

Here Comes the Sun

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Here Comes the Sun

by [artfullofchaos](#)

Summary

Two identical girls meet at summer camp. In an attempt to piece together the missing parts of their lives, they switch places to relive memories of a relationship, an unwanted pregnancy, and, with a little luck, a family.

Chapter 1: Sun, sun, sun, here it comes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Prologue

Moscow

“Shit, shit, shit.”

Lily isn't exactly bright. She knows this. She's not exactly known for her good ideas, and she's aware that she makes mistakes. Mistakes like anyone else's, and although her father often jokes that hers are more frequent than everyone else's, Lily thinks it's an exaggeration.

She's a perfectly normal seventeen-year-old girl.

With the worst luck in the world.

“Fuck.”

“Will you stop swearing, damn it? We've got enough with this fucking summer rain, I don't need... ah!”

Mila's voice trails off in a muffled gasp, but she can still see the faint beam of her flashlight, so Lily breathes a sigh of relief and continues to cling to the branch as if her life were slipping through her fingers, because *at any moment I could kill myself, for heaven's sake*.

"Are you okay?" Lily's question is more out of obligation than anything else, because she and Mila have been in enough similar situations to know the drill. As long as neither of them loses consciousness, it's a guaranteed success in their books.

She thinks. It's never happened, but Mila is stubborn. That probably extends to her skull.

"Fucking hell I'm fine," Mila grumbles, and with an angry sigh climbs up to the same branch Lily is hanging from. "I told you we had to leave at least two hours earlier. I told you, and you never listen to what I say because you're an imbecile who..."

"I love you too, but this isn't the time for declarations. We still have one floor to go."

"You're an idiot."

"Oh, really? Do you want to fall off a branch?"

Lily exhales irritably and, without warning, takes the final leap to the final branch. She can see the window open—the one she leave open before leaving because she's really smart, *ah!*

suck it, world—, and, with calculated movements, she climbs up to the glass and crosses it.

Seconds later, a dull noise tells her that Mila had the same luck as her.

Lily's room is a mess. This is clear evidence that she did not follow her father's instructions; she preferred to attend a party on the spur of the moment rather than prepare for her damn flight. Clothes are scattered on the floor, makeup is disorganized on every possible surface, and her suitcase is lying unfinished on the bed. In the mirror—reflecting her damp and disheveled appearance—there is a post-it note with his father's elegant, cursive handwriting.

Carefully, as if it were going to bite her, Lily reads her father's written message, which indicates that *damn, he's angry*.

The plane leaves at 9:00. If you're late, you'll be working with Svetlana all summer.

“Fuck,” Lily whines, “I’m dead. I’m dead and my dad is going to kill me and I’m...”

“I mean, it doesn’t sound so bad,” Milas says, ever the encouraging friend, reading the note above her shoulder. “My mom’s job has this amazing...”

Lily turns her head to squint at her.

“I’m going to kill you”.

“Hey! This is all your fault. I told you we should go to Zoya's party, have a drink, and come back early. You were the one who was sucking Ivan's neck like your life depended on it,” Mila informs her in a tone that implies she thinks Lily is a dick. Which she is not. Why can’t a girl have some fun without being shamed by her friends?

“I get it. Shut the fuck up.”

Lily shuffles to the bed and drops down onto the soft surface with a groan.

“Look, Ilya is not going to ground you or anything,” Mila says with a light tone because her father adores her and she's never been at the end of one of his scrutiny looks. “He’s just gonna be really quiet and expect an explanation on why your neck is red. And tada! You're free to go to the stupid summer camp.”

Lily whines again because she knows Mila is right. Her friend usually is. Her father is really unusual, intense and freaks out about the weirdest things, but he also has the warmest hands Lily knows and the softest smiles, so yeah, he’s not gonna make a big deal about this.

Lily just hates disappointing him.

“I’m tired,” Mila says, barely fitting her words around a yawn, “and I think I’m a little drunk. I really love when you have mental breakdowns, but I need to sleep.”

Mila undresses without waiting for a response from Lily, and with a familiarity gained after years of friendship, settles in the bed and covers herself up to her ears.

"I hate you. Thank you for tonight." Lily laughs, dropping a kiss on Mila's head. "I'm gonna send you lots of pictures, okay?"

"Hopefully all with clothes. I don't need to see your bare ass".

"Ha, ha. Bitch."

After a few seconds, Mila's breath is slow and content. It's always been amazing how quickly her friend falls asleep. Mila's face is hidden in her thick hair, and if Lily squints, she can still see the childlike features she grew up with.

Damn, she's going to miss her. Going to New York was Lily's idea, and after begging her dad for months to let her go, she's not going to back down, but still. Not having Mila around will be strange.

She just hopes that the stupid summer camp is everything she expects, or she'll have to endure the laughter of his father, Svetlana, and Mila until the end of time.

Montreal

Jane wants to lie and say she can see it. She turns her head, makes a nod of approval, and looks again. It's just a bunch of colors, but Arthur's eyes are bright and hopeful. What can she say?

"It's beautiful," Jane says with her best smile, "like, really, really beautiful."

"You think so? I really tried to encapsulate the spirit of Montreal."

Arthur is very talented, Jane knows this because her friend attends a school dedicated to art and things she can't quite grasp. Even so, no matter how much she squints, she can't see shit on the canvas.

As talented as he is, Arthur is also perceptive, so he laughs carelessly and pats her back.

"Girl, you're terrible at lying. I appreciate the effort, though."

"I'm sorry, Art. I can't think of anything else. What am I supposed to do for the next few weeks?"

Jane wants to scream and hide, but she's not a child anymore. For the first time since they started attending camp, Arthur can't go with her. He has an art exhibit next week, and although he'd like to attend belatedly, Jackie and Hayden planned a family vacation. So, Jane is fucked.

She doesn't even like summer camp! Too many bugs, too many people.

“What if you talk to your father? I'm sure Shane will understand.”

“Yes, that's the problem. My father will understand, he'll ask me what's wrong, I'll cry, and I'll be in therapy for the rest of my life. Mrs. Cooper has better things to do in the summer.”

Arthur laughs because he's an asshole, but Jane loves him so she stays quiet.

“Okay, so don't talk to your father. What about, hm, you try to have fun?”

“Alice will be there.”

“Oh.”

Jane already wants to cry, conversation with her father be damned. If Alice is there and she's alone, Jane will do something stupid like ask her to answer her messages or love her back. And under no circumstances can Jane do that.

"The painting is beautiful. I hope you win," Jane says weakly. Arthur laughs casually and puts an arm around her shoulders, giving her a hug she knows he hopes will be comforting. It is, so Jane lazily kisses his cheek.

“Its not about winning.”

“Damn right it isn't because you already did”.

Arthur has kind eyes like his mother and dark hair like his father. His sense of humor is almost as odd as his jokes, but Jane always finds herself laughing at them. She thinks that if she ever had to marry someone, Arthur would be the perfect choice. Polite, friendly, and charming. His parents would be delighted and her father would throw such a big party that he might end up in jail.

But she can't. She can't because Arthur is rough in all the parts she prefers to be smooth, and angular in all the corners she prefers to be round. So yeah. Jane will probably die alone eaten by Morty, her cat.

“You're extremely dramatic, did you know that?” Arthur says, squeezing her shoulder. “Take vitamin D, swim in the lake, look at girls in bikinis. Be happy for once in your life, silly.”

Jane nods, her head feeling as heavy as ever. Shit, maybe she should talk to her father and Mrs. Cooper.

“Kids! Lunch is ready!”

“Do you think Shane will ever stop calling us ‘kids’?”

“I doubt it. He still calls me baby, you know”.

“Because you're such a baby. I would call you worst.”

Jane laughs slightly and, along with Arthur, they leave her study to go to the yard where her parents are having the first barbecue of the year before Jane leaves for camp.

Be happy for once in your life, silly.

Yes, Jane is going to try to be happy. She thinks of her father's smile, his soft hair, and his deep voice telling her stories of his youth, full of energy and personality that Jane seems to lack. Still, she's Shane Hollander's daughter, so she won't embarrass him. She'll have a perfect summer, a perfect life. No matter what it takes.

Chapter End Notes

hi! so, english its not my first language so bare with me and my grammar mistakes lol.
the parent trap au that no one ask but im here to deliver!! have fun xoxo

Chapter 2: There she goes

NEW YORK

Lily tries to keep her jaw shut, but she fails spectacularly. Everything is so green and beautiful. A magnificent lake sparkles in the distance with red canoes lined up on its shore, and it almost seems like the huge trees hug all the teens carrying backpacks, pillows and other personal belongings.

There's so many people everywhere. *This is going to be so, so fun.*

A tall, older woman with silver hair is barking out instructions and bunk assignments. She identifies herself as Mary, the owner of the camp.

Lily can't stop vibrating with joy.

"Okay, we have Berg, Kate, Taylor, bunk five! Wilson, Reid, Kulp, bunk seven! Hollander, Ojiro, Walker, bunk nine! Allen, Qadi, Miller, bunk eleven! Rozanova, Cole, Carter, bunk thirteen!"

"That's me!" a girl with long eyelashes and bright red hair says next to Lily. "Lucky thirteen".

"Me too," Lily says immediately, with a broad smile. "Lily Rozanova."

"Alice Carter".

She's cool, Lily decides. The girl carries a duffel bag on her shoulder and is chewing gum with a chill attitude. She reminds her of Mila, but Lily is not going to cry on her first day.

"You must be new."

Lily looks at herself—she's wearing a shirt that says 'certified freak' (a gift from Mila, by the way), a baseball cap and sunglasses. Her black hair is trapped in a high pony-tail, but there's nothing that gives away that she's new.

Alice laughs.

"Don't worry about it, I've been to this camp more years than I care to admit. You don't have your bag; it must be trapped under a pile of other backpacks. I'll help you, and then we'll go to our cabin, okay?"

The girl is impressively helpful, so Lily spends almost all afternoon with her. Alice knows her way around the place, looks very shocked that she came all the way from Moscow and tells her that she's from Manhattan. Lily tells her about Mila, the lies she told her father to

convince him to give her permission to attend the summer camp, and that she can't wait for the parties and all the crazy things the pamphlet promised.

“So to learn english, mh? You don’t even have an accent”.

“Shut up, Alice. It's about the culture.”

The other girl they share the cabin with is Linda Cole, a lovely chick with a tie-dye t-shirt and a bandana around her head. She’s from Long Island, a place where Lily it’s never been but Linda describes it in such colorful language and detail that it sounds like home.

“Okay, so they put the boys on the other side of the lake but don’t you worry,” Linda says gleefully, altering her broad grin between Lily and Alice. “I know my way around. But fuck that now, it’s like two in the afternoon. Who would like to go kayaking?”

Oh, Lily’s going to have the summer of her life.

Jane has never actually bunk with a boy besides Arthur. Stephen Walker has bright blue eyes and really bright hair, with a smile that her father would definitely call “chaos”. At least he's respectful, Jane wants to assume.

“Mary, the owner, is my aunt,” Stephen says when Natsu Ojiro, their other bunk mate, asks.

The layout of the cabin is familiar to Jane; she’s been here before plenty. Small space, with a simple bed and one bunk, the washroom next to the front door. Natsu is someone she knows from previous years; they both won a basketball game last summer. She has a gorgeous japanese accent and a pretty strong right, so it’s all good. Jane tries not to think about it.

“That’s fine, dude, just don’t be weird,” Natsu answers before the boy can say anything else, “We don’t want you in your underwear and shit.”

Stephen makes a face, Jane just snorts.

Fuck, it’s going to be a long summer.

The sun is still high when Jane goes to walk around the lake. She really misses Arthur, but she's proud of her friend for what he achieved. An art exhibit, a place no one in his family has gone before. Jane still remembers her uncle and auntie's faces when Arthur announced, in front of the whole family, that he was going to quit playing hockey to pursue what truly interested him: art.

It was certainly an afternoon.

Jane had been sitting beside him, her heart pounding like a frightened bird, but neither Hayden nor Jackie seemed bothered. Her father looked a little confused, but simply congratulated him and shared a long look with Jane, as if she, too, could reveal all her true feelings to him.

Could I?

Jane isn't so sure. Yes, Shane is the best father she could ask for. Loving, caring, with endless patience that only her grandfather could rival. Still, Jane has an irrational fear of voicing her insecurities, about the emptiness that follows her everywhere no matter how many people surround her. It's about this unknown longing, this unknown need that she cannot name.

Be happy for once in your life, silly.

Jane is going to try, especially for her father. She opens up the camera app on her phone, blinks when her face appears on the camera and snaps a picture as fast as possible.

To: dad 😊 (8:14 pm)

having fun!!!!

1 image attachment

Of course, because his father is a doting person, Jane's phone pings twice in quick succession.

From: dad 😊 (8:14 pm)

You look beautiful darling, I hope you have wonderful days.

Make many friends. I miss you.

Fuck. Jane blinks away the tears and walks around the lake to steady herself. Without Arthur she feels a bit lost, but she can do a lot of activities in solitary. Besides, Stephen seems nice enough. Maybe he can be her new companion in lacrosse and... *is that fucking Alice?*

The first thing Jane notices is that Alice looks beautiful under the afternoon sun. Her red hair seems to be on fire, a stunning waterfall behind her back, and her smile as bright as the lake. She looks incredible.

Shit.

It's not like Jane and Alice even really interact that much. They've met, sure, *a lot*, but they are not friends. In Jane's experience, Alice is a chill girl who doesn't give the time of day to people or things that she doesn't think are worth it or fun. That's why she stopped replying to her texts, Jane assumes.

That's why they kissed like there was no tomorrow and now Alice can't even look at her.

The second thing that Jane notices is that there's a girl next to Alice. She's tall, with dark long hair and sunglasses. She seems to be talking about something really interesting, moving her hands in the air with energy. Alice nods one, twice, and then laughs.

Yeah, Jane is fucked.

When the sun rises the next day, Jane decides to stop thinking about Alice and get over her. Yes, they kissed and groped each other once, a year ago, but that doesn't mean they're anything. There are plenty of nice people at camp.

To prove her point, Jane decides to go have breakfast with her cabinmates, who seem to have gotten along much better since their first encounter. Stephen talks quickly about different topics, but Natsu keeps up with him easily. The dining hall is buzzing with excited voices and bubbly people.

"So, families," Stephen says with a huge grin while Natsu stuffs her face with bread and berries, "My aunt is here, my parents aren't worried about me. What about your folks, Janny?"

"Don't ever call me that again," Jane grumbles but Stephen just laughs. "It's just me and my dad. He's fine with me coming here, I do it every summer. He's busy working anyway".

"Really? What does he do?"

"He runs a charity. His name is Shane Hollander."

"Oh, fuck," Natsu wheezes, almost choking on food. "Your dad is Shane Hollander? *The* Shane Hollander? From the Montreal Metros?"

Jane is used to that reaction from strangers when they hear her father's name. Even years later, after his retirement as a player and then as a coach, people recognize him with amazement. Jane shrugs.

"Yeah."

"My mom is, like, his biggest fan or something. She's gonna die when I tell her that I met someone close to him," Natsu says with a whistle. "Are you interested in that, Jane?"

"Uh?"

"In hockey, keep up. Aren't you a legacy, or something?"

Jane envisions a future filled with grueling training, interviews, and questioning glances. She imagines being part of the world that, in a sense, privately exiled her father and robbed him of his dream.

It's easier to shoot herself in the foot.

"Not really," she answers vaguely. "Can you pass me the berries?"

“Fuck, I would love to play hockey,” Stephen laughs airily, “but I love my teeth more, so there goes that dream.”

“You can also lose your teeth working as a supermarket cashier, you know?”

“You are full of shit, Natsu.”

They immediately begin arguing heatedly, ignoring Jane's presence. She's been to enough camps to know how this *thing* between Natsu and Stephen will end by the end of the summer, so she prefers not to intervene.

It's been two weeks and Lily is ecstatic. Surprisingly, when she told her father she needed a summer camp to improve her English and that this was a chance to socialize with different people, she didn't expect it to be true. There are campers from places she'd never even heard of, she's heard stories that are as ridiculous as they are entertaining, and, *damn*, the men.

The guys here are something else. In Moscow, they're cold and distant, with that macho attitude that Lily hates. Not all of them, but enough to be unpleasant. Some boys here have gentle smiles, others an overwhelming energy. They all seem eager to hear her stories from Russia, and well, who is she to refuse?

Mila always says she's a bit of a slut. But, once again, can't a girl just have fun? Her friend doesn't need to know how many times she has fluttered her eyelashes or given flirty smiles.

Now, Lily is wearing a nylon jacket and a wire-mesh mask and she is, honestly, killing it. Both in the duel and in her appearance. Without warning, Lily knocks the sword out of his opponent's hand and pins him against the wall. The other campers applaud and cheer her new win.

"The winner and still undefeated champ, Lily Rozanova!"

Lily takes a bow and smiles at the boy she just beat. Robert something. He's very tall, with broad shoulders and a fantastic smile. *Fuck*, the promised land and all that crap. Lily is having a field day.

“Sorry, but you know, I'm not,” she simply smiles, bats her lashes at Robert.

“You are amazing. Who are your parents, professional fencers or something?”

Lily laughs.

“Or maybe you are just really bad at this.”

“Against a girl like you, probably. Would you be into...?”

"Okay!" The older woman in charge of the activity claps loudly, signaling the boy to leave the court. Then, she shouts near her ear. "Who's next? Do we have any challengers?"

Lily looks around at the other campers, but none of them seems brave enough to offer to play. There's a girl next to Alice whom she hadn't noticed before, looking directly at her with her head tilted. She has long blonde hair, wavy at the ends like Lily's, and deep blue eyes that seem interested in something that makes her irrationally nervous.

The old woman notices this look, smiles at the girl next to Alice, and gestures for her to come closer.

"Hey, Hollander, do you want to beat Rozanova? You've been a winner in previous years, why not try again?"

The girl jumps slightly when she hears her last name, and when their eyes meet, the Hollander girl shrinks back almost imperceptibly. Not before looking Lily up and down and grimacing. What on earth is her problem?

"Thank you, Mrs. Walker, but I have an activity at the lake in ten minutes," Hollander says, quietly. Her voice is soft and delicate, as if she doesn't raise it often. Before turning and leaving the crowd, Hollander looks Lily up and down again, makes a strange expression, and walks away lightly.

Bitch.

When the activity ends and the audience disperses, Lily approaches Alice and Linda with a frown.

"Who the hell is Hollander?"

"What do you mean?" Linda says, and the three of them start walking to the lake.

"She seems... stuck-up."

It is Alice who answers, small smile on her face.

"Oh, Jane is great. She just doesn't like crowds."

"And why the fuck did she look at me like that?" Lily grumbles, unable to help it, because *that girl can go to hell.*

"You two look similar, now that I think about it. You guys have the same... ah! Don't smack me! I'm just saying, Lils."

Alice laughs at their antics and the conversation ends at that.

Despite that, for the rest of the day, Lily can't shake the feeling of unease. She doesn't know why on earth she keeps thinking about that Hollander girl, but a cold sweat she recognizes as anger runs down her neck and she has to pull out all the big guns to fight it.

After lunch, she calls her father, who answers immediately.

"*Baby.*"

Her father's tone is loving and infinitely familiar, but Lily isn't going to cry because she's not twelve years old and she's not stupid.

“Hi.”

“Miss you. How's camp going? Have you made friends?”

Lily thinks about the girl's strange gesture from before and absentmindedly kicks a stone as she walks towards her cabin.

“I think so.”

“You don't seem too thrilled. Do you want me to buy you a plane ticket? There's one that leaves in...”

“Dad, don't be dumb.”

“Who are you calling dumb, you dumb? You know, I can shut down and sink that American summer camp if I want to.”

Her father's tone is light and playful, as if he can sense something is wrong. Lily smiles, thinking that he still does the same thing he did when she was little: being emphatically clear when he's joking and when he's not—very helpful in moments like these, when her head is spinning with too many ideas to grasp.

Lily imagines her father sitting in his office, in an elegant suit that smells of woodsmoke and childhood. Maybe he's in his bedroom and... shit.

“Sorry, did I wake you?”

“Don't worry about it, my beautiful flower. Tell me about your day.”

And just like that, Lily opens her mouth and a senseless stream of disorganized, anxious thoughts rushes out. She tells him about breakfast, her cabinmates, her success at fencing, and that girl's disdainful look. Her native language rolls through her tongue in a comforting and warm way, a hug from home.

In a predictable move, her father laughs a husky, loving laugh.

“Dumb girl, but even more dumb you. Why do you care? You know everything is not about you, baby.”

Lily loves her father because he has an inexhaustible amount of qualities, but, above all, she loves him for his ability to bring her head back to the present with hard and cold truths.

“And if it is?”

“Then you tell me this girl's name and I'm going to come down there and...”

“Okay, James Bond, chill out. I don't even care anymore. Tell me about work.”

When the call ends, Lily feels light and cheerful. For such a serious man, her father has always been warm and understanding. Well, it's only been the two of them for as long as Lily can remember, so she's grateful for his gentle smiles and his endless blue eyes.

In the cabin, Alice is swivelling idly in the desk chair watching Linda crouched in front of the standing mirror to do her makeup.

“Secret party tonight. The girls from cabin eleven just told me. You coming?” Linda says.

“Obviously.”

With renewed energy, Lily styles her hair to frame her features and chooses the smallest skirt she brought from home. She stands in front of the mirror next to Linda and smears glitter on her face, carefully tracing the shape of her cheekbones, and then reaches for her mascara for a thin coat on her eyelashes. Alice laughs when she sees them, but when Linda offers to do her eyes and calls her a chicken, she ends up on the floor next to the mirror while Linda highlights her face with glitter.

The moon shines through the trees as, with light steps, they move away from the cabin and approach the lake.

“This is gonna be so fun!” Lily tries to whisper, but it's more of a stifled scream. Linda hits her on the shoulder and pretends to be quiet.

“Shut the fuck up, Rozanova. What part of ‘secret party’ did you not understand?”

“You shut the fuck up, Cole. I have a right to be excited.”

“I'm not going to go with you when you get deported for underage drinking, just so you know.”

“Fuck off.”

Lily really loves her new friends.

The parties on the other side of the lake are the same as every year. Jane doesn't drink, so she entertains herself by watching the scenes the other campers put on. Some chat animatedly around the campfire, others hide in the shadows to do heavier things than just kiss, and the rest drift between sobriety and drunkenness.

Jane laughs with George, a boy with spike hair and thick arms tries to teach Stephen and Natsu a choreography from some K-pop song that she doesn't know. Natsu is really trying, but Stephen is replicate whatever the fuck George is doing while laughing with his chainsaw laugh.

“That looks really hard, you shouldn't be laughing.”

Alice sounds amused, gently clapping Jane on the back when she takes the seat next to her. She looks relaxed and smells vaguely of beer, but she looks beautiful anyway. *Is that glitter*

on her face? Jane wants to raise a hand and touch her chin, but looks away instead.

“I’m laughing because I know it’s really hard, so I’m not gonna try to do it.”

“Interesting philosophy.”

“Well, I never say I was smart.”

“I think you are, Jane,” Alice says, watching her from the corner of her eyes. Her red hair seems to blend in with the campfire, an eternal light in the darkness. “Like really, really smart. Did you decide what you’re gonna do next year?”

“Do I have to?”

“I’m just asking”.

Alice has mesmerizing eyes, but not enough to keep Jane from being aware of her situation. Alice is kind to her during camp, away from prying eyes and the pressure of being someone important. She can kiss her among the trees like everyone else and pretend for a couple of weeks that she has the world at her feet, but Jane knows the truth. As soon as it's time to leave, she won't hear from her again until next summer.

She's a good friend, Jane supposes. Arthur always seemed enthusiastic about their love affair, but Jane tried to be realistic. Being seventeen and in love doesn't guarantee anything, especially in their respective situations.

“I don’t know yet,” Jane says, gently gripping Alice’s hand and giving it a squeeze, because even at the end of the world one can indulge in a luxury, she supposes. Alice taps her fingers against the back of her hand. “My dad says I can do anything I want. What if I don't want to be anything?”

“Well.”

“I know, I know, I'm a spoiled brat.”

“I think you are just sad, Jane.”

Is that why you haven't answered my messages all year?, Jane wants to say, but she can't. It's unfair to Alice. She's a nice, easygoing girl, without the invisible burden Jane carries. It's okay, some things are just the way they are. She'll be fine.

“Alice! Robert just asked me... uh. Sorry.”

A voice with a heavy accent breaks through the noise of Jane’s thrumming heart, and when she turns around, the same girl with dark hair that follows Alice everywhere is here. Rozanova something.

Jane has watched them closely on the days she sees them strolling by the lake. Not because she wants to stalk them, but she finds it curious how easily the dark-haired girl moves and

laughs. Alice seems to enjoy that tune, and although it's obvious that Rozanova is painfully straight, Alice seems drawn to that carefree nature that Jane lacks.

Carefully, Jane lets go of Alice's hand and stands up.

"Don't worry, I was just leaving."

It seems to be the wrong thing to say, because Rozanova frowns aggressively and raises a crooked hand to point at her.

"What the hell is your problem? You don't even know me. Screw you, everyone likes me. I'm a fucking delight."

"Hey, Lily, don't talk to her like that."

It's obvious the girl is drunk, so Jane decides to be the grown-up and turns her back on her to go get another soda. A wrong move, because as soon as Rozanova leaves her field of vision, Jane feels an impact on the back of her neck and the hollow sound of the beer can falling to the ground.

What the fuck?

"What the fuck?" Jane says aloud, surprised. Indifference is quickly replaced by indignation, which bubbles up rapidly in her throat. "What the fuck is your problem, Rozanova?"

Before acting irrationally, Jane tries to consider whether she has ever antagonized Rozanova. She avoids her, yes, because she also avoids Alice when she doesn't initiate a conversation. It's true Jane turned down the invitation to play fencing once, and she also snuck out another time when they needed someone else to play basketball, but it wasn't personal. Jane was wearing a skirt that day, and honestly, Rozanova seems intimidating.

Not anymore, obviously, because she's an idiot.

"What the fuck is *your* problem, Hollander?"

"Eh, girls..."

It's Natsu who's speaking. Jane is too caught up in her indignation to notice her surroundings, so when she turns her head, she sees several people staring at them.

"I don't want things to get creepy, but girls, what the hell? Have you seen each other?"

Rozanova seems just as confused as she is.

"Why's everyone staring?"

"Oh, you're right," a girl Jane doesn't know says. "The resemblance between you two is scary".

“Linda, shut the fuck up,” Rozanova waves a vague hand and gives a nasty smile.
“Between her and me? Don't make me laugh. Let me see... Yeap, no resemblance. I'm cool, you're not. So, end of discussion. Who wants another beer?”

Jane steps forward, and before she can stop herself, touches Rozanova's shoulders.

“Leave me the fuck alone, will you? I don't care if you don't like me, but I don't need your stupid whiny voice in my ear every minute of this fucking camp.”

“Oh, now I see the resemblance,” Alice says with a confused look, “you sounded just like Lily, well, without the Russian accent.”

A couple of years ago, when some elementary school kids made fun of the shape of Jane's eyes, her father took the unorthodox route and, behind her grandparents' backs, taught her a thing or two. Jane never had the energy to use the knowledge she'd gained, but Shane made sure she could defend herself. At the time, Jane thought it was a waste of time, but now, with anger simmering in her palms and Rozanova's disdainful gaze upon her, Jane is reconsidering her knowledge.

“Please,” Rozanova laughs, tossing her dark hair, “she could never sound like me. She's stupid and... *what the fuck was that!?*”

Yeah, not her proudest moment. Jane's father is going to be furious. The palm of her hand that touched Rozanova's cheek stings, but the shiver that runs through her body is exhilarating.

Jane doesn't know exactly what reaction to expect from Rozanova, so she still screams when the girl lunges at her and grabs a lock of hair to pull it hard. Despite the girl being slim and slender, her body must be all muscle because she weighs a ton and makes Jane lose her balance, so they both fall to the ground in a matter of seconds.

“Everybody! Run!” someone shouts from a distance, and suddenly the main lights of the small secluded spot in the woods turn on and the camp staff's horn sounds loud and clear.

Shit.

Right. Obviously everyone knows that campers throw parties at least twice during their stay, but these usually have an end time before the staff kick them out and penalize them.

In previous years, Jane has had a couple of sodas with Arthur, and then they've both quietly retired to their cabins. She's never been detained past the unspoken curfew, not even when Alice's gentle hand traced her back and face among the trees.

So yes, now she's screwed.

“Eh, Rozanova!” Jane yelps, grabbing her by the shoulders, “Stop it! You need to get up.”

Around them, the other campers flee at full speed, carrying with them their beers and any other incriminating items. Jane doesn't have time to react before the space is empty and Mary Walker, the owner of the camp, appears in front of them.

Oh, god.

Jane and Lily stand side-by-side as Mary paces in front of them. Her office is ancient, wood everywhere and cobwebs older than her, which is saying something. Lily wants to run away and never come back. Damn it, why does everything always happen to her?

“Look, ma'am. Everyone was there, they only caught us. Can't you, you know, just let it go?” Lily says.

It's an argument that always works with her father, partly because Lily puts on her best innocent face and partly because her father loves her more than anything in the world. Clearly, Mrs. Walker doesn't feel an ounce of affection for her.

“So, tell me. Who?”

“Who what?”

“Who else was there?”

Lily isn't a snitch, so she keeps her mouth shut. Beside her, Hollander has a blank expression and slumped shoulders. Lily's cheek still burns. Bitch.

“The worst part is that sisters should be setting an example for the entire...”

“We are *not* sisters,” Hollander says suddenly in a tight voice. “I- We've never even seen each other before.”

Mrs. Walker turns and looks at them.

“So why on earth were you fighting, then?”

Lily would like to answer that, but she's not quite sure. She's not used to people not admiring her or not wanting her friends, so the discovery that Hollander isn't interested in her is unsettling. Besides, she's still a little drunk.

“Look, girls,” Mrs. Walker says with a sigh, “I choose to believe you are good people. Let's solve this the old-fashioned way. We've got five weeks left at camp and you two are going to spend it together. You'll eat together, bunk together and do all your activities together. Either you'll find a way to get along or kill each other.”

The woman's words are final, and Lily opens her mouth but has no words left to protest. She doesn't know what's worse. She hopes the woman doesn't call her father, or else all that's left is for God to protect her.

What a shitty summer.

“Go get your bags, girls, I'll take you to the isolation bunk.”

Jane doesn't say a word as they walk back to the cabins, but Lily feels strangely guilty. She started it, after all. Still, Jane remains silent, maintaining a stoic and distant expression, as if the situation doesn't bother her at all. What on earth is wrong with that girl? Why isn't she reacting?

Anyway, she has bigger problems. Lily needs to call her father.

Fuck.

Chapter 3: Do you believe in magic?

NEW YORK

Like all the other weird moments in her life, Jane falls into a strange, silent spiral. To be honest, the isolation bunk isn't so terrible. It's an old house, yes, but she can come and go as she pleases, listen to loud music and decorate almost an entire wall with things she likes.

Despite this, she can't bring herself to enjoy it. Jane feels like her shoulders are heavy and her father's voice is so, so far away. Not even Lily Rozanova's presence can pull her out of her daze.

Rozanova sings loudly, ignores Jane and turns on a Madonna album almost every single day. Sometimes, the girl paints outside in a black bike shorts and sports bra, ignoring the whole world. At other times, Rozanova reads between gasps and shouts of excitement as if the words of the books she reads were real.

They never look at each other.

Jane prefers it this way. For the last three days she has stayed inside the cabin, lying on her bed staring at the ceiling. The wood is old and damp. Her father and Arthur have tried to call her, but Jane has made excuses saying she has too many things to do. She'll have to return their call soon, before her father threatens to come in person.

Jane looks out the window, where the rain is pouring down and the wind is howling.

Today's activities have been suspended due to the weather, so Rozanova is sitting at the foot of her bed smiling broadly at her phone.

Jane should move around and eat something, but she's tired. She closes her eyes with a sigh and imagines Morty lying across her lap. She misses her lazy cat. And the Montreal landscape. And her bed. Fucking shit.

Just as she seems about to fall into a deep sleep, Jane hears a husky, masculine voice drifting into the small cabin she shares with Rozanova. For a moment she thinks she's dreaming about her father, but when she opens her eyes, she finds herself under the same damp ceiling. To her right, Rozanova wears an amused smile, her eyes fixed on the glow of her phone.

The man's voice continues speaking. Jane can't understand his words, and it takes her a while to realize that it's because they're in a different language.

When Rozanova laughs and Jane lets out a small groan as she sits down on the bed, the girl seems to realize her mistake and raises her head to look at her with wide eyes.

“Shit, sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Rozanova has very blue, big and expressive eyes. After a few seconds, Jane lowers her head, unable to bear the intensity of her gaze. She's a strange girl, but Jane is glad that the slap she gave her didn't leave a mark. She still regrets that. Rozanova seems to have forgotten, because she blinks and starts talking again.

“I thought you were sleeping, that's why I was listening to the video out loud. Sorry again.”

“That's okay.”

Rozanova seems friendly enough to continue the conversation. Jane takes a deep breath.

"Was that Russian?"

“Yeah, my dad,” Rozanova says, and immediately a smile begins to form on her lips. The girl turns her head for a few moments as if she were considering something, and then takes three strides to Jane's bed and sits down beside her. “Look, that’s my dog. Her name is Bubbles because my favorite show when I was little was The Powerpuff Girls. Anyway, my dad is telling me about her adventures. She went into the neighbor's yard and ate all the flowers; it's hilarious.”

Rozanova's phone is more modern than hers, so the screen displays a clear image. A small sized, long-haired mutt with brown, white, and grey fur is running in circles on the yard. Rozanova's father doesn't appear in the video, but his voice is clear. It's husky and rough, undeniably affectionate.

Jane smiles.

“She’s a cute dog. I have a cat, but he’s incredibly lazy so no adventures for him.”

“Really? I love cats, but I don't think they like me.” Rozanova doesn't pout, but she's close. “My best friend, Mila, has a gorgeous Persian cat, but he hates me. He’s always biting my ankles. My dad thinks it's because I'm noisy, but he's worse than me and Misha loves him. He's full of shit.”

Despite her rapid and accusatory tone, Rozanova's voice sounds amused. Jane hums and crosses her legs.

"You're close to your father," Jane says. A statement, not a question.

"It's just him and me, so I have no choice," Rozanova laughs. "Look, that's him. He didn't know I was taking a picture or he would've turned around. He's kinda my best friend, and I know, it's lame, but we do everything together.”

Rozanova shows her a picture of a blond man with his back to the camera, hands on his hips, looking at a house.

"He's... blonde," Jane says in response to that whole statement, but Rozanova doesn't seem offended.

"Yes, he has curly blonde hair. I dyed mine black to spite him last summer, but he liked it, so I lost out."

It's impressive how easily words flow from Rozanova's mouth, but Jane finds it strangely comforting. She can understand why Alice wants to be her friend.

When both women fall silent, Rozanova seems to understand that the conversation is over and stands up. Jane sees her cross to her trunk and takes out a bag of cookies, but instead of going back to sit on her own bed, Rozanova returns to her side.

"I asked Alice which cookies you liked," Rozanova says, a slight blush coloring her ears. "I didn't see you go out for lunch and the sky is fucking falling. Do you want some?"

Jane blinks and tilts her head.

"Why are you being nice to me? I literally slapped you a few days ago."

"Girl, if I got angry at everyone who gives me what I deserve, I'd be in jail," Rozanova says with a laugh, "Besides, it's my fault we're here. If I hadn't jumped on you, we wouldn't have been caught, yada yada yada. It's all good."

Yes, Rozanova is definitely a strange person. Jane wants to tell her it's not that simple, that she can't just let others walk all over her like that, but it's obvious that Rozanova doesn't do what she doesn't want to do.

Jane shrugs and accepts the peace offering. As they both begin to eat, Rozanova starts telling the story of how her father arrived one Christmas with her dog, and the first thing the animal did was eat the wrapping paper. The girl gestures dramatically with her hands every time she speaks, commanding attention with confidence and self-assurance. Before Jane can even realize it, she's laughing heartily at every pause Rozanova makes.

"So," Rozanova says after a while, "are you okay now?"

"Uh?"

"I asked if you were okay," she levels Jane with her gaze. "You didn't open your mouth for, like, two days. I was getting scared."

Jane has the urge to huff and tell Rozanova never to speak to her again, but the girl's eyes seem sincere. Worried. As if they were friends, not acquaintances.

"Yeah," Jane says, feeling like it's been punched out of her, "I guess. Sometimes... you know."

"Oh, I know," Rozanova agrees with a nod. "My dad's the same. Sometimes he remains silent for many hours, but he always says that my voice helps him feel better."

“You are very full of yourself, did you know that?”

“Don’t be stupid, I mean *talking*. Talking always makes us feel better. That's what other people are for, isn't it? To help each other.”

Rozanova speaks as if it were a universal truth, always certain. Her eyes never betray a moment of hesitation. Jane shakes her head. What a complex personality to have.

“If you say so.”

The girl laughs nonchalantly, stands up, and sits back down on her own bed as if nothing had happened.

Jane takes a deep breath, then exhales, and places her feet on the cold floor of the cabin. For the first time in days, Jane’s head feels lighter and her body less heavy. Perhaps Rozanova is right, but she's not going to tell her.

Jane manages a small, private smile.

Monday arrives with a beautiful, clear sky. Lily is so happy that she starts her day by jumping to her feet, puts on a short dress, and pulls her hair back into a messy ponytail. She texts Mila to check on her, and of course, tells her all the dirty details.

To: stupid head 😊(09.02 am)

hi baby doll

i miss u

guess who got lucky last night lol

Mila answers three hours after with a selfie of her with Lily’s father. Bitch.

From: stupid head 😊(11.56 am)

guess who just saw your message

To: stupid head 😊(11.58 am)

ur fucking w me

i hate u

From: stupid head 🤡(11.58 am)

YES LOL

also wdym lucky

if u come back pregnant i swear to go ilya is gonna kill me

To: stupid head 🤡(11.58 am)

why u

From: stupid head 🤡(11.59 am)

cause my mom is obsessed w the idea that im a bad influence

shes gonna blame it on me

everyone hates me

To: stupid head 🤡(12.00 pm)

sucks to be you but i'm built different

my dad loves me

also wtf im not pregnant

robert and i just kissed !!!! i mean yesterday but still

From: stupid head 🤡(12.00 pm)

lol

To: stupid head 🤡(12.00 pm)

BITCH

“Hey, Lily,” Linda raises her voice a little, “I’m fucking talking to you. Did love make you deaf?”

“Sorry, I was messaging Mila... and the fuck do you mean ‘love’?” Lily grumbles, putting her phone in her pocket and looking at her friends. “Robert and I just kissed for like two seconds. Chill out”.

“Two seconds? More than Stephen has done in his life.”

“Ha, ha. Very funny, Natsu.”

Lily laughs loudly when Stephen eventually joins in. He and Natsu spontaneously joined their group after Lily felt the imperative need to invite Hollander to sit with her, Alice, and Linda during dinner. She can't explain why, but Lily feels compelled to continue talking with her new cabinmate. Well, not so new. After their conversation that rainy day, things changed for the better. Now, Hollander wakes up and sometimes tells Lily about her dreams—structured stories with people she has never even heard of. Now Hollander listens to her talk when she feels restless, and has even agreed to sit with her.

Lily doesn't understand why she is so eager to be friends with Hollander, but she seems like a cool girl. She doesn't usually talk much when they're all together, but she has revolutionary ideas about certain things that Lily doesn't understand and she explains them easily and calmly. She also has a strange sense of humor that makes Lily laugh more than she should.

“Anyway,” Linda says, “I was asking you if you wanna go swimming.”

“Oh, I’m okay. You go.”

The sun is shining pleasantly, so Lily lies back on the grass and gazes at the blue of the sky as her friends stand up and run towards the lake, shouting with excitement.

Hollander remains seated beside her, toying with the buckle of her jacket.

“Do you swim?” Lily asks, because her father says she's infected with the ‘never shut up’ disease, and she's starting to think he's right.

“Yes, but I’m a bit cold. I live near a lake so I’m used to swimming. It's not a big deal to me.”

“Right.”

A bird sings above them. Hollander remains silent for a moment, then continues.

“Have you ever been to Montreal?”

“Not really, but apparently I was born there. Too little to remember and shit.”

“It's a beautiful place. You should go. It has lots of trees and wide streets.”

“Same as Moscow, eh?” Lily laughs, but for a moment she thinks that perhaps her joke was too sarcastic. Hollander just rolls her eyes and maintains a friendly smile on her face. “Do you live with your parents?”

“Just my dad”.

“What about your mom?”

Hollander stays silent for a few seconds, then twists her mouth.

“It's... complicated.”

Mila always says that Lily probably fell on her head as a baby because she sometimes asks very stupid and inappropriate questions.

“Fuck, sorry,” Lily rushes to say. “You know, same here. According to my father, I don't have a mother. I mean, I probably had one, but they were never together or some shit like that. I try not to ask him about that because the only time I did, he, like, cried three days straight. So yeah, no mother either. It's scary the way nobody stays together anymore.”

Hollander looks at her curiously, but nods her head.

“You're right.”

“Do you think that will affect our relationships? You know, romantically.”

“Is this you trying to justify that you're a slut?”

“Fuck you, Hollander,” Lily says, but she's laughing openly and wholeheartedly.

“You first, Rozanova.”

Hollander is easy to talk to. Even though she's not very expressive, she responds positively to every topic of conversation. It's almost as if they've known each other for years. The only other person outside Lily's family with whom she has that kind of connection is Mila, but no way is Lily going to tell her best friend that.

The rest of the afternoon the group alternates between activities. Linda, Stephen, and Hollander team up against Natsu, Alice, and Lily to play soccer, but none of them really know the rules, so the game ends in a tie. Lily loses a volleyball match against Hollander, but immediately wins when Robert stops by to give her a quick kiss on the corner of her mouth. Her friends shout obscene things to make fun of her, but Lily flips them the bird and later beats them at poker.

That evening, the camp organizes a game of capture the flag, but since Lily and Hollander are still on the blacklist, they can't participate and must retreat to the isolation bunk without being able to play.

Lily doesn't mind too much; she's halfway through a really good book she needs to finish before summer. Hollander doesn't seem bothered either, as she busily reorganizes her bag like

the damn psychopath she is.

When Lily's phone vibrates against her thigh, she hauls it and glances at the screen.

from: papa aka the police (9:28 pm)

Look who's here with me

2 images attachment

In the first photograph, her father's face is right next to Svetlana's. Her auntie looks exhausted but as good as ever. In the second picture, Bubbles is gnawing on a bone bigger than her body. Lily laughs. For a moment she considers sending a photo with Hollander, but Lily isn't sure how close they actually are. And heaven forbid Mila ever sees that picture.

Lily takes a selfie with her tongue out and sends it.

to: papa aka the police (9:29 pm)

happy family indeed

tell auntie svetlana that I love her very much

1 image attachment

from: papa aka the police (9:29 pm)

What about me?

to: papa aka the police (9:30 pm)

i love u the most

from: papa aka the police (9:30 pm)

:)

Thank you.

"Look, Hollander," Lily says, turning her phone so the girl can see the picture of her dog, "my baby is a beast."

"She's adorable," Hollander says with a smile identical to hers. After a beat, she adds, "you can call me Jane, you know. Nobody calls me by my last name, it's almost like you're talking to my dad."

"Okay, so I'm Lily."

"Okay."

"Are we like, friends or something?"

Lily tries to put on a serious face, but the corner of her lips twitches and Hollander—no, *Jane*—laughs.

"Or something."

"Go to hell, girl."

It takes Jane a couple of days to realize that Lily Rozanova is full of universal truths. The girl speaks fluently about every possible subject, always unconcerned if someone corrects her or disagrees with her point of view.

Forced to spend most of their time together, Jane and Lily end up talking about almost everything. Eventually, when the topic of romantic relationships comes up, Jane practically swallows her tongue trying to explain that she finds boys nice but doesn't enjoy them.

Lily doesn't even blink.

"So, what's the problem?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you seem so distressed?" Lily frowns and looks at her closely. "Don't you live in Canada, the gay paradise or something? Is your dad homophobic? I bet there are laws against that. Man, fuck Russia."

"No, of course my dad is not.... He's the opposite, actually, but it doesn't matter. This isn't about him. It's about me."

"Oh, I see," Lily squints at her, "you are the one that's homophobic."

"What? No! Why is it so difficult to talk to you?" Jane says, and then sighs through her nose, "I'm the problem because I feel like something is wrong with me. I should do the right thing, make my grandparents happy, or, I don't know, my friends."

Jane knows what she's saying is nonsense because she's had this argument before. Not with her father because she doesn't want to break his heart, but with Arthur and her therapist. It's not about other people; it's about Jane and her inability to feel that someone could love her, love her romantically, so maybe she should punish herself.

She expects some complex or arrogant response from Lily, but the girl looks at her with a tilted head and says:

“Who cares about what's right if you're unhappy?”

Jane exhales all the air from her lungs and looks at Lily who, nonchalantly, returns her gaze while chewing an apple.

“You’re insane, did you know that?” Jane says because she doesn’t want to cry.

“Yeah, I know. What did you mean before, that your dad is the opposite?”

Lily seems unimpressed by anything, so Jane takes another breath and vaguely tells her father's story. A trans man, his traumatic experience in heteronormative institutions, and the biological blood they both share. Lily doesn't even blink.

“Cool. So, have you been to New York, like the city? My dad and I are moving here this winter because I want to study at an art university, but I don't know which one. Which one do you know?”

As easy as breathing, they both change the subject of conversation to the uncertain future that their age brings. Lily opens her hands enthusiastically again and tells her about all the plans she has for the coming year, and that, since they will both be nearby, they could probably visit each other. Jane breathes a sigh of relief for the first time in months and smiles.

“You could come to my birthday party,” Jane nods, “my dad makes great barbecues.”

“Sure, when is it?”

“December 29th.”

“Are you fucking with me?” Lily almost chokes on her apple. “My birthday is also on December 29th.”

“How weird is that, uh?”

Jane stands up and stretches her arms above her head, yawning. She's spent far too long sitting and talking to her crazy new friend. It's almost midnight, so Jane needs to sleep if she wants to get up tomorrow to play basketball with Alice and Natsu. Tomorrow she also needs to call her father, remind him that Morty needs to take his medicine, and that...

When the cabin goes silent for an unusually long time, Jane turns around to look at Lily and find out what's wrong. The girl is frozen at the edge of her bed, her eyes wide open and her expression troubled. During these days Jane has learned not to focus on Lily's details, as these are usually the prelude to something bigger and more overwhelming.

Like clockwork, Lily walks to Jane and looks her up and down, really studying her. As if needing an anchor, Lily places her hands firmly on Jane's shoulders. Jane can hear her ragged breathing, as if she's just run a marathon.

"Okay, this is officially weird. What is wrong?"

"Jane, what's your father like? Not Mr. Hollander, you know, your other father."

"I never met him. It's something similar to your mother. My dad doesn't like to talk about that. I mean, I tried it once. I've never seen him so sad before, so now I avoid asking."

"You know, my father is bisexual."

Lily's tone is casual, almost nonchalant. It would be a believable performance if her hands weren't trembling slightly and her eyebrows weren't twitching. Even so, Jane can't understand what the damn point of this conversation is; she's sleepy and she has to win the basketball game tomorrow because Natsu can't keep kicking her ass.

Jane doesn't want to be rude, so she lightly pats Lily's hands.

"Good for him. I mean, I guess it's not really good because of Russia, but you know."

"Look, I can tolerate you being an idiot at any time except this one" Lily says, almost desperate. "You have to try, c'mon."

"What the hell are you talking about—?"

When the weight of the world falls on her shoulders and Lily's eyes light up in recognition, Jane nearly falls over. The only thing stopping her is her friend's gripping hands. Because it can't be possible. It can't be possible that Lily would even consider such an absurd possibility. On what basis? That they share the same birthday? Or perhaps that they both look slightly alike? Lily lives in damn Moscow and she lives in Montreal, for God's sake. Yes, Lily mentioned that she was born in the same city as her, but it's just a coincidence. There are millions of people who were born in the same place and don't entertain the thought that they are...

Jane laughs softly at first, her body trembling gently. Gradually, the laughter escapes her control and turns into an almost hysterical shriek.

"I understand now," Jane says between comical gasps. "You're joking."

"Damn it, Jane, I'm serious. Once, when I was little, my dad showed me a picture of one of his old friends. Dad used to cry a lot, so I never asked him about him, but I stole that picture because maybe I could give it to him for Christmas or something. Stupid idea. Anyway, years later, when Mila saw it, she said it was probably one of his old boyfriends."

"So? I'm sorry to hear that sad story, but it doesn't prove anything, Lily. You're being irrational."

"I have that picture now. Wanna see it?"

Even though Jane knows that this is all an absurd idea, her heart begins to beat wildly in her chest. Lily speaks again with that characteristic confidence of hers, and for a moment Jane thinks *are we really sisters?* But she knows it can't be. Even if Lily is an amazing girl, entertaining the idea of them being... and if it's true... No, it's not true.

"Lily," Jane says slowly, taking a step back. The girl's hands fall to her sides with a thud. "Look, I don't really know what's going on, but it's late. I'm tired. I understand you think this joke is funny, but I can't do this right now, okay? Let's go to sleep."

Without waiting for a reply, Jane goes to her bed and hides under the covers. She tries to close her eyes and thinks of her father's warm embrace, Arthur's sincere gaze, and the endless landscape of Montreal. Even after Lily turns off the lights in complete silence, Jane keeps her eyes wide open for almost the entire night.

Could it be? No. No, no, no.

When morning arrives, Jane's body feels numb. Lily is still lying in her bunk with her back to her, so she takes the opportunity to leave the cabin to be alone. Even though the sun's rays are shining brightly, Jane feels her arms are frozen. She's spent the whole night tossing and turning in bed, replaying Lily's bewildered face and hopeful eyes in her mind.

There's not much point in theorizing, Jane decided around four in the morning. For that reason, when she is close enough to see the lake, Jane sits under a leafy tree and calls her father on the phone.

Tell me the truth. Tell me the truth. Tell me the truth. Tell me—

"Good morning, darling."

The first thing she feels when she hears her father's voice is an overwhelming urge to cry. Even though he can't see her, Jane fakes a smile.

"Hi, dad."

"How's everything?"

"Very weird, actually" Jane says because she knows her father will discover her strange voice sooner or later. The call began with the policy Jane had followed throughout her life: the truth. However, as soon as she heard her father speak, she felt her throat close up. Shit. "Eh, um, have you ever been in love?"

Not what she wants to ask, but close enough.

"In love? Of course. We all are, at some point in our lives. Why? Are you in love?"

Jane thinks about Alice's hair, her kind eyes, and her booming laughter when the rest of her friends tell a funny joke. Yes, she likes her, but Jane doesn't know if she's in love.

"Not really. I mean— have you ever been in love with someone? With my, um, I don't know, with my sperm donor?"

There's a long pause on the other end of the line and Jane fears she's fucked up, but she knows she's right in this situation. She can hear her father's steady breathing and tries to imitate his pulse.

"That's a very strange way to refer to your other parent."

"I wasn't aware that I had one," Jane answers quickly and immediately bites her tongue.
"Sorry, dad."

Her father's laughter is restrained, and Jane can sense the awkward atmosphere surrounding the same conversation they've both been avoiding forever. Jane because she doesn't want to hurt the only person who loves her completely and irrevocably; her dad because... Jane has no idea. That's exactly the fucking point of this.

"Kid," his father says in a low, controlled tone. "I'm sorry. I know we need to have this conversation. Yes, I loved your other father, and I love you. I'm sorry things aren't different. Why are you asking me about this now?"

This is the perfect moment to talk about Lily's crazy behavior, the snow-covered streets of a faraway city like Moscow, and her birthday, but for some reason, the words catch in her throat. Jane doesn't want to hear her father lie. She knows that if she asks him and he chooses not to tell the truth, something will break between them.

"I had a dream," Jane says instead the small piece of her heart. "A blond man gave me a present on a deserted island. Maybe it was my subconscious telling me I should visit Grandpa."

"You should, he misses you. I miss you."

"I'll be back soon, okay? Don't worry. I love you."

"Love you too. Goodbye, darling."

"Bye, dad."

When her father's breathing fades on the other end of the line, Jane remains perfectly still beneath the tree. If she didn't ask directly, it's because deep down she knows the answer.

A fucking sister.

Arthur is going to have a field day.

Just as she begins to feel a tingling pain in her lower back, Jane hears a branch crack behind her and smells the familiar soft perfume that haunted her all last summer.

"I saw you leave your cabin," Alice says sitting next to her, "and I remembered we have a basketball game, but that's in two more hours. Did something bad happen?"

"I'm not sure."

“What?”

“Do you think Lily and I look alike?”

For a moment Alice remains silent, but wears her ever-present relaxed smile. Fuck.

“Do you want me to be honest or do you want me to lie? I know it bothers you when people say you look like her.”

Jane wants to jump off a bridge because that's the most direct and truthful answer she's going to get about this whole charade. She moans in despair, buries her head between her own legs, and then says:

“I need to talk to Lily.”

Lily wakes up to the distinct feeling of being watched. She was dreaming about Christmas when Bubbles arrived. Everything was really warm and light, as if it were a memory inside a snow globe. She stirs between the covers of her bed, registers drool running down her cheek from one corner of her mouth and yawns.

When Lily opens her eyes, she finds Jane's serious face staring at her.

“I need you to show me the picture.”

For a moment, Lilly is very confused. *What the hell is she talking about?* Damn it, she needs a cup of coffee. Maybe ten. And then, like a tractor, yesterday's unfinished conversation slaps her in the face and she lets out an undignified squawk and flails out of the blankets.

“Oh, fuck. Did you call your dad? What did he say?”

“How did you know I was gonna talk to my dad?”

“Duh, we’re sisters, Jane. It's telepathy at this point.”

We’re sisters. Lily savors those words in her mouth and smiles because they sound perfect. A sister. Woah.

“Can you not call us that? How can you be so sure?”

Jane's tone is one of absolute anguish, but after a few weeks, Lily can say that she knows her well enough to tell that that tone is caused by a wide range of things.

In reality, Lily has no basis for claiming that Jane is her sister except for a couple of coincidences and her heartbeat. Yes, the both of them are chillingly similar—Robert helped Lily realize that—, but beyond that there is something that penetrates deeper into her skin and her insides, her soul.

Lily can't explain it, but she feels it.

For someone as precise as Jane, it's obvious that's not enough, so Lily rushes to her bag, wildly tossing out her things. She pulls out a small box, opens it and carefully takes out an old photograph. Lily walks back to Jane and stretches the image towards the girl.

“Look, my father never said anything about the photo besides what I already told you. The only information I have is the year written on the back next to my father's initials and someone else's.”

Jane takes the photograph in her trembling hands, and for a terrifying moment, her expression is absolutely blank. Lily holds her breath, afraid of breaking something intangible. Slowly, as Jane turns the photograph over to see the back, her face transforms into something indescribable.

“I.R,” Jane reads in a weak voice.

Lily nods.

“Ilya Rozanov.”

“S.H,” Jane says again, but this time she fills in the gaps. “Shane Hollander, my father. Jesus fucking Christ”.

The world falls silent for what seems like an eternity. Lily feels as if she's underwater, drowning, completely alone. *What on earth is happening?*

Then, a cold hand tugs at her arm, and the next thing Lily knows is Jane's warm, soft body wrapped around hers. The world spins again, and all the sounds slowly awaken as if she's hearing them for the first time.

Jane makes a gurgling noise of distress in the back of her throat and hugs Lily tightly.

“I think I’m gonna die.”

“Me first,” Lily can’t even speak. “Holy shit.”

She doesn't know how long they spend hugging, but at some point the breakfast bell rings and they both ignore it. Lily doesn't want to say she's scared because that's not her true nature, but she's afraid to let go of Jane and have her disappear in a cloud of dust.

When they both seem to have calmed down, they sit on Lily's unmade bed and look at each other.

"This is so stupid," Lily laughs. "You have the same eyes as my dad. My god.”

“*Our* dad, actually. Fuck. I can’t do this.”

Even so, Jane doesn't get out of bed. She keeps staring at Lily as if she were an alien.

“So you’re my sister. What the fuck even is a sister?” Jane says with a laugh that trembles because of the tears that begin to form at the corner of her eyes. “I don’t even have girl

friends. This is insane.”

“You don’t? That’s actually a bad sign.”

“Piss off.”

Lily smiles.

“Wait” Jane says suddenly, opening her eyes as wide as she can. “If we were born on the same day, does that mean we are twins?”

“I don’t know. We are not exactly identical, right? You have that mole under your nose and I don’t. I can do this.”

Lily bends her right thumb down to her wrist.

“I can do it with my left hand only.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah.”

After a pause, Lily says:

“Could we be one of those people, you know, the doplestngahers?”

“What the fuck is a ‘doplestngaher’?”

“Those doubles of people. Like Natalie Portman and Keira Knightley. Or me and you, apparently.”

“Oh, you mean a doppelganger?” Jane’s laughter is light but genuine. “Jesus, my sister’s an idiot. Even worse, my *twin* is an idiot.”

“But, could we?”

“I mean, we could be, but that doesn’t explain why your dad was fucking mine.”

“Ew. Don’t ever say that again”.

They both joke around for a few more moments, still in an absurd and unreal bubble inside the small cabin. When reality hits them, they choose to sit on the porch with a cup of hot water to seriously discuss the situation because *what else can you do when you find a damn relative in a random place?*

“I don’t know what was the problem with our parents,” Jane sighs. “Whatever happened must’ve been pretty dreadful for them to bisect us like that.”

Jane falls silent, and Lily watches her. In the light of truth, the resemblance between Ilya Rozanov and Jane Hollander is now so obvious that Lily feels like laughing.

“Look, my dad's a little crazy, yes, and sometimes he worries about silly things like whether I fold my clothes or not, but he's not a bad person. I don't think he left you willingly.” Lily sucks in a breath through her teeth. “Or me. Do you think your father left me because I was more pretty than you?”

It's obvious that Jane recognizes Lily's attempt to make a joke, so she laughs. Simple as that.

“Sure.”

Lily grips the hot mug tighter than necessary when she thinks about what this means. It's obvious her father loves her; she has Mila and Svetlana, but her biological family is small. She has no aunts, uncles, or grandparents, not even distant ones. At least, she doesn't know any of them. An unfamiliar but comforting itch runs through her limbs when she thinks that Jane is now also part of her world.

“Tell me about Shane” Lily says with a slightly trembling voice.

“He’s... warm. Dad works with his charity raising money and awareness for those suffering from mental illness.”

“Woah.”

“He’s a little famous. He was born and raised in Ottawa, so he used to play hockey when he was younger, but he didn't achieve much success as a player because teams weren't very understanding of his...situation. He gained more fame as the coach of the Metros.”

Lily's mind fills with images of an unknown man, brave and uncompromising, who carved out a place for himself in a hostile world. A man who raised a girl practically identical to her, yet different in many ways.

“What about your.. my... our dad? Ilya.” Jane looks far from that skeptical and detached expression she had a few hours ago; instead, her eyes shine with renewed interest.

“He's a very funny man. He always acts serious, but he tells the worst jokes and always tries to make you laugh. He works with one of his friends at a car company. He doesn't really like it, but he makes good money. He gives the best hugs.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah, I know.”

This is definitely an out-of-body experience. Lily tries to think of a young Ilya and Shane, friends or one-night stand, having twins only to choose completely opposite directions.

The audacity of her father to say that she has bad ideas when his way of living life is probably the worst, like, ever.

"When I spoke with my dad on the phone this morning," Jane says, frowning, "he told me he had loved my other father. Ilya, apparently. Do you think they still love each other? You said that Ilya cried for him when you were little."

“Yeah, but. It’s been like twenty years. Nobody has been in love for that long.”

“My grandparents are.”

“Fuck, we have grandparents? This is really fun. What’s next, another sibling?”

“Ha, ha. You’re not funny, Lily.”

“You shouldn’t lie to your big sister.”

“Fuck you, if one of us is the... hey! I’m still talking to you!”

When the hunger becomes unbearable, they both decide to go find their friends and cancel the basketball game in order to continue talking. Lily thinks it makes sense; they have seventeen years to make up for.

They eat hamburgers while sharing bright, blurry childhood memories, as well as those that are not so pleasant, but necessary nonetheless. Lily vibrates with excitement at every little detail that Jane reveals between the lines, both about Shane and about herself.

As Jane tells her about the first time she felt attracted to a girl, a fleeting but captivating thought crosses Lily's mind. Holy shit. Fuck, fuck, fuck. Yeah, she has the worst luck in the world, but Jane does not.

This can work.

Probably not.

Must definitely yes.

Lily bolts straight up in the bed they both are sharing and looks at her sister with the intensity of a thousand suns.

“Oh, no. What now.”

Of course Jane can read her mind because they’re a fucking twins, regardless of how long they have been separated.

“I have a brilliant beyond brilliant idea” Lily says. “Like genius level. Like a world changing level. Like you’re going to fall on your ass level.”

“You know, the more you keep talking, the more terrible it becomes in my imagination.”

“Why are you so dramatic?”

“Just tell me, my god!”

Lily slowly sits up straight, creating an anticipation worthy of the idea of the century. Jane follows her.

"You want to know my dad. I'm dying to know Shane... oh man, this is so brilliant I'm scared the secret service is gonna take me away."

"I'm gonna slap you again."

"Shut your trap, Jane. Anyway, you, me, Ilya, Shane. At some point we'll all have to meet up because you and I are never going to be apart again, but maybe we could have a little fun before then. You know, before all those deep conversations and adult decisions."

"You're scaring me."

"I think we should switch places. When camp's over, I go to Montreal and you go to Moscow. It's gonna be fine, we're twins."

Jane has that expression she usually has before she explodes, negatively or positively. Her blonde hair is tied back in a ponytail, and damn, *have they always looked this alike?*

Lily hits her in the arm looking for a response, but her sister (sister!) just blinks.

"Twins from different countries, different accents, different hair.. you are insane. We are like, one hundred percent different."

"So? We learn. I'll teach you to be me and you teach me how to be a stuck up Canadian. Everybody wins. It's probably gonna be like two weeks, what's the worst that could happen?"

Jane is sure she's losing her mind, but she's never had so much fun before. It's as if the ground has opened up beneath her feet and there are only clouds, puppies and other adorable things surrounding Lily, her damn twin. *Twins.*

She still can't believe it, but when on Wednesday they both get the same hairstyle and look at each other for hours in front of the mirror, it's undeniable that they are identical. Thursday, the two discuss the points of the plan, and every time Jane thinks of resisting, Lily smiles so brightly that she can't help but give in. Friday, they discuss the topic of languages, because Lily clearly has no problem with them—who on earth speaks Russian, English, and French perfectly?—but Jane is screwed. Yes, she knows French because she has to, but her accent is so awful that Lily laughs for two hours. Saturday, they argue for four hours straight about the hair issue because Jane refuses to dye it black, not when her father insists that her curly blonde hair is the most beautiful thing in the world.

"I get it, you love your dad. I love him too and I don't even know him! But we need to do this."

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

"You're a damn parrot, is that all you know how to say?" Lily growls, covering her face with both hands. "Look, I understand it's difficult, but I can't dye my hair blonde. The damn black color won't come out—don't make that face. Your father will love you anyway."

Again, Lily's eyes are so big and pleading that Jane has to bite her lip to keep from immediately giving in. How the hell does she do it? Jane sighs. Dyeing her hair isn't really so terrible, it's just that she's never been very fond of change. And this is too big of a change, one that involves sharing her life with a stranger. But when she looks at Lily, at her strikingly similar features and her enthusiastic heart, Jane can't help but think that the emptiness she's always felt has been slowly filling up these past few days.

"Fuck it, let's do it".

The excited scream that Lily lets out is inhuman.

Sunday, after Lily got her hands stained with dye, the two of them spent their time locked away, learning specific things about each other. Maps of places, photographs, dreams, stories, other people's secrets, and all those details that could give them away.

Jane can't help but laugh because, while Lily seems to handle many things well, she has a terrible compass. They argue for almost twenty minutes about Jane's house address, the streets where she lives, and downtown Montreal.

"How are you supposed to live in New York if you have no idea how to read a map?"

"Duh, my father will be with me. Papa is amazing with directions."

"It's a shame you didn't inherit it."

"But you did, eh?"

Jane smiles. She looks at the drawing of her house that she made herself—indicating her bedroom, her father's office, the kitchen, and the yard—and thinks they'll be really lucky if they don't end up in jail for fraud or something.

"Great! It's my turn." Lily moves a little closer to show her photos on her phone. "This is Mila, my best friend. I'm not going to tell her anything about our plan because I trust your abilities and because I have a bet on how long it takes her to figure it out, and I want to win."

"Is anyone else betting?"

"Shut up, it's recreational. Anyway, this is Dad. You already know him. Look at him, there he is in our living room! He always wears sportswear when he's home. This is Aunt Svetlana, she's Mila's mom and Dad's best friend. They've known each other forever."

Jane looks at the photograph of a beautiful woman with thick hair and nods.

"Do you think she knows?"

“About us? Probably. There's nothing she doesn't know about dad. Oooh, do you think she could help us find out what happened between our parents? Like, what really happened?”

“Sure, and if anyone knows whether your father still loves mine, it's probably her.”

Lily gasps as if it were a great idea and nods firmly. Then, a shadow of sadness crosses her face.

“If that's the case, this is so fucking sad. Why on earth aren't they together?”

Jane raises her eyebrows and moves a hand between them.

“Duh, bad decisions. It's obvious they don't have good ideas.”

“Do you think... we should help them?” A calculating smile begins to appear on Lily's face and Jane sighs. “I know you can't interfere in other people's lives, but we could... plant a seed. Remind them of what made them bring us into this world.”

“I don't know if I want to remember that, to be honest.”

“Ew, not that.”

Monday, they both practice pretending to be each other. At first, it seems like a futile attempt, but when Alice enters her cabin and calls Jane “Lily,” they both try not to show their surprise and pretend nothing is wrong. The girl doesn't seem to notice that anything is different, so she announces that they'll soon have a volleyball tournament and need reinforcements.

When they all gather on the court, everyone is absolutely impressed by Jane's change in appearance, but they don't seem to know who's who, so they avoid malicious comments and just congratulate her on her bold decision.

The real test is convincing her camp friends, so Jane tries her best to be Lily. It's exhausting to be someone else, and it's even more exhausting to be her sister, so Jane ends up completely drained by the end of the tournament. She tries to imitate her actions, her small gestures like tossing her hair back and saying some English words with more accent than others. No one seems to notice anything strange when Lily calls her by her own name while pretending to be Jane, so it's a success.

The damned plan is in motion and Jane can feel her heart wanting to escape her chest.

The rest of the days pass at the speed of light. Before Jane can fully process the situation, she finds herself standing in clothes that aren't hers, with plane tickets that say the wrong address, and a phone that feels different than usual.

Around her, teary-eye campers are hugging goodbye as they load into the buses and cars. Linda, Alice, Natsu, and Stephen bid them both farewell affectionately, promising to stay in touch. Out of the corner of her eye, Jane sees Alice pause for a moment beside her sister and kiss her cheek, probably mistaking her for her. To give Lily credit, she doesn't even blush.

When they are both alone, Lily lets out a huff.

"I'm telling you this as a sister and as a friend: Alice is not right for you."

"Shut up."

"I'm serious! I know you like her and all, but there are other people in the world who deserve you more than her. You're so cool you should be with, I don't know, the Princess of Canada or something."

Jane rolls her eyes, but still smiles at Lily's attempt to take care of her.

"What happened to Robert?"

"Summer camp, babe. It's over."

"If you inherited that detached attitude from one of our parents, we're screwed."

Lily laughs uproariously and leans in to give her a tight hug that threatens to break her ribs. Then, they exchange phones to send one last message to their parents before they see each other again, next time with everything out in the open.

Jane moves a little away from the crowd, opens her father's chat and presses the voice recorder. She tries to keep her voice steady because she knows he'll worry. Anyway, he'll be fine; Lily will come home to give him a hug.

"Hi, Dad. The last activity of camp is to send a message to our loved ones, so here I go." Jane has never been good at lying, but she supposes the situation calls for it. She takes a deep breath and continues. "Do you remember when I was little and I was afraid of the dark? I always wanted to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, and because I was so scared, I would yell to you from my room so you could help me get there. You always woke up, no matter how tired you were. I guess that says a lot about who you are. I'm sorry if I haven't thanked you before for everything you've done for me. I know we argue sometimes because we're very different, but you're the best dad in the world, and nothing you do will change that. I love you. See you soon."

She can't stop her eyes from filling with tears and her shoulders from feeling heavy, but among so many people in the same situation, Jane knows she goes unnoticed. When Lily returns, she's crying too, and Jane can't help but notice that her face takes on the same expression as her father's when he's sad: the corners of her lips turned down, a slight blush on her nose.

They hug again.

"Give papa a kiss for me, okay?"

Jane nods. Her legs tremble and she feels like she's going to faint, but Lily's eyes are so big and bright that they won't allow it.

"You too."

"Lily Rozanova! Your car's here."

Mrs. Walker's voice travels at full volume toward them, and when Jane doesn't move, Lily gives her a light push on the shoulder.

“That’s you.”

“Right.”

“Take my phone. Remember to find out how our parents met. I’m gonna find out why they broke up,” Lily says with her characteristic confidence. “I love you, okay? Don't get into trouble in Moscow. I don't want to see you on the news.”

“Same goes for you, I have a reputation to uphold.”

“That's not true, nobody knows you.”

They both laugh nervously and hug again. When Mrs. Walker's voice calls Lily again, Jane has to force herself to pull away from her sister.

“Love you too,” Jane says and tries not to cry anymore. “Give Morty a kiss for me.”

Without waiting for Lily's answer, Jane takes off.

As she settles into the taxi and looks out the window, she sees tears streaming down Lily's cheeks. In an impulse that she knows her sister will also have, Jane takes Lily's phone, unlocks it, and goes to her father's chat.

to: papa aka the police (10:02 am)

I voice message.

Jane presses play and closes her eyes to listen to her sister's bubbly voice in, surprisingly, English. The damn girl must have known Jane would want to listen. Lily starts with the same lie as Jane, and reinforces the idea that the camp assigned her the task of speaking exclusively in English, not Russian, to practice for New York.

“Papa, thank you for letting me come to this camp. I found my other half here, lots of friends and had fun so thank you. You're really dumb sometimes, and I'm sure you've made more mistakes than anyone else in this life—that's probably why you always give terrible advice, haha, just kidding. I love you, I love you and I love you. You are the sun of my universe, and I swear to God that even if you try to make me leave your side, ah!, tough luck. Let's talk more about our lives when I get home, okay? Thanks for being my dad and my best friend. Ew, I'm going to get the award for the biggest nerd in the family. Good luck with me. Anyway, see you soon!!”

Jane smiles, broadly and happily, like she never has before.

Family.

What a promising word.

Chapter 4: Come and get your love

MONTREAL

Two weeks.

Two weeks is the limit they both set for themselves in case this "plan" falls apart faster than expected.

Lily doesn't think she'll survive two weeks.

Montreal's airport is large and easy to navigate, but Lily can't concentrate on anything other than the frantic beating of her heart. She's a little tired and her eyes are probably swollen from crying so much, but as soon as she gets off the plane, Lily looks among a sea of faces for her other biological father.

Where are you? Where are you? Where are y--? Oh, my fucking god.

Between an old woman and a man idly looking at his phone, Shane Hollander's eyes find hers. Immediately, he brightens and waves.

"Oh, my fucking god" Lily says aloud, forcing her legs to walk towards him.

It is the strangest experience of her life. The man in the photograph, the one she had seen so many times in the shadows, is standing in front of her. Shane Hollander is handsome. He has black hair, dark eyes and a face full of freckles. *Like Jane*. He is much shorter than her father—the other one, but Shane is considerably more muscular. He's wearing a slightly wrinkled shirt and has such a loving smile that Lily is left breathless.

"Hey, kiddo. Jesus. I can't believe it. You dyed your hair."

Shane's voice is different from his father's. Much softer, similar to Jane's, with a slight Canadian accent and a very careful way of pronouncing words. His eyes stare at her, completely focused on her as if there were no other people around, blinking between two dark and infinite galaxies.

Lily is going to faint.

"Y-yes, I did. Do you like it?"

The words sound strange in her own ears, but she can't give up now. Lily straightens up and mimics his wide smile.

"Of course, darling. You look completely different. In a good way, I mean. What possessed you to do it?"

My fucking secret twin sister.

“I just needed a change, you know, to end the summer.”

Shane lets out a short, light laugh, and without warning he wraps his arms around Lily and pulls her close.

Lily is surrounded by love. That's a fact. She has tons of friends, a small but close-knit family, and an adorable dog. Everyone is drawn to her; they always try to get closer to her to become involved in her life. Never in her seventeen years has she felt alone, not even when she began to notice that her family was different from the rest. Her father always took it upon himself to fill every void.

Lily is surrounded by love, and yet, when she feels Shane's warm, firm arms wrap around her shoulders, something clicks inside her. It may be something breaking or mending, she's not sure, but she feels it deep in her chest and it spreads throughout the rest of her body. It's such an honest, cozy, and intimate hug that it completely disarms her.

Before she can stop it, Lily feels her eyes fill with tears and sobs against Shane's body. He smells so fucking good.

“What’s wrong, Jane?”

Right. It’s Jane he is hugging, not Lily. He doesn't know her, he doesn't know what she likes or about the time she broke her wrist when she ran away from home—for like, two seconds—with Mila. It’s okay. That’s why she’s here.

Lily takes a deep breath and looks at Shane's worried expression.

“Sorry. Jet lag.”

It's a lame joke, but when Shane shakes his head in confusion because there's clearly no jet lag between New York and Montreal, Lily remembers that she's supposed to be Jane. Boring, quiet, “where fun goes to die” Jane. Shit.

“I'm fine, I just missed you. It's been too many weeks.”

Shane gives her that impossible warm look again and affectionately touches her cheek.

“I know, baby, let’s go home.”

Yeah, Lily is going to die.

They leave the airport still locked in an embrace. Shane carries Lily's backpack despite her protests, and when they reach the car, he opens the passenger door for her. Lily raises her eyebrows but remains silent, channeling the best version of her sister. She feels the need to comment on every detail she notices about Shane, but it's obvious that the real Jane wouldn't be impressed by his behavior.

As Shane drives through the streets of Montreal, he tells her in a relaxed and friendly tone about what she missed while she was at the camp. Lily listens intently, mesmerized by the way the man in front of her speaks. It's almost as if she's watching a commercial. She can't help but become fixated on his mannerisms, so similar to Jane's. Lily has a constant urge to ask more questions and interrupt him, but she knows that's not something her sister would do.

“What about you, darling?”

“You know, it's always the same. Even though I missed Arthur, I managed to survive.”

“I can see that. With new hair and everything. Just so you know, Jackie, Hayden and the kids will be coming later for a welcome dinner. Your grandparents are already at home preparing everything.”

Lily can't help but notice that Shane's words are carefully chosen, as if he's gauging her reaction. In the weeks she and Jane spent together, it was clear that the girl's personality was more shy than the others. It's good that she has people looking out for her. Lily smiles.

“Sounds fun.”

Shane shares her expression with obvious relief.

“Welcome home, Jane.”

Shane and Jane's house only has one floor, but it's tall and wide. It's typical but very pretty, with a large garden full of flowers and green grass. Jane's description is quite accurate, so Lily has no problem jumping down and running toward the entrance when she sees two figures standing by the front door. Those must be their grandparents, Yuna and David. They both have a strong but kind presence, sharing the same demeanor as Shane and Jane.

Lily hesitates for a moment about whether to approach or not, but ultimately she is overcome by emotion and rushes towards them to give them a shared hug. Holy shit. She has never had grandparents or elderly people in her life before. According to Jane, they're both incredibly loving and understanding. Duh, like everyone in her life, apparently. How on earth did Jane grow up in a fairy tale?

When they return the hug with intentional affection, Lily feels like crying again. She's going to be dehydrated by the time this is over.

“Hi, Janie.” It's her grandmother who speaks. “You change your hair. Is that what the kids are doing these days?”

“You have no right to speak, Mom. You're blonder than the last time I saw you.”

When Shane jumps to her defense, her grandparents laugh. It's a gratifying and pleasant sound.

“You look lovely, dear,” her grandpa, David, kisses her on the head. “Welcome home, we miss you.”

“I missed you too, you have no idea.”

Lily keeps smiling throughout the rest of the afternoon. Shane carries her backpack to her room while she looks around the rest of the house trying not to look too surprised.

Jane seems to surround herself with many people, because there are photos of her and Shane with her grandparents, with people Lily recognizes as the Pikes and with strangers Jane didn't bother to mention. In all the photos, her sister seems serious but relaxed. There's one of her as a little girl, adorably dressed in a Powerpuff Girls romper. Whoah. Fate and all that. *We were an adorable baby.*

Lily isn't quite sure where to stand, so she chooses to follow her grandparents into the kitchen. They fill the silence with stories about what happened in her absence, which means Lily has to keep her mouth shut and avoid being herself.

They tell him about his cat, Morty, and the naps he's taken in the garden, about their washing machine that broke down, and about the Pike's vacation. Yuna is more energetic than David, moving her hands with confidence and enthusiasm. Her grandfather nods and adds details that his wife forgets.

They're an interesting family. Lily notices that no one asks her to help with the preparations; on the contrary, they serve her juice and snacks. She chuckles to herself, realizing her sister is a spoiled brat, but it also seems an obvious result given how they treat her. Damn, if she'd grown up in that environment, she'd be unbearable. This highlights the difference between Lily and Jane. She assumes that the way her father raised her is either a blessing or a very effective strategy for keeping her in check.

When the Spike arrive, they greet Lily with fleeting hugs. Neither the parents nor the children pester her with questions. Instead, they seem to ignore her in favor of talking amongst themselves and giving her peace of mind. It's... weird but soothing. That is when Lily discovers that pretending to be Jane is quite simple: keep quiet most of the time and smile just the right amount of times. No one seems to suspect that anything is out of place or that there is anything strange going on, so Lily calmly maintains the facade of being her sister.

Her grandparents' cooking is delicious. She uses dinnertime to absorb all the extra information the other family members provide, which, thankfully, is a lot. At some point, Rose Landry's name comes up, and Lily looks up.

"She's filming in Ottawa, so she'll be coming to visit us for a few days," Shane's tone is meant to be nonchalant, but Lily is good at reading people. He seems uncomfortable talking about a topic he himself brought up. "You know, tourism."

Hayden laughs.

"Yeah, right. What do you have to do with tourism?"

"A lot, it seems," Jackie says, lips curling in a teasing gesture. "Well, she recently broke up with her boyfriend. Maybe she's looking for... comfort."

“Yeah, right, comfort.”

"Stop, please," Shane says, his shoulders slumped. It's striking how much Jane resembles him. "She's my friend."

"Friend of your..."

"Hayden, please," Yuna rolls her eyes and stands up. "She's a good girl. And there are children present. Okay, who wants ice cream?"

Lily thinks about the list of people Jane gave her, but Rose Landry wasn't on it. She knows she's an actress because, duh, she doesn't live under a rock, but she didn't know she was close to Jane's family. Shane seems particularly embarrassed, but Lily is starting to think that might just be his face.

What the fuck is Rose Landry deal?

When dinner ends, a tall boy with blond hair and light eyes arrives at the house. That's Arthur, from the photos Jane showed her. He's even more handsome in person, and Lily can't help but look him up and down. She restrains herself from whistling because she's not a pervert and, also, she doesn't want to ruin her cover before it even starts.

"Oh my god, did you dye your hair? What the hell happened to you?"

Lily's first instinct is to get defensive because *who the fuck does he think he is?*, but she stops in time because this is Jane's best friend. She's not sure whether to hug him or not, so when the others stand up to go into the living room, Lily stands next to him and gives him a small smile.

"I guess I wanted a change. How are you? How were your holidays?"

"Okay. We went to Vancouver to see my aunt. And my art exhibition was a huge success. The director of the Montreal Art Center and Museum contacted me and invited me to participate in an exhibition next month."

Lily's eyes widen in surprise.

"Really? That's super cool. I'm also interested in..." She says, but stops herself before she messes up because she's Jane, not Lily who wants to dedicate to do art and move to New York. "I'm also interested in seeing you at that exhibition. I'm happy for you."

"Thanks, girl. How was summer camp without me?"

"Too many people, but good."

"And Alice?"

Lily thinks about the redhead she considers her friend, but she also thinks about Jane's longing glances and Alice's lack of interest. Her sister deserves better, someone more devoted

and caring. According to Jane, it's been two years of uncertainty, and honestly, Lily thinks it's too long. She'll have a serious talk with her when they see each other again in person.

"I'm over her, I need to meet new people."

Arthur gives her a questioning look, and Lily shrinks back almost imperceptibly. Of course, Jane is someone who seems to have never gotten over anything in her life.

"I mean, not over her, but you know. When I feel ready, you could help me meet someone new."

"This year's camp really changed you, huh?"

"Oh, you have no idea."

MOSCOW

Jane wakes up to someone violently kicking the side of her bed. Oh no. Did auntie Jackie let Ruby go up to her room? She feels the orange sun on her face and the soft sheets enveloping her, she still doesn't want to wake up. Jane burrows further into her pillow with a groan.

"Not now."

The voice that answers her is soft, delicate, and in a language completely different from her own.

Jane sits up abruptly on the bed.

There's a girl at the foot of the bed. Jane blinks, perhaps she's still dreaming. She has thick, brown hair and dark, intriguing eyes. She's the most beautiful woman Jane has ever seen. She's wearing low-cut, tight-fitting clothes, similar to—

It's Mila, Lily's best friend.

The girl starts speaking again in that language she doesn't understand, and Jane desperately tries to find her bearings in this time and place. Summer camp. Lily. Changing places. Ilya. No one could pick her up at the airport, so Lily helped her call a taxi to take her home. Jane was so exhausted that she blindly made it to Lily's room and fell asleep.

Right.

"I'm sorry," Jane says in a slurred voice. She clears her throat and continues. "At camp they told me to only speak English to, uh, prepare myself. For New York."

Mila frowns, speaks to her again in Russian, and when Jane doesn't move a muscle to respond, she huffs in annoyance.

“English sucks.”

Jane nods and blinks again, this time looking around. Lily's room is spacious and bright, with a queen-size bed and an en-suite bathroom. Everything is perfectly clean and tidy in a specific place. During the time Jane lived in the isolation cabin with Lily, the girl proved to be surprisingly tidy and self-sufficient.

"Yep," Jane says, unsure what else to say. She feels uncomfortable under Mila's watchful gaze, whose eyes are actually an adorable shade of brown. Damn it, she always feels intimidated around women she considers pretty. Arthur would laugh at her for acting like a virgin. She is, but still.

“I respect no english, it is boring, as Ilya always says”, Mila laughs and throws her hair back, a gesture she shares with Lily. “How did it go? How many guys did you kiss?”

Jane purses her lips at the idea, but she's supposed to be pretending to be Lily. The thought makes her stomach churn; she's sure it will all go wrong and Shane will never speak to her again.

Actually, now that she thinks about it, she's the one who should be outraged. Fuck it.

“Mmh, lots.”

Mila turns her head when she falls silent, as if she's waiting for something. Jane blinks.

“Uh, what?”

“Something bad happened?”

“Why?”

“You're very quiet.”

Jane opens her mouth to apologize, but she can't find the words. She still feels disoriented, and pretending to be the most radiant person in the world isn't easy. Lily probably would have said a thousand different things in this short lapse of time and Mila wouldn't be looking at her like she's an alien. Damn it, why didn't they practice more? Her sister is probably having a wonderful day with her family, who never question her directly because they know exactly what she's like.

Thinking about her father breaks her heart because she's on a goddamn unknown continent where she can't even read the news, but Jane isn't going to give up now. Not after crossing an ocean and nearly having a heart attack.

When Jane comes up with a convincing excuse, the door to Lily's room opens and Ilya Rozanov enters.

Jane's first impression of him is that no one could question that Lily is his daughter. They both carry themselves with the same proud, confident, and haughty posture as they walk, as if they were the most important person in the room. The second is that he's a flawless man, with not a single stray blond hair and a broad, polished smile. He's gorgeous.

Ilya enters the room, crosses his arms, and says something quickly in Russian. Then, without warning, he dramatically collapses onto the bed where Jane is still sitting.

Is this her other father? Was this the other person her dad wanted to bring her into the world with? Well, her and Lily. *I'll never be alone again.* The man looks at her through his thick eyelashes and waits for a response, but all Jane can hear is the beating of her heart in her eardrums. She's struggling to process exactly what's happening, but Jane has to try. For Lily.

"Ow," Jane mutters, straightening her back, "hi, papa."

"Ah, right, the stupid English," Ilya says with that deep voice that Jane has heard before. "Tell me who came up with the idea so I can go and beat him up."

Jane does what her sister would do: she laughs.

"Chill out. I think it will be useful when we move. You speak perfect English, but I don't."

"That's not true," Mila interjects, "you don't even have an accent now. Too many weeks at camp."

"That's because my beautiful flower is very intelligent and perfect," Ilya says with a very serious face. Then, without warning, his two pale hands touch Jane's cheeks, and she can't help but blush. Ilya opens his eyes in surprise at something Jane can't understand, but then the man smiles tenderly. "I'm sorry I couldn't pick you up at the airport; the meeting ran longer than expected. It's very late. Are you hungry? Are you okay? Oh, I missed you so much."

Ilya's hands are extremely warm, but it could also be that Jane's body is on fire. It's difficult to understand the whirlwind of emotions that shakes her in every direction, because the man who holds her face as if it were something precious is a stranger. She has never seen him before, she doesn't know what weighs on his heart or how his daily life unfolds. Jane has never fallen asleep on his chest or listened to his breathing while they are sitting in the garden.

And yet, Jane irrationally fears that the man will leave again. Definitely. Just like before, when she had no say or power to ask him to stay with her and father. With Lily. Fuck.

"Yes, I'm okay," Jane lies. "It seems like it's been forever."

"I know. Now let's go to the kitchen, it's dinner time."

Jane nods and stands awkwardly after her father leaves the room as quickly as he entered. She plans to follow him, but a firm hand stops her.

It's Mila.

"Are you angry with me?" Mila asks with a serious expression. She doesn't seem worried but rather intrigued, as her eyes search for hers to stare intently at Jane.

"Everything's fine" Jane gently tugs her hand loose. She tries to hold his gaze, but Jane has to look away when it becomes too much. "I'm not angry."

Mila scowls at her and one of her eye twitches.

"So why the fuck are you acting like this? Did you get stupider at camp or something?"

Jane's mouth drops open in surprise at her angry tone. Aren't they supposed to be best friends? How could Lily let her talk to her like that? Yes, Mila might be very beautiful and stunning to look at, but that doesn't excuse her rude behavior. The silence that stretches between them is thick and uncomfortable, and Jane can't think of a better thing to do than shrug her shoulders.

"I already said everything's fine. Now I'm hungry, so..."

Jane turns her back on her and leaves before Mila can confront her. She hears her shout something she can't understand, so Jane looks ahead with all the confidence she can muster and follow the pattern of the house she memorized from Lily.

So much for keeping her cover, uh.

Ilya and Jane's house is small but modern. All the bedrooms are on the second floor, while the first floor is an open-plan space that allows her to see the kitchen, dining room, and Ilya's office all at once. It's clear they do everything together because there aren't many spaces for privacy except for their room. Even so, when Jane sees Ilya cooking in the kitchen with his back to her, she feels a pressure in her chest that disappears only when she gets closer to him.

Ilya says something to her in Russian, but when Jane ignores him, he sighs heavily and waves the spatula in his hand.

"Set the table for dinner," the man says. "How long will this unpleasant American habit continue?"

"Canadian, I think. My teacher was Canadian. When I told him I was born in Montreal, he was excited because he thought I spoke perfect English. Clearly not, so he gave me this task."

Ilya remains still for a moment, but then raises an eyebrow with humor.

"He wasn't rude to you, was he?"

Jane laughs.

"No, I think he was intrigued by why I came from so far away if I was born in Montreal. So why?"

"Why what?"

“Why was I born in Montreal?”

This time Ilya stops completely to look at her. He seems uncomfortable, surprised by such a direct question. Damn. Perhaps being raised by her father spoiled her, since he taught her to converse with other adults as equals without any inhibitions.

Ilya's eyes are clear, sharp, and perceptive of everything around him. He's an intimidating man because of his seriousness, but Jane remembers what Lily said and thinks about his warm hands a little while ago. It's just a facade.

“We—I was living there when you were born. That's why you have dual citizenship. After a few months, I had to return to Moscow, so you were raised here.”

Simple as that.

Ilya seems tense but not completely closed off to having this conversation, so Jane gathers her courage and continues.

“Was my mother from Canada?”

The word feels sour in her tongue because it disrespects his father; Ilya seems to agree because his face twists in an unpleasant gesture.

“I've always told you that you don't have a mother.”

“Everyone has one.”

“No, not all of them. Some have two dads, others two moms. What kind of conservative attitude is that, flower? I didn't teach you that.”

Ilya's tone is serious but light. Jane fakes a smile and nods.

"I know, but I think I'm just asking for an explanation. My father, then. Was he from Canada?"

Jane's heart begins to race desperately when Ilya puts the spatula aside, turns off the pan he was cooking in, and approaches her with his solemn but affectionate eyes.

Ilya nods almost imperceptibly.

“Yes, Lily. From Ottawa, really.”

Jane's head is spinning with so many questions, but she remembers the agreement they made with Lily and focuses on the topic she was assigned. Her sister is so bossy. Jane smiles.

“How did you two meet?”

Ilya remains silent and stares ahead, over Jane's head and beyond the space they share. Beyond the earthly realm that surrounds them, toward a time when neither Jane nor Lily

existed. The man has been completely transported to a different, happier or brighter place, because his blue eyes shine and a small smile adorns his lips.

“We were—I was young. Before working with Svetlana, I played hockey. I did it for a few months before retiring because—that's where I met your father. We both played together.”

“Were you good at playing?”

Jane has never heard his name in her father's social circles, and he certainly has never mentioned it. Ilya Rozanov is an uncommon name; Jane is sure she would remember it.

Ilya's response is a stifled laugh.

"You know your papa, I'm good at everything."

“Was my father good at playing?”

Ilya's eyebrows rise sharply as if the question were absurd. As if it were a universal truth that Shane Hollander and hockey will always be compatible, even after 17 years.

Ilya doesn't respond as Mila enters the kitchen and interrupts their conversation. Without waiting for instructions—probably accustomed to a routine Jane is unfamiliar with—Mila starts taking out plates and forks.

"Hey you," Mila growls without looking at her. Her rude tone is the only thing that indicates she's talking to Jane, "Help set the table, or do you think you're getting special treatment because you just got back from that stupid summer camp?"

Jane frowns but doesn't answer. She's never liked it when people talk to her like that, and Mila has ruined perhaps her only chance to have an honest conversation with Ilya. The man looks at them but doesn't comment, focusing instead on serving dinner.

Jane's phone vibrates in her pocket. The screen displays the corny name Lily has chosen for her contact.

from: twinnnn 🌸🌻❤️(08.21 pm)

hi girl

IM DYING OVER HERE WHY IS NO ONE TALKING TO ME

also lol your friend is like super hot but not my type

AND SHANE OMG I LOVE HIM

everyone is so cool here

damn u ungrateful bitch

jk i love u

I image attachment

The photograph shows Lily with her tongue out and a peace sign next to her face. She doesn't seem terrified or anxious about being in an unfamiliar place, but to be fair, Lily never seems scared of anything. Jane smiles. They've only been together a couple of weeks and she already misses her. How could she live her whole life without her?

Jane hears an indignant voice speaking Russian to her right. It's Mila again, looking over her shoulder directly at the screen.

"Oh, so you've made a new friend," Mila grumbles in English, snatching the phone from Jane's hands. Before Jane can protest, Mila opens Lily's photograph and freezes.

The hope that Mila won't recognize Lily turns to zero when the girl opens her eyes so wide they look like they're about to explode.

Oh, fuck. They're officially screwed.

MONTREAL

Lily is bored.

Jane and Shane's house seems to get bigger as the days go by, and although at first Lily enjoys the non-existent pressure of pretending to be her sister, by the second day she gets bored. There is a limited number of times she can walk through the halls looking at the photos of the Hollander family's life before it becomes repetitive. Her grandparents are busy with their own lives and Arthur is focused on his exhibition, so the only person available to talk to is Shane.

Shane is a fascinating person. Lily isn't ashamed to admit that she's become obsessed with observing his gestures and mannerisms. He's a calm man, but he can also be blunt when things frustrate him. He's incredibly dedicated to everything he does, and it seems like his concentration is always one hundred percent focused on what he has to do at that moment.

It makes perfect sense that he and his father were together; what doesn't make sense is why they broke up.

Lily finds that one disadvantage to this situation is that Jane is too independent; she spends most of the day alone. In her daily life, Lily usually spends her time annoying her father, so she decides to do what she does best.

She knocks three times on Shane's office door and opens it.

“Hi, kid. Something happened?”

The man wears glasses (glasses!) and has such a wide smile that Lily feels like crying again. Jesus fuck. This whole situation is so emotional, when will it stop? She enters his office and sits down across from him.

“Nothing, I just missed you.”

Shane's cheeks turn reddish, and Lily is mesmerized by the pattern of his shoulders shrugging. He's a man who gets embarrassed easily, as if affection were unusual for him. Lily finds it hard to believe that Jane isn't constantly clinging to his hip because she definitely would be. I mean, she does it with her other father, but Shane seems to be infinitely more patient.

“Really? I’m glad. We could do something, it's been a while since we spent time together.”

“Sure, whatever you want.”

If Shane is surprised by her relaxed attitude, he doesn't mention it. They both decide to watch a movie in the cinema with too many action scenes to have an interesting plot, but Lily still has an amazing time. Shane is funny, not like her father who deliberately tells jokes to make her laugh, but because he makes quick, sharp, and observant comments. When the movie ends, Lily's stomach hurts from laughing and her cheeks are sore from smiling so much.

Then, when they both sit down to eat ice cream, Shane takes a deep breath and says:

“Jane, I’ve been analyzing what we talked about that time we spoke on the phone while you were at camp. I don’t think I’ve been fair to you about your father.”

Lily nods slowly, secretly relieved because she hadn't known how on earth to bring up the subject of her parents. Jane had said that Shane looked very sad when they talked about it; Lily doesn't want to be the reason for his sadness, not when all she has caused him so far are smiles.

"You said you had been in love with him," Lily says with a small voice.

It is evident that time has not healed any wounds in Shane, because the man looks in the opposite direction from Lily and sighs.

“Yes, I was.”

“What changed?”

For a horrifying moment, Lily considers the possibility that her father hadn't supported Shane when he needed it. Jane had mentioned that her father had a difficult time with his hockey team because he was trans and had to retire for a few years before returning as the team's coach. *No*. Oh, no, the Ilya Rozanov that Lily knows could never do that.

“Life is hard sometimes, kid.”

Shane's voice sounds so defeated that Lily can't stop the tears from welling up in her eyes.

“Was he... bad to you?”

“Never. He was the most energetic and kind person I've ever met. He smiled all the time, and though he thought he was the best of the best, he kinda was.”

Lily has no trouble picturing her father as a young, brash, and overwhelming figure among others. He's still like that sometimes. What does surprise her is that Shane says her father was kind, because he always tells Lily that he was rude and an idiot when he was young.

“What happened between you two, then?” Lily can't help but press, feeling a little desperate. She can't ignore Shane's broken tone.

“Like I said, sometimes life is hard. It has nuances. Your father, in particular, had a difficult life. I think in some ways I made it worse.”

Oh, fuck. Lily can't stand it. She opens her arms and wraps them tightly around Shane's waist, as if he might choose that moment to run away. Automatically, he puts his arm around her shoulders and gives her a squeeze, as if to reassure her.

"But," Lily says in a whisper, “what about us? Didn't he love us?”

Jane and me, Lily doesn't say. *You*.

“Darling, I don't think there was anything in the world he loved more than you. But life is complicated and sometimes people make decisions they believe are best for everyone.”

How? How could her father leave someone like Shane? How could her father go to Moscow and not look back, not look back at Jane and Shane? Lily can't understand it, she doesn't want to. Nothing makes sense. She feels like hiding in her bedroom closet and never coming out again.

They both remain silent for long minutes until Lily has the courage to ask.

“Do you regret it?”

“What, kid?”

“Him. Me.” *Us*.

Against all odds, Shane chuckles softly.

"How could I regret the best thing that ever happened to me?"

Now, Lily can't stop the sob escaping her lips and hides her head against Shane's side, who holds her tightly for as long as her crying lasts. The thought of that man, alone and sad, moves Lily and makes her feel as if her whole chest is crushed.

Later, on her way home, with puffy eyes and a heavy head, Lily realizes that Shane didn't specify whether what he didn't regret was her or her father.

The moon is bright when Shane's car parks outside their house and they both walk towards the entrance. Lily doesn't want to leave him; she wants to apologize on behalf of her father because, while the man sometimes has idiotic ideas, he's a good person.

When Shane smiles and the corners of his eyes crinkle, Lily could bet her life that Ilya Rozanov hasn't gotten over Shane Hollander.

And she would very much dare to say that it's reciprocal.

"Hey, dad, I love you," Lily says before going to her room. "Like, a lot. Like I'm gonna die because of how much I love you."

Shane makes an adorable confused face and then laughs, before kissing her forehead.

"Since when are you so weird, kid? I love you too. Goodnight."

Jane's room is small and a bit messy. It's full of books on history and philosophy that Lily couldn't read even if she were paid. There are CDs and landscape paintings that Lily could bet were made by Arthur, but there are also notes scattered all over the room, which, when Lily reads them, seem to be nothing more than fleeting thoughts.

"What do you think?" Lily asks Morty, who's looking at her indifferently from Jane's bed. "On a scale of one to ten, how screwed are we? No wonder Jane needs therapy."

The cat meows and Lily nods.

"Yes, I think I should get in line to make an appointment with that therapist of hers."

Lily is dozing on Jane's bed when the phone rings, startling her.

It's an unknown number. Maybe someone Jane knows but Lily doesn't, so she decides to let it ring. After a few seconds, she recognizes the area code and curses. Who else could her sister know from Russia?

"Holy shit, Jane. Why aren't you calling me from my phone? Are you okay? Did something happen to you?"

The line goes silent.

"Jane, fucking god. Are you alright?"

"So it's true," Mila says in Russian, making her sit up abruptly on the bed. *"I thought you'd just gone crazy or been abducted by aliens, but out of all of them, this is the most outlandish theory. What the fuck, Lily?"*

Lily's first thought is that she lost the bet against herself; she'd given Mila a week to figure out that something was wrong. Her second thought is that Jane must be doing a terrible job if

she was caught on the second day.

Mila's huff indicates that it must not have been a pleasant discovery, so Lily laughs a little hysterically.

“So, funny story.”

“'Funny story' my ass, bitch. What the hell is going on here and why are you in fucking Montreal, according to your obnoxious double?”

“What, you didn’t like Jane?”

“Tell me everything. Now.”

Lily isn't surprised that Mila discovered her lie, really, since her best friend spends every second of the day glued to her. She tells her about the camp, the isolation bunk, and the crazy story that connects her and Jane. Mila makes a couple of sardonic comments in between her story, but most of the time she listens silently and makes little noises of affirmation to let Lily know she's listening.

“I think,” Mila announces, and Lily can imagine her tilting her head, *“that this is the worst idea you've ever had.”*

“What? Why?”

“How do you think Ilya will feel when he finds out you deceived him?”

“I couldn't care less. He didn't think about me when he decided to separate me from my fucking twin sister.”

“That's unfair, and you know it. Have you thought about Jane? How is she feeling? She's in a country she doesn't know and she doesn't understand a damn word of our language. I don't know how much longer she can hold out. It seems like she's going to fall apart at any moment.”

Fuck Mila and her incredible sense of responsibility and empathy. Lily rubs her face with the palm of her hand and sighs.

“She always looks like she's about to collapse, that’s just her face,” Lily says. “Look, Jane's an adult. Well, no, but we both decided this. It's important to us. Is she there? Let me talk to her.”

“It's five a.m here, she is asleep. I'm getting ready to go for a run.”

“Did you—did you stay with her?”

“Yes, she was upset because I saw the photo you sent her; that's how I uncovered your flimsy lie. She's so different from you, it's funny no one notices. She's a little crazy and kind of weird, but I guess she's scared. I would be too in her situation.”

There's something about Mila's tone that makes Lily frown. Her friend is someone she trusts completely, and she'd give her soul to her without a second thought, but she's still a horny teenager.

“Mila.”

“*What?*”

"Mila," Lily says again, with a touch of urgency. "I don't need to tell you that would be fucking weird. Jane has my same face, dude. And the friend code and all that shit."

“The Canadians drove you fucking crazy because I couldn't be less interested in that girl even if she were the last one on earth. Anyway, I'm heading out. Save my number, you bitch. I love you.”

“I love you too, help Jane if you can. Not much, if you know what I mean.”

“*Ew. Bye.*”

Lily laughs when Mila hangs up and, despite the teasing, she can finally breathe. It will be good for Jane to have allies at home. She knows her friend will be helpful when it comes to her father, and might even help them find out Svetlana's side of the story.

Before falling asleep, Lily sends Jane a message. She smiles to herself when she sees the contact's name, so typical of her sister.

to: Lily :) (09.05 pm)

don't kiss mila or im gonna kms

jk but also not jk

anyway i made progress

shane definitely still loves my father

good for us!!!

sleep tight, i love u

Morty meows at the foot of the bed, as if he wants to say hello to Jane. Lily blows him a kiss and closes her eyes.

MOSCOW

Jane's day begins with Ilya asking her to do the laundry, and although it's definitely something she's done before, she can't remember how the hell a washing machine works. She silently curses her father for spoiling her too much and has to look for a quick tutorial on her phone. Then, Ilya tells her that he has cleared his schedule so that they can spend a "father-daughter" day together, as if they hadn't already spent the entire previous day together.

It's not that Jane isn't deeply intrigued by Ilya—because he is her biological father, she wants to know *everything*—, but she's learned over the years that she's easily overwhelmed and needs more time than others to recover from social interactions. Pretending to be Lily means that time doesn't exist, so Jane has no choice but to nod at Ilya's words with a forced smile.

“Sure.”

"What?" he says, "you're no longer interested in spending time with your old man?"

In a move Jane doesn't see coming, Ilya wraps his arm around her neck and puts her in a headlock as if he's going to throw her to the ground, but in reality, he barely touches her. Despite that, Jane is so surprised that she freezes and lets out a small yelp.

The room falls silent. Then, Ilya says something quickly in Russian, and when he doesn't get a response, he frowns and looks at Jane with his questioning blue eyes.

"Are you okay, Lily?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?"

The words come out faster than she intends. Jane tries to relax her shoulders which are still trapped under Ilya's arm. The man does not answer and slowly lets go. Oh, fuck.

“Are you sure?”

Ilya's hands touch her arms, holding her in place. The man is much taller than her, so he tilts his head so he can get close enough to create an atmosphere of intimacy that Jane immediately rejects. She may not know Ilya, but she knows his father, and she's seen those searching eyes before.

"I've noticed you've been different since you came back from camp. Did something happen?"

Damn her luck that she ended up with the more observant parental figure of the two of them. Shane is a saint and Jane has nothing but praise for him, but when it comes to people, being perceptive isn't his strong suit.

“Everything is okay, I swear.”

Jane tries to sound as convincing as she can, but the last few days her mind has been a whirlwind of emotions and, fuck, she's just a teenager. What is she supposed to do? She

misses her father, she misses Lily, and she misses Ilya even though he's right in front of her because he doesn't love her, not in the way he should.

Suddenly, the world spins and Jane feels her chest tighten. Oh, no. *Not now.* She knows that feeling of being dragged out of reality very well, so she tries to focus on the warmth of Ilya's hands as they cup her cheeks in a firm but gentle grip. When a tear falls onto her lips, Jane knows she's fucked.

Ilya repeats something over and over in Russian, then drops a kiss to her forehead, feather-light and fleeting. Jane can't help but sob.

"Hey, hey," Ilya says in a low, soft voice, like Jane has never heard before. "Panic attack, yes? Breathe, I'm here."

Jane follows Ilya's instructions to inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, until she can see through her blurry vision. She's had enough panic attacks in her life to know the procedure, but they've never ended with anyone other than Shane holding her tightly enough to bring her back to reality.

Ilya smells of hope, of love, of everything she once lacked.

"Beautiful flower," Ilya whispers, stroking her cheek with his thumb, "what's wrong? I've never seen you like this before. What is it? Is this about your father?"

Jane inhales shakily and accepts the opportunity presented to her on a silver platter.

"Yes."

"What about him?"

"Do you think...?" Jane doesn't know if she wants to hear the answer. She doesn't think she can bear the truth if it isn't what she expects. Still, she must ask. "Do you think my other father loves me?"

It's not what she should ask because Lily gave her clear and precise instructions, but Jane can't help herself. Her impetuous heart just needs to hear it from Ilya's lips, at least once.

"He doesn't know who I am," Jane says, her voice trembling. "He doesn't know me. He can't know if I'm a bad person or not. Do you think he loves me?"

Mrs. Cooper used to say that her lack of self-esteem stemmed from a void: the absence of her other father. Jane always felt this was unfair because Shane was everything she needed. He still is everything she needs. Her father gets up early for her, taught her to brush her teeth, took care of her when she was constantly sick as a child, and helps her understand every day that the world is bigger than her mind.

Jane loves him with all her heart, and for that reason she always felt guilty for looking for someone else's shadow in a place that never existed.

But Ilya is here, existing and breathing the same air. A tangible shadow, a light of hope, an absent space that becomes present with large, warm hands.

"Twenty-six."

Jane blinks when she hears Ilya's voice.

"Uh?"

When she finds his blue eyes, Jane can see them filled with tears and her heart stops.

"When you were born, I used to count the freckles on the bridge of your nose," Ilya says in a voice so gentle that Jane can't believe it. "He said it was no use counting them because you'd grow up and even more would appear. But Lily never had any."

Jane's breath hitches harshly.

"Is it really you?" Ilya murmurs, his voice breaking. "I thought I was imagining it. I never thought I'd see you again, my beautiful sunshine. Jane."

Oh, god.

to: Lily :) (04.24 pm)

okay new plan

WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS????

I image attachment

we are like super mega fucked

what do we think about rose landry as our new stepmother lol

from: Lily :) (04.25 pm)

wft

anyway

we have bigger problems. Ilya knows about me.

to: Lily :) (04.25 pm)

are u kidding me????

from: Lily :) (04.25 pm)

no.

to: Lily :) (04.25 pm)

well

see you at my funeral

SHIT

Chapter 5: Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley low enough

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

MONTREAL

Shane blinks when the light hits his eyes.

He feels a hand gently shaking his arm and he blinks again to begin to regain awareness of his surroundings. Shane had a strange dream, where the ground opened up beneath his feet and he floated adrift for days. This is the third day in a row that he has dreamed the same thing. He needs to stop watching documentaries about serial killers before going to sleep.

The sheets slip off his chest as a soft hand finds his face. Then, Shane feels a quick but light slap across his cheek.

“What the f—?” he blurts out, barely managing to bite his tongue in time when Jane’s eyes appear in front of him. “Uh, hi, kid.”

His voice sounds slurred from sleep and raspy from all the talking he did last night. He has a slight headache that's spreading down his neck because he's old now, shit happens. He'll never drink that much beer again. Shane sighs, running both hands over his face and rubbing his eyes.

Jane is sitting in the empty space of the bed and wears a strange expression, which puts him on alert and eliminates the last vestiges of sleep.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

It's incredible how fast time flies. Jane is practically an adult, a woman who will soon leave home and make her own way in life, just like her mother always says. Shane suppresses the urge to cry that he has felt since Jane turned fifteen. Now, his daughter has a curious yet angry expression, which intensifies when she shows her phone screen without saying a word.

It's a website; a celebrity news portal. Shane blinks once more and tries to make sense of the letters on the screen.

**THE TRUTH BEHIND EXES SHANE HOLLANDER AND ROSE LANDRY’S
LATEST REUNION**

Shane Hollander, the 36-year-old former Metros coach, and movie star Rose Landry met again in Montreal, at a downtown bar.

Following the success of her latest film, Rose Landry appears to be taking a well-deserved vacation with her ex-boyfriend, Shane Hollander. The two were seen happily leaving a bar and getting into a car together. According to sources close to Landry, she has never lost touch with him and is seriously considering marriage. According to sources close to the former coach, he too would be looking to settle down.

Shane stares, stunned, at what he has just read.

What the hell. He's not even *that* famous anymore.

Jane is practically vibrating beside him, so he takes a deep breath and looks at his daughter. One problem at a time. He needs to reassure Jane and explain the situation to her.

Shane opens his mouth, but all that comes out is:

"Why is it necessary to mention my age?"

Silence follows, and then he feels a strong hand slapping him on the shoulder.

"Dad! Why are you marrying Rose Landry? That's insane! How can you marry a woman just like that?! I mean, it's *the* Rose Landry, but still!"

"Ouch, baby, calm down—," he says, but Jane interrupts him again.

"Calm down? *Calm down?* Do you know what it feels like to find out your father is getting married through your phone? I can't believe this!"

Jane has always had these big, expressive eyes that aren't his. They've always been able to betray what his daughter is hiding, but now it seems unnecessary because the girl stands up and starts ranting and raving, speaking in rapid English that slips into Russian.

What the fuck?

"Hey, hey, Jane." Shane stands up next to his daughter and stops her frantic movements by placing his hands on her shoulders. "Now you speak, what, Russian?"

That stops her in her tracks and makes her look at him.

"I learned it at camp. Most of them are, uh, swear words."

"What kind of camp did you go to? Don't swear, not in Russian or any other language."

"But, dad!" The groan that Jane lets out is not like her, but she quickly recovers and takes a deep breath. "I'm sorry. Let's discuss this calmly and rationally."

“And in English, if you don't mind. Jesus.”

Shane had his entire adult life to learn how to handle teenage mood swings, but Jane had never exhibited them. Until now, at least. His daughter has always been the quiet type, bottling everything up only to explode later. It's not exactly healthy, but Shane has learned to care for her based on those very traits. He observes her carefully, every day, attentive to her micro-expressions and tiny changes that have profound repercussions.

For that reason, this vigorous and energetic teenager baffles him. It's almost as if...

Shane shakes his head.

“Honey, Jane, I’m not going to marry Rose. We just went out to a bar yesterday, had a beer and chatted. She’s my friend and I’m *gay*. I told you this before, remember?”

“But here it says ‘ex’. As in ex-boyfriend. If you are gay, why did you date her?”

Jane still sounds a little desperate, so Shane takes her hands and guides her to the bed so she can sit down.

“Honey. We were all teenagers once. When I was younger, I thought I could have... other options. I was wrong. Rose is one of my best friends, okay? Nothing's happening. I'm not marrying her or anyone else.”

Shane tries to keep his explanation in neutral territory because it's not appropriate to burden his daughter with a weight that isn't hers. Once, after his life had fallen apart and it was just him and Jane, he thought that perhaps another parental figure might be ideal. Rose was kind, caring, nice. There's a reason she remains one of his friends, even after all these years.

Jane nods as if she understands, but then frowns.

“Why not anyone else?”

Shane sighs. He doesn't remember having so many questions when he was younger, and if he did, his parents certainly handled it better than he is doing right now.

“Jane, it’s complicated.”

“You say that a lot.”

“Because it’s true,” he says, absentmindedly stroking his daughter's cheek. She returned from camp thinner and with a different demeanor. Perhaps he should call Mrs. Cooper. “Let's have breakfast, shall we? Then we can discuss the complications of life.”

Jane shrugs but stands up and walks towards the door.

“I think it's pretty simple. You love someone, you're with that person. That's it.”

Shane watches as his daughter leaves his field of vision, and he falls back onto the bed covering his face with both hands.

Fuck.

Being a father has always been a complex task. It's been his favorite thing in life, even more than playing hockey, but it's still difficult.

Shane never thought time would pass so quickly. One moment, Jane was a quiet little girl with sea-blue eyes and endless, curly light hair. Then, in the blink of an eye, she's a moody, dyed-haired teenager with a presence so strong it throws him off balance.

His daughter is magical with every step she takes, bigger than the world, stronger than the sun.

If only Shane could see the other part of his soul in flesh and blood, as he has been wishing for the last seventeen years of his life.

Lily.

Shane's chest aches as always when he thinks of her, and he has to take a deep breath to avoid spiraling downward. Is she like Jane, affectionate and quiet? Although his daughter has been louder than ever these days, he supposes Lily must be having mood swings too.

Is he a better father than me?

Shane would bet his heart that he is.

“Dad! Breakfast is served!”

The past is a shadow with claws and sharp teeth that makes him run through all the corridors of his mind without rest. Shane tries not to overthink it, but it's difficult when every step he takes is the wrong one. What's done is done. He knows this because he has spent so many sleepless nights that the shadows blend with the lights, and sometimes he can imagine a different life surrounding him with arms paler than his own, strong and secure. Sometimes he's sure a warm, beautiful face is looking at him with love. Sometimes he thinks he feels a breath on his ear, one that smells of home and cheerful afternoons and unfulfilled promises.

Sometimes, just sometimes, Shane can feel Ilya Rozanov walking beside him.

“Dad, the eggs are getting cold,” Jane shouts again. “I want to know about this complicated life of yours before I get old.”

But imagination isn't enough, it never is. Shane has Jane, the choices he's made, and himself. It doesn't matter.

I really doesn't.

Sometimes, when adulthood weighs heavily on his shoulders, Ilya wishes he could be like his teenage self. He remembers being sixteen years old with a vast life ahead of him, full of possibilities and countless unmade mistakes. He remembers being arrogant and petulant, acting without considering the consequences and thinking of no one but himself.

Those were more fun, simpler times, but also incredibly lonely.

Now, Ilya has a house in Moscow, in a sunny part of the city and of his life. The snow no longer burns his hands, the cold no longer paralyzes his dreams. Now, Lily walks with giant strides in a city that once seemed like purgatory. Lily brings light and energy to every aspect of his life, proudly presents herself as he once did, and possesses the strength he always lacked.

That's why Jane Hollander is sleeping on the sofa next to him, clinging to his arm as if he were about to escape.

She is absolutely beautiful. Stunning. Ilya tries to keep his pulse from racing when he sees her chest rise and fall with her breathing, when he sees her eyebrow furrow and smooth out as she sleeps. She has the same hair and chin as Lily and a nose just like his.

Identical twins. That's what the medical record says.

Jane is completely different.

As soon as he saw her, Ilya knew that the one lying in bed was not Lily. They may look identical, but Ilya can see through their differences. For starters, Jane is a terrible actress. Lily is a very good liar—Ilya learned that the hard way—because she thinks she's the queen of the place. He supposes it's partly his fault for spoiling her, but he can't do anything: it's a fact she is everything she wants. Lily doesn't hesitate for a moment when she walks, and although she sometimes fears uncertainty, she always has the upper hand.

In contrast, Jane possesses a different kind of confidence. She has an observant, penetrating, and quiet gaze, ready to uncover anyone's true personality. Ilya realized that as soon as he looked into her eyes. Yes, Jane has slumped shoulders and a withdrawn presence that shuns the unknown, but she also holds her head high and has a courageous spirit.

She looks a lot like *him*.

Ilya closes his eyes.

He can't believe Jane is there, beside him, wrapping her thin, pale hand around him.

It's a dream come true.

It's his worst nightmare.

Ilya imagined so many times seeing his daughter again, his beautiful sunshine. He thought about it so often that sometimes he would wake up and think he could see Lily's shadow

splitting in two. He thought he could be ready and be a better man for her, prepared after so many years to face her and apologize in ways that cannot be put into words.

He doesn't know how to look her in the eye and face the worst mistake of his life: allowing others to dictate his actions and distance him from his family. Losing him. Losing her. Losing their family.

“Dad?”

Jane's voice sounds tired. Ilya opens his eyes and immediately strokes her cheek, making sure she's alright. Her large blue eyes gaze back at him, and she offers a lopsided smile. Ilya's heart clenches.

“Hi, my beautiful sunshine. Did you sleep alright?”

“What time is it?”

“Midnight. You slept a lot. Do you feel better?”

Ilya feels an uncomfortable tingling in the pit of his chest. He doesn't want Jane to feel awkward about his closeness; after all, they don't know each other. Ilya is a stranger. The thought is devastating, but it remains true. At that, Ilya slowly withdraws his hand, but Jane catches it mid-air.

"What's wrong?" Jane says, frowning.

He opens his mouth to answer, but the words catch in his throat. Jane lets go of his hand.

“Is it because I'm not Lily?”

There's not a trace of sadness on her face, but rather a fusion of anger and frustration. Mixed with the fierceness in her eyes, it's almost as if he were looking at him. Even after all these years, the image is so vivid that Ilya smiles.

“Six pounds, eleven ounces, twenty-one inches long,” Ilya says. “Those were your measurements when you were born. Lily weighed two ounces more.”

Jane blinks and she remains silent, as if inviting him to continue.

“I was scared shitless. You were so small and quiet. I could barely sleep because I felt like if I lost sight of you, you'd stop breathing. Lily was always louder.”

“Did she have a really ugly crying face?” she asks.

“She still has it, but don't tell her I said that.”

Jane laughs softly, throwing her head back and hiding her mouth behind the back of her hand. It's a new, unfamiliar, and pleasant sound.

Ilya wants to hear it again and again.

“She's just like you, you know? You both talk the same way,” Jane says. She doesn't stop smiling. “I've never met anyone like her. She's crazy, but in a good way. It's hard to pretend to be her, but it's interesting to see how she lives. The dynamic between you two says a lot about her personality.”

He finds it difficult to open his mouth and think of the right words. Svetlana told him many years ago that when the time came, he would feel the weight of his decisions and their consequences in every syllable.

Ilya feels they slam into him like a freight train.

“Have you ever thought about making a decision that would protect others?”

The question hangs between them and echoes through the living room walls. Jane sits up straight, still holding his hand, and looks at him seriously. And she waits.

Ilya breathes shakily and continues.

“When I was young, I never thought about others. I was the most important thing to me because I wasn't important to anyone else. That was until I met your father.”

If he closes his eyes, Ilya can relive the first time he saw Shane Hollander. The first time his world was set right.

“You know him well enough to know what he's like. He was absolutely everything I wasn't, better than me in every aspect of life. Everyone loved him. Everyone wanted to be around him, to be like him.”

The palms of his hands are filled with a ghostly warmth, invisible now but once burned into his memory. Ilya squeezes Jane's hand and looks away.

“He made me better in every way you can imagine, and when you and Lily were born, it was the perfect opportunity for me to be happy. To make you happy”. Ilya feels the weight on his shoulders and his eyes burn, but he doesn't deserve to cry. “But my life wasn't easy. I had unfinished business, and even though your father was—and is—an incredible man, I couldn't put him through that. I had to do the right thing. I had to let him be happy, let you all have peace. It was the right thing to do. I believed it was the right choice at the time.”

Now, when he hears his own words, they fail to encompass the disaster that his mind was during those years. Ilya knows he was irresponsible, selfish, and stubborn. He knows he ruined Lily and Jane's lives, Shane's life, and even his own. At the time, Ilya believed it was the right thing to do, but he never managed to return to what he was when he was nineteen years old and had two daughters.

He doesn't deserve Jane or Lily's forgiveness. He can't.

Despite knowing that, Ilya dreads meeting his daughter's disappointed eyes. He has been a coward his entire life.

“Who cares about what's right if you're unhappy?”

Jane's voice is reflective, as if she were thinking about something else. Ilya looks for her eyes, so similar to his own, and when he finds them, he sees them clear and calm, enveloped in a small smile.

"I think this just proves I'm your daughter," Jane says with a sigh. Then, she gives him a playful nudge with her shoulder. "Don't get me wrong, this doesn't mean I'm not angry at you. I will be for a while, I suppose. But I guess I understand what you mean about doing the right thing. Which is stupid, because you should have been selfish when it mattered and stayed with us."

Ilya sometimes forgets what it's like to be a teenager and the simplicity of life. He laughs.

"I know, I'm pretty stupid."

"I'd say more than stupid."

"Don't push it."

Jane laughs with him and melts into his chest to hug him.

Ilya lets the tears fill his eyes and returns the hug. The second proof that it wasn't Lily, after the freckles, is her scent. Jane smells like Montreal.

"Now, what will we do?"

Jane's question floats amidst the uncertainty that he himself has built up over the past seventeen years.

Ilya doesn't answer and hugs her tightly, enough so that she doesn't disappear between his fingers.

MONTREAL

Lily is not stupid.

She knows the press sucks and she trusts Shane, but Lily still can't quite wrap her head around this whole Rose Landry thing. The woman visits them for lunch, dinner, and breakfast the following day, all amidst playful smiles and looks a little too deep for her liking.

Shane says he's gay. Does Rose Landry know that? Because she's great. Genuinely great. More so than Shane, probably, but from an objective point of view. She shouldn't be with someone who doesn't love her, especially since that would ruin the plan Lily's carefully laid out over the last few weeks.

"I think movies are interesting. I know it's my job, but there's a whole world behind it. Do you like it, Jane?"

"Yes," she huffs at her. "It's fine."

Shane watches their interactions with a little too much interest. The man follows Lily's movements when she eats her breakfast, as if he wants to ensure that she is paying genuine attention to the woman.

"It's an unstable business when you start out, but you have many options. If you'd like, you can come to the studio sometime."

Lily wonders if she is just being a crazy bitch, like Mila sometimes says, because the way Rose tilts her head and looks at her seems full of genuine affection. It's already established that she's great, she doesn't need to try so hard. Why she does it, Lily has no clue.

"I think it's a good idea," Shane says with feigned disinterest. "You could look at your options, you know, for next year."

Oh.

Jane told her, as they were preparing to switch places and forging their bond as sisters, that she didn't really know what to do with her life when school was over. Her sister had spoken with a hint of desperation, as if she were trying not to think about the situation, but it's obvious that this matter is constantly nagging at her.

Lily doesn't know Shane very well, but she knows a father who is subtly trying to get involved in his daughter's affairs. Ilya is as subtle as a gun, but it's the same thing.

She doesn't want to interfere more than necessary in Jane's life, so she shrugs in response.

"Oh, and there are cute boys."

At this, Lily straightens up.

"Really?"

Rose laughs at Shane's frown and pats his back lightly.

"You can also come if you want."

"Shut up."

Lily laughs and watches the kind way Rose's eyes crinkle. Shane looks relaxed in the woman's presence, calm, and when Rose pats his back, he shakes his head with a smile. It's obvious they're good friends.

Maybe Lily *is* a crazy bitch, like Mila always says.

When Rose leaves and Lily—to Shane's surprise—helps him clear the table, her father says:

“You know, you don't have to pretend with Rose.”

"About what?"

"About boys."

Lily stays very still. Shane moves around the kitchen without looking at her.

“I know you don't like talking about yourself, but I want you to know that at home you never have to be someone you're not. Nowhere, really.”

Fuck. Lily and Jane really hit the parental lottery, huh?

"I don't want you to feel that because of what happened to me, the world is cruel. There are people who will always protect you. Arthur. Your grandparents. Me."

Shane seems desperate to feign nonchalance, probably in an attempt to prevent Lily from running away. Perhaps Jane would, but Lily would grab her by the shoulders and force her to confront Shane. Perhaps Ilya would intervene, saying he'd beat up anyone who spoke poorly of her sister.

Shit. She needs to stop with the family fantasies.

Lily remains silent. Jane trusted her enough to confess that the topic of liking women was a delicate subject for her. Not for the rest, but for herself. It doesn't seem right for Lily to speak for Jane, so she nods and focuses on something else she's been thinking for a couple of days.

“What did my grandparents think when you had me?”

Shane laughs as he starts washing the dishes. Lily immediately stands beside him to begin drying everything he's washed.

“They were surprised. They never thought I was interested in having children, much less in that way. When they saw you, they were happy. You were a cute baby.”

"Oh, I know," Lily says before she can stop herself. She's Jane, not Lily. Fuck. She's starting to let her guard down, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to pretend to be someone she's not. Shane doesn't seem to notice. "Was it a complicated pregnancy?"

“Not really. I stopped playing hockey for a couple of years because it was physically risky. Your grandmother made sure everything was okay before and after, so we never had any problems.”

We. Shane and Ilya.

So their grandparents know about Jane and Lily. That raises thousands of questions that Lily can't ask, so she nods silently.

A couple of days ago, when Lily woke Shane up with the news of his supposed marriage, they talked about his public life as a hockey player and what it meant to be a transgender man

in that field. Shane told her about the good and the bad, about how Yuna had protected him in every way she could, but there are fucked up people regardless of the fucking gay country they live in. As Lily listened, she felt the urge to go and punch every single person who had dared to look at Shane the wrong way.

Shane seemed to speak about it fluently; it's obvious that this is a topic that he has clearly overcome and processed over time.

"I mean it when I say you shouldn't pretend to be who you are," Shane sighs and dries his hands. "In that same spirit, and taking advantage of the fact that you seem willing to talk, I think we should see Mrs. Cooper again."

Ah, the therapist. Jane mentioned that she attended when she was a child and that now, as a teenager, she goes a couple of times a year.

"I think it's important that we monitor how you've been doing with the medication," Shane continued, looking at her with his endlessly loving eyes. "Have you been feeling well?"

Jane's phone has an alarm set for eight o'clock every morning called "PILL". When she asked about it, Jane didn't specify what it was for. Lily feels that if they continue talking about it, she'll be invading her sister's personal life, but screw it. She figures that pretending to be her crosses all boundaries of privacy.

"I think so," Lily says carefully. She doesn't know the extent to which they've discussed it, so she's keeping it in neutral territory. "Everything's great."

"That's fine, but you know depression isn't linear, even with medication. If you're feeling unwell or think you're acting differently than usual, you can talk to me about it and we'll work it out."

Depression.

It's a heavy word that Lily knows from her father, who sat her down a couple of years ago to talk about her grandmother Irina and about himself. Genetic, her father had said. Her grandmother had it and he had recently been diagnosed, so they needed to talk about it. Lily hadn't liked the defeated tone her father had used, so she hit him on the shoulder as usual and hugged him for two hours until Ilya had changed his attitude.

When her father asked her how she usually felt, Lily shrugged and said that sometimes she felt too much, but never sadness.

Lily thinks about Jane and the quiet afternoons she spent in the isolation cabin, about her withdrawn behavior and her sister's constant need to punish herself.

She wants to cry because she needs to hug Jane now, but she can't or Shane will suspect something's up.

Instead, she nods repeatedly and hugs Shane.

"Thanks, dad. They're going to give you the award for best father of the year or something."

Shane laughs.

“Will you come to see me receive it?”

“Only if you dress well.”

The afternoon passes peacefully. The leaves on the trees slowly change color, a mixture of green and orange on some branches.

The school year is about to start, and she has to go back to Moscow, far away from Shane, her grandparents, and Morty. Lily has grown a little too attached to that stupid cat. She'd pack him in her suitcase if she knew Jane could live without him.

When Shane has to go to the charity, Lily has the house to herself. She prepares for the conversation she has been avoiding for the past few days, takes a deep breath, and types the number she knows by heart into Jane's phone.

His father answers on the third ring.

It's a video call, so Lily can see the exact moment her father's eyes light up in recognition. Then, his face contorts with anger. Or surprise. Or frustration. Lily can't be sure.

Fuck, Lily has missed him too much.

“Young lady.”

“Old man.”

“Don't play games with me,” her father says quickly in English. Perhaps Jane is nearby and he wants her to understand. *“What the hell were you thinking?”*

Lily snorts.

“Do *you* want to talk about bad ideas?”

Her father raises his eyebrows at her boldness, but Lily is completely unfazed. He's had seventeen years to get used to it, and in some ways, Lily knows he likes it that way. They are both close enough to shout truths in each other's faces and survive. Lily is not sensitive—at least not with her father—because she knows he would never intentionally hurt her.

That's why, when her father grumbles in frustration, Lily smiles slightly.

“You're a spoiled brat. What am I going to do with you?”

“You could put me in touch with my sister, for starters. I think that would be a good idea.”

Her father moves the phone and disappears from the camera for a moment. When he reappears, Lily realizes he is standing to walk around his office. Oh, it's the universal signal. Theirs, at least. Lily rolls her eyes and gives him a nod of approval.

“Go ahead, tell me what you have to say. Tell me and then I'll do it.”

Lily and her father often argue. She supposes it's part of being very different but alike at the same time. He was always worried that she would feel bad, overwhelmed, or unloved because of arguing, so they both developed a foolproof system.

The one who feels more distraught speaks first. The other listens without interrupting, and then the first person hears what the second person has to say.

For that reason, Lily spends at least fifteen minutes staring at her phone screen before her father calms down. His father speaks desperately, quickly, oscillating between anger and regret in every word he utters. He tells her about Jane, about how he discovered her, and what they've been up to these past few days. He yells at Lily for her terrible ideas and her irresponsible ability to trap people into doing what she wants, but he also apologizes to her again and again for everything that happened and is happening.

When her father calms down, she laughs at his flushed face.

“You're really weird, you know that?”

“Yes, I know. Turns out I'm a lot like Shane.”

At the mention of his other father, Ilya freezes. Lily sighs. This is going to be more difficult than it seems.

“I'll save my turn when we meet again. I'd rather yell at you in person,” she says. “I'd like to sort this out first.”

“Of course. I have to talk to him, I suppose.”

Her father speaks in a low, calm voice now that he is no longer upset, but Lily knows him too well.

“You suppose.”

“Can't you cut me some slacks here, please?”

“No. You're an adult, do it better.” Despite her words, Lily keeps her tone light so that her father knows she is not actually angry. “I guess you have to switch us back now, uh? At least before the school year starts.”

Lily tries to maintain a neutral expression, because the idea of her family being together makes her heart do funny things inside her chest and she doesn't want her father to get any ideas. From her, at least.

Lily would like him to come to his own conclusions.

“Definitely because Jane doesn't know any Russian,” her father says, frowning again. “Do you know how dangerous it is to send her here without her knowing the language?”

“Yes, yes. I already heard everything from Mila.”

“Mila knows about this!?”

“It's embarrassing that a little girl figured it out before you did, huh? She found out when Jane arrived,” Lily laughs. “Dad, you're losing your touch.”

“I repeat, you're very strange. Why are you so calm about this?”

Her father's stressed tone is low and almost strangled. It's obvious this is driving him a little crazy. Who wouldn't be, if Lily is honest, but she just happens to be optimistic about most things.

“I have a sister, another dad—who's cool as fuck, by the way—, grandparents, and even a cat. What could be better?”

Lily watches the exact moment the tear fills his father's eyes, and like a mirror, her own eyes fill with tears too. Fuck, how she loves that ridiculous man.

At that moment, knocks on the door alert her that someone has arrived. Lily sees her grandparents' car through the window and smiles, blinking back her tears.

“Speaking of the devil, Yuna and David are waiting for me. Talk to you later, dad.”

“I love you, beautiful flower.”

"I love you too. Don't stress too much."

When the call ends, Lily feels light in her chest and shoulders.

Now all that's left is to talk to Shane.

MOSCOW

In the light of truth, Moscow doesn't seem like such a terrible place. Ilya talks to her about everything and a little more, and although Jane feels self-conscious about his close attitude after knowing her for such a short time, she can't help but get even closer.

He's a dynamic man, a bit dramatic and definitely prone to exaggeration, but he's endlessly entertaining. Jane finds herself watching him all the time, following his energetic footsteps as if he were about to disappear at any moment.

Ilya takes a few days off work to further intentionally nurture their time together. Jane feels a little suffocated by the abrupt change her life has recently taken, but surprisingly, Ilya can

read her perfectly. He respects her time in the morning, doesn't press for more elaborate answers, and doesn't bother to fill the silences that fall upon them.

When Jane asks him about it, the man laughs.

“Believe it or not, seventeen years isn't enough time for me to forget what your personality is like. You've had similar preferences since you were a baby, I can pick up on stuff like that,” Ilya says, wrapping one arm around her shoulders. “Besides, you're just like your father.”

“Shouldn't you have forgotten my father's personality after seventeen years?”

Ilya's smile falters, but it doesn't disappear.

“You sound just like Lily. I'm not that old, and I take good care of my health. My memory is perfect.”

“I'm not talking about that.”

Ilya kisses her head and withdraws his arm to move towards the kitchen.

"It's lunchtime, I'll make pasta. Svetlana and Mila are on their way. Set the table."

Jane notices Ilya's tense shoulders and decides not to press the issue.

She's been texting Lily the last few days, who told her that Arthur invited her to his art exhibition this weekend and that her grandparents taught her how to bake cookies. Lily also told her about her conversations with Shane and the Mrs. Cooper incident. After assuring her that Jane was indeed taking her medication and that she would tell Ilya about it when she felt ready, Lily proceeded to squeal for twenty minutes about Rose Landry and her amazing studio.

Now, when Jane opens her messages after setting the table, she laughs at the photo Lily sends her. Her sister is hanging off Rose's shoulder, wearing a cowboy hat and exaggerated makeup.

from: twinnnn 🌸☀️❤️(01.02 pm)

look at me and rose today!!!

we went to the studio and get to see shirtless guys lol

well not really because im you but i used my 🙄🙄

anyway we r like best friends now

so sorry abt that

i mean not really

i can tell her it was me all this time and u will be spared from talking to her

to: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.02 pm)

i like rose

i just didn't remember that i met her when i was little

from: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.03 pm)

how could u forget it?

shes the coolest

Jane smiles on the screen and proceeds to tell her about when she met Rose, during the time when her father tried to pretend to be a traditional family. Clearly it didn't last too long because his father was miserable, but Jane finds it amusing to remember because her grandmother wasn't particularly happy either.

Yuna can be terrifying if she wants to be.

After that came the talk in which his dad told her about his situation and about her other father, who at that time was nothing more than shadows and empty memories. Jane was too young to understand the magnitude of the matter, but she remembers hugging her father tightly and promising him that everything would be alright.

"What's making you smile?" Ilya asks, making her lift his head.

"Lily."

"That tracks."

"Look at her."

When Jane shows Ilya the photograph of Lily with Rose, Ilya's eyebrows rise so high that they disappear under his curly hair. He doesn't say anything for a moment, and then he turns around to start preparing the salad.

"Who is she?"

Ilya's tone is casual, detached. Jane narrows her eyes.

"Rose Landry."

"Ah," Ilya says. A beat passes, and then he speaks again. "Is she your stepmother?"

“My what?”

“Stepmother. You know, your father's partner.”

Jane wants to laugh, but she imitates her father's detached tone and shrugs. She's failed Lily enough in this stupid plan already, so she can at least do something in this area.

“I don't know,” Jane says. “Do *you* have a partner?”

“No. What do you mean you don't know?” Ilya's eyebrows can't come together any further or they'll merge into one. “Don't you talk about these things with your father? If Lily is with her, it must be something serious.”

“People have friends, Ilya.”

The man stumbles slightly as he sets the salad on the table, but he quickly straightens up as if nothing had happened. Ilya glances at Jane for a moment, then goes back behind the stove to stir the pasta.

“Right,” he says. Then, “I spoke with Lily a few days ago, and we think it's best if we talk to your father before the school year starts. Time is running out, girls.”

All traces of humor vanish from Jane's face, and she lowers her gaze to look at her hands. Of course. How can she allow herself to forget? Everything has its limits. Yes, Ilya is her biological father, but that doesn't mean she'll see him every day.

Or if she'll ever see him again.

As if he could read her thoughts, Ilya's warm fingers take her chin and lift it. Jane looks him straight in the eyes. Blue, sky merging with sea.

“Hey. That doesn't mean this is over. I just got you back, I'm not going to let you go.”

Relief sends a shiver through her body. Jane nods once and smiles slightly.

"Are you going to kidnap me?"

“Could you learn Russian in a week?”

“Sorry to disappoint you, but I don't think so. I barely speak French.”

“Fuck the French. Anyway, I think it would be counterproductive to kidnap you here if you don't understand the language. Besides, it wouldn't be unfair to him.”

Jane laughs.

“You know his name, right?”

“Uhm?”

“My father's.”

Every time Ilya speaks of his father, he surrounds him with pronouns and an evasive gaze. He hasn't said his name once since learning the truth about Jane, and isn't that interesting?

“Yeah,” Ilya says with a straight face. “Is it still Hollander?”

Jane laughs again.

to: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.22 pm)

ilya definitely still loves my dad

good for us, i think

also i think he's jealous of rose

Lily responds immediately.

from: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.23pm)

JSDFNSKFSMDMSL

GOOD FOR US!!!!

how does it feel to be part of a functional family???

to: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.23pm)

what the fuck

which part of us is functional

from: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.24pm)

dad + dad + daughters = happy family

to: twinnnn 🧚‍♀️☀️❤️(01.24pm)

u need to get better at math asap

When Svetlana and Mila arrive, Jane is affectionately attacked by the woman. Svetlana is beautiful, smells of roses, and has an angelic face, which smiles broadly when she sees her.

"I can't believe it, it's really you! I almost fainted when Ilya told me on the phone and Mila confirmed it. You're so beautiful, you've grown so much, oh my God."

Svetlana hugs her, all broken up, repeating over and over that it's a miracle she's there. Jane supposes she'll have to get used to it, because many more hugs like this await her when everything comes to light.

"Thank you" is all Jane can say as Svetlana lets go of her and goes over to Ilya to give him a kiss on the cheek.

Behind the woman, Mila appears and stares at her. Fuck, she's even more beautiful than Jane remembered. She's wearing a flowered dress, and her hair frames her face like a halo. Jane blinks, unsure what to say. The last time she saw her, the girl stayed with her all night after discovering she wasn't actually Lily. They didn't talk much because Jane was about to have a heart attack, but Mila was a safe and steady presence.

"How are you?" Mila says with a heavy Russian accent. "You look good."

Jane can't help the blush that stains her face.

"I'm good. Thank you for the other day."

Mila nods once and turns to pet Bubbles, who enters the kitchen barking loudly, delighted by the visitors.

She's a nice girl, and Jane feels guilty for judging her so quickly, but she supposes that's just how things are. She's already apologized, so there's not much to think about. Besides, she can't talk to Lily about it because her sister has very weird ideas about the whole thing.

When they sit down to lunch, Svetlana tells them about her recent trip to the United States and thanks them for looking after Mila. Again, Jane is overcome with guilt because Lily had told her that Mila spent practically every day with her at her house, but since their plan was discovered, the girl hasn't shown up there.

"What are you going to do about this?"

Svetlana's question makes Jane look up.

"We'll sort it out," Ilya sighs. "I need to talk to their father to... resolve this in the best way possible."

"Talk? You boys are stupid," Svetlana says. "You always were and probably always will be. I bet you were thinking of just calling him, huh?"

Ilya's silence is devastating.

“My god, I have to do everything around here.” Svetlana slaps her friend’s arm. “You are a lost cause. Why don't you call him and say you'll meet him in a neutral place?”

“Er, I don’t think that is a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because he probably won't want to see me.”

Jane's heart squeezes at Ilya's tone, so defeated and distant. It isn’t like him at all.

Would it ruin their plan if she told him that her father hasn't stopped thinking about him in seventeen years?

“This isn't about you, idiot. This is about Lily and Jane. I have a trip planned to Boston in three days. Come with me and you can meet him there.”

The tone is so definitive that Jane's heart leaps. She knows that Ilya will make the final decision anyway, but she can't help feeling that Svetlana's idea is the best option they have at that moment.

Ilya looks at her and Jane holds his gaze until they both nod.

“In order to do that, Lily has to tell Shane the truth.”

MONTREAL

Lily is going to die young. Her heart can't take it.

She hears her ragged breathing exploding in her ears and the blood rushing against the flow. Morty is wrapping his tail around one of her legs, and Lily feels like crying because *what if this is the last day I'll ever see Morty?* She hasn't petted him enough.

An hour ago she received a call from Jane, but only now is Lily able to stand up and approach Shane's room.

He's sitting on his bed, dressed in black pajamas and wearing his glasses, finishing a coffee and making a call to Paris. Or somewhere near here, because he's speaking French. He's holding a piece of paper while he talks.

Shane looks like a fucking dream and Lily feels like she's dying. How can she tell him? He's going to hate her. She's not Jane. She can't be nice and soft and calm like her sister.

Lily appears in the doorway and stops to listen to Shane talking on the phone. His voice is soft, made drowsy by the early hour—it's barely eight in the morning—which makes this

whole thing more painful.

When Shane hangs up, Lily pushes open the door and enters. The man smiles.

"Hi, kid. Come on in."

It takes all the strength Lily doesn't have to not burst into tears when Shane pats the bed. She crosses and climbs in next to her father.

He immediately puts an arm around her.

"I have to send this to your grandma, and then how about you and I go out to lunch?"

Shane smells so good. Lily hides her face in his chest, her heart pounding, and shakes her head.

"I can't."

"Oh, are you going out with Arthur?"

Lily denies it once more and smells her father one last time before squirming under the sheets and disappearing completely. Fuck, she really can't do this.

Whose idea was it to make this stupid plan?

Damn Jane and her easy ability to be convinced.

"Jane?"

"I can't," Lily says again from under the covers. "I have to go to Boston."

The silence that follows her words takes all her breath away. She feels Shane's hand on her head, and even under the sheets, it's incredibly warm. Loving. Full of promises Lily can't accept because she isn't Jane.

"Boston, as in the city Boston?"

"I have to go to Boston," Lily says again, focusing her energy on Shane being able to forgive her. "I have to go to Boston to see Jane and her father, Ilya Rozanov."

Lily freezes as the words leave her mouth and the room falls into a deathly silence. She thinks about Shane, her grandparents, Shane's friends, Morty, and even Mrs. Cooper, whom she spoke to on the phone a few days ago to (falsely) make sure she was still taking her medication.

Fuck.

This isn't her life, she knows it. She misses her father, Mila, Svetlana, her friends, and the cold Moscow air.

Is it a sin to wish that both lives could be one?

When Shane's hand leaves her head, Lily's heart breaks in two. However, it quickly mends itself when the sheets are ripped from her body and Shane's face appears, pale and distraught, with his eyes filled with tears.

"You are not Jane."

"Yeah, no. Ups. Sorry to disappoint."

The hug Shane gives her presses against her chest and makes her back creak a little, but it's the best hug she's ever received. He is shaking. Lily smiles from ear to ear, tears streaming down her face, and wraps both arms around her dad's neck.

"I'm sorry, but not really," Lily whispers in Shane's ear. "Jane and I met at camp and we decided to switch places. I'm sorry I lied but I'd never seen you and I'd dreamt of meeting you my whole life. I hope you're not mad at me because I kinda love you. Like, a lot, really. I just hope one day you can love me as me and not as Jane."

"Lily."

Her name sounds almost reverential in Shane's voice. When the man pulls back to look into her eyes, one of his tears fall onto Lily's cheek.

"Oh, I've loved you your whole life," he says with a broken tone. "I don't think there is a life where I couldn't love you."

Lily bursts into tears.

Lily cries because she misses her father and loves him, despite his flaws. She cries because she can't wait to see Jane again, to share every thought that crosses her mind, to hug her and tell her she'll always have someone by her side. She cries because Shane is her dad, an impeccable, incredible, and deeply loving man who loves her back.

She doesn't know how much time has passed, but her head hurts and she feels sticky when she separates from Shane and sits up straight. Lily is sure her skin will look amazing after all that crying. Uf.

Shane has been silent the whole time, but when he looks at her, he smiles. A small, private smile that reassures her that everything is alright.

"I'm sorry, dad," Lily says with a sigh. "I think there were better ways to handle this. I must admit that sometimes, though rarely, I do have bad ideas."

"You don't have to apologize, love. And don't even mention bad ideas because I'll never win the World's Best Dad award."

"I would give it to you if I could."

Shane laughs.

"I don't think Ilya will like that."

"He'll survive."

Shane shakes his head and the sigh he lets out is so long that Lily approaches him and hugs him again.

"Everything will be alright, dad. We'll go to Boston, see Jane and my father, and sort this out as a family. Everything will be fine."

Lily smiles to encourage him. The sound of Shane swallowing echoes in the room.

Boston isn't preparing for what's coming, Lily thinks, shaking her head.

Chapter End Notes

thank u so much for all your comments!! <3

Chapter 6: Love is more than just a game for two

BOSTON

The city is exactly as he remembers it. Boston doesn't seem to have changed that much in the years that have passed; Ilya has changed in at least fifty ways.

It's the same, yet so different, immensely different.

The cold air shakes his hair as he gets out of the taxi, carrying his bag in one hand—containing a change of clothes and filled with regrets and broken words—and Jane's suitcase in the other. This last one contains souvenirs from Moscow, photographs and things that Ilya has bought her during the time they have shared together.

Jane sighs as she stops beside him.

"You know we're going to be okay, right?"

No.

"Yes, beautiful sunshine."

"Good, because Lily and dad are already here."

Jane's hair is tied back and she looks calm. Ilya doesn't want to think about the repercussions of seeing her daughters' father again. He knows him, remembers his hands, his back and the gentleness of his eyes when they still shared dreams, but he can't blame him if he chooses not to look at him now.

Or never again.

Time has passed for everyone.

Ilya has no illusions of being remembered or appreciated after these years, *especially* after these years.

Jane, oblivious to the irregular beating of his heart, takes his hand and drags him inside the hotel.

Many years ago, when Ilya had recently destroyed the universe, he used to fantasize about their reunion. The other man's eyes opening wide, him running to meet him, and the satisfaction of feeling whole again. Ilya fantasized about the explanation he would give, about how much he had missed his breath on his shoulder. His smile. His words, always sincere, confrontational, and impulsive at times.

At some point, the fantasy transformed into longing, and it became painful to think about it. He focused on his work, on Lily, and on the idea of being a normal human being.

Judging by the sidelong glance Jane gives him, he's not succeeding.

"They're in the pool, God knows why Lily's built like a damn fish. You know when we were at camp she swam in the lake practically every day?"

"I can imagine," Ilya says absently. "I'll go leave our bags in the room."

"But—"

"I'll be down soon, don't worry."

He uses the time it takes him to drop off his bags and go back down to calm his breathing. He cannot let the erratic pumping of his heart consume every part of his sanity.

Ilya's an adult now, for fuck's sake. He can't act like the teenager he once was. Now he knows what he wants, and even if it's just about having a good relationship with his daughters' father, he'll achieve it with a cool head and honesty.

Ilya's not going to dwell on the past to relive it, but to mend it.

Even if the idea of meeting in a hotel is *extremely* familiar.

When Ilya goes out into the pool and into the sunlight, he hears them before he sees them.

Lily's voice has always been the loudest in a group, the one that leads the conversations. Ilya can tell her apart from Jane, who answers in low tones but just as enthusiastically. Ilya looks through the crowd until he finds them. Lily is in the water, Jane is sitting on the edge, and Shane Hollander is standing next to them.

His heart stops.

There he is.

Shane Hollander.

Ilya's mind has spent so many years avoiding pronouncing his name because it rolls down his tongue like honey every time. He doesn't want to feel hungry. He hates that ancestral, primitive, necessary hunger that makes his breathing uncomfortably shaky.

The man has his hands on his hips and listens intently to Lily's chatter. He's wearing summer clothes and glasses that prevent him from seeing his eyes, but Ilya can imagine them. He can draw them in detail, even after all this time.

Now, all that's left is putting one foot in front of the other. So, that is what Ilya does. One foot in front of the other. One foot in front of the oth—

Shane Hollander raises his head and looks at him. Directly. He doesn't seem nervous; he raises his hand casually and shakes it in greeting.

As if this were something they always did.

A small group passes by, so Ilya circles around them not wanting to lose sight of *him*. When he looks back at his family, Lily has a horrified expression and Jane screams:

“Ilya, watch out!”

Shit.

Ilya feels that the cold water calms his nerves when he falls headfirst into the deep end of the pool, at least. He feels a throbbing in his forehead and his wet clothes pull him down. When he surfaces, Ilya finds Lily's face next to him.

Big eyes, a huge smile, and a crooked tooth.

"Papa, you're so dramatic. You don't always have to make a grand entrance, you know? Shane won't be impressed by that."

It's strange to hear one of his daughters speaking in their shared language after spending so many days with Jane, but Ilya's heart leaps and he breathes a sigh of relief.

Then, he splashes her with water.

“I can't believe you did this. Swap places? You're insane. Dumb girl.”

“Dumber papa. You are bleeding.”

The hug Ilya gives Lily is so clumsy and rough that they both sink a little in the water, but neither of them cares. Lily smells like sunscreen and Montreal. Ilya's eyes wet up with tears, but he blinks rapidly and kisses his daughter on the head.

When they both get out of the pool, Ilya is dripping wet. His shirt clings to his limbs and water runs down his face, but he doesn't mind. Jane appears in front of him and looks at him with a worried frown.

“That looked painful. Are you okay? You have a cut on your forehead.”

Next to her daughter is Lily. The two of them, standing side by side, are a dream come true. The last time Ilya saw them together, neither of them had any teeth. Now, the two of them look like women ready to leave him behind. They look larger than life, grown up and mature.

His daughters.

Ilya wraps them in a wet embrace and holds them tightly. He is speechless.

Lily and Jane automatically complain.

"Ugh, papa!"

"Hey, now I have to change my clothes."

Ilya laughs, happy and still astonished to have them together in front of him.

"I can buy you any new clothes you want."

"That would be a waste. Didn't you bring any change of clothes, Jane?"

His voice hasn't changed.

When Shane Hollander speaks, he takes a step forward and looks at him with his head tilted. Just like Lily does when she wants to ask something. He hasn't taken off his sunglasses yet, but Ilya can see his face very well. He looks slightly tanned, with his freckles standing out on the bridge of his nose. Just like Jane.

Ilya swallows.

"Yes, she did, it's in her room."

"How are you? Besides the cut, I mean."

"Great. What about you, Hollander?"

The man remains silent and stares at him. Ilya can't help but notice that Hollander looks... big. Ilya blinks at the sight of his muscular arms, broad shoulders, and slim waist as he approaches to greet him. He knows he doesn't play hockey anymore because Jane has updated him on every detail of the man's life that she could, so he has no excuse to look *that* good.

Then, the man says,

"We have two daughters together and you won't even call me by my name?"

Silence stretches between them for a moment, but is broken when Lily bursts into laughter.

"Guys, you are fun. I don't know about you, but I think we should take a picture."

"Lily," Jane warns with a sigh, but she also smiles.

"What? We all know each other here. Some of us a little too well, for the looks of it. I understand the awkwardness, but c'mon. This is the best day of my life. So, picture?"

Ilya rolls his eyes at what his daughter says, but he knows they'll eventually do it anyway. The cut on his forehead is starting to hurt, so he nods and puts an arm around Jane, who grimaces at the dampness of his jacket.

"Hurry up."

Lily rolls her eyes.

"What, do you have to go somewhere? Don't be such a grouch."

In order for everyone to appear in the photograph, Lily stands at the opposite end of the four. Therefore, Hollander—*Shane*—stands next to Ilya.

Ilya pretends his heart isn't racing when the man's body heat burns his arm as he stands next to him. He pretends his breath isn't ragged when Shane's familiar scent triggers a thousand sensations at the edge of his skin.

When Lily takes out her phone, points the camera at them, and tells them to smile, Ilya can see in the reflection of the screen everything they could have been.

Everything they are.

A family.

Lily takes the photograph and shouts with excitement.

"Okay, now, where the hell can we find a first-aid kit in this place?"

Shane feels like he has spent the last hour with his head underwater, miles and miles away from the surface.

Ilya Rozanov is standing in front of him again.

Reasonably, Shane knew this moment was going to happen eventually. He expected it. He wasn't going to keep the secret forever, and Jane was always a little more perceptive than most. Due to her persistent questions about her father, it was only a matter of time before Jane found out.

Even so, Shane feels his world collapse and rebuild itself when he sees Jane and Lily interacting with each other, laughing amidst whispers and jokes that they are not part of. When he sees Ilya smiling at them with a broad, genuine, and happy expression.

The hotel is large enough that he doesn't feel suffocated when they have dinner, but Shane can do nothing except take a deep breath when the four of them meet in the hotel room that Ilya has booked.

Shane's hands tremble on his knee as he sits down on the small sofa next to Ilya. Lily and Jane watch them intently from across the room.

Inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

"We owe you an explanation."

Ilya's voice is barely a whisper, but Shane can still distinguish his accent after all these years. It's low and husky, the kind he'd recognize even in the noisiest place.

It is Jane who nods.

“Okay, we're listening.”

Both sisters are a mirror image of each other, but side by side the differences are incredibly obvious. Shane can't believe he didn't realize it sooner. During dinner, his daughters tell him how they hatched the plan and how quickly Ilya figured out they were switched because, according to Lily, her sister was absentminded enough to not to cover her freckles with makeup. Shane isn't surprised and doubts that cosmetics have helped their cause.

Even when they were both babies, Ilya had no trouble telling them apart.

Thinking about those days makes Shane's stomach churn. He supposes there's no point in ignoring it; the explanation necessarily involves revisiting and reliving that chapter. They owe it to their daughters.

Shane opens his mouth to begin speaking, but the words get stuck in his throat and the beating of his heart deafens his ears. He can't do it; he doesn't know how to explain. He needs to make his daughters understand that everything they have done is because they love them, because he didn't know how to do things any other way.

Ilya glances at him sideways with his piercing eyes and speaks for him.

“We met when we were young. We were seventeen, like you. We both played hockey on different teams and sometimes played against each other, so we became, eh, friends.”

The man speaks in a clinical, detached tone.

"One thing led to another and your father got pregnant. It was a complicated situation for everyone, but we decided we would have you because..."

Ilya's voice falters. He lets out a choked sigh, so Shane straightens up and looks at his daughters.

“Because we were a team,” he says, continuing the story of the man next to him. “Partners. We weren't looking for it, but we had to take responsibility. We wanted to. Our... relationship was never public. We told your grandparents, who helped us with medical issues and at work.”

It feels strange to talk about such a confusing, exciting, and painful period of his life when he spent seventeen years avoiding thinking about it, but it's necessary. Shane exhales the weight of his decisions and looks at his daughters.

“You already explained that to us,” Lily says, and for the first time since seeing her again, Shane doesn't recognize her tone of voice. “Why did you break up?”

The girl twists her face in a pained expression. Ilya notices this and raises his head to look her in the eyes.

“Your grandfather was sick. He and your uncle lived in Moscow. When my brother said that he didn't want to take care of him anymore, I had to take responsibility. We couldn't go live in

Russia and be a family together. I wanted to stay here, but your uncle threatened to abandon your grandfather. I couldn't leave him. I couldn't do it.”

Shane remembers those times amidst painful shadows and utter darkness. He remembers Ilya with slumped shoulders, bloodshot eyes from lack of sleep, and his constant anxiety about his family.

They were both young, and Shane still regrets not having had the tools to handle it better. The world seemed so big and so selfish back then, generous in giving them daughters but evil in depriving them of a life together.

“Ilya had decided to go to Russia alone, to protect us,” Shane says in a whisper. “No one apart from our closest friends knew that you were our biological kids, and I couldn't allow your father to leave like that. Not without his daughters, whom he loved—and still loves—deeply. So we arranged it so that each of us could take care of one of you.”

Shane has never been able to relive the last day he spent with Ilya and his daughters. The image burns into his very being and haunts him like a horrifying ghost.

Jane tilts her head and asks,

“Did you love each other?”

As if pulled by an invisible force, Shane stares at Ilya, whose eyes are fixed on him. He can perfectly recall, even after so much time, the rhythm of his breathing while he sleeps.

To say that Shane loved him would be an understatement.

“That’s why we did it this way,” Ilya says, breaking eye contact. “I could never have taken you both, I couldn’t have done that to your father.”

For a moment the room falls silent. Shane can see his children processing this information, which must be incredibly difficult for them. Suddenly, Lily stands up, shaking her head.

“Seventeen years have passed. Why did you never look for each other?”

“I couldn’t risk putting your father in danger, he—”

“I never knew my grandfather. He died before I could remember him. What’s your excuse?” Lily speaks in a rapid, desperate, and angry tone. When Ilya doesn’t answer, his daughter exhales sharply. “Fuck this. I haven’t had my sister this whole time. I had Mila, yeah, but Jane was all alone. Fuck!”

Lily points a finger at Ilya and shouts something in Russian that Shane can't quite understand, but Ilya doesn't break his impassive expression. When Lily storms out of the room, the man stands up to go after her, but Jane signals him to stop.

“I’ll go.”

The room gets colder when only Ilya and Shane are left sharing the space on the sofa. His body feels numb and his hands stiff. He lets his chest release the pressure it's holding with a trembling sigh, and Shane says,

"We really fucked this up, huh?"

"I don't think it was worse than what we've already done."

Ilya has lines around his eyes and a ghostly beard forming from his jawline. He looks thinner, at least two sizes smaller. The cut he got from falling into the pool is hidden under a band-aid. Other than that, he looks practically identical to the image of the man Shane knew.

When Ilya slumps back against the sofa and rubs his face with both hands, Shane chuckles softly.

"You look the same as before."

"Did you expect me to be fat and bald?"

Shane shakes his head and mimics Ilya's posture, staring at the ceiling.

"Fuck, what are we going to do now?" Shane sighs, thinking about his daughters' bright smiles and the new relationship they've formed. "Lily is wonderful."

"Jane is identical to you," Ilya smiles, "she's a beautiful kid."

"I still can't believe they did this."

"That would be Lily's fault."

"They both have terrible ideas. Jane dyed her hair; I don't think her sister forced her. She doesn't do things she doesn't want to."

"Hmm, I noticed. What color was her hair before?"

"It was the same as yours."

It's surreal to have such a normal conversation with the man he's dreamed about for the last seventeen years, but Shane appreciates the air between them. The warmth their bodies, so close to each other, radiates. The hope that this is for the best.

Then, Ilya says,

"I looked for you."

Shane's heart stops.

"What?"

"Years ago. My father had recently died and I was sorting out a legal issue with my brother, but I was able to return to Montreal for a few days. I wanted to talk to you and see Jane."

Ilya's voice is a murmur, almost invisible against the accelerated beating of Shane's heart. He tries to remain calm, to etch into his memory the profile of Ilya who refuses to turn around and face him.

"Why didn't you do it?"

"I... I saw you with her. At first I thought she might be your friend, but then you kissed her. She was carrying Jane, who was laughing and hanging onto her neck like she belonged there."

Shane connects the dots with what Ilya says; it can be no one but Rose. He never again tried to build anything with anyone, because he was always indifferent to those fleeting loves that never came close to *him*.

No one could ever compare to Ilya.

The time he did try to have a relationship with Rose, Shane had recently celebrated Jane's second birthday. He was still sad and depressed about Ilya and Lily leaving, but he figured he had to try. Days after what Ilya must have seen, Shane broke up with Rose.

Holy shit.

A wave of despair washes over him from head to toe, and Shane feels his eyes fill with tears.

"Why didn't you...? We could have... we could have talked. You always knew that if you..."

The words evaporate as soon as they touch his tongue, and Shane has an irrepressible urge to grab him by the shirt and shake him, but his feet are stuck to the ground.

"I knew that. But I also knew we weren't doing well before we separated," Ilya sighs. "We argued a lot, I was depressed and needed medication. You resented me for what happened with hockey and the pregnancy and..."

"Never."

Ilya seems so detached from the conversation that Shane needs him to feel the same desperation. A burning, suffocating, and dominant despair that stifles all his senses. This time, he gives in to that feeling and takes Ilya by the shoulders, forcing him to look him in the eyes.

"I know we had problems, but we were two teenagers. We didn't know shit. Don't say I resented you because you never asked me; you're assuming that. I know the pregnancy was unexpected for both of us because we never really wanted it, but my daughters are the best thing in my life. This is more important than anything else."

We are more important than everything else.

Ilya's shoulders burn beneath his palms and he can feel his body trembling slightly, but perhaps it's just him. Shane sees his eyes wide open, pupils dilated, with a bright light in the center that had disappeared during the last year they were together.

Shane wants to tell him about the arguments he had with his mother when he refused to play hockey again. He wants to tell him about the time Jane took her first steps. He wants to tell him that after he left, Hayden was the only one who stood up for him among their close group, even though he and Ilya never got along. Shane wants to tell him about the good dreams, the nightmares, the despair, the longing.

He wants to tell him that, in the seventeen years that have passed, he has thought of him every single day.

Instead, Shane pulls his hands away and huffs angrily.

"So yeah, screw you for assuming what's true and what's not."

Ilya remains silent for a moment, blinks, and looks at him again.

"When did you stop being boring?"

A wave of nostalgia drowns out his insecurities, and Shane laughs.

"About three years after you left. Hayden told me I couldn't keep crying like a fucking idiot, and Jackie threatened to call you to show you how ridiculous I was being. I guess losing the love of your life messes with your head, but what do they know?"

Now, Shane looks back on that time with humor. At one point, he couldn't breathe from the pain of not seeing Lily again, of not feeling Ilya behind him watching over his every step. His family tried their best to help him, but only time could shake off the numbness from his head and body. Only Jane's eyes, so like Ilya's and Lily's, helped him.

When Ilya doesn't respond to his poor attempt at a joke, Shane looks at him. His expression immediately disarms him. Ilya looks desolate, his mouth half-open and his eyes wide with anguish that seems to rise from his very core and flow into the moisture of his eyes.

Ilya says something quickly in Russian that he can't understand. Then, with a clearing of his throat, he corrects himself in English:

"Love of your life?"

"What?"

"You said 'losing the love of your life'."

Right. Fuck. Shane has allowed himself to let his guard down and his thoughts have escaped from the high tower he has built all these years.

He shakes his head with a smile that can only be nervous in an attempt to maintain normalcy, but his daughter saves him from further humiliation. Jane opens the bedroom door and enters carefully.

"Ilya, Lily is ready to talk to you. She's in our room."

The man blinks, nods once, and gets up from the sofa, leaving the room and giving Jane a kiss on the forehead on the way.

When they are alone, his daughter raises her eyebrows.

"What did you do to him?"

"Why do you say that? We were just talking."

Jane looks grown-up, different with her dyed hair. Stunning. Changed. Her freckles stand out even more against the black dye framing her face, and Shane wants to kick himself for being so blind as not to notice the difference between her and Lily.

His daughter takes short, slow steps until she reaches him and sits on his lap, just like when she was little. Immediately, Shane puts his arm around her waist and hides his face in her long hair. She smells of an unfamiliar place, of Ilya, of the life that was stolen from her. Shane holds her a little tighter.

"I'm sorry it turned out this way. I always wanted to tell you about Lily and your father, but time flew by and I never had the courage to do it."

Jane looks at him with those large, infinite eyes, weighing what he says. Shane always found it impressive that, even without Ilya's active presence, his daughter was so much like him. Her gestures and her gaze, her cool demeanor in certain situations, and her ability to read other people.

"I guess being a teenager with so many responsibilities is hard, you know, making the wrong choices and all," Jane says. Then she smiles, raising her eyebrows. "Didn't grandma ever tell you about condoms?"

Shane blushes automatically because, fuck, he doesn't want to have this conversation with his daughter. She doesn't need to know what was going through his head every time he shared the same space as Ilya, and he certainly isn't going to tell her.

"You're sounding more and more like Lily, you know?"

"I hope so, because she's great."

"She is. I'm sorry again. I'll always be sorry."

"I know. But I love you. We love you. Everything's okay."

His daughter hugs him tightly, and Shane holds her like the most precious thing he has, because she is.

"How are you feeling? Are you taking your medication? I still can't believe you were in fucking Russia."

"Dad! Aren't you supposed to not swear?"

"When your life is falling apart, you can allow yourself to swear once or twice. Now, medication?"

"Yes, dad. Everything is fine. Lily is fine too, although she's probably yelling at Ilya right now."

Jane doesn't seem stressed or anxious, which is a good sign. Shane tilts his head to get a better look at her and kisses the bridge of her nose.

"I've noticed you call him by his name. I'm not saying it's necessary, but you know it's okay to call him 'dad' if you want, right?"

Her daughter sighs and hides her expression in the curve of his neck.

"I know. What if he doesn't want me to call him that?"

Shane thinks Ilya would rather cut off his hand than let Jane feel that he doesn't love her.

When he tells his daughter this, she laughs.

"You're so weird. Why don't you just tell me he'd be okay with that?"

"I'm not weird," Shane snuffles. "Lily says I could win the World's Best Dad award."

"I'm sure Lily believes it, but they wouldn't give it to you."

"Ouch."

"Maybe you'd fall into that category but... ah, dad! Don't tickle me!"

Jane's laughter is so clear that Shane smiles from ear to ear, light for the first time in years.

Lily is the happiest person in the world.

Her father, dad and sister (what a family they have, Lily is bursting with excitement) are all in the same place. She and Jane wake up together after the most frustrating conversation the girl's ever had, but she supposes that yelling at her father for a couple of minutes helped release her stress. Like the champion he is, the man accepted her yelling and hugged her tightly when it was over.

Lily jumps out of bed when she notices the sun's rays on the floor and immediately looks at her sister, who is sleeping peacefully with her eyes half-open. Her phone clock reads nine in the morning, so she has no time to lose.

Without waiting any longer, she flicks Jane's forehead.

"Ouch, what the fuck?"

"Hi. How did you sleep? Wake up, it's late."

“What time is it...? Fucking shit, Lily, it's too early. Shut up and let me sleep.”

"You're so rude in the mornings," Lily says with a wide grin. When Jane closes her eyes again, Lily lies down on her chest and waits for her to look at her again. "We have one more day before we part ways again. Do you want to spend it sleeping?"

That seems to wake her sister, who frowns but stares at her intently.

Last night, after they both talked with their parents and retired to the room Shane had reserved for them, Lily and Jane talked until the sky turned violet. They caught up on what they had experienced pretending to be each other, what their parents had told them, and what decision they would make now. Yes, their parents have the power to decide for them, but both know they wouldn't force them into anything. When Jane reminds Lily that they only have one year left before they can choose what they'll do with their lives after school, a range of possibilities opens up, each one more exciting than the last.

New York is the most logical choice. Lily wants to study art, and Jane has no idea what to do, but she figures that city is big enough to figure it out.

"It won't be the last time we see each other, don't be dramatic."

“Yes, but we're here as a family,” Lily presses. “Shane, Ilya, and the ghosts of the past.”

"You know we can't get involved in that."

"You lack vision. Let's have breakfast."

The thing is, Lily has a knack for certain things. Yes, she has bad plans and they often backfire, but not for everything. When it comes to people and romance, Lily is the undisputed president of the intuition club.

That's why she knows Mila's tone of voice is different on the phone when she asked her how everything went and how Jane was. Ugh.

That's why she notices the long, lingering glances her father gives Shane when he thinks the other isn't looking.

It's pure and simple mathematics.

Jane looks grumpy as they both leave the room. Their parents are waiting for them in the hallway, looking everywhere but at each other. Lily smiles broadly.

"Hi, family. How was your night?"

Her father has the same grumpy face as Jane.

“Can we go have breakfast now?”

"Did you swallow the sympathy award?"

"Lily, shut up," Jane says, starting to walk toward the elevator. Ilya follows closely behind.

Shane and Lily exchange glances and laugh. God, she loves her parents. They are as different as she and Jane, but at the same time it seems that they all vibrate on the same frequency despite never having lived together. They're ridiculous men, but Lily can understand. Yesterday she was so angry because, damn it, the decisions they made were so idiotic, especially since they love each other so much it's a little hard for Lily to breathe.

But if anyone knows what it's like to be young and stupid, it's Lily. She's not going to condemn anyone.

"Did you sleep well?" Shane asks, putting an arm around her shoulders.

"Yes, Jane and I were talking about next year."

"Oh?"

Her dad puts on a face of feigned disinterest, which he must have manufactured especially so that Jane wouldn't run away from awkward conversations. Lily returns the hug.

"We talked about New York. I'm going to live there next year because I want to study art. You know, painting, sculpture, and all that. Jane wants to come with me. We could both have an apartment together."

"Really? That's great, honey. We can discuss it over breakfast."

"How are you? Did you sleep well? Did you talk to papa?"

Lily can feel Shane's muscles tense beneath her hands, but politely decides not to mention it.

"Uh, no, yes. Everything is fine"

Her dad doesn't elaborate on his answer, so Lily doesn't press him. During the walk to the hotel dining room, Lily observes how her father chooses to stay away from Shane, either talking to Jane a few feet away or remaining a little further back.

While Shane is talking to her sister about New York and the four of them are sitting down having breakfast, Lily turns to look at her father, her eyebrows raised.

"What are you doing?"

"About what?"

"About my father."

Ilya looks at her with the same expression and tilts his head.

"What's going on with your father?" Ilya asks in rapid, halting Russian.

"We're leaving tomorrow and you haven't exchanged a single word."

"We've talked about you and Jane."

"And about the two of you?"

Lily doesn't usually interfere in her father's personal life because, although they are close, he remains an authority figure. And Lily certainly doesn't want him interfering in hers. The obligatory conversation they had about using condoms and being careful around men was enough to keep her occupied for the next seventeen years.

"Beautiful flower, mind your own business."

"It's not healthy for a functional family like ours to ignore each other."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Hey, that's not fair," Jane says. She doesn't pout, but it's close. "I can't understand what you two are whispering about."

"Lily was telling me about a guy she met at camp," Ilya lies easily, so Lily kicks him under the table.

She's always had a terrible aim. Shane lets out a groan.

"Did you just kick me?"

"Oops, sorry, dad," Lily says. Then, she lights up when she thinks of what they can do for the rest of the day. "Hey, what do you say we go for a walk? I've never been to Boston before."

"Boston is boring," his father says, this time in English, rolling his eyes. "Nothing interesting ever happens."

"How do you know?"

"I lived here a few years ago."

"Twenty years ago, Ilya," Shane interjects. "Things certainly change."

"Umh, no. What's boring is always boring."

"How could you know?"

"Oh, I just know."

The silence between the two men seems heavy with things neither Jane nor Lily can understand. They both shrug, and Jane says:

"Okay, we already established the word boring. Why don't Lily and I go sightseeing and you two, I don't know, stay here and argue about which city is less charming?"

"Wait, wait," Lily says, narrowing her eyes. "When did you live in Boston?"

"When I played hockey," her father replies simply, taking a sip of coffee. "I met your dad here."

Now, this is a story that interests them. Lily gives Jane a look she hopes her sister will interpret correctly. They certainly share the same genes because Jane looks at their parents and smiles.

"I'd like to know that story."

"I don't know if we have the time, we still need to see Svetlana," Ilya says, glancing at his phone where it lies face-down on the table. "And if we—"

"What, are you a coward, Rozanov?"

Shane's voice has a tone Lily doesn't recognize in him. It's funny, defiant, and confident. As if conditioned by this, his father responds automatically.

Interesting.

"Me, a coward? I was protecting your pride. I didn't think you wanted your daughters to find out how I used to kick your ass when we were rookies."

"When I met your father, I was already famous, kids," Shane says, looking at Lily and Jane. There's a different kind of gleam in his voice when he speaks. "I was an excellent player. Top player in the league."

"At least that's what he says," Ilya snorts, looking at his hands with disinterest. "That didn't stop me from beating you that year."

"If we're talking about counting the times I beat you..."

"We're not counting because you played longer than me. My fame lasted as long as I was successful, which is to say, the entire time I was on the ice."

"So, you two were rivals," Jane says. "When did you become friends?"

"We didn't," Shane says, shaking his head. "Your father was an idiot."

"Me?" Ilya asks, frowning pointedly. "You wouldn't know fun if it bit you on the ass."

"Wait," Lily says, grinning. "You guys said you became friends and then dad got pregnant. But you just told us that you were never friends. So this is definitely a case for the stork, huh?"

The silence that follows Lily's words is clearly awkward for her father and Shane, whose face is flushed. Oh, this is hilarious.

Jane makes a disgusted face and shakes her head.

"Ew. No. Please, no details."

"At what age did you get pregnant? Eighteen? Nineteen?" Lily asks in a honeyed tone because she can. Because it's fun to watch her father's expression get more and more irritated. "We can talk about this or take a walk around Boston. You choose."

A beat passes and then Shane says,

"I could walk around."

"I know some good places," Ilya says quickly and stands up.

That concludes breakfast.

The four of them wander the streets of Boston amid conversations, laughter and anecdotes that unite them in a common place. Lily can't stop smiling, she feels like she's floating and every so often she makes sure that her parents and her sister are still with her. She chokes up laughing when Shane tells them about the first time Jane gave a presentation in front of her whole school, and then she blushes when her father relives the terrifying story of the time Lily tried to sneak a boy into her room.

It's comfortable. Familiar. It's everything she always wanted and never thought she'd have.

Lily asks for an ice cream and stuffs her face before she does something embarrassing like hug them all for no goddamn reason.

When they stop to sit on a park bench and Jane asks Shane for a drink, Lily and her father sit quietly waiting for them. The trees dance overhead, enjoying the rhythm of the wind and rustling their leaves before they fall. Soon everything will be orange, a sweet brown. The promise of a cold winter whispers in the air. Soon, Lily will be in Moscow, far away from Shane and Lily.

Her father puts his arm around her shoulders as Lily drops her head onto his chest.

"Are you alright, beautiful flower?"

Her father's voice is soft, loving, gentle. He knows her well enough to understand that her throat is closed, paralyzed by the sadness of thinking about losing what she has regained. His hand, so warm and welcoming, holds all her dreams and hopes as it always has. Lily takes a deep breath.

"This sucks."

"I know."

"Shane and Lily are the best thing that's ever happened to us."

"I know."

"Are you going to do something about it?"

Her father's silence is complex, woven from years of distance and a turbulent youth. Lily knows this. It frustrates her not knowing how to fix it, because she has seen her father's eyes. She has seen the shine he never has, the wider smiles he never gives, and the lighter shoulders he never has.

And all thanks to Shane.

Life's a bitch. Her father's right; it's complicated.

"Why don't you have dinner with him?" Lily suggests in the gentlest tone she can manage, as if she doesn't want to scare her father. "We're leaving tomorrow and Jane and I want to have a little more time alone. It doesn't have to be anything more than dinner."

"What else could it be?"

"A better life. Your life."

The man doesn't answer, and when Lily looks up at him, her father's eyes are fixed straight ahead. Jane and Shane walk toward them, talking to each other. A bird chirps nearby. Her sister is sipping coffee and wearing the jacket she borrowed from Lily that morning. Shane laughs, shaking his head at something his daughter says.

A family.

"Fuck, I love Boston," Jane says with a smile they get close enough. She seems relaxed and happy; Lily can't help but smile back. "Are you sure you don't want to move here?"

"Don't swear," Shane says, crossing his arms.

His father snorts in disbelief.

"Your foul language could make a nun cry, and you want to control how Jane speaks?"

"What my father means with all those big words," Lily interjects with a conciliatory smile, "is that he'd love to discuss the way we're being raised with you at dinner. Jane and I are meeting Mila in a few minutes to watch a movie. Love you, bye!"

If life is complicated, Lily will kick it in the face and take the simplest and most radical solution because, fuck it, what else can she do?

Without waiting for a response from either of her parents, Lily takes Jane by the arm and leads her in the opposite direction. When they are far enough away, she lets go and fixes her hair.

"This is really hard."

"You are truly unpredictable," Jane says with half of a smile, "and one day you'll definitely get us into trouble."

"I have seventeen years to catch up. I'm working overtime."

Ilya chooses the restaurant.

It's a small place, with dim lighting and a sparse crowd. They're both sitting at the back, far from the entrance, facing each other. Shane doesn't seem nervous, but he moves his fingers rhythmically and incessantly against the table.

Now, with no other distraction than observing him, Ilya studies the details of his face. Shane's skin is far from perfect; it looks tanned, with many more freckles than before, his features adorned with small scars from a youth spent on the ice and from stories Ilya wasn't a part of.

He is devastatingly attractive.

"I always thought we could come to this place," Ilya says, but his voice is a whisper. He clears his throat and continues, "Before. I knew the answer would be no, but I think I should have tried asking anyway."

"Before the girls?"

Shane's voice is in the same tone. Ilya notices his lips, thin and outlined by a subtle cupid's bow. They look moist, and as soon as Shane finishes speaking, his pink tongue fleetingly licks them.

"Yes."

"We weren't close then."

"No, we weren't."

A young waitress takes their order. Ilya notices the way Shane's fingers grip the menu, the way his eyes crinkle when he finishes ordering and looks at the waitress. He's still kind, always.

Ilya swallows and leans back against the chair.

"I apologize for Lily's attitude. I know she can be intense sometimes."

"She's my daughter too. You don't have to apologize," Shane says and when he smiles, his eyes light up his face. "I guess I have to thank you. You raised her perfectly. She's a wonderful girl, and Jane couldn't be happier to be her sister."

They both remain silent for a few moments while the waitress serves their drinks and brings their food. Ilya feels as if his gaze is drawn by a magnet, unable to tear his eyes away from the man in front of him.

He's having trouble processing the idea of having Shane Hollander in front of him. Again.

For years, Ilya tried to capture this feeling. The calm, the tranquility of knowing he was alright. The impatience at not being able to bridge the distance between them. The need to

ask him about every minute they were apart. The desperation to confess every feeling that blossoms beneath his skin, about the fire that fuels his desire to look at him again.

"We need to review the girls' situation," Shane says after taking a bite and making a sound of approval. "There's still a school year left. We can't interrupt this process, but we also can't keep them away."

The nod that Ilya gives takes almost all of his strength.

"I know. I don't want to lose Jane again."

"You won't, because I won't let Lily walk away either. We're a team, just like before. We'll work together to find the best solution."

Shane speaks with confidence, without hesitating or second-guessing his words. It's clear he has the whole picture analyzed. In that light, the comparison with his mother is inevitable. Yuna shares her genes and her attitudes with him, which Shane undoubtedly exhibits. He remembers the woman with her vitality and her decisiveness, always protecting her son and granddaughters.

"How are your parents?" Ilya asks.

If Shane is puzzled by the question, he doesn't show it.

"My father is retired and takes care of the house while my mother helps me with my charity. They were both surprised when I told them about coming to Boston, but they were happy to see Lily again. Mom cried so much her face swelled up."

"Poor Yuna."

"They send their regards," Shane says. "They invited Lily for Christmas, and that extends to you as well."

Ilya momentarily watches the people entering the restaurant while blinking to hold back tears.

It's painful to remember his former in-laws. He thinks of Yuna and her kind smile, of David's pats on the back and their constant desire to make him feel welcome in the family. It's painful to think of the life he could have had.

In front of him, Shane stares seriously, miles away from this place.

Ilya wants to touch him and ask him to look at him, really look at him, to act like the person he truly is and not this detached character who breaks his heart. He can't. Ilya doesn't have the right. He lost it when he left Montreal and boarded a plane to care for the father who shattered his life, with one of his daughters in his arms and his dreams dissolved in tears.

"I appreciate their invitation," Ilya says, holding his gaze. "It's up to you, really, but thank them for me."

"Up to me?"

"Yes, up to you. I can't accept it if I interfere in your life in any way."

Shane glares at him until he seems unable to bear it any longer and huffs angrily.

"Fuck, Ilya. Can you... stop doing this?"

"Doing what?"

"Pretending we don't share a life. Because whether you like it or not, our daughters, identical to us, are walking around Boston. We'll see each other until the end of our days, so stop looking at me like that."

Ilya is so surprised by his outburst that he can only blink.

"I'm not looking at you in any way. You're the one who seems not to want to be here," Ilya says after a pause. "I've been thinking about this day for the last seventeen years, don't try to take it out on me."

It's unsettling that, despite the time that has passed, Ilya can still identify most of Shane's expressions and the nuances of his voice. He can read between the lines, understanding the true intentions behind his actions, the explanations for the movement of his eyebrows, and the disbelief spreading from his face to his body.

Ilya still knows him better than he knows himself.

"I'm not," Shane says with difficulty. Then he swallows and shakes his head. "I do want to be here. I *am* here. I just... you have to understand that this is fucking hard for me."

"And for me it isn't? I was the one who left. I left you here, alone with Jane. You couldn't play hockey for years, and when you came back to it, I know your new teammates didn't welcome you. I wasn't there for you. For Jane. Shit." Ilya says, his breath ragged. He places his hands on his knees and clenches them, trying to maintain his composure. He feels the fire rise in his throat that burns his eyes, but this time he can't stop the wetness. Ilya gasps, trying to breathe better, and continues, "I want you to know that I regret getting on that plane and leaving every single day. For years I thought it was the right thing to do, but I always knew this was what I had to do."

"This?"

"You and me. Our family."

He can't see Shane's expression because the blurry image is distorted between the dim light and regret, but he hears him swearing and the sound of a chair being dragged. Before Ilya can speak again, two arms encircle his neck and anchor him to the ground, to this moment in life.

Shane smells like the past and the present, the future. His own.

His arms are numb, but Ilya forces himself to lift them and return the hug. Shane isn't sitting on his lap, but he's close. The fabric of his shirt is soft against his cheek, and his solid body reminds him of days he'd tried to forget but couldn't.

A hundred more years could pass and the only thing Ilya would remember would be the man in his arms.

He doesn't know how long they stay embraced, and although he can't see Shane's face, Ilya knows he's crying. He feels the swaying of his body and the warmth of his palms against his back.

After a while, Shane says,

"Jane is like you, you know?" Ilya's heart stops, but he doesn't interrupt. "She never says what she thinks until she explodes. She was diagnosed with depression when she was twelve. She used to say she wanted to be happy because I seemed sad. Back then, I always wanted to talk to you because you would have known what to say."

That explains Jane's wandering gaze, her expression with much lower energy than Lily's, and her downcast head in the mornings. Ilya was always afraid that Lily would inherit the hell he carries on his shoulders, and he always wondered about Jane. It's painful to know, but Shane speaks about it calmly and with composure. It's obvious he's done a good job protecting her.

"I'm not telling you this to make you feel worse," Shane says, in a murmur that exists within the intimacy of the space they share. "I want you to understand that I've always wanted you there. Here. We had some bad times before we separated, but I never resented you for that. I just missed you. I was angry, but not at you. I was mad at the situation."

Ilya has stopped crying, but he can't move. He doesn't want to. Shane's warm body melts into his, and he doesn't care about the number of people around them. It's something they would never have done before because everything prevented it: them, the world, Ilya's family.

Eventually, Shane pulls away and breaks the hug. His movements are clumsy, slowed, as he sits down opposite him again, but he maintains a small, promising smile.

"We weren't friends before, but we can be now."

Friends.

Rationally, Ilya knows it's unwise to jump into a relationship with a man he hasn't seen in years. They don't have youth on their side to be reckless, especially since their daughters are counting on them.

But he knows Shane. Ilya knows him in every corner of his mind, in the darkness of a room and under the spotlight of a crowd. He knows him awake, asleep, ecstatic, angry, and frustrated. Full of pain and free. He knows it with an open soul, with his heart in his hands, and with tears streaming down his cheeks.

Ilya knows Shane with his spirit, with his mind, with every breath he has taken since he first saw him.

But what if that's not enough? But what if *Ilya* is not enough?

"I think it's a wise decision," Ilya says slowly, pressing his lips together.

Shane nods and then frowns.

"I'm sure the kids won't agree."

"Fuck the kids."

"Ilya!"

Shane laughs.

Oh.

Ilya's mind automatically records the sound and plays it back as an echo among his tortured thoughts. It sounds the same as before, except more muffled and hoarse. More adult, more beautiful.

Friends? Ilya can be his friend. It wouldn't be the first time he's been in love with him and can't do anything about it.

Ilya raises his wine glass and forces a smile.

"I'm just kidding, I love our daughters. Cheers to them."

"That won't excuse what you said. Cheers."

Ilya drinks the red liquid as fast as he can, hoping it gets to his head quickly enough so he won't think about Shane's laugh again. Or about him at all.

The sky is overcast when everyone arrives at the airport. Jane struggles to carry her suitcase; she and Lily made a detour on their way to the movies and bought too many things to remember each other by. Ilya helps her without saying a word, and soon, everyone is waiting for the loudspeakers to announce their flight.

Shane and Jane are going to Montreal. Ilya, Lily, and Mila to Moscow.

His sister hasn't stopped crying since they got out of the taxi, so Ilya and Shane comfort her together with kind words and affectionate touches. Jane watches them from a distance and can feel the heaviness in her heart knowing that she will have to wait until December to see them again.

"Are you okay?"

Mila's voice is soft beside her. The girl will be traveling with Ilya because her mother still has some business to finish in the city, and she'll take the opportunity to keep Lily company.

"Yes," Jane says, nodding once. "It'll be strange not seeing her every day, but we can always text."

"I can give you my phone number," Mila says, shrugging. "In case Lily doesn't answer and you need her."

Jane turns to stare at her. Mila is infinitely more interesting than she is, more confident and brilliant in every way that defines her, so Jane doesn't quite understand why she wants to get closer. Jane has felt her watchful eyes glued to her neck with every step she's taken since they met, but it doesn't mean anything. She's probably just trying to be friendly.

Even so, a tingling in the pit of her stomach compels Jane to say,

"You know Lily would have a fit if she found out I had your number."

"What Lily does or doesn't do is none of my business," Mila replies, tossing her dark hair. "To be honest, she can go to hell about this. You are her twin, not me."

Fuck, she's so... Jane swallows, nods once, twice, and then repeats the motion until she feels dizzy.

"Okay, give me your number."

"Don't you want to write it down?"

"I have a good memory."

Mila looks at her like she's crazy and then laughs openly. She's beautiful in ways Jane can't explain. Mila doesn't seem interested in being gentle or beating around the bush with her; she's always spoken to Jane directly, without any ulterior motives.

She's like, super hot.

Jane might faint.

"You're weird, you know that? Never mind. Remember this, okay?"

She doesn't need to tell Mila that she memorizes by heart every number that comes out of her mouth with a marked Russian accent.

When the loudspeakers announce Shane and Jane's flight, the girl shifts her heavy feet and approaches her family. Lily has stopped crying, but her face is so red it looks like it's about to explode.

"You look awful," Jane says before she can stop herself.

Lily sobs again.

"Fuck you. This is the worst day of my life."

"Why are you crying?" Jane asks, pretending her hands aren't trembling and her chest isn't being crushed. "We'll see each other again at Christmas. Grandpa makes a delicious turkey."

"I don't like turkey," Lily cries, throwing herself into her sister's arms.

Jane holds her sister with all her strength and buries her face in her neck. She loves her. She can't remember what life is like without her, and she doesn't even want to imagine it. Her spirit aches in places she can't name, but it's her duty to act like the composed person she is. Jane is the eldest, after all, no matter how much Lily protested when she found out.

When it's Jane's turn to hug Ilya, she imprints his scent on her heart.

"We'll see each other soon," Shane says, his voice subdued, but he maintains a cheerful smile, trying to help Lily out. Jane knows the man well enough to know he feels the same way her sister does. "Don't forget to call, okay?"

"Every Saturday without fail," Ilya replies, kissing Jane's head. "See you soon."

They quickly embrace as the loudspeaker calls the last group of passengers, amid tears and promises about the next time they will see each other.

Jane is sad to be returning to Montreal, but the idea of seeing them again gives her the hope she needs to approach the boarding gate with her head held high.

Between Ilya and Lily, Mila waves goodbye.

Jane waves back.

Jane doesn't miss the way the girl's lips curve into a smile, nor can she help but notice Ilya's desolate expression. The man isn't looking at her, but at her father.

Shane doesn't turn around.

As soon as they both settled into their seats on the plane, Jane sees the thick tears falling down his dad's cheeks. Without saying a word, she takes his hand and gives it a light squeeze.

Shane returns the gesture with his eyes closed and a hurt expression. He looks younger, smaller, reduced to pieces that Jane doesn't know how to pick up.

Jane doesn't feel able to tell him that Ilya feels the same way, so she remembers Lily's words and begins to talk. She tells her dad about the camp, the isolation cabin, and her sister's boundless energy. She tells him about Alice and Mila, about the advice Mrs. Cooper gave her during therapy, and about the taste of Ilya's cooking.

When the plane lands in Montreal, her father has a gentle smile and clear eyes.

He kisses her on the head, and they both get off the plane with the same wound, but in each other's company.

Jane is sure that this wound won't last forever.

Chapter 7: Right back where we started from

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

MONTREAL

Shane's life remains largely the same once they return to Montreal. He goes for runs, works at his charity to build bridges between the communities it serves, spends time with Jane and his parents, and tries to make progress on his monthly reading.

Now, to his great joy, Shane is in constant contact with Lily. Every morning, he sends her a good morning message, and she replies with a picture of her face or of the things she's doing.

After so long in his life, everything is perfect. Fluid. Everything seems to be working flawlessly.

And yet, Shane feels that something is off.

If he thinks about it long enough, in the darkness of the night and in his heart, he knows that the person responsible has a name, a last name, and a stupidly arrogant smile: Ilya Rozanov.

Shane barely has time to think about him.

Barely.

Ilya keeps his promise to call Jane every Saturday, so they spend hours talking on video calls. Sometimes Lily joins them, or Shane participates in their conversations, but he usually lets them catch up and talk about what interests them. It's gratifying to hear Jane's amused laughter and the good mood that lingers with her for hours after their call ends.

In addition to this, Shane and Ilya now exchange text messages. The main topic of conversation are their daughters because, obviously, after seventeen years, they don't have much in common, but sometimes Ilya asks how he is or sends him messages about out-of-context ideas that make him smile.

So, yeah. Everything is normal.

And still.

Shane knows there's something strange about the pumping of his blood, the echo of his footsteps, the absence of something. During the day, he pretends that the foreign beating of

his heart is his own and that it's normal for his movements to be so silent. During the night, Shane is unable to escape a suffocating sense of loss.

He can't figure out exactly what is slipping through his fingers at an alarming rate, but the agony of feeling it seems to need no explanation.

Shane is convinced that the only thing he's losing is his sanity.

Hayden seems to agree.

"I don't understand you, dude, seriously. I still can't believe you told him you wanted to be his friend."

"But I do want to be his friend! We haven't seen each other in years. I want to be able to talk to him without dying."

Hayden narrows his eyes and Jackie pats his back tenderly.

"Shane, in this context, being friends doesn't mean that. You two were a couple. If you say you want to be friends, it means you're not interested in keeping that possibility open."

Fuck. Shane groans and drops his head against the wood of the table.

"I'm going to die."

"Hey, it doesn't sound so bad," Hayden says, always so encouraging. "Ilya has never been my favorite person, and he's probably still a jerk, but he knows you. He knew you better than anyone. And we were there, Shane. I don't think the love with which he looked at you has disappeared."

"Aw, honey," Jackie says, her voice undeniably affectionate. "You're so sensitive when you want to be."

"It's because you make me a better person."

Shane looks up, sees them kiss and then drops his head back down hard enough he thinks it's going to bruise.

"Can you two stop? I have bigger problems."

Sitting in her high chair, Amber shakes her rattle. Shane thinks he's going to cry.

"Shane," Jackie smiles, beautiful and understanding, with her usual kindness. "He's the father of your daughters. You'll have to see him your whole life. You need to grow a pair and ask him out like the adult you're supposed to be."

Shane would like to take back the "beautiful and understanding" part. Hayden laughs and gives his wife a high five.

"Damn right. Besides, I'm sure Ilya must be crying every night when he goes to sleep because you told him you only wanted to be his friend."

"That doesn't help my case."

"I am your friend, my job is to tell you the truth, not help your 'I-can't-talk-like-an-adult' case."

Shane sighs and straightens up, looking at his two friends. Jackie is sitting on Hayden's lap even though there are four other chairs available because they are undeniably in love. And because their love is reciprocated.

When Shane told Ilya they could be friends, it was an immediate reaction to his blank expression after their hug. He didn't want to hear that he was leaving his life again.

He couldn't possibly overcome another event like that in his life, not when he had just recovered them.

Fuck.

Amber starts whimpering in her chair, so Jackie sighs and gets up to start clearing the table. Hayden goes over to his daughter and picks her up, cradling her against his hip.

After four children, it's a natural movement for him. Shane smiles.

"Look, man, just talk to him. Ilya has always loved you."

"Since when are you his number one defender?"

"I'm old now. Everyone should have someone in their life. Even someone as awful as Ilya. "

"We're the same age."

"My point still stands. Talk to him."

Shane shakes his head, trying to clear the weight from his shoulders, and helps his friends wash the dishes as a thank you for dinner. It's a routine they've created together, one Shane enjoys because it makes him feel at home. The other children of his friends are grown and in college. Arthur will soon be moving to Toronto to continue working on his art, and although Jane isn't very happy about being away from her friend, she knows it's for the best.

When he finishes washing the dishes and dries his hands with a cloth, his phone vibrates in his pocket.

He knows who it is before he even looks at the screen.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.47 pm)

Lily has problems.

I'm sure she inherited them from you.

I image attachment

The photograph of his daughter swimming in a pool makes him laugh. It must be around six in the morning in Moscow, but Lily has told him that swimming has appealed to her more these days than ever. Because of her energetic and committed personality, Shane knew it was only a matter of time before Lily started dragging her father to the semi-Olympic pool near their home.

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.48 pm)

Discipline is good for her.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.48 pm)

Not when I'm the one who suffers the consequences.

I prefer Jane and her human schedules. How is she?

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.49 pm)

Better.

She is still sad because she won't see Arthur, but she knows she will see her sister every day.

Have you decided if you'll come for Christmas and the girls' birthday?

Shane's heart races as he types those words, but he doesn't delete the message because he has a plan. His friends are right. He's a functioning adult, not a cowardly teenager. Inaction in his life has only brought him unhappiness and years of suffering, so screw it all.

If Shane is going to suffer, it will be after he grabs Ilya by the shoulders and tells him everything.

When the phone vibrates again, Shane almost feels as if his soul is escaping from his body.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.51 pm)

Yes.

Do you still like ginger ale?

I wouldn't want to show up empty-handed.

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.51 pm)

Fuck you.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.51 pm)

Is that a yes?

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.51 pm)

Just coming is enough.

Shane watches the three dots next to Ilya's name appear and disappear, as if he were typing a reply but then decided to delete it. He knows he looks like an idiot standing there staring at his phone, but Shane can't think of anything else.

After a few moments, his phone lights up with Ilya's reply.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.53 pm)

Okay, then I'll come.

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.53 pm)

Good.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.53 pm)

I want you to know that I'm trying very hard not to let my inappropriate thoughts win.

Shane frowns, confused by his words, but when he rereads his messages, he notices the double meaning that what he said might have. Even though Ilya doesn't see him—thankfully so—Shane's cheeks are flushed. Shit. It's amazing how, despite the time that's passed, Ilya is still the same idiot he's always been, and Shane is still the same fool who falls for it.

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.54 pm)

Fuck you.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.54 pm)

Okay, so you agree I should let my inappropriate thoughts win.

To: Ilya Rovanoz (10.54 pm)

????

No.

From: Ilya Rovanoz (10.56 pm)

Lily finished her swimming practice.

See you at Christmas and we can review this conversation to see if you change your mind.

Shane reads the message over and over until the words no longer make sense. With trembling hands, he puts his phone away and exhales.

He will see Ilya at Christmas.

The snow is falling heavily outside, so he has about a month to prepare to not act like an idiot in front of his daughters' father. At least Jane will be happy to see her family again, and Shane will be able to hug Lily until she gets fed up with him.

He will *see* Ilya at Christmas.

Fuck.

From then on, Shane tries not to let that alarming feeling of loss take hold of him again and does his best to ignore the tingling sensation that fills his gut every time his phone vibrates.

With each passing day, he lives his life normally. Shane tells his parents that Ilya will be coming for Christmas with Lily, and as always, they celebrate this decision with open arms and a kind smile. Jane is pleased with this and begins planning all the activities they will do together during those seven days they will share.

Shane can't help but smile at how lovely Jane looks, so determined and happy with her choices. She is having a good school year so far, and while she's had some emotional lows, now she can call Ilya and talk for hours about everything that seems to constantly fill her head. Shane kisses her cheek and hugs her tightly, trying to send that same energy to Lily despite the distance.

Ilya's messages are becoming more and more frequent. Shane finds himself staring at his phone screen with a ridiculous grin that even embarrasses him, but he can't help it.

It feels unreal to talk to Ilya again and read his quick, witty ideas, so Shane constantly fears waking up one day and realizing that he has imagined it all.

When he expresses this fear to Hayden, his friend rolls his eyes and glares at him.

"The only thing you should be afraid of is that idiot coming back into our lives."

"You're a confusing person. How does Jackie put up with you?"

"You're not going to like the answer."

"Ew. Shut up."

Before Shane can feel ready, December arrives, bringing with it the infernal cold. He's used to it after a lifetime of freezing his hands in the ice and being shoved against glass partitions by brutes, but Jane always complains and gets sick from the low temperatures.

When Shane gets home from work, her daughter is sitting on the sofa, wrapped in a blanket up to her head, drinking steaming tea and staring into the distance.

"Hey, don't do that, you'll give yourself a fever."

"I'm cold."

"I know, but the tea will be enough. How was school today?"

Shane leans in and kisses her forehead. She doesn't have a fever. He sits down next to her and watches her shrug.

"Fine, grandma came to get me and gave me this. She said to give it to you because she was cleaning your old room."

Jane nods toward a wooden box on the coffee table. It has stickers on the outside and an open padlock, now rusted with age. Shane's breath catches in his throat when he recognizes the box.

"Did your grandmother say anything else?"

"No, she just asked if you'd decided on a time for Christmas dinner."

"Mmh. I'll call her later."

When Shane lifts the box, he's not impressed to recognize its weight, since he used to spend almost every day looking at what was inside. In the early years of Jane's life, after Ilya and Lily left, Shane lived with his parents. He needed the help and companionship they could give him to overcome the absence that haunted him. When he moved to his current house, he left behind many belongings that only caused him pain, or sometimes, relief. He couldn't bear either unless it involved Ilya's physical presence.

"What's inside?" Jane asks, craning her neck. "I didn't open it, but I want you to know I'm dying of curiosity."

Shane laughs.

"Relax, we can look at it together."

A fine layer of dust rises as he opens the box. Shane is pleased that its contents have remained intact despite the years.

They are photographs.

Jane gasps in surprise.

"I've never seen this before."

"Well, there was a reason. The good thing is that it doesn't exist anymore."

Shane looks at the first photograph and uses all his strength to resist being overcome by nostalgia. In the picture, a young Shane is standing outside the gym where he used to train after playing hockey. He was fifteen years old, but he looks even smaller in a shirt that's much too big for his shoulders. Shane remembers the discomfort of binding his breasts and the burden of not belonging in a space he longed for with his life.

Jane makes a cute noise.

"You were adorable."

"I still am."

The next photograph shows him pregnant. It's strange, after all this time, because his face looks rounder, more childlike, and tired. Shane has hazy memories of those moments, torn between the frustration of not looking like himself and the longing to see his babies' faces.

The memory of Ilya and his warm hands reminding him that it was only a temporary event and that he still was who he has always been intoxicates him for a moment, but Shane takes a deep breath and does his best to enjoy the past.

Jane's arm encircles his waist in a comforting embrace.

"I've never seen this picture before. You look so young."

"Well, I was."

"Did you ever regret having us at that age?"

Shane thinks about the times he felt he was going to die of fright when his daughters cried more than necessary. He thinks about Ilya, scared and trembling the first time he had to put them to sleep. They seem like someone else's memories, tinged with the desperation to forget and the need to relive those moments every day.

The past is a funny thing.

"I don't know if I ever regretted it, but I always thought I could have done everything better if I had been older."

"Well, you're all grown up now."

Shane's eyebrows rise.

"What does that mean?"

"You could have another kid."

Jane seems serious, so Shane snorts in disbelief and shakes his head.

"Hormones ruled that out years ago. Besides, who the hell would I have another kid with?"

His daughter laughs carelessly and hugs him a little tighter.

"You and Ilya make adorable children."

Shane shakes his head again until he feels dizzy and looks at the photographs in front of him. He doesn't need to tell his daughter that if he and Ilya had stayed together, they probably wouldn't have had more children, but they would definitively have tried.

Yeah, for the fun and the laughs.

Right.

Shane remembers the next photographs very well. He used to look at them for hours, clinging to the idea that nothing was forever and that he would see the man of his life again sooner rather than later.

Ilya is the protagonist of all the following photographs. Ilya putting together a puzzle with his parents. He's a curly-haired teenager with youthful features, smiling between Yuna and David. Ilya swimming in the lake. Ilya posing with a huge smile, holding his two daughters. Shirtless Ilya sitting on the edge of the bed, looking seriously at the camera. Ilya cooking. Ilya with Jackie while Hayden makes a face.

Ilya teenager looks happy, free, and relaxed. The resemblance he shares with his daughters is always striking.

The last two photographs are of him and Ilya. In the first one, they are looking at each other face to face, with a smile so wide, so promising, and so youthful that it hits him like a truck at full speed. The next one is of both of them sleeping in the garden, with Ilya's mouth half-open and Shane holding his head on his chest.

Fuck.

"Wow, dad," Jane says in a tone so soft it sounds like it might break at any moment. "It's clear you two loved each other."

Shane swallows hard before answering.

"Yes, we did."

"Were you happy?"

He knows his situation with Ilya is messed up because they both made mistakes and regrettable decisions, but Shane can't imagine a time when he was happier than with his two daughters and the man of his life.

Between forgetting it and doing it all over again, Shane would rather be condemned for the rest of his days than not live with Ilya at least once.

"The happiest I've ever been."

Jane smiles through teary eyes and Shane hugs her tightly.

Montreal is completely covered in snow when the last days of December arrive. Jane and her mother take care of decorating the house, putting up the Christmas tree and whispering about things Shane would rather not know. For his part, he is busy tidying the guest rooms for Lily and her father. He tries not to think about Ilya's body resting on the same sheets he so carefully smooths, or he'll go insane.

His attempt is futile because when December 24th arrives, Shane feels like he's going to faint. Hayden watches him with palpable concern as he runs around the kitchen like a madman, because fuck, he's not ready yet.

"Shane," his friend says, sounding worried, "everything will be all right."

"Yes, it's gonna be fine, uncle Shane."

"We'll eat any garbage you serve us, I swear. Jackie's eaten my food; she'll outlive this."

"He's holding a knife, dad. I don't think it's wise to bother him."

Shane ignores Hayden and Arthur because twenty minutes ago his father texted him saying he was coming from the airport with Lily and Ilya, and he needs to concentrate on not cutting his fingers while preparing the salad.

He's not nervous. He's not nervous because it's not the first time they've celebrated Christmas at his house, but it is the first time Lily will be spending it with him, as well as the first time she'll be sharing a birthday with Jane.

It will be the first time, since he and Ilya separated, that they'll be together for more than three days in a row.

Shane is so nervous he's on the verge of a breakdown.

Fortunately, his friend shuts up and lets him finish cooking in peace. When Jane comes downstairs, she's wearing a dress that drapes gracefully around her body. She recently got a haircut, and it looks so perfect on her that Shane can't help but smile.

"You look adorable, darling."

"Thanks, dad. Do you need help with anything?"

"Eh, no. You can make conversation with your uncle so he stops being such a pain in my ass."

"Hey!"

The conversation between Hayden, Arthur and his daughter helps him maintain some semblance of sanity and distracts him from the clock racing across the wall.

"Did you talk to Mila?" Arthur asks, and Shane can't help but raise his eyebrows. He's grateful his back is turned because he doesn't want to come across as the nosy father.

"Oh, who's Mila?" Hayden's teasing tone, which Shane knows all too well, makes him flinch, but Jane's response is a laugh.

How much can change in a couple of months.

"A friend. Yes, I spoke to her, but her mother is free, so they'll both be spending Christmas together. We'll see each other in February."

Now is the time to be nosy, so Shane turns around and looks at his daughter curiously.

"Are you meeting up with Mila?"

"Yes, she's coming to Boston with Svetlana, and I'm going to visit her for a few days."

Jane smiles privately and small, almost shyly but happily.

Ah, youth.

Hayden seems to agree with him, because he smiles amusedly and refrains from commenting. He'd better, because Shane doesn't feel like fighting when his heart has been trying to escape his chest ever since he woke up.

Jackie appears in the doorway with Amber in her arms and smiles.

"Hi, Jane, you look so cute! Hey, you, super dad, your daughter needs you. I'll help Shane bring everything to the table, you change her diaper."

His friend sighs in defeat and goes over to his baby, who waves her arms excitedly when she sees him.

"Always remember to use a condom, kids."

"Too late," Shane laughs when he sees Jane and Arthur's disgusted expressions.

When his parents' car pulls into the driveway forty minutes later, Shane feels a little calmer. He goes out to greet them slowly, trying not to trip over his own feet, followed closely by Jane.

Lily leaps out of the car and runs to give them a hug. He sees his daughter's face in photographs and hears her voice in audio recordings every day, but it still feels like seventeen years have passed since he last saw her.

Lily has a red nose and such a big smile that Shane feels like crying.

"Oh my god, I missed you all so much. The flight was too long and I'm starving. I think I could eat a cow."

His daughter speaks rapidly and with little jumps, clearly excited to see them again. Shane kisses her head and lets Jane pull her inside.

Ilya is standing in front of him when Shane looks for him.

It's almost as striking to see him again as it was the first time. The man looks slightly different, as if he's gained muscle, and his cheeks have regained some color. He has a relaxed expression and a small smile. Ilya is wearing a black turtleneck sweater and loose-fitting trousers.

He looks too good for a Christmas dinner.

Shane wants to lock himself in his room and never come out. He's not seventeen anymore, so he takes a step forward and tries to smile.

"Thank you for coming."

"Hello. I said I would, didn't I? Thank you for having me," Ilya says with a little nod. "You look pretty."

In retrospect, adults can hide in their rooms too. Now, Shane doesn't know whether to do it alone or with Ilya.

He lets out a shaky sigh.

"Thanks. You too, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Damn it, Ilya. Have some compassion. What do you want me to say, 'I've never seen anyone look so good'?"

At that moment, his parents appear carrying their guests' suitcases. Fuck. His mom has a funny expression that Shane doesn't bother to interpret. He swallows his humiliation and turns.

"Come on, let's go inside. It's time to serve dinner."

His house is big enough to accommodate all his guests, but Shane still feels suffocated. Ilya chats with Hayden and Jackie in a corner as if they see each other every day—Shane definitely doesn't want to hear what they're talking about—, while Lily and Jane chat with their grandparents amid animated gestures.

It's a postcard that Shane longed for so many years that having it in front of his eyes feels alien, stolen from someone else.

Can Shane have everything he ever wanted?

He's not sure, but he desperately hopes so.

Jane has never been much of a Christmas person. There are always too many people and too much noise, but lately it's been shown that people can change. That she can change.

Sitting between Ilya and Lily, Jane can't stop smiling. Her cheeks ache, and she's laughed more times than she can count. The table is decorated with candles nestled among the food prepared by Shane and his grandparents. Everything looks beautiful, and Jane is grateful for how lucky she is to have such an amazing family.

"I think they're going to win next year," his grandmother says without hesitation. Beside her, his grandfather snorts. "What? I'm never wrong."

"It's true, I always rely on Yuna to know who's going to win the cup," Hayden laughs, sitting next to his wife and son. "Shane always bets against his mother because he's an idiot."

"That's not nice," Aunt Jackie says with an amused smile. "Just because he's an idiot doesn't mean he's betting against Yuna."

Everyone seems more cheerful this year. Jane exchanges a glance with Arthur, who smiles at her amusedly. Damn, she's going to miss him so much. She's going to have Lily, but she'll feel lost without Arthur and his wise advice.

"Do you like hockey, Lily?" her grandmother asks the girl beside her. "I always tried to get Jane to watch the games with me, but she never liked them."

Jane blows a kiss to the woman while Lily smiles beside her.

"Not really. My aunt, Svetlana, loves it, but I prefer other types of sports. Swimming, running, or soccer."

"Lily is really good at swimming," her father adds, his eyes shining. "Ilya always sends me pictures of her training sessions, which start at 7 a.m."

"Ah, very good, my dear," says her grandmother, winking. "You have the family discipline."

Lily laughs, her whole face flushing. For someone who loves attention, she seems particularly self-conscious tonight. Jane takes her hand under the table and gives it a squeeze. Her sister returns the gesture.

"Ilya, what do you do for a living?" Hayden asks.

Ilya has remained silent for most of dinner, only speaking when someone asks him directly. Jane wonders if he feels uncomfortable, and judging by Shane's worried expression, he must think the same.

"I sell cars," Ilya says quietly. "It's not as intense as hockey, but there's always work."

Hayden nods.

"I get it. I work in an office now, and it sucks."

"Hey," Shane warns, frowning. "You work with me."

"I love you, man, but you have to admit it's not the same as scoring points or winning a cup."

"You two played together?" Arthur asks, surprised.

"Yes, Ilya was our archenemy," Hayden sighs. "Clearly, girls, your father doesn't know the meaning of loyalty."

"Maybe he wanted to be near a winner for once," Ilya says, taking a sip from his wine glass. "You know, far away from you."

Jane watches Shane's face flush, unsure if it's from embarrassment or the topic of conversation, but judging by the amused expressions of her grandparents and Jackie, it must be a common topic of conversation between them. She doesn't know how common it can be after seventeen years, but Jane still doesn't quite understand much about the dynamic between her parents.

"I firmly believe he was after something else," Hayden says, raising his eyebrows.

"Okay, stop it," Shane groans, shaking his head. "Who wants more wine?"

"I don't know if that's a wise decision," Jackie laughs. "Hayden, honey, it's no use fighting with Ilya anymore. Everyone here knows you're his number one fan."

"What!? No!"

"I can't even begin to tell you how excited he was when we were told you were coming to this dinner," Arthur adds, looking at Ilya. "I didn't know you before, but now I understand the appeal."

Lily laughs so hard at Hayden's face that she ends up leaning on Jane's shoulder, who mimics her action because the man looks mortified. Besides them, Ilya watches them with lively eyes and a fleeting smile on his lips.

"I appreciate the affection, Hayden. Still, I'm not interested in you."

"I have a wife!"

"One that appreciates your lack of interest," Jackie says, winking at Ilya. "Anyway, David, how did you prepare this turkey? It tastes better every year."

Dinner continues with lighthearted banter, conversations about Jackie and Hayden's children, and the teenagers' plans for the coming year. Jane is grateful to no longer feel the uncertainty she felt a few months ago. Lily is a confident, radiant, and self-assured presence that allows her to hold her head high without fear of ridicule.

Throughout the evening, Jane discreetly watches her parents. Shane doesn't seem anxious about having to share the same space as Ilya; instead, he sees them on several occasions chatting casually or exchanging ideas with their friends. Jane watches them move around each other, like two interdependent planets that need each other's attention. Shane pours wine for Ilya, and Ilya keeps an eye on his father's seat to make sure no one else takes it when he gets up to go to the bathroom.

Lily seems to notice the same thing, because when Jane sneaks off to the kitchen for a breather, her sister comes skipping excitedly behind her.

"Fuck, did you see that? They love each other," Lily nearly shouts. "Officially. Like, love-love. I told you they've been texting. Papa can't stop grinning like an idiot every time he is on his phone."

"Yeah, I know." Her sister's enthusiasm is contagious. "What do we do now?"

"Ah, my dear Jane. One thing at a time. We have one week left together. The 'kiss the father of your daughters' plan begins as soon as this dinner is over."

"Sometimes you scare me. No, I'm lying, you always scare me."

"You asked."

Lily proposes the simplest plan imaginable: they'll both try to spend as little time as possible at home so their parents can have some time alone and make up for lost time. Her voice is clearly suggestive, so Jane pretends to vomit and grimaces.

"What are we going to do if we get back and they're, you know, *busy*? Ew, no, I can't, this is disgusting."

"It's just sex, don't be ridiculous. Haven't you ever done it? Wait, I know you haven't."

Jane immediately thinks of Mila's bright, promising laugh, but shakes her head and shoves her sister.

"Don't be such a jerk. It's disgusting because they're our parents."

"Look, Jane, that's exactly why we're going as far away as possible. In fact, we can go camping, just you and me. Quality sister time and all that shit. What do you say?"

"I hate camping."

"You're impossible," Lily huffs, but she has a smile on her face. "We'll rent a damn cabin, are you happy now? We'll say we feel nostalgic about the camp."

"Okay, then what?"

"Then our parents love each other, keep up!"

Jane rolls her eyes and wants to tell her sister that maybe they should let their parents go at their own pace, but they don't need to wait another seventeen years.

Just then, their grandmother walks into the kitchen. She looks them up and down and narrows her eyes.

"What are you two up to?"

"Nothing!" they both say in unison.

It's hardly their least suspicious moment, but Yuna just shakes her head and gestures for them to move.

"Everyone is leaving, girls, come and say goodbye."

Jane says goodbye to the Pikes with a hug and promises Arthur she'll visit his exhibition in the next few days. Lily says she's also going, even though she's clinging to her grandfather's neck. Everyone expresses their gratitude for the dinner, exchanging good wishes and making plans to see each other again soon.

When only the four of them remain, Shane's sigh is so deep that it echoes throughout the house.

"I don't know why I don't listen to my parents and let them host Christmas dinner. This is exhausting."

"You're being dramatic," replies Ilya, coming out of the kitchen drying his hands with a tea towel. "I know you liked it. Relax now, I made you some tea."

Jane exchanges a glance with Lily. Their parents speak to each other naturally, as if this were something they've done thousands of times. When Shane sighs again and sits down on the sofa to drink his tea, neither of them says a word.

"I know. I apologize for Hayden."

Ilya sits across from him and casually sips his wine.

"Don't worry, I've always known he's an idiot."

"He likes you, but he's still bitter about the way we broke up."

"I know he's your friend, and I appreciate his concern, but it's none of his business."

"I guess you both don't get along because you're both equally idiotic."

Jane snaps her mouth shut as her tongue goes dry because *what the fuck*. When did her parents become so... normal with each other? Lily gives her a look that seems to say "screw our plan, we're like ten points behind," but they can't verify that because that would mean meddling in her parents' lives (more than they already do) and they wouldn't come out looking good.

"Is everything alright?" Ilya asks, startling her.

Her sister's nudge tells her that he's talking to her.

"Uh, yes," Jane says, shuffling over to sit next to her father. Lily takes a seat next to Shane. "We were just talking about the days we have left together."

"We thought Jane and I could spend a few days together like sisters. You know, just the two of us."

The smile Lily gives their parents is adorable and certainly enviable, which explains why she's never faced any consequences in her life.

Ilya blinks and her dad looks confused.

"But your birthday—"

"Oh, we'd be back in time for our birthday," Lily nods, feigning innocence. "We just need to reconnect before we go our separate ways again."

It's ludicrous how much nonsense her sister spouts and how casually she does it, but what's even more incredible is how convincing it sounds.

When her parents' gaze focuses on her, Jane tries not to shrink back and imitates her sister's expression, but probably with much less success.

"Yeah, we want to relive our summer camp days. Go to the lake and all that."

"But it's snowing," Shane says, frowning. Shit. "It's dangerous."

"We'll go with Arthur, and I'll invite Mila. I've got some money saved up," her sister conveniently says because, holy fuck, the girl always has a trick up her sleeve. "It'll be our special time. It will only be two or three days. Please?"

Again, Lily looks at them with those big, pleading eyes. This is getting pathetic. Jane is tempted to back down, but the possibility that Mila might actually travel to Montreal, to her, before February stops her in her tracks.

"Fine," Ilya says, waving his hand as if to ask her to stop. "But Shane and I will go drop you off and pick you up. It's dangerous for you to travel alone."

"It wasn't dangerous for us to go to camp—" Lily starts, but Jane glares at her. "Right. Thanks, papa. We'll behave ourselves."

Jane smiles and rests her head on Ilya's shoulder.

Good, part one of the plan accomplished. She hopes her father is brave enough to go through with part two.

Whatever that means.

Ilya wakes up disoriented.

For a moment he doesn't recognize the ceiling above his head, but when he blinks and takes in the cold light coming through the window, he remembers that he has been sleeping in Shane's guest room for the last two days.

Jane and Lily left yesterday afternoon, so the long drive there and back was exhausting. He and Shane didn't have much time to talk because, due to the time difference and the change of scenery, Ilya fell asleep as soon as he got in the car and continued through the night.

Now, the house is completely silent.

Ilya sits on the bed, does his usual stretch, and lets his bare feet touch the cold floor. It's eight in the morning, but he's never been able to sleep in, so he puts on a sweater and opens his bedroom door.

Christmas morning was a quiet affair. He and Shane had decided via text that they wouldn't exchange gifts with each other, but would instead focus their energy on spoiling their daughters. Lily received—amid excited shouts—new material for making sculptures, while Jane got a history book that she had her eye on, according to her father, for months.

It was a dream come true to be able to share a holiday with her two daughters.

With Shane.

Ilya still finds it hard to believe he's in the house of the man he loves. Alone. He knows his daughter is involved in this somehow, but he decides it's not really that important. Especially when he walks into the kitchen and sees Shane, shirtless, preparing breakfast with his back to him.

Holy fuck.

Shane has always been incredibly disciplined. Ilya knows this because he met him years ago when he had a strict routine, both in terms of exercise and diet, and he knows it because he can see traces of this behavior in the way he does things.

That explains why the man has muscles as if he were still a professional athlete.

Shane has broad shoulders and thick arms that move to the rhythm of the invisible melody of his breathing. Ilya's fingertips itch to caress his smooth skin and see if it still feels the same as before.

When he turns around and Shane notices him, his eyes widen and he curses under his breath.

"Are you trying to kill me?"

"Sorry."

Ilya doesn't really feel sorry because now he can brazenly admire Shane's torso. Seventeen years have passed, sue him. He observes the curve of his hip, his defined musculature, and stifles a sigh. On his chest, Ilya notices two scars.

The sting of absence hits him again, but Ilya is working on it. He gives that area a little nod and asks,

"Was it painful?"

"Not really," Shane replies, still tense. Then he shrugs and turns his back to continue making his coffee. Ilya notices two mugs of steaming water. "It was ten years ago. My recovery was quick, and I was definitely grateful not to be using bandages anymore."

Ilya helped him put on the bandages to protect his chest more than once when he played hockey. He also helped him take them off, but he can't allow himself to think about that when he's wearing such thin pants. Not yet, at least.

"I'm glad. You always wanted to do it."

I'm sorry I wasn't there, Ilya doesn't say. Shane seems to hear it anyway because he smiles slightly.

"I know."

Ilya crosses the kitchen as Shane hands him a cup of coffee.

It seems like such a normal, casual, and ordinary morning that he's afraid of doing something wrong and destroying the relaxed atmosphere that keeps Shane's expression peaceful. Ilya decides to stay in safe territory.

"Have you spoken to the girls?"

"Jane sent me a picture last night of Lily, Mila and Arthur eating marshmallows, so they're having a great time."

"Good for them."

"Yeah."

Ilya remembers being seventeen and having fun with his friends. He remembers being seventeen and obsessed with Shane's freckles, the way his body glided across the ice, and the scornful looks that burned his extremities.

As if he were thinking the same thing, Shane laughs. It's a delicious sound. Ilya wants to hear it again against his lips, against his hands, against his chest.

"We never did anything like that. My mom would have had a fit if you and I had been in a cabin in the middle of nowhere," Shane says, shaking his head.

"I think she had a fit anyway when we had to tell her you were pregnant. Maybe the cabin thing was a better idea."

"Ha, ha."

Ilya takes a sip of his coffee, and he's not surprised that it's exactly how he takes it. He could describe the way Shane folds his clothes even ten years from now. He smiles.

"Thank you," Ilya says, hoping it sounds as sincere as he feels. "For inviting me. For being you and letting me be part of our family."

He has to admit he's a little obsessed with the word "family." Shane was all he had for a long time, so the fact that he can now share that concept with Jane and Lily is unbelievable.

The four of them fit together so well that it's hard to believe the time they spent apart.

Shane offers a private, gentle smile.

"You don't have to thank me. We both messed up, you're not alone in this."

"Still, thank you."

"Okay, stop saying that because you are freaking me out," Shane says. "What do you want to do today? I don't have to work, we can do whatever you want."

Ilya raises his eyebrows.

"Careful, Hollander, that sounds like you're asking me out on a date."

"You wish."

Shane looks relaxed, comfortable in the privacy of his home. They share a knowing silence as Shane finishes preparing breakfast. Then, they eat exchanging ideas of things they could do, but ultimately decide the snow is too deep to go out and they prefer to stay home.

Ilya has to stifle the feeling of loss when Shane puts on a shirt.

The day passes too quickly for his liking. They talk, exchange stories, and play a ridiculous board game that Ilya doesn't understand, but decides to give it to Shane anyway.

Ilya listens to Shane talk about Jane and the fears he experienced raising her. His voice is intimate, caramel melting in the space they share. Then it's Ilya's turn to confess all the mistakes he's made with Lily. Shane listens with his eyes fixed on him, hanging on every word that rolls out of his mouth.

It's an indescribable feeling having Shane so close. Ilya can smell the scent that emanates from his skin and hair every time he moves, piercing his nose painfully. He needs to be closer. Closer. Always.

When Ilya looks out the window, dusk engulfs the outside world. Shane's fireplace warms his legs when he stands beside it. The fire dances before his eyes, simple and uncompromising.

During the months Ilya spent away from Shane and Jane, he dedicated himself to confronting every pathetic thought that crossed his mind and steered him away from the idea of fighting for Shane. Why would he, when he had already ruined everything they had built years ago?

The most certain conclusion he reached was that he loved him. That he still loves him.

Ilya is not chosen by others. He knows it. Ilya works hard and earns a place in people's lives if they let him, but he's aware that it's not a choice others make willingly. He made peace with that many years ago; it doesn't hurt like it used to. That's why he strives every day to be better. For his daughters. For Shane.

Does Shane want to be his friend? Ilya could do that. He does. He answers his messages and keeps the conversation friendly because he doesn't want to push Shane away, not when he's just won him back.

But Ilya can also fight to see him smile, to hear his laughter again. To feel his body heat warm his soul once more, even if it's the last time.

He can fight to make Shane love him in some way.

"Are you okay?"

Shane's voice is a low rumble in his chest. Ilya stops looking at the fire to focus on him. His dark brown eyes seem to smile at him.

Ilya remembers the first time he saw Shane's eyes across a crowded room. It was as if a spotlight shone down above their heads, shining on the boy he would love for the rest of his life. He's not a boy anymore. Shane has thick arms and an imposing, confident, and welcoming presence. He is an adult, a man, the image of a beacon of light pursuing his dreams and aspirations.

Ilya exhales.

"Yes."

Shane doesn't seem sure of his answer, but he nods.

Before he can stop it, Ilya takes a step towards him. His palms grow unbearably hot when Shane doesn't step back.

It's magical, really.

Ilya doesn't believe in fate. He chooses not to believe because it pains him to think that the universe allowed such horrific things to happen to his mother, and it breaks his heart to think about his father and brother. About the cruelty of it all.

However, when Shane tilts his head, amused by something Ilya can't quite grasp in the electricity surrounding them, Ilya silently thanks the force that put a man like Shane in front of him.

So beautiful.

So strong.

So wonderfully kind.

So infinitely his.

"I love you."

These are words that Ilya's mouth knows perfectly. He has spoken them in his sleep, in the distance and in the intimacy of closeness, in the past and, hopefully, in the future.

It used to terrify him. Ilya can't wait to say it again.

Shane's eyes widen and his breath catches in his throat.

"I love you," Ilya says again, taking another step towards him. "Always."

"Well, shit," Shane murmurs in a panic, but Ilya knows him well. He waits a moment, and the man says, "I didn't expect this when I said we could play two truths and a lie."

Ilya smiles.

"I know all your lies. I think I'm more interested in your truths." He takes another step forward, and Shane raises his eyebrows, looking impressed.

"Were you reading a book about how to flirt?"

"No."

"Well, maybe you should write this down because it's working."

Ilya wants to tell him he's a ridiculous man and he hasn't changed one bit in all these years, but Shane's lips capture his and steal his words.

It's like being born again.

Ilya wraps his arms around Shane's waist and pulls him closer until he can't take it anymore. His mouth is warm and wet, familiar and known; it's a messy, open-mouthed kiss, it ignites every fiber of his body and sets his soul ablaze. It's an old pattern, one Ilya could never forget. He moans when Shane's hands tug at his hair, and slips his hands under the man's shirt to caress his smooth skin.

He knows exactly how Shane likes to be kissed.

Quickly, Ilya grabs him by the thighs and lifts him into the air, carrying him to the sofa. The sounds Shane makes against his mouth are delicious and Ilya drinks them in one after another, greedy to get more. It's a hungry, desperate kiss, eager to continue until his face aches and he's breathless.

He can't believe seventeen years have passed.

Ilya can still map Shane's mouth, and he does so without any shame when the man beneath him gasps.

"Wait," Shane breathes hoarsely, cupping his cheeks in his large, warm hands. "Stay."

Ilya blinks, panting, confused.

"I'm not going anywhere."

"No, I mean now. Tomorrow. The day after. Stay here. Or I'll go there. Ilya, I—," Shane's voice sounds choked and desperate, mangled by more than a decade of loneliness. "I won't be able to bear it if I see you walk through that door without knowing if you'll come back. I can't. I—"

Tears stream down his face, and Ilya brings his lips close to kiss each one. They taste of hope and affection, but also of the fear that lingers within him.

"I love you so much that sometimes I think I'm going to die," Shane's whisper breaks on the last syllable. "It's too much."

Ilya captures his mouth in a wet, hungry kiss, seeking to remind him that fear runs through his blood too. That it runs through their history and revolves around their mistakes, but that it also keeps them alive.

"I love you too. We can do this together. We are a team, right?" Ilya murmurs against his lips. "You can't die now."

"Fuck you. You can't tell me what to do."

Ilya laughs, happy and free.

"And you have the nerve to wonder why Lily is dramatic."

Shane kisses him again. And again. And again. And again. Ilya enjoys the warmth of Shane's body against his and wants to merge with him until there is no separation between them.

The overwhelming feeling of reunion fuels the fire within him, and Ilya gives in to everything he's longed for years.

Always.

A few hours later, as Shane holds him tightly against his chest and absentmindedly strokes his back, Ilya thinks about how lucky he is. About the courage of his life partner and how fortunate he is now that they can breathe the same air again.

"I was serious," Shane says suddenly. Ilya lifts his head to meet his gaze. "You and me."

"I know."

"If we're a team, I don't want to guess whether you're on my side or not."

"I know. You won't have to," Ilya agrees, squeezing his side. He likes this Shane, determined about what he wants. "What do you think of New York?"

"New York?"

"Svetlana needs a base in the city. I'm moving in with Lily next year because that was our initial plan, but she'll be staying in the city with Jane. My idea was a house in a quiet, more private location."

Shane blinks, a little confused, and then opens his eyes wide.

"Oh."

"Yes."

"You're asking me to move in with you."

"I would also ask you to marry me, but I have a feeling that would scare you more than anything else."

Shane shakes his head in a repetitive motion. Then, he gives him a light tap on the chest and grabs his shoulders to look him straight in the eyes.

Ilya thinks there's no one more beautiful than him.

“Shut the fuck up.”

“I will not. Not about this, at least,” Ilya says. He gives Shane a long and slow kiss and smiles. “I’ll settle for this for now. I know you have your own life, and I’m not asking you to change it. Just know that I’m yours to decide whatever you want.”

The man looks at him, completely still for a few moments, and when his body begins to tremble, he nods and kisses him again.

“I’m yours too,” Shane whispers back.

“Thank fuck.”

After long, lazy minutes, Ilya falls asleep with Shane's mouth on his and his heart beating against his chest. When he closes his eyes, he can only see a promising, happy future filled with Shane and their daughters.

Family.

Finally.

EXTRA - MONTREAL, AT NIGHT

Lily is furious. Her ass is frozen, she can’t see shit and the key doesn't enter in the lock of Shane's house, but that's not going to stop her.

"Lily, wait," Jane's desperate voice follows her from several feet behind. When she stops beside her, her sister touches her arm, but Lily shakes it off. "It's not what it looks like."

“It's exactly what it looks like,” Mila says with a bored tone. "Why do you have to be such a dick?"

“Oh, I’m a dick because you jumped on my sister when I explicitly told you not to.”

Lily might admit she was a bit dramatic. Making Arthur drive her home in the middle of the night wasn't exactly a well-thought-out decision, but Lily is angry. Very angry.

At least Jane looks guilty.

“To be fair, I jumped on your friend,” her sister says.

Lily grumbles in frustration until the stupid key goes into the lock and pushes the door open.

“I don’t fucking care. There are codes. Codes! Do codes mean nothing to you people?”

It's dark, but Lily enters Shane's living room followed by her sister and her friend. Yes, she's making a scene, but Jane doesn't understand. Lily isn't going to let Mila break her heart because between the two of them, Lily is going to choose her sister, and then her friend is going to be sad and—

Lily stops abruptly and Jane bumps into her back.

"Fuck, what happened?"

All the bad thoughts flooding Lily's mind fly out the window and are replaced by a million bursts of joy.

His father is on the sofa, shirtless, hugging an equally naked Shane. They sleep peacefully.

Oh, my fucking god.

Jane sees the same thing as her because she gasps and covers her eyes despite the darkness.

"Jesus."

Lily wants to scream, but if she does, she'll wake her parents and ruin this lovely moment. She settles for a quiet squeal and wraps her sister and friend in a hug.

Holy shit, this is the best day of her life.

"I can't believe my plan worked," Lily whispers in a choked gasp. "Perhaps this is what I should do with my life. Dedicate myself to making plans and helping others."

"One in a million. You definitely don't have good odds."

Mila's tone is resentful and angry, but Lily doesn't care. She's too happy to be mad at her.

"Okay, look," Lily says. "I'll bless this union because this is the best day of my life, but you're forbidden to break up."

Sometimes she is surprised by her own kindness. Mila's frown deepens.

"Who died and made you queen of the world?"

"I don't care, I'll take that option," Jane says with a wide smile, hugging her sister and shaking her, still surprised. "Are you watching them? They love each other. Fuck! I'm so happy."

"You guys are weird," Mila grumbles.

"Oh, we know," Jane and Lily say in unison.

They both smile and hug each other again.

Lily still can't believe it. Happily ever after and all that crap.

She loves them *so* much.

Chapter End Notes

aaand its finished !!! thank u all for reading and keeping me company and this wild (and fast lmao) ride. I really appreciate all of you comments, kudos and bookmarks. thank u again!! and im sorry for my grammar mistakes lol
see u soon!! xoxo

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