep smothering Tolya forever. He had to spread his wings and”—with her hands, she mimicked a bird flying away, making tiny chirping noises for effect—“leave the nest.”

She was smashed, Pierre realized. At least she had done a decent job of hiding it until now.

“They’re my babies,” she finished, hands on her heart. “My stupid, stupid, eighteen-year-old babies.”

“Sounds like me. Me and my stupid, stupid, six-hundred-page baby.”

“Jesus,” Hélène snorted. “Trust you to mother your dissertation.” And then: “Wait, six hundred?”

“I’m still refining my scope,” he said defensively.

“Well, you know, I’m sure it’ll be great,” she said, patting him on the shoulder. Given the height difference between them, this took a significant amount of stretching. “You sound very passionate.”

Silence fell, but it was more content than awkward.

“I know this is probably a little late, but I’ve wanted to talk to you for a while. To apologize,” she said quietly. “I know I never properly made amends for the whole…mess in junior year. We were a disaster together, but I know that a lot of that was my fault. I’m really sorry.”

Pierre’s cheeks flushed a dark pink. “I think I owe you an apology as well. For everything. Especially the things I said to you.”

“Well, we both said a lot of things we probably shouldn’t have.” Hélène held a glass towards him. “Peace offering?”

“Oh, um, thank you, that’s very nice of you, but I’m not drinking anymore.”

Her eyes went wide. Gingerly, she set the glass aside, now quite flushed herself. “Oh. Oh, God, I didn’t realize. I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s really okay. I just decided that I’m not always a great person when I drink.”

“ Took you long enough to figure that out,” she said. “I’m happy for you, though. Honest.”
“Thank you.”

“It’s nice to see you out and about.” She let her eyes roam across the room, and she must have liked what she saw, because her face cracked into a genuine smile. “Nice to see you being social as well.”

“I just thought it would be nice.”

“It is. The place looks great. I’m a little surprised you’re still hanging around Moscow.”

“I think it’s grown on me,” he said, scratching the back of his neck. “Well, the property prices have, at least. Didn’t expect you to stick around either.”

“Ah, well. It’s not all that bad. And I’m still finishing up my master’s.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“And it’s nice to be able to see everyone all in one place. Anything exciting planned for tonight?”

Pierre shuffled his feet. “Not really. Er, well, actually, there’s supposed to be a comet tonight. I was going to go up to the balcony to watch in a few minutes. I mean, I thought I’d invite everyone else up to watch it as well, only”—he craned his neck to survey the room—“they all look pretty comfortable where they are. If you want to join me?”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” she said. “I have to go find Fedya and Anatole, anyway. They’ve run off and they’re not answering my messages.”

“Promise me you won’t flip out on them for disappearing.”

Hélène smiled again and reached into her bag for her phone. “Don’t worry. I trust them. Kind of.”

But Pierre wasn’t fully listening anymore. His eyes had wandered over to Natasha instead, rapt in conversation with Marya Dmitrievna. With her hair cropped to just above her shoulders, she looked almost as sophisticated as her godmother, if a good few inches shorter.

Evidently, Hélène had noticed him staring, because her mouth curled into a wry little smirk and she nudged his side with her elbow and said, “I didn’t know she’d be here.”


“Natasha.”

“Oh. Oh, well, we’re friends. She’s good company.”

Hélène raised an eyebrow. “You like her, don’t you?”

Pierre’s jaw swung open. He began to blubber out something half-hearted and not at all convincing, which Hélène must have taken as an affirmative.

“I swear, everyone at this party’s pairing off,” she said.

“She’s sweet,” Pierre murmured. “And she’s very smart. And she listens to my philosophy ramblings. Like my dissertation..”

Hélène’s smirk deepened. “Does she know about this?”
“What?”

“Your little crush?”

His face went even hotter. “It’s…we’re adults, Hélène, we don’t get crushes.”

“Fine, fine,” she said breezily. “Let me rephrase. Does she know about your feelings?”

Pierre lowered his eyes and closed his mouth. If he kept it closed, perhaps it would keep him from saying something stupid or embarrassing. “I don’t know.”

Hélène sighed dramatically. “Oh, Pierre. What are we ever going to do with you?”

“It’s fine,” he muttered defensively.

“It’s not fine,” she said. “As a friend, and more importantly, a person of common sense, I’ve decided I’m going to intervene.”

Pierre’s heart sank to his toes. “No, Lena, really, that isn’t—”

He reached after her, hoping to stop her before she could even start, but it was too late.

“Natasha!” Hélène exclaimed, grinning her too-wide victory smile as she intercepted Natasha and steered her by the elbow back to Pierre’s corner of the room. “It’s so lovely to see you again, darling. How are you?”

Natasha looked vaguely bemused. “Oh, hi, Hélène.”

“Pierre was just looking for you,” she continued, and shot Pierre a conspiratorial look. “He had something very important to ask.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow and turned to Pierre. “Oh?”

“I won’t keep you two occupied,” she said. “Ta-ta, lovelies.”

Pierre shot Hélène a wicked glare as she blew him a kiss and glided out into the hallway.

*Conniving little weasel,* he thought.

Then Natasha bumped his shoulder with hers and startled him out of his thoughts with a hot flush of embarrassment. “How’re things going?”

“Swell,” he said, more gulp than speech, and then silently cursed himself for his word choice. *Swell.*

It was a small mercy, at least, that Natasha looked almost as awkward as he felt. “What was it you were going to ask me?” she said.

Pierre glanced at the clock. Five minutes to eleven. He’d have to hurry soon, or he might be late and miss the comet altogether. But that would mean leaving the conversation before it even started, which he didn’t want either.

Actually, he realized, there was a happy middle ground.

*Helpful conniving little weasel,* he amended his earlier thought.
“Do you like astronomy?” he said.

Natasha smiled in pleasant surprise. “I do, actually. Why’d you ask?”

Jackpot. Home run. Ten points to Gryffindor. He was saved—more than that, he might actually impress her.

“You know,” Pierre said conversationally, “there’s supposed to be a great comet tonight.”

Natasha’s eyes widened. “Really?”

He nodded with just a shade too much enthusiasm, but that didn’t seem to bother her. “In five minutes. It—well, I was sort of hoping that the whole party could come and watch it, but everyone seems to have disappeared. There’s a telescope on the balcony, if you want to come have a look. If you don’t mind, that is.”

“Can I?”

Pierre hesitated. He hadn’t considered that she might actually accept his offer, and he was so thrown by her eagerness that it was almost a full ten seconds before he could respond. “Sure. We can—actually, you might want to bring a cardigan or something. I wouldn’t want you to get—”

“I’ll survive,” she said, and grabbed his hand. “Come on. I want to see this.”

It wasn’t really a balcony so much as a little fenced-off patch of roof that peered out over the shed. Pierre had had to re-tile a great deal of it for fear of stepping wrong and having his foot punch through the ceiling below, but he hadn’t done a very good job of it, and little puddles had gathered in its dents from last night’s rainfall. Miniscule as it was, with no trees or power lines in the way, it offered a clear view of the sky if they looked up and an equally clear view of downtown Moscow if they looked straight ahead.

“It’s not much,” he said.

“It’s perfect,” said Natasha.

The chilly air had left her arms covered in gooseflesh. Pierre considered offering her his jacket for a moment, before remembering that he had forgotten to bring one as well.

In one corner there was a heavy black canvas bag. Pierre delicately opened its flaps and unfolded a silver trifold stand, which he stood upright after locking the legs into place. The telescope came next. Hélène had bought it for him several birthdays ago, back when they were still dating.

But that didn’t matter. Natasha was here, not Hélène.

“Most comets go unseen, actually,” he said, fiddling with the magnification. “They pass through the inner Solar System and nobody notices them, and then they’re off in orbit again until they break apart or crash into a planet. They live and die and no one even realizes they ever existed. A great comet, now, that’s special. They’re so big and bright that you can actually see them with the naked eye. They’re rare, too. You might see one once in your life if you’re lucky.”

“Wow,” Natasha breathed. And then: “Is this one long-period or short-period?”

Pierre looked up at her with his glasses dangling off his face by one ear and his face broke into a
smile. “Pardon?”

“I know a thing or two about astronomy,” she said, gently teasing. “Is it long-period or short-period?”


“And why did you bring your telescope out? If it’ll be visible to the naked eye?”

“You know,” he admitted, “I’m not really sure. It’s a habit thing, I think. I guess I like seeing them up close. And they don’t start off visible, either. This one’s called twenty-one P Giacobini-Zinner, and it should enter the solar system with a magnitude of one, but then it should pass by the constellation Cygnus, at which point it will peak to—”

Suddenly, Natasha gasped and pointed a finger skywards. “Oh my God, Pierre, look!”

Pierre followed her gaze. How he hadn’t noticed it until now was entirely beyond him.

Up ahead, a radiant arc of light streaked across the horizon, so bright and dazzling that all the other stars dimmed in comparison. The comet seemed to trail stardust as it soared across the sky. A fleeting droplet of quicksilver. Something ephemeral and wondrous.

“Would you look at that,” he murmured. He looked down at the telescope again, and then back up at the sky. “I guess I won’t be needing this after all.”

Natasha leaned her shoulder against his. “Oh, Pierre, it’s stunning.”

“Isn’t it?”

“You know, that’s the one thing I don’t miss about Seattle. You can’t see all the stars at night. Too much light pollution. I like that about this place.”

“Me too.”

“How long will this one last?”

“Not long. We have a few minutes, probably.”

Saying it out loud seemed to make it feel more real. A few minutes, and it would be over. A few minutes, and there would be no proof it had ever been there at all besides the memory of what they had seen. The shed and the balcony and he and Natasha would all be still standing, only the world around them would be entirely the same and yet completely different.

He felt tears beginning to trickle down his cheeks. Natasha laid a hand on his forearm and furrowed her brow. “Are you alright?”

Pierre nodded, blinking rapidly. “I’m fine,” he sniffed. “I just—it’s so beautiful and it’ll be gone so soon. I can’t help it. I’m sorry. I get a little sentimental, that’s all. It’s silly.”

“It’s not silly at all,” she said. “Here, let me just…”

Natasha’s voice trailed off as she wiped his eyes with her sleeve. Then her fingertips. Her eyelids fluttered delicately. Pierre found his breath coming in quick, shallow bursts, his heart thrumming wildly in his chest.

“Natasha, I—”
He never did get to finish. Natasha leaned up on her tiptoes and cut him off with a kiss, gentle and sweet and soft. It was over just as soon as it had begun.

Pierre blinked. His eyes welled with tears again.

Natasha pulled away, looking horrified. “Oh, God, Pierre, I’m so sorry, I—”

But before she could properly respond, Pierre reached down and cupped her cheek to kiss her again. Natasha leaned into his touch for a beautifully tense moment that, to Pierre, seemed somehow to be both drawn out and painfully short. Finally, she broke away with a quiet gasp and touched her fingers to her lips.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“Did we just—?”

“Yeah.”

Natasha’s cheeks flushed pink. “I liked it,” she said.

“I liked it too,” he fumbled out. “I—I wouldn’t mind doing it again, actually.”

They did.

When they pulled away again, this time, both of them were smiling.

Together, they turned their gaze back to the sky and watched as the comet finally petered out into darkness. Natasha’s hand came to a rest atop his, her thumb stroking small, lazy circles along the ridge of his knuckles. She smiled as she tipped her head against his shoulder, relaxed into him, and said, “You know, I could get used to this.”

A laugh bubbled out of him at that, for some reason. Maybe it was the way her dark hair caught the silver glow of the moonlight, or the look of unadulterated awe and joy on her face, or the way her eyes twinkled so much brighter than any star or comet, or maybe it was all three combined or maybe it was something else altogether. He had no idea. All he knew was a sudden warmth in his chest and a kind of lightness in his shoulders and a wonderful sensation that he hadn’t felt in a long time, so long he was almost unable to remember its name—joy.

Pierre was content.

THE END

Chapter End Notes

When @MaplePaizley and I first started writing Either Very Clever Or Very Stupid, I don’t think either of us imagined that it would ever come to an end. And at least until now, it certainly felt like that! In many ways, this fic has grown with me over the past eight months—I began writing this deep in the miserable throes of college applications, and now here I am over a half a year later ready to move on to the next chapter of my life. What started as a silly, self-indulgent, often a little cringey but
always fun little outlet for our thoughts and ideas has become the most rewarding (and longest!) writing project I’ve ever been a part of. Somehow our fun little romp that began as a joke (“hey wouldn’t it be funny if Balaga drove the school bus in a modern AU?”) snowballed into this giant novel-length monster that nearly crashes Google Docs whenever I try open it. In fact, this fic was really what started our friendship. It’s goofy. It’s kitschy. It’s a little dramatic and a little angsty and more than a little teenagery, but more than that, it’s been something very meaningful and dear to my heart, and from chapter one, we’ve had so much fun writing it and so many good memories have come out of this that I wouldn’t even know how to begin describing them. And here we are, at the very end of one project, but it certainly won’t be our last. :) 
To everyone who has ever read or left a kudos or comment, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I don’t think any of you realize just how deeply your support and love have touched and inspired me. I definitely wouldn’t have been able to get this far into anything without you guys. I hope you know that we treasure each and every comment, and I hope you know how much they have made us smile and laugh and almost-cry. And last but not least, a massive shout-out to the incredible @MaplePaizley herself for being such an amazing and hilarious co-writer, partner in crime, editor, shouter of ideas, headcanon schemer, and friend.

—@thewhiskerydragon

I first met @thewhiskerydragon when she commented on one of my (still unfinished welp) fics, and offered to beta my work. From there, we began talking on tumblr, and we shared two stories that we had partially written; a college AU (mine) and a high school AU (hers). That was how EVCOVS started. The first few chapters reflect the way our friendship started; they’re goofy and fun, and a little uncomfortable.

However, looking back now at the end of a thirty-one chapter-long fic, I can’t fully express in words what EVCOVS and her friendship means to me. @thewhiskerydragon is an incredibly inventive and talented writer, but she is also a deeply compassionate person, and a wonderful friend. I am very lucky to know her.

I also wanted to thank all of you for investing your time and emotional energy into this monster. Every kudos, every comment and every view mean so, so much to us, and we appreciate you all so deeply. Thank you for taking this journey with us.
- @MaplePaizley

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!