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## 10 years in a seat next to a window

The sound of my high heels firmly clapping on the stone floor as I walk on the bumpy sidewalk is the only thing disturbing the heavy silence. My head is bowed, dirty blond hair creating a thick curtain isolating me from the outer world, denying access to the friendly, yet worried faces passing by me. Every morning their curious eyes follow me as I turn around the corner by the modern coffee shop, greeted by the morning sun rays, peeking through the clouds, wrapping me in their warm welcoming embrace and giving me a sense of comfort. As soon as their arms let go, I am left alone to scuttle towards the entrance of the library, eager to invisibly slip inside before attracting any more attention than I already have. Brisk walking, heading for the old looking pair of wooden doors with square grubby glass windows, I eagerly reach out for the handle, feeling relieved when my fingertips make the contact with the icy cold metal. As if in a bad horror movie I open the door with a loud crack, earning a few annoyed glares from the disturbed visitors. With head bowed, cheeks red of embarrassment I turn around, my back facing them and shut the doors as quietly as I possibly can. Fast as a cheetah I rush by the front desk, missing the warm smile of the young librarian. My body instantly relaxed as I slip away into the farther part of library, escaping his concerned stare. My eyes wander around this undiscovered, yet calmly looking surroundings and my gaze slowly falls on a book, completely different from the ones next to it, clearly not belonging to this place.

I keep staring, but curiosity got a hold of me and I stretched out my hand, fingers brushing along the hard covered book before slowly lifting it and returning with the new found discovery back to my usual seat next to a large window, far away from other people.

My fingertips gently slide across the front of the journal, caressing the front leather page full of deep scratches, the slightly bent corners and the thick layer of dirt and dust, which got under my nails. The leather strap, the only thing keeping this poor collection of sheets together, simply falls off when I slightly tug on it. I open the book as if I was opening a birthday present, with care and nervousness, but with the added feeling of doing something forbidden. This feeling is quickly replaced with a wave of excitement as my fingers turn the front cover to reveal old looking pages crowded with beautiful handwriting I clear my throat, releasing the breath I didn't even know I was holding before narrowing my eyes and focusing on reading.

February 1938

Dear Aude,

*In the cattle car, there was not a single source of light except the stripes sneaking through the crannies between the wooden plates. It was too crowded. We had to take turns sleeping. There was no food and often no water. After forty-six days or so we arrived at the camp and immediately started to work. I ended up in a unit called The unshod and unclothed of those for whom there were not any more uniforms. After building our own Baraki, which I am sharing with the other kind-hearted men, I managed to steal some time and I have saved it for you. To write you a letter. To explain everything. To say that I am sorry. I am sorry for leaving. You know that I did not have a choice of staying, but I still feel the urge to apologise. I won't ask you to wait for me, I know that is too much to ask for, but there is one thing you must do. Do not forget me. Do not forget that I love you with all my heart and that I would die for you any moment. And I swear, I swear to God that if I ever return from this bloody place and you are still there, I am going to marry you. I am going to confess my love to you in front of the whole world, get down on one knee and ask you to be mine. Forever. I promise. Don't cry because they took me away. Think of this promise because I will hold onto it as if my life depends on it. I promise you.*

Love

Nikolai

The heavy rain drops interrupt me from reading when they start pounding directly against the window being as loud as a lion's roar. I lift my eyes from the book, taking a quick glance on the outside world, letting my eyes rest before bringing my attention back to the letters, my fingertips travelling along the words as I read, finding myself more engrossed in the story of Nikolai and Aude.

June 1941

*My dearest love,*

*I was sent to work outside the camp for the fifth time since arriving. There was no water. We drank the melted snow, loads of dirt getting caught behind our teeth. At this point, there was no infirmary. So when the flu overwhelmed me I couldn't get excused. Those times you don't pay any more attention to cutting down the trees with naked hands full of callouses or getting through a snowstorm with less or no clothes, you squeeze out the last drops of energy and strength. You need to have an anchor. You are mine. You are the only thing that keeps me going. You are the only one in my thoughts and dreams. The closer I am to you, even just in my wildest dreams, the happier I am. I love you more than I love life.*

*Forever and always*

*Nikolai*

August 1941

*My beloved Nikolai,*

*If only you could know how much I miss you! How life has no purpose with you not around. Waking up alone everyday, you are the only one I think of. I don't know if this letter could help me relieve the agony of being torn away from you, in any possible way because no words may describe the passion I feel for you, but you must know that I will wait. I promise to wait forever, even if everyone's hopes have died long time ago, I will wait for you to appear on our doormat, knocking the air out of your lungs with my tight embrace.*

*With love*

*Aude*

I flip onto the next page, silently hoping that no one comes to talk to me, because I probably look like a mess. Still stiffly sitting in my coat as warm as the heat coming from a fireplace, I feel drops of sweats forming below the line of my hair. With a sigh, I unwrap the scarf from my throat, setting the book aside. When I am finally free of any unnecessary clothing, I open the window with a loud crack, to let the temperature cool down, listening to the wind whirling around the building in spirals, carrying the message of upcoming fall. Leaning my head against the window, I see the fog forming on the glass as I exhale, blocking the view of the beautiful city lying in front of me. My hair cascades around my face, locking me in my own world, giving me space to process everything I've read. I slowly close my eyes, letting my thoughts drift out with the wind.

It is a miracle. It is a miracle to find someone who loves you more than they love themselves. The reassuring feeling of finding proof makes me want to believe that we still have hope. That we can fix our mistakes, because love as infinite as it is overcomes it all. I reach out for the book, press it to my chest, right where my heart beats under the skin, feeling special to have the privilege of reading Aude and Nikolai's story. A sudden desire overtook me, urging me towards finishing the book as quickly as possible in order to find out the ending. There is a small smile playing on my lips as I find the next letter and fall into its welcoming arms.

November 1946

*Dearest Aude,*

*The cold and flu have taken over my body. With my current state according to Paika, the law of the food supply I get the minimum amount of food. I have been moved into Odinochka, a cell for the ones that are beyond the point of saving. I knew this time would come. I am trying to persuade Life to stay longer, but she is relentlessly pushing me towards the deadly embrace of her sister. Coming every night into my cell, she whispers promises into my ears, telling me it's time. But every time she offers herself as a way of a relief, I deny it, seeing your face, hearing your laugh.*

*The thought of your sweet lips is keeping me from going insane and agreeing on a date with Death itself. If this is the last goodbye, the last time you will ever hear from me again, you must know that I will never stop loving you. Not even the abyss of death can stop me from doing so.*

*Live the rest of your life well*  
*Nikolai*

I finish reading with trembling hands, threatening to lose the hold of the letter. I did. Swaying in the air, the piece of paper lands on the floor waiting for me to pick it up. But I can't. My thoughts are flying around, but my body is petrified in place still processing what happened. I slowly sink down to my knees, grab the letter, and grip the corner of the table to help me stand up. Just as I am about to sit down into my seat and re-think this again, I notice a small piece of paper already occupying my place. *Must have fallen out the book* I thought, bringing the paper closer to my face to read it.

*January 1948*

*The camp leadership desires me to express his deepest regret that Nikolai Ripley passed away on twenty first January in gulag camp, Siberia.*

To my surprise I accepted this information peacefully, already expecting something like this to happen. I bring my knees to my chest, hugging them with my arms, letting my head rest, still forcefully holding the book in my right hand, my knuckles already turning white. Suddenly I hear someone clearing his throat and opening my eyes just a little, seeing a figure slowly approaching me from my peripheral vision. A male figure. "Hi, ehm" there is a little pause before he carries on speaking, when he must have realised that I won't greet him back, "I noticed you look quite pale, I just wanted to check if you are alright?" The end of his sentence sounds more like a question, and I can sense that he is a bit unsure of his decision to come and talk to me. After a few moments of awfully loud silence, I can still feel his presence next to my chair, not too close to disrupt my personal space but not too far either. I know he isn't waiting for me to respond. I never do when he tries to talk to me. But something in his voice makes my walls to retire slowly, maybe they way he talks, how the words slowly roll off his tongue, pronouncing every letter, or the color of his voice, which feels like home. Before I realise what am I doing, I raise my eyes to the figure of librarian next to me, giving him a small smile and answering with surprisingly steady voice. "I am okay, but thanks for asking." He looks shocked, because finally after the weeks of trying I actually answered. I am too. His eyes drift to the book I am still holding, mine following his path. When my gaze falls onto the book I suddenly realise how lucky I actually am. I have food, warm bed and family waiting for me when I return home and if Aude and Nikolai can be brave, fearless and manage to stay together forever, still loving each other despite the large amount of risks I can do that too. Closing myself up to people won't help me, because I can't stay in my imaginary world forever. I can still fix this. I can still be brave. The soft sound of his voice interrupts me again, bringing me back to reality.

"You have been here for an hour and a half, I am sorry but it's late and I have to close the library for today, but I wanted to ask if since there is already dark outside, do you think I can walk you home?" I look out the window, noticing that he is true, moon accompanied by stars already decorating the night sky, the streetlights being the only thing illuminating the city. "Are you sure it was an hour and half? It felt like a whole ten years to me." I mumble quietly so he can not hear. I shake my head in response, visibly nodding, shooting him smile again. "I would love to." I answer, standing up and following him out of the library, taking the last look at the book, lying there lonely on the seat next to the window.