



Where Silence *Becomes Home*

BOOK THREE

of The Six Languages of Love

DMITRY RUSOV / NEXXE

The Six Languages of Love (English Edition)

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Where Silence Becomes Home. Tom 3

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The phone rings on a Wednesday evening. I am flying in on Saturday, says Nonna — and Dmitry's sister arrives like a hurricane. She rearranges the kitchen, argues about the dress, crosses out half the flowers and has an opinion on everything. The wedding is coming. And then something far worse surfaces: someone has been quietly taking what belongs to Dmitry's music. Between a sister who cannot stop protecting, a bride who will not be decided for, and a secret that threatens everything they have built, Dmitry and Ksyusha must learn one more thing — how to let others close without giving up the right to their own life. The final book of the trilogy: a wedding, a betrayal, a song for a sister, and a home where silence is no longer loneliness, but peace.

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Дмитрий Русов

Where Silence Becomes Home. Tom 3

Prologue

The Call

The phone rang on Wednesday at half past eight in the evening. Dmitry started, and only then realised how long it had been since he had last had an ordinary “live” call.

Hardly anyone rang his number for a simple conversation any more, and at that hour it was usually the studio: someone had missed a deadline, mixed up a version of a file or suddenly remembered some “urgent” question that could easily have waited till morning. Everything else came as messages. His phone had long since become a working tool and had lost its old purpose of connecting people for heart-to-heart talks.

Before looking at the screen, Dmitry always hesitated for a second. The habit dated from the years when a late call could change a great deal.

The screen said “Nonna”.

He breathed out before he realised he had been holding his breath.

The phone went on vibrating in his palm. In the kitchen the extractor fan clicked; behind the wall the water stopped running. Nonna rarely rang. Instead she might send a photograph of the morning sky, ask whether he had eaten, or leave a forty-second voice message with a month’s news. If she did ring herself, it was only to present him with a decision already taken.

Dmitry swiped the screen with his thumb and answered.

“Hello.”

“I am flying in on Saturday.”

Not “hello”. Not “how are you”. His sister never wasted words on what ordinary people might call “simple politeness”.

“Saturday is rather sudden.”

“Sudden is when there is no warning. I am warning you.”

“Three days ahead.”

“That is enough.”

Dmitry could not help smiling. From the way Nonna’s voice softened it was clear that she had heard it.

“For long?”

“Until I have sorted it out.”

“Sorted what out?”

Nonna fell silent. She had an answer — Dmitry knew that pause far too well — but of course she was not going to give it. Not yet.

“See you,” she said instead of answering. “Love you.”

“Wait. Shall I meet you?”

“I know how to find my way around an airport and call a taxi. Even in another city.”

“I never doubted it.”

“Then do not offer what I do not need. Same address?”

“The same.”

“Good. And do not make up the sofa bed in advance. I am not made of china.”

“Nonna...”

“Everything on Saturday, Dima.”

The line went dead.

For a few more seconds Dmitry held the phone to his ear. Outside the window the evening city was lit up — street lamps, cars, signs and houses. Thousands of tower blocks glowing in the dark like trees decorated for New Year showed off the scale of the metropolis and the insignificance of each single human life.

But not to him.

The glass reflected the room: an open laptop, two mugs, Ksyusha's notebook with a pencil between the pages. Once an extra cup had meant only that some stranger had stayed on in the house. Now the second mug had become a sign of living together with someone dear and needed.

With Nonna it was different. She was family, but she remained only a temporary guest. In someone else's home she would at once check the locks, the fridge and everything that, in her opinion, might do harm to those close to her. She showed her care through orders, a displeased look at an empty shelf, or a suddenly bought ticket.

In all these years he had never learned to guess why Nonna was coming. She gave her explanations afterwards, when it was too late to argue with the reason.

Chapter One

A Hurricane on Saturday

In the next room Ksyusha was humming something, not noticing that the tune had long ago turned into his own — the one he had written for her many evenings before. He listened for a little before calling to her.

“Ksyusha.”

“Mm?”

“There is a hurricane coming to us on Saturday.”

Ksyusha appeared in the doorway, drying her hands on a towel. She was trying to tell from his face whether he was joking or warning her.

“What hurricane?”

“My sister.”

“You have never really told me about her.”

“Because you cannot really describe her. She has to be lived through.”

Ksyusha smiled but stayed in the doorway.

“Is she older than you?”

“No. She just behaves as if she were older than everyone.”

“Are you close?”

He looked at his phone; the dark screen gave him no answer.

“We can go months hardly talking. And then she rings and knows from the first word whether I am lying that everything is fine. I suppose that is what closeness is. Only ours comes without daily reports.”

“And why did you call her a hurricane?”

“Because after her everything seems to stay where it was, but somehow it all stands straighter. In her opinion, at least.”

From Ksyusha’s look he understood that this explanation was not enough. Dmitry was silent for a while.

“I shall tell you later. First I shall warn you about one thing.”

“What?”

“Whatever she says in the first five minutes — do not argue. Just listen.”

Ksyusha frowned, but she did not ask any more.

She went back to the kitchen, and Dmitry stood at the window for a while longer. Then he followed her after all. A sauce was finishing on the hob, chopped vegetables lay beside it, and Ksyusha, turning on the water again, asked over her shoulder:

“What does she like for breakfast?”

“Strong tea. And nobody fussing round her.”

“After your warning that sounds suspiciously simple.”

“She will do everything else herself.”

Ksyusha handed him the towel.

“Then on Friday we shall buy tea. And you will make up the sofa bed after all.”

“She told me not to.”

“Then we shall make it up and fold it away again, to check that the mechanism works.”

Dmitry looked at her gratefully. She had heard both warmth and wariness in his voice, but she did not ask. Instead she concentrated on the tasks in hand: the sofa and the tea.

Over supper they came back to Saturday several more times. Ksyusha wanted to know whether she should clear a wardrobe, whether they needed to change their working schedule, whether their usual household rhythm would get in Nonna’s way. Dmitry answered honestly: he did not know. His

sister might come for two days and stay for two weeks; she might bring one shirt and three tins of her own tea; she might say nothing the whole first evening and then rearrange half the kitchen in the morning.

“Only she will not touch the lamp,” he said.

“Why are you so sure?”

“Because she knows it is not a thing you move for convenience.”

Ksyusha nodded. That was enough for her.

On the metal tray by the wall the old brass lamp was burning. Since the autumn chamber performance they had taken it out of the cupboard more often on their evenings together. Ksyusha had checked and topped up the oil before she struck the match. Now all five wicks burned evenly, and there was no reason to touch the bowl.

The lamp was not lit for guests. It belonged to the home: the five flames recalled the five forms of love, and Silence needed no flame of its own.

Outside it was getting dark quickly, the way it does in autumn. Somewhere in another city Nonna was probably already packing her case. Whether her things would fit and the zip would close did not usually trouble her.

On Thursday Nonna sent one message: the flight number. On Friday, a photograph of a case lying open on a bed, with the caption: “Plenty of room.” In the picture the things rose so far above the edges that closing the zip without outside help looked impossible.

Dmitry showed the photograph to Ksyusha.

“Is she joking?”

“No. For her that really is plenty of room.”

They went for the tea after work. Dmitry insisted that any strong black tea would do, but at the shelf he stopped and began reading the small print on the boxes.

“Any?” Ksyusha asked.

“Except flavoured.”

“So not any, then.”

“And not in bags.”

“Go on. I am writing down the terms of hospitality.”

He picked up one packet, sniffed it through the cardboard and put it back. The second seemed too finely cut. The third Nonna had once called “dyed water”, although Dmitry could not remember in what circumstances, or why he had tried to give her that kind in the first place.

“Why not ask her?” Ksyusha suggested.

“Then she will bring her own.”

“And what is wrong with that?”

“I want at least to choose the tea myself.”

Ksyusha looked at him more closely. The tea was only a pretext. Three days before his sister arrived, Dmitry was standing in front of a shop shelf trying at least to choose the right tea for her. He hoped the meeting would begin more calmly that way.

She did not say this aloud. She took a tin of large-leaf tea down from the top shelf and handed it to Dmitry.

“This one?”

He read the label, turned the tin round and put it in the basket.

“This one she will at least be able to criticise properly.”

At the till Ksyusha added some biscuits. Dmitry wanted to warn her that Nonna hardly ate sweet things, but he remembered how his sister had once demolished half a box she had been given in a single evening, all the while maintaining exactly the opposite.

“Take two,” he said.

“Now I am beginning to be frightened.”

Outside it was drizzling. Dmitry tucked the tin of tea under his jacket, although the bag would not have got wet in the five minutes to the car. Ksyusha noticed how carefully he was carrying the purchase, but again she asked nothing.

On Friday evening they tested the sofa bed, cleared one shelf and laid a clean towel over the back of a chair. Dmitry moved the cups around twice, although usually he never noticed how they stood. Ksyusha made no comment. Only once she came up behind him, put her arms round his waist and pressed her cheek between his shoulder blades.

“Are you glad she is coming?”

He covered her hands with his.

“Yes.”

“And anxious?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Then I have not got anything wrong.”

He turned round to her.

“If there gets to be too much sister, tell me. Not her — me.”

“And will you tell her?”

“I shall. She may even hear it the first time.”

“Are you trying to calm me down again?”

“No. I am warning you honestly.”

Ksyusha laughed. Dmitry finally let his shoulders drop.

That night Dmitry did open the wardrobe in the room with the sofa and checked the shelf they had cleared. On it remained an old blanket, a box of cables and a few music notebooks that he had long meant to move to the study. He packed the cables more tightly into the box, took the notebooks and found between them a sheet with the early lyrics of a song. In the margin, in Nonna’s handwriting, was written: “Do not lie here.”

He remembered that evening: a cheap microphone, the kitchen in his old flat, a first draft. Nonna had not let him hide a weak line behind a pretty melody. She had listened to his songs long before there were catalogues, releases and conversations about sound. And she remembered every attempt Dmitry had made to seem more confident than he was.

Ksyusha found him in the doorway of the room.

“Changed your mind about not making up the sofa?”

“I am clearing the old notebooks and cables out of here.”

She saw the sheet in his hand but did not ask to see it.

“You can keep the notebook in the study,” Ksyusha said. “It is yours anyway.”

Dmitry put the notebook on top of the box rather than hiding it at the bottom. In the morning he would take it to the study together with the cables. The shelf was clear, and the sheet stayed within reach.

On Saturday morning he woke a few minutes before the alarm. Ksyusha was already in the kitchen cutting bread, trying not to make a noise. On the table stood a third cup — still empty.

“She has not even taken off yet,” Dmitry said.

“But the cup is already in place.”

He checked the flight message. Departure with no delay. He wanted to write to Nonna asking her to ring after landing, but remembered that she had sent the flight number herself and would certainly let him know if anything changed.

“Are you waiting for bad news again?” Ksyusha asked.

“More trying to live through all the possibilities in advance.”

“Does it work?”

“Never once.”

She pushed the bread towards him. Dmitry sat down and for the first time in three days did not move the cups. The third stood opposite — empty, ready for the arrival of one more person close to them.

Before going out they checked the room together. The sofa bed unfolded, the window shut, the clean towel lay on the chair. Ksyusha left the shelf empty. Dmitry wanted to put a spare blanket on it, but stopped.

“An empty shelf looks unwelcoming,” he said.

“It looks free. Nonna will decide for herself what to put there.”

Dmitry put the blanket back. Nonna really would decide for herself what she needed.

When Nonna’s taxi left the airport, Ksyusha put out the lamp. She waited until the wicks stopped smouldering and the brass had cooled, then put the bowl away in the closed cupboard. Nonna knew what it meant. There was no point in making a show of the meeting.

Nobody had rung the bell yet, but Dmitry was already standing in the hall.

“You could sit down,” Ksyusha said.

“I could.”

“But you will not?”

“No.”

The wheels of a suitcase rattled outside the door. Dmitry breathed out and looked at Ksyusha. She came over and stood beside him.

Dmitry put his phone face down on the table.

There was perhaps a second left before the bell.

Nonna was on the other side of the door.

Chapter Two

Nonna

She rang and came in almost before Dmitry had opened the door.

The taxi had not yet pulled away, and a suitcase was already standing in the hall — a small one, packed so tightly that the zip was holding on by a thread. Behind it stood a woman barely taller than Ksyusha's shoulder, in a coat too warm for such weather. She looked as though she already knew how the visit would end.

The flat was small and all on one level: from the hall a single corridor led to the kitchen, the room with the sofa bed and the study. Nonna had managed to set her case across this one route, as if showing the home whose rules it would now have to run by.

"Dima," she said instead of a greeting, "you have lost weight."

"I am the same as last time."

"Then last time I was right as well, I just did not say so."

She hugged him quickly and hard, at once stepped back a pace and looked at Ksyusha.

Nonna looked closely, without smiling. That is how you study a person you have heard a great deal about and have finally met.

"Ksyusha," she said.

"How do you do," Ksyusha answered.

"Nonna."

The handshake was firmer than Ksyusha had expected.

Nonna held her hand for a second, took in her face and her hastily gathered hair, and let go.

"You are different from your photographs," she said.

Ksyusha was on her guard.

"Worse?"

"Calmer. Photographs lie about living people in any case, and Dima only chooses the ones where he feels good. That is why it looks as if it were your permanent state."

"And what is it now?"

"Now you are deciding whether I may be let in."

"You are already in."

The corner of Nonna's mouth twitched.

"Then the first question is settled."

Dmitry picked up the case.

"Come through. We shall sort out your things later; first let us have some tea."

"No. Not that first."

"What, then?"

Nonna looked from one to the other and back again. She took off her coat, quickly and briskly, and hung it on the hook as though it had always been hers.

"First I want to say what I actually came for."

Ksyusha looked at Dmitry. He raised an eyebrow with the weary readiness of a man who recognises the opening of a familiar play.

"We are listening," he said.

Nonna folded her arms.

"You are right for each other."

A pause.

"Thank you," Ksyusha said cautiously.

"That is not a compliment. It is a fact."

"Nonna," Dmitry said.

“What?”

“We met in the hall five minutes ago.”

“The drive from the airport was enough for me to understand from the photographs what some people cannot work out in a year.”

She went through to the kitchen, switched on the kettle — again without asking where anything was, although she was clearly here for the first time — and went on talking without turning round:

“You need to make it official.”

The kettle Nonna had just switched on had not yet begun to hiss. For a few seconds the kitchen was quiet enough to hear the badly placed suitcase in the hall slowly keeling over on to its side. Then it bumped softly against the wall.

“Make what official?” Ksyusha asked.

“Your union. Your marriage. Call it what you like out loud — swapping the terms round does not change the sum.”

Ksyusha gave Dmitry a meaningful look. He met it and spread his hands very slightly: the hurricane had arrived, the warning had been honest.

“We have not discussed it,” Ksyusha said.

“Then it is high time you started.”

“Nonna, we have our own view on this. We live at our own pace,” Dmitry said.

“You have excuses. A pace is when people move. You are just standing in one place for a long time and calling it a pace.”

“That is not quite...”

“Dima.”

He fell silent.

Ksyusha noted with interest that it had taken Nonna exactly one word.

The kettle boiled. Nonna found the cups at the first attempt. In two she put ordinary tea; for herself she brewed it separately — stronger, from a tin she had already managed to put out on the table.

“I am not asking you to marry in church today,” she said, sitting down. “I am simply saying what I see.”

“And if we are not ready?” Ksyusha asked.

Nonna looked at her the way you look at a pupil who, as expected, admits to having left the homework at home.

“Readiness is a word invented for putting things off. I am not arguing with you, Ksyusha. I simply do not intend to pretend I cannot see the obvious.”

“Is that not the same thing?”

“No.”

She sipped her tea.

“An argument aims to change the other person’s mind. I do not want to change your mind. I do not need it — you need to get married. And my aim is to get that across to you. As you see, the meanings are quite different.”

Dmitry made a strange gurgling sound, something between a sigh and a laugh.

“You see,” he said quietly to Ksyusha. “I told you.”

“That is not what you told me. You said: ‘She is a bit pushy.’”

“I did not want to frighten you in advance.”

“You prepared me about one-tenth of the way.”

Nonna heard them and had no intention of pretending to be deaf. Unfortunately.

“I am not pushy,” she snapped. “I simply see further than the two of you are ready to admit.”

“Everyone has their own speed of readiness,” Ksyusha said.

Ksyusha spoke calmly, but she put her cup down on the table with more of a clatter than she had meant.

Nonna nodded slowly.

"I agree."

Ksyusha had time to breathe out.

"But at your speed you will only decide by March which month to choose," Nonna went on. "I am simply suggesting a shortcut."

"That is not a suggestion. That is a timetable already," Ksyusha objected, rolling her eyes slightly.

"A timetable is when there are dates. So far I have only a direction."

"And a one-way ticket?" Dmitry put in.

"There is a return one too. I can just change it."

"Naturally." Dmitry nodded at the thoroughly predictable answer.

Nonna took her glasses out of her bag, put them on and looked at the two of them over the thin frames, like a strict teacher telling off two troublemakers.

"I understand that you are grown-ups. That is exactly why I am not going to act out a scene in which I do not care what you do with your life. If you do not want to marry, do not. But then at least once tell each other honestly why."

This time there was no pressure in Nonna's voice. She fell silent and left the right to answer to them.

"And if the reason is that we are fine as we are?" Ksyusha asked.

"Then that is a reason to change nothing. But it is not an answer to the question of whether you want to call each other family outside your own home as well."

Dmitry ran his palm along the edge of the table. They had thought about a wedding for a long time, but each time they had put off talking about it directly. The subject came up over other people's wedding photographs, in a casual "if one day", in Ksyusha's glance at rings in a shop window, which she thought went unnoticed. Every time something more urgent, more important turned up. And above all, between the two of them everything that was happening seemed clear without words.

Dmitry drank his tea in silence and watched them. Ksyusha already knew that expression: with his sister he saved his strength and waited for the moment when his words might have some effect at all.

Later, when Nonna had gone to unpack her case in the room with the sofa ("it will not unpack itself, and I am not going to sleep in my coat"), Ksyusha stayed in the kitchen with Dmitry.

From the room came the rasp of a zip, then the thud of a falling tin.

"It is not broken!" Nonna called before anyone could ask.

Ksyusha looked at the closed door and only then turned to Dmitry.

"Is she always like this?"

"Give or take."

"You were not surprised by a single word."

"Did you want me to be surprised?"

"I wanted you to be at least a little on my side."

Dmitry looked at her seriously.

"I am on your side. But if I start arguing with Nonna now, by the evening we shall have no strength left for our own conversation."

"And which conversation matters?"

"The one we shall have this evening. Without her in the room."

Ksyusha softened a little, but not completely. The crease between her brows did not go away.

"She ignores everything I say."

“She listened to you. It is just that she has a peculiarity: what she hears does not change her aims. Call it selective hearing.”

“That does not sound like a compliment to her.”

“It is not a compliment. It is an exact description.”

He was silent for a moment.

“She does not mean any harm, Ksyusha. She just cannot do it any other way. If she could — perhaps I would not be here now.”

Ksyusha did not ask him to explain. She knew whom Dmitry had tried to ring that day, and she knew that Nonna had appeared later — when the worst had already happened. Appeared and stayed: without promises, without bargaining, with that very stubbornness which had now taken the form of an order about a wedding.

Ksyusha did not answer at once. Behind the wall Nonna was noisily moving things about, already taking over a strange room.

“All right,” Ksyusha said at last. “Today I shall just watch.”

“Sensible.”

“I did not say I agree with her.”

“I did not say you had to.”

From the next room came Nonna’s voice, with words that expected no reply:

“By the way, I have already looked at which venues are free in June. Just for future reference.”

In the evening Nonna made supper out of what she found in the fridge, and complained for another half hour: “The only proper things here are eggs and butter.” Ksyusha tried to help, but twice ended up at the wrong drawer and once on the wrong side of the hob. In the end she was trusted with the bread and with answering questions.

“Do you eat in the mornings?” Nonna asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Wrong answer. And Dima?”

“If he is reminded.”

“That I know.”

“How do you know, if you do not live together?”

“Some failings do not change with age.”

Dmitry came in just on the last sentence.

“I can hear everything.”

“Then tomorrow you will make breakfast yourself.”

“Have you come to visit or to carry out an inspection?”

“I have not decided yet.”

At the table Nonna talked about the journey, about the woman in the next seat who had been afraid of turbulence the whole flight, and about the taxi driver who had tried three times to take the wrong turning. She did not come back to the wedding. That surprised Ksyusha more than if she had opened next year’s calendar again and begun explaining in what order to carry out the wedding preparations. In spite of the impression she had made earlier and her unshakeable view of their future, Ksyusha was able to see other traits in her too. Nonna turned out to be quick to laugh, attentive to detail and able to tell a story so that Dmitry several times laughed quite a different laugh — short, young, unfamiliar to Ksyusha.

Ksyusha watched the brother and sister. They turned their heads the same way, interrupted each other mid-word, and both knew at which point in a story the other would lie to show off. Near Nonna, Dmitry seemed to grow younger. Or perhaps... freer? Now Ksyusha saw in him a complete stranger, a young man whose life she could know only from stories.

After supper Nonna washed up herself. Ksyusha dried the plates, and for a few minutes they shared a calm silence.

"I do not want to decide for you," Nonna said suddenly, looking into the sink.

"But it seems you cannot help it."

"I know. It is always like that with me... First I do things, then I explain why."

"Could it be the other way round?"

Nonna thought.

"I could try."

Nonna did not apologise, but at least she agreed to try talking before she started acting.

Ksyusha breathed out and went back to the plate. At the table Dmitry smiled into his cup.

"Here we go," he said.

"Did you know it would be like this?"

"I knew there would be some version of this. I cannot predict the form. It never repeats itself."

Outside it was getting dark. In the room with the sofa the suitcase zip creaked again, then Nonna demanded to be told where the spare hangers were. In a few hours she had managed to take up exactly as much space in the flat as she needed, and a little more — just in case.

Ksyusha took her a clean towel. The case lay open on the floor: clothes, two packets of tea, chargers, a book with dog-eared corners and a small cloth bag of unknown purpose. There were a great many things, but inside there reigned an order that only their owner understood.

"Is the shelf free?" Nonna asked.

"It is at your disposal."

"Drop the 'at your disposal'. If we are going to live in one flat, that sort of politeness will not last long."

Ksyusha put the towel down on the edge of the sofa.

"The shelf is yours."

Nonna held her gaze for a moment, listening to the tone.

"Good."

She moved two piles into the wardrobe and stopped at the next shelf, where the box of cables stood.

"Can this be moved?"

"Better ask Dima."

"So not without asking."

Nonna closed the wardrobe door and did not touch the box.

"Do you really not know how long you have come for?" Ksyusha asked.

"The return ticket is in ten days. But a ticket is not a sentence."

"And what is supposed to happen in those ten days?"

Nonna sat on the suitcase to press down a bulging pocket.

"I want to see how you live when you are not trying to show that everything is fine."

"We are not trying."

"Then we shall check."

Ksyusha was already getting ready to object, but Nonna raised her palm first.

"Badly put. Not 'check'. I shall look. And I shall try to keep my conclusions to myself at least until tomorrow."

"A great sacrifice."

"You have no idea."

They both smiled. Ksyusha went out and pulled the door to behind her.

Late in the evening, when Nonna had at last shut the door of her room, Dmitry and Ksyusha went back to the kitchen on their own.

"Let us forget for a minute everything she said," Dmitry suggested. "If she had not come, would you yourself want to be my wife?"

Ksyusha was silent for a long time. She needed to hear her own answer apart from Nonna's pressure.

"I would," she said. "But I do not want it to look as if Nonna married us off."

"She can choose a venue, argue about flowers and announce deadlines. The one choice she cannot make for us is each other."

"And you?"

"I want to marry you. Nonna has only made us stop walking round this conversation. For too long we thought that the main thing was already there and it was not necessary to name it."

Ksyusha took his hand.

"June, then?"

"June. If it is our choice."

"Ours."

They did not wake Nonna. Dmitry took the lamp out of the cupboard, checked the oil and lit the five wicks. Ksyusha sat down beside him, resting her palm on the table. For a few minutes they were silent, getting used to the decision they had just made.

"We can change our minds about June," Dmitry said. "About the format, the guests, the venue. About everything except that we are the ones making the decision."

"Yes."

"And if Nonna starts pushing, I shall stop her."

Ksyusha looked at him.

"Not argue, but stop?"

"There is a difference."

"Now I understand."

They went over the main thing once more: for now June meant a direction; the venue, the format and the day they would choose together. Ksyusha said it again herself and only then relaxed. Nonna opened her door, put her head out and asked whether she might at least write down the month. Dmitry allowed it — in pencil only.

Before bed Dmitry put out the wicks, and they put the lamp away in the closed cupboard. In the room with the sofa the bed creaked, and Nonna's muffled voice was heard:

"I am not asleep. And June is a good choice."

Ksyusha covered her face with her hand. Dmitry laughed soundlessly.

On the kitchen calendar the word "June" appeared in pencil.

Chapter Three

A Kitchen for Three

On the table lay three notebooks, two phones and one list that no one could properly read any more, because three hands had written over it.

"The hall on the embankment is out," Nonna said without raising her head. "Too open. The wind will spoil the sound."

"What about an awning?" Ksyusha's mother suggested.

"With an awning it is no longer a hall on the embankment, it is a marquee on a building site."

Ksyusha wanted to put in that she actually liked that hall, but she did not get the chance — her mother was already nodding in agreement, as if the idea had been her own from the start.

"Then the veranda at the restaurant," her mother said. "I asked; in June there is a covered terrace."

"That terrace is what I told you about yesterday."

"You told me about the hall."

"I told you about the hall's terrace."

Ksyusha looked at them both.

"Could you at least sometimes make clear who said what?"

Both of them looked at her in unison with the same bewilderment. They were moving down the list so quickly that Ksyusha could barely bring the conversation back to her own wishes.

"We do make it clear," Nonna said. "Between ourselves."

"And where am I in that?"

"Ksyusha," her mother said gently, "you are the bride. You choose the dress, the guests, the food. The rest is not your worry."

"It is my wedding, actually."

"That is exactly why," Nonna answered imperturbably, "you should not waste your nerves on terraces and awnings."

Ksyusha opened her mouth to object and turned to her mother for support.

"Mum, tell her..."

"Ksyushenka," her mother covered her hand with her own, "Nonna is right. Let us deal with this. You and Dima have enough to worry about without it."

Ksyusha looked at Nonna, waiting for at least some hint of disagreement with her mother. None came.

"Mum, do you really think so, or are you just agreeing with her?"

"I really do think so. That does not stop me agreeing with Nonna."

"Did you arrange this in advance?"

"No," they both answered at once, and it came out so perfectly in unison that they surprised even themselves.

Before Nonna arrived, Ksyusha had been sure she knew her mother's way of making decisions. First a cautious question, then "I do not mind", and ten minutes later everyone was somehow discussing the option she had chosen the day before. Nonna began with a ready answer and only then found out who agreed. Now one came straight at her and the other from the side, and as a result Ksyusha came to her senses only when half the list she had drawn up had already been crossed out.

"Stop. Let us take a step back," she said. "There will be no final decision about the venue until Dima and I have seen it."

Her mother was the first to put down her pen.

"Of course, Ksyushenka."

Nonna kept her finger on the line with the address for a second longer, then took her hand away too.

“Go and see it. I have only booked a viewing, not the venue.”

“When?”

“On Tuesday.”

“On Tuesday I have a recording.”

“Then Wednesday.”

“Have you already moved it?”

“Not yet. But I have the number.”

Irritation rose in her throat again. Ksyusha laid her palms on the table and spoke while she could still speak calmly.

“Nonna, I do not want to choose from what you have left me. I want to be able to choose before you have managed to cross out half of it.”

Her mother looked at her more closely. Nonna did not look away.

“All right,” she said at last. “We put back what we crossed out. Except the ones who do not answer the phone.”

“Why except them?”

“Because if they do not answer before you pay, it will not get any better after.”

Ksyusha wanted to object, but stopped. There was logic in it.

“Fine. Those stay crossed out.”

Nonna silently pushed the list towards her and took her hand away.

Ksyusha leaned back in her chair.

“I feel superfluous at my own wedding.”

“Not superfluous,” Nonna at last looked up from her notebook. “Just freed. There is a difference.”

“Freed from what?”

“From what you have absolutely no need to do.”

“And if I want to do it?”

Nonna shrugged and turned the second sheet round to face her.

“If you want to, do it. Here is a list of florists; I have not looked at it yet. Take it on.”

Ksyusha looked at the list. Twelve items, half of them already crossed out in someone else’s hand.

“Half of them are crossed out already.”

“Bad options,” her mother explained briefly. “We weeded them out straight away.”

“You said I could take it on.”

“You can. From the remaining six.”

Ksyusha snorted. The anger was still there, but what was going on was beginning to amuse her. At that moment the front door banged.

Dmitry came in, pulled off his shoes and felt the familiar atmosphere from the hall: the women in the kitchen were deciding something again.

He brought cold air in with him and the smell of wet leaves. A fine rain had begun outside, and a few drops had left dark marks on his shoulders. Ksyusha noticed that he was tired: his movements were slower than in the morning, but his eyes still went first to her, checking her mood, and only then to the papers spread out on the table.

“Hello,” he said, as if to the air. “How is it going?”

“It is going well,” Nonna answered without turning round.

He went into the kitchen, put the kettle on and looked over the shoulder of Ksyusha’s mother at the list.

“Why are the florists crossed out? Those ones had quite good work, I looked...”

“Dima,” Nonna did not let him finish, “keep out of it.”

“I only asked.”

“This is not a man’s business.”

“I am going to be at this wedding too, you know.”

“You will be present at the wedding itself. For now, do not get in the way.”

Dmitry glanced at Ksyusha, clearly counting on her support.

“Dima, do not interfere,” she said, trying not to smile with glee and not quite managing it. “Really, let them.”

He looked from Nonna to Ksyusha’s mother, then to his own bride, who five minutes earlier had been arguing with both of them.

“So,” he said slowly, “there are three of you now.”

No one answered — all three women were bent over the list again.

Dmitry took the boiled kettle, poured himself some tea to drink in solitude and, laying claim to nothing more, turned away.

“You know,” he said to nobody in particular, heading for the study door, “I always thought that even one was almost impossible to cope with.”

He stopped in the doorway and, after a dramatic pause, finished:

“I had no idea it could get worse.”

And, smiling at something of his own, he went off to work, leaving three women arguing about terraces and marquees again.

Ten minutes later Ksyusha closed her notebook.

“That is it. Enough for today.”

Nonna looked at her watch.

“We have only just started.”

“That is exactly why we must stop, while we are still talking and not ordering each other about.”

Her mother was the first to get up from the table. She gathered the empty cups and, passing her daughter, touched her shoulder lightly.

“You are right. I got carried away.”

Ksyusha expected Nonna to carry on the argument, but she neatly closed her notebook and laid her pen on top.

“Till tomorrow?”

“It does not have to be every day.”

“The day after tomorrow?”

“We shall see.”

“That is progress already,” her mother remarked, and they both laughed.

When the door had closed behind her mother, Nonna came back to the kitchen to clear away the papers. She sorted them by subject: venue, flowers, food, guests. Ksyusha stood beside her, neither helping nor leaving.

“Are you angry?” Nonna asked.

“Yes. A little.”

“With me or with Mum?”

“With both of you. And with myself, because first I let you decide everything and then took offence.”

Nonna straightened the edges of the pile.

“You did not let us. We took it. Those are different things.”

Ksyusha had not expected such precision and so did not answer at once.

“Then give it back.”

“We shall. But the help is not cancelled.”

“I am not asking for it to be cancelled.”

The rule was written on the top margin of the list: Nonna and Ksyusha's mother gather information, ring round, check prices and dates, but book nothing without Dmitry and Ksyusha. First their wishes, then the options. Nonna called this bureaucracy, but she did not cross the note out.

Almost at once her phone rang. Nonna glanced at the number and mouthed: "Florists."

"Will you take it?" Ksyusha asked.

"Under the new rules I first need written clearance."

"Take it. Only do not confirm anything."

Nonna put it on speaker. The woman at the other end named a free date and a minimum sum and offered to put a provisional booking in place until the evening. Nonna had already opened her mouth — Ksyusha saw the familiar expression with which she was about to answer for everyone — but Dmitry's sister stopped herself.

"Thank you. We shall note the terms and ring back once the couple has decided."

She ended the call and put the phone on the table.

"Did you see?"

"I saw."

"It was physically painful."

"But you survived."

"I am not sure yet."

Ksyusha wrote the price in the "checking" column. Nonna did not reach for the pen, although it lay right by her elbow. Ksyusha noticed the effort, but said nothing.

Dmitry came out of the study when the kitchen was already empty. He was holding his headphones, which he had evidently taken off only at the door.

"Everyone alive?"

"So far, yes," Ksyusha said.

Nonna walked past him with a pile of papers.

"Do not overrate your importance. We managed without you."

"So I noticed."

When the door of the room with the sofa had closed, he sat down opposite Ksyusha.

"What really happened?"

She told him about the florists, the terrace and the new rule. Dmitry heard her out without interrupting once.

"A good rule," he said. "Let us add another: if I go off to the study, it does not mean I do not care."

"Then what does it mean?"

"That I decided you would manage on your own. But I should have asked first whether you needed me in that conversation."

Ksyusha nodded.

"Today I managed."

"I heard."

"You were eavesdropping?"

"In this flat it is impossible not to overhear Nonna."

He held out his hand across the table. Ksyusha put her palm in it. Beside them lay a sheet dented by a pen, and under the first rule there were two heavy lines.

The next day Nonna really did not open her notebook until supper.

But after supper she laid a blank sheet in front of Ksyusha.

"Your conditions for the venue," she said. "Not options. Conditions first."

Ksyusha looked at Dmitry. He was sitting by the window with his laptop, but he had already raised his head.

"Our conditions," she corrected. "Dima, come here."

They began not with the price and not with the address. Ksyusha needed natural light and a place where the guests would not be split into little groups. Dmitry needed decent acoustics, a way of setting up equipment without cables across the aisle, and no separate stage that would turn a family evening into a concert. Neither of them wanted a huge hall that would have to be filled with people for the sake of scale.

Nonna wrote without interrupting. Once she raised her pen, about to object about the stage, but Ksyusha said:

“Hear us out first.”

The pen went back to the paper.

Her mother joined them by video call. Her first question was where to put the flowers. Ksyusha answered that until the venue was chosen, the flowers did not exist. Her mother laughed and agreed.

Half an hour later there were seven requirements left on the sheet. Nonna crossed out three addresses, but this time she explained each one: one venue did not allow outside sound equipment, the second was too big, the third had no free dates in June. Ksyusha rang two of the places herself to confirm. The answers matched.

“Now they can be crossed out,” she said.

“That is why I crossed them out yesterday.”

“But yesterday it was your decision. Today it is ours.”

Nonna looked at her, then wrote beside each address the date of the call.

“Understood.”

Dmitry closed his laptop.

“Let us write down the budget as well.”

“I thought you wanted to look first,” her mother said from the screen.

“We should look at what suits us in price and conditions. Otherwise we shall waste time on an option we would never choose anyway.”

Together they named the sum they considered reasonable. Nonna tried to add a margin out of her own money; Dmitry refused at once.

“You can offer help,” he said. “But we do not want to increase the budget at your expense.”

“I am not buying myself a say.”

“I know. That is why I am saying it straight before we quarrel.”

His sister put the calculator away. Ksyusha’s mother did not insist either.

After the call her mother sent a spreadsheet of expenses she had drawn up overnight. Besides the venue and the flowers it already included an arch, matching chair covers and presents for the guests — things Dmitry and Ksyusha had not even discussed. For a few seconds Ksyusha looked at the screen, choosing between the habitual “fine” and the equally habitual “we do not need anything”. Then she rang her mother herself.

“Mum, the spreadsheet is good. Keep the transport and the food. Put the rest on a separate sheet for now.”

“Take it out altogether?”

“Do not throw it away. Just do not count it as decided.”

Her mother was silent for a moment, then asked what colour to mark the suggested but unapproved lines. Ksyusha chose grey. A minute later the spreadsheet came back with the new marking.

Nonna watched Ksyusha change the markings and did not correct her. Then she did say:

“You do not need an arch.”

“Possibly. But we are the ones who will say so.”

“I am learning.”

“Quickly?”

“I do not promise.”

By the evening a clean sheet with three columns had appeared on the fridge: “want”, “checking”, “not having”. Dmitry added a fourth — “do not know”. Nonna called it pointless, and five minutes later moved two addresses into it.

By the end of the evening four hands were mixed on the sheet: Ksyusha’s conditions, Dima’s technical notes, her mother’s questions and the dates of Nonna’s calls.

“So now there really are three of us?” Dmitry asked.

“Four,” her mother answered from the screen.

“I meant in the flat.”

“Then three. But do not get used to it, Dimochka — I shall be coming soon too.”

He covered his face with his hand. Ksyusha and Nonna laughed at the same moment.

Chapter Four

The Studio

Nonna had invited herself to the studio that morning — she wanted to “see how it is all done”. Now she had been sitting for the third hour in a corner of the control room on a hard chair that everyone else had long since left to chance visitors.

The professional studio was at the other end of the city, in a building with no sign, where the ground floor smelled of paint and damp concrete. On the way Nonna had asked twice why they could not record somewhere nearer, and both times Dmitry gave the same answer: the room here was right, and so were the equipment and the man who knew his requirements. The study at home was fine for drafts, arrangements and late work in headphones. The final recordings they made here.

Before going in, Nonna carefully read the signs on the doors, memorised where the fire exit was and only then took off her coat. Dmitry noticed but said nothing. His sister always studied a space first and only then allowed herself to relax in it.

She had been holding a cup of cold tea for nearly three hours without touching it.

“Once more from the bridge,” Dmitry said, without looking up from the monitor.

Ksyusha nodded, settled her headphones more comfortably and began singing again — the same passage, for the eighth or ninth time that morning, differing from the last by a fraction of a tone that no one but the three people in the room could catch.

The sound engineer recorded in silence, watching the screen where the track was running.

Between takes Ksyusha came out of the booth, listened to the notes, asked about breathing and the ends of phrases, then went back to the microphone. The eighth take no longer frightened her. The sound engineer was responsible for the recording, Dmitry heard the piece as a whole, and the final decision about the voice remained hers.

Nonna watched how Dmitry changed while he worked. At home he could sit motionless for hours, listening to one fragment in headphones. Here his whole body took part in the sound: his fingers counted beats on his knee, his shoulder rose almost imperceptibly before the right entry, his gaze grew sharp and focused. He did not order Ksyusha about. He asked her to try things, explained what he heard, and accepted her refusal if a suggested movement broke the meaning of a line.

“It does not need to be louder here,” he said after yet another take. “Imagine you have already decided everything but have not yet said it aloud.”

Ksyusha slipped one side of her headphones off.

“Then a longer pause before the word.”

“Try it.”

She tried. This time the sound engineer raised his thumb himself, without waiting to be asked.

Ksyusha came out of the booth and held out the spare headphones to Nonna.

“Do you want to hear the difference?”

“I heard it already.”

“Not that one. Between the seventh take and the last.”

Nonna put the headphones on with the mistrust of someone being offered a hearing test. Dmitry played the fragments one after the other. In the first Ksyusha took the note evenly and beautifully; in the second there was a short pause before the word, and the next phrase sounded more certain.

“Again,” Nonna asked.

Dmitry played them again.

“In the second she is tired,” his sister said.

“Technically, yes,” he answered. “But the tiredness took away some unnecessary caution.”

“So you sang eight times in order to get tired in the right way by accident?”

Ksyusha laughed.

“That is more or less what the profession looks like.”

Nonna handed back the headphones. Until then it had seemed to her that studio work consisted mainly of waiting: the same line, the same screen, the same notes. Now she understood why Dmitry did not settle for the first good take. The difference was tiny, but after the comparison the first version already seemed like someone else's.

“And if I like the seventh?” she asked.

“Then you like the seventh,” Ksyusha said.

“And you will not keep it?”

“I shall listen to both again. But I shall not choose by a vote.”

Nonna looked at Dmitry. He did not intervene or try to win his sister over to the last take. He only noted the track numbers.

“Impractical,” Nonna concluded.

“But honest,” Ksyusha said, and went back into the booth.

After that Nonna began to watch the whole room. Here everyone answered for their own part of the work, and the final decision about the performance was Ksyusha's.

Now Nonna was watching neither Ksyusha nor Dmitry. Already in the first hour the sound engineer's manner had put her on her guard. Nonna was watching not so much his words as the gestures of a man sure that no one was looking at him.

Something did not add up in his movements.

At first Nonna decided she simply did not like his habit of answering before Dmitry had finished a question. Then she noticed something else: he was too attentive to which files were open, and not attentive enough to the music itself when the conversation did not concern what he was doing. When the name of a new folder appeared on the screen, his eyes lingered. When Dmitry asked him to go back a few bars, he did it precisely, but a second later he was checking his phone again.

Nonna did not build an accusation out of gestures. She knew the cost of a suspicion that too quickly becomes certainty. So she only memorised: times, exits, a screen turned over, a brief tension in a face.

Between takes, while Dmitry and Ksyusha were bent together over some detail, he quickly checked the phone by the keyboard. It lay face down. After each glance he turned it over again, as though he had never picked it up.

“Coffee, anyone?” he asked during one of the breaks, getting up. “I shall be quick.”

“Go on,” Dmitry answered without raising his head.

He went out. During the eleven minutes he was gone, Dmitry and Ksyusha listened to one passage twice, and the coffee machine in the corridor came on only at the very end. Nonna looked at her watch when the door opened again.

He came back with two cups. Neither was his.

“None for you?” Ksyusha asked.

“I do not want any,” he said, sitting back down at the desk with the same calm, practised smile with which he always sat down.

Dmitry took his cup, had a sip and winced.

“No sugar?”

“You take it without sugar.”

“I do. Ksyusha does not.”

The sound engineer looked at the second cup as though seeing the marking on the lid for the first time.

“Mixed them up, then.”

Ksyusha shrugged and took Dmitry's coffee. They swapped cups in silence. Nonna made a note of the mistake: after several months of working together such small things are usually learned.

Nonna sipped her long-cold tea.

Towards lunchtime he went out again — “to make a call, a personal one”. When he came back he stood in the doorway for a few seconds before sitting down at the desk. Before speaking he gave a strained smile.

Ksyusha noticed nothing. Nor did Dmitry — he was busy with the panning of the vocal, that same fraction of a tone for which they had been listening to the bridge for the twelfth time.

Nonna put her cup on the windowsill and went out into the corridor — quietly, as if just to stretch her legs.

She walked to the end of the corridor, to the spot where, as she already knew from last time, the signal was better.

There was no one there.

She was back in the control room before anyone could ask where she had been.

“Everything all right?” Dmitry asked, looking away from the monitor for a second.

“Yes,” she said. “I was thinking.”

In the corridor she had noticed the closed door of the technical room and the red light of a camera under the ceiling. If something untoward was going on here, there would be traces: times of entry, an access log, a copying history. How such things were checked, Nonna did not know. But she knew her brother: an empty hint he would either dismiss or take too much to heart. Both outcomes were bad.

Back in the room, she asked the first safe thing that came into her head:

“Much longer?”

“An hour and a half,” Dmitry answered. “Tired?”

“No. I want to know when to order food.”

The sound engineer looked up at her too quickly. Perhaps he had simply heard the word “order”. Perhaps he was checking what exactly she had been doing in the corridor. Nonna did not let herself pick the convenient explanation.

In the evening the sound engineer said goodbye as usual: he shook Dmitry’s hand and nodded to Ksyusha. His eyes rested on Nonna a second longer, and he was the first to leave.

Nonna watched him all the way to the door.

She said nothing to anyone that evening.

On the way home Ksyusha talked about the last take, which they had finally managed to get whole. Dmitry argued that the second verse would have to be listened to again with fresh ears. Nonna sat in the back, watching the reflections of the street lamps in the side window, and answered at random.

“Did you not like it?” Ksyusha asked, turning round.

“I did.”

“You have been quiet the whole time.”

“I know how to keep quiet.”

Dmitry grinned.

“Do not believe her. It is a temporary phenomenon.”

Nonna did not take up the joke. She was remembering eleven minutes, two cups and an empty corridor. All of it could have a dozen explanations. So far none of them gave her the right to interfere.

At home she wrote on the last page of her notebook a date and two stretches of time. The name she deliberately left out. Then she closed the notebook and put it under her things in the room with the sofa.

She decided to go again — without warning and half an hour before the appointed time.

A week later the chance came. Dmitry was due at the studio at noon, Ksyusha fifteen minutes later after a lesson. Nonna said she would go separately and meet them there. At eleven twenty-nine she was already standing at the entrance to the building.

The studio was open. The administrator was talking to a courier; there was no one in the corridor. Nonna did not go into the control room or try to catch anyone in the act. She sat on the sofa by the front desk, from where she could see the main door, and took out her wedding notebook.

The sound engineer appeared a few minutes later. He came from the direction of the technical rooms, although by the schedule his session began at the same time as Dmitry's. In his hand he held a small external drive. Seeing Nonna, he stopped for a split second, then said hello.

"You are early today," he said.

"I do not like being late."

"Dmitry is not here yet."

"I can see."

He put the drive in his bag and went into the control room. Handling drives was part of his job. Nonna wrote down only the time.

When Dmitry arrived, she said nothing about the encounter. During the session the sound engineer worked attentively, did not go out once and carried out every task precisely. By the end of the recording Nonna was already angry with herself for being suspicious.

During a break the administrator asked him whether he had finished "that copy". The answer was quiet:

"Later. There are people here."

Nonna raised her head. The administrator had already turned to a phone call, and the sound engineer looked in her direction and smiled. "Copy" could refer to any project. And yet now she had three things: the time before the session, an external drive and a word she had overheard.

On the way back she asked Dmitry, as if in passing:

"Who makes your backups?"

"The automatic system and the administrator. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious."

"You are never just curious about backups."

"Today I am."

He gave her a long, expectant look, but did not try to drag an answer out of her. Nonna did not like this: she demanded directness from others, and now she herself was dodging the conversation. But slandering a man without evidence would have been even worse for her.

At home she added to her earlier notes a date and a question: "Who authorised the copy?" Nothing more.

The next morning Dmitry came back to the subject himself. He was putting the mugs on the table when he noticed the wedding notebook lying open. Nonna managed to turn the page, but the movement was too hasty.

"So it is not just curiosity after all," he said.

"For now it is just an observation."

"Of whom?"

"Of a process. And do not ask me anything more until I can confirm something."

Dmitry sat down opposite her and at once became serious.

"If this 'observation' concerns my files, I need to know."

"If I name someone to you now, you will start seeing every action of that person through my still subjective opinion. And that alone will affect the work. I have a time, a drive and the word 'copy'. That is too little for outright suspicion."

"But enough to check the access rules."

Nonna looked up. He had understood her rightly: first check the procedure, then the people.

Dmitry opened his laptop and found the studio hire agreement. An appendix stated that technical copies were made by the administrator, and that temporary working files could be kept

by the engineer only for the duration of a session. Who confirmed their deletion, the document did not say.

“A gap,” he said.

“Not a crime.”

“I am not saying it is a crime.”

He wrote to the administrator, asking for a description of the backup procedure, the access logs and the rules for external drives. The sound engineer’s name did not appear in the letter.

They promised to prepare an answer by the end of the week. Nonna crossed out in her notebook the question “whether to tell Dima” and wrote a new one: “Compare the procedure with the actual dates.”

“Will you stop now?” Dmitry asked.

“Until the answer comes — yes.”

“And you will not go looking for anything yourself?”

“I am not a detective. I am your sister.”

Nonna closed the notebook. She had no intention of searching through other people’s data, demanding access or passing judgement in Dmitry’s place.

With the sound engineer she behaved as before. She said nothing about her suspicions to Ksyusha or Marina, and she did not look for any personal information about him either. If Nonna was wrong, her suspicions must not harm another person’s work.

The administrator’s answer came in the evening. It contained the general rules, but not a list of the actual operations. Nonna saw the difference at once.

“He has answered how it should be,” she said. “Not how it was.”

Dmitry reread the letter.

“Then I shall ask for the log for specific dates.”

“Will you mention what I observed?”

“No. I shall mention my projects and my right to know who opened the files.”

Dmitry wrote the request himself. Nonna did not dictate the wording or ask to be copied in. She closed her notebook and leaned back in her chair. Now all that was left was to wait for the administrator’s answer.

Ksyusha was told that they were checking the access procedure. Until the answer came, unfinished recordings were kept at home and brought to the studio only for the duration of a session.

Nonna did not go to the next recording. She stayed at home with the wedding lists. If facts turned up, she would tell them what she had seen. For now all she could do was wait, not accuse in advance a man whose guilt had not yet been proved.

Chapter Five

The Letter

The letter came on Thursday between rehearsal and supper. In those fifteen minutes Ksyusha usually dealt with everything that could wait.

The subject line was short: “A proposal for collaboration.”

Ksyusha almost scrolled past it. Since the chamber evenings she had had the odd separate work invitation, and none of them had needed an immediate answer. The sender’s name seemed familiar: this was the man who had come up to her after the performance and suggested in passing that they “give each other a ring some time”.

She opened the letter.

The first paragraphs were impeccably composed. They thanked her for her attention, noted “a rare combination of a recognisable timbre and sincerity” and referred to the chamber performance after which, supposedly, the whole team had been discussing her voice. Ksyusha read the words twice. The flattery was obvious, but that did not stop it working.

She sat down by the window with one leg tucked under her and downloaded the attached file. Eighteen pages of small print took a while to open. Ksyusha decided to look over the beginning and come back to the document after supper.

Twenty minutes later she was still sitting in the same place.

This was not a one-off offer, nor an invitation to perform.

It was a full contract. An album under her name. A production team “already chosen and ready to start at a time convenient to her”. A clause on the rights to the use of her image. A clause on the rights to archive recordings — and here she read it twice to make sure she had understood correctly: the songs recorded jointly with Dmitry, if reissued under this contract, would automatically pass into the category of “the performer’s solo material”, with his name given only in the acknowledgements.

Below that came a demand for exclusivity. Not only for future recordings, but for public appearances, interviews, taking part in other people’s projects. Each of them required written approval. The wording was polite and broad; the more closely Ksyusha read, the less she could tell where professional organisation ended and the right to decide how she spent her time began.

She opened a search engine, typed in an unfamiliar legal term, read two explanations and got even more confused. She could have called Dmitry. He was sitting in the study a few metres away, and his single question, “Show me”, would have been enough for the document to stop seeming a secret. Ksyusha did not call him.

If she showed it straight away, the letter would become shared before she had had time to feel it was hers.

She put the phone down.

She picked it up again.

She read it a third time.

The first feeling was joy, and Ksyusha was almost ashamed of it. The letter addressed her personally. Separately from the couple, separately from the Nexxe project.

She remembered the evening at the arts centre. After her solo numbers listeners had come up to her, talked about her voice, asked where to find a recording. Ksyusha had thanked them and almost every time added Dmitry’s name, although no one had asked her. That was honest: the songs had been born within their shared work. The letter, though, spoke only of her voice.

Ksyusha got up, walked across the room and came back to the screen. The document had a place for a signature. The empty line looked innocent, but it already changed the meaning of everything above it.

She had long wanted someone one day to approach her in her own right. Until this letter Ksyusha had not admitted such a wish even to herself.

Dmitry's voice came from the next room — he was reminding her about tomorrow's call with the mastering engineer.

"All right!" she answered too quickly.

He appeared in the doorway.

"Was that to me?"

"No. I mean yes. I heard."

"I asked whether I should take the bathroom first."

"Take it."

Dmitry lingered for a second. His eyes slid over the phone in her hand, but he did not ask what she was reading.

"Supper in twenty minutes?"

"Let us make it half an hour."

"All right."

When he had gone, Ksyusha felt both glad and hurt. She wanted him to notice, and she was afraid he would ask. Dmitry did not ask, giving her space, and she took it almost as indifference. Catching herself in this unfairness, Ksyusha closed the document.

A minute later Ksyusha opened the letter again.

Then she closed it without replying and put the phone in her pocket. First she had to understand for herself what she felt. That was how Ksyusha explained her silence to herself.

Within half an hour she had invented a postponement: tomorrow she would reread the contract on a big screen, write out her questions, and then tell him. Ksyusha wanted first to work out whether she needed such an album, and only after that to go to Dmitry with her joy and her confusion.

The next day the sender reminded her of himself: "I would be glad to hear your first impressions." Ksyusha did not answer this letter either. So far she was being asked only for impressions, but she already felt obliged to make a decision.

Over supper Dmitry asked how her day had gone.

"Ordinary," she said. "Nothing special."

He nodded. Ksyusha could not tell whether he believed her or had decided to give her time.

Nonna was having supper at Ksyusha's mother's that evening, and the flat had grown unusually quiet. There were two plates on the table. Dmitry talked about the mastering, about an argument over top frequencies that were too bright, then asked whether she was tired after the rehearsal. Ksyusha answered precisely and briefly. Once she almost said, "I have been offered a contract," but Dmitry reached for the salt, and Ksyusha stayed silent again.

Ksyusha understood that she herself was looking for a reason to put off the conversation. She wanted to say it all without interruptions or muddle, so that Dmitry would understand at once: she was glad of the offer, but she was not going to leave.

Ksyusha finished eating in silence. The clause about the archive recordings worried her, and the ready-made image the company was offering along with the contract. But the thought of an album under her own name still gave her joy.

Before going to sleep she opened the letter once more and starred it so as not to lose it. Then she created a note headed "Questions".

The first thing she wrote was: "Who do the songs belong to?"

The second: "What will happen to our recordings?"

The third line she left empty for a long time, and then typed: "Why am I afraid to tell Dima?"

The last question frightened her more than the legal clauses.

In the morning Ksyusha woke before the alarm. Dmitry was still asleep, turned towards the window, and in the grey light his face looked tired. The phone lay on the bedside table between them. The letter was a few movements of a finger away, but Ksyusha did not open it in bed.

She went to the kitchen and reread the note. Three questions were enough to start the conversation today. Ksyusha added a fourth: “Do I want an album on these terms?” First she wrote, “No,” then corrected it to “I do not know.” The second answer looked worse, but it was honest.

At breakfast Dmitry noticed the open notebook.

“Plans for the day?”

“I am trying to sort out a work question.”

“Do you need help?”

Ksyusha’s shoulders tensed and she gripped her mug harder.

“Not yet,” she answered.

Dmitry nodded. He was not hurt and did not ask questions. A minute later he started talking about the weather.

Ksyusha felt relief and was at once angry with herself. He had offered help without pressure. She had refused it in order to keep the letter hers alone a little longer — together with the feeling of a secret possibility.

When Dmitry had left, Ksyusha printed not the whole contract but the four pages about rights and exclusivity. The printer stood in the study and could be heard all over the flat. She collected the still-warm sheets and went back to the kitchen.

With a red pen she circled the words “irrevocably”, “for the whole term” and “at the producer’s discretion”. Beside the clause on archive recordings she wrote: “Can they even offer this?” Then she crossed out the question mark and put two.

On paper the contract was less unsettling than on screen. In front of Ksyusha lay sheets of small print with uneven margins and page numbers. She could not bring herself to throw them away: she folded them in half and hid them in her notebook of solo exercises.

Hid — the word came before she was aware of it. Ksyusha tried to replace it with “put away”, but the difference was too obvious: you could put something away on a table; you could hide it only from a person.

She took the pages out again. For a few seconds she held them, getting ready to take them to Dmitry. Then she put them back in the notebook, this time without closing the cover. The half-measure put nothing right, but it let her pretend for one more day that the decision to talk had almost been made.

In the afternoon the sender of the contract rang. Ksyusha saw an unfamiliar number but guessed from the area code, and did not answer. A minute later a message came: “I wanted to check whether you received the materials. I would be glad to talk it over informally.”

“Informally” sounded pleasant. There were far too many formalities in the contract; a living voice could explain everything more simply. She typed a reply suggesting a call in the evening and stopped before sending it. Why the evening, exactly, when Dmitry would be busy, if this was an ordinary work conversation?

Ksyusha deleted the message. She wrote only that she had received the materials and would come back with questions later.

At rehearsal she sang worse than usual. She hit the notes, but came in with a slight delay: her thoughts kept going back to the letter. After the third stop Dmitry took off his headphones.

“Let us finish early.”

“I can go on.”

“You can. But today you are not here.”

“Are you angry?”

“No. I am suggesting we do not waste our strength on the appearance of work.”

He did not ask where exactly she had got lost in her thoughts. Ksyusha gathered up the sheets. The silence was already interfering with their shared work, although she still considered the contract a personal matter.

In the evening Nonna talked about yet another venue, Ksyusha's mother sent photographs of flowers, Dmitry answered letters. Ksyusha looked at the shared table. She could put the contract down beside everything else and discuss it without giving Dmitry the right to decide for her.

Later, when Dmitry had gone to the study, Ksyusha stayed to wash up. Nonna dried the plates and put them in the cupboard, though twice she put them on the wrong shelf.

"Something is the matter with you," she said.

Ksyusha almost answered at once. It was easier with Nonna: her opinion decided nothing in this matter. She could tell her, test her own words and go to Dmitry prepared. But then a small alliance behind his back would appear between them.

"There is a work offer," she said carefully. "But I am not ready to discuss the details yet."

Nonna stopped drying the plate.

"Does Dima know?"

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because the offer is for me."

"That is the answer to a different question."

Ksyusha felt irritation, but she could not call the remark unfair.

"I want first to understand what I myself want."

"Then understand it. Only do not ask me to hide it."

"I am not asking."

"Good."

Nonna did not demand to see the letter or go to her brother. She put the plate on the right shelf and went out. Telling Dmitry was up to Ksyusha herself.

Left alone, Ksyusha opened the contract again. Now she saw before her an ordinary document with terms that could change her present life. Exclusivity for several years, the use of her image in promotion, advance approval of recordings with other authors — a separate career on such terms would inevitably touch their shared work.

She wrote out the specific clauses in her notebook. Beside each she drew two columns: "concerns me" and "concerns us". Most of the lines went into both.

In the study Dmitry played one eight-bar fragment over and over. Ksyusha could hear through the door how he changed the bass, put the old one back, stopped the recording again. Usually she would have gone in and asked if she might listen. Today she stood in the corridor with her phone in her hand and could not bring herself to knock.

She went back to the kitchen, poured some water and wrote herself one more question: "How much time do I really need, and how much am I just putting it off?" There was no answer. But a date appeared: tomorrow after supper.

The next morning she moved the conversation to the evening because of an early session. In the evening her mother came, and Ksyusha told herself again that she would talk tomorrow. Each reason on its own seemed sensible.

For the first few days the letter gave her energy. Ksyusha woke earlier, read articles about contracts, wrote out unfamiliar wording. She called it preparation, although she had not asked the sender a single question. The more she learned, the more convincing it seemed that one more day of silence was necessary.

On the fourth day the company sent examples of a visual image: other people's photographs, stage costumes and the caption "a possible direction for the artist's growing up". The word "growing

up” stung Ksyusha. It meant that at present she was not grown up enough, while someone outside already knew what she should become.

She showed the selection to Nonna only from a distance, without letting her read the letter.

“Do you like it?” Dmitry’s sister asked.

“Some of the things are beautiful.”

“That is not an answer.”

“Then I do not know yet.”

Nonna did not try to draw out more. Ksyusha closed the screen and caught herself wanting to hear Dmitry’s opinion of this very wording. He would have noticed at once that the company was already offering a ready-made image without having got to know Ksyusha herself. But asking him would have meant having to open the whole letter.

In the dark glass of the studio booth she saw her reflection: headphones, plain clothes, a sheet of lyrics in her hand. Ksyusha looked at herself and thought that she did not need anyone else’s “direction for growing up”.

In the evening Ksyusha added two more questions: “Who decides the image?” and “Can I refuse a particular campaign?” Then she made a separate line: “Who is the person they are offering me to become?” The answer came out short: “I do not know her.”

She already understood that she would not sign the contract as it stood. But admitting it to Dmitry was still hard, because the conversation concerned more than the dangerous clauses. She would have to say that for the first few minutes the letter had brought her joy; that a separate offer had confirmed that her voice existed outside their shared work; that part of her had not wanted to hand this feeling over for discussion.

The joy was what she hid most deeply.

Once again she decided to tell him after supper. But when the plates were cleared, Nonna started an argument about dates, and Ksyusha let that conversation take up the whole evening. Then she went to bed, knowing that there would never be a convenient moment for the admission anyway.

Chapter Six

Silence

For the first week the letter was her secret, one that stirred her soul.

On Friday morning she answered the sender briefly but politely: she thanked him and said she was still studying the terms. The reply came almost at once — she was again invited to talk at any time convenient to her. Attached to the letter were a provisional recording schedule and concepts for the artist's visual image.

The photographs showed a girl of similar height, build and hair colour. She stood in an empty hall looking into the lens. The photographer had clearly tried to make loneliness part of her image. Ksyusha could easily picture herself in her place. But admitting that someone else's team had invented "this image" even before their first conversation with her turned out to be harder.

Ksyusha opened the letter in the evenings, when Dmitry was working in the study, reread the clauses, pictured the album cover, her own name without an "and", without brackets, without the word "jointly". Her imagination slipped her posters and interviews in which for the first time nobody would ask, "And how did you meet Dmitry Rusov?" — only, "Tell us about your music."

She liked imagining it. Too much to admit it even to herself without a certain shame.

In the daytime she worked through vocal parts, answered messages, helped Nonna check the addresses of venues. The letter stayed beside her even with the screen dark. It created a small private space that no one else had entered yet. Sometimes this felt like freedom, and sometimes it made every ordinary conversation a little more complicated and a little less honest.

On Sunday Dmitry suggested she listen to a new harmony. Ksyusha sat down beside him in the study, put on the second pair of headphones, and for the first few minutes really did hear only the music. Then she thought: if the contract were signed, would even home drafts like this need approval? Would she be able to record a line for his song without the company's permission? The contract gave no clear answer.

"You do not like it?" Dmitry asked.

"I do. I was thinking."

"About what?"

"About the second verse."

That was how she first lied to him about the letter, although formally she had told the truth.

The second week began with a question she did not want to ask herself: what if he was against it?

She began to watch his reactions to other people's offers more closely. When Marina forwarded an invitation to a small joint broadcast, Dmitry calmly said that Ksyusha could accept it on her own if the format interested her. When Nonna suggested moving a rehearsal to view a venue, he was the first to point out that the decision should depend on Ksyusha's schedule. Time after time Dmitry's behaviour disproved her fears, but Ksyusha still went on expecting a painful reaction from him.

She was not afraid of a prohibition: Dmitry had never forbidden her anything. She was afraid of something else. His name had stood beside hers on release cards and on the rare posters, all along their shared road. What if a contract that moved his "name" into a footnote hurt him more than he would let himself show?

She ran through the conversation in her head dozens of times, changing his reaction each time: now he calmly nodded and said, "It is your decision"; now, for a second before he nodded, something in his face changed — that barely perceptible thing she had learned to notice in her years beside him.

None of the versions gave her any peace.

On Tuesday she opened a draft message to Dmitry: "I need to show you a contract." She read it, deleted the word "need", then put it back. A message to a person in the next room looked absurd. She put the phone down and went to the study door.

Music was playing inside. Dmitry was recording a melody on the voice recorder, quietly repeating one turn of phrase. Ksyusha stood at the door and decided not to disturb him. An hour later he came out himself and asked whether she would like a walk. They went two blocks, bought bread and came home. She said nothing.

Later Ksyusha admitted to herself that she had been protecting not his working minute but one more day of silence.

One evening, lying awake, she asked herself directly for the first time: what if we break up over this?

At first the thought seemed absurd: there was no reason to break up. But the longer Ksyusha kept silent, the more easily she invented possible quarrels and answers from Dmitry.

By the middle of the second week another voice began to sound in her — quieter, but more stubborn.

Who said she was obliged to account for herself? She was an adult, she earned her own money and answered for her own voice — in every sense. Dmitry had no right to limit her choice. But he did not even need to say anything to limit it, if she herself looked at his possible reaction before looking at her own wish.

The words “account for herself” were a convenient thing to hold on to: beside them silence looked like a defence of freedom. But the contract touched their shared recordings. Telling him about it was not yet asking permission. Ksyusha almost reached this thought and each time turned off into the more comfortable argument about independence.

For a couple of days this thought brought her a strange, prickly relief.

She even answered the sender once more, agreeing to consider a date for a meeting. It created no obligations, but after she had sent it her palms were sweating as though the signature were already there. In the evening Dmitry noticed that she was hardly eating.

“Are you unwell?”

“No. Just not hungry.”

He took his hand away from the bread basket and looked at her closely.

“If something has happened, I am near.”

“I know.”

“Good.”

He did not ask again. His patience irritated her: there was nothing to defend herself against.

Left alone, she wrote her signature several times on a scrap of paper. She imagined announcing the contract after signing it, as an accomplished fact. Each time Ksyusha stopped, unable to think what she would say to Dmitry next.

By the end of the second week the home had grown especially quiet.

Once Nonna found her in the kitchen with the contract open. Ksyusha managed to lock the screen, but Dmitry’s sister noticed the movement.

“Secrets?” she asked, pouring tea.

“Work.”

“You can hide it from me. Not from Dima.”

Ksyusha’s head jerked up.

“Why did you decide I am hiding it from him?”

“I did not decide anything. But for some reason that is how you heard it.”

Nonna took her cup and went out without asking a single question. Ksyusha stayed in front of the darkened screen. It would have been easier if Nonna had started pushing: then she could have been indignant and done nothing again, going on defending her right to “independence”. But Dima’s sister had only said out loud what Ksyusha herself had known from the start.

For a few days Ksyusha stopped rehearsing conversations in advance, but she did nothing: she neither turned the contract down, nor proposed changing the terms, nor told Dmitry.

In the third week it became impossible to hide the change.

Dmitry did not watch Ksyusha's every move, but now he could see it: at supper she dropped out of the conversation, before sleep she held her phone with the screen towards her, and she changed the subject too quickly whenever work outside the studio came up.

He asked nothing.

By the start of the third week he had stopped telling her every little thing about his work. Not out of revenge: Dmitry could see she was only half listening and did not want to talk into emptiness. Ksyusha noticed the change a few days later, when she realised she did not know how the argument about the mastering had ended.

"You did not tell me what they decided," she said.

"I told you on Monday."

"Really?"

"You said, 'That is good.'"

She felt ashamed. One conversation that had not happened was already crowding out others that were perfectly alive.

Dmitry wanted to know what was going on. But in all their time together he had learned that if he started questioning her, she would close up even more. He did not want to decide for her when she should speak.

So Dmitry behaved as usual and waited.

In the evenings Dmitry checked the oil before they lit the lamp, shut the window before bed, left water by the bed. He did not grow cold, nor did he become pointedly attentive. Ksyusha saw this, and still she was afraid of the conversation.

One night he woke up because of the light. Ksyusha was lying with her back to him; her phone lit the edge of the pillow. Hearing him move, she switched off the screen at once.

"Can you not sleep?" Dmitry asked.

"I am asleep already."

"Convincing."

She turned over, but kept the phone under her palm.

"Early recording tomorrow. Go to sleep."

The question was on the tip of his tongue: "What are you hiding from me?" Dmitry almost said it. He imagined her shutting down even further, and chose another.

"Shall I bring you some water?"

"No need. Thank you."

He lay on his back. In the dark he could hear Ksyusha breathing too evenly, trying to be the first to pretend to be asleep. About ten minutes later her hand found his forearm. Dmitry covered her palm with his, but did not begin the conversation.

In the morning he stood under the shower for a long time, angry. With her — for an obvious secret. With himself — because under the guise of respect he too had been avoiding an unpleasant conversation.

At breakfast she asked why he was frowning.

"I slept badly."

The answer was true, but not the whole truth. Dmitry heard it at once: now he too was holding things back.

He did not start the conversation before the recording. He decided to wait until the end of the week, and then name plainly what he saw and hear her answer. Two days were left.

He wanted Ksyusha to speak sooner.

He understood that if they did not talk, the silence would show itself in actions. He wanted the words to come sooner.

By the end of the third week Ksyusha already understood what was happening. Afraid of seeming dependent, she was pushing Dmitry further and further away from a decision that concerned them both.

On the last evening of the third week a new letter came. The sender suggested meeting on Thursday and asked her to confirm the time by noon the next day. Ksyusha looked at the date, then at the closed study door.

She could agree to the meeting herself, or refuse. But three weeks of silence had not made the clauses about Dmitry's songs and their joint recordings disappear.

Ksyusha opened the note "Questions". Under the first three lines she added a fourth: "Do I want an album, or do I want to prove that I can create on my own?"

The answer did not come at once. She wanted to work, to hear her own voice outside their shared project, to answer for a song of her own. But she did not want to leave. And she had no intention of handing their joint recordings over to someone else's control for the sake of a contract.

She closed the letter without replying, got up and went to the study.

Now Ksyusha knew what she wanted to say.

At the study door Ksyusha stopped. There was no music inside, only the occasional tap of keys. She raised her hand to knock, but never touched the door.

Dmitry opened it himself a few seconds later.

"Have you been standing there long?"

"A minute."

"Come in."

Ksyusha did not go in at once. Behind the door was the familiar home space: the lamp over the desk, the monitor with a paused track, his mug by the keyboard. Dmitry sat back down in his chair and waited for her to begin.

To occupy his hands, Dmitry pressed save, turned his chair round and fixed his eyes on Ksyusha, ready to listen.

"All this time I have been thinking that first I had to choose by myself," Ksyusha said. "And only then tell you a ready-made decision."

"Why?"

"So that it would definitely be mine. So that you would not influence it."

"And now?"

"Now I understand that the silence had an influence too. On both of us. Only without your consent."

He ran his palm along the arm of the chair, holding back his first impulse to answer sharply.

"I could see that something was distracting you, taking you away from me and from our project. But I did not know whether I had the right to ask."

"You did," she said honestly, but after a second's pause she added: "I could simply have chosen not to answer."

"That is easy to understand now."

"For me too."

A car went by outside; the light of its headlamps slid across the ceiling and vanished. Ksyusha heard her own breathing, uneven, anxious. She clenched her fists and breathed out. The next sentence she no longer rehearsed.

"If I ever say 'it is my business' again, remind me to ask: are the consequences only mine as well?"

"I shall. But I shall not use it to put pressure on you or take advantage."

"I know."

Dmitry had given her no reason to expect a prohibition, punishment or humiliation. Ksyusha had been afraid of something else: of losing at one stroke him, their shared world and the

independence she had found beside him. In trying to protect herself, she had almost walled herself off from the person closest to her.

“Wait. I need to say one thing first, or I shall start with excuses again.”

He neither came out nor drew her in. He only shrugged.

“Say it however it comes.”

Ksyusha breathed in. For three weeks she had been repeating in her head the sentence “I have been offered a contract”, but instead of flying out like a joyful bird, it had become weighed down with stones and heavy chains dragging it to the ground.

“There is something important I have not told you,” she said.

And for the first time in three weeks she breathed out freely.

Dmitry did not ask at once what she had hidden. He switched off the speakers, closed the working file and pushed his phone aside. A space cleared on the desk.

“Is it about us?” he asked.

“And about me. And about work. And a lot of it I have muddled up myself.”

“Then do not begin with an excuse. Begin at the beginning.”

Ksyusha came in, but sat down not beside him but opposite. Between them there remained the desk, on which the contract could be laid. She took out her phone, but did not yet open the letter.

“I am afraid you will hear three weeks, not an offer.”

“I shall hear both.”

“And you will be right to be angry.”

“Perhaps. But my anger will not cancel your right to want work of your own.”

Dmitry could be angry about the silence and still not condemn her wish to work separately. Ksyusha finally heard the difference.

She opened the letter and laid the phone screen up. Now the document existed in their shared space, but the decision had not yet stopped belonging to her.

Chapter Seven

Confession

Ksyusha sat looking into Dima's face, not daring to begin on the main thing. Dmitry looked from her to the phone and back, but did not pick it up. He was waiting for her to explain rather than inventing an explanation for her himself.

"I have been lying to you. Not directly, not in words. But I have been lying."

His face did not change. Only his shoulders tensed slightly — so he had been expecting something like this after all; he had noticed. Ksyusha felt ashamed of the lie again.

"I am listening," Dmitry said, and leaned forward a little.

"Three weeks ago I got a letter. An offer of a contract. A solo one. An album under my name."

She saw him blink a little more slowly than usual — the only sign that the news really was news. Confirmation that he had not been going through her things, had not tried to invent an explanation for her behaviour on her behalf, and that Nonna had had no intention of making her task easier.

"And you kept quiet for three weeks."

It was not said as a question. He had named the exact length of time — three weeks. Her answer "I was going to tell you" would have sounded false. So she simply nodded.

"Yes."

"Why?"

He asked evenly, and that made excuses harder.

Ksyusha looked at the floor; her fingers clenched nervously on her knees. But no one was going to answer for her.

"At first because it was pleasant. It flattered me that they saw me as an artist. Me myself. Not 'the Nexxe project', not two inseparable names on a poster, not 'your girlfriend', but me. Only me."

"That is normal."

Dmitry remained calm and reasonable, letting Ksyusha go on without breaking off for extra reproaches.

"Then I got frightened. That it would hurt you. That I would take something that belongs to both of us and make it my own."

"And then?"

Ksyusha fell silent. The least attractive part was coming.

"And then I got frightened of something else. That if I told you, you would somehow influence my decision, perhaps without even wanting to. With one look, one insincere smile. And then I would not understand what I wanted myself and what you wanted. And where the line would be between my own wishes and the fear of a woman in love of hurting you."

Dmitry ran his thumb along the arm of his glasses and was silent.

"So you decided to work it out yourself. In secret."

"Yes. I almost agreed to a version where you were not there at all. Not in the rights, not in the list of participants. Only thanks somewhere at the bottom in small print."

"Almost — what does that mean?"

A lump rose in Ksyusha's throat, but she had to keep talking.

"I answered that I was studying the terms. I agreed to discuss a meeting, but I have not confirmed a time. I have signed nothing and have not consented to the use of the songs."

"It is good that you are saying this precisely."

"I should have said it sooner."

"Yes."

Dmitry did not comfort her or pretend that three weeks of silence meant nothing. He did not take her hand, did not hold her, said nothing; he simply looked and was silent.

Ksyusha lowered her eyes. She was waiting for what came next, but she herself did not know what it would be.

Dmitry was silent longer than she would have liked. But now it was her turn to wait and not hurry him.

“But you did not agree.”

“I did not agree. In the last few days I have understood that I was confusing two things: being myself and being separate from you.”

“And for that three weeks of silence were needed.”

“Yes. I am sorry.”

He held out his hand. First he barely touched her fingers, then he covered her palm with his.

“I am sorry it was so frightening for you to tell me. Three weeks alone with that is hard.”

“I was not afraid of you,” Ksyusha said. “Or rather, not of what you would do. I had decided in advance: if you said ‘choose for yourself’, it meant you did not care. If you offered help, it meant you wanted to control me. Whatever you answered, you came out guilty. A very convenient scheme, if you do not want to admit that you have lost your bearings yourself.”

Dmitry looked down at their hands.

“Thank you for saying that now.”

“It sounds dreadful.”

“But honest.”

He pushed the keyboard aside, clearing space on the desk.

“Then I shall be honest too. A solo album does not frighten me. If you want to record on your own, record; there should be room in your life for that too. But the contract concerns songs that I wrote, and I knew nothing about it and could not protect my rights.”

“I understand.”

“And another thing. I do not want to check your every step or control you. I do not need that. Your life, your voice, your career matter as much as mine. But if you have a question or a matter to think over that touches us both, or our shared work, I have the right to know about it and about your thinking before the decision is all but made.”

Ksyusha nodded. Now it was perfectly clear that she made her own decisions about a solo career. But she could not decide alone about their shared work, the songs Dmitry had written for her.

“You are not angry?”

“A little,” he said honestly. “Not about the contract. About three weeks in which you decided this alone, although I was in the next room.”

Ksyusha nodded, accepting it as fair karma.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now tell me all the terms. The good ones and the ones that are awkward to talk about.”

“I shall tell you first how I understood them myself. Then we shall read them, and you will tell me where I went wrong.”

“Agreed.”

She went through the letter from memory: the album, the team, the schedule, image rights, personal consultations. Several times Dmitry opened his mouth, but he did not interrupt. As Ksyusha said the terms aloud, the fine wording lost its shine. “An independent image” did not explain who would decide what for her. “Full support” could mean almost anything. When she had read it alone, the name on the cover had hidden these gaps.

She took out the phone with the letter that for three weeks had been read by nobody but herself, and moved closer so that he could see the screen too.

“Where do you want to start?”

“With the clause on authorship.”

“That stays yours. I shall insist on it myself, before you even have time to ask.”

“Not only mine, if you contributed to a particular song. We shall not answer a bad contract with another inaccuracy.”

“All right. Then we shall go through each recording separately.”

Dmitry looked at her and gave a slight nod.

“Good. And the rest?”

Ksyusha scrolled the letter to the next clause.

“Rights to archive recordings. Songs recorded with you automatically become solo material when reissued. Your name — only in the acknowledgements.”

“That clause we change completely.”

“I know. And I have already decided what I want instead. In our songs we must both remain. I can work alone, Dima. But I will not erase you to prove it.”

“That sounds like what I want as well.”

He enlarged the document on the screen and handed her the mouse.

“Mark it yourself. I shall be near and tell you what I see, but the letter with the corrections must go from your inbox and in your name.”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because the offer came to you. If I write even the first letter, at the meeting they will look at you condescendingly and talk to me instead of you, even if you are in the room.”

Ksyusha highlighted the first paragraph. Dmitry stayed near but did not take over the initiative — nor, for that matter, the mouse. The tension in her shoulders gradually melted.

“And another thing. I want you to come to the meeting with me. Will you?” She looked him straight in the eye. “I shall do the talking. But you have more experience, and it would be stupid not to take that into account.”

Dmitry smiled slightly.

“You are asking me for help.”

“Yes. But we shall be equals.”

“I know. It is just unusual to hear that from you.”

“It is unusual for me to say it, too.”

He moved his chair closer to her. Ksyusha lightly touched his cheek.

“Then let us read the rest. Clause by clause.”

They sat over the letter until late in the night. Ksyusha marked the disputed places in yellow; Dmitry wrote questions in the margins. Reading shoulder to shoulder turned out to be easier than sitting opposite each other and guessing who was judging whom.

Around midnight Dmitry went for some water. Ksyusha stayed at the screen and by chance opened his comment on the clause about image: “Ask what exactly Ksyusha wants. Do not put my own comments ahead of hers.” She read it twice.

“Do you really want it to be like this? Do you keep telling yourself this?” she asked when he came back.

“What exactly?”

She showed him the line.

“I try.”

“And did you never for a second want to exclaim: ‘No, you are not going to be photographed in that’?”

Dmitry put the glass down too carefully.

“I did. I do not like some of the photographs. And the wording about ‘growing up’ makes me angry.”

“Then why do you say nothing?”

“Because my ‘I do not like it’ should come after your answer, not instead of it.”

“But I need your experience, and I asked you myself to say what you see.”

A sigh.

"I see an attempt to invent for you in advance an image that would provoke neither resistance nor questions in you. But I also see that you liked some of the shots."

Ksyusha nodded. She did not have to defend herself against his precision: Dmitry did not make her delight into evidence, and he did not pretend that he himself felt nothing.

"I did like them," she said. "Not all of them. But I liked being put at the centre of the frame at all."

"That is worth saying at the meeting too."

She added a new question to the list: "How will the image be developed taking my opinion and preferences into account, and not simply for me?" Dmitry did not correct a single word.

By one in the morning there were twenty-three comments in the margins. Some of the terms they proposed removing, some clarifying. Against the clause about personal consultations Ksyusha wrote: "Only by prior agreement, in the presence of a representative of my choosing, or remotely." Dmitry read it and asked:

"Do you really want to keep this clause?"

"For now I want to hear what it means and why they need it. If the answer satisfies me, the wording can be made safe. If not — that will be an answer too."

"Agreed."

They proposed a preliminary meeting on Thursday, saying that they would send the exact time and place later, together with the "contract". Ksyusha sent the message from her own address. Dmitry did not check the text before it went; he only sat beside her and waited for her to press the button herself.

Before bed she stopped at the study door.

"Do you trust me?"

He did not answer automatically.

"Yes. But right now it hurts. And yes, those things can exist at the same time."

Ksyusha came over and put her arms round him. Dmitry froze for a second, then held her tightly in return.

"I am not asking you to stop being angry," she said.

"And I shall not use my anger to punish you with silence."

They switched off the light in the study together. One conversation could not wipe out three weeks of silence or at once calm Dima's anger. And yet they got to the bedroom together, keeping near each other. For today that was enough.

In the morning they both woke heavy. The conversation had finally happened and ended well, but the body needed time to get its lightness back. Dmitry made coffee in silence; Ksyusha cut bread. They kept near each other, although the usual ease had not yet returned.

"I do not know how to behave today," Ksyusha admitted.

"As usual."

"Usually I do not confess that I have been hiding something from you for three weeks."

"Then do not act 'usual'. Let us just have breakfast. We have to have breakfast anyway."

She sat down opposite.

"Do you want to be alone for a while?"

"I think so. An hour in the study. I need to reread the corrections with fresh eyes and separate my authorship rights from the wish to protect you from absolutely everything."

"All right."

"After that we shall send them the contract with our corrections together."

Nonna came into the kitchen five minutes after Ksyusha had managed to butter her bread, looked at their faces and understood at once that something serious had happened.

"Who died?"

“No one,” Dmitry said.

“Then why are you eating as if at a wake?”

Ksyusha was about to unload their three-week problem on her, but stopped in time. The contract concerned only the two of them; Nonna did not have to become a third judge.

“A work conversation,” she said, frowning slightly. “We are sorting it out.”

Dmitry’s sister looked at him.

“Do you need help?”

“No.”

“Then I am off to Ksyusha’s mother’s and shall be back by evening. Do not touch the food in the fridge; it is all counted.”

Counted for where and for what they did not ask, and Dmitry’s sister did not say.

But it has to be said that Nonna really did not ask a single further question about their “work question being sorted out”. She took her bag, put the keys in her pocket and left. Ksyusha watched her go with a gratitude she decided not to voice just yet. She might jinx it.

Dima looked at the clock and said he would be back by half past ten. Now Ksyusha knew how long her solitary silence would last and did not have to listen to every rustle behind the door.

An hour later Dmitry called Ksyusha. They opened the contract again. Overnight some of the comments had come to seem too harsh, others not precise enough. Ksyusha removed a “categorically unacceptable” that had slipped in and replaced it with specific demands to keep authors’ and related rights. Dmitry suggested excluding all joint recordings from the subject of the contract rather than trying to describe each one in detail.

“If they want a solo album, let the contract cover new solo material,” Ksyusha summed up.

“Exactly.”

She wrote the letter herself. At the start she thanked them for the offer, then listed the conditions without which a meeting made no sense. As the last point she stated her right to come with a representative of her choosing.

“A representative?” Dmitry asked.

“You. But I do not want them to think of you as a man who has appointed himself to supervise my meeting.”

“A good formulation.”

“Do not praise me for every ‘right’ word. I am beginning to feel as if I am in an exam.”

“Sorry.”

He moved away from the screen. Ksyusha reread the letter on her own and sent it.

The answer came towards evening: the company agreed to a personal meeting but made not a single comment on the corrections to the contract, as though they were not there. That put them both on their guard.

Ksyusha printed the letter and put it beside the contract. They agreed not to pick apart possible hidden motives before the meeting, but to prepare for possible questions. Dmitry marked the clauses concerning his authorship rights. Ksyusha marked the schedule, the image, the solo recordings and the possibility of refusing particular forms of promotion.

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