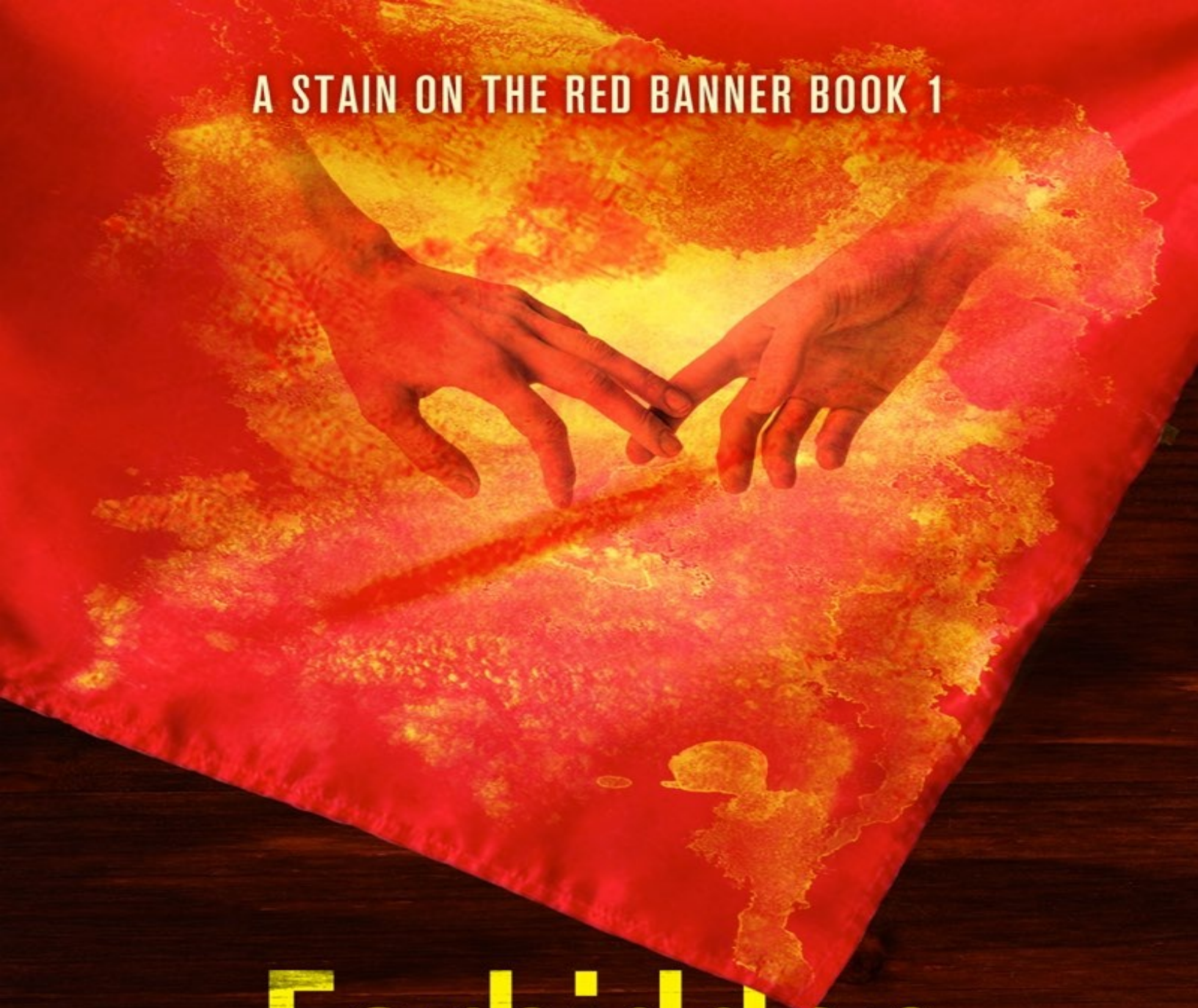


A STAIN ON THE RED BANNER BOOK 1



**Forbidden  
Rock and Roll**

POLINA KRYMSKAYA

# Forbidden Rock and Roll

A Stain On The Red Banner

Book 1

Polina Krymskaya

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## Chapter 1

### *The Broken Window*

**T**he massive wooden door slowly cracked open. The snub-nosed, dark-haired boy of about fifteen timidly looked through the gap.

“Did you call for me, Rosalia Andrianovna?”

“I did, Temkin, I did!” a loud female voice from the other end of the office responded with displeasure. “Come in! Don’t pretend it’s your first time.”

From the restlessly darting eyes of the unfortunate Temkin, he was clearly, desperately looking for an opportunity not to cross the threshold, so as not to find himself in this terrible room. But he had no choice. With a resigned sigh, the dark-haired boy went into the office and closed the door behind him.

“Tell me about what happened, Seva.” A woman sitting at a round table made of dark wood took off her glasses and looked up at him with tired eyes.

He sighed heavily again and looked around the office wistfully. Indeed, it wasn’t the first time he was here. Last year, he went here as if going home, sometimes alone, sometimes with his father. The first time was better, of course. The arms and legs were intact, he had pocket money, and no one threatened to drive him out of the house. The fact that Andrianovna’s shouting was ringing in his ears for another week was nothing. He could survive it; there had been worse.

Nothing had changed in the office since the last academic year. The same sad, green walls, a battered carpet, massive furniture made of dark wood. Maybe the flowers were different, but that was just a little thing. Andrianovna also changed her hairstyle—clearly burned with peroxide. Poisonous white hair lay

on her shoulders in some odd style.

“She looks like a poodle,” Seva thought, but he immediately pushed this thought away. First, to laugh in his position meant condemning himself to death. Second, even if he left the office alive, it would still be impossible to spread Andrianovna’s new nickname around the school—it would not take root. With eternally pursed lips, a tenacious hawk’s gaze from which all the schoolchildren huddled in hallway corners, and a broad-shouldered posture towering over even tenth graders, she involuntarily and simultaneously inspired awe and respect, even among slobs like Seva. A poodle? No way—a German Shepherd.

“Seva, please don’t waste my time,” the head teacher’s voice threatened. “Why did you break the window in our art teacher’s apartment?”

Seva lowered his eyes and began to carefully examine the toes of his shoes. They were already battered. If he didn’t change them soon, they would be riddled with holes but, it wasn’t surprising. He had been wearing them for more than a year; it was a miracle they lasted this long. They had bought them, even though they knew he was growing, but now they pressed so hard against his toes that it hurt to walk.

“Seva!” Rosalia Andrianovna was becoming really angry.

No, Seva was not an idiot. He knew perfectly well that sooner or later he would have to answer the head teacher, but he tried to delay answering until the last moment. What should he say? That he and his friends were aiming to hit the window but missed? And how would he explain why he threw stones at the art teacher’s apartment? Well, he could say that they wanted to call Lenya, the art teacher’s son, into the yard. But why? So that he would give them the math homework done for them in exchange for keeping his big secret? It was unlikely that Maria Viktorovna would be happy with the news about her exemplary son being un-Komsomol-like and taking money from elementary students to get cigarettes.

Seva bit his lip. That was the truth but saying it out loud didn’t make it any easier; Andrianovna definitely wouldn’t approve of such an answer. As if he had done something wrong! On the contrary, he tried to help the Octobrists, but no one appreciated his noble act. Lenya tried to buy him off with cigarettes, but you

couldn't buy Seva so cheap. However, none in their trio needed to smoke. Rostik was an athlete, Dima had asthma, and Seva himself had an extreme adversarial to smoking. If Seva had his way, he wouldn't want to see any cigarettes for a century!

"It was an accident." Realizing the pause was prolonged, Seva muttered under his breath, "I won't do it again."

It was so unfair! The three of them messed up but why was he the only one shouldering the consequences? How could he call them comrades? If he would have known that they would run away from the crime scene so quickly, he would never have gone with them to beat out debts from Lenchik! He wouldn't even greet them. However, Seva reluctantly admitted, he didn't hold much of a grudge against Rostik. Rostik had at least made an attempt to pull him along. But Dima, he ran off without even looking back!

"You're not a kid anymore!" The head teacher threw up her hands. "I've already heard from you this 'it was an accident' excuse and the 'don't call my father, Rosalia Andrianovna, this won't happen again' line, but what's the use? Once a hooligan, always a hooligan!"

"But it really was only an accident!" Seva jumped up resentfully.

"I don't believe that you could accidentally hit her window; Maria Viktorovna lives on the fourth floor!"

"I was aiming at the window leaf." Deciding that the situation could not be saved, Seva gave up. "So that Lenya could meet us in the street."

"What were you thinking?!" Rosalia Andrianovna was horrified. "This is ridiculous! Temkin, you're already in the ninth grade! Moreover, you are a Komsomol member! Did you leave your brain in elementary school? What kind of example do you set for the younger ones? You're disrupting lessons, your academic performance is inexcusable, and now you're also breaking windows!"

*"You're rude to teachers, you don't communicate with your classmates, you twist off the lightbulbs in the bathroom ..."* Mentally, Seva continued the list of his "merits". He had heard it before and had heard it more than once. He was so bored with all these accusations! Moreover, most of them were unfounded; Andrianovna hung all the sins on him out of habit.



Once, last year, Seva unscrewed the lightbulbs in the bathroom, but no one noticed him. Yet Andrianovna didn't hesitate to say, "It was Temkin!"

There was no evidence, but everyone immediately thought of him. It was offensive, even though he deserved it. And Seva never disrupted any lessons. He wasn't that much of an attention-seeker. What kind of example should he even set for the Octobrists?

"Listen, Temkin, if you keep this up—"

*"Then I can't blame anyone else but myself. I will be expelled from the Komsomol; I would not be able to see either the Communist Party or have a decent future,"* Seva finished the always repeated threat.

They would not expel him from the Komsomol, that he was sure of. There was not a single case in his memory where someone was kicked out, at least during his school years. Only the university students could be kicked out—for having low academic performances. But Seva was not going to go to any university so his academic performance in the Komsomol did not particularly bother him. What was the use? That only concerned those who were going to build a career, which he had no plans of doing.

"Look, Seva. You know that teachers are always happy to help you." Having let off steam, the head teacher continued on a calmer note. "Maybe you're still mad at Maria Viktorovna for your grade? It was a long time ago; you haven't studied her subject for a year, and you have a good grade. You have nothing to worry about."

"I'm not mad about that," Seva snorted.

No, he'd never been that petty. His grade could not upset him that much. Besides, he had enough bad grades in other subjects. Art wasn't something special. One more bad grade was not a big deal.

"Alright then, look at me," sighed Andrianovna. "Explain to me, Seva, why you chose Turin as your friend out of everyone else in the entire tenth grade. There are so many other good boys in this grade! Zhenechka Smirnov, for example. But you decided to be friends with the big bully in our school! And for what? Your grades have deteriorated drastically, your behavior has been erratic, and you don't communicate with your classmates either. The teachers are all

complaining about you.”

Seva was silent. What else could he say? He listened, as it should be, without raising his eyes, creating a very guilty appearance, while he lazily thought that Andrianovna was wrong in her conjectures. In fact, it was the opposite. His grades deteriorated first, then his behavior. He only became friends with Rostik and Dima afterwards. But who cared? Andrianovna had already created idealistic conjectures for herself and even came up with a “solution” to this so called “problem”—which was to make friends with Zhenya Smirnov.

Seva had seen Zhenechka many times. At school events, at joint physics lessons, at school contests when Seva still went; he could always find Zhenechka. He was first in everything, he was the best among the best, the kind of person who was always happy, never complained, and did everything perfectly, in accordance with instructions. It was no surprise that Andrianovna was crazy about him.

Zhenechka was the typical excellent student—a nerd, a parent’s joy and pride. He always wore a neat and ironed uniform with the Komsomol badge, his shoes black and shiny. He had huge brown eyes which appeared earnest and naïve, the kind of innocence found in those helping a grandmother cross the road. The only thing that stood apart from this image of a typical good boy was the unruly blond curls sticking out in all directions. They always reminded Seva of fluffy dandelions.

As soon as he saw Zhenya, Rostik, ever lacking in eloquence, would loudly announce, “Oh, the ram is coming!” Rostik was well known for giving everyone nicknames that would, more often than not, stick for a long time. Maybe that was why Seva became friends with Rostik; it was hard for him not to be. Or maybe he just didn’t care who he hung out with, as long as he didn’t have to stay at home.

“Okay, Seva, this is not even the main thing.” Exhausted, Andrianovna stopped scolding him. “I’m not just telling you off because of your academic performance. Your father wasn’t at the parent meeting, so I’m telling you now: your classmates’ parents decided to give you a gift and organize an excursion to Odessa at the end of the year. For a whole week, Temkin! I arranged for the five

best students to receive this trip as a reward for their efforts. But this is all provided there are no second-year students in the class. And you, Seva, are the main contender to be in the ninth grade for two years. We transferred you from the eighth grade last year ... just because ... because of your beautiful eyes. So, you must really try not to let your classmates down.”

Seva nodded obediently, but a feeling of indignation stirred in his chest. What did she mean the “main contender”? It had only been two weeks since the beginning of the school year; he hadn’t had the time to get bad grades yet. Dima’s grades were worse than his, but no one told him off. And Seva was definitely not going to study for the sake of his classmates! Anyway, he was not going to go with them to Odessa. He was willing to go anywhere else, but not to Odessa. At the mention of this picturesque city in the Northern Black Sea region of Ukraine, Seva suddenly felt nauseous.

“If, in the first semester, you still get the same marks and are doing poorly, you and I will have another conversation.” Andrianovna became serious again. “And not just with you. Denis Ilyich, I think, will also be happy to hear what a slacker his son is. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Seva nodded dejectedly.

“Alright.” The head teacher stretched her thin lips into a good-natured smile. “Now, get out of my office. I have no more time for you.”

Seva immediately rushed to the door, not intending to linger for a second.

“By the way, I haven’t called your father about the window yet, so you have time to tell him yourself,” Andrianovna said as Seva headed out of the office. “He will be so very happy.”

Stopping, Seva looked back and offered Andrianovna a fake smile.

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The remaining lessons flew by unnoticed. Ignoring all of Andrianovna’s reminders, Seva played “naval battle” with himself in math, counted the men who wearing gray clothes passing along the school fence in literature, and slept peacefully in history; all of these he got away with by hiding behind the broad

back of Nastya Suvorina, sitting in front of him. With the bell signaling the end of the class, he quickly threw all his things into his briefcase, but was stopped in the aisle between the desks. Sveta Kaluta, the head girl and the best student of the class, blocked his way.

“Kaluta, what do you want?” Seva asked impolitely, taking a step back.

“Fie, how rude.” She wrinkled her nose.

“Why should I be nice to you?” he snorted. “If you have something to say, say it quickly. I’m busy.”

“You probably don’t know ...” Twisting a strand of her short light brown hair around her finger, Svetka told him, “Your dad wasn’t at the parent meeting yesterday, and you don’t talk to anyone in class.”

Seva felt slightly irritated.

“So no one told you. Our class will go to Odessa this summer, and the top five students will get this trip for free. But only if there are no repeaters in the class. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

“No,” Seva replied cautiously. He didn’t like the topic of conversation, Svetka’s tone, or her haughty, irritated expression.

“Why am I not surprised.” Sveta rolled her eyes. “We have this great chance, okay? Only you are standing between the trip to Odessa and us. So, Temkin, if you and your grades are the reason why I can’t go to Odessa ...” Sveta fell silent, giving Seva time to consider what she’d said.

Seva felt his face redden with indignation and his fists involuntarily clenched. Who was she to talk to him in such a tone? This blabbermouth, a sycophant, and a know-it-all! Who was she to threaten him and set conditions?

Seva took a deep breath and was about to retort when a calm voice from behind said, “Kaluta, leave him alone.”

Seva turned around. Alina Denikina was sitting at the desk behind him. The belle of the school. Oozing with confidence and a touch of arrogance, she garnered admiration, some envy, and a lot of respect from his classmates. Many were even afraid of her.

It seemed like she’d heard their entire conversation from the start. He suddenly felt uncomfortable. His face turned red but this time from

embarrassment.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Svetka snapped, but it was clear that under Alina’s icy gaze she had lost some confidence.

Alina gracefully, without any hurry, got up from her desk, put her accessories in her bag, took out a mirror, and straightened her hair. With every movement was a subtle sense of superiority, and Seva thought that such self-control could only be envied. After looking at her reflection for several seconds, she finally turned to Sveta, and stretched her lips into a venomous smile. “Sveta, just because you don’t have a personal life and you spend all your free time studying, that doesn’t mean that others have to do the same. I think Seva will figure out what to do for himself. Right, Seva?”

Seva nodded gloomily. He wouldn’t say anything he might regret later.

“How do you know if I have a personal life or not!” Svetka blurted in a squeaky voice.

Alina had clearly pushed the right button.

“Your evening get-togethers with Alena, Nastya, and Oksana reading tea leaves about future husbands do not count as a personal life,” Alina said caustically. “Right, Lelia?”

Standing behind Alina’s back like a shadow, Lelia nodded in agreement. She never argued with what her friend said. Lelia herself was mostly silent, so no one knew whether her usual uncomplaining consent was the same full-fledged opinion of, or just blind devotion to, Alina. It was rumored that Lelia was afraid of Alina, so she used Lelia’s fear of her and treated the poor girl however she wanted.

Seva never really believed these rumors. Alina was a cold person, but only to those who tried to mess with her. In other cases, she preferred to uphold strict neutrality, not getting involved in any conflicts and keeping her communication with classmates to a bare minimum.

With regards to Lelia, during the nine years that Seva had been studying, he had never heard Alina be rude to her friend. Quite the contrary. Alina was ready to fight to the death anyone who offended Lelia. How these two managed to be friends was a mystery to everyone.

Confident and a little bitchy Alina Denikina. Tiny and easily intimidated wallflower Lelia Turina. Their friendship surprised everyone; someone even believed that Lelia should have made friends with Svetka and become part of their foursome instead of Alena Solodskaya. Lelia would fit in perfectly with large-sized Sveta, who sported an ugly, almost boyish hairstyle, unpretty and unpleasant Oksana Kachusova, and funny, chatty, fat Nastya Suvorina.

Bright and quite pretty, Alena would have made a perfect friend for Alina Denikina. But it didn't turn out that way. Alena was happy to be friends with Svetka, Nastya, and Oksana, but Lelia was friends with Alina, following her everywhere like some shadow. Given that Alina and Alena had a lot in common, it made sense for them to be together; Alina and Lelia were nothing alike. Still, they were friends and generally, everyone was happy and doing well—until someone from the foursome encountered Alina.

And now, hearing Alina's words, Svetka almost choked with indignation. Blushing, she opened her mouth to say something but immediately closed it, apparently unable to find the right words. Seva sneered mockingly, as if he hadn't been in her place a minute ago.

"Move along, Kaluta." he said with fake calmness. Only the barely noticeable tremor in his voice suggested just how hard it was for him to do this.

Sveta glared at all three of them, snorted loudly, and turning sharply on her heels, and sped off after the trio who had long left the classroom.

Seva exhaled and turned to Alina. "Thank you," he smiled tightly.

He was still embarrassed that he could not immediately retaliate, and was even more embarrassed that another girl had to stand up for him. But despite this and the rage inside, Seva was grateful to Alina. It turned out she wasn't that conceited.

"It's nothing," she winked at him.

Seva was utterly surprised. Did she just wink at him? Alina? *Winking? At him?* Trying not to show his amazement, he bid goodbye to Alina and Lelia, and rushed off to exit the classroom.

With these gloomy thoughts, Seva reached his yard and stopped near a tall maple tree. He didn't want to go home, even if his father, from whom he would

probably get a good beating today, hadn't come home yet. What would he do there? Contemplate the dreary view from the window with his grandmother? There was no more boring activity than that in the entire world.

Usually, he spent all his free time with his friends, but now Seva had absolutely nothing to do. He didn't want to be with friends right now. No, Seva was not proud, but he had some self-respect. How could he call them his friends when they just left him in trouble like that? Ironically, this was even less Komsomol-like than their innocent blackmail for the benefit of society.

Shaking his locks of dark hair, Seva rushed home, but only to drop off his briefcase and borrow the toy soldiers from Sema, his younger brother. Of course, he wasn't going to play with them. Rosalia Andrianovna was right; he hadn't gotten smarter since elementary school, but not to such an extent that he'd lapse into childhood again.

Leaning against an old maple tree, Seva remembered that only seven years ago he was reputed to be the best shooter in the yard. Actually, not just the yard; the rumor about him spread all over the district! If Seva left the house with a slingshot, his friends understood that they had a busy day ahead. It would be luck if by evening, something had survived in the yard. Young shooters' parents tended to swear terribly when collecting broken glass jars and bottles all over the street.

Seva was not a fool. Even as a child, he always had the sense not to choose living targets. And since he never missed, there had never been an injured eye or head of some clumsy person who'd turned up at the wrong time. And after such skillful feats, it was a shame how the incident with the window happened! If someone had told him that he would miss a shot a few years ago, Seva would not have believed it.

He was going to prove to everyone—or to himself—that he could still do it. Having lined up the soldiers in a neat row on the back of the bench, Seva pulled out a slingshot from his pocket that he'd found in a chest filled with old toys. It had been so long since he'd held it in his hands!

As a child, the slingshot seemed such a solid weapon, a real jewel; even the older guys envied him. But now it was only an ordinary slingshot, too small for

his palms. How was he supposed to aim at something? It appeared that over time he had finally lost his knack.

Seva shook his head. It was simple! He took the slingshot in his right hand, found a suitable pebble, pulled the elastic with his left hand, eyes squinting, focusing on the target. A crow cawed loudly near his ear as the projectile flew into the crown of a spreading birch tree. Damn it! Thank God, it did not hit someone's window again. Irritation stirred in him with renewed vigor. Snorting, Seva fumbled on the ground in search of a new projectile, straightened, aimed. The pebble missed the target again.

“Damn it!” Seva swore aloud.

This time it was not possible to blame the treacherous crow. It was completely quiet in the yard, only the leaves of the old maple tree rustled. Seva felt angry, not at anyone, at himself. Cursing under his breath, he found a third pebble, aimed the slingshot at the target again, and whispered, *“If I miss again ...”*

And he did. The slingshot flew into the bushes.

“Ouch!” A voice full of indignation yelped.

The slingshot had landed on the bench behind the bushes where, by coincidence, someone decided to sit down exactly at that moment. The ground slipped from under his feet. What if he had knocked out someone's eye or hit his forehead? As if he wasn't in enough trouble today!

But who knew that in an absolutely empty yard, this particular bench behind the bushes would be occupied? Even mothers walking with their kids preferred not to sit down because older guys on the carousel might have sprinkled them with sand. But not today!

The bushes rustled threateningly and Seva cautiously pulled his head into his shoulders. He exhaled sharply and almost laughed with relief—a blond curly dandelion came out to meet him, rubbing the bruised back of his head with a slingshot in his hand. The same Zhenechka Smirnov that Andrianovna had been talking about earlier today.

His eyes were okay, there was no blood either, and he would not complain to his father; it was not customary to snitch on one another at school. Even the most



responsible students knew that.

Seva could not have imagined that he would ever be so happy to see him. “I’m sorry,” Seva apologized, unable to restrain a broad smile.

“Why are you so aggressive?” Still wincing from the pain, the blond boy asked, “What did that poor piece of wood do to you?”

Seva realized that Zhenya must have heard him swearing at the top of his voice, when he’d thought there was no one else in the yard. Somehow, he didn’t feel embarrassed; it was funny. Seva snorted with laughter. At Zhenya’s questioning look, he just waved his hand and briefly, but honestly explained, “Just a bad day.”

“Did Rosalia Andrianovna tell you off?” Zhenya came closer and handed him the slingshot. “You should be more careful. It turns out that you’re stronger than you look. If you’d serve like that in volleyball, your class would always win.”

“I haven’t been going to PE for six months. Besides, I’m not that strong. Also, I think your hair softened the blow,” Seva said sarcastically. “And how did you know about Andrianovna?”

“The whole school knows.” Zhenya was surprised by Seva’s ignorance. “And also about the window, and about the fact that Rosalia Andrianovna called you in her office ...”

Seva grimaced. Of course, everyone knew about it. Could there be any doubt? In their small school of five-hundred students, rumors spread at the speed of sound—literally. In the absence of major scandals and gossip, even little things such as being called to the office of the head teacher could become the main gossip of the day. From the Octobrists playing hide-and-seek in the backyard, to high school students with cigarettes behind the bushes, and the entire teaching break in the staff room. The whole school had probably heard about Andrianovna scolding him today. His mood soured again.

Seva put his hands in his pockets and glared at the blond boy from under his brows. “What are you doing here anyways?” he asked rudely. “I’ve never seen you in this yard.”

The question was a good one, albeit a little late. Seva had never seen Zhenya

outside of school, especially in his yard. As far as Seva knew, he lived in a completely different neighborhood. And what could have brought him here, no one knew.

Zhenya was suddenly embarrassed. “Nothing, actually. I just don’t want to go home yet. I had a fight with my father, so I decided to take a little walk after school. And this courtyard is secluded and calm, so, I thought, why not sit here in silence for a while? Who knew that you were here with your slingshot.” Either jokingly or reproachfully, Zhenya still answered his question.

“Who knew that there was a *dandelion*?” Seva responded in the same tone.

Actually, he wanted to call the blond one something offensive, but at the last moment he changed his mind. Zhenya had not managed to do anything bad enough to deserve Seva’s anger. Besides, there was no suitable name to call him. “Nerd” was trite, “Ram”, as Rostik liked to call Zhenya, was too strong. So, he called Zhenya what he usually called him in his head.

“Dandelion?” he chuckled. “Not Ram, thanks. Say hi to Rostik.”

“For sure,” Seva winced.

“And what do you have here? Toy soldiers? As a target? What great entertainment!” Zhenya said appreciatively.

Seva didn’t understand whether his approval was sincere or just mockery, so he snorted and rolled his eyes. Zhenya did not notice this. He walked around the bench, looked at the soldiers curiously, and held out his palm to Seva. “Let me try!”

Seva was surprised but did not argue. Obediently, he handed the slingshot and stared at Zhenya with genuine interest. It wasn’t every day you saw a tenth grader recklessly playing with toy soldiers in the middle of the playground. And knowing that this same tenth grader was also an exemplary student, the pride and joy of teachers alike, it was quite funny. He wondered if Zhenya had ever held a slingshot in his hands before. Usually, exemplary children didn’t do these kinds of things.

The first pebble flew right on target. Seva’s face expressed surprise, but he skeptically assumed that it was just on accident. Zhenya took aim again and casually, playfully, as if not making any effort, he shot again. Bull’s-eye! The

second soldier fell behind the bench.

“*Coincidence*,” Seva thought less confidently.

The “coincidence” was repeated eight more times in a row, and each time Seva felt his eyes widen more and more, and his mouth continually formed the letter “O”. When the last, tenth, soldier was defeated, Zhenya lowered the slingshot and proudly asked, “Well, how was that?”

“Impressive!” Seva murmured, stunned, but immediately came to his senses and pulled himself together. Pretending to have little interest, he casually asked, “Where did you learn this?”

Zhenya shrugged. “My father is fond of hunting. Since childhood, I have been able to handle weapons. Especially a conventional slingshot.”

“Ah ... I see.” Seva pretended that he was not surprised at all, but in fact Zhenya’s words struck him to the depths of his soul. Who would have thought? “I was the best shooter in our neighborhood as a child. Even the elders came to look at me. I never missed!” Seva boastfully shared, but immediately deflated. “But that seems to be in the past. Now, somehow ... it just didn’t work. You saw it.”

Zhenya looked like he wanted to say something encouraging, but rubbed the bump on the back of his head, grimaced, and instead asked, “Why did you decide to take a slingshot anyway? The last time I held one in my hands was probably ten years ago already.”

Seva caught himself thinking that if someone else had been in Zhenya’s place, he would have been embarrassed by this question. In fact, what was a fifteen-year-old boy doing out in daylight with a toy for hooligans from the senior kindergarten group? But Zhenya’s question held no condemnation or ridicule, only genuine curiosity.

So, Seva explained. “I couldn’t think of anything more interesting to do. I don’t want to go home. My father will be so mad because of Andrianovna when he comes back. So, I’m killing time as much as I can.”

“I see,” Zhenya nodded. “Why aren’t you hanging out with Dima and Rostik, like usual?”

“We kinda had a fight.” Seva said and, catching Zhenya’s questioning look,

waved a dismissive hand. “Long story.”

The story was actually not long at all, just childish and stupid. Seva didn’t want to tell anyone about the reasons for their “fight”. He was ashamed.

“Okay.” Zhenya did not insist.

They fell silent. Seva stood for a while, furtively looking at Zhenya and his fluffy curls—*wow, not a single crease in the suit, not the slightest spot on the shoes, even on the playground, with its perpetually dusty, sandy paths!*—and went to collect the soldiers lying behind the bench. Zhenya followed him.

“Listen, I just thought ...” He started to say, handing Seva the last soldier.

Squinting, Zhenya wrinkled his snub nose. The sun’s rays fell on him so that the light eyebrows on his white face were almost invisible. Seva wanted to say something sarcastic and had already opened his mouth, but for some reason changed his mind at the last moment and simply asked, “Thought what?”

“You don’t have anything to do anyway, do you?”

Seva nodded, stuffing the soldiers into his pockets. “Why?”

“Let’s go to my place,” Zhenya said and, noticing Seva’s surprised look, hurried to explain. “Well, you don’t want to go home, and I don’t either. I already told you it was because of my father. Rosalia Andrianovna complained to him that I didn’t want to participate in the Physics Olympiad, so he’s been freaking out these past few days. I don’t know why I’m resisting, anyway. I’ll still do as he says ... whatever. If I don’t come home alone, maybe he’ll leave me alone for at least one evening. So? If you don’t want to, no problem. I won’t insist.”

Seva, at first, wanted to refuse—well, what could they do at Zhenya’s place? Read a math textbook together? Discuss probability theory? Or what else were the blond nerds doing there?

He was about to open his mouth, to give some stupid excuse, but suddenly he thought about what he’d do all alone for the rest of the day? Continue to throw pebbles that might kill someone? Not so fun. Even reading a math textbook together, seemed to Seva, not such a dull thing to do compared to injuring someone. And why not find out how such exemplary, excellent Komsomol members live? Rostik had always wondered, sincerely believing that they were

cloned and grown in incubators. Smiling at this thought, Seva waved his hand toward the street. “Whatever. Let’s go.”

## Chapter 2

### *The Records*

**Z**henya lived in a large, nine-story house, a few bus stops from school. Seva was surprised how close it was to the town center—ten minutes on foot to the main avenue. None of his friends or acquaintances lived in this area, and he himself was rarely here. He was a strange boy, this Zhenya; now Seva was sure of it.

The Smirnovs' apartment was on the seventh floor. They took the elevator up. Seva felt uncomfortable. There was no elevator in his small five-story building and, until today, he had never been in a house with one.

“Mom, I’m home!” Zhenya loudly announced, having crossed the apartment threshold.

Seva followed and stood behind him, furtively looking at the hallway. Usually he was not so shy, but now Seva wanted to shrink as much as possible or become invisible altogether. It seemed that Zhenya’s mother would immediately kick him out of their apartment, which was as perfect as the blond boy himself. A sterile flowered carpet, a clean floor, family photos on the walls in classic frames, potted plants in the corners that were probably always watered, shoes lined up in a neat row at the threshold—and even in the corridor he could smell the mind-blowing smell of rich, hearty homemade borscht. The last time Seva’s apartment held such a fragrant smell was in the seventh grade. And what was Seva doing here in his rumpled shirt, dirty worn shoes, and ridiculously disheveled hair?

As if to confirm his thoughts, Zhenya’s mother came around the corner; she

was a well-groomed lady of about thirty-five, in a pale pink housedress and a clean apron. Her short blond hair, just like her son's, was immaculately styled, strand to strand, and clearly set with a huge amount of setting lotion or spray. The woman herself, despite her short stature, towered over them—at least, it seemed so, thanks to her excellent posture and proudly straight but fragile shoulders.

Seva mentally shrank and was ready to hear something like, “What kind of ragamuffin did you bring to our house?” However, catching the eye of this visibly meticulous lady, he suddenly calmed and even relaxed a little. Her gray eyes shone with cordiality and hospitality. Her lips were pulled into a light, slightly tired smile.

Zhenya, bending down a little, pecked her on the cheek and said, “This is Seva Temkin from my school. And this is my mother, Maria Arsentievna”.

“Nice to meet you,” Seva modestly said and lowered his gaze, having remembered remnants of politeness and upbringing.

“Me too,” Maria Arsentievna nodded. “Zhenya, are you hungry? Wait a little while until the borscht is cooked. I’ll feed you.”

Seva almost choked on his saliva, barely refraining from nodding vigorously in agreement.

“Okay, Mom. Thank you,” Zhenya answered for him.

“If you need me, I’m in the kitchen.” Maria Arsentievna left them alone.

Seva followed Zhenya into the room closest to the entrance.

“Wait a couple of minutes. I’ll change and come back,” said Zhenya, putting the backpack on the bed.

Seva nodded and curiously looked around the room. He was terribly interested in how all these teachers’ favorites really lived. He couldn’t believe all Zhenya’s interests were limited to textbooks and preparation for tests!

The initial inspection did not provide much: the room was a room. It wasn’t much different from Seva’s. Two huge closets. One was filled with a huge amount of junk, and the other it seemed was for clothes. A bed in the corner, a desk, heavy velvet curtains, a patterned carpet on the floor. Everything normally found in a person’s room. Only there were a lot of honorary certificates hanging

above the table.

Seva stepped closer and began to read.

“This letter ... awards a student of grade 9 ‘A’ Smirnov Evgeny Prokofievich for good studies in connection with the celebration of the Great October.”

“A commendatory sheet ... to the runner-up in the high jump ...”. Seva snorted with disappointment. Even without being in the same room with him, Zhenya managed to bore him. It turned out that he was also an athlete!

Seva became sad. On the way to Zhenya’s house, he’d assumed he would see him from a new side, but the most interesting thing in his room turned out to be letters and commendatory sheets. Rostik was kind of right: Zhenya was grown in incubator.

To entertain himself before Zhenya’s return, Seva went to one of the cabinets and began to look at the contents without much curiosity. Some books, of course, school textbooks, incomprehensible figurines ... oh! A record player! Seva whistled in surprise—and how did he not notice him right away? If there was a record player, then there must be records! Now, he had to find them.

Seva skimmed through the rest of the shelves but found nothing but books. When he was about to get upset again, his gaze caught something unusual. He took a closer look and almost cried out in amazement: on the bottom shelf of Zhenya’s closet was a record by The Beatles!

It was *The Beatles*, written on it just like that, in English. How many times had Seva heard about the original records, but had never seen them with his own eyes? Had Zhenya managed to get it somewhere? It was almost impossible!

“Have you looked around?” the blond guy’s voice rang out.

He started and turned around sharply.

In a T-shirt and battered shorts, Zhenya suddenly lost that “exemplary” appearance and seemed to be an ordinary boy Seva’s age, not a nerd at all, but quite an ordinary kid from the yard. Only the dandelion-ish curls were still sticking out, but even they did not seem so ridiculous anymore.

“Yeah,” Seva replied, a little stunned. “I found a record here ...”

“I see.”

“Is it real?” asked Seva stupidly, in a suddenly hoarse voice.



“Yes. And the songs on it are also real,” Zhenya chuckled.

“Original, I meant.”

“As you can see,” he shrugged.

The Beatles! None of his friends had an original record from any foreign bands. There was simply nowhere to get them. Some lucky people had records with “Melodies” and “Vocal and Instrumental Ensembles” written on them, as if the names of the bands itself was something extremely shameful and indecent. None of his acquaintances could even dream of an original record! And now he found it at home of the most boring person at their school. If anyone had told Seva that, he wouldn’t have believed it. In Moscow, such an item could be obtained, even if scarcely and illegally, but in their small town? Never!

“I also have The Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd records,” Zhenya added proudly, pushing the record under a stack of magazines with his foot.

Seva opened his eyes so wide and stared at Zhenya in amazement for so long that they started to hurt. When the emotions subsided a little, he could only ask, “Where did you get them?”

“It’s not there anymore.” Zhenya waved it off, but he thought about a little and decided to answer, switching to a whisper. “A friend of my father gave it to me. He has some connections. I didn’t really delve into it, to be honest. I have to hide it from my parents. The father believes that it is impossible to support and instill in the younger generation an American or foreign culture. I don’t know what will happen if he finds these records. He doesn’t really approve of our bands either, actually.”

Seva barely nodded at Zhenya’s revelations; his thoughts were far away. He still did not fully realize what he had just found among dusty books and old magazines. It was unbelievable! Rostik and Dima would die of envy if they found out. But they should have thought about it earlier, before fate suddenly became kind to Seva.

“Can I ... can I put it on?” Seva asked cautiously, as if afraid to scare off sudden good luck.

A shadow of confusion passed over Zhenya’s face. “Well ... I don’t think so. My father is at home. I tell you he forbids listening to this. So no, I’m sorry.”

“Okay. Whatever you say,” Seva sighed.

There was so much disappointment in his sigh that Zhenya hurried to console him.

“But you can come back another day if you want. Even tomorrow. Tomorrow father is at work all day.”

“Really?” Seva became delighted again.

“Really.”

“Then after school, I’ll come straight to you!”

“Okay, you got it.”

The world around began to shine brighter. He was going to listen to The Beatles! Dima would have sold his soul for the original record, but Seva got it for it free. Had luck finally decided to embrace him? He looked around contentedly again and asked, “What are we going to do now?”

“What do you want to do?”

Seva shrugged. “We can play cards.”

“Do you have a deck?”

“If I offer them, then I do. A durak?”

“The crazy?”

“The full one,” Seva replied, taking the deck out of his pocket, just to disagree with Zhenya.

“Well, deal the cards,” Zhenya waved his hand.

Seva carefully shuffled the deck, sitting down on the floor like a master. And not just shuffled, but as Rostik had taught. Until that day, he had never had a chance to brag about this useless trick in front of someone, but here was an opportunity! Seva stole a glance at Zhenya: did he appreciate his skill?

Zhenya whistled respectfully. “Deftly!”

Seva smiled proudly. No doubt it was deftly! Finally, having finished showing off, he dealt the cards. The game began.

It took him only a few moves to realize Zhenya was playing terribly. Even with the ace and king of trumps in his hands, he managed to lose to Seva, who did not get any trumps at all. After getting rid of the last card, Seva said mockingly, “So, we found out that you are not a ram at all, but just a fool.

Another game?”

Zhenya, unlike Rostik, was able to lose. He smiled at Seva’s words and returned the cards to the deck. “Let’s start.”

Seva narrowed his eyes suspiciously but shuffled the deck—in the usual way, without unnecessary ostentation, and dealt the cards again. After playing only with Rostik, Zhenya’s reaction to losing surprised him. Seva remembered how often he had to give in, because the loser, Rostik, stubbornly did not accept his defeat and accused him of cheating, and Dima, who was not playing at all, always agreed with him. To avoid conflicts, Seva preferred to lose if they did not play for wishes. Then he was smashing Rostik to smithereens! But Rostik stubbornly refused to recognize Seva’s victory. And this one, imagine that, accepted defeat with dignity, and agreed to a rematch. A miracle!

Zhenya did not manage to recoup. Surprisingly, at gambling he was a complete zero with cards. Seva won for the fifth time in a row and once again mocked Zhenya. “If you were a girl, I would offer to play strip poker.”

He thought decent Zhenya would be outraged, but he just giggled.

“Won’t you offer it now?”

Seva chuckled. “Tempting. Let’s play the game for wishes.”

“Okay.”

“For any.”

“Of course.”

Once again shuffling the deck, Seva raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“I don’t know if I admire your amazing self-confidence or if it puts me in a stupor.”

“I’m just a gambler.”

“I already figured that out.”

Seva was waiting for a trick. He was sure that all this time Zhenya had adhered to some of his tactics and now, at the most crucial moment, when Seva was relaxed, he would blow him to pieces. But that didn’t happen. Having thrown out the last card, Seva stared in disbelief at the trumps remaining in Zhenya’s hands.

“Come on! Seriously?”

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought ... okay, forget it. Will you fulfill the wish?”

“I will. I lost, and gambling debt is a sacred thing.”

Seva shook his head in bewilderment. He wondered if all these exceptional students were like that or did he get a special one? In any case, it was necessary to create a wish. Seva frowned. On the one hand, he wanted to watch Zhenya pester passersby on the street with questions about what year it was or shout something indecent through an open window. Something like that happened once in a hundred years; it was impossible to miss the opportunity. But on the other hand, Rostik had taught him for a whole year to use won wishes wisely, and most importantly, with maximum benefit.

What could this blond student give Seva? Records. But he promised them anyway, and he hadn’t yet reneged on anything, even after six losses. What else did Zhenya have that was interesting? His father must have a gun. Seva would love to shoot from a real smoothbore. But it was his father’s, not Zhenya’s, and he’d not likely allow that. What other benefits could be derived from a blond nerd? The answer came to mind in a blink.

“Do my math homework for me.”

It was not that Seva was afraid of Andrianovna’s threats, but ... since there was a chance to do so, why not improve his grades? Especially if he didn’t have to do anything? And maybe Andrianovna would leave him alone.

“What? Seriously? Math homework?”

“I couldn’t be more serious. You promised.”

“If I promised I would, but ... math, seriously?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“You are just wasting your wish for nothing. Original, isn’t it?”

“I feel this is far from my last wish,” Seva sarcastically remarked.

“So what? Will you spend the next one on physics?” Zhenya answered in the same tone.

“If I want to,” Seva said calmly. “Come on. Fewer words, more action. Marina Savelyevna will be stunned tomorrow!”

“Wait, right now?” Zhenya grimaced with displeasure.

“Yes. I have a briefcase with me, and a textbook, and a notebook. We had a math lesson today.”

Zhenya rolled his eyes. “Okay, give it here. But you will write it down in the notebook yourself. I’m not going to fake your handwriting.”

“As you say.” Seva relented and went to get his briefcase. He lay the textbook in front of Zhenya and pointed to the task. It so happened that today he even knew what was required; Marina Savelyevna, who’d been standing at his desk while dictating homework, left him no other choice but to write down what she dictated.

“Then sit down and don’t flash before my eyes,” Zhenya snapped.

“So angry,” Seva giggled, obediently sitting down on the next stool.

“I can’t stand math; doing it in my free time is still a setup. If I knew you were going to do this, I would have played strip poker, honestly.”

“I know from your grades how much you hate math.”

“Just because I understand it doesn’t mean I love it. I have a tutor three times a week, so of course I understand it! And I have the city Olympiad in two weeks. And here you are, still with your homework,” Zhenya grumbled, scratching something with a pencil on a piece of paper.

“Compared to the math contests, my homework is nothing major, so don’t grumble,” Seva chuckled.

“Be quiet for a bit, please.”

Seva wanted to snap back, but couldn’t find anything to say, so he obediently shut up and began to watch the blond guy solve the problem.

After reading it again, Zhenya furrowed his blond eyebrows and began flipping through the textbook, muttering something softly. He read some theorems over and over and, it seemed, even understood something. His long thin finger slid across the pages of the book, lingering on some lines for a fraction of a second, until finally it froze at the end of the paragraph.

He immediately grabbed a pencil and began to draw something; Seva looked at the paper over his shoulder with interest, but he could not make out anything in Zhenya’s scribbles and decided not to climb under his arm to do so. He continued to frown, his eyes running over the written numbers and letters with

concentration; he sniffed and licked his lips, completely immersed in drawings and theorems.

Seva was amused by this, but not wanting to interfere with the thought process, he quietly chuckled and looked away. After studying Zhenya's room inside and out, he turned back to Zhenya and saw that he had stuck out his tongue as he concentrated. Seva burst out laughing.

"What are you doing?" Zhenya stared at him uncomprehendingly, clearly dissatisfied with the fact he was distracted.

"You look very funny when you think," Seva giggled and, remembering the expression on his face, burst into silent laughter again.

Zhenya frowned again, but seeing Seva's merriment, he could not restrain himself and smiled in response. "You're such a child, you know that?"

"Like, you're too grown-up?"

It was obvious that Zhenya wanted to object, but changed his mind and shrugged his shoulders. "Probably I am. While you were having fun, I solved your problem." He handed Seva a piece of paper with the solution.

Seva whistled in surprise. "You're fast!"

"It's an easy task," Zhenya waved a dismissive hand. "A fifth-grader could solve it; it was only necessary to substitute two formulas."

"Yeah, no doubt," Seva snorted. "Okay, thanks. I'll rewrite it at home."

"You do understand that Marina Savelyevna will ask you how you solved it? Can you explain it to her?"

"... No," Seva answered honestly after giving it thought.

"Let me explain."

"Okay," Seva reluctantly agreed. He didn't want to rewrite the task and get a bad grade anyway.

"Look, first you draw a parallelepiped ... you know what a parallelepiped is, right?"

"It's a figure," Seva shrugged.

"What does it look like?"

Seva said nothing: his knowledge of geometry was far from extensive.

"Seva, do you even show up for lessons?"

“Of course, where else can I go?” He felt offended. “I even listen to Marina Savelyevna ... it’s hard *not* to listen to her when she shouts at the whole classroom: ‘Temkin, why are you going to school? Who are you going to work for with such grades? It’s a complete disgrace ... wherever your father looks! What irresponsible student you are! My Tanyusha was an excellent student at your age; she only thought about studying. And she was an athlete, a smart girl, a beauty; all the boys were crazy about her, but she did not pay attention to them because study was the first priority.’” He ceased mimicking his math teacher.

Zhenya tried to keep a straight face, but couldn’t, and chuckled. “That really sounds like her. She tells us about her daughter throughout the lesson too. She’s the pride of all parents and the joy of all teachers ...”

“*You would be a great couple,*” Seva thought sarcastically, but said out loud, “And how can you study if you are constantly compared to some possibly fictional Tanya? The desire to study evaporates.”

“I don’t know who or what prevents you from studying, but Marina Savelyevna is a wonderful teacher. She just loves her daughter so very much.” Zhenya became serious. “If you listened to her, not only when she lectured, but also when she explained, you might understand something. Now, listen up.”

Seva thought that his stupidity and incomprehensibility would anger Zhenya, but he didn’t even raise an eyebrow. Opening the textbook on the right page, he explained patiently, then asked, “Do you see this theorem?”

A few minutes later, it began to make sense to Seva. He no longer saw incomprehensible formulas and theorems, seemingly written in a foreign language, but that they formed coherent and logical solutions to problems that he had never mastered in his life. Incredulously shifting his gaze from the pencil-covered sheet to the textbook, Seva exhaled loudly. “Wow!”

“Do you understand it now?”

“You won’t believe it, but I do!” Seva responded. “I can probably even repeat it. And I will if Marina Savelyevna asks. You’re good at explaining,” he said with unintended respect.

“Well, the task is easy. What’s there to explain?” Zhenya responded skeptically.

“Five minutes ago, I didn’t know what a parallelepiped was,” Seva snorted. “Believe me ... for me it’s *higher* mathematics.” He nodded at the deck. “Maybe another game?”

“Do you still want me to do physics?” Zhenya chuckled.

“We don’t have to play on the wish,” Seva took pity on him.

“Tempting. But it’s a little late.” Zhenya looked at his watch with regret. “I still have homework to do. Come back tomorrow, and we’ll play. And we’ll listen to the records too.”

“Nerds!” Seva rolled his eyes. “Are you sure you can’t do without it for one night?” He clasped his hands pleadingly.

“I’m sure,” Zhenya said firmly and then giggled. “So, that’s what Mom meant when she talked about bad influences. I thought it was a myth!”

Seva giggled in response. “I didn’t call you to unscrew the lightbulbs in the bathroom yet. Well, Zhenya, maybe a little later? I really don’t want to go home now. I’ll run into my father. I can sit and wait while you do your homework. I won’t even interfere, honestly.”

“You want to sit and watch me do my homework?” Zhenya was surprised.

“Not that I want to, but I want to go home even less,” Seva admitted honestly.

He saw that Zhenya wanted to object but changed his mind. “I get it. You can stay, but I think you understand that it will take far from twenty minutes.”

“Who would doubt it?” Seva grinned with understanding.

Zhenya took out his notebooks and textbooks from his backpack, spread them out on the table, found a chewed pencil, and plunged into his squiggles. Seva sighed, picked up the deck from the floor and moved to the bed, shuffling the cards again, with an inset, then with a sliding volt. He didn’t understand whether he did it to attract Zhenya’s attention or out of boredom. *Nerds! Where do they get all this enthusiasm and energy for all this senseless studying and writing?* Seva snorted in frustration and put the cards aside.

There was nothing to do except look at the blond guy’s back. This was what Seva did for the next ten minutes, with quiet chuckles as he noticed more and more of Zhenya’s oddities: that he clicked his tongue, scratched his head with a



pencil, then he tapped thoughtfully on the table with his nails. The combination was repeated and became boring.

Seva studied the room. His gaze lingered on the record player and he smiled in anticipation but looked away so as not to tease himself. More than books, nothing interesting could be found. Seva reluctantly got off the bed, ambled over, and ran his fingers over the spines. A bunch of unfamiliar names, mostly textbooks. Boredom. There were a couple of familiar authors. Seva grimaced, turned back to the textbooks. It was amazing how many of them there were, even beyond the school curriculum. Many seemed to be history.

Meticulously studying the spines, Seva realized that there was only history here: world history, history of Russia, Ancient Rome, the Middle Ages. Where did they all come from and, more importantly, why? Randomly choosing a textbook with an attractive cover from a long row, Seva opened it in the middle and read a few lines. He didn't understand anything, maybe because he'd started reading from the end of the paragraph. Then he opened the next textbook; the situation repeated itself. Regretfully, he returned it to the shelf and commented aloud, "Rubbish."

Zhenya, who'd been bending over a notebook, turned around and saw Seva removing his hand from the textbook. Squinting, peering at the names, he asked, "Are you talking about the history of the Middle Ages?"

Seva frowned. He had already forgotten which textbook he had just held in his hands. Shrugging, he answered honestly. "I'm talking about history in general."

He thought that Zhenya would be satisfied with the answer, but he unexpectedly, vigorously objected. "It definitely *isn't* rubbish. It's an interesting subject, and Grigory Olegovich teaches it well."

"Maybe," Seva reluctantly agreed. He could not remember the last time he'd listened to the kind historian. Usually, during his lessons, Seva did everything but study the subject. He played dots, sea battle, or just lazily looked out the window. Grigory Olegovich stopped asking him questions a long time ago, preferring to ignore the negligent student.

"What are you studying now? The Russian-Japanese War?"

“I guess,” Seva nodded uncertainly.

“And how do you like it?”

“Should I *like* it?”

“I like it; it’s an interesting topic. Did you know that the general of the Japanese Empire, due to heavy losses, asked his emperor for permission to commit hara-kiri?”

“No,” Seva responded, giggling. “Did he allow it?”

“No, of course not. And there is nothing funny about it. Hara-kiri is a ritual, a painful suicide done by ripping open the stomach to atone for guilt. Can you imagine what someone would feel at that moment, once they decided to do this?”

“Oh, these impulsive Japanese.” Seva was not impressed. “What else can you tell me?”

Zhenya did not catch the mockery in his words and, tilting his head, thoughtfully said, “There was one case ...”

Seva wanted to interrupt him, but suddenly felt ashamed. Zhenya was speaking so enthusiastically. He began to talk about the appeal of the Japanese to the American president, with a request to act as a peacemaker, and then about the first use of radio communication during war. Seva listened, nodding politely after every sentence, and calculating when Zhenya would get bored. But very soon, to his own surprise, he realized that he still hadn’t lost the thread of the narrative. Zhenya’s voice hadn’t become a monotonous background sound. On the contrary, Seva was surprised to notice that he didn’t even want him to stop talking. He was relating interesting things while bypassing boring details like dates and unmemorable names.

Zhenya suddenly stumbled in the middle of a sentence and said, embarrassed, “Oh, sorry, I’ve gotten carried away. You probably don’t need to know this. There’s nothing like that in the school program anyway.”

Seva looked irritated. “I don’t care about the program. Tell me, I’m interested.”

Zhenya continued to talk. Seva noticed that his eyes even glistened. Time seemed irrelevant; who knew how much time passed before Zhenya summed up

his story? “Well, it seems that’s all I know.”

Seva shook his head, sorting out the information received, and exhaled, amazed. “It’s really impressive! Have you ever thought of becoming a teacher? I’ve never been so interested in listening to a history lecture in my life!”

Zhenya waved a hand. “A teacher! Yeah, right. The topic is easy; I didn’t even explain everything, just offered random facts.”

Seva was indignant. “Maybe just facts but I, while you were telling me, remembered the reasons for the war, and its course, and the end. I can even retell it. Can you imagine how stunned Grigory Olegovich would be? The last time I answered him was in the seventh grade, but without facts. You have a talent, Zhenya, I’m serious”.

“I don’t have any talent. I’d given up history for a long time.” Zhenya grimaced, as if Seva’s words were unpleasant. “It’s just that you’re more clever than you let on. By the way, do you want to eat?”

Carried away by cards and then a lecture on history, Seva had managed to forget about the rumbles in his stomach and had even stopped noticing the smell of borscht in the apartment. After Zhenya’s question, he suddenly felt ravenous. “I do!” he nodded enthusiastically.

“You’re *really* hungry, aren’t you?” Zhenya asked sympathetically and looked at his watch. “Of course, it’s already eight o’clock. I should have fed you much earlier,” he muttered guiltily and left the room.

Five minutes later, Zhenya returned with two bowls. Steam rose from the fragrant borscht and made Seva’s mouth water. As soon as Zhenya put the plate in front of him, he said, “*Bon appétit.*” Quickly, he started to eat, not paying attention to the fact that the soup burned his tongue and lips.

“And to you,” Zhenya replied, surprised. “Isn’t it hot?”

“Just right,” Seva replied with a quick wave of his hand.

Zhenya spooned up some borscht and gently blew on it. Then he tried it, grimaced—it was too hot for him—and decided to wait until it cooled down. Seva didn’t care. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten real, homemade soup. He lived on cereals and pasta. Sometimes, he would have lunch in the school cafeteria, but he ate only a couple of buttered sandwiches. There

were, of course, entrees at his house, but they were prepared by Seva himself and he couldn't call the entrees "soup". Most often it was one salted potato in a three-liter pot of broth, at the sight of which his brother, Sema, an eternally hungry seventh grader, winced and said that he would have lunch with friends. Now, before Seva, was a bowl full to the brim of this delectable, hearty, rich borscht! He would listen to ten history lectures for this!

Having quickly finished half of the soup, Seva pulled himself together and commented, "Very tasty."

"I know. Say thank you to my mom."

"For sure."

For a while, they ate without another word. Only the clink of spoons broke the silence in the room. Seva's gaze wandered absently from the record player on the shelf to Zhenya's thoughtful face and back. Gradually, the silence started to seem awkward and tense. Thinking that there was no better time to get to know the blond guy better, Seva made a request. "Tell me about yourself. We've been studying at the same school for so many years, but we still don't really know each other."

Zhenya was puzzled. Continuing to pick at the soup with the spoon, he idly straightened his blond hair. "Well, what can I tell you? I'm seventeen. I'm in the tenth grade—you know. I'm a good student. I love history and that sort of thing. Not into math, as you know. What else?"

Seva grimaced with displeasure. Zhenya's answer was similar to girly quizzes that his classmates enjoyed filling out. Once Alina had approached him with an offer to write something about herself, and he, unable to come up with something witty, wrote "Denikina is a fool" in all the columns. Oh, the screams! And such stupid quiz responses were the most interesting things a person with original records of The Beatles and Rolling Stones could reveal about himself? Even Rostik's assumptions about these "incubator honor students" sounded more exciting.

"You're telling me about school. What do you do in your free time?"

"I like to read. Most of all science fiction. I listen to music. Did I ask for these records from a friend of my father for no reason? No-o. I ride a moped

sometimes, but it's rare."

"You have a moped too?" Seva's eyes grew round, like five kopecks coins.

No question; they'd been brought together by fate.

"Mokik," Zhenya explained with a certain claim to pride. "Verkhovyna-5. My parents gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday."

"Will you let me drive?" Seva extended his hands pleadingly.

"It's at the summer house." Zhenya shook his head.

"Ok-kay," Seva drawled in frustration. He'd already imagined how Rostik and Dima would surely become envious when they saw him on a moped.

"And you, Seva?" asked Zhenya, scraping up the remains of the soup and setting aside the bowl.

"What?"

"What can you tell me about yourself?"

Seva had not expected that. After Zhenya's question, he was lost a little bit. What could he say about himself? He had no records, no moped, and, moreover, no hunting rifle. Seva didn't like to study, didn't read books, listened to music only at Dima's, but this was in the past. And what else? Would Zhenya be interested to learn how he, along with his blockheaded friends, missed lessons, unscrewed lightbulbs in the bathroom, drank alcohol (actually moonshine, illegally distilled liquor) in Dima's father's garage, and looked for hours at "adult" magazines that Rostik had found? No.

Zhenya was responsible; he had morals. Seva couldn't explain to him that they only skipped useless and stupidly boring lessons, drank just a little alcohol (Rostik wouldn't have been able to remove a lot of the moonshine from the house), and that he wasn't interested in "adult" magazines at all. Talking about them only bored him. He didn't understand that which delighted his friends. And he'd unscrewed the lightbulbs in the bathroom only once, at Rostik's request. Would Zhenya understand any of that?

"Well ..."

Realizing that the silence had been dragging on, Seva drawled, "I'm not thrilled with mathematics either. And I don't like to study at all."

"You're telling me about school." Zhenya repeated Seva's words

sarcastically. “What do you do in your free time?”

“Hang around somewhere,” he muttered, completely embarrassed.

“Explain to me, honestly, how did you break that stupid window?” To Seva’s surprise, Zhenya was looking at him with genuine interest and not condemnation.

This lifted his spirits a little. “I explained that to Andrianovna today. She didn’t believe me. I called Lenchik. Why ‘I’? Rostik and Dima were also there.”

“Yeah, and Rosalia Andrianovna scolded you, as I understand it—*only* you.” Zhenya chuckled. “As usual. Okay, I also heard Rostik say today that he was ashamed in front of you. He said it wasn’t decent leaving you there alone, and if Dima hadn’t run away, he would have waited for you.”

“I believe it,” Seva grimaced. He didn’t, however, understand his own sarcasm. Rostik, despite all his shortcomings, was always a reliable and loyal comrade. Seva really believed in the sincerity of his words, but childish resentment did not allow him to admit it.

“And why did you need Lenchik at all? I heard about him from someone. They said that he was a nerd, and no one really talked to him.”

“Lelia communicates well with him—Alina Denikina’s best friend,” Seva explained, catching Zhenya’s puzzled look. Everyone knew Denikina. “And second, he had to give us his geometry homework. I didn’t know what a parallelepiped was then, so Lenchik would have explained it to me.” Seva offered a mocking smile.

“Did you make him do your homework for you? And not with your fists?” Zhenya eyed him suspiciously.

“How offensive! By the way, we did a noble deed,” Seva declared pathetically. “Lenchik was weaned from smoking and the little ones were saved from his ... racket. He won’t be extorting money for smokes from Octobrists ever again. In my opinion, it’s very commendable ... isn’t it? He tried to buy us with cigarettes so that we wouldn’t tell Maria Viktorovna anything about his shenanigans, but we wouldn’t have fallen for such a thing.”

“Wow ... petty!” Zhenya whistled and inquired, “Don’t you smoke yourself?”

“I don’t.” Seva winced involuntarily.

“That’s good,” Zhenya praised him.

“Yeah,” Seva muttered and squinted at the wall clock. “Okay, I better go. By the time I get home, my father will have gone to bed, so we won’t run into each other.” Seva quickly threw the notebook and the piece of paper with the math solution into the briefcase, glanced sadly at the record player on the shelf, and went to put on his shoes.

Zhenya followed him.

“Maria Arsentievna, thank you for the soup; it was very tasty!” Seva said loudly. Standing on the threshold, Seva held out his hand to Zhenya and said more quietly, “And thank you ... well, for allowing me to stay.”

“Thank you for coming.” Zhenya nodded good-naturedly and squeezed Seva’s hand. “See you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow.”

Zhenya’s hand was firm, and the handshake was strong, but his palm was soft, like a woman’s. Surprisingly, Seva liked shaking his hand, and he let it go with a slight regret. It occurred to him that he would also like such a handshake for himself: tough, masculine. But not like Rostik’s, which could also be rough. Strange, he had never paid attention to such trifles before. Maybe he was growing up.

On the way home, Seva replayed the day in his head again and again, and he felt calm, relaxed. The time on the clock was approaching nine. It was slowly getting dark on the streets. He walked through the almost deserted courtyards, looking at the windows of houses lighting up one after another, and listening to the quiet rustling of still green leaves. His thoughts flowed slowly, melancholically.

The blond guy wasn’t the nerd he’d seemed at first glance, and it was even somewhat interesting talking with him. To be completely honest, he’d enjoyed this day much more than the others, usually filled with aimless wandering through the streets in search of some entertainment. He had had a good time and tomorrow at school he wouldn’t be punished for the lessons he hadn’t learned.

“Unlike Dima and Rostik. They probably wandered aimlessly around all day,

as always!” Seva thought, gloating, opening the door to the building.



## Chapter 3

### *The Gambling Debt*

The next day, fortunately, Seva was not called to answer any of the questions written on the board. In math class, he sat quietly and avoided everyone, as usual, and while in history class, he contemplated whether to voluntarily answer a couple of the questions, but decided against it. Seva knew that showing off would amaze his teachers and classmates and have them wondering, but he didn't want to attract more attention to himself than necessary.

He'd imagined how Grigory Olegovich, always understanding and kind to students, would raise his thick eyebrows in amazement and would cheerfully say, "Temkin? I wanted to please you by not giving you another bad grade, but what a surprise! Alright, Vsevolod, show us what you know."

Everyone in his class, from the nefarious Svetka to the snooty Denikina, would be gazing at him in bemusement, expecting this to be an April Fool's joke.

Seva shuddered. No, he wouldn't do that. All he could do was hope that this wouldn't be the last time he would come to school prepared, so that he could impress everyone with his intelligence. It would be much more entertaining when Grigory Olegovich, realizing he hadn't given him a negative mark in a long time, asked him to answer the questions. He'd immediately assume that Seva would remain still in front of the board for a few minutes and fidget in place as he received—unsurprisingly—a new bad grade on his record; his classmates would look at him standing by the teacher's desk and chuckle in anticipation of silly jokes that he typically made. And when he opened his

mouth, everyone would be holding their breath, preparing to burst into silent laughter.

He would, however, suddenly say, “Did you know that the Russian-Japanese conflict was the first time radio communication was actively employed in a fight?”

And everyone would be shocked.

Seva remained calm during the history lecture, having found justification for his laziness. He listened with pleasure to the history teacher chastising Dima and was amazed by Alina’s expertise, who, using the information from the textbook, recounted facts she had heard about the Varyag cruiser, which supplemented Alena Solodskaya’s initial weak response. He even enjoyed sitting in class, anticipating giving an answer at any moment. He didn’t even twitch when Grigory Olegovich pronounced a word similar to his last name. While waiting for the ring of the bell, in boredom, he stared at the window of the building opposite the school and scribbled in a notebook, pretending to be busy and unable to respond.

Seva even listened to a new topic with true curiosity. The history teacher was so thrilled talking about the beginning of the revolution that Seva couldn’t help but be interested. It was more certainly more interesting than a dot game or a naval battle against an unknown opponent.

Something else interesting happened that day. At recess, after history class, Sveta came up to Seva without her friends, who usually stuck to her like glue, and hiding her eyes, asked for forgiveness for her outburst yesterday. Seva was so taken aback that he first thought Alina had threatened her with something. Then he decided Alina wasn’t that worried about it, that it was unlikely she’d even remember their encounter after she left the classroom. Obviously, Sveta came to him voluntarily.

Seva didn’t believe her apology was genuine, but he accepted it nonetheless. Sveta raised her eyes to his, smiled warmly, nodded slightly, and walked away with the rest of the group waiting down the hallway.

*“Like lovebirds, ... parrots,”* Seva thought.

He had noticed Svetka’s eyes were red and puffy, as if she hadn’t slept, or

had cried herself to sleep, or maybe both. Was it Alina's words that had made the supposedly impervious Svetka so sad? Seva didn't feel sorry for her, but he promised himself that he would not engage in any more fights with Sveta, and he would not allow Alina to get personal or poke at her sore spots.

After school, he and Zhenya agreed to meet on the schoolgrounds. Seva was sitting on pins and needles towards the end of the last class, continuously staring at the clock over the teacher's desk. It was difficult to believe that he would be listening to a record that none of his classmates had probably ever heard—except for Alina, of course. When it came to her, he was certain she had seen and heard everything in this world, and 'The Beatles' record would not surprise her. It was understandable. Alina was, after all, the daughter of the district committee's first secretary. He might have envied her a week earlier, but now he felt like he'd won the lotto. Life had finally smiled upon him.

Seva was in an unusually cheerful mood. The dazzling September light forced him to squint. The sparrows outside the window chirped his favorite song, as though happy for Seva and his unheard-of good fortune.

A cold breeze from the slightly open window ruffled his black hair, which Seva repeatedly straightened, but only creating an even bigger tangled mess. Finally, a piercing ring bell resounded, announcing the last period was over! After shoving his belongings into his briefcase, Seva raced from the classroom.

Zhenya was already there, near a thin birch so close to the school that its spreading branches scraped the art classroom windows. Seva could describe this despised tree in great detail, and with his eyes closed, because it was at a drawing for which he earned his first 'C'. Couldn't Zhenya have picked another area?

Zhenya noticed him from afar and waved his hand in greeting, to which Seva only nodded sullenly. Coming closer, he silently stretched out his hand, but mentally cursed himself. How could Zhenya have known about his dislike for the stupid birch? Seva forced a smile,

"Hello."

"Hi," Zhenya smiled broadly in response.

"What are we doing now? Going to your place?"

“I’m afraid not,” Zhenya shook his head. “I thought Mom would leave for work in the morning, but she stayed at home. Maybe to yours? Do you have a record player at home?”

“I do. You can come to mine. My father would probably be late tonight,” Seva nodded thoughtfully. “Did you take the record with you?”

“I did.”

“So, I get to listen to The Beatles at home, from my record player?” Seva’s eyes sparkled. “This is crazy! Well, what are we standing around for? Let’s get moving!”

Zhenya smiled at his childlike, joyful expression and watched as he quickly exited the schoolyard.

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Seva’s house was a leisurely ten-minute walk from the school, but today, motivated by the desire to hear those beloved tunes as soon as possible, he broke all records and sped to his place in only three minutes. Zhenya, who didn’t share Seva’s intense enthusiasm, complained the entire way and asked him to slow down, but he pretended not to hear. Seva, who stopped in front of the entrance door, glanced down at his out-of-breath buddy and asked, “Where did those good grades in PE come from?”

“Where did you get those bad ones?” Zhenya snapped angrily. “For running short distances, there shouldn’t be a simple ‘A’, but an ‘A’ with a dozen pluses.”

As Seva approached his front door, he instantly regretted his hasty choice to bring Zhenya home. Seva was so excited about listening to The Beatles that he entirely forgot about his house being so different from Zhenya’s gorgeous and spotless place. It wasn’t like they lived in a pigsty or an old, dismal common apartment, but after the Smirnovs’ clean, big, and bright house with its immaculate order and obvious comfort, the Temkins’ modest and cluttered apartment seemed a true shame to Seva.

Of course, he was certain that Zhenya wouldn’t mock him as soon as he crossed the threshold and would most likely not say anything to him, but he still

felt apprehensive. He was particularly uneasy about his room. He hadn't been expecting guests for ... well, for a long time, so he didn't bother cleaning it. Hopefully, Zhenya wouldn't be a jerk and his willingness to hang around with Seva wouldn't disintegrate upon viewing the mess.

"Which floor?" Zhenya drew Seva out of his unpleasant thoughts.

"The fifth," he replied with a mocking smile. They didn't even have an elevator!

Zhenya muttered something to himself. It appeared to be a curse, but Seva quickly discarded this thought. Zhenya started up the steps, and Seva followed slowly, as if instinctively attempting to delay the inevitable. He attempted to recall the state of the hallway, which was the first thing Zhenya would see when he entered the apartment. Apart from strewn shoes and the always knocked-aside doormat by the door, everything appeared to be acceptable enough, Seva concluded.

He still felt irritated though. Dima and Rostik used to come to his apartment frequently, and he never considered that something might be wrong with it. He had no notion that his buddies might not like the clutter in his room, but even if they did, he believed it would be no big deal.

So, what separated Zhenya from Dima and Rostik? *He's not a sanitary inspector!* Seva calmed a little and moved up the stairs more enthusiastically.

Zhenya didn't say anything critical and didn't even grimace at the sight of the little corridor crammed with junk. He followed Seva inside the apartment, wiped his shoes on the rug, removed his shoes and carefully placed them against the wall, and softly asked, "Is there anyone at home?"

"Only Grandma," Seva responded. "My little brother is probably hanging around somewhere. He'll return in the evening, and Father is at work till eight o'clock. So, consider us alone. Grandma won't disturb us; she doesn't hear well, and she won't come into the room."

"What about your mom?"

"She's gone," Seva stated quickly and after a few seconds added, "She died a year and a half ago." There would be no more questions.

Zhenya's face revealed a wide range of emotions, from astonishment to

shame.

Seva regretted what he'd told him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know—"

"It's all right," Seva cut him off. "It was a long time ago, so I'm not bothered by it anymore."

Actually, it wasn't all that long ago. Seva's memories of that May day was still vivid. At times, it seemed like it had occurred yesterday, although there was a significant gap between seventh and ninth grades. That abyss known as eighth grade, became the darkest year of Seva's brief existence. All the events and people, emotions and sentiments, converged into a solid black realm that Seva didn't want to recall. Not having known what to do or say, he preferred to leave all his grief, hate, and contempt out there, in the void. Eighth grade had appeared much darker and more difficult than the end of seventh grade ... when his mom died.

Seva, his father, and brother didn't accept what had occurred initially; they lived in a vacuum and didn't realize that it would always be like this. The reality finally hit Seva at the start of the new school year, crushing him with its weight, and completely enveloping him. He had to go about his usual life, attend school and appear as if nothing had occurred. But how could he continue, knowing that the closest and most valued person in his life was no longer with him?

Seva gradually stopped speaking with his classmates and the boys from the yard and began sitting at home, quietly despising the entire world with all its delights and beautiful colors; for some reason, it was passing him by. He longed to scream against injustice, and he was overcome by fierce, searing tears at night. He couldn't understand why the world held so many horrible people—murderers, traitors, swindlers, and cowards—yet it was his lovely mom who'd died.

She was just thirty-four years old, gorgeous, the smartest and sweetest woman he had ever met. She was always there to shield him from his father and to be there when he needed her. This was how she stayed in Seva's mind; his brain had wiped away the final two months that she spent lying in bed, unable to communicate even a few words. She was gone. How would it ever be possible to

accept that?

As it turned out, it *was* possible. Seva grew accustomed to returning to an empty apartment, where his mom's ringing laughter could no longer be heard and there was no heavenly smell of chicken cutlets for dinner. He grew accustomed to seeing an eternally sad and frequently drunk father, just as he grew accustomed to the fact that his family would never be the same again.

Dima and Rostik, who didn't ask him foolish questions and didn't attempt to sympathize, were new companions. They simply accepted him into their never-ending antics and helped him re-experience emotions; he laughed, had fun, didn't think about coming home again. Memories of that May day gradually faded and stopped hurting, as if the wound had been covered with a thick bandage; it didn't hurt or bother you until someone removed.

Zhenya did. But he looked at Seva with such guilty eyes that he couldn't get mad at him. To prove to him that everything was alright, Seva decided to change the topic of the conversation. "Do you want to eat?"

"I do!" he responded with uncustomary enthusiasm.

Seva smiled wryly in response and, glad that Zhenya didn't notice it in the darkness of the hallway, nodded at the door opposite the entrance,

"Wait in my room. I'll figure something out."

Simple to say, far more difficult to do. Seva forgot that they had nothing in the refrigerator when he offered Zhenya something to eat. He normally went for the groceries and made his own meals. His brother and father ate outside the home, and it was difficult for his grandmother to stand at the stove for an extended period. But Seva hadn't been up to it the previous two days.

He scratched his head after casting an absentminded glance across the mostly empty shelves. He could have boiled potatoes, but he didn't want to keep Zhenya waiting. Seva cursed and rummaged through the drawers; after two minutes of searching, a half-empty jar of jam was discovered beneath the sink.

Wow. Seva forgot that at the end of summer, the mother of Sema's friend handed them gifts from her garden. He swiftly put jam on slices of bread and boiled tea while mentally thanking this unknown but extremely generous woman. Sandwiches, of course, couldn't compete with borscht, but Seva had an

excuse; he made them himself, and borscht was made by Maria Arsentievna. Therefore, Zhenya couldn't say anything to him ... although Seva was certain that Zhenya wouldn't say anything anyway. This was only him overthinking things.

Seva took the cups of tea and walked to his room. He grimaced when he crossed the hallway. It was a disaster. However, Seva was always able to dump everything on his brother. Let Zhenya believe it was Sema who constantly tossed his belongings on the floor and left cups with nasty tea stains on the table; they didn't know each other.

Zhenya seemed unbothered by the mess in his bedroom. The blond guy simply looked around curiously and offered a compliment when he noticed Seva in the doorway. "It's nice in here."

Seva had no idea what Zhenya deemed nice in all the chaos, but he didn't argue. He placed the platter on the table and with a warm smile said, "Here you go."

Zhenya, to his surprise, was delighted with the sandwiches; he took a small bite and blissfully closed his eyes. "You have no idea how long it's been since I've eaten jam."

Absorbed in the moment, Zhenya didn't notice that a sliver of strawberry had fallen off the bread onto his jacket. When he came to his senses and noticed, he said "oops", looked fleetingly embarrassed, picked up the strawberry with his finger and licked it.

Seva smiled. "I have half a jar left. Do you want me to bring some more?"

"Later," he muttered and sipped his tea and glanced at the large painting above Seva's bed. "Beautiful. Did you want to hang it there?"

Seva took a big bite of the bread instead of answering.

Zhenya had poked his finger into the old wound, which appeared to be slowly mending. Of course, it wasn't Seva who'd put the painting over his bed; it just wouldn't have occurred to him. His mom had done that. She'd decided that the canvas would look great as part of the decor. Seva had really disagreed with her; the image seemed too fanciful to him, but he didn't dare oppose his mom. Not then and of course, not now. He'd become so accustomed to the



canvas that he hardly even noticed it anymore.

Seva only recalled his earlier childhood when he looked at the summer woodland scene: the sun-drenched chamomile glade and the great old oak tree extending its branches and covering two boys whose features were hidden in the shadows. He remembered how his mom had appreciated the painting for a long time, and his spirit grew warm and tranquil. It wasn't until he got older that he realized why she'd adored it so much. The image emanated innocent and naive carelessness—a blissfulness you felt during those moments when you didn't have to worry about anything, and nothing upset, things that grownups often overlooked.

His mom had frequently recounted her youth to him, which occurred during the terrible post-war years. His grandfather perished in the war and Grandma hid the daughter of a neighbor, who froze to death in the last winter before the victory. Of course, she couldn't feed her two children and herself; they continued to starve and walk in rags long after the war.

His mom and her “new” sister had to resort to begging and, on occasion, stealing food. She was not proud of this period in her life, but she was happy that even in the midst of adversity, she'd maintained childlike frivolity and unwavering trust in a bright future. In many ways, due to his grandmother, who worked as a teacher of Russian language and literature and instilled in children a sense of beauty from a young age, his mom had frequently fled from that hard and hungry gray reality to the public library, where much of the literature had survived.

She was familiar with all Russian classics and many foreign ones by the age of six, and she could readily quote Shakespeare and Griboyedov. At the age of eleven, she became very interested in painting. Varvara Kapitonovna and the other schoolteachers couldn't get enough of this curious, diligent girl.

His mom shocked everyone even more after seventh grade. She stood steadfast in her determination to go to law school. And she succeeded! Despite extremely tough competition, a delicate blue-eyed child with a deep sense of beauty and determination to study Soviet laws and fight for justice astounded almost everyone. His mom was making progress until she met Seva's father in

the second year of law school. A whirlwind romance led to an unexpected pregnancy, and mom's academic leave was extended for another couple of years owing to Sema, who was born shortly after Seva.

But his mom was undeterred. After learning about the pregnancy, the couple promptly became engaged, and a few years later they moved into their current apartment. His mom attempted to return to university, but Seva and Sema were continuously ill, and when they grew up and went to school, their grandmother's health also deteriorated. There was nothing she could do except leave law school. His mom wasn't upset with her sons for ruining her career. She followed in the footsteps of Varvara Kapitonovna, reading her favorite novels to children and teaching them to appreciate any piece of art, particularly pictorial art.

She believed that everyone should seek the message that the artist had placed on the canvas for themselves, comprehend it, and allow it to course through them. And although Sema was usually bored and didn't pay attention to his mom's long speeches, Seva couldn't keep his gaze away from her; she was so excited about everything.

Thanks to his mom, he was once able to cite Silver-Age poets and explain how the Renaissance era varied from the Middle Ages, and realism in art differed from Romanticism, but that was a long time ago. And Zhenya didn't have to know about that.

Despite having swallowed a piece of bread that had become lodged in his throat, Seva responded, "I did."

Zhenya moved closer to the painting and examined the small, casual strokes that Seva was all too familiar with. "It's quite warm and sunny. Pacifying, rather. You probably often gaze at it on winter evenings? If I had it hanging, I would look at it and think of summer."

Seva coughed involuntarily. "As I do," he said flatly, quickly changing the subject. "How about we get down to business?"

"Right, the record. One minute," Zhenya said as he proceeded to fetch his briefcase.

Seva held his breath when Zhenya returned, took out the record, and gently slipped it into the player. Zhenya drew the lever and positioned the pickup on the

record. An ear-splitting noise was heard throughout the room, followed by vibrant music that was accompanied by multiple voices pouring out of the speaker.

Seva almost stopped breathing because he was afraid of missing even a second of the song. He didn't even understand a word, but the intense energy was obvious, and he began to snap his fingers in time. Zhenya, who'd heard the song many times, softly sung along to himself. Seva wondered if Zhenya realized what he was singing or if he was merely humming something similar. He most likely understood English well, since he was a topnotch student. *If that's the case, he should know what's being sung here.*

Seva was envious, and he wanted to know what he was hearing. What if it included profanity and he had no idea? Of course, no obscenities should be found on the record, but it was an interesting thought.

After the song finished, Seva inquired, "Do you understand what is being sung here?"

Zhenya shrugged. "Some parts, I do. Not verbatim, but in basic terms. I have never studied English in depth, and my knowledge isn't sufficient enough to translate the whole song."

Seva was a little upset. "I'd like to know what they're singing about. It's interesting! How about we try translating it?" he suggested.

"Do you know English well?"

"I don't know anything about it, but you have to start somewhere, right?" Seva was already burning with energy, and something like a lack of English didn't deter him at all.

"It's difficult. It's highly unlikely that we'll be able to translate the whole song ourselves," Zhenya said doubtfully, but when he saw the gleam in Seva's eyes, he waved his hand and said, "I think we can try. Get the dictionary."

For the next hour and a half, they repeated the same song while searching the dictionary for words that sounded similar. The job was going nicely at first. Zhenya translated the first two sentences without consulting a book, and it immensely inspired them. The English-language material appeared to be a piece of cake for first-graders.

It did, however, become increasingly difficult. Zhenya got two pieces of paper and scribbled the text in English on one and its translation on the other. It turned out that writing down unfamiliar terms was a challenging process. They listened to the first verse several times, scribbled down sound combinations they heard, and tried to build words out of them, which they then looked up in the dictionary. It was tough and time-consuming to translate, but it was also fascinating. After the third listen, Seva began to sing along, even though they had only a couple of lines recorded, while Zhenya enthusiastically shook his head to the tune, seeking the right words in the big dictionary. His blond hair bounced strangely to the beat, and Zhenya irritably brushed them out of his eyes.

They created and translated the first verse entirely by themselves, sometimes with the assistance of the dictionary and sometimes by choosing words based on their meanings. They smiled at each other after finishing the last line.

Everything turned out to be not that tough! However, it was too early to celebrate. There were a couple more verses ahead, which were as lengthy as the first.

They had to relisten to the irritating first stanza while translating the second one, and Seva began to feel nauseated from the phrases that were beginning to appear quite difficult.

*“We’re going home ...”* He sung the final lyrics of the first stanza to himself and grimaced. As if he didn’t know enough Russian love songs! He now had to ruin this one as well. It might be best to keep believing that some obscenities were being sung here, so that there was room for creativity.

But he didn’t want to give up, and his curiosity won out. Who knew? Maybe they’d get to some obscenities in the last stanza. Seva listened to the same two verses over and over again, trying to help Zhenya identify similar-sounding phrases. However, after half an hour, when the Russian lines became confused with the English ones, and the letters began to add up to total absurdity, Seva understood it was time to call it a day.

He lifted his head from the dictionary, stretched, and patted the blond guy on the shoulder, who was still buried in the pages of the dictionary. “Alright, Zhenya, let’s call it a day. We’ll continue tomorrow; I can’t stand seeing these

Latin hieroglyphs any longer.”

Zhenya, without looking up from the lines he had already written, suggested, “Let’s finish this verse. How can we leave it hanging?”

Seva chuckled as he examined the piece of paper; they clearly would never be recruited as translators. On the white paper were sloppy, half-empty lines scribbled in blue ink. “Come on, we’ve already listened to it fifteen times, so what’s the point? Let’s figure it out tomorrow. By then, our minds should be raring to go again,” Seva suggested.

“We have just a little bit left! ‘You and me.’ What ‘you and me’? I don’t understand what is being sung next. Something on ‘b’. A ‘building’, or what? Is it, ‘You and I a building’? Some sort of gibberish,” Zhenya mused aloud, anxiously tapping the pen on his knee and chewing his lips.

“Perhaps a building,” Seva replied quickly, eager to get it done as soon as possible. “Let’s decide tomorrow, but today we should get some rest.”

“I’m not tired.” Zhenya waved him off. “Replay it.” Without waiting for Seva to do as he requested, he jumped up, went to the record player and replayed the song. He listened to the first verse and on the second, he pricked up his ears and rejoiced, “Got it! There’s not an ‘i’, there’s a ‘u’ in the middle. ‘Burnin’ or something like that.”

Zhenya rushed to the dictionary. “‘In’ is the ending, as I understand it, so it’s a verb. ‘Burn’. Sounds familiar. Oh, I found it! I’m telling you, I heard it somewhere,” and Zhenya, shining like a lit Christmas tree, wrote the word he had found.

“Great!” Seva was too exhausted to truly care. “Now that there’s nothing else to do, could we finish this tomorrow?”

There was still a lot of work—as much as a verse and a half long. Seva wondered how long it would take to finish everything but was afraid to even guess.

“That’s right, nothing else to do, so let’s do everything now.” Zhenya restarted the record from the very beginning.

Seva groaned inwardly. He admired Zhenya’s persistence and endurance, but he couldn’t bring himself to listen to the two verses again and again. The song

didn't appear to be coming from the record player but rather from inside his head, squeezing his brain and echoing somewhere in his temples. Seva closed his eyes and slumped back on the couch, lacking strength. Sadly, the darkness did not conceal the noise, and the song could still be heard. Maybe he could flee and leave the job to Zhenya?

Seva glanced out of the corner of his eye at Zhenya. He sat, engrossed in his notes, and didn't see anything around him save the song, which was already playing for the hundredth time. He didn't appear to need much help, and there wasn't much help that Seva could give. He quietly stepped out of the room and into the little kitchen, calming himself.

He was able to unwind a little there. The music was muted by the thin walls, and the tune still echoed in his head. How had Zhenya *not* gone insane by now? Maybe he had. Topnotch students typically repeated the same thing over and over again, without pausing. Zhenya was undoubtedly accustomed to "studying" like this. So, he shouldn't be worried about Zhenya going insane. Nothing would happen if it hadn't already happened after several years of cramming. And if it did, there was nothing that could be done about it.

Seva relaxed and cooled down, and soon became bored. He gave up after fifteen minutes of pointless staring at the pigeon on the other side of the window, prepared a couple more jam sandwiches and went to his room. Zhenya was so engrossed in his squiggles that he didn't see the sandwich until ten minutes later, when he finally looked up from his notebook, blinked in surprise, and sheepishly thanked Seva for it.

Zhenya managed to nearly translate the entire last verse during Seva's brief absence. Triumphant, he showed Seva the notebook covered in blue ink and swiftly they translated the last few sentences together. Fortunately, they'd already made some dents in the text. Seva sighed loudly as a grinning Zhenya placed the final fat dot.

"Whoa! I thought it would never end. Aren't you tired?"

"I am," Zhenya stated honestly, happily beginning to eat the untouched sandwich. "But was it possible to leave half of it?"

"I'll let you in on a little secret. *Yes*, it was," Seva snorted. "You translated a

complete song in a few hours; you are crazy! And you claimed you didn't know English."

"I don't know a lot of English words," Zhenya muttered, his mouth full. "There is nothing particularly complicated here. As it turned out, it's pretty easy if you listen closely. I only knew what was taught as part of the school curriculum and nothing more."

"Nothing complicated!?" Seva choked with indignation. "There are more than three verses, and all with words that I saw for the first time! Is that what you call *nothing complicated*?"

"I translated it with a dictionary," Zhenya shrugged. "I'm sure you could easily do it yourself. Moreover, you participated in this."

"Yeah, I was nodding next to you; you think too highly of me," Seva chuckled. "Alright, I recognize that everything in the world is simple for you."

"I didn't say it was simple. It was rather tiresome, but intriguing," he stated.

"I have no doubt. Do you want to play cards and rest?"

"Like yesterday, with a wish?"

"You have already fulfilled my wish. Take a break. We'll simply play," Seva proposed gently.

"Okay, get the cards ready."

When Seva drew out the cards, a crazy idea flashed across his mind. What if he gave in to Zhenya this time? The thought seemed appealing. First and foremost, he wanted to please him, just as Zhenya had satisfied Seva with the record. Second, he had to triumph at least once! Third, it would be fascinating to witness his reaction. Zhenya might lose, but could he also win? Seva, attempting to conceal a sneaky grin, drew a trump card from the deck. Thus, the game began.

It turned out that giving in to Zhenya was more difficult than winning. Seva had no idea this was going to happen. There must be something that Zhenya was unable to do. So, why not play cards? Maybe card-playing wasn't the most useful talent, but ...

Zhenya did not believe it after throwing away the last card. He fluttered his eyelashes and flashed a pleased smile as he gazed from his empty palms to the

card in Seva's hands. "I won, didn't I?"

"You did," Seva chuckled, collecting the scattered cards.

He enjoyed Zhenya's reaction to the win. The blond guy could win and lose with the same dignity. No mocking arrogance flashed in his eyes, no caustic remarks were made, and Zhenya did not exult or gloat, even in jest. Necessary characteristics of a victor, Seva was certain.

While dealing cards for the next round, Seva discreetly watched Zhenya celebrating his win. His joy was genuine, even a little immature, and if Seva had lost for real, he wouldn't have felt any resentment.

Seva diligently "lost" the subsequent games. He mourned dramatically, lingering with the cards in his hands again and over.

Zhenya played poorly, but he wasn't a fool, and after his third consecutive win, he felt something was amiss. "Are you losing on purpose, or what?"

Seva shook his head. "No, it looks like today is just not my day." But he began to lose more selectively with the following rounds.

They did play for a long time, and Zhenya even won a couple of times without Seva's "assistance". His genuine amazement was hidden under a coughing fit the first time. Both had forgotten about the record.

Seva was scared that Zhenya would want to translate everything else, so he decided to resume when he was ready to listen to English passages on repeat and browse through the dictionary for several hours. He felt confident Zhenya would agree to come to his home again.

Zhenya gleefully stretched and flashed his scornful gaze in Seva's direction, having won two games in succession. "And which one of us is a fool now?"

"In percentage terms, it's still you," Seva responded in the same tone.

"What clever words," Zhenya chuckled. "What? Have you started studying math?"

"No, I'm not that bored yet."

Zhenya's sneer seemed utterly harmless and nothing more than pleasant bantering ensued. Seva has become accustomed to regularly hearing a torrent of mocking and "jokes" bordering on insults from Rostik, and had forgotten what normal conversation was like. The sole saving grace was that Rostik was never



insulted by the ridicule in Seva's replies ... perhaps because Seva didn't know how to make insensitive jokes.

Anyway, he didn't have to do this with Zhenya. Despite his obvious superiority, he never thought to flaunt it. Seva realized that he was much more at ease in the company of this blond guy than with his ex-friends. After thinking about that for a bit, he shifted a few times, got comfortable, and began to deal cards once again.

Zhenya shook his head. "No, I should probably go home."

"Come on, one last game," Seva urged, becoming upset.

"Seva, I have a lot of assignments to complete ... and I also wanted to go to the library and get a book, so it would be good to finish early."

"You can borrow from my grandma. Have you seen her bookcase? She has everything."

His grandma's bookcase was enormous. The entire wall was covered with books, meticulously arranged by author and alphabet. Seva used to be able to find any work by any author on the shelves with his eyes closed, but now he hardly recalled the titles, let alone the names.

"Ostrovsky?"

"Ostrovsky. Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Balzac, and Turgenev are all there."

"Will she let me borrow it? I don't know, I'm kind of embarrassed."

"She'll lend you ten books with it! You'll delight the elderly woman ... that at least some of today's youngsters still read classics, and study well."

"No, Seva, I'm going anyway. I still have to do the analysis of Gorky's *The Lower Depths* tomorrow, and I didn't grasp what it was about; well, maybe I did, but I can't formulate it in any way, and I'll have to spend the entire evening on it since I don't even have somebody to copy it from."

"Oh, what is there to formulate!" Seva scoffed. "I'll formulate it for you. This is a play about people with various destinies, views, and life positions who ended up at one point in poverty and despair; they lost the vestiges of dignity and self-confidence ... day after day, they stupidly lived out their aimless lives, no longer even hoping for some light at the end of the tunnel. One decided not to waste time at all and committed suicide. In a nutshell, everything is bleak. But in

the analysis, you can say that Gorky just wanted to raise important life problems and make readers ponder ... humanism, immorality, conflicts with themselves and others ... And blah-blah-blah. Everything is pretty standard. I think you'll figure it out yourself." Seva blurted everything in one breath and only ceased when he noticed Zhenya's eyes, which had rounded like five kopecks coins.

Immediately, he was perplexed, as if he had said something completely dumb. He took the deck and shuffled the cards, taking care not to stare at the blond guy.

It took nearly a half-minute for Zhenya to regain his ability to speak. "What did you just say?" he squeaked, still amazed.

"I did half your homework for you," Seva chuckled in embarrassment.

"And I'm assuming it's not a secret; what grade did you get for literature?"

"In eighth grade, a 'C' probably." Seva shrugged. "I don't remember."

"Really?" Zhenya was even more amazed.

"I deserved it since I hadn't done anything all year. And now I'm not going to; it's simply a fleeting flash of clarity. So, how about the latest batch?" Seva offered, hoping.

"Not terrible clarity ... I didn't think you even read it! Listen, if you're so excellent at it, maybe you can write this assignment for me, huh?" Zhenya was still shocked, "And I'll do the math for you. How about it?"

"I won't," Seva said truthfully. "Don't you find this funny?"

"Five minutes ago, maybe I would have, but now I don't. I'm begging you! I'll do your math homework for a whole week if you write this stupid analysis for me. There are only two pages; work for half an hour."

"Do it yourself then."

"Seva, please!"

"Zhenya, back off." Seva snapped.

"Let's play cards then," Zhenya found a solution. "If you win, you won't do anything, and if I win, then you do the literature analysis for me and I do your math homework. How about that?"

"Are you sure?" Seva chuckled.

"One hundred percent sure!"

“Whatever you say,” Seva agreed easily. He thought the idea was amusing. And so enticing—how could he resist? Seva foresaw the outcome of the game as he was shuffling the cards.

He wasn’t mistaken. It turned out that leaving Zhenya at the fool’s abbey took a mere five minutes.

He glanced at Seva, puzzled, with the remaining useless card in his hands, and was indignant for the first time. “Why now?”

The outcry was so harmless that Seva chuckled. He didn’t explain why, simply collected the cards and shrugged innocently. “This is your fate; should I give you geometry tasks?”

“Wait,” Zhenya said angrily, waving a hand. “Please, let’s do it again!”

“No, that’s not how it works,” Seva said, his face gleaming with delight. “Raise the stakes if you want to win back.”

“No problem. You like shooting?”

“Perhaps,” Seva replied slowly. “What exactly are you proposing?”

“If you win this game, I’ll take you to the summer house over the autumn break to shoot from my father’s gun, okay? Well, and math, of course.”

In surprise, Seva whistled. “Are you serious?”

“More than you think, and you can ride a moped as well. So, do we have a deal?”

“Of course, we do! What am I? A fool to refuse? Just remember, though, this was your idea, not mine,” Seva cautioned, dealing the cards again.

“I will.”

The second game was slightly more intense. Zhenya was determined this time. But sadly, it was not enough. Zhenya put his own cards into the general pile as soon as Seva threw out the remaining cards. He waited for a few moments, bit his lips thoughtfully, then appealed again.

“Perhaps a third game? If I lose, I’ll—”

“You won’t do anything.” Seva interjected, gathering the strewn cards. “Are you really so unwilling to do this stupid analysis?”

“Literature is not my thing,” Zhenya confessed sheepishly. “I also have no time for it.”

“I never would have guessed. Alright, I’ll do it for you. Is it due tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow, third period. Thank you very much. You have no idea how much you’ve helped me! Give me your math homework. I’ll bring it over tomorrow.”

“Forget it,” Seva frowned. “I’ll manage it. Consider it a thank you for the record. Besides, you said you have no time for it.”

“No, let’s be fair. You won, didn’t you—”

“I won, and I don’t have to do anything, so it’s fair. Alright, back off. Otherwise, I’ll change my mind.” Seva snapped.

“Thank you,” Zhenya muttered somewhat timidly after a brief silence.

“Not quite yet.”

“Alright, then I’ll probably go home, but if you want, I can leave the record for a bit so you can listen to the remainder of the songs.”

“Really?” Seva couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Really. Just don’t damage it.”

Seva vowed not to damage it and saw Zhenya off. He remembered the book as he approached the doorway.

“Zhenya, Ostrovsky!”

“What?” He seemed baffled, then a few seconds later remembered. “Oh, damn! Are you sure your grandmother won’t mind?”

“I am. Let’s go,” Seva said as he knocked on the door of his grandmother’s room. “Hi, Nana, I’m here with my ... school friend. May we come in?”

Upon hearing the okay, Seva quickly introduced his newly-made friend, “This is Zhenya. He needs a book—”

“*How the Steel Was Tempered*,” Zhenya explained.

“Oh, you have that, don’t you? Can you lend it to him?”

“First and foremost, I am delighted to meet you,” his grandmother, Varvara Kapitonovna, stated in her usual kindly manner. “And secondly, of course, I do. And yes, he can take it; have I ever been selfish about books? On the contrary, I am always in favor of young people learning and reading intelligent things. There it is, your book, on the penultimate shelf—”

“I know,” Seva interrupted the elderly woman, climbing onto a chair. His eyes immediately discovered the cover he remembered from his childhood and,

with difficulty, he drew a substantial volume of Ostrovsky from a row of densely packed books. “Here you go!” he exclaimed as he leaped off from the chair, handing Zhenya the book.

“Thank you very much. You helped me a lot,” Zhenya said, tucking it in a briefcase.

“You’re welcome, dear. Come back if you need books, and make sure to read this one; it’s a really fascinating read, fairly long, with something to think about.”

“That’s great, I like to read,” Zhenya responded, smiling.

“That’s commendable,” said Varvara Kapitonovna. “Did you hear that, Sevochka? When was the last time you read a book? Do you even know what you’re studying right now?”

“*The Storm*,” Seva retorted belligerently. “Ostrovsky, too ... but different.”

“Did you read it?”

“I did,” Seva grumbled as he looked down at his feet.

Varvara Kapitonovna glanced at him suspiciously, but Seva was not worried since what he’d said was true. He had read it, but that was five years ago. His mom, to be more specific, read it to him before he went to bed. Each of her characters was unique; she possessed exceptional talent and could turn even the most mundane play into a genuine performance. Seva had listened to her with amazement, often forgetting to breathe during the climactic moments, while his mom seemed to be someplace else, far away, in a lovely city on the Volga’s banks. For a few minutes, Seva had been transported there with her.

He had forgotten what had happened in the play, and he had forgotten the characters. He simply recalled the ragged cover and his mom’s happy, dreamy expression. He didn’t want to relive his childhood by rereading the book right now.

“That pleases me,” Grandma remarked, incredulous. “And you, Zhenechka, what do you like to read?”

“Well ... different things.” The blond guy was visibly embarrassed. “I love science fiction, but from the classics ... I like Turgenev; his work is so easy and enjoyable to read. I read *Fathers and Sons* in two days. Dostoevsky’s *Crime and*

*Punishment* impressed me too. I've been reading it for long time, but it has a lot that makes you think and rethink. There are a lot of interesting things, actually, but I'm still more into science fiction."

Varvara Kapitonovna was touched. "What a smart, well-read young man. How wonderful!" the old woman exclaimed. "You see, Seva, from whom you need to take an example ..."

Zhenya reddened and Seva growled impatiently, "Uh-huh, I got it already." He dragged his new friend out the door.

Zhenya sensed a change in his demeanor, thanked Seva again for the book, and opted to retreat cautiously. Seva returned to his room after locking the door behind him and playing a song—a nice, much calmer song. It swept across the room, enveloping Seva and dragging him somewhere far away. He had no idea what the song was about, and that was the last thing he wanted to know.

He was just happy that he was listening to the long-anticipated record, and that the record player was no longer accumulating dust in the closet. Previously, it had only been used by his mom. She'd been a lover and connoisseur of classics in everything, and her favorite records with symphonies by Bach and Tchaikovsky were moved to the garage after her death, and the record player relocated to the farthest corner under the ceiling, so as not to remind anyone ...

He'd found a very worthwhile purpose for it again, and Seva couldn't help but be delighted. After some thought, Seva chose to listen to the first song. This time though, knowing the translation word by word. The familiar tune filled the room once more. Seva was impressed by the fact that he now understood every word and comprehended the magnitude of what had occurred the last few hours. He not only heard The Beatles but he also knew what they were singing about.

If Seva's classmates had known, they would have been envious. Who'd have guessed this was all due to Zhenya "The Nerd" and his meticulousness?

Other songs followed. Seva enjoyed listening to lovely, absolutely incomprehensible foreign songs, and his eyes was drawn unconsciously to the painting over the couch from time to time. And now, for the first time in a year and a half, staring at the beautiful summer canvas, he felt the calm and tranquility that his mom once felt.

## Chapter 4

### *The Old Drawings*

Seva listened to all the tracks on both sides of the record. He didn't simply listen; he memorized them. Even though he only comprehended a few words, it didn't worry him at all. As he listened to the song again and again, he sung incorrectly along, but from the heart. And he didn't brag about it in class.

Sema got home fifteen minutes after Zhenya had departed, and his brother was as taken aback as Seva had been when he first saw the record. Seva asked him not to talk about it, but would a self-respecting seventh-grader keep his mouth shut when he had the Beatles record all to himself at home? Of course not.

The news about this spread through the school at the speed of sound, and for a whole week, students from all grades approached Seva at recess with the question, "Is it true?"

In response, he mysteriously kept silent, neither denying nor confirming the rumors, which only fueled interest. Sema's eagerness to tell all helped him. Now, the entire school was aware of the album. Seva didn't have to brag about it to anyone, so no one could call him a blowhard.

However, not everything went as smoothly. Zhenya was horrified to discover that the entire school was discussing The Beatles' record. What if one of the teachers found out it was his? The news would reach his father! Seva, feeling bad, soon calmed him down. First, he hadn't informed anybody about the record, and believing a cocky seventh-grader was a fairly silly thing to do. Second,

Sema had no idea Zhenya had handed this gem to Seva. He relaxed slightly but said he'd no longer risk carrying the record home. Seva didn't mind.

The next day, Seva delivered the damn play analysis to Zhenya, as promised. He'd spent the entire evening on it, despite having intended to only pen something acceptable. He'd changed his mind halfway through. It would be a shame to let down Zhenya, who had good marks and a keen approach toward learning. So, Seva worked on the report until late at night, rewriting it three times. He cursed all the characters, even Gorky, but he refused to quit. As it turned out, Zhenya received a well-deserved 'C'.

Seva, on the other hand, didn't have to regret his impulsive act of kindness. Zhenya asked one of Seva's classmates for the answers to their math assignment during the first break, and provided Seva with the completed problems after the second lecture. Seva grumbled at Zhenya for doing this, but he accepted the paper nevertheless. He couldn't have Zhenya do that for nothing, right?

Zhenya did Seva's math homework again the next day, and two days later. The next week he requested Seva to write an essay "only a couple of pages" long.

Eight, it turned out. Seva did get enraged initially, but he produced an excellent essay. It ended up as a model for Zhenya's classmates. And, as it turned out, Seva couldn't be mad at Zhenya for long.

To make up for his request, Zhenya began doing not only math for Seva, but physics and, some days, chemistry. Later, he dug out a big stack of notebooks from the previous year with all the solved problems. Seva began to memorize things as he copied Zhenya's notes.

They shared a mutually beneficial partnership and began to interact daily. But it wasn't just about the homework. Zhenya usually came to Seva after school, and they ate sandwiches with jam and played cards together. Zhenya gradually improved at playing and Seva, ever giving, taught him a few shuffle tactics he'd learnt from Rostik.

They also listened to The Beatles again and attempted to translate their songs. It worked with different degrees of success; sometimes, they felt like native speakers and promptly translated a few lines and other times, they



couldn't hear the "love" wafting from the guitars and drums. But that didn't deter them. It felt great pretending they were expert translators; they were having fun, despite the fact that the endeavor was clearly fruitless if not stupid.

Zhenya had a tutor multiple times a week; Seva prepared supper for him whenever he came over. He didn't need to strain himself, though, because Zhenya ate strawberry jam with great relish; the remaining half of the jar was empty in two weeks. Seva was relieved that neither his father, grandma, or brother were huge fans of it; after six months, they'd never notice there wasn't left.

Zhenya's parents would occasionally leave for the entire day and the Smirnovs' home would become available to the two teens. Zhenya invited Seva over, served his beloved mother's excellent cooking, and played records while looking out the window—and not always the Beatles.

During a brief conversation with the blonde guy, Seva became familiar with ABBA songs and the work of Pink Floyd, the name of which he only recalled after a third listen to the record. Seva estimated that there were roughly twenty songs on only three recordings, which was already five times more than the foreign singers' songs he'd heard his entire life before meeting Zhenya. Music, however, wasn't the main reason for their spending time together. Seva was surprised to discover that he was more comfortable with Zhenya than with his former friends. Their conversations were polar opposites.

Seva was continuously seeking frivolous amusement with Dima and Rostik, and getting into stupid scrapes, and simply wandering around the streets, filling the stillness with crazy jokes and bizarre talk about nothing of note. Seva was exhausted and overwhelmed upon arriving home; he wanted to get to bed as quickly as possible so that the day would finally end.

And then it began all over again.

He didn't need to stupidly joke around with Zhenya and fill the silence with useless chatter. They didn't talk to excess but were always straight to the point. Seva listened to Zhenya's fervent history lessons with genuine interest and he, in turn, did laugh at Seva's jokes with utmost sincerity, which pleased him.

Zhenya returned the book to Varvara Kapitonovna after finishing Ostrovsky,

and they chatted for several hours. Seva listened wistfully to their enthusiastic conversation about books, movies, and school, fantasizing about the hour when it would all come to an end. Varvara Kapitonovna liked the “lovely, clever young guy”, and she began questioning how Zhenya was daily and when he would return. Zhenya went to see her for at least fifteen minutes every time he visited the Temkins’, and Varvara Kapitonovna was delighted at the wonderful friend Seva had found for himself.

After several weeks, the two had become so used to spending time after school together that when they learned at the next meeting by the birch tree that their fathers were both at home that day, the thought of going their separate ways didn’t occur to them. After scratching his head and giving it some thought, Seva suggested the only suitable option about where to go was his garage. It was warm, dry, and most importantly, quiet; no one would stop them from going about their business quietly. Zhenya was taken aback by the offer, but he didn’t refuse, and when they arrived, everything became obvious to him.

Seva’s father had purchased a garage four years ago. Denis Ilyich had the notion of getting a car when Seva was five years old. He instantly got in line to get it, but after a while, he felt that it would be better if it didn’t stand in the yard, so he also ordered a garage. He obtained the right to membership in the garage cooperative after a bit of a fuss and waiting in a few lineups, annoying the chairman of the garage cooperative a couple of times with a document indicating that his father died in the rear flanks during the Great Patriotic War. Seva had just turned nine at the time.

Seva, who was eleven, took an unusually keen interest in the construction of a “second home”, as his father dubbed it. Every evening, he would sprint up to his father, who had just come home from work, and would ask, “Well, how is it?” His father would always say, “In progress.” This excited everyone and the anticipation grew.

Seva grew so used to his father’s in-progress reply that when he heard his father say, “Everything is ready, son!” he didn’t know *what* was ready.

He remembered celebrating the garage’s completion three days in a row.

Only six months later did Seva understand he had been fooled. His father

promised to take him with him, to let him sit behind the wheel and teach him to drive, and to fix the vehicle together if it broke down. Seva was excited by the possibility of spending more time with his father, who was usually busy with work, more than he was about the idea of learning about vehicles, something he'd always been uninterested in. The exact opposite happened; there was no promised car and his father began to disappear, not just at work, but also in the garage with friends. They didn't bring Seva to these get-togethers, of course.

He didn't have the time to stay upset for long because there were more pressing issues. They found out that his mom was ill when he started seventh grade, and his father had forgotten about the garage. He spent all his free time with her. Seva, on the other hand, quickly understood that he couldn't be at home. No one mentioned his mom's illness aloud, and everyone acted like everything was normal, but he knew full well that this wasn't the case.

Seva felt suffocated by the grim atmosphere that grew thick in their apartment, and he didn't want to come home from school, knowing that he would have to see the dismal expressions of his father and brother, as well as the face of his mom, who'd seemed to accept the inevitable.

He took the key to the garage from his father's bedside table and meekly ran there after school, lying to his parents that he was going for a walk with his friends. Only when he was alone could he take a deep breath and pretend that everything was normal ... for at least a few hours. Seva repeated the trips with remarkable frequency, and when he realized his father hadn't appeared in the garage in over six months, he courageously began to equip it for his own needs.

From a nearby dump, he hauled in a wooden cabinet and a table that were in good condition, scrubbed them, and fixed the walls with boards for warmth; they held various pictures and newspaper and magazine clippings. He also brought old stuff from home that he'd felt bad about throwing away and begged his grandma for an old bag. He filled the bag with sawdust and began using it as an armchair.

The garage became much more like his own space. For at least a few hours, he could collect his thoughts and be alone, run away from all the problems that weighed heavily on his shoulders. Denis Ilyich didn't become furious when he

went into the garage to retrieve some belongings and discovered what his son had done with them; he was too exhausted from continual stress and restless nights. Seva somehow sensed it would have been better if his father had been angry with him, thus showing vigor.

Seva spent the summer following his mom's death in the garage. He did nothing, thought nothing, and sat quietly in his bag chair for hours, staring at the wall. His father and brother didn't look for him, supposing that he preferred to be alone. It made no difference to Seva if they had come looking. He'd not have reacted if a throng of people broke into the garage.

The garage faded into the background when Dima and Rostik appeared in Seva's life. It became a special haven for Seva, which he didn't want to spoil with silly jokes and awkward conversations about cars and women. As such, Seva didn't consider bringing any friends here. In fact, they had no idea that Seva's dad owned a garage—still without a car.

But with Zhenya, everything was different. Seva felt confident that the guy would be able to appreciate the atmosphere of this place—*his* place. He wasn't wrong. Zhenya looked around admiringly from the entryway and sighed softly. "It's really an awesome place!" He smiled and commented with utmost sincerity, "If I had such a place, I'd disappear for days."

"See? I told you," Seva boasted. At the very least, he'd managed to surprise Zhenya. "Look, I have all kinds of things lying around. There are some boxes filled with old junk. Maybe you'll find something interesting in it. There are magazines a year and a half old ... oh, and here are new ones. I forgot my father took them from me because of a cracked window. Plus, we have an old card deck. We can play if you want."

Zhenya liked the bag chair at first, but as his eyes adjusted to the dim garage lighting, he noticed Seva's favorite spot; a broad ledge he'd dubbed the "windowsill without a window". To be more comfortable, he retrieved an old faded floral blanket from the mezzanine. Now, there was a bed in the garage in addition to the chair. It was so small that a first-grader wouldn't be able to extend to his full height in it, but if he curled up ...

Seva, on the other hand, had never spent the night here before, and he

decided that his “windowsill without a window” would work fine as a regular comfy seat. Seva made the decision to give it to Zhenya without reservation. He wouldn’t mind the blond guy sitting on the combination bed-windowsill-sofa.

Seva grabbed his bag chair from the other corner and sat against the wall a few meters away from Zhenya. They were neither interested in conversing nor in playing cards, which was very much the case these days.

Usually, at moments like these, they either listened to a record or Zhenya began lecturing ... and Seva was bored stiff. That was the situation now, when Zhenya began reading *Old Woman Izergil* after retrieving Gorky’s volumes from his briefcase, which he had borrowed from Varvara Kapitonovna. Seva frowned.

He adamantly refused to evaluate this story. Zhenya practically begged him, but Seva refused, and the blond boy was forced to study the plot on his own. Seva felt a twinge of guilt, knowing how exhausted Zhenya was from studying, especially because he was still doing his homework using Zhenya’s notes. But he couldn’t bring himself to touch the book, so he sat still, absently watching Zhenya read it.

Seva unconsciously smiled as he noticed a barely discernible smile pull at Zhenya’s mouth.

Zhenya quickly returned to his senses and flipped the page.

“He’s probably reading about the old Izergil’s lovers,” Seva theorized, guessing which page he was on. He had long ago realized that what Zhenya was thinking or reading at a given moment was easy to determine, based on his reactions. He probably didn’t notice how, while reading stressful or intense scenes, he chewed his lips with anticipation; when reading sad scenes, he comically furrowed his brow, and when something pleasant happened, he usually broke into a smile.

Seva liked Zhenya’s smile. Especially at moments like these, when he didn’t notice it himself. It was so warm and genuine, unlike the one Seva saw in the photo in his room. Zhenya had been awarded with another diploma on it and despite his face being locked in a broad smile as faultless as himself, unending weariness could be seen in his eyes. His genuine smile was far more attractive than that forced mask. And Zhenya, real and alive, was far more attractive than

the slick Komsomol nerd Seva had previously known. This blond guy wasn't at all like that. He became a new person after changing from his school uniform into regular everyday clothes.

Seva enjoyed seeing Zhenya's emotions, the amusing way he responded to events depicted in a book while reading, and the way he frowned and squinted while tackling math problems. More than once Seva had caught himself wondering about Zhenya, trying not to stare at him. Sometimes, he got pretty bold and blatantly eyed him, like he was doing now.

Seva couldn't help but notice how attractive Zhenya was. And not because he resembled a model from a magazine cover, as he originally assumed. Seva had grown to realize that Zhenya wasn't flawless; there was a weird dimple on Zhenya's chin, a scar on his left cheek, and his front tooth protruded slightly. But this simply made him more attractive.

Eventually, Seva ceased being bothered by Zhenya's brilliance. And the facial features—huge brown eyes, a slightly snub nose, and those blond curls Seva once noted bore a humorous similarity to a dandelion—only piqued Seva's curiosity. It was as if he were seeing a young male model stepping off the cover of a magazine, revealing to Seva his true self—a lively, genuine, and far more intriguing individual than the frozen flawless statue in the photograph.

Zhenya squinted his eyes, reading the words, snorted, shook his head, and turned the page again, confirming Seva's thoughts. Seva laughed quietly. He wondered whether he was the only one who found this amusing. Zhenya's friends had surely noticed his various propensities, exchanging glances and chuckles; they probably watched him until he became aware of their eyes upon him.

Seva, now that he thought about it, was unsure whether Zhenya had any friends. They had been together for a little less than three weeks, meeting every day right after school and going home only in the evening. Seva strongly doubted that Zhenya, after bidding goodbye, would go to a disco or join a noisy group of teens in the yard. Most likely, he would return to his room, complete his homework, read another intriguing or not-so-interesting book, and went to bed, serenely and happily.

Seva was somewhat dumbfounded by this style of living. Zhenya was not as boring as he appeared at first glance, not the nerd he'd thought him to be. He was a very interesting and cool guy, and it was enjoyable talking with him. He was also an athlete, a Komsomol member, a great student, and a charming tenth-grader. Zhenya couldn't possibly be alone! And if he did lack of friends, it was no doubt because of envy. Given his looks and brains, the girls should be hanging off him!

Seva felt uncomfortable thinking about it. He was the absolute opposite of Zhenya in every way, beginning with the fact that he'd never been an athlete, a good student, or a Komsomol member. In terms of his looks, instead of his mom's flawless facial features, Seva had inherited his father's humped nose, big lips (for a boy), broad cheekbones, and thick black eyebrows. Only his mom's eyes remained—the same huge, pale-blue eyes, framed by long and dense lashes. Seva, on the other hand, was not especially proud of this, given that long eyelashes were a girlish feature. He was defeated by the blond guy on all counts!

Zhenya's personal life didn't appear to be very busy. Seva, intrigued, decided to casually ask him about it. "Zhenya?" he asked gently, not wanting to disturb him.

"Yes?" He didn't glance up from his book.

"What are your plans for this week?"

"Nothing, I believe," Zhenya answered and looked up. "Why?"

"Nothing ... it's only that you and I spend all day at my place, and I'm wondering whether you have time to see your friends."

"I don't have any friends," Zhenya stated simply and unashamedly. "You see, I'm constantly studying, at school and with a tutor, and I've just begun talking with you; there is almost no time for anything else. I used to talk with the guys from training, but now I've stopped. The things that need doing are numerous. I have company at the summer house but, of course, it's only for the holidays. And with that, I have no friends left in town."

"At all?" Seva was dubious.

"Well ... there is one," Zhenya mumbled, his voice unsure. "But I'm not sure our current relationship can be considered friendship."

“Why?”

“Pasha and I barely talk outside of school,” Zhenya answered. “We were friends since childhood, even before first grade, because our parents were close. We also went to first grade together, and we were inseparable until seventh grade.”

“And what happened in seventh grade?”

“Nothing. We just stopped talking when we grew older because our interests began to differ. I focused on my studies more, took up sports, while Pasha likes to spend time on the street, walking, and going to the movies. He has a lot of friends and has no problems with girls. I would not mind walking with them, but I’m always busy.”

Seva recognized, with respect, that Zhenya’s remarks were devoid of contempt. He didn’t think Pasha’s choice was “bad” and merely said that their interests were different.

“So, you don’t interact at all?” He was letting his curiosity get the better of him.

“Well, not really. We communicate occasionally. We’ve been sitting at the same desk at school for the tenth year ... our parents occasionally visit each other. I won’t say we’re completely bored when we get together; we have common topics for conversation. He’s fun, and he’s always been pretty funny. Witty, I’d even say. But it’s not the same anymore, and it’s highly unlikely we’d keep interacting.”

“Do you want to?”

“I’m not sure,” Zhenya replied thoughtfully. “I believe so; after all, we’ve been friends for over ten years. But I wouldn’t pursue it, because I don’t have much spare time. How about you? Do you still talk with Rostik and Dima?”

“No. They didn’t make any effort to seek me out, so why should I?”

“Are you still upset with them about the window situation?”

“Kind of,” Seva evasively replied. Feeling a little embarrassed, he didn’t want to tell Zhenya that he preferred to interact with him.

“Come on,” Zhenya urged, shrugging. “If you were in their shoes, would you think you’d just be standing there? They may have assumed that you had time to



run away ... or maybe they just didn't think about it. Do you need to be smart to throw stones at someone's window?"

"Well, look what we have here? A smartass!" Seva felt offended, grudgingly acknowledging to himself that Zhenya could be right. "I'm not sure what I'd have done in their shoes, but they were still wrong. After all, we were taught as children that friends should help one another, right?"

"Yes, contribute to something useful rather than hiding after minor acts of mischief." Zhenya said. "You don't interact with anyone else besides Rostik and Dima?"

"No," Seva replied, shaking his head.

"How about your other classmates?"

"I don't know," he muttered, averting his gaze. "Many people treat me like Svetka, with some kind of wariness. She apologized recently, but I'm still convinced that we're unlikely to become friends. I used to communicate well with everyone, but after my mom's death, I somehow ... began to step away ... and they didn't mind. That's how we stopped being friends." Seva smiled wryly and returned the conversation to Zhenya. "Okay, I stopped interacting with Rostik and Dima a couple of days before I met you, but how did you spend your free time before? You can't spend all of your time sitting and reading textbooks; you need to socialize with people outside of school."

"I have a girlfriend," Zhenya shrugged. "I hang out with her."

To say Seva was stunned would be an understatement. He'd considered that someone as attractive and "Ideal" as Zhenya would surely have a partner, but it was unusual to hear it from him. Seva was taken aback. "Really? From our school?"

"From my class, Sonya. Maybe you know her. The girl with brown hair and freckles, who usually wears a golden brooch in the shape of a butterfly," Zhenya said, a barely visible half-smile returning to his face.

"Sonya? Not Oskina, by any chance?"

"Exactly her."

"That's Dima's sister!" Seva was amazed. "Wow! What a small world."

"What a small town actually," Zhenya remarked, then broke out laughing as

he remembered something.

Seva stared at him, perplexed.

“It turns out that Sonya told me about you,” the blond guy shocked him, unable to hide a wicked smirk. “She was always complaining about some dunces her brother was messing with. She said he used to at least think about studying, but now he disappears all day on the street and steals alcohol from that friend’s father.” He quickly added, “It’s a direct quote, nothing personal.” Zhenya giggled.

Seva frowned bitterly. “She’s lying,” he grumbled. “When I started being friends with them, Dima had already given up on studying for a year and, well, as he made friends with Rostik, everything went ... wrong. I’m not involved in his ‘bad influence’. *They* were the ones who had a bad influence on me. Besides, I drank alcohol with them only once,” Seva frankly lied, but under Zhenya’s mocking look, he reluctantly admitted, “Okay, maybe twice. Or three or four. Well, maybe a little more. But it was less than ten!”

“Alright, I got it,” Zhenya told him, a nasty smirk on his face.

Seva wanted to prove that he wasn’t a provocateur in the friendship, but rather a victim. However, he realized this wouldn’t convince Zhenya. He wouldn’t have believed himself to be completely honest. Exhaling softly, Seva decided to change the topic. “Tell me something about her. I only know her as Dima’s older, boring sister who always prevents us from listening to music.”

“Sonya is always like that,” Zhenya said without hesitation. “What more can I tell you about her? She is that terrible and stern older sister, but she’s the same as you; she too loves to listen to records at my house when my parents are away ... only her brother doesn’t blab about it to the entire school afterwards,” he jokingly added.

“She just didn’t take them home. Otherwise, not just our school, but the entire district would have known about your records,” Seva mumbled, hiding his eyes. He was still feeling guilty.

“I’m just kidding. Well, what else? She’s beautiful, but I guess you’ve noticed that already. Smart, well-read, and an A-one student; she’ll be entering a biological facility after school to further her studies.”

“I see how and why you’ve found each other. She’s as boring as you are,” Seva said half-jokingly.

“Exactly!” Zhenya said, unaffected. “How about you, Seva?”

“What?” He was perplexed.

“Are you dating anyone?”

“No,” Seva said, looking at Zhenya, wondering what he was going to tell him now.

“Do you like anyone?”

Seva didn’t like anyone. He hadn’t thought about these things in well over a year and before that he’d been too young for such intense emotions. Yulia, a kindergarten classmate, was one of his few good and warm memories of the other sex. When they’d met, they were only five, and Seva was instantly captivated by her beautiful green eyes and cute button nose, which he often tried to squeeze with a ringing “beep!”. Surprisingly, Yulia was not upset. She laughed out loud in response to Seva’s unusual displays of attention, and her adorable nose crinkled humorously, causing Seva to chuckle as well. Parents and teachers had been moved by their genuine childhood “love” and had helped to foster their friendship.

They were assigned nearby lockers, frequently visited each other, their mothers drove them to kindergarten and back, and their fathers strolled with them in the park on weekends. Everything was good until Yulia and her family moved to the opposite side of town. Several bus stops constituted a major barrier to their seemingly deep feelings and six months later, Seva had already forgotten Yulia’s gorgeous green eyes and equally exquisite button nose.

He never fell in love again after that. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to be in a relationship, but he wanted to follow simple logic—if he fell in love, he’d have a girlfriend, and dating a first comer was stupid. Rostik’s repeated failed and short-term relationships simply served to prove how accurate he was.

For some reason, he didn’t want to tell Zhenya. But he’d opened up with Seva, why couldn’t he open up with Zhenya? Furthermore, what if Zhenya considered it odd that Seva didn’t like anyone save Yulia? Seva had never expressed his sentiments to anybody, so he had no idea how common they were.

Weighing all the advantages and disadvantages in his mind, he decided to lie.

“I do.”

“Who is she? Is she in your class?” Zhenya was immediately intrigued.

Seva was at a loss with the simple question. Which of the girls might he be interested in? He was mentally reviewing the fifteen female classmates, and none of them aroused any sort of emotion or thought. Dima, who had been desperately in love with Alina Denikina since fifth grade, came to mind. He never said anything out loud, but Seva was well aware that his former friend had sent love letters to Alina that she’d never read.

Everyone knew about it, and rumors circulated in the classroom quicker than flies to honey. Seva always felt sad for Dima, knowing full well that Alina would never look at him. Dima was short and plump, with black disheveled hair and a potato nose, and he was completely unnoticeable as the friend—shadow—of athletic and confident Rostik. Alina, on the other hand, had to be given credit. She never offered a sarcastic comment, knowing that words would ultimately crush his already poor self-esteem. So, she just pretended not to notice his love-filled glances.

Alina Denikina was attractive, intelligent, a bit caustic and arrogant, and liked by more than half of the class and a quarter of the school. Alina fitted the role of Seva’s “girlfriend”, and Zhenya might easily believe it.

“From ours, Alina.”

“Denikina?”

“Yeah.”

Slight disappointment was viewable in Zhenya’s face. “Alina? I thought you’d be more original.”

Seva was embarrassed. “Why? She’s beautiful ...” He stopped, not knowing what else to say about her. “And not stupid. I guess,” he added uncertainly, already doubting any arguments in her favor.

“Beautiful, right.” Zhenya did not argue. “But also arrogant. Just like her father ... and why does everyone find her attractive?”

“She’s not that arrogant,” Seva declared, unexpectedly standing up for Alina. “If you don’t touch her, then she won’t touch you. But yes, it’s better not to mess

with Alina.”

“I can’t see it.” Zhenya doubted Seva’s words. “But have it your way then. Do you talk to her?”

“Not really ...” Seva answered honestly, but remembering the encounter with Sveta two weeks ago, clarified, “Sometimes. We say hello to each other every day and she also winked at me once.” Seva did not mention that she also protected him from Svetka; his pride wouldn’t allow it.

“What if she likes you too?” Zhenya grew enthusiastic. “Have you ever tried talking to her more? Or inviting her someplace after school?”

“I haven’t,” Seva muttered. He didn’t like the direction this conversation was taking.

“So why not give it a shot? If Denikina herself isn’t unpleasant to you and even winks at you, it must mean something.”

“She isn’t mean to me because I don’t annoy her. I don’t want to hang out with her; why can’t I simply ignore it?”

“What? You think it’s that simple?” Zhenya questioned haughtily with a smile. “Perhaps I can assist you? For example, you could ask her to the movies. The four of us would go, which would be easier than taking you her out alone.”

“Tempting, but no, thank you.” Seva quickly declined the offer and changed the subject. “Anyway, tell me: how did you and Sonya meet? Well, more accurately, how did you two start dating?” he corrected, recalling that these two were in the same class.

“Don’t just shrug it off, Seva. Think about it,” Zhenya insisted, allowing himself to be led away from the awkward conversation for Seva’s sake. “Our parents are also friends with Sonya—not as close as Pasha’s, but they interact sometimes, and we also get to visit each other, so I knew Sonya before school. We were never really friends, but in the eighth grade, she asked me to help her with math, and I invited her to my place afterwards. And everything escalated from there.”

Zhenya’s face was blank but the corners of his mouth raised unconsciously. The blond guy was lost in his thoughts.

“Interesting,” Seva murmured flatly and then, shaking his shock of black

hair, he asked, “And now where is she?”

“What do you mean?” Zhenya questioned, reluctantly coming back to reality.

“Well, how often do you see each other? You’re always with me, aren’t you? So, when do you meet *her*?”

“At school,” Zhenya said, shrugging.

“At school? And what about outside of school?” Seva queried.

“Both of us don’t have time outside of school. I’m always here with you and Sonya is also busy. She’s either studying or hanging out with her friends. If there’s some extra free time, we’ll see each other after school.”

“And Sonya isn’t bothered about that?” Seva questioned, perplexed.

“No, why? She understands it, especially since she also has to, and likes to, interact with other people.”

“Weirdos,” sighed Seva, finally resolving to mind his own business. Such a relationship felt exceedingly unusual to him, since he had always assumed that people who loved each other would want to spend all of their free time together, but he could be wrong. He didn’t want to continue this conversation with Zhenya so he changed the topic. “So, can we *now* play cards?”

Seva wanted to do something more enjoyable and productive after becoming bored of this long and irrelevant discussion about girls; he’d talked enough about them with Rostik and Dima, to the point of nausea.

“Let’s do it a little later. I haven’t finished reading this crap yet.” Zhenya pointed at the cover of the collection of works by Maxim Gorky lying next to him on the “windowsill”.

“Oh, leave it,” Seva said, dismissing Zhenya’s unpleasant comment about a story that, in his opinion, was rather pleasant. “Distract yourself a little; you can think better afterwards... just half an hour.”

“Fine, but just for half an hour,” Zhenya said unwillingly.

“It will be!” exclaimed Seva. “Please bring the cards; they’re in the desk drawer.” He motioned the far corner of the garage.

Zhenya gave him a suspicious look but stayed quiet and proceeded to retrieve the cards. Seva fidgeted blissfully in his bag chair, settling in. He wondered if Zhenya would agree to play with bets again and if so, what should

he come up with this time?

“Seva ...?” Zhenya’s muffled voice could be heard in the distant corner.

“What? The cards are in the drawer on the left side,” Seva grumbled. He was thinking about what might be appealing to wish for.

“This here ... is it yours?”

Puzzled, Seva turned. What could Zhenya have found in his desk drawer? Seva strained his eyes in the dimness and was immediately able to distinguish Zhenya’s blond curls and a face no less puzzled than his own. He was leaning over the desk drawer ... and then realization hit! He jumped from his bag chair in a rush and tried to quickly close the drawer, but Zhenya was faster and managed to pull out its contents.

“Put that back,” Seva grumbled, advancing cautiously.

“So, this is yours?” Zhenya asked again, ignoring his words. He carried an incredible collection of sketches in his hands. They ranged in size and dates. Some sketches were of beautiful metropolitan sceneries, others from a biology textbook, still lifes, and some were almost like fully developed paintings. There were pictures of places. Zhenya held these sheets that came from albums, were on cut art paper, and sad fragments of paper torn from school notebooks. He seemed to quite interested in them.

Seva took a peek over Zhenya’s shoulder at the topmost drawing. Nothing unusual, just a typical view from the window of a mundane gray courtyard, of which there were hundreds in this town, and thousands around the country. Anyone born in the enormous Soviet Union could draw it since everyone saw the same scene outside the window every day. But, of course, Seva was the one who drew it, as he had everything in the pile. He didn’t want to talk about it with Zhenya.

The blond guy waited for an answer. He turned to Seva and arched his eyebrows in a questioning manner after patiently studying the gray scenery.

Seva mentally cursed every last thing in the world, especially Zhenya and his stupid curiosity. “Mine ...”

“Can I look ...?”

Seva couldn’t have said “no” even if he wanted to. More than anything,

though, he wanted to rip the pictures from Zhenya's grasp, toss them under the desk, and resume the game as if nothing had happened. But Zhenya wouldn't understand, and Seva wouldn't be able to explain. So, he nodded again, and bit his inner cheek, angry at himself and this stupid situation.

There was no need to tell Zhenya twice. He quickly settled down on the fairly clean floor and spread out the sketches in a fan-like fashion. With a wistful sigh, Seva ambled to the "windowsill", resigned to the inevitable. He sat opposite Zhenya, rested his chin on his palm, and began to study Zhenya's reaction with feigned indifference. It was certainly as intriguing as reading Gorky. There was one important difference, though, and this enraged Seva. He had no idea what the various emotions crossing his face represented.

Zhenya frowned, shuffled the pictures from place to place, glanced at some, gazed at others at length, brought them close up to his face, bit his lip, twisted and turned in all directions, then returned them to their original positions, moving from one to the other. This silent theater of one actor and one unhappy audience member lasted ten minutes, which felt like an eternity to Seva.

Finally, Zhenya looked up and poked one of the album sheets in the center, having completed a detailed study of those drawings that piqued his interest. "Who is this?"

Seva grudgingly averted his gaze from Zhenya's face to the drawings and almost choked with indignation when he saw where he was pointing. *Is he doing this on purpose?* Why had Zhenya chosen to focus on this one from the vast stack of thirty-some drawings?

Seva wasn't too sensitive or touchy, but Zhenya's ability to identify really unpleasant things that weren't worth touching and probing them with that curious finger vexed him.

"My mom," Seva responded with controlled indifference, deciding not to show his indignation.

"She's beautiful." Unlike the earlier conversation about Seva's mom, Zhenya, captivated by the drawings, was not embarrassed at all. He took the sketch off the floor, again inspected it carefully, checking it against the faint garage lighting, and quietly asked, "How old are these drawings?"



Seva didn't want to think about each one separately, and not looking at Zhenya or the gigantic fan of paintings, casually replied, "From one and a half to three years, or more."

"And you don't draw anymore?" Zhenya glanced up at Seva, shook his head, and questioned, "Why?" He set down the painting.

Seva pondered. He had no idea what to say to Zhenya. Why did he stop sketching? He simply didn't want to anymore. But he couldn't tell Zhenya that since he'd throw forth a few whys. Seva himself didn't truly know the answer.

After a several seconds of silence, he decided to provide some half-truths. "There is nothing to draw, and there is nothing to draw with. My mom used to buy me all types of pencils and paper whenever there was money, and my dad swore and called it nonsense. He never changed his views, so now no one buys me materials anymore ... and so, I stopped drawing." Having said this, Seva realized there were more lies than truths in what he said.

That wasn't the point, of course. Or, more accurately, not the only point. There had been tough, rough days in the family, when Seva had to sketch with a pencil stub on a piece of his father's newspaper. Everything suited him: no albums, paints, or anything else were required. He was inspired to draw what he saw on paper, and he would sit for hours crouched over a painting. His grandmother chastised him for ruining his eyes and not going out with friends; his father swore he was using his newspapers to do something useless instead of helping around the house. Only his mother never distracted him from the process, and always asked him to show her when he was finished drawing.

Seva no longer wanted to take newspapers from his father or listen to his grandmother's lectures, and there was no one to show his drawings to, so he hadn't touched pencils or paints in eighteen-some months.

"We have an art group at school, and I'm sure Maria Viktorovna wouldn't deny you a couple of album sheets and a brush," Zhenya said.

"Yeah, yeah, you're right. That's definitely where I should go. After I broke the window at her apartment, she'll definitely give me both paint and paper, and will say, 'Take everything home, Sevochka. I'm not greedy, you can take out the entire classroom!'" Seva stretched his arms, as if demonstrating Maria

Viktorovna's fictitious generosity, his expression mocking.

“Right, I forgot about that.” Zhenya became visibly upset. “Well, Maria Viktorovna is kind; I think she forgave you a long time ago. By the way, since we're already talking about this ... Rosalia Andrianovna said that you were so angry at Maria Viktorovna because of a 'C' in art class, that that was why you decided to break her window.”

Zhenya looked at Seva uneasily. He didn't dare ask directly, but Seva became upset anyway. “You never know what Andrianovna says ... and do you even believe anything she says?”

“I didn't say I believed her—”

“But the possibility of you believing her was pretty high.” Resentful, Seva narrowed his gaze. “Do you think I'm crazy? Yes, I was angry at her for giving me a 'C', but to break a window in the apartment because of that? Who do you have to be to do that? I told you it was an accident; we were aiming at the window leaf—”

“Alright, I got it.” Zhenya murmured guiltily.

“Besides, a year and a half has passed between then and that broken window! I hold grudges, yes, but not to that extent!” Seva barked angrily.

“And why did she give you a 'C'?” Not knowing how to calm a furious Seva, Zhenya decided that it best to change the subject so he wouldn't get angrier.

Seva grew subdued, and all the bitterness vanished, as did the not-so-fond memories at the end of seventh grade. As if his eyes had a will of their own, they looked at the sheets strewn across the floor, gliding over the works, both successful and unsuccessful, and halted at the unlucky birch.

Seva had managed to forget about his previous dislike for the innocent tree after meeting Zhenya every day near there. But here was that silly painting, reminding him of how long they hadn't seen each other. Seva frowned unknowingly and looked back at Zhenya, who waited patiently for an answer.

Sighing in resignation, Seva mumbled, “About the drawing,” he paused for a second before continuing hesitantly, “At the end of seventh grade, Maria Viktorovna tasked us to draw whatever we wanted, but it had to be related to the

summer as it was the last lesson. I drew a view from our classroom window. Do you remember that birch tree where you and I always meet?"

Zhenya nodded.

"Maria Viktorovna looked at it and remarked that the drawing was beautiful, but it wasn't what she told us to do. She meant for it to be something warm, sunny, and light. But my birch tree was gloomy and dull, like the ones in late autumn. So, she gave me a 'C'. Of course, I was livid. Maybe *my* summer really was rainy and dull. But I didn't break her window just because of that," he said as if admonishing Zhenya.

He either didn't understand or was ignoring the jab. After a few seconds of silence, Zhenya shook his head and incredulously stated, "*Gloomy and dull?* Did Maria Viktorovna tell you that? She gave me a 'B' simply because I didn't blend the colors properly and nothing floated about ... and if it was obvious what I drew, then she gave me an 'A', no less!"

"Well, you're a model student," Seva said. "Why would she jeopardize your grade?"

"No, I'm simply incompetent, so she felt sorry for me, just like our entire class. 'Smart student, but the creative aspect has bypassed you' was what she said. I guess she saw a lot of potential in you, so maybe she expected better from you. Anyway, you got an 'A' for the semester, right?"

"Right."

"See?" Zhenya replied, satisfied, but then frowned. "And it turns out that you haven't drawn anything else since the end of seventh grade, barely a year and a half ago."

"I haven't," Seva said hesitantly.

"Is it because of that single 'C'? Not so much to be unhappy about! Have you seen your drawings? I could never draw like that in my entire life, and neither can anyone else I know. You need to keep drawing, Seva. Don't be stupid."

"Neither can anyone else?" muttered Seva, skeptically.

"Absolutely no one," Zhenya replied firmly.

"I didn't quit just because of that mark. It's just that ... I don't know ... We

finished studying art after the seventh grade. I don't think it's possible anymore."

"What about the group? Didn't Maria Viktorovna invite you to join?"

"She did," Seva muttered dejectedly, understanding that lying would not help.

"How come you declined the invitation?"

"I don't know! I didn't want to; I didn't have time ... there were many reasons."

"But it's stupid to give up at what you're so good at. Talk with Maria Viktorovna. I'm sure she'll be pleased to have you this year."

"Zhenya, can't we just end this conversation?" Seva requested sternly, weary of the pointless conversation.

"At the very least, promise me you'll think about it?"

Seva knew there was nothing to think about, but Zhenya wouldn't be satisfied with that, so he simply nodded. Furthermore, the promise to consider the suggestion didn't obligate him to do anything, so he wouldn't like he'd cheated or lied to the blond guy. Seva sensed that Zhenya did not believe him, but he didn't dare to argue further.

Seva hurriedly gathered the drawings off the floor and placed them in a careless pile on the table, and nodded at the deck, forgotten amidst the conversation. "Maybe we can *finally* play now?"

They played quietly. Seva's mood was glum, and even a successful card game wouldn't lift his spirits. Zhenya would occasionally discreetly stare at the stack of drawings in the distant corner of the garage. Seva appeared to be flattered that Zhenya loved them so much, and he was relieved that at least someone appreciated his art. At the same time, he didn't want Zhenya to know anything about these sketches! Seva had never discussed them with Dima and Rostik, so how did Zhenya end up sticking his nose where he shouldn't have? Just like Svetka! Seva was annoyed by the comparison to Svetka and winced instinctively.

No, unlike her, Zhenya acted with the best of intentions because he was really interested; there was no self-interest there. Seva didn't want to hide anything from him, it was just ... well, for some reason, he was ashamed of his

stupid crude sketches, despite the fact that he did think they were pretty good.

So, they ended the game with the same strange stillness with which they'd started, with Zhenya looking at the drawings and Seva looking at Zhenya. Only towards the end, after defeating Zhenya's king with his last trump ace, did Seva allow himself a satisfied smirk.

He mentally noted that he like this feeling. At least with playing cards, he got to beat the blonde one!

## Chapter 5

### *The Lake in the Middle of the Forest*

Seva was called to the blackboard during history at the end of first semester. For a long while, he'd been sitting peacefully at the last desk when he felt shivers travel down his spine and his legs quickly became heavy. The issue wasn't that Seva wasn't prepared. On the contrary, he was well-versed on the subject. Zhenya's old notes still proved useful in terms of his terrible scores, and Zhenya also regularly offered him complete history lectures.

Seva preferred listening to him rather than reading a boring textbook; lengthy paragraphs recited by Zhenya were like watching a documentary, though without any images. But they weren't required. Zhenya explained everything in such depth that Seva's mind could easily imagine it all. He had a real talent for teaching; Seva had no doubts about that.

Seva suspected Zhenya's choice of topics were purposefully made, since the monologues frequently corresponded with the school curriculum. Of course, Seva was indifferent about it. He began taking his exams with relative ease, navigating the chronology of events appropriately. He was well-versed in the topic of the day, which Zhenya adored and described in vivid detail. It was so detailed that Seva was sure such precise details could never be found in the textbook. That was why Seva decided to take a risk—getting another 'D' when you knew the material well enough to receive at least a 'C' would be a shame.

He wasn't that worried, even when he got up to answer; in fact, he wasn't worried at all. When he was called to the blackboard, his classmates didn't stop rapidly flipping through textbooks or studying the material. They knew Seva

would be given a well-deserved ‘D’ and that someone else would answer the question. And that might have happened any other day, but not today.

Seva walked to the blackboard with stiff legs, and instead of the typical “Grigory Olegovich, I didn’t learn it”, he answered with an unsure, “The First World War was caused by the exacerbation of contradictions between the major capitalist powers ...”

Grigory Olegovich, who had been buried in a textbook, gasped in surprise and looked at Seva, stunned. He measured him with a long, searching gaze, as if trying to figure out if it was truly Temkin Vsevolod Denisovich, a student of the ninth ‘B’ class who stood before him. He regarded him in silence, obviously afraid of stopping the informative response.

“The countries battled each other for markets and raw materials,” Seva said quietly and hoarsely.

There were murmurings in the class, but neither Seva nor Grigory Olegovich reacted to it. As he stood at the blackboard, Seva blurted out the topic by heart, fumbling and confused in his words, as if he were terrified of forgetting it. The whisperings in the classroom grew louder and began to distract Seva after a few minutes; Grigory Olegovich irritably shushed the students, and they obediently quieted down, not out of respect for the kind teacher that permitted his students to do various things throughout his lessons, but out of surprise at Seva. He got more confident before his silent classmates; his words became louder and more measured, and eventually he began to mimic Zhenya’s intonations.

When he completed the last line, he felt his breath catch and his hands quiver uncontrollably, but his classmates’ shocked expressions and disbelieving voices soothed his nerves, providing a sense of delicious vengeance. Seva glanced at Grigory Olegovich questioningly, barely holding back a buffoonish bow.

He met Seva’s gaze and that made him come to his senses. “Vsevolod, I’m not only surprised, I’m overjoyed! To what do I owe such an unexpected and, to be honest, *very* delightful surprise?”

Seva wanted to blurt, “To Smirnov Zhenya from the tenth grade, section ‘A,’” but was embarrassed and meekly responded with, “Don’t know. Just wanted to study a little.”

“And what should I do, Seva, to ensure that this desire always remains with you?”

“Give me an ‘A’.” Seva went from shyness to brazen arrogance in an instant.

“Of course, your answer for an ‘A’ is too poor; there was no clear structure, you got lost, forgot names and dates.” Grigory Olegovich paused and seeing Seva’s disappointed face, continued more cheerfully, “But I’ll give it to you as an advance and encouragement for your efforts; I guess no one will argue with me, right, guys?”

The students’ responding whispers were dissonant and uncertain. They were too stunned to argue or show resentment.

The happy historian produced a large ‘A’ in the notebook and handed it to Seva. He took a flying stride to his workstation, feeling like Zhenya Smirnov and almost like Albert Einstein. On the way, he noticed Dima’s face contorted with astonishment, caught the approving smile of Alina Denikina and, passing by Svetka, he heard an almost soundless, “Well done.” He was skeptical about the latter, but he wanted to sing, dance, and run down the school halls with the journal, sticking his ‘A’ in the faces of all passing students, teachers, and even strangers who happened to be present.

Something clicked in his mind that day, as if it had shifted to another mode, like the choice to start studying properly. He was open to learning. He continued to do literature for Zhenya, copied his notes, gladly received assignments in mathematics, chemistry, and biology, and even began to attend history classes with great interest. Grigory Olegovich couldn’t get enough of his accomplishments, and Seva sensibly remained silent so that he didn’t have to strain too hard. Zhenya’s hour-long monologues had somehow expanded his mind.

Of course, not everything went smoothly in every subject. While Seva was praised every which way by his history teacher, Rosalia Andrianovna expressed disappointment that he didn’t comprehend chemistry any more than before. He took notes and learned formulae, but this was insufficient for the demanding Andrianovna. She closed her eyes and gave him a ‘B’ for homework, but she crushed him to smithereens during tests.



Seva would have gotten another 'D' after the last test, but Svetka came to the rescue. Turning to ask for a pencil, she noticed out of the corner of her eye that just the date was written in Seva's notebook, so she swiftly handed him her answers while Andrianovna was looking at the next row. Seva was so taken aback that he tried to figure out what the set-up was for fifteen seconds before deciding that he would figure it out later. He clumsily copied some answers and handed the notebook back to Svetka, thanking her in hushed tones for her help. She waved away the gratitude.

Seva received a 'B' on the test and received guarded praise from Andrianovna, which satisfied him. When it came to semester grades, the head teacher, pursing her thin lips, remarked regrettably that she couldn't give him anything more than a 'C' ... yet.

Seva was not upset at the slightest. He didn't expect good grades in chemistry and biology, especially since he already had a solid 'B' in the other subjects, except for history, which was a huge step forward. Grigory Olegovich graciously gave an 'A' on Seva's report card, which made Zhenya happy as if he had heard The Beatles were coming to their town for a concert.

Aside from Russian literature. Zhenya remained perplexed as to why—while Seva performed all of his homework—he didn't do anything for himself. He was unwilling to explain, and Zhenya finally surrendered himself to the conclusion that questions and countless persuasions to see Maria Viktorovna, the art teacher, would not work on Seva either.

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Seva stood in the school corridor on the last day before the holidays, relishing the straight row of 'B' grades in his report card. Five Bs in a row! When was the last time something like this had happened? Chemistry, biology, and literature dominated the view, yet they couldn't dampen his pleasant mood. He felt calm, at ease. He wouldn't have to listen to Andrianovna's screaming or quarrel with his father, so the holidays would be peaceful. But what delighted Seva the most was that he now had a strong desire to continue his studies, and the thought of

graduating from high school with a good certificate wasn't as ridiculous as it had seemed previously.

"Busy?" Svetka unceremoniously appeared beside him. She wasn't very interested in the reply, so Seva sighed quietly and prepared to listen. "Tell me, Seva. Don't you hang out with the tenth graders?"

"With who?" he stupidly asked, oblivious to what Svetka might be thinking.

"Well, you and your Zhenya are good friends, always together," Svetka sighed, lowering her gaze to the floor.

Seva unexpectedly loved the words "your Zhenya" but he didn't enjoy Svetka's suspicious interest in him. She was correct that he and Zhenya were always together, but that doesn't mean they wanted a third person in their company. What had prompted Svetka's sudden interest? This had never happened before. She was standing there, her eyes wide, pulling a strand of short thin hair around her finger. Seva caught sight of Svetka's support team at the opposite end of the corridor out of the corner of his eye. He knew something was wrong when the closeknit trio exchanged secretive glances and giggled.

"Yeah, I'm friends with Zhenya, but he has a girlfriend," he quickly said, immediately catching on why Svetka was interested.

"Yes, I know," Svetka said, waving her hand dismissively. "But what about his friends? There must be at least one person in the entire tenth grade! Perhaps you can introduce me to someone?" She batted her eyelids coquettishly, just like Alina when she needed something.

Seva had to fight the impulse to laugh with Nastya, Alena, and Oksana, because the image was ludicrous. But he recalled Sveta's help with the chemistry test, and his conscience compelled him to maintain a serious expression like never before. "I'm not sure; I'll ask Zhenya if any of his friends are single, but I'm not promising anything."

"Thank you, Seva," Sveta said, smiling contently. "Just don't say it explicitly, okay? Just say it casually, so he doesn't catch on."

Seva nodded, his expression impervious and unfazed. "Deal."

"Thank you again," Svetka winked, smiled, and headed right to her friends. A few meters later, she turned back, paused, and said, "I've seen your semester

grades. I didn't think I'd ever say this, but you've done really well." She started walking twice as quickly.

Seva could only gaze after her in amazement. He did not have time to utter even a simple "thank you". He wondered if Svetka was so nice because of her request, or if she truly believed so. In any case, Seva was embarrassed by his hasty promise to her. He was fully aware that there was nothing for Svetka among the tenth graders. Zhenya didn't have any friends, but Seva couldn't tell her that. So, he'd said it without thinking. *Svetka will have to wait now; she'll tell her friends. No ... it's not necessary to delay this.*

He'd inform her right after the holidays that Zhenya has no free friends, so she didn't think she'd be snagging a tenth-grader.

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Zhenya remembered their deal at the end of the semester. He casually approached Seva at recess and asked, "So, are you gonna come with me to my summer house?"

Seva didn't understand at first since he had forgotten about their deal and merely blinked blankly in answer. "Why?"

"What do you mean 'why'? I promised to take you shooting, didn't I?" Zhenya shrugged. "Besides, you've done so much for me this semester that I'd have gone insane without you. I believe I should express my gratitude in some way."

"Zhenya, forget about it. It wasn't that hard for me," Seva responded dismissively. "And you've also helped me a lot. Consider us even."

"Even if that's the case, a deal is a deal. I promised, so let's just go. It's not difficult for me to take you with me on vacation to the summer house."

Seva was about to object again when he abruptly changed his mind. Why should he say no? He didn't mind shooting, especially if Zhenya insisted. Going somewhere during the autumn break sounded like a fantastic idea, so he had no reason to say no. Seva shrugged, unsure. "All right, I'll ask my father."

He was not pleased about the idea and stated that he was totally opposed to

his kid traveling to who knew where and with whom, but his grandma unexpectedly supported Seva.

Varvara Kapitonovna told her son-in-law what a brilliant, hardworking, responsible, and well-mannered youngster Zhenechka Smirnov was, and swore that if she committed her grandson to anybody, it would be to him alone. Denis Ilyich gave up after an hour of Seva's whining and his mother-in-law's lamentations, waved a hand, and allowed his son to accompany the blond kid ... even if it were to another country ... but only for a few days.

Seva, overjoyed, raced to gather his belongings.

The trip, however, had to be postponed. Dissatisfied with their son's 'B' on a physics test, Zhenya's parents had him remain at home for the first few days of the vacation and redo everything he had passed in a quarter. When the exhausted and tortured Zhenya eventually broke away, they only had a few days until school, but he and Seva reasoned that it would be enough time. Seva brought a school briefcase and some warm clothing with him while Zhenya brought a hiking backpack full of foods and clothing. They set off on the road in high spirits.

They had to take the train to Zhenya's summer house and then walk for another forty minutes from the station. Despite the considerable trip, the time passed quickly. Everything seemed different outside of the city—the air was cleaner, their thoughts were clearer, and their senses appeared to have heightened several times. Seva moved slowly into the thicket, inhaling deeply the wonderful scent of pine needles, and happily watching Zhenya forge ahead. He was rejuvenated by being away from the rumbling traffic and grey panel boxes and began to feel at peace.

Zhenya enthusiastically noted something about the country's heat, then the mushroom season, and then jumped to fascinating but useless historical facts, and told Seva that Alexander I of Russia was slightly deaf in his left ear due to an artillery cannonade, and Russia did not have a flag until the eighteenth century.

Seva didn't mind. He half-listened to Zhenya's eager chatter and enjoyed seeing his change. The blond guy's motions grew more sweeping and livelier, his

facial expressions became more expressive and vibrant, and Zhenya appeared to relax and breathe deeply. Seva liked the changes but for some reason, couldn't stop watching Zhenya. Fortunately, Zhenya was a few steps ahead of him.

When Zhenya came to a stop at the gate and told Seva that they had arrived, he completely forgot that he had been watching him with bated breath only a second before. His attention was immediately captured by something more intriguing: the Smirnov family's country house.

Seva and his family did not have a summer house, but as a youngster, he frequently went on vacation with his friends and their parents. A vision of a rural house had long evolved in his mind, gleaned from the few examples he had seen. The country house, according to Seva's modest ideals, was a small one-story building with two rooms, a kitchen, and a little corridor in the courtyard with half the school's sports hall housing a vegetable garden and meager village amenities. However, the Smirnovs' summer house wasn't what he was used to seeing when he visited his friends in the countryside.

The first distinction was the size of the property. It was like a full-fledged stadium, not half a sports hall, with trees and some bushes, either raspberries or currants, or maybe both. The second was the home itself. A clean two-story structure with a large porch and a tiled roof appeared well-kept and substantial, as if it were not a vacation house where people only visited on weekends, but permanent lived. It was hardly the humblest of dwellings.

Seva spotted a swing and for some reason thought of how lovely it would be here in summer as he walked down the stone path under the poplar trees that leaned almost to the ground. Numerous flowerbeds left little question that everything blossomed here during the summer season, transforming an already lovely plot into a true paradise. Unlike the melancholia he saw in the town back home, a bright and colorful scene would appear through the windows of this residence. Seva turned his head with exaggerated attention and continued to observe the place.

The interior of the house was considerably more modest than the outside. Guests were met at the door by an unremarkable vestibule filled with rubbish ... and pickles. The next door opened to a large kitchen, similar to other rural

kitchens Seva had seen. A carpeted walkway had also been installed to prevent stains on the clean floors from mud and sand, as well as a tiny stove, worn but clean curtains, and a white tablecloth on a large table beside the window. The only thing that stood out from Seva's typical image of a country house was a staircase leading to the second floor, where Zhenya planned to let him stay. Seva didn't really mind. On the contrary, he was happy, because there was only one room on the second floor, and Seva, used to sharing his personal space with Sema, was overjoyed at the prospect of having a full floor to himself! Even if just for a few days.

Zhenya had intended to swiftly drop off his belongings and head straight for what they had come here for, but when they reached the house, it had begun to darken. After some thinking, he decided that strolling through the autumn forest at night with a gun in hand was a very stupid idea. They had to make minor changes to their Napoleonic plans.

He wasn't that too upset about it. Seva was exhausted from the trip, and the last thing he wanted to do was get out of his chair and amble into the gloomy fall mist.

Seva and Zhenya headed to bed after quickly preparing a little meal from the items brought with them. They'd be fully prepared in the morning.

They were unlucky again the next day. It had been pouring heavily all night, and by morning, appeared to have only gotten worse, as if mocking their plans. It was impossible to leave the home; their clothes would be soaked, and they'd be drenched to the skin in the blink of an eye. The roads were muddy, the grass was muddy and slippery, and going anywhere in the woods was out of the question if the purpose of the sortie was not to get covered in mud.

Seva gazed longingly out the window of his second floor, reflecting how, even in the Smirnovs' summer house, in such a lovely and unique setting, he'd managed to find typical dullness and sadness, that which he'd depicted more than once in his landscapes.

Zhenya called Seva to breakfast to divert his attention from negative thoughts. He dragged himself down to the first floor and slowly trudged towards the kitchen. He didn't have any appetite; he just wanted to snuggle inside his

blanket, curl up, and sleep till things got better—at least until a sliver of sunlight broke through a dense curtain of heavy, nearly black clouds. Seva, on the other hand, drew some semblance of a smile for Zhenya as to not spoil his mood.

The blond guy was likewise unhappy with the weather, but he maintained a rather cheery demeanor. Zhenya was hurrying around the kitchen, stirring something, scraping a frying pan with a fork, and arranging the table. In his excitement at the stove, Seva forgot about the bad weather on the street. Zhenya, who had never wielded a knife before, cooked pancakes excitedly and hummed something. When had he scheduled a trip to the supermarket for milk and eggs?

After a truly royal breakfast, Seva thawed a little and stopped being angry at the whole world, just with thrice-cursed downpour outside the window. Zhenya wisely reasoned that with those irritated grumblings, he wouldn't cause the sun to rise unless it was part of some pagan ritual, and therefore it was worth pulling themselves together and doing something useful and enjoyable. He immediately pulled out of his immense backpack—which would fit half the Temkins' apartment—one of the records they had heard. They found a record player as ancient as Seva's in the living room closet and, with difficulty, hoisted it onto the table, and went about their favorite business.

By this time, four Beatles songs had already been translated in their entirety, and Seva had been surprised to notice how much better he'd understood English. His grammar was pretty lame; however, it was becoming much easier for him to perceive the language by ear. And thanks to the endless flipping of the English-Russian dictionary in search of audible sound combinations, the lexicon has expanded significantly. Now Seva, albeit with difficulty, could make a couple of simple sentences and not be ashamed in front of the whole class.

In some mysterious way, and in their free time from school, he and Zhenya were doing something, if not useful, then at least not harmful. Even Denis Ilyich had noted with surprise that Rosalia Andrianovna had not invited him to her office for a long time. He noted it and cheerfully offended, "Doesn't she miss me at all?"

Less than ten minutes later, Seva was involved in work and completely forgot about the terrible weather outside. He reminded himself that they hadn't

come here to scribble translations into an already rather shabby notebook. The Beatles sang to the whole house about their faith in tomorrow, the rain drummed furiously outside the window, as if accompanying the performers, and Seva and Zhenya completely immersed themselves in this simple melody that was becoming firmly entrenched in their brain.

“All I can hear”—the record player standing on the floor sadly sent forth—“I me mine, I me mine, I me mine.” Large drops violently rapped the iron windowsill. “Even those tears, I me mine, I me mine, I me mine ...”

Their noses buried in papers with unsuitable words, Zhenya absently reread the text while biting the tip of a pencil.

They were so carried away by the record that they didn't notice how dark it had grown outside. They only did when the lines in the notebook became completely indecipherable. Zhenya came to his senses and broke away from his notes. Annoyed, he noted that the rain on the street had ended “In time”, and the sky had cleared, but now it was strewn with bright stars. They had only one word left to find, without which the meaning of the first verse was completely lost, but their tired brains, irritated by the melody repeating for the hundredth time and the monotonous noise of the rain, refused to work.

Zhenya, of course, insisted on continuing these ineffective searches, but by some miracle, Seva managed to persuade him to postpone the search for the one word for another time. The strongest argument for doing that was they'd not eaten anything since eleven o'clock in the morning, and Seva's stomach had grumbled and rumbled like wild beasts at the zoo.

Hearing his plaintive rumbling, Zhenya decided to have mercy, and they went to cook dinner.

A few hours before going to bed, Seva and Zhenya chatted about everything and nothing, taking a break from the foreign language that had proven boring that day. It was mostly Zhenya who spoke. He gave some strange historical facts, then said something about mopeds, then suddenly went to the window and began to tell Seva about constellations, stars, and the Milky Way.

When Seva, surprised by the blond guy's knowledge with such a useless subject as astronomy, listened to his colorful monologue. Zhenya suddenly



started talking about literature. He'd moved so smoothly from the boundless cosmos to the depth of Sholokhov's novels that Seva did not even realize at first that he had been swept to another realm. When he came to his senses, he was indignant, and Zhenya wisely changed the subject.

The incident didn't spoil the inexplicably cozy atmosphere of the evening. At some point, standing at the window with a cup of tea and lazily looking for familiar constellations in the black sky, Seva realized that if tomorrow he still wasn't able to hold the gun in his hands, the reason they'd come here, he'd not regret this trip at all. On the contrary, he could probably call this day one of the best in the last year and a half.

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Waking up in the morning, Seva saw a nasty image. It was raining again and it seemed more heavily than yesterday. It wouldn't be so insulting if the bright moonlight hadn't flooded Seva's room all night, not for a moment hiding behind the smallest shabby cloud. Was nature laughing at him?

Seva came down to breakfast completely upset. Yesterday he'd managed to control himself and squeeze out a smile on the spot, but today he indifferently said, "morning" to Zhenya and plopped down on a wooden chair, propping his cheek with his hand.

Zhenya's mood was also low. He didn't even bother to warm up the leftover breakfast from yesterday and smacked three cold sticky pancakes onto Seva's plate; he didn't eat breakfast at all. He sat there, stirring a single spoonful of sugar in a cracked mug with a melancholy and inappropriately bright orange dahlia on the side. Neither of them wanted to talk and had breakfast in gloomy silence; the sounds of drops drumming the tiled roof only made the silence in the kitchen more tangible and heavy.

Half an hour later, Seva, out of respect for the efforts and time spent by Zhenya, stuffed the last pancake into his mouth.

"What are we going to do today?"

The question sounded mocking, and, as if picking up that mockery, thunder

rumbled outside the window. Seva didn't react to this already open sneer from nature and shrugged indifferently. Probably, they would listen to the record again. Did they have any options? In any case, he would not be able to shoot today. Something told him that the rain would drag on again for the whole day—and they had to leave the next day.

Zhenya, who had already recovered a little from his morning disappointment, was extremely dissatisfied with Seva's sour face. So he forced Seva to wash the dishes in icy water so that he would cheer up a little and dragged him—no surprise there! – to the record player, still vertical on the floor. But either Seva's frustration was beyond the positive influence of Zhenya or he, no less upset, wasn't too eager to search for one stupid word again for several hours.

The work was not going well. They were tired of listening to the opening verse for the hundredth time. Seva tried to fake enthusiasm and leafed through the worn pages of the dictionary actively, but he failed to deceive either himself or Zhenya. Whispering the line that infinitely eluded them, Zhenya exhaled noisily and grinned, peering at Seva from under his short, blond eyelashes. "Feeling pretty sick of all this, huh?"

Seva opened his mouth to argue and convince him that everything was alright, but beneath the intense stare of Zhenya's brown eyes, his argument faded before it could come out from his mouth and nodded in embarrassment. Most likely, the lies would have been too obvious and useless. Zhenya wasn't a fool. Could you even fool him with feigned amusement and pleasure? Especially when it was a losing substitute for smoothbore shooting.

"Can we do something else?"

Seva had no idea what he was hoping for when he offered to change his position. With such dreadful weather, how could one entertain oneself in a summer house in the fall? Remove cobwebs from corners? Rummage through old newspapers? To be honest, Seva would be content with experiencing local wildlife if he no longer had to hear that annoying song and irritating rustle of the pages.

Seva looked really sad, making Zhenya's face contort with pity; he leapt to his feet and fiercely shook his head. "That's it. I can't do this anymore! We came

here to do some shooting, so we will do just that. Get dressed!”

“What about the rain?” Seva widened his eyes in disbelief.

“We aren’t sugar, so we won’t melt. The prospect of seeing your miserable face all day scares me much more than getting wet in the rain for a couple of hours.” Zhenya rubbed his hair with a mischievous smile.

There was no need to tell Seva twice. He snatched all the papers in one arm and hastened to get ready. He dressed in all his warmest clothes. A hooded sweatshirt, with a turtleneck underneath, a jacket on top, and old trousers a nasty green color, which wouldn’t be a pity to ruin. Then he went down to the first floor, where Zhenya solemnly handed him something of an immense size to match his “favorite” pants. Seva carefully unwrapped a massive piece of rubberized fabric that revealed an ordinary raincoat, one clearly sewn for someone one-and-a-half times taller and twice as fat.

“That’s cute,” Seva chuckled, trying to figure out where the raincoat’s sleeves ended and where the cutout for the head began.

“Well, what did you expect from a summer house in the countryside?” Zhenya shrugged his shoulders. “It’s amazing that I even remembered we had it.”

“You have only one?” Seva frowned.

“I think so.”

“What about you? What are you going to wear? This jacket?”

“What’s the problem? It’s warm, and I wouldn’t get too wet in it. In any case, I signed up for it on my own; no one asked me.”

“Warm, huh,” Seva said, ridiculing Zhenya’s thin windbreaker. It felt cold to stare at him wearing that, even inside the warm home. “My clothes are warmer; perhaps you could put on a raincoat?”

“Nah, I’m good,” Zhenya said, waving off the suggestion. “Although ...” He climbed back up the staircase and after a few minutes of fumbling and muffled curses, took out a second, no less massive lump of rubberized cloth, but this time it was a yellowy mustard.

“Now, we both look like idiots,” Seva concluded philosophically.

“Yeah. Would you like a green one?”

“No!” said Seva, horrified. “I already called dibs on yellow; otherwise, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Who are you going to make things worse for?” Zhenya joked. “It’s weird, a green raincoat—”

“As disgusting as those pants,” Seva finished for him. “No, thank you. If I have to choose, I prefer yellow.”

“No problem,” Zhenya said, taking the raincoat from Seva and putting it on without getting tangled in it.

Seva followed in his steps, but Zhenya told him not to rush since he still needed to retrieve the gun from his father’s safe. Seva sighed loudly, but did not grow irritated, and marched into the kitchen to wait.

He had to wait for a long time. Seva thought Zhenya got lost in the four walls when he’d not appeared twenty minutes later, and not half an hour later. The rain had still refused to stop. On the contrary, it was pouring so hard that it seemed as if someone had turned on a huge shower in the sky and broke the valve. How would they get to a place where they could safely shoot? Sure, they’d get wet, but they could drown in the vast mud and puddles! Seva wasn’t even able to see his outstretched hand in the rain. How would he be able to aim in this crazy weather? What if he hit somebody?

Unpleasant, terrifying, and invasive thoughts overtook Seva, forcing their way through the raincoat and multiple sweaters beneath the T-shirt and producing chills on his back. He was nearly ready to give up and head upstairs, when Zhenya stepped into the kitchen. All the negative thoughts suddenly flew from Seva’s mind. He couldn’t help but smile; the blond guy looked really stunning in that raincoat!

Zhenya had pulled on the hood beforehand and looked like an evil dwarf from fairy tales, loaded with huge bags of jewelry that he got in a diamond mine. Except that the height didn’t match, and the blond curls that escaped from under the hood spoiled his image of Grumpy from Snow White. They stuck out in different directions, in a cute, charming way.

“Why are you so upset?” Seva asked, his smile unabated.

“It took ages to remember the safe password, disassemble the gun, and find

my backpack; I thought we'd never leave the house. I also dropped a book on my foot, one of the volumes of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia!*" Zhenya grumbled. "And why are you so cheerful?"

"Have you seen yourself in the mirror?" Seva asked, laughing. "An overgrown dwarf, as if he had escaped from a book ... and began to slay Snow White and the dwarfs, who weren't allowed to dwell in peace in the forest!"

"Why would I slay ...?" Zhenya didn't understand.

"Then why do you need a gun?" Seva answered the question with a question, innocently batting his eyelashes.

Zhenya chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Do you remember when Rosalia Andrianovna said that you'd become more serious and responsible?"

Seva nodded.

"It's a lie."

"You don't like it?" Seva raised one eyebrow.

"When did I say I didn't?" Zhenya answered in the same tone. "Let's go now. Otherwise, it will get dark again before we even leave the house."

Seva pulled on his hood and deciding not to look at himself in the mirror so as not to get upset, ran out into the street first. He was immediately doused as if from a bucket. Part of his pants, not covered with the raincoat, got wet instantly. The rain continued to pour and pour from the sky, and Seva's eyelashes immediately stuck together, preventing him from seeing anything beyond his nose, and the hair escaping from under the hood stopped sticking out in all directions and hung like cold icicles, unpleasantly tickling his cheeks. He wanted to go home, to the warmth, to dry out and forget about this gun as if it were a terrible dream, but Zhenya came out and resolutely headed for the gate. Seva had no other option but to follow him.

After about five minutes, it became a little easier. Seva got used to the slippery earth under his feet, stopped chattering his teeth, and somehow managed to see at least a couple of meters around him. It was enough to walk confidently and not be afraid to crash into someone or something.

Zhenya was walking a little ahead and Seva was guided by his bright green raincoat. Passing by some crooked wooden houses, the blond nodded in their

direction and said that his childhood friend lived there. It turned out that earlier, at the summer house, Zhenya had a lot of people with whom he spent all weekends and vacations; they went to the river together, burned bonfires, caught frogs, stole apples from neighbors' gardens. Hearing about apples, Seva nearly choked. Who'd have thought? But Zhenya didn't even notice his surprise. Carried away by his story, he looked into the distance and enthusiastically, without seemingly taking breaths, talked about happy childhood years.

The downpour suddenly ceased to be a hindrance to him. Zhenya seemed not to notice it anymore, only pushing away the hair sticking to his face; even his heavy backpack suddenly seemed to be half empty. Seva, lightly packed, could barely keep up with him.

Cheerfully, Zhenya walked first along the blurred but straight road and then, without slowing down, along the crooked forest paths, without stopping to talk, and not even out of breath. Zhenya jumped from topic to topic, pausing every few minutes to wave his hand and reveal some memory associated with the place, and Seva listened to his stories with so much attention that soon he also stopped noticing the rain and the mud which he'd felt he was drowning in almost to his head. He was no longer aware of the tree branches whipping his face. He liked Zhenya's emotional monologues, his energetic broad gestures, the bright smiles and sparkling happy look, which he gave Seva every time he turned around to check if he was lagging and that everything else was fading into the background.

The dreary autumn dampness no longer worried him with the water squelching in high rubber boots and the loud, rustling of wet leaves appeared to have decreased so as not to disrupt Zhenya's voice. He never stopped talking. He talked about friends, the summer house, summer and the river, winter and sledding, and then he talked about history and old friends again. Zhenya was so engrossed in his chatter that Seva began to wonder whether they were lost. However, the blond guy was still walking briskly along the overgrown forest path, confidently maneuvering tall fir trees and didn't appear to doubt the route, and so Seva quickly calmed down. At some point, Zhenya, during the flow of his chatter, even remembered the purpose of their hike.

“Did you know that in a smoothbore shotgun, the number of calibers means the number of round bullets that are cast from an English pound of lead? It turns out that the man had a pound of lead and he figured that for a gun, for example, a twelve-gauge, twelve bullets could be cast. And the diameter of this bullet is the diameter of the barrel in its middle part.”

Though it was an interesting educational program, Seva didn't comprehend anything, but he didn't want to interrupt Zhenya's monologue with his silly inquiries. If it was something significant, he'd figure it out right away; if not, he'd forget in five minutes. Meanwhile, Zhenya had moved on to talk about hunters, animals, hunting in nature, and nature on the hunt. Seva remained silent.

Seva was worried when Zhenya stopped midway through a sentence and stated, “We've arrived,” while moving aside the wet branch of a fir tree.

“What do you mean ‘we've arrived’? How far have we walked from your house? Two kilometers? There must be people nearby, somewhere!”

“What could people do here, Seva?” asked Zhenya in bewilderment. “We have walked more than six kilometers. The nearest settlement is more than half an hour on foot.”

“Six kilometers? How long have we been walking?” Seva was stunned. It seemed to him that the journey took them no more than forty minutes.

“About an hour and a half.” Zhenya shrugged his shoulders. “Don't worry, there won't be anybody around here; no one will disturb us. My father used to take me here as a child, and here I learnt to shoot.”

“I'm not worried, I was just surprised that time flew by so quickly,” Seva muttered and immediately, as if waking up, loudly clapped his hands and said, “So, why are we slowing down again? Come on, get your smoothbore out already, and let's start!”

“Rosalia Andrianovna would kill me for giving you not just a gun, but ordinary matches,” Zhenya grinned, but he still reached into his backpack and pulled out a carefully wrapped bundle.

Unwrapping a colored cloth, he first pulled out a block of barrels, then the remainder of the smoothbore from the package. Seva, who was watching, exclaimed incredulously, “Does your father even know you took his

smoothbore?”

“He wouldn’t allow me,” Zhenya said, shaking his head.

“Wow!” said Seva in awe. “I didn’t anticipate this from you; you learn quickly,” he said slyly.

“It’s not the first time I handled a gun by myself,” Zhenya said. “Father won’t notice. I’m not going around killing people, am I? I’m not even going after animals, so what does it matter to my father? I simply pulled his smoothbore shotgun out of the safe and will return it afterwards.”

“What if I’m a maniac and I’m going to shoot people?” Seva stupidly squinted in an attempt to look like a madman. Judging by Zhenya’s dry laugh, it didn’t turn out too realistically.

“Then you’ll have to shoot me because there’s no one else within a few kilometers. And with a hole in my head, I wouldn’t be caring what my father will say,” Zhenya replied without a trace of irony.

Seva was about to remark, “What if there’s a hole in your leg?” But he began assembling the gun, and Seva’s attention was instantly switched.

Noticing his interest, Zhenya began to comment on his actions along the way, “Look, you take it, fold the block of barrels and the butt at an angle ... then you move the block a little and it goes into the rails. The locking lever is gently pulled back, and everything is ready. And it’s even easier to disassemble; you disconnect the forearm with the help of a button, break the gun, and disconnect the block. Understood?”

“I think so.” Seva nodded uncertainly.

“Okay, this isn’t that important, I can teach you this at home. For now, let’s do something more interesting. Here, hold this.” Zhenya handed the assembled gun to Seva and reached into his backpack again.

Seva held the smoothbore in his hands with reverence and slowly traced his finger from the aiming bar to the front sight. Zhenya, on the other hand, snatched the gun from him and nodded towards a piece of cardboard in his hands, without even letting him experience the moment.

“You’ll aim at it. As you know, no shooting at any birds or animals. I won’t let you. And you won’t be able to go home without me, so only such an



improvised target remains. By the way, I used to practice with it as a kid.”

Seva only realized the cardboard was covered with little bullet holes after hearing what Zhenya had said. He was uncertain. “Won’t it get wet if it rains?”

“It’s thick, and it isn’t raining as much as before.”

Seva lifted his head in astonishment, and it was still dripping from the sky, albeit not as abundantly or fiercely as it had been only half an hour ago.

“Don’t worry, this thing has been through a lot worse than you think.”

Seva sighed and shrugged. His only role was to ask. Meanwhile, Zhenya expertly connected the cardboard to two branches and strolled ten meters away, enjoying the handiwork. On the reverse side of the target, a bold black dot was drawn with a hand. It appeared that the center should be the target. Seva examined it more closely and decided that, based on the position of the holes, the blond guy wasn’t exceptionally accurate when he was a kid. Zhenya must be bad at something.

As if reading Seva’s thoughts, Zhenya raised the smoothbore shotgun, took aim and fired in a blink. Seva squinted, looking at the cardboard, and without much surprise, he chuckled. *Bull’s-eye*. Sure! Who’d have doubt?

Satisfied, Zhenya beckoned him with his finger and carefully handed him the gun. “Remember that this is not a toy, Seva,” he admonished with all seriousness.

“I know, I’m not stupid,” Seva replied irritably. “If you stop reminding me that matches are not a toy for children and how to teach them how to use them ... I won’t kill anyone by accident.”

“Don’t be grumpy,” Zhenya muttered absently. “Okay, look. You need to stand half-turned to the goal, the left shoulder is higher than the right and slightly forward. The feet are shoulder-width apart, and the right leg is slightly behind. Lean your body a little on your left leg and lean forward slightly,” he instructed quickly, simultaneously moving Seva’s legs and shoulders with his hands. “Hold the gun with your left hand at the end of the forearm, without closing the aiming bar, and with your right hand wrapped around the box. It should be at shoulder level, understand? The butt is inserted into the shoulder cavity, and the cheek touches it on the left side but does not fill up the head so

that it doesn't hurt when recoiling. Press it harder to the shoulder and most importantly, you need to relax; the pose should not be tense."

"How can I relax?" Seva was indignant. "You just described the position of all parts of my body to almost a millimeter, and now you ask me to relax? I'm afraid to breathe!"

"That's right." Zhenya was not embarrassed. "Breathing is also important to regulate." He critically examined Seva, shook his head, came up from behind and put his hands on him, pointing the gun in the right direction. His wet tangled curls, escaping from under the hood, tickled Seva's cheek. "When you shoot, you can't talk or even breathe ... you just can't aim while the chest is in motion."

It seemed that Seva took Zhenya's last advice too seriously. He suddenly lost his breath, and his mouth went dry. The sounds around him were muffled, and he heard Zhenya's voice as if through cotton wool.

"This gun has two triggers for two barrels. You need to click on the one that is closer to you." And Zhenya carefully, without sudden movements, took Seva's fingers and put them on the right hook. After waiting for Seva to look down for a couple of moments, he pressed the trigger himself and only then let go of Seva's hand. The sound of a shot came as from under the water, and Zhenya jumped up joyfully on the spot.

"Yes! Did you see it? Right on the bull's-eye!"

He ran to examine the new hole in the cardboard, and sounds burst into Seva's ears again, as if he had abruptly surfaced in a lake. In contrast, they were likely too loud. He could hear his own heart pounding in his chest. Lowering the gun, Seva gasped and shook his head in confusion. He didn't understand what had just happened. Did he miss? Did he hit right at the center of the target? Seva couldn't even tell for sure if he had made a shot.

But smiling and enthusiastically poking at the unfortunate cardboard box, Zhenya made it clear that he shot and he hit it. Sadly, that news did not bring Seva the expected euphoria, or satisfaction. He still couldn't come to his senses and, staring at the target with a sightless gaze, tried to breathe quickly and deeply, as if he had forgotten how to do it.

Not noticing his condition, Zhenya flew up to Seva and slapped him on the back with a flourish.

A strangled “gkhm” burst from Seva’s chest.

“Well, will you try it again? This time you could do it by yourself.” Zhenya excitedly rubbed his hands.

Seva looked with horror at the smoothbore in his hands. He was scared by those few seconds from which he fell out of reality, and he did not want to repeat them. Then Zhenya directed the gun to the right point, but Seva’s hands seemed numb and he couldn’t even pull the trigger. What if he was less lucky this time and shot the trunk of a tree or his leg? Just thinking about it made Seva feel goosebumps on his back, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood erect. He had already opened his mouth to refuse and ask Zhenya to make the shot himself, but it seemed to fly off his tongue against his will. “Sure, I’ll try ...”

Seva immediately cursed himself. What’ was he doing? What an idiot! Now he couldn’t get out of it and had to shoot. But how? What did Zhenya say about triggers? Which one was he to press? Seva raised his gun and frantically groped for one of them, the nearest. Maybe that one? Just as Seva was about to press, it flashed through his head like lightning—how Zhenya took his hand, gently put it on the hook, squeezed sharply ... yes, it was the next one, no doubt.

Aiming, he exhaled sharply and pulled the trigger. The sound of a shot rang out, already much louder and clearer, and the butt hit him painfully on the shoulder. It seemed that Seva hadn’t pressed it properly. This time, the sounds around weren’t muffled, his heart beat at the usual pace, breathing wasn’t lost, and the world remained quite real. Seva was worried; did he do everything right? Did he hit the target? He didn’t kill anyone, right?

Seva turned to Zhenya and looked at him questioningly.

“You hit it. You hit the target!” Catching his worried look, Zhenya nodded with satisfaction. “There, look, to the very edge, of course, but for a start, it’s very good. And you have a good pose. It’s not for nothing that I told you about breathing. Let’s do it again!”

Seva didn’t like the remark about breathing—two minutes ago he’d almost suffocated because of it—but the praise enticed him, and he readily raised the

smoothbore again.

From that moment on, everything went like clockwork. Seva shot, sometimes hit, sometimes missed. Zhenya made comments and gave advice, but most often praised, and sincerely rejoiced at every successful shot. And when Seva almost got the very center, Zhenya enthusiastically admired the perforated cardboard for another five minutes, exclaiming tirelessly, “You saw it, didn’t you? Another couple of centimeters and you would have hit it! After a couple more times, you’ll see that you’ll stop missing the target at all!”

Seva took in Zhenya’s unfeigned enthusiasm, flattered, and enthusiastically continued to shoot until they ran out of shots.

Seva suddenly became scared. “Your father won’t scold you for this?”

Zhenya nonchalantly dismissed his concern. “When will he come here? I don’t think he’ll even remember that he had shots left, and if he remembers, he definitely won’t think about me.”

Seva was once again struck by Zhenya’s sudden frivolity, but he said nothing and only asked to disassemble the gun himself. Zhenya generously allowed it.

They walked back, surprisingly, in silence. Zhenya was whistling softly to himself, admiring the double rainbow in the gaps between the trees, and Seva kept thinking about something. If someone had asked him about what he was thinking, he wouldn’t have been able to give an exact answer. Thoughts were rapidly slipping away from him, leaving only vague fragments, but Seva didn’t notice it, as if everything should be like this.

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Closer to night, having warmed up and dried off, Seva sat on the bed in his bedroom on the second floor and, thinking about the events of the day, got ready for bed. When the fear had passed, he liked shooting. He especially liked the part when Zhenya was telling him how talented and accurate he was, how fast he was to learn, and how well he held a stance.

When Seva’s head had already touched the pillow, the door to the room opened slightly and Zhenya appeared on the threshold, wearing an old, washed

T-shirt and shabby sweatpants. Seva was touched by his homely look.

“Are you asleep?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you want to talk?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Did you enjoy what we did today? We haven’t talked about it yet, and I’ve been meaning to ask.”

“It was great,” Seva quite sincerely assured him. “I liked it. If it weren’t for this stupid rain ... but even so, it was good.”

“And how do you like the trip itself? Well, I mean the summer house and everything else.”

“I like your summer house. I like everything,” Seva said enthusiastically, completely forgetting that both days in a row he had been in a terrible mood. “I even thought how nice it would be here in the summer. Well, imagining everything is so green, beautiful, everything is blooming, the birds are singing, the sun is shining ...” For some reason, he stumbled with his words.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about that too,” Zhenya nodded. “I want to bring Sonya here this summer. Like you rightly said, everything is beautiful, everything is blooming, and there are no parents like in a fairy tale! At night, the sky is so starry, without a single cloud, such a romantic ...”

Seva became bitter all of a sudden. While Zhenya thought about his Sonya, Seva was stuck here, talking about how much he enjoyed everything and what a lovely summer house the Smirnovs had. Pfft, the stars! A romance in this rustic house? There were stars in the city too, and there were no insect-infested restrooms in the house.

Zhenya, on the other hand, had a different opinion. He spoke carefully and exhaustively about how he planned to bring Sonya here in the summer, while Seva was becoming increasingly irritated just listening. How had he missed Zhenya’s intolerable chattiness before? Why did he think Seva would be interested in hearing about his girlfriend, with whom he had no interactions? When Seva was already becoming sick of the name “Sonya”, he understood that he had reached the boiling point, and decided to change the subject. He rudely

interrupted Zhenya right in the middle of his sentence.

“By any chance, do you have any single friends?”

“... No,” he answered in surprise, puckering his lips like a fish. “Why?”

“I have a friend who wants to start dating tenth-graders. Are you sure? It’s a little embarrassing for me to refuse her. She once helped me a lot,” Seva muttered confusedly, not quite understanding what he was saying, but simply not wanting to return to the conversation about Sonya.

“I’m sure. Have you forgotten I don’t have any friends?” Zhenya chuckled, then suddenly shivered, crossing his arms over his chest.

Seva realized he must be cold in a single T-shirt and trousers. Seva slept under two blankets since the second floor was so poorly heated.

“Are you cold?” Without waiting for an answer, he lifted the blanket next to him and said, “C’mere, sit down. You’ll catch cold in that state, and it won’t be the best way to end the holidays.”

Zhenya gratefully nodded and slid beneath the warm blanket. His icy fingers inadvertently brushed Seva’s bare legs, and Seva felt his entire body covered in goosebumps. It was as if frozen metal had been inserted into his gut.

“You do realize you have hands like a dead man, don’t you?” he complained.

What type of day had this been? Seva shrugged and backed away from the blond guy. The frozen metal in his gut immediately disappeared.

“I do,” Zhenya said. “By the way, who is this friend? Do I know her?”

“Probably,” Seva said, recalling his promise not to mention anything about Svetka.

“Are they from your class? Let me see ... you don’t really talk with anyone else, so ... is it Sveta?”

“No,” Seva replied stupidly, but his decision to look at the floor betrayed his lie.

“So, it’s her,” Zhenya nodded sagely. “Why is she suddenly interested?”

“How did you know it was Svetka?”

“The only people you have mentioned to me for the last two weeks were Alina and her. You also talked about how Sveta helped you with chemistry.” Zhenya gave a sarcastic smile. “And ... Alina would never ask you to introduce

her to someone for anything in her life; her pride would never allow it. For Denikina, that's not an issue. In summary, it's elementary, my dear Watson."

"Who are you, Sherlock Holmes?" snorted Seva. "Are there no other friends? How about that Pasha you mentioned?"

"I think Pasha doesn't need a relationship right now; he has had enough," Zhenya shook his head and explained reluctantly, "He had a rather unpleasant breakup recently, and he got really withdrawn for some time, so I don't know if it's good offering him such a proposal."

"I understand but let them at least talk! If they don't like each other, that's their issue; our job is to introduce them, and then let them work it out for themselves."

"I don't know," Zhenya said doubtfully. "At the very least, tell me about Sveta; what she's like and what are her hobbies?"

"Like I would know!" scoffed Seva. "She's quite basic. Her haircut is stupid; I'm sure you've noticed it yourself. In general, Kaluta is not my cup of tea, but what's the difference? The main thing is whether Pasha likes her or not. But probably there's something to talk about with her. She's far from stupid, although she sometimes appears to be, for some strange reason. I know she loves history and literature, but sometimes she can't be quiet, and even the teachers get annoyed with her. But I can tell you that out of everyone in our class, only I can talk about history more than her," Seva said modestly, looking down.

"I don't know, Seva," Zhenya mumbled thoughtfully, dismissing the veiled praise. "What if it doesn't work out? On the other hand, you're correct. They can just separate ... but I'm not sure how to approach Pasha with this."

"Just say it directly, but don't tell him it's from Svetka," Seva stressed, just in case. "Plus, didn't you mentioned that you wouldn't mind talking to him again? This could be the first step."

"Maybe you're right," Zhenya conceded, still unsure. "Then let's wait until my parents leave and invite them both to my house; you, of course, will be there as well. If everything goes well, we'll leave them alone and won't interfere."

"Sure, that's the plan. It's definitely a wonderful plan, being surrounded with topnotch students," Seva grumbled. "Two outstanding students and Pasha and I!

Or is he an A-one student as well? I can already imagine how I'd silently sit there with dumb expression while you and Pasha discuss the Victorian era and Svetka recites her favorite Yesenin by heart. No, thanks, I'd rather stay at home."

"First and foremost, Pasha is not an excellent student," Zhenya sighed patiently. "And second, if you stop pretending to be an idiot, like you said about Sveta a minute ago, you'd actually have something to say."

"I'm not pretending," Seva grumbled.

"You are, and I still don't understand why. It's only because of you that I received an 'A' in literature this semester; you should be given credit. How could a stupid person write so many essays for someone a grade above? This is still a mystery to me and proof that you're just pretending to be an idiot."

"I'm not pretending," Seva repeated. "It just turned out that your assignments this semester were simpler than mine."

"Oh, yes, the analysis of *Fathers and Sons* is much more difficult than everything that you did for me," Zhenya drawled skeptically. "You wrote essays for me that I would never be able to achieve in this lifetime. Why didn't you do your own tests? I'm sure you would have thought of something, at least for a 'B'."

Seva was about to claim that he was simply too lazy to read the book when he changed his mind. It wasn't even a plausible explanation, especially given how passionately he did everything for Zhenya. There was genuine excitement; Seva hadn't done anything with such zeal in a long time. Zhenya wouldn't have believed him, and Seva realized he didn't want to lie either.

Would he also lie through the end of the school year? Stupid. Zhenya would insist on a straight answer sooner or later, and his curiosity was so genuine, with no hint of condemnation, that it was far easier to share the truth with him than to remain silent.

"My mom was really into art," Seva began with a sigh, looking afar. "Especially classics. Everything from music to books, she always talked about it all so religiously that I became really interested with it since childhood. So, I also began to read fervently while discussing various books with her. I fell in love with drawing thanks to her. It just so happens that our love for books is a



family trait. Have you seen my grandma's collection? I think I read almost all of it. Back in seventh grade, I read most of the school curriculum ... still remember them all very well. But we didn't just read them, we took it all apart, shared opinions, impressions. By the way, the majority of your essays are written from my mom's perspective. Occasionally, even verbatim. The majority of Russian novels, not only Russian classics ... but I now really identify with her. Her death ... wasn't easy for me." Seva selected the most neutral word. "Since then, I can't look at the books she loved or the records she listened to. I'd already stopped drawing. That's why I refused to help you with *Old Woman Izergil* because it was one of her favorite stories. I stopped doing a lot of things after her death actually," Seva muttered and suddenly stopped, and bit his tongue, thinking he had said too much.

Zhenya, on the other hand, was neither scared nor puzzled by what he'd said. On the contrary, with the same eagerness, but more comprehension, he asked, "Drawing and learning, right?"

"Yes," Seva conceded grudgingly. "I didn't have any issues with my studies until eighth grade, and even more so with Andrianovna, who is now always grumbling, 'Temkin, you'll be out of the Komsomol, you'll remain for the second year!' Before then, she only knew my last name because of my drawings. And every time I wonder how I could refrain myself from telling her, 'I will and I don't care' ... it doesn't matter anymore."

"It doesn't?" Zhenya muttered thoughtfully.

"Believe me. It doesn't."

"So? Go ahead and say it out loud."

"Yeah, like I need more issues than I already have."

"But you'll fly out of the Komsomol for sure."

"Yeah, and then my father will kill me, that's also for sure. Screw this Komsomol. I just joined it on the fly a few months after my mom died. Not my greatest decision ...but not really mine. Mom wanted it, and who was I to go against her?"

"And do you think she'd be alright with you giving up drawing?" Zhenya questioningly chuckled.

“Believe me, if I could, I would force myself to draw.”

“Well, you started studying again ... so, somehow ...”

“Pfft, studying! I just copy from your notes, nothing more. You’re right, of course, but you can’t compare studying and drawing. Those are two completely different things.”

“I understand,” agreed Zhenya. “And what? You’re not going to start again at all? Like ever?”

“I don’t know,” Seva answered honestly. “Never say never, but ... let’s just say I don’t want to yet. So far, nothing inspires me, and I don’t want to do anything about it either.”

“How about the essays? Don’t you need inspiration for them?”

“Yup, but it’s quite different. It’s hard to explain. Don’t worry, I won’t stop doing your homework. Well, not all of it. I just can’t force myself.”

“And what is not included in this ‘all’?”

“*Fathers and Sons, The Thunderstorm, Old Woman Izergil.* Haven’t I already told you ...? Absolutely all the works of Chekhov and Sholokhov, Dostoevsky’s *Pentateuch*,” Seva listed. “Don’t worry, there’s almost nothing from the tenth grade there.”

“That’s right,” Zhenya said. “But I hope you can overcome this obstacle soon, not just for my essays, but even with drawing ... I think you need it.”

“I used to need.” Seva didn’t want to continue. “Let’s go back to what we were talking about. I mean, Pasha and Svetka.”

“Whatever you say,” Zhenya agreed, unexpectedly easily. “What do you think we should tell Pasha to get interested in your Sveta?”

“She’s not mine,” Seva responded casually.

He had no idea what to say to Pasha to arouse his interest in Sveta. He didn’t care if they were both interested in each other or not; their job was to introduce them and let them figure out the rest on their own. The blond guy, on the other hand, seemed to believe otherwise. Zhenya carefully considered how to introduce Svetka to Pasha in such a way that he wouldn’t consider anything extraneous was going on and wouldn’t be irritated or even furious. He began to consider options: discreetly point at Svetka among a swarm of ninth-graders,

unintentionally put them together in the school yard after classes, or introduce her as his friend and pretend they'd known each other for a long time.

Seva chuckled quietly as he listened to Zhenya's thoughts. Even a casual acquaintance he approached with responsibility, so that his plan had no flaws, despite the fact that he'd had doubts about it five minutes before.

Zhenya continued to explain it energetically to Seva and he half listened to the ideas and nodded lazily. Seva wasn't too interested in the details of his classmate and Zhenya's friend, whom he had never seen, but he didn't want to interrupt Zhenya either. Over the past two months, Seva had gotten used to this: when Zhenya talked and he listened, everyone was fine and everyone was happy.

Zhenya could discuss something other than textbooks and even share his infinite knowledge with anyone who listened to him. His monologues often faded into the background as Seva watched Zhenya's lively and sometimes very funny emotions, facial expressions, and hand gestures for hours.

That was how things went on. Seva missed the moment when he completely stopped listening to Zhenya's thoughts, but he clearly remembered how, with the words, "No, it should happen as if by accident," Zhenya's bright eyebrows were raised in a charming arc. Then he caught himself thinking how, for the first time, he could view Zhenya's face in such close proximity. That strange dimple on his chin and absurdly protruding front tooth ... the mole on his cheek. Zhenya was sitting so close that when he turned his head, his unruly curls fell into Seva's eyes. But this did not annoy Seva at all.

On the contrary, removing them from his face, he suddenly noticed that in the dim overhead light, Zhenya's straw-colored hair seemed to be cast in gold. He opened his mouth to say it out loud, but Zhenya looked at him with his animated sparkling eyes, and Seva immediately forgot what he was talking about. He was seeing Zhenya's eyes in a different light—not brown, not at all. Framed by thin, light eyelashes, they were light amber, almost like honey. It was as if he were woven from the sun and its golden rays; he glowed and his gaze was so warm that the heat could be enough to warm the whole country house.

"Seva ...?" Zhenya, frowning, snapped his fingers right in front of Seva's nose.

Seva blinked stupidly. The obsession disappeared.

Zhenya was looking at him, puzzled, appearing as before, his eyes brown again, his hair no longer gold.

A nasty chill ran down Seva's back, even under the two blankets. "What? I was a little distracted, sorry," Seva muttered guiltily.

"What was I talking about?"

"You were talking about Svetka and Pasha. I think you offered to introduce them to each other at recess after literature ..."

"That's exactly what I offered about five minutes ago," Zhenya chuckled. "What are you thinking about, if it's not a secret?"

"Nothing ... just fell from reality for a while, sorry. Go on," Seva said confusedly and rubbed his eyes embarrassedly, as if they hurt from seeing something overly bright.

"You probably just want to sleep. Oh, it's very late." Zhenya squinted at the wall clock. "We have to get up for the train in a few hours. Let's go to bed then, and tomorrow we'll discuss the rest." He got out from under the blanket, patted Seva on the shoulder, and disappeared through the door, saying, "Good night!"

"Good night," Seva answered belatedly.

Zhenya, most likely, did not hear it.

Seva fell asleep when his head touched the pillow. The fatigue and emotions experienced during the endless day impacted him. Everything was so diverse that they resembled a swing. He dreamt of a blinding bright sun flooding his entire small room on the second floor with a piercing golden light. It blinded him, but Seva still couldn't tear himself away and close his eyes; on the contrary, with some strange pleasure, he continued to stare straight out the window. Only an hour before waking up, when it seemed to Seva that the sun had already burned through his eyelids, its blinding rays disappeared behind the black clouds that suddenly covered the whole sky.

Thunder crashed, and rain poured again. Not mournful and monotonous, as in reality, but frighteningly—a poisonous, acidic, mocking downpour.

Seva woke up in a cold sweat.

## Chapter 6

### *A New Portrait*

U pon returning home, Seva noticed with chagrin that Zhenya's adventurism and recklessness had disappeared, giving way to the usual prudence and responsibility. He wondered if it was the fresh air that had affected Zhenya.

In the end, he decided not to lie to Pasha and honestly told him that he wanted to introduce him to “that ninth-grader with a chemistry textbook in her hands”.

He hesitated for a brief while, but Zhenya turned out to be a born diplomat. Seva hastened to tell delight Svetka, and she was so happy that she promised to help him with all tests in the future and allow him to copy homework until the end of school. At first, Seva doubted the seriousness of her words, but from that day on, he and Svetka began to converse, unexpectedly perhaps for both, and certainly for the whole class. They nodded affably to each other when they met, at recess on Tuesdays and on Thursdays they ran to the canteen together (for some reason, other classmates didn't care for their favorite buns quite a much), and when Alena, with whom Svetka always sat, fell ill, she moved to Seva—although she was ready to kill for her rightful place in the second middle-row desk. When the day of the blind date came, Seva was no longer afraid that they would have nothing to talk about.

Sveta turned out to be a surprisingly simple and friendly girl, understood his stupid jokes, and was able to keep up with any conversation.

On the way to Zhenya's house, both were worried. That evening, Seva saw

Svetka with make-up for the first time. She'd sprayed her stupid haircut with a huge amount of hairspray, smeared her lips with bright cherry gloss, put on a flirty pink turtleneck, and hung chain around her neck. Without having time to say hello, Seva quickly paid her a compliment, surprising himself with his sincerity.

Svetka blushed in embarrassment and fluttered her short eyelashes, thick with mascara, and Seva realized that she had a good chance of winning over her "date"

When they arrived, Pasha was already at Zhenya's. He came out to meet her with a wide smile that even Seva found warm and genuine, politely introduced himself to Sveta, and gallantly helped her take off her coat. Seva realized that he had every chance of succeeding.

Having settled on Zhenya's bed, he curiously began to observe the development of events. As the girl, Svetka was given the only chair. Zhenya plopped on the bed next to Seva, and Pasha sat down on the floor.

At first, the conversation was tense. Seva listened in silence while Zhenya tried to defuse the tension and told Pasha something about mutual acquaintances, and Sveta wrinkled her nose in embarrassment; when she held Pasha's gaze for more than a couple of seconds, she, now and then she averted her eyes in fear.

A little later, after getting more comfortable and hearing familiar names they tossed about, she slowly joined the conversation. Seva, however, was still silent.

As words flowed, the atmosphere turned from awkward to relaxed and friendly. Pasha, as Zhenya had said, turned out to be quite a wit, and quickly endeared himself to both Svetka and Seva. The first burst out laughing at his jokes, and the latter, with the dignity of a true connoisseur of comedy, approved of several funny jokes about Andrianovna, with restrained laughter. Pasha's sense of humor turned out to be surprisingly similar to Seva's.

Seva became interested in making everything work out for these two. They'd have opportunities to gather in future, and he'd be able to fully appreciate the jokes that were "too much" for Sveta and Zhenya.

Pasha won him over not only with jokes. Getting up from the floor to stretch his cramped legs, he saw a collection of Mayakovsky's poems on Zhenya's table

and immediately perked up. “Oh, are you reading these for pleasure, or are you just doing homework?”

“It’s Seva doing my homework for me,” Zhenya admitted.

“Really?” Pasha looked incredulously from Zhenya to Seva.

“I’m serious. Why do you think Darya Mikhailovna suddenly began to praise my compositions so much?” Smiling, Zhenya winked at Seva.

“Aren’t you ashamed?” Pasha frowned jokingly. “It’s one thing to write some essays, but Mayakovsky is quite a poet! It’s a sin to miss the brilliance of the poems and I urge you do any related essays yourself ... or at least read the collection.”

“I’ve read it,” Zhenya grimaced. “I wasn’t impressed, sorry. I know how much you love him, but it’s not for me—”

“I don’t like Mayakovsky either,” Svetka interjected. “It’s not even poetry, just a group of words without any special rhymes ...”

Seva was close to indignant and was about to reply, but Pasha beat him to it.

“Just because you don’t understand them doesn’t mean they’re not poems. Not all of them should be of traditional rhymes and patterns; there should be some variety. Maybe it seems weird, but that’s what catches my attention. For me, his poetry is bold, interesting, and not banal.”

After hearing that, Seva experienced spontaneous admiration. In a few short sentences, Pasha had captured all Seva’s thoughts about Svetka’s statement—carefully and tactfully! Seva himself would have surely blurted something offensive had he opened his mouth.

But Sveta was in no hurry to agree. No less delicately, she objected. “Not everything that stands out from the gray mass of genius is more brilliant.”

As Seva predicted, she managed to bring her beloved Yesenin into the conversation. Pasha offered barely noticeable grimace in response to this, and Seva realized that he was about to witness a most interesting dispute.

Stubborn Svetka was set against someone whose opinion Seva agreed with one hundred percent and who knew how to argue his position. This promised to be quite engaging.

Bummer, though. Having assessed the situation, Zhenya leaned over to Seva

and whispered in his ear, “We have to go.”

Seva felt immobilized as he regarded Zhenya who, with a purposeful gaze, nodded towards the kitchen. He drifted into a daze. Goosebumps prickled his neck and all along his spine; his hands and feet instantly froze. It seemed to Seva that he’d been pushed into an ice-filled hole.

Seva’s daze dissipated when Zhenya climbed off the bed and headed for the door. He stared at him with bewilderment and then followed Zhenya’s meaningful look at Sveta and Pasha; finally, he understood the message and flew out of the room like a bullet after Zhenya.

In the kitchen, Zhenya shook his head and eyed him mockingly.

“Do you even sleep at night?”

“What?” Seva blinked uncomprehendingly, shook his head, coming to his senses, and hesitantly drawled, “I do, probably ...”

“I see,” Zhenya chuckled, sat down on a leather sofa by the table and pushed a bowl of cookies towards Seva. “Try to go to bed earlier. You haven’t been yourself lately. It’s like you’re not here all the time, you don’t hear anything, and you don’t respond to questions.”

“I’ll try.” Seva sat down on a chair opposite Zhenya and automatically took two of the offered cookies, took a bite, chewed, and eventually protested, “Don’t lie, I listened about your Decembrists for an hour and a half yesterday and wasn’t distracted for a second.”

“Mine?” Zhenya raised his eyebrows skeptically but did not argue, “Okay, not all the time. But quite often, so try to sleep more anyway.”

Seva nodded, although he understood perfectly well that it was not a lack of sleep at all. Returning home from the garage or Zhenya’s, he didn’t always know what to do, and immediately went to bed, but got up half an hour before the start of lessons. He had a full nine or even ten hours of sleep. How could he not get enough sleep? Seva generally felt quite cheerful, so it wasn’t lack of sleep at all. But *what?*

“What do you think those two are talking about now?” Zhenya’s voice interrupted his thoughts.

“I’ll bet Kaluta is proving her case.” Seva rolled his eyes wearily. “I also like



Yesenin but she's, like, crazy about him. When we studied Darya Mikhailovna's poetry, she got an 'A', even though Svetka was ill at the time. She knew that Svetka knew all his poems by heart. It seems to me that we left in vain; what if they end up quarreling?"

Zhenya shook his head. "I know Pasha. He won't swear over such nonsense."

"I know Svetka, and she will!"

"If they quarrel, they'll make up. We're not going to babysit them all evening. And if they don't make up, then they shouldn't be together."

"That's fair," Seva agreed after thinking about it. "I liked Pasha, by the way. I think he's exactly what Svetka needs. Maybe something good will come out of it. And his jokes about Andrianovna are awesome! To hear more of them, I'm ready to do anything to get these two to start dating."

"I knew you'd become friends," Zhenya smiled and, after being silent for a wee while, suggested, "Maybe now we can bring you and Alina together?"

"Why?" Seva instantly frowned.

"Why what? You like Alina. Why don't you want to just talk to her?"

Remembering a long-ago conversation in the garage, Seva barely contained a heavy sigh. He glanced cautiously towards the corridor, worrying that Svetka might also hear that he liked Alina. If that happened, she'd tell her friends about it. Did he need such drama? Moreover, it wasn't even true, so it would prove doubly unfair.

"I just don't want to and that's it."

"Are you afraid?"

"I'm not," Seva snorted disdainfully and immediately realized he'd not believe himself either.

Why did he say such a stupid thing? Even if he admitted to Zhenya that he'd lied, it would still sound like a ridiculous excuse for his indecision.

"Then what's the problem?"

"Simply ... that I don't want to talk with Denikina," Seva stated with utmost sincerity. "I'm okay with how things are. She's beautiful and I can look at her from afar. She's smart and I can listen to her without approaching her. She's ...

hell, I don't know what she is, but whatever, I can observe from the sidelines."

"But this is completely different." Zhenya wasn't going to give up so easily. "It's one thing to observe from the outside, and quite another to communicate with a person. For example, Sonya alone with me and Sonya in the company of our classmates are two completely different people. Would I realize this if I just looked at her from the sidelines?"

Seva completely agreed with Zhenya. The same person alone and in the company of others could be completely different. But at the same time, he didn't understand how Zhenya could talk about it in that way if he still saw Sonya only at school. It seemed that he'd only postponed a meeting with Seva once to go to her place, when she'd asked him to explain a new topic in math. He implied that, in the few months that Zhenya spent with Seva, and only communicated with Sonya at school, she could have become a completely different person, and he'd not have been any wiser.

Obsessive doubts overcame Seva, but he didn't dare express them aloud. Given his zero experience in relationships, it wasn't for him to give advice and teach Zhenya, especially since he hadn't asked. If he wanted to talk about how great it would be to bring them together with Alina, then Seva would listen.

Once, Zhenya had been so enthusiastic about why he and Alina should at the very least take a walk that Seva listened attentively, not wishing to interrupt, and constantly nodding in agreement.

Zhenya was sitting in front of the lampshade floor lamp, and Seva involuntarily noticed how pleasingly the light fell on him. Emphasizing facial features, it reflected in Zhenya's brown eyes, and they shone even brighter than usual. Seva himself didn't notice how he absently ran his finger along the white tablecloth, drawing first the oval face, then the contour of the lips, the low-set eyebrows ...

Coming to his senses, Seva was desperately embarrassed and immediately hid his hands under the table, although Zhenya hadn't noticed anything. A minute later, the embarrassment was replaced by a glimmer of realization: he wanted to draw Zhenya. Right here, right from this angle, and with this lighting. Seva was already picturing how he would draw his eyes, the snub nose, bring out

the mole on his left cheek, how he would mess around with Zhenya's unruly hair. He even thought that if he used watercolor and not a simple pencil, he would be able to convey the momentary obsession that he'd embraced by chance at the summer house ... those golden curls, honey-amber eyes and warm, radiant smile.

He thought about it and immediately dismissed the thought. He'd not held a brush for a year and a half. More than likely, he'd not even remember how to calculate proportions and shade the drawing, which meant that there'd be no portrait. How could so much time have passed? Seva hadn't wanted to draw in a long time; why did he now? It was silly, a fleeing thought. It would disappear.

"So, have I convinced you?" Zhenya's sonorous voice cut through the nebulous reality.

Seva shuddered. Zhenya looked at him with a full smile and a sly look, and Seva was confused; he couldn't even respond. A minute ago, he was listening attentively to Zhenya, nodding after each sentence, laughing to himself at his excessive enthusiasm. How had all that faded into the background?

Well, no matter what the blond guy said, he'd be unable to convince Seva to take a walk with Alina. Seva looked Zhenya straight in the eye and answered clearly, with a certain challenge. "Nah, you haven't."

The disappointment on Zhenya's face was so expressive and stirring that Seva was certain this is what he'd have captured in his portrait. *But there won't be any more portraits. That's it, period. I've been done with drawing for a long time, and I'm not going to return ...*

"Promise that at least you'll dance with her at the New Year's disco." Zhenya's calm tone changed to a pleading one.

"Okay, I'll do it, but let's move away from the topic." Glad that Zhenya had run out of arguments, Seva agreed without hesitation.

There was still more than a month left before the New Year's disco, and Seva blithely hoped that Zhenya wouldn't remember his promise.

Zhenya beamed. "Agreed!" He glanced at his watch. "Maybe we should go back? Because we've been sitting here for more than half an hour; they probably think we drowned ourselves in the sink."

“It seems to me that they’ve figured out our brilliant plan and don’t mind at all,” Seva chuckled, but didn’t argue.

Returning to the room, they found that Svetka and Pasha not only avoided a quarrel but moved together to the vacated bed and were now peacefully looking into each other’s eyes and discussing some actor whom Seva knew nothing about. Judging by how surprised Svetka’s face appeared when she saw Seva and Zhenya, the two had already forgotten that they weren’t alone in the apartment.

Coughing with embarrassment, Pasha automatically moved away from Svetka and asked with a grin, “Did you drown yourself in the sink back there?”

Zhenya chuckled and Seva, confused, blurted without a shadow of a smile, “Rather in a teapot. We were making tea.”

“And where is it?” Looking at their empty hands, Sveta raised an eyebrow.

Zhenya, more quick-witted than Seva, shrugged. “We drank it. You were having such a nice conversation that we didn’t want to interrupt you. If you want, we can make some more.”

“No, we probably should go; we’ve been sitting up too long.” Pasha was the first to get off the bed, gallantly stretching his hand to Svetka, who blushed.

“I’ll be going home now too,” Seva muttered before biting his tongue as a sharp pain suddenly pierced his arm. Zhenya had ruthlessly pinched him.

“You’ll help me first, and then you’ll go. Don’t wait for him, guys. I don’t know how long it will take,” Zhenya looked expressively at Seva, and he understood.

“Whatever you say.” Pasha didn’t argue.

In the hallway, he kindly handed Svetka a coat, and she, glowing like a lit-up Christmas tree, shot Seva a grateful look. He smiled slightly and gave a quick nod. Who’d have thought that Zhenya’s only friend would get along so well with the not-always-nice Svetka? Fate, no doubt. When, after almost a ten-minute farewell, Seva and Zhenya were finally left alone, the blond guy gazed at him mischievously.

“I’ll bet you whatever you want; they’re made for each other!” He ran to the window to make sure that the two were heading in the same direction.

They were. Pasha, like a true gentleman, was escorting Svetka. Zhenya

nodded with satisfaction, and Seva calmly stated, “So we’re great guys and near geniuses.”

Zhenya had no choice but to agree. After waiting twenty minutes and proudly discussing in detail their outstanding matchmaking abilities, Seva also left the Smirnovs’ apartment.

On the way home, he thought a lot about the evening, about his strange behavior, but most of all about the sudden and almost irresistible desire to draw Zhenya. Seva knew that he wouldn’t do it, that it was a terrible idea, and that he’d regret it. He swore that he wouldn’t even touch pencils or brushes, but his legs, as if against his will, led him to the garage gate instead of the five-story building where he lived.

Putting paints in his pockets and hiding brushes under his jacket, Seva promised himself that on the way to the house he’d throw them out, finally parting with his far-from-rosy past.

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Of course, Seva didn’t do it. How could he? Having laid out the brushes and paints on the desk at home, Seva realized that his hand couldn’t, wouldn’t, throw away such wealth.

At the very least, it would prove pure selfishness (he could have brought all this to Maria Viktorovna), but a large number of his memories were stored in these barely useable brushes and half-empty jars than in his head. As soon as he touched the wooden handle of the oldest brush, a picture immediately flashed before his eyes; he was seven years old, sitting on the floor of his grandmother’s room and diligently drawing cat whiskers, trying to make the lines as thin as possible.

That day, Maria Viktorovna had asked them to draw a pet, theirs or that of a friend’s, a neighbor’s ... whomever. There had never been any hamsters, parrots, or kitties in the Temkins’ apartment, and when Seva asked a very serious question whether he could draw his younger brother, Mom just laughed and scolded him, asking him not to repeat the words to Sema.

Then Seva began to draw the cat out of his head, coming up with details in the process. There were stripes on its thick sides and a white spot under its nose, a fluffy tail, and sly green eyes. Mom sat next to him and gave her son, who was carried away by the creative process, paints, cheerfully commenting on everything that loomed on the white sheet. Admiring the result, she called the red-haired fat cat Chamomile and asked Seva to wash the floor because she knew that his father wouldn't be thrilled if he returned home and saw the stain-filled room and his son smeared with paint. They couldn't explain to him that this was simply a creative mess; he wouldn't understand.

For drawing Chamomile, Seva received his first 'A' and praise from Maria Viktorovna, which he remembered, it seemed, for all his life. Passing by Seva's desk, the teacher raised her eyebrows in surprise and said in a loud whisper, so that the whole class heard her, "This is the most animated cat that I have seen! With character ... and such a crafty one. It's immediately clear that you drew him from your own pet."

Later, when he got older, Seva looked at his childhood drawing and wondered where Maria Viktorovna saw "animation" and "character", but at that moment, he felt as if his painting had been exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery.

How could Seva throw away these brushes? Reluctantly, he put them away on the farthest shelf so that neither his father nor Sema could get to them and promised himself to bring them to school someday. After that, he went to bed with a serene soul. Although the day had been busy and difficult, it had been productive.

Sveta's acquaintance with Pasha was quite successful and he'd do a good deed: give things he didn't need to those who would find use for them.

However, despite sensing satisfaction, Seva didn't manage to fall asleep. He was spinning on his unfolded couch. Then he covered his head with a pillow, completely hid under the blanket, then threw it on the floor.

Sleep wouldn't come, and Seva's gaze often drifted to that very far shelf. Seva was angry, closed his eyes and tried to count sheep, but in five minutes, the shifting and gazing happened again. It was about two o'clock in the morning when the exhausted Seva cursed under his breath, abruptly got up from the

couch, and grabbed everything from the shelf that came to hand: brushes, paints, and pencils. He placed it all on the table, rejoicing in the fact that Sema always slept like a dead man, tore a double sheet from his history notebook, and sat down to draw.

Seva drew much like he did when he was much younger—enthusiastically, selflessly. He completely forgot about proportions and anatomy, which Maria Viktorovna painstakingly taught him for so long. It was as if he were afraid that if he fiddled with the drawing for too long, he'd forget how Zhenya looked.

He randomly jumped from lips to eyes, then to nose, and then abruptly moved to hair without completing the newly started line. The page turned out crumpled and dirty.

Seva was confused with shadows and several times redrew eyebrows that refused to look remotely similar, but he didn't care. Seva completely lost track of time, and at some point raised his eyes, which hurt from tension, to the window. He was surprised to find that dawn had arrived.

The drawing wasn't ready yet, and this "Seva impulse" could hardly be called a full-fledged drawing; it was just an ordinary sketch, nothing more. But Seva was satisfied. Having carefully gone over the lips of the drawn Zhenya for the last time with a simple pencil, he studied his clumsy black-and-white sketch and nodded with satisfaction. Seva saw all the shortcomings of the portrait.

Maria Viktorovna would have scolded him for such modest work, he had no doubt. But the beauty of his sketch was not in its "Ideality" and academic accuracy, not at all. It was good because of his careless and sincere approach. Looking the slightly crooked and inspired painting, he saw the eyes he'd viewed earlier in the kitchen. It was as if he'd fulfilled what he'd promised to do for a long time or satisfied a nasty, persistent itch. Feeling lighthearted and calm, Seva put the sketch on the table, hid the pencils and brushes back on the shelf, and went to bed for the remaining two hours. This time he fell into a sound and peaceful sleep, barely covering himself with a blanket.

The next day, Seva was met at the school gates by an excited Svetka. While he was standing on the porch melancholically, tying his shoelaces, Svetka told him about her impression of the previous evening.

There were so many of them, that when the first lesson began, Svetka sat with him at the same desk, honoring her best friend Alena with only a fleeting nod. She, of course, was taken aback by such impudence and for forty-five minutes Seva felt the gazes of the bewildered trio on him. Svetka wasn't concerned.

Happy, she sounded like a nightingale as she singsonged how wonderful Pasha was—intelligent, well-read and incredible. It seemed to Seva that at one point she was trying to bring him together with Zakryatin. But Seva didn't mind, not at all. He was glad about how well everything had turned out. Svetka was happy. And perhaps Seva himself would find some new company.

With surprise, Seva realized that he no longer thought of himself as some unessential member of the foursome.

Having finished her excited account, Svetka flew back to her rightful place next to Solodskaya. Given he heard no enthusiastic chatter or excited screams, it was obvious that Svetka had decided not to tell her friends about Pasha.

Later, Zhenya provided his take on the situation. Pasha, although he'd tried to appear restrained and unperturbed, also beamed the next day, as if a lightbulb had been screwed into him. Sometime later, he even managed to invite Sveta on a second "date".

Seva, when he heard about it, was firmly convinced that the two were together through fate. After all, who in their right mind, after arguing about poetry with Svetka, would ever want to see her again?

Since the day Seva had picked up the paints for the first time in eighteen months, something jumped into his head; a new, even more obsessive idea took root. He began to draw Zhenya every day.

Seva himself didn't understand how it happened; one day, after returning home from the Smirnovs, he simply grabbed the sketch from the table, looked at it critically again, and decided that he should do a normal, full-sized portrait. But it seemed to Seva that his hand didn't want to lead the pencil to where it was being directed, as if mocking him. Things were going badly, so much so that Seva struggled for several hours every night over a new drawing, swearing under his breath, and barely restraining himself from breaking the pencil, and in the



morning he still broke down and angrily crumpled another failed portrait. He then lay down to sleep for a couple of hours.

Seva, with his eyes closed, could describe the blond guy's face in great detail, recount every pore, scar, mole. He remembered each randomly, as well as those strands of curly hair that stuck out everywhere. But Seva no longer had to look for an excuse as to why he was so brazen, like the first time, looking at Zhenya. It was necessary to study his "model" from all angles so that the drawing came out as realistically as possible ... right?

Seva thought that he would soon get bored and would abandon the senseless undertaking. Maria Viktorovna had always said that his landscapes came out much better than his portraits. A couple of times, Seva tried to distract himself and—since inspiration had returned—drew a familiar view from the window. Still, his attempts were in vain. As soon as he raised his pencil over the white sheet, Seva realized with irritation that he didn't want to draw something else. Why couldn't he give up on his idea? It was as useless as it was obsessive ... yet he couldn't help himself.

Seva drew solely at night, having made sure that his brother was sleeping solidly. When he angrily crumpled another sheet of paper and hid pencils and brushes on the farthest shelf, there were no more than three hours left before the alarm would go off. Of course, Seva didn't get enough sleep, which added absent-mindedness and inattention to his eternal fatigue.

Zhenya was perplexed. Svetka scolded him sillily when he fell asleep in class. Seva himself understood that he was doing something wrong, but he had free time and the desire to draw only at night. For some reason, he couldn't give up his desire to bring Zhenya's portrait to life, maniacal as perhaps it was.

Two weeks passed. The bags under Seva's eyes looked so unhealthy that Zhenya and Sveta began to seriously worry about him and inquired about his well-being every day. Seva invariably replied that he felt great, but then fell asleep during the first lesson, barely having time to open the notebook.

But his suffering wasn't in vain. One night, Seva believed he'd completely disappointed himself as an artist and, realizing that he'd soon go crazy, was surprised to find that he was painting for the fourth hour in a row—and during

that time had never wanted to tear up the album sheet in another fit of anger and despair, and go to bed. Everything was going so well that Seva considered it might be some trick. But no, after a thorough study of the still black-and-white sketch, he didn't find anything that would make him send the portrait to the trash like its predecessors.

Delighted and a little excited, Seva took out watercolors for the first time and began to paint the sketch carefully, almost without breathing. The hand trembled slightly and the eyes hurt from constant straining, but a burst of inspiration and a second wind drove Seva forward. It wasn't in vain. The colors melded almost perfectly, nothing blurred or smudged, and the entire process went so smoothly that Maria Viktorovna would have given him an 'A' with two pluses. She'd always said that Seva, like his transitions, was just as abrupt and sudden, and always made him work on them during recess. Now, a few years later, for the first time, he was grateful to her for that.

When Seva dipped the brush into a glass of water for the last time to wash off the paint and put everything back in place, the clock showed twenty minutes to seven in the morning. Soon, he had to get up for school. His eyes felt weary, as if they could barely stay open, his head was splitting, and his swollen eyelids seemed to be filled with lead, but Seva was in an excellent mood ... because on the table was a portrait on which Seva spent more than two weeks.

Seva hadn't wasted a minute of his time. The Zhenya he'd painted looked exactly as Seva imagined him, as he saw him at the summer house, and as he looked at him in the Smirnovs' kitchen. His hair wasn't just white, it glimmered with gold, and his brown eyes shone and looked so warm that Seva could feel the intensity just by looking at the drawing. Zhenya was exactly the way Seva would like to always see him: cheerful, carefree, smiling with all thirty-two teeth, not concerned about studying for the next chemistry test. But, to Seva's great regret, he'd only see Zhenya like this in the portrait, which he decided to consider the peak of his career as an artist.

Seva didn't go to bed. His head was still splitting and his eyelids were still sticking together, but he felt great. Cheerful and energetic, he flew into the history classroom and from the threshold told Grigory Olegovich that he wanted

to respond to the homework, the thrice-cursed (by Seva) Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. He'd remember this one for the rest of his life! Zhenya had retold it four times, but Seva, who was carried away by calculating the distance from the mole on his cheek to the tip of his chin, couldn't remember anything except the date of the event. Then, for the first time, the concept of incorrectly prioritizing matters crept into his head, but Seva ignored it.

The portrait had come out so good that, after returning home from school, Seva looked at it and wanted to show Maria Viktorovna. She would be delighted! But he realized that the art teacher knew him very well, and it was unlikely that she'd understand why Seva spent so many nights in a row with such persistence, drawing a blond A-one student from the tenth 'A' class.

Truth be told, he didn't really know what he'd say to Maria Viktorovna. And to say that he drew it for the first time wasn't going to work. She'd never believe it! Seva suffered for several days. The desire to show the portrait to someone, anyone, was unbearable, but at the same time, it was scary. Maybe they'd simply be laughed at.

There was no question of showing this small masterpiece, in Seva's humble opinion, to Zhenya. Seva remembered that Zhenya had been trying to get him back to drawing for a long time, and he knew that he'd be happy to know that he had succeeded, but Seva didn't want him to find out exactly how.

After several days of hard thinking and mental anguish, the portrait went into the drawer, followed by the old gouache.

## Chapter 7

### *Physics Against Sense*

Over the past couple of months, Seva had learnt Zhenya's schedule by heart. Neither of them asked each other what time and where they were meeting; both knew the details perfectly well. Some days, Seva came to Zhenya's after his tutor; other days, they met at the school and went to Seva's place. And sometimes, when Zhenya's parents weren't home, before the last lesson, he simply gave Seva the keys to his apartment. They'd only been hanging out for a couple of months, but it already seemed like a lifetime. Seva didn't even notice how he'd mentally dubbed Zhenya his best friend, which was strange, because he usually didn't say such words aloud, preferring even to call Dima and Rostik, who were once close to him, his "Comrades in misfortune".

Seva even came to terms with Zhenya's turn to study. They spent all their free time together at the end of lessons and until late in the evening, and Seva had to consciously wait until Zhenya sorted out all his "nerdy affairs". This was what Rostik condescendingly called everything that was connected with the school, and Seva had always indifferently agreed with him. After all, would a normal person waste time on lessons?

He would. Seva never shared Rostik's position. But he didn't do his homework either. He didn't want to, and then, there'd been no time to do it. Now, with Zhenya, there was plenty of time. While he was solving some of his mathematical problems, Seva was copying his old notes out of boredom. Thanks to the notes and the assignments completed by Zhenya in return for literature, Seva's grades improved significantly. But he wasn't happy with the grades.

Without noticing it, Seva had started to do more than aimlessly wander through the streets again. Although though this seemed like an insignificant trifle (just a drawing and a couple of essays), for some reason Seva considered it an achievement. He was grateful to Zhenya. If it hadn't been for him, Seva would likely not have pulled himself together.

As such, it wasn't difficult for Seva to write an essay for him or wait an hour until he finished his homework. Even at the height of the semester tests, when Zhenya paid special attention to his studies, he didn't complain. He went about his business in silence, waiting for Zhenya to close the textbook so they could finally talk. It usually didn't take too long. Zhenya, who studied for the whole semester, repeated everything he knew effortlessly, and that was when he considered his training over.

And every time Seva was surprised by his excellent grades, he waved a hand dismissively. "I was lucky with the variant. We were just studying this the day before."

But before the biology test, he suddenly remembered Sonya. She came to help him with the preparation. That day, as always, Seva was sitting at the Smirnovs' and witnessed the most boring meeting of a dating couple. After three hours of never-ending biological terms and assignments, he almost went crazy, waiting for Sonya to finally leave.

All that time, the two had never touched each other. Both were immersed in their studies, it seemed, completely forgetting that they weren't just classmates who met by chance outside of school. They even sat apart. Seva once again thought that he didn't need a relationship. Anyway, if they looked like this, Zhenya had even more chemistry with the history textbook than with Sonya. But since both were satisfied with things as they were, then it was okay.

Sonya explained what she could and went home at exactly seven in the evening. Seva exhaled with relief. Finally, they were alone together! The deck of cards in those three hours almost burned a hole in his pocket.

He thought the worst was over—truly, could there be anything worse than Andrianovna's biology test? But later Seva realized that he'd been mistaken. One day, their habit of not specifying the time and place of the meeting went

south.

That day, as usual, a few hours after school, he went to Zhenya's house ... Thursdays at four, he was already returning home. Seva knew perfectly well that he would pass several bus stops, enter a quiet snow-covered courtyard, walk through the crisp snowdrifts to the third entrance, take the elevator up to the seventh floor, open the massive iron door without knocking, say hello to Maria Arsentievna, take off his shoes, and then go to the room of the blond guy. These actions were so automated and hammered into the sub cortex of the brain that when Seva said "hello, Maria Arsentievna", and a curly head poked out of the room on the left, Seva was confused. Zhenya had never gone out to meet him before. Frozen in place with a shoe in his hands, Seva blurted out in surprise, "Why did you come out here?"

Zhenya scratched his head in embarrassment.

"Damn, I completely forgot to tell you not to come today. I'm kind of trying to prepare for a physics test."

"Since when is this a reason not to come?" Seva was surprised.

"Physics is not English, which is not necessary to prepare for, and I don't have a tutor for it, as in mathematics, so I have to do it myself."

"And what should I do? Go home?" Seva made a show of grimacing. He didn't want to drag himself back through the December frost.

"I'll be busy all evening. If you don't mind, you can stay."

Seva thought about it a bit. He wouldn't be happy watching Zhenya do physics all evening. But, on the other hand, he had no interesting things to do at home either. He shrugged irritably. What? Had he come all the way here for nothing?

So be it, he would sit, warm up, and be silent for a couple of hours. "I don't mind. I'll take care of your essay for next week," Seva sighed, placing his shoes in an even row of shoes of the Smirnov family.

Zhenya didn't object. They went into the room and the first thing that caught Seva's eye was an unusually large pile of paper on Zhenya's desk. Usually clean and ordered, it was littered with all kinds of papers, written on and crumpled, as if someone had chewed them, and simply torn them out of a notebook. From the

outside, it looked like an artist's workplace that had undergone a prolonged creative crisis. Seva shivered, feeling a sense of fear.

"What happened here?" he asked Zhenya, nodding at the table.

"Nothing. I was telling you, I'm getting ready for the physics test."

"How long have you been sitting on it?" Seva was surprised.

"About four hours. Now, don't distract me, please," Zhenya requested, sitting at the table and digging into his papers.

Seva shook his head in bewilderment. Zhenya's thirst for studying would always surprise him. He'd have gone crazy if he'd spent four hours studying. But Zhenya seemed to be okay. He was sitting, writing out something with concentration, muttering to himself. And then he would probably say that he was lucky with the variant, that everyone passed the test "perfectly".

Seva took a piece of paper from Zhenya, a book to serve as a hard surface, and sat on the bed. He didn't want to write an essay. He wanted to talk, to relate how Dima stumbled on the stairs today and almost fell on Alina, to play cards again for a wish. He wanted Zhenya to stop his doodles. Seva eyed him over an empty piece of paper. He seemed angry, indignantly muttered something, frowned, flipped through the textbook, rolled his eyes, and sighed heavily. Seva could sympathize. He wanted to help, but what could he do?

There was nothing to do, so Seva continued to stare at his empty piece of paper, then at Zhenya. It must have been about an hour and out of boredom, he began to draw intricate patterns. He didn't even draw, just aimlessly steered a pencil on paper.

Zhenya was still immersed in his papers and, it seemed, was angry about something. He habitually bit his lips, nervously tapped a pencil on the table, frowned and bit his lips again. During the preceding months, Seva had learned the sequence of the actions by heart. Earlier, he might have looked at them with little thought, but now he found a new entertainment and began to guess what they'd be in advance. "So, now he's scratching his ear ... and now, he's frowning. He'll tap his fingers on the table."

In most cases, he turned out to be right. "He bit his lip, so he should soon wince. Right! And he'll frown again. Now, he'll grab a pencil—but no, he

sniffed. Something new.” Seva was surprised.

Zhenya sniffed again and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand without looking up from the textbook. Seva absently followed his hand, and traces of crimson drops on Zhenya’s hand caught his eye.

At first, he didn’t understand and then, shifting his gaze back to Zhenya’s nose, mentally slapped his forehead with his palm. Another drop of blood fell right on the desk. Carried away by the task at hand, Zhenya didn’t notice.

“Zhenya—”

“What?” he asked brusquely, obviously dissatisfied at being interrupted.

“Your nose is bleeding. Can’t you see it?”

“What? Oh, shit.” Zhenya swore softly and threw his head back. “Go to my mom, ask her for a rag and some cotton wool, please.”

Seva obediently put down the sketch, got off the bed and headed towards the kitchen. He was surprised by Zhenya’s calm, indifferent tone and his reaction in general. It was as if this happened to Zhenya regularly. But it didn’t because Seva spent all his free time with him, and he had no recollection of it having happened before. Could a nose bleed without a reason? Was it a normal thing?

On the way to the kitchen, Seva regretted for the first time that he had never been interested in biology.

Maria Arsentievna was standing at the stove, softly humming some song unknown to Seva, stirring something in a large saucepan. Judging by the amazing aroma in the kitchen, she would soon to offer them sorrel soup.

Having coughed to garner her attention, Seva then quietly called her. “Maria Arsentievna?”

“Yes, my dear?” Tapping her spoon on the side of the pot, she turned to Seva with a welcoming smile.

“Could you give me a rag and some cotton wool, please?”

“Oh, sure.” She nodded calmly and, standing on her toes, began to rummage in the upper cupboard. “Why? Is Zhenya’s nose bleeding again?”

“Yeah—what do you mean ‘again’?” Seva didn’t understand.

“It happens when he retrain.” Maria Arsentievna took a piece of cotton wool from the shelf and handed it to Seva. Noticing his puzzled look, she gave a



little laugh and patted Seva on the shoulder, “It’s okay, don’t worry. It’s not fatal. It’s going to stop now. The rag is lying by the sink.” Considering the conversation over, the woman returned to the soup.

Confused, Seva thanked her, took the rag, and hurried back to the room. Hundreds of thoughts were spinning in his head, the most distinct was: how could it be okay?” Seva couldn’t believe that Zhenya’s mother couldn’t care less about the fact that her son had bled from his nose from overwork. And, it seemed, not for the first time! *What’s wrong with this whole family?*

“Here.” He handed Zhenya the cotton wool and began to wipe the table.

“Don’t touch it. I’ll wipe it myself,” Zhenya muttered, trying in vain to wipe the traces of blood from his cheeks and chin.

“Go wash your face first,” Seva mumbled.

When Zhenya returned, Seva had already finished cleaning and returned the rag to the kitchen.

“Thank you,” Zhenya thanked him shyly. “I’m sorry that it happened—”

“Forget it, it’s okay,” Seva interrupted him.

He waited until Zhenya sat back down at the table and asked sympathetically, “It’s because of overstudying, right?”

Zhenya winced and shook his head faintly. “Sort of,” he admitted grudgingly. “It happens if I take too long to solve some difficult tasks. I became mad when it doesn’t work out, and because of that, it turns out even worse. And tomorrow is a test, you know ...”

“I don’t,” Seva answered honestly. “Don’t you think it’s kind of ... not normal?”

“I’m fine, so it’s okay.”

Seva barely restrained himself from slapping Zhenya on the back of the head to bring him to his senses. He was so smart, but didn’t understand elementary things! In an attempt to calm down, Seva took a long deep breath and slammed shut the physics textbook. He stared intently into Zhenya’s eyes, surprised by his sharpness, and firmly declared, “You should take a break.”

“I’m almost done,” Zhenya protested, not as confidently as before. “I’m going to finish it quickly and maybe even do your math.”

“I don’t have math homework,” Seva lied without blinking. “Zhenya, tell me, why are you completely indifferent to yourself and your health? You can’t sit at lessons for six hours without a break, even at school. There’s recess! Have you even eaten today?”

“I had a good breakfast.” Zhenya began to look confused. Perhaps Seva had almost managed to convince him. “It’s not that difficult. I don’t unload wagons!”

“I’ve seen how ‘not difficult’ it is,” Seva snorted. “I will ask Maria Arsentievna for soup, which you will eat, and *then* and *only then* will you return to your physics. It won’t take you more than fifteen minutes, okay?”

“Seva, I just want to finish as soon as possible and—”

“If you don’t rest now, I’ll leave and never come here again,” Pursing his lips, Seva didn’t regret resorting to openly childish blackmail.

Of course, he couldn’t never not come again; he’d become too attached to Zhenya these past months, but he had to do something! Even if it was in such a stupid and childish way. The blond guy stared at Seva, trying to figure out whether he was bluffing or not, but not a single muscle twitched on Seva’s face. Finally, giving up under his impenetrable gaze, Zhenya said, “Okay, if it’s so important to you, I’ll take a short break.”

Seva felt everything inside him shake with relief. He had no idea what he’d have done if Zhenya hadn’t fallen for the idiotic trick. But Zhenya fell for it, and Seva’s felt at peace—for different reasons. He wouldn’t have to be a chatterbox. Zhenya would eat and rest at least a little. And ... he didn’t want Seva to leave and never come back. Unable to restrain a broad smile, Seva quickly turned away and left the room so that Zhenya wouldn’t notice his overly pleased expression.

Of course, Maria Arsentievna poured soup for both of them, and Seva barely managed to carry the two full bowls. Stepping onto the threshold, he noticed out of the corner of his eye how Zhenya was frantically closing the book. He smiled haughtily. It was too predictable. But Seva didn’t say anything to Zhenya, just put the sorrel soup in front of him and nodded. “Enjoy your meal, smartass.”

“You too, blackmailer.” Zhenya was not offended.

Seva loved Maria Arsentievna’s cooking with all his heart; it was one of the

main reasons why he was happy to be at the Smirnovs'. He always looked forward to when Zhenya would get hungry and ask his mother to feed them or Maria Arsentievna herself offered them her next culinary masterpiece. Every day, a new dish was served at the Smirnovs' table and Seva wondered sometimes where Maria Arsentievna had the time and energy for daily cooking and maintaining perfect cleanliness in the apartment? Magic. There was no other rational explanation.

Today, even Maria Arsentievna's culinary delight didn't give Seva as much pleasure as understanding that Zhenya could take his mind off his physics for a few minutes and relax a little. He saw Zhenya hurry, literally choking on soup, trying to finish the meal as soon as possible and stop wasting time nonsense, but mentally calmed himself. Even in such a hurry, it was better than starving until the next morning. Seva himself ate deliberately slowly and it took a minute for each spoonful so that Zhenya, looking at him, also slowed down. But it didn't turn out that good, because he didn't really look at Seva, just continued to speedily empty the bowl. Finally, recognizing the futility of his actions, Seva stopped and casually asked, "Can we listen to some music?"

"I have to study," Zhenya replied with displeasure, fishing out more potatoes from the soup.

"We're still eating," Seva shrugged innocently. "We'll just listen to one song and finish it, and then you do whatever you want."

"Mom is at home." Zhenya continued to resist.

"I'm not suggesting that you listen to something foreign," Seva chuckled. "Let's have some Singing Hearts or The Flame. I guess Maria Arsentievna won't tell your father anything about them."

Zhenya frowned; it seemed like a vain attempt to overcome temptation. Finally, having fished out something suspiciously green from the bowl, he generously nodded towards the "secret" shelf with records. "Okay, put something on. But only one song!"

There was no need to repeat that to Seva. He immediately rushed to the closet and seized the first record that came to hand. It turned out to be Singing Hearts, and Seva mentally smiled. That was exactly what he needed. He inserted

the record into the player and cast a sly glance in the direction of Zhenya. Seva knew for sure that it would shake him up a little.

And sure enough, as soon as the first notes were heard, Zhenya's eyebrows seemed to rise by themselves, and the corners of his lips trembled, "Seva, that's pretty provoking, don't you think?"

"You said yourself to put something on!" He grinned evilly.

Instead of answering, Zhenya closed his eyes and repeated the song. "I am every gesture, every look ..."

The satisfied smile didn't leave Seva's face. It wasn't for nothing that he spent all his free time with the blond guy; he knew which buttons to press. He settled himself comfortably in a chair and began to fish potatoes from the bowl, glancing at Zhenya out of the corner of his eye. Even the food didn't entice him as much as usual.

Seva was glad of his resourcefulness. Zhenya, getting carried away, stopped eating soup. And it appeared that he'd forgotten about physics.

Their utopia was interrupted by the loud, unnecessarily sharp sound of the front door opening. Soft footsteps rustled in the corridor. It was Maria Arsentievna going to meet her husband. Casting a cursory glance at Zhenya, Seva saw that he choked on the next line and turned noticeably pale. Seva immediately got scared. What if Zhenya's nose bled again or something worse happened?

He cautiously asked, "Are you okay?"

"Turn it off," Zhenya hissed with clenched teeth.

Seva rushed to the record player while Zhenya opened the physics notebook and shoved some textbooks into his hands. Seva understood without words.

He went back to the bed, sat down in the corner, trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, and opened the book on the first page that came to hand. As it turned out, on time. As soon as Seva froze and stared unseeingly at the abstruse text—the textbook turned out to be tenth-grade chemistry—the door to the room opened and made out a tall broad-shouldered figure from the corner of his eye. Seva was afraid to break away from the book. The figure did not inspire him with any confidence, and therefore he simply shrank even more, if

that was possible.

Zhenya's father looked around the room with a fleeting glance. The tense, unpleasant atmosphere that hung cut through by a stern question, "Evgeny, would you care to explain what you are doing now?"

The steely sound of his voice was an unpleasant sound to Seva's ears. He was startled, even though the question had not been addressed to him. He immediately understood Zhenya's strange reaction to the sound of the front door opening. Perhaps if Seva had been at his place, he would have hidden under the table.

But Zhenya turned out to be strong and only lowered his eyes to the floor. "I'm preparing for tomorrow's test. I decided to eat *for the first time today*. I wanted to stimulate brain activity," he explained, barely noticeable mockery in his voice.

"Oh? And this?" Zhenya's father waved his hand in the direction of the player, "This also stimulates your brain activity?"

Seva felt a burning sense of guilt and blushed so much he was sure he was attracting attention to himself.

"I decided to take a break. Just for one song," Zhenya hastened to justify himself. "You can ask Mom!"

"Mom always defends you." The man shook his head disapprovingly. "The best rest is a change of activity, and your records are just degradation. Tell me, is it so difficult to allocate a whole evening to prepare well? Or do you want to fail the test, as you did in the last semester?"

"It was once," Zhenya said through gritted teeth. "I wrote the rest of the tests and received 'A', nothing worse."

"Of course, you did!" His father was genuinely indignant. "Everything is according to the program; it's very easy. It's a shame to fail it and when the assignments become a little more difficult, you immediately have a problem. To prepare well is not for you, am I right?"

"I do nothing but study all evening!" Zhenya was furious. "Can't I rest for at least ten minutes? Or should I die here, with these textbooks?"

"Look at him, he's retrained." The man grimaced. "You can relax when

you're doing something. But when you're having fun with friends instead of studying, it's called laziness and irresponsibility. Or are you, young man, also preparing for a physics test?"

As soon as Seva opened his mouth, Zhenya interrupted him and blurted out, "He's just helping me. Sonya did help me with biology, right?"

"That's how it is," the man drawled thoughtfully. "A ninth-grader helps a tenth-grader prepare for a test? This is something new."

Seva mentally went over all the curses that he had learned in his short life. The feeling of guilt in front of Zhenya flared in him with renewed vigor, and with a huge effort of will, he forced himself to raise his head and look into the eyes of Zhenya's father. He answered with a polite, questioning look.

He caught a spark of irritation, even anger, flaring up more and more with every second. It was as if the mask of calmness was about to fly off his face, and he'd scream at Zhenya, and throw Seva out the door with one hand.

"He definitely could," Seva thought, cautiously studying the strong, impressive silhouette in the doorway—a tall, broad-shouldered man with a hard face and thick dark eyebrows low on the bridge of his nose. Goosebumps prickled Seva's back when Zhenya's father glanced at him cursorily. The blond guy, who looked like a harmless dandelion, had inherited nothing from his father except piercing brown eyes.

"He just supports me. It's calmer and easier for me to prepare with him." Zhenya was in no hurry to give up, but even Seva admitted that this attempt was pretty pathetic.

Seva realized from the corners of his lips, which twitched for a split second, that Zhenya's father felt the same way.

After a short silence, he stated in a firm tone, "You, young man"—he looked expressively at Seva—"I recommend you go home. It's late. And you"—the brown eyes rested on Zhenya—"I'll talk to you after you see off your friend."

Seva stole a glance at Zhenya, and he nodded dejectedly. Without further ado, Seva got off the bed, straightened his T-shirt, and trudged to the exit. Passing by Zhenya's father, he muttered softly, "Goodbye." Immediately, he quickened his pace, not wanting to hear a return farewell.

Zhenya followed him no less gloomily. Seva put on his shoes in tense silence. Zhenya absently and motionlessly stared at one of them, and he, not knowing what to say, tried to get ready and leave as soon as possible so things wouldn't get worse.

It was when Seva put on his jacket and adjusted his backpack that Zhenya seemed to wake up and, grabbing his hand, whispered fervently in his ear, "Forgive him. He's not always like that and I should have guessed in advance that he would not be thrilled. Don't worry that he kicked you out like that. My father knows about you and doesn't mind you coming. It's just that today wasn't the right day."

Seva unconsciously jerked back, freeing his hand, and rubbed his ear against the collar of his jacket. It flared with a such force that it seemed to him that even in the dark Zhenya could notice how red it turned. After a couple of seconds, Seva realized that not only his ear was on fire; the heat rushed across his face, neck, and, even his shoulders. His breath had been taken away, as if Zhenya hadn't taken Seva by the hand but slammed him in the gut.

Glad that he didn't turn on the light in the hallway, Seva answered hoarsely, "It's okay. I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have insisted that we listen to anything. I hope you don't get in too much trouble because of me."

Zhenya shrugged one shoulder limply. "I shouldn't. Will you come tomorrow?"

"Absolutely," Seva smiled encouragingly, and Zhenya responded uncertainly in the same way.

Once in the cold foyer, Seva felt the heat fade from his face, sobering his mind and allowing him to think sensibly. But his thoughts were randomly rushing from, "I'm feeling so guilty" to "Damn it, what's wrong with his father?!"

Everything fell into place in his head. Zhenya's obsession with studying, his unwillingness to bring him home when his father wasn't at work and a resolute desire to get As at all costs. The questions of why Zhenya never acknowledged his achievements and why he blamed himself for any blunders also disappeared. *Who wouldn't with a father like this?* The realization turned into boundless

sympathy. *Has he lived like this all his life? Are Zhenya's grades all that matters to his father?*

Not that Seva's father was very interested in his life, but at least he never put pressure on him and didn't force him to study. *However, maybe he should.* Remembering his eighth grade, Seva believed maybe he should have. If the attitudes of their fathers to grades could be added up and divided into two, then it would be the golden mean. But, despite his indifferent attitude to studying and to Seva himself in general, Denis Ilyich would never have allowed himself to kick out Seva's friend. It was something simply not done. Wasn't it Zhenya's right to decide how he'd prepare for the test and who would help?

Seva went home on foot, hoping that the crackling December frost would cool the anger boiling in him. It didn't work out very well because along the way, Seva furiously kicked icicles and wondered how Zhenya was feeling. *Does his father scold him? Does he yell at him and threaten to take the records away forever? Will he forbid me to come to their house from now on? Or maybe Zhenya has already listened to his angry tirade and is now reading the conditions of the next assignment .... to the point of pain in his eyes?*

At the thought of the schoolwork, Seva kicked an icicle with heightened anger. *If Zhenya starts bleeding from his nose again, no one will tell him to rest. They'll just give him cotton wool and tell him to go on studying. Damn them all!*

Seva didn't stop thinking about Zhenya, even at night. He turned restlessly in bed, returning again and again to the events of the evening. He wanted to go back and tell Zhenya's father everything he thought about his approach to raising his son. Seva wanted to tell him that if he didn't stop, Zhenya would completely wither over his textbooks, embracing a stack of notebooks filled with useless exercises and assignments. But Seva understood that even if he did this, it would only be worse for Zhenya. So, he tossed from side to side for a long time, exhausted by remorse and tired of every minute thought. *Is Zhenya still studying or has he already gone to bed? Is he in trouble? Is he offended?* The thoughts drilled into his brain.

Sometime in the early morning, Seva was able to fall into restless, anxious sleep.



## Chapter 8

### *Isn't That the Same with You?*

**C**ontrary to usual, the next morning Seva rushed to school fifteen minutes before the bell rang, announcing the start of classes, and immediately ran to the classroom where tenth 'A' had physics. A bunch of chattering tenth-graders were crowded in front of the door. Someone was noisily discussing plans for the weekend. Someone, grinning, was giving slaps for losing in some stupid dispute. The responsible ones were quietly standing in the corner with textbooks and frantically repeating facts. Seva was not particularly surprised to find Zhenya in the company of the nerds, but Pasha was standing next to him with a book in his hands.

Seva raised his eyebrows in bewilderment. Zakryatin, who reminded Seva so much of himself at their first meeting—although he was quite well-read—didn't give the impression of someone paranoid and obsessed with his grades. Was Svetka affecting him like that?

Studying physics next to Zhenya, Pasha was not the only surprise for the sleepy Seva. After regarding several nearby students, he realized that he didn't see Sonya anywhere. Seconds later, however, he found her in the company of the guys discussing the upcoming weekend. She was laughing and looking not at all worried about the upcoming test. It seemed weird to Seva. Zhenya had said she was a superlative student and always worried about her grades.

Having pushed through the crowd of tenth-graders, Seva stopped in front of Zhenya and suddenly realized that he didn't know what to say to him. How to explain what he was doing at school at such an early hour, and in the wrong

wing where they had lessons? Seva just wanted to make sure that Zhenya was okay after yesterday, but how should he ask him about it when his classmates were standing around?

Having come up with nothing, Seva confusedly tapped the hardcover of the textbook. “Hi, are you preparing?” he asked stupidly.

Zhenya lowered the book in surprise. “Hi, sort of. What are you doing here?”

Seva waved his hand limply. “Nothing. Why isn’t Sonya preparing? Doesn’t she need good grades anymore?” After asking that, he pulled his head into his shoulders so Zhenya wouldn’t notice his embarrassment.

“I have no idea,” Zhenya shrugged, automatically glancing in the direction of the five guys and Sonya. “Maybe she’s very well prepared.”

“Ah ... okay,” Seva drawled. “And how ...” He stole a glance at the blond guy, and he understood.

“It’s all right,” Zhenya assured him. “Come over today; nothing has changed.”

“Alright, I’ll come,” Seva nodded. “Okay, get prepared. I won’t distract you. Break a leg,” he said and dove back into the crowd of tenth-graders.

Seva had fulfilled his mission. He’d made sure everything was fine with Zhenya, and they would meet again today. Distracting him from preparing for an important test wasn’t part of the plan; thus, he retreated quickly. Pushing through the crowd of excited students from the tenth ‘A’ class, Seva noticed out of the corner of his eye how Sonya tapped the nose of a tall dark-haired boy and shot an attentive glance in the direction of Zhenya. He immediately turned away. Why would he look at them?

Zhenya wrote the test for a well-deserved ‘A’, and Seva exhaled with relief. It was the first time he was worried about someone else’s grade, and for the first time, the mark seemed to him something more than a simple scribble in a gradebook. The grade was a guarantee that Zhenya’s abnormal father, Prokofy Ivanovich, would be satisfied and not break his son’s already weak nervous system. It was bad to think like that about his friend’s father, and Seva understood that perfectly well, but he couldn’t do anything. There was nothing so bad as keeping your only child in the eternal fear of failing another useless

subject.

After the test, Seva realized that he had to talk to Zhenya about his attitude to grades and studies in general. He knew that it wouldn't be easy, but who else, if not Seva, would be able to do it? More precisely, who would even *want* to do it?

He understood, but he didn't know what to say or how to make Zhenya not just listen, but also get what he was saying. Zhenya has been brought up all his life to earn excellent grades and topnotch certificates. Then he, Seva, such a smartass, came around and said, "Nonsense, start living differently." Zhenya would immediately realize how wrong he'd been all this time.

Seva preferred to look at the situation with his characteristic pessimism (or realism?) and he understood perfectly well that a miracle wouldn't happen. It wouldn't be possible to take away Zhenya's textbooks and forbid him from studying. How would he then be better than his tyrant father? The same threats and prohibitions, also solely out of sincere concern for Zhenya's future, only from the other side? Nonsense.

Seva was tormented by thoughts until he realized that the test term had come to an end, and Zhenya passed all of them with As. After that, Zhenya noticeably relaxed, and Seva cowardly decided to postpone the conversation—at least until the beginning of the next semester, justifying this by saying that now there was no urgent need.

Seva relaxed along with Zhenya and life returned to normal. He again spent almost all his free time with Zhenya and felt even better than at home. The apartment of the Smirnovs on the eve of the holidays became cozier and homier.

One day, sitting at Zhenya's desk with a plate of fried chicken cutlets with a lovely golden crust, listening to one of the records memorized by heart, and looking out the window covered with a thin film of patterned frost, Seva realized that for the first time in a long time his soul was at peace. Sitting opposite Zhenya with a greasy spot from a cutlet on his chin, made this picture even more homey. He swung his leg carelessly to the beat of the song and, catching Seva's attentive gaze on him, smiled charmingly. "How about some tea?"

And Seva felt so good hearing this simple everyday question! Quickly putting a piece of cutlet in his mouth, and unable to smile with all thirty-two

teeth, he mumbled, “Sure.”

Five minutes later, Zhenya returned to the room with two steaming flowered cups and unpleasant news, “Mom asked us to go to the store after we finish our tea.”

Seva grimaced with displeasure. The moment he felt at home, household chores appeared from nowhere! But there was nothing to do. *Going to the store once is the least I could do to thank Maria Arsentievna for her kindness and hospitality.* He took a big sip of very sweet tea with three spoons of sugar, burned himself and, stupidly sticking out his tongue, muttered indistinctly, “For what?”

Zhenya shrugged his shoulders. “She said she will write a list later.”

Maria Arsentievna wrote an impressive list. Having looked at it, Seva immediately took back his earlier rash statement. *Why the list? Surely, we’re not too stupid to remember a couple of products ourselves?* They wouldn’t remember; even Zhenya with his nerd memory was powerless here.

“Are you planning to stay at home until next year?” Seva grumbled, wrapping a prickly scarf around his neck.

“There’s not much time left,” Zhenya chuckled, taking money from the bedside table along with the list. “Dad’s birthday is this week. He probably called half the town to our house as usual, so mom is fussing.”

“So, that’s it,” Seva nodded understandingly, looking at the list again. “Where are you going to get milk at five in the evening? The delivery was in the morning; everything has already been put away. The sausage! You’re crazy. They told me it would only be delivered by Monday!”

“Oh.” Zhenya looked down guiltily. “Did you think we were going to the store around the corner? We’re going to Pushkinskaya. Don’t worry, everything is there for sure.”

“Where?” Seva choked.

“Come on, let’s take a walk. We can’t stay at home all day.” The blond guy smiled broadly and before Seva had time to respond, he left the apartment.

Despite the late hour, two-meter-high snowdrifts, and a prickly wind that knocked them down sometimes, they got to the cherished store on Pushkinskaya

surprisingly quickly. Or rather, they got to the bus stop, and from there a brand new yellow bus, пазик, helpfully drove them almost to the door. It was like any other ordinary store with the sign “Groceries”. Why did Zhenya come here, all the way across town, and at such a time? Was this some kind of magic shop where you could find everything your heart desired at any time of the day? Or at least everything that was on Maria Arsentievna’s list.

Entering the store, Seva looked around curiously and immediately pouted in disappointment. The store didn’t surprise him with any special varieties. The dairy, as he predicted, was no longer on the shelves, let alone the sausages. However, Zhenya didn’t look upset at all. On the contrary, he put on a fake smile that Seva disliked very much, and went straight to the middle-aged saleswoman sitting behind the counter.

“Hello, Aunt Luda,” greeted a most exemplary good boy.

Seva had flashbacks from his first meeting Zhenya in the courtyard, and he was amazed at how differently he now perceived him. So much so that the “exemplary complaisant” tone and ingratiating smile seemed strange and completely out of character with the Zhenya he had grown used to ... like they were two completely different people.

Aunt Luda behind the counter didn’t share Seva’s opinion. Looking up from the latest issue of *Izvestia*, the woman threw up her hands and, glistening like a polished samovar, began to talk with great energy. “Zhenechka, it’s been so long! You’ve become quite an adult! And you’ve lost weight. Do your parents not feed you?” the saleswoman jokingly asked, and Seva thought gloomily that she wasn’t too far from the truth. His parents had a hand in Zhenya’s hollow cheeks and thin-as-matches ankles and wrists. “Well, tell me, how is Masha? Still busy around the house from morning to night? And how are things at school?”

And Zhenya, casually laying Maria Arsentievna’s list on the counter, began to answer Aunt Luda’s questions in detail. Yes, Masha still cleans the house all day long and cooks like she’s preparing to feed a battalion of soldiers, but she feels great, as usual. Things are going well at school. Zhenya modestly boasted that he was an excellent student again this semester. Seva didn’t even know that such a thing was possible until that moment. He was showing off his grades, but

at the same time, he seemed so shy and innocent. Zhenya surprised him more and more.

Aunt Luda continued to ask questions, simultaneously managing to fill the shopping bag with products. Seva silently watched the scene and didn't know what he was more perplexed about: the cute conversation between the blond guy and Aunt Luda, or from the quantity of provisions that she kept retrieving from under the counter. In five minutes, everything was in the string bag—from milk, which was always gone by seven in the evening, so Seva recalled, to a jar of mayonnaise and redfish. Seva had tried the last item only once in childhood when his father stole it during the birthday of his good friend, some big boss.

Where these items all came from in a small shop on the outskirts of town and why he and Zhenya didn't have to stand in a kilometer-long queue remained a mystery for Seva. Even with contacts, it was simply impossible to get so many products at once. But right in front of Seva's nose was a full string bag, so he just had to believe his eyes.

Aunt Luda finished fussing and interrupted Zhenya's inspiring story about his life. "So, honey, everything that Masha asked me for is here. But I'm hearing about some products for the first time—and pardon me because I really can't do anything about it. Bananas! You're funny. There was a delivery three weeks ago, and it was taken in an hour. If you would have asked earlier, maybe we would have saved something for you."

"It's okay, Aunt Luda." Zhenya smiled charmingly. "Mom said that she just decided to try her luck. How much do I owe you?"

The saleswoman named the amount and Seva, choking on air, delicately pretended to cough. Looking at the bag inflated under the pressure of provisions, he'd already mentally estimated its approximate cost, but when the woman voiced it out loud, it seemed even more impressive.

Zhenya, not at all embarrassed, counted out the required number of bills and picked up the string bag from the counter. Under its weight, he gasped and doubled over, but immediately recovered, straightened up, and proudly squared his shoulders.

"Don't forget the potatoes," the saleswoman reminded him sympathetically.

Seva, waving his hand to Zhenya, took the net from the counter himself. He nodded gratefully, warmly said goodbye to Aunt Luda, and left the shop. Its porch had rusty railings that were frost-covered in the December cold. Seva, grunting, stepped after him.

They walked a few meters to the stop in silence. Neither had enough breath to talk, and their tongues, frozen to their palates from the cold, didn't want to shift in their mouths. Seva didn't know how many kilograms of potatoes Aunt Luda generously poured into the net, but after a couple of minutes, realized that his fingers would be cut off by the handle digging into his skin with unbearable pain. Probably, when they'd stiffened a little more, he wouldn't feel anything, because the frostbitten digits would simply fall off, as if under anesthesia. Seva thought about this calmly and indifferently. For a moment, he imagined himself a lizard, regenerating fingers instead of a detached tail.

Seva's senseless thoughts were interrupted by Zhenya's voice, which had become several tones lower after leaving the store. "Seva, do you want to hear a joke?"

"No," he answered with difficulty, tearing his frozen tongue from his palate.

"I'll tell it to you anyway," Zhenya said, turning away from the bus schedule with a dissatisfied face. "Our bus will arrive in an hour."

Seva immediately felt a couple more kilograms of potatoes added to the net, and his numb fingers were cut as if by a real blade. Great. What now? They had to sit at the bus stop and wait until everything else froze and fell off after their fingers?

"We can walk to Pervomaiskaya," Zhenya suggested thoughtfully.

Seva figured that he wouldn't want to walk for half an hour and bent like the letter 'S' under the weight of the potatoes. But at the same time, wasn't too pleasant turning into one of the ice statues that stood on the main square. Resolutely pushing his hat up to his eyebrows, Seva shifted the net to his other hand and puffed, "Let's go."

Five minutes later, he regretted his rash self-confidence. What was happening was a replay of the day when he and Zhenya went to the very edge of the forest with a hunting smoothbore in a backpack, and the rain poured down on

them from the sky to the extent that it was difficult to open their eyes. The only difference now was that the fierce wind, instead of rain, mercilessly blew icy, spiky snowflakes into their faces, and Seva himself wasn't walking light, but with a hundredweight (at least, it seemed to him) of potatoes in his numb hands. He didn't want to seem weak in front of Zhenya, especially since the blond one was walking quite cheerfully a few steps ahead. The only thing that betrayed his discomfort was that Zhenya was silent. Either he didn't have enough breath, or the wind was in the way, or he was just feeling lazy about talking. Unlike other times, the blond didn't say a word, which meant that he wasn't thrilled with their walk either.

But if Zhenya was just not thrilled, then Seva felt it even more. Maybe he'd fall in some snowdrift. It wasn't even about the heavy potatoes, the prickly wind in the face or the infernal cold; it was about everything coming at once. But, in order not to lose face, Seva, gritting his teeth, continued to stubbornly step forward on legs unbending from the cold. Zhenya continued to amble briskly ahead as if it wasn't him in the store who'd almost broke down under the load of his string bag.

Seva had great difficulty understanding where they were. His narrowed eyes could only distinguish Zhenya's gray coat ahead, but even to determine the distance between them was no longer enough. When Seva crashed into something soft and painfully hit the "something" with a potato net under his knees, he wasn't even very surprised. "Something" grumbled with displeasure,

"Ouch, be careful!" Then more serenely it suggested, "Let's sit down and rest a bit. Otherwise, my hands will fall off."

Seva didn't believe that Zhenya was tired. He'd walked so briskly through the fresh, crisp snow, never shifting the string bag to the other hand. Rather, he simply turned around, saw an unfortunate cripple behind him struggling through the merciless north wind and stumbling over his own feet, and out of the kindness of his heart, decided to take pity on him. This hurt Seva's pride and he wanted to proudly protest that he wasn't going to rest. But then he realized that it wouldn't be nice of him and, if on the way his legs gave way from fatigue and he fell into the nearest snowdrift, then that would be a much heavier blow for his



ego. With difficulty, catching his breath, he said generously, “Okay.”

He was the first to sit on one of the nearest benches along a long snow-covered alley. Seva put the hated potatoes next to him with a strangled “ak-kh”. Zhenya was right to advise him to do physical education, a thousand times right!

The blond guy landed on the bench to the right of Seva and put the string bag on his knees, wrapping his arms around it and hugging it to himself as if someone might steal it. Although ... Seva remembered what he was carrying in the string bag, and decided that if he were Zhenya, he’d also not let it out of his hands.

They sat in silence. Seva stretched his legs forward with pleasure—he finally managed to straighten them—and furtively, habitually glanced at Zhenya from time to time. He watched large fluffy flakes fall to the ground and carelessly whistled some uncomplicated melody to himself. Seva couldn’t get enough of the fact that he had become himself again, and not an exhausted and irritated bundle of nerves, which was painful see.

A wooden bench with a wrought-iron back stood behind an old thick oak tree, protecting it from sharp gusts of wind and the weather ceased to seem so ruthless and harsh to Seva. On the contrary, in the yellow light of the lanterns, the falling snowflakes merrily shimmered with the colors of the rainbow, the snowdrifts on the sides resembled huge mountains of soft cotton wool, and the sprawling branches of trees dusted with snow created the feeling of a real winter fairytale. Just like in childhood. Even the melody that Zhenya was whistling resembled some familiar New Year’s song and it made Seva relax. His heart felt at peace and ease. In less than a week, the holidays would begin, then there was the school disco, and then the New Year. How would he celebrate it? Seva didn’t know yet but at the moment, it seemed unimportant.

Zhenya was the first to break the silence, as usual. “Your class had a parent-teacher meeting this week, right?”

Seva winced slightly. The pleasant atmosphere of the New Year’s fairytale instantly faded. “Sort of.”

“Well, and ...?” Zhenya looked at Seva with fervent interest; his eyes shone with excitement.

“And what?” Seva asked, pulling his head into his shoulders as if he suddenly felt cold.

“What did Marina Savelyevna say?”

“She said that I was doing well. And that friendship with you has a good effect on me,” Seva muttered, purposely not looking at Zhenya.

“And that’s it?” Zhenya asked, disappointed. His blond eyebrows formed a sad little house.

Seva felt irritation mixed with a sharp sense of guilt, although he knew for sure that he wasn’t to blame for anything. “That’s it,” he shrugged. “And what was she supposed to do? Talk about me all through the meeting? Like, Temkin is such a good fellow ... he did what all normal people have always done!”

“No, but you’ve improved your academic performance so much ... I think it’s worthy of more mention. It was possible to focus a little more on that, wasn’t it? It’d become an example for failing classmates.”

“I was the most failing classmate,” Seva chuckled.

“But it’s still kind of disappointing,” Zhenya sighed in frustration but, shaking the white curls escaping from under his hat, immediately pulled himself together. “Rosalia Andrianovna said at the beginning of the year that because of you and your grades, the whole class might not go to Odessa, and here we have such amazing progress in three months! I thought it should have been noticed somehow.”

“Screw them all with their Odessa ...” Seva blurted, but immediately caught himself. “I mean, it’s not because of this that I began to study, so I’m not offended.”

“Wait. You don’t even want to go there?” Zhenya was surprised.

“No.” Seva shook his head.

“Why?”

“Let’s not talk about it. I don’t want to, that’s all.”

“Whatever you say.” Zhenya didn’t press. “What did your family tell you at home?”

“Grandma was delighted,” Seva said softly.

The corners of his lips crept up; it was nice recalling how he’d showed her

the school diary for the first time in a long time, and with real pride. Varvara Kapitonovna had no idea about his annual grades for the eighth grade. Seva thought that her weak heart couldn't stand it.

“And your father?” Zhenya frowned. “What did he say about your grades?”

“My father ... he said well done. I did well,” Seva muttered and, after a little thought, added under his breath, almost in a whisper, “And offered me to drink a shot of vodka with him. To good studies and further success. And to you.”

But Zhenya heard anyway. “And what did you do? Drink it?”

Seva hesitated. On the one hand, he was ashamed to tell Zhenya the truth. Seva doubted that he'd ever tried alcohol, even on holidays. On the other hand, he knew he couldn't lie. The blond guy would immediately see through the lie, and Seva's conscience wouldn't allow him to be deceived. He would honestly say to Rostik and Dima that he drank it ... that it wasn't a big deal. He would even brag about his father offering him that. But Zhenya! Zhenya was completely different. Seva didn't know what the difference was, but he was firmly convinced that everything was different with Zhenya. Feeling how, despite the frost, his ears were burning scarlet, Seva answered honestly, “I did.” And immediately hastened to justify himself. “But I couldn't refuse! My father always told me that I wouldn't be a normal man, and if I refused to have a drink with him, he wouldn't respect me at all. Do you understand?” Seva looked hopefully at Zhenya.

He worried in vain. Zhenya didn't condemn him. But he didn't support him either. “Not really. In your opinion, the fact that you drank a shot of vodka proves that you are a ‘normal’ man?”

“What does it have to do with me? I'm talking about my father. He always dreamt of a son with whom he could go fishing, and talk about cars, smoke a cigarette, drink vodka when he gets older.” Seva hastened to explain, “He had a difficult childhood. Even if there was no war, he was still unlucky. He was quite young when he got put in an orphanage, about three years old. You know, life there held no easy days, especially in those years. That's why he started drinking and smoking at a very early age, and so did all the boys in his circle. Don't stress about it. Now, he's quite a decent person, and he has a good job,” Seva defended

his father. “It just seems to him that a ‘real’ man should be like him. And it turns out that I’m not like that. A failed child.”

“Why failed?” Zhenya was surprised.

“Like I said,” Seva sighed heavily. “A ‘man’ should love fishing, understand cars, get involved in sports, and at my age already talk with girls and drink with their father. I don’t like fishing, I don’t understand a damn thing about cars, I couldn’t fix one for anything in my life, I have only a ‘C’ in physics, and I don’t talk with girls except classmates and before that, I loved to draw and read. Are they things men do as pastimes? Maybe this poor, silly shot was my father’s last hope.”

“Normal pastime.” Zhenya shrugged his shoulders. “I think you’re imagining it. What could your father not like about you drawing?”

“How do I know?” Seva chuckled. “He constantly grumbled that it would be better if I was kicking a ball with the boys in the yard than wasting time and money on such nonsense. Only my mom probably restrained him from throwing away my pencils and paints. But he was lucky with Sema. That one doesn’t like to draw, he plays football, and they go fishing together. Except that he doesn’t drink, but it’s too early for him, even by our father’s standards.”

“But you like to shoot! Isn’t that a man’s pastime? You said yourself that as a child you were constantly running around the yard with a slingshot, right?” Zhenya argued with him hotly and suddenly seemed to stumble. He frowned, putting two and two together, and asked softly, cautiously, “You started doing this to please your father, didn’t you?”

“No, I was still a little boy. I wouldn’t have thought of it,” Seva objected, without any confidence. Then he thought about it, remembering his childhood years, and reluctantly muttered, “Although, you know ... when I first picked up a slingshot, I was almost seven, and I’ve been drawing since I was four. I don’t remember the point where it began to annoy my father, but it’s quite possible that was the case even then. Sema was five, and he was either disappearing in the yard all the time, messing with the builder or playing with his soldiers. I swiped my first slingshot from him, by the way. It seems that was after our father praised him for being a good shot ...”

“Were you offended because Sema’s relationship with your father was closer than yours?” Zhenya asked.

“No. At least, I don’t remember that. I always wanted to spend more time with my father, but I never got upset if it didn’t work out. My mother and I were always closer. I never left her side as a child and could listen to her for hours, and Sema wasn’t interested in her conversations about books and other things.”

“So, you kind of ‘divided’ the parents?”

“Kind of. But it was unnoticeable. My mom always tried to make sure that we spent as much time together as possible ... the whole family. So, even though Sema and I are very different, we were friends in childhood. We communicated well. And now, after Mom’s death ... I don’t remember the last time I was interested in how he was doing.”

Seva didn’t catch the moment he began to confide in the blond again; it happened by itself. Zhenya was the first person he had told about the difficult relationships in the family; no one had ever been interested in this before. Surprisingly, realizing how much he had already told to Zhenya, Seva didn’t feel awkward. On the contrary, it became very un-winter warm inside.

“And why did it happen?” Zhenya asked, frowning.

“We hardly see each other. He and his friends are always disappearing somewhere. And when we do see each other, we don’t talk much, like strangers. I think we’re just still angry with each other because of an old, trifling quarrel, although, I guess it shouldn’t matter now,” Seva replied reflectively, amazed at his inexhaustible outburst of frankness.

Zhenya continued to look at him, waiting for him to carry on, and Seva, wincing, reluctantly explained, “It’s nonsense. My father and Sema were at my mom’s funeral, and I couldn’t even force myself to go to it with them, no matter how much my father persuaded me. Well, more precisely, no matter how much he threatened to punish me. Sema got angry. I think he thought it was disrespectful to Mom and that I’d decided to pass. How could I explain it to him? When I returned home from the garage the next day, I found torn album sheets all over the room and a carpet stained with paint. Sema ruined everything he could find. I think if it wasn’t for my father, we would have fought then. But I

just took everything that survived into the garage and didn't talk to Sema for several months. Then we drifted back a little bit, but things definitely won't be like back then." Smiling tightly, Seva spread out his hands.

Zhenya was stunned into silence. He wasn't ready for such a story. Seva raised his eyebrows with mock indifference to the sky, which was dull orange from the light of many lanterns, and began to look with exaggerated interest at the prickly fluff that still falling. When many of them settled on his eyelashes, it was difficult to open his eyelids. Zhenya finally asked, "What did your father say?"

Blinking rapidly to remove snowflakes from his eyelashes, Seva chuckled nonchalantly. "He told Sema that he was wrong, just for the sake of decency, and then he told me that it was high time to put all the stuff in the garage and get smart. Maybe he was right. We never talked about that situation again. But what else could our father tell us? He wasn't up for our childish showdowns at that time. I understood him." He felt a sincere need to justify his father's actions.

"I can understand him too, but he was still very wrong," Zhenya categorically declared. "What does it matter to him what you're interested in if it doesn't bother anyone? And what a 'non-male' pastime, if there are so many male famous artists around the world. Dali, Picasso, Van Gogh, and even the Russian Shishkin! Your father demands too much of you, Seva. Isn't it up to you to decide what *you* want to do?"

Zhenya's inspiring speech sounded neat and convincing, but Seva didn't buy it. He barely contained a nervous laugh. It was Zhenya Smirnov telling him that! Realizing that he wouldn't be able to seize a more suitable moment, Seva peered into the distance, through the snow-covered fluffy branches of fir trees, and asked,

"Doesn't your *father* decide for you?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Seva watched Zhenya's reaction, but he remained surprisingly calm. He didn't even blink and calmly replied, "Not really. I want to study well myself, but he just motivates me when I'm lazy. Yes, it goes overboard sometimes, I agree. But I think it happens to everyone. Moreover, he cares about my future. He wants me to achieve the same as him,

and maybe even more.”

Indignant, Seva choked on the crisp frosty air. Zhenya’s picture of what was happening sounded so harmonious and logical that he didn’t want to ruin it, but Seva understood perfectly well that it was simply vital. Trying to speak as calmly as possible and choosing his words carefully so as not to blurt too much because of emotions, he asked, “To achieve a lot is, of course, good, but do you understand that illusory success shouldn’t cost you your health?”

Zhenya waved a hand. “What about health? Do I work as a loader on the night shift or something like that? I’m just sitting around with books. Can it hurt much?”

“Yes!” Seva almost blurted, but caught himself in time and said restrainedly,

“You don’t work as a loader, but it will still affect you. You know, it’s not worth spending hours studying textbooks for grades ... you need to be able to properly allocate your time.”

“My father wants me to settle down well in life, and for this, I need at least to go to a good university. You know that you can’t enter good universities with nothing.”

“Who does your father work for ... that to surpass him, you need to kill yourself over textbooks?” Seva grumbled, almost giving up.

“He is the director of our machine-building plant,” Zhenya shrugged. “For this, you know, he had to work hard, and trust me, ‘hard’ is an understatement.”

Seva’s mouth took the shape of the letter ‘O’. He had understood that Zhenya’s father was not a simple hard worker, but the fact that Zhenya had managed to hide the position of a parent for several months, never hinting at it ... He was stunned by such modesty!

“Oh.” Regaining the power of speech, Seva stupidly drawled. “I see now. And the records, and the summer house, and this”—he nodded at the string bag, which Zhenya was still hugging—“Now, it all makes sense!”

“You could have asked,” Zhenya chuckled. “And the records are not at all the courtesy of my father. It’s his friend who needs to be thanked, and this ...” He critically examined the string bag, as if seeing it for the first time. “Aunt Luda is the wife of the head of one of the departments. He and Dad are old

friends. Well, consider it a friendship gift.”

“I was wondering ... why are you being so nice to her?”

“I talk with all my parents’ friends like that,” Zhenya grimaced. “A habit. Just don’t blab about my dad, okay? Many people already know, but I don’t like to talk about it. I used to tell everyone that he was a master at the same plant.”

“I won’t,” Seva promised. “But why doesn’t the whole school know about it yet? Even the Octobrists are familiar with Denikina!”

“Don’t compare me and Denikina,” Zhenya smiled. “Firstly, the director of the plant and the first secretary of the district committee are completely different levels and secondly, it’s more about Denikina herself. If Alina’s father had been an ordinary locksmith, she would still have remained the beauty of the school and everyone would have known about her.”

“Maybe,” Seva agreed after thinking about it.

They became silent for a while. Zhenya was considering something and Seva was thinking about how to explain to the blond guy everything that seemed obvious to him. He couldn’t find the right words, so he just took a deep breath into his chest and exhaled. “But how do you not understand that—”

He was ready to burst into an angry tirade, but Zhenya interrupted him. “Look, isn’t that Sveta and Pasha coming over here?” He gazed intently into the distance.

“What?” Confused, Seva looked to where Zhenya was pointing.

Along the snowy lane, he could indeed see two lovers of Russian classics. It was impossible to see their faces, but Seva would have recognized Svetka’s shabby sheepskin coat out of a thousand. “I think they are,” he nodded reluctantly.

“Come on. Let’s say hello,” Zhenya jumped up from the bench.

The last thing he wanted right now was to talk with someone else. Seva began to protest. “I didn’t fin ...”

“Let’s go and say hello,” Zhenya repeated insistently and pulled him by the hand.

His palm was soft and warm, despite the frost, and Seva didn’t understand how he allowed himself to be dragged towards Svetka and Pasha. They were



surprised at the meeting and pretty embarrassed, it appeared, but agreed to accompany them to the bus stop on Pervomaiskaya.

Seva walked distantly while listening to the lively conversation of friends, his thoughts were occupied with something completely different. He was walking along the icy stone path with an unnaturally straight back because he didn't want to embarrass himself in front of Sveta and Pasha by bending under the weight of the potatoes. At the same time, Seva felt like he was inflated with unspoken indignations to Zhenya. He didn't doubt that he'd run briskly to meet these two not because he wanted to greet them at all costs, but to avoid Seva's full-of-indignation sermon. But never mind, Seva thought, narrowing his eyes from anger as well as the prickly wind. He'd remind Zhenya about it. He'd not evade him!

## Chapter 9

### *Flared Pants Behind the Scenes*

Sveta and Pasha escorted them to the bus stop, and then decided to continue their walk. The delicately minded Zhenya didn't ask if they could officially be called a couple, and they were in no hurry to reveal their cards. Either they hadn't crossed that line yet, or they simply didn't consider it necessary to share the details of their relationship. Seva didn't doubt that sooner or later these two would announce that they were a twosome. Svetka, always strict and a little proud, cooed sweetly with him, and, standing at the bus stop, Pasha gently stroked her short thin hair. Seva and Zhenya, next to them, looked at each other conspiratorially and chuckled, hoping that the bus would arrive as quickly as possible.

Seva didn't manage to talk to Zhenya. Returning to the Smirnovs' apartment; they found that Prokofy Ivanovich was already at home, and Seva decided to go home, out of harm's way. The next day, Zhenya helped his mother prepare food for the festive table, while the star of the day celebrated his birthday with colleagues. The blond guy had to entertain guests, so they didn't see each other for two long days.

Their next get-together fell on the long-awaited New Year's disco day, about which Seva's classmates had chattered incessantly. Seva himself had only been at such an event once, in the seventh grade. Before that, he wasn't allowed to attend because of his age, and after that, he'd not been particularly eager. But this time Seva decided to go; too much excitement had been revolving about this annual event in the school assembly hall. Moreover, Zhenya was going to the

disco, and with him, Seva definitely wouldn't be bored.

For this occasion, he pulled out his best dark blue shirt from the far corner of the closet, decided to iron the trousers, and even polished his shoes to a gleaming shine. He didn't do anything with his hair. It was stiff, disobedient, and didn't give over to any method of styling; so Seva had no choice but to accept it for what it was and pretend that this was the intended outcome.

After casting a cursory glance into the mirror with its chipped edges before going out, Seva grinned. Of course, he couldn't compete with Zhenya and Pasha, but he looked very good today.

With Zhenya, Pasha, Sveta, and Sonya, who decided to keep them company today, they met at six near the bus stop at the school. The girls were dressed up as if for a wedding, and if pretty Sonya didn't surprise Seva, then the usually plain and unattractive Svetka made his mouth drop. He didn't know how a little makeup and glitter on the eyes could transform a person!

Only now did Seva notice that Sveta's always short-cropped hair had started to grow out and that she'd carefully curled the ends, generously spraying it to hold it in place. Seva never had anything against short haircuts for girls, but in Svetka's case, this hairstyle only spoiled everything. What an intriguing appearance she had. Pasha, unobtrusively holding Sveta's hand under the pretext of "warming it", periodically shot admiring glances at her, and Seva understood perfectly why.

On the way to school, Svetka briefly brought everyone up to date. On the approach to the entrance, the improvised company, thanks to the ubiquitous Svetka, already knew that the local vocal instrumental ensemble, or VIE, consisting of two tenth-graders and one funny guy from Seva's and Svetka's group of peers, managed to get a signature—"approved"—from Rosalia Andrianovna regarding the list of songs they were going to play at the disco. Nothing unusual, but Svetka, smiling conspiratorially, told them that the list included two songs by The Rolling Stones and one by The Beatles, albeit in slightly modified versions. Even though this VIE was playing a song with the funny title "Red Mandarin", according to Svetka it was pretty mediocre; however, dancing to your favorite songs should be much more fun anyway.

When Seva heard this, he immediately looked at Zhenya, and he gave Seva the same sly look. The evening promised to be interesting!

The group neatly hung their jackets in the wardrobe, and Seva briefly appreciated Sonya's fashionably flared pants. The chiseled girlish figure in them looked awesome, which he noted with lazy indifference. Svetka was wearing an ordinary black dress with a turned-down collar, not made for school dances, but it surprisingly suited her, emphasizing all the feminine advantages and hiding the shortcomings.

"Yeah," Seva thought, watching Pasha, who appeared fascinated by her. "Svetka, it turns out, is so ..." But then he sighted Zhenya and stopped in the middle of his thoughts.

Seva stared at him for a good fifteen seconds and managed to look away only when Svetka pulled him by the elbow towards the assembly hall. Taking off his gray coat, Zhenya wore a tight black turtleneck with the sleeves rolled up, and he looked really outstanding—so outstanding that Seva now wanted to draw a full-length portrait.

The assembly hall greeted the company with pleasing soft lighting; numerous reflections of the disco ball danced across the walls, floors, and ceiling as a rather average version of "Singing Guitars" played. The high school students were warming up before moving on to what everyone was waiting for.

The dance floor in the center was empty as students huddled in the corners in small groups, uneager to become the first to step there. Seva thought, with annoyance, that they had come too early.

They weren't bored for long. Svetka's close friends joined them almost immediately, and after hugging her, the usual initiator in everything, Nastya Suvorina, immediately told a funny story about how the school VIE begged Andrianovna for permission to perform "suspicious" foreign songs.

Resourceful tenth-graders wrote the history of each of the compositions, which were imaginary, and head teacher fell for. For example, the guys said "Back in the USSR" was written by a British unemployed man whose cherished dream was to move to the Soviet Union and live a happy life as a righteous communist.

In terms of “Ruby Tuesday”, they stated that it recounted the dispersal of the May Day demonstration in Chicago in 1878. When the laughter among the unique collection of seemingly different people subsided, green-eyed, red-haired Alena Solodskaya, without false modesty, declared that the last idea belonged to her.

Nastya nodded, readily confirming the truthfulness of her friend’s words, and Svetka whistled in surprise. She was completely unaware of what was happening in the lives of her friends. However, judging by the curious and interested looks that she cast at Pasha, Sveta didn’t tell them much either.

Gradually, the friends began to actively invite everyone to the dance floor and were the first to run towards the guys on stage enthusiastically playing “Leaves Will Spin”. Sonya Oskina and Pasha Zakratin confidently followed them, the awkward Oksana Kachusova trotted toward them and, to Seva’s surprise, Svetka resolutely headed there too. When she caught up with her friends, she smiled broadly at them, looked coquettishly at Pasha, and began to dance. Seva couldn’t remember if he had ever seen her like this before! Svetka moved without thought, with obvious pleasure at what was transpiring, and her eyes shone brighter than the disco ball under the high ceiling of the assembly hall. The cheerful girl in the center of the dance floor, no longer looked like an eternally serious or irritated topnotch student.

On the other side of the dance floor, Seva noticed Alina Denikina and Lelia Turina, who managed to hide almost completely behind her frail shoulders. The girls were standing in the company of tenth-graders unknown to Seva. Alina, with playful exaggeration, fingered the strands of the hair that had been piled high, and listened politely yet indifferently to one of the guys, and Lelia, smiling shyly, absently shifted her gaze from her friend to the tenth-graders and back.

At the sight of Alina, Seva became gloomy. He remembered the promise he’d made to Zhenya thanks to his hopeless stupidity. He’d naively believed that during this time Zhenya would forget about it and that the grade-A student, whose head contained everything from physics formulas to useless historical facts about the royal family, wouldn’t recall the rash promises of his stupid best friend.

As soon as he noticed where Seva was looking, Zhenya smiled wickedly and, leaning towards his ear (Pasha had already returned from the dance floor), whispered loudly, “You promised, remember?”

Seva instinctively jerked back, but he’d already swallowed his heart. Zhenya remembered, which meant that it wouldn’t be possible to refuse now. Seva always kept his word and never reneged on promises. But with Alina, he’d made a huge mistake!

Raising his pleading eyes to the blond guy, Seva suggested, “Maybe I could do something else? You see, she’s hanging out with some tenth-graders. She seems to be having fun.”

“Oh, those are idiots,” he waved it off. “I think she’d be happy to trade their company for a dance and so, the first slow dance is yours. By the way, it’s right after this song. I asked Sveta,” Zhenya informed him smugly.

Seva glared at him from under his brows.

“Will you at least invite Sonya?”

Zhenya shrugged his shoulders. “She’s gone somewhere ... if she comes back in time, I’ll invite her. But you won’t be alone, don’t worry. Pasha is also going to invite Sveta.”

It didn’t get any easier for Seva. It was one thing; those two were nearly a true couple, but he and Alina were almost strangers to each other. And given her often bitchy nature ... she’d him to go to hell for sure!

Keeping that in mind, Seva stood, nervously shifting from one foot to the other, until the end of the song. Zhenya patted him on the back encouragingly, but this didn’t make it any easier. Seva broke into a cold sweat. As soon as the last chords were played, the blond guy gently pushed Seva in the direction of Alina and he had no choice but to go on heavy, unbending legs, confident of imminent rejection. Fortunately for him, Alina and Lelia had managed to move away from the company of tenth-graders. It wasn’t as scary to embarrass himself in front of Lelia as in front of a bunch of Zhenya’s classmates.

As if from afar, Seva heard the guys from the stage announcing a slow dance, and he was near Alina as the intro sounded.

“Alina?” he called out to the girl in embarrassment.

“Yes?” Alina turned around, a soft smile froze on her lips.

“Shall we?” Seva squeezed out with a voice that wasn’t his own. His mouth was unbearably dry.

Alina glanced with widened eyes in the direction of Lelia. Seva didn’t understand what this expressive look meant, and was preparing for a mocking “with you?”.

Suddenly, Alina nodded. “Sure,” and, noticing his confusion, pulled Seva into the crowd.

Seva followed her, dumbfounded, unsure of what was happening. Alina herself? With him! No way! It wasn’t that he considered himself completely clumsy or lacking or anything like that, but Alina was the cherished dream of all the boys in their school, from elementary to senior grade. It would never have occurred to Seva that she would simply agree to slow dance with him.

Squeezing the girl’s hand tighter, as if checking whether he was really holding it or just imagining it, Seva gazed around for Zhenya. The blond guy looked straight at him and imperceptibly gave him a thumbs up.

Seva felt relieved.

Stopping in the middle of the dance floor, Alina turned to Seva and, without any warning, put her hands on his shoulders. Seva, embarrassed and blushing (it was good that no one saw this in the semi-darkness of the assembly hall), slid his fingers to her narrow waist.

Alina smiled encouragingly.

Everything was far from as scary as Seva had pictured in his head. They were standing among other similar couples, swaying to the beat of the song and shifting from one foot to the other. Alina managed to do this with her usual grace and dignity, and Seva, involuntarily admiring her movements, accidentally stepped on her snow-white boot with his foot.

He gave an embarrassed gasp, darted a frightened glance at the blond one—who, distracted by a conversation with Alena, didn’t notice—and muttered “I’m sorry.”

Alina just smiled again and answered quietly, “It’s okay.”

And they continued to dance.

Seva tried not to think about how many guys were probably looking at him with envy right now. These thoughts flattered him, but he'd still have found it awkward with everyone watching; as such, Seva tried to imagine that all of Alina's admirers had disappeared or simply decided not to come.

A little later, the silence began to seem awkward to Seva, although Alina herself looked completely comfortable. She clasped her fingers behind Seva's neck and gently swayed from side to side, and it wasn't at all clear from her impenetrable face whether she liked what was happening or she was looking forward to when the dance was over. Seva didn't look at Alina, but now and then he felt the gray-green eyes studying him. Finally, unable to stand it, he timidly said, "You're very beautiful." And immediately he felt even more awkward and bit his tongue. However, Seva spoke sincerely.

Alina nodded gratefully, accepting the banal compliment. Seva was sure that she heard this almost every day. However, Alina surprised him again by taking a step toward him. "You too. This shirt suits you very well."

And before the surprised Seva managed to blurt out some nonsense, she offered topic for small talk. "Is this your first time at a school dance?"

"Yes," Seva answered without hesitation, and then hastily corrected himself. "Or rather, the second one. In the seventh grade, I also went to a New Year's disco."

"Oh, I remember that." Alina suddenly laughed loudly. "You danced with the boys all evening then, and during the slow dance you stood against the wall and mimicked couples from the dance floor."

Seva felt the color rush to his face, but Alina's relaxed tone and joking attitude made him laugh. However, he still didn't look at Alina, and she continued to "explore" the dance floor over her shoulder. Among the dancers, he saw Pasha and Sveta, who were embracing rather than dancing, and mentally envied them. Then he found Zhenya. He was chatting sweetly with Alena. Seva turned away and finally forced himself to look into Alina's eyes.

"You shouldn't have done that then ... many girls from our class were waiting for you to invite one of them to dance," she added calmly.

Her gray-green eyes sparkled; they reflected the glittering mirrored disco



ball.

Unable to stand the staring, Seva looked away and began to absently study the dance floor: Pasha and Sveta, some vaguely familiar faces from the tenth 'A' and parallel class, a couple of classmates. He and Alina were dancing right next to the stage, and Seva's view from one side was limited to the legs of the vocalist VIE and the right side of the backstage. Indifferently glancing at his battered shoes, Seva looked backstage and, noticing a couple passionately kissing there, hurriedly turned away. *Wow, they found a secluded place away from Andrianovna.* The head teacher stood at the entrance to the assembly hall. He involuntarily looked backstage again. The girl in flared pants wrapped her arms around the guy's neck and broke the kiss, clinging tightly to his chest.

Seva turned away again and looked at Alina. He had to say something.

Wait a minute! *Flared pants?* Seva turned cold from the realization that flew into his head like a heavy basketball. Having already spat on decency, he spun his body backstage. Alina, whom he held tightly by the waist, gasped in a strangled way. She barely stood on her feet.

But Seva didn't apologize. He just stood stupidly and stared straight at the once again kissing couple, forgetting even that he had to shift from one foot to the other to the beat of the song. He was right. Sonya Oskina was kissing some dark-haired guy. The tenth-grader was hugging her waist with one hand and with the other was fingering the chestnut strands covered with hairspray ... only now Seva saw how disgusting and vulgar their kiss looked. *They should be ashamed; do they not understand that they can be seen from the dance floor?* The unsuspecting Zhenya was standing ten meters away—at least one of them had to have a conscience!

Seva felt unbearably disgusted, as if he had stumbled into something sick and dirty.

"What are you doing?" Alina asked in bewilderment, shaking him lightly by the shoulder.

Seva shuddered; for a moment he'd completely forgotten that he was standing in the middle of the dance floor and dancing his first slow dance with the most beautiful girl in the whole school. It didn't seem important now. But it

was also no longer possible to stand still as a stone—so as not to attract attention to him and Alina and, especially, a couple beyond the floor. Seva pulled himself together with some difficulty and continued to dance as if there'd been no ten-second hitch.

“What happened?” Alina repeated insistently.

“Nothing,” Seva answered coldly. It wasn't easy for him to maintain his composure.

“I can see that something is wrong.” Alina wouldn't let herself be fooled. “You turned around so suddenly, and your face looked like you saw a ghost.”

Seva mentally cursed himself for his lack of restraint. He should have acted more carefully. Alina was far from stupid. *You can't fool her so easily.*

Seva had neither the time nor the desire to come up with a plausible excuse. Smoothly, continuing to shift from one foot to the other, he turned Alina to face the backstage and whispered in her ear, “Look behind the stage. Just not too closely.”

Alina squinted, peering into the darkness, and immediately turned away. She shrugged indifferently. “And what? Have you never seen couples kissing?”

“I don't give a damn about couples, it's just the girl—”

“Sonya Oskina!” Alina gasped, taking a closer look. “God, what a nightmare,” she muttered, her eyes darting around the dance floor in confusion. “And what are you going to do?” she asked after a short silence.

Seva wanted to ask how Alina knew Sonya and that she was dating his best friend, but he remembered in time that everyone knew Alina, just like she knew everyone. But she asked a good question. Seva himself did not know, so he honestly told her, “I have no idea. Just don't tell anyone, okay?” he added, already regretting his rash act.

“I won't and I also don't know what I would do in your place,” Alina admitted. “If you want to talk about it, just tell me.”

Seva nodded gratefully. For some reason, he believed Alina. Despite all the nasty things that were said about her, she had never been a gossip. Probably not because of high moral principles, but that she just wasn't interested in spreading rumors, like how a girl from the tenth ‘A’ cheated on Zhenya with their

classmate.

But Seva unwittingly found himself in the epicenter of this situation or maybe it was a crossroad. He didn't know what he was going to do, and he would have given anything to erase the last two minutes from his memory and live in peace. But the vile picture kept popping up in his head, and Seva felt a nasty lump rise in his throat every time. They finished the dance in silence; fortunately, there was very little left until the last chords.

Seva was grateful to Alina for not asking too many questions. It was difficult for him to think right now, let alone talk. Alina felt it, and there was much more support in her understanding silence than in the most eloquent of words. When the song ended, Seva quietly said "thank you" to Alina, not knowing whether he was thanking her for the dance or understanding.

She nodded, and the two of them walked towards the group crowded against the wall. Seva was passively surprised. He thought Alina would return to Lelia after the dance, but she confidently followed him, and he didn't mind it. If it hadn't been for Sonya, he would even have been glad, but the thoughts of what he saw by the stage, drove everything else out of his throbbing head.

The both of them approached the guys and out of nowhere, Lelia joined them. Zhenya greeted the trio with a sly smile and Seva in response grinned so widely that he almost dislocated his jaw. It was impossible to look into Zhenya's eyes that were, unlike Seva's, so sincere and honest.

Seva began to examine the toes of his shoes with feigned interest. Alina, standing next to him, sighed sympathetically and took on the task. She started a conversation about nothing in particular so that Seva wouldn't have to talk to him. Seva thanked her again in his mind, but still didn't raise his eyes.

He didn't have to stand staring at the floor for long. From somewhere on the side, an excited Svetka flew at Seva and, almost overcome with delight, she whispered in his ear so loudly that everyone around heard, "Can you imagine? Pasha asked me to date him!"

Seva looked at her, filled of childish glee, and forced himself to smile crookedly. "Cool. I knew it was only a matter of time. I'm happy for you."

Slight disappointment was reflected in Svetka's face. She'd obviously

expected a more intense reaction to her words. He'd have given that desired reaction, if not for stupid Sonya with her "stupid dark-haired fancy boy", Seva thought with annoyance. What kind of evening was this? He'd upset Svetka, he was upset himself, and what to do about Zhenya was also unclear. It would have been better if he had stayed at home!

But Svetka's mind-blowing news didn't go unnoticed. Alina, who heard her perfectly, turned to her and with a smile, without the usual malicious irony or mockery, said, "Congratulations. You look very cute together."

Svetka frowned with a hint of contempt, but the joy that overwhelmed her turned out to be much stronger than the resentment against Alina. A second later, she offered a huge smile. "Thank you."

Two seconds later, interested and intrigued friends surrounded Sveta and she willingly, in detail, told them everything about the kiss during the slow dance and Pasha's romantic confession. The girlfriends turned out to be a grateful audience. They gasped admiringly when necessary and during specially designated pauses they inserted "Are you serious! Wow!" They screamed joyfully at hearing about the climactic moments. Even Alina, who was holding Lelia's hand, as if afraid that she would get lost, listened to Sveta with condescending interest, and Seva stopped feeling guilty.

Absently listening to Svetka's story and the appreciative sighs of her friends, he lost interest and so, when an excited whisper sounded in his ear, he jumped almost half a meter.

"Well, how was the dance?"

"It was fine," Seva muttered, taking a step back and rubbing his ear, which itched from Zhenya's ticklish whisper. Another time, he would have become indignant and asked him not to sneak up and whisper in his ear, but now he just looked guiltily at the blond and immediately turned away.

"That's it?" Zhenya was indignant. "And where are the details? What did you talk about ... how did you talk and how did you look at each other?" Zhenya gave him a wink and Seva suddenly became completely embarrassed.

Rescue came from where he'd not expected it. Someone slapped a palm heavily on Seva's back. He coughed and recognized Rostik, who flew at him

with the suddenness and abruptness of a bursting firecracker. The former comrade was smiling, showing gleaming-white teeth, and looked as if they'd not quarreled. Seva smelled the faint odor of ethyl alcohol. In another situation, he would have told Rostik everything he thought about him, but now Seva was ready to kiss him. He slapped Rostik on the back in response. "Rostik, hey! What's up?"

"I'm great," Rostik assured him sincerely, without ceasing to smile. "Right, Dima?" He turned to a friend, hiding behind him.

Seva stepped forward to greet Dima but immediately recoiled. Such intense anger flashed in the eyes of his old friend that he was afraid. He nodded confusedly, cowardly hiding behind Rostik's broad shoulders just in case, and received in response a disapproving look and a contemptuous, barely noticeable nod worthy of Alina Denikina. Having drawn an uncomplicated parallel, Seva mentally groaned. Alina! Of course. His old friend, head over heels in love with her, probably saw their ill-fated slow dance, and now he was furious. He knew perfectly well that Seva was aware of his feelings for Alina.

Looking at Dima Oskin's malevolent expression, Seva understood that he was to blame, even if they hadn't been friends for a long time. But his brown eyes burned with righteous fire and Seva saw the cheeky and deceitful sparks of the same brown eyes of Dima's older sister; they seemed to be laughing at him, chasing him everywhere, looming in the darkness of his closed eyelids, and Seva didn't know where to hide. The ability to think sensibly finally returned. If it wasn't for Zhenya, Seva would have burned with guilt in front of his former comrade, but his best friend worried him much more than Dima and thus, the wounded feelings of Oskin Jr. receded far into the background. To distract himself and occupy himself and his head with something, Seva introduced Rostik to the interested four girls who'd just finished congratulating a beaming Svetka.

"Girls, this is Rostik Turin, our Lelia's brother." He nodded at Lelia, who clung to Alina's hand. "And this is Svetka, Nastya, Oksana, and Alena ..." He alternately named the girls in the crowd and fell silent.

"Nice to meet you," Rostik replied with drunken gallantry, nodding to the

girls in turn. He lingered on Alena and broke into a wide smile. “Very, very nice!”

She chuckled in embarrassment and, with coquettish modesty, straightened her red curls.

Seva grimaced with displeasure and turned away.

Tipsy Rostik turned out to be a wonderful conversationalist. He was cheerful, courteous, and able to turn any trivial story into a comedic performance. He didn't swear when delivering every sentence. Either he was setting a good example for his younger sister, or he was trying to impress a bunch of laughing girls. They remained a great audience, laughed at every joke, supplemented or developed them, and listened to every word from Rostik with genuine attention and interest.

Zhenya tugged Seva's elbow a couple of times in the hope of taking him aside and talking about the slow dance, but Seva just shushed him, pretending that he was completely absorbed in Rostik's story. It was about the algebra test notebook stolen from the teacher, and Seva listened as if he hadn't heard it for the tenth time and didn't know that it ended with a scolding from teachers and parents. In the end, Seva even stepped back from their group and stood on the other side. He understood that once he was alone with Zhenya, he would no longer be able to remain silent, but he hadn't yet decided what to say.

The blond guy looked disappointed, but he didn't waste time and quickly joined the conversation, and soon Pasha also joined them. He immediately made a joke about Andrianovna standing at the entrance with a stone-faced soldier of the guard of honor, to which Seva laughed hysterically for about a minute, and gave a fleeting kiss on the cheek of the rosy Svetka. Her friends offered enthusiastic squeals.

The relaxed and friendly atmosphere of their diverse and colorful group was spoiled only by the displeased face of Dima Oskin, who had only exchanged a few words with Alina; he wouldn't thaw and have fun on par with everyone. Seva, on the other hand, laughing hard at jokes and inserting his witty comments where it was necessary and where it wasn't, all the time felt as if what he was wearing was suddenly three sizes too small for him. Something squeezed him in

his chest and pressed on his shoulders, not allowing him to enjoy the pleasant company.

When a disheveled and flushed Sonya ran up to them from the side of the stage, Seva felt the collar of his shirt cut into his neck and he regretted not knowing how to intervene with just a look. Zhenya nonchalantly kissed Sonya on the nose, without even asking where she had been for so long, and calmly continued the conversation. In response, she took his hand and squeezed his fingers tightly, while carefully looking somewhere to the side, and Seva's heart shrank to the size of a pea and began to beat in his throat. He wanted to snatch Zhenya's hand from Sonya's tenacious fingers, to angrily tell her to her face everything he thought about her, and inform Zhenya about her vile behavior, the deception she was spinning literally in front of his nose. Seva even stepped in her direction, but another burst of laughter brought him to his senses.

He wouldn't do it. Not now. Seva didn't yet know how he would tell Zhenya about it—but he knew that he definitely would. It was impossible to announce Sonya's infidelity in front of the whole group; the already *un-joyful* news would be twice as tough for the blond one. And who knew? Maybe Zhenya was aware of Sonya's adventures, since she was so calmly kissing their classmate right at the school disco. In any case, the issue was extremely personal and delicate (and most importantly, absolutely disgusting), and therefore Seva had to solve it alone with Zhenya, but not now or in public. His heart ached from the thought that he might spoil this carefree, cheerful evening for Zhenya.

Having promised himself to talk to the blond at the first convenient opportunity, Seva tried to distract himself and forget about Sonya for a while during the lively conversation, but it turned out badly. Now and then, he involuntarily looked at their tightly intertwined fingers, noted Sonya's absent look, the excessive fun, and when Zhenya put his hand on her waist, he almost choked with anger. It was unbearable to see this, and Seva turned his body toward Alina, standing next to him, and began to tell her something stupid so not to remain silent. Even though now he only noticed Zhenya's black turtleneck from the corner of his eye, Seva's thoughts were completely absorbed by him. Alina's face, which he looked at point-blank, was blurry and indistinct, but she

did not pay attention to his detachment, laughed at Seva's jokes, and willingly supported the conversation. Seva could feel Dima Oskin's malevolent gaze on him.

The rest of the disco evening passed that way. The group was having fun, Sveta and Pasha were whispering and giggling about something, and Rostik was almost openly flirting with Alena ... and Dima silently hated Seva. Seva, in turn, begged himself to hold out for the rest of the evening, as if nothing had happened. In general, it turned out well.

No one noticed that something was wrong with him, only Alina sometimes looked at him with sympathy and interest. During the long-awaited songs, The Rolling Stones and The Beatles Seva flew with Zhenya to the dance floor and had fun with everyone, surprising the group with verbatim knowledge of the lyrics of each song. He realized that the hours spent on the records hadn't been wasted! Zhenya, of course, no less boasted of his English. They exchanged glances now and then, and it cost Seva a lot of effort to not look away from Zhenya.

The end of the disco evening seemed like a blessing from above to Seva. With great enthusiasm, he, along with Pasha and Rostik, ran to the cloakroom to get the jackets and coats for the whole group, who slipped them on as they continued to have fun, until someone offered to continue the evening with an outing to the park.

The weather was good, and no one wanted to leave, so the offer was received enthusiastically. Excited, hot, and happy, they hurried into the street in unbuttoned jackets and coats, without scarves and hats. It had been dark for a long time; the sky had turned gray-red, as happened only in the winter, and the silence in the schoolyard was broken by ringing voices as they managed to leave the building first.

Going down the steps from the entrance, Seva heard Alena shriek from behind; Rostik had thrown a snowball right into her hair. The idea was immediately picked up by Pasha, who threw a snowball at Svetka and then, laughing, threw her into a snowdrift near the entrance. The others took it as a signal for action and ten seconds later snowballs were flying everywhere in the



schoolyard, and loud laughter and piercing screams were heard. Even Alina succumbed to general insanity and, covering Lelia with her frail back, threw snowballs with passion at Svetka and her friends. If they'd not become friends at the disco, then they'd now reconciled for sure. A small heavy snowball hit Seva right in the cheek, and he bit his tongue painfully ... and realized he could no longer do it. He could no longer have fun or watch how the unsuspecting Zhenya carefully shook off the snow from Sonya and kissed her forehead ... and she thanked him and took his hand again. An abomination!

After waiting for Pasha to lift Svetka out of the snowdrift, Seva approached them and informed her that he was going home because he wasn't feeling well. The excited Svetka offered to accompany him, but Seva hastily refused. The brief fun-filled "altercation" had attracted attention, and Seva realized with annoyance that he wouldn't be able to sneak away quietly.

He had to say goodbye to everyone, hug girls shake hands with the guys (this time even Dima extended his hand covered with a fur mitten), and then explain the reason for his hasty departure.

Then he had to dissuade Zhenya from seeing him off.

After finally leaving the schoolyard, Seva felt tired, exhausted, and broken. On the way home, he didn't have a single thought in his head as he shuffled his shoes on the tightly-packed snow and nervously bit his lips until they bled. What had forced him to look behind that stage? Damn it!

## Chapter 10

### *Do You Like Her?*

**T**he next day, Seva did not talk to Zhenya. He also didn't talk to him the day after or even a week later. The reason was simple. They never had a chance to be alone. During a single evening, the company from the ninth 'B' and tenth 'A' classes had become so friendly that they couldn't part ways and went for a walk every day—except for Sonya.

Seva concluded with sad certainty that she probably spent time with her “fancy boy”. He thought to talk to Zhenya when everyone left, but he lived next door to Pasha, and they went home together; as such, it was impossible to seize even a minute. Probably, deep down, Seva was happy about this—so the coward believed—because he couldn't find the right words. Diplomacy had never been his forte. But every day, Seva promised himself that he *would* talk to Zhenya, sooner or later.

The New Year was approaching. The day before the thirty-first of December, the group made a spontaneous decision to celebrate it together, and Zhenya kindly agreed to provide his apartment for this occasion, saying that his parents were going to visit friends for the whole night. Seva, when he heard this, choked on air. He'd never understand anything about the Smirnov family! To worry so much over grades and monitor the learning performance of a seventeen-year-old son, and then leave an apartment at his disposal and allow him to call a bunch of strangers into it! What logic were these people guided by?! The rest of the group, not of the same mind as Seva, readily accepted Zhenya's proposal, and everything was decided.

Seva didn't buy gifts for all eleven guests. Even if he'd wanted to and knew what to give, his modest budget wouldn't allow it, and therefore he spent his meager savings on Zhenya without regret. Back in November, Seva had looked at a textbook on the history of Ancient Greece in a bookstore at the intersection near the Smirnovs' house. He had long ago noticed that the blond was interested in this topic. It seemed that everything was in the book—for almost a thousand pages—such as myths and legends, which Zhenya adored no less than dry truthful facts.

Having carefully wrapped the textbook in a gift wrapper, Seva suddenly thought about putting his drawing in the gift too—the one he still admired from time to time and which he considered the best he'd ever be able to draw. He thought this only for a split second and then became desperately embarrassed, cursing himself for such stupid thoughts. Was it a gift? Maybe it would seem strange to Zhenya; none of his friends ever gave him a portrait of himself. Friends should give each other normal, worthwhile gifts. Having decided, Seva again put the already worn-out sheet on the farthest shelf.

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On the afternoon of the thirty-first, Seva came to Zhenya's place before everyone else. His father let him go without any curious inquiries. He was probably so used to the name "Zhenya" in his son's vocabulary that the blond guy was just familiar to him as he was to Seva. At first, Seva was concerned about how his family would celebrate the New Year, but his father reassured him it was fine. The mother of Seva's friend, who'd generously shared jam with them, promised to come to visit them with her son, and his grandmother would call her neighbor friend. This meant that no one would be bored and Seva, relieved and calm, rushed off to Zhenya's.

He delighted Seva from the threshold with the news that Svetka and Sonya would come to help cook and set the table and ordered Seva to peel the hated potatoes. Most likely, the same ones that he had recently dragged for an hour and a half from the store on Pushkinskaya Street. Of course, Seva had nothing

against Svetka, he was glad to see her, but being in the same room with Sonya was akin to torture for him. Seva was not going to say anything to Zhenya today, considering it insensitive. Besides, it was stupid to not ruin the blonde's disco evening, yet then spoil his New Year instead. No, he had to grit his teeth and endure this night, and then he'd sort it out somehow. Maybe when Sonya disappeared somewhere with her tenth-grader, Zhenya would have forgotten what she looked like.

With the fakest of all possible smiles frozen on his lips, Seva met Sonya and greeted her and, with spiteful satisfaction, entrusted the girl with the most complex dishes. *Svetka shouldn't strain.* He'd find easier things for her. But he must give Sonya her dues. She didn't even blink an eye. She nodded without further words and began to carve the meat. Seva snorted in disappointment behind her and continued peeling potatoes.

The clock on the wall ticked unbearably slowly, and Seva was willing and prepared to eat unpeeled potatoes and raw chicken just to leave the kitchen and never return. Zhenya went to the store. Svetka was unusually late. Sonya tried again and again to engage small talk with him, as if not noticing his irritation and undisguised aggression towards her. She was vigorously slicing meat, gesticulating with her hands too actively for a person with a knife, and chatting for two persons. Sonya seems to have discussed everything: her studies, her wayward younger brother, the recent disco night, and the biological facility that she was going to study at.

*"She only forgot to mention her tenth-grader,"* Seva thought, furiously peeling another potato. He was glad to hear the doorbell ring, as if he expected to see a real Father Christmas on the threshold and not Zhenya or the late Svetka.

Svetka was standing in the hallway, shifting uncomfortably at the front door. One glance at her and Seva understood without words the reason for her delay. Svetka's hairstyling and make-up took the girl more than one hour. Seva was again convinced of how lucky Pasha was. Hugging Sveta tightly, who was still a little shy, he exhaled softly and smiled. "I'm so glad you came!" And, noticing the surprise that flashed on her face, he hurried to explain. "There's a lot of work. Sonya and I can't cope."

With the arrival of Sveta, everything became more interesting. Seva willingly talked with her and no longer had to focus on peeling potatoes to the point of pain, so as not to hear Sonya's chatter, and it went like clockwork. The three of them quickly threw together several salads, baked meat, potatoes, sliced cheese and sausages. They did all this in a friendly atmosphere and with pleasant conversation. However, Seva talked only with Sveta, diligently ignoring Sonya's words, but the girls were chattering enough for four people, and no one paid attention to it.

Soon Zhenya, who had been missing for two hours, returned from the store with Pasha and, smiling conspiratorially, took three bottles of champagne out of his backpack. The girls clapped their hands in delight and Seva was unspeakably surprised and only whispered, "Not bad".

Wow. He thought that the blond didn't drink, even on holidays! To the reasonable question, "Where from?" Zhenya shrugged. "I got champagne for my parents from Aunt Luda, and they allowed me to take three bottles for myself."

Seva was once again convinced that Zhenya's parents were the strangest people he knew.

After another half hour, the others began to arrive. Zhenya constantly ran from the kitchen to the hallway, simultaneously controlling the process of preparing the last salads and meeting the newcomers, and Seva chuckled to himself. The blond looked so funny in the role of a hospitable host. Seva has long been used to the fact that Zhenya never met him and answered questions about food with "In the refrigerator".

Polite and friendly, he escorted everyone to the living room and sat on the sofa, offering to play and listen to records. He was no longer afraid that his parents would find out. Seva had kindly allowed him to say—in case of an emergency—that all the "forbidden" records were his.

Tired of slicing vegetables for salads and the incessant chatter of Sonya, Pasha and Svetka, with the friends who came, when the doorbell chimed again, Seva went with Zhenya. Stretching his tired arms and bending his back, he nodded indifferently to the person in the doorway and suddenly froze with his mouth open.

Alina was standing on the threshold. She smiled charmingly, shaking off the snow from her brand-new sheepskin coat, and Seva, seeing her, could not take his eyes off her. Alina looked incredible! In her white boots and short skirt, she easily caught people's eyes and knew it perfectly well. A little make-up accentuated her already bright facial features, and the snowflakes that had settled on her long brown hair seemed to adorn her flawless hairstyle. Always beautiful, today, without a doubt, Alina surpassed herself, and it was impossible to argue with that. Confident in her irresistibility, she charmingly fluttered her long eyelashes. "Hi, boys."

"Hi," Zhenya nodded in response and rushed to hang up Alina's sheepskin coat.

"You look so great!" Seva exhaled in greeting. "I mean, you're always ... but especially today!" he muttered confusedly.

"Thank you." Alina graciously accepted the compliment. "I'm so glad that I'm celebrating the New Year with you ... Lelia, come on. Take your coat off ... it's warm in here!"

Seva only then noticed Lelia standing behind her.

Lelia, who was completely lost against Alina today, quickly and awkwardly unfastened her coat, and Seva and Zhenya escorted the girls into the living room. Everyone was now gathered. The close-knit four, Pasha hugging Svetka, Dima frowning at the sight of Seva with Alina, Rostik enthusiastically citing something, and Sonya hugging a pillow on the sofa.

Food was already on the table, with Alina making final touches. *Carnival Night* was on TV and the record player standing on the dresser was waiting for everyone to relax and eventually listen to music. For the first time in the few days that their group had gathered, Seva felt tender feelings towards everyone in the living room, with the exception perhaps of the Oskins. Maybe it was the fact that Seva hardly saw Sonya huddled in a corner, maybe it was the carefree festive atmosphere that the company created, or maybe it was Zhenya standing shoulder to shoulder with him, who shone brighter than the Christmas tree by the window—so bright that his joy was transmitted to Seva.

Everyone sat down at a long table and Zhenya graciously poured glasses of

mors. It was to mark the outgoing year, they ceremoniously wished one another everything they could come up with. Pasha made a long sad toast, but they could not remain serious for long. Fifteen minutes later, laughter was heard at the table again, Pasha's sometimes risqué jokes, for which Svetka elbowed him, and the incessant whispering of the other girls from the foursome, who closely watched every movement of the two.

Seva watched this farce with a smile, intercepted the same look from the blond, and rejoiced even more, and then turned his eyes to Sonya and his mood deteriorated again. Why, oh, why hadn't he told Zhenya about her? She wouldn't be here now, and everything would be fine. However, as Seva honestly admitted to himself, it wasn't known if they'd all still have gathered at Zhenya's if he'd found out about Sonya's betrayal. *Maybe it's for the best.* At least he'd let Zhenya enter the New Year happy.

The time was slowly approaching midnight. Already roused and animated, they looked at one another impatiently in anticipation of the magical twelve o'clock, Brezhnev's solemn speech, and the traditional chimes. Bottles of champagne were moved from the floor to the table and, judging by the sly looks that Rostik threw at them, he was waiting for the opportunity to drink more that evening than through the entire New Year itself. Or maybe he just wanted to throw a cork at the Smirnovs' ceiling. He, along with Pasha and Zhenya, had been entrusted with uncorking bottles.

At fifteen minutes to twelve, the girls found pieces of paper and pencils, and sent Zhenya for candles. Seva himself, for the life of him, didn't know what he was going to wish, but he didn't care too much. He didn't believe in the fulfillment of a New Year's wish, as he hadn't believed in Father Christmas for a long time. The year before last, he'd wished for his mom to be healthy, but two weeks after the holiday, the doctor matter-of-factly stated that the disease was progressing. At that point, Seva had decided that he no longer believed in this nonsense, and last New Year, without much regret, he missed both Brezhnev's speech and the ringing of the chimes.

But this time it was different. The girls' enthusiasm passed on to Seva, and when Zhenya returned to the living room with three candles in his hands, he

decided that he wouldn't lag behind the others. Even if the wish didn't come true, he didn't care; happy memories of how he'd hurriedly wrote it on the piece of paper, along with everyone else, was much more important.

Brezhnev's appearance on the small screen of the roundish TV was greeted with a joyful hum. Zhenya, Pasha, and Rostik picked up bottles, the girls grabbed pencils, Seva absentmindedly watched everyone, the smile not leaving his face. Brezhnev was listened to with half an ear; everyone was entrenched in their own business. The guys were removing the foil from the bottles and the girls were whispering something again.

Two minutes before midnight, everyone tensed and fussed, and Pasha and Zhenya exchanged confused glances. They weren't sure they'd do everything right. Seva took his pencil and a wish soared through his head like an arrow. How had he not thought of it before?

Their wait ended with Brezhnev's solemn words: "Happy New Year, dear friends. I wish you ... *New Happiness!*"

Three corks flew off into the ceiling with a pop, accompanied by the enthusiastic squeals of the girls, and while the guys poured champagne, the rest bent over their papers.

Clumsily, in a hurry, Seva wrote, "*I want Zhenya not to get upset because of Sonya*" and held the paper to the candle without the text showing. Watching the flames slowly engulf it from all sides, Seva heard the ringing laughter of the blond guy, and his heart filled with warmth and confidence that the New Year would be the best year of his life.

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They exchanged gifts for about an hour. Zhenya was delighted with Seva's, as if he had been dreaming about this textbook for several years and he, smiling slyly, handed him a set of brushes and paints.

Seva mentally blessed Zhenya, and almost burst into tears with happiness. *He knows, that blond nerd, what not to do—but still does it!* Seva couldn't get mad at him, because Zhenya did it so sincerely, not with spite, quite the contrary,



with the best intentions. Putting the box tied with a bow into his briefcase, Seva promised Zhenya to use the brushes at least once.

The gang was having great fun. In the living room, Zhenya's favorite records were playing to the fullest, Nastya and Alena danced as if they'd returned to the disco dance, lively arguments on various topics flared at the table, and under the table, Rostik constantly poured alcohol (that knock-your-socks-off moonshine) brought from home into his mors. From time to time, others who also lacked champagne slipped their glasses to him. Among the "others", Seva was surprised to see Svetka do this and was glad that Pasha didn't leave her for a single moment. *Who knows how alcohol might affect her, given she's never been drunk before?*

Right after the chimes and the anthem struck, he had had fun, they danced together, joked, talked, laughed, and then everyone slowly broke into smaller groups, and in each of them, Seva felt uncomfortable.

Dima was in one of them, the girls were talking about something in the other, and Zhenya and Sonya were sitting in the corner, hugging and whispering. Watching this annoyed Seva and he decided not to spoil everyone's mood with his sour looks and went to the kitchen.

There, without much surprise, he found Lelia sitting alone at the table. Hunched over, she was finishing the mors from her glass and twirling a toffee wrapper in her hands. Seva thought that if there had been anyone else in the kitchen, he'd not have noticed her.

"What are you doing here?" Sitting down opposite Lelia on a corner seat, Seva asked more out of decency than curiosity.

Lelia shrugged her narrow shoulders and gulped down the last of the drink. "The living room is too noisy. What's your excuse?"

Seva grinned. "Well, I could say the same thing. People are annoying."

Lelia smiled timidly. "When I left, I thought you were having fun."

"At first I was, then it got boring," Seva explained, not lying. "My head ached, so I decided to rest a little. Don't you want to have some fun at all? To dance, to chat with the girls?"

Lelia shook her head. "I don't like dancing, and no one except Alina seems

to like me.”

“What makes you think that?” Seva asked.

He reluctantly admitted to himself that Lelia was almost right. It wasn't that no one disliked her, it was that no one knew what to discuss with her, and simply considered her a silent appendage to Alina. How, and about what, they communicated privately to this day remained a mystery.

“I can literally see it.” Lelia did not go into details.

“And Alina left you?” Seva smiled and immediately cursed himself for being tactless. He didn't want the question to sound so rude.

“No, I decided to go myself.” Lelia was not offended. “You talked very nicely. I didn't want to bother you.”

Seva frowned, remembering. Yes, it seemed that Alina had approached him, and they'd discussed Zhenya's collection of records.

“Alina is well versed in music,” he said, engaging in small talk. “Did she go to music school?” He mentally kicked himself again. Even now, almost for the first time in his life speaking to Lelia, he'd reduced the conversation to Alina.

“Yes, she studied piano until she was twelve,” Lelia confirmed absently and casually asked, “Do you like her?”

Seva, who had been playing with the candy wrapper that he'd taken from Lelia, dropped it on the table out of surprise. He raised surprised eyes to her, and she answered him with a questioning look. She was waiting for an answer. Coughing, Seva hesitantly said, “Well, she's beautiful ... and it's also interesting to talk with her. Does that count?”

Lelia smiled indulgently. “Okay. So, you like her as a person, as a friend. What about something more?”

“More than a person?” Seva chuckled.

Lelia looked at him reproachfully. “You know what I mean.”

Of course Seva knew. It was hard not to understand such a simple, frank question, asked point-blank by the usually quiet and unassuming Lelia. She probably expected the same honest and straightforward response, and it seemed impossible to lie to her.

Lelia sat opposite Seva and silently regarded him with gray watery eyes.

Seva hadn't noticed before how big they were, much bigger than Alina's. And Lelia's nose was beautiful, with a small hump and a scattering of pale freckles, and ash-blond hair—today not gathered in a ponytail at the back of her head—seemed to glimmer with silver. Was the light in the Smirnovs' kitchen magical, or what? After looking at her serious face, Seva honestly said, "I don't know. I have no idea what 'like' means, so I can't answer you."

He was amazed at himself. She was the first person to whom Seva had confessed this.

"What does 'like' mean?" Lelia bit her lip thoughtfully. "When you like a person, you'll know it if you aren't completely stupid. 'Like' is when you want to spend all your free time with a person ... you're ready to change all your plans to meet them somewhere."

"Where does such knowledge come from?" Gazing at her slyly, Seva had asked this in the hope of learning something interesting about her.

"Rostik told me," Lelia explained simply. "So, 'like' is when—"

"How does that one know what it is?" Seva muttered in disappointment.

"When you remember everything that a person tells you, even if it's some nonsense you don't need at all. When you're in a crowd of people, you always look only at them." Lelia said this thoughtfully, with an odd expression, as if she could taste it. A soft voice seemed to envelope her consciousness. "When you are ready to listen to them for hours, and it doesn't matter what they say, as long as they aren't quiet ... although you also like to be silent with them. When they touch you, it's like a current is being passed through your body. You get goosebumps all over. When their smile seems to you the most beautiful thing you've ever seen."

Lelia continued to list what "like" meant without restraint, and Seva nodded slightly after each item. It began to come together, and the more the points began to come together, the more he felt how everything was growing cold within his core—because involuntarily, he wasn't comparing all of Lelia's points with Alina's.

He was ready to listen to him for hours, and spend all his free time together; he liked both talking and being silent. Goosebumps prickled his body from

touching, and his gaze invariably rested on him ... why on “him”? Because it was all about the meticulous, study-obsessed blond, Zhenya Smirnov! But how and why it was all about him was a completely different question—a question to which Seva frantically searched for an answer and couldn’t find.

“... When even the flaws in them seem to be something beautiful. And, most importantly, when you see someone next to them, you immediately go crazy and start hating that person simply because you should be in their place!” Lelia said. “In general, if everything comes together and makes sense, then you’ve got it.”

It seemed that Seva really got it, but the enthusiastic Lelia sitting opposite him couldn’t suspect how much! “And even if you had only half of what makes up ‘like’, then congratulations. You’ve fallen in love.” Lelia smiled charmingly.

“What do you mean, ‘fallen in love’?” Seva asked hoarsely, having gathered the words into a logical sentence with difficulty. “You were talking about ‘like’, weren’t you?”

“I got a little carried away,” Lelia shrugged. “What I listed is no longer like, but real love.”

*No damn way!* Seva bit the inside of his cheek until it bled and frantically tried to refute what he was thinking. All the months of friendship with Zhenya flashed before his eyes. From the very first meeting in the yard to the last time he saw him on the sofa with Sonya. He couldn’t be in love with his best friend! *Because ... because he’s a boy, and that doesn’t happen!* This argument was the only answer and, frankly, quite weighty. Yet on second thought, as Seva put together all Lelia’s colorful points on an imaginary scale, they seemed to crack the ground with their immense weight ... and this ground ... was the ground under Seva’s feet.

“*This doesn’t happen!*” Seva repeated to himself in confusion. Falling in love is about girls. About Alina, about Alena, about Nastya, even Lelia in the end! But not about your best friend. A friend with whom he spends all his free time together, whom he always looks at, carried away for a moment, whose smile he enjoys seeing like a child. Even now, trying to figure out if he liked Alina, Seva was thinking only about him again.

“So, what?” Lelia’s muffled voice came from somewhere far away.

Seva made a sound, a grunt or a groan, which Lelia could interpret as anything, and continued to stare forlornly into the void. Thoughts were circling in his head like an enraged swarm of bees, and each one stung him painfully. His arms and legs were frozen in place, and Seva was glad that he was sitting because otherwise, he'd simply have fallen to the floor. Nonsense, nonsense, he's just tired and drunk with champagne. *I need to go home and rest a little, by morning everything will work itself out.*

Maybe it would work itself out. But the problem was that Zhenya's face, which he studied to every scar and mole, would still appear in front of him, even if he closed his eyes. Zhenya's ringing laughter would still sound in his ears, and Seva was ready to listen to it forever. Why had he not considered it before, that this somehow went beyond the usual understanding of friendship? The way Seva stared at him from time to time, how he tingled from his touch, how falling asleep, he imagined their meeting the next day. Would one "friend" do this, even if unconsciously ... or maybe, rather *all the more unconsciously?*

Although, in general, it was quite obvious why Seva never thought about it. In whose perverted brain could such an idea enter, even in jest? This didn't sound like some kind of mental disorder or Seva would have heard about it. On the other hand, who sets the rules of "friendship"? Maybe Zhenya just became his first real friend, and that was how true friendship manifested itself. How would Seva know? Experiencing the goosebumps and constantly seeing Zhenya's face flash in front of his eyes was because he was just sensitive; as an artist, he'd never had problems with visual memory.

So, Seva tried to calm down, but it wasn't really working ... or at all convincing. Even though he had never fallen in love with girls, and he had never had friends closer than Zhenya, even with his zero-life experiences, Seva understood that no one felt this way about "friends". *Even if you were ten times as close a best friend, your handshakes would be simple farewell rituals and not sweet memories that you scroll through your mind all the way home.*

Lelia was still watching him intently with those attentive gray eyes, but she was understandingly silent, allowing his thoughts to gather and group. She didn't realize they'd not only formed, that they hadn't created a single picture, that they

were rushing through the corners of his consciousness, not letting Seva think of just one, but all. He feverishly jumped from one to the other until, finally, he saw his consciousness flying on the tail of a comet. *“I think I’m ... in trouble.”*

Seva didn’t have time to come up with a solution to the sudden insight he’d gained. A small but noisy group—Pasha, Sveta, and, of course, Zhenya—came into the kitchen. All three were either drunk or overly excited by their favorite songs and the good company. They filled a small space and, chattering loudly enough for ten people, began to take notice of Seva.

“Why are you sitting there? Come with us. You’re missing so much!” Sveta informed him with glassy eyes. “Oh, Lelia, you’re here! Join us. It’s much more fun in the living room!”

“I’m not ...” Seva began, but was immediately interrupted.

“Guys, you’ll miss all the fun and interesting things if you stay in here,” Pasha declared, energetically supporting Svetka and, narrowing his gaze, added enticingly, “Zhenya just put your favorite record.”

“I’ve heard it a million times already,” Seva excused himself unconvincingly. “Lelia and I were talking so nicely here; please, don’t interrupt us.”

“I already learned everything I wanted,” Lelia shrugged.

“So, let’s go,” Zhenya chimed in.

The very sound of his voice made Seva shiver. This time, it seems, from fear.

“I’ll talk to Lelia a little more and then join you,” Seva lied, lowering his eyes and wringing his fingers until the bones cracked.

“No ‘a little more’! We’re going now,” Svetka insisted.

“But Lelia and I ...” Seva started protesting again.

“Lelia will come with us,” Zhenya said and, grabbing Seva by the wrist, pulled him along.

Seva swung forward and abruptly pulled his hand out of Zhenya’s tenacious fingers with such force that he jerked back. Unable to resist, Zhenya hovered over Seva; for a split second, their faces were so close to each other that he could feel Zhenya’s warm breath, but Seva immediately recoiled half a meter, catching his foot on the table so that it rattled from shifting dishes. The whole group, including Lelia, stared at him, bewildered.

“What are you doing?” Zhenya softly asked, rubbing his bruised knee.

“Nothing, you just grabbed me so abruptly ... reflexes,” Seva muttered in confusion, carefully not looking at anyone present, especially Zhenya.

“It wasn’t abruptly ... okay, so are we going?”

Seva looked up and caught the expectant glances of all four. He had already attracted too much attention with his stupid trick, and he didn’t want to trigger unnecessary questions. Giving up, he muttered, “Yes, let’s go.” And he allowed Svetka, giving a delighted squeal, to drag him into the living room.

Music was playing loudly in the living room and Alina, Rostik, and Dima were talking animatedly at the table. As soon as Alina saw the newcomers, she flew to meet Lelia. Dima followed her with a sad look.

“I was contemplating starting a search for you, but here you are,” she said, taking Lelia by the elbow.

“We brought her,” Sveta clarified. “And this one, too.” She nodded at the lost-looking Seva. “They were sitting together, whispering.”

“Really?” Alina’s eyes flashed strangely. “Interesting”. She looked at Lelia with an inquisitive look, but smiled again and started a conversation with Alena, who was passing.

“Seva, why are you just standing there?” Svetka shook him. “Let’s go dancing; you love this song! Or maybe you want a salad? There’s still some left —”

“Does Rostik still have some alcohol?” Seva interrupted Svetka rudely.

“He does,” Sveta answered in surprise. “Ask him if you want, but it’s more like sewage.”

Seva didn’t care. He nodded gratefully to Sveta, squeezed through close-standing girls yammering about something inconsequential and, ignoring the displeased gaze of Oskin Jr., handed Rostik the first glass he came across.

“To old friendships,” he winked at Seva and generously filled the glass a quarter full.

Seva drained the glass in one gulp and brazenly returned for more; Rostik, confused either by Seva’s brusqueness or by the fact that he, without wincing, had thrown back all the alcohol, muttered, “You should at least have a snack or

something.” Then he filled half the glass for Seva.

Seva gratefully saluted him with the glass and moved over to the enthusiastically chatting Nastya and Oksana. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew for sure that of all those present, Zhenya was least likely to approach these two and, as such, that was the best option for him.

It was suddenly scary to talk with Zhenya. Even being in the same room with him seemed like torture for Seva! The girls, who nodded at him in surprise, decided that he was just showing off in front of them with his half-full glass.

Seva had seen his drunken father desperate from grief more than once, and each time he'd thought with naive condescension, “*Why doesn't he understand that alcohol can't help him?*” Now, however, for the first time, faced with the overwhelming dismay that gripped him, real fear and a complete ignorance of what he was going to do, Seva wanted only one thing: to forget the most frightening thought that pierced him half an hour ago. There was only one way to forget, the one he'd never liked seeing his father take.

Maintaining a polite conversation with feigned interest, Seva emptied the glass with amazing speed. He didn't remember what the conversation was about, and it wasn't because of the alcohol at all. All that was going on in his mind was a deep desire that Zhenya not approach him until the end of this disgustingly long night ... and wondering when Rostik's magic drink would take effect. The girls, judging by their inquisitive glances, were waiting for the same.

The alcohol intoxicated Seva quickly but softly. As luck would have it, his mind was not clouded at all, only his movements became awkward, as if in slow-motion rewind, and his tongue moved with difficulty in his mouth.

Later, Seva approached Rostik with a request to pour more, to which he just spread his hands; the alcohol was gone. Out of frustration, Seva almost kicked a rickety stool next to him, but he thought better of it in time. He had to return to the group empty-handed, and prayed for the strength to survive the waking nightmare with a sober head.

Seva remembered the next couple of hours in fragments, though he did pretend that everything was normal and fine. He willingly engaged in conversation, laughed when it was funny, and even made jokes. No one would



have known what was really going on in his head. Even if someone found out, they wouldn't have believed it. Seva himself didn't and wished only one thing; to be alone with himself, calmly considering the situation, and laughing at its absurdity.

As soon as the first guests decided to leave Zhenya's apartment, Seva happily wedged himself into their ranks, referring to poor health. Zhenya was upset, because Seva was meant to spend the night with him, but he didn't argue. Seva didn't want him to get upset, but he couldn't stay here anymore. He was too tired of reacting every time he caught Zhenya from the corner of his eye.

The farewell was a new test for Seva. Sveta, Pasha, Rostik, Lelia, and Alina left with him, and he diligently hid behind their backs in the hope that Zhenya would forget about him. But Zhenya didn't forget and Seva had to look him straight in the eyes for the first time that night, and firmly shake his outstretched hand. The handshake lasted no longer than a second, but it seemed to Seva that during that second everyone present guessed how much he liked to touch Zhenya's soft hand. He pulled back quickly and jumped onto the stairwell first, before anyone could figure out *why* he liked it.

After saying goodbye to Alina after they'd walked a few blocks, the rest of the group ambled to their own neighborhoods. Sveta, Pasha, and Rostik were discussing something energetically all the way, and their chatter in the background distracted Seva from his thoughts that seemed so loud. Because of this, he was afraid to part with his friends, but Sveta and Pasha, with their carefree jokes, escorted him to the entrance. Having once again congratulated each other on having embraced the New Year, they finally said goodbye, and Seva speedily flew up to the fifth floor.

Home, he greeted his brother, his drunken father, the overstayed guests and, without undressing, immediately dove under the blankets. He fell asleep as soon as he closed his eyes. It was probably the fatigue, alcohol, and jumbled nerves that had exhausted him during the course of the overly long night.

## Chapter 11

### *No Longer a Friend*

**I**t seemed to Seva that everything would be fine in the morning. He would wake up, and yesterday's thoughts would be a result of silly confusion and ordinary fatigue. He'd just been overexcited and drunk.

Seva, however, couldn't seem to catch his breath. He dreamt of Zhenya all night. The worst thing was that the dream was one of those where you blushed and shyly hid your eyes so that no one could guess what was going on in your head. Seva was ashamed of his dream; no matter how he hid his eyes, he couldn't forget that it was about Zhenya from beginning to end. After that, Seva was convinced that "just a friendship" was all a facade.

It was likely some kind of mental disorder. Rare, shameful, and reprehensible by everyone. Otherwise, why had he never have heard of such a thing? Or maybe he was the only one on the whole planet experiencing it, and there wasn't even a name for such perversion. *Fall in love with your best friend? Who and what were you ... for a thing like this to happen to you?*

Seva paced the room in a panic and tried to figure out how it happened and, most importantly, what to do next. The images from his dream returned, the tiniest details flashing before his eyes, and he began to whisper children's rhymes to distract himself from obsessive shameful memories.

His mom had always said, "Falling in love inspires." But Seva didn't feel the wings that should have erupted on his back. Rather, he felt like a worm that had just been cut into half. It was unclear how to live with this; it hurt, and he wanted to be swallowed up by the ground. But Seva had never questioned his mom's

words.

Who claimed that his feelings for Zhenya were love? Again, just like his mom said, falling in love was a pure, brilliant, and wonderful feeling, about which poems were written and to which songs were dedicated. Seva was probably crazy, mentally ill. As such, could a disease be pure, brilliant, and beautiful?

On the other hand, he had never thought about anything like this before talking to Lelia. He loved spending time with Zhenya, sometimes admired him from afar, and listened with pleasure to his long, enthusiastic monologues. Seva liked Zhenya's smile. He was ready to travel to another part of town every day just to meet him. Seva worried about Zhenya more than for himself. Was that bad? He didn't bother Zhenya. He didn't harm anyone, and he had no intentions of ever hurting anyone. He didn't care if this was called falling in love or something else, Seva was glad that Zhenya existed; he made Seva happy with his existence alone. Could such sincere and warm feelings truly be something bad?

Seva had almost calmed himself down when he suddenly remembered his dream again. It was obscene ... shameful ... and even disgusting. If that was what he wanted, then it truly was awful and he should be disgusted with himself. *Thinking these things about your best friend!* Seva had never dreamt of such a thing about girls—that was how bad, wrong and absurd this all was.

Seva suffered alone with his thoughts until the evening. He even tried to sleep so as not to think about anything, but as soon as he closed his eyes, Seva was afraid of a repetition of the dream and abruptly jumped up from the couch. It wasn't so much the dream itself that was scary—it was scary to realize that he *liked* it. This gnawed at Seva the most.

He couldn't think about anything else. He spent the whole day trying unsuccessfully to relax and convince himself that everything was fine. He tried to persuade himself he'd made it up, that Lelia's points applied only to girls and that he was mentally healthy, which meant there was nothing to be afraid of. But as soon as he'd nearly succeeded, Zhenya flashed before his eyes for the hundredth time, smiling, cheerful, so charming, and so handsome. Seva would then shudder and shiver again. At such moments, he jumped up from the couch

and began to rush around the room, muttering to himself all sorts of nonsense, covered his face with a pillow and bit the cover with all his might, or violently kicked the soft armrest with push the image of Zhenya out of his head. None proved very helpful, because Seva would only end up exhausted and slide down to the floor without strength, praying that none of his relatives would notice his silly antics.

Another day passed, followed by the third and fourth. Seva's endless reflections—jumping from “I made it up” to “How ashamed I am in front of Zhenya” to “Can they put me in a mental hospital for this?”—were interrupted only by a night of heavy, restless sleep. Seva didn't remember what he had dreamt and was glad about it.

He did remember waking up in the middle of the night with his heart pounding wildly and immediately thought about Zhenya again. Exhausted by the already familiar “rituals”, Seva fell to his knees beside the couch and leaned back on the armrest. The first time he'd found himself in this position, Sema had asked in amazement why his older brother was sleeping-sitting on the floor, to which Seva irritably muttered that it was not Sema's business. He shrugged and didn't ask any more questions.

On the fifth day, an agitated Varvara Kapitonovna came to visit her grandson. She was seriously alarmed that Seva had been sitting at home for so long and was stubbornly ignoring the phone, which had been ringing frequently for several days.

At that moment, for the first time, he mentally cursed the day when a home phone had been installed in their apartment, the only one on the entire floor. Seva evasively answered all the questions; he wasn't in the mood and he wanted to be alone, but he and Varvara Kapitonovna had a conversation for the first time in a very long time.

Seva forgot how close he and his grandmother used to be. She, a former teacher of Russian language and literature, was a well-read person and seemed to know everything in the world, especially when it came to books. As a child, on dark winter evenings, Seva loved to listen to her long stories about the lives of writers and other great people; sometimes, Varvara Kapitonovna would embark

on long discussions and start arguing with herself and then Seva, giggling, wondered which of the two grandmothers' personalities would eventually win. Sometimes Mom joined the discussion, and then the three of them could sit by the window until nightfall and discuss literature, art, and ordinary everyday life. Such days became a real holiday for Seva, because the adults, forgetting themselves, didn't ask him get to bed until later in the morning.

Later, Seva, who went on to become friends with Rostik and Dima, no longer spent evenings at home, and he hardly communicated with his grandmother afterwards. There was no time, and there was nothing to talk about. He didn't read books anymore either. But now, having talked to Varvara Kapitonovna, Seva suddenly remembered those indescribable feelings he'd experienced as a child. Seva still didn't touch many books, but over the past few months, he'd become very adept at history. Now, he could tell his grandmother what she didn't know before, and this pleased his trampled pride.

They talked until it was time to go to bed, and discussed, it seemed, absolutely everything. Next to Varvara Kapitonovna, Seva felt so calm and good that for a while he wanted to share his thoughts with her, tell her about his feelings for Zhenya, and hear something in response that would surely calm him down. "Don't worry, silly. You just made it up in your head." Or, "Of course, this doesn't happen." Or even, "Yes, honey, it happens, and it's okay; you're not alone."

But Seva knew that even his mom wouldn't tell him that. She understood and accepted everything, even the most stupid and strange of his antics. Could he say the same about his grandma? She would have a stroke if he told her the real reason for his voluntary "imprisonment". And even though Varvara Kapitonovna, alarmed and worried about his behavior and depressed state, persistently repeated that Seva could tell her absolutely everything and she would understand, he knew perfectly well that no one could understand such a thing. Therefore, he had to deal with the crazy thoughts in his head himself.

The next morning, Seva came to his grandmother's room with a collection of Mayakovsky's poems, which Zhenya had forgotten he had the week before last. Timidly sitting on the edge of a stool next to Varvara Kapitonovna, Seva asked

her opinion about the poet's work. The flattered grandmother readily launched into her opinions.

Seva listened to her every word, both because he was interested, and because her lively speech, full of epithets and metaphors of a philologist with forty years of experience, did not allow him to plunge back into thoughts that were slowly starting to drive him crazy. Varvara Kapitonovna's enthusiastic monologue with rare Seva comments ended only when *The Fate of Man* began to be shown on TV, which both had seen more than a dozen times, but decided to watch again.

Seva sat down right on the floor next to his grandmother's chair and put his head on her lap. Watching the film, Varvara Kapitonovna gently stroked her grandson's hair and commented on everything that was happening on the screen, and Seva, who had not slept the previous night, felt that he was slowly falling asleep. The mumblings of the TV and his soft grandmother's voice lulled him to sleep, and soon he was no longer watching film. It would be stupid to worry about it, given he remembered every scene and every dialogue by heart anyway.

He was jerked out of his half-sleep by the sharp and shrill ring of the doorbell. Wincing, Seva rubbed his cheek as he reclined against his grandmother's knees and tried to return to sleep, but the doorbell rang again, and Varvara Kapitonovna lightly patted him on the head:

"Sevochka, don't you hear that the doorbell is ringing? Go open it. Probably, Lydia Stepanovna decided to visit me."

"Or maybe they are some kind of robbers," Seva muttered, unwillingly opening his eyes and getting up from the floor.

"Watch your tongue." Varvara Kapitonovna was indignant and Seva only sighed humbly in response.

Zhenya was standing on the threshold. Seva's first impulse was to slam the door right in his face, but he gathered his courage and stepped aside, allowing Zhenya to enter.

"Hi. Are you ...?" It was stupidly asked, without ending the question.

"I am," Zhenya breathed out irritably. "I've been calling you, but no one picks up the phone. Then Varvara Kapitonovna says, 'Sevochka is sleeping, I don't want to wake him up.' Have you been sleeping for almost a week? You

still can't get past the New Year?"

Having released the angry tirade, Zhenya folded his arms across his chest and stared reproachfully at Seva, waiting for explanations and excuses from him.

The situation was stupid and absurdly ridiculous, and Seva didn't know how to explain his behavior to Zhenya. He didn't have time to think about it. It was the first time in the last few months that they hadn't seen each other more than two days in a row. If Zhenya had disappeared like that without warning, Seva would think up the worst scenarios. Judging by his angry face, Zhenya had done exactly that.

"Come in," Seva said, instead of answering.

They went into his room. There, Seva climbed onto the couch with his legs and, putting one hand behind his back, clutched the blanket so that his fingers turned white. Zhenya stood directly in front of him and continued to stare at Seva with a hard look, which he felt even by eyeing the patterns on the pillow. A tense silence hung between them. If Seva had his way, it would have lasted forever, but Zhenya gave up after just a couple of minutes.

"You still don't want to explain?"

Seva sighed. "I was sick. I told you, I didn't feel well."

"How about letting me know ... picking up the phone? You don't look like a person who can't get out of bed!" Zhenya said angrily.

"I asked my grandma to tell you," Seva answered quietly, squeezing the blanket in his hand so hard that his nails bit painfully into his palms.

"She must have forgotten," Zhenya snorted. "I'm sorry, but I don't believe you. You don't look sick ... at least not *that* sick. What am I saying? You came to my place in November with a temperature of thirty-eight degrees and said that you felt great!"

"And you and your mom scolded me and took me home by car. I resolved not to bother you anymore."

"And decided to disappear and hope that I wouldn't notice it?!" Zhenya exploded. "I've been making up the devil knows what for myself, and it turns out that you're sitting at home ... pretending you're sick." Zhenya suddenly smiled sadly. "I don't believe it. I'm sorry."

“Why?”

“I already told you. And you’ve been kind of weird lately, like you’re not yourself. You avoid me. We only exchanged gifts for the New Year, and that’s it; we don’t talk anymore. You didn’t stay the night, although you promised, and before that, you talked to everyone in the group, but not to me. Tell me honestly”—Zhenya averted his eyes for the first time during the conversation —“Is it ... you just don’t want to talk with me anymore?”

Seva almost fell off the couch with surprise. Zhenya looked so upset that Seva wanted to run up to him, hug him, and say, “I want to talk to you more than anything. I don’t want to communicate with anyone except you; you make me the happiest person in the world.” But it was necessary for him to control himself, and so Seva exclaimed hotly, “Of course, I want to! How can you think that? How could I not want to talk to you?”

“I don’t know. Then why are you acting like this?”

Looking at the lost and sad Zhenya, and realizing that he was the cause of Zhenya’s sadness, Seva was angrier with himself just then than he’d been the entire previous week. Not only had he tormented himself with his delusions, but he’d also made Zhenya feel abandoned. How could he possibly think that?

“It’s just I ...” Seva frantically searched for the right words and, reasoning what to say to him, when he decided to blurt a half-truth, “I was ashamed in front of you.”

“Ashamed? Of what?” Zhenya looked up at him with surprised eyes.

Seva felt hot, like a surging fever was coming on. He was not at all ready for this conversation, but to reveal the real reason for his strange behavior would be suicide. Moreover, sooner or later Zhenya had to find out.

Seva exhaled, gathering his thoughts, and said, “I know what I should have told you right away, but I didn’t. I couldn’t find the right words and find the right moment for us to be alone, and then I didn’t want to spoil the New Year for you. I know I’m a bad friend, I’m sorry.”

“Say it already!” Zhenya was indignant.

“I saw Sonya kissing some dark-haired tenth-grader backstage at the disco,” Seva blurted and looked at Zhenya with apprehension. He was afraid of his



reaction and didn't know what to do after saying this.

Zhenya suddenly laughed merrily and shook his head. "No, it can't be true. You must have confused her with someone else."

Seva bit his lip and swallowed a tight lump in his throat; it was hard for him to talk about it. "No, I couldn't confuse her with anyone. Flared pants, white blouse. And a tall, dark-haired tenth-grader. Alina saw it too ... she can confirm."

Zhenya frowned and crossed his arms over his chest again. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sorry ..."

"No, I'm fine," Zhenya waved it off and, contrary to his words, nervously walked from corner to corner. "And what did he look like, this tenth-grader?" he asked with calmness, wringing his hands.

"I don't remember, I didn't see him," Seva said guiltily. "I'm telling you: tall, dark-haired, with an athletic build. He was also wearing a light jacket."

"Emelyanov!" Zhenya hissed angrily and, unable to restrain himself, slammed his fist against the closet.

Seva's mom's favorite porcelain figurine swayed dangerously, but Seva didn't make a peep.

"I always knew he was a real jerk, but this?"

Unable to stand it, Seva jumped up from the couch and approached Zhenya, but shrank back slight and only put his hand awkwardly on his shoulder. Half patting, half stroking, he murmured reassuringly, "Look, maybe it's for the best. How would you know?"

"To what 'best'? How can it be for something good?" Zhenya's voice trembled, and Seva's heart skipped a beat from sympathy.

"Maybe you want me to ask Rostik to talk to this Emelyanov? He is strong, and his friends, hockey players, are the same. Emelyanov will remember an encounter with them. I'll tell everyone about Sonya, what she is, and Alina will confirm my story," Seva muttered, not realizing what he was saying.

He never solved problems with his fists and never asked Rostik and his hockey friends to scare someone or beat them up, never spread gossip, and was never so petty, rightly believing that everything would return to offenders in full.

But Zhenya looked so devastated and unhappy that Seva was ready to personally have a showdown with this Emelyanov fellow, then tell Sonya everything he thought about her and repeat it to others so that everyone knew exactly what she was. He was ready to put the whole world at Zhenya's feet, so long as he didn't get upset and worry about Sonya Oskina, who wasn't worthy.

But Seva didn't have to do any of this—putting the whole world at Zhenya's feet or having a showdown with Emelyanov. Having settled his initial emotions and regained his composure, Zhenya shook his head. “And what will it change? Moreover, Emelyanov hasn't got anything to do with it ... what does he care about me?” Surprisingly sensible for a person who'd just found out about a betrayal, he was able to reason. “But Sonya ... she couldn't. I don't believe it!” he added in a sinking voice, and Seva's chest twisted with pity.

For a second, he wanted to respond with, “She couldn't, of course. I was joking, Sonya would *never* do that.” Instead, he inhaled at length and looked sympathetic, not knowing how to support Zhenya. “Don't be upset, please,” he muttered after a short silence. “She's not worth it if she could do this to you. Soon, everyone will find out, and then we'll see what she and her Emelyanov will do!”

Zhenya winced. “I won't tell anyone about this, and I want you to do the same. What's the aim of that? I'll just talk to her, and we'll break up in a positive way. I don't want to pour dirt on her and start all sorts of rumors. Let everything go peacefully and calmly.”

Seva gasped from indignation and admiration at the same time. “Zhenya, what are you talking about? She ... she's like *that*, and you react like this way,” he muttered incoherently and, pulling himself together, exhaled and told him, “You are *really* noble!”

“What does nobility have to do with it?” Zhenya waved him off. “I don't want anyone to know what happened so that our classmates start gossiping about it. It will only make it worse for both of us; only we'll know about the real reason for the breakup. Ah, well, and Alina Denikina. That means Lelia too.” Zhenya became gloomy again.

“She promised not to tell anyone.”

“And you believe her?”

“Yes.”

Zhenya looked at Seva doubtfully, but said nothing, just squeezed his eyes shut and massaged his temples with his fingers.

“So, will Sonya get away with it?” Seva asked, saddened by the injustice.

“What’s the difference?” Zhenya shrugged irritably. “It will be easier for me ... and let her do what she wants. I know Sonya is a good person, but life happens.”

“What do you mean, ‘a good person’? She acted like a real—”

“Seva!” Zhenya interrupted reproachfully.

“What? Tell me, do you disagree?” he snorted.

“I agree,” Zhenya sighed. “But for my sake, promise you won’t say anything?”

“I promise,” Seva reluctantly agreed.

“Thank you,” Zhenya nodded and smiled so tightly and sadly that Seva could hardly resist the impulse to hug him.

Instead, he asked, “Is there anything I can do for you? Just say the word! Do you want to talk about it? Or we can talk about something else, if you want to distract yourself.”

Zhenya shook his head. “I don’t want to bother you, but thanks anyway.”

Seva waved his hand, irritated. “What do you mean ‘bother’? Are we friends or what?”

“*Or what*” sailed through his thoughts but he immediately dismissed it.

Surprisingly, Zhenya smiled timidly, and this time much more sincerely. Overjoyed, Seva took a step towards him, intending to either hug or pat him on the shoulder again, but he thought better of it and abruptly hid his outstretched hand behind his back. It looked a strange awkward jerk, as if he’d caught something in the air and didn’t want to show it. Seva coughed, trying to hide his embarrassment.

Zhenya didn’t notice Seva’s clumsy movement. He sat on the edge of the couch and said thoughtfully, “Maybe you’re right. I don’t know ... I probably need to talk.”

“Of course, you need to!” Seva agreed too vigorously and sat down opposite him.

“I never thought that a break-up with Sonya would be like this,” Zhenya confessed, and Seva nodded understandingly.

Zhenya began to slowly, thoughtfully analyze his relationship with Sonya from their very first day. Seva expressed sympathy and understanding, although he was focused only on one thing: to keep his eyes on the calendar behind Zhenya’s back, and not on him.

Slowly relaxing, he remembered his main problem, and tried to turn the sound of Zhenya’s voice into monotonous mumbling. It was becoming unbearable to listen to and see him again. Seva pressed himself into the armrest with such force that he felt wooden boards through the thick upholstery press his spine; he felt he was sitting too close to Zhenya. So close that he saw the mole on his cheek, that small, almost invisible scar, and the way his light eyelashes fluttered. Or did he simply recall Zhenya’s face so well that he didn’t need to sit close to see it all? *So, calendar, calendar, what’s the date today? Yes, that’s right, January sixth. The holidays will be ending in less than a week.*

Zhenya spoke for an unbearably long time, but Seva didn’t even notice how the hours flew like minutes. Having finished his sad monologue with the affirmation, “Okay, I’ll get over it somehow,” Zhenya began to get ready to go home.

Seva followed him into the hallway. “Maybe I should walk you home?” he suggested worriedly.

“I’ll get there myself. It’s already late. What time will you be back? Or are you worried that I’ll throw myself under a bus rather than get on the bus?” Zhenya joked darkly.

“Are you a complete fool?” Seva became angry. “No, I just want to keep you company, at least until the bus stop.”

“I’ll get there myself,” Zhenya said amiably. “Before you finish getting dressed, all the buses will have left.”

Seva was surprised. It was never his habit to take a long time to dress, but he didn’t argue. He said goodbye to Zhenya by shaking his hand—his palm was

still soft and still affected Seva as if a current ran through his body—and tiredly leaned his head against the wall. At least Zhenya was joking, which meant that he would get over Sonya. But Seva himself wasn't in the mood for jokes. He didn't even know what constituted funny in such a circumstance. However, this was the irony of fate! Comforting a best friend with a broken heart, while he ... he what? Slowly went crazy? With a nervous laugh, Seva broke away from the wall and hurried to Varvara Kapitonovna. They weren't done discussing Mayakovsky's metaphors.

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The next day, Seva went to Zhenya's place without telling him. He justified himself by saying that he was worried about his best friend and wanted to support him during a difficult moment but somewhere deep down, he understood perfectly well that he simply missed Zhenya like crazy. He missed his voice, smiles, funny facial expressions, animated gestures during conversation, historical facts that were out of place, and sudden discussions about literature—which Seva always interrupted because of his irritation. And now, even though getting together with Zhenya seemed an ordeal, Seva could no longer isolate himself from him. He didn't care about sleepless nights, eternally wobbly legs and trembling hands. One smile from Zhenya was worth it.

Delighted with the end of his self-imposed imprisonment, Varvara Kapitonovna—to whom Seva had briefly outlined the whole story with Sonya yesterday—wrapped up the cabbage pies Lydia Stepanovna had brought with her and generously poured the remaining toffees from the holidays into all his pockets. Seva filled a small jar of strawberry jam, which the kind mother of one of Sema's friends brought them for the New Year, and went to the Smirnovs in full readiness, considering the gifts as both support and apologies for Zhenya's sudden loss.

Zhenya didn't seem to be flagging, as he'd been yesterday, but rather focused and serious, even more than usual. To his hasty and slightly tactless question, "Well, what's up with Sonya?" Zhenya answered without unnecessary details.

“I asked her to meet and talk. At first she refused, she seemed to be busy, but I said it was important and urgent. I arrived at her house, she came out, and I said that I knew about her and Emelyanov ... and I wanted to break up ... and immediately left. She had asked me to stay and talk, but I didn’t want to.”

“Why?” Seva asked naively, without thinking. For some reason, all his attention was focused on how Zhenya nervously twisted a pencil between his fingers.

“I didn’t dare.” Zhenya stopped and returned the pencil to the table.

Seva tore himself away from staring at his fingers and looked at Zhenya’s face.

“Sonya was very emotional. I knew that no matter how our conversation turned out, she would burst into tears. I can’t stand tears. They’d make me immediately forgive her for everything and do as she asks, even apologize. I didn’t want to talk to her, in all honesty; what were we going to discuss? How does Emelyanov kiss? That’s useless information to me. I’ll know well enough whenever I decide to kiss a guy,” Zhenya snorted irritably.

Seva inhaled sharply, as if he’d gasped. It seemed as if someone had knocked the air out of his lungs with a powerful blow to the back. “That’s right,” he approved hoarsely, barely catching his breath. Seva had completely forgotten that Zhenya had a unique talent of striking the most painful places with his comments. “She wants to talk, pfft! When she was kissing her Emelyanov backstage, she certainly wasn’t thinking about talking!”

Seva spoke so as not to be silent. It seemed to him that if he didn’t say something, Zhenya would guess everything. What exactly he might guess, Seva himself didn’t really know, but it fretted him.

“Seva.” Zhenya looked at him reproachfully, and only then did Seva realize that he had said something stupid again.

“What?” he chuckled sheepishly. “I just wanted to say that you did the right thing, that you didn’t give in to her persuasions.”

“I get it. Now, I just have to figure out how to tell my parents about it.” Zhenya rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily.

“What do you think? Just tell them something like, ‘It turned out that she ...

she behaved in a disgusting manner’.” Seva found himself under Zhenya’s intense gaze. “And that’s it, the conflict is over; there aren’t any questions for you to answer.”

“If it would only be that easy! You don’t know how much they love Sonya. We’ve been family friends since childhood, and Sonya’s father is the deputy where my father works. It won’t just be a conflict between the two of us.”

“Dima’s father works with yours?” Seva whistled in surprise. “Come on, they’re adults. Why would they get angry or have to get involved in your teenage fight? Especially at work! The main thing is that you should be happy, right?”

“Mom will say so, but Father ...” Zhenya shook his head with doubt. “Okay, I don’t want to talk about it. It’s sickening. Tell me something ... like, what did you do while you were hiding from me?” Zhenya asked with a sort of laugh, but his gaze was cold and sullen for a moment, and Seva shuddered from surprise.

“Nothing. I watched TV with Grandma,” he replied and hurriedly changed the subject. “By the way, I brought you some jam. Do you want me to make some sandwiches?”

“I do.” Zhenya immediately thawed. “You know where the bread is. While you’re doing it, I’ll put on a record. I haven’t listened to anything since the New Year. Your Alina, it turns out, understands them better than me, and music too. And she knows English well! She gave a detailed analysis of each song, and my jaw dropped!”

Standing in the doorway, Seva, listening to the last words, involuntarily smiled. He loved it so much when Zhenya was chatty and carefree like this, not sad and serious. When he jumped from topic to topic and didn’t focus on one thing (especially Sonya), he joked and laughed. Maybe it was hard to read what was really on his mind, but appearing lighthearted like this was so much better.

Seva returned five minutes later with a plate of Zhenya’s favorite jam sandwiches, and everything seemed to fall into place again. They listened to the record, discussed nothing of significance, then Seva retold his grandmother’s opinions about Mayakovsky’s poems. Zhenya, finishing his fourth sandwich, listened attentively. They talked until late in the evening.

When Seva left the Smirnovs, it was almost eleven o'clock. It seemed that everything was back to how it used to be: pleasant, simple, and serene. Seva still diligently avoided any eye contact, shied away from touching his friend, and blushed painfully as soon as he caught himself shamelessly staring at Zhenya. But he liked Zhenya's smile so very much!

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The next day, Zhenya wanted to unwind and expressed a desire to take a walk with their friends, and he and Seva went to the park, where everyone, despite the fifteen-degree temperature, gathered daily at six in the evening. They were delighted to see Seva, as if it had been months instead of a week since they'd last seen him. He was exceptionally happy. There was no Sonya, he was in the center of attention, and Zhenya looked cheerful and seemed to be enjoying life. Everything was getting better, slowly but surely!

So, they spent the rest of the holidays either sitting in Zhenya's house or walking with the others. Both purposefully didn't think about or discuss Sonya. Zhenya wanted to erase what he'd heard about her from his memory, and Seva had enough of his own problems.

He was like on a swing. First, he soared so high that his heart dropped to his feet, then dropped to the ground like a rock and a nasty lump rose in his throat. It was good being with Zhenya; his palms sweated only a little and he always had to think about things in the distance. But that was a trifling thing. Without Zhenya, however, and alone with his thoughts, Seva opened a personal portal to hell. It was especially hard at night. Waking up again and again in a cold sweat, every time, Seva thought, "Screw it all!" Every morning, he went to Zhenya's place anyway. Seva was waiting for the beginning of his studies like manna from heaven. He'd be able to distract himself and occupy his unhappy, sick head with school.



## Chapter 12

### *Just Like You*

**O**n the first day after the holidays, Seva felt better. He listened attentively to the teachers, taking notes. At recess, he was distracted by conversations with the closeknit foursome, Alina and Leila. He didn't want to think about Zhenya at all. In history, telling Grigory Olegovich about the February Revolution, Seva diligently quoted the textbook. He could, as usual, use Zhenya's colorful descriptions and interesting facts he'd read from additional literature, but Seva had no desire to hear Zhenya's voice in his head. He addressed the lesson quickly, providing the event date, a brief description of it, and Grigory Olegovich, although he was disappointed to note the dryness and haste unusual for Seva, didn't skimp on grading and gave a well-deserved 'A'. Seva thanked him sadly; he hadn't liked how he'd handled his answer today either.

The day passed quickly. After saying goodbye to the girls in the cloakroom, Seva went out to the school entranceway and breathed in the biting, frosty air with pleasure. His mood was surprisingly good. In a couple of hours, he'd meet with Zhenya. Tonight he'd manage to have a good sleep for the first time since the New Year. At school, the girls constantly distracted him from obsessive and wrong thoughts. Maybe if it continued like this, everything would work out just fine. Exhaling noisily, Seva ran down the stairs.

"Seva!" a girl's voice called out to him.

Seva turned around and immediately realized that everything wasn't as rosy as he thought. Sonya was standing on the porch, and Seva could barely stop

himself from spitting on the ground. He measured her with a long, hard look and turned away, walking along the snow-covered path twice as fast.

“Wait!” Sonya shouted, and the click of heels on concrete steps was heard echoing behind. Seva didn’t react. “Please, Seva, I need to talk to you!”

Seva didn’t understand what made him turn around again. Whether he did it because Sonya was shouting throughout the whole schoolyard, or whether the desperation in her voice momentarily clouded his mind. He stopped and scowled. “I don’t think we have anything to talk about.”

“I want to explain myself,” Sonya stated breathlessly, catching up with him.

She looked unusual. Always combed, collected and neat, today Sonya seemed exhausted and broken. Her hair was disheveled. The skirt sticking out from under her coat was rumpled, and her black boots were covered with dried white streaks from the snow. Even the freckles on her nose seemed to have faded. Sonya herself didn’t look up at Seva and fidgeted with the tip of her braid.

Seva shrugged irritably. “You don’t need to explain yourself to me.”

“He doesn’t want to talk to me,” Sonya said quietly.

“And he’s doing the right thing,” Seva snorted. He was about to turn around again when he noticed the foursome together with Pasha at the entrance. Seva cursed inwardly. It was impossible to make a scene in front of them. How would he then explain what Sonya wanted from him? Zhenya had asked to keep the real reason for their separation a secret, which meant it was important to him, and Seva couldn’t deny his friend that. Sonya had to be guided from the schoolyard so that she wouldn’t shout after him at the top of her lungs again.

“I know, but—”

“Okay, let’s just go to the park,” Seva cut her off, gazing cautiously in the direction of Svetka and company.

Sonya was surprised by Seva’s quick change of mind, but after following his worried look, she understood everything, nodded, and was the first to head to the schoolyard exit Seva hurried after her.

They walked to the park in silence. Seva was angry and couldn’t figure out whether he should actually talk to Sonya. On the one hand, what could she say to him that would make Zhenya feel better? And if he wasn’t going to feel better,

then why did he need this conversation at all? On the other hand, if Sonya wanted to explain herself, it would be decent to listen to her. Maybe this way Seva would understand how it was possible to cheat on Zhenya with this Emelyanov jerk.

As he approached the bench favored by their friends, he thought that he would talk to Sonya and later decide whether to tell Zhenya about it. If Sonya didn't say anything worthwhile, then why remind him of her once? Zhenya had barely gotten over it, and who knew how Sonya's reasons for her infidelity would affect him? Seva calmed down a little, sat on a bench, crossed his legs, and nodded to Sonya to take the opposite seat. "Go ahead."

Sonya hesitantly shuffled, raised her eyes to the overcast sky, took a deep breath, and finally sat on the edge. Seva noted that Sonya, energetic and always self-confident, was the same Sonya that was the strict older sister of his former comrade Dima Oskin, who'd once scolded them for listening to music loudly in the evening. This Sonya sitting in front of him, pulling the tip of her braid with trembling fingers, was slumped like a guilty first-grader in front of a teacher. She appeared confused, unhappy, and guilty before him.

"Not before me, before Zhenya," Seva mentally corrected himself and looked questioningly at Sonya.

She coughed softly. "It's my fault, I know. I'm not going to deny it. What I did was terrible, and there are no excuses for it. I'm very, very ashamed!" Sonya rattled off quickly. "I really want to apologize to Zhenya personally, but he doesn't even want to listen to me ... and is probably doing the right thing. That's why I decided to talk to you. You're his best friend. Surely, he'll listen to you!"

At the words "best friend" something twitched inside, but Seva didn't understand whether that pleased or upset him. He crossed his arms over his chest, trying not to betray his confusion, and muttered softly, "Do you think it'll be easier for him if you ask him for forgiveness?"

"No. Of course not." Sonya slumped lower even more, and the butterfly brooch, visible under the unbuttoned coat, sadly hung on one thread. "But I'm so, so ashamed! I want to do something. Zhenya is such a good person; he shouldn't suffer because of me."

“Can you explain then why you cheated on him ... since he is so good?” Seva asked gloomily.

Hearing the word “Cheated”, Sonya shuddered and lowered her eyes. She noticed the brooch had almost fallen off, broke the thread, and pinned it again, now upside down. She tried to fix it, but with trembling hands, she couldn’t cope with the clasp, and left it as it was. At last, she looked up at Seva with a haunted, remorseful look and said in a strangled voice, “I didn’t want to hurt him. Really! I didn’t think about it at all when ... when I was talking to Vasya.” Sonya blushed furiously.

“You couldn’t imagine that Zhenya might not like your ‘talking’?” Seva snorted.

Sonya blushed again; even her neck and ears turned scarlet. Of course, she understood everything perfectly. Seva was regretting that he had agreed to talk to her. Of course, she was ashamed! How could it be any other way? But she never said a word about why she’d done it, and these empty apologies and Sonya’s trembling voice, full of sorrow and sadness, were beginning to irritate him. Leaning back on the bench, Seva rubbed the bridge of his nose and asked wearily, “Did you ever love him?”

“Of course ... yes, I did!” Sonya jumped up. “When we started dating, I loved him very much. You probably know that we started dating back in the eighth grade. Back then, he seemed to me the best, smartest, well-read ... so educated and intelligent. My parents praised him in every possible way. They said he was such a well-mannered good boy, not like our peers. You know our families are friends, right?”

Seva nodded.

“And then, after a while, I realized that we’d stopped talking about anything other than studying. We didn’t do anything, we didn’t go anywhere, and we both didn’t have friends. We were always sitting at his house with our books. Only sometimes would we broke away from them to help each other. Although we saw each other every day, we became strangers, detached and distant. Once Zhenya went to the summer house in the summer, and our classmate invited me to walk with his friends. Well, I agreed—”

“In the summer?” Seva scoffed. “Do you mean to say that this affair of yours with Emelyanov has been going on since the summer? How do you even sleep at night?” He narrowed his eyes contemptuously.

“Hear me out, please,” Sonya requested quietly but firmly. “I agreed. We went for a walk, and I felt so good! I had forgotten I could have so much fun. We started walking every day, and it was the best summer of my life. I had never been so happy. Then Zhenya came back, it was the end of August. When the beginning of September came, he plunged headlong into his studies because of graduation class and everything. And I realized that I couldn’t do it anymore. I’m an excellent student anyway. I know biology better than anyone in the class, and I’m fine with the rest of the subjects. It usually takes me no more than an hour and a half a day to do homework.

“So, I continued to walk with Vasya and his friends. Zhenya didn’t mind. We only saw each other at school, and I didn’t notice how the feelings for him slowly began to fade. It seemed to me that the same thing had happened to Zhenya. And even more so, I didn’t notice how much closer I got to Vasya. So much so, that at some point, I realized that I could no longer live without him. It happened just a week before the New Year’s disco. Then he kissed me for the first time, and I succumbed ... even if my first impulse was to push him away,” Sonya said the last words in a whisper, but without regret.

Seva felt a little relieved. At least, Sonya has been cheating on Zhenya for not so long. But he still had questions. Lots of questions. They were silent for a while, and Seva reflected on everything Sonya had told him. Gradually, anger at her receded. He realized that Sonya was not at all a schemer, maliciously plotting against Zhenya, but a confused tenth-grader. An ordinary scared person, the same as him, even if she liked to pretend to be someone who knew everything. But, of course, this didn’t justify her betrayal. Sonya acted meanly and offensively, hurting someone who loved her. And her excuses were pretty mediocre. *If you don’t love him anymore, and your feelings have totally disappeared, then go ahead and break up, but don’t complicate life for yourself, Zhenya, or your Emelyanov. Especially after a kiss!*

Seva looked at Sonya intently. She had relaxed a little. She didn’t bite her

lips, her hands didn't tremble, and her gaze was no longer so hunted and unhappy. Seva grimaced, looked Sonya straight in the eyes, and dumped on her all the questions that had been soaring through his head over the past couple of minutes. "What makes you think that Zhenya's feelings for you have also faded away? Wouldn't it have been easier to ask? Why didn't you break up with him right after Emelyanov first kissed you? And how could you ever be bored with Zhenya? He's the most interesting person I know!" Having blurted the last question, Seva bit his tongue. He'd been too emotional.

"Wait, let's go in order." Sonya shook her head, confused. "I decided that Zhenya didn't feel anything for me because he wasn't eager to see me either. You spent all your time together; it was quite good for him. I offered to meet a couple of times and he agreed only when I asked for help with studies, and so I didn't ask anymore. Wouldn't a person 'in love' look for opportunities to meet?"

"Okay." Seva reluctantly accepted Sonya's answers. "Why didn't you break up with him right after?"

"I was afraid," Sonya cut him off. "I was afraid of Zhenya's reaction; I was afraid that everyone would find out about it—"

"Well, you should thank Zhenya. If it wasn't for him, the whole school would know about it. I wanted to tell everyone, but he talked me out of it," Seva confessed.

"That's what I meant! God, how could I do this to him?" Sonya gasped, in genuine despair. "I'm telling you that he's very nice, I didn't want to hurt him at all. I was afraid to say this, I was afraid of him, I was afraid of my parents because they are friends with his parents. I know for sure that they'll be angry with me, especially if they find out the reason for our break-up. Yes, it's very selfish and cowardly, but I couldn't help myself."

"Don't worry, only I, you and Zhenya know about it. Oh, Alina Denikina knows too. She saw you backstage also. But she promised to be silent," Seva reassured Sonya for some reason.

"Okay. Thanks. If Alina promised, then she really will be silent," Sonya smiled shyly for the first time during their conversation and immediately became serious again, as if afraid of her smile.

Seva sighed sadly. He was experiencing mixed feelings and no longer knew what to think. “Tell me, was this Vasya at least worth it?”

“Yes,” Sonya answered unexpectedly and firmly. Outwardly, she was transformed after the words. Straightening, she pushed back her hair, and fixed the crumpled collar of her coat. “I think I love him. He loves me too.”

Seva only nodded distantly in response. He didn’t know which part of this long conversation he should share with Zhenya. Everything he’d heard from Sonya could only make it worse. After thinking a little, Seva asked Sonya, “What do you want me to tell Zhenya?”

“I want you to apologize to him for me. Tell him it’s from the bottom of my heart. I think you can see for yourself how much it hurts me that everything turned out so terribly and stupidly. Thank him for me too for not telling anyone about ... that I cheated on him,” Sonya said with difficulty. “And also that he’s wonderful, the best, but we’re just too different. I’m not the girl he needs. You said it right; he’s the most interesting person you know, but he’s too withdrawn for others to see it.

“Your friendship seemed to draw him out. I’ve never seen him like that at a school disco or on New Year’s Eve. He was constantly rushing to you as if he was happy and having fun with you alone. Perhaps that’s how it is. I am very glad that you have become friends, I think, thanks to you, Zhenya will endure our break-up much easier. And he needs a girl just like you. Someone who will love him for who he is, with whom he can be himself, with whom he will think about something other than studying. Do you understand?”

Seva felt his eye twitching. No matter how Sonya proved that she and Zhenya are completely different, they had one thing in common: to strike the most painful places with words! *He needs a girl, you see!* The same as Seva, and she should fall in love with Zhenya ... the way he was. Were they mocking him? Seva couldn’t see it as anything but.

“Seva!” Sonya snapped her fingers in front of his nose.

“Yes, it’s good,” Seva responded, his mind elsewhere.

“What’s good? Will you talk to Zhenya?”

“Yes, of course. I’ll tell him everything.”

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After listening to Seva's long and confusing story, Zhenya sadly stated, "At least she regrets what she did. I understand her. I'd also be afraid to talk."

"To begin with, you wouldn't cheat," Seva snorted.

They had been sitting in Seva's father's garage for several hours. Perhaps they were sitting too close. The two of them were squeezed into Zhenya's favorite "windowsill without a window". Their knees rested against each other's and they could easily see their faces in the eyes opposite. At least, Seva definitely could. When he first started talking about Sonya, he plopped down next to Zhenya without hesitation so he could observe his reaction and shut himself up in time if he needed to.

Focused only on Zhenya's facial expressions and the correct and best choice of words, Seva told him the whole conversation from beginning to end, delicately missing his question, "Was it worth it?" He also replaced "I was bored with him" with a more neutral "Our interests diverged".

Zhenya listened attentively, nodded, but it was unclear from his expressions what he felt. Seva was upset by this, but when he finished the chaotic story, he exhaled with relief. Despite the excitement and haste, he'd smoothed all the corners that could be smoothed. The tension eased a little, and Seva looked at Zhenya inquisitively, trying to read in his eyes what he was thinking. He looked and suddenly came to his senses. What was he doing there, on the "windowsill" so close to Zhenya, almost touching his knee with his fingers?

Seva felt feverish and pulled his legs as tightly as possible to his body and wrapped his arms around them. The "windowsill" was very tiny but there were a few centimeters between him and Zhenya; at least Seva didn't touch him that way. From then on, it was both calming and a little annoying. If he hadn't paid attention to it, he'd now be sitting without twitching, and his knees would still be touching Zhenya's. Seva took a deep breath, clearing his mind and resting his gaze on the black pupils opposite him. Looking at his reflection in them was much more reasonable than hiding his eyes again and being afraid to look at Zhenya.



“Never say never,” Zhenya remarked philosophically and suddenly smiled. “Who knows what I’d have done in Sonya’s place.”

“You wouldn’t be afraid to talk to her honestly.” Seva carefully watched his reflection shrug.

“I think you’re idealizing me,” Zhenya chuckled. “I’m also a human being, and we all make mistakes.”

Seva shrugged again. Probably Zhenya was right. But how could he not idealize a person who was sitting next to him right now and was justifying the girl who cheated on him? For his generosity and attitude towards Sonya, Zhenya could be awarded the medal “the best man on this planet”! Seva himself would never have been able to do that.

“Aren’t you upset?” he asked cautiously.

“I don’t know,” Zhenya answered thoughtfully. “I don’t want to think about her, about what she did, but I can’t. It’s not about your conversation—it probably made me feel better—but about the fact that we study in the same class, and I saw her all day today with Emelyanov. It was very ... unpleasant.”

Seva sighed. That’s what he was afraid of. “And how was it during the holidays? Did you often think about her?”

“You know, I didn’t,” admitted Zhenya. “We walked a lot. I was always with you, and there was no time to think about Sonya. But now ...”

“Then maybe Sonya was right?” Seva suggested. “I’ve been thinking about it. Well, about her words. That her feelings were gradually fading away, and that she believed the same thing was happening to you. Maybe it was? I’ve been surprised for a while that you two don’t talk, you don’t even see each other on weekends, but I didn’t say it out loud. I thought I had no right to get into your relationship. Maybe you haven’t loved her for a long time ...?”

“But when you told me about what you saw beyond the stage, it hurt me. I don’t know if you’ve ever had this feeling, it’s hard to explain ... it’s like the air was knocked from your lungs and the ground was yanked from under your feet. If I didn’t love her, I probably would have reacted differently.”

Seva had experienced this twice. The first time was when he was told that his mom had gone and the second time was quite recently, when he realized that in

some incomprehensible way, he had fallen in love with Zhenya. It was a terrible feeling, and he wouldn't wish that on an enemy ... even more so on Zhenya.

"Of course, it hurt you." Giving up, Seva stared at his own interlocked fingers. "This is betrayal; it would hurt anyone. But maybe it's more in your head than in your heart? I mean, you used to think that you loved Sonya; you never questioned it, and even when you stopped loving her, you didn't notice. And now you understand, logically, that it hurts you, especially when you see her but you've been ready to let go of both Sonya and this situation for a long time. Well, I'm not saying that it is so"—Seva belatedly caught himself—"because only you can know how you feel, and if you still love Sonya, that's okay. You just need to get over it, although it will be hard at first, of course. But I'll try to be there and help in any way I can, I promise."

Seva's hand twitched involuntarily. He wanted to brush Zhenya's fingers but changed his mind at the last moment. However, Zhenya noticed his awkward movement. He smiled gratefully and put his palm on Seva's hand, accidentally touching his knee. Seva bit the inside of his cheek hard, but he didn't take his hand away. He couldn't.

"I didn't think about that," Zhenya said slowly, squeezing his fingers. "Maybe you're right. Perhaps I should sort myself out, and then decide what to do next. But, anyway, thanks. I'm glad you talked to her. It was like the stones in my heart fell away when you told me about it."

Seva smiled in response. It was becoming easier for Zhenya, and this was fine. It meant that he didn't talk to Sonya in vain and didn't choose his words carefully for nothing when he'd retold their conversation. But Sonya's words still wouldn't leave his head. "And he needs a girl just like you."

To fall in love with Zhenya the way he was ... the worst thing was that Seva knew, sooner or later, Zhenya would find such a girl. And, most likely, he'd be happy with her. Seva wanted Zhenya to be happy. He wanted it more than anything in the world. But he understood that he wouldn't be able to watch him with someone else. Seva disliked Sonya even before her betrayal. What could be said about the one that would make Zhenya happy, with whom he would want to spend all his free time with, and for whom he'd certainly be ready to cancel all

get-togethers with Seva?

And what would be left for Seva himself? Lying down at night again, thinking about Zhenya and going crazy, realizing that everything he felt was unhealthy, disgusting, and against nature and common sense? These thoughts were painful, wrong, and selfish, but Seva couldn't do anything about them—especially now, looking into Zhenya's eyes and feeling those warm fingers squeezing his limp hand.

## Chapter 13

### *The Pack Of “October”*

**A**fter their heart-to-heart conversation in the garage, Zhenya felt better. The next day, he told Seva he had thought about everything and realized that in recent months he'd hardly thought about Sonya, didn't want to see her, and thought about her only at school. So, he decided, feelings had long since begun to fade for both. Realizing this, Zhenya relaxed and could now be in the same class with her and Emelyanov. After a couple of weeks, he stopped even thinking about Sonya. The same way it had been even when they were still dating.

The group of new friends also played an important role in this. Having bought a little freedom, Zhenya began to treat his studies more simply. For example, one day, he determined that he would write a math test without preparation, and offered to take a walk with the others instead. Seva happily agreed. He liked spending time with them, even if a couple of months ago he couldn't have imagined that the foursome, his former comrades, a couple of tenth-graders, and Alina and Lelia could become friends. But they had, and now every evening they gathered in the park. Sometimes, on especially cold days, they would go to the home of Pasha, Alina, or Zhenya and listen to records, talk, and laugh late until their parents asked everyone to go home.

When the records got boring, Pasha pulled out a guitar, and Alina's musical education, and the literal breakdown of The Beatles' lyrics by Seva and Zhenya turned out to be very useful. However, Seva almost always became quiet, and all the laurels usually went to Zhenya. Seva saw how much he liked to be the center

of attention and casually bragged about his knowledge, and thought that he could do without it. If Zhenya was happy, then Seva was happy too. Even when he was by himself, Seva remembered that Zhenya was happy, and it became easier for him.

*So, you see, he'll stop putting grades first and will understand that there are more important things in life.* Seva crossed the road to Zhenya's yard. His heart was beating anxiously somewhere in his throat, as it always did before meeting Zhenya. Seva was used to taking a deep breath from time to time, wiping his perspiring hands on the legs of his trousers, clenching his fists behind his back until his palms bled, and doing other strange things. It had become commonplace for him. Today, just like other days, he drew more air into his lungs, abruptly opened the door to the Smirnovs' apartment, took off his shoes, ambled to Zhenya's room, and only then, finally, exhaled. "Hello."

"Uh-huh," Zhenya muttered inhospitably.

Seva just grinned. He was used to that too. He closed the door behind him, threw his briefcase on the bed, and walked over to the table, behind which Zhenya was posed like a question mark. "What are you staring at so intently?"

"At the notebook."

"Yeah. I see. What's so interesting about it?"

"A 'B', Zhenya replied.

Did it happen again? If Sonya wasn't his problem, then his studies definitely were. What the hell! Out of the frying pan and into the fire, as they said, trying to choose the lesser of two evils. Cautiously, he asked, "For what?"

"For the essay."

"You?" Seva asked incredulously. "Grammar?"

"No, grammar just fine. That's not important here."

"I don't understand," Seva honestly admitted.

"Me neither!" Zhenya exclaimed hotly. "A 'B'! For the essay! Me!"

"C'mon," Seva murmured soothingly. "It's just a 'B'. What does it spoil for you? A semester grade? Or are you afraid your parents will find out? So, explain to them that you'll fix it, that it won't affect the final grade in any way."

"I don't care about that. They won't find out. I don't report to them for every

test,” Zhenya said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Seva chuckled, embarrassed. He’d thought otherwise. “Then what’s the problem?”

“The ‘B’ is the problem! For literature! Okay, chemistry, okay, biology, even physics, yeah, okay! But literature? A stupid essay! I’ve never received a ‘B’ for an essay! For once, it was worth writing it myself ... and here you are!” Zhenya blurted angrily and threw the notebook off the table.

It flew across the room, hit the wall, and fell on the bed, opening to the page that contained the ill-fated essay. Seva’s insides tightened. Literally, five minutes ago he was glad that everything was fine. Had it been his imagination? What had he expected? That Zhenya, fixated on grades for ten years, would suddenly go against his beliefs and stop worrying about studying? That would never happen. Seva, immersed in his problems, forgot that he’d wanted to talk to him seriously; what could he expect? Of course Zhenya’s unhealthy obsession with grades had to reappear sooner or later.

It was necessary to talk to Zhenya. Today. Now. But firstly, he had to calm him down so that the conversation would go peacefully, so that Seva managed to get through to him, and not upset him even more. How would he do this? Seva had no idea, and chose the only option that came to mind, to ask gently and sympathetically, “Have you asked Darya Mikhailovna why? She usually always explains why she made an assessment, sometimes even correcting it.”

“She said it herself,” Zhenya replied. “You see, this isn’t my opinion. I wrote this way only because *it was necessary*, and not because I think actually this way.”

Seva was stunned. He’d expected anything but this. “Can I read it?”

“Go ahead,” Zhenya motioned the notebook. “You can read it. I’ll go out on the balcony to get some fresh air and calm down a little.”

Seva nodded and Zhenya, throwing on a jacket that hung on a chair, disappeared behind the balcony door. “That’s nice, we’ll talk about it after,” Seva thought with satisfaction and picked up the notebook from the bed. He opened the last entry and read the topic written in small, clumsy handwriting. He squinted. “The novel *Virgin Soil Upturned* by M. Sholokhov.” He was glad that

he had been regularly rewritten Zhenya's old notes for the last six months, because an unprepared person wouldn't understand a thing. "In his work, Sholokhov paints a realistic picture of the life of ordinary peasants in the crucial thirties ..."

Reading the essay was not easy for him. Zhenya's squiggles were as incomprehensible as those he'd seen in past. However, the further Seva read, the more amazed he became and the better he understood Darya Mikhailovna. The essay didn't look seem to be his own opinion, but rather a template in which Zhenya simply entered the right words. Seva was reading it for the first time, but the sentences were so dry and formulaic that it seemed as if he had been reading the lines for the tenth time. But it wasn't bad, just ordinary flawless text; it was scholarly and logical. Something, however, was confusing. Recently, just a week ago, they'd been sitting in the garage and Zhenya was reading a novel for the next day. He was reading and cursing ... because it was too difficult for him.

Seva didn't discuss the novel with him. Sholokhov was still on the list of authors whose existence he would prefer to forget. But Zhenya couldn't resist commenting; he was too indignant about forced collectivization and said he thought the creation of collective farms was simply inhumane. Seva had heard about this from his grandmother, who had watched everything with her own eyes: peasant riots, famine, theft, and destruction of collective farm property. Zhenya was told about the same thing by his father, who was born into the family of a dispossessed peasant. Having heard from his son about the book, Prokofy Ivanovich thoughtfully said, "A hard novel. And that time was terrible. No good purpose could justify all the horror that was going on in those years. However, it's hardly better now ... the same lawlessness, only less blood." Without adding anything to his vague statement, the man switched to questions about other subjects.

Seeing that Seva wasn't eager to talk about it, Zhenya came to his senses and changed the topic. Of course, he didn't ask him to write an essay, although now Seva regretted his tact. "I liked the novel, written with the pen of the master. It's full of colorful and realistic descriptions, is quick to read, and can be read in one breath."

“In one breath,” Seva chuckled, remembering how Zhenya stopped at every scene with violence, cruelty, and sometimes murder—there were many such scenes—and for a long time could not bring himself to look at the book again.

Having finished reading the last line of Zhenya’s outright lies, Seva threw it back on the bed. Zhenya had probably calmed down already, he decided, which meant it was time for them to talk about the essay. It was unknown where this conversation might lead, but it was impossible to do anything else. Seva shook his head, got off the bed resolutely and in two steps overcame the distance to the balcony door. He opened it without knocking, afraid of losing his confidence.

“I read your essay ...” He began from the threshold and immediately stumbled about the very threshold and his own words.

Zhenya jumped in surprise. Their gazes met. There were Zhenya’s frightened eyes, like a cat’s caught next to a broken vase, and Seva’s, which were amazed and quite a bit disappointed. For about ten seconds they looked at each other in silence, and Zhenya couldn’t stand it. He coughed, exhaling smoke, and brought out his hand with a lit cigarette from behind his back. He realized that there was nothing left to lose; Seva already had time to see everything.

“Wait a second, I’ll be quick,” he muttered hurriedly and leaned against the window frame, taking a last puff.

Seva shouted in a shrill voice, not his own. “Throw it away! Please, just throw it away!”

“What? Why?” Zhenya was confused, but he obediently put out the cigarette and carefully hid it in the pocket of his jacket.

Seva shuddered. For a few more seconds, he silently looked at Zhenya, and then abruptly turned around and left the balcony.

Perplexed, Zhenya followed him. “Seva? Are you alright? Ugh, I was afraid it was my mom! My heart is still pounding,” he grumbled.

“Everything is fine.” Sitting back on the bed, Seva waved a hand, but his voice trembled. “How long have you been smoking?”

The question sounded so deliberately casual, so tranquil, that Zhenya would never have believed it.

“Actually, since the eighth grade,” Zhenya chuckled and, noticing how



stunned Seva was, hurried to clarify. “Not every day, of course. It’s only when I’m nervous ... and it helps me calm down. Here, this pack,” Zhenya took out a half-empty October package from his pocket, “I’ve had it for three months. I’m not addicted, I just use it to put my thoughts in order. Why are you so scared? Allergic to smoke? If that’s so, then I understand. I won’t smoke in front of you anymore.”

“Is there such a thing as an allergy to cigarette smoke?” Seva was surprised. “I wasn’t scared, I just ...” He moved his lips, searching for the right word. Having come up with nothing, Seva helplessly blurted, “Please don’t smoke anymore—not in front of me, or ever!”

“I rarely smoke anyway,” Zhenya shrugged. “I don’t think it even counts.”

“It’s addictive,” Seva said quietly. “Even if you aren’t addicted now, you can become addicted later. I’m asking you to please not smoke anymore. Not ever.”

“Why are you so worried? Many people smoke every day, even my father! Everything is fine with them; they’re alive and well.”

Seva grimaced. “I know, I’ve heard all these stories. ‘I’m one hundred and ninety-two and I’ve been smoking since I was two months old. I feel great, I walk up to the twentieth floor, I do push-ups on one hand two hundred times a day. All the chakras and a connection with the cosmos have opened.’ It’s all contingent on the individual, Zhenya. You never know if you’re going to be an elderly energetic smoker or die at twenty from lung cancer or something like that. It’s better not to experiment with your luck, right?”

“And this is coming from you, the guy who begged the last of the alcohol from Rostik at New Year! Alcohol is also addictive, if you didn’t know.”

“I only did it once!” Seva was indignant, but under Zhenya’s mocking gaze, he stopped and wilted. “You don’t understand, it’s different. I mean, not really ... please, I’m just asking you. Don’t smoke anymore, especially if you don’t have an addiction!” Seva exhaled sharply, despaired.

He shouldn’t have insisted. Zhenya owed him nothing, Seva wasn’t one of his parents, and it wasn’t necessary to obey him. Zhenya was old enough to decide for himself whether he wanted to ruin his health. Seva understood this perfectly well, but the very thought that he might see Zhenya again with a

cigarette in his hands made him shiver.

Zhenya's mockery was replaced by concern. "Is it that important to you?"

"It is. I can't explain it, but ..."

"Okay. If it's important to you, I won't smoke anymore. I promise."

Seva smiled gratefully. "Thanks. Komsomol word of honor?"

"Komsomol word of honor," Zhenya smiled in response. "Here, look." He took the half-empty pack out of his pocket, crumpled it up, and threw it in the trash under the table.

Seva's eyebrows flew up in surprise. "I'd have taken your word for it."

"This is so there would be no temptation," Zhenya winked at him.

Seva snorted. "And you said you aren't addicted."

"I'm not," Zhenya declared with a flick of his hand. "Tell me, what did you read in my essay that made you burst onto the balcony so quickly?" He sat on the bed next to Seva.

Seva automatically moved closer to the headboard. "That's right, the essay," he frowned, putting his thoughts in order. "Zhenya, don't be offended, but Darya Mikhailovna is right."

"Why?" Zhenya was indignant.

"Because I know for sure that this isn't your own opinion. You told me about *Virgin Soil Upturned* no more than a week ago. You couldn't possibly change your mind so quickly. How can it be 'easy to read'? Do you remember how for half an hour you refused to pick up the book after another episode with dispossession?"

"I remember, but Darya Mikhailovna doesn't know that. Pasha wrote about the same thing, but for some reason, he has an 'A'. Apparently, *he* can hold such an opinion," Zhenya snorted.

"Darya Mikhailovna knows about it," Seva chuckled, confused. "At our last lesson, we talked about *The Fate of a Man*, and I said that I liked it, unlike *Virgin Soil Upturned*. It was the day after our conversation with you. And I talked about you, too. How was I supposed to know that you'd decide to lie so openly in your essay!"

"What was I supposed to write? 'The book is hard. It was unbearable to read.

I consider it inhumane and unfair’? Is it even possible to say that? Mention something like this at school and you’d be in trouble immediately!”

“If you think so, then yes. Darya Mikhailovna specifically asked for essays to be written on paper so that Andrianovna doesn’t go through them. She always said she wanted to know our own opinions. My grandma was her teacher; maybe that’s why they are so similar in their attitude to students. I think it was, thanks to them, that I fell in love with literature.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Zhenya said thoughtfully and started to get up, then looked at Seva incredulously. “Did you just say that you got into the discussion of Sholokhov? Voluntarily?”

“Sort of.” Seva lowered his eyes. “I don’t know what came over me. Maybe talking with my grandma had such an impact.”

Seva knew perfectly well what had come over him, and Varvara Kapitonovna had nothing to do with it. Once again, absently drawing stars on the margins of his notebook, he remembered a dream that he had had the day before. Not as obscene and disgusting as after the New Year, but colorful and pleasant. Of course, it was also about Zhenya. As soon as Seva remembered this, the color rushed to his face and he wanted to fall to the ground. It felt as if everyone in the class knew what he was thinking. In vain attempts to distract himself, he’d almost torn the notebook but then Darya Mikhailovna suddenly came to the rescue with the question, “And which of you has read Sholokhov’s *The Fate of a Man*?”

Slamming a pencil on the desk so loudly that the whole class turned to him, Seva blurted, “I’ve read it, and I think ...”

No one had asked for his opinion. But Seva didn’t care. He discussed Sholokhov’s novels with Darya Mikhailovna until the end of the lesson and at recess, he and Svetka went to the buffet for jam buns. During this time, he managed to calm down, and the rest of the school day passed without self-torture.

“That’s great!” Zhenya said happily. His eyes shone and Seva immediately, embarrassed, stared at his palms. He already knew that if he saw changes in Zhenya’s gaze, that he was looking at him too intently and much too long. “It

means that you are slowly moving away, returning to what you loved. You know, I don't care about this 'B'. It was worth it!"

Seva couldn't restrain himself and regarded Zhenya with undisguised amazement. "Are you serious?"

"I am! I'll rewrite it. Not a big deal. But the fact that you finally come to your senses is already worth a lot. I hope you'll come back to drawing too," Zhenya said quietly but firmly. "I want you to do what you like, and we both know it's neither physics nor mathematics."

Zhenya was right. They both understood why Seva had stopped drawing, reading, and being interested in things in this life, but only Seva himself knew that, thanks to Zhenya, he'd already returned to both.

Zhenya spoke sensible words. "I want you to do what you like." How ironic that they came from a person who'd been doing nothing all his life but studying against his will. Didn't Zhenya understand this himself?

"Not physics or mathematics," Seva agreed. "Maybe I'll start drawing again. Just remind me, if I suddenly start spending several hours a day with a physics textbook, even if I can't stand it, how normal that is."

"That'll be stupid. You're not a physicist, so why torture yourself?"

"For the good grades; what else would it be for?"

"Good grades are not worth bad nerves," Zhenya began and stopped, realizing where Seva was going. "But not in my case. I'm used to studying in this mode, so I'm fine. Moreover, you know that I'm doing this for a reason."

"You already have 'As' in all subjects, even physics. It used to make sense to study so much. You worked to maintain a reputation, and now it works for you. Even if you don't do anything, teachers will give you 'As', but you continue to torture yourself and worry because of those grades that don't affect anything. What for?"

"Because I not only need to get a good certificate, I also need to pass entrance exams. My 'reputation' won't help me in any way with them. I'll have to do everything myself, and every little thing is important, you know?"

"Zhenya, believe me, in our town you can go anywhere. Any university here will be glad to have you as a student," Seva sincerely assured him.

Zhenya raised his eyes to him, and it came to Seva so sharply that everything in his chest turned cold. “And where are you going to enter?” he asked, involuntarily averting his gaze.

“To Moscow, of course. At MSU.”

“I see,” was all Seva managed to say.

“Well, that’s if they take me.” Catching a change in Seva’s mood, Zhenya changed course. “It’s one of the best universities in the country, after all, and not everyone gets in.”

Zhenya would attend MSU. Seva had no doubts. Who, if not him? However, he couldn’t feel happy for Zhenya. Even the understanding that he would enter only after six months didn’t help. From the experience of the past few months, Seva understood perfectly well that six months would fly by with relentless speed ... and he’d not have time to look back.

But Seva didn’t have time to get upset; a spark flashed in his head. Zhenya would leave! He’d leave completely, forever, and would live in Moscow, a thousand kilometers from Seva and all his problems would be solved. He’d no longer have to hide his eyes and try, as he was doing now, to keep his distance, whispering to himself Tatiana’s letter to Onegin, memorized by heart, just to push the image of Zhenya out of his head. Over time, the feelings would fade, and someday they’d have disappeared completely. Even though life lost half its colors without Zhenya, Seva would regain something equally important: calmness and confidence in his own sanity.

“To what faculty?” he asked to say something.

“To the engineering faculty, most likely, and then we’ll see how it goes from there,” Zhenya answered serenely.

It looked like he didn’t care too much about what happened after admission. But Seva jumped up, forgetting about his mental anguish for a moment. “To where? Are you out of your mind?”

“I’m not,” Zhenya said calmly. “My father says that the most sought-after specialists come out of there. And higher mathematics hasn’t harmed anyone yet, so ...”

“You can’t even do the usual one!” Seva couldn’t resist.

“I can. I have good grades,” Zhenya retorted with the same calmness. “And the fact that I don’t like it ... maybe I’d like to lie down and curse at the ceiling, but I can’t do that all my life. I’ll figure something out.”

“You didn’t consider your option with the history faculty at all?” Seva asked in complete bewilderment.

“I was considering it. Earlier,” Zhenya said with slight regret. “From the sixth to the eighth grade, I was preparing to enter it, but my parents said that it was a useless specialty, and I changed my mind.”

“But you *like* it!”

“I also like riding a moped, but I can’t make a living from it,” Zhenya philosophically remarked.

“Why should I listen to the advice of a person who doesn’t follow it himself?” Seva asked wearily.

“These are different things. I’ve seen you draw, and I’m sure that’s your calling. But just because I like history books doesn’t mean I want to become a historian. Engineering sounds much more serious, don’t you think?”

“Maybe you should just admit that your father forced this on you?” jumped out of Seva’s mouth.

He immediately regretted his words. They were harsh, rude, and very different from those that were spinning in his head when he’d rehearsed the word. However, carefully considering what he wanted to say to Zhenya, Seva didn’t yet know that he was going to enter Moscow State University, never mind talking about taking up math! The news was so overwhelming and so absurd that Seva couldn’t blame himself for lashing out. His reaction seemed appropriate.

Zhenya seemed to understand this too. He didn’t pay attention to Seva’s harsh tone, although he had every right to ignore his tactlessness. But he just shrugged and calmly replied, “He didn’t force me, but showed me a better way, and I agree with him.”

“But he’s *forcing* you to do things you don’t want to do!” Seva exclaimed with great emphasis on the word “forcing”.

“He just gives me motivation when I start getting lazy. I wanted to go to MSU by choice, even without his insistence.”

After these words, Seva exploded. “*Motivation?* What do you call ‘motivation’? The instance where you spent six hours studying for physics, and your father scolded you for a ten-minute break? This isn’t ‘motivation’, it’s like flogging a dead horse!” Seva declared in rage. “Did you see yourself at the end of the last semester? I saw it, and I can say that I was scared to talk to you. You looked so angry and tired that it hurt to look at you. Your father doesn’t motivate you; he just devalues everything you do. I used to wonder why you can’t admit that you have good grades because you deserve it, but after I met your father, everything fell into place. Can’t you see what he’s brought you to? You know, the phrase good grades are not worth bad nerves, hasn’t been relevant to you for a long time. You simply have *no* nerves left! And you’re going to tell me that everything is fine and you have everything under control. Your nervous system is so screwed up and shaken that you nearly jumped out of the window because of the one ‘B’!” Seva practically shouted the last words.

He fell silent, as if releasing all the accumulated anger and indignation. Instead of rage, only emptiness remained in his chest, and Seva suddenly felt incredibly tired. Not just tired but squeezed dry like a lemon. There was neither the strength nor the desire to continue the argument.

Zhenya was silent. However, Seva wanted him to speak, to say something, so he could understand what he was thinking. Had Seva managed to reach him? Was he angry? Did he want to tell Seva that he’d maligned his father and had said nothing relevant? For a while, they looked at each other in complete silence. No one after Seva’s angry monologue dared to speak first.

Then a door slammed in the hallway.

“Mom’s back home.” Zhenya broke the silence. “Come on, let’s help her unpack her bags.”

Seva nodded, agreeing. He had no choice. Moreover, he didn’t know what else to say to Zhenya; he’d already thrown out all his thoughts and emotions, and now he was calmer. He slowly got off the bed, went to the door, and stopped, waiting for Zhenya. An absent glance slid along the lower shelves of the closet and stopped at the trash can under the table. Seva’s attention was focused on the crumpled cigarette pack, and suddenly something clicked in his head and a

memory from a month ago flashed past.

Seva frowned and held Zhenya's elbow as he left the room.

“When you told me not to walk you to the bus stop, was it just so you could smoke on the way to calm down?”

Zhenya chuckled, embarrassed. “I won't do it anymore. Honestly.”

Seva looked into his eyes, smiled involuntarily, and let go of his elbow. “I believe you.”

How could he *not* believe Zhenya?



## Chapter 14

### *Jam Bun for a Kiss*

Seva walked down the school corridor, habitually biting his lips. Over the past month and a half, there was no untouched place left on his lips; Seva frequently bit them until they bled. And he'd dared to say something to Zhenya about shattered nerves! If Zhenya was just neurotic, then Seva, for sure, was psycho. How could he not be, if everything around him contributed this? Even Zhenya's admission to MSU became a real torment. Zhenya would leave, and everything would fall into place again. He'd no longer have to nervously gnaw his lips, be afraid to look people in the eyes, and consider himself a psycho. But, of course, it wasn't that simple. No matter how much Seva convinced himself that everything would be fine with Zhenya's departure, deep down he knew that this wouldn't solve his problems. Psychos, deprived of the stimuli of their disorders, didn't cease to be psychos; they just calm down until a new one appeared.

Calling Zhenya "stimuli", Seva got angry at himself and tightly squeezed the handle of the briefcase. His nails bit painfully into his palms. There were more unmarked places left on them either. He couldn't stop thinking about Zhenya. Even when he did everything to avoid crossing paths with him, at least at school, life decided to make fun of him and deliberately pushed them together.

It happened again today. During the geography lesson, Seva sat by the window and copied a paragraph, lazily thinking that they'd have physical education next, along with the tenth grade. He didn't want to attend. Not only did the subject itself seem useless to Seva, but he'd also meet up with Zhenya

once again. It wasn't enough that he experienced trembling knees and downcast eyes after school?

Seva judged that it was enough, and turned to Alina sitting behind him with an offer to skip this pointless lesson. Alina wasn't surprised by the offer, but hesitated for a couple of minutes, after which she replied, "Okay, you win." And whispered to Lelia that they were not going to PE. Lelia nodded in agreement.

Through Dima, Alina passed along a message to the foursome about the planned absenteeism, and Alena and Nastya, who were ready for any excitement, except a hunger strike, quickly replied that they agreed too. Dima, of course, didn't have to confirm his agreement. After geography, they threw their bags into the locker rooms and, taking Rostik with them, a company of seven truants headed for the closed staircase between the third and the topmost floor. It was closed.

Pushing the door harder, it was possible to easily get into the most secluded place of the school, where couples or smokers hid from Andrianovna. Satisfied with the spontaneous outing, they settled comfortably on the stairs and began shushing each other and chuckling incessantly and discussing plans for the weekend. Seva listened in silence. He didn't care where the group decided to gather this Saturday.

He and Lelia sat shoulder to shoulder, and both looked at Alina, who was eagerly explaining something to Nastya. Seva heard Rostik telling Alena about the game that took place that week, which, of course, they won, and grinned to himself. He was sure that Rostik, who had never skipped PE in his life, agreed to this venture only when he found out that Alena would be with them. It seemed that he liked her. To Seva's recollection, Rostik never skipped PE lessons or hockey practice for girls. Of late, he'd become gallant and didn't even swear, and his speech was quite articulate. How sensational.

Alina didn't let Seva think long about the changes in Rostik's behavior. She poked him lightly in the leg with the toe of her shoe and asked, "And you, Seva, which would you rather prefer? To hang out at my place or go to the movies?"

Seva caught Dima's tense gaze. With a barely perceptible sigh, he shrugged. "I don't care. If you want, we'll hang out at your place. If you want, we'll go to

the movies. Whatever you say, put me down for it.”

Alina smiled, and Dima’s gaze went from tense to angry. Seva suddenly wanted to laugh. Poor, stupid Dima! If only he knew ... He wouldn’t have believed it anyway. He was so desperately jealous of Alina and Seva, closely watching their every move and instantly turning pale as soon as their eyes meet. He didn’t even suspect that Seva didn’t need Alina for anything. If their school had its red list, then Seva would top it as the oddest and only high-school student *not* in love with Alina Denikina. Thinking about it, for the first time in many years, Seva envied Dima. He was in love with Alina, hopelessly and desperately in love, but the feeling, even if painful, was at the same time so pure and beautiful. Dima didn’t realize how happy he should be. If only Seva could have his problems...

With the sound of the bell, the seven truants began to leave their shelter one by one. Seva came out fifth and hurried to the locker room, mentally calculating whether he would have time to redo his homework before the biology test. It seemed that he would. The recess was long and he’d take out his briefcase, return to class, and have more than fifteen minutes to redo his work. Even if he didn’t have time, he understood the topic. Zhenya had explained it three times the day before.

*“If I had been listening and not looking at the clock behind his back, it would have been wonderful,”* Seva mentally reproached himself. He had been having a hard time concentrating on his studies lately. Okay, he seemed to remember everything. Epithelial tissue, nerve, muscle, and this—what was its name? He frowned, straining to remember, but he didn’t have time. From the other end of the corridor, he noticed Zhenya walking towards him through a crowd of classmates. Thoughts about the test immediately disappeared, as if someone had knocked them out of his head with a powerful blow, like someone might remove dust from an old carpet. *“And why exactly did I just miss the lesson?”* Seva thought wistfully. It was impossible to turn around and go back. Zhenya could see him, and he would still have to go back to the locker room for his briefcase. Sighing with resignation, Seva continued to move forward slowly, towards an inevitable collision with Zhenya.

He stopped, waved a hand to Pasha to tell him to go without him, and smiled broadly at Seva. His heart skipped a beat, but Seva swallowed and courageously quickened his pace. Zhenya was waiting and if he continued to trudge at the same speed, it will be strange.

“Hi.” Seva forced himself to grin.

“Hi!” Zhenya happily slapped him on the shoulder. “Where did you disappear to? Why am I only seeing you now?”

Seva shrugged a shoulder lamely, simultaneously answering the question and thrusting off Zhenya’s hand. “We decided to skip PE. We were supposed to race today, so I thought that I didn’t need an extra ‘E’.”

Seva didn’t lie. They’d raced according to the curriculum today, but that wasn’t why he’d skipped, of course. And that wasn’t why he didn’t go to the cafeteria either. Their table was next to the table of the tenth ‘A’, and their seats with Zhenya were back-to-back with each other. Seva couldn’t eat under such conditions, so he wisely decided to go to the buffet during another break. The jam buns were being sold there today.

“That’s reasonable.” Zhenya suddenly approved of his absenteeism. “But do you know that you’ll still have to do this race?”

Seva waved it off. “Maybe he’ll forget about it.” And he entered the locker room.

He nodded to Pasha, pulled out his briefcase from under a pile of bags piled on top of each other, and started to leave, but Dima intercepted him at the door. Reluctantly, stepping over his pride and self-esteem, he asked, “Seva, have you been preparing for the test?”

“Sort of.” He watched for Zhenya to enter the room. He was impatiently shuffling from one foot to the other, wanting to get out of the locker room as quickly as possible.

“Can I sit behind you and copy ...?”

Seva chuckled. Dima’s father was seriously engaged in his studies again; he wouldn’t voluntarily lift a finger, and he wouldn’t even bother to copy it. He appeared to be a smart guy and his genes were probably good if his older sister and Zhenya were both competing for first place in academic performances. But

Dima had become friends with Rostik, and everything went wrong. He could have stood in the background of his athlete friend, at least with his mind, but Dima preferred to follow the path of less resistance. But it wasn't right for Seva to judge him. Judging someone else wasn't what Seva should be doing.

"If you can do it unnoticed, you're welcome, but you know that during Andrianovna's lessons, we always sit according to the seating arrangement."

"I'll figure something out," Dima promised. "But make sure your writing is very legible and bold, okay?"

Seva wanted to be outraged by his impudence, but out of the corner of his eye he noticed Zhenya by a locker, pulling off his T-shirt, and his mouth suddenly dried up. He could only nod in agreement.

Dima beamed. "Thanks!" He slapped Seva on the back.

"Uh-huh," Seva choked out and abruptly yanked the door open.

In the corridor, he heard Zhenya call out to him, but out of harm's way he quickened his pace and muttered to himself like a stuck record, "Epithelial, nerve, muscle ... and connective ..."

Seva walked down the corridor, biting his lips and clutching the handle of the briefcase until red appeared on his palms. He couldn't wait for summer, when Zhenya would leave and Seva's long-awaited freedom arrived! Even though something told Seva that it wasn't that simple, the obsessive thought that after Zhenya's leave he'd feel better, calmed him a little.

Even the worries that he had no idea what he'd do all day without Zhenya faded into the background. Of course, Seva would miss him the way he'd never missed anyone, but this longing will be bright, pure, and most importantly, understandable and easily explicable, unlike what he felt currently. Seva would be sad, his soul serene, and there'd be no worrying about something being wrong, unnatural, or even disgusting.

With these morose thoughts, Seva reached the class, sat at his place by the window, took out a textbook, and covered his ears with his hands, as if this could drown out his inner voice stubbornly repeating that he was slowly losing his mind. It turned out quite the opposite. In the ringing silence, his thoughts sounded even louder and Seva, closing his eyes, whispered, "Epithelial ... cubic

epithelium, flat, cylindrical and ...”

His confused monotonous mumbling, which resembled a prayer, was interrupted by Svetka. She’d snuck up from behind, put her hand on his shoulder, and laughed when Seva jumped in his chair from fright.

“Why are you so twitchy?”

“And why are you so impulsive?” he muttered, taking a calming breath.

“What was I supposed to do? You didn’t hear me calling you,” Svetka said.

“What were you call me for?”

“You were going for jam buns, and I want one too. I thought I’d catch you near the locker room, but you left so quickly,” Svetka explained. “Can we go now?”

“The recess will end soon,” Seva reluctantly drawled. “Don’t you want to prepare for the test?”

“I’m ready for it,” Svetka snorted. “We still have ten minutes. Come on. There won’t be any left at the next recess.”

Seva sighed. It was stupid to doubt that Svetka was ready for the test. He was too lazy to go to the cafeteria, but jam buns ... they’d not be there until Tuesday, and Seva’s stomach, not having had lunch yet, made that clear with a disapproving rumble that said it would be very useful to have a snack *now*. Giving up, he got up from his desk and warned, “But if there’s a queue, I’ll leave.”

“What am I? My own enemy, to come late for biology?” Svetka became rightly indignant, and they both left the classroom. “Why didn’t you go to PE?”

“So that I could avoid the race,” Seva answered, speeding up his steps so that Sveta would not see his face.

“Petrovich moved it to the next lesson,” she giggled. “We played volleyball today.”

“Well, okay.” Seva wasn’t upset. “But we decided that we’d go to the movies on Saturday.”

“Oh, that’s great!” Svetka was delighted and started to talk excitedly. “So, who’s all coming? Well, Pasha and I, of course. Zhenya, I think, too. By the way! I’ll have to remember to thank him again. He showed me how to hit the

ball correctly. Now, I'll finally have an 'A' in PE. And how does he manage everything, with normal subjects and with PE? Amazing!"

"*He doesn't manage it,*" Seva thought gloomily, letting Svetka go ahead on the stairs. What a goddamn curse! If he didn't think about Zhenya, then someone was there to remind him!

"Amazing," he agreed complacently and hurried to return the conversation to the movies. "Alina will be going, and your friends, Rostik, Dima, and Lelia. The whole group."

"Wonderful!" Sveta declared energetically. "I'll have to tell Pasha ... oh, there he is!"

Seva turned in the direction Svetka was looking and, with difficulty, hid the groan that escaped behind a cough. Pasha and Zhenya strolled from the buffet to meet them. In their hands they held jam buns wrapped in napkins. Sveta, breaking into a happy smile, ran up to Pasha. Seva trailed after her.

"We were just talking about you," Svetka immediately reported.

"And what were you saying?" Pasha was interested. "Surely, some nasty things?"

"Yeah, that's the only thing we can do," Seva chuckled as he approached them.

"No, we wanted to invite you to the movies. The others are going on Saturday," Svetka told him. "Will you go?"

"And me? Don't you want to invite me?" Zhenya was theatrically offended.

"Where would we dare go without you?" Seva snorted and nodded at the jam bun in his hands. "Are you experimenting with that today? You don't like jam buns, do you?"

"I don't like it," Zhenya agreed. "This is for you. We have lessons in neighboring classrooms, so I thought—more precisely, Pasha thought—to buy jam buns for Sveta, but I remembered that you also like them. So, I decided to buy it for you too."

"Oh, is this for me?" Sveta asked and gave Pasha a resounding peck on the cheek. "You are the best, thank you! We were just going to buy them," she explained, wiping off the lip gloss she'd left on Pasha's cheek with the sleeve of

her blouse.

“You see how timely we are,” Pasha smiled contentedly and gave the bun to Svetka. “I love you too.”

Zhenya handed his to Seva.

He nodded shyly. “You shouldn’t have. But thanks. I thought I’d starve to death.”

“It’s not a problem.” Zhenya waved a hand.

Pasha coyly exchanged glances with Svetka and feigned indignation. “Don’t you want to kiss Zhenya? Did he buy you this bun for nothing?”

Seva blinked stupidly. It was only after a few seconds that he realized that Pasha was just joking in his usual way; he hadn’t gotten into Seva’s head and wasn’t mocking him. Sounding as nonchalant as possible, he chuckled and said, “Absolutely.”

“Absolutely what? Kiss him!” Pasha declared.

Seva froze in confusion. There was a ringing in his ears, and his eyes seemed to blur, and he suddenly lost the ability to reason. He had no idea what to do. If anyone but Zhenya had been there, Seva would have found a way to laugh it off. Maybe he’d even have played upon Pasha’s joke by kissing them on the cheek; it wasn’t a big deal! But it was Zhenya.

Blood pounded loudly in his temples, and Seva stared at the trio with a helpless look. Pasha looked at him expectantly, Svetka with curiosity, and Zhenya smiled broadly, not resisting Pasha’s joke and not supporting it. Seva realized that he was attracting more and more attention to himself every second. How would he behave if someone else were in Zhenya’s place?

Seva squeezed the jam bun in his hands so hard that the filling dripped onto the floor. Fortunately, no one noticed. He took a long, shuddering breath and reminded himself that for everyone—Pasha, Svetka, and Zhenya—this was just a stupid joke. Calming a little, he drawled in a mocking tone, “You’re the best, thank you!” And, rising on tiptoe, touched his lips to Zhenya’s cheek.

He did it lightly, not even a peck, but just touched, not having time to feel what it was like. But everything inside him still went down, and his legs became heavy; it was hard to stand.



Zhenya, startled, answered in the same mocking voice, “I love you too.” Making a sweetie-pie face, he wiped nonexistent lip gloss from his cheek.

Seva bit into the jam bun.

Svetka snickered. “You’re both clowns! Come on, Seva, we have a minute left; we can’t be late.”

*Clowns!* Chewing savagely, Seva was indignant. *What clowns? At least they get paid, and I almost died just for free! Damn Pasha.* But all this was only in his head, and Seva hurried after Svetka. It was dangerous to be late.

“Today at four at my place!” Zhenya reminded him from behind, as if there was a need to do that.

Of course, at four, he’d be at the Smirnovs’ place. It couldn’t be any other way.

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Seva angrily threw off the blanket and then picked it up from the floor and covered himself up to his head again. For the fourth time that night, for sure. It was impossible to fall asleep. As soon as he closed his eyes, annoying thoughts entered his head. In a vain attempt to switch off, Seva cursed all of them: Pasha, jam buns, and the long recess, during which he’d dragged himself to the buffet. He didn’t even want to. It was Svetka who was to blame for everything. If she hadn’t insisted on it, he would have calmly reviewed biology and would have had a great sleep.

Before his eyes, those few seconds flashed again and again, deposited in his memory frame by frame: how he rose on his toes, the heat rushed to his face, his heart beat in his throat, and Zhenya’s face was very close, his curls almost in Seva’s eyes.

And then Seva seemed to be flying down from a nine-story building. The heart fell from his throat to his feet with such speed that it took his breath away. But he didn’t have time to understand what Zhenya’s cheek felt like. Soft and velvety? Hard because of those high cheekbones? Warm or cold? But it was good that he hadn’t had time. What would he have used that knowledge to do?

Why did Seva do it at all? He knew even then, standing in the middle of the school vestibule, that he would regret it. Why hadn't he just laughed it off or ignored Pasha's stupid joke?

Because of the fear of attracting attention to himself, Seva answered himself. Lately, all he did was try to keep a low profile, blend in with the crowd and behave like everyone else. Every time he was with the group of friends, he carefully made sure to stand no closer to Zhenya than the others, not to look at him for too long, and to communicate with him no more and no less than with the others. Seva understood that no one cared, no one noticed how he shuddered at Zhenya's touches, and how he forgot to breathe while standing next to him, but he couldn't help himself. Fear, an overwhelming irrational fear that someone might find out, held him down every time he was in public, so he clenched his teeth and tried to behave as if nothing had happened.

It became more difficult to be alone with Zhenya. There was no one around with whom Seva could orient himself, and he relaxed, forgetting that Zhenya wasn't allowed to know about any of it either. Ceasing to control his every breath, Seva kept catching himself looking at Zhenya openly for several seconds, and sometimes unconsciously reaching out to him, trying to accidentally touch his shoulder or arm.

One day, Zhenya was enthusiastically telling Seva something about his friends from the summer house and Seva didn't listen. They were sitting very close, bent over one photo, and Zhenya's curls were right in front of Seva's eyes. Seva looked at them distantly, without a single thought in his head. Zhenya's voice in the background seemed to plunge him into a trance, and he didn't understand how his hand had reached out to Zhenya's golden hair. He came to his senses only when his fingers touched a strand near Zhenya's ear, but it was too late to remove his hand.

Confused, Seva pulled Zhenya's curly hair, and he cried out indignantly, "Ouch! What are you doing?"

"You had something stuck there. I didn't mean to pull so hard. I'm sorry," Seva apologized, blushing deeply.

Zhenya looked at him doubtfully but said nothing and continued the story. Of

course, he couldn't imagine what was going on in Seva's head. No normal person could.

Seva lowered the blanket to his chin and turned on his other side. His eyes, long accustomed to the darkness, stopped at Sema, who was peacefully snoring on the next bed. Nothing bothered his brother, and he probably had already had his tenth dream.

Seva envied him and turned over on his back, staring at the ceiling. "*Why do I think I'm in love with Zhenya?*" he asked himself for the hundredth time. Maybe he made up all sorts of nonsense for himself, and now he was lying and suffering. Falling in love was about burning eyes, butterflies in the stomach, and wings behind backs, and not at all what was happening to him.

Once upon a time, his mom told him how she realized that she had fallen in love with his father. Seva remembered her story as if it was yesterday. They were on this very couch, unfolded, and his mom, putting him to bed, answered the questions he'd asked so that she wouldn't leave so soon. She answered briefly and to the point so that Seva would fall asleep as quickly as possible, but with one question, he realized that he had hit the bull's-eye. "How did you meet Dad?"

Mom's eyes sparkled, and she told a story that wasn't too romantic, in Seva's opinion, as if in one breath. In the university cafeteria, in line for cabbage pies. Could there have been something more banal? But Mom seemed to think otherwise. Seva, not wanting to miss the moment, immediately asked her, "And how did you know that you loved him?"

Mom smiled dreamily. "We were sitting at his house, and he was telling me something boring about cars, and I listened and was happy that he was near. And then I caught myself thinking that I wanted to kiss him. He did it first."

At this moment, little Seva grimaced, and Mom, laughing, patted him on the head. "Don't worry. Someday it will be your turn to tell me about it. I promise I won't make a face like I'm listening to you and chewing a lemon."

Seva snorted contemptuously. "There won't be my turn; it's disgusting!"

Mom gently pinched his nose and left.

Seva smiled sadly as he remembered those words. He'd been right. There

wouldn't be. For many reasons.

He used to believe his mom. Even now, almost two years after her death, their old conversations remained the only guidance for him. She was the only person he'd discussed really important things with. Even if naive and childish, Seva knew that his mother had always been honest with him, and he'd unconditionally believed her words. She wanted to kiss her father, and only then realized that she loved him.

Seva never wanted to kiss Zhenya. He didn't even think about it. So, he was probably right and all this "falling in love" was just a figment of his sick imagination. It would pass soon. To kiss Zhenya! What an absurdity, Seva thought. Sometimes, maybe he wanted to hold Zhenya's hand longer when shaking hands, to touch his shoulder, very rarely did he want to touch his disheveled curls ... but never to kiss him.

Seva loved hugging Mom, and he also loved holding her hand. He was just such a person. He liked tactility and what was wrong with that? Seva didn't force Zhenya to do anything and didn't try to touch him. To kiss him? Never!

Having placed everything on the shelves in his head, Seva felt relieved in his heart. There was nothing wrong with him. He hadn't fallen in love with Zhenya. He'd simply been overly impressed with Lelia's words that one night, that was all. Realizing the absurdity of the situation, Seva laughed with relief. *No, it's not Zhenya who should check his nerves, it's me.*

It was unbelievable to come up with such a thing! "Fall in love!" A minute ago he was seriously thinking about whether he wanted to kiss Zhenya. Seva smiled at his stupidity and wondered how he'd even imagined such a thing. Chuckling, he closed his eyes ... and a familiar scene appeared before him.

He and Zhenya were sitting at the table, bent over a book again. He was talking about something, his face again too close to Seva's. Naughty curls jumped in front of his eyes, but they didn't bother Seva. He looked at Zhenya, barely listening to what he said, rejoicing in the fact that he was near—just like Mom had with Dad. And then Zhenya suddenly fell silent. He peered at Seva with a long, attentive gaze, and in his brown eyes, Seva notices unusual bright sparks. And just as Seva was about to open his mouth and ask why Zhenya had

stopped talking, he leaned forward a little, ran his hand through Seva's hair, tucking a wayward strand always behind his ear, and stroked his cheek with his thumb ... before kissing Seva, who'd had no time to come to his senses, on the lips. He, of course, responded to the kiss ...

Seva jumped up from the couch so abruptly that the sound creaked throughout the apartment. His heart was pounding in his chest, and he was rushing around the tiny room, completely forgetting about his brother sleeping on the bed. *No, no, it can't be; it's some kind of nonsense!* Seva, in a panic, paced the distance from the table to the couch and whispered under his breath the numerous curses that he had learnt in his short fifteen years.

He was scared out of his wits, to the point that his knees trembled, and red circles appeared in front of his eyes. If Seva wasn't sure before, now there was no doubt left: he was insane and he should stay away from Zhenya.

In a fit of anger, Seva kicked the couch and was suddenly aware, and afraid, that he might wake up Sema. Seva didn't want to think about how to explain to his brother why he was rushing around the room in the middle of the night and hitting furniture.

As quietly as possible, he slipped out of the bedroom and locked himself in the bathroom. He looked at his reflection in the mirror with disgust. And just recently, he'd condemned Sonya! Compared to him, what Sonya did was nothing, a mere trifle. She was just a confused tenth-grader and Seva ... well, how could he be called anything other than "mentally ill".

He splashed icy water on his face and leaned against the sink, holding his hands under the frigid, cold stream. This sobered him a little, and soon his heart stopped bursting out of his chest, and his vision cleared. Gradually, the ability to think returned. He could no longer speak with Zhenya (at least so closely), that was for sure. Seva didn't want his illness, or whatever it was, to affect Zhenya in any way. He couldn't know about it! Seva couldn't imagine how disgusted Zhenya would become if he found out what was going on in his best friend's head. Poor Zhenya! He really didn't know how to choose friends or those people close to him.

Zhenya's face flashed before his eyes again. He was disappointed, just like

when he'd found out about Sonya's betrayal, and Seva clung to the edge of the sink with all his might. He wouldn't be able to avoid Zhenya forever. They went to the same school, had the same mutual friends, and they saw each other every day! But Seva could no longer afford to hang out with him, much less be alone with him. Who knew when the next ... "attack" of this bizarre illness would overtake him? It was impossible to risk it.

"Zhenya will leave soon!" A saving thought flashed through his head. And indeed, it was soon! Six months. Six months was nothing at all. *They will fly by, and no one will notice. Just six months and Zhenya will leave. He'll leave for good.* This realization began to please Seva. Of course, he'd come back during vacation, but surely Seva would have had time to sort everything out, and their get-togethers wouldn't seem so terrible. In the meantime, he had to grit his teeth and endure while trying to figure out how to avoid Zhenya these next few months. First, he'd probably need to keep their get-togethers to a minimum.

Upon making that decision, Seva stalled. He still couldn't think straight, so he stupidly stared at the water pouring from the tap, which he hadn't bothered to turn off. His head was so empty that it seemed to ring. Sitting on the higher side of the cold bathtub, Seva rocked back and forth in a detached manner and whispered something to himself. When he came to his senses, he froze, and a barely audible "six months" flew from his lips. The gaze stopped at the turned-on tap, and Seva finally twisted the tap in the opposite direction. There was sudden deafening silence in the bathroom.

He was unsure how long he sat like that, in silence and without movement; Seva completely lost track of time. When there was a gentle knock on the door, he was so scared that he jumped off the side of the tub and tumbled to the floor.

Sema's worried question came from the corridor. "Seva, what are you doing there?"

"Nothing, one moment," Seva replied, startled by the sound of his voice, and hurriedly got up from the floor and opened the door.

His sleepy younger brother, in a rumpled nightshirt, entered the bathroom and stared at Seva with incomprehension.

He immediately got angry. "What are you staring at?"

“Why did you get up so early? Did you even sleep?” Sema asked anxiously.

“I did,” Seva lied. “I was thirsty, so I woke up.”

“I’ve been waiting for you to come out of the bathroom for half an hour. You were that thirsty?” Sema chuckled and immediately became serious. “Are you alright? You’ve been kind of ... different lately. Kind of weird.”

“Everything is fine,” Seva said dismissively, displeased and annoyed by his brother’s observation.

“Are you sure? You’re not yourself ... you’ve become haggard, and you’ve even lost weight.” Sema looked at Seva with genuine concern, but he only shrugged his shoulders.

“It’s none of your business,” he snapped and hurried out of the bathroom.

He reached the room and collapsed on the bed, yanking a blanket over his head. Seva felt as if he had been carrying the hated potato nets all night. He didn’t have the strength to think about doing anything, let alone actually doing something.

Exhausted and crushed, Seva curled up and pulled a pillow over his head. He wasn’t going to go to school today.

## Chapter 15

### *It's Not the Same*

“**H**ow long will you spend there? Until five, six in the evening?”  
“Until eight o’clock,” Seva lied. He was usually home at half past five.

Throughout the second hour, he had been sitting at the table with his back to Zhenya and diligently coming up with all sorts of excuses. They all turned out pretty mediocre. Seva was repeating boring excuses that neither Zhenya nor he believed. If Seva was tired of them and didn’t feeling anything but boundless fatigue and irritation, then he should be upfront. Zhenya was getting angrier and angrier.

What could Seva say? The previous month they saw each other no more than twice a week; even at school, Seva avoided Zhenya in every conceivable way. It was almost impossible to do this so that he neither suspected anything nor took offence. The problem wasn’t just finding a plausible excuse. Even the first evening, Seva realized that without Zhenya, he had absolutely nothing to do.

Listening to the “borrowed” records a couple of months ago alone was not fun, and he didn’t want to remind himself about Zhenya. Seva couldn’t concentrate on reading, let alone studies. From boredom and idleness, obsessive thoughts began to creep in again, one more disgusting than the other, and there was nowhere to escape when he was alone in an empty room.

Seva tried to be honest with himself. It wasn’t so much that he wanted to find entertainment for himself, but the fact was that he was trying to escape from himself. If his thoughts hadn’t scared him so much, he would have been lying



quietly all day, staring at the ceiling, just like when Mom died. Back then, his thoughts were clear, understandable, and didn't frighten him at all.

These were the very sufferings that, as his mom had said, made a person purer and stronger. His sick, disgusting thoughts about Zhenya weren't doing anything, except turning him psycho. Therefore, he couldn't fully indulge said sufferings. He remained only to avoid them, concentrating on conversations with his grandmother, and mindlessly picking at the wallpaper on the wall by the couch. Seva tore them right off in strips, not even considering what his father would say to him if he ever pushed the couch away and saw a bare wall behind it.

In the end, Seva couldn't stand it. In the middle of the night, tearing off a particularly long piece of wallpaper, he growled hollowly, jumped up from the couch and rushed to the table. He pulled out paints, brushes, and a piece of paper from the drawers and sat down to draw. Dipping the brush into the cup, Seva didn't yet know what he was going to draw; he just wanted it *not* to be connected with Zhenya.

Without marking out the sheet, without making pencil sketches, he randomly applied stroke after stroke, enjoying the way the colored watercolor appeared on white paper. After a while, the strokes acquired clearer outlines and after adding a dirty yellow color, it became obvious that Seva was painting a rainy, autumn forest. With a brushstroke here and another there, he noted with pleasure that Maria Viktorovna would have had a heart attack. The landscape turned out to be so dirty, sloppy, and pathetic that it stirred ambivalent feelings and seemed repulsively attractive and breathtakingly creepy. Then he thought that he'd associated the forest with Zhenya, and almost tore up the drawing. But he restrained himself in time. He could claim that he associated everything with Zhenya. He shouldn't go crazy; he already done so.

Lying down to fill up the remaining couple of hours, as usual, Seva wanted to throw out the drawing, but changed his mind. He put it on the windowsill, behind the curtains, away from Sema's eyes, so that it would dry. Covering himself with a blanket over his head, Seva didn't feel happy, but a soothing fatigue spread throughout his body and closed his eyelids, and contentment

allowed him to forget about Zhenya for a while. Later, lost in a dream, his brain kindly reminded him of that.

Seva became a little more relaxed. When thoughts of Zhenya seemed unbearable, he either went to his grandmother or sat down to paint, depending on whether Sema was at home or not. The drawings turned out to be different, each one unlike the other, but all equally gloomy, expressive ... and far from ideal. Seva even drew a cemetery but later, angry with himself, tore it up and threw it out.

Seva began to think about Maria Viktorovna every day. Almost as often as about Zhenya. Whenever he thought about him and sat down to draw, Seva immediately remembered Maria Viktorovna. He had an obsessive desire to apologize to her first, and then he wanted to draw again. With a brush in his hand, Seva felt confident and calm and most importantly, his thoughts were far away, where there was no place for Zhenya, nor his illness, nor endless fear and eternal anxiety.

At first, he didn't take his desires too seriously, but the further he went, the more he realized that he wanted it more and more. He was still ashamed before Maria Viktorovna and the coward in Seva drove away thoughts about her. It probably would have gone on for a long time if Zhenya hadn't start suspecting something.

They'd hardly talked to each other outside of school for a week and a half, and even naive, trusting Zhenya had long realized that something was wrong. Then Seva decided, if he said that he had started taking extra classes with Maria Viktorovna, all the questions will immediately disappear, and Zhenya would even be happy for him. Then he wouldn't have to deceive him. Seva was so tired of his endless lies!

The very next day he overcame his fear and came to Maria Viktorovna with remorse. When he appeared on the threshold of the classroom, she looked up from some papers and stared with incredulous amazement. "Temkin? Is that you?"

"It's me, Maria Viktorovna. Who else would it be?" Seva chuckled, blushing intently.

“I don’t even know.” Maria Viktorovna sighed softly, as usual. “And why did you decide to come see me?”

“I missed you,” Seva blurted. “And drawing ... I miss everything.”

“Did you come to your senses!” She threw up her hands theatrically.

“Sort of,” he muttered, confused. “I’m sorry that I refused to go to your extra classes in the eighth grade, I don’t know what I was thinking then. But now I’ve rethought everything, and I want to draw again,” Seva said shyly, shuffling his feet on the wooden floor.

While he was saying this, his stomach clenched with excitement. After almost two years, he, who once declared that he wasn’t interested in art and that he was sick of drawing, suddenly showed up and advised Maria Viktorovna that he’d had an epiphany ... that he wanted to draw again! Six months ago he had broken a window in her apartment. Even though his father paid for the installation of a new one and settled the conflict a long time ago, the situation had been a tense one.

Maria Viktorovna could have driven him away as soon as he appeared on the threshold. But Maria Viktorovna was kind, understanding, compassionate, and not at all vindictive. Therefore, she only smiled. “I knew you’d come back. Let me ask you why you suddenly changed your mind. Why now?”

Seva exhaled and whistled softly. What should he say? He didn’t want to lie to the kind, warm-hearted Maria Viktorovna. But what was the truth? “*I fell in love with my best friend. I can’t think about him anymore, and drawing helps distract me*”? Or maybe, “*I’m always sitting at home and not talking to anyone, and my friends and my grandmother are starting to suspect something, and I need an alibi so they don’t worry.*” Or, “*I can’t cope with my emotions anymore, because they drive me crazy, and drawing is the only way to throw them out painlessly, without consequences.*”

The last option was the most acceptable, but in all cases, Seva wanted to draw to extract some benefit from it: to distract, to forget, to wipe out emotions. There was some kind of cold calculation behind his words. Maria Viktorovna couldn’t stand the consumer attitude to art. She believed that a person should work for art, not art for a person. Seva had to direct his feelings, whatever they

were, in the right direction, and not clutter colors with emotions; he needed to pour out his soul. Maria

Viktorovna would welcome this approach. She considered sketches made in fits of rage, anger, despair, or unbridled happiness to be drafts, sources of inspiration for truly serious works. “Art is not just emotions. It is, first of all, self-discipline ... and colossal work,” she liked to repeat, looking at Seva’s chaotic, sometimes completely disorderly drawings.

Seva had eventually become imbued with her words. Any art, and especially painting, became for him not just a chaotic, meaningless flight of feelings and emotions, but long, painstaking work in which you placed your soul. And for no reason, under any circumstances, should it be used for selfish purposes. Now, standing in front of Maria Viktorovna and looking her straight in the eyes, he could couldn’t offer anything from the options spinning in his head. His conscience was tormenting him.

Coughing uncertainly, Seva spoke softly at first, and then became louder and more confident. “Because I can no longer deny that this is what I like to do the most. Nothing makes me feel euphoric anymore, as if I’m alone and the whole world doesn’t exist and there is no time, no space, nothing at all. I can no longer deny and invent excuses when I’m advised to do it again.”

Having given out his short but sensual speech in one breath, Seva was surprised to notice that there was much more truth in it than he’d thought. If he’d discarded all the unnecessary details that Maria Viktorovna didn’t need, that was how it was. He could no longer deny that nothing helped him feel useful and nothing truly meant more to him than drawing; nothing strengthened him as much. Which meant he was *almost* honest with her.

With apprehension, Seva looked at Maria Viktorovna and warily watched for her reaction. He expected the worst and was even prepared for the fact that she would get angry and chase him out of the room, but the fears weren’t justified.

Slightly tilting her head and looking attentively at Seva, as if she were seeing him for the first time, Maria Viktorovna held up a hand. “Alright. Accepted.”

Seva gasped with delight. “So, that means ...”

“Yes. It does,” Maria Viktorovna nodded without taking her gaze from him.

“And you’re not even mad at what I said to you in the eighth grade? And about the window? Aren’t you mad at me for your window?”

“I’m angry, of course,” she said softly, even affectionately. “And not so much for the window, but for the fact that even after that, you didn’t come to see me, although it seemed a sign of fate. But even if I’m angry, who am I to stand between young talent and art?”

Seva felt his heart flutter from the warmth and tenderness that suddenly overwhelmed him for Maria Viktorovna. During the previous two years, he’d managed to forget how amazing, kind, and understanding she was. How could he refuse her classes? Did he have the conscience to offend her?

“Thank you,” was all he could say. “Thank you ... it means a lot to me. On what days do the classes take place?”

“Why do you need classes, Seva?” Maria Viktorovna asked in a slightly bored tone, resting her cheek on her hand.

“What do you mean?” Seva didn’t understand. “To study. That’s what I came here for.”

“Do you need to study with someone else? Do you need a team for moral support?” Maria Viktorovna chuckled, and Seva was completely lost.

“Well, no, I can handle it myself. I mean, without the team, without you, of course not—”

“Don’t delay, just tell me. Will we study individually? Are you ready for this?” Maria Viktorovna asked directly.

Seva’s expression revealed bewilderment. “Me?” After a few seconds, finding the power of speech again, he stupidly stated, “Of course. I’m ready! Well, if you think ... if you think that I—”

“I think, Seva, I do,” Maria Viktorovna interrupted his incoherent, confused flow of words. “But I hope you understand that what was in the seventh grade was nothing. I’m going to be much stricter now.”

“I understand,” Seva nodded eagerly. “You can tear up my drawings if you want to!”

“Impressive! You’ve become very accommodating.” A smile softened Maria Viktorovna’s serious face. “If you’d always be like that, you’d be priceless.”

Seva promised that he would.

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“I didn’t get home until half past eight.”

Seva didn’t take into account that even Zhenya’s desire for him to return to drawing wasn’t unlimited. At first, Zhenya was delighted with Seva’s classes and happily stated, “Of course, stay with Maria Viktorovna for as long as she asks. We’ll take a walk in the evening without you.”

The next day he found him at recess and asked him in detail about everything related to drawing, even if he didn’t understand anything about it. Seva, just to be cautious, always stood at least a meter away from him, and answered in detail. He liked drawing again and Maria Viktorovna was unusually kind and generous with praise; each lesson became a saving hour of escape from reality. It was worth picking up a brush, as Zhenya, and his, Seva’s, problem, and all the other issues that were attached to the two flew out of his head. Seva had no idea that he would return to drawing like this, abruptly, as if he’d jumped off a cliff, but the jump turned out to be so necessary for him that he didn’t regret it for a second.

Not everything went as perfectly as he’d planned. At first, Zhenya was understanding and even happy for him, then later he began to realize that something was wrong. The “extra classes” took up too much time, suspiciously so. Each time it became more and more difficult for Seva to explain why they couldn’t meet, and in the end, Zhenya completely stopped taking his excuses seriously.

“You used to come whenever you wanted, at nine in the morning, even at night,” Zhenya grumbled.

He was lying, of course. Seva never came to the Smirnov’s late at night. Usually, he came much earlier. What else did he have to do? But Seva understood why Zhenya was angry. He understood and diligently pretended to be a fool, acting as if everything remained as before. They hadn’t seen each other for more than a week. Was it a big deal?

Actually, it was. Because they used to see each other every day. Seva understood that too, but there was nothing he could do.

“I’m just always tired after the lesson,” he said softly, not knowing what he was expecting from him.

Maybe Zhenya would take pity and finally leave him alone, but it wasn’t so easy to be soft or considerate with him.

“Last week you said that you had a fever every night, and the next day you came to school,” Zhenya snorted. “Try to come up with something more acceptable.”

Seva jumped up with mock indignation. “Did I ever deceive you?”

Zhenya smiled sadly. “You did. After the New Year, when you didn’t want to tell me about Sonya. Then, by the way, you also said that you were sick. What don’t you want to tell me about this time?”

Seva gauged Zhenya with a long, attentive look and turned his back to him, staring blankly at the dark surface of the table. Zhenya, as usual, had hit the spot, and again it was the most painful spot. Seva had something to hide from him, and this time it was much worse than Sonya’s betrayal. And he really should lie to Zhenya in a more believable way. Even a first-grader wouldn’t have been believed his excuses, they were so ridiculous. But on the other hand, how could you avoid a person you saw every day so that he didn’t suspect anything?

Zhenya was not a fool; he understood perfectly well that Seva couldn’t be so busy every day and get so tired from his drawing classes. He couldn’t be going to lessons every day either, because Maria Viktorovna had enough headaches without him. Seva also understood this, but the further along he went, the fewer excuses he had left, and therefore he had to repeat them.

This caused intense discontent in Zhenya. Discontent was an understatement because this was already their third or fourth conversation about this. Each time, there were fewer justifying words.

“Nothing.”

But now, it had reached the limit. Seva couldn’t articulate properly. He couldn’t see Zhenya’s expression, but he was sure that he’d be rolling his eyes and silently cursing. When would the torture end? Why couldn’t Zhenya

understand that he couldn't know the real reason for Seva's strange behavior? He wouldn't want to know it; no normal person would.

Seva continued to remain silent, and after several minutes of tense silence, Zhenya could no longer stand it. "Seva, I'm not talking about any particular day. We haven't seen each other more than seven times outside of school in the last month, and each time you tried to leave as soon as possible. I'm not stupid. I understand perfectly well that you couldn't have possibly become so busy so suddenly. Just tell me what's going on and I'll leave you alone. I promise!" he stated quickly, anxiously.

Seva wanted to cry. Not even cry, he wanted to become hysterical. The situation was so absurd and hopeless. What was he supposed to tell Zhenya? To lie again so that he would say, "I don't believe you"? To keep silent? To tell the truth? If Seva wanted to be sent to a mental hospital, he would have called there directly, without intermediaries.

"Nothing is going on. I've told you a hundred times. Everything's fine. It just happens that way," Seva repeated his lie, wringing his hands under the table.

"You told me that last week and the week before, but what's the use?" Zhenya muttered regretfully. "Couldn't you have had at least a little more time for me in those ten days?"

*"Believe me, I have. In my head, I only have time for you, even if we haven't talked for ten days,"* Seva thought dejectedly, but only said out loud, "If I could meet you for at least an hour, I'd do it."

"But you found time to go for a walk with Sveta," Zhenya grumbled.

Seva blushed. "We didn't go for a walk. She asked me to accompany her to her aunt's for books after school." At least he wasn't lying about it.

"Whatever you say," Zhenya agreed wearily. "Seva, if you don't want to be friends anymore, just tell me. I'll understand, it's okay. Sad, of course, but okay. I've thought about it so many times ... you understand that it's not the first time I've bothered you, and I've done it so obsessively that I'm sick of it. I'm humiliating myself with my lamentations about us not seeing each other. I see how it annoys you. But it's important to me. That's why I behave like this. Isn't it important to you?"



Seva wanted to fall to the floor. Of course, it was important to him! It was the most important thing in his life. There was nothing Seva was more worried about than Zhenya and their friendship. But he couldn't be near him. What kind of friendship were they talking about? Seva couldn't calmly wait for Zhenya's departure and exhale with relief. These unbearably long six months had still to be endured, and everything was already going downhill.

During their conversation, Seva had thought about actually telling Zhenya that he didn't want to be friends with him because it would be better for everyone concerned. Seva would no longer have to think up stupid excuses for his strange behavior, and Zhenya would cease being so worried. To know the truth was always better ... or rather a half-truth. The real truth was the worst thing right now.

But after Zhenya's words, Seva couldn't do it. What kind of monster would he be, having heard from a loved one about how important he was to him, and say in response, "I don't want to talk to you anymore"? Such cruelty seemed heartless. Seva mentally issued a full-of-doom groan.

He finally turned to face Zhenya, resting his elbows on the back of a chair and clasping his fingers in a tight lock, he tried to give his voice sincerity and emotion. "It's important, Zhenya. My friendship with you ranks first place among everything. If I didn't want to talk to you anymore, then I'd say so directly. Do you remember how it was with Rostik and Dima? I didn't avoid them, I just stopped talking with them, and that's it. But I want to be friends with you. I have no one closer than you, no one I'd be more interested in than you. Don't you understand?"

Zhenya's face softened a little, and he said quietly, "It sounds convincing. But I still don't understand why—"

"I started drawing again, that's why." Seva threw out his last trump card and rested his chin on his hand. "Every day, when I come back from school, I draw. I'm not avoiding you, I'm not thinking about how to get rid of you as soon as is doable. It just takes a lot of time to draw. Ask anyone. As a child I used to stay at home for weeks when inspiration came to me. And now, after almost two years, in which I haven't picked up a brush ... well, you understand."

Seva realized that it was an act of manipulation, and he wasn't proud of himself. He knew perfectly well how Zhenya was worried about his art "Career" and as soon as Seva mentioned it, he immediately softened. What Seva had said wasn't a lie. Everything was happening that way. But he became unbearably ashamed. How could he so cynically manipulate Zhenya's sincere and pure motives? Again, he used art for his selfish purposes. He'd once let Maria Viktorovna down. What was wrong with him anyway?

Zhenya stared incredulously at Seva's face, but he didn't bat an eye. He'd become used to his endless lies over the past couple of months. If he had to take a polygraph test, nothing in his indifferently calm face and relaxed posture would give him away. And Zhenya believed him, fell for his manipulation again. But this time he wasn't happy at all; he was sad and resigned. "Does that mean you'll always be at home now? We'll only see each other at school?"

"No," Seva replied. "Sooner or later, it'll be different. A change of scenery is generally useful; if I stay at home forever, I'll go crazy, and inspiration will leave me. But right now, I'm still full of energy, and so I'm constantly drawing. Later, I think, everything will return to normal. Just like today. Don't forget that I came to you."

"You did," Zhenya chuckled. "For the first time in a week and a half, thanks for that."

"Maybe," Seva reluctantly agreed. "But I'm telling you, it's all about inspiration. Soon, it will leave me, and I'll start to see you again."

"No, it's better it doesn't leave. Keep drawing." Zhenya feigned a frown.

"We'll see each other, I promise," Seva assured him. "At least once a week, I'll surely find time for you."

He thought, "*What's wrong if we will meet occasionally?*" Zhenya didn't force him to come every day, and once a week Seva could somehow survive.

Everything was fine today. They'd met a couple of hours ago, and he'd still managed to keep himself in control. The main thing was to remember the distance; everything would be fine. He'd be able to save both his friendship with Zhenya and his nervous system. "*If there's still something to save,*" he thought wryly.

“Good,” Zhenya nodded, smiling. “Since we agreed on ‘at least once a week’, then let’s do it on the weekend? Everyone will be gathered at my place.”

“No problem,” Seva agreed contentedly.

It was much easier to control himself within the group of friends. He’d sit with everyone for a couple of hours, even with Zhenya. It wouldn’t be necessary to do a lot of talking, and they’d simply spend time together. He’d chat with Alina, listen to Svetka, laugh at Pasha’s jokes. Until next week, he’d be free as a bird.

“Agreed.” Zhenya loudly clapped his hands and said, “By the way, if you want, you can stay overnight as soon as everyone leaves. My parents won’t be there. A friend of my father’s promised to get me a new record.”

Seva’s insides turned cold. He’d decided something, and here it was again! Staying at Zhenya’s for the night was not part of his plans. It was stupid to even consider it. He could survive a couple of hours with their friends, but spending the whole night alone with Zhenya was beyond possibilities. Trying to make his voice sound as carefree as possible, Seva replied, “I would love to, but my father won’t let me.”

Zhenya stared at him, baffled, and Seva immediately realized that he had blurted something stupid. He mentally cursed and sighed in resignation, thinking of an excuse for his rash statement.

“Since when are you not allowed to go to sleepovers?”

“Well, you know how weird adults are. Today they say one thing, tomorrow another,” Seva drawled unconvincingly.

“And what makes you think that your father will not let you stay?”

“I just assume,” Seva muttered under his breath.

“You didn’t *assume*. You said it with confidence,” Zhenya frowned, but did not continue to clarify further. “So, will you come? I’m sure he’ll let you go. If he let you go to the summer house for a few days, then it’s a sure thing for the weekend.”

“I won’t come,” Seva answered, frowning, and almost hit himself. Why didn’t he say, “I’ll ask”?

“Why?”

“I ... I like to draw at night,” Seva muttered helplessly, turning pale, and looked at his watch. “Damn, I didn’t notice how late it is. I should go.” Without looking at Zhenya, he abruptly got up from the table, grabbed his briefcase, and headed for the door.

His temples were pounding. *Hurry, hurry, away from here! Anywhere.* As long as he no longer had to feverishly find excuses and painfully choose the right words and be afraid to say something wrong. He’d already blurted out some nonsense to which no excuses would help. His refusal to stay at Zhenya’s for the night sounded so ridiculous. Such a hasty and urgent exit from the house only added fuel to the fire, but Seva no longer had any strength to think about it.

“Are you kidding me or what?” Zhenya shouted behind him in a voice that was strange to him, and Seva, startled, froze before the door. “I can understand everything, but this is beyond comprehension!”

Clutching the handle of his briefcase, Seva whispered a curse and turned to Zhenya. The fear streaming through him from head to toe suddenly gave way to fatigue, which was unbearable and insurmountable. The legs stopped feeling wobbly; on the contrary, it felt as if they were filled with lead, and his pounding heart calmed down. How long could he do this?

Having observed an enraged Zhenya with indifference, Seva asked for some reason, “What is beyond comprehension?” He understood perfectly well what.

“You assure me that everything is fine, that you are just too busy drawing, and you are not avoiding me, but as soon as I offer to have you stay with me, you run away, even though we were talking calmly a minute ago. You were so frantically looking for an excuse that you didn’t even ask what the record was that I’m getting. If everything were fine, you’d be interested in finding out that!”

Seva noted distantly that it was true. He didn’t think about what the new record was, although he’d been ready to sell his soul for them before. Of course, Zhenya would never believe that he’d suddenly lost interest in them. And now he’d never believe that Seva didn’t want to be friends with him. Putting the briefcase on the floor, Seva gave a heavy, empty sigh. “What should I tell you?”

“The truth, Seva. Just tell me the truth. I’m not asking that much of you.”

*That much?* Seva smiled unhappily to himself. If only Zhenya knew that he

was asking for the almost impossible! “You won’t like it. At all. I wouldn’t want to know about it if I were you,” he tried to reason with Zhenya for the last time.

“Believe me, you would. Therefore, be kind ...”

“Okay, I’ll tell you. Just remember that I warned you.” Seva, caught his breath and with great effort gathered the fragments of thoughts that were spinning in his head into one phrase that had proven unbearably frightening to him all this time and said, “I like you.” Suddenly, something snapped inside and fell away.

Other than being puzzled, Zhenya’s face didn’t reflect a single emotion.

Seva realized that the full meaning and horror of these words had not reached him, and hurried to clarify, “Not as you like me. It’s not the same. I mean, not as a friend, but as ... as you liked Sonya. I don’t know how to explain it. It takes my breath away when I see you. I get goosebumps all over my body from just your voice, and my palms sweat when you’re around ... but anyway, it’s all nonsense. I can live with it ... I got used to it. I’d even be calm if I hadn’t realized recently that I wanted to kiss you. And now, I can no longer live with it, or be friends with you, I can’t do anything at all.” Having said it all in one breath, Seva gazed at Zhenya and suddenly became very scared.

It was only now, when nothing could be fixed, that he realized what he had done. Fatigue and indifference to what was happening were gone. Seva even shook off the fear. No one should have known this, especially Zhenya! Seva had tried to preserve their friendship to the last, but now it wasn’t only friendship; Seva’s whole life was under threat. Everything depended on how Zhenya replied to his terrible, shameful, and inappropriate confession.

Seva froze, unable to move even a finger or look away, waiting for some kind of reaction from Zhenya. It seemed to him that time had stopped, so long had he been digesting his words. Finally, when Seva was ready to die of shame and fear, Zhenya blinked stupidly and shook his head, “Are you kidding, or what? Is this some kind of joke? It’s not funny, Seva, it’s not funny at all. I had a much higher opinion of you.”

“Does it look like I’m kidding?” Seva shouted, on the verge of hysteria. “Do you think I would be kidding about such a thing?!”

And then Zhenya believed it—he believed Seva’s unconditionally. Probably, Seva had so much pained sincerity and despair in his tone that his crazy confession sounded convincing. Zhenya *believed* it, Seva understood this by the raised light eyebrows showing astonishment, lips that just for a moment took the shape of the letter ‘O’, and eyes that flashed something Seva couldn’t quite catch. It was bewilderment, or fear, or clarity of the long-awaited truth. Seva could admire him at this moment if he didn’t understand that the touching, surprised expression on his face was a reflection of a complex thought process ... in which Seva’s future fate was being decided.

It was uncertain how long they stood a meter apart, looking straight into each other’s eyes, both trying to read the face opposite to decipher answers to the questions swirling in their heads like destructive cyclones. With every second, Seva sensed more and more clearly that he was breaking into thousands of pieces, and he knew perfectly well that none of Zhenya’s answers would bring them together, but he waited anyway—with a sinking heart, he waited for the thick silence between them to finally be broken by the sound of Zhenya’s voice. *Let him be angry, scared, judgmental, anything, as long as this vicious silence is broken by something.*

Seva’s silent prayers were heard, but they weren’t understood the way he’d wanted. In the oppressive silence, the slam of the front door hurt his ears; he even shuddered. And immediately, Zhenya’s voice rang out, “My father’s back home.”

As if Seva didn’t understand that. Zhenya looked away and stared with exaggerated interest at his own hands. Hearing his father’s gruff baritone voice, he became noticeably nervous, and even took two steps back. Seva, exhausted and desperate, pleaded, “Say something!”

Zhenya squinted at the door, and it seemed to Seva that he’d turned pale for a moment. “Let’s talk about it tomorrow.” He stepped in Seva’s direction, making it clear that he was escorting him out.

Seva wanted to object, but looked at the pale, confused Zhenya and bit his tongue. He dutifully picked up his briefcase from the floor and was the first to leave the room. In the corridor, he ran into Prokofy Ivanovich, who hadn’t had

time to take off his shoes, and Maria Arsentievna, who was meeting him. For some reason timidly, guiltily, and embarrassedly, although they didn't know anything about what transpired inside Zhenya's room, he greeted them.

"We've already said hello, Sevochka," Maria Arsentievna smiled at him. "Did you do your homework?"

Zhenya, who came out after him, shuddered, wrapped his arms around himself, and, carefully not looking at his mother, answered for him, "We did, don't worry."

"Well done." Putting the shoes neatly with the rest of the shoes by the door, Prokofy Ivanovich approved. "What are we having for dinner today?"

"Chicken cutlets," Maria Arsentievna replied, and the couple left in the direction of the kitchen.

Seva glanced at Zhenya. He was still restless, shifting from one foot to the other, nervously wringing his hands, his eyes darting from side to side. Then Seva hurriedly put on his shoes, got tangled in the laces, and mentally cursed himself for his clumsiness. Finally, having mastered his fingers and laced up his shoes, Seva straightened and reached for his jacket.

Zhenya was ahead of him and took it off the hanger, handed it to Seva, and whispered, moving in quite close, "We'll discuss it tomorrow. Just don't tell anyone else about this, okay?"

Seva jerked back, snatched the jacket from Zhenya's hands, and hissed irritably in response, "I wasn't even going to tell *you* about it. What am I? Stupid?"

Zhenya nodded, but Seva realized that the nod wasn't in answer to his rhetorical question, but rather a confirmation of some of his thoughts. He zipped up his jacket, picked up his briefcase, and reached for the door.

Zhenya said, "See you tomorrow," and habitually extended his hand to him.

Seva gazed first at Zhenya's open palm, and then at Zhenya himself, and raised an eyebrow. He understood and hurriedly hid his hand behind his back, and stepped back, nodding goodbye.

With a huge effort of will, Seva suppressed a fleeting desire to grab his hand from behind his back and shake it, just to hold Zhenya's soft and familiar hand,

perhaps for the last time, and mouthed, “Bye.”

He left the apartment perhaps too quickly. A heavy iron door slammed shut and the loud buzzing sound reverberated in the back of Seva’s head, becoming the last straw. Only now did he recognize how much his hands were shaking, how hard he was breathing, and how frantically, as if having run a hundred meters, his heart was beating. Even with his eyes unfocused, Seva reached for the elevator call button and barely touched it.

The elevator was moving unbearably slowly, as if it stopped on purpose on every floor before stopping at the seventh, and when it finally opened its doors, Seva fell into a cramped booth and leaned limply against the wall, and without looking, pressed the button marked ‘1’. The elevator started moving, and he realized that even his legs were no longer supporting him. He slid right onto the dirty floor, hugging his knees with his hands. Seva was breathing with difficulty, greedily gasping for air. With every second it seemed to him, more and more, that he was suffocating.

Once upon a time, when he was still going to kindergarten, Sema pushed him off the slide and little Seva, having flown one and a half meters, landed gently on the sand and his leg, which crunched suspiciously, didn’t want to straighten. Then he cried loudly, either from pain or from fear, and his father, who hurried to his aid, picked up Seva in his arms and sternly admonished, “Don’t cry, Vsevolod. Men never cry.” After hearing these words, Seva calmed down and without making a single sound, allowed the doctors to examine him and put a cast on him.

Then, for a month, he steadfastly endured bedrest, which had become boring on the first day, without thinking to complain to anyone about his unenviable situation. Five-year-old Seva was proud of himself and was glad that his father also had a reason to be proud of him, and when he nodded respectfully at the removal of the cast and offered a restrained “attaboy”, Seva promised himself that he would never cry again in his life.

More than ten years had passed since then, and it no longer mattered. He’d never have become a real man in his father’s eyes, shamefully falling in love with Zhenya killed any hope of that, and even if he wouldn’t cry, nothing could



be fixed.

He closed his eyes tightly and bit his lower lip, Seva felt tears rolling down his cheeks and didn't try to stop them. Perhaps they were the least of his problems.

## Chapter 16

### *We'll Call It a Fight*

**S**eva was woken up by a crash. Sema, who had just returned from school, threw his backpack on the bed with a thud, and it opened upon landing on the bed and the contents fell to the floor. Sema sighed heavily, swore, and, without formality, pushed the fallen textbooks and notebooks under the bed. Seva covered his head with a pillow and muttered irritably, “Could you be any quieter?”

In response, Sema went to the couch and cheekily took Seva’s pillow and pulled the blanket off him. “I can’t. The time is three o’clock in the afternoon, so wake up.”

“I woke up a long time ago,” Seva waved him away, wrapping himself in a sheet.

“Then I don’t understand what the problem is. It’s time to get up!” Sema kicked his older brother in the side without a twinge of regret.

“I don’t want to. I’m sick,” he snapped, leaving Sema unpunished.

“I know how sick you are. You just coughed in front of Grandma, and that’s it, no school for you! And by the holidays, of course, you will have recovered,” snorted Sema.

“Don’t be jealous. Is it my fault that you don’t have enough brains for this? Back off.”

Having finished their not-too-meaningful dialogue, Seva turned his nose to the wall and his back to Sema.

“I’ll leave now, so don’t worry,” Throwing the pillow back on the couch,

Sema said, "I'll change my clothes and leave." He knocked aside cabinet doors, opened and closed drawers with loud bangs, and left five minutes later.

Seva was alone again. He wasn't going to get up, even if he had woken up a few hours ago. What for? He'd been sitting at home for almost a week now, so far quite successfully pretending to be sick. He didn't even have to try hard.

Varvara Kapitonovna, looking at her grandson lying flat and staring blankly at the ceiling, anxiously shook her head and asked, "What's going on with you, Sevochka? Don't worry, honey. You'll recover soon. Just lie down, I'll bring you some compote, and you'll gain some strength."

Seva was overcome by suspicion that his grandmother didn't believe that he was at all sick. She never told him to take his temperature and didn't put some life-saving pill under his tongue. Usually, whenever he sneezed, she made a fuss, as if he'd come down with pneumonia. But for some reason, Varvara Kapitonovna was in no hurry to scold him for lying either. Maybe she felt that he was already feeling lousy.

Day after day, she brought compote and put a glass of it on the bedside table next to the couch, and in the evening, it had cooled down and was consumed by Sema. Seva, on the other hand, could neither eat nor drink, even if forced. The very sight of food made him sick. He was only able to turn over on the other side or bury his face in the pillow; there was no desire to do anything else. The last week had merged into one unbearably long, never-ending day.

Seva would fall asleep, have another nightmare, jump up in a cold sweat, wait until his heartbeat and breathing returned to normal, and again fall asleep. Then he'd wake up again, staring blindly into the darkness or squinting from the blinding sun's rays pouring into the room. Day and night got mixed up. Seva lost track of time so much that when he opened his eyes, he couldn't tell if he had woken up the next day or was still in the current day, and he didn't think much about it. The only thing he wanted was to sleep, because the horrors in his head succumbed to the slumber, while reality remained the same.

Seva didn't know how long he'd be able to avoid the conversation he had been begging for just a week ago. He knew that sooner or later he'd have to get out from under the covers, go back to school, and face his fears. If he were

smart, he'd have garnered some self-control to keep his feelings a secret, but he'd dumped his shameful confession on Zhenya, and now he had to summon up courage and take responsibility for his stupidity and recklessness.

He should go back to school, look Zhenya in the eyes, wait for the end of lessons, and finally hear what he thought about it, no matter how terrible his reaction would be.

That evening, Seva returned home, having forced himself to get up from the dirty floor in the elevator thirty minutes later and, having washed his face with water in the courtyard in an attempt to hide the traces of recent tears, walked to the bus stop. He thought he'd have the courage to talk to Zhenya and accept his response. However, as soon as he'd opened his eyes the next morning, he realized that he wouldn't, couldn't look at him after that, let alone talk. Seva didn't want to meet his classmates either. It seemed to him that everyone would look at him with condemnation and disapproval and would suspect something was off. He knew that Zhenya wouldn't tell anyone anything, but he couldn't find the strength to come to school.

It was impossible to count how many times he regretted his confession, especially those last words! Why did he tell Zhenya that he wanted to kiss him? Like all that he'd said before wasn't enough? Now, for sure, Zhenya would be totally disgusted to be near him, maybe even scared. Seva himself didn't know what to expect. Every time he replayed their conversation in his head, the feeling of burning, unbearable shame surged with renewed vigor. He wanted to fall deep into the earth and never, ever return.

For the first couple of days, Seva convinced himself that the next day, he'd go to school and talk to Zhenya but quickly stopped believing this self-deception. The longer he stayed away, the more terrifying it was to go back, and the more stupid it seemed to him to talk about it. Seva didn't know how to find a way out of the situation, and tried to sleep as much as possible. This way, he didn't have to think about the inevitable return to school and Zhenya. And having just kicked Sema out into the street, Seva wrapped himself in a blanket and tried to fall asleep again.

A few more days passed. Grandma still pretended to believe him, and Seva

had grown so accustomed to being wrapped in the blanket that he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his own feet. Sema was the only reference point by which he roughly understood the passage of time. His brother got up in the morning at seven o'clock, returned from school at two, immediately went for a walk, and came home by ten in the evening. He did all this so noisily that Seva opened his eyes every time, raised onto his elbows, and grumbled irritably, "Can't you keep it down? Do you live alone, or what?"

At first, Sema snapped no less irritably, "I didn't ask you to stay here!" Or, "I don't want to and this is my room too."

After some time, Sema's irritation was replaced by bewilderment. "How long can you sleep?"

Each time, he asked this question with less indignation, and his tone wasn't as condemning but became more and more anxious, until after another episode filled with Seva's grumbling, Sema finally sat down on the edge of the couch and muttered in confusion, "Seva, I know you're not sick."

"You are a genius. You've made the conclusion of the century!" Seva snorted. "How long did it take you to understand that?"

"Not funny. How much longer are you going to pretend?"

"As long as I need to. How does it concern you?"

"I thought you were trying to get away from school, but then I realized that you don't need to lie in bed all day to do that. Moreover, all the tests have long been over, the holidays will start in a day, and you still haven't gotten up from the couch to eat."

"Wait! What's today's date?" Seva frowned.

"The twenty-second of March. The second to last day of school," Sema answered, carefully peering into Seva's tense face. "Are you alright? I mean, you can't be alright. What exactly happened?"

"Curious Varvara ..." Seva waved a hand with displeasure.

"I'm not curious, I'm worried," said Sema.

"Since when?"

"Since always," snapped Sema. "My older brother doesn't get out of bed for more than a week, doesn't communicate with anyone, doesn't eat anything.

Really, why would I worry?"

Seva sighed, realizing that it would be stupid to deny it. "Even if something happened, I don't want to talk about it. I can take care of myself. If I pretend to be sick and don't go to school, then there's a good reason."

"You don't get out of bed and don't eat anything because 'there's a good reason'?" Sema asked pensively, but didn't press any further. "Okay, but if you want to talk about it, then I'm here. Are you sure you have everything under control?"

"Yes," Seva answered firmly. But it was a complete lie. He had nothing under control and he was even lost as to the date, not to mention the fact that he had no idea how he would go back to school, interact with friends (and most importantly, his "best friend"), and how life would continue.

Sema didn't have to know about it. In order not to reveal too much, he turned his back to his brother and covered himself with a blanket, making it clear that the conversation was over. Sema sat on the edge of the couch a while longer, thinking about something of his own, and then went to change clothes. He was heading out to hang out with friends.

He didn't ask any more questions. Only sometimes, when heading outside, he paused for a moment at Seva's couch and then quickly left the room, as if afraid to disturb him with his silent sympathy. He even began to change clothes surprisingly quietly, almost soundlessly, something he'd never done before. Since childhood, Sema was always restless, flighty, too loud, and tiresomely active.

Seva stopped waking up from his sleep, so silently did Sema now slip out into the street.

Only a few days later, did Sema approach him again. He did so timidly and hesitantly, and Seva suppressed his usual irritation. When Sema quietly whispered his name, Seva looked up from the pillow and asked, "What?"

"Someone has come to see you. Should I tell that person you're sleeping?"

Seva felt something leap inside his chest, and there was no trace of drowsiness left. Rising from the couch, he asked hoarsely, "Who?"

Sema shrugged. "I don't know, some girl. Blonde with a short haircut."

“Oh-hhh,” Seva drawled, both relieved and disappointed at the same time. “No, let her come in. Just warn her that it’s a mess in here.”

Sema nodded agreeably and went to call Svetka, and Seva quickly tried to smooth his tousled, unkempt hair. It probably didn’t work out very well, but Seva didn’t have a mirror, a comb, or time to fix it, and when Svetka entered the room, she saw him in all his glory, the way a sick person would and should be: sleepy, disheveled, in a rumpled T-shirt, pale, and noticeably emaciated.

“You don’t look very well,” the straightforward Svetka sympathetically confirmed.

“I don’t feel any better.” Seva didn’t lie. He patted the couch. “Sit down and tell me how you’re doing.”

Svetka plopped down next to him. “You missed the chemistry test very successfully. Without it, you got a ‘B’ in the semester. Rosalia Andrianovna counted several times,” she readily reported. “You were almost proved to be an excellent student this semester. Okay, not really, but you only have a ‘C’ in biology. Well done!”

Seva was fleetingly surprised. This semester he’d not been up to studying and was worried about completely different problems, ones much more serious than grades or a trip to Odessa. Friendship with Zhenya had this effect on teachers, or what? Seva didn’t give it much more thought.

Svetka hadn’t seen him for almost two weeks and was in a hurry to share all the news and gossip, and immediately jumped to another topic, and Seva’s surprise slipped away as quickly as it appeared. It was always difficult for him to concentrate on Svetka’s words because she chattered enough for five people, as if she was afraid to forget what she wanted to talk about. In any other situation, such talkativeness could be annoying, but it turned out to be very useful. Seva wouldn’t have been able to hold a normal conversation anyway, and so he only had to feign interest, to nod to the beat of Svetka’s rapid speech, and occasionally insert comments like “Wow! And “What are you saying?”.

Seva didn’t listen to her chirping; he wasn’t too worried about Alena’s new dress or the news about their English teacher’s decree. Svetka didn’t mention anything important. And not a word was said about Zhenya, although Seva

waited with a painful tremor for his name to slip through the ongoing chatter. It was as if she had forgotten about Zhenya, as if nothing had happened. Had Zhenya managed to pretend that nothing had happened between them?

Svetka was talking enthusiastically about various things, waving her arms and even jumping up from the couch a couple of times with excitement, before she stopped in mid-sentence, as if she'd stumbled. Frowning with sudden seriousness, she repeated Sema's recent words, "You're not sick, Seva."

Seva was stunned and surprised by the rapid change of topic. "What makes you think that?"

Svetka smiled indulgently. "I've been sitting with you for about"—she glanced at her watch—"forty minutes, during which time you've not coughed or sneezed. You look sleepy, but your eyes are completely healthy, and your voice isn't hoarse. And your temperature"—Svetka reached forward, touched his forehead with her short childlike fingers—"Is normal."

"Maybe my stomach hurts. What makes you think it's a cold?"

"With two-week-long abdominal pain, Seva, you'd be in the hospital," Svetka said patronizingly, as if she was talking to a child. "Tell me, why did you suddenly decide to arrange unplanned holidays for yourself?"

"Tired of studying," Realizing that it was pointless to pretend further, Seva shrugged. "I decided to stay at home."

"So, there was nothing left until the real holidays. Was it that impossible to wait a week?" Svetka was surprised.

"It was the week of the tests, so I did it at the right time."

"Okay, but you know that it's been a few days since the holidays started?"

"I know. I can't immediately 'recover' at the end of the semester. Grandma's not a fool. She'd immediately understand what's going on." As usual, without blinking an eye, Seva lied.

"Yeah," Svetka nodded. "A beautiful story, almost perfect. I can't disagree. Did you want to say your 'sickness' isn't at all connected with Zhenya?"

A chill formed in his chest. Seva shivered and stared at Svetka with eyes as round as five kopecks coins. Had Zhenya told her? Did she guess it herself? How could he give himself away? It wasn't surprising that astute and quick-



witted Svetka suspected something.

“How can it be related to Zhenya?” Seva asked in as smooth and calm a voice as possible.

“You tell me how.” Giggling, Svetka turned the spotlight on Seva.

Seva studied her imperturbable face, the curiosity in her eyes, and thought that if she knew the truth about him, there wouldn't be so much serenity and playfulness. If she'd known the truth, she wouldn't have told him the school gossip for so long; she'd have announced it as soon as she was at the door. “You disgust me. How could you do this to Zhenya?” And she would have been right. But she didn't know the truth, which meant it was possible to pretend that he didn't understand anything and he could try to find out what Zhenya had said about their last meeting, or whether he had said anything at all.

“I have no idea,” Seva shook his head. “Zhenya has nothing to do with it.”

“And your fight too?” Svetka asked innocently.

“*Our fight? That's what he calls it? Interesting,*” thought Seva, and asked aloud, “Did he say we fought?”

“Well, not really.” Svetka was suddenly embarrassed. “Pasha and I guessed that.”

“And what makes you ‘guess’ that?”

“We asked him where you were, why you didn't go to school or go for a walk, and he said he didn't know. How could Zhenya *not* know where you are and what's wrong with you? And he was answering like ... well, like if he was nervous. So, we decided that you fought. Everyone was wondering why you two quarreled, but we couldn't come up with a reason. Will you tell me?” Svetka batted her eyelashes.

“We had a little fight. I said too much to him, and it turned out ugly.” Scratching his head, Seva hummed in embarrassment. He *almost* didn't lie about what had happened.

“Yeah. Can't you just apologize?” Svetka's gray eyes flashed impudently, mockingly.

“It's hard to apologize. And it won't help,” Seva confessed.

“What did you say to him?” Svetka frowned. Idle curiosity on her face was

replaced by concern.

“A lot of things,” Seva shrugged. “I don’t want to talk about it, okay?”

“How complicated boys can be,” Svetka sighed sadly but stopped demanding details. “When are you going for a walk?”

“I don’t know. As soon as the mood ‘hits’ me.”

“Can you be a little more specific? Alina is worried about you.” Sveta looked slyly at Seva from under her short light eyelashes.

“Who’s worried?” Seva was amazed. “Why would she be?”

“I don’t know.” Svetka leaned on the armrest and looked straight into Seva’s eyes. “She gave me the idea that I should go and check on you. She wanted to come herself, but she was too shy, she decided that you two don’t talk that familiarly just yet.”

Seva whistled in surprise. “I never would have thought! Alina is much nicer than she wants to seem.”

“Alina is the sweetest. I won’t argue that,” Svetka unexpectedly and easily agreed and broke into a coy smile. “But tell me how surprised you are that she’s worried about you.”

“Actually, yes, I’m surprised,” Seva chuckled. “Shouldn’t I be?”

“Come on, you’re not that good at acting,” Svetka said dismissively. “Do you think I don’t notice how you make eyes at each other? The chemistry between you two is much more interesting than in the laboratory with Rosalia Andrianovna. Sparks will fly soon!”

Seva choked. Just a few minutes ago he mentally called Svetka astute and quick-witted. Who’d have thought? Why did everyone want to bring him and Alina together so much?

“We don’t make eyes at each other,” he objected, not too energetically.

“Whatever you say, the sparks are flying anyway,” Svetka nodded agreeably. “And tell me that you and Lelia weren’t talking about Alina in the kitchen at New Year!”

Seva agreed. He couldn’t prove to Svetka that Lelia spoke about her. And what for?

“You see!” Svetka gloated. “I’ve been guessing it for a long time. Well,

Pasha and I, we're not stupid," she concluded with satisfaction.

"*Not stupid, of course, but blind for sure,*" Seva thought impassively. They were thinking like everyone in his social circle, but it would be stupid to complain about it. If they wanted to think that he liked Alina, then let them do so. It was even beneficial, to some extent.

"Not stupid," he echoed Svetka's words.

"Alina, by the way, is the best option for you ... Pasha and I think," Svetka stated.

Seva thought grumpily, "*Are they doing everything together?*"

"She's smart and beautiful, and there's always something to talk about with her. Don't be embarrassed, I didn't talk about her for nothing. She likes you too," Svetka reassured him, although Seva wasn't embarrassed.

A couple of months ago, he was blushing at the thought that Svetka might overhear his conversation with Zhenya and find out about his invented sympathy for Alina. But now, he listened with pleasure as she talked about the virtues of the same Denikina that she'd recently disliked so much. Such a scenario played into his hands. If everyone believed in the "sparks" between him and Alina, then no one would suspect anything. They didn't suspect it anyway, but if Svetka managed to convince everyone of what she believed, he'd stop worrying. Svetka would be able to do it, of this Seva had no doubt. She'd already talked about the notorious chemistry between him and Alina so convincingly that he almost believed it himself.

"She's also the daughter of ... well, you know who." Exhausted, she summed up her fiery speech. "If I were you, I'd also be afraid to fall in love with her because there is too much competition, but you're in a completely different situation. She likes you too! It's not just Pasha and me who noticed it, my girlfriends think so too. We even tried to approach Lelia, but she keeps her friend's secrets like state secrets. She's tough," Svetka announced with respect. "In any case, everything is clear. It was crystal clear from your slow dance. She refused everyone else, only agreeing to dance with you! Alena and Nastya told me this. The tenth-graders from the drama club complained to them," she explained with a laugh.

“Okay, I didn’t know that,” Seva admitted, puzzled.

“Decide for yourself what you’ll do with this information, but if I were you, I’d ask her out!” Svetka playfully arched her eyebrows. “Even Pasha admitted that Alina suits you, although he doesn’t like such girls at all. I didn’t like her myself before, well, you remember ... I was probably jealous,” Svetka suggested, wrinkling her nose. “Pasha doesn’t tolerate that type of girl either—those arrogant, sarcastic, confident with their irresistibility. I only recently realized that on the one hand, these are advantages, if you don’t overdo it. But Pasha’s still wary of her. He had one of the same—arrogant, sharp-tongued, and looked like some kind of actress, and was no worse than our Alina. And she was also the daughter of the head doctor of the hospital where his father works.

“She cheated on him with a guy from their company! And Pasha found out that during their relationship, she’d told everyone that he should pursue her because she was beautiful, smart, and the daughter of the head doctor. And he, she said, was just the son of a surgeon. His father, by the way, has golden hands!” Svetka suddenly realized that she was talking too much. “Okay, it was probably personal. Don’t worry. Just know that we’re all rooting for you and Alina.” She frowned, creating little lines at the bridge of her nose, and began prodding her knee.

Seva chuckled and shook his head without condemnation. That was what she was all about. “Don’t worry. Zhenya had already told me something similar ... about the fact that Pasha had a difficult breakup and everything. You didn’t tell me anything particularly new,” he said consolingly, lying a little at the end.

Svetka stopped prodding her knee and, with noticeable relief flooding her freckled face, looked at Seva.

*It’s not surprising that Pasha, hurt by a girl like Alina, fell in love with Svetka.* Funny, simple, straightforward and sincere to the point of anger and tenderness, she was the complete opposite of Alina and at the same time possessed unique charm, which Seva himself was able to recognize only after he began to associate closely with her. Pasha, unlike him, took much less time.

“Great,” Svetka said optimistically. “By the way, Maria Viktorovna was interested in knowing how long you’ll be gone. She said she was afraid you

might have lost the desire to draw. And you can't ... you have a talent!"

"Did Maria Viktorovna say that, or did you add that on your own?" Seva asked with a chuckle.

"I did. But what's the difference?" Svetka wasn't embarrassed. "Better tell me when should she expect you."

"Tell Maria Viktorovna that I'll come back as soon as possible. Don't let her worry."

Svetka giggled and suddenly and loudly slapped her hands on her knees, sat close to Seva. The distance between them was reduced to a few centimeters. "Seva, Sevochka!" She quickly whispered, "I know how important Zhenya is to you, and I understand how sad you can be because of your fight. And you'll make up—honestly, you will! But believe me, the world doesn't end with him. Even if you feel lousy and sad and it seems that you have nothing to do in our group without him, you're wrong! We're all waiting for you, constantly remembering and really missing you, maybe except for Dima, but everything is clear in that regard," Svetka waved away the thought of Dima like an annoying fly. "And don't tell me fairy tales, please. I understand perfectly well that it wasn't because of the tests that you prescribed this jail sentence for yourself. Leave your room and come back to us; we've been waiting for you and your jokes. On Friday, we're going to Alina's ... Zhenya won't be here," Sveta promised with a sigh. "Although if he would be, it'd be even better; you could finally make up. Come, please!" Svetka folded her hands pleadingly.

Seva looked into Svetka's worried eyes and folded his palm across her hand. "I'll try," he promised. "If it works out, I'll come."

"And what might *not* work out?" Svetka chuckled, squeezing the tips of his fingers.

The question was rhetorical, and Seva chose to remain silent. He just smiled fleetingly and met Svetka's timid, and uncertain smile. They looked closely into each other's eyes and suddenly, for no reason at all, they laughed, feeling relief as if the sword hanging over them had shattered into thousands of fragments, allowing him to breathe deeply. Svetka squeezed and freed his hand,

"Okay, I'll go, I've been sitting too long. Will you see me off?"

Seva nodded. At least he could get up from the couch. Following Svetka, he went into the hallway, finally parting with a blanket that seemed to stick to him. Svetka sat down to lace up her shoes, and Seva reached for her gray jacket hanging on the hook. He took it and whistled in surprise because it was so lightweight.

“Isn’t it cold?” he asked, handing it to Svetka.

“Temkin, you live in a vacuum,” Svetka giggled, accepting the jacket with a grateful nod. “It’s almost April outside and it’s fifteen degrees Celsius. Your brother is hanging out in the schoolyard during recess in his shirt.”

“It’s not because he’s smart,” Seva chuckled. He watched Svetka slowly put on the jacket, carefully adjust the collar, and run a hand through her slightly disheveled hair. He sensed confidence in her. Even if she didn’t possess Alina’s irresistibility and beauty, she had modest and natural charm.

“Well,” Svetka flashed a full smile, prompting Seva to smile in response. “We’re waiting for you, so get up from the couch, and come back to us. Pasha is frothing at the mouth,” she joked. “He’s come up with so many jokes about Rosalia Andrianovna, but there’s no one to tell them to!”

“Now you’ve convinced me,” Seva laughed merrily. The unaccountable, lingering and painful anxiety in his chest was replaced by something light and pleasantly warming.

“I hope so,” Svetka said, becoming serious for a moment, and suddenly did something she’d never done before. She stood on her toes and wrapped her left arm around Seva’s neck, poking her nose into his shoulder. “And hurry. We miss you,” she whispered quickly, almost unintelligibly.

Seva, confused and surprised, hugged Svetka in response and promised from the bottom of his heart, “I’ll try.”

Svetka let go of his neck, peered into his face eyes, and said contentedly, “Make up your mind fast.” She left his apartment.

Seva chuckled, embarrassed. Who’d have known that talking to the chatty, occasionally annoying and unbearable Svetka, would help him so much! He closed the door behind her, went into the bathroom, and looked in the mirror for the first time in two weeks. He grimaced at what he saw: disheveled, almost

tangled hair, swollen eyelids, sunken cheeks, and a pale sickly white, almost green face. He didn't want to return to his friends like this.

Seva ran a comb through his messy hair, wincing with pain, and pulled it through all the tangles. He leaned on the sink and splashed cold water on his face. It was a little better; he could look at the reflection without tears.

“What if Svetka is right?” he asked the face in the mirror thoughtfully.

It was hard to believe that Alina liked him, but if it was so ... he could check it out. He could invite her to the movies, take a walk with her, or chat. After all he'd been through, it didn't seem so scary anymore. And if Alina agreed ... then they could start dating, and that would solve all his problems.

He'd always liked her. For his fictional sympathy, he didn't choose just anyone; he chose her. She was really beautiful, smart, pleasant to talk to, and all that Svetka listed with such passion. She'd be able to remove any unhealthy thoughts about Zhenya. So, Seva decided, it was worth a try. If she didn't like him, then at least everyone would know that he'd tried to ask her out, and there'd be no questions. Having made a decision, Seva pulled down his crumpled T-shirt and smiled at his reflection in the mirror.

“Everything will be fine,” he promised himself and left the bathroom, intending to carry out an urgent audit of the refrigerator.

The stomach that had been MIA for a long time finally made itself noticeable.

## Chapter 17

### *The First Date*

**W**hen Sema returned in the evening, he found Seva in the kitchen and jumped from fright; he was so unaccustomed to seeing someone at the table. Seva, having finished laughing, offered his brother to share with him the third plate of a hastily boiled pasta. Sema refused, saying that he'd eaten at a friend's place.

"His mom also asked if we needed strawberry jam," he said, sitting down opposite him.

Seva barely restrained himself from hitting his brother on the forehead with a spoon. But he immediately pulled himself together and exhaling, calmly smiled.

"No, we don't. Not anymore."

Sema shrugged. No meant no. What did it matter to him? In silence, Seva finished his third serving of pasta, but the silence wasn't tense. On the contrary, there was a sense of tranquility in the kitchen and for the first time in a long time, the brothers didn't quarrel, but regarded each other amicably over the table. Sema continued to remain stubbornly silent, but Seva saw relief in his eyes. "You are finally eating!" they said.

After the meal, Seva washed the dishes, assembled the couch, and knocked on his grandma's room. She, unlike Sema, expressed her joy out loud and asked him not to scare her anymore. Seva hugged her and assured her that he felt great and wouldn't scare her like that in the future. It seemed to him that his grandma understood everything perfectly but was waiting for him to confess his lies. But, of course, Seva didn't.



They talked for a long time and he briefly told her about his fight with Zhenya, presenting a more or less true story from everything that had happened. Varvara Kapitonovna was visibly upset. She'd always liked Zhenya, and it seemed to her that Seva had managed to get very attached to him. But he comforted her, said he wasn't worried, and Grandma calmed down a little. She philosophically remarked, "Well, now you're talking to me about books, which means we'll get over it somehow."

Seva smiled with relief. And really, they *would* get over it.

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On Friday, he didn't have a chance to talk to Alina. She quarreled with her father, and he forbade her from inviting anyone over. Offended and upset, Alina decided that she'd stay at home. But Seva met with the others and the friends, as soon as they saw him on the stone path to their favorite bench, immediately rushed over to greet him, asking where he had been for so long.

No one mentioned Zhenya. Seva felt in his gut that for this he should be grateful to Svetka, who stood on the sidelines and contentedly watched the excited group of friends and him, looking joyful and a little embarrassed.

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On the first day of school, Seva returned to school in a cheerful mood. Eating normally over the past three days, having slept—finally a sound, healthy sleep—and noticeably refreshed, he walked into the classroom with a confident step, and threw his briefcase on his third desk.

Alina, who was looking thoughtfully out of the window, started. "Look who's here! Have you finally recovered?"

"I have," Seva assured her and plopped on a chair with a flourish to face Alina, leaning on her desk. "Did I miss a lot?"

"Are you talking about studying or something else?" smiled Alina.

"About something else," Seva said.

“I don’t know,” she drawled thoughtfully and poked Lelia with her elbow. “Did he miss a lot?”

“Not really,” Lelia shrugged. “Pasha and Sveta only fought once, but now everything is quiet and calm as usual.”

“Let me guess ... because of Yesenin and Mayakovsky?” Seva chuckled.

“How’d you know?” Alina was surprised.

“I know a lot of things,” he replied cryptically. “For example, the fact that you want to go to the movies at the *Black Tulip*.”

“I do.” Alina’s lips twitched with an odd smile.

“And I just happen to have two tickets.” Seva winked conspiratorially at her. “Shall we go?”

Alina shot her eyes in the direction of Lelia quickly. She tapped her nails on the desk and coquettishly drawled, “I’ll think about it.” She then offered a dramatic pause and graciously nodded. “Okay, I thought about it. I’d like to. When?”

Seva drew a deep breath and calmly replied, “Tomorrow night at six.”

“Okay,” Alina whispered and with her gaze advised him to turn around because Marina Savelyevna was entering the classroom.

Seva quickly turned away and stood up with everyone else to greet the teacher. His mood elevated. When he’d invented interest in Alina, the offer to invite her somewhere seemed foolish! But now, he had some hope that she liked him. It seemed that all the guys in the class were looking at him with envy, and even though he understood that it was just his imagination, he was still bursting with pride.

Sitting at his desk, he met Dima’s eyes and realized that his imagination didn’t extend to his former friend. The guy looked at Seva angrily, jealously. For a moment, Seva felt a pang of regret but quickly dismissed it. Both he and Dima knew perfectly well that he and Alina had never been an item. So, why should he feel guilty? Moreover, they hadn’t been friends for a long time, which meant that the notorious “friendly solidarity” didn’t apply to him. This was life, it was sometimes cruel, and it wasn’t Seva who set the rules.

He came to Maria Viktorovna after the last lesson. He sat at the first desk

near the teacher's desk and offered a wide smile.

"Afternoon! Did you miss me?"

"Temkin!" she said with slight irritation.

"Svetka said you did," he said calmly. "I missed you too."

"I'm glad you did." Maria Viktorovna muttered it in a calm voice, such as someone would use to say "very interesting", when in it wasn't interesting at all.

"I see," Seva snorted.

"Have you recovered?"

"As you can see." Seva spread his arms.

"And are you ready to work?"

"I am," Seva said confidently.

"And while you were sick, did you do anything?"

Seva lowered his eyes in embarrassment and shook his head. While he was "sick", he had no inspiration to draw and even reaching for brushes had proven problematic.

"Okay, Temkin," Maria Viktorovna sighed, but a slight smile played on her face, and Seva thought that this wasn't good. "If it makes you happy, while you were sick, I thought about you a lot. Yes, Seva, I missed you," she quickly told him, noticing that he was about to say something. "So, I often returned to those drawings that you brought me."

Maria Viktorovna unlocked the top drawer of the table, pulled out a stack of sheets from it, and put it in front of Seva. "They seem to me ... peculiar. I'd told you that. But interestingly, they have potential. Maybe you want to paint complete, full-sized paintings based on them?"

Seva's face involuntarily twisted when he saw the stack. Fortunately, Maria Viktorovna didn't notice. The very drawings had been created in an endless attempt not to think about Zhenya and became an opportunity for him to release all the negative emotions that had no place in him so that it would be a little easier to cope with them.

Equally gloomy and eerie, the landscape of a sunlit summer meadow for some reason had seemed the calm before the storm. Maria Viktorovna, looking at it, commented, "The field before the start of hostilities ... no other

interpretation.”

Seva remembered each of these drawings—the conditions under which they were created—and now at the very sight of the stack, he shuddered. Why he’d brought them to Maria Viktorovna, Seva didn’t understand. Maybe because that one day she’d asked, “Did you draw before you came back to me?”

He’d blurted, “I did.”

Maria Viktorovna became interested, and Seva thought that there was nothing wrong with bringing these drawings to her. But now he regretted his rash decision. He’d suppressed the feelings that made him draw, and now Maria Viktorovna wanted to make him remember them, relive them ... feel them again. No way!

“I don’t want to,” Seva declared, perhaps too sharply.

“Why?” Maria Viktorovna was surprised.

Unable to come up with a worthy reason for refusal, Seva was honest when he explained, “They cause me unpleasant memories. And anyway, I want to work on something new ... to move on.”

Disappointment was reflected in Maria Viktorovna’s face, but she didn’t argue. “Whatever you say,” she shrugged, putting the stack back in the drawer. “But if you suddenly change your mind ...”

He was sure he wouldn’t.

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Seva turned to Alina and looked into her attentive, interested face. “She’s amazing. Probably, there’s no better teacher of art,” he said sincerely.

They walked along the main street from the new cinema, three bus stops from Alina’s house. Coming out of the cinema, they’d both decided to walk. Both had liked the film, even though Seva wasn’t a fan of historical movies. Alina, with the attitude of a film connoisseur, said there are many inconsistencies and inaccuracies in it, and it should be perceived as an ordinary comedy with a storyline taking place in the eighteenth century.

Seva shrugged. During the two hours that the movie on screen, he was busy

with thoughts and watched with one eye. His head was spinning. Had he chosen the right place? Did Alina like the movie? Was he sitting too close? Should he hold her hand? Maybe even hug her? Or was it better not to rush on the first date?

Rostik, as a specialist in the field of first dates, when they were still talking, often gave friends useless advice. Among them was, “On the first date, at the end, if you don’t kiss, then that’s it, you’ve wasted your time. But at least try to hold hands with the girl.”

Seva and Dima listened to Rostik with a bored look, both hoping that he’d get tired of showing off in front of them. His words, such as “at least try to hold hands with some girl”, didn’t interest Seva, but Dima sometimes turned green with envy. Seva suspected that Rostik was well aware of this, and enjoyed providing details of the “date” with great pleasure.

Rostik was a specialist in first dates—because he had had a huge number of those, and a rare one had gone on beyond the first.

“*I wonder,*” Seva chuckled to himself. “*Does Rostik follow his own advice with Alena?*”

Confused, he mindlessly stared at the screen, and then Alina herself assisted. Casually, as if tired of sitting straight, she put her head on his shoulder and Seva, stunned from surprise, stopped breathing for half a minute. Then he became bolder, learned to move his hand again, and diligently watching the events playing out in the film, put it on Alina’s warm one. She intertwined their fingers and, with a little fumbling, settled herself more comfortably on his shoulder. For the rest of the film, Seva was afraid to move so as not to disturb her.

After leaving the theater, Alina took the initiative again. Again casually, as if she did it every day, she placed her fingers on the crook of his elbow and walked down the stairs. Seva had no choice but to bend his arm and, feeling a little stupid and awkward, pretended that this was a familiar thing for him. So, they walked along the street, arm in arm, not hurrying, talking about anything and everything. Seva kept glancing shyly at Alina. For some reason, it wasn’t easy for him to maintain eye contact, and even when telling some funny story, he always looked in front of him, at his feet or the tops of distant trees. Alina, on

the other hand, stared straight at him and listened to every word with undisguised interest.

When Seva began to tell her about yesterday's visit to Maria Viktorovna, she opened her eyes wide, her eyebrows raised, and her plump lips parted with interest, revealing pearly teeth. As soon as Seva finished, Alina nodded thoughtfully. "I know. Maria Viktorovna is a wonderful teacher; it seems to me that this has always been her calling."

"It is," he replied, watching a cawing crow fly up from an old maple tree.

"And, to be honest, I'm so glad that you decided to apologize to her. I think you would have missed a lot if you hadn't."

"Why did everyone want me to start drawing again?" Seva asked the question that had been on his mind for several days.

"Because you have talent," Alina replied seriously. "Ask anyone you want. Everyone thought so from the beginning; no one in the class could surpass you in drawing."

"I have no talent ... I've just been doing this since childhood. Of course, I picked up a lot during that time," Seva shrugged indifferently.

"Call it what you want," Alina waved off the statement. "The point is the same. You like it, and everyone can see how much you're into drawing. Even I was upset when you abandoned it. I wanted to talk to you about it back then, in the eighth grade. But you looked so angry. It looked like you'd hit me, and I decided that I should mind my own business. Now, it appears that everything's good and I'm so glad about it!"

"I don't remember that," Seva frowned. "I don't even remember that we talked in the eighth grade."

"No wonder," Alina chuckled. "Then you were ... quite unfriendly, if I may say so, and you didn't talk to anyone except Dima and Rostik. Lelia and I recently discussed that if someone had told me in the eighth grade that we'd be talking, I'd not have believed it."

Seva forced himself to look at Alina. "I'm sorry. Was I that mean and angry looking?"

Alina became embarrassed. "Not really. I understand, Seva. Don't be sorry.

I'm just saying that I'm surprised that we started talking. Not just with you, with everyone. We have such an odd collection of friends; I'd never have thought that we'd get along. Even though I've never had issues with any of them, it's still strange. Well, except for Svetka." Alina shyly lowered her eyelashes. "But we somehow made up."

"I remember." Seva suddenly cheered up, remembering the skirmishes of Svetka and Alina. "I can't believe it!"

"Me neither!" Alina agreed. "She's so cute. I can't imagine how we could fight. Now I don't know what we could argue about."

"Yes," Seva nodded. "Pasha has changed her a lot. She's blossomed, and is a completely different person. Svetka was always cool, but she didn't see anything beyond studying, and she was also a grumbler, complaining constantly; she seemed toxic. She's feeling too good now to grumble."

"I agree," Alina nodded. "I'm happy for her. It's just a pity that she needed Pasha to feel better about herself."

"Why?" Seva was surprised.

"Because self-love shouldn't depend on other people's opinions," Alina stated with a shrug. "She didn't change that dramatically thanks to herself; it was all thanks to Pasha. And if he hadn't appeared in her life, what then? What if he leaves now? I want to believe that it won't affect Svetka, but ..."

"If he hadn't appeared ... if he leaves," Seva repeated. "In my opinion, there's nothing wrong with that. She needed someone to tell her what she needed to hear: how wonderful she is, the most beautiful, the smartest, the best. Making it clear that she's loved her for who she is, not because of her grades, inspired her to do something besides study. Pasha accomplished that. He pushed her and helped her open up. Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Maybe you're right," Alina drawled thoughtfully, not too confidently. "Oh, look, there's a squirrel on the tree!" She pointed somewhere in the distance.

Seva followed her finger with his eyes, didn't see anything, and wanted to ask which tree exactly, but before he could, Alina's hand had slipped from the crook of his elbow and she ran to the spreading maple without looking back.

Seva followed slowly. "You have an eagle eye!" He was amazed; with

difficulty he was finally able to see a tiny gray animal in the crown of the tree.

“It jumped so fast, it was hard to notice,” Alina smiled. “Do you think it will eat from my hands?”

“And what will you feed it?”

Alina reached into the pocket of her jacket and pulled out a handful of seeds. Proudly showing them to Seva on an open palm, she explained, “On the way home today, I bought a jar of seeds from some old lady not far from school. I wanted it so much, but I quickly got full, so I thought I’d leave them for later. They’ve come in handy!”

Alina stepped close to the trunk, stretched her hand with an open palm, and cooed softly, almost in a whisper, “Come here, I won’t hurt you, I promise. These are delicious seeds. Honestly, I’ve eaten them myself.”

Seva couldn’t resist a good-natured laugh; it was funny and at the same time cute. Alina, standing up on her toes, was holding out a handful of seeds to an interested but cautious squirrel, an absolutely happy childlike and joyful expression on her face. Her eyes were lit up. Through the bare branches of the maple, the setting sun’s rays fell on Alina, and her light-brown hair appeared red in places. She squinted comically, covering her eyes with her free hand.

Why was it her bitchy nature that was always being talked about in school? Seva admired the charming ninth-grader, talking to a squirrel so much that, for a moment, he forgot that this was Alina, who everyone thought of as the haughty, proud, and somewhat arrogant daughter of the first secretary of the district committee. The image of the unapproachable, restrained and imperturbable Denikina, ingrained in his subconscious, didn’t match with this uninhibited and unusually cheerful girl.

“It’s not coming down,” she stated disappointment, interrupting Seva’s thoughts and returning him to earth.

“Do you want me to lift you? It’s not too high,” he suggested, touched by her disappointment.

“If it’s not too difficult.” Alina was delighted.

Seva snorted and, without further ado, grabbed Alina by her narrow waist, and easily, like a kitten, lifted her off the ground.



Surprised, she screamed, then immediately laughed and exclaimed, “Fool! Let’s go a little higher ... I can’t reach it.”

Seva tensed, grabbed Alina more comfortably, and lifted her higher, and she again whispered, “Honey, come here ... what beautiful fur you have! It’s so soft. Come to me ... oh! It came, Seva! Can you imagine? Do you think it’ll be scared if I try to stroke it?”

“I do,” Seva groaned. Alina weighed no more than a feather, but it was not easy to hold her.

“Okay, I won’t,” she said agreeably. “That’s it. I poured out the remaining seeds for her.”

Seva mentally thanked her and gently lowered her to the ground. In her hands, Alina held a torn twig with leaves that had just begun to bloom. “Thank you,” she smiled charmingly and kissed Seva on the cheek. “Shall we go?”

Alina had done it casually, as if she kissed him on the cheek every day, and Seva was embarrassed again, but he tried not to show it. He nodded calmly, put his hands in his pockets, and smiled back at her.

They turned back onto the stone path and slowly strolled toward Alina’s house. It was getting dark, and she should have hurried, but neither wanted to separate, and so they walked at the same leisure pace. Alina didn’t take his arm this time. She chatted carelessly and sorted through the budding buds on the torn twig, and Seva listened, observing this unexpected side of Alina. He no longer felt awkward. On the contrary, he felt calm and quite warm, as if he weren’t walking with the school beauty but an old friend with whom he could talk about anything.

For the rest of the way, they discussed everything that came to their mind laughing and joking around, as if they had been close for many years.

## Chapter 18

### *Kisses are Overrated*

**T**he next day, as soon as Seva entered the classroom, an excited Svetka flew at him, almost knocking him down. Without even thinking to apologize, she pulled him behind her desk, sat him on the same chair with Alena, and, plopping on the next one, whispered, “How did it go? Tell me everything in detail!”

Seva looked incredulously at Alena and asked Svetka equally softly, “How could you already know?”

“I asked Lelia what you were whispering about,” Svetka waved a hand. “Don’t get distracted from the topic.”

“Doesn’t she keep her friend’s secrets like state secrets?” Seva chuckled.

“It’s not a secret,” Svetka shrugged.

“Come on, Temkin, tell us!” Alena nudged him.

Seva wanted to be indignant, but calmly replied, “There’s nothing to tell. We watched a movie. It was interesting, but Alina said it wasn’t too reliable in terms of historical facts.”

“I know that. Pasha and I watched it too,” Svetka grimaced. “That’s not what we’re talking about. Tell me! Did you ... do something?”

“Something as in what?” Seva sneered.

“Seva, don’t be silly,” hissed Svetka. “Tell me, did you kiss?”

“Nope,” Seva answered honestly, shaking his head.

“Well, you’re an idiot, Temkin!” Svetka was indignant. “So, what happened?”

“Nothing,” Seva drawled.

“This can’t be! Did you hold hands? Hug goodbye?”

“Yes.”

“Which one is ‘yes’?”

“Both are.”

“And you say *nothing* happened!” Sveta slapped him lightly on the shoulder, but broke into a smile. “If you hugged, why didn’t you try to kiss her? Or did she not want to?”

“I haven’t tried.”

“And why? I told you he was an idiot, Alena!” she said, annoyed.

“You’re an idiot yourself, Svetka.” Seva wasn’t offended. “Tell me, if Pasha had come to you with kisses the first time you met, would you have started dating him?”

“No,” Svetka admitted after a little thought. “But you and Alina have known each other for a long time.”

“But we only spent time together for the first time. I don’t want to rush. Moreover, this is Alina, you know ...”

“I know,” Svetka sighed. “Okay, I’m sorry. I’m just so worried about your relationship ... even more than for my own.”

“Why should you worry about your own?” Seva chuckled. “Don’t worry, we’ve already agreed to take a walk; everything is fine.”

“Really? I knew you were the coolest!” Svetka beamed.

Seva chuckled. *She’s not changing.* He moved to his desk, letting his friends discuss what they’d learned, and winked at Alina. “Are we still on for today?”

Alina put the mirror in her bag and shot a flirtatious look. “Of course.”

Seva noted fleetingly that in class she was transformed again into the familiar, restrained, calm, somewhat condescending Alina, whom he’d always respected but was involuntarily afraid of. But this didn’t bother him. On the contrary, Seva was glad that he’d seen the other side of Alina, with which only Lelia was probably familiar.

In the following days, Seva became convinced that when alone with him, Alina changed with a simple click of a button. He’d never known a person more

open, sincere, and cheerful than Alina when they were together. It was a pleasure to spend time with her, and it didn't matter at all what they were doing. Some days they met with their usual group of friends, and every time Seva, caught the interested glances of the closeknit foursome. He was looking forward to the moment when they'd disperse, and he would see Alina off. He was in no hurry to shower her with kisses and other tender signs of affection, as Svetka had advised. He simply liked talking to Alina, getting to know her better and better; he enjoyed laughing together, making silly jokes, and discussing whatever topics popped into his head.

Romantic moments still confused him. Sometimes Alina took his arm, and sometimes he forced himself to offer her an elbow, and each time after this uncomplicated gesture, the conversation stopped going well. After a while, Alina's hand shifted from the crook of her elbow to Seva's hand, and from that moment they walked with interlaced fingers. Seva didn't understand what the point of doing this was. It was uncomfortable and he couldn't gesticulate with his hands, and his fingers were frozen stiff when it was cold outside. But every time he met Alina, he invariably took her hand, realizing on some subconscious level that this was expected and necessary.

They didn't talk much at school. Seva suspected that Alina didn't want to generate any unnecessary rumors, and therefore tried, if not to hide, then at least not to advertise their relationship too much. And Alina had Lelia at school. She couldn't abandon her friend, who without her would surely have gotten lost in the mass of high school students. Seva and Alina met after school and with serene souls—without fear of anyone's judging eyes and curious ears, and without being distracted by other people—and went for walks in the park.

The only exception was when Seva went to Maria Viktorovna. However, the more time he spent with Alina, the less often he appeared in her classroom. With great disappointment, Seva noticed more and more that he could no longer draw. It wasn't that he didn't want to, he just couldn't. He didn't know what to draw, and the options offered by Maria Viktorovna seem boring and didn't elicit any interested responses. Even when Seva did start drawing something, it ended with Maria Viktorovna sternly declaring, "I don't like it. Redo it."

But he couldn't envision the drawing anymore. At first, Seva blamed everything on a lack of inspiration; later he considered that this was a real creative crisis, and then he practically stopped going to classes. It was undoubtedly a shame to Maria Viktorovna, but Seva couldn't force himself to draw.

Art was replaced by Alina and his friends. Seva began to walk more often, and almost stopped staying at home, but if he did, he talked with his grandmother. The cycle of events and people after a prolonged bout of melancholia seemed a real panacea for problems. He didn't have time to analyze the thoughts constantly spinning in his head or consider even one event that had transpired. Wasn't this what he'd been dreaming about for the last few months?

At half past seven, he met Alina at her entranceway. She, unlike Seva, didn't like to be late. On the way to school, they stopped for Lelia. Every time Alina apologized madly to him, but she continued to stand firm; coming to school together was a longstanding tradition for them, one she wasn't going to break. Seva didn't mind—the company of the ever silent “shadow”, Lelia, didn't bother him at all. On the contrary, he was even interested in learning new things about her after nine entire grades.

Lelia opened up reluctantly. At first, Alina dragged her into the conversation, trying to get a few words out of her friend, but she did it so gently and delicately that Seva envied her diplomatic abilities. After some time, he noticed that Alina wasn't trying to talk to Lelia, but to interest her. She didn't ask Lelia to tell her anything, but casually mentioned Seva's drawings, his classes with Maria Viktorovna, how passionate he was about art, and how much he enjoyed drawing. Every time Lelia's bulging gray eyes sparkled with curiosity more and more ... and then she couldn't stand it. One morning, as soon as she saw Seva and Alina, she rushed to meet them and dumped on him a whole bunch of questions that seemed to have been accumulating for several months.

In those short ten minutes from her house to school, Lelia learned everything about Seva and his drawing classes—how long he'd been drawing, in what style, what he drew, and what he liked to draw the most. To his question about why she was so interested, Lelia explained without false modesty and embarrassment that

she was writing a book, and she needed a person who could draw illustrations for it.

Seva was struck by the ease with which the always withdrawn Lelia shared her plans and dreams with him. She said that she'd first finish it and then bring the book to him so that he'd understand what he needed to work with.

Alina pretended to be offended, saying that despite ten years of friendship, Lelia had never shared details about her novel.

Lelia smiled condescendingly. "Don't confuse friendship and business."

Completely stunned, Seva promised that he'd do what he could.

Alone again with Alina, they returned to this conversation. Amazingly understanding, expressing a hint of pride, she explained that Lelia always was like that. "Do you think she's so quiet because she's shy? Lelia is in some inner, secret world of her own, and to interest her in something or someone can prove a major job. I usually can do that," Alina added modestly. "Her life is not the easiest, I can't judge her for being ... absent. Who knows? Maybe in her place, I'd do the same."

Seva nodded absently. He knew about Lelia's life not being the easiest. Even when he'd talked with Rostik, he was aware of all the family squabbles, about his father's drinking and the beatings of the equally drunken grandmother. The Turins didn't have a mother; she'd died during Lelia's birth, and the brother and sister had to cope with their unbearable relatives on their own. Rostik was doing well, it seemed to Seva at the time, but the downtrodden and quiet Lelia always aroused his sympathy. However, it had turned out that her quiet, withdraw nature wasn't at all the consequence of a difficult life under the same roof of two alcoholics.

"She's amazing," Alina smiled warmly. "Weird, yes. She has very unusual views about the world, but I almost always agree with them. And the sense of justice in her is off the scale ... she does everything in this life according to her conscience. Sometimes, I think she's the reincarnation of Pavlik Morozov. No, I'm serious. Lelia would snitch on any relative if she thought it was right and fair. Funny ..." With a soft laugh, Alina shook her head.

Seva smiled and squeezed her hand tighter. Alina looked at him

affectionately and squeezed her eyes tightly, either from the wind blowing in her face or from overflowing thoughts. With every word, gesture and look she showed Seva her readiness for a relationship, but she didn't take the first steps anymore. He understood that it was his turn, but he couldn't make up his mind.

Ever curious Svetka had been languishing with impatience for a while now, calling him slow-witted every time they met. At first, Seva was snappish, but then admitted she was right. They walked hand-in-hand and hugged goodbye, with Alina always staying close to him when they were with their friends ... often putting her head on his shoulder or snuggling up to him when they were sitting on a park bench. Everyone had figured that this wasn't "just friendship".

Dima had stopped shaking his hand when greeting him, and this was the first sign that Seva was on the right track. But even though everyone was holding their breath, waiting for some development, they simply continued to walk, holding hands, and quickly hugging goodbye. Seva blamed himself for not moving further in the relationship.

"I don't like those clouds." Alina distracted Seva from his sad thoughts. "It looks like it's going to rain soon."

"Let's hurry," Seva suggested. "We can go to the gazebo in the park and sit there."

Alina agreed, and they quickened their pace. The route was familiar; it wasn't the first time they'd met around Alina's house and walked to the park near the school, and then taken the bus back. While the path was the same, the conversations were always different, and so they never tired of walking.

So, holding hands tightly and walking quickly through the park, and enthusiastically discussing something of little note, they completely missed seeing the dark clouds suspended immediately over them; thunder crashed, and suddenly rain poured from the sky in torrents. Running through puddles was fun, but after a couple of minutes they slowed down to catch their breaths.

"By the time we get to the gazebo, the rain will have stopped," Alina giggled, pushing wet strands of hair from her face.

"Yeah. We're soaked through, and it's cold too ... do you want to come to my place? It's closer than going to the gazebo."

“Let’s go,” Alina said.

And, holding hands again, they reached Seva’s house in a matter of minutes. Going up to the fifth floor, Seva remembered the mess and mentally reproached himself. He should have recalled it before inviting her over. Then he stopped. Would it be better to drag Alina, chilled to the bone, through the wet streets? So be it. Yes, there was a mess, but there was also warmth, and no fear of catching pneumonia.

Alina didn’t seem to notice the mess at all. She went into his room, looked around curiously, sat down on the couch, and pulled her legs up to her chest.

“You look like a wet cat,” she told him with a smile. “Although, I’m probably looking no better.”

“You’re always beautiful,” Seva said, and realized he’d uttered the absolute truth. Even pale from the cold, with disheveled wet hair and eyelashes clumped together, Alina looked surprisingly pretty. “Some tea? Why am I asking? Of course, you need tea!”

Seva brought two cups of tea, found an old plaid blanket in the closet, and carefully draped it over Alina’s shoulders. She smiled gratefully, wrapped herself in it, picked up a cup, and to Seva’s surprise, said with pleasure, “You know, it’s kind of ethereal.”

He agreed. Because of the dark clouds gathered outside the windows and the fact the curtains that were drawn, the room was dark as at night, and in the dim light of the desk lamp, everything acquired a warm and cozy orange hue. The mess gave the room some sort of strange charm.

Seva sat on the couch next to Alina, took his cup of tea, and sipped. His throat burned, and Seva thought distantly that here it was, the perfect moment he’d been looking for. Could circumstances be any better? Alina was sitting in his house, near him, they were alone, and no one could interrupt them. He just needed to bend over, and it would happen: the long-awaited first kiss. Alina might push him away, of course, but Seva was sure that she’d not mind.

The conversation flowed smoothly behind lazy reflections. Warm, Alina removed the blanket, pulling aside her T-shirt and exposing her shoulder. Seva noticed this only when he got up from the couch to take the two empty cups to



the kitchen.

There he slowly washed them in hot water, standing thoughtfully at the sink and staring out the window unseeingly. It was still raining outside; clouds filled the sky and didn't want to allow one ray of sunshine to flow through.

Alina was still sitting on the couch in his room, waiting for him. After a cursory glance around the kitchen, Seva didn't find anything urgent to occupy himself with and sighed heavily. *Now or never*. Sooner or later, it had to happen, so why not today? Seva stood for a while at the countertop in thought and returned to the room.

“I was just thinking, what if ...”

Seva didn't listen to the rest. He walked over to Alina, sitting by the armrest, bent down and, leaning over the pillow, kissed her. Surprised, Alina inhaled sharply, as if she'd gasped, but quickly got her bearings and responded to the kiss, gently running her fingers along his cheek, and then wrapping her arms around his neck.

Her lips were soft and warm, even though her cheeks were still cool, and her hands were tender, their every movement affectionate yet cautious. Severing the kiss, Seva took her hand. “What were you thinking?”

“I don't remember,” she admitted, and her gray-green eyes sparkled. “I'd started to think this would never happen!”

“Same here.” Seva chuckled and squeezed her fingers tighter.

He realized that he'd been afraid in vain. There was nothing terrible in the kiss; it was quite pleasant, but nothing special. It was unclear why there was so much unjustified talk around it. It wasn't a big deal. His lips had touched Alina's for a few seconds, she'd hugged him around the neck, and their faces were but a millimeter apart. Nothing special, yet so much nattering and bantering!

If everything turned out to be so simple and so ordinary, then Seva was worrying in vain. It wasn't clear why he'd been so excited back then, imagining a kiss with Zhenya. Yes, it was wrong and probably disgusting to imagine such a thing, but if everything had happened with Zhenya the same way as with Alina, then there truly was nothing special about it. They just pressed their lips together. Seva hadn't even felt anything. At that time, with everything that was

going on, he'd probably overanalyzed everything and as a result, he'd been scared. "*Creative, impressionable nature,*" he mentally quoted Maria Viktorovna and grinned at his stupidity.

Alina sat closer and snuggled up to him, looking into his eyes. "Now, as an honest person, you have to ask me out on a date," she narrowed her eyes slyly.

"I was thinking of getting married," Seva drawled in the same tone.

"Don't rush things," Alina slapped him gently on the shoulder. "Well? I'm waiting!"

"It seemed to me that everything was obvious." Seva offered an exaggerated sigh.

"Who knows what you're thinking?" Alina feigned a deep frown, but immediately her face softened, and she laughed. "Okay, I won't be annoying. Better tell me, how will we tell our friends about this?"

"I don't think we need to tell anyone; everyone's already made assumptions."

"Guessing is one thing, knowing is another," Alina objected logically. "I care about how they react."

"How they react? They'll say 'finally' and they'll say how slow-witted I am," Seva chuckled. "Everyone'll be happy. Everything's been obvious for a long time, hasn't it?"

"What about Dima?" Alina shook her head. "He won't be happy! Can you imagine what he'll do if we tell him we're dating?"

Seva rolled his eyes. "Really, what'll he do? Look at me angrily? Refuse to shake my hand whenever we meet? How will I survive it?"

Relief flashed across Alina's face, and she smiled uncertainly. "You think?"

"I do! And I'm sure that worrying about how our friends will accept this news is the last thing we should be doing right now."

"You're right," Alina agreed and cupped his chin in her hand, pulling him to her. "We have much more important things to do ..."

She kissed Seva again, this time much more confidently. Seva didn't resist. And who *would* in his place?

## Chapter 19

### *She's Incredible, But ...*

**T**he next day, they walked into the classroom together, holding hand. Svetka, who was accustomed to this order of things, nodded to them ... and then suddenly realized that they were at school, in front of everyone. As soon as Seva let Alina go, she ran up to him. “What are you doing? You did it ... well, I mean, is it official now?”

Seva chuckled. Svetka looked so funny and excited, and she was burning with curiosity. “Yeah. I did.”

“Temkin, don’t mess with my head!” She became angry. “Answer the question.”

“I answered it.” Seva innocently widened his eyes.

“How you infuriate me sometimes,” she hissed and, lowering her voice to a whisper, rephrased the question. “You’re dating now, aren’t you?”

“We are,” he admitted, realizing that it was no longer possible to evade the answer anymore.

“Wow!” Svetka breathed. “And how did it happen? Tell me, did you finally kiss? If you say that Alina was the first one who did, I’ll kill you, I promise!”

“Don’t worry, I was the first one,” Seva reassured her. He prudently keeping silent about the fact that all subsequent times were exclusively Alina’s initiative.

“Attaboy!” Svetka was touched. “I’m so proud of you! And how was it? I need details! Where, what time, what did you talk about after?”

“Sveta, let’s not do that now.” Seva was a little annoyed by Svetka’s persistence.

“Whatever you say,” she agreed easily. “It’s not a secret, is it?”

“It’s not.”

“Can I tell the girls about it? And Pasha?” Svetka asked, her eyes gleaming with delight.

“You can,” Seva nodded.

“Finally!” She was delighted. “I’m so happy for you!” She hugged Seva quickly and rushed to her desk to share the news with Alena.

Seva sat in his seat and began to watch Svetka telling Alena about what she’d just learned. *Those four’ll know their business and after two recesses, the whole school will know about my relationship with Alina.* Seva didn’t doubt that for one second.

After this lesson, Svetka would tell the latest news to Pasha, and the whole tenth ‘A’ would know ... which meant that very soon Zhenya would also find out. This thought pierced Seva’s chest sharply that he inadvertently twitched, and straightened in his chair as if he’d been yanked up by ropes. He snorted irritably and shrugged. Zhenya would find out. So what? They didn’t talk anymore, so did it matter what Zhenya thought when he found out about him being with Alina? *That’s right, it doesn’t. At all.* Seva relaxed.

That was how the relationship with Alina began. On the same day, they gathered in the company of friends in the park. Only Zhenya wasn’t there. Otherwise, Seva wouldn’t have come. He noticed a little later that Dima was also absent. Rostik, however, was there with everyone else.

Their relationship is now known to the friends, Alina seemed much freer. She constantly held his hand and didn’t miss an opportunity to hug him, ruffle his hair, or kiss him on the cheek. The other girls were touched, the guys laughed benignly ... and Seva suddenly realized that he felt uncomfortable.

In private, it was tolerable. He even liked it when Alina hugged him tightly, but with the others, the attention was insanely embarrassing. For some reason, it seemed wrong, not the way it should be ... unnatural. Seva kept glancing at Pasha and Svetka to make sure that holding hands in public, hugging, and showing their feelings was normal. It was, but he experienced a sense of discomfort every time he remembered that he was no longer just friends with

Alina, but embracing the honorary status of “boyfriend and girlfriend”.

He found an explanation for feeling this way. This relationship was his first, and not with just anyone, but with Alina. Who’d have thought such a thing just six months ago? Naturally, he wasn’t used to it yet because it was a new thing, and over time everything would surely settle, and he’d stop feeling this stupid awkwardness—and “wrongness”.

As Seva had thought, everyone quickly became aware of his relationship with Alina. However, he couldn’t imagine why they’d continued to be interested. The first week after they’d come to school holding hands, many students approached him and asked, “Is it true?”

Seva happily confirmed that it was, and the guys respectfully slapped him on the back while the girls widened their eyes and gasped, “Wow!”

Even the teachers found out about it. On a beautiful April day, with great effort and will, Seva forced himself to visit Maria Viktorovna, and sit down to draw. It was quickly evident that things hadn’t gotten better—not the desire to draw, nor the understanding of why he did. Seva was upset by this, but he didn’t want to let Maria Viktorovna down again and forced himself, for the hundredth time, to draw whatever she asked him to. He still didn’t have any ideas of his own.

One day, Maria Viktorovna was busy with her teacher’s stuff, or so he thought because she was sorting papers. But Seva caught her curious glances.

Forty minutes later, she couldn’t stand it. Sitting at his desk, she asked in a conspiratorial whisper, “Tell me. You and Alina. Is it true?”

Seva choked on air. The hand holding the brush shook and the tree branch he’d been painting took on a unique shape. “How do you know that?”

“Everyone knows,” Maria Viktorovna giggled. “So, is it true or not?”

“It’s true,” Seva muttered, hurriedly blotting the wet branch.

“I’ll pretend that I didn’t see it.” Maria Viktorovna nodded at the drawing. “And you’ll tell me how it happened, okay?”

“By the way, I messed up because of you,” Seva said, indignant.

“I don’t care. I’m waiting for a story,” Maria Viktorovna declared and rested her chin on her hand.

“Let’s do it this way. I’ll tell you everything, and you don’t force me to redo this stupid view from the window.” Seva squinted with disgust at the drawing lying before him.

“No, that won’t do.” Maria Viktorovna shook her head with a smile. “You will redo it as many times as I see fit.”

“Are you kidding me, or what?” Seva was angry. “How much can I do in one sitting? ...I can’t do it anymore! Even if there are some flaws in it, just tell me, and I’ll fix them next time!”

“Why fix it next time if you can do it now?” Maria Viktorovna reasonably objected.

“Because I can’t look at it anymore!” Seva exhaled loudly and angrily.

“Don’t you understand why I make you redraw again and again?”

“I don’t,” Seva admitted. “Unless you want me to go completely nuts. Then you’re on the right track.”

“You’re silly, Seva,” Maria Viktorovna smiled without malice. “I’ve been telling you for many years that success is a hundredth of talent, and everything else is hard work ... you know?”

“I know, of course, but what does that have to do with it?”

“You don’t want to work at all. For you, art is a way to vent emotions, a fleeting impulse, a flight of inspiration. And that’s fine, it should be, but there must be something else behind it. Do you understand?”

“Not really,” he answered, admitting his stupidity.

“Okay, look,” Maria Viktorovna said patiently. “You always have amazing sketches. Especially the ones you brought me from home, when you suddenly had a rush of inspiration. But when I asked you to make full-sized paintings out of them, you always waved me off. Even if you started, you never finished. You were born with countless ideas, yet you never complete any of them.

“It’s like ... poets write short poems, and they are beautiful, and full of emotions and feelings. That’s also an art, and it helped them cope with their experiences. And there are novels, more poems, and works that may not take twenty minutes, but sometimes twenty years. It’s the same with paintings. You can draw a sketch in a rush of emotions, and it will undoubtedly be wonderful,

but if you want to create something worthwhile, then you have to be ready to create a complete picture—redo it five, ten, fifteen times.”

“And that’s why you’re forcing me to fix every, no matter how minor, little thing that no one will notice?”

“Yes, Seva,” Maria Viktorovna nodded. “I hope that in the future you’ll have enough patience to create something really meaningful.”

It sounded inspiring and, more importantly, plausible. Seva could get into it. He could never really concentrate on one thing. He always left work half-finished and enthusiastically started new ones, but then burned out, and so it went on and on in circles. No matter how Maria Viktorovna tried to make him finish at least one drawing, nothing worthwhile ever came of it.

Maybe Seva would have listened, but he had a new problem; he couldn’t do sketches either. Previously, ideas entered his head randomly and it was worth picking up a pencil, but lately, the sight of a white sheet of paper made Seva fall into a stupor. It was as if the emotions that could be transferred to it no longer existed. It was a creative crisis, no other explanation. Seva had always wondered what it looked like. Now he knew, but he wasn’t going to tell Maria Viktorovna. Maybe it would pass by itself; why annoy her with his thoughts?

“Okay, it makes sense,” admitted Seva. “I understand that this”—he nodded at the drawing—“I’ll need to redraw?”

Maria Viktorovna smiled wryly.

Seva rolled his eyes. “So be it.”

“I have faith in you.” Maria Viktorovna’s eyes sparkled. “But you’re going to tell me about you and Alina, right?” She clasped her hands and looked at him pleadingly.

“You remind me of Svetka,” Seva chuckled. “Why would you want to know about that?”

“Temkin, I’m a teacher and if you think that teachers aren’t interested in anything at school except work, then you are deeply mistaken,” Maria Viktorovna said condescendingly, in a Svetka-like way. “It’s not like we’re strangers. I’ve been fighting with you since the first grade and trying to direct your ‘impulses of inspiration’ the right way. Of course, I’m interested! So be

kind and please tell me how everything happened.”

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The next day, Seva told Alina about everything—Maria Viktorovna’s words about his fleeting impulses of inspiration and her sudden interest in their relationship too. They were at his house and for the second hour, talking enthusiastically about everything, just as they had before they’d started dating. The only difference was that now Alina was comfortably sitting on Seva’s lap, but this didn’t bother him at all. He even liked it when she did. Seva also liked hugging her and running his fingers through her soft, silky hair, and talking like this, for hours about everything and anything.

He couldn’t be otherwise with Alina. But Seva couldn’t kiss anymore, and Alina, it turned out, liked kissing very much. As soon as they were silent for a fraction of a second, she suddenly appeared close at his face, Seva didn’t have time to come to his senses. At first, it was tolerable, then later annoying.

Seva could happily kiss Alina on the cheek, nuzzle her shoulder or hug her tightly, but as soon as their kisses dragged on, he realized that he didn’t like it at all. He’d mentally count to twenty and then break away from Alina’s lips under all sorts of pretexts. The most frequent: “lack of air”. To this, Alina always raised her eyebrows in amazement and invariably repeated, “It means we’re doing something wrong ... and we’re not kissing with our noses!”

Seva only shrugged in response. Probably, she was right.

That’s why he liked walking with Alina much more. On the street, their joint pastime consisted mainly of conversations. If he had his way, they’d walk every day, but Zhenya, whom Seva never stopped avoiding, was still part of the group. Those days when he didn’t have lessons, Seva and Alina stayed at home, and it was impossible to go without kissing. Seva tried not to resist. If Alina liked it, why should it prove so difficult for him?

“And yet, Maria Viktorovna is amazing,” Alina stated after listening to his story. “I loved her so much when she was teaching us. You should have known!”

Seva grinned, methodically dividing a shock of brown hair into small



strands. “I felt the same.”

“You’ve always had a special relationship with her,” Alina said thoughtfully. “If someone would have told me that you could argue with a teacher with such impunity, I wouldn’t have believed it! But I always knew she was the mentor you needed. You can’t imagine how I wanted to kill you when I found out that you’d given up drawing.”

“Why?” Seva was surprised.

“Well, first because of Maria Viktorovna. I guessed how insulting it must be for her, and secondly ... okay, I didn’t want to kill you, but I wanted to talk to you. I understood the mistake you were making, and I understood perfectly well why you were doing it. I went to music school,” she explained, noticing Seva’s uncomprehending look. “I liked it. I studied piano, sang in the choir, even soloed. My parents were happy, and so was I. Everyone predicted a bright future for me until I suddenly decided to leave when I was twelve. Do you know why?”

“No,” Seva answered honestly.

“Mila,” Alina explained briefly, and Seva couldn’t resist a stifled gasp.

Mila! He’d managed to completely forget about her, even if that had happened only a year and a half before the death of his mom. Mila Denikina, a charming green-eyed fourth-grader, was loud, energetic, and active. Probably everyone knew her, because she participated in every event and performed on every holiday. Seva had never really been acquainted with Alina’s younger sister, but had heard a lot.

Seva had but a few memories of Mila. He remembered the first time he saw her on Sema’s first day at school. She, his brother’s future classmate, was sitting on the shoulder of a tenth-grader and ringing a bell. Mom smiled at Sema. “Look, what beautiful girls you have in class!”

He just clicked his tongue. “Big deal!”. Seva wasn’t sure, but it seemed that Sema liked Mila. That wasn’t surprising.

Unlike her older sister, Mila never seemed proud or arrogant, quite the contrary; she was sincere and open. Seva still remembered how in the fifth grade, at a school exhibition of drawings, nine-year-old Mila approached his work and, enthusiastically rounding her eyes, pulled her mother’s skirt. “I want

to draw like this when I grow up!”. Her words were childishly naive but so sincere that they touched and flattered Seva. He shared his favorite candy with her. She thanked him shyly, and they never spoke again.

In the sixth grade, a tragedy happened in the Denikin family. Ten-year-old Mila ran onto the roadway to get a stray kitten and was hit by a car passing at a ridiculously high speed. The driver was put in prison for a long time. The whole school knew the details of this story. But it was hardly consolation for the distraught parents and Alina, who’d doted on her younger sister.

Perhaps the relationship between Mila and Alina became one of the reasons why Seva had never believed all the rumors about her. She’d loved her sister so sincerely and reverently that there was no way she could be an insensitive, cold-blooded bitch, as they always called her.

For the first couple of months, Alina wasn’t herself. She went to school every other day, shuddered every time she heard her name, and answered teachers’ questions with difficulty. Time passed and Alina slowly recovered from the blow, and everything returned to normal. Nobody remembered Mila, and Alina herself never spoke about her.

“I had no idea that after the accident you stopped going to music school,” he said softly, lifting Alina slightly and hugging her shoulders.

“Few people know about it. Probably only Lelia,” Alina said, burying her nose in his jacket. “At that time, I didn’t want anything at all ... I didn’t want to eat or talk to anyone, let alone talk about school and music. No matter how my parents tried to persuade me, I never returned, and then it was too late.

“A year later, I regretted my decision, and we gave the piano to some of Mom’s friends, because I couldn’t look at it. I was angry at myself, terribly angry, and I’m still angry. And then I found out that you quit drawing! I so badly wanted to explain to you that you were wrong, that you were making the biggest mistake of your life. And I told you that I even tried, but you snapped so angrily that I was afraid to preach to you. I still feel kind of guilty, but now you’ve come to your senses, and it’s much easier for me.”

“Why did you feel guilty?”

“We were going through almost the same thing; you also gave up drawing

after your mom's death, and I understood how you felt, but I couldn't help you."

"You shouldn't have," Seva comforted her. "Even though our situations were similar, I think I quit drawing not only because of my mother. In any case, you probably wouldn't have been able to do anything about it, so don't blame yourself anymore."

"Everything is fine now," Alina summed up with a sad smile. "Even better than it could be. You're drawing again, I almost don't miss music school anymore, and we've started dating. Who would have thought? By the way, if you didn't know, I liked you for a long time, almost from elementary school."

"Seriously?" Seva stared in amazement.

"Yes," Alina nodded. "You had no idea?"

"I couldn't even imagine!" Seva exclaimed sincerely. "Why did you never give me a hint? You know perfectly well that almost the whole school would love to date you. Were you really afraid?"

"I don't know," Alina shrugged thoughtfully. "I was probably too proud for that. Stupid. I wanted you to guess for yourself. And you did! What, by the way, has changed? What happened?"

"Svetka," Seva answered. "If it wasn't for her, I probably wouldn't have dared". *I wouldn't even have thought about it.*

"So, we should say thank you to Svetka," Alina concluded with satisfaction.

"Yes. I found her Pasha, and she brought us together," Seva chuckled.

"You see how well everything turned out." Alina gazed at him happily and pulled Seva close.

He obediently leaned forward and mentally sighed. *One, two ...*

## Chapter 20

### *Strange Reaction*

“Can you imagine? She thinks that my hair somehow affects my knowledge!” Alina snorted indignantly. “She seems like a smart woman, but when she says something like that, you don’t know whether to cry or laugh.”

Seva and Lelia exchanged weary glances. For twenty minutes, the three of them had been sitting on their favorite park bench, waiting for someone to join them, and during the twenty minutes, Alina was indignant about an incident in Andrianovna’s lesson earlier that day.

The day before, she spent the whole evening twisting her hair into huge curlers, on which, according to her, it was damn painful to sleep, but the strict head teacher didn’t care her new image. Whether Andrianovna was dissatisfied with the volume or the loose hair itself, no one understood, but she forced Alina to braid her hair and threatened, seeing her with such a hairstyle again, to call her parents.

“My mom helped me with it, by the way!” Alina indignantly declared.

“I doubt it’s just her. There are rules and it’s unlikely that she came up with them herself.” Seva stood up for Andrianovna. “Or maybe she’s just jealous that she can’t do the same sort of styling for herself.” He smiled encouragingly and pulled Alina to him.

She was sitting on the back of the bench with her feet on the seat.

“Unless that’s the case,” Alina chuckled and obediently moved closer to him. “But what a shame!”

“Calm down, Alina,” Lelia grimaced. “It’s a shame, yes, but what can you do? And how many people have said how this hairstyle suits you?”

“If the witch’s lesson hadn’t been the first one, there’d have been even more,” Alina muttered and then, calming down, put her head on Seva’s shoulder. “And where is everybody? Did they decide *not* to come today?”

“It seems our foursome should be here,” said Seva.

“Svetka is coming!” big-eyed Lelia exclaimed, pointing in the distance.

Seva looked. Indeed, a stocky figure was approaching them from the schoolyard.

“Why is she without Pasha?” Alina was surprised. “Think about it, Svetka walking without Pasha!”

“Pasha has seven lessons today ... she probably hung out with him during the long recess,” Seva explained. He knew perfectly well that Pasha wouldn’t come today. The day before he had complained about the many lessons and chemistry test. This meant that Zhenya wouldn’t be there either and Seva could remain calm. He exhaled with relief and waved his hand to Svetka.

“Here you are,” she smiled, approaching the bench. “I thought I wouldn’t see anyone here.”

“Come on, it’s not so odd seeing us here,” Seva waved a hand.

“Yeah, whatever you say,” Svetka chuckled. “You have no idea what I’m about to tell you right now! You’ll be stunned!”

“Amaze us.”

“Alena told me today that she kissed Rostik! Twice.”

Seva’s face expressed bewilderment. “Really? It seemed to me that she was rejecting him.”

“Yes, that’s the point!” Svetka sighed with annoyance. “She turned him down before. She hasn’t decided whether she likes him or not, or whether she wants to date him. She finds him attractive, but Alena has big doubts about building some kind of relationship with him ...”

“So, she kissed him twice for fun, or what?” Alina was cross. “He already fantasized about them dating, and now she’s going to reject him again?”

Seva wanted to support Alina, but bit his tongue in time. Who was he to

judge Alena? How could he know what was going on inside her head, especially if he'd found out about what happened not from Alena herself but from Svetka? It wasn't for Seva to reproach anyone and recite morals. It would be pure hypocrisy on his part to reproach Alena, so Seva shrugged. "It's her business. Rostik signed up for it himself. She didn't promise him anything, did she?" He looked questioningly at Svetka, and she nodded. "Well, that's that."

"I don't know. I still think it's rude on her part," Alina said not so confidently.

"Maybe, but who among us hasn't made mistakes?" Seva remarked philosophically. "And is it our business? Sveta, why did you tell us about this? So that we could condemn her ... say about how bad she was behaving?"

"I'd never condemn my best friend," Svetka snorted. "Alena herself asked me to talk to you so that you could help her figure things out."

"Talk to me?" Seva was amazed.

"Yes, to you," Svetka calmly confirmed. "You were friends before, and you both talked a lot, so you should know him well. So, tell me, is it worth starting a relationship with him, or is it better for Alena not to waste her time?"

"It's not that I know him well," Seva said doubtfully. "Why don't you ask Lelia? It's her brother. She should know better than anyone."

"We forgot about that." Svetka suddenly appeared confused. "And—"

"And I'm an interested person," continued Lelia, not offended at all. "Of course, he's not the same with me as he is with you. After all, he isn't only my older brother, he's also my parents and grandparents wrapped into one person."

"Exactly," Alina agreed. "Rostik at home and Rostik with friends are completely different people, and how he behaves alone with someone not from the family, Lelia and I have no idea. You, Seva, should know."

"We haven't been that close as friends," sighed Seva.

"Really?" Lelia's face showed surprise. "Rostik told me that you were very good friends. He was even sad that you and Zhenya began to talk. He thought you would make up. Sometimes, he says that you are a 'cool dude'."

"Really?" It was Seva's turn to be surprised. "I'd never have thought. It seemed to me that they were indifferent about it."

“Dima maybe, but not Rostik,” Lelia assured him.

“Guys, maybe we could return to the original topic?” Svetka reminded them.

“Exactly,” Seva nodded. “You know, Sveta, if you’d asked me six months earlier, I’d have said that he’s a jerk. The girls ran away from him so fast, they looked like jets. That’s not surprising, given he had only hockey in his head and was drinking alcohol in the garage. But now, he seems to have come to his senses, and with Alena he is a completely different person. I think he really likes her, since he’s been waiting for a simple kiss for so long, and now he’s ready to wait for her to sort herself out. Who knows? But the Rostik I knew was a rare jerk ... I’m sorry, Lelia.” He glanced at her guiltily. “I think something has changed. Let Alena decide for herself if she likes him. I think if they kissed, it was for a reason.”

“Fair enough,” Svetka said thoughtfully. “Okay, I’ll tell her. Thanks for the consultation. The life of a matchmaker is hard!” Putting a hand to her forehead, she plopped on the bench next to Alina and smiled broadly at the spring sun.

“But your work isn’t for nothing. Seva and I haven’t thanked you yet!”

“Oh, come on, I just had to push him. I really didn’t do anything.” Svetka was being modest. “Right, Lelia?”

Lelia looked at the two of them thoughtfully, paused for a few seconds, and reluctantly answered, “Perhaps.”

“But if it weren’t for you, Seva would never have realized that I like him. Right, Seva?” Alina smiled at him affectionately and reached out to kiss him.

Seva dodged, pretending not to notice, and turned to Svetka. “Why are you so happy?”

“Can’t I be happy?” She chuckled. “It’s spring outside, May is coming soon, the weather is lovely! And it’s close to the summer holidays. And Odessa ... I helped Rosalia Andrianovna in the teacher’s room today, and I saw our class book. Not a single ‘D’, can you imagine? If we finish the last semester the same way as this, then the trip is certainly in our pocket!”

“Is it true?” Alina was delighted. “When we were told about it, I thought that someone would surely ruin everything!”

“I thought so too,” Svetka smiled guiltily. “I even fought with Seva in

September ... in vain. I'm sorry."

"Forget it. It was a long time ago," he waved it off.

"I'm still uncomfortable," sighed Svetka. "You improved your grades so much, I was stunned."

"Everyone was stunned," Alina echoed.

"Yeah. Although this isn't so surprising; you always studied well until the eighth grade. It's not too difficult catching up in one grade. The main thing is to want it. You had motivation," Svetka concluded and immediately frowned. "But now you've started getting 'C' again. Let's fix it or otherwise we won't get to see Odessa."

It was true. Since Seva had stopped talking to Zhenya, he didn't bother much about lessons. Regularly, Seva promised himself that he would soon come to his senses again, but he always found a new and different excuse. So, soon he moved down from a solid 'B' to a 'B-', then 'C', and during his last lesson with Andrianovna, he got a well-deserved 'D'. This didn't motivate him to pick up his textbook. But after Svetka's words, he felt ashamed.

"I'll fix it," he promised meekly. "But I'm not going to Odessa with you."

"Why?" Svetka was surprised.

"What do you mean you're not going? Why is that? Did your father say he wouldn't give you any money?" Alina looked worried.

"I didn't ask," Seva answered reluctantly. "And I don't want to. I would love to go somewhere, especially with you, but not to Odessa."

"Why?" Svetka repeated her question.

"I don't want to talk about it," Seva grimaced. "But don't worry, I'll fix the grades and you'll go there."

"So, you *never* intended to go there?" Svetka frowned.

"I didn't," Seva admitted.

"I was sure that you started studying so that everyone could go to Odessa ... including you. If not, why?"

"Sveta, I got a 'D' in several subjects last year," Seva chuckled. "Andrianovna would have devoured me whole if I hadn't started doing something. Two years of sitting in the ninth grade isn't that much fun, to be



honest.”

“Ah,” said Svetka. “In the eighth grade you kept saying that you didn’t care as long as you finished school with a certificate.”

“Well, this year I changed my mind. And I began talking with Zhenya; he’s easy to study with.”

“Yes, it turned out well with Zhenya,” Svetka agreed. “You started a lot of things with him. Your friendship was a good influence.”

“Right!” Alina supported her. “It’s even weird. You were so close and suddenly quarreled so much that you don’t even talk anymore. We still can’t understand what had happened between the both of you and that you’re still keeping silent about it. Maybe you want to make peace with him now? So much time has passed ... and you even avoid him in the group.”

“I’m not avoiding anyone,” Seva objected, knowing full well that it was stupid to deny.

“Oh, really?” Alina grimaced. “Seva, I’m not a fool. I’ve noticed for some time that you and I show up in the group only on those days when Zhenya is busy. When he’s with our friends, we’re holed up at your house. Once or twice may be a coincidence, but now it’s ... it’s a tradition!”

“Okay, I’m avoiding him,” Seva reluctantly admitted. “Why do you need unnecessary conflicts? We don’t bother anyone and it’s convenient for everyone ... and everyone is happy.”

“We’re not happy, Seva.” Svetka shook her head.

“Yes, we’re worried.” Alina peered into his eyes and took his hand. “You may not have noticed, but our friends understand how much you meant to each other.”

*They understand, sure!* Seva gave a mental snort.

If one of them had guessed the truth, they’d not have worried, but would have amicably searched for a psychiatrist for him. He shifted uncomfortably on the bench, shivering from the unexpected cool breeze on the clear spring day. He didn’t like the conversation.

“Both of you are so stubbornly silent about the reasons for your fight. One of you offended the other so much ... and we’re not supposed to know ... or it’s

such a trifle that you're ashamed to admit that you fought because of it," declared Svetka.

Seva suddenly cheered up. "Neither," he smiled broadly. "Stop wasting your time guessing; it doesn't work that way."

"It doesn't matter," Svetka agreed easily. "The important thing is that you need to make up. Are you *that* proud that you can't take the first step?"

Seva wasn't proud at all; he was afraid. After everything that had happened between them, it seemed absurd to start chatting as if nothing had happened. They didn't quarrel to apologize and forget about old grievances. Seva had simply made a huge stupid mistake, which he regretted to this day. He didn't know what Zhenya thought about him these days, but it couldn't be anything good. Most likely, Zhenya believed he was crazy, and he was probably right. Maybe everything was fine with Seva now. He was dating Alina and wasn't thinking about disgusting things like before, but it was unlikely that this would prove much of a consolation for Zhenya after everything he'd heard. If he didn't try to make peace, to talk to him, it meant he didn't want to, and Seva had no right to condemn him for this.

"I'm not proud," he stated honestly. "But I'm not at all sure that he needs ... us to make up. Just believe that it's better for Zhenya, especially if he isn't eager to make peace."

"You're not eager either," Alina retorted.

"Why are you trying to reconcile us then?"

"Tell me that you both don't need this friendship." Svetka rolled her eyes. "I've never heard such an outright lie! Both of you have changed each other beyond recognition in but a few months ... after what happened in the eighth grade, it's a miracle!"

"Maybe it's a miracle," Seva agreed because he had neither the strength nor the desire to argue. "And maybe we've already squeezed everything we could out of this friendship, so there's no point in reconciling." *Someone squeezed more than he should have.*

Alina looked like she was outraged and had opened her mouth to respond, but she caught Svetka's meaningful look and gave her the floor. "Fine, whatever

you say,” she nodded. “Answer one question. If Zhenya came to you himself to talk and make peace, would you meet him halfway?”

“I would,” Seva answered without hesitation. “But that’s not going to happen, so please mind your own business.”

“We will,” Alina promised, looking at him with such rounded eyes that it was clear she was lying.

“You both have such strange reactions when it comes to your fight,” Lelia, who had been stubbornly silent, suddenly said.

Seva forgot that Lelia was also sitting with them. He shuddered and felt how everything inside turned cold; even his breath caught for a second.

“Why is it strange?” Alina asked.

“I don’t know,” Lelia frowned. “You both start to get nervous, you answer briefly and in monosyllables, as if you’re afraid to talk about it. It’s not as if we’re interrogating you about the fight, just asking what led to it.”

“It’s unpleasant for them to talk about it,” Alina suddenly came to his aid. “Would you like it if we quarreled and everyone bothered you with questions about it?”

“I wouldn’t,” Lelia agreed. “But I think ... okay, it doesn’t matter. What am I digging for?” She was suddenly embarrassed.

“Exactly,” Alina chuckled and, turning back to Seva, kissed him.

For the first time, he was happy to receive one. Anything, just not to talk about Zhenya anymore! Especially about his “strange reaction” to the conversations. Damn Lelia’s observation. The others hadn’t noticed anything! On the other hand, she said that Zhenya also reacted strangely to the mention of their fight, which meant that Lelia was very impressionable. No one took her words seriously.

“Eww,” Svetka grimaced. “Guys, you’re not alone here!”

Seva mentally thanked her, and Alina sarcastically said, “Oh, you’re one to talk! We tolerate you and Pasha, so you have to be patient too.”

“Don’t lie. Pasha and I have never kissed in front of you ... well, almost never,” Svetka added doubtfully.

“Exactly, almost!” Alina snorted.

“Look, the girls are coming,” Lelia pointed.

Seva turned around and saw Nastya, Oksana, and Alena approaching. His heart immediately lightened. With them, Alina and Svetka definitely wouldn't start a conversation about Zhenya, which meant he had nothing to fret about. Barely restraining a broad smile, he got up from the bench to make space for the girls, and offered a silly clownish bow, “Here you go, ladies.”

The trio exchanged glances and, giggling, rolled their eyes. Everyone's mood was cheerful, sunny, and carefree like the spring.

## Chapter 21

### *Are We Cool?*

Seva completely forgot about his birthday. It crept up so unexpectedly and imperceptibly that he didn't have time to figure out how he'd celebrate it. At first, he wasn't going to, but he was attacked from both sides by Alina and Svetka. They unanimously claimed that it was a sin not to celebrate such a date, that he would regret it later, and that he should just give the go-ahead, and they would take over the organization of the entire event.

After listening to their tearful persuasions for a couple of days, Seva gave up, and the friends enthusiastically set to work. They made a list of everything: music (Alina promised to bring her records), dishes, food, and guests, although Seva wasn't going to call anyone except their group of friends.

It was agreed that they celebrate at his house on the weekend before his birthday, and Denis Ilyich kindly agreed to go to the summer house for a couple of days with the mother of Sema's friend, taking with him his grandmother and Sema himself. The kind woman gave Seva a gift in advance: a three-liter jar of strawberry jam. When Seva saw it, he grimaced involuntarily, but he conveyed his thanks and shoved the jar on the farthest shelf.

On the morning of the first of May, two days before his birthday, Seva was rudely awakened by the doorbell. Svetka and Alina were standing on the threshold, smiling, and Lelia was standing a little behind them, sleepy and obviously dissatisfied with being woken up at such an early hour. Seva himself looked no better. He was disheveled, in a rumpled night T-shirt, sleepy, and with a stripe from a pillow on his cheek.

At that moment he couldn't come up with anything smarter than, "What are you doing here?" And, realizing what he'd just said, immediately caught himself. "I mean, come on in. I'll change and come sit with you."

With annoyance, it occurred to him that if Svetka had already seen him in such an unpresentable state, then this was the first time for Alina. However, contrary to his fears, this didn't bother her. As soon as she crossed the threshold, Alina threw her arms around Seva's neck. "We woke you up, didn't we? Sorry, we just wanted to have time to prepare everything. You're so cute when sleepy." She patted his tangled hair.

"Get off him and let me hug him too," Svetka smiled and, pulling Alina by the hand, hugged Seva. "Happy upcoming sixteenth birthday! You're almost an adult, how quickly children grow up!" Theatrically, she wiped a non-existent tear from her eye.

"You're six months younger than me," Seva chuckled, hugging her back.

"How quickly children grow up!" Svetka repeated and, laughing, tweaking his nose. "So be it. Alina and I won't drag you by the earlobes, but Pasha will come, and you'll be in trouble! This is so that life doesn't seem like a dream to you."

"So that life doesn't seem like a dream to him, you woke him up at nine in the morning on a day off," Lelia grumbled and belatedly added, "Happy birthday!"

"Thank you," Seva chuckled.

"Okay, come on, birthday boy, go wash up and get dressed. We'll give you gifts and start preparing," Alina ordered, and Seva obeyed without further ado.

When he got back, the girls presented their gifts. Alina was generous with a set of brushes, a palette, and professional watercolors, saying that it was from her and Lelia. Svetka solemnly presented him with a volume containing two Dostoevsky novels. Seva kept silent about the fact that the same one had been in his grandma's home library for many years. The very fact that Svetka remembered from the seventh grade about Seva's love for Dostoevsky was a pleasant surprise. He was touched, a little embarrassed, and awkwardly but sincerely thanked the girls for the gifts, for organizing the party, and for

everything they had done for him.

They, with a glance at each other, hurriedly assured him that it wasn't difficult for them; quite the contrary, they enjoyed doing it, and went straight to the kitchen. Seva followed.

There they filled the entire tiny space; the kitchen was filled with sounds of slamming cabinets, clattering dishes, and singsong female voices. Seva, who didn't want to sit idle, tried to assist, but Svetka sternly stated that today he should rest and enjoy. Seva wasn't satisfied with this and after a fifteen-minute discussion, he was assigned to peel potatoes. Taking the knife from Alina's hands, he thought with annoyance that it'd be better not to show off.

The time spent cooking, thanks to the incessant chirping of Svetka and Alina, flew by quickly. Watching them, Seva wondered how they, so completely different from each other, managed to become such good friends. Judging by the ease with which the girls changed topics of conversation, the amount of harmless gossip, and the genuine laughter of both, they felt completely comfortable in each other's company. Occasionally inserting comments, Lelia only listened to their chatter with curiosity; she wasn't at all offended that Alina didn't talk to her. Seva was mostly silent as well because it was almost impossible to insert onto word into their enthusiastic dialogue.

By one o'clock, when almost everything was ready, guests began to arrive. Nastya, Oksana, and Alena were the first. Rostik and Dima came after them. Seva barely restrained the laughter that wanted to burst forth when Dima, frowning and clearly dissatisfied with his presence here, issued a forced birthday greeting and, almost grimacing, extended a plump hand. Such a weirdo! Had Seva dragged him here by force? If he were in Dima's position, he'd have been happy to stay at home, citing ill health or some such excuse.

But he came to watch everyone from under his eyelashes. Maybe he thought that his discontent and contempt for what was happening would spoil everyone's mood. Let him try.

Seva absently glanced at the almost set table and counted the plates. Eleven. How would they all fit at the small table? And weren't there too many settings? Seva frowned. Five people in the room, three girls in the kitchen, he was the

ninth. Pasha, the tenth, had promised to come later. Sveta must have miscalculated. Taking the extra plate with him, he returned to the kitchen.

“Excess, he explained to Alina’s questioning look. “There are ten of us, and you have set eleven plates.”

“Oh?” She looked at Svetka with a smile. “How is it that an A-one student can’t count to ten?”

“I’ve been so inattentive lately,” she complained. “I’m losing my abilities. Okay, you can start without me. I’m going to meet Pasha.” She licked the knife with which she’d cut tomatoes and put it on the countertop.

“Why?” Seva was surprised. “He knows where I live.”

“He does. I just want to take a little walk with him. Can’t I meet my boyfriend?”

“I didn’t say anything like that.” Seva became indignant. “I just asked.”

“By the way, I brought some bottles of wine with me. Mom secretly gave them to me,” Alina said, laying out cheese on a plate. “They’re in the bag ... you can take them to the room.”

Seva obediently complied, fleetingly thinking that it would be better for Pasha to hurry up. He’d never opened wine before and wasn’t sure that he could do it correctly. There was little hope for Rostik; it was unlikely that he ever drank anything other than his usual alcohol and that champagne for the New Year.

Putting a bottle on the table, Seva looked around. Rostik was explaining something to Dima and the trio was loudly discussing the last rehearsal of the drama club. Everything was as it should be. But without Alina and Svetka, he quickly became bored. As if having heard his thoughts, Alina joined everyone with Lelia at her side. She put on Seva’s favorite record by The Beatles and sat down next to him on the couch.

“Svetka said to start without them, but I think we’ll wait a bit, right?” she cooed, running her fingers through his hair.

“Sure,” Seva shrugged.

It didn’t take long. No more than five minutes after that, the shrill trill of a bell rang forth. Alina, who’d been hanging off Seva’s neck, hurriedly removed



her hands and nodded towards the hallway. “Well, go and welcome your guests!”

Seva looked at her in surprise but said nothing and silently went to open the door. Alina followed him for some reason. She stood behind him when he turned the latch, and Seva wanted to ask with a laugh if she were trying to prevent his escape. But the door opened ... and he suddenly forgot what he was thinking.

Zhenya was standing on the threshold. Pasha and Sveta were also there, but after opening the door, he saw no one else. Seva froze and stared stupidly for several seconds. Then he came back to life. Confused, he remembered to step away and averted his eyes—to Svetka, who was standing behind Zhenya, smiling broadly. Seva suddenly felt anything but happy.

They hadn't talked for a month and a half, avoided each other in every possible way, were afraid to chat, and suddenly Zhenya, as if nothing had happened, showed up at his home. He stood, looking at him confusedly and shifted from one foot to the other. As if it wasn't him yesterday, who as soon as he saw Seva on the landing, made a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn and disappeared behind the blue doors to the fourth floor. And for what?

Would he find the courage to talk to Seva about what had happened between them? Seva didn't believe it, just as he didn't believe that without that frightening and awkward—but necessary—conversation, they'd be able to become best friends again. Even if Seva already has Alina, even if Zhenya had long considered his confession a fleeting and insignificant clouding of the mind, without discussing it, they'd never be friends like before.

Seva looked at Zhenya again, peered into that familiar face, and firmly decided that he'd not make the first step. He wouldn't do anything to try to fix things. Zhenya had to decide that they'd talk and if not, then they didn't need this friendship.

All these unpleasant, painful thoughts were undoubtedly reflected on Seva's face, because Zhenya frowned too and glanced at the people crowding behind Seva with a serious look. The group moved into the hallway and were standing and looking at them with bated breaths and curiosity. Then Zhenya, without a shadow of a smile, stretched out a firm hand. Seva looked at it with dislike. Not because Zhenya was disgusting to him, not at all. This was still his beloved

Zhenya, the best person in the world, who through an absurd circumstance had become distant.

He'd never have allowed himself to treat Zhenya with disdain or hostility, but Seva didn't want to shake his hand at all. Still fresh in his memory were those days when, from a simple handshake, goosebumps prickled Seva from head to foot. For more than a month, Seva hadn't experienced that feeling and even though his unhealthy love had lessened long ago, he was still afraid of Zhenya's touches. Who knew what would happen ...?

But it was impossible to refuse a handshake, even if you'd quarreled. Seva knew this from childhood. So, clenching his jaw, he cautiously took the outstretched hand. He squeezed Zhenya's soft palm with icy fingers and, exhaling with relief, let it go with a smile. This time, nasty goosebumps mercifully spared him, and the simple touch didn't do anything to Seva. Only in his stomach, something barely noticeable, just for a split second, twitched when Zhenya, holding his hand, stole a glance at him. But delighted, happy Seva didn't pay attention to it. He smiled more broadly at Svetka, pulled Alina, who was still standing next to him, by the waist, and waved his hand to friends standing nearby. "Come in already. Why are you standing there like strangers?"

The three of them stumbled into the apartment, and the hallway was filled with the usual hubbub and laughter again. Seva had noticed that everything was happening in complete, absolute silence, that everyone present hadn't seemed to breathe as they observed the reunion of the two once best friends.

Alina, who squeezed his hand painfully, "Seva!" she said with an excited gasp.

He looked at her gloomily, not knowing whether to be angry or to thank the enterprising girls. Seva understood that his mood was irretrievably spoiled, and all hopes for a pleasant birthday had turned to dust. It was impossible. After a month and a half, he once again found himself in the same room with Zhenya—with whom he still hadn't talk.

The group sat at the table again. Zhenya settled down in the corner, directly opposite, and Seva compulsively grabbed Alina's hand and lowered his eyes, not wanting to look at him.

She frowned worriedly, leaned close to his ear, and asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah, I am.” Seva flicked a hand.

Alina, calmed down, smiled broadly, and clapped her hands to garner everyone’s attention. “Guys! We can finally start—”

“No! Wait a minute,” Svetka cut her off in mid-sentence and ran out of the room. She returned with a plate in her hands and, after exchanging sly glances with Alina, handed it to Zhenya.

“The eleventh one,” Seva commented softly.

“Yes! *Now* everyone is finally here,” Alina stated happily. “You all know why we gathered today, and, I think, each of us has already congratulated Seva, so I won’t talk for a long time. I’ll just add that now we have another reason ...” She looked at Svetka.

“That reason you all also understand perfectly,” she chuckled. “Therefore, congratulations, Seva! This is our main gift to you.”

Seva wanted to fall to the ground. It seemed that his worst nightmare was coming true. Everyone in this room was carefully watching him and Zhenya, wondering what they would do next. For the first time, his fear that someone cared how he looked at Zhenya, how he behaved with him, and how he shied away from him turned out to be justified. His worst birthday gift ever!

Zhenya also looked uncomfortable. Humming in embarrassment, he meticulously studied his own hands and didn’t look at Seva. Oksana, who was sitting next to him, kept shifting her curious gaze from Zhenya to Seva and back, each time irritating both more and more.

“I suggest you open the wine and have a drink!” Alina took everything into her own hands again.

“Let’s get drunk already!” Rostik enthusiastically declared, and everyone laughed carelessly in response.

Seva missed the moment of uncorking the bottle and the pouring of wine into glasses, didn’t notice how the record from The Beatles changed to Pink Floyd and didn’t realize when he was surrounded by girls. Huddled next to Alina and Svetka, Seva was still holding Alina’s hand and absently examining his

antiquated record player as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Alina periodically elbowed him, and every time he automatically nodded, saying that everything was fine. Trying not to give himself away, Seva closely watched Zhenya. He even managed to connect to the girls' conversation from time to time, so that from the outside it wouldn't seem as if he were mindlessly staring at a certain someone. But the spy in him was frankly bad. Sometimes Seva caught Zhenya's cursory glances at him, and both immediately averted their eyes, pretending that they hadn't noticed anything. He was talking about something with Pasha, and Seva was ready to swear that Zhenya wasn't even listening, he looked so vacant.

Seva was angry—angry at the girls for inviting Zhenya, at Zhenya for coming, and at himself for not being able to relax and breathe calmly. What was he so afraid of? That Zhenya would tell someone about everything? He hadn't told anyone in the six weeks, so he wouldn't tell anyone now. That everything would remain the same? It wouldn't. Seva was convinced of this when he shook Zhenya's hand at the threshold.

*He's okay. He's normal now, and Zhenya can make sure of this himself if he wants to. He can ask and not pretend that everything is as it should be.* Seva didn't understand why Zhenya had come, but he wasn't going to speak first and ask this question head-on. If he wanted to, he would take the first step. If he didn't, then Seva wouldn't either. Seva calmed a little and joined the lively conversation of the girls.

He managed to distract himself. Singing along to his favorite song from the record silently and absently listening to Nastya's story about the play they'd put on next year, he held Alina's hand and drank wine. He even thought to ask Rostik about other alcohol, but he was sitting at the other end of the table, and Seva didn't want to shout over the record.

Relaxed, he flinched when Alina patted him insistently on the shoulder. "What's up?"

"I said, Zhenya wants to congratulate you," Alina repeated, let go of his hand, and leaned back a little, allowing Seva to see him.

Zhenya was standing next to the couch, a little embarrassed, obviously not

knowing how to start. The girls crowded around, watching him and Seva closely. Seva looked attentively at Zhenya and then lowered his gaze, again taking Alina's hand.

Zhenya coughed timidly. "I'm not so great at giving gifts," he finally confessed. "And so, without further ado ... here you go." Zhenya handed him the book hidden behind his back.

Seva thanked him, took the book in his hands and his expression was one of amazement. His eyes became rounded like five kopecks coins. "Are you serious? You remembered?"

Seva himself forgot when it had happened; he only remembered that once, sitting in the garage one evening, he'd casually mentioned that there was only one book in his life that he'd like to reread and which, unfortunately, wasn't in his grandma's huge closet. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was his mom's favorite book, which she read until the pages had grown thin. She'd retold it to Seva more than one hundred times. Seva remembered the plot by heart, remembered every hero so vividly described by his eloquent mom. Though he'd never seen it, he could envision the French cathedral because it was etched into his memory. It so happened that shortly before her death, the book was lost, and since then Seva hadn't had the opportunity to touch one of the most vivid memories of his childhood. It was impossible to find that novel in stores and Seva could never hope to reread it, but Zhenya's gift turned everything upside down. Now, after so many years, holding *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* in his hands, he stared at Zhenya.

"I did," Zhenya shrugged. "You like it?"

"Are you kidding?" Forgetting himself, Seva exhaled loudly. "Of course, I like it! Thank you."

"You're welcome." Zhenya waved his hand.

"Come on ... give each other a hug finally!" Alina was indignant and pushed Seva toward Zhenya. "Like some first-graders, honestly!"

The girls supported her.

"Go on!"

"Really!"

“Don’t act like kids!”

Seva, pushed off the couch, snatched the book out of his hands. There was nothing else to do. With an embarrassed smile, he hugged Zhenya.

Seva hugged him tightly, impressed by the unexpected gift, and Zhenya responded in kind. He patted Seva on the back and, accidentally poked his nose into the place between his neck and shoulder, where the collar of the T-shirt ended and the bare skin began. He said quietly, “Happy birthday.”

Seva inhaled sharply, but couldn’t exhale. It was as if he’d been prodded by an electric shock. Zhenya’s ticklish whisper raced from his neck all over his body, even to the tips of his fingers. His legs buckled, and his heart fluttered and kept beating like crazy. Everything swam before his eyes, and awareness fell on Seva with all his weight, pinning him to the floor.

Here it was, a fresh “attack” of the illness he’d been so afraid of. This time it was much scarier, primarily because it didn’t happen while he was alone or alone with Zhenya. There was a bunch of people around them, whose gazes drilled into Seva and seemed to see right through him, noticing how desperately his insides clenched, and how the heat rushed to his face, neck, and shoulders.

Panicking, he recoiled from Zhenya, rested his gaze on the floor, and said with a strangled voice, “Thank you. I’ll ... I’ll be right back.” He stormed out of the room.

Having covered the distance to the bathroom in a matter of seconds, he locked the latch, twisted the top of cold water, and put his hands under the icy water. His heart was bursting out of his chest, his legs couldn’t hold him, and Seva sank to the side of the bathroom without strength. There were no thoughts in his head, not a single one, nothing sensible and nothing delusional. There was only a horror-piercing understanding. *This has not passed.*

Seva sprinkled water on his face, washed his neck, shoulders, and arms up to the elbow, and even gave himself a couple of slaps on the face. It didn’t get any easier. Only his breathing slowly returned to normal and it no longer seemed like he was going to suffocate. Seva couldn’t look at himself in the mirror; he was too disgusted. How else should he feel if the most beautiful girl in the school, ideal in every sense, didn’t stir up a hundredth of the feelings that flared inside

him as soon as Zhenya whispered something?

Seva had forgotten what he'd said, remembering only his warm breathing and a light pat on the back, with which Zhenya managed to knock out all the air from him. After the third washing with ice water, Seva had a bright thought that no one probably understood what had happened. What kind of nutcase could come up with such an idea? Except maybe Zhenya. He could have guessed it, but Seva suddenly realized that he was not afraid of it at all. Zhenya already knew everything because just a month and a half ago, Seva had dumped everything on him. If this didn't stop Zhenya, then who could blame him? Seva was sure that he not tell anyone, and what Zhenya himself thought he had not cared about several weeks.

After a few minutes, Seva calmed down completely. His vision cleared, and the heat subsided from his neck and shoulders; only his face was still a little red. His hands stopped shaking, and he forced himself to look in the mirror. He didn't see anything new there. Pathetic, soaked, scared to death. He was disgusting to himself. Seva had no idea about how to return, to look friends in the eye and be in the same room with Zhenya. One thing that was clear was that it was impossible to stay in the bathroom too long; he'd be missed.

Cursing softly, Seva turned off the water and ruffled his already shaggy hair. He looked at his reflection again, grimaced, and decided that he'd go to the kitchen, drink some water, dry off a little, and, as if nothing had happened, return to the others. Taking a deep breath, Seva unlocked the door and left the bathroom.

As soon as he turned the corner, he cursed again, this time almost aloud. In the kitchen, at the windowsill, with his back to him, stood Zhenya. Seva's first impulse was to turn around and leave, but he stopped himself in time. It was impossible to go to the bathroom again, and it seemed much scarier to return to a room full of people than to spend a little time in the kitchen with Zhenya. If he didn't get too close or whispered something in his ear, then Seva will be fine. Taking a deep breath, he strolled into the kitchen.

Zhenya didn't react to his arrival. He just turned around, looked at Seva with a detached gaze, and turned back to the window. Seva snorted faintly, took a

glass out of the cabinet, poured himself some water, and leaned against the wall. All the chairs were in his room.

He took a small sip, and his eyes rested on Zhenya. He stood with his hands on the windowsill, as if basking in the bright rays of the May sun. Seva glanced at his back, his arms, from his fingers to his shoulders, stopped at the blond disheveled curls that had not changed at all. He managed to forget how he felt whenever he was with Zhenya. Despite all his fear, that pitch-black inexplicable nightmare that had been happening to him in the last months of their friendship, it was always especially good and soothing with Zhenya. That was why Seva, who was so desperately trying to keep himself in control, sometimes forgot himself ... and, quite accidentally, could be close to him, reach out with his hands to that soft hair, or gaze into brown, almost honey-colored eyes. And now, after the chilling horror that had surfaced moments before, Seva calmed down completely. He took another sip and, despite everything that was spinning in his mind, asked sharply, "Why did you come?"

Zhenya shuddered, as if he'd forgotten that he wasn't alone in the kitchen, and turned to Seva. Not completely, half-turned, so that the sun's rays fell directly on his face. Seva caught his breath, everything inside shrank as he noted how handsome Zhenya was at that moment.

Back at the summer house, on the dim second floor, he'd seemed a real piece of art. So, what could he say now, when the sun shone on him, making his curly hair burn with golden fire? Maria Viktorovna always said that artists had a special gift to see beauty in what others might view ugly. What everyone already saw as beautiful, the artist viewed many times more beautiful. Seva had heard this since childhood, but he desperately desired to bid farewell to this "gift" once and for all! He admired Zhenya too much and stared at him so intently that he almost forgot to listen to the answer to his question. But he couldn't even recall what he'd asked.

"Alina and Sveta invited me, so I came."

The meaning of his words didn't reach Seva immediately, but when he finally understood, he crashed from heaven to earth, and it seemed that he made quite an impact when falling. He squeezed the glass tighter and took another sip,



without taking his gaze off Zhenya, who looked confused, scratched his head, and hurriedly added, “Well, I thought, why not, since they said you didn’t mind ...? I remembered the book, bought it, and here I am.”

Seva watched the movement of Zhenya’s hand from the windowsill to his curly hair and back, and frowned. “When did Alina and Svetka invite you?”

“The day before yesterday, I think. Or yesterday. I don’t remember,” Zhenya shrugged.

Seva finished the water and put the glass in the sink. Something didn’t add up. Alina and Svetka called Zhenya yesterday, and the book was with him. It didn’t add up in any way! No, if this was about a volume with Dostoevsky’s novels, Seva wouldn’t be surprised, because they could be gotten from any library and every bookstore without any problems. But this was about Hugo’s *Notre Dame*, which was almost impossible to find anywhere! Seva wasn’t even sure that it wasn’t banned, it was that difficult to get. If Zhenya said that he’d been called at least a week before, Seva would have believed him. With his father’s connections, finding even a banned book was fairly simple. But two days? Zhenya was hiding something, but why was another question. Seva, however, wasn’t going to ask. If Zhenya wanted to play games and continue to avoid the difficult but necessary truth, then let him enjoy.

Both fell silent. There was nothing to talk about. Actually, there was, of course. But neither of them wanted to start that conversation. Pretending that they just barely knew each other was much easier than admitting the need to sort out everything that had happened between them and determine a resolution. And that was why they were silent for a long time, standing opposite each other and openly looking at each other as if something could change these short six weeks. Seva would have given up ... a couple more minutes and he’d have given up.

But Zhenya was the first to break the suffocating silence. “Your grades have slipped again, right?”

Seva barely restrained a nervous laugh; the question of studying sounded so ridiculous in their situation. But, of course, he didn’t tell Zhenya about it. He looked closely at his frowning face and shrugged. “Kind of. How do you know about it?”

Zhenya turned away from the window, stood facing Seva, and chuckled, surprised at the naivety of his question. “Sveta told me. How else will I know?”

Seva, slightly annoyed, rolled his eyes. Really, how else? Why did he even ask? “Why is she always meddling in the other’s business?” He shrugged again.

“She’s always like that, you know her,” Zhenya said with a knowing, slightly condescending smile. “Her intentions are pure; she’s worried about you. And she likes to chat, to share all the news. I hear so much from her about you and Alina ... and about your grades.”

Zhenya forced a smile, and it seemed to Seva that he didn’t want to know about his relationship with Alina. He grimaced. Why should Zhenya care to know the details? Still, it is much easier to maintain friendly relations and not to avoid each other ... to behave like ordinary acquaintances, without even making attempts to return to the former friendship. Seva bit his lip painfully; these thoughts were so unpleasant.

“Come on, don’t be mad at her.” He interpreted Seva’s silence as annoyance with Svetka. “If it wasn’t for her, I’d have found out anyway. Andrianovna recently talked to me about you. She asked why we stopped being friends, and then she said that you started getting bad grades again and asked me to study with you. I was thinking about how to approach you with this, and then Alina and Sveta came to me to invite me here if I wanted to make peace. So, I came.”

Seva was fleetingly surprised. Despite Zhenya’s help, he never really shone during Andrianovna’s lessons. Moreover, that ‘D’ was a rather unpleasant mistake, but not a regular grade. Even the meticulous, strict, and picky Andrianovna wouldn’t have sounded the alarm because of it. And what did “to study with you”? Had Andrianovna decided to shift her responsibilities to the students now? The second thought was that Zhenya hadn’t changed at all. He was still overthinking, complicating things too much. If it wasn’t for that stupid trait of his, maybe they’d have talked a long time ago.

Seva averted his eyes, pretending that they were hurt from the bright sunlight, and said softly, “You could have come here anyway, without any birthdays.”

Zhenya winced and looked at Seva in disbelief. “And wouldn’t you have told

me to get out?”

Seva chuckled to himself. Of course, he wouldn't have. How could he? Only now, standing opposite Zhenya again and looking at him, so beloved, so awesome, he realized for sure that he would have agreed. He would have agreed to anything that Zhenya offered, as long as he didn't leave anymore. Seva couldn't get mad at him. Even now, when he heard the reason for Zhenya's visit was Andrianovna's request, a touch of indignation swayed in his chest and quickly subsided as soon as he caught the gaze of those sparkling eyes. What difference did it make why he came? *Let him just not go anywhere, and I'll be ready to forgive him absolutely everything.*

But, of course, he didn't say this out loud. He only said, “I wouldn't. Of course, I wouldn't.”

Zhenya's eyes flashed especially brightly and his lips pulled into an uncertain smile. “So, we can try again? Are we cool?”

Seva felt a painful ache in his chest, but he nodded in response. “We are.”

Zhenya smiled, this time broadly, much more confidently than before, and Seva involuntarily returned the smile. Who'd have known how much he missed Zhenya's smile? He'd already forgotten how much he loved it. And now, as he remembered, warm feelings for Zhenya overwhelmed him with new intensity. Seva felt a sharp twinge inside and he had to avert his gaze so as not to give himself away.

“Tell me how you're doing. We haven't talked for so long.” Zhenya shrugged a shoulder in embarrassment.

It occurred to Seva that they should be talking not about how he was doing, but how he'd said something completely different from what he was thinking. “And what should I tell you?”

“Are you asking me that?” Zhenya was humored. “It's not me who started dating Alina these past six weeks. You can't tell me that nothing new has happened to you!”

Seva grimaced. This was the last topic he wanted to talk about right now. “You said Svetka has already told you everything.”

“You never know what she could have muddled.”

“Svetka is a chatterbox, but I’ve never caught her lying or making mistakes.” Seva stood up for her.

“I’m not saying that she did it on purpose,” explained Zhenya. “Tell me, how it came to be. I’ll compare it with Sveta’s words. Anyway, let’s sit down.”

“Sit where? On the floor?”

“Why not?” Zhenya was the first to sit down in the corner, patting the place next to him. “Sit down. I’m waiting for details.”

Seva firmly believed Zhenya was mocking him, but he didn’t have the strength to think about it or resent it. He silently sat next to Zhenya, carefully making sure that the distance between them was at least half a meter. Precautions were unnecessary, they were alone in the kitchen and, judging by the events of today, Zhenya wasn’t worried about such trifles. “His problems,” Seva thought, although the problems were truly only Seva’s. He just couldn’t be angry, afraid, or worried anymore, and preferred to let everything take its course.

The story about him and Alina could have been told better, but Zhenya, who insisted so much on details, was unexpectedly satisfied with it. They changed the topic quickly and went through the events that happened at school and the group of friends. They discussed Rostik and Alena, and Seva shared with Zhenya how his classes with Maria Viktorovna were going. Zhenya listened with interest, asked questions when he didn’t understand something, and even admired Maria Viktorovna’s attitude to art and Seva’s tutoring. He did all this with unfeigned interest and Seva didn’t have the slightest reason to doubt his sincerity unless Zhenya was a very good actor, which was impossible. He’d always lied quite badly.

When it was his turn to speak, he inhaled more air into his lungs and, in one breath, dumped forth everything that had happened over the past six weeks. Zhenya talked a lot too, much longer and more emotionally than Seva. He talked about everything: parents, school, friends, books, walks, and he even managed to remember Sonya. Seva didn’t know why he needed information about how Sonya was doing well with her Vasya, but he listened, not missing a single word. Zhenya told everything in so much detail that Seva wondered if he’d written down all that had happened to him so that he could recount it.

Zhenya was especially proud to note that he'd followed Seva's advice and began to focus less on studying, at the same time spending more time preparing for entrance exams. Seva preferred not to remind him that the advice, if it could be called this, wasn't to enter the university chosen by his father. He considered it pointless and didn't want to interrupt Zhenya. As before, Seva was ready to listen to him forever. The things he was talking about weren't as important.

How long they sat there on the kitchen floor was unknown. Topics of conversation didn't run out. There was no heavy silence, no stifling moments. They talked and talked and talked ... until a short girl appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, boys, we were already worried about you!" Svetka announced loudly, making both of them wince, as if they'd been caught doing something indecent. "You can keep talking. We won't bother you," Flashing a coy gaze, she disappeared into the dim hallway.

Seva and Zhenya exchanged confused glances. Blinking and looking away from Zhenya, Seva was surprised to find that they'd been talking for so long that the kitchen, which had been flooded with golden sunlight, was now filled with a sunset orange-red light. It was May outside, so it got dark quite late. How long were they sitting here?

After Svetka's visit, Zhenya's eloquence disappeared.

The same for Seva, who looking around with a puzzled look, gave a discouraged chuckle.

"We got a little carried away."

"Yeah," Seva agreed, stunned.

"Should we go back to the others?" Zhenya offered uncertainly.

Seva didn't want to. He didn't want to go back to the others or stop talking with Zhenya, or even get up from this place in the corner. But he didn't dare to object, so he nodded silently and was the first to get up from the floor.

"Help me up," Zhenya asked with a grimace and held out his hand.

"Can't you do that yourself?" Seva muttered gruffly.

"My legs are cramped," he shook his head.

Seva's first impulse was simply to kick Zhenya, he'd made him so angry at that moment. *He knows! Zhenya does know.* Seva didn't suffer from memory

problems. He remembered perfectly well how he'd told Zhenya absolutely everything without hiding it, how he said that he could not be near him, let alone touch him. He remembered how he refused to shake his hand at the farewell, and Zhenya understood why he did it.

Seva believed that Zhenya wouldn't come a few meters near him after that. But he didn't mind hugging, and he, as if on purpose, offered Seva to sit closer. And now he was extending his hand, asking for help! *Either he's a complete fool, or he's forgotten what happened between us.*

Seva immediately pulled himself together and bit his tongue so as not to blurt too much. Maybe Zhenya thought that evening was an ordinary clouding of the mind, and now, after watching him with Alina, he was convinced that Seva was normal. Maybe he hadn't even noticed the incident earlier today. If so, then it was worth continuing the performance that Seva had long ago grown sick of, while he could still do it. Seva clenched his jaw and took the outstretched hand, pulled it towards him, and then, as soon as Zhenya got up, he quickly let it go. He knew that if he held it a little longer, it would be much more difficult to release it.

Their reappearance was met with conspiratorial and meaningful glances from the girls and restrained smiles from Rostik and Pasha. They went to different corners again, as if they hadn't been talking incessantly for several hours. Seva sat down with Alina and she, almost glowing with glee, squeezed his hand tightly. Zhenya again found himself next to Pasha, who was discussing with Nastya the staging of some Mayakovsky play. Seva noted with indifferent surprise that Svetka was silent.

They celebrated for a long time, until the early morning. By nightfall, there were fewer of them, only those whose parents had allowed them to stay. Nastya and Oksana left, Dima followed them at ten in the evening, and Lelia, tired of the noisy company, was escorted home by Rostik around twelve.

When he returned, he pulled out a bottle of alcohol from behind his back with a satisfied smile. This made everyone happy, even non-drinkers Svetka and Alena. The table was returned to the kitchen, the record player removed, and they sat closer to each other, and eventually a guitar came out. Except for a desk

lamp, the lights were turned off, and the atmosphere became cozy, as happened only at night,

After the first shot, Svetka looked around at everyone with a cheerful look and commented, “Funny, just three couples remaining. Well, and Zhenya ... you’ll have to find someone, too.”

“We’re not a couple,” Alena gently rebuked her.

“Knowing these two”—Alina nodded at Seva and Zhenya—“I’m the only one here who’s the third wheel, and it’s me who needs to look for someone.”

The friends laughed, and Seva forced himself to laugh along with everyone. Zhenya also chuckled. Against the background of awkwardness and confusion, he was overwhelmed by a sharp sense of guilt in front of Alina. She’d not realized just how on the mark she’d been. She thought she was talking about a strong friendship, but it was quite different. No one would be the wiser. And Seva had absolutely no thoughts as to what to do about it.

The topic changed quickly, and no one came back to them anymore. Soon the drunken friends were drawn to frank conversations, and everyone shared at least one of their secrets with the others. Seva, when his turn came, invented a crush on a cute girl named Dasha from another class in elementary school. Nothing else came to mind. Zhenya, listening to his fairytale, frowned strangely, as if thinking about something.

So, continuing to share funny, sad, and interesting stories, they sat until six in the morning. Svetka was the first to remember that she had to go, recalling that she had promised her mother to go to the market in the morning, and together with Pasha they hurried home. The others followed, lazily rubbing their drooping eyelids. All six of them left Seva at the same time. After seeing off his friends, he fell asleep with a sense of accomplishment, knowing that in two hours he would need to wake up to clean the apartment before his grandma, father and Sema returned.

## Chapter 22

### *And Here We Are Again*

Seva squinted, covering himself with his free hand from the blinding sun, and turned his back to the window. He looked at the portrait lying in front of him and sighed heavily. Maria Viktorovna didn't like shadows. Who would have told him that portraits would prove even more difficult?

A week ago, after finishing another landscape, Seva firmly declared to Maria Viktorovna that it was enough, he couldn't do it anymore; now he wanted to paint portraits.

She only grunted in response, "If you have enough patience, then enjoy."

Seva assured her that he had enough of it, but after a few of her remarks, he lost his enthusiasm.

Even before he started drawing, Maria Viktorovna strongly recommended, "Draw someone you think is attractive, so it will be more pleasing for you to draw."

Seva, listening to her instructions, lazily thought, "*Zhenya then?*"

Maria Viktorovna clarified. "Attractive not only visually, rather more internally ... a real artist should be able to convey inner beauty."

Seva realized that that was no one but Zhenya. In the end, he preferred to draw an actress he liked, but for a couple of classes, her regular facial features and a flawless white smile filled him with such amusement that he wanted to howl. Maria Viktorovna remained adamant, and Seva did not argue much. It was his fault, no one forced him.

Over the past week, Seva unexpectedly came out of his notorious creative



crisis and made several sketches. In his humble opinion, they came out a little bad, but Maria Viktorovna, having meticulously examined each one of them, said, “There’s something to it. If you finish painting the portrait, we’ll start making full-sized paintings out of them.”

Seva didn’t mind because he had no negative emotions associated with these sketches. Rather, on the contrary, he sat down to draw in a surprisingly elated mood.

Stretched out, almost lying on the desk, he tapped the pencil on the table and caught a furtive curious glance at himself. He grinned. It was the third time in the last fifteen minutes, which meant that Maria Viktorovna wouldn’t stand for it and sit him down to question him.

Less than five minutes later, she came up to his desk, glanced at the portrait that had not changed, made another remark, and as if by chance, asked, “So, you have reconciled with Zhenya?”

Seva looked at her with slight disappointment. He’d hoped the question would be more interesting. “I have,” he replied, scrutinizing his mockery of a portrait.

“And now you are best friends forever again?”

“How did you know that we were best friends?” Seva was surprised.

“Everyone knows, Seva,” Maria Viktorovna simply explained, shaking her head at his incomprehensibility. “So, have you reconciled? Are you best friends again?”

Seva frowned. “I don’t know. Probably,” he replied. He really didn’t know. They still hadn’t discussed anything, even how’d they’d now start talking. Seva himself wasn’t sure whether they could be considered best friends again, and therefore, even if he wanted to, he couldn’t answer Maria Viktorovna.

“It is really difficult talking with you.” Maria Viktorovna was indignant. “How did Zhenya find common ground with you? Okay, that doesn’t matter. But why did you fight?”

Seva snorted irritably. It seemed that it was high time for him and Zhenya to sit down and come up with a reason for their “fight” that looked more or less authentic so that no one else would ask such questions. Maria Viktorovna tried

from time to time, with amazing tenacity, to find out what had happened between them, but Seva remained adamant. She persisted, sighing with disappointment, and even went on to find more mistakes in his drawing in retaliation. This confrontation had been going on between them for more than a month. Seva felt that it would be easier for him to invent something so Maria Viktorovna would be satisfied and calm down.

“What difference does it make? We made up,” he shrugged.

“Look, I get that then; you didn’t want to discuss details. But now that everything is fine, why not tell me?” Maria Viktorovna looked at him ingratiatingly.

“Then, I didn’t want to and now it’s pointless to talk about it. Why rehash the past?” Seva retorted. “Let’s talk about drawing instead.”

“Okay,” Maria Viktorovna agreed with visible displeasure. “Then tell me where you saw that nose.”

“I drew it the way I remembered it,” Seva muttered. “Maybe it was different from this. I don’t even remember what the face was originally there. You always don’t like something! It seems to me I’m drawing some completely different person.”

“If it makes you feel better, I’ll bring a photo next time. Just draw.” Maria Viktorovna calmed him down.

“I don’t need a photo; I can’t draw it anymore!”

“You’re doing it again.” Maria Viktorovna was indignant. “Tell me, what would you rather draw so you don’t give up in twenty minutes?”

“Twenty? I’ve been working on this portrait for the fifth day in a row!” He sat up abruptly and slumped again. “I don’t know.”

“I’m not restricting you, Seva. You can draw anything. We’re not in an art school where you learn to draw only still lifes for several years in a row. Although it would be useful for you.”

“You asked me to make normal drawings out of the new sketches, and I agreed. I’ll finish this.” Seva looked at the portrait with distaste. “And then I’ll start.”

“I don’t mind Seva, but you’re going to drop it again. There are so many

details. It's not a portrait on a white background, and you can't even draw a portrait."

"They are tiny ... these details. Who'll notice if I mess up?"

"I'll notice, you know me," Maria Viktorovna said mockingly.

"What if this is my style?" Seva's gaze narrowed. "You say that there are no rules in art, so how can there be mistakes in it?"

"When you make the same mistakes, warn me about them in advance, and not make new ones every time, then we'll talk about your 'style', my rebel," Maria Viktorovna smiled. "Temkin, I don't understand what we're talking about. You have never brought me a single portrait! You've even stopped making sketches lately and I've already started to worry. Now, it seems, you got involved again and brought new ones. What brought inspiration back to you?"

"*Zhenya did,*" Seva thought melancholically, but he only said out loud, "I don't know."

"It's sad." Maria Viktorovna was upset. "If so, then continue your portrait. When you finish, we'll do your sketches."

Seva glared piercingly into her face. She didn't blink an eye, and he, not thinking of anything smarter, made a childish face and stuck out his tongue.

"The arguments are over," Maria Viktorovna summed up with the same affectionate, slightly condescending smile. "As soon as you decently finish at least one drawing, then we'll talk."

Seva sighed. Maria Viktorovna was completely right, and it would be stupid to argue with her. If he had finished at least one stupid drawing, he'd have had every right to object, but ... wait a second! A thought flashed through his mind and made him sit up; his eyes flashed proudly. "What if I tell you that I decently finished one drawing?"

"I won't believe it," Maria Viktorovna simply replied. "During this time that I've been teaching you, that has never happened."

"It was without you. You never saw it."

"Then I certainly won't believe it," she chuckled.

"And if I bring it and show you?"

"Then I'll believe it and then we'll talk about your 'style' and everything else

that comes into your head.”

“You got it!” Seva declared. “I’ll remember.”

Maria Viktorovna just sighed and shook her head.

That day she let Seva go early and he, after thinking about it, decided to go to Alina. She recently hinted that they had begun to spend less time together, so there was a reason to fix it. Seva didn’t deliberately avoid her. It hadn’t occurred to him. It was just that after his birthday he began to silently go with the flow. If Zhenya would offer to come to his place, then he’d agree. If Alina called to go for a walk, then he’d go, if the group wanted to get-together, he’d gather with everyone. Seva himself didn’t invite anyone anywhere, didn’t offer anything to anyone; he only obediently agreed to everything.

But, despite Seva’s humility, meeting Alina became a burden for him. He couldn’t get rid of the obsessive feeling of boundless guilt, and he knew perfectly well that he felt it quite deservedly. After all, it was Alina! Not only was she insanely beautiful, she was also kind, sincere, understanding, and so affectionate and gentle. Seva couldn’t believe how her endless hugs, kisses, and sensual touches didn’t cause any reactions in him, while Zhenya’s simple gaze ran electric discharges throughout his body.

It didn’t make sense, and so he desperately tried to make himself feel something. After his birthday, as soon as they met, Seva didn’t let Alina go for a second. Sometimes, he gave her kisses with such enthusiasm that she, who had always been the one to take the initiative, didn’t cease to be surprised by his unexpected passion—she was surprised, but certainly glad. Seva, on the other hand, realized with disappointment every time that there was nothing there. He promised himself frequently that one way or another, he’d feel at least a tickle inside.

Seva didn’t think about breaking up. How could he break up with her? He continued to stubbornly convince himself that he liked Alina. It might not be like Zhenya, he may not catch his breath whenever he saw her, but Seva was fine with her. It was always comfortable and pleasant with Alina, and therefore Seva stubbornly ignored the fact that he felt the same with Svetka. And even if he stopped, he still couldn’t break up.

No matter how Zhenya turned a blind eye to absolutely everything, if Seva and Alina had broken up after their truce, he'd have understood everything for sure. Seva still played the game according to his rules. *Nothing happened. that conversation never happened. I'm normal.*

Seva tried his best, telling himself that there was no one better and more beautiful than Alina. He looked at her for a long time, trying not only to understand it but to feel it ... as was the case that evening. They were sitting in the gazebo in the park near her house, and Alina enthusiastically talked about how her father promised, if she finished the school year with two 'Bs', to give her a ticket to Bulgaria. Seva listened with half an ear, carefully examining her as if seeing her for the first time. With a hastily tied ponytail and strands escaping from it, and her father's jacket thrown over her shoulders, and homemade trousers, she was still awesome; such carelessness only gave her a special charm.

Alina got ready in just ten minutes when Seva suddenly showed up to her house in the evening and asked her to come down, and now she was sitting in front of him disheveled, dressed in the first things that came to hand, but so happy that everything else faded into the background.

Her gray-green eyes sparkled excitedly and she constantly straightened the jacket that fell off her shoulders and brushed the hair poking out of her ponytail from her face. Seva closely followed her every gesture. Even now, when she didn't think about it, her movements were full of unique grace, and the slight blush that appeared on her cheeks only emphasized her almost perfect features. Alina was as beautiful as anyone could be, and Seva understood this perfectly well. No matter how long he looked at her under the rays of the setting sun, he couldn't find a single flaw. Seva was also aware that her undeniable, flawless beauty aroused no more emotions in him than photos of actresses from magazines.

Alina waved her hand and her father's worn jacket fell off her again, and Seva finally listened to her words.

"Well, I decided that I will learn physics. Andrianovna won't give me anything but 'B' anyway."

“Fair enough,” Seva agreed distantly.

“I’m already tired of talking,” Alina sighed wearily. “I think it’s better you tell me something. For example, how is it going with Zhenya?”

Seva looked at her with annoyance. Did they conspire? “Fine,” he replied flatly.

“Are you glad that we helped you make up?”

Seva was silent for a while, seriously pondering her question. “I am,” he finally said. “I think so.”

He was *really* glad, in fact, admitting to himself that it was worse without Zhenya than with him. No matter how hard the strange friendship was for him, Seva missed him, even when he tried not to think about it. But he was simply ashamed to answer Alina’s question, and Seva guiltily lowered his eyes and stared at his dirty shoes. If Alina only knew what a disservice she had done for herself by reconciling them out of the most noble of motives!

“That’s great,” she sighed with relief, squinting happily at the setting sun. “Svetka and I were worried that you won’t make up. You both are so proud! You turned out to be even prouder,” Alina said with a playful reproach. “But that’s okay; the main thing is that everything is fine now, right?”

“Right.” Seva could not disagree.

“I hope so,” Alina nodded with satisfaction. “Have you been to Maria Viktorovna’s today?”

“I have.”

“And how was it? Did you quarrel with her again about which of you was right or wrong?” Alina smiled. She was used to Seva always telling her about their arguments after classes.

“Why?” Seva chuckled. “No matter how we quarrel, I think it’s obvious that she’s right, and I’m always a fool. No, we didn’t quarrel. Today, everything was almost peaceful.”

He understood that if he told Alina about the dispute with Maria Viktorovna, she’d be interested and would ask questions. He didn’t want to tell her about drawing at all. He didn’t want to tell her or anyone else, except Maria Viktorovna.

“How weird.” Alina raised her eyebrows mockingly.

They were silent for a while, and then she asked Seva the same question again, to which he again answered monosyllabically. Alina remained puzzled by his responses, but didn’t ask the reasons for it. Deciding that they were not destined to talk today, she simply moved closer and silently reached for his lips. At first, Seva enthusiastically succumbed, but after only a few seconds, he again held back a disappointed sigh.

Half an hour later, when dusk had slowly gathered over the square, Alina had to go home. Annoyed with himself, Seva escorted her to the entrance and took the bus home. There, for some reason, he felt almost like a criminal. He climbed onto the far shelf of the closet and pulled out that one drawing, taking along with it a sketch and a couple of other failed attempts. He examined them meticulously, doubtfully. All confidence disappeared somewhere and he immediately thought, “Is it worth it?”

His brother suddenly flew into the room and Seva, jumping up from surprise, tucked the sheets that came to hand first in the briefcase. He didn’t take them out again, rightly judging that, since he’d promised to bring them, he should keep his word.

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The next day, Seva burst into Maria Viktorovna’s office as soon as the bell rang from the last lesson and threw his briefcase on the desk near the teacher’s table.

Maria Viktorovna raised her eyebrows, perplexed. “Temkin, why so aggressive? You got an ‘E’ from Rosalia and decided to take that out on me?”

“You offend me! I got a ‘B’ for the last test,” Seva objected and landed himself opposite Maria Viktorovna, his gaze intense. “And it’s not aggressive at all, it’s with a victorious triumph.”

“You should work on your triumphant look,” Maria Viktorovna calmly drawled. “Well, what victory?”

“In the argument with you,” Seva replied with undisguised pleasure. “Wait! Before you begin to get sarcastic, I’d better show you.” With a rehearsed gesture,

he fanned out all sheets on the table. “Here, look. This”—he pointed to the first one— “Is the sketch that started it all. As you like to say, emotional, written in a burst of inspiration. Then there are failed attempts ...there are not so many of them here.

“In fact, there were much more, but they didn’t survive. And this.” Seva proudly handed Maria Viktorovna the last sheet. “This is the final result. It took me two weeks to do it! And I finished it. I finished drawing, remembering all your instructions, and correcting all the mistakes that I could. Try saying that it turned out badly again!”

“I never said that it turned out badly, I was only talking about mistakes,” Maria Viktorovna corrected him distantly, looking at the drawing with surprised interest. “But now I won’t even talk about them, because it’s ... it’s really good, Seva! Not perfect, I admit, but I’m pleasantly surprised. Gauging the amount of time and effort you spent, the portrait is magnificent! The best you’ve ever painted,” Maria Viktorovna said proudly, looking at him. “But tell me ... why Zhenya?”

“Is it important?” Seva snapped. He hastily scooped up the spread-out sheets and placed them into the briefcase. Of course, he didn’t want to answer. He hoped that Maria Viktorovna, delighted that he was not the slacker he seemed, would not attach importance to the fact that it was Zhenya in the portrait. But she did, and now Seva was sitting, looking at his own hands in confusion, and couldn’t figure out what would be stronger in him, joy for the deserved, long-awaited praise or annoyance because he’d have to, as usual, lie about Zhenya.

“It is,” Maria Viktorovna said in a soft tone, but Seva realized he had no chance to remain silent.

“Why not him?” Seva shrugged.

“Why him?” Maria Viktorovna asked in the same manner.

“I wanted to.”

“Okay, then tell me, is he a very important person to you?”

“He’s my best friend,” Seva said calmly, considering the answer comprehensive.

“And there is no one closer than him to you?”



“Perhaps,” Seva agreed as indifferently as possible. “What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that ... First of all, forgive me for this inappropriate interrogation.”

“I’m used to it,” Seva snickered angrily.

“Maybe.” Maria Viktorovna was suddenly embarrassed for the first time. “But now it’s very personal. You don’t have to explain to me why you wanted to draw something or someone. I’m not only interested out of idle curiosity. It’s just that when I looked at this portrait of Zhenya, I realized that I shamelessly deceived you. I said that you never brought me a single finished drawing, but that’s not true. Once in the seventh grade, you drew a magnificent portrait. Maybe you remember how you stayed after school for several days in a row and stubbornly corrected every shortcoming that I pointed out to you. Painstakingly, with such uncharacteristic patience that I was confused. Then this drawing hung at school for another month, Rosalia wanted to send it to the exhibition, but you didn’t let her, and you took it home.”

“Mom’s portrait,” Seva said quietly. He remembered. Then, in the seventh grade, when the whole family knew about his mom’s illness, Seva wanted to make her a gift for Mother’s Day and draw her portrait. He told Maria Viktorovna about his intention, and she willingly supported him, allowing him to stay after school as long as he wanted. Seva stayed until dark, gritting his teeth, redrawing several times because the work to him or Maria Viktorovna wasn’t perfect. As a result, it turned out so well that Andrianovna, gasping enthusiastically, took the portrait and hung it on the bulletin board at the main entrance, where it hung for a whole month.

Seva didn’t have time to give it to his mom for Mother’s Day, but before his mom’s birthday, he protested almost to the point of shouting. He wouldn’t let the portrait be taken to any exhibition, and Andrianovna, frightened and at the same time outraged by his violent reaction, allowed him to take it home. When Seva gave it to her, his mom could hardly hold back tears of joy and emotion, and he realized with relief that everything hadn’t been in vain. It was this portrait, which was now ingloriously gathering dust in the garage, that Maria Viktorovna was talking about.

“Yes. I’m sorry,” she said guiltily. Seva shook his head, saying nothing. “I remembered it, and I thought ... after all, you’re sensitive, you live only by emotions and fleeting impulses. First you do, and then you think. That very real creative nature in the flesh. And since the only two works that you managed to finish are portraits of the people closest to you, maybe there is some kind of connection in this?”

Seva froze, as if thunderstruck. He stopped breathing for a couple of seconds, he was so surprised by this unexpected discovery. “I’ve never thought about it,” he finally said, a little hesitantly.

“Me too,” Maria Viktorovna nodded vigorously. “But it seems to me that we should think about it.”

“And then what? If you are right, I’ll have to draw Mom and Zhenya all my life, because I’m not capable of something else?” Seva exhaled in quiet horror.

“You’re being dramatic again.” Maria Viktorovna smiled and patted his head reassuringly. “Firstly, you can draw anything. I’m just being too strict with you. Secondly, it means that you and I have to find something that catches your interest, causes a strong response, and with which you have the same emotional connection as with your mom and with Zhenya. However, only if you want to draw. Not just as a pleasant pastime, a way to vent your emotions, but to do it seriously.”

“Of course, I want to,” Seva sincerely assured her.

“Don’t worry. You still have a lot of time ahead to figure out everything, especially yourself. In the meantime, if you don’t mind, you and I will try to determine what makes you pick up a brush. Something that will not become a fleeting feeling, but will last for a long time. Sooner or later, you’ll fall in love, and imagine what an endless kaleidoscope of emotions that will be.”

Seva studied her with undisguised skepticism, but Maria Viktorovna, carried away by her monologue, didn’t notice. A kaleidoscope of emotions! There was indeed a kaleidoscope, but the emotions in it were so diverse and fickle that it wouldn’t be possible to grasp any of them. Seva smiled sadly and stopped, and quickly corrected Maria Viktorovna, “What do you mean, sooner or later? What

about Alina?”

“Ah, Alina.” She frowned as if she remembered something insignificant, not worth her attention. “Yes, Alina. You know, if those fireworks of feelings haven’t already happened, then they never will. If they’d happened, I think you’d have captured it. No offence.” Maria Viktorovna suddenly caught herself and her expression revealed a little guilt. “How do I know what’s going on with you and Alina? Maybe you’re right. I should mind my own business.”

*Fireworks of feelings ... and kaleidoscope of emotions.* The metaphors sounded quite familiar. “Was my grandma your Russian and literature teacher by any chance?” he asked, changing the topic.

“She was,” Maria Viktorovna nodded. “Why?”

Seva didn’t have time to answer. The door to the office opened abruptly, without no warning knock, and Andrianovna burst into the classroom in rapid step, like a small hurricane. Ignoring Seva, she approached the teacher’s desk and asked in a loud, stern voice, which he’d assumed she only used with students “Maria Viktorovna, do you have a grade book for the fifth ‘B’ class?”

“I do, Rosalia Andrianovna. I delayed entering their grades. I’m sorry, I’ll return it to the teacher’s room soon,” said Maria Viktorovna.

“Hurry up, please. It’s already six in the evening,” Andrianovna requested with displeasure and finally noticed Seva. “Temkin, you’re here! You’ve come to your senses again. It’s commendable!”

“Thank you,” Seva said uncertainly.

“Lately, you continue to please me. Grigory Olegovich said that you got an ‘A’ in the last test. Well done, Temkin! I’ve always said that you can do it, if you wish!” Andrianovna, usually restrained, continued to praise him.

“How could it be otherwise, if you asked Zhenya to study with me?” Seva shrugged.

“I didn’t ask anyone. Don’t make it up,” Andrianovna waved off the comment. “Have you been studying?”

“We have,” Seva answered in surprise.

“That’s good. It means both of you are doing well,” Andrianovna said calmly. “I have no time to chat with you. I have to work!” And she left as

quickly as she had entered.

Seva continued sitting and looking at the unlocked door, puzzled and perplexed.

“By the way, about Zhenya,” Maria Viktorovna remembered. “Does he know about the portrait?”

“No.” Seva started and shook his head. “Can you not tell him?”

“Whatever you wish, Seva,” Maria Viktorovna simply agreed.

## Chapter 23

### *Broken Pride*

“**A**nd Svetka didn’t say anything?” Seva asked incredulously.  
“Imagine that!”

Zhenya got up from the chair by the window, crossed the room, and sat on Sema’s bed next to Seva.

He automatically moved away and asked again. “And Pasha said that he considers Mayakovsky the best poet of the twentieth century?”

“He did!” Zhenya confirmed with pleasure.

“It seems like she’s grown up,” Seva concluded philosophically.

“Exactly! What love does do to people!” Zhenya mockingly shook his head.

Seva nodded in agreement and tried to delve into the text of the geography paragraph, but Zhenya distracted him again. “Do you think Svetka will start reading his poems soon?”

Seva looked at him with bewilderment and shrugged. “I think she won’t. This is still Svetka, even if she has changed a bit.”

“I think she will. Pasha talks about him so enthusiastically that even a dead man will be inspired.”

Seva arched a shoulder. What did it matter to him? He had been trying to do his homework for the second hour, but Zhenya, who came to him right after school, continued to persistently interfere with him. Seva always knew about Zhenya’s love for long conversations, but usually they never interfered with getting homework done. Now, after their truce, Zhenya began to prefer empty chatter for the sake of chatter, and Seva didn’t understand why.

After their truce, Zhenya began to behave differently. Seva didn't recall the moment he'd noticed it, but it didn't take long to understand that something had changed. During their talks, how they behaved alone and with friends, how they looked at each other, and even how they acted when silent. They could talk for a long time, discuss everything in the world, but it was only after the truce that their conversations began to truly last for hours, just like when they'd lost track of time in the kitchen.

During such moments, Seva forgot about everything, even though he still unsuccessfully tried to treat Zhenya with certain detachment and caution, yet felt like the happiest person in the world. When Zhenya was sitting opposite him, enthusiastically talking about something and vigorously gesticulating with his hands, Seva felt removed from reality. Then, coming to his senses, he'd wonder how they'd gotten so close to each other when he distinctly remembered sitting on the other end of the bed at the beginning of the conversation. This happened regularly. Zhenya would sit down next to him again and again, as if by chance, just like this moment. Zhenya constantly touched his shoulder or arm, and Seva winced and shied away each time.

Zhenya began to shake his hand differently. At first, Seva thought that this was a figment of his imagination, but then he clearly realized that previously, Zhenya's handshake had been different. Fleeting, it was an ordinary gesture, a tribute of respect at parting, no more, no less.

Zhenya, shaking his hand, paused for a moment to meet his eyes and immediately lowered his gaze. Seva could have considered it an ordinary coincidence, but he didn't remember that before, upon releasing his hand, Zhenya ran his fingertips along the back of his palm, as if casually stroking it. It was a simple, seemingly random movement. Each time, it resulted in soft pricks in the stomach. He thought that he wanted to kill Zhenya during moments, but there was nothing he could complain about. Zhenya would state that it happened by accident, and Seva wouldn't be able to prove anything.

But Seva wanted to express all his thoughts to Zhenya. Twitchy and nervous, he no longer understood whether Zhenya was doing this inadvertently or deliberately mocking him. He convinced himself that he was imagining

everything. Because it was Zhenya, the kindest, the most understanding person in the world, a friend who'd always supported him. Zhenya couldn't joke so viciously. Seva tried to assure himself of this.

The climax occurred during a recent evening in the park. The friends had gathered and everyone was excitedly discussing something, and only Zhenya didn't take part. It happened that he and Seva were sitting apart from everyone else on the other bench. While Seva listened with interest to the quarrels of friends and even sometimes inserted a word, Zhenya was suspiciously silent. He looked distant, it seemed to Seva, staring into the void and caught up in personal thoughts.

Zhenya was sitting so quietly that Seva forgot for a while that he wasn't alone. When cold fingers touched his temple, he jumped with fright. He turned to Zhenya and looked at him, bewildered. He didn't seem to notice Seva looking at him as he tried to tuck a stray strand of hair behind his ear. Several seconds passed, which seemed to Seva an eternity, before Zhenya's gaze appeared to come into focus and, he took his hand away. Seva didn't say anything but he was furious.

After he found out that Zhenya had lied to him, he was completely confused. Andrianovna didn't ask him to study with Seva; he'd made this up. The only question was why? Seva couldn't figure out why. It seemed that the desire to be friends again was voluntary, and the "studies" were just an excuse. But why couldn't he tell him the truth? Was he embarrassed? In front of whom? In front of Seva, who had disgraced himself so much just a month and a half before? It was stupid, and it didn't fit Zhenya's strange behavior. Seva didn't know if it was his imagination or if Zhenya was laughing at him, but just in case, he maintained a calm demeanor. Moving his shoulder, he buried himself in the textbook.

"What? Have you finished reading already?" Zhenya asked.

"No," Seva answered, perhaps too sharply.

"Keep reading it then," he sighed. "I'm going home. Mom asked me to help her with the cleaning."

Seva nodded with ill-concealed relief. "Then I'll have time to draw before

Sema returns.”

Zhenya frowned. “You still haven’t told anyone you’re drawing again?”

“Why? I told Grandma, but the others don’t need to know. Why should they?”

“You shouldn’t wait until Sema goes to bed to sit down to draw. When I see you in the morning, I can tell right away whether you’ve drawn at night or not.”

“I’m fine,” Seva shrugged. Not that he was lying; part of what he said was true. There were advantages to not getting enough sleep. Leaving himself only three or four hours to sleep, he instantly passed out when his head touched the pillow, and he no longer had time for painful or sick thoughts. Seva slept soundly, like a dead man, without a single dream. He was especially grateful for this. If he dreamt of something, it was Zhenya, and Seva was more afraid of such dreams than he was of fire. No matter how magical they were, no matter how shamefully Seva realized that he would like to never wake up, the morning after them always started on a note of disgust, and the whole day went awry.

But it couldn’t go on like this forever and he couldn’t keep losing sleep. Seva felt sluggish, depressed, and sullen, had meltdowns because of little things. He often slept until lessons started. If it hadn’t been for Sema, who always pushed him off the couch in the morning, Seva would have come to school when the third lesson started every day.

“I see how fine you are,” Zhenya chuckled. “What’s the problem with telling them? I don’t understand. It doesn’t affect anything. It will only make you feel better, won’t it?”

“What the point of telling my father?” Seva snapped. “To hear again that I’m wasting my time on some nonsense, and should be doing something useful? I used to say I was doing homework for Maria Viktorovna, but that won’t work now. Thanks. I’ll figure out something else.”

“Not to your father. You rarely cross paths with him anyway, and he doesn’t stop you from drawing,” Zhenya calmly agreed. “But Sema? Would he grumble that you’re doing nonsense? I don’t think he cares, and he won’t lecture you, for sure.”

“Sema could tell our father. Even if he doesn’t, he’s never been thrilled with



me drawing either. I don't want to listen to his stupid taunts, I can do without them. What if he destroys my drawings again for some reason? It's not worth it."

"Sema has been an adult guy for a long time." Zhenya suddenly stood up for him. "Don't be so vindictive. When it happened, he was only eleven, and he was shocked, depressed, no less than you. I don't think he even realized what he was doing. You were both upset and emotional. It's good that you didn't beat each other up, but now you've grown up and can finally talk like adults. I'm sure that Sema will understand." Zhenya paused for a while and added, "And you will understand him."

Seva shook his head uncertainly. "Maybe we will, but why—"

"Sometimes you amaze me," Zhenya interrupted, indignant. "What do you mean 'why'?" After all, you're not strangers to each other, even though you don't communicate much now. You were like friends before! It's not difficult to try. It won't hurt you."

Seva wanted to object but stopped before he could open his mouth. Suddenly it occurred to him that Zhenya was right and maybe he should at least try. Even if his estrangement with Sema didn't bother him too much, for the last six months his head had been filled with much more serious things. But if he could improve things and make his life a little easier, why not try?

"Maybe you're right," Seva relented. "I'll try. I don't know about talking, of course, but I'll start drawing in front of him."

"Finally!" Zhenya beamed. "Tell me how it went later."

With a broad smile, he patted Seva on the back, but before removing his hand, he slid his fingers along the spine. Seva involuntarily twitched, straightened ramrod straight, and quietly inhaled air through his mouth, as if he were afraid of something. He closed his eyes for a split second, trying to pull himself together, and asked through gritted teeth, "You were going home, weren't you?"

It sounded rude, but Zhenya wasn't offended at all. He looked at his watch and agreed too cheerfully, "Yeah, I'm late already. Mom will probably be offended. I think I'll go." He got off the bed.

Seva breathed a sigh of relief and followed Zhenya into the hallway. He

silently waited until he put on his shoes and, at the door, asked a rather rhetorical question, “Why is it that I listen whenever you tell me smart things, but you never listen to me?”

Zhenya looked at him with resentment. “Why would you say I don’t listen? I do ...”

“Oh, yes, less study, more preparation for exams,” Seva waved a hand, deciding not to continue the meaningless conversation. “How could I forget.”

Zhenya caught the evident irony in his words but kept silent. They said goodbye and Seva once again, without much surprise, was convinced that Zhenya was shaking his hand in a completely different way. Seva even watched and made a disappointing conclusion: everything remained the same with everyone but him. Sure enough, Zhenya was mocking him, he was almost positive. It was unclear why, and how it was possible to mock so openly, looking at Seva with such kind and honest eyes?

After Zhenya’s departure, Seva sat down to draw. After that conversation with Maria Viktorovna, he seriously wondered where his mind was and in which direction he should move, but so far nothing sensible came to mind. Seva, of course, knew what he wanted and was ready to draw all his life: Zhenya. The answer was so obvious that Seva didn’t think for a second, he just knew it. But for the same obvious reasons, he couldn’t tell Maria Viktorovna, and it was necessary to dig deeper.

Starting with, “Draw those you like, especially internally.” Seva thought about drawing Svetka. Lately, she and Alina have become very close to him. But he wouldn’t have dared draw Alina, even though her flawless facial features were begging for someone to capture them on canvas. Seva was ashamed to look into her eyes for a long time, and he wouldn’t be able to endure the gaze from the portrait during long hours of work. Therefore, only Svetka remained, but the problem was that Seva did not look at anyone except Zhenya for too long. Even though he, with his developed visual memory of an artist, could quite well imagine Svetka’s face, the smallest details, putting them on paper stubbornly eluded him. It seemed strange to ask Svetka for a photo. She wouldn’t understand, and she might tell Alina that Seva wanted to draw her and not Alina.

During these reflections, he missed the moment when Sema returned home. He came to his senses only when his brother entered the room and threw his backpack on the bed. Seva winced in surprise and mechanically covered the table with himself, but remembered today's conversation and, giving as unperturbed a look as possible, continued to draw again as if he hadn't noticed Sema. He even stopped breathing, listening to what was happening behind his back.

Sema did not take long and very soon Seva heard footsteps. "Are you drawing?" Sema asked quietly, stopping a little away from the table.

"As you can see."

"Cool!" Coming closer and taking a cursory glance at the sketch, Sema offered a compliment. "It's beautiful, I mean."

"I got it. Thank you," Seva said with a timid smile and, after a short silence, added, "I'm studying with Maria Viktorovna again. I apologized to her for the window, and she suggested that I come to her after school."

"I know." Sema suddenly shrugged. "She's still my teacher. She once said that you are studying. She also swore at you. Well, it was a kind of swearing, without malice," he clarified. "I was happy for you then, but I didn't ask about anything. I decided that if you wanted to, you'd tell me yourself."

"I just did," Seva nodded.

"You did," echoed Sema and, after a little thought, admitted, "Actually, I've known for a long time—for over six months, when you were drawing something at night and thought I was asleep."

Seva was confused. "Yes, I just—"

"I understand," Sema interrupted him. "But just so you know, I'm happy for you. Well, it's cool that you're drawing. And if you tell our father, and he starts grumbling again ... don't listen to him. I used to think like him, too, and then I listened to Maria Viktorovna and realized that I was wrong. And our father was most especially wrong too. You're a great artist ... I've always known that."

It was only after these words that Seva realized how much his animosity toward Sema had been pressing on him and how important it was for him to hear it. Touched, looking at his brother with unusual warmth, he honestly said,

“Thank you. It means a lot to me.” He added with surprise, “I didn’t notice that you managed to grow up.”

“I managed a lot of things while we weren’t talking,” Sema grinned, but it turned out sad instead of cheery. “And also, since we’re talking ... sorry about those drawings. I didn’t think about what I was doing, and the very next day, I realized that I was a complete jerk. But for some reason, it was scary to apologize, and then it was somehow strange. I’m still ashamed of it. I knew how much they meant to you. I’m sorry.”

Seva finally felt the armor, dusty and covered with cobwebs, fall from his soul, and everything seemed lighter. Immersed in his problems, he hadn’t notice how much he missed Sema. Seva was confident he was right and didn’t consider being the first to make concessions and talk; he’d even convinced himself he didn’t need to. But it turned out that it was necessary. Seva felt guilty and a little stupid. He was the eldest, which meant he should have been smarter and more lenient and should have been the first to resolve the conflict, two years ago.

Ashamed, he released a lengthy sigh. “Forget it, Sema. Don’t think about it. It’s not that serious; these are little issues,” he explained and continued more quietly, “I also want you to forgive me too. Try to understand that I didn’t want to go to the funeral not because I was a jerk ... I just couldn’t.”

“I know,” Sema told him. “I didn’t want to either. But after you refused, Father said that one of us must go, so I went. It was terrible. I thought I’d never forgive you. Well, at least for the first couple of days. Then I forgave you, but it was too late.”

“It’s never too late,” Seva remarked philosophically. He looked at his brother attentively, and suddenly realized that. It was simple and yet ... they hardly talked for two years because of their stupidity. The conflict could have been solved with just two words. Their pride stood in the way. The realization was so unpleasant, annoying, and stunning in its absurdity that Seva winced. How could he be such a fool? What would Mom have said? The last thought made him especially sick.

“I forgive you,” Sema smiled timidly. “I think Mom would have understood if we both hadn’t come to the funeral. She wouldn’t be offended, for sure.”

“Yes,” Seva agreed thoughtfully. “It’s a pity that Father didn’t understand.” After a short silence, he smiled back at Sema. “I forgive you too. The drawings are no big deal! I’ll draw some more some other time.”

In fact, it was a big deal, but now it wasn’t that important. A pity, but what could he do? He could make draw more drawings, but he had only one brother.

Sema seemed to understand from Seva’s face what he was thinking and lowered his eyes in embarrassment. It was obvious that he wanted to say something but couldn’t decide what.

They were talking longer than they had in a long time. Seva didn’t want the conversation to end, but he didn’t know what to say either. So, they stood awkwardly, looking at each other and then averting their eyes. Finally, Sema muttered uncertainly, “I should go. The guys are waiting for me in the yard. I just came in to drop off my backpack.”

“Go then. Have fun,” Seva nodded. His gaze followed Sema to the door and he said after him, “If you want, I can show you new drawings when you come back!”

Sema slowed and turned to his brother. “Of course, I want to see them!” His eyes sparkled with joy. “I’ll try to get back early today.”

And Sema, happy, rushed off to his friends. Seva waited until the front door slammed and absently looked at the drawing in front of him. How much they had to say to each other, how much to discuss! But now it didn’t scare him. They had a lot of time ahead, and nothing would prevent the brothers, who’d become almost strangers, from getting to know each other again. Seva picked up his pencil again, and an idiotically happy smile appeared on his face.

## Chapter 24

### *Night in the Lilac Bushes*

Seva put down the book and looked at Zhenya with slight irritation. But the irritation didn't last linger. As soon as their eyes met, he softened and answered quite peacefully, "I don't want to go, not because your father will be there. We won't cross paths anyway; I just want to stay at home."

Zhenya sighed heavily and leaned back on the couch. For half an hour, he had been trying to persuade Seva to come to his graduation, but without success. Seva himself didn't really understand why he didn't want to go. Exhausted, tired of Zhenya's strange behavior, he wanted only one thing: to be alone.

While the final exams were going on, he almost succeeded. Zhenya spent whole days studying, but he did it at Seva's place. He spared no time on the way back and forth, which put Seva into a stupor. Even though they hardly talked, they spent time together anyway, and Zhenya was too close, in a literal sense; instead of working at the table, he preferred to sit next to Seva on the couch. He was angry, but kept silent, repeating to himself, like a mantra, that Zhenya would soon leave and everything would be over.

Perhaps that was the only thing that saved him. Time didn't fly by unnoticed, but the exams finally ended, and today the tenth 'A' had their graduation. Zhenya passed everything with 'As', even hated physics, and he was going to be provided with a red certificate. This meant that his chances were even higher. He was leaving tomorrow to prepare for admission. Seva felt lousy because he was so happy about his departure, but he couldn't help himself. Seeing Zhenya became even more unbearable than it had been in the spring.

“Seva, I’m leaving tomorrow. Come on, please. I really want to see you at my graduation.”

Seva looked with regret at the cover of the book in his hands. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. He still couldn’t finish reading it. He turned his gaze to Zhenya, intercepted his curious stare, and with a heavy sigh slammed the book shut. Zhenya was really leaving tomorrow. It meant no more touching, no embarrassment, no self-examination and mental anguish. Maybe he’d even fall in love with Alina over time. That would be absolutely great.

Seva got up from the couch, went to the closet to put *Notre Dame* on the shelf, and only then answered, “I don’t want to. What am I going to do there? Anyway, you’ll celebrate as a class, without parents.” He was in no hurry to turn to face Zhenya. Seva knew perfectly well that as soon as he looked at him, he would immediately give up and agree to go. If Zhenya asked, he wouldn’t have time to blink an eye before he agreed. So, he remained standing with his back to Zhenya, pretending that he was carefully studying the familiar book spines. He even moved his fingers over them.

“Everyone is allowed to attend the graduation ceremony and so everybody will come, Svetka to Pasha, Alena to Rostik, and the rest of our friends ... even Alina will!”

“Isn’t that enough?” Seva took some old encyclopedia from the shelf and ran over the cover with an absent gaze. The news that Alina would be at the presentation of certificates didn’t impress him at all. He wanted to go there even less. He preferred to avoid her out of remorse for his prolonged deception. But he still couldn’t break up with her. The hope that he would come to his senses wouldn’t leave him. There was nothing in the world Seva wanted so much as to finally feel something for Alina.

“I want you to be there. I’ve already asked the guys to come for us at six,” Zhenya said.

Seva heard the couch creak. He instantly tensed. As it turned out, it wasn’t in vain. A second later, he felt movement behind his back and Zhenya put his hand on his shoulder.

Seva swore silently. “Of course, you didn’t care to ask me in advance.” he

muttered. He put the encyclopedia back on the shelf and at the same time shook off Zhenya's hand.

"I didn't think you'd mind."

Zhenya obediently removed his palm but slid his fingertips to the elbow. And an "accident" ... such a sickening, unbearable "accident" that caused real fireworks inside Seva. It seemed that even his blood boiled in his veins. Unable to restrain himself, he angrily muttered, "Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?"

Seva abruptly turned and looked into Zhenya's eyes. He had already managed to scare himself with his question. Usually, when he was angry, he looked at Zhenya and all indignation was removed as if by a magic wand, but this time Seva was beside himself with rage. He nodded at Zhenya's hand and narrowed his eyes angrily. "This. What for? Just answer me, *w-h-y*? Do you like it?"

"What are you talking about?" Zhenya's bewilderment seemed somehow insincere.

Of course, he understood perfectly what was going on. This exasperated Seva.

"Don't pretend that you don't understand what I mean!" His voice was filled with rage. "Or have you completely lost your brain from preparing for exams? Don't make a fool of yourself. You understand me perfectly. Are you doing this on purpose? Explain why then. Do you like to mock me, or what? Do you think it's funny?"

"Why would I want to mock you? What makes you think I'm mocking you?" Zhenya appeared surprised.

Seva noted that this time the surprise seemed genuine. Zhenya never knew how to lie. And now he was standing before him, looking at him with amazed eyes; no one would doubt his sincerity.

But Seva was unstoppable. "Because I know you remember our conversation perfectly well! Or did you think I was joking? All that has happened after our truce is just one continuous mockery, as if it gives you pleasure to scorn me! Or do you want to check if it's gone? It hasn't. I can prove it." Seva jerkily rolled up



the sleeve of his jacket and showed Zhenya his arm up to the elbow. His skin was covered with tiny goosebumps.

“Oh,” was the only thing Zhenya struggled to say.

“Are you satisfied? Is that what you wanted? If so, then you’re either really just mocking me, or—”

“Or what?” Zhenya asked dully.

“Or ... I-I don’t know,” Seva muttered.

Zhenya looked at him in silence. It was hard gaze, as if he was waiting for Seva to say something else, although he had already expressed all the thoughts that had accumulated.

He was also silent and glum, but with a certain challenge peered into Zhenya’s eyes. They stared at each other stubbornly for a long time, maybe half a minute, until Seva suddenly gasped, “Wait. No, it can’t be! You’re not serious, are you?”

Zhenya winced, shrugged, took two steps back and sat back on the couch. He stared at his own hands and hesitantly spoke, “After that conversation, I couldn’t come to my senses for a long time. I’d been wondering what to tell you when we get back to it. I never came up with anything. You probably thought that I just didn’t want to talk to you, so I didn’t come when you were sitting at home for a week and a half.

“That’s not right. I wanted to be friends with you more than anything in the world, and that conversation didn’t push me away at all. It just scared me because I didn’t know what to say to you when I met you. I couldn’t pretend that nothing had happened, could I?”

At these words, both smiled grimly.

“I think I should have thought about it back then. I thought and thought about it every day. I almost went crazy. You can’t imagine how much I wanted to see you! To discuss everything, to understand, to help. I didn’t know what else to do. I just wanted to do something. But I was afraid I was only making it worse. So, I tossed thoughts around for about a week, and then ... no, I couldn’t. I was ashamed to talk about it,” Zhenya faltered and blushed.

He blushed so charmingly that Seva’s heart fluttered. But he didn’t give in.

With a huge effort of will he pulled himself together and asked in an icy tone, “Are you serious? If you really remember our conversation ... or rather, my monologue, then ‘ashamed’ shouldn’t even be in the question. You started, so finish.”

“Fair enough,” Zhenya smiled shyly. “And then ... then I started dreaming about you. Every night, all the time, I really started to think that I was going nuts. During the day—you, at night, you again, always, you. And then for the first time, I thought that our friendship was kind of strange. Or rather, friendship is normal, but this is my attitude to it ... and to you in particular ... is already wrong. I used to blame everything on the fact that I just didn’t have close friends, but then, after your confession and my dreams, I realized that this didn’t fit the concept of ‘the closest and best friend’ anymore.”

“Sounds familiar,” Seva put in softly, and smiled wryly.

His support inspired Zhenya, and he began to speak a little more animatedly. “Then I was ready to come to you to talk, to solve something, and you went back to school and immediately started talking with Alina. It was so fast that I didn’t have time to come to my senses. Sveta started to chatter at me—what a wonderful couple you make—and then I remembered how you said that you liked her. I decided that you were joking that night. I didn’t understand what the joke was, maybe you just left me, not too delicately, maybe you just wanted to see my reaction.

“In short, I was horrified! You were joking, but I really felt everything that you were talking about that day! Then I realized that I was probably sick, and I kept looking at you and Alina. I decided that if you weren’t joking, then the relationship with her definitely helped you, so something should help me. I’d changed my mind so many times ... you should know! I never thought I’d ever consider myself crazy.”

Seva felt great pity, because he understood what Zhenya was talking about. He wouldn’t wish that on an enemy, let alone a loved one. It was scary to even imagine what he had to go through at the time when Seva had suddenly decided to date Alina! What an idiot. What made him think it was a good idea?

“But I still remembered that evening vividly,” Zhenya continued. “I saw your

eyes, heard your voice, understood that you were already on the verge of hysteria. I couldn't believe that such a thing could happen. And the fact that I suddenly began to feel everything that you were only joking about ... I couldn't believe. Every day, I realized more and more that something was wrong. In the end, I decided I had to talk to you. Sveta and Alina invited me to your birthday just in time. I don't know why I said what I did about Rosalia Andrianovna. I was ashamed to be honest. And how do you imagine it?"

"Actually, I imagined it perfectly well," Seva said quietly.

Zhenya was confused. "Yes. Probably, it would be better than ... but I wasn't sure I was right, so I wanted to make sure. To understand that you really weren't joking, that you still felt what you said, that I wasn't crazy. I was pretty sure I was crazy. I promised myself every day, honestly, that I would definitely talk to you that day ..."

Seva didn't listen further. Zhenya spoke, stammering and embarrassed, but fervently and excitedly. Seva, for the umpteenth time, admired him. Zhenya's brown eyes shone feverishly, his hands pulled at the bottom of his shirt, then the next second they were gesticulating vigorously in the air. His feet were tapping nervously on the floor. After each sentence, Zhenya convulsively licked and bit his lips. And as soon as Seva noticed this, everything else faded into the background. Even the sound of Zhenya's voice, his emotional revelations, all this merged into a monotonous mumbling, which he couldn't concentrate on and didn't want to.

Zhenya had already said the most important thing. Seva himself wasn't sure how he ended up two steps away from him. "You know, if I could ..." Zhenya did not have time to finish.

Seva, without realizing it and without thinking, took his face with both hands, pulled him close, and pressed his lips firmly to Zhenya's.

Zhenya froze, fell silent, his eyes widened, but he didn't try to pull away or to push Seva away. Not only Zhenya froze. The whole world around him seemed to have dissolved and nothing else existed, only Seva and his confused gaze, his dry and chewed lips, but the sweetest ones.

The touch lasted no longer than a few seconds, but it seemed to Seva that

he'd soared to the ceiling and at the same time everything inside dropped with unbelievable speed. Everything within exploded—like fireworks. The sensation ran through his whole body with electrical discharges, leaving behind those prickly goosebumps, making his heart freeze yet beat twice as fast. And all this in just one moment. The next second, Seva recoiled from Zhenya's face, but he wasn't embarrassed and didn't remove his hands.

They looked at each other in silence, neither wanting to spoil the moment and neither knowing what to say. Seva feverishly tried to understand from Zhenya's gaze what his thoughts were. What was he thinking? Had he ruined everything? Had this outburst, this frankness, scared him? Was it stupid, thoughtless, reckless?

It was, of course it was! Was it worth it? Did Zhenya want this as much as Seva? Did he find it inappropriate or disgusting? Did Seva need to remove his hands now? He frantically tried to find answers to all these questions, staring hopefully at Zhenya.

But he just kept silent. In his gaze, there was only boundless amazement, a little embarrassment, and some kind of happy relief, it seemed flashed in it. Zhenya was in no hurry to push him away.

They'd might have sat like this for a long time, but a muffled Svetka's voice burst into the wide open window with a gust of warm May wind, "Seva! Zhenya! Come down!"

Startled, neither turned away from the other. Seva bit the inside of his cheek, seeing his reflection in the eyes opposite him, and said firmly, "We'll talk about this after the presentation of certificates," Only then did he take his hands away.

Zhenya only nodded in response.

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Seva dressed as quickly as possible. He had to leave the house in a rumpled shirt and with his hair tousled. Svetka, Pasha, Dima and Rostik were waiting for them at the entranceway. It seemed that they waited a long time, because Zhenya and Seva were met with unkind looks and grumbling.

“Even the girls were faster than you.”

But they didn't react to the outrage, only greeted their friends absently and headed to school. Seva believed that the sooner they came, the sooner everything would end. Even before that, he wasn't eager to attend the presentation of certificates, and this event seemed to be utter nonsense, some trifle that took up his time with Zhenya. It was hard to believe that after so much time they were able to be completely honest with each other! Without lies or pretense, not evading conversation, but just talking. Seva's knees were still shaking, but he wanted to sing with happiness.

They walked a little ahead of their friends and sometimes they casted shy, searching glances at each other and exchanged embarrassed smiles. Both wanted to know what the other was thinking. Seva had no idea what was going on in Zhenya's head, but he sincerely hoped that he, too, could hardly resist continuing their exciting conversation instead of sitting through the ceremony.

What kind of certificates could they talk about after ... this? Zhenya said that he felt the same way as Seva! He didn't go crazy. Zhenya openly talked about it! Something constricted in Seva's chest. But it wasn't sad and painful. This time it was much more and he wanted to scream about how happy he now was. After stealing another glance at Zhenya and catching his equally cautious gaze, Seva broke into a wide smile and caught himself and turned away in embarrassment. Zhenya did the same.

Looking at each other and exchanging embarrassed laughs, they reached the school. In the vestibule, they had to split up. Zhenya, Pasha and Rostik went to their classmates, and Oksana was waiting for Seva, Svetka and Dima. The other girls came much earlier and asked her to meet the latecomers. She beamed when she saw the friends and led them to the assembly hall. At the door, after waiting for everyone to go inside, Seva held her elbow, “Is Alina there too?”

“Where else would she be?” Oksana shrugged.

He nodded and followed the others into the hall. The girls took the second last row and, smiling happily, waved at them. Seva smiled crookedly in response and exhaled loudly, trying to calm down. He didn't want to see Alina at all but of course, they had to sit together. His conscience, which had been gnawing at him,

churned with renewed vigor; on the way to their row, Seva managed to recall all the familiar curses.

“Hi.” As soon as he sat down, Alina leaned over the armrest and kissed him on the cheek.

Seva shuddered and looked away. “Hi.”

She took his hand and cheerfully said, “We’ve been waiting for you. What have you been doing for so long?”

Seva shrugged embarrassment. “I have ... I’ve been ironing my shirt.”

“It turned out pretty mediocre,” Alina giggled, critically examining his crumpled clothes. “Look how beautiful everyone is. What an awesome atmosphere!”

Seva peered around. The hall was crowded with people, parents, grandparents, students and teachers, and everyone was so serious and solemn that he was pulled into it. He couldn’t believe that graduation day had already arrived! It seemed not that long ago that he and Zhenya accidentally met in Seva’s yard.

“How quickly time flies!” Svetka read his thoughts. “Can you imagine that in just a year, we’ll be the graduates. Do you think they’ll also come during the presentation of our own certificates?”

“I’m sure Pasha will,” Alina said firmly and nodded somewhere into the crowd. “Look, Seva. Zhenya’s parents are standing there.”

Seva looked over and winced slightly. Prokofy Ivanovich in his best suit was explaining something to a clearly bored man, probably also the parent of one of the graduates. *He’s probably bragging about his son’s success. He should tell them what price it all came in at instead.*

“They’re talking to Pasha’s parents,” said Svetka.

“Yeah, and there’re our parents going to them.” Dima pointed at a couple pushing through the crowd.

Everyone stared with interest at the assembled company, and only Lelia turned away with a barely audible sigh. Seva looked at her with genuine sympathy. None of their relatives came to Rostik.

Alina squeezed her hand without further ado and changed the topic, “Oh,

look how solid Grigory Olegovich looks in this suit!”

The others forgot about their parents and began to look for the historian.

Alina, smiling contentedly, put her head on Seva’s shoulder and quietly said in his ear, “You know, I missed you.”

Seva cursed himself. Chewing his lips thoughtfully, he leaned over and whispered, so that no one else could hear, “We need to talk.” Immediately he got up and pulled Alina after him.

She obediently followed. Seva had made the decision to break up with her on the way to school. He hadn’t the slightest doubt that it was necessary to do this. If before he could lie to her, to himself, to everyone around him, now it seemed impossible. Moreover, he condemned Sonya Oskina so much when she hadn’t broken it off with Zhenya after that first kiss with Emelyanov. So, would he be better than her if he continued to date Alina? Of course, what happened at his house was not much like what Seva saw backstage at the New Year’s disco.

There was the fact that Seva ... cheated? What else could he call it? No other options; there could be no excuses. That he’d cheated on Alina not with another girl, but with Zhenya, turned everything upside down. And their kiss was ... not even a kiss, just a momentary touch. They’d not had time to understand anything. But what a touch it was! Seva had felt it in every cell of his body, as if he had been born anew at that moment, as if he had been waiting for that moment all his life. And it, this momentary touch, Seva considered to be a real kiss. He even considered it his first kiss. He couldn’t lie to himself anymore that he liked kissing Alina even a little. And he couldn’t lie to Alina about it either.

He and Alina left the assembly hall, turned into the left wing, stopped at the stairs. There was not a soul around, which was unusual; the school was already empty. The echoes of the loud hum of the crowd still rang in his ears. Everything in his head seemed to be covered with a light veil.

After looking around, Seva took Alina’s hand again.

Only after that, did she tense. “What is it, Seva? Something happened? What do you want to talk about?”

Seva took a deep breath, lowered his gaze. He thought it was good that he didn’t delay this conversation. Now that he’d started, he’d have to talk to the

end, no matter how hard it turned out to be. And it would be hard, Seva realized, having caught the wary gaze of her gray-green eyes.

“I don’t even know where to start,” he said honestly. “Alina, you’re amazing. Literally the best. I don’t know anyone more beautiful, smarter, more interesting than you. I really feel good with you, and probably our relationship is the best thing that could have happened. I still don’t understand what you found in me ... many people didn’t understand. But I’m glad it happened ...”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Alina shook her head, frowned. “Your speech sounds painfully familiar, I’ve heard it ... or said it more than once myself. Are you ... are you breaking up with me?”

“Yes,” said Seva, deciding not to delay the moment. “I’m sorry.”

His heart pounded and his chest ached. Alina’s eyebrows shot up, and she looked at Seva with sincere surprise and such resentment that he had an unbearable desire to punch himself.

After being silent for a while, Alina bit her lip and asked softly, “Why? What happened?”

“Nothing. Really, nothing. You didn’t do anything, just ... I don’t feel like I probably should. You’re incredible, and you deserve so much more, believe me.”

But Alina didn’t seem to hear him anymore. Her lips trembled slightly and she quickly turned away, sniffed as quietly as possible. Seva was speechless for a moment. He hadn’t seen her cry in elementary school! Self-loathing stirred in his chest like a nasty worm.

Before Seva could say anything, Alina turned to him again and asked, “Have you found someone?”

Seva grabbed her hand again and sincerely, warmly assured her, “No, of course not! Think for yourself how could I have found someone better than you? I spent all my free time with our friends. When would I have had time?”

In fact, Seva wasn’t lying. He really was sure that it was simply impossible to find someone better than Alina. Zhenya ... What about Zhenya? Did that count? Even if it counted, how would he explain it to Alina? She wouldn’t believe it. She’d think he was mocking her! Seva himself would have decided the same. If he told her the truth—“I’m in love with Zhenya, and we kissed



earlier today”—Alina would laugh in his face and probably call an ambulance. And maybe she’d be right.

“How would I know?” she snorted. “It couldn’t have happened out of the blue!”

“Maybe we’re just not right for each other. I swear it’s not your fault.” Seva couldn’t say that he was just crazy, and one look from Zhenya kindled so many emotions in him, that even the longest and most sensual kiss from her couldn’t. Alina wouldn’t have understood, and he had to limit himself to a half-truth.

“How long have you thought about this?” she asked coldly, unable to restrain herself. She sniffled again.

“I didn’t delay this, so as not to aggravate the situation. I thought it would be less painful this way.”

“You were wrong,” muttered Alina and burst into tears. Tears poured down from her eyes, which started to swell, and her pretty face turned red, and her lips curled back in anguish.

Seva, in a panic, looked in confusion at how Alina was unsuccessfully trying to pull herself together, and finally awkwardly hugged her trembling shoulders, muttered helplessly, “Don’t cry, please. Just don’t cry. What can I do to make you feel better? Do you want me to tell everyone that you dumped me ...”

Hearing the last words, Alina choked on a sob. She narrowed her eyes angrily and asked furiously, “Are you a fool? Temkin, do you think I don’t respect myself?”

Seva bit his tongue. She was right. What he said was utterly stupid. When would he start thinking before he spoke? On the other hand, the situation was critical and now Alina, surprised by the nonsense he blurted, even calmed a little. She smeared the tears on her cheeks with remnants of mascara, wiped the smudged lipstick with the black sleeve of her blouse, took a deep breath and closed her eyes, probably counting to ten.

“I’m sorry,” Seva said in embarrassment and took his hands away. “Just tell me what I can do for you?”

Alina opened her eyes and looked at Seva with irritation. She leaned against the wall painted a dreary green and shook her head. “Nothing. What can you

do?” She straightened her blouse, removed a hair from her trousers. It was then that Seva noticed how beautiful Alina looked. A fitted blouse and trousers on a lovely figure, low-heeled shoes, hoop earrings, and a disheveled but still fashionable hairstyle. Probably, the make-up, before it was smudged, was also amazing. And all for what? To come and hear what he’d just said here?

Self-loathing stirred in Seva with renewed vigor. “I don’t know,” he finally replied. “Whatever you ask.”

“Forget it. I’m an adult, I can handle it myself. Call Lelia here; that’s all you can do.”

Alina took out a pocket mirror and began to fix her hopelessly ruined makeup.

“Are you sure?” Seva asked cautiously.

“I’m sure. Go already, Temkin.” She waved him away.

Seva turned around one last time, looked at Alina carefully and, making sure that she was okay, ran back to the assembly hall as fast as he could. He ran there in about ten seconds, not noticing anything around him, and almost broke down the flimsy wooden doors.

Andrianovna belatedly shouted after him at the entrance. “Temkin, slow down. You’ll bump into someone and hurt yourself!”

But Seva no longer heard. He pushed his way through the crowd that filled the hall during the time he was gone, pushed past the people who occupied seats in their row, and bent down to Lelia. “Lelia, Alina called for you. She’s at the stairs in the left wing.”

Lelia instantly tensed. “Is something wrong?”

Seva grimaced. “It’s too long to explain. I think she’ll do it herself.” He turned to the noisy crowd. “Do you need help getting out of the hall?”

Lelia shook her head and selflessly moved through the crowd. Seva mentally crossed his fingers and sat down in her place, spread out on the chair like a puddle. The atmosphere of joyful excitement that reigned in the hall no longer delighted him; it became almost unbearable to be here. Seva wanted to take Zhenya and run away, forget about the events of the last twenty minutes. Or at least get out of here himself. But he didn’t, and reproached himself for his

weakness. Zhenya had been begging for him to come for so long, that it was clear Seva's presence at the presentation of certificates was really important to him. Seva couldn't let him down.

The ceremony hadn't started yet, and he kept looking back at the doors slamming every second. He knew that they would return. Lelia couldn't miss seeing her brother being awarded a certificate. It only remained to figure out how to behave when the girls eventually appeared in the hall. He definitely wouldn't go to Alina, but ... should he ignore her? Should he pretend that nothing had happened? Seva had never parted with anyone before and had no idea what to do in such a situation.

He turned out to be right. When the tenth-graders were crowding around the stage in confusion, the door slammed for the last time, and Alina and Lelia stealthily made their way to the empty seats at the other end of the hall. Seva was surprised to note that the Alina looked as if she had just gone to the washroom to powder her nose, except that there was no blue shadow on her eyes anymore. Neither of them looked in his direction, and Seva felt annoyance mixed with relief. If they had turned around even for a second, he would have been completely confused.

"Why did they sit down separately?" Nudging Seva with her elbow, Svetka nodded at the girls.

"Well ... Alina and I kind of broke up," he muttered, looking at Svetka with apprehension.

Her reaction wasn't shock at all. Sveta, opening her mouth, stunned, batted her eyelashes, but didn't have time to ask anything. Solemn music burst from the speakers near the stage and the ceremony began. Seva breathed a sigh of relief, but from Svetka's meaningful look, he realized that he'd not get off so easily. After it was over, an interrogation would certainly be waiting for him. He sighed heavily. It was his fault. But at least now he had time to prepare.

The ceremony turned out to be even more tedious than Seva had initially assumed. At first, they listened to the long and dry speech of the headmistress, then to the proud and overly loud Andrianovna talked about the 'A' class for another five minutes with tears in her eyes about how "almost her own children"

had grown up and how hard it was for her to let them out under her wing. Maybe Seva would have gotten into it if he didn't want to leave so much. He was even upset that Pasha was standing there in the crowd of graduates and not sitting with them in the hall. For sure, if he were here, Seva would have heard a stream of snide jokes addressed to all of today's speakers.

At this solemn moment, Seva wasn't the only one thinking about Pasha. Every now and then Svetka pushed Alena and whispered in her ear, "Just look at how beautiful he is! He's so solid in that suit. It's just impossible to look away! And yours too. They are all so stunning today that you just can't take your eyes off them!"

Seva involuntarily agreed with her. They were beautiful, all of them ... especially Zhenya. Not only beautiful, but also happy. There was such a wide smile on his face that Seva could see it from the other end of the hall, and his soul felt so serene, as if he hadn't been trying to get out of here a minute ago. For Zhenya, graduating from school meant the long-awaited end of a ten-year-long hassle. By enrolling at MSU, he'd be free of his father's constant control and would finally be able to breathe. Seva was happy for him and suddenly froze, even stopped blinking. Zhenya was going to leave tomorrow.

Then what was the point of their conversation? Even if there was a point, when would they be able to talk? The tenth 'A' had a graduation, which they'd traditionally celebrate until dawn, and tomorrow morning Zhenya had a train to catch. With all that required doing, he'd not be able to allocate even half an hour to speak with Seva. And there was so much to say that it seemed that a whole night wouldn't be enough.

The mood immediately deteriorated and even Zhenya, glowing with joy, no longer prompted excited emotions. Seva, without much enthusiasm, listened to the speech of another adult with an overly serious and pretentious face, fidgeted with impatience, and only when they finally began to hand over certificates did he perk up a little. The medalists were awarded first: Zhenya, Sonya and a couple more people whom Seva knew only by sight. Dressed up, beautiful and happy, they stood on the stage, and excitedly and joyfully exchanged glances with one another and with the audience. Seva briefly forgot about his spoiled

mood, the moment was so solemn and important. Sobbing teachers and parents, sniffing girls, and guys with wet eyes, it all seemed so strange, unusual, but at the same time exciting. Even Seva was touched. Svetka was rubbing tears on her cheeks, although the graduation wasn't hers.

“What will you then do when we graduate?” Putting his arm around her shoulders, Seva chuckled kindly.

She didn't say anything, just sniffed even louder. Seva patted her shoulder encouragingly and turned in the direction of Alina and Lelia. On the stage, certificates were already being handed to the rest of the graduates alphabetically, and the girls were looking forward to Rostik's last name at the very end of the list. So far, they'd only reached Pasha, and Seva was almost deafened by how loudly Svetka screamed when he separated from his classmates and moved towards the stage.

Compared to how long the teachers talked, the certificates were handed over quickly. Seva didn't have time to get bored. As soon as his attention dissipated, and his gaze moved idly around the hall, now and then returning Zhenya, the headmistress announced Rostik. Seva immediately became animated and applauded for his friend. Again, he looked back at the girls. They even got up from their seats, and the always quiet Lelia offered a full smile and clapped so enthusiastically that she'd probably have bruised palms the next day. Alina didn't lag; there was no trace of her recent tears. Seva shook his head. That was probably a good sign. He wasn't sure, but he hoped so.

Rostik was followed by five more surnames, and the presentation of certificates came to an end. Svetka, not waiting for the last words of the headmistress, jumped up from her seat and ran to Pasha, and Seva remained sitting in the hall with a heavy heart. Unlike Svetka, he didn't know where to run. To Zhenya? To Alina? Or maybe even go home? None of the options seemed right to him, and Seva decided to stay where he was.

He sat for a few minutes, until Zhenya squeezed through the busy crowd to him. In his hands, he had a certificate and a small gold medal, which he nervously twisted between his fingers. Having plopped on the next seat, Zhenya leaned over to Seva and, shouting over the hubbub in the hall, said, “There'll be

a concert now, and just a couple of acts, so please stay and watch it. After that, I'll see my parents off, and you and I will sneak off somewhere, okay?"

"Yeah," Seva agreed automatically and immediately caught himself, asking in surprise, "I don't understand. Where we were going to slip away?"

"I don't know, preferably somewhere far away," Zhenya shrugged.

"Which 'far away' are we going to slip to, Zhenya? You have a graduation; we won't be going far anyway," Seva frowned.

"Screw this graduation," Zhenya waved a hand. "In my opinion, our conversation is much more important."

Before Seva could object, he jumped up from his seat and hurried to his parents, who had already lost him.

Seva stared after him in bewilderment. "Screw it"? And this was said by Zhenya? The blond guy who for most of his life had always dreamt about this graduation? On the other hand, he'd dreamt more of a gold medal, which he received ten minutes ago. But to hear this from Zhenya was still unusual, even a little suspicious. But at the same time, it was also joyful. He preferred conversation to graduation. Who'd have thought! A smile appeared on Seva's face.

Svetka jumped up out of nowhere and, looking around, put her hands on her hips. "What's going on with you and Alina?"

Seva shivered and scratched his head in embarrassment. "We broke up."

"I know that. Because of what?" Svetka crossed her arms over her chest.

"Ask Alina."

"I've just come from her. She said to ask you because it was your idea. Everything was fine, wasn't it? What happened, Seva?"

Seva chewed his lips thoughtfully, pulled on his shirt sleeves so as to hide his hands, which suddenly felt frozen, and suggested, "Let's talk somewhere else, I don't want to discuss it with such a crowd hanging around."

He hoped that Svetka would agree to postpone the conversation, but she was determined.

"Let's go," she said and dragged Seva to the exit.

He had no choice but to follow. They left the assembly hall and Svetka

pulled him towards the stairs in the left wing. Seva swore to himself but didn't object. It seemed that the concept of "a secluded place" was the same for all students.

They walked in silence all the way to the stairs, and only after turning the corner did Svetka finally look up at him. "So? What happened?"

Seva sat on the steps with a sigh. Svetka had asked the question with her usual straightforwardness, and she was waiting for the same type of answer: honest, simple and without prevarication. Seva didn't want to lie. He never came up with anything useful, and therefore decided to tell it how it was. Let Svetka do with this information what she wanted.

"I realized that I don't feel anything for her," he sighed after a few seconds of silence. "Alina is incredible, and she doesn't deserve to be lied to. So, I decided not to delay it."

Seva said it honestly, but without unnecessary details, so that the answer would fit in Svetka's head. He was ready for her usual overly animated reaction: indignation, bewilderment, even insults. Was it really possible not to feel anything for Alina? It seemed incomprehensible, and Seva would have understood if Svetka would've said, "You're a jerk, Temkin!"

But Svetka's answer struck him. She looked into his eyes, frowned, and said quietly and very seriously, "You can't control your heart. You did well not to deceive her."

Seva coughed. "Did well? Don't you think I did something disgusting? That I'm a jerk, a scumbag, a moral freak?"

After these words, Svetka widened her eyes and asked in amazement, "Did Alina say that to you?"

Seva was confused. "No."

"Then I don't understand where you got such thoughts from." Svetka shrugged in indignation. "What were you supposed to do, date her just so as not to hurt her? It's terrible. You can't think of anything worse. How to tear off a bandage ... the faster, the less painful. How are you doing yourself?"

Seva smiled timidly. He wouldn't have thought that Svetka would support him. On the other hand, she didn't know the real reason for their separation and

in her eyes everything didn't look that terrible. Thinking about this, Seva wilted again. "I'm fine. Is she okay?"

"She seems okay," Svetka shrugged again. "You know Alina. She will never show her feelings, even during such moments."

Seva remembered how half an hour ago Alina was crying at this very staircase, and thought that Svetka didn't need to know about it. "I hope she'll be all right," was all he said.

"Of course, she will!" Svetka said with conviction. "It's Alina. She can handle it. We'll find the right person for you too, don't worry."

Seva remembered Zhenya, nervously twirling his gold medal in his hands, and with a quiet laugh shook his head. "Thank you, Sveta, I can handle it myself too. I have to go back. I promised Zhenya to see him after the concert."

Svetka didn't object, and they returned to the assembly hall. It turned out that the concert was just coming to an end, and Seva mentally thanked Svetka for not having to spend the time in the assembly hall. He continued standing at the door, deciding once again not to go to the vacant seats. Seva regretted it right after the last act ended. The applause didn't have time to subside; the crowd rushed to the exit, and he was literally pressed into the wall. But among the huge crowd, he was able to find Zhenya. He was passing by with his parents and managed to whisper to Seva, "In five minutes by the entrance."

Exactly five minutes later Seva came out. Zhenya was already waiting for him there, and as soon as he saw him at the door, he nodded towards the gate.

"Let's go faster, before any of my classmates come to their senses. I told them that I'd leave with my parents, that I don't feel well. Andrianovna got upset, asked who would control Rostik," Zhenya laughed. "I think he can handle himself."

Seva grimaced. He had long been used to lying, evading answers, confining himself to half-truths, avoiding provocative questions. But Zhenya! Honest, decent, sincere as a child Zhenya! was he going the same way? The situation seemed painfully familiar. Seva had used such an excuse more than once.

But they had no choice. They hurriedly left the schoolyard, and only a few blocks later, Zhenya stopped with a question. "Where will we go?"



“To my place?” Seva suggested.

“Yeah, we surely need extra ears,” Zhenya quipped. “My place is also not an option.”

Seva thought about it. “It’s warm outside; we can go anywhere.”

“Only somewhere where our friends will definitely *not* go. Sveta was going to go for a walk with the girls after the presentation of certificates.”

“Yes,” Seva drawled and scratched his head. It immediately dawned on him. “I know a place where people never go, ten minutes from here. Girls will certainly be in the park, so there is definitely nothing for them to do there.”

“If you’re sure of it, then lead.”

Seva led. They walked in silence, and it was a great opportunity to think about what Seva wanted to say when they got there. But he was overwhelmed with emotions that didn’t fit in his head. They were so diverse that he wanted to hug and kiss Zhenya right now or slap himself in the face. Seva felt all-consuming joy, lightness and anticipation, all inspired by distant, shaky and ghostly hopes for who knew what? At the same time, he felt anger at himself and a heavy, aching sadness for Alina. He hoped that Lelia was able to comfort her, and that she’d be fine. There was no strength left to think; it took everything to keep himself in hand.

The journey took them a little longer than Seva had said. The hole in the fence, through which he’d made his way earlier, was finally repaired, and he had to climb over the top. Zhenya looked doubtfully at Seva climbing the iron fence.

“Are you sure that we’re even allowed to be there?”

“Yes. There’s a gate further on, but it will take a long time to get around, so it’s better this way,” Seva said breathlessly.

There was no need to tell Zhenya twice. Shrugging his shoulders, he climbed after Seva. They were on the observation deck. From here, from the micro district located on a hill, the whole town was visible at a glance. After passing the fenced area and a small copse of three trees, they went down the slope, and Seva sat down on the grass. Zhenya settled down next to him.

Trees covered them from behind, tall lilac bushes grew on the sides, and right in front of them was their entire small town, gilded in the rays of the setting

sun. From here they could see Seva's five-story building, the school, and part of Zhenya's house. The sunset was blazing like a fiery glow above the gray panels on the horizon. Seva fleetingly thought that he would have to come back here with paints, and looked at Zhenya inquisitively.

He squinted curiously at the town surroundings, but he was in no hurry to start a conversation. However, Seva was also in no hurry. He looked from the town stretched out in front of them, then to Zhenya and back, and struggled with the desire to kiss him again, hug him, at least take his hand. He thought, screw it, this conversation! Did they really need to waste precious time on empty chatter? Seva mentally ordered himself to calm down and reluctantly turned away from Zhenya. Otherwise, he might not be able to restrain himself.

So, in silence, they sat until the sun sank below the horizon, leaving behind only a pale pink stripe. The warm spring breeze ruffled their hair, especially Zhenya's tangled curls. Seva's head was spinning from the intoxicating scent of lilac, and the distant echoes of the railway and the rustle of green leaves seemed to fill the silence, giving volume to the picture that Seva was determined to paint in the near future.

Neither knew where to begin. Seva always loved to be silent next to Zhenya, but not today! The silence that hung between them began to seem inappropriate. Zhenya decided to be upfront. Without stopping to contemplate the roofs of the nearest five-story buildings, as he might have once, he said, "Sveta once again told me all about Odessa today. You still haven't decided to go?"

"No." Seva looked at him point-blank. "But I'm happy for Svetka. She has been dreaming about it for a long time."

"Maybe you can tell me why you don't want to go?" Finally turning to him, Zhenya regarded him closely. "It's been almost a year, and I still don't understand."

Seva sighed. He didn't want to talk about it, the topic was unpleasant and difficult. But, since they had a day of difficult revelations, Seva didn't shirk any more.

"I was there a little less than three years ago. Aunt Olya, my mom's sister, lives in Odessa. Not biological sister, my grandma sheltered her during the war

... a long story. In general, we went to her place every year in the summer, and the last time was in the seventy-third year. We had a great time there, Odessa probably remained one of my favorite childhood memories. But immediately after returning from the last trip, we learnt about my mom's illness. Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease," he clarified for some reason.

"So that's why you don't want me to smoke!" Zhenya slapped his forehead with his palm.

"Yes," Seva said. "Mom smoked constantly. I don't remember her without a cigarette in her hands. She said that at first she relieved tension this way."

"I don't smoke," Zhenya hastened to say. "Since I promised you, I haven't smoked again. Even when we didn't talk. Although, you know, there was plenty of tension."

"Thank you," Seva nodded. "It's important to me. And as for Odessa ... I can't go there. I know this city like the back of my hand, and I associate every place there with my mom. The trip would turn out gloomy, sad. I don't want to spoil it for others."

"You have an aunt living there. Sooner or later, you'll have to go to see her."

"She'll visit here," Seva shrugged. "Even if I have to, I'd rather do it alone than with the whole class."

"What is your relationship like with her?"

"With Aunt Olya? It's a good one. It's not like before anymore, of course, but I really liked her as a child. And Sema loved her. Even our father was happy to stay at her place."

"Maybe you should start creating new memories? I think your mom would be happy if you visited her sister."

"Probably." Seva didn't argue. "But what new memories are we talking about? In any case, Odessa will always be associated with my mom."

"Your mom has lived in our town all your life, walked these streets. She lived in the same apartment with you! I'm sure she has been in your room more than once. Tell me, what do you associate your room with now?"

A flush rose to Seva's cheeks. He muttered confusedly, "Try and guess".

"I bet I've guessed," Zhenya chuckled and suddenly blushed too, but quickly

pulled himself together. “Maybe it will be the same with Odessa? You can’t avoid the places you’ve been with your mom all your life. And to miss this trip is a shame.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Seva admitted thoughtfully.

“I am,” Zhenya said confidently.

They fell silent again. Seva was seriously thinking about what he had just heard. There was something reasonable in Zhenya’s words. Something he wanted to listen to. Looking up from his knees, where he’d been staring for a wee while, Seva was surprised to notice that dusk had already fallen over the city, and lanterns were gradually starting to light up on the streets. But they never started talking about what they came here for. He wondered how long it would be before they separated?

The silence didn’t last long. Having dug into the ground with the toe of his shoe, Zhenya affirmatively said, “You broke up with Alina.”

Seva shivered, as if a cool autumn breeze had cut through the warm, almost viscous summer air. “How do you know?”

“Sveta told me. Won’t you regret it?” Zhenya asked, peering with excessive attention at the lights of the town.

Seva looked at him and shook his head. “No. I’m sure I won’t. You know perfectly well how I really feel, I haven’t lied to you. To this day, nothing has changed. Therefore, continuing to deceive her and myself is the worst thing I can do.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“Almost the truth. That I don’t feel for her what I should feel.”

“How will you explain it to the others? They won’t understand you. Especially Dima.”

“I won’t explain anything to anyone. Let them understand it any way they want. As Alina says, so it will be. Even if she tells everyone that I cheated on her, I’ll also agree. In the end, it’s ... it’s partly true,” Seva faltered in mid-sentence. “And maybe not partly. I don’t know what to call what happened today, but it was more than cheating. So ... I’m sorry. I don’t know. It was probably stupid, maybe you didn’t want it ...”

Zhenya let out a nervous laugh. “Not stupid at all, Seva. I also wanted it. I thought it was clear from what I’d said that this was all I wanted for more than a month.”

Seva blushed again. Even his ears and neck turned crimson. He really wanted to forget about all the useless, unnecessary words, kiss Zhenya, press his cheek against his shoulder, nuzzle his neck. He wanted it too! Seva felt dizzy when the meaning of what he’d just heard finally reached him. He looked at Zhenya with a wide smile, without trying to hide it. Fortunately, it became completely dark in their hiding place.

His heart was beating so hard that it seemed like it was going to jump out of his chest. “And what are we going to do now?”

The question, which had been hanging in the air for a long time, fell from his lips. Despite the obviousness, it caught Zhenya by surprise. Fidgeting, tensing, he had to admit after a short silence, “I don’t know. Believe it or not, in all the textbooks I’ve read, none of them said what to do in such situations.”

Seva and Zhenya exchanged glances and both burst out laughing. The tension accumulated during the day, the jangled nerves, and the experienced excitement, affected them. They laughed sincerely, carelessly, to the point of stomach cramps, although there was nothing particularly funny in Zhenya’s words or in their situation.

Seva hadn’t considered such a situation in past. From the moment he’d realized that he was in love with Zhenya, he lived in endless fear that someone would find out about it, especially Zhenya himself. Despite all his dreams, for which he was so ashamed, he never even dreamt of reciprocity. Seva couldn’t imagine that Zhenya felt the same way.

Reasoning about what would happen if his feelings were mutual seemed so absurd that Seva never considered it. In the world in which he’d lived until today, there was no such thing as reciprocity on the part of Zhenya, there was only Seva and his disease. Or maybe it wasn’t a disease after all? If Zhenya felt the same way, maybe it was okay? Seva could believe in his own disease. He had his own hang-ups, and maybe after the death of his mother, he went crazy. Moreover, as Maria Viktorovna said, he was an artist, with a subtle, sensitive

nature! All people of art were slightly insane. But Zhenya! An excellent student, a smart guy, an athlete, a Komsomol member. Could there be someone more exemplary, more normal than him? Of course, they had never heard of such a thing. But Seva had also never heard of the American anthem, which didn't mean that it didn't exist.

Seva opened his mouth to share his reasoning with Zhenya, but he was ahead of him, "You know, actually, it doesn't really matter what we decide now."

"Why?" Seva was surprised.

"I'm going to Moscow soon, remember? Forever. And tomorrow I'm leaving to prepare for the entrance exams."

Something broke inside Seva. He'd managed to forget about Zhenya's departure, which he'd recently been waiting for as a cherished holiday. But now, after everything that had happened today, it would be incredibly hard to separate. With ill-concealed resentment and disappointment in his voice, he asked, "So, that's it? Won't we see each other again?"

"Why? I'll be back at the end of August. Then I'll come for the holidays. However, there'll be fewer of them than at school. But then you can also enroll and move to Moscow!" Zhenya's face brightened.

"At MSU? Are you kidding?" Seva chuckled sadly.

"What's the difference? Anywhere, the main thing is to go to Moscow," Zhenya said enthusiastically.

"Doubtful. Very doubtful," Seva shook his head skeptically.

"We'll wait and see." Zhenya wouldn't give up. "Okay, actually, if I stayed here, what would we do? Would we hide from everyone forever? Friends, parents? They wouldn't understand, I'm sure of that. They would say that this isn't normal ... and, probably, they'd be right."

It seemed to Seva that Zhenya had hit him in the gut with a swing. No, he hadn't said anything new; he'd just voiced what Seva himself had been thinking about for the last six months. But for some reason it was still not easy to hear this from Zhenya, as if he'd just extinguished a barely smoldering light of hope. All today's joy, the exciting thrills, the happy anticipation, all this was crossed out at once, as if someone had mercilessly cut off a butterfly's wings. It was only

today that Seva realized what his mom meant when she talked about falling in love.

Noticing how Seva had wilted after his words, Zhenya hurried to correct himself. “Listen, I want it too!” He touched Seva’s fingers, cautiously, as if with apprehension, but immediately became bolder and took his hand. “So that it turns out to be normal, so that both friends and parents understand us, so that I myself don’t consider myself different and don’t stay afraid of what I feel. But I understand that this is impossible. You, too, I think. I’m sorry I have to say it out loud, I know you don’t want to hear it. Just like I don’t want to say it.”

Seva squeezed Zhenya’s warm, soft palm, ran his thumb along the back of it. How he dreamed of doing it every time he shook his hand! How he dreamed of holding it at least for a few seconds longer! There was a pleasant twinge in his stomach, a slight smile appeared on Seva’s lips. “And now what? We talk before you leave as just ‘a friend’?”

“What else can we do?” Zhenya squeezed Seva’s fingers so hard that it hurt. “Good ‘friends’—the *best* ones!”

They chuckled nervously. Seva suddenly thought about what difference it would make how they’d pass their remaining time. They were “just friends” for a year. Big deal, a couple of months! The main thing was that now they were sitting beside each other, very close, he was holding Zhenya’s hand, they had stars above their heads, and around them were only lilac bushes, and not a soul. They kissed this afternoon. How could he have thought of such happiness just a day ago? How could he have dreamed of anything else? If only ...

Breathing warm night air deep into his lungs, as if gaining courage and audacity, Seva blurted, “Can I at least kiss you for the last time?”

Zhenya shuddered, looked attentively at Seva and turned around, as if looking for someone in the darkness of a copse or a thicket of lilacs.

“There’s no one for a mile, I promise you,” Seva assured him.

Zhenya was confused, turned to him, and nodded. “You can. Of course, you can.”

Everything in Seva’s stomach twisted into sharp needles. He leaned forward, just like in his dreams, touched Zhenya’s cheek with his free hand, brushed his

hand over it, and pulled him closer. The sharp scent of lilac hit his nose, mixed with the familiar smell of Zhenya's hair. Everything froze inside Seva. A sweet chill ran down his spine, and he finally touched Zhenya's lips. At first, it seemed to him that their second kiss wouldn't last much longer than the first. Seva would have had enough, he would even have had enough to kiss Zhenya on the cheek, just like that distant winter day in the vestibule of the school.

But Zhenya didn't recoil and lightly, innocently touched his lips. He touched Seva's hair, slid his hand down to his neck, and Seva gasped in surprise. It seemed that his fingers were electrified; Seva seemed to be struck by light electrical discharges with each touch. With unexpected regret, he thought that this wasn't the first kiss for both of them. But, on the other hand, he was grateful to Alina; even if he hadn't liked it, she'd taught him how to do it right, and now it wasn't scary at all, but sweetly exciting. And now he finally understood *what* people found in kisses.

It felt like more than ten seconds had passed, and Seva realized that Alina was wrong; there really wasn't enough air. But not because he was doing something wrong. It was just that his breath was suddenly taken away from him with delight. He was ready to suffocate, if only this moment would last forever.

But Zhenya broke the kiss first, and Seva took a deep breath with sincere regret. They, as last time, didn't move away from each other, but continued to sit close. Seva felt Zhenya's warm breath, touched the tip of his nose, and a lock of curly hair tickled his cheek. He barely refrained from nuzzling Zhenya's temple, pressing his cheek against his. But Zhenya didn't restrain himself and leaned forward again, and kissed Seva on the lips and after that sat down a little further away.

Seva, like a fool, broke into a wide smile. He still couldn't believe it. Did it really happen? Did those dreams that he was so ashamed of, for which he hated himself so much in the morning, come to life? Zhenya, having learned about what he felt, didn't find it disgusting, didn't despise him; on the contrary, he reciprocated!

Let this magic, this beautiful dream stop very soon, remain in the twilight of the night, under the dome of stars and behind the bushes of blooming lilac. Seva



was grateful even for these few moments. He knew for sure that the muffled chirping of crickets, the warm summer air, Zhenya's soft hair and his rough lips, would remain in his memory forever. Perhaps, in reality, everything turned out to be even better than in a dream.

Zhenya and Seva's fingers intertwined.

He removed his hair from his face with his free hand and sarcastically commented, "You and Alina, I see, didn't waste time."

Seva, with difficulty, suppressed the desire to give him a light slap. He looked at Zhenya reproachfully. "Did you have to ruin everything?"

"Why?" Zhenya wasn't embarrassed. "I'm just jealous." He chuckled, averting his eyes.

Resentment overwhelmed Seva with renewed vigor. Probably, he'd never forgive himself for his relationship with Alina. But who'd have known? Who'd have told him?

"Can you imagine how much time we've lost!" He sighed bitterly.

"Yes," Zhenya replied dully. "If I had been a little quicker, everything could have been different."

"If I weren't such an idiot, maybe you'd be more determined," Seva objected.

"You can't change anything," Zhenya said philosophically. "But I'm glad that at least now ... at least today, we have nothing to regret."

Seva couldn't disagree. This day ... or rather, this night, couldn't have been better. It seemed that what happened to them was on the verge of fiction, a completely different, magical, unreal world. And, as soon as they returned to people, the door to it would close once and for all.

As if confirming his thoughts, Zhenya said quietly, "I don't know what time it is, but I think we should slowly get ready to go home."

Seva restrained another sigh. Beyond the distant houses, dawn would soon approach. It was really late. Or really early? Anyway, his father definitely wouldn't miss him, his grandma probably would, but it seemed like utter stupidity to go home now. Could he destroy a fairytale that he'd never had the hope to dream of?

“Probably.” Seva reluctantly agreed and immediately added, “Or maybe we’ll stay here forever?”

He didn’t mean it seriously, but there was a subconscious, unaccountable hope in his voice that Zhenya would answer with “okay”. And they would stay here forever. Because Seva was always ready to do as Zhenya said, to agree with any of his proposals. If Zhenya’s words acted on him in such a magical way, then why couldn’t they act on the universe in the same way? Maybe if Zhenya agreed now, and the night would never end, and they would always sit by the lilac bushes and, holding hands, look at the stars. Was Seva really asking for so much? But it wasn’t possible to check Zhenya’s influence on the universe.

Smiling sadly, he tucked a stray strand of Seva’s hair behind his ear with his free hand and objected, “You know how much I want this. But I have a train to catch in the morning. It would be good to get home before it leaves.”

Seva turned away, peered into the darkness of his town. It seemed that he had never been out so late. Most of the lights went out at night due to energy savings, and the ones that remained on emphasized the impenetrable darkness of the deserted streets. Coming out of a heated shelter surrounded by lilacs and filled with warm air, electrified so much that sparks flew from any touch, was now not only unbearably sad, but also a little creepy. Squeezing Zhenya’s thin fingers, Seva looked at him with hope, “Maybe we can sit a little more? Until dawn. You were supposed to meet it with your classmates anyway.”

Zhenya plucked a leaf from a nearby bush, turned it thoughtfully in his hands, and nodded silently. Seva’s heart jumped with joy—they still had some time! After a little thought, he decided not to waste the last moments of his own fairytale in vain. He moved closer, put his head on Zhenya’s shoulder, closed his eyes with a quiet sigh of pleasure.

Zhenya placed their hands, still locked together, on his knee, and ran the stem of the leaf over Seva’s fingers. It tickled. Seva giggled and nuzzled his neck, releasing a soundless laugh.

Zhenya shuddered, removed the sheet from his hand and moved his shoulder, “Seva ...”

He understood without further ado. Seva went down a little lower, lay down

on his shoulder with his cheek, carefully turning away from his neck. Zhenya put his head on Seva's, returned the leaf to his hand, and again began drawing meaningless patterns on it. Seva absently watched his unhurried movements. It seemed that Zhenya brought out the simple curlicues on his hand with much more diligence than he wrote school notes. He entered scrawls in his notebook with enviable speed, later sometimes not understanding what they meant. No wonder ... he had so much to write! And for what?

Seva touched a round piece of metal in Zhenya's pocket. "Was it worth it?"

Zhenya grimaced, shook his head faintly. "I don't know. Time will tell."

Seva didn't object. It was fair. Silently, he put his head back on Zhenya's shoulder and blissfully closed his eyes. For the first time, he regretted that the June nights were so short. Quite recently, they were looking at a late summer sunset, but now it was already getting light. On any other day, he wouldn't have noticed, but now every minute counted. They'd not yet had time to disperse, and Seva was already bitterly imagining how tomorrow he'd remember this night, which would surely seem like a dream.

He didn't want to talk. Everything was clear and didn't require words. He just wanted to snuggle closer to Zhenya, so that he could dissolve into him, maybe even become him. So, Seva did. He lifted his hand and pulled him close, wrapping himself in his arms. Zhenya, with a laugh, put his chin on the top of his head and continued to run the sheet over his hand. The first golden rays appeared from behind the houses.

Seva thought that they'd go home as soon as the sun appeared over the houses. But he was mistaken. Time passed, and Zhenya, squinting from the bright light that flooded their shelter, still didn't remind him of his train. It wasn't known how long they'd have sat like this if Seva hadn't worried that Zhenya might be late. Reluctantly, he gritted his teeth, hoping with all his soul for a refusal, and asked, "Shall we go?"

Zhenya nodded. Finally, he scratched the stalk on his skin and threw the leaf back into the bushes, twitched his shoulder as if waking up Seva. That last time, Seva briefly touched his shoulder with his lips. He didn't kiss it, just touched it for a second, and raised his head, wincing with displeasure. Even the smell of

lilac had somehow dulled, and the sun that rose above the houses unbearably blinded the eyes. A cool morning breeze crept under his shirt.

Seva got up from the ground, pulling Zhenya with him, and gasped in surprise. The leg on which he was sitting was noticeably numb and now a thousand tiny needles were digging into it; even standing was painful. He and Zhenya looked at each other and silently, without saying a word, uncoupled their hands. The fairytale was over. They had to go home.

They walked to the fence in silence. Any conversation seemed inappropriate. What could they say when everything was clear, without words? Now they, delaying the moment until the last, would reach the fork, separate, and go home. They'd again become "just friends", close comrades, whose friendship was admired by teachers and classmates, not guessing what was really hidden behind unremarkable communication. Maybe they'd never talk about tonight again. They had an unspoken contest: who would better hide what he really felt, and who would be able to better pretend that everything between them was the same as what was between everyone else. Funny game. Even Seva got into it.

Only when he was climbing over the fence, Zhenya stretched out his hand to help him pull himself up, and warned, "Be careful."

Seva barely restrained himself from jumping into Zhenya's arms. For the last few minutes, the last chance he wanted to cling with both hands. But Seva held on, and they continued their journey to the fork in the same silence. After descending the stairs, Zhenya stopped and looked at Seva with a long, steady gaze.

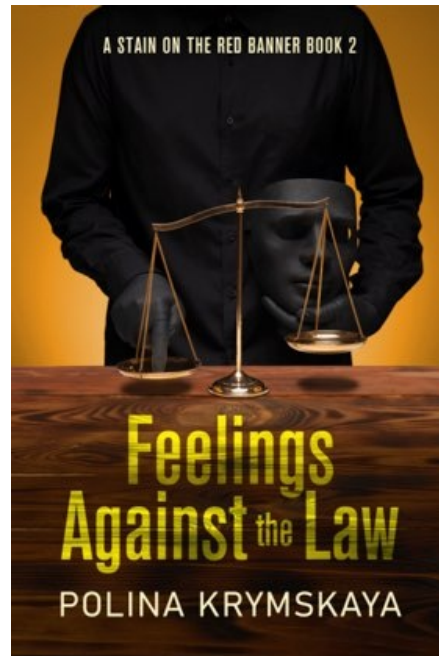
"I'll return from Moscow, and we'll spend the end of the summer together," he finally said.

"I'll wait," Seva agreed, although it wasn't the end of summer he wanted to spend with Zhenya. It was his entire life.

Zhenya nodded and extended his hand to him. Seva took it and shook it. Something inside him was outraged, overcome with bewilderment. After everything that had happened, the farewell seemed terribly ridiculous, a mockery of themselves. But neither of them would have risked hugging or kissing for the last time here, without being hidden by the dense lilac bushes.

Shaking hands, they allowed themselves to freeze for but a second, gaze into each other's eyes, and run their thumbs along the back of their palms ... then went in different directions.

**Next in the Series:**  
Feelings Against the Law  
(A Stain On The Red Banner Book 2)



Soviet students Seva and Zhenya have decided to rise against societal norms, embrace their love and defy prejudice. Their courageous pursuit of happiness challenges a conservative society that seeks to confine them.

As Zhenya's departure looms, their time together becomes precious, and they yearn to cherish every moment of serenity and affection. However, their newfound freedom carries unforeseen consequences that could shatter the very foundation of their lives.

In the second book in Polina Krymskaya's series, the love story of Seva and Zhenya unfolds against the backdrop of a society at odds with their desires. 'Feeling Against The Law' explores the balance between love and sacrifice, as Seva and Zhenya navigate a world where liberation comes with its own set of risks.

## **Feelings Against the Law**

## About the Author

I'm Russian. Now I study at the Faculty of Psychology in Belarus and teach English to preschoolers. I have good writing experience for my age. I worked as a copywriter for five years and wrote over several thousand articles. To be honest, I have never wanted to publish my fiction stories. I have been writing for myself all my life. Only when I completed "A Stain on the Red Banner" I believed this particular work was worthy to have other people learn about it. However, right at this moment the "propaganda" of same-sex love was banned in my native country, and the few publishing houses publishing LGBTQ+ literature were closed. Then I decided to translate the book into English and try my luck where I can be heard and stay safe. Now, I am happy to write, share my thoughts and create freely, knowing I am safe and can find like-minded people.

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To learn more about Polina Krymskaya visit her [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).