

Night Changes

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Night Changes

by [proseandpulse](#)

Summary

Shane is drunk, concussed, and hiding in a phone booth when he calls the only number he knows by heart.

The man who answers is not Hayden Pike.

- Translation into Русский available: [Night Changes](#) by [dkudryashka](#)

Chapter 1

Shane had lost Rose somewhere between the second vodka soda and the third man who'd recognized him.

That, on its own, wasn't unusual. Rose treated nightlife like a military exercise conducted in heels: vanish, reappear, hand someone a cigarette they hadn't realized they needed, acquire gossip, repeat. Under normal circumstances, Shane would have trusted the pattern. He would've stayed put, danced badly, let Rose find him when she was ready, and gone home with a headache and a handful of stories he would later insist hadn't been worth it.

These were not normal circumstances.

The club on Crescent had opened three weeks ago and already believed very deeply in itself. The facade was all gothic arches and stained glass pretension. Inside, it leaned hard into the sacramental bit: red velvet, votive candles guttering in alcoves, little carved booths along one wall that were apparently meant to suggest confessionals and in practice mostly suggested expensive places to get groped by strangers. The bass was relentless. Every surface gleamed damply in the low light, and the air smelled like incense layered over sweat, spilled gin, and the acrid bite of barkeeper's friend.

Shane had been trying to leave for the better part of twenty minutes.

The guy had started out attractive enough in the broad, interchangeable way of men who knew it. Tall. Dark hair. Teeth a shade too white. One of those men with an overconfident stillness that read as charisma from across a room and entitlement from two feet away. He'd bought Shane a drink that he hadn't asked for, leaned in too close when Shane declined it, and laughed like "no" was a flirtation rather than a complete sentence.

Shane had moved away. The guy had followed.

Shane had said, clearly, that he wasn't interested. The guy had put a hand on his waist anyway, thumb pressing into the hollow above Shane's hip like he'd paid for access.

Shane had removed the hand. The guy had smiled.

That had been the moment the night changed shape.

Now Shane stood near the back corridor by the bathrooms, pulse kicking too hard under his skin, scanning through bodies that all looked wrong. No Rose. No one he recognized. Someone bumped his shoulder and muttered something that might have been an apology. Someone else laughed too loudly behind him. The music hit him like a physical force.

He dug his phone out of his pocket and looked at the black screen.

Dead.

"Fuck," he said aloud.

He patted himself down for his keys out of instinct, found them, and immediately knew driving was out. His limbs had that loose, delayed quality they got when he was drunker than he liked to admit. Not blackout drunk, not even close. Just enough that the floor still felt like it shifted half a step after he did.

He turned, meaning to go back toward the front and find God, or the coat check, or the exit, or a bouncer, or anyone with an earpiece and a functioning sense of liability.

The man from the bar was standing at the mouth of the corridor, one shoulder braced against the wall, smiling like they were in on the same joke.

Shane's stomach dropped.

"There you are," the man said, pitching his voice low enough that it had to be deliberate. "You keep disappearing."

"I'm leaving."

"Okay." The smile widened. "I'll walk you out."

"No."

The man stepped aside with exaggerated courtesy, but not far enough to stop being in the way. Up close he smelled like cologne laid over stale beer, sweet and sour at once. His face had a slackness to it that didn't match the sharpness of his attention, something chemical loosening the surface while whatever drove him kept right on running underneath. "You're making this weird."

Shane laughed once, sharp and humorless. "*I'm* making this weird?"

A flicker in the man's face. Irritation, brief and ugly. "I just want to talk."

"You've been doing that all night. I'm done."

He shouldered past. The man caught his wrist.

Not hard. That was almost worse. Like he thought he didn't need to try.

Shane ripped free on reflex. "Don't fucking touch me."

A few heads turned. The music swallowed the edges of it. The man lifted both hands, palms out, playing harmless, but there was a rigidity in the gesture, a tightness around the jaw that made Shane's skin crawl.

"Jesus, okay. Sorry."

Shane backed away, then turned and pushed into the crowd before the guy could shift tactics again.

The trip from the corridor to the street should have taken thirty seconds. It took nearly three minutes. He kept catching shoulders, apologizing to people who glared, slipping on the slick strip of floor near the bar where someone had spilled something sugary and clear. He nearly went down once, caught himself on the edge of a banquette, kept going. By the time he hit the front doors, his heart was pounding so hard it blurred his vision.

Cold air slapped him full in the face.

Montreal after one in the morning was all light and no warmth. Streetlamps. Headlights. Neon bleeding across wet pavement. Crescent was still busy, but the crowd had thinned just enough that the gaps between people looked like openings for the wrong kind of attention. Laughter spilled from patios. A taxi slid past with music rattling behind its windows. Somewhere farther down the block, sirens wailed and then dissolved.

Shane got three steps from the club before he realized he had no plan at all.

His phone was dead. His car keys dug into his palm, useless. Rose could be anywhere. The people smoking outside the club looked like exactly the sort who would stare if he made a scene and talk about it to a tabloid tomorrow. His own face, if anyone bothered to look too closely, was recognizable enough to become a problem.

He kept walking.

He told himself that was all he was doing. Walking. Getting distance. Getting to a brighter street, a hotel lobby, a gas station, anywhere with fluorescent lights and a charging cable and maybe a lock on the bathroom door. His oxfords struck unevenly against the pavement. Once he clipped the curb and had to windmill a hand out to steady himself.

A block down, he risked a glance over his shoulder.

The man had come outside.

He was half a block back, not hurrying. Watching. Keeping pace.

Shane's mouth dried out instantly.

He turned the corner without fully deciding to. The street narrowed. Fewer people. Quieter storefronts, most of them dark. A hair salon. A boutique with mannequins stripped down to pale torsos in the window. The club noise fell away behind him until all he could hear was the slap of his own footsteps and, a second later, another set answering them.

No. No, absolutely not.

He walked faster.

The footsteps behind him did too.

Shane broke into a run.

It was a bad idea. He knew it as soon as he did it. The pavement lurched under him, his balance a fraction behind the rest of his body, his ankles loose in shoes that weren't built for this. He made it maybe fifteen yards before the toe of his oxford caught on a broken lip of sidewalk. His ankle turned. His body pitched forward.

He landed on both hands and one knee, the side of his forehead cracking against the concrete edge of the curb.

Light burst white behind his eyes.

For one stunned second he stayed there, palms burning, ears ringing, the world reduced to cold stone and the taste of blood where he'd bitten the inside of his cheek. Then panic flooded back in, hot and absolute.

He shoved himself up.

His jeans were torn at the knee. His hands stung in bright, specific lines. Something warm was collecting at his temple.

Behind him, the footsteps quickened.

Shane ran again.

He barely knew where he was. The street opened onto another, then another, each one looking only slightly different from the last. Shuttered storefronts, black windows, parked cars slick with reflected light. He took the first turn he saw and felt something crack loose in his chest when he spotted the phone booth.

It stood on the corner like something left behind by accident, glass walled and ugly, lit from above by a jaundiced yellow bulb. Shane lunged for it, yanked the door open hard enough that it bounced off the frame, and all but fell inside. He slammed it shut behind him and jammed the lock.

A second later he was breathing against the glass, one hand braced on it, scanning the street.

Empty.

No. Not empty.

Down the block, under the diluted halo of a streetlamp, the man from the club stopped and looked directly at the booth.

Shane made a sound he would later deny making.

He dug through his pockets with shaking hands. Wallet, keys, a crumpled receipt, coins. Thank god for cash. He grabbed the receiver, nearly dropped it, fumbled two coins into the slot, and stared at the keypad.

There was exactly one number he knew by heart.

He dialed it wrong the first time.

He hung up, swore, wiped his hand on his jeans, and dialed again.

The line rang once.

Twice.

Someone picked up on the third ring with a voice like gravel and no patience whatsoever.

"Кто, нахуй, это?! It's 1:34 in the fucking morning."

Shane blinked. "What?"

On the other end of the line, a rustle of sheets. Movement. "Who is this?"

Shane clutched the receiver harder. "Hayden, it's Shane. I fucked up, please don't hang up, my phone's dead and I-"

"I'm not Hayden."

The accent registered a beat late. Russian. Deep and blunt and very, very real.

Shane shut his eyes for one useless second. "What do you mean you're not Hayden?"

"I mean," the man said, with forced patience, "that my name is not Hayden."

"What?"

"Who. Is. This."

Shane laughed once, because of course this would happen tonight, because apparently the universe had gotten bored with subtlety. "Are you messing with me? Dude, there's a guy fucking following me and I don't have my phone and I'm too drunk to drive and if this is some kind of joke-"

The voice on the other end changed completely. Sleep vanished from it. "Wait. Slow down. Who's following you?"

"I don't fucking know!"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know!"

"Helpful."

"I was at that new club on Crescent, the one that looks like a basilica designed by a pervert, and there was this guy and I thought he was just annoying, but then he touched me and wouldn't stop and I left and now he's following me and I'm in a fucking phone booth because apparently it's 1998."

Silence.

Then: "Can you see him now?"

Shane looked.

The man was still under the streetlight. Watching. Not advancing. Yet.

"Yeah," Shane whispered. The word snagged halfway out. "Yeah. He's down the street."

The stranger swore under his breath in Russian. Shane didn't know the words, but he knew the shape of them. Fabric rustled again. A door opened. Footsteps. Then the faint jingle of keys.

"All right," the man said. "Stay on the line. Tell me exactly where you are."

"I just told you, I don't know where I am."

"What street?"

"I don't know."

A car door slammed on the other end. Engine turning over. "What do you see?"

Shane twisted, taking in the intersection through smeared glass. "A dépanneur with the lights off. A salon. There's a mural with- fuck, I can't tell, an angel? A pigeon? I don't know."

The man let out a breath that sounded almost like a laugh and somehow made Shane want to bite him. "You are very bad at this."

"I'm concussed!"

"I'm not convinced you're qualified to diagnose that."

"I hit my head!"

"That, yes."

The engine revved. "You said the new club on Crescent. The one with the confession booths?"

"The ones he tried to force me into? Yeah. That one."

"Good. I know it." A pause. "Five minutes."

Shane stared at the receiver. "What?"

"I'm on my way."

The man under the streetlight started walking.

Shane's vision narrowed to a hard bright tunnel. "Fuck. Fuck, he's moving."

"How far away?"

"Halfway down the block."

"Is the door locked?"

"I think so."

"You think so?"

Shane yanked on the handle with his free hand. It held. "Yes."

"Good. Stay inside."

A fist cracked against the outer pane.

Shane flinched hard and stumbled backward into the narrow corner of the booth, shoulder colliding with filthy glass.

"Hey!" the man outside shouted. His face was loose with drink and anger now, all pretense stripped. "I just need to talk to you. You misunderstood."

"Fuck off!"

The man slapped the side of his fist against the glass again. "It's not like that. I'm a fan, man, I swear. I just wanted to talk."

"Does it look like I want to talk to you?"

The man rattled the door. It shuddered in its frame but didn't open.

In Shane's ear, the Russian voice cut through clean and level. "Shane."

Shane went still. That was the first time the stranger had used his name.

"Breathe."

"Oh my God," Shane said, and heard the pitch of his own panic, how close it was to turning into something helpless and unrecoverable. "What the fuck is happening right now? How is this real?"

"Shane."

He dragged air into his lungs. It felt thin. Useless.

Outside, the man's expression soured. "If you're going to be a dick about it."

His fist hit the glass again, harder this time. A spiderweb crack jumped in one corner.

Shane folded instinctively tighter into himself.

The Russian voice lost whatever softness it had possessed. "Listen to me carefully. Is he alone?"

Shane forced himself to look. "Yes."

"Good."

"Good?"

"Better one than two."

That was not, in any universe, reassuring.

A second blow struck the booth.

Then the street went white.

Headlights slewed around the corner too fast, high and clean, washing the whole block in hard brilliance. Tires screamed against wet pavement. A low, sleek sports car came to a stop half on the curb and half in the street with the kind of violence that suggested the driver had never once in his life been told no by a machine and accepted it.

The driver's door flew open.

The man who got out moved with terrifying economy. Tall. Broad through the shoulders. Dark coat unbuttoned over a t-shirt, hair a copper tumble of curls pushed back by one impatient hand. He crossed the distance in six long strides.

The guy from the club barely had time to turn before the stranger punched him in the face.

Not the wild swing of inflated heroics. A clean, brutal right hook that landed with a sound Shane felt in his teeth.

The man went sprawling.

Shane made a shocked noise and fumbled with the booth door. It stuck for half a second, then gave. He lurched out into the cold just as the stranger planted himself between Shane and the man on the ground.

The guy from the club tried to push up on one elbow. The stranger hit him again. Shorter this time. More instructional.

The man stayed down.

Satisfied, the stranger stepped back and shook out his hand once, flexing his fingers. Then he turned.

Even in the streetlight, even with adrenaline making everything unreal at the edges, he was difficult to look at directly. Not because he was pretty, though he was, in a sharp, unfair way. Pale eyes. Severe cheekbones. Mouth made for bad ideas. But there was a composure to him that had nothing to do with stillness and everything to do with density, as though the air around him had simply agreed to organize itself differently. He looked like the sort of man who came with consequences and knew it.

He took one step toward Shane, then stopped. Lifted both hands, palms visible.

"Shane?"

Shane swallowed. "Not Hayden?"

For the first time, the man smiled.

It altered him. Not softened, exactly. Just made him look briefly less like a weapon.

"No," he said. "I'm Ilya."

The man on the pavement groaned something incoherent.

Ilya didn't take his eyes off Shane. "Can you walk?"

"What?"

"Can. You. Walk."

"Yes."

"Good." He tipped his head toward the car. "Come on."

That, bizarrely, was the moment Shane started laughing.

It came out breathless and frayed and a little hysterical. Ilya watched him for half a second like he was deciding whether this was a problem.

"Later," Ilya said. "Breakdown later. Car now."

Shane obeyed.

The interior smelled like leather and cold air and something aromatic underneath. The seats were warm, as though the car had known he was coming and had the good grace to get ready. Shane sat down too fast, then winced as all his scrapes announced themselves at once. His palms burned. His knee throbbed. His temple felt sticky.

Ilya got in, locked the doors, and pulled away from the curb before the man on the sidewalk could prove unexpectedly resilient.

For a minute, neither of them said anything.

Shane was aware, in disconnected fragments, of the city sliding past outside. Storefronts. Brake lights. Neon on wet pavement. The shaking in his hands beginning now that he was sitting still. The elegant line of Ilya's wrist on the steering wheel. The fact that he had just gotten into a stranger's car and somehow still felt safer than he had all night.

Ilya released one hand from the wheel long enough to hold up a charging cable.

"For your phone," he said. "In case you'd like to call someone you actually know."

Shane took it. "Thank you."

Not just for the charger. They both knew that.

He plugged his phone in. The dead screen remained black for a moment, then flared weakly to life with the red slash of one percent battery. Shane stared at it without unlocking it.

At the first light, Ilya glanced over, presumably to ask for directions, and his expression changed.

He reached out automatically.

Shane flinched before he could stop himself.

Ilya's hand paused in midair and immediately withdrew. "Sorry." The apology was instant and unadorned.

Shane blinked at him.

"There's blood," Ilya said, nodding to Shane's temple. "On your forehead."

Shane touched the spot. His fingers came away red. "Oh." He leaned his head back carefully against the seat and shut his eyes for a second. "I fell."

"I assumed."

"Rude."

"But accurate."

Shane laughed, then hissed when the motion tugged at the cut over his brow. "I was running."

"You were being chased by an unwashed hooligan. You're allowed."

Shane turned his head slowly. "Did you really just call him that?"

"When I left him in the street, that was the impression he gave."

Shane laughed. "Who even talks like that?"

Ilya's mouth tipped at one corner. "People with standards."

"Interesting thing to say to the guy you just picked up from outside a club at 1:30 in the morning."

"You're not the problem here."

"That is extremely debatable."

"No." Ilya checked his mirrors, then looked back at the road. "He's the problem. You are merely drunk."

Shane smiled despite himself. "And bleeding."

"And difficult."

"I'm not difficult."

Ilya gave him a glance that suggested several rebuttals and chose the most efficient one. "You called me Hayden for a full minute."

"I was under stress."

"You're under stress now. Still not calling me Hayden."

"Your customer service voice has improved."

"I don't have a customer service voice."

"You absolutely did when I called."

Ilya looked over, dry as dust. "I answered a strange phone call in the middle of the night. In Russian."

"That's what I'm saying."

They rolled through another light.

"So," Shane said, because silence suddenly felt too intimate, "who are you, actually?"

"I already told you."

"No, you told me your first name. Not the same thing."

Ilya considered that. "Ilya Rozanov."

Shane turned toward him. "That sounds fake."

"It's not fake just because it's inconveniently dramatic."

"It sounds like the name of a guy who knows how to ruin lives in five languages."

"I only ruin lives in three."

Shane stared at him.

Ilya's expression didn't change.

Then Shane barked out a laugh. "Okay. That was good."

"I know."

There was a pause.

Then Ilya said, more lightly than the question deserved, "Any particular reason you did not call the police?"

Shane looked out the window.

City light flashed over the glass, over his own faint reflection. Ruddy cheeks. Hair disordered from wind and panic. Blood drying near his temple.

"Because I'm drunk," he said. "And because I'm Shane fucking Hollander, and I didn't think he was going to follow me for blocks."

He felt rather than saw the shift in Ilya beside him.

"I see," Ilya said.

That was all.

Oddly, it was enough.

Shane gave him directions in pieces after that. Right at the next light. Straight for three more. The building with the ugly awning on the left. By then his phone had enough life to buzz itself half-dead with missed texts from Rose and Hayden and one from his mother asking if he'd remembered the thing she'd asked him to remember, which could have been anything.

He ignored all of them.

As they stopped at a red light, Ilya glanced over again. His gaze lingered on Shane's face with an attention that had no want in it, no angle. Just the plain fact of being looked at by someone who was paying attention for its own sake.

"You should have someone check your head."

"I will."

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "You're lying."

"I'm embellishing."

"You're a terrible liar."

"You picked me up from a phone booth after hearing me panic-babble at you for ninety seconds. I think your judgment may be compromised."

"My judgment is excellent. My choices are questionable."

Shane looked at him fully then, at his profile made austere by passing light, the loose curls falling into his eyes, the composure that kept landing on the warm side of severe.

"Yeah," Shane said quietly. "I'm getting that."

Ilya's hand shifted on the wheel. Long fingers. Clean knuckles, except one now reddening where he'd hit the guy outside the booth. Shane looked at that hand for one second too long.

Ilya noticed.

"You're staring," he said.

"You punched someone for me."

"Yes."

"And you're being weirdly casual about it."

Ilya shrugged. "He was frightening you. I found it motivating."

Shane turned toward the window to hide his smile. "I'm not sure I've met anyone like you."

"You should see me when I've had some sleep."

Shane groaned. "Oh my god, I really am sorry. I must have fat fingered Hayden's number. It's kind of the only one I know by heart like that."

"I'm not sure I know any," Ilya said quietly.

Shane's building appeared ahead, familiar and looming and suddenly dear to him. He directed Ilya to the curb out front. The car eased to a stop.

For a moment neither of them moved.

The engine hummed softly. Outside, the street was quiet in the particular way cities sometimes were just before two in the morning. Not asleep, exactly, but resting one eye.

Shane unbuckled his seat belt and then, instead of opening the door, held out his hand.

"Give me your phone."

Ilya lifted an eyebrow. "Yours appears to be alive again."

"Your phone, Ilya."

A beat.

Then Ilya unlocked it and handed it over.

Shane entered his number, called his own, waited for the buzz in his palm, then handed the phone back.

Ilya looked at the screen. Then at Shane.

"Are you always so efficient?"

"I'm concussed," Shane said. "Not stupid."

"Debatable."

Shane smiled, because apparently that was what his face had decided to do around this man, and leaned across the center console before he could overthink it. He pressed a kiss to Ilya's cheek.

When he pulled back, Ilya was looking at him like the evening had tilted without warning.

"Memorize that one," Shane murmured.

Something in Ilya's expression shifted. Small. A little tender.

Shane opened the door before he could sit there long enough to ruin it. Cold air rushed in. He got one foot onto the sidewalk, then turned back.

"Thank you," he said. "For answering."

Ilya rested one arm along the wheel and looked at him with that same unnerving steadiness he'd had outside the phone booth, stripped now of irritation and distance and most of the armor.

"For you?" he said.

Like it was the simplest thing he'd ever meant.

"Anytime."

Chapter 2

Shane woke with a pounding head, a stale mouth, and the dim, immediate conviction that his body had filed some sort of formal complaint against him overnight.

He kept his eyes shut and took inventory the way trainers always told him to after a bad hit. Head. Fine, probably. Stomach. Unsteady but survivable. Hands—

He hissed and pulled them away from his face.

That woke him properly.

His palms were scraped raw in two bright, stupid crescents where the gravel had taken skin. The left was worse, the heel of his hand sticky where it had bled and dried against the pillowcase. One temple throbbed with a deep, mean ache that announced itself all at once, bruise and abrasion layered together like they'd coordinated while he'd slept. His knee, when he shifted under the sheets, joined in, less pain than opinion. A pointed reminder that he had, at some point, been running in dress shoes on wet pavement, which was exactly as dignified as it sounded.

He lay still for a moment and let the memory come back in loose, disjointed pieces.

The club. The man who wouldn't take no for an answer. His cologne, the insistence of his hand, the way the room had shrunk around Shane until the only clear thought left was *out*. The sharp, ugly jolt of fear once he realized he was being followed. Running. Falling. The phone booth, absurd and ancient, its glass fogged with his own panicked breath.

The Russian stranger who wasn't a stranger anymore.

Ilya.

Shane opened his eyes.

Grey winter light pressed at the edges of the curtains. His bedroom looked clean and curated and faintly accusatory in the late morning, everything in its proper place except him. He was still wearing last night's dress shirt, half unbuttoned and wrinkled beyond salvation. One sock on. The other presumably lost to whatever chaos had governed his arrival home, which he didn't fully remember and chose not to investigate.

He turned his head on the pillow and reached for his phone. Regretted that too. The screen lit against his vision like a personal attack.

11:47 AM. Three missed calls from Rose. One text from his mother that said *Call me when you're alive* with a period at the end, which meant she already knew something, somehow.

And there, below everything else: one unsaved number. The last call he'd received.

Shane stared at it longer than was necessary, thumb hovering uselessly over the screen. The memory of Ilya came back with inconvenient clarity once he stopped fighting it. The cold air outside the booth, the low voice on the phone that had kept him breathing when his hands wouldn't stop shaking. The smell of leather and winter and something clean in the car. The way Ilya drove with one wrist on the wheel, unhurried, like the city would wait for him. The hard line of his mouth softening by degrees whenever Shane said something too honest for his own good.

He remembered those hands. The careful way they hadn't touched him.

He remembered himself, drunk and bleeding and babbling like a disaster in a torn Ettore de Cesare shirt, and shut his eyes briefly in mortification.

Absolutely not, he thought.

He was **not** going to text the terrifying and mysterious man who had scooped him out of a public humiliation like some kind of extremely specialized emergency concierge service. He was going to get up, shower, drink water, suffer quietly in the privacy of his own home, and preserve what remained of his dignity.

His phone buzzed in his hand before he had quite settled into that decision.

Please get your head checked out if you haven't already. - Ilya

Shane stared at the message. Then he barked out a laugh and immediately regretted it. Pain flashed sharp and white behind his eyes, a punishment delivered with precision.

"Oh, fuck you," he muttered, and smiled anyway.

Good morning to you too, he typed back.

The reply came almost immediately.

Ilya: Is it?

Shane: No.

Ilya: You're delightful when you're hungover

Shane snorted, more carefully this time, and pushed himself upright against the headboard. The room tilted, then settled. He pulled the duvet up over his lap and typed with his thumbs, wincing when the scrape on his right palm caught against the screen.

Shane: Be nice to me, I'm wounded

Ilya: You make a very compelling damsel in distress

Ilya: A less charming patient, I suspect

Shane looked down at his hands. The scrapes were ugly in daylight, raw pink halfmoons dotted with dried brown at the edges, the kind of injury that looked worse than it was but still

made everyday tasks feel like personal insults. Buttoning a shirt. Gripping a coffee cup. Typing, apparently.

Shane: Pretty sure the only thing I seriously injured was my pride

Ilya: You won't know unless you Go. Get. Your. Head. Checked.

Shane laughed under his breath.

Shane: Bold of you to assume I can be bullied by punctuation this early in the morning

There was a pause. Long enough for Shane to picture him somewhere warm, functional, already dressed; probably one of those people who woke at six without resentment, and looking down at his phone with that private, severe amusement that Shane had only glimpsed once but had apparently memorized in full.

Ilya: You keep saying that

Ilya: But it's 12:30 in the afternoon

Ilya: I'm worried about your head

Shane dropped back against the pillows and buried his face in them with a groan that was only partly about the hangover. His stomach did something complicated that he refused to examine.

Butterflies, he thought with disgust. Or nausea. Probably nausea. Almost certainly nausea. He was a grown man with a head injury and a hangover and absolutely no business feeling fluttery over a text message from someone who had seen him at his actual, literal worst.

And yet.

I'm worried about your head. Concern so simple and direct. Not trying to be charming. Which was, of course, what made it charming.

Ten minutes later he checked his phone again.

Ilya: Don't make me beg.

Shane pressed his face into the pillow and made a sound that no professional athlete should ever have to account for.

The next morning, the annual Metros visit to Montreal Children's ran exactly the way it always did, which was to say on the careful edge between circus and ritual.

December had settled into the city properly by now. The kind of cold that made the air taste like metal and turned every exhale into something visible, something you could almost hold. The hospital's main entrance had been done up for the season with the particular care of people who understood what holidays looked like from inside a building you couldn't leave. Paper snowflakes in the windows, taped at waist-height. A tree in the lobby strung with ornaments that were clearly handmade: lopsided stars in gold paint, cotton ball snowmen

with crooked button eyes, a reindeer made from popsicle sticks that had one antler significantly larger than the other and was, for that reason, perfect.

By ten in the morning the lobby was already warm with bodies and noise. Volunteers in Santa hats. Camera flashes bouncing off the linoleum. Carts loaded down with wrapped gifts, their wheels squeaking on the freshly mopped floor. A security guard held the door for a teammate carrying a comically large stuffed bear, and neither of them acknowledged the absurdity, which made it funnier.

The team arrived in coordinated festive jerseys, some of them broad enough to block hallways, all of them temporarily trying to make themselves smaller. Someone from communications handed Shane a stack of signed cards and a bag full of team shirts and murmured something about photos on level three, then the oncology ward, then peds rehab. Shane nodded like he'd been listening. He hadn't, entirely. He'd been looking at the ornament tree.

This was his favorite day of the season. It always had been.

There was no game face required here. No postgame choreography, no charm manufactured for sponsors or media or donors who wanted proximity to famous men and the reflected warmth of philanthropy. Kids either liked you or they didn't. Parents either wanted a photo or they wanted you to please keep your enormous body out of the path of the IV pole, and both of those were honest responses, and Shane had always preferred honesty to performance, even when performance was easier.

A six year old with a feeding tube didn't care whether you were the captain of anything. She cared whether you would sit on the bed with her and read her a story.

Shane liked that. He'd always liked that.

He spent the first hour on autopilot in the best way, signing hats and mini sticks, crouching for photos, letting a solemn child in a knit beanie explain to him at considerable length why goalies were, as a category, mentally unwell. Shane nodded along with genuine interest; she had real data. He listened. He took a plastic cup of truly terrible coffee from a grateful father and drank it without complaint. He let a little girl with a nasal cannula and fierce opinions about Warrior over Bauer inspect his hands, and when she asked about the scrapes on his palms he told her he'd fallen while running, which was true, and she said, "Were you being chased?" which was also true, and he said, "A little bit," and she said, "By a bear?" and he said, "Close enough," and she seemed satisfied.

The hallways smelled the way hospital hallways always do, like antiseptic and recycled air and something underneath that's harder to name, something that lives in places where people are trying very hard to be brave. But layered over it today was cinnamon, inexplicably. Sugar cookies, maybe, from the activity room down the hall. Pine, real pine, from the garland someone had wound around the nurses' station. The combination shouldn't have worked, but it did.

Then he turned a corner with two gift bags hooked over one wrist and stopped so abruptly the volunteer behind him nearly walked into his back.

Ilya was halfway down the corridor.

He was in scrubs - green, embroidered at the breast pocket - with one hand in his pocket and the other pressing a tablet against his thigh while he spoke quietly to a nurse. His badge was clipped at the waist and caught the light when he shifted. He looked nothing like the man in the peacoat. He looked nothing like the owner of the low voice in a dark car. He looked settled, like someone standing in the exact place he was supposed to be, doing the thing he was built to do. The overhead fluorescents washed everyone else on the floor into the same pale, institutional sameness, but Ilya just looked present inside it; composed and purposeful, his attention on the nurse undivided.

Shane had seen him in darkness, in the sharp private glow of a car at two in the morning, backlit by the dashboard, saying *anytime* like it was a fact and not a comfort.

This was something else entirely.

Ilya in daylight. Ilya in context. Ilya with a stethoscope hanging partway out of his pocket and a tablet in his hand and a job that involved... what, exactly? Saving children's lives, apparently, because the universe had decided Shane hadn't been in enough trouble already.

He stood there. He should not have stood there. He was a professional athlete in a hallway full of cameras and kids and his own teammates, and he was standing still in the middle of all of it, staring at a doctor as though he had just walked into a glass door.

Then, as if tugged by the same dumb, inconvenient gravity that had rooted Shane to the floor, Ilya looked up.

Their eyes met. Ilya's expression didn't change. Not visibly, not in any way a camera would catch. But something behind it shifted, a flicker of recognition that was warm and private and entirely too brief, and Shane felt it land in his chest like a thumb pressed against a bruise.

The nurse beside Ilya followed his line of sight. She was somewhere in her thirties, with sharp features, her dark braid thrown over one shoulder. She had the kind of eyes that missed nothing and enjoyed everything they caught. Her gaze landed on Shane, traveled back to Ilya, and sharpened with unmistakable delight, as though she'd just been handed exactly the information she wanted.

"Oh," she breathed.

Ilya's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

"So," she said, smiling slowly, savoring it. "This is the beautiful man with freckles."

Shane, who had taken plenty of hits in his career and recovered from most of them gracefully, felt the words land and had absolutely no recovery. His brain offered nothing. His mouth offered less. He stood there, gift bags dangling from one wrist, and blinked.

The nurse looked him over once more, then added, "I was told Ilya was very brave. Is it true?"

She said *beautiful man with freckles*. Which meant Ilya had described him to someone. Which meant Ilya had described him as *beautiful*. Which meant Ilya had noticed his freckles, specifically, and mentioned them, specifically, to this woman, who was now looking at Shane with complete satisfaction, as though she had just solved a puzzle she'd been working on for days.

Heat flooded his face. Not a slow climb but a full, instantaneous betrayal, his skin deciding independently that composure was no longer an option. To cover, and badly, he blurted: "He scared off an unwashed hooligan, actually, but don't let him oversell it."

Ilya's expression shifted into the contained resignation of a man who had just realized he was trapped between two people who had already decided to be difficult together. He muttered something quick and low in Russian that Shane couldn't translate but understood perfectly in tone. Possibly asking God for patience he knew he wasn't going to receive.

"Oh, this is excellent," the nurse said, and held out a hand. "Svetlana. Long suffering friend. Occasional coworker. Witness to terrible choices."

"Shane," he said, taking it.

"Yes," she said, and her smile widened. "I know."

"Please ignore her," Ilya said to Shane. His voice was level, professional, but he'd gone faintly pink above the collar of his scrubs, and Shane caught it, and the catching felt like finding money in a coat pocket. "She becomes impossible when she has an audience."

Svetlana clasped Shane's hand in both of hers, tugged him forward until their shoulders were touching, and turned to Ilya with an expression of exaggerated, luminous innocence.

"Please can we keep him, Ilyusha?" She pressed her cheek briefly against Shane's arm. "It's Christmas."

"I'm leaving," Ilya said flatly.

"You have rounds in ten minutes."

"I'll do them from the parking lot."

Shane bit the inside of his cheek to keep from grinning. He was failing. He could feel himself failing, could feel the grin pulling at the corners of his mouth like a thread being tugged. Ilya caught the look and held it for a half second too long, and something silent passed between them. The brief, shared understanding of two people who were already in more trouble than either of them had planned for.

Then Ilya's gaze slid to the bruised scrape at Shane's temple, and his expression changed. The humor didn't leave, exactly, but something more careful moved in alongside it.

"Did you get it checked?"

Shane's grin came back at once, full and easy and slightly insufferable. "Yes, *doctor*."

"Look at it for me?" Ilya asked Svetlana, as if Shane were not standing right there in full possession of his own hearing and a recently verified clean bill of health.

Shane squawked. There was no other word for it. "*I just said—*"

"I heard you." Ilya was already turning back toward the nurses' station, tablet in hand. "Sveta?"

Svetlana patted Shane's arm and the conspiratorial warmth of the gesture made something in Shane's chest crack open a little. "I'll take care of him," she said to Ilya and gestured her head down the hall. "Go."

Ilya went. He walked down the corridor without looking back, steady and unhurried, the way he seemed to do everything, and Shane watched him go and thought, very clearly and very unhelpfully: *Oh no*.

Svetlana, still holding his arm, glanced up at him. "You're staring."

"Am I?"

"You are. It's all right. He's worth staring at." She patted him once more and released him. "Come. Let me see your head, and you can tell me how he rescued you. He was very modest about it, which means it was probably very dramatic."

By the time the team visit wrapped, Shane's cheeks hurt from smiling and one of the rookies had been conned into wearing a tiara by a six year old monarch in orthopedics who had negotiated the deal with a savvy that suggested a future in contract law. Shane had signed approximately four hundred items. His coffee had gone cold twice. A toddler had fallen asleep against his shoulder during a group photo and he'd sat perfectly still for eleven minutes rather than wake her, which his teammates would never let him forget and which he would do again without hesitation.

He was halfway through the lobby with the others, pulling on his coat, when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

He didn't check it.

He made it to the car. Made it through the drive home. Made it through the door, coat off, shoes off, into his bedroom with the specific, deliberate mission of proving to absolutely no one that he was not the kind of person who checked his phone immediately.

Then he checked his phone.

It was from Ilya.

No message. Just a photograph.

Svetlana, curled like a cat in what appeared to be an office chair, wrapped in a Metros fleece blanket that she had clearly stolen from the stack of team merch. She was half asleep, mouth slightly open, her braid trailing over the armrest. On the table beside her, amid a scatter of

medical journals and someone's abandoned coffee cup, Shane's autograph was visible on a piece of paper, the one Svetlana had produced from seemingly nowhere during the head inspection, along with a pen and an expression that made clear refusal was not among his options.

Shane sank onto the edge of his bed and looked at the photo for a long time. Not at Svetlana, though she was wonderful. At the edges of it. The cluttered desk. The worn chair. The way the blanket was tucked around her with a carelessness that was obviously anything but. Someone had wrapped her up before taking this photo, and Shane knew who, and the knowing sat warm and heavy in his chest like a stone pulled from a fire.

His thumbs moved.

Shane: So you neglected to mention you're a pediatric surgeon

Ilya: You neglected to mention you terrorize children in team issued outerwear

Shane: They loved me

Ilya: One asked if you knew Tuukka Rask

Shane: Unbelievable betrayal from your entire floor, honestly

Ilya: She's seven. She contains multitudes

Shane: I'm choosing to forgive her only because she had excellent opinions about goalie pads

Shane set the phone down. Picked it up. Set it down again. Picked it up.

Shane: Coffee tomorrow?

He watched the typing bubble appear. Disappear. Appear again. The tiny animation had no business being that stressful.

Ilya: Is that the head injury talking

Shane smiled. Slowly. The kind of smile that arrives before you can decide whether to let it.

Shane: No

Shane: Maybe

Ilya: Then ask me again when you're medically cleared

Shane: I'm trying to schedule an appointment with a hot doctor right now but he's being annoyingly difficult about it

The reply took longer this time.

Ilya: You like it

Shane grinned at the screen with all the dignity of a man who had hit his head two days ago and learned nothing of value from the experience.

Shane: You're insufferable

Ilya: Tomorrow. 7:30? I have to be in by 9

That made him pause.

He looked at the clock. Thought about the hallway, the scrubs, the tablet pressed against Ilya's thigh. The fact that he had only ever seen him in motion toward something necessary. The car, the phone booth, the nurse's station, the next thing that needed him. Ilya's life had a weight to it that Shane could feel even from here, the kind of seriousness that came from spending your days with your hands inside the problem.

7:30 meant Ilya would have to wake up earlier than he already did. 7:30 meant he was making room.

Shane: Yes

Shane: I have a flight at 11

Ilya: Your life sounds exhausting

Shane: Seriously? You save tiny lives. It's deranged. Who allowed that?

Ilya: Nobody. I did it anyway.

Somewhere across the city, a pediatric surgeon with steady hands and a severe mouth and a habit of describing near strangers to his coworkers using the word *beautiful* was probably already setting an alarm, or reviewing a chart, or doing whatever impossibly competent thing he did with his evenings.

Shane set his phone on the nightstand, screen down, and stared at the ceiling.

Tomorrow. 7:30. Coffee with a stranger who had driven across the city for him without being asked. Who tucked a blanket around his best friend and sent Shane a photo like it was nothing.

Shane pressed his scraped palms together, felt the sting, and smiled at the ceiling like an idiot.

He couldn't wait.

Chapter 3

Ilya had always wanted to help.

He remembers dirt under his fingernails at the dacha and his mother laughing softly, handing him tasks too minor to matter and therefore perfect for a little boy who wanted desperately to be useful. *Hold this. Hand me the basket? Thank you, Ilyushenka. Slowly, don't step on the dill.*

Later, when he was old enough to stand at the kitchen counter without being watched every second, he'd been allowed to stir with the big wooden spoon, as long as he used both hands. He remembers golden honey warmed on the stove and glimmering crumbs of burnt sugar on the kitchen floor. His mother making medovik in careful layers while he stayed at her elbow under the pretense of wanting to help, but mostly in the hope that good behavior might earn him first crack at the trimmings.

It had been some years after that, when he'd stumbled into her room one dark January morning, bleary eyed and late for school. He remembers being unable to wake her, the shape of panic before he'd had language for it, and how he had again wanted, fiercely, desperately, to help her then too. But all he could offer was the useless ache of having been twelve years old and full of want and not nearly enough power.

So he took it for himself. Four years of undergrad in Toronto, four in Montreal after that. Another four during his residency followed by an extra two, once he discovered his love for pediatric surgery.

Eighteen years had passed between the boy in Krasnodar and the surgeon at the table. He'd earned every one of them.

It suited him. Surgery was concrete. Honest. A problem in the body that could be located, handled, and repaired. Bloodwork could lie. Symptoms could distract. Imaging could suggest ten different things simultaneously. But once you were in, once the body opened under your hands and the truth of it presented itself there, you could do something.

Ilya could help.

It still surprised him a little that one of those hands had ended up breaking a creep's nose on a random street corner in the middle of the night in Downtown Montreal because a frightened hockey player had sounded too scared over a pay phone.

His hand was fine. A little stiffness across the knuckles the next day, nothing he couldn't work through. Which was fortunate, because he'd spent most of that day and the one after that in the OR and walked upstairs afterward to find the same hockey player standing in the hospital corridor with gift bags in one hand and Ilya's composure in the other.

That part had been Svetlana's fault, if he was assigning blame fairly.

When she'd asked about his hand he had intended, very simply, to lie. *Hit the bag wrong. Knocked a doorframe.* One of the transparent things men said when they didn't feel like explaining themselves. Instead he had said, before his dignity could intervene: *he's going to ruin me.*

Svetlana had stared at him, confused. *Who?*

And because apparently humiliation could always be refined further, Ilya had heard himself answer: *The beautiful man with freckles.*

He hadn't been allowed to live it down for even one full day.

Now it was seven in the morning on a Tuesday in December, and the beautiful man with freckles had asked him to get coffee. When Ilya had said 7:30 - a truly ridiculous hour to go on a date, but quite literally the only one he had free this week - Shane hadn't hesitated. Hadn't suggested something more civilized. He'd just said *yes*.

Interest, then. With enough spine to inconvenience itself.

Ilya wasn't used to this. He lived in a profession that wore strange hours like a second skin. Normal people got quietly put off by his schedule. Not always dramatically, sometimes just with a faint shift in tone. A suggestion for *some other time*, some abstract *later* that really meant *never*, after a while.

He'd learned to hear withdrawal before it happened. Most people wanted to be loved in ordinary hours, on a civilized schedule, with texts answered promptly and weekends protected from catastrophe. He didn't resent them for it. He simply no longer expected anyone to bend.

Shane Hollander had bent.

And Ilya, being Ilya, was a little suspicious of things he wanted. Not tortured about it, but disciplined. He hadn't woken up thinking *I'm excited for my date*. He'd woken up thinking about the newborn with bowel atresia he'd treated three days ago, the fact that he had light clinic hours today but a mountain of admin to get through before another OR day after that. He could give Shane exactly one hour if he was efficient, and there was no reason to make more of it than that.

Then he'd spent twelve full minutes standing in front of his closet deciding between two sweaters.

Svetlana, from the doorway of his bedroom, made a sound of such concentrated amusement that he considered murder.

"Should I have taken you shopping?" she asked.

Ilya turned, a gray sweater in one hand, and the same sweater but in navy in the other. "You've done enough, witch."

She smiled, entirely unbothered, and came farther in. She was still in sweats and one of his old McGill hoodies, hair in a braid over one shoulder, tea mug warming both hands. She had stayed over after their late shift and commandeered his guest room with the entitlement of old friends who had seen each other cry in call rooms and vowed never to mention it again.

He kissed her cheek as she passed. It softened the insult, though not by much. "I don't know what I'm doing," he admitted.

"I do." She set her mug on the dresser and went to the closet with complete confidence; she had long ago accepted that all of his personal crises would eventually become hers. After a moment she pulled out a chambray button down and then, from the upper shelf, a slate cashmere sweater. "You are getting dressed," she said, "to meet the man you're going to marry."

"It's just coffee."

"With the beautiful man with freckles."

Ilya groaned and fell back onto the bed, forearm over his eyes. The mattress gave under him with a soft sigh. "It's coffee with a concussed hockey player I met *two days ago*."

"And yet," Svetlana said, "you're choosing knitwear like you're sitting for a portrait."

He dragged his arm away and glared up at her. She looked down at him with infuriating serenity. "I saw the way you looked at him," she said. "And I saw the way he looked at you."

"Groundbreaking. News at eleven. Humans have eyes."

She waited.

He wilted. "I was tired."

"You were smitten."

"I was concussed by proximity."

She rolled her eyes. "This is why you're never invited to movie nights anymore. No sense of romance or whimsy."

He threw a pillow at her. She caught it without effort.

"I punched a stranger for a cute boy at 1:30 in the morning and now my suspension needs work."

Svetlana hummed, considering. "I bet Hollander can help service your undercarriage."

"SVETLANA."

She laughed so hard she had to grab the dresser.

"I'm revoking your access to my home."

"You'll forget by noon."

"Leave."

Instead she came closer, laid the sweater across his lap, and looked at him carefully. The joking went first. It always did, when she wanted to tell him something true. "Ilyusha." Her hand was soft on his cheek. "You're allowed to want things."

He looked down at the sweater. Fine knit. Soft hand. A little too nice for clinic hours, which was exactly why he shouldn't wear it to get coffee and exactly why he would.

"Especially hot hockey players who already look at you like you personally invented rescue," she added, rolling her eyes. "Now go. Be handsome and devastating. And text me after, or I'll assume he bored you to death and I'll have to avenge you."

By 7:28, Ilya was standing just inside the cafe doors with cold air still clinging to his coat and the smell of espresso and burnt sugar settling around him.

The place was larger than he'd expected. High ceilings, chandeliers hung from old beams, their light the color of warm brass against the dark wood. Tall windows awash in the blue of early winter dawn, their lower corners filmed with condensation that caught the light in slow rivulets. A woman in a camel coat typed at a laptop near the wall, her coffee untouched and cooling. Two students in parkas shared a muffin without speaking, knees touching under the table. Behind the counter, a tray of pastries had just come out warm, and the whole room smelled of butter and coffee and toasted almonds, the kind of warmth that made December feel like something you'd chosen rather than endured.

Shane was in the far corner under one of the windows, wearing sunglasses as though the existence of dawn was a personal insult he hadn't yet decided whether to litigate.

The glasses were absurd. Ilya hated them immediately. They hid too much of his face. More importantly, they interrupted the freckles.

Shane had one hand around a coffee cup and the other dismantling a croissant with slow, vindictive precision, tearing it into pieces too small to eat comfortably and arranging them on the plate like evidence. He looked very awake physically and profoundly asleep morally. His hair was still damp at the temples. A paper napkin had been folded into a small, meticulous triangle beside his cup, the kind of idle geometry people flirted with when they were nervous and unaware of it. There was a faint scrape at the heel of his hand when he reached for the plate, a pink crescent against the porcelain, and Ilya's gaze caught on it and stayed for half a second longer than it should have before he made himself look away.

Shane tipped his head back in the chair and stared at the ceiling as though he'd been personally betrayed by time itself.

So. Not a morning person.

Ilya ordered a cortado and a warmed nutella horn, and crossed the room.

"Good morning," he said.

Shane, still addressing the ceiling: "That's a contradiction and you'll never convince me otherwise."

Then he sat up, pushed the sunglasses into his hair, and smiled.

The smile did something to his face that the glasses had been actively working against. Everything opened at once, freckles across the bridge of his nose and cheeks, brown eyes warm and a little shadowed from too little rest, and a mouth that looked like it had been waiting to do exactly this since he sat down.

Ilya's lungs, traitorous and dramatic, forgot their profession.

"Hi," Shane said.

"Hi," Ilya replied, and sat down.

"You look awake."

"I am awake."

"Disgusting." Shane gave him a look over the rim of his cup. "You know, I could tell from your texts that you were a morning person."

"My texts."

"Yes."

"I don't have a textual tone."

"You absolutely do."

"Is it the same as my customer service voice?"

Shane smiled into his coffee. "No, that one's in Russian."

"That's a language, not a tone."

"I'd argue it's at least partly a tone."

Ilya laughed. It came out more easily than he'd expected, looser, and Shane's eyes tracked the sound of it with something that looked like satisfaction. "You've known me for forty-eight hours and already feel comfortable slandering an entire linguistic tradition."

"You punched someone for me. That accelerates intimacy."

The word *intimacy* landed somewhere under Ilya's ribs before it reached his brain.

Shane tore off another piece of croissant. "Also I'm right."

"What you are is impossible."

"And yet you asked me out."

"You asked *me* out."

Shane pointed one buttery finger at him. Flakes of pastry clung to his sleeve like confetti from a very small parade. "I suggested coffee. *You* set the hour. That's hostile."

"It was my only hour."

"I figured." The finger lowered. Shane looked at him steadily. "That's why I said yes."

Something about the way he said it made Ilya want to set his cup down very carefully so his hands had something to do. He tore off half his nutella horn instead and nudged the plate across the table. "Eat this. Your croissant looks like it offended you personally."

Shane eyed it suspiciously. "Is this charity?"

"Harm reduction."

Shane glanced at the wreckage on his own plate. "It knows what it did."

"You tore it apart like it cheated at cards."

"I like to understand what I'm dealing with." He picked up the nutella horn and took a bite, and his whole expression changed. He chewed slowly, closed his eyes for a second, and when he opened them he looked personally wounded. "Okay. That's obscene."

"It's a pastry."

"It's a revelation. Why did you let me have this? I can never eat a croissant again."

"You were murdering your croissant," Ilya reminded him. "I intervened."

"And ruined me for all future pastry." Shane took another bite, smaller, deliberate, like he was trying to make it last. He had chocolate at the corner of his mouth and hadn't noticed. "You're dangerous."

Ilya eyed the chocolate on Shane's lip and didn't mention it.

"And you're staring," Shane said.

"You have chocolate on your face."

Shane wiped at the wrong side.

"Other side."

He tried again. Missed again.

"You're getting further away."

"Well, I can't see my own face, so."

Ilya almost reached across the table. Almost. His hand moved an inch off the surface before he caught himself, fingers curling back. Shane saw it - the start and the stop - and something in his expression shifted.

"You can touch me," Shane said quietly.

The words settled between them. Shane said them simply, without bravado, but Ilya heard what was underneath: someone who'd had his boundaries ignored two nights ago choosing, in full daylight, to be vulnerable for someone else. The size of that trust was almost too much to hold at 7:45 in the morning in a cafe that smelled like toasted almonds.

Ilya studied him. The ambient noise of the room seemed very far away. Then, because the honesty of the moment needed air around it, he said, "Your first date protocol. You mentioned a... what was it? 'Standard information exchange'?"

Shane accepted the pivot with grace, as though he understood that some moments needed to be approached from the side. He wiped his face with a napkin and leaned back. "Right. Age. Family. Deep dark secrets. Whether you've ever joined a cult."

"I've never joined a cult."

"Exactly what someone in a cult would say."

"I'm thirty-six."

"I knew that one."

"Then ask better questions."

Shane's mouth twitched. "Family?"

Ilya looked down at the surface of his cortado, the thin crema already breaking. "My mother died when I was twelve. My father five years ago, though not in any way worth romanticizing. I have no siblings who care to claim me. I have Svetlana, which is a different administrative burden entirely."

Shane's smile faded into something quieter. "She seems very attached to you," he said.

"She's professionally committed to my humiliation."

"That can be a kind of love."

"Yes. Unfortunately."

Shane nodded, accepting it. "I'm twenty-nine. No siblings. My parents are alive, loud, and too interested in my love life." He paused for a moment and then asked, "Favorite color?"

"This is absurd." Ilya pointed out.

"You're participating beautifully." Shane reassured him.

Ilya sighed. "Blue."

Shane brightened. "What kind?"

"What *kind* of blue?"

"There are many."

"Are you a descendant of Bob Ross? Because if yes, you should lead with that."

"Answer the question."

Ilya thought of winter twilight over Moscow. The hour just before the dark completed itself, when the snow caught the last of the sun and held it. Blue-white briefly glowing lavender and peach before the cold took everything back.

"Glacier," he said. "Snow in the right light at sunset. When it goes blue and purple and pink all at once." He shrugged. "You?"

"Green."

He shouldn't have smiled at the certainty in Shane's voice. He did.

"What kind?" Ilya asked cheekily.

"Thank you for asking." Shane looked pleased. "Phthalo green. Like when the sun hits a wave just right and it looks like light through a bottle."

"Very specific."

"I have very specific taste."

Shane said it lightly, but his eyes didn't leave Ilya's, and the sentence sat between them carrying more weight than its words.

For a moment neither of them spoke. The cafe had filled around them; more coats, more cold air through the door each time it opened, the noise thickening into the steady hum of a room that had woken up. Their table still felt private. A country of two with a border made of pastry crumbs and steaming coffee.

Shane reached for his coffee and winced.

Small and involuntary, a flicker across his face as his palm closed around the cup, the injury catching against the hot ceramic. He corrected immediately, shifted his grip and moved on,

but Ilya's hands were already responding before his brain had consulted, the way they always did when he saw pain: cataloging, assessing, the instinct so deeply ingrained it preceded thought.

The trauma to Shane's palms. He'd seen it in the corridor at the hospital, pink and raw against the tiny hockey sticks and overfilled gift bags. He could partially see the scabs now, the skin pulling itself closed with the slow patience of tissue that had been asked to do something slightly unreasonable.

Ilya held out his hand. "May I?"

Shane gazed back at him. The noise of the cafe filled the pause; milk steaming, a spoon against china, the front door admitting another gust of cold air. But inside the pause it was very quiet.

"Your abrasions," Ilya said. He kept his voice even, clinical, as though the request were routine and not something his pulse had strong opinions about. "The scrapes. Can I see?"

Ilya could read reluctance; he saw it every day in patients deciding whether to trust him. Shane's hesitation held a different weight. Like he was deciding how much the gesture meant before he agreed to it.

Then he set his coffee down and placed both of his hands in Ilya's, palms up.

The scrapes had closed over the past two days, pink and tight, the skin knitting itself back together with the slow diligence of tissue doing its job. The left palm was worse with a long scab running from the heel of his hand to the base of his fingers, the edges dry and clean but still tender looking. The right was smaller, a rough crescent that must have caught the worst of his weight when he fell. Both palms were a little swollen where the new skin pulled.

Ilya had looked at thousands of wounds. He had debrided burns on toddlers and sutured lacerations on screaming six year olds and held a premature infant's entire hand inside the circle of his thumb and forefinger. His hands didn't shake. His hands were the steadiest thing about him.

His hands were not entirely steady now.

He touched the edge of Shane's left palm, just below the gash, where the skin was whole. Carefully, with the pads of two fingers, the way he'd check the margins of a healing wound on a patient, except no patient had ever made the air leave his body like this.

Shane's fingers twitched but didn't close. He held still. He let Ilya look.

Ilya turned Shane's hand slightly, angling it toward the window light. The cut was superficial; no signs of infection, no deeper damage, only the raw slow work of healing. He already knew this. He'd known it from across the table. The examination wasn't the point and they both knew that too.

He moved to the right hand, to the crescent shaped scrape. He traced the unbroken skin along its edge, following the curve with his fingertip, and Shane inhaled, small and controlled, the kind of breath a person takes when they're trying not to react to something and failing.

"These are healing well," Ilya said. His voice sounded strange to himself. Too careful.

"Good to know." Shane's voice wasn't much better.

Ilya's thumb was resting against the base of Shane's palm, against the smooth skin below the wound, and he could feel Shane's pulse there. Or maybe he was imagining it. Maybe it was his own pulse translating itself through his fingertips the way it sometimes did in the OR when the room went quiet and the only thing left was the body under his hands and the work.

But this wasn't the OR. This was a public cafe table. This was a man who had been grabbed two nights ago by someone who didn't ask, and who was now sitting perfectly still with his hands open and offered because Ilya had *asked*, and the difference between those two things was so vast that Ilya felt it restructure something in his chest.

He should have let go.

Shane curled his fingers around Ilya's.

He had no real grip; the scabs wouldn't allow it. Instead he laid one hand flat over Ilya's, palm down, fingers extended so the healing skin didn't fold or stretch. His grasp was loose and warm and careful in a way that had nothing to do with caution and everything to do with the kind of attention Shane paid to things that mattered to him. Ilya had watched him with the children at the hospital. He'd moved with the same deliberateness then. The same quality of *I'm here, with you*.

Ilya looked at their hands on the table. Shane's over his. Four hands and a small still life of a nutella horn.

Shane's hands were warm from the coffee cup, and the heat of them against Ilya's knuckles was so absurdly good, that he had to close his eyes for a second to absorb it.

"Hi," Shane whispered, very quietly, as if they were meeting again for the first time inside this new thing.

"Hi," Ilya breathed back.

Shane smiled. It was the most defenseless thing Ilya had ever seen on a grown man's face, and Ilya had once watched a father cry while holding his daughter after a nine hour surgery, and that had also restructured him, and he was beginning to think that he was perhaps not as structurally sound as he had previously assumed.

Shane glanced down at their hands, then at Ilya's wrist. He turned it slightly - still holding on, still careful - until the watch face was visible.

"What time do you have to be at the clinic?"

"Nine."

"It's 8:17."

"Yes."

"So we have-"

"Fifteen minutes. Approximately."

Shane looked toward the window. The sky had lightened to the pale, noncommittal gray that passed for morning in Montreal in December. Snow was still falling in tiny indecisive grains, refusing to commit to real accumulation.

"Walk with me?" Shane said.

Ilya should have said no. Clinic hours started in forty-three minutes. He had charts to review, a preop note to finalize, a mountain of admin he'd been avoiding for the better part of a week. Svetlana would cover for him if he was late, but she would also never, ever let him hear the end of it, and the price of her loyalty was a lifetime of ammunition willingly supplied.

"Yes," he said.

They stood. Shane's hands released his and Ilya felt the loss of it like a change in temperature. They gathered coats and cups and Shane crammed the last bite of nutella horn into his mouth with a total absence of dignity that suggested he had forgotten anyone was watching.

Ilya was watching.

Outside, the cold hit immediately, sharp enough to make their eyes water. Shane zipped his coat to the collar and shoved his hands into his pockets, and for a moment they were just two men on a sidewalk in the early gray, breath visible, shoulders nearly touching.

The sidewalk was dusted with a thinly packed snow that hadn't been walked on yet, and their footsteps left the first prints. Somewhere nearby a plow scraped against asphalt, and a shop owner was salting her front step, the crystals scattering bright against the dark concrete. The air smelled like wet pavement and exhaust and, faintly, bread from somewhere they couldn't see.

Shane pulled his right hand back out of his pocket.

He didn't look at Ilya. He didn't say anything. He just extended his hand, low and to the side, and opened it. Carefully, fingers spread, palm facing down so the scrapes weren't exposed to the cold.

He crooked his pinky.

Ilya looked at it. Glanced at Shane, who was staring straight ahead with a determined expression, as though he had decided to be brave and was also considering the possibility that

he was actually being ridiculous.

Ilya looped his pinky through Shane's.

It was a small thing. It shouldn't have mattered the way it did. It was one finger. A point of contact so minor it would be invisible to anyone passing. Two men walking close on a cold morning, hands at their sides, nothing to see. But Ilya could feel the warmth of Shane's finger against his, and the slight tension where Shane held on without closing his hand, and the whole frigid street narrowed to that single point of contact, that one curved finger, and Ilya thought, *I'm in so much trouble*.

They walked. Not toward anything in particular, just along the block, past a boulangerie that wasn't open yet, its window still dark but the air near its door already warm and yeasty, a pharmacy with its lights flickering on, and a bus shelter advertising something in French that neither of them bothered to read.

The snow had committed to falling now, small and steady, catching on their shoulders and in Shane's hair.

"Kozinaki," Ilya said, after a while.

Shane glanced at him. "What?"

"You asked me about my favorite snack earlier and I evaded. Kozinaki. Like a nut brittle. Any kind, but the ones with sunflower seeds are best. Also, medovik."

"The cake?"

Ilya turned to Shane, surprised. "You know it?"

"I had it once. Not made by a Russian."

"Then you haven't had it properly."

"Sounds like a threat when you say it like that."

"More like a promise."

Shane's pinky tightened against his. Just slightly, a reflex, as though his hand had heard the word *promise* before his brain had decided what to do with it.

"My mom makes this thing," he said. "Butter tarts. They're disgusting and they're perfect. They have, like, an unreasonable amount of sugar, and the filling is basically caramel that hasn't decided whether it wants to be a liquid or a solid, and I've been eating them since I was four and I'll fight anyone who puts raisins in them."

"Raisins?"

"It's a divisive issue."

"In a butter tart."

"I told you. Divisive."

Ilya laughed. The sound came out warm and visible in the cold air, and Shane looked at him sideways and smiled, a little crooked, a little stunned, as if he kept being surprised by how easy this was.

A city bus hissed past, close enough that the slush spray nearly caught their shoes, and Shane pulled Ilya half a step closer by the pinky without seeming to think about it. They walked the rest of the block like that, slightly closer than before, their breath making small clouds that tangled together and dissolved.

They rounded the corner and the hospital came into view down the block. Ilya felt it, the shift from person to professional, the day asserting itself, the machinery of his life starting to hum. But today the shift came on more slowly. It was reluctant, like it was dragging its feet.

"That's you," Shane said, nodding toward the building.

"That's me."

They stopped. Facing each other now, their fingers releasing as they turned. Shane's hand fell to his side, and Ilya's hand remembered the warmth for several seconds after it was gone.

Shane shoved both hands back in his pockets. Rocked once on his heels.

"Sunday," he said.

"Sunday?"

"Dinner."

"Okay."

"I'm just confirming." Shane's mouth was doing something it clearly couldn't help, pulling upward at one corner. "In case the past forty-five minutes gave you second thoughts."

"They gave me several thoughts," Ilya said. "None of them second."

Shane ducked his head. When he looked back up the color was high under his freckles, and snow was catching in his hair, and he looked like a vision Ilya would have to be very disciplined not to think about for the rest of the day.

He wasn't going to be disciplined about this. He already knew.

"Your sweater," Shane said.

"What about it?"

"Do you always wear Armani to see sick children?"

Ilya looked down at the cashmere. Looked back up. "Yes."

"Liar."

"Obviously."

Shane reached out and fixed Ilya's collar where the wind had turned it. Two fingers, a brief adjustment, the touch proprietary and gentle in equal measure. His hand lingered for a quarter second at the lapel of Ilya's coat, thumb resting against the wool. Then he stepped back and reached for his sunglasses.

Ilya looked at them with open distaste. Shane laughed. "What is that face?"

"Offense. They interfere with your face," Ilya said, before he thought better of himself.

Shane paused. "What?"

"The glasses. They get in the way of your face. You look better without them."

Shane blinked. Then he started laughing like it was startled out of him, the kind that arrived with his whole body. "That is the nicest rude thing anyone's ever said to me."

"It wasn't that nice."

"It was a little nice." Shane pulled the glasses down over his eyes anyway, grinning. "But I have a flight and the sun exists and I'm not going to walk through an airport squinting because a handsome surgeon has opinions about my eyewear."

"A handsome surgeon?" Ilya repeated.

"Don't."

"I won't." He would. Later. Over text. He was going to make Shane regret every adjective.

A car horn sounded up the block. Shane turned, raised a hand to the driver, and turned back.

"Favorite snack was a bad question, by the way."

"Why?"

"Because now I'm going to spend the next five days thinking about you feeding me cake."

Shane was already walking backward as he said it, hands in his pockets, grinning, putting distance between them with reluctant momentum, like he was swimming against a current. Snow caught in his hair and on the shoulders of his coat. "Sunday," he called.

"Sunday," Ilya promised.

Shane turned and walked toward the car. Ilya watched him go, easy and balanced even on icy sidewalk, head bent against the wind, sunglasses on, mouth still shaped around a smile he hadn't quite finished.

Ilya turned toward the hospital.

He was halfway to the main doors before he realized he was smiling at nothing in public and hadn't stopped since he'd left the street corner.

Svetlana texted before he'd cleared the revolving doors.

Well?

The lobby was warm and bright around him with an institutional warmth that smelled like floor cleaner and coffee and the start of a twelve hour day. He unzipped his coat. Checked the time. 8:48. He was going to be a few minutes late to clinic and he didn't particularly care.

He typed: *Troubling.*

Three dots, instantly.

How troubling?

Ilya thought about Shane's hands in his, palms up. Shane's finger wrapped around his on a frozen sidewalk. The way Shane had said *hi* like they were starting over inside something new.

He wrote: *Potentially fatal. Bring me coffee at eleven to discuss*

Then, after a moment: *We can keep him.*

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The elevator played music when the doors opened. A single clear tone, something between a chime and the first note of a phrase that never resolved. It stayed suspended for half a second, clear as struck crystal, and then the doors parted, and Ilya stepped into a foyer that smelled like clean linen and eucalyptus.

He paused in what was, apparently, a mud room in the sky, too well appointed to belong to something as ordinary as taking off your shoes. The space was small and enclosed with a bench along one wall, coat hooks, a shoe rack holding one pair of sneakers and one pair of oxfords arranged with the kind of precision that suggested they'd been placed rather than left. Storage bins tucked neatly beneath the bench. A closet to his right, closed. Everything clean, everything deliberate, everything communicating a single, very specific message: *this far, and no further, until you've been invited.*

Ilya sat on the bench and unlaced his shoes. His fingers were clumsy. Twelve hours on his feet and his hands had that post shift tremor, a low hum in the tendons that meant his body was running on willpower instead of energy. He set his sneakers beside Shane's and noticed, casually, that they were the same size. He noticed this and then immediately wished he hadn't, because it was the kind of detail that would make Svetlana say something devastating and clever, and he was too tired to defend himself, even in his own head.

The french doors to his left were heavy and substantial, the kind that made a sound when they closed. He pushed through them into a second foyer, this one wider, warmer, and anchored by a fireplace set into the facing wall. The flames were low and steady, tinted shades of blue. To his right, a den he didn't enter. To his left, the foyer gave way to the rest of the penthouse in one sweeping line of impossible square footage.

The great room unfolded in front of him and Ilya's first thought was that Shane lived inside of a lantern. Walls of glass, the city below and beyond in every direction, and the interior all dark oak and recessed light, surfaces that caught the glow and held it close. The floors were wide-plank and heated throughout, the warmth seeping through the balls of his feet. A sunken living room to his left, another fireplace, a television he doubted Shane watched much. Music was playing, low and slow, half heard.

It was beautiful. It was also, unmistakably, a fortress.

Every surface was considered. Every material chosen for how it absorbed or reflected light, how it sealed the space against the glass, how it made the outside visible without making the inside vulnerable. Shane had built himself a castle that was simultaneously transparent and impenetrable. Ilya understood that impulse. He'd built his own version of it, though his was made of complicated schedules and competence rather than glass and marble.

He walked past the living area. Past the dining room table, set for two at the far end, candles unlit.

Beyond it all, in the open kitchen with his back to the entire glittering expanse of his own life was Shane.

He was standing at the stove barefoot, in a dark henley pushed to his elbows and what appeared to be very well tailored jeans, and he was doing something with a pan that required the kind of focus that made the muscles in his forearm shift. The kitchen smelled like butter and herbs, warm and nutty and layered underneath with something sharper. A wine reduction, maybe, or shallots in the early stages of dissolving into something better than themselves.

"Hi," Shane said, without turning. "There's wine in the fridge or vodka in the freezer. Help yourself; I'm in the middle of stirring and if I stop the sauce will give up and die."

Ilya didn't go to the fridge.

He crossed the distance between them - the expansive kitchen island, the last four feet of dark wood floor - and pressed himself against Shane's back. Both arms around his waist, face buried in the curve where Shane's neck met his shoulder. He breathed in and the smell of him was there underneath the cooking. Like black tea and something smoky sweet, vanilla maybe, the warmth of his clean skin. It hit a register somewhere between arousal and relief, and Ilya's eyes stung with it, which was mortifying, so he pressed his face harder into Shane's neck and breathed again.

"Hi," he said, into skin.

Shane went still.

Not stiff. Still. The way a person falters when something they've been wanting arrives in a form they weren't expecting. The spoon stayed in his right hand. His left found Ilya's arms where they were wrapped around his waist, and his fingers closed over Ilya's wrist gently, like he was checking for a pulse, like he needed a second point of confirmation that this was actually happening.

Then he leaned back.

It was a small shift. He let his weight settle against Ilya's chest and turned his head just enough that his jaw grazed Ilya's temple, his nose pressed into the curls above Ilya's ear. He stayed there. He breathed. The pan was still doing something that required attention and neither of them was providing it.

Shane kissed his hair. A press of lips, brief and deliberate. "Hey you."

They stayed like that. Ilya didn't know for how long. Long enough for the tremor in his hands to go quiet against Shane's stomach. Long enough for the day's stress to finish leaving his body. It receded in layers and what replaced it was the impossible heat of Shane's body against his, alive and present and smelling like tea and smoke and dinner.

Shane set the spoon down.

He turned inside the circle of Ilya's arms, slowly, carefully, the way you turn toward something you don't want to startle. And then he was facing him, and Ilya saw the moment Shane actually looked at his face; the pause, the brief assessment, and in an instant, tenderness and concern softened his features.

Shane didn't ask. He just gathered Ilya into his arms properly, one hand spread wide across his back and the other cradling the base of his head, and Ilya let himself be held.

He let go of everything that was keeping him upright and vertical and presentable and leaned into Shane with his full weight, face against his neck again, arms loose now instead of holding on. It was the most graceless thing he'd done in front of another person in years. He felt reduced to a tired body that wanted to be exactly here, with this specific person, in this specific kitchen, and nowhere else.

Shane held him tighter. Ilya felt the exhale against his hair, felt Shane's hand move once, slowly, up his spine and back down.

One of them moved first. Later, neither would be able to say who. But there was a shift. A pulling back just far enough, two or three inches, the distance it takes to find someone's mouth when your eyes are already closed. Shane's hand was still on the back of his neck. Ilya's fingers had found the hem of Shane's henley and were resting against the warm skin above his hip.

The kiss was soft. A simple, warm, closed mouth press of lips that lasted exactly long enough to be something other than an accident. Ilya felt the shape of Shane's mouth against his and the faint catch of his breath and he thought, very clearly: *I want to remember every single thing about this.*

They stopped. Rested their foreheads together. Shane's hand was still curved around the back of Ilya's neck and his thumb was moving in a slow arc just below Ilya's ear, and the touch was so careful it made Ilya's throat ache.

"Hi," Ilya whispered. It was the second time he'd said it. He was apparently not capable of saying anything else.

"Long day?" Shane's voice was low. Close. The words almost more breath than sound.

"By my count, it's been five."

He watched Shane's expression shift from soft concern to something startled and bright, a flash of understanding - *you've been counting the days since I saw you* - followed by a smile that Shane tried to control and couldn't. Ilya kissed him again, just as lightly as the first time. Let him go.

"Wine's in the fridge, you said?"

Shane blinked. Turned back to the stove. Stared at his sauce. Blinked. Stared at it some more.

"The chablis would go best with dinner," he said, in a voice that was trying very hard to sound normal. "There's red too, if you want. And whatever's in the walk-in."

Ilya opened the fridge. He stood in the cold light of it for a moment and pressed his fingers against the shelf and let himself feel the full scope of what had just happened, which was: he had walked into this man's home and wrapped himself around him like he belonged there, and Shane had held him like he did.

He took out the chablis.

"What are you making?"

"Seared scallops with brown butter and sage." Shane adjusted the heat under the pan without looking up. "Risotto. A salad that I'm pretending is optional but is actually very good."

"You're making risotto and scallops and a salad for a Sunday dinner."

"Yes."

"For two people."

"Yes."

"You know that most people would just order something in?"

Shane glanced at him. "Most people don't have a Michelin-starred nutritionist who spent eight years making them eat quinoa until they learned to cook out of pure spite."

Ilya leaned against the island with his wine and watched Shane work. He moved around the kitchen with the same unhurried precision Ilya had seen in the hospital hallway, the same quality of being entirely inside what he was doing. Spoon in the risotto. Quick check of the oven. A bunch of sage leaves laid out on a cutting board beside several pinch bowls of textured salt, waiting. His hands were steady. The scabs from the phone booth had healed to smooth pink lines across his palms, and Ilya tracked them without meaning to, the way he tracked any healing wound.

Shane caught him looking. "They're fine."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were doing the thing with your eyes."

"I don't have a thing with my eyes."

"You absolutely have a thing with your eyes. You did it at the cafe too. You go creepy still and you look at me all, like, clinical and I can feel you mentally assigning a recovery timeline." Ilya took a sip of wine to avoid confirming this. The chablis was cold and citrusy and very good, which he was choosing not to comment on because he suspected Shane had chosen it carefully and he wasn't ready to think about the sheer amount of effort on display in front of him yet.

"Tell me about your road trip," Ilya said instead.

Shane talked while he cooked. He talked about Winnipeg, where the wind had been so brutal the team bus had rocked in the parking lot, and about the room service soup in Calgary that had been so aggressively bland he was fairly certain it constituted time in the penalty box. Ilya learned that Shane ordered soup in every city he traveled to. Not as a food review, but as a baseline. A diagnostic. "You can tell a lot about a hotel by the soup," Shane said, completely serious, and Ilya stared at him and thought, *you are the most peculiar man I've ever met, and I would very much like to never stop talking to you.*

"The Calgary soup was that bad?"

"It was personal. I think the chef was going through something."

"And Winnipeg?"

"Winnipeg was fine. Cream of mushroom. Respectable."

"You're ranking them."

"I'm not ranking them."

"You're ranking hotel soups across the eastern circuit."

Shane pointed the spoon at him. "I'm *assessing* them. There's a difference."

"There is no difference."

"There's a meaningful methodological difference and I don't have time to explain it to someone who doesn't appreciate soup."

Ilya was smiling. He could feel it in his face, the ache of a smile held too long, and he couldn't stop it. This was the thing about Shane that he hadn't been prepared for. Not the beauty, nor the kindness, but the strange, stubborn specificity of him. The soup rankings. The heated floors. The three jars of different types of salt evenly spaced. Shane was someone who had opinions about things most people didn't know existed, and he held those opinions with a quiet, immovable certainty that Ilya found so endearing it was almost physically painful.

"And how were your games?" Ilya asked.

"Split. Won in Winnipeg, lost in Calgary." Shane dropped the sage leaves into the brown butter. They hissed and curled and the kitchen filled with something warm and botanical and delicate. "The loss was ugly. I played badly."

He said it flatly, without drama or self pity, the way someone who'd been evaluated publicly since adolescence learned to state a fact. Ilya watched him plate the sage on a paper towel and thought about what it took to say *I played badly* that simply. In his own profession, a bad day could kill someone. In Shane's, a bad day got broadcast to a few million people and archived forever. Different machinery. Same exposed nerve.

"And your day?" Shane said, not looking up. "You seemed..." He paused. Chose his next word carefully. "Spent. When you got here."

Ilya turned the wine glass slowly on the counter. The base left a damp ring on the dark stone.

"Neonate came in this morning. Malrotation with volvulus." He glanced at Shane to check if he needed to translate, and found Shane watching him with an expression of quiet, focused attention that meant he was either following or would ask if he wasn't. Ilya continued. "The intestines twist on themselves. When that happens the blood supply gets compromised, so it becomes a question of time. We went in expecting a straightforward procedure, but some of the bowel was worse off than the imaging suggested, so it took longer. Had to assess viability segment by segment." He stopped. Took a sip of wine. "They're fine. The patient will be fine. But it was..." He let out a breath. "Long."

Shane was quiet for a moment. "How old?"

"Eleven days."

Shane's hands stilled on the cutting board briefly, and then he went back to what he was doing, but something in his posture had shifted, a degree of additional care in the way he handled the knife, as though the information had changed the weight of things in the room.

"I want you to know something," Ilya said.

Shane looked up.

"This is what it looks like. Most of the time." Ilya gestured vaguely at himself. At the worn jeans, the aran sweater he'd pulled on without thinking, the tiredness he could feel settling under his eyes. "I know you've seen me be... impressive, or whatever. At the phone booth. The hospital. Even Tuesday, I was trying." He took another sip. "But this is the version that actually exists most often. And if this is going to be something, I thought you should see it now rather than later."

Shane set the knife down. He gazed at Ilya for a long moment across the island, and there was something in his expression that Ilya couldn't quite parse. Tender, yes, but also something sharper. Understanding, maybe. The look of someone seeing a room they'd already furnished in their head.

"Ilya."

"Yes?"

"I practiced this dish three times."

Ilya blinked.

"The scallops. I've made them almost every day since I've been back. Thursday was inedible. Friday was fine, but I burned the sage. The scallops were good but the risotto was overcooked, so I made it again yesterday morning before the game." Shane was looking at him steadily. "You're telling me you're not always the most polished version of yourself, and

I'm telling you that I've been rehearsing dinner for three days because I wanted it to be good enough to feed you. So I think we might both be operating under the impression that we need to earn something that the other person is already trying to give us."

The kitchen was quiet except for the low hiss of the butter and the music from the other room, barely audible.

Ilya looked at him. At the breadth of his shoulders under the worn henley, the hollow of his throat. At the careful arrangement of the mise en place and the two wine glasses on the counter, Shane's now empty, and he felt something settle in his chest that was too steady to be called a flutter and too warm to be called calm.

"Your butter is browning," Ilya observed.

Shane swore and turned back to the stove. Ilya laughed and it felt like the first full breath he'd taken all day.

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Shane lit the candles. It was a small thing, barely worth noticing, except that he did it with a long match from a box he kept in a drawer beside the stove, and he cupped his hand around the flame as he carried it to the table even though there was no wind, and the gesture was so instinctive and careful that Ilya watched it the way he sometimes watched hands in the operating theater. Not for what they were doing, but for what they were telling him about the person attached to them.

The table was substantial but Shane had created a sort of shared space at the far end, set against the glass overlooking the city, chairs close enough that their knees nearly touched when they sat down. Shane had set it with cloth napkins and heavy silverware and two plates that were matte black with intricate gold inlay and they looked like they'd never been used before, which was, Ilya suspected, because they hadn't.

"This is exceptional," Ilya said, after the first bite.

"The risotto needs another minute."

"The risotto is perfect. You know it's perfect. Accept the compliment."

Shane's mouth twitched. "The risotto is acceptable."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "You're infuriating."

"I've been told."

They ate. The scallops were seared to a clean golden crust and the browned butter pooled beneath them, rich and nutty and faintly sweet. The risotto was, despite Shane's protests, perfect. The salad, which Ilya had been prepared to ignore on principle, turned out to be shaved fennel and grapefruit and something peppery he couldn't identify, dressed in olive oil

and lemon, and it was so good he went back for more without comment. Shane noticed. Shane verbalized nothing, but the corner of his mouth said plenty.

"Can I ask you something?" Ilya said.

Shane nodded. "Go ahead."

"This place." Ilya looked past the candles, past Shane, into the wide dark glass of the living room where the city sparkled below them like a jewelry box left open in the cold. "It's beautiful. You clearly love it. But it's very dark for someone who is, in my limited experience, a considerable amount of light."

Shane set his fork down. He didn't answer immediately. He glanced at the table, at his own hands, at the candle flame dancing its silent choreography between them.

"I built it to feel safe," he said. "That's the honest answer. I was twenty-two and there were a lot of people who wanted access to me, and I didn't know how to say no to most of them, so I said no to all of them." He picked up his wine glass, turned it, put it down again without drinking. "I hired a designer and told her I wanted a place that no one could see in to. She showed me the glass, which I thought was counterintuitive, but she explained that from outside, at night, it's reflective. You can't see in. You can only see out. So I get the whole city and the city gets nothing back."

"That's a very elegant way to hide."

"I'm a very elegant person."

"You're eating scallops barefoot."

Shane tapped him against the ankle with one of those bare feet and kept it there. "Elegance is a state of mind, Ilya."

Ilya smiled. Shane smiled back, but it faded into something more considered, and he was quiet for a few seconds before he spoke again.

"I'm proud of this place. I designed every room. I chose every material. The floors, the lighting, the sightlines. It's exactly what I wanted." He paused. "Six, almost seven years ago. It's exactly what I wanted seven years ago. And I think I'm realizing that what I wanted back then was a very nice place to be alone in, and I'm not sure that's what I want anymore."

Ilya waited. He could feel the conversation changing register, the way air pressure shifts before a weather system moves through. He kept his hands still on the table and gave Shane the thing he suspected most people didn't: room.

"I want a kitchen with stupid tile," Shane said. "Tile I chose because I liked the color, not because it photographed well for Architectural Digest. I want a dog and I want to argue about whose turn it is to walk it. I want to come home and have someone ask me about my day who actually wants to hear the answer." He stopped. Swallowed. His voice had gone quieter, not for effect but because the words were closer to the surface than he'd expected and he was

managing the distance between what he felt and what came out of his mouth. "I want a life that has someone else's things in it. Someone else's schedule to consider. Someone else's shoes next to mine by the door."

He reached across the table and hooked his pinky through Ilya's. The gesture was so familiar now, their private shorthand, but here in the candlelight with Shane's voice stripped down to its studs, it felt like the first time.

"I want to be careful with you," Shane said. "And I want to know if you'll be careful with me too."

Ilya looked at their hands. At their fingers, small and absurdly insufficient for everything they were being asked to carry. He opened his mouth and closed it again. The joke was right there. He could feel it sitting in the back of his throat, the deflection, the easy out. *I'm a surgeon. Careful is literally my job.* It would land. Shane would laugh. The moment would ease and they'd move on and Ilya would spend the rest of the night furious with himself for choosing comfortable over genuine.

He didn't take it.

"Yes," he said. His voice came out rough, which surprised him. "I'll be careful with you. I think I already am."

Shane's eyes were bright in the candlelight. He didn't look away. Ilya didn't either.

"I also want the stupid tile," Ilya said. "And a dog and probably a couple of cats, because I'm not a monster. I want the argument about the dog. I want to know how your day was. I want to know which parts you tell me first and which parts you save for when we're half asleep and it's easier to tell the truth."

He was talking too much. He knew he was talking too much. He kept going.

"I want to know what you actually want your life to look like. Not the version from the interviews. I want to know if you want to travel or stay still. Whether you think about kids. What kind of quiet you're looking for." He tightened his finger around Shane's, just slightly. "I've wanted something like this for a long time. I stopped saying it out loud because it felt like asking for something that didn't exist. And then you called me from a payphone at one in the morning and I'm starting to think I might have been wrong."

The candle flickered between them. Shane's hand was trembling, very faintly, where their fingers were linked. Ilya could feel it the way he felt pulses. Small. Fast. Alive.

"Okay," Shane said.

"Okay," Ilya said.

Shane adjusted his hand so they were holding on properly, palms pressed together. The shift was small. Ilya felt it everywhere.

The scallops were getting cold. Neither of them moved.

"Your mollusk is going to suffer," Ilya said eventually.

"I'll make it again."

"You've already made it four times."

"I'll make it a hundred times." Shane was still holding his hand. "I'm very patient with the things I care about."

Ilya looked at him from across the small table in the dark tower, the city lacquered in cold below them, and thought that this was perhaps the most dangerous meal he'd ever eaten. Not because of what it contained, but because of what it was making him willing to believe.

He picked up his fork with his free hand. Shane did the same. They ate the rest of dinner one handed, neither willing to let go first, and the risotto was cold by the time they finished, and it didn't matter at all.

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They did the dishes. Or rather, Shane rinsed and Ilya dried, and they moved around each other in the kitchen with an ease that had no business existing between two people who had shared a meal exactly once before. Ilya found the cabinet for the fancy plates on his second try. Shane didn't tell him where anything went. He just let him look.

Shane refilled their glasses and took Ilya's hand. His whole hand this time, fingers threaded together, Shane's palm warm and dry against his. He led him down the two steps into the sunken living room where the fire was lambent and a record player on a low console was turning something slow. Ilya didn't recognize the song but he recognized the voice, like longing with impeccable manners, and he thought it suited this room and this man and this night in a way that felt almost too deliberate, except that Shane didn't seem like someone who curated a mood. He seemed like someone who played what he liked and the mood arranged itself around him.

Shane sat on the couch and pulled Ilya down beside him. Set their glasses on the coffee table. Then he reached for Ilya again and guided him down until Ilya's head was in his lap, his legs stretched along the length of the cushions, his face turned up toward Shane's.

Shane's hand found his hair.

Ilya closed his eyes.

Shane's fingers moved slowly. Through the curls at Ilya's temple, along the side of his scalp, back down to the nape of his neck where the tension from twelve hours of surgery still lived in the muscles. Shane's touch wasn't tentative. It was thorough and patient, laced with the same intention Ilya had watched him bring to the risotto and the scallops and the careful arrangement of sage leaves on a cutting board. He gave everything his full attention. It was, Ilya was beginning to understand, simply how he was made.

The fire crackled softly. Peter Gabriel crooned softly about a long and boring book that Ilya thought he might like to read. He lay in Shane's lap on a Sunday night and felt the week leave his body in slow, surrendered increments, replaced by warmth and the steady pressure of fingers in his hair and the newfound unreasonable safety of being touched by someone who seemed to consider it a privilege.

He was going to fall asleep. He could feel it pulling at him, the heaviness in his limbs, the way the firelight moved behind his closed eyelids in slow warm shapes. He was so tired and so comfortable and so exactly where he wanted to be that the distance between waking and sleeping had narrowed to almost nothing.

Shane's hands stilled.

Ilya opened his eyes.

Shane was looking down at him with an expression Ilya couldn't catalogue. It was too open for composure and too steady for vulnerability. It was just Shane, unguarded, looking at him like he was trying to memorize something.

"Can I tell you something?" Shane asked.

"Always."

"I don't do this." Shane's thumb traced a small arc behind Ilya's ear, almost absently, as though the admission required a point of contact to be possible. "I've been with people. Dated. Whatever that word means when you're someone like me. But never here. I've never brought someone into this apartment and cooked for them and wanted to ask them what they were doing for the rest of their life, and if they weren't too busy, would they maybe want to spend some of it with me."

He pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. Let out a breath through his nose that Ilya felt against his forehead.

"I've lived here for almost seven years. You're maybe the third person who's been up here who isn't maintenance or my parents." He opened his eyes. "I know that's a lot to hand someone on a second date."

"Shane."

"I know it's only been five days--"

"It's been eight."

Shane stopped. "What?"

"Eight days," Ilya said. "Since the phone booth. Not that I've been counting."

"Eight days," Shane repeated, as though testing the number for weight.

"Eight days. And I've thought about you every single one. It's not too much." Ilya reached up and touched Shane's jaw lightly, just his fingertips against the bone. "It might be too fast. But those are different things."

Shane turned his face into Ilya's hand. The movement was small and instinctive and Ilya felt it in his sternum.

"I'm scared of this," Shane said, into Ilya's palm.

"So am I."

"Not because I don't want it."

"I know."

"Because I want it in a way that doesn't have a casual setting. I've known you for eight days and I can't make it smaller. I've tried." He exhaled. "It won't go."

Ilya guided Shane's gaze back to his with his fingers, pressing gently into his jaw. "I don't want you to make it smaller."

Shane studied him. "What do you want?"

Ilya lay still in his lap, Shane's hand warm against the side of his face, eyes too bright and too close, and considered the question honestly.

What he wanted didn't have a version that sounded reasonable. There wasn't a way to say it that didn't outpace what a week should allow. He could feel the shape of it in his throat, pressing against language, and every honest version was too large and every safe version was a lie.

He sat up slowly. Shane's hand fell from his hair and Ilya missed it immediately, a sharp little absence he filed away to think about later. He turned on the couch so they were facing each other, knees touching, close enough that he could see the different colors in Shane's eyes, shades of caramel and honey and a darker ring at the edge that he hadn't noticed before.

"I want more time," Ilya said. "I want conversations that go on longer than they need to. I want the next date. And the one after that. All of them."

Shane was watching him the way he'd watched the candle flame earlier, like something he was afraid to breathe on.

"I want to find out why you feel like home," Ilya admitted. "Because you do and I can't explain it and I've stopped trying."

Shane kissed him.

It wasn't like the kitchen. The kitchen had been tentative, a question asked with closed lips. This was the answer. Shane's hand came up to the side of Ilya's face and his mouth was warm and open and Ilya tasted wine and felt the slight roughness of Shane's lower lip and then

Shane's tongue brushed his, lightly, a suggestion rather than a demand, and Ilya made a sound in the back of his throat that he would deny later and leaned in and the kiss became something with gravity.

They sank into it. Ilya's hand found the back of Shane's neck and Shane's fingers were in his hair again and they kissed the way you kiss someone when you've been thinking about it for eight days and the reality is better than every version you'd constructed. Slow. Thorough. Learning each other's rhythms, the tilt and the pressure and the small adjustments that happen when two people are figuring out how they fit. Shane kissed with his full attention, with patience, with a focus that made Ilya feel like the only thing in the room that existed.

Ilya pulled back just enough to breathe. Shane chased him, just barely, a centimeter of forward motion that he caught and corrected, and the fact that he'd had to correct it, that his body had moved toward Ilya without his permission, was so gratifying that Ilya felt it in his spine.

He kissed Shane again. Slower this time. He took Shane's lower lip between both of his and felt Shane's breath catch and the hand in his hair tighten. He kissed the corner of his mouth. His jaw. The skin just below his ear where his pulse was fast and close to the surface, and Shane made a sound, quiet, almost private, and tilted his head to give him room, and Ilya pressed his mouth there and stayed.

"You might be dangerous for my health," Shane murmured.

"Maybe." Ilya kissed his neck again, lower, where the collar of the henley started. "Luckily, I'm a doctor."

Shane laughed, a little breathless, and pulled him back up and kissed him properly, and they stayed that way.

They stayed that way for a long time.

The fire burned low. Peter Gabriel gave way to silence and then the soft click of the needle reaching the end of the record and neither of them got up to flip it. They kissed and talked and kissed again, Ilya's legs across Shane's lap at some point, Shane's hand resting on his knee, their foreheads together during the quiet stretches when they were just breathing in the same air and neither one wanted to be the first to pull away.

Ilya's eyelids were heavy. He could feel sleep pulling at him again, more insistent now, his body making its case. He was warm and his mouth was tender and his whole body hummed with a low, banked heat that had nowhere to go and was in no hurry to get there. Shane's thumb was moving in small circles on his kneecap, a rhythm that seemed unconscious, and every pass sent a slow current up Ilya's thigh that he was acutely aware of and doing nothing about.

"It's late," Shane said.

Ilya hummed in agreement but didn't move.

"You could stay."

Ilya opened his eyes. Shane was looking at him, and the expression on his face was so carefully held together that Ilya could see the effort in it. The offer was real and the fear was real and he was making it anyway.

"I don't want to go," Ilya said.

"Then don't."

It was that simple. It was the least simple thing either of them had ever done.

Shane stood and offered his hand. Ilya took it, let himself be pulled to his feet, and swayed into Shane's chest for a second because his legs had forgotten the concept of standing. Shane steadied him with a hand on his hip and kissed his temple and said, "Come on," and led him toward the kitchen.

He grabbed two bottles of water from the fridge. Then he led Ilya past the island, toward a bookcase built into the wall beside the kitchen. Ilya looked at it without stopping. Books in English. Books in French. A small, unexpected shelf of Norwegian.

"No Russian?" Ilya joked.

Shane turned. Even in the low light, Ilya could see the color rise along the tops of his cheekbones, faint and fast and entirely involuntary.

"Not yet," Shane said.

Ilya kissed him for that. Pushed him gently against the bookcase and kissed him until Shane's hands were fisted in the front of his sweater and the water bottles were in danger of being dropped. Then they were moving down a hallway, kissing and walking, Shane leading him backward by the hand, both of them bumping a shoulder against the wall and laughing into each other's mouths.

The hallway opened into the bedroom. Glass on two sides, the city below a scatter of lit needles stitched into the dark, a bed large enough to feel like a landscape. Ilya registered the room in pieces because Shane was still kissing him. Soft furniture in a far corner. A door to the left he didn't investigate. The bed, wide and low, sheets dark, turned down on both sides as though Shane had prepared for the possibility of this and had been too honest to pretend he hadn't.

Ilya stopped at the foot of the bed. Shane put the water bottles on the nightstand. When he turned back, Ilya was already reaching for the hem of his henley.

They undressed each other slowly. Ilya pulled the henley over Shane's head and found clean, smooth skin underneath, pale gold in the low light. A scar along his collarbone, silver and old. Another one low on his ribs, a short straight line that looked surgical. No freckles below the jaw. Ilya put his mouth on the faded scar and felt Shane's hands come up to his waist, find the hem of the aran sweater, and pull.

Shane stared at him.

Ilya was used to being looked at. He'd been scrutinized by lovers and colleagues and patients' parents and strangers on the street and none of it had ever felt like this. Shane's gaze moved over his chest and his stomach and the dark scatter of moles across his skin, all different sizes, a constellation that no one had ever bothered to map, and his expression was unguarded wonder at finding something he wanted to look at very closely.

Shane touched a mole on Ilya's ribs. Just his fingertip. Then one on his sternum, then one near his hip, tracing a line between them like he was connecting points on a chart.

"You're covered in them," Shane said. An observation made with something close to reverence.

Ilya shrugged. "They're everywhere."

Shane put his mouth on the one nearest Ilya's collarbone.

Ilya's breath left him.

They finished undressing in the low light, down to their underwear, hands tracing silhouette through cotton and then against skin. Ilya discovered the map of Shane's body in the order it was offered to him: the hard curve of his shoulders, the ridge of muscle along his spine, the softer skin at the inside of his wrist where his pulse jumped when Ilya kissed it. Shane discovered Ilya's body hair, the dark trail below his navel, the coarser hair around his nipples, and touched all of it with the same unhurried attention he gave to everything, and Ilya stood in the dim room with Shane's hands on his bare skin and felt known in a way that had nothing to do with being seen and everything to do with being studied.

"Which side?" Shane said.

"What?"

"Of the bed. Which side do you sleep on?"

"Left."

"I sleep on the left."

"Then tonight you sleep on the right."

"That's very presumptuous."

"You invited me to stay. I'm claiming territory."

Shane's mouth curved. He climbed onto the right side of the bed with the air of a man making a significant concession, and Ilya followed him into the left, and the sheets were cool and soft and smelled like clean linen and faintly like Shane, and the pillow was better than any pillow Ilya had ever owned, which he would also deny later.

They lay on their backs, side by side. The city glowed through the glass, blurred by distance and the low bedroom light. The room was quiet. The kind that has texture to it, that you can lean into.

Shane's hand found Ilya's under the sheets. His little finger hooked around Ilya's gently, their shorthand, their first language. Then he tugged. A small pull, barely any force, just enough to collapse the distance between them, and Ilya rolled onto his side and Shane's arm came around him and they were pressed together from chest to knee, warm skin against warm skin, and Ilya could feel Shane's heartbeat through his ribs, fast and steady.

"Hi," Shane whispered.

"Hi."

Ilya kissed him. And this time there was nowhere else to be, no stove to tend, no dishes, no record to flip, no conversation waiting. Just the dark room and the long bed and Shane's mouth opening under his, and the banked heat from the couch which was no longer banked. It was present and consuming and everywhere.

Shane's hand moved down Ilya's back slowly. His fingers traced the length of his spine, each vertebra, and came to rest at the small of his back where the skin was thin and warm. Ilya pressed closer and felt Shane hard against his hip, and the knowledge of it went through him in a slow wave, not urgent but pronounced. He rolled his hips forward, once, gently, and Shane's breath stuttered against his mouth.

"Is this okay?" Shane said.

"Yes."

"You're tired."

"I'm awake."

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. His eyes were dark and his mouth was slightly swollen and he was searching Ilya's face for something, permission or hesitation or some sign that this was moving faster than Ilya wanted. Whatever he found must have been sufficient because he kissed Ilya again, deeper, his hand sliding from the small of his back around to his hip and then lower, and Ilya's hand was moving too, learning the terrain of Shane's stomach, the cut of muscle at his hip, the soft skin below his navel where it was smooth and the warmth was concentrated and close.

They moved together slowly. Hands finding each other, then finding rhythm, and it was less like a first time than a conversation that had been happening in another language and had finally found its words. Ilya wrapped his hand around Shane and they breathed together, and Ilya felt Shane's fingers close around him with the same care he'd shown all evening.

It wasn't frantic. It was slow and warm and close, foreheads together, breathing the same air, the sheets tangled around their waists. Sometimes one of them would stop and just kiss the other, long and deep, and then their hand would start moving again. Shane said Ilya's name

once, into his mouth, and the sound of it, his full name in Shane's voice at that pitch, went straight through him.

Ilya came first, with his face pressed against Shane's neck, Shane's hand still moving, Shane's mouth against his temple whispering something Ilya couldn't make out and didn't need to. He lay in the aftershock of it for a few seconds, his breath ragged against Shane's skin, and then he kissed Shane's throat and shifted his grip and gave him everything he had left, which wasn't technically a lot but turned out to be enough. Shane pressed his face into Ilya's hair and his body went taut and then very still and then he shuddered with his whole frame, and Ilya held him through it.

They lay tangled together, catching their breath. Shane's hand was resting on Ilya's chest, over his heart, and Ilya's hand was in Shane's hair, and neither of them moved or spoke. The city hummed outside the glass. The sheets smelled like both of them now.

Shane lifted his head. He looked wrecked. Beautifully, thoroughly wrecked, his hair in his face and his mouth bitten pink and his eyes heavy and bright, and Ilya looked at him and felt something so vast and simple that it sat in his chest without requiring a name.

"I like you." Shane whispered.

Ilya kissed the yellowing bruise at his temple. "I like you too."

Shane's fingers found his again beneath the blanket. He hooked his pinky through Ilya's and held on, and they fell asleep like that, tangled together in the dark cathedral of Shane's bedroom, the city below them somnolent, knowing nothing about what had just started thirty-five floors above it.

Chapter End Notes

hi 

this was supposed to be one chapter. ONE.

look what you've done: you inspire a whole universe.

thank you for being here.

continued in Immune to Everything (Except You)

- m

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