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Alex R. Keat

*Your
Equilibrium*

Alex Keat

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Аннотация

He is Thomas, a French journalist who fled to Quebec after a betrayal. His rule: trust no one. A handshake is already too close.

She is Izzy, a Swiss editor hiding from her past. A kinesthetic who forbids herself from reaching out.

They were brought together by an accidental lie. They speak different languages but fear the same thing — a step toward each other.

Can two broken people find in each other not passion, but a quiet harbour where they don't need to fix themselves to be accepted?

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CONVERSATION

the glance / look at me, if you dare

Izzy

“Why do you always look at me like that?”

It took Izzy a moment to realize Delcourt was talking to her. She'd been distracted by her phone, texting her father to say she was running late at work. She turned around, and the first thing her eyes landed on was his sneakers.

Bright. Orange. Sneakers.

Who wears something like that to the office? Especially with an equally bright shirt. Green. Modern men's fashion was completely beyond Izzy. Her father definitely wouldn't approve.

“There!” His voice carried a strange note of triumph. “That's exactly what I mean!”

“Sorry?” Izzy didn't catch it right away. That damn French. Why, out of all the cities in Canada, was her father invited to

Quebec?

“I’ll forgive you when you answer the question.” Delcourt stepped closer, busily, almost amused, hands tucked into his trouser pockets. Izzy instinctively took a step back. “Every day in this corridor you give me this look of utter contempt — and — » the rest dissolved into some French wordplay Izzy missed entirely. “Do you follow me?”

Great. Fantastic. Not only had she caught barely half of what he said, but now she had to explain herself to this peacock. Izzy didn’t trust people with eccentric fashion choices; behind that kind of façade, there was usually something far less pleasant.

And she didn’t look at him with contempt. She wanted to say Don’t flatter yourself, but she didn’t have enough vocabulary for it, and anything simpler sounded childish.

Think, Izzy. Think.

Delcourt waited, studying her closely, as if he could pull the thoughts straight out of her head.

“Not very talkative, are you? Not a great trait for a journalist.”

At this point, Izzy couldn’t take it anymore. Questioning her

professional competence was one thing this peacock definitely had no right to do.

“A good journalist weighs every word,” Izzy said, surprising herself with how quickly and easily the words came. “It’s just...” She glanced around — the corridor was still empty. “French isn’t my native language,” she added more quietly.

“Seriously?” Delcourt looked genuinely surprised. “But you’re an editor — I’ve seen you in editorial meetings. How do you even write, then?” he asked, with a trace of irony.

Izzy winced. Of course. The newsroom’s favorite question. Her father had never had any trouble with language barriers. Only her — the screw-up.

“I write better than I speak.” Izzy lowered her gaze, then forced herself to look back at him, pulling her hand away from her hair. “I moved here from Switzerland not long ago. I do speak French, but I need time to... get used to speaking it. The Quebecois accent is still a bit hard for me.”

She could feel her ears burning. Why did he need to know any of this? Her brain, unhelpfully, couldn’t come up with anything clever in French, only panic in German.

Delcourt let out a short laugh. But not in an unkind way. Izzy couldn't remember ever seeing him smile before.

“Monsieur — ”

“Thomas,” he corrected. “So what is it about me you don't like? Your contempt is going to burn a hole right through me at this rate.”

Izzy shifted her phone from one hand to the other, trying to recall — she didn't show off, didn't draw attention, didn't do anything that might have given the wrong impression. She wasn't the one walking into the office screaming, “I'm classy, and I know it,” just by the way they dressed.

“I don't fully understand what you mean.”

“I see you in this corridor almost every day,” he said, noticeably slower now, softer. “And almost every day, you look at me as if my mere existence offends you. I got curious.” He shrugged.

Izzy hesitated, nearly blurting out that it was hard not to look that way when someone dressed like a circus act.

“I didn't mean to offend you. I apologize. I'm just not used

to that kind of style... that kind of..." She lifted her eyes to the ceiling, as if a dictionary might suddenly appear there. "Flamboyant," her brain finally supplied. "I grew up in a different kind of world."

"And that means I'm not allowed to look a bit brighter?"

Izzy didn't know how to answer. Yes would be a lie — she knew modern culture embraced self-expression. But no would be just as dishonest, because in her world, that kind of behavior wasn't acceptable.

"Isabelle? What are you doing here?" came a voice from behind her, making her inhale sharply and straighten up. Chin up, shoulders squared.

"You always pop up out of nowhere," Delcourt greeted the editor-in-chief immediately, giving an exaggerated shake of his head.

"Watch the familiarity," Gagnon shot back. "Isabelle, the workday's been over for a while. Thomas, I thought you were leaving too," he added after a pause.

Izzy tensed and turned toward Gagnon at once — so he wouldn't think she was speaking to him over her shoulder. Her

father had always taught her to look people in the eye.

“Yes, I had to stay because we were discussing...” she struggled to come up with something remotely plausible, but her mind went blank, “...something work-related.”

“What kind of work?” Gagnon frowned, then shifted his gaze to Delcourt. “You again? How many interns have you had already — maybe that’s enough?”

“I asked for it myself!” Izzy blurted. “You keep promising me more serious topics, so I decided to take matters into my own hands.”

“See? Not my fault,” Delcourt chimed in, spreading his hands, watching her closely. “Come on, I’m drowning in routine work anyway — let the next generation learn.”

Gagnon only huffed.

“This is the last time you take one of my juniors,” he warned, gesturing as if he might strangle him. “Actually, you know what?” Gagnon smiled slyly. “Fine. Take her under your wing. Train her. Drill her. You’ll report back to me on her progress. Consider it a return to your teaching days,” he emphasized — and judging by Delcourt’s expression, he didn’t like that one bit.

Looks like Izzy was in way over her head.

“What’s the catch?” Delcourt narrowed his eyes.

“No catch.” Gagnon smiled. “Maybe you’ll finally have more time for commercial work and finding experts — the sales department is already howling.”

“Deal,” Delcourt said through clenched teeth.

If Izzy could have snapped her fingers and vanished, she would have done it that very second.

“Isabelle, you’ll have plenty of time to work late some other day. Come on, I’ll give you a ride home. It’s already late,” Gagnon said, motioning for her to follow.

Izzy nodded automatically, but didn’t move. She stood frozen, looking at Delcourt in a quiet panic. He glanced around and stepped closer — not too close, but close enough to finish the conversation.

“I... I didn’t mean to. I’m so — ”

“Write to me. We’ll set up a plan.” Delcourt handed her his

business card.

“Thanks I’ll write to you bye,” Izzy rattled off in one breath and hurried toward the exit.

letter / with the deepest disrespect...

Izzy

“Jérôme called. Said he was glad you’re taking initiative,” her father began over dinner, cutting into his steak with methodical precision. Even at home, he insisted on speaking French, no matter how much Izzy begged him to switch to German. Before leaving for Canada, they had agreed to stick with French to help her adapt faster.

Izzy waited for him to bring up Delcourt — she had no doubt Gagnon had reported everything immediately. Probably right after dropping her off at her door. They were friends, after all. The hardest part was getting used to the fact that “Uncle Jérôme” had turned into “Monsieur Gagnon.”

But the moment never came. Or maybe Izzy was just too afraid to start it herself. How had the stars aligned like this? She had assumed Gagnon would bury her in minor lifestyle pieces — and now she’d ended up under the wing of an established journalist.

The only problem was that it was Delcourt. Visiting freelancer who looked like a cross between a peacock and a pain in the

ass wrapped in bright candy packaging. Izzy had never trusted people like that. In the end, their insides always turned out to be rotten — like Dorian Gray's.

That was exactly what she didn't need.

"Isabelle, come back to earth. I'm talking to you." Her father's voice was quiet, but it carried enough weight to make Izzy nearly spill her water.

"Sorry, I got distracted," she said with a brief smile. "Honestly, I'm not entirely sure — it all just sort of happened..."

"A smart move with that journalist," her father continued for her. "Good for you, stepping up instead of waiting around. Jérôme told me about him — apparently, he's experienced, but not stuck recycling the same stories or chasing the news cycle. Good practice. Fieldwork. That's your element."

Izzy was so taken aback that she didn't even argue. Who would have thought that one impulsive, stupid lie would turn into an unexpected boost to her professional karma?

On the other hand, the outcome was almost too good. Finally, a chance to get back to stories that mattered more than which celebrities were dating and how to improve your skin with

avocado.

All that was left was to find out what that Delcourt would ask for in return. He had to ask for something. There was no way his reaction to Gagnon's comment about paid articles had been random. Izzy had clearly set him up somehow.

He had to want something.

Dinner ended as it always did: clear the table, stack the dishes into the dishwasher, wipe down the kitchen, then retreat into their separate routines. Her father read. Izzy disappeared into her bedroom. After a full day in an open-plan office with no private spaces, all she wanted was to lock herself in and shut the world out.

Except now she also had to write to her suddenly appointed mentor — or whatever he was supposed to be called.

Delcourt's business card was painfully simple: black-and-white, name, email. Naturally, no phone number — otherwise he'd be torn apart. His inbox was probably strictly work-only, too.

Izzy quickly drafted a standard message. She still didn't understand why she had to write first, but there was no way

around it — especially since he had asked.

She reread it and was about to hit Send.

Then she remembered how particular the French were about emails. They had briefly covered business correspondence in school, but apologies and expressions of gratitude had been drilled into them no less rigorously than those infamous numerals. Of course, a language that says “four times twenty plus nineteen” instead of “ninety-nine” would be obsessed with long, unnecessary phrases like “please kindly accept my deepest respect”. Izzy had always thought that this was where the hypocrisy of the French language lay: elaborate, circling endlessly around a simple three-letter sound, masking true intentions. German was just as intense, with its own pitfalls, but it was precise, structured, and capable of expressing multiple states in a single word. French demanded attention and engagement: miss two words or mishear the pronunciation, and you lose the thread entirely.

Izzy gathered everything she knew, added an online translator for safety, and finally sent a short but linguistically correct email.

Delcourt replied so quickly — and so briefly — that it took her a moment to process it.

— —
Mademoiselle Keller,

Thank you very much for your message.

Allow me to express my strong interest in working together going forward.

I suggest we hold our first meeting tomorrow at 1:00 p.m. in the conference room on the second floor to discuss the details.

Kind regards,

Thomas Delcourt

P.S. Let's skip the usual formalities in email — it'll be faster that way. My personal number is below — I tend to respond to messages more often than emails.

— —
Izzy was ready to scream.

What did he mean by “skip the formalities”? Had she done all that for nothing? Dug up all those elaborate constructions just to avoid offending this insufferable Frenchman?

She let out a low growl through clenched teeth and forced

herself to take a few deep breaths.

He probably just needed an assistant to dump all the tedious, dirty work on — that's why he'd latched onto her. Why was he so polite? So helpful? Had he set this whole thing up? Did he think she was just some inexperienced student?

Izzy counted to six, exhaled, and typed out a reply.

— —

Monsieur Delcourt,

Thank you for your prompt response.

I confirm the meeting at 1:00 p.m. If anything changes, I will let you know as early as possible.

*Kind regards,
Isabelle Keller*

— —

She included her mobile number as well. A courtesy. A return move. Besides, he wasn't going to start texting her for no reason.

Right?

He didn't.

Izzy didn't like that she kept looking at her phone — and waiting.

distance / when barricades aren't just for revolutions

Izzy

Izzy would come to the second-floor conference room when the newsroom fell unbearably quiet, and music only made it worse. She had tried noise-cancelling headphones, but the absence of movement around her was distracting even visually — it made it harder to focus.

She missed the rhythm of the news.

Most of the time, you were glued to your desk, barely able to step away, because the world changed at a relentless pace. Stories updated constantly, reactions came in from all sides, photos and videos were replaced in real time. It was a vortex, a constant churn — the kind you could only escape long enough to grab lunch, bring it back to your desk, hold a fork in one hand and type or scroll through agency feeds with the other.

Any place feels like a swamp at first after working in the news.

Izzy had hoped she would be assigned to politics, international conflicts — something that mattered. Instead, Gagnon had

placed her in what he called lighter topics: travel, life hacks, pieces about Quebec, and other small, unfamiliar details of everyday life. He had said her writing was strong, but she needed to learn how to handle solid, long-form material. Promised it would only be for a couple of months.

Izzy was on her third.

The second-floor conference room was used for calls and, as her colleagues had put it, “when you really need to scream.” It had decent soundproofing and only a few administrative offices nearby — perfect if you needed to disappear.

Only when she stepped in at ten to one did Izzy wonder why Delcourt had asked her to meet on the second floor. Did he know she came here? Or did he simply not want extra ears — or eyes — around? Likely, after yesterday.

She laid her things out in advance: laptop, notebook with a digital pen. Made sure everything was aligned, traced the edges of the screen with her fingers, checking the smoothness of the plastic out of habit. Checked her chats — no urgent tasks, no updates from Delcourt. She tapped her nails against the keyboard, eyes fixed on the clock. Three minutes to one. The last thing she needed was for him to be late.

“Oh, wow. Been here long?”

There he was.

Izzy jumped to her feet and adjusted the sleeves of her shirt under her sweater.

“You’re a minute late,” she said, frowning, gripping the back of her chair like a shield.

Up until the last moment, Izzy had refused to believe this wasn’t some trick of her subconscious. But reality was becoming increasingly solid, tangible. Delcourt gave a quiet huff, set his wide coat over a chair, placed a worn bag on the one next to it, and pulled out his laptop in a single smooth motion. Izzy couldn’t help a quick, critical glance — those strange high-waisted trousers again, and a bright yellow sweater.

“Your father taught you to judge people by the color of their shirt, but not how to greet them properly? I’ll chalk up the comment about being late to your national stereotypes.”

Izzy dug her fingers deeper into the chair. Could he speak any simpler?

“My apologies, Monsieur Delcourt. Good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon,” he said with an approving nod. “Sit down — we’re not in a classroom.” Izzy immediately sat, though she didn’t move any closer. To her relief, Delcourt didn’t either — if anything, he defined the distance by remaining at the far end of the table. “Tell me about yourself.”

“What exactly would you like to know?”

“I need to understand who I’m dealing with. Education, experience, what you’ve worked on here.”

“Is this an interview?” Izzy crossed her arms. Delcourt didn’t answer. “Fine,” she sighed, rolling her eyes. “Bachelor’s and Master’s from the University of Bern, Communications and Media Studies. I started at a well-known Bern newspaper, then moved into news at a regional TV channel in the canton of Bern. Worked my way up to senior editor, then moved here and ended up at City Courier.”

“No position in local television here?”

“I wanted to try something new,” she cut in. That was all he needed to know. “Anything else?”

“Of course, Mademoiselle Keller, of course.” Izzy was almost

certain he was mocking her. “Since I’ve ended up with you, I’m obligated to get the most out of the situation.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, will you just forgive me for yesterday?” she blurted out. “I just — » Izzy exhaled and bit the tip of her tongue. “I really am sorry. I didn’t mean it. Gagnon is a long-time friend of my father’s. He helped us move, got me this job, keeps checking in, asking if I’m seeing anyone, discussing my work with my father. Sometimes he even drives me home,” she rolled her eyes. “And then he saw me with you, alone, and I panicked.”

“The panic I noticed,” Delcourt said with a faint smirk. “But it works out better this way. I had been keeping an eye on the new editors — the others all ran off eventually. For what it’s worth, Gagnon thinks highly of you. Though now I understand why he’s so protective. He asked me at least four times not to come closer than a meter.”

Izzy tightened her grip on the chair and shifted even farther away from him. Wonderful. “Uncle Jérôme” at his finest.

“Are you sure I’m a good fit for you?” she asked quietly, almost strained. “If you just need a personal assistant, that’s not me.”

“I know,” Delcourt said with a small smile. “I need someone

who writes about interviews as a form of power — not a girl running errands. Though there will be some running involved.”

Izzy felt her ears burn.

“How do you — ”

Delcourt gave her a look. The question was, admittedly, stupid. Izzy hadn’t exactly hidden her blog, and he had probably gone through all her social media. Journalists were bloodhounds — worse than private investigators.

“Then why the interrogation?”

“It’s always interesting to hear how colleagues present themselves. You’ll learn.”

Izzy wanted to say something back, but didn’t. This wasn’t the position to push. Besides, he clearly wasn’t going to share much about himself. She had tried to look him up too — found half-empty social media profiles and articles from two years ago. A lot, and somehow not enough. As if part of it had been cut out or hidden.

“Is that why you spoke to me yesterday? Some long game with Gagnon — ‘take the editor’?”

“Honestly? No.” Thomas shook his head. “But we’ll come back to that conversation. I’m still curious about the impact of brightly colored clothing on the quality of one’s writing.” Delcourt feigned a frown, though he didn’t stop smiling.

“Monsieur Delcourt — ”

“Thomas,” he cut in. “We’re going to be working together for a while, and I don’t miss the elaborate French formalities.”

“Isabelle. Izzy is fine,” she nodded, only realizing a second later that she had answered.

rumors / hands in your pockets, heart locked away

Izzy

The rumors spread quickly — it hadn't even been three weeks. Izzy told herself it was a combination of factors: the new girl and the freelancer, two single foreigners, and why exactly were they disappearing into a conference room once a week?

The “training” started at full speed. Izzy wasn't unfamiliar with that pace. Thomas made her gather enormous amounts of information, verify it, re-verify it, and analyze it. After news work, the adjustment wasn't easy: clarity and speed were replaced by three meticulous rounds of editing, in which Thomas still found mistakes. But Izzy was willing to do anything — as long as she didn't have to compile another batch of memes for Gisèle's department, where she'd originally been placed.

The only thing Thomas didn't let her near was commercial pieces.

“You'll have plenty of time to die of boredom later.”

On that point, Izzy almost agreed. Formulaic, pre-approved

questions about someone's business were enough to make anyone drowsy.

Gagnon kept an eye on them. Constantly asked how things were going, sometimes reviewed Izzy's drafts himself. A couple of times, she overheard him arguing with Thomas over yet another commercial article, demanding that certain key points be rewritten.

But most often, in work chats, people asked whether Izzy and Thomas had slept together yet.

If Thomas had been some strikingly handsome man all the junior editors were pining after, it might have made sense. But no. He just stood out. Completely ordinary looks, hidden behind bright clothes and an almost absurd number of bracelets. Though Gisèle and the others mostly discussed his smile — equally ordinary, in Izzy's opinion.

Either way, the rumors would die down soon. Izzy was sure Delcourt didn't particularly like her — if not outright disliked her. Starting with that conversation about appearance, and ending with the fact that she had practically landed on his head.

Still, judging by how often Gisèle tried to peek at their

messages from the next desk, silence and peace weren't coming anytime soon.

"Want some, no?" Gisèle held out a chocolate bar.

Izzy grabbed the edge of her desk so she wouldn't instinctively lean away. Gisèle always appeared too close, too suddenly, even though they sat side by side. Izzy had started recognizing her movements by the scent of her perfume: the sweeter the air, the closer the lifestyle editor of *City Courier* was.

"Can you ask normally?"

"What's wrong with that?" Gisèle pouted.

"It's like you're offering and implying I should refuse at the same time. It's annoying," Izzy said, though she still took a piece of chocolate.

"What's wrong with it?" Gisèle repeated. "I just asked if you want it or not."

Izzy sighed.

"I can't get used to the way you, Quebecois, phrase things," she said, slumping back in her chair. "Why is there always

another question inside your question? Like: ‘You want coffee, no?’ Or: ‘Maybe we sit here today, yeah?’ It’s like you’re either unsure or pushing the person toward a specific answer. I’m constantly trying to guess the right one. It makes no sense.”

“Why do you need logic?” Gisèle shrugged. “Drop your weird European habits already. Adapt. No one’s going to do it for you.”

She slid the rest of the chocolate toward Izzy and rolled back to her laptop, muttering something unintelligible in slang Izzy still couldn’t decipher.

Izzy wanted to say she was afraid of drifting so far from where she came from that she would forget it entirely.

But she didn’t.

That wasn’t for Gisèle. She wouldn’t understand. No one would — why Izzy had run across the ocean. Who, in their right mind, would leave their hometown, friends, a good job, cut off every possible tie to make sure there was no way back?

Of course, sometimes it felt like a mistake. Something could have been fixed, pieced back together.

But every time, Izzy remembered how quickly she had agreed

to move to Canada. Her father had barely finished mentioning a new position at Université Laval, and in her mind, she was already drafting her resignation letter.

More and more often, she wondered how quickly Thomas had made the same decision once.

But no one ever let her think about it for more than a minute.

Thomas Delcourt 17:02

figured out open banking?

Isabelle Keller 17:03

working on it

will deliver on time

Thomas Delcourt 17:05

you'll manage by the end of the day? need help?

Isabelle Keller 17:05

i'll handle it

After working in Switzerland, Izzy had thought it would be hard to surprise her with a difficult topic. She had always prided herself on persistence — the ability to process large volumes of data, make sense of them, even become something of a specialist.

But all of that collapsed against Canadian startups.

Fintech, data centers, big data — a set of concepts she had never dealt with before and, frankly, hadn't planned to. Her father often said she had a technical mind rather than a humanities one, but Izzy refused to believe it.

Apparently, Thomas wasn't thrilled either when Gagnon assigned him those pieces — so he passed them on to his “student,” while also making sure she actually understood the material instead of just consulting AI. Izzy still couldn't figure out his attitude toward her, but she was certain he was venting years of accumulated irritation on her.

“Surprised?”

Thomas practically pulled her out of the article. Izzy blinked and looked up at him, genuinely confused. Why that question? Surprised by what? That he had come over from the other side of the newsroom? Or that he was wearing a normal suit — in a completely abnormal color?

“Is there something wrong with my face?”

“There's always something wrong with your face when you look at me,” Thomas mimicked her. “Leave my jackets alone.”

“You asked if I was surprised. The jacket is normal. The color

is terrible.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbed them, then let out a restrained laugh and dropped into Gisèle’s chair. When had she left?

“What’s so funny?”

“Sorry. Really, sorry.” He wiped his face and exhaled. “I asked if you were tired. *T’es tanné*,” he said slowly, articulating each syllable.

Izzy repeated it silently, but it still didn’t make sense.

“Wait. It still sounds like *étonner* — to be surprised. You should have asked if I was fatigued. And why are we even talking about this?”

“Even in France, I wouldn’t phrase it like that,” Thomas said, shaking his head, resting his cheek on his fist. “Too formal. Quebec French is softer. *T’es tanné* is... — » he leaned back, snapping his fingers a few times,” — more like concern. You’re nodding off, time to wrap up. Everyone’s already gone. Otherwise, Gagnon will go full mother hen again and start complaining I’m exploiting you. Send me what you have — we’ll go over it tomorrow.”

Izzy stood up immediately and looked around. The newsroom really was empty. Even Antoine, Gagnon's deputy, had disappeared — and he was usually the last to leave. She checked the time twice and clicked her tongue in irritation: she should have been home by now. In ten minutes, her father would start calling.

“Scheiße,” she muttered, then froze and looked at Thomas. “You didn't hear that.”

“Jawohl.” He smiled, running his fingers across his lips as if zipping them shut.

“Not funny,” she grimaced. “My father and I have a rule — no German. Especially at home. Otherwise, we'll never adapt.” She sent the file, shut her laptop, and began clearing her desk. “Thanks for pulling me out of it. I usually track the time, but I got buried. My father worries because I walk home through the park. I try not to be late.”

“I gratefully accept your most sincere thanks, Mademoiselle Keller,” Thomas said in exaggeratedly formal tones, giving something like a mock bow.

Izzy frowned and slung her bag over her shoulder.

“Are you going to keep bringing that up? I just wanted to write a proper French email. Because you’re French.”

“Here’s a terrible secret: no French person actually likes formal emails — except maybe arrogant Parisian universities,” Thomas said more quietly, staying where he was. Not leaning in, not moving closer. Just... staying. Most men didn’t behave like that.

Or maybe Izzy was simply tired. Especially tired of reacting to him.

“What’s wrong with them?”

“Parisian higher education values its uniqueness so much that it expects students to praise it in motivation letters more than their own achievements.”

“I don’t want to know anything else. My brain’s about to shut down,” Izzy exhaled. “I have to go. It’s late.”

“Want me to walk you home? You can tell your father you weren’t alone,” Thomas asked carefully.

Not in the tone Izzy expected. No invitation, no real flirtation

— maybe just a trace of it, but she wasn't entirely sure. He looked at her without evaluation, without planning how the walk would go or how it might end. Still kept his distance. Didn't imply anything. At most, he was thinking about the route.

“Oh no, that's exactly what he shouldn't know. Gagnon would have you quartered,” Izzy laughed. “But I don't mind. I've never left this late before.” She tightened her grip on her bag strap.

Thomas sighed, gave a small smile, nodded, and gestured toward the exit.

Only then did Izzy notice that he was tired too.

The walk home took between twenty and thirty minutes, depending on the pace. Izzy liked walking. More than she disliked crowded buses and their unreliable schedules.

Strangely, Thomas didn't reach for her. His words flirted, maybe, but his hands stayed to himself. Always in his pockets. He didn't try to touch her, didn't move closer. He kept the distance on a long leash.

Izzy couldn't understand why — but part of her was relieved. No closeness meant no painful attachments. No memorable touches.

Only *part* of her.

Because she wanted to touch him so badly, she had to clench her teeth.

She needed to know how soft his jacket was — she couldn't tell just by looking, no matter how many times she had studied it over the past two weeks. The sweater, too: soft or slightly scratchy? That thick collar had to be stiff to hold its shape.

And his hands.

She wanted, unbearably, to take his hand. To understand the texture of his skin, whether it was rough or dry. The need was so sharp it made her fingers tingle.

But Thomas never took a single step closer.

And Izzy felt so comfortable in that distance that she was afraid to break it.

Thomas

Thomas drove home on autopilot: turned the music up, shut his brain off, followed a familiar route.

He only exhaled once the apartment door closed behind him.

When you try very hard not to get close to people, you inevitably start noticing when they move toward you. Small details. Movements. Half-hints.

Izzy moved toward him — and pulled herself back every time. Not even halfway. At the level of thought.

Thomas had learned to see it in her gaze. In the way she didn't look at him as a whole, but at separate parts. Izzy seemed to perceive people in fragments — remembering details rather than the full picture. A useful trait for a researcher. Less so socially.

He took her behavior apart piece by piece while changing, reheating dinner, even when he finally put his phone on charge and went to bed.

How many editors had approached him? Four? And all of them had backed off once they realized nothing beyond work was going to happen.

But Izzy seemed to hold onto that. As if that was exactly what she wanted — for nothing to happen.

“Then why do you fight it so much?” Thomas muttered into the empty room.

He had come to Quebec precisely to avoid questions like that. To spend time on nothing but work. He had crossed an ocean, moved into another world so he wouldn't have to fit in — just work and stay focused.

And now he didn't fit in with Izzy.

A girl from a world of neutrality, forced into a foreign language and culture. Who, in their right mind, moves from German-speaking Switzerland to Canada?

Thomas wanted to ask her about it. How she and her father ended up in Quebec. Why such a move? Where her mother was. Why did she keep fidgeting with her hair or jewelry — it's slightly irritating. Why her gaze always drifted to things she could touch.

And you don't?

It was something cynically professional — seeing someone's armor and wanting to break through it. Izzy's was so strong that even brushing against it resonated for days.

Strong enough that Thomas was afraid to even think about touching her.

Which only made approaching her more interesting.

Not because of any forbidden-fruit nonsense. Nothing forbidden about it — show him a journalist who hasn't slept with a colleague. With other professions, your schedules simply don't align.

Usually, that line carried a certain implication.

But not with Izzy.

She was the editor-in-chief's friend's daughter. A girl who reached for everything — except, for some reason, she forbade herself from reaching.

And that mystery was far more compelling than why she always wore a sweater over her shirt.

step / the closer a person gets, the less intact they are

Thomas

Letters refused to turn into numbers. Numbers wouldn't turn into letters either.

Thomas had made a deal with Gagnon: one day a week when neither he nor Izzy would be buried in routine work — unless the world suddenly caught fire or they found themselves on the brink of World War III. He'd negotiated that mostly for himself, just to have one day when no one hovered within a two-meter radius.

Except Izzy.

At first, she irritated him immensely. Because of her, he'd been dragged into mentoring again, and on top of that, Gagnon had fully saddled him with the quarterly magazine. Thomas disliked commercial pieces for their lack of freedom, but they were the only thing bringing money into the newsroom — and the reason he'd been hired in the first place. A name, without the need to show his face too much.

If Thomas could, he would erase himself and write himself

anew. But in the modern world, that kind of luxury was out of reach.

And then there was Izzy. Smart, capable, but very particular. He hadn't really been surprised by the way she reacted to his shirts or whatever else bothered her. Izzy was the embodiment of every stereotype about Switzerland: dressed strictly, almost perfectly, muted or dark colors, even her hairstyle looked more put together than the entire newsroom combined. Still, Thomas knew women who, with that level of restraint, managed to look elegant and sensual. Izzy wasn't one of them. Even if she wore a fitted shirt, no one would ever see it — she always layered herself in sweaters, sweatshirts, vests. Pure yin and yang of the fashion world.

And yet, unexpectedly, she was comfortable working with. No unnecessary invasion of personal space, both of them — or at least one — always in headphones, no pointless questions, no digging into each other's souls.

Perfect.

Too perfect.

And that, in itself, was exhausting. As much as Thomas enjoyed gathering material in silence and supposed solitude, his

eyes would drift, then burn, then start seeing zeros and ones instead of Latin letters.

“Alright, enough.” Thomas snapped his laptop shut. “Get up, or we’ll rot here.” Izzy just blinked at him, confused. “God, Izzy, don’t just stand there. Grab your things. We need a walk.”

She hesitated, but obeyed, packing up and following him out without a word.

Autumn Quebec greeted them with wind again. The hardest thing to get used to was the weather forecasts — after a year and a half in Canada, Thomas had learned not to trust them, but still hadn’t figured out how to interpret them properly. Wind and humidity distorted everything. Back home, he would never have wrapped himself in a coat this early — usually that came closer to December.

But Quebec in autumn was brighter, and you didn’t have to go far to see it. Thomas led Izzy to the nearest park — the perfect place to look at something other than black text on white.

“Want a poutine?”

He pointed at a small stand selling fries with cheese curds — Quebec’s most famous street food and, in Thomas’s opinion, the

greasiest thing on the planet.

Izzy followed his hand with unmistakable hunger in her eyes, but only tightened her grip on her bag strap. Embarrassed? Tired?

Thomas rolled his eyes and went to order without another word. He came back with two cardboard boxes.

“You’re obviously hungry, and working on an empty stomach is a bad idea.” He held one box out insistently, and this time, Izzy gave in. Not surprising — the smell alone was irresistible. Even after a year and a half, Thomas still wasn’t fully used to the squeak of cheese or the sauce threatening to spill over the edges, but hunger didn’t care about details.

Izzy held the box awkwardly, like she didn’t quite know what to do with it.

“Turn it sideways and support it with your palm,” Thomas demonstrated. “Time to pick up the habits and default settings of another country. Otherwise, you’ll always feel out of place.”

“It’s hard to feel at home holding what looks like an insult to cheese in a country that barely understands fondue,” Izzy scoffed. “Thanks.”

“You can get used to things. You can find things that didn’t exist in your old world.”

“Sure. Or things that are missing. I distinctly remember we managed to invent words like ‘sixty’ and ‘ninety’ without using multiplication tables.”

“That’s Belgium!”

“Switzerland too! Ow!”

A drop of hot sauce landed on her fingers. She jerked her hand and shook it.

“Burned yourself?”

“I’m fine,” Izzy waved it off, though Thomas caught the brief flash of pain on her face. “Hold this.” She shoved the box into his hands and hurried to wipe her fingers with a Kleenex.

“You sure? Let me see.” Thomas stepped closer but kept his hands apart, holding the food away.

Izzy immediately pulled her hands in, as if his touch — or even his gaze — might make it worse.

“It’s nothing. That’s why I don’t like eating on the go. I don’t have a yellow sweater to match the sauce.” She stepped toward a trash bin, then came back and took the box again. “Anyway... I don’t know about you, but it’s still hard for me. And this — » she lifted the poutine slightly,” — this is too simple. The default setting of any Quebecois. Liking fries with cheese doesn’t make you one of them. And I know my cheese and potatoes — this is a disaster.”

Thomas thought for a moment.

“Alright. Fair point. But everything is in the details. For example — chocolatine.”

“Did we come out to eat, or are you giving me a crash course in Canadian assimilation?”

“I was in your place a year ago. No reason for you to repeat my mistakes if you can avoid them. So eat and listen. Again — chocolatine.”

“What is that?” Izzy asked, already tired.

Thomas stopped and looked at her expectantly. He’d been waiting for sarcasm, irony, anything — not a genuine question.

“You only know one name for a chocolate pastry?” he tried.

“That’s pain au chocolat,” Izzy said confidently. “Yours must mean something smaller. I’d guess it’s some kind of chocolate candy.”

Thomas held it together for three seconds, then shook his head and laughed.

“Your French is too proper! Even for me! That’s not how this works, Izzy. Alright, sorry,” he raised a hand. “There’s an ongoing linguistic war over that pastry in France, and in Quebec, one side clearly won. But you need to know both.”

“Are we seriously still talking about pastries?”

Thomas scoffed theatrically.

“Just remember: chocolatine. Say it differently, and everyone will know you’re not from here. Once, in a bakery, they made me go to the back of the line and order again. Hard to switch overnight when you’ve spent your whole life on the other side of the barricades.”

“Oh, you should never go to Switzerland,” Izzy suddenly

laughed and tossed her empty container into a bin. “You won’t survive past your first breakfast.”

“Oh, really?” Thomas raised an eyebrow. He caught himself stepping closer, then just as smoothly corrected the distance.

Izzy seemed to notice, but didn’t comment.

“If you ask for a croissant, no one will give you one.”

“I don’t believe you don’t have them.”

“We do. They’re called gipfel. And they’re shaped like little crescents.” She gestured with her hands, and Thomas immediately noticed how her voice shifted with that brief slip into German.

“So your country has three official languages and still dares to lecture others on culture?” Thomas tried to sound serious. “Never say that word again,” he added with mock offense. “But that’s exactly why I like working with you. You notice details I’ve already stopped seeing.”

“You like working with me because you’ve forgotten how to talk to people. For starters, you could look them in the eye and stop trying to run away.”

Thomas stopped. How had she noticed that? He'd only taken her along once for an interview. Or had she figured it out from the way he interacted with her?

"I don't like pressuring people." He cleared his throat and looked away.

"An interview is intimate by definition. You know that," Izzy said, stepping ahead of him and catching his gaze. "It's not just a list of questions. It's something alive. You adapt, improvise, and ideas come to you that weren't there during prep. That's the real art of conversation. Art, power, control."

"You're quoting your blog," Thomas narrowed his eyes. "All you need is a banner and a barricade."

"Actually, that's my thesis," she smiled.

Izzy glanced at her smartwatch — several notifications at once. She grabbed her phone.

Her eyes widened.

She froze.

Panicked.

“Oh no, no, no! The weekly pitch meeting! I was supposed to prepare! Thomas, sorry — I have to run!”

Thomas stayed in the middle of the park, unsure whether to move at all. Technically, he should’ve been at that meeting too, but two hours in a room full of people — relevant or not — drained him and got in the way of actual work. Gagnon didn’t mind, as long as Thomas sent ideas in advance.

With Izzy, everything felt too easy. That wasn’t how things worked. They’d started absurdly, yet somehow found a rhythm. Izzy didn’t chase emotional closeness, didn’t flirt, didn’t try to push things beyond work. They had grown closer — naturally, spending that much time together — but it wasn’t quite friendship. Something lighter, hovering on the edge between camaraderie and overfamiliarity. And even then, they maintained distance.

Still, it felt like there was a thread between them — always taut. Relax it for a second, and it would snap back like an electric shock.

Too good. That meant something was off. There had to be a catch.

Thomas didn't go back to the newsroom. He headed straight home — to shut everything out, to think. Instead, he ended up working on yet another article about the Middle East.

Izzy didn't text.

She wasn't supposed to.

But the unease crept in anyway.

He asked if she'd made it. No reply. He texted again an hour later — still nothing. He told himself she didn't owe him an immediate answer, but this was Izzy. She was always on her phone.

He didn't call — that would've been too much. Too inappropriate. He checked her socials — nothing new. No posts. No updates. Nothing had happened.

Except Izzy was silent.

Isabelle Keller 23:43

Sorry for the late reply

Gagnon told my father

O F C O U R S E

We argued for a long time

Thomas Delcourt 23:43

Consequences?

Isabelle Keller 23:45

Working together only within strict hours

Any mistake — goodbye to the paid article

Thomas Delcourt 23:46

Didn't mean to put you in that position

Sorry

Isabelle Keller 23:46

My fault

Good night

Thomas Delcourt 23:46

We'll figure it out

Good night, Izzy

Thomas put his phone aside and muttered a quiet curse. If he hadn't factored in her father, then he'd let himself forget — no matter how much he claimed otherwise. Maybe that was for the best.

Still, he caught himself trying to figure out how to see Izzy outside her “curfew.”

And he didn't like that thought.

FEAR

childhood / forgive me, if you can

Thomas

Ring. Ring. Another ring.

Anyone else in Thomas's place would've hung up by now, but he always waited until the very end — because his sister Lucy never kept her phone nearby and would run all over the apartment looking for it whenever it rang.

“Tommyyyy, hiiii!” Her breathless voice came through before she even turned on the camera. “I was about to call you myself today — you’ve completely disappeared.”

“We finally sent the quarterly magazine to print. Nothing ever goes smoothly with that.” Thomas set his phone on a stand in the kitchen and opened the fridge. “Where are the kids?”

“I just sat them down for dinner, don’t distract them,” Lucy rolled her eyes and dropped into an armchair. Children’s voices echoed in the background. “André, I’m watching you — eat your

meat! What are you making over there?"

"Quiche." Thomas was peeling an onion. "Haven't eaten anything proper all week — just sandwiches and one baked chicken."

"Wait till Mom's home, you can brag about healthy eating then," Lucy smirked. "So? What's new? Still writing things you could've just typed from home?"

Thomas gave her a long, pointed look, then swept the onion peels into the sink and turned on the disposer.

"Wow, terrifying. Truly terrifying," Lucy laughed. "I'm serious — what's going on at work?"

"Same as usual." Thomas took out a pan. "Except now I'm fully stuck with that damn quarterly and nothing but commercial articles. Also, by pure coincidence, I've acquired a junior editor. Smart girl. Still willing to work for the idea, not the money. So far, it's going well."

Now Lucy stared at him.

"That explains the smug face. How long have you been working together?"

“About a month.” Onion done, now the chicken.

“A month?! You’ve been spending that much time with one specific girl, and I’m only hearing about it now?”

“You’re yelling like we’ve been dating for six months and I just forgot to mention it.”

“In your world, that’s exactly what this is! Is she at least normal? Not one of those obsessive reporters?”

“The news already broke her when she was young,” Thomas said before he could stop himself.

“Where’s she from? What’s her name?”

“Switzerland. Izzy. I mean — Isabelle,” he corrected quickly.

“Send me a photo.”

“Lu, relax. Her father’s a good friend of Gagnon’s, and we’re colleagues — professional ethics...”

“You could’ve just said you don’t like her. Instead, you’re making excuses like a schoolboy. Photooooo!”

“Lucy, drop it.” Thomas still didn’t look at her, focused on frying the chicken.

“Wait. You actually like her? She’s not blonde, is she?”

“Brunette. Drop it, Lucy.”

“You didn’t answer the question!”

“How’s Mom?”

“You have a crush on her!”

“How’s Mom, Lucy?” Thomas repeated, more firmly.

Lucy rolled her eyes and settled deeper into the chair.

“She’s still on shift. Misses you. Keeps asking about you like I somehow know more than she does.”

“I miss her too.”

“Planning to come back?”

Thomas hated that question.

Mostly because he didn't know the answer.

And partly because he did — he wanted to come back, but he couldn't. Didn't have the strength.

"I don't know, Lu." He turned off the stove. "Not sure. Honestly, I've been thinking about going staff. Or finding something else. Maybe I'll still make it to New Orleans."

Lucy went quiet. Like she always did when their conversation hit the same wall.

"We miss you."

"Come on, it's been almost two years."

"We've been together since birth. You don't just 'get used to that' in almost two years. Are you coming for Christmas?"

"Probably not. Tickets are expensive, and I'd spend more time flying than actually being with you. Plus, I'd rather work through the holidays here in Quebec. And Izzy is staying too, I think..."

"So it is Izzy."

"Lucy..." Thomas exhaled. "You know how it is. I'm done

with anything more complicated than work. I'm not ready. And she doesn't seem to need that either. We just... get along. No digging into each other's lives."

"And not digging into anything else either?"

"LU!" Thomas inhaled sharply and nearly dropped the baking dish.

"You're alone there, Thomas. You won't last like that forever. You need to learn to trust someone."

"You're not hearing me. I don't want anything complicated. Just something normal. Something that doesn't go anywhere — no 'happily ever after.'"

Lucy clearly wanted to argue, but got distracted.

"Oh, Mom's home. Mooom! Thomas is here!"

Noise, movement. Their mother rushed in, still taking off her coat, grabbed the phone from Lucy, and — as always — started firing questions without waiting for answers.

"I'm fine, Mom."

"Yes, I eat properly, I can cook, how many times should I tell

you, look.”

“I’m working, Mom. The money’s good.”

“I miss you, Mom.”

“Mom, I’m sorry, I won’t make it, Mom, I — ”

Thomas missed home unbearably, but the very thought of returning triggered something close to a panic attack. A chain of betrayals — not started by him, but ending with him — tightened around his throat every time. He simply couldn’t go back. Physically couldn’t. Couldn’t get close to anyone because he was afraid of getting burned again.

His mind threw up the memory of Izzy burning her fingers on the sauce — and how he’d rushed toward her without thinking. Close. Too close.

Good thing her father had strictly limited their time together.

For the best.

For the best.

For—

Damn it, Lucy. Why.

collision / when you hide, get a mirror to look around the corner

Thomas

Isabelle Keller 21:43

sorry, I'll be busy tomorrow

Beaulieu suddenly dropped a longread on me, I'll need the whole day

Thomas Delcourt 21:44

Need help?

Isabelle Keller 21:44

don't think so, thanks

Isabelle Keller 21:45

might move into your department though
I'm going to lose my mind among my lot

Thomas Delcourt 21:47

Text me if anything
At the very least, I'll edit

Isabelle Keller 21:48

you're the best

thanks

His subconscious tried to latch onto that last message, but stopped itself.

Thomas didn't fully understand his own reactions. If he had remained the French version of himself — playful, flirtatious, sleeping with colleagues, always smiling, easygoing, constantly seeking emotional and physical connection — it would probably be simpler.

With Izzy, he wasn't looking for that connection. But he inevitably gravitated toward a point of comfort and unforced silence. She didn't need flirting. She didn't even particularly need a friend. Just someone who was always there, yet far enough away so that nothing became complicated. Thomas didn't yet know why, but he felt that Izzy didn't need anything "complicated."

That only made him want to take a step closer even more, but he was afraid of scaring her off. It's not every day a girl tells you you're the best without implying anything beyond the situation at hand. The best because you're willing to help. The best because you don't ask unnecessary questions. The best because you're there, but at a distance.

Thomas still hoped Izzy would move over to the politics and economics row. She had already started doing it more

often, claiming she got distracted by the lifestyle editors' chatter. Colleagues at nearby desks whispered, joked, then eventually stopped paying attention — none of the rumors had ever been confirmed. Thomas and Izzy hadn't become a couple, hadn't become friends, hadn't stepped outside the boundaries of an unusual newsroom professionalism.

Just in case, Thomas even came into work later that day — Gagnon didn't require constant presence as long as deadlines were met, and Thomas stayed reachable. He didn't want to pressure Izzy by temporarily being “the best.”

The moment he saw her, he knew he'd made the right call.

Izzy was in full shutdown mode. Touch her, and she'd kill you. Or at least bite your hand off. On days like this, she wore her “super-protective sweater” — oversized, gray, soft, slightly worn, with a meme cat and the words so fugging happy. And yet she still wore it over a white shirt — as if trying to preserve some trace of strict style — pulling the sleeves down to her fingertips.

“Again? Isa...”

“Tststststst!” Thomas stopped Antoine, Gagnon's deputy, halfway, catching him by the arm.

“She shouldn’t be sitting here!” Antoine hissed. He loved order, and in the newsroom chaos, he could only tolerate it when people sat exactly where they were supposed to. “You’re distracting her again. I’ll be the one blamed!”

Antoine hadn’t been deputy for long and was still anxious about holding onto the role. When you claw your way up from an internship, you end up like that. Not that he was a full Cerberus, but he saw everything, like he had three heads.

Thomas stood up and steered him further from the desk.

“Beaulieu dumped a complicated piece on her. Look at her, she’s about to eat her sweater from stress.” Thomas nodded toward Izzy, feeling a flash of fear himself. She was staring at the screen, barely blinking, eyes wide, fingers nervously twisting the ends of her ponytail. “I asked him to keep her busy, but didn’t expect this.”

Antoine shook his head.

“You won’t break her? She’s hyper-responsible. She even makes me nervous,” he added more quietly. “Catch her if anything.”

“You’re telling me?” Thomas shot him a look. “Of course I

will — I offered yesterday,” he added quickly, cutting off the topic.

“Thomaaaaaas,” Antoine drawled. “Please don’t tell me you two...”

“That we text outside work?”

“And that’s it?”

“That’s it.”

“The whole newsroom is placing bets on when you’ll sleep together. Do something about it. Make a statement or something.”

“Are you serious?” Thomas grimaced. “We work together. The office’s private life isn’t your business. What’s your problem?”

Antoine said nothing, but Thomas noticed the relief on his face.

“Thomas! Can you come here?”

He did. Not too close — he stayed across from Izzy, at his

desk.

He didn't hear the quiet snickers.

But he filed that strange interrogation away.

Izzy

Izzy was ready to explode and regret ever leaving news for long-form and analysis. What could be difficult about covering the construction of a cutting-edge data center powered by renewable energy?

Everything.

She kept the structure in her head — from general to specific, dig up the background, identify the main thesis, break it into subpoints, outline arguments, and draw conclusions. What she lacked was academic, economic French — when all you have is conversational language, half-forgotten at that, it's not easy to snap back into it.

She didn't want to ask Thomas for help, but he could at least edit the text. He'd clicked his tongue, pointed out mistakes, and he'd softened it with a joke. Because he made those mistakes too. Because he'd once had to learn Québécois phrasing and quirks himself.

Beaulieu found issues as well — mostly structural — but praised her. Took the piece. As usual, he hinted that submitting so late wasn't ideal. Izzy exhaled, went downstairs for coffee — it would only work for an hour, that was enough to get home, and then shut down.

She still couldn't get used to working so long on a single text. In the news, everything was faster: take the story, write, file. Several times a day.

The coffee machine refused to work. Izzy, out of frustration, kicked it. Nothing happened. She let out a low growl at the ceiling, and trudged back upstairs.

“Izzy, so? Did they take the piece?”

She was so deep in her thoughts that she didn't hear Thomas call her.

Didn't even notice he was right there.

They jerked apart instantly, as if that touch would burn.

Izzy wanted to apologize, but the words got stuck somewhere in the air.

For a few seconds, she saw past his bright outer shell — caught a reflection of her own eyes.

Frightened. Broken.

Thomas stood across the corridor, watching her for a long moment. As if he had seen something too. Noticed the crack — huge, barely covered by a tarp of detachment.

Then it was like someone turned the lights back on. Defense snapped into place, every piece of armor reassembled. Hastily — but who would notice?

Thomas noticed.

And Izzy noticed.

The realization made her want to hide — and, at the same time, to test whether she was right.

But Izzy ran away.

leap / the soul's bottomless abyss

Thomas

Thomas kept replaying the moment Izzy flinched away from him by the coffee machine. As if from a strike.

He should've gone after her. Should've said something. Apologized. It would've been clumsy, sure, but better than standing there, pressed against the wall. He had the distinct sense he'd seen something he was never meant to see. Something not meant for him or anyone. Something Izzy had buried so deep, she probably didn't let herself remember it.

Except his own buried fear had surfaced too.

He hadn't even meant to get that close. It just... happened. Probably, still under the influence of that stupid talk with Antoine. But Izzy had been standing there, lost in thought by that broken coffee machine, and it hadn't even crossed his mind that he might scare her.

One step too many — and she was gone.

No explanation.

When Thomas returned to the newsroom, she wasn't there anymore. For a moment, he considered going after her, maybe catching up in the park, but decided it would only make things worse. Would it? What had happened between them — that abrupt recoil, the way they'd scattered in opposite directions — felt like something else entirely.

For the first time, Thomas had seen something in Izzy that felt familiar.

Sharp. Painfully so. And at the same time, loud, calling, demanding attention.

Sometimes you don't need to study a person closely to understand that something inside them is off.

At first, he thought about texting her. Then imagined her actually answering. Explaining. Opening something up — a problem, a wound, a piece of the past. And then he would have to respond in kind.

And he knew Izzy didn't need that.

Neither of them did.

It was easier this way — staying at a distance. From people. From each other.

He stared at their chat for a long time.

Then texted Lucy instead.

Tommy 19:19

I like Izzy

Lu 19:22

We established that already

Like *really*?

Tommy 19:24

Lu, I'm serious

“What happened?” Lucy called immediately, as always.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” Thomas checked the time and grimaced. It was well past midnight in Lyon.

“Talking to you,” she muttered. “Hold on.”

There was the rustle of sheets, hurried footsteps, and a quiet click of a door.

“Okay. I’m in the bathroom. Talk.”

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