

you, as my weakest point.

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by [hcneymooners \(romqntics\)](#)

Summary

Ilya was looking away from the garden, away from their daughter, and at him. It was his full, unmediated attention that Shane had spent years learning to receive without deflecting, which he had never mastered and probably never would. It was a great deal of attention. It had always been.

[...]

"She is like you," Ilya said, into his hair. "In here." Shane felt, rather than saw, the gesture—Ilya pressing a hand briefly to his own chest. "The way you were."

"I wasn't—"

"Да, детка. You were." Shane huffed out a breath, and Ilya squeezed the side of his stomach with amused affection. "When I was trying to find you, you were just like this: present and also somewhere very far away, so careful with everything, and impossible to reach unless you wanted to be." A pause. "It took time. You needed time, a lot of it, and I had to trust that. And eventually, I found you."

His voice lowered, guttural. "And I will *always* find you."

★

ilya, shane, & their middle daughter—as seen by each other.

Notes

this entire premise was entirely inspired by artifice's wonderful paris review-styled fic in which ilya mentions gleefully that he is a "boring grandpa" along with shane, and i couldn't stop thinking about them with a middle child—specifically a daughter. this entire thing is enormously self-indulgent and ridiculously ornate and was also a bit inspired by the scene in sofia coppola's marie antoinette where she's trying on shoes and you see a pair of converse.

as a youngest child, i think middle siblings are very special, and of my family i'm the closest to mine.

thank you for giving this a chance, thank you again to the talented gem that is artifice and their work, and i'll see you soon. x

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

- Inspired by ["Ilya Rozanov, The Art of Fiction No. 381" - The Paris Review No. 390, Summer 2060](#) by [artifice](#)

Mischa had been asked before which of her fathers she was most like, and she wished they would ask again, if only so that she could take them to now. She saw most of herself in the way her *Iiana* drove their butter-yellow convertible recklessly down the winding strip of pavement the villa host had generously called a road—coastal pines blurred into a long green smear on either side, the salt coming off the sea in waves even this far from it, the sun doing what the French sun always did: making everything look unreal and slightly overexposed, like living directly inside one of those overpriced postcards you could find in any street shop, everything a hair too bright—but found that the smaller, most private notion of herself was housed in the flutter and spasm of her Dad’s hands alongside the console as he rocked to-and-fro with every other wild turn.

At one point he placed a calloused hand over his eyes, two long fingers descending like spider’s legs to rub avidly at the bridge of his nose. Mischa found herself there, too: the anxiety, the push down, the whitening of skin as the blood abandoned it, the flush of color as it all spilled back in—red and wet, held back by a layer of tanned, freckled skin. The heat here had a gravity attached to it that was much different from their winter home in Ottawa, thick and golden, and faintly floral, with bougainvillea climbing every white wall they’d passed since Nice. Mischa idly watched her Dad absorb it from the backseat, behind the dark perch of her sunglasses.

He’d been having a time of it lately. Last night, before ensuring that Mischa and her siblings were packed appropriately (Irina, the youngest, had sobbed at not being able to take the new cream-colored puffer *Iiana* had gotten her for Christmas, the bows all done up around the collar so she could simply slip into it as it was meant to be) he’d made an off-hand comment to his husband that he wished for *once* he could stop thinking. His mind had been going nonstop, cluttered since they’d booked their annual familial vacation, and he just wanted to silence it for only a second, maybe a minute.

Mischa had known what her father was going to say before he had even said it.

“We will pile in car together and drive somewhere. Very dangerous, very fast with top down. Best way not to think.”

It did what it was supposed to do: it made her father laugh. *Iiana* took great pride in making her father laugh; his face got an odd glow to it when he was successful, and she suspected he felt as clever as she did whenever she got a question right underneath the bright gaze of the woman who instructed her American literature course.

Her father couldn’t help his reasoning; it was in his blood. Ilya Rozanov had always loved the road—the only thing that could ever rise above it was his trio of children, Anya I (†) & II, and his husband—and so had become the fastest driver in the world. Shane Hollander, hockey player extraordinaire, had chosen the ice. How they had chosen each other baffled nearly everyone, Mischa included.

She could smell the mix of their colognes, which she found more romantic than she would’ve found on anyone else (biased, always): strawberry, leather, musk—all of this her Dad—, then plum, amber, and a dry adult vanilla; sandalwood with a soft, tremoring blossom of Turkish

rose—all of this *Иана*. In her more sentimental moments, Mischa wanted to smell this mix forever, live in its cloud. At her worst, she wanted to smell anything but.

Mischa was Mischa to most (Misha to *Иана*, he *refused* the ‘c’), Mimi to her grandparents, and Ella to a girl at her boarding school who came very close to being her best friend. And Mischa was Mishaela Rose Wren Hollander-Rozanov to the world, gifted and talented, the second daughter in a famous trio of siblings, the middle child who settled tepidly into the background of most things, and an occasional tennis star.

(*Why must I have such a long name?* she’d once bemoaned to her grandpa.

So you have at least two other people to be, Yuna had answered, overhearing them, and Mischa had liked that.)

She was preceded by her brother, Alexander Ymir Hollander-Rozanov, and followed by her sister, Irina Svetlana Lane Hollander-Rozanov (I mean, honestly), and Anya—their American Bully, who was really Anya II but was never called anything other than ‘непослушная девочка’ or Anya, as if the first hadn’t existed at all.

Alexander and Irina looked most like the people who’d been used to surrogate them, people her fathers loved: Rose Landry and Svetlana Vetrova. Alexander had stolen the curls straight from Aunt Sveta’s head, and combined with the dark, doeish look he’d borrowed from their father, he was a well-desired hearthrob at twenty-three. Irina leaned more toward Ilya in looks at thirteen, blonde hair a spill of wheat across her shoulders, nearly to her back, and gemlike blue eyes with a small smattering of moles close to her lips and across her right cheek, but her mouth and smile spoke to Aunt Rose—especially when she laughed. Whenever Mischa made the observation, everyone acted as though she was only being silly, and Mischa felt the crack run down the middle of her cleave her further in two.

Because Mischa—well, Mischa. She looked nothing like someone her family loved, and everything like the donor they had chosen within the lull between births, between oldest and youngest, and on the worst days, it nearly tore Mischa apart.

Mischa had a strong nose, straight and Roman and slightly too assertive for her face, which had not quite grown into it yet and perhaps never would. Her hair was dark brown, not the warm brass of Aunt Sveta’s curls nor the chocolate of Alexander’s when he let it grow out, but a flat, severe color that amassed splinters from sitting on the fence between black and brown, a shade that swallowed light rather than reflecting it; she wore it long and unstyled because she could never decide what to do with it and indecision was easier than choice. She had her fathers’ height but not their build; she was narrower, longer, her limbs imbued with a length that only ever made her feel ungainly off the tennis court and purposeful on it.

Her eyes took first as the strangest thing about her: light enough to be near a mistake, slightly animalistic, hazel-green-sometimes-yellow, and slightly too pale against the warm olive of her skin, which tanned without effort every summer until it was highly evident that she’d been assembled from a different palette than the rest of her family. In photographs, she was striking. Mischa knew this the way she knew most things about herself: at a clinical distance, without it helping at all.

The wind was pulling her hair across her face now, the convertible cresting another hill, and below them the sea appeared for just a moment—flat and silver-blue and enormous, a long worldly lung with salt breath—before the road curved again and swallowed it. Mischa reached up and pressed her hair back with one hand, contemplating using her sunglasses in place of a headband. *Iana* glanced at her in the rearview mirror and offered a toothy smile.

For a moment, she returned it, a small, toothless, flattening stretch of a usually full pink, and then Mischa looked away first, as she always did.

The fight about the rooms was not, technically, a fight.

This was because Mischa did not fight; certainly not in the way Alexander fought, which was loudly and with historical grievance that always inspired a headache in one or two of them, and certainly not in the way Irina fought, which was with her whole body and an outpour of adolescent tears honed with practice that made *Iana* go slightly grey. Instead, Mischa simply assessed the situation, determined the path of least resistance, and took it, which everyone mistook for graciousness and which was actually just self-preservation.

Mischa was not necessarily a very gracious person. She only cared very much about the people she loved, and if you weren't blood of her blood, this meant you had to go through a process that was intensive and entirely unnecessary, according to her third trial therapist, and signaled a lack of trust in other people. However, it worked.

All of her closest friendships were the best ones, and rarely fell through.

The villa was pink. This was the first thing. It was pale pink, like the inside of a shell was pale pink, that deep, impossible blush, so warm and nearly honeyed, that appeared painted on meticulously by someone who had vivid opinions about beauty and desire to have it around always, no patience for subtlety. It sat right at the water's edge with ease, the foundation settled in a way that spoke to a firm decision to be there, made centuries ago, and so the sea had arranged itself accordingly.

There were iron balconies laced with bougainvillea going orange at the tips, an odd twist of a friendship bracelet. There were stone steps that descended directly into the cove in several places, sometimes juxtaposed against pines bowing overhead, cutting the late afternoon light into long slanted pieces that fell across the terrace. It all looked like something out of a painting, which, Mischa would discover by evening, was because they *were*: she found a print of this precise view in the upstairs corridor. She could picture some Belle Époque watercolorist waking wildly from an afternoon slump, standing exactly here, seeing exactly this, and deciding it was worth keeping.

The host had met them with barely concealed excitement, though Mischa found it to be closer to that of someone sharing something they loved without wanting to show how much they loved it, rather than that of someone recognizing either of her parents. The tour was given

quickly, with warm precision and the studied neutrality of a person who had done this many times and still hadn't gotten used to it.

The villa slept eight. There were four bedrooms on the upper floor and a fifth on the lower, the smallest, which had a view of the garden rather than the sea and a window that caught the morning light instead of the evening. But they had not yet gotten to the rooms, because first there was the matter of the car.

Iana had parked at the top of the drive just like he parked everywhere else, which was with complete confidence and mild illegality. The convertible sat angled across the gravel as though it had arrived mid-thought, a coy scoop of yellow. The host had looked at it briefly ("Oh, did you rent?" "No," Ilya told her, his mouth slightly twisted at the thought, the skin around his nose already peeling. Mischa watched her Dad hide a smile, and remind his husband to put on sunscreen when inside) and chose, wisely, to say nothing.

The boot was a true exercise. Mischa's bag was on top because she had packed last and packed least—a single structured duffel, vintage Ralph Lauren in a dark olive canvas, one that rolled into itself for the return journey, with her tennis racket case buckled alongside it, the chestnut leather gleaming. Beneath that: her Dad's suitcase, which was a matching set in navy blue with brass fittings that he'd had since before she was born and maintained with a fidelity that bordered on sentimental, packed with the methodical precision of a man who wrote multiple lists before deciding on the best one and then checked it. Beneath that: *Iana's* suitcase, which was enormous and black and had a crack along one wheel from some altercation in an airport he refused to discuss, stuffed so full that it required a particular technique to open safely, and which contained, she knew from experience, at minimum four things that had nothing to do with a beach holiday.

Mischa didn't understand anything of his penchant for excess when packing, but one night, while creeping to the kitchen for some warm milk, she saw him lift her father rather dramatically and plop him on the top, claiming that the suitcase could only ever close with the weight of a beautiful, beautiful man to assist it. She hadn't minded as much after that.

Beneath *that*, wedged into the corners with the specific chaos of someone who had packed in fifteen minutes and in high emotion: Irina's two bags, one a large red hardshell printed with a pattern of white daises that she'd had since she was nine and refused to retire, the other a newer sage green tote overflowing with things that hadn't fit, including the sleeve of the *exact* cream puffer she had been told *not* to bring and had brought anyway, poking out from the zipper, slightly deflated and flailing through the teeth like some sad animal.

Alexander, thank God, had chosen to arrive separately. He came only with a rolling carry-on in slate grey and the expression of someone who had learned, over twenty-three years, that the best time to involve himself in the family luggage situation was never.

Mischa handed bags down from the boot one after another, humming lightly, dressed in the air of someone who regularly appointed herself to the least desired tasks before anyone could make a mountain of it. Her Dad took each one with a nod of thanks and stacked them on the drive. *Iana* made a gesture toward helping and then was distracted by the view and drifted toward the balustrade overlooking the water, shading his eyes, which was so exactly him that Mischa felt something loosen in her chest, the last of the drive unknotting.

"Sasha," Irina said, from somewhere behind her, in the tone that meant she was building toward something, "you're not *seriously* going to try for the big room."

"I'm twenty-three," Alexander said. "I think it makes the most sense."

"And I'm *thirteen*! I have needs."

"What *needs*?" Alexander echoed, and the disdain dripping from the last bit made Mischa bite the inside of her cheek lest she make it any worse.

"Needs, Alexander."

"Right. That's not any clearer and —"

"I have a whole routine. I need the light! You know this!"

"You sleep until *noon*."

"For my *skin*."

Mischa passed a bag to her Dad and continued to keep quiet. She had learned, years ago, that the fastest way to end a room argument was to remove herself from it.

"Mischa," Irina tried, pivoting with the instincts of someone who had identified the most useful person in any situation since roughly age four. "Tell him. Tell him about my routine."

"I'm not involved," Mischa said.

"You're *always* involved, you're the reasonable one—"

"That's not the compliment you think it is."

Alexander had already gone inside. Irina made a sound of profound injustice and followed at speed. Above them, briefly, there was the thunder of footsteps on old stone floors, a door, a counter-claim, another door, and then...silence, of a kind that suggested a *détente* had been reached or would shortly be imposed by someone with more authority than either of them.

Her Dad watched the doorway they'd disappeared into and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Every year," he grumbled, to no one in particular.

"Every year," Mischa agreed blithely.



Alexander had claimed the largest room before the host had finished speaking. Irina, who had been vibrating since Nice, at least had the foresight to wait until the host distributed the keys and drove off before flinging herself through the door of the second, and could be heard, from the corridor, exclaiming about the bathtub. That left Mischa and her fathers standing in the hallway considering the remaining three: two sea-facing rooms of roughly equal size, and the garden room below.

Mischa gets one," her Dad said, already moving toward the nearest door. "Obviously."

"Oh, that's okay. I'll take the garden room," Mischa said.

The silence was very brief. Her fathers exchanged a look over her head—she had been watching for it and caught it—the quick semaphore of two people who had been reading each other for twenty-some years and could conduct entire conversations in the space of a glance.

This one said: *Should we argue with her?* The response said: *You know how she gets.*

"Mischa —" her Dad began.

"I wake up early," she said, which was true. She liked to run in the dawn, get a taste of being out in the night without fear compounded by who she was and what could happen to her. "I like morning light, not evening. And I don't sleep well when I can hear the ocean."

The last part was a lie. She slept beautifully when she could hear the ocean. But it was a useful lie, one that gave everyone somewhere to put their hands, and her Dad's face did the thing she'd noticed it doing lately—a small, controlled flinch, something behind the eyes—before he nodded, coming in close to press a kiss to her temple, and carried her bag down the stairs himself, which she hadn't asked him to do, and which meant he knew.

He always *knew*. That was the thing about her Dad that was most inconvenient.

The garden room was pink, too, in the way the whole villa was pink. Mischa had to commend the decorators for managing to make it feel neither aggressive nor oppressively girlish, but chic in the manner of *Architectural Digest*, a spread of pleasantly pastel color that hinted at the absorption of decades of Mediterranean light.

The walls were peach, or maybe colored like the inside of one, just on the side of overripe. The rug was a faded Persian, blue and bubblegum, and accents of what might once have been gold, layered over warm stone floors that were cool underfoot even in the heat of the afternoon. The bed took up most of the room (if that was even possible. God, it was so spacious. Mischa was struck with the irrational idea that she may be at risk of getting lost in it), and was slightly larger than necessary, dressed in linens that were expensive to the touch. Beyond it, there was a window seat that looked directly onto the garden: lemon trees, lavender going lunar grey in the heat, a low stone wall beyond which she could hear but not see the water.

Mischa stood in the middle of it for a moment, which was the way she stood in most rooms, always taking inventory and filing it, deciding what it meant—and then she unpacked.

She was efficient about this, too. She had a system: three weeks of clothes for a hot climate, edited down to what she'd actually wear, which was less than people expected. The pistachio linen trousers she'd bought in London in the spring for a bit of fun. Three cotton shirts in gradations of white. A cover-up the color of cantaloupe with an open weave design at the sides that she wore either for beach-going or evenings at casual eateries when she wanted to look like she'd made an effort without doing the work of making an effort. Tennis things. Her favorite polka-dot bikini, cream and cornflower blue, the one her *Obaachan* had called ridiculous when they saw it in a shop in Tampa, which made Mischa buy it immediately; this she folded carefully and placed at the top of the drawer because it would be the first thing she needed.

She changed into it now, tied the strings the way she liked them, and settled the cantaloupe cover-up over the top. After came the cool slide of her Chaumet bracelet onto her wrist—honeycomb links, yellow gold, a diamond set into every third hex, thin as a thought—and felt, as she always did when she put it on, the specific warmth of being known by someone. Alexander had given it to her for her birthday, right at the midnight second that she'd turned eighteen, and had it engraved on the inside with a tender phrase from her favorite Rainer Maria Rilke poem "Going Blind" in a scratch of uneven Latin, which meant it was modeled after his handwriting.

She would be beyond all walking / and would fly.

She touched the inside of it once with her thumb, habit, and went barefoot up the stairs toward the sound of her parents.

She heard them before she saw them.

This was standard. Her fathers had a way of filling a space that had nothing to do with volume. Her *Iiana* was loud, yes, constitutionally, helplessly loud, but her Dad was not, and still between them they generated a soothing atmosphere that had enough presence to be a person in and of itself, that arrived before you did. She had grown up inside this pocket of affection and had spent considerable time thinking about what the skin of it was made of and had concluded that she couldn't fully account for it, which annoyed her.

The kitchen of the villa was enormous and old and a little impractical, which was to say that it was perfect. It had the high ceilings and arched doorways of the rest of the house, but the floors were oddly parquet instead of stone, worn smooth at the threshold. In the center rested a long wooden table clearly used for everything: cooking, eating, arguing, or possibly hitting a limb upon. Light came in from the enormous window above the sink, the glass allowing a shower of sun to tumble inward, the rays late and golden and falling across the wood at an

angle that spun everything into sacrament. It was all divine now, the marble cutting board, the loose heap of fresh fruit, the open bottle of rosé sweating gently beside the sink.

Her *Iana* was at the table, cutting a peach with the particular focus he brought to things he had decided to do well, which was most things. His large hands moved with the careful economy she associated with him at his best, unhurried yet exact. He was still in his driving clothes—linen shirt rolled to the elbows, the fabric scarlet like a freshly broken heart, black sunglasses pushed up into his hair like she'd thought of doing in the car—and he was talking, which he was *always* doing, the low continuous run of his voice filling the kitchen the way music filled a living room, more texture than content, something to exist inside of.

Her Dad was at the counter. He was opening a jar of something—olives, Mischa thought, or cornichons—while listening to her *Iana*'s chatter. He was slightly turned away, so you might think he wasn't paying attention, but upon closer look, you'd find his whole body oriented toward the sound, like a plant toward a window. He had taken his shoes off and changed into a shirt she knew to be old because of the particular way the fabric sat on him, soft and slightly misshapen at the collar, something you denoted as well-loved because it had become comfortable in a way that couldn't be replicated and had a slight fray at the hem, kept where others might've tossed it. He got like this on the second day of any trip, the version of himself that arrived after the version that was mildly anxious and triple-checking things and making sure everyone had their documents. The settled version.

She liked it.

"—*not* what I said," her *Iana* was saying. "I said you would enjoy it more if you stopped worrying about whether you were enjoying it."

"That's an incredibly annoying thing to say."

"*Da*, but true."

Her Dad set down the jar and turned to look at his husband, and his face underwent a certain turn of emotion, one Mischa had catalogued and had never found the right articulation for, the expression her Dad got when *Iana* was being absolutely insufferable and infuriatingly correct simultaneously, which was a condition of loving him that her Dad had clearly made peace with sometime in the previous twenty years and occasionally still resented. It was exasperation with its teeth pulled. It was helpless.

"You're a nightmare," her Dad said, but his voice was warm.

Her *Iana* looked up from the peach. He looked at his husband in the same way he looked at the road, like there was nowhere else worth going. It lasted less than a second. Then he set down the knife.

He crossed to her Dad in three unhurried steps (Mischa thought fondly of the way it mirrored his navigation of their house and every house they'd ever stayed in, like every inch of it was his) and came up behind him at the counter, pressing his mouth to the side of his neck. It wasn't a kiss exactly, more a placement, a burrowing, his nose dragging slowly through the

short hair just beneath his ear. Her Dad went stock still, as though he was trying not to show that something had moved him.

"Пахнешь морем," her *Пана* said, against his skin. His voice had dropped into Russian without effort, always a native no matter how long he spent away. *"Ты пахнешь как дом. Я люблю тебя такой. Мягкой и сладкой, с меньшим количеством мыслей. Мне нравится, что ты позволяешь мне иметь тебя такой. Мне нравится, когда ты позволяешь себе немного веселья, отдыха. Ты всегда заслуживаешь этого. Все, что ты хочешь."*

Her Dad turned his head just enough. He did not say anything. He put his hand over her *Пана's* hand where it had come to rest on the counter beside him, and that was the whole of it, the entire conversation, conducted in the grammar of people who had learned each other so thoroughly that words were sometimes just a courtesy; a routine done to ensure that occasionally they seemed like other people, normal people.

Mischa stayed where she was in the doorway. She had only understood the closing lines. *You always deserve it. Everything you want.* She remembered then that it had once been very hard for her parents to be together. She remembered it then, that this could still be new to them.

After a moment, *Пана* held up a peach slice, and her Dad took it from his fingers without discussion, eating it while he turned back to his task, a minuscule slip of pink erring outward as his tongue swept across the fruit. The whole exchange was so practiced that it had become indistinguishable from breathing. Still, Mischa lingered in the arch of the doorway and watched.

She was looking, she realized, for herself. She did this. She had always done this, catalogued the gestures and expressions and tendencies of the people she came from, sorting them, trying to trace the line from there to here. Alexander got the road, his need to be elsewhere at times. Irina had gotten the careful listening, that quality of attention her Dad had, the way he turned his whole self toward a thing. What had Mischa gotten? She had the efficiency, maybe. The assessment. The standing in doorways watching instead of walking through.

What she had not gotten—what she could feel the absence of with the same low specific ache she had felt all her life, sharpening in summer when they were all together and proximity made comparison unavoidable—was the ease of it. The way her siblings moved through this family was as though they were made of the same material as it.

But Mischa...well, Mischa. She moved through it like a guest who had been given every courtesy and could not shake the feeling that she had not been expected. She looked at her *Пана's* hands on the peach, pressing inward on its yellow-orange insides, and could not find them in her own. She looked at her Dad eating repeatedly from those fingers and recognized the gesture in her chest, the receiving and the trust of it, but could not locate it in her face or her body or anything someone else might see.

She was there. She knew she was there. She just couldn't always find *where*.

Her Dad reached across her *Пана* for the rosé without asking and poured two glasses and handed one back without looking, and her *Пана* took it without interrupting himself, and they were so unbearably themselves, so completely legible to each other after all these years, that

Mischa felt the crack again—the familiar one, the one she'd been living alongside long enough to know its shape; she pressed her back against the door frame and breathed.

The light through the kitchen window was going pink. Outside, she could hear the cove, the small patient sound of water reaching out with timid question and finding the answer of stone, and Irina somewhere above her laughing at something Alexander had said, their fight forgotten. Mischa remembered every row, even when she apologized or forgave.

The peaches on the board were a shade south of the color of the villa's walls, sometimes north. The rosé in the glasses caught the late sun and seemed to radiate, light and lambent. Mischa touched the inside of her bracelet with her thumb. She stayed along the arch a moment longer, indulging in being on the border of affection.

Then she went to swim.



Mischa sometimes wished that she were a mermaid, bottom body gone smooth and reptile, breathing nothing but salt and song and sun. She'd said as much aloud once, on a rare night where she'd had both of her parents to herself, and her *Пана* had made a great show of being grief-stricken, but her Dad had only looked at her for a long time and then said,

"Well, I hope you'd come and sing to me." And Mischa had felt so regretful of having said anything that she burst straight into tears.

It was one of the few times she'd allowed herself to be held, her limbs long and gangly and sticking out from the cradle of her Dad's arms like ousted thorns from the spine of a rose. Most of the time, she was loath to touch. But sometimes, she had moments in which she fashioned time for other people, for only a few minutes before she locked herself away again.

In this moment, the cove had only been hers for exactly eleven minutes before someone inevitably needed her for something again.

Mischa knew this because she had counted, floating on her back in the shallow basin the stone steps descended into, her ears beneath the waterline so that the world reduced itself to the muffled, interior sound of the sea moving against rock, a sound she associated with the perfect ephemeral quality of being completely alone, which she did not experience often and valued enormously. The water had been warm all day and was only now beginning to remember that it must be somewhat cool and compatible with the body within it. It was extraordinarily clear. Mischa could see her own feet below her, the lilac nail polish she'd applied on the train to Nice gone slightly ragged at the edges.

She floated. Above her, the sky had been woven into a waltz of color, scoring from indigo into the deepest blue that reminded her of Irina's eyes when she became incandescent with rage, then fell into a shade between that and raven's black, a held breath between afternoon

and dusk peppered with the beginning kisses of stars. The villa rose behind her at the waterline, pink walls bleeding deeper in the changing light, resolving into a hue more saturated, more itself. Somewhere above and to her left, she could hear Irina singing a wordless melody through an open window, tuneless and confident and bright like a nightingale, the singing of someone who has never been told to stop.

And Mischa would never tell her to stop.

Irina's voice was that of the work of a siren. Mischa closed her eyes. She let her sister beseech her not to leave.

She was not, technically, thinking about anything. This was an achievement she had to work for, harder than tennis, harder than the six languages she was assembling with the careful industry of a person who believed that the more ways you had to say a thing the less likely it was to stay trapped, and she was working for it now; consciously smoothing the surfaces of herself, pressing down the corners, doing the thing her therapist called *grounding* and she'd coined submarining—*submerging underwater in every possible sense*. The Rilke on the inside of her bracelet was just above the waterline. She was beyond all walking. She floated.

Eleven minutes.

After a long silence—Irina had dropped something, the clatter made Mischa suspect it was her personalized boar-bristle hairbrush, the handle as dark as Mischa's own hair—she shifted so that her shoulders were covered by salt and only her nose hovered above the surface. She turned easily from the villa, green-grey-yellow eyes gazing anxiously out to the far-off horizon where she could see a storm coming. Her gaze fell lower, to the sudden jut of cliff where the basin fell off into the infinite open hands of the ocean, and she thought of how easy it would be to fling herself over, to hit the waves with a spray of white and swim off under the guidance of the moon, body heeding no authority but that of the tide.

If there were truly no mermaids, then maybe she could be the first one. But who would love her enough to create more?

Her eyes smarted then, and she jerked further down until all the world was gone and there was just water and the sounds of muffled life, including that of her tears and breathing. She rose again, and the feeling, the marine call, the phantom of scales she could feel along the wide bowl of her hips—it was all gone. She kept her eyes closed.

Irina had begun to sing again, and Mischa let it drive her home. As if to strengthen the urge, her name was called.

"Миша."

She did not startle. She had learned not to startle. But her eyes opened, and she righted herself in the water, found the stone ledge with her foot, and turned to find her *Пана* at the top of the steps with the expression of someone who had not considered that he might be interrupting anything because he had never once in his life considered he might be interrupting anything. Or at least that was what Mischa saw at first glance. But her *Пана* was very good at pretending things were different than what they were, so by the time Mischa had

reopened her eyes she had missed the long flicker of worry that lapped across Ilya's face, like a flame warming him—that persistent sense of '*I must catch her before she's gone, I must carve out what is wrong, I must be with her, for her, save her*' that haunted him late into every evening.

He was not alone.

It took Mischa a while to understand it because the girl was standing slightly behind him so that it looked as though they were one strong line in the silhouette of a sole person, but then she shifted to the left, which was where you stood when you had been brought somewhere by Ilya Rozanov and were still recovering from the experience of him.

She was tall. Not unusually, but it was enough height to make Mischa register it more intentionally, a stretch of several inches that delivered a particular ease of posture, languorous and self-possessed. Her hair was very long and very dark, wine and bark—*nearly purple*, Mischa thought—and it fell straight past her shoulders with the artlessness of something that was routinely left alone to do what it wanted. Her skin was golden in the glow of the ocher of the bulbs installed neatly along the footpath; the light came close to oleaginous as it filtered across it. She had the luminosity of someone who tanned slowly and kept it for even longer.

She wasn't wearing much, simply a loose white shirt with its sleeve cuffs rolled up at the wrist and left unbuttoned over a thin one-piece whose color made Mischa think of a cup of charentais, and her shoes dangled from one hand, a pair of unsuspecting Neopolitan pink flip flops she'd removed for the stone path to better prevent an often common fall.

Mischa looked at her for approximately one second longer than she looked at most people. Then she looked at her *Iiana*.

"Five more minutes," she said.

"I have someone," he said, gesturing, as if she had not already noticed.

"I can see that."

"She is friend of Sasha's." He barreled over her response. "Sculptor, and sometimes harpist. He invited her; very beautiful here for someone who works with shapes and materials, he said, and I agreed with him, which is not always the case, so I am being generous." A brief pause in which he appeared to be congratulating himself privately for this. Mischa nearly laughed. "She is staying in the village. I found her at the steps."

The girl made a small expression that was not quite a smile but was adjacent to one. *A containment*, Mischa thought, the expression of someone who found things funny and had learned to be selective about when they showed it. She had very dark eyes and an extravagance of eyelashes, which gave her the look of someone partially stuck in a dream. Mischa observed this and then observed that she had observed it and moved on.

"Violet Chapman," the girl said to Mischa rather than about herself. Her voice was even and like water, running slightly low. "He found me at the steps"—a brief, dry emphasis on *found*, as though she were gently annotating his version of events—"because I was sitting on them

drawing the water and he came and looked over my shoulder for about four minutes before introducing himself."

"This is accurate," *Iana* confirmed, without embarrassment.

"God, I'm sorry," Mischa sighed. "He's like that."

"I am exactly like that," Ilya agreed. Then, as though this had all been a dressing for the thing he actually came down here to say, he turned to Violet with the air of a man rather pleased with himself. "This is my Misha. Second of three. She has read the most books and wins the most matches, and knows when everyone in a room is lying, usually before they do. So do not try to hide anything. It will not work." He said it with the simple amplitude of someone reporting an observable fact, the way he might say *she is eighteen* or *she has been swimming since four*. "She speaks—how many now?"

"*Iana*."

"Well, she is working on six. Very humble, you see, like my husband. She gets all the beauty from him, too,"—Mischa felt her stomach squeeze—"but do not tell him I said that, I pretend she gets it from me. She is perfect. You would get along. You have the same—" he made a gesture with his hand that described something she had no words for, a quality of attention or interior life—"the same thing. A good thing."

Mischa, still waist-deep in the water with her wet hair pushed irately back from her face and the cantaloupe cover-up abandoned on the lower step, felt the annoyance arrive first, as it usually did. She was accommodating. She knew this about herself. She was the one who took the garden room and unloaded the boot and removed herself from arguments so they might end faster, and she was very tired sometimes of being the one who made space, the one for whom the path of least resistance had become so habitual she sometimes couldn't locate where her preferences actually were beneath the pattern of yielding. She had not asked to be introduced to anyone. She had *asked for five more minutes*.

So, yes, the annoyance arrived.

But then her *Iana* said *my Misha*—no 'c' she knew as always, thought it truly made *no* difference in sound; she could not understand it—and she felt it dissolve, quietly, the way sea-foam dissolved at the skirt of sand, present and then not.

Because that was the thing about him, about the way he spoke about her. He did not speak about her carefully, the way people tended to speak about middle children, tiptoeing around or on top of them with that slight walking-on-water quality intended for the effort of trying not to leave anyone out. He did not qualify or distribute. When he spoke about her, he spoke about *her*, the whole of her, with the same bottomless confidence he brought to the road and sometimes the ice and always everything he had ever decided to love, as though loving her were not something that required maintenance or reminding but simply a condition he had woken up in one morning and never left.

My Mis(c)ha. Second of three. The one who.

She *had* read the most books (She was friends with her Dad on Goodreads). She *did* win the most matches. She *did* know when people were lying. She hadn't known that they had known this, too.

He said it to this stranger on the steps as though it were the most ordinary thing, as though of course you would want to know this about a person, as though of course this was where you began, and Mischa felt something in her chest quiver the way the water rippled while receiving a tremor from the shift of a tectonic plate.

She looked at him. Ilya was squinting slightly in the lowering light, sunglasses still pushed up into his hair despite the moon being quite visible, and he looked—he looked so much like her *father*, simply, irreducibly, in a way that she found difficult to articulate even to herself. Not handsome, though he was. Not famous, though he was. Just: her father. The person who had taught her to drive on an empty road outside of Montréal at three in the morning when she was fifteen and had told no one, who had appeared at the door of her room at boarding school exactly once, unannounced, on a gloomy, overwrought Tuesday, because she had sounded wrong on the phone. Her father, who had come up with little songs to sing her when she was three and four, because she couldn't ever go to sleep without them.

The paralysis was brief. It always was. She did not let it show.

"Mischa," she said to Violet, because it felt correct to reintroduce herself on her own terms. "He left out that he also tends to talk enough for both of you before even beginning to tell you his name."

"Oh, well, I must be special then," Violet said, her teeth flashing brightly as she laughed. "He told me his name immediately."

"He probably assumed you already knew it. Since you're Sasha's friend."

Something shifted in Violet's expression, the containment coming slightly undone, the laugh settling into the almost-smile from before, which became the thing itself, quick and real, there and then replaced. *She had a good face, arresting, like a princess*, Mischa thought, with the detachment she applied to aesthetics, the part of her that could admire a thing cleanly without it becoming complicated.

Strong brows. A jaw that would photograph well in profile. There was a smudge of something pale along her left forearm, chalk or clay or charcoal, the residue of whatever she'd been drawing at the steps, and she hadn't noticed it or hadn't minded.

Mischa looked at it for a moment too long. Her *Iana*, satisfied in the manner of a person who has successfully introduced two people and believes the rest will sort itself out, was already beginning to drift back up the steps toward the terrace.

"Dinner is in two hours," he said, over his shoulder, to no one and both of them. "Shane is making the thing with the tomatoes. No need to dress up."

"The thing with the tomatoes," Mischa repeated.

"You know the one."

She *did* know the thing. She looked back at Violet, who was watching her *Ilana* ascend the steps with the expression of someone recalibrating after an experience they had not been prepared for.

"He's always like that," Mischa said, because it seemed fair to offer. "You stop noticing eventually."

"I don't think I would," Violet said. She said it simply, without flattery in it, a matter of fact, a simple pure truth, one Mischa recognized the edges of because she said them in the same way herself. Then she looked at the water. "Is it cold?"

Mischa realized then that she was still in it. She should've gotten out to shake her hand.

"No," Mischa said. "It's perfect."

Violet set her shoes down on the lower step.

Mischa watched her and did not look away, and did not examine why, and the sun continued to slip away, far more interested in elsewhere. She wondered if Violet was the kind of person who preferred hugs to hands instead. She did not know why she was wondering what kind of person this woman was, let alone how to touch her.

Violet shrugged off her button-down and let it pool to the stones, swimsuit rising high along the strong crease of her inner thighs. Mischa let out a sudden rush of breath, which made Violet look over to her, and as Mischa felt the blood flood hot and red to her cheeks, she scrambled for cover.

She found herself frozen and floundering under Violet's dark attention, and after slapping her hands to her cheeks like a little mortified child, she dove back under the water.



She had meant to go straight down.

She really had. That was the plan: return to the garden room, rinse the salt out, change into something appropriate for a dinner with her family and their new guest, and present herself downstairs in a state that required no comment. She was good at this. She had been good at this since she was small, the art of arriving already composed, of giving people a version of herself that was complete enough that they didn't go looking for the seams.

She was damp still at her hairline, and she had a towel over one shoulder instead of around her at all. Her cover-up had dried stiff with salt. She had spent an unspecified amount of time after swimming sitting on the lower step of the cove watching Violet draw, which she had not planned to do and which she was not currently examining.

The corridor smelled of beeswax and a note that was floral and white, possibly Irina's seasonal perfume. It wasn't strong enough to properly identify, but it mingled with everything else around her to the result of a scent old and pleasant, the smell of a house that had been cared for by people who placed value in caring for anything.

The villa's upper hallway was long and narrow and warm, the stone holding the day's heat the way it was meant to, releasing it slowly into the evening. The print of the cove was here, the watercolorist's view from the terrace, and she touched the frame of it lightly as she passed. She was thinking about nothing in particular, which was to say she was thinking about several things she had decided not to name.

She heard the music before she saw anything.

It was coming from the gap in the door at the end of the corridor. Their parents' room, the largest one, the one Alexander had claimed with such velocity and then been gently and immovably displaced from by two people who had, between them, navigated more difficult negotiations than a twenty-three-year-old with territorial instincts. The door was not fully closed. It never was, in any house they stayed in; her Dad had a slight and unspoken anxiety about closed doors that no one mentioned and everyone accommodated, and so in every hotel room and borrowed villa and rented flat of Mischa's memory, their door had always been left ajar, a thin line of mellow light at the threshold.

There was jazz. A wail of vintage trumpet, crackling with the texture of old recordings where the sound had a crunch to it, like something being relayed through velvet, intimate and slightly worn. Another wail of trumpet. The silky splurge of a saxophone. Then the piano came in beneath it, hesitant and soft.

She slowed as she passed their door, then paused completely, drawn in despite her previous determination to be on her way down to her room to dress.

She did not mean to look. This was true. She was constitutionally averse to the vulnerability of other people, not because she didn't want it—she wanted it with a frequency and intensity that alarmed her—but because witnessing it uninvited felt like handling an heirloom that wasn't hers, a necklace glittering and rife with beauty that she was terrified of sending across the floor with an involuntary bout of clumsiness. And yet.

And yet.

Through the gap: the room was golden, awash in low light. The moon leaked in from the balcony through the long gauzy curtains her Dad had pushed aside, probably the moment they arrived, ignored for the view beyond the glass. He did this in every room, moved toward windows with the reliable instinct of something phototropic. She could probably bet thousands on the fact that his holiday-ready yoga mat was uncurled on the deck right outside of it.

The curtains were moving slightly in the sea breeze, two lovely shuddering columns of baby blue. Her *Iana* had his phone in his hand. He was doing something with it—adjusting the volume, she thought—and then he set it on the mahogany dresser and turned, uttering something to her Dad that she couldn't hear, and her Dad said something back, and then her *Iana* held out his hand.

Her Dad looked at it with raised brows; this was how he often looked at things her *Iana* offered him, with a brief, fond suspicion, as though checking for the catch. Then he took it, and her *Iana* pulled him in with the easy authority of someone who had been doing this for a very long time and never once found it less than necessary.

They were not doing any elaborate movements. They were just winding in large, meandering circles. She understood that it was more about the closeness. Slowly, in the small space between the end of the bed and the balcony doors, her *Iana's* hand at her Dad's back and her Dad's chin tipped slightly down toward his own shoulder, eyes closed, both of them turning in the patient way of people who have nowhere to be and have decided to let that mean they had to be here. Her *Iana* was saying something into her Dad's hair. Whatever it was made her Dad's mouth do the thing, the helpless thing, the one Mischa had labeled from the kitchen doorway and still had no words for.

Mischa stood in the corridor and watched her parents dance.

She did not mean to cry. This was also true, and somewhat more embarrassing, because she was almost nineteen and she had, she felt, a reasonable handle on herself in most circumstances. But there was something about the angle of them, the complete and unconscious sufficiency of it, two people who had found the frequency of each other after a great deal of difficulty.

She knew the shape of their story, not all of it, but enough, the way you knew the shape of something in a dark room by what your hands found, and she had been living inside it ever since she was small and new. She felt a sudden surge for her parents, who were dancing in their room before dinner because the music was good and because they wanted to, because they were still, after everything, people who wanted to.

Her parents, with their thoughts, feelings, and desires. Her parents, whom she loved so much, and looked nothing like.

She felt the crack, creeping and familiar.

She pressed her fingers to her mouth and breathed through it, but the breathing did something to her face, and *that* did something else, and then her eyes were wet, and she made a sound. A very small sound, barely anything, barely —

Her Dad's eyes flew open. He'd always been overly attuned.

There wasn't a dramatic gasp or run for the door as she'd dreaded. Instead, simply turned his head and saw her through the gap in the door, and his expression barely changed. There was just an odd collapse, like a building's new shape after an impact moved through it.

"Baby," he said, quietly.

Mischa took a step back. "Sorry—I wasn't— " She gestured vaguely at the corridor, the direction she'd been going, the destination she'd entirely had. "I was just passing."

Her *Iana* turned. He looked at her face and then looked at her Dad, and the look between them was very brief and contained a great deal of information and ended with her *Iana* doing the thing she might have expected, which was beginning to say something, probably something large and well-intentioned —

"Ilya," her Dad said. Just that.

Her *Iana* closed his mouth.

Her Dad had already crossed to the door and opened it fully, and Mischa took another step back on instinct, which she immediately recognized as the thing she always did and hated, the reflexive retreat, the making herself smaller, making herself easier to miss—and her Dad simply reached out and took her gently by the wrist and that was enough, that was the whole of the gesture, no further persuasion.

She did not sob. She was deeply opposed to sobbing. What she did was stand in the doorway of her parents' room with her Dad's hand around her wrist and her face twitching and jerking through motions of grief she couldn't entirely control, and her Dad waited, with his brand of understanding he had that was different from other people's because it was meant just for her.

He understood, she thought, *nearly everything about her*. But not this, this thing she refused to let ruin them, nor the specific weight of it, the donor's face hunted her down in the mirror, the crack she'd been living alongside since their first Christmas pictures, where the photographer had jokingly called her the black sheep, much to *Iana's* rage.

But she knew that he knew what it was like being overwhelmed by love, the not knowing what to do with the evidence of it, that he understood from the inside, and it was the most comforting thing she knew about him, and it was all that mattered now.

He drew her in, and she let him, her forehead against his shoulder, his hand moving once from her wrist to her back, a simple flat pressure, present and still.

"I'm fine," she said, into his shirt.

"I know," he said, and his hold tightened.

"It's stupid, really. So silly."

"It's not."

Her *Iana* appeared in her peripheral vision, hovering in the way of someone who was extremely adept at most things and found it frustrating when he was not. She had always been a genuine exercise in self-governance for him. He had his arms loosely crossed, and his expression was what others would think to be annoyance, but she knew to be anxiety.

She looked at him over her Dad's shoulder.

He uncrossed his arms, pressed two fingers briefly to his lips, and pointed them at her. It was an absurd gesture. She felt her throat stumble over a watery tune that was almost a laugh.

Her Dad pulled back just enough to look at her, then reached up and pressed his thumb below her eye, once on each side, collecting the damp from her lashes.

"Come here," he said. "I'll do your hair."

Mischa blinked. "*You'll* do my hair."

"I used to do it when you were small." He was already steering her gently toward the chair at the vanity, which was a large and beautiful, highly impractical piece of furniture that belonged to this room and this room only. "You've forgotten."

"I haven't *forgotten*." She hadn't. She remembered the drag of his hands in her hair, heavy and careful, better than she'd expected, given that he'd clearly read instructions somewhere first and was following each step to the 't'. "I just didn't think—I thought you didn't like it. The textures."

"I love everything that has to do with you," her Dad said, with such complete simplicity that it landed as something dropped from a height, "especially the things *you* like."

Mischa sat down at the vanity and looked at herself in the mirror, which she did not normally do at length, and then looked at her Dad's reflection behind her as he reached for the comb on the dresser.

"My dress," she said, because she needed to say *something*. "It's in my room, the one I was going to wear. The maxi —"

"Do not worry about that," her *Πανα* said, from behind them both, with the satisfaction of someone who has been waiting for precisely this cue. *He could be so theatrical*, she thought, her ribs expanding with the swell of affection.

He produced the box with full commitment, no preamble. It was a large, poppy red flat box of bamboo fiber with its inside packaged in a manner that spoke to considerable forethought and expense: heavy ivory card, a ribbon stained a wane thistle purple, a sprig of baby's breath tucked under the sizeable bow, because her *Πανα* had a sense of occasion that was entirely his own and he exercised it without apology.

He set it on the vanity in front of her.

Mischa looked at it. Then at him. "My birthday isn't for three days."

"I know when your birthday is," he said, in a tone that communicated mild offense at the implication that he might not.

"We leave the day after."

"I know when we leave also."

"*Иана*."

"Open it, Миша."

She looked at her Dad in the mirror. He had begun to work the comb through her hair, gentle at the ends first, and he met her eyes briefly and gave her nothing, which meant he'd known and had kept it, which meant this had been planned.

She untied the ribbon and lifted the lid.

The dress was a deep bruise of color, a rich abstruse pink that lived at the far end of rose, past blush, past petal, almost red but not quite, almost purple but not quite, entirely on its own. It was silk and dropped at the waist, hem cut in a bubble shape that required enormous confidence to produce, no ornamentation, nothing to hide behind, just the color and the short fall of it, and along the neckline, so subtle it was almost not there: the faintest thread of something gold, like a ley line.

It was bright and gamine and touched on the fact that Mischa liked to have fun when she dressed, like to be as beautiful and ridiculous as money could allow, when she recalled that she was allowed it.

Mischa touched the fabric. She could not say anything for a moment.

"Your grandparents chose the color," her *Иана* said. "I chose the rest." A pause. "Your brother said the neck."

She thought about her brother, strong and almost always gone, finding the time to weigh in on the neckline of her birthday dress in between planes, the Rilke in his handwriting on the inside of her bracelet. She thought about Irina singing through the window, pulling her back from the water. She thought about her Dad, remembering everything. She thought about her *Иана*, crossing the kitchen in three steps because the food was good and his husband was there, and why would you need another reason?

"You don't have to wear it tonight, baby. You can save it for your actual birthday dinner before we go, but we thought you might like to have it now," her Dad continued.

Still, she could not say anything.

She stood up from the chair and put her arms around both of them, one and then the other, and then somehow both at once in the ungainly way of someone who rarely did this and so had not gotten very good at the geometry of it. Her face pressed into her *Иана's* shoulder, and her Dad's hand was on her back again, that same flat, steady pressure.

She held on for a very long time.

Outside, the sea continued its patient work against the stone, and the jazz was still playing from the phone on the dresser, a more modern trumpet crooning to the three of them. The room was full of enough love to kill her, and the moonlight of the south of France in June,

and there were three days before her birthday, the last summer she would be this age, so Mischa held on.

interlude: shane.

The next few days were uneventful in a way they all needed.

News had broken via some rather unflattering pap shots of Mischa and Irina at the marina—Shane somewhere in the background, partially obscured by a fishing display, squinting—and so they had all turned their phones face down until it once again became the practical necessity their flight information hinged upon. This was the thing about Beaulieu-sur-Mer that Shane had loved since Ilya first brought him here, years before the children: it was small enough that the world felt genuinely far away. The village did not care who you were, and neither did their vaguely wealthy neighbors. It had been here longer than fame and was expected to outlast it.

He was on the veranda off the side of the house, in one of the wide wicker chairs that had been placed at an angle toward the garden, a cup of something that had been hot coffee an hour ago and was now room temperature in his hand. The loggia stretched long on either side of him, its vaulted ceiling keeping the afternoon heat at bay, iron lanterns hanging at intervals like dark fruit. Beyond the arches, the garden was dense and lush and drowsy with the sound of things growing: olive trees, something flowering that he hadn't identified, and somewhere in the distance the occasional declarative shriek of a bird that Irina had spent two days trying to locate and had not yet found.

He was watching his children, something he rarely had the opportunity for anymore.

This was something he had never entirely gotten used to, even now, even after nearly two decades of practice: the fact of them, the sheer improbable fact. Three people who had not existed and then did, who had arrived and immediately begun to become themselves with a thoroughness that still occasionally stopped him mid-room. Alexander was somewhere inside, he thought, or maybe he'd gone into the village to get his beloved steps in. Irina was on the lawn below the garden wall with her feet dipped idly in the mouth of an old, whispering fountain, reading something she'd tilted away from him when he passed earlier, which meant it was either very good or very inappropriate, possibly both. Christ, that girl.

And Mischa.

Mischa was at the far end of the loggia, in the chair nearest the garden steps, with her legs drawn up beneath her and her journal, navy leather with a spangle of silver stars, open across her knees. But she wasn't writing in it. Instead, she was watching Violet, who had arrived several minutes ago with a large canvas bag of materials, including a sketchbook with a spiraled spine that struggled to close, and had set herself up on the lawn below to draw with a quiet, concentrated attention that seemed to require no acknowledgment and received none.

Mischa simply watched, and Violet worked, and there was something between them that Shane could not quite put a name to from this distance, but recognized the shape of.

Shane felt his heart squeeze. His daughter was traveling somewhere beyond him so quickly, so on fire at the sparse age of eighteen. He had been watching Mischa for three days with the particular helplessness of someone who knew a thing was wrong and knew equally that saying so would accomplish nothing and possibly worse than nothing.

She was fine. She was, in every observable way, fine: she played tennis in the mornings and ran when she didn't, she ate voraciously and pretended that his various attempts at new recipes were good, complete with over-the-top "yummy" sounds, she was quietly funny at dinner in the way she always was. She had even been kind to Violet with a naturalness that surprised him, given that Mischa's kindness was usually a thing she rationed. She was fine.

But he had held her in the doorway of their room two nights ago, her face twitching through something she was trying very hard not to show him, and he knew what *fine* cost her, because he knew what it cost him, and the knowing sat in his chest like a stone he kept turning over.

"Любимый, why the face?"

He turned his head from where he'd propped it on his open palm and found Ilya standing at his shoulder with a glass of ice water beading with condensation, and the expression of a man who had been watching him for some time before announcing himself. This was not something Ilya did with most people, but he did it with him, and it still, after everything, managed to catch Shane slightly off-guard.

He accepted the glass. Ilya dropped into the adjacent chair, claiming territory, and looked out at the garden. His ears were going red. His shoulders, too, the skin across them just beginning to make its grievance known above the collar of his shirt. Shane would spend the better part of the evening with the aloe, and Ilya would submit to this after several minutes of grumbling; the routine surrender of a man who burned every summer without exception and accepted it as one of the fixed conditions of his own nature.

Shane reached out to the side so that their fingers could tangle together. Ilya lifted them and leaned in so he could press a long, dry kiss to the backs of their threaded hands.

"Mischa," Shane said. It was not really an answer to the question, but Ilya had not really needed one.

A silence. Ilya looked at her, at the end of the loggia with her little journal and her careful observation. Then he looked at Violet on the grass below, and then back at Mischa, and he continued to look back and forth avidly, which meant he was adding things up and arriving at a sum he found interesting.

"She is watching her," he said.

"She watches everyone."

"Not like that."

Shane's brow furrowed, and he looked again. Violet had set down her pencil and was examining something in the garden—a craggy slice of what looked like an old urn, Shane really hoped no one's great-grand-someone had been in it—and Mischa was watching her do it with the interest of someone who had forgotten, for a moment, to maintain any distance at all.

It lasted only a few seconds. Then Mischa looked back down at the blank pages balanced across her knees and wrote something, in quick, curling script. Shane felt the stone in his chest turn once more.

"Something's bothering her," he said. "And it's not about Violet. There's something else. She's been carrying it since before we left. I don't—" He stopped. He pressed his thumb against the frosted rim of the glass. "I don't want to push. You know how she goes when she feels pushed. But I hate it. I *hate it*. I *hate* not knowing how to—"

"Shane. *Любимый*."

He stopped.

Ilya was looking away from the garden, away from their daughter, and at him. It was his full, unmediated attention that Shane had spent *years* learning to receive without deflecting, which he had never mastered and probably never would. It was a great deal of attention. It had always been.

Then Ilya reached over and took hold of Shane's wrist and pulled tenderly. Shane allowed himself to be maneuvered with the mild resignation of someone who knew resistance was theoretical, shifting from his chair to climb into Ilya's lap in the loose-limbed way of long practice, the wicker creaking once in protest and then settling.

Ilya's arms came around him. His chin found the top of Shane's head.

"She is like you," Ilya said, into his hair. "In here." Shane felt, rather than saw, the gesture—Ilya pressing a hand briefly to his own chest. "The way you were."

"I wasn't—"

"*Да, детка*. You were." Shane huffed out a breath, and Ilya squeezed the side of his stomach with amused affection. "When I was trying to find you, you were just like this: present and also somewhere very far away, so careful with everything, and impossible to reach unless you wanted to be." A pause. "It took time. You needed time, a lot of it, and I had to trust that. And eventually, I found you."

His voice lowered, guttural. "And I will *always* find you."

Shane stayed silent, but a current ran down his spine, and subconsciously he bared his neck to his husband as if to let him know he'd won. A breeze blew through the olive trees, and he watched as Irina abandoned her book and dangled her hand in the fountain water, watching it ripple.

"She will come to us," Ilya said. "When she is ready. She knows we are here, even when she pretends she doesn't need us to be."

"What if she doesn't?"

"Then we make ourselves very obvious until she has no choice." He said it as if it were the most obvious choice in the world. "This is also a strategy. I have used it before."

"Oh, yeah? On who?"

A beat.

"On you," Ilya said.

Shane laughed then, against his husband's shoulder. The brightness of the sound surprised him, unexpected, and Ilya's arms tightened briefly around him in response, as though he was still, after all this time, pleased to have caused it.

At the far end of the veranda, Mischa had once again uncapped her pen and was writing something now, properly, with her normal focused velocity. She did not look up. Below her, Violet placed the shard of stone she'd been studying down, and with careful nonchalance, she began to sketch his daughter instead.

Shane watched her look up and down, taking in the angle of Mischa's jaw so that she could translate it to paper.

He thought: *Time, then.*

He thought: *Alright.*

He leaned back against Ilya's chest and let the afternoon settle inside of him. He squinted as hard as he could, and as if hearing his silent wish, Violet tilted her sketchbook just enough to the side that. Shane could see the curves she'd drawn, meant to be Mischa's nose.

No, he wanted to tell her, *it's a little longer than that.*

But maybe that was the point sometimes, to get it wrong.

Turning nineteen felt like both nothing and everything.

It was a transition age, somewhere older than eighteen and feeling less like an adolescent than any other "x-teen" year had, but terrifying in the sense that you were arriving at twenty and soon to make decisions that would show up in your thirties and either make or break you. A dream that everyone was having all at the same time.

Despite it all, Mischa was ridiculously excited.

Birthdays were special; they always had been. And none were more special than Mischa's, because no one loved them as much as she did. She had parents to thank for that. They had always made such an event of it, so she never became familiar with the haunting sense of being old or the grief that could arise on the day of.

It had never really been about the parties; it had always been about the people who loved her and who were happy to be there. It had always been about her posting about it for days after, reliving and reaffirming the memories. It was about the late birthday messages that she'd received because people were busy, but not too busy to forget her.

It was about being remembered forever. It was about being loved forever. It was about leaving and being missed. It was about 'this made me think of you'. It was about being greeted with a hug and an extravagant cake that no one finished, and having endless pictures being taken, even when you were tired.

It was about finding out that you had weight, that you were someone people sought after in your wake.

She finally came up the stairs at seven-fifteen.

As a result of her excitement, she'd spent longer than she intended on her makeup, because there was a certain degree of attention required for putting it on, the way it had to be placed with enough confidence to read as beautiful rather than disastrous, and Mischa did not do *anything* half-heartedly. Eyeshadow sat in the inner corners of her eyes and across the lid, the color of a pea shoot in early spring, muted but alive and glittering intensively under the light, and it did what she'd hoped: made her eyes go strange and luminous, the hazel resolving into something more green than not, the effect of a person who had looked into a tide pool and brought some of it back with her.

Her hair was up. Her Dad had done most of it, a soft bouffant gathered high with the loose pieces falling forward at her cheeks, pinned artfully so that it appeared chic and careless and so that no one could see the copious amounts of bobby pins enlisted to hold it all together. She had sat quietly at the vanity while he worked, watching his face in the mirror: the focused twitch of his nose, the way he bit the inside of his cheek slightly while concentrating, a thing she did too, which she had only recently noticed.

She hadn't said anything about the similarities, but it was a nice thought, nonetheless.

The dress was exactly what it had been in its box: impossible and entirely hers. The silk moved when she moved. The bubble hem sat perfectly at her mid-thigh, swinging tenderly as she twisted this way and that to grapple with the zipper at the back. The gold thread at the neckline caught the stairwell light as she ascended, a thin gleam, there and then not.

She had on three different necklaces: a pearl pendant—her birthstone—stacked atop a herringbone chain and a glistening rose-gold initial necklace. Her Chaumet was ever by her side.

She heard her family before she reached the top.

They were in the upstairs hallway, her *Нана* and her Dad and—she could hear her sister's voice, rising with delight before taking a shallow dip in faux-outrage—and with them, there was music. Tinny at first, from a phone speaker, but then got the aux to work and suddenly the house was thudding, fludding with a melod then she recognized instantly and made her stop on the third step from the top with her hand on the banister.

"Messy Enough." The opening, that bright, insistent guitar, the kick of drums that arrived toward the end with a spur of perfect energy.

She had shown it to her Dad on a drive, two years ago, on an autumn that felt like it was trying to be everything before it ended. She had pressed play without explaining why because they had the same taste in music (she loved that, she loved it so much) and knew he'd like it immediately, and as it played, she'd watched the window instead of him. When it finished, he had said nothing for a moment and then said, *play it again*, and she had, and that had been the whole of it. She had not known he'd kept listening to it.

She stood on the third step and breathed through her mouth, a smile itching at the corners. Mostly, she thought, her life was perfect.

Then she went up.



Her *Нана* saw her first.

He was in the hallway in his dinner clothes—black blazer over a forest green silk shirt, crisp and beautifully cut—and he turned from where he'd been saying something to Alexander, who was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed and the put-upon expression he usually used when pretending to be too old for whatever was happening, and he stopped. He looked at her for a long, long time.

His face went through an array of emotions, and for a moment, she remembered that he also felt the effect of her getting older, the helplessness and the pride, the full stop of it.

"Misha," he said. *"Моя маленькая девочка."*

"Don't," she said, because that was all it took for her to feel the threat of tears begin to rise.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're about to say something perfect, and I've just done my makeup."

"I am simply looking at my daughter," he said, with a soft smile, and then crossed the hallway in four steps and took her face in both hands and kissed her forehead with a thoroughness that suggested he was making a point, which he was, and she let him, her eyes closing briefly, because sometimes you just let him.

Her Dad appeared from the doorway of their room. He stopped, too, when he saw her, but his stopping was different. He'd seen her get ready, yet he was still looking at her as though he was seeing her for the first time again, as if she was the eighth wonder of the world, and then he smiled, which was not something he deployed carelessly, and Mischa felt her eyeshadow was suddenly doing a lot of structural work.

"Okay," Irina announced, arriving from nowhere—perfectly timed, bless her—already in her own dress, which was a stellar drape of pale periwinkle organza that made her look like a Botticelli come to life. "We're not all going to stand here and cry before dinner, that's insane, someone has to do something fun." She took Mischa's hand without asking. "You look perfect, Mimi. Also, I fast-forwarded to the ending bit."

"The end of wh—"

And then suddenly the song rushed along until it was at the breakdown.

The ending of "*Messy Enough*" was not instrumentally complex. It was just the melody, loosed from the lyrical structure, and absolutely perfect for dancing. There was a deep, nameless naivety to it—the repetition of the keyboards, the way the drums were dropped in halfway through by sheer persistence into something that felt, by its final seconds, almost unbearably bright—that made it impossible to be still inside of.

Irina pulled her into the hallway and Mischa went, laughing despite herself, the sound startled out of her, and then her *Iiana* appeared on her other side and did something ridiculous with his arms that made Alexander groan and peel himself off the wall to demonstrate that he could do better, which he couldn't, and her Dad was laughing from the doorway, the real laugh, and she could see him taking pictures with the Canon camera he always packed and—

The world spontaneously slung sideways, because Her *Iiana* took her by the waist and spun her. Once, twice, the skirt of the dress lifting. She was laughing properly now, with full energy, the sound barking forward from a place lower than the throat, ungovernable, and Irina was spinning herself with her arms out and her head back, and Alexander, despite all previous protest, had taken Irina's hands and was turning her in a circle, and her Dad had come out of the doorway and taken Mischa's free hand and they were all of them moving in the narrow upstairs hallway of a shell-pink villa on holiday in the last minutes of her eighteenth year, and the song played, and played, and played.

When it ended, there was a moment of breathless, happy stillness.

Mischa's hair had come slightly undone on one side. She pressed it back. Her Dad reached over and fixed the pin with two fingers, precisely, the way he'd originally placed it.

"Okay," she said. "Now we can go."

Her aunts had arrived at the restaurant before them. They celebrated with them every year; this was always the case, but Mischa couldn't help but feel a suffocating surge of affection toward both of them for putting in the extra effort of surprising her.

Aunt Rose operated on a principle of early arrival that bordered on moral conviction, and Aunt Sveta (who claimed to be perpetually late and was, Mischa had observed, never actually late when it mattered, especially to Rose) had presumably been collected by her other aunt's particular gravitational insistence.

They were already in the booth when the Hollander-Rozanovs arrived, a semicircle of deep crimson velvet curved around a marble table in a room that felt like the inside of a jewelry box: dark lacquered walls etched with pale animals and the makings of nature—a heron, a deer, maple leaves—glowing faintly in the amber uplighting, a chandelier above them like a cluster of white petals coming apart.

Aunt Sveta's current boyfriend (Oliver, Dutch, early forties, who dealt in contemporary art and had strict requirements for what seemed about everything but managed to make charming rather than exhausting, very on-and-off in terms of in love vs. not) was there too, already in conversation with a sommelier with the terrifying energy of someone who had taken it upon himself to make the wine his contribution and was committing fully. Mischa liked him. She liked most people she didn't have to see very often.

Everyone thought Oliver and Aunt Sveta would get married, but Mischa privately thought that Aunt Sveta cared a bit too much about Aunt Rose to go and do that.

Rose stood when they came in, because Aunt Rose always stood with overwhelming excitement when she saw them, and she met them with her regular vivaciousness: warm and solidly present, beautiful as a summer's day, her face lighting up with a smile that echoed the one Mischa watched Irina make a thousand times, arms thrown out as if to gather all three of them inside of it. She embraced Mischa first, squeezing so tightly that Mischa thought she heard her rib creak concerningly, her arms full and certain.

"Happy birthday, princess," she said, into Mischa's hair. "Look at you! Look at this dress."

"Thank you," Mischa said into her shoulder. She closed her eyes for a moment, languishing in the citrus and dahlia of her aunt's scent. After a moment, she pulled back. "You look *so* good."

And she did. Her hair was freshly done, an artfully dyed ombre melting from fawn-brown to a sleek auburn, and it went beautifully with the sequined Carolina blue of her halter, mermaid evening gown.

"Svetlana picked it out. She has such good taste, you know?" A pause. "Don't ever tell her I said that, she'll never let me hear the end of it."

Aunt Sveta had already descended on Irina with the energy of someone who had been waiting to do so since approximately the last time they'd seen each other, and the reunion was loud and warm and involved Svetlana holding Irina at arm's length to examine her and declaring something in rapid Russian that made Irina flush with pleasure. Alexander was bearing a similar inspection with greater dignity. She then turned to Mischa and peppered kisses all over her face, leaving behind smudges of Revlon's Smoky Rose that Mischa made a show of wiping off, exclaiming how beautiful she looked, how she proud she was of her recent grades from last semester, (How she knew that Mischa didn't know, but her Aunt Sveta could be very terrifying, and so she beamed at the compliment and didn't ask), and extending an apology from Uncle Sasha who wasn't able to make it but would see her when they got back home.

They settled. The seating arranged itself the way these things arranged themselves: *Irina* next to Svetlana, which was where he always ended up, the gravitational logic of oldest friends; her Dad between *Irina* and Rose; Irina between Oliver and Alexander, who was already doing something to make her laugh; and Mischa at the curved end of the booth with Violet beside her, who had met them in the village with a slow intimate smile at Mischa's stuttering invite, close enough in the velvet booth that their shoulders were nearly touching.

Violet had chosen a sleeveless dress for the evening, a sheath of dark olive that made her skin look lit from within, and she wore her hair down in large Hollywood-style curls, which Mischa had not seen before. She smelled faintly of something clean and resinous but confectionery; milk, almond, and toffee, like a biscuit. She had a small dot of what was probably dried clay just below her left ear that she hadn't noticed. Mischa noticed it and did not mention it, but took a leap of faith and carefully wiped it off. Violet smiled at her, and Mischa's stomach constricted so violently she nearly threw up. As if to return the gesture, Violet reached over and made a show of bringing the clasp of one of her necklaces back to the nape of her neck.

Mischa could feel the ghost of her fingers for ages after.

The evening moved along easily, wine and food arriving, the conversation finding its levels, Oliver holding forth on something about the Marseille art scene until Aunt Sveta redirected him with the practiced ease of someone who had long learned to install conversational guardrails. Alexander and Irina maintained their détente in the way of siblings who often suspended hostilities for a social occasion, and the sight of it made Mischa smile. The chandelier overhead sent its pale light down across the table in pieces, the marble surface holding the reflections of the glasses, everything red and gold and dim and warm.

Mischa ate. She spoke when spoken to. She laughed and told dry, well-timed jokes that sent the table collapsing into a chorus of giggles.

Everything was perfect. She was fine.

Which meant, of course, that something was destined to go wrong.



It was Aunt Sveta who said it. It was not meant unkindly—nothing Aunt Sveta said was ever meant unkindly, she simply had a quality of directness that did not always pause to check the terrain—and it came in the middle of a perfectly ordinary moment, between courses, when the conversation had dropped to a comfortable lull and she was looking at Irina with that expression she sometimes wore, the warm, assessing one.

"You know," she said, mostly to Rose, "sometimes I look at her, and I think—it's like looking in a mirror, almost. The way she laughs."

Rose smiled. "I know. I see it too. Her mouth is exactly—"

"And Sasha with the hair," Svetlana continued, reaching over to touch one of Alexander's curls with the proprietary affection of someone who considered it partially hers, which Alexander bore with impressive equanimity. "Exactly my mother's. Exactly."

Around the table, this produced the warm murmur it always produced; everyone looking at Alexander and Irina with the pleased recognition of people who enjoyed a visible continuity, a traceable line. Mischa looked at her water glass.

She was not going to say anything. She was very clear, internally, that she was not going to say anything, that she was going to remain exactly where she was and let the moment pass over her the way she had let a thousand similar moments pass over her, with the learned patience of someone who knew that the alternative was worse. She was not going to say *anything*.

"That would be the best birthday gift," she said. "To look like one of you."

The table went deathly quiet.

The restaurant thankfully continued: other tables, other conversations, the low music, and the ambient hum of an evening in a beautiful room. But their table was terribly soundless, like someone had sucked out every bit of joy, had slit their throats and left them gurgling awkwardly over the spilled blood.

Mischa heard herself. She couldn't take it back and felt a swell of grief for that. The words were already in the air, already irrecoverable, and she felt the heat begin at her sternum and move upward, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about any of it.

Her *Irina's* face—she couldn't look at it directly. Her Dad had frozen, unable to speak, in fear of saying the wrong thing that would make it worse. Aunt Rose's hand was moving across the table toward hers with the slow, gentle intention of someone trying not to startle a spooked animal. Aunt Sveta had gone quiet, her face slack, horrified that she'd accidentally uncovered a skeleton in the closet and couldn't close the door.

Oliver appeared to be examining the dessert menu quite rapturously.

Mischa was already moving. She didn't decide to; her body made the decision, the old reflexive one, the making of herself easier to miss, and she was pressing out from the booth, murmuring something that was probably *excuse me*, her sight blurry, her lips salty around the corners.

A hand around her wrist. It didn't belong to either of her fathers. It felt closer to a question rather than an answer, tentative, an action occurring before its owner had decided to make it, and Mischa looked down to find Violet's fingers as the culprit and Violet's face turned up toward hers, dark eyes and heat-softened Hollywood curls, and her expression was not pity, which was the thing Mischa could not have survived, but something else.

"Hey," Violet breathed out, and Mischa felt the awful give of her first sob leave her.

The hand loosened immediately at the sound. It had been a reflex.

Mischa stumbled back, wrist slipping free from Violet's grip. And despite the desperate pleas of her name, Mischa did what she did best.

She went away.

The bathroom was dark and coastal-themed and very quiet. She stood at the sink and ran cold water over her hands until she could barely feel them, the tips of her fingertips shrivelled like dates. She then looked at herself in the mirror, which turned out to be a terrible idea, so she looked at the water instead, at the place where it hit the basin and divided.

*She was fine. She was fine. She was—*she breathed. Hmm.

She was nineteen, and she had said a true thing in the wrong room at the wrong moment, and it was mortifying, and it would pass. Everything passed. She was an expert in the passage of things.

She turned the tap off.

She stood in the quiet of the room for one more minute, staring at the soap in the shape of a sand dollar, alone in the way she valued— completely, temporarily—and then she went back out.



They did not make her talk about it at the table.

This was the true gift her parents gave her, sitting back down, the way they simply absorbed her return and let the evening continue, *Ilana* refilling her wine with casualness and then again when she downed it in two swallows, her Dad's knee finding hers briefly under the table before moving away. Aunt Rose asked her something about tennis. Oliver had recovered from the dessert menu and was telling a story about a sculptor he'd represented whose work had been mistaken for a load-bearing wall which made Violet *finally* look away from her with interest, and the table laughed, and Mischa laughed too, genuinely, because it was actually very funny, and then Violet—who had said nothing and done nothing except let her wrist go when asked—did not look at her again, but pressed their shoulders together more closely than before and Mischa found herself relaxing into it.

The chandelier held its white light above them. The pale deer in the lacquered wall gazed across the room at nothing, serene and slightly mournful.

Mischa ate her dessert. A princess cake with a beautiful, careful layer of marzipan over the top in a wintry, shallow pink.

It was very good.



But of course, her parents were excellent ones, so they approached her eventually.

The drive felt as though it happened naturally, but Mischa knew it had been by her parents' special arrangement, this cornering of her. After collecting the bill and a slew of gifts that made Mischa go pink in the face with delight despite her insistence that it wasn't necessary, her aunts took her siblings, Violet, and Oliver home in Aunt Sveta's rental, Oliver navigating from the backseat in a way Alexander would later describe as *confident and entirely wrong*, and Mischa found herself in the front seat of their little convertible with the top down and the Riviera night coming in from all sides, her *Ilana* at the wheel and her Dad in the back, and no particular destination.

Her *Ilana* drove a little less recklessly than normal, but still with an inextinguishable hunger. He hadn't put any music on. Mischa noticed this and understood it as a form of consideration. She hated the radio when she was overstimulated.

The coast road at night was something else. The sea was a dark weight to their right, the surface of it catching light from the moon and the occasional cluster of lights from a boat, and the pines came and went overhead, and the air smelled of salt and night-blooming jasmine, and Mischa sat with her knees pressed together and her hands in her lap and the gold thread at her neckline catching nothing now because there was no light to catch.

She'd left the house with nothing to wear in case she was cold, but Violet had wrapped her in her emerald pashmina with a half-smile before sliding into the dark yawn of the rental's backseat, out of reach. Now it was wrapped delicately around Mischa's head, with leftover fabric trailing sleepily along her right arm.

It was *Ilya* who spoke first.

"*Милая...*" he began.

She closed her eyes, and he stopped.

"You don't have to explain," her Dad said from the back. "There's no pressure, honey."

He sounded remarkably like Obaachan when he said that.

"I know," she told him. "It's why I didn't."

A pause. The road curved. Her *Pana's* hands moved on the wheel, easy and automatic.

"I don't look like anyone you love," she said. It came out without difficulty, which surprised her. It was almost a relief, the pain fleeting, like the groan of a sore muscle when you finally remove a weight from it. "Alexander looks like Aunt Sveta. Irina looks like you and like Aunt Rose. And I look like someone you chose from a stack of applications, and I know that doesn't mean—I know it doesn't mean anything about what I am to you, I know that, but sometimes I can't—" She stopped. She looked at the road ahead. "Sometimes I can't find myself in any of you, and it's like being the guest that arrived without a reservation, and everyone has been very gracious about it. I guess, despite it not being a big deal to you, it turned out to be a very big deal to me."

The last sentence, when it arrived, sounded wet. It was the most vulnerable she'd ever been in one sitting.

The car did not stop. Her *Pana* kept driving, which she was grateful for, because this was a conversation that needed constant motion, that couldn't survive a full stop.

"Misha," her *Pana* said. His voice was very even. "*Милая*. You have my hands."

She looked at her hands, where they lay in her lap. She thought of him at the kitchen table, pressing into the peach, before feeding it to her father. She thought of herself at the net, the exact pressure required to win.

"And you think before you speak," her Dad said. "So much, baby. In the way I think before I speak. You reread things. You make space for people at your own expense, and you're working on it. You like order, rules. You hate it when things aren't done properly. You came out of the water when your Papa called your name, even though you wanted five more minutes, because you didn't want him to have to call twice." A pause. "I do that too. I've been doing that my whole life."

Mischa looked at the sea.

"You are not a *guest*," her *Πανα* said. The simplicity of it was almost violent. "You are the house."

She thought she was going to die right there, with the way the relief speared through her. She wanted to sob all over again, wanted to make them repeat it over and over until the words lost all meaning to anyone but her.

"Okay," she said, instead.

"Okay?" her Dad said.

"Okay," she said again, more certainly.

All three knew that this was far from over, but still, her *Πανα* made a sound that was mostly satisfaction and slightly smug, which was so exactly him that Mischa felt the last of this long-held breath come out of her in something too tremulous to be a laugh but stronger than a weep, a sound habituated in the warm country between them.

Then, very quietly, she told them,

"I'm tired."

And they knew what it meant, so the car crawled to a stop, right in the middle of the road, heedless of the silent rule to pull to the side of it. Ilya stayed where he was, but Mischa crawled into the back, right into Shane's lap, where she rolled into a tight ball much like a child again. Ilya reached behind from the front seat and put his hand on her ankle. He left it there, thumb rolling across the bone. She put her hand over it, eyes still closed.

Then they were moving again, the car slinking through the Riviera night, the sea to their right and the pines overhead and the jasmine coming and going, and her *Πανα* drove like there was no tomorrow, and maybe there wasn't, but the speed made her drowsy instead of scared.

Mischa lay in the heart of their butter-yellow convertible in her perfect, pink-ish, birthday dress and felt her father layer the pashmina over her so that all the world was blocked out and she was required to do nothing, absolutely nothing, but sleep.

She wished this could be her life forever: piled in the car together, driving somewhere. Very dangerous, very fast with top down.

Best way not to think.

Shane glanced down at his daughter, hand coming to stroke gently at her cheek. They were so full, perfect apples that slightly bulged when she laughed hard enough to snort, her teeth pearlescent and gleaming.

She didn't look much like anyone then, but he thought of how she'd looked when she was younger, seven and dreamless and sweet and free.

*“ those who live to have it and
those who live to give it.
of course there are those for whom both are true,
but never in the same measure.
those who have it to give are
like cardinals in the snow. so easy
and beautifully lit. some
are rabbits. hard to see
except for those who would prey upon them:
all that softness and quaking and blood.
those who want it
cannot be satisfied. eagle-eyed and such talons,
any furred thing will do. so easy
to rip out a heart when it is throbbing so hard.
i wander out into the winter.
i know what i am. ”*

— i've been thinking about love again, vievee francis.

End Notes

if you made it here, thank you so much for reading. feel free to comments to your heart's desire; i respond to every single one.

all my love. x

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!