

## Dare You Twice

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| Characters:      | <a href="#">Shane Hollander</a> , <a href="#">Ilya Rozanov</a> , <a href="#">Svetlana Vetrova</a> , <a href="#">Irina Rozanova</a>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
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# Dare You Twice

by [theaftercare](#)

## Summary

One delayed flight. One closing airport bar. One truth or dare game that gets significantly out of hand.

Ilya Rozanov came to his ex-girlfriend's wedding to prove he was over it. Shane Hollander came to his best friend's wedding to prove he was fine. They were both lying, but they didn't know that about each other yet.

Then they had to share a room.

## Notes



**UPDATE 01/08:**

[This fic has been translated into Russian by lastdanceandgo and is available on FicBook 😊](#)

Endless thanks to sleepyheadtae and the cottagerechicass for being the most supportive betas and proofreaders for the last three chapters (and eventually, every chapter from the top!) You girls made everything *bet-ter*.

Also thanks to gift\_of\_gab for the lovely cover!

PS: The grammar inconsistencies are intentional (and no, I'm not planning to fix them 😊). I'm using variations of present and past tense to either add urgency or when I want things to feel a little more distant or reflective. Also I'm aware of the weird hourly timeline (wait, was

it twenty or nineteen hours since they met? Does it technically count as two or three days?  
Hmm). I've had enough constructive feedback in my life so, not looking for one here, tysm!

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# Chapter 1: The Bartender Left And Never Came Back

## Chapter Notes

So, here's what happened. I had a delayed flight in Helsinki back in January, rewatched My Best Friend's Wedding on my laptop, one thing led to another.. and this fic drafting itself. Plus, Dubrovnik is one of my favourite cities ever, so obviously.

Finnair, I hope you're proud.

*PS: Rhys is just a man. Tall. Handsome. Not from acotar. Not from twisted. We love him.*

Ilya had been fine about the breakup for three years.

The wedding was a more recent problem.

Svetlana had called four months ago: *Ilyusha, I have to tell you something, and I need you to be happy for me* which was how he knew immediately that he was not going to be happy about it. At least not in the first thirty seconds, possibly not in the next thirty minutes and definitely not on the drive home from the clinic, where he'd taken the call sitting in his car in the parking garage because his next patient wasn't for another hour and he had nowhere to be and nowhere to put this information yet.

She'd met someone. A businessman. Canadian. Very tall, apparently, she mentioned the height twice, which Ilya chose not to think about it too much because he was fine and also a grown adult with no strong feelings about Canadian businessmen or their heights.

Six months of dating, then engaged, then inevitably, *you have to come, Ilyusha, I mean it, I want you there, you are very important to me and if you don't come I will never forgive you and also I will call your mother.*

She would absolutely call his mother, this was not a bluff. His mother would then call him, and that call would be significantly worse than the wedding.

He RSVP'd yes.

He bought a suit.

He was, he had decided, totally fine.

He also booked a flight from Moscow to Helsinki to Dubrovnik, where Svetlana had decided to get married, presumably because Croatia was beautiful and also because she had always been someone who committed fully to things. That was one of the reasons Ilya had loved her. One of the reasons they hadn't worked, and one of the reasons he was now dragging a carry-

on in Helsinki Airport at ten in the evening with a connection to catch, a bottle of mineral water and the sustained, practiced feeling of being completely *fine*.

Helsinki at ten pm was not that special. There were still people moving through it, there were still announcements, and it had that evening quality of a day winding down around you whether you were ready or not. The shops were pulling their gates half-closed, the restaurants had stopped seating, and the light was the same fluorescent it always was but somehow felt dimmer. Maybe Ilya was just tired, Moscow to Helsinki being two hours of recycled air and a window seat he'd paid extra to spend staring at clouds.

Gate 14C was quieter than the main terminal. He found it, dropped himself on a seat, and did what he always did in new spaces. He looked, catalogued, and assessed. *Pediatrician habit*. You read a room before the room knew it was being read. Because rooms contained people, and people contained things they weren't saying. It was almost always useful to know what those things were before anyone had to say them out loud.

Gate 14C at ten pm contained: one family whose toddler had staged a full emotional collapse somewhere around baggage claim and was now running purely on snacks and spite. Two businessmen who looked very bored. One elderly woman with a paperback she was actually reading, which Ilya respected. A coffee shop still technically open, staffed by a teenager who had the look of someone counting down the minutes to something better.

And one man in the far corner, sitting very still, performing relaxed.

Ilya noticed him the way he noticed the children in his waiting room who sat very still, being very good and were absolutely, silently terrified. The stillness that was too careful. He had a carry-on. A phone face-up on his knee that he wasn't looking at. A cup of coffee beside him that he also wasn't drinking. He was looking at the departures board with the focused expression of a man who was somewhere else entirely in his head and using the departures board as a cover story.

Ilya knew this look. He was probably wearing this look himself. His self-awareness did not make it better, it just made the performance more convincing.

Also.. freckles.

This was also *fine*. Freckles were a completely normal thing for a person to have. They were, in fact, a mild dermatological concern in terms of prolonged UV exposure. Ilya recognised them in that professional capacity and moved on.

He looked away.

Then he looked back.

The gate lighting was doing something to that man's face. There were significantly more freckles than he'd initially clocked. They scattered across the nose and cheekbones that suggested years of outdoor activity and apparently a confident indifference to sunscreen. As a doctor, Ilya had opinions about this. As a professional, he kept them to himself. As a man sitting in a Finnish airport at ten pm on his way to his ex-girlfriend's wedding, he was in no

position to be having any thoughts at all, about freckles or otherwise. He was going to stop immediately. He *needs* to.

And so, he stopped.

Then he looked at the departure board instead.

Helsinki to Dubrovnik: **DELAYED**.

No reason given, no new time. The word was sitting there, blinking at him.

*Blyat.*

Ilya looked at it for a long moment.

Then, quietly, in Russian, he said something that made the teenager at the coffee shop glance up with a frowned expression. Clearly someone who didn't speak Russian but understood the general sentiment completely.

*Da*, Ilya thought. *Exactly.*

Ilya dragged his carry-on. He needed a drink and something to do with the next however-many hours and across the gate there was a bar still open. That was, for now, enough of a plan.

He started walking.

As he passed the gate, the man with the freckles said something out loud, to no one in particular, about the board. It was dry, sounded tired and despite everything, it also sounded funny.

Ilya stopped in his tracks. He responded before he decided to.

That was the thing about Ilya. He was, in most areas of his life, a very careful person. He did not say things without considering them first. He did not make decisions without turning them over and over, finding the one that made the most sense. *Doctors' habits.*

And yet.

"Finnair," Ilya said, to the side of the man's head, "Is very sorry for inconvenience. They say this every time. I think maybe they are not actually sorry."

The man turned.

Up close, the freckles were.. *well*. They were there. Ilya noticed them and moved on. He was getting quite good at it.

"Do they say it every time?" the man said. His English sounds Canadian, that flatness vowels, it did something slightly different than British and American accent. French influence underneath, maybe.

“Every time,” Ilya confirmed. “I fly Helsinki connection with them four times. Always delayed. Always very sorry.” He tilted his head toward the board. “Tonight they don’t even bother with the sorry yet. They are getting lazy.”

The man looked at the board, then back at Ilya. His expression was doing several things at once, which Ilya found interesting, because most people’s expressions in airports at ten pm were doing only one thing, which was tired.

“How long,” the man said, “in your experience?”

“Last time? Three hours.” Ilya adjusted his bag. “Time before, two. Time before that—” he paused for effect. “They cancelled the flight entirely. Very sorry about that one.”

The man stared at him.

“I’m joking,” Ilya said. “About cancellation.”

“Were you?”

“Mostly.” He shrugged, then gestured down the terminal. “There is bar. Still open. I am going there. You can continue to wait here and look at board that will not update for at least one hour, or—” He shrugged again, as if he meant *the rest of this sentence was obvious*.

The man looked at the board. Looked at Ilya. Looked at his cold, untouched coffee.

“Yeah,” he said, after a moment. “Okay.”

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They ended up at a corner of the bar that felt, Ilya thought, like the airport had been specifically designed for this occasion. The bar was still doing business, barely. A handful of other travelers distributed along it at the intervals of people who did not want to talk to each other. The lighting had the warmth of a place that understood evenings, all soft amber instead of harsh white, flattering everything it touched.

Then the bartender came. Ilya ordered whiskey without looking at the menu. He already knew what he wanted and there was no point in pretending otherwise.

The man beside him looked at the menu for exactly four seconds, then said, “Moscow mule, please.”

Ilya looked at him.

“What,” the man said.

“Nothing.”

“You’re making a face.”

“I don’t make faces. I am Russian. We have one face.” He picked up his whiskey that was being placed in front of him by the bartender. “You are flying to Croatia and you ordered drink named after city I just came from. I am just making an observation.”

“It’s named after a cocktail because it has ginger beer in it and I like ginger beer. It’s just a preference.”

“Hm. Very suspicious preference.”

“It’s not suspicious, it’s just a drink—”

“Okay okay,” Ilya said, in the tone that meant he stopped teasing, and took a sip.

The man stared at him for a long moment with an expression that was trying to be annoyed and not quite making it. Then, startled out of him, he chuckled.

Ilya noticed this.

“I’m Shane,” the man said.

“Ilya.”

They didn’t shake hands, it was too late in the evening for that kind of formality, or maybe the bar had already made them past it. Shane picked up his Moscow mule and turned it slightly in his hand, looking at it just how people looked at things when they were aware of being observed and trying to seem like they weren’t.

“So,” Shane said. “Four times taking this connection.”

“Four times here, yes.”

“Where are you coming from?”

“Moscow. You?”

“Montreal.” He said, instinctively, “It’s been a long day.”

“Yes. Long day,” Ilya agreed.

Outside the bar, the terminal had gotten quieter. The family with the toddler had migrated somewhere toward the restaurant area, or toward collapse, it was hard to say. The businessmen were gone. Gate 14C was emptying out.

Ilya had a connecting flight to catch and nowhere to be in the meantime.

Shane had a cold coffee he abandoned at the gate and the look of a man who had been holding something carefully for a very long time and was, for the moment, setting it down.

“So,” Ilya said. “Dubrovnik.”

“Dubrovnik,” Shane confirmed.

“You have been before?”

“No.” Shane turned his glass. “You?”

“Also no.” Ilya considered this. “I looked at pictures. Very beautiful. Very— ” He searched for the word. “Aggressively beautiful. Like it is trying too hard.”

Shane looked at him. “You think a city can try too hard?”

“I think anything can try too hard.”

“That’s a very specific worldview.”

“I am very specific person.” Ilya tilted his head. “Why Dubrovnik? You choose, or someone else choose for you?”

“Someone else,” Shane said it in a tone that closed the door on that question without quite slamming it. Then, after a beat. “It’s for a wedding.”

“Ah.” Ilya nodded. “Me also.”

Shane looked at him. “You’re going to a wedding in Dubrovnik?”

“This weekend, yes.”

Something moved across Shane’s face, small, a flicker. “Who— ” he started, then seemed to reconsider. “Are you— do you know the couple well?”

Ilya turned his glass. “The bride. We are old friends.” He said it as if he’d been practicing saying it. “She is— well, we know each other long time. She invited me and I said yes because that is what you do when Sveta asks you something.”

The flicker in Shane’s face moved. More than a flicker this time.

“Sveta.. Svetlana Vetrova?” Shane said.

“You know her?” Ilya said, though something in him had already started to understand the shape of what was happening.

“I—” Shane set his glass down. Picked it up again. “I know Rhys. The groom. I’m his.. Well I’ve known him since we were eight.” A pause. “I’m the best man.”

The bar was doing its soft amber light thing. Somewhere behind them, the departure board was blinking. Ilya looked at Shane. Shane looked back.

*The same wedding.*

They’d been sitting here for twenty minutes talking about nothing, and they were going to the same wedding. Neither of them had known, and now they both did. The information sat between them.

Ilya picked up his whiskey.

“Small world,” he said.

“Yeah,” Shane said. Something careful had entered his voice that hadn’t been there thirty seconds ago. “Small world.”

They looked at each other for a moment longer than necessary.

Then Ilya said, “So. Montreal vs Moscow. Which is worse in winter. I need you to defend your city because I have strong opinions and no one to argue with.”

Shane blinked. Then, slowly, the careful thing in his expression loosened. “Excuse me, Montreal winters are— ”

“Wrong answer already,” Ilya said. “Go on.”

The Montreal-Moscow winter argument lasted forty-five minutes.

This was, objectively, too long for an argument about weather between two strangers in a Finnish airport. Neither of them acknowledged this. They were both too busy being wrong at each other, which was, Ilya was finding, significantly more entertaining than being right alone.

“You don’t understand,” Shane said, for the third time. He had the energy of a man who had explained something correctly twice already but couldn’t understand why it still wasn’t getting through. “The wind comes off St. Lawrence, its.. It’s pretty specific kind of cold. It feels intentional, like the wind has intent or something.”

“Intent,” Ilya repeated.

“Yes.”

“The wind has *intent*.”

“The Montreal wind, yes.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. “Shane,” he said. “I am from Moscow. In January, in Moscow, it is so cold that your breath freezes before it leaves your face. Not after. Before. The air outside your mouth is already frozen. You are breathing into ice.” He picked up his whiskey. “Your wind has intent. My wind has victims.”

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Something was happening in his expression that was trying very hard to disagree.

“That’s—” he started.

“I know.”

“I wasn’t about to admit defeat.”

“I know that also.”

“I was going to say that’s a different category of cold entirely and therefore not a fair comparison—”

“Ah.” Ilya nodded seriously. “So you are admitting Moscow is colder.”

“That is not— ” Shane pointed at him. “*That* is not what I said.”

“It is what you meant.”

“It absolutely is not what I— ” He stopped. Pressed his lips together. Looked at the ceiling briefly, he looked like a man who conducted an internal audit, he fought a smile, and then, with great dignity, he shrugged. “I’m going to need another drink before I continue this.”

Ilya signaled the bartender. “Smart,” he said. “Hydration is important when you are losing argument.”

“I’m not— ” Shane exhaled. “You’re infuriating.”

“Also possible,” Ilya agreed pleasantly.

The second round arrived. Shane wrapped both hands around his Moscow mule just like someone who needed something to hold onto, which Ilya noticed and filed and did not comment on. Some things you filed and left alone for now.

“So,” Shane said, after a moment. “Doctor.”

“Yes.”

“What kind?”

“Children.” Ilya watched Shane’s face did the thing, that small involuntary softening people did when he said this. The information rearranged something in his expression, it happened every time. He had stopped being surprised by it. “Pediatrician. In Moscow. Eight years now, almost.”

“Do you like it?”

Not *that must be rewarding* or *oh how lovely*. Shane asked a direct question, delivered like it actually mattered and wanted an answer. Ilya considered this for a moment.

“Yes,” he said. “It is..” he searched for it. “Well the job is difficult. The children are sick and sometimes very scared and the parents are also scared, which is sometimes worse. But,” He turned his glass. “Children are honest. They don’t perform. If they are scared they tell you. If they feel better they tell you. There is no.. ” he made a gesture that meant *all of this*, the airport, the performance, the whole evening. “No pretending. And I find it..” He paused. “Restful.”

Shane looked at him for a beat. “That’s a surprising word for it.”

“You asked if I liked it. Not if it was easy.”

“Fair,” Shane said quietly. Then he looked at his drink and said out of nowhere. “I play hockey.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Professional?”

“Yeah.”

“For Montreal?”

Ilya caught the small change in his expression. “For a team. In the MLH.” Shane said it like he was used to revealing himself in pieces, waiting to see how people reacted before giving them anything else. “I’ve been playing since I was four. It’s all I’ve ever done, basically.”

“You like it.”

Not a question. Shane just looked at him.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I do.” A beat. “Most of the time.”

Ilya heard the *most of the time*. He didn’t touch it. He just picked up his whiskey and let the sentence sit there between them. Because some things you let sit, and this was one of them.

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The bar had thinned out considerably by the time they got to the third round. The other travelers had dispersed to gates, bathrooms, or finding somewhere to lie down. The bartender had started doing the end-of-shift work, wiping down the far end of the counter, moving things, the small choreography of a place preparing to close without quite closing yet.

Just them, mostly, and the soft dim light. The DELAYED board visible through the bar’s entrance, still blinking with no update. Finnair absolutely taking its time.

The conversation had surfaced from shallow to slightly less shallow, from funny to almost real, then drifted back into funny again before either of them noticed how far they’d come. They’d covered: the indignity of airplane food, which Ilya had strong opinions about and Shane had stronger ones. The correct way to navigate a city you didn’t know, where Ilya said *ask someone* and Shane said *research beforehand*. They looked at each other with the mutual recognition of people who were obviously very different, and yet somehow understood that difference immediately. Shane’s spreadsheet of coffee shops ranked by roast profile and proximity to opposing team arenas. He said it like he was confessing something, then immediately got defensive the second Ilya’s expression changed.

“It’s efficient,” Shane said.

“I said nothing.”

“You made a face.” Shane protested.

“I told you. One face. Russian. Very consistent.” Ilya said, deflecting.

“You made *a face*.”

“I was just thinking about your spreadsheet,” Ilya said. “With great respect.”

“See, you’re doing it again—”

“It is very organized,” Ilya said. “Very thorough. I am impressed. Genuinely.” He was, actually. There was something about the spreadsheet that told him more about this man called Shane than the last two hours of conversation.

“You like coffee that much?” Ilya tilted his head.

“I like knowing what I’m getting into.”

“Before you arrive.”

“Yes.”

“So you are always.. prepared.”

Shane looked at him. “Is that a criticism?”

“No.” Ilya said it simply, without the joke, which was its own kind of statement. “I think it is just how you are.”

A beat passed. Shane’s expression did something complicated that he smoothed over quickly, the armor going back on before Ilya had quite finished watching it come off.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “I guess it is.”

Outside, a plane taxied past the window, slow and lit up against the dark. They both watched it for a moment without saying anything. It was the kind of silence that happened when a conversation had found its own rhythm.

Then Shane said, still looking at the window, “She must be a really close friend. For you to come all this way alone.”

Ilya considered this. It was a casual question, so he gave it a casual answer.

“Yes. And also because she asked,” He said. “And I said yes.” Then he picked up his whiskey. “Simple.”

Shane made a small sound that wasn’t quite agreement.

“You think it’s not simple,” Ilya said.

“I think—” Shane paused. “I think flying from Moscow to Croatia alone for a wedding is not nothing. That’s a lot of yes.”

Ilya looked at him for a moment. Shane was still looking at the window, at the dark and the planes moving slowly across it. He had an expression of someone who asked about someone else's situation but also thinking about their own.

"She is important person," Ilya said simply. "When important person ask, you go." He tilted his head. "Rhys asked you?"

"Yeah." Shane turned his glass. "Five years ago, actually. Before he even met—" he stopped, cleared his throat. "He asked me five years ago. Said whenever he got married, he wanted me to be the best man." A pause. "I said yes then too."

"Before you knew it would be Croatia."

"Before I knew a lot of things." Shane said it lightly but it sounded like he meant something else. Ilya heard the *something else* and left it alone.

"Finland is the happiest country in the world," Ilya said instead.

Shane looked at him. "What?"

"Seven years in a row. They were very consistent." He gestured at the bar, the empty terminal beyond it, the bartender who had vanished entirely. "I think maybe it's because they close everything at midnight and go to sleep. They know when to stop." He finished his whiskey. "This is secret to happiness, I think. Not talking about feelings. They just.. go to sleep."

Shane stared at him for a long moment. Then, reluctantly, helplessly, like it was being taken from him, he laughed.

"That's genuinely the most depressing thing I've heard tonight," he said.

"We are stuck in Helsinki at midnight. Bar is closing. Your standard for depressing is maybe not so high right now."

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it. Looked at his drink. Looked back at Ilya. "Okay," he said. "Fair."

Ilya smiled into his glass.

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It started, as most things did between them, because Ilya said something.

The departure board hadn't updated in almost three hours. The bartender had migrated to the far end of the counter and appeared to have entered a meditative state. Shane's third round of Moscow mule was three-quarters gone and Ilya's whiskey was pretty much the same. Outside the window, Helsinki was simply being Helsinki, completely unbothered by the fact that two people had somewhere to be.

Shane was turning his glass in slow circles on the bar. Not fidgeting exactly, he looked like he was lost in his thoughts. It was very visible, Ilya had started to recognize as one of his tells,

the glass turning meant something was being processed that hadn't finished yet.

Ilya watched him do it for a moment.

"Let's play truth or dare," he said.

Shane looked up and rolled his eyes. "We're adults."

"Yes."

"In an airport."

"Also yes."

"It's past midnight."

"Shane." Ilya set down his glass. "Truth or dare."

Shane looked at him for another moment with the expression of a man doing serious calculations over a very simple decision. Then he picked up his Moscow mule. "Truth," he said. "Obviously."

"Obviously," Ilya agreed, and Shane pointed at him but Ilya was already asking. "Most embarrassing thing in professional capacity. Go."

Shane didn't even hesitate. "I got lost in my own arena."

Ilya stared at him.

"It was a new season," Shane said. "They redid the whole corridor system in February. I ended up in the visitors' locker room during warmup. Three opposing players saw me."

"What did you do?" Ilya looked at him amused.

"I told them I was checking the pipes."

"The pipes?"

"Well I panicked."

Ilya put his glass down and he laughed out loud. Shane watched him with an expression that was trying very hard to remain offended and failing completely.

"Your turn," Shane said, pointing.

"Okay. Truth for truth." Ilya composed himself. "I had patient. Six years old. Very serious boy. Very—" He held up a hand to indicate small and solemn. "Dignified. He comes in, I say hello, I ask how he is feeling. He looks at me. Then he roars. Like dinosaurs. Full roar. Very committed."

Shane stared at him.

“I told him his dinosaur impression was very scary,” Ilya continued. “And he started crying immediately. Because he was not doing impression, he was saying hello, with a sore throat.” He shook his head. “I don’t talk about this anymore.”

Shane looked at him for a long moment. Then he started laughing. “You just told me about it.”

“You will never speak of this again.” He pointed. “Truth or dare.”

“Truth.” Shane said, and then before Ilya could open his mouth, “Don’t.”

“I said nothing.”

“You were going to say predictable.”

“I was going to say *of course*,” Ilya said. “Which is different word. Very different energy.” He considered. “Okay. Secret skill. Secret hobby. Something you have that no one knows about.”

Shane turned his glass. “I make playlists,” he said, in the tone of minor confession. “For everything. Warmup, cool-down, driving, specific moods,” He paused. “I have one called *Tuesday Morning* that I’ve been adding to for four years and I’ve never listened to it start to finish.”

Ilya looked at him. “Why not?”

“It’s not finished.”

“How many songs?”

“Two hundred and forty-seven.”

“Shane.” Ilya opened his mouth in disbelief.

“It’s not finished,” Shane said, with great dignity.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. The playlist was four years deep and still not done. There’s a tenderness of adding to something without completing it. He felt that then moved on.

“Scurvy,” he said.

Shane blinked. “I’m sorry?”

“Last February. I convinced myself I had scurvy.” He said it with the dignity of a man at peace with his past. “I was tired. My gums felt sore. Then I looked up symptoms online—”

“You looked up your own symptoms?” Shane sounded amused.

“I was concerned.”

“Ilya, you’re a *doctor*—”

“This is exactly why it was embarrassing,” Ilya said. “I know this. I diagnosed myself with scurvy at two in the morning. I went to pharmacy. Buy many vitamin C. The pharmacist looked at me very suspicious.” He paused. “Apparently I was just not eating enough fruit. This is whole story.”

Shane laughed and Ilya watched it happen. He felt the satisfaction of a joke landing exactly where it was aimed.

“Did the vitamin C help,” Shane managed to say in between his laughs.

“Yes. Immediately. Only need three days then I was cured.” He picked up his whiskey. “Probably not scurvy. But I increased fruit intake just in case. I am much healthier now. Very good citrus consumption.” He pointed.

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The bar had thinned to almost nothing. The other travelers were gone. The bartender had vanished and apparently decided they were fine on their own, which was either very trusting or very Finnish.

Three more lights had gone off. Just this corner of the bar now, soft and close, the rest of it surrendering to dark. Outside, the gate sat empty. The board blinked its patient DELAYED into the void.

Two am past midnight. Helsinki doing its thing.

Shane had his elbows on the bar, the careful gate 14C posture entirely gone somewhere around the second round. He was looking at Ilya with the expression that had been getting progressively harder to read as the evening went on. Not because it was hiding more, Ilya thought, but because it was hiding less, and that was somehow more complicated.

“Truth,” Shane said. Then, after a pause. “Ask me a real one.”

Ilya looked at him.

*A real one.* As if the scurvy, the pipes and the playlist hadn’t been real, which they had, but Shane was right that they hadn’t been the real ones that count. The ones underneath. You had to get through the surface layer before anyone trusted you with the actual thing.

“Okay,” Ilya said. He thought about it properly, it took longer than usual because Shane had shifted on his barstool toward his way and the freckles had shifted with him. Ilya was a professional who had been noting them professionally all evening and was finding it increasingly difficult to continue doing so professionally.

“What do you want. That you haven’t told anyone.” Ilya looked at him,

Shane went still, which Ilya had learned by now meant something real was processing underneath. He picked up his whiskey. Gave it the space it needed.

“I want to stop being so careful,” Shane said quietly. Said at the bar, not at Ilya. “All the time. I have four drafted speeches in my bag for a wedding toast I have to give this weekend. *Four*. I know what I’m doing for the next four months. I have a playlist for every situation and a spreadsheet for coffee shops and I— ” he stopped. Started again. “I’m very tired.”

He looked up.

“That’s it,” he said. “That’s the answer.”

Ilya looked at him for a moment. “It’s good answer,” he said. No joke underneath it.

Shane held his gaze for a beat. Then looked away, smooth and automatic, the armor finding its edges again. “Your turn.”

Ilya’s truth was supposed to be funny. He’d had one ready. Something light. Something that would reset the banter back to where it was safe. But instead—

He opened his mouth.

“I came to this wedding,” He started. “Because I thought it would fix something.” He turned his glass. “I don’t know what exactly. I thought.. maybe seeing her happy, seeing them, I thought it would close something properly.” He paused. “Instead of just leaving it— ” he made a gesture with one hand. *Ajar. Walking away and calling it the same thing.*

Shane looked at him. *Old friends*, Ilya has said. Shane’s expression shifted, it’s neither pity nor sympathy, it’s something more like a recognition. The recognition of someone who understood, from the inside, what it cost to say a thing lightly that wasn’t light at all.

He didn’t push it.

“Is it,” Shane said carefully. “Closing?”

Ilya considered this honestly. “Ask me again at the end of the weekend.”

“Okay.”

A beat.

“Okay.” Ilya said. He looked at Shane. At the freckles in the last of the soft amber light. At the four drafts of speeches and the *I want to stop being so careful* still sitting in the air between them, warm and slightly dangerous. The way Shane looked at Ilya’s mouth whenever he’s talked all evening, thinking Ilya might not notice, but of course he does. At the hands around the almost empty glass, that had tightened slightly, then loosened, then tightened again, which Ilya had noticed and not commented.

“Truth or dare,” Ilya continued.

Shane looked at him. Something small shifted on his face. The processing expression. Then, like it surprised him, “Dare.”

Ilya looked at him.

“Dare,” Shane said again. More certain this time. Like he’d checked the answer and it was still the same.

The last light on the bar went off.

Just the bar itself now, fully closed. The plane’s path was dark outside the window, Helsinki past midnight. The bartender had disappeared entirely, no other travelers in sight. Just them and the quiet empty gate beyond. The board blinking its patient DELAYED at no one.

Ilya looked at Shane in the dark. At the freckles gone soft in this light. At the jaw, slightly less set than in the gate 14C, slightly less set than an hour ago. It loosened in increments that Shane probably didn’t know were visible. At the *Dare* said twice, the second time more certain than the first, like Shane had made a decision and was committing to it.

*I want to stop being so careful*, Shane had said.

*Da*, Ilya had thought. *I know*.

He looked at him for one more moment.

“I dare you,” Ilya said, “..to kiss me.”

The bar was very quiet.

Shane stared at him. Ilya could see it, the full processing, the calculation running, *what does this mean, what is the correct response here, what does he want, what do I..* He watched Shane run the calculations, and he almost said *forget it, joke, sorry*, except—

Shane’s hands tightened on his glass. His eyes dropped to Ilya’s mouth and lingered there a few seconds too long.

“Okay,” Shane said, very quietly. Like the word had been there for a while, waiting for the right moment.

He leaned in.

Ilya had predicted, somewhere in the leaning, that it might be quick and contained. The responsible execution of a dare. A point proved, a game completed and *done*.

Shane closed the distance.

His mouth found Ilya’s.

And then, unexpectedly, Shane made a sound at the back of his throat.

Small and sounded relieved. Definitely not meant to be heard by anyone. The sound of someone who had been holding something very carefully for a very long time and had, for one unguarded fraction of a second, put it down.

Ilya heard it.

He went very still. Then he didn't.

Maybe it's the three rounds of alcohol, maybe it's the closing bar, maybe it's those goddamn freckles, he could not decipher why.

Ilya moved first. Or Shane did. It didn't matter. They both did.

His hand found Shane's hair, one other hand on his face, the freckles under his thumb, "*Bozhe moy*," the freckles, and Shane made the sound again, slightly different this time, less surprised and more.. Ilya didn't have a word for it, didn't have a word for any of this. He was operating entirely without language for the first time in recent memory.

Shane's hand came up between them.

Ilya thought for a split second *here it is, the stop, the we shouldn't, the—*

Shane's hand found his collar and stayed there.

*Oh.*

The kiss deepened. Shane kissed him in a way Ilya hadn't expected. There was no performance in it, no guard left between them. His mouth was warm, certain, and slightly desperate. The desperation of someone who had denied himself something for far too long and then, in one unguarded moment, finally got it.

Ilya's hand moved from Shane's cheekbone into his lower jaw, tilting his head back slightly, and the new angle was dizzying.

"*Da, vot tak*," Ilya groaned, low, quiet and completely beyond his control. Shane swallowed it and pressed closer, his knee finding the space between Ilya's, his other hand sliding from Ilya's collar to his sides, clutching hard. Ilya pulled Shane closer and Shane moved willingly, immediately. He let out a small desperate sound that settled somewhere low in Ilya's stomach.

Ilya's hand tightened in his hair.

Shane's breath caught.

They both came off the barstool entirely. They were in a bar. Technically.

Ilya pulled back slightly.

Shane followed, a small desperate sound escaped him as he chased Ilya's mouth, his hands tightening, pulling, not letting the distance exist even for a second.

"*Ty.*" Ilya said softly, which wasn't English, which meant Shane wouldn't understand it, which was probably why he said it.

“What,” Shane said. His voice was lower than it had been all evening. Eyes hazy and heavy with wants. His hand was still at Ilya’s side.

“Nothing,” Ilya said. “Come here.”

What happened in the next few minutes was, technically, still in a bar.

Technically.

Ilya walked him back. They knocked a barstool down and completely ignored it.

One step, two, until Shane’s back met the wall at the gap between the end of the bar and the entrance to what looks like a staff room, they’re completely shielded from the public eyes.

Ilya’s hand slid from Shane’s jaw to the back of his neck and pulled. He dropped a kiss to Shane’s throat and Shane’s head fell back immediately, mouth dropping open, eyes sliding closed, low moan escaped his mouth. The careful person from gate 14C was entirely gone, and Ilya smiled against his skin because he couldn’t help it. He pressed another kiss to his throat and felt the swallow of it against his mouth.

“Don’t stop,” Shane said. Low and certain.

“*Ne sobirayus*,” Ilya said. *Not planning to*. Not even slightly.

He trailed down, throat to collarbone, slow and maddening, leaving his mouth somewhere new every few seconds and feeling Shane’s breathing change with each one, becoming less controlled and more wrecked and entirely unguarded. Then he licked a slow line up the full length of his neck.

Shane shivered from the point of contact all the way down.

Ilya moved up. Found the spot behind Shane’s ear, pressed his mouth there, teeth grazing, just enough pressure—

Shane shuddered. His breath caught audibly. His hands flew to Ilya’s back and gripped like something to hold onto, pulling him closer, and Ilya did it again, because he was thorough, and because Shane’s reaction was worth repeating.

“*Bozhe moy*,” Ilya said against his neck.

“You keep saying that,” Shane breathed.

“*Da*.” Ilya’s hand tightened on his waist. Drew him in. “Because you keep—” he didn’t finish the sentence. He kissed him instead, deep and hungry, and Shane made the sound, *that* sound, the first one that had started all of this. His hips rolled forward again and Ilya thought, *we are in a bar; an empty public bar, in Finland, which is the happiest country in the world, and maybe this is why, this is the secret, two people in a closing airport bar past midnight making questionable decisions—*

Shane bit his lower lip gently.

Ilya forgot about Finland.

Shane's hands moved, his back, his waist, decisively lower, both hands gripping Ilya's ass and pulling him flush, all of him at once. Ilya groaned into his mouth, deep and low. Shane pulled harder, his hips rolling forward, slow and deliberate and devastating.

Ilya pressed back. They moved, the slow desperate grind of it building, hips finding friction and chasing it, the hard press of them against each other undeniable, no distance left to negotiate, no pretending about what was happening or what they both wanted to happen next.

Ilya pressed in. Shane exhaled against his mouth, *wrecked*, his head falling back against the wall, hips pressing forward into Ilya's, chasing the friction they'd just found. Ilya gave it to him, pressed in, and Shane made that low broken sound again. He kept grabbing at Ilya's back with both hands like he needed something to hold onto.

Ilya's hands moved, chest first, feeling Shane's heartbeat against his palm, fast and unsteady, then ribs, then the hem of his shirt, fingers sliding underneath to warm skin, finding the hard plane of his stomach, the muscle of it, trailing lower, finding his waistline, his fingertips slipped inside the waist of his trousers, looping in, pulling, just slightly, just enough—

And then the airport announced their flight.

*Attention passengers. Finnair flight HR1221 to Dubrovnik is now ready for boarding at gate 14C. We apologize for the delay.*

They broke the kiss. Gasping.

The announcement had done it. It cut through everything, the heat and the dark and the bar that had stopped being *just* a bar. Now they were two people pressing at each other in a closed airport bar past midnight with the light of the terminal coming in and making everything look exactly like what it was.

Ilya stepped back. His hands fell at his side. The warmth of Shane's skin still lingered on his fingertips.

Shane stood, straightening himself.

They looked at each other.

This part, the after, the *what now*, the airport light coming from the gate with the board reading BOARDING, this part neither of them had a plan for. Shane's shirt was untucked. His mouth was red, swollen. His hair was.. Ilya had done that with his hands, in what felt like a different universe.

The board said **BOARDING**.

Shane looked at it, then at the floor, then briefly at Ilya. Ilya recognized the expression immediately. It was how Shane looked at things he hadn't planned for, like he was running the numbers and they weren't adding up to anything he had prepared for.

He cleared his throat.

“Right,” he said.

“Right,” Ilya said.

A beat of silence passed, and it wasn't comfortable. The comfortable silences had been earlier in the amber light, during the game, in those five hours when everything between them had made sense in the moment. Now all of it was sitting here between them.

Shane reached for his jacket and his carry-on. The movements of someone putting himself back together and had done it many times before. Jacket, posture, expression, the jaw setting itself, the armor finding its last pieces and clicking into place.

It took fifteen seconds.

It was the saddest fifteen seconds Ilya had seen in a while. He worked with sick children for a living. He knew what fifteen seconds of someone putting themselves back together looked like.

Shane opened his mouth then closed it. He tried again. “I have to board now. I’m in business class,” Shane said. Like that was what needed saying right now, out of everything.

“Okay,” Ilya said.

Neither of them moved.

Shane stood there for one more moment, carry-on in hand, his expression carefully smoothed over. The only thing that hadn't been covered yet was still there in his eyes, visible if you knew where to look.

Ilya was looking.

Shane put it away, and finally put his perfectly guarded expression back.

“See you there.” he said, looking away, trying to avoid Ilya’s eyes.

“See you there.” Ilya said.

Shane walked toward the gate. He didn’t look back.

Ilya sat for another moment in the closed bar, alone in the dark. The soft light was long gone. Only the terminal’s stark glow spilled in now, flat and bright and honest, making everything look exactly like what it was.

He picked up his glass. Empty.

He put it down.

He thought about the sound Shane had made.

He straightened his jacket. He picked up his carry-on and went to gate 14C. It was the sensible choice, the only choice, the obvious next step in a sequence of events that had begun with a departures board, moved through a bar, a dare, and ended with fifteen impossible seconds. None of those seconds had been remotely sensible.

He boarded.

Found his seat. Window seat, he always paid extra for the window, right now he couldn't remember why that had ever seemed important.

Somewhere on this plane was Shane, in business class, separated by a curtain, twenty rows, and whatever had happened in the bar. Something Ilya didn't have a name for yet and was not going to name at thirty thousand feet over the Adriatic.

He looked at the dark outside the window. Helsinki disappearing under the clouds.

He thought about the freckles.

He thought about the sound.

He put his headphones in.

He closed his eyes.

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## Chapter 2: Coffee Is Not Water

### Chapter Notes

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

Dubrovnik at seven in the morning didn't care how you arrived.

Shane had arrived hungover, sleep-deprived, carrying eight hours of something he hadn't processed yet and wasn't planning to process on Croatian soil if he could help it. The city received him anyway. The light was already doing something unreasonable over the water, gold and soft and slightly cruel, the kind of morning that had no business existing on a day when Shane felt like this.

He'd spent the flight not thinking about Helsinki.

He'd been extremely successful at this. He had not thought about the bar, or the stranger, or the ungodly hours that had made perfect sense in the soft light of a closing Helsinki bar and no sense whatsoever anywhere else. He had not thought about the dare. He had not thought about what he'd done after the dare. He had not thought about any of the things that had happened between the dare and the announcement, which was a long list, which he was not making right now.

He had not thought about all of it constantly for four hours and twenty minutes, since the last time he walked away from that said bar.

The taxi from the airport was small and warm and smelled like pine air freshener. The driver had the radio on low, something Croatian and vaguely melancholic. Shane sat in the back and watched Dubrovnik arrive around him, the old city walls, the water, the specific blue of the Adriatic that he'd seen in pictures and that was, in person, significantly more blue than advertised.

He had four drafted speeches in his bag.

He had a suit hanging in a garment bag that he'd paid extra to check, because the suit needed to be right, the speech also needed to be right, and this weekend absolutely needed to be right. Shane Hollander had been preparing for this weekend for six months and was not going to let one night in a Helsinki airport with a Russian pediatrician derail the plan.

The plan was to show up, be the best man, give the speech and be *fine*.

He was fine.

He looked out the window at the Adriatic sea. The light on it was doing something that would have been beautiful under different circumstances. Under current circumstances, it was slightly aggressive.

His mouth still tasted like ginger and whiskey.

He was not thinking about that.

The taxi turned up a narrow road and Shane straightened in his seat and decided that whatever had happened in Helsinki will stay in Helsinki. Dubrovnik was in a different country entirely and he was going to be fine.

He was going to be *so* fine.

After a forty minute ride from the airport, the taxi stopped.

Shane looked up.

The resort was, as suspected, *aggressively beautiful*.

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The resort was built into the side of a cliff the way things in Croatia were built into cliffs, like the cliff had always intended this, like the stone walls, the terrace and the bougainvillea spilling over everything were simply what happened when you left a Croatian cliff alone long enough. Shane stood at the entrance with his carry-on and his four drafted speeches and looked at it for a moment.

It was, objectively, one of the most beautiful places he had ever been.

He resented it slightly.

A porter appeared and took his bags with the efficiency of someone who had seen many tired, slightly wrecked-looking guests arrive at seven in the morning and had opinions about none of them. Shane followed him through the entrance and into a lobby that was all pale stone and high ceilings. The coolness that came from thick walls keeping the morning heat away. He was just beginning to orient himself and locate the reception desk while formulating a plan, when someone called his name.

“Shane?”

He turned.

Svetlana Vetrova was smaller than he'd expected, that's the first thing he noticed, and then immediately he noticed everything else: the warm-looking, with a crown of auburn curls, her eyes sharp and bright, and she was wearing a linen dress and a gold necklace that caught the morning light. She was already crossing the lobby toward him with the energy of someone who had decided they were friends before the introduction had technically happened. She was looking at Shane with the warmth of a person who had heard a great deal about him and had been waiting to confirm it in person.

“Finally!” she said, as she hugged him.

Shane, who had not been prepared for this, stood for a moment with his arms slightly out before his manners caught up with him and he hugged her back. She smelled like something floral. She hugged with her whole body, and she meant it.

“Rhys talks about you constantly, I mean *constantly*, it’s Shane this and Shane that—” she laughed, bright and easy. “It’s so nice to finally put a face to the name. Like a real one, not just photos.”

“So glad to finally meet you too. I’m excited for you both,” Shane said. He’d had six months to practice saying this. “The resort is incredible, how did you find it?”

Svetlana brightened immediately. “Rhys found it actually. He did all this research,” she gestured expansively. “Spreadsheets, reviews, everything, it was very thorough, very Rhys.”

Shane smiled despite himself. “That does sound like him.”

“Come sit, you look exhausted. The delay sounds horrible, five hours.. I can’t believe it.”

She was already moving, gesturing for him to follow, leading him toward a lobby area that looked out over the terrace and the Adriatic sea below it.

Shane followed. “Where’s Rhys?”

“Still sleeping.” Svetlana waved a hand. “He was up until three dealing with the situation. He’ll be at breakfast soon, don’t worry, he’s been talking about seeing you all week.” She settled into one of the lobby chairs, catching a passing staff member’s eye and gesturing for refreshments. She did it with such an ease like she owned the place, then she looked back at him with bright eyes, “How was the delay? There was a whole thing in the group chat—”

“It was fine,” Shane cut her short. “Long.”

“Did you sleep at all?”

“Yeah. Some,” he said, which was not true, but was easier than the alternative.

Svetlana nodded sympathetically and began talking about the wedding prep. She had the energy of someone who had been running logistics for months and had opinions about all of it. The decoration flowers had arrived yesterday and were almost right. The caterer had a disagreement with the venue about the timing of the main course that had been resolved but not without drama. The rehearsal was tonight. Shane had known that for weeks. It was in his calendar, planned for and mentally rehearsed.

Shane nodded in the right places and drank the sugary welcome drink that appeared in front of him from somewhere and tried to look more awake than he was.

Then Svetlana said, “So. The rooms.”

Shane looked at her.

“There was a situation,” she said carefully. Her expression looked like someone who had been apologizing for this situation all morning and had not yet run out of apology. “My uncle. My father’s only cousin, from Volgograd. Nobody told him about the wedding, and there was a misunderstanding. He arrived yesterday with his wife and his two sons and their wives and

—” she stopped. Made a gesture that covered the full scope of the disaster. “The point is, we had to rearrange everything, and the last room—”

She stopped.

Because behind Shane, someone else stepped into the lobby.

Svetlana’s face changed.

Shane watched it happen, her expression went from warm, apologetic and mid-sentence to something else entirely, something that bypassed polite and went straight to real. She was already standing, already moving, before Shane had fully turned around to see what had caused it.

He turned around.

Ilya was standing in the lobby entrance with a carry-on and a jacket slung over one arm. He looked like a man who had been traveling since yesterday and was running on very little sleep and considerably less grace than usual. He looked, Shane thought, slightly more human than he had in Helsinki. Less composed.

Shane had approximately one second to notice all of this before Svetlana crossed the lobby in four steps and threw her arms around him.

Ilya caught her.

The hug was immediate and real, Ilya’s arms going around her properly, his chin dropping slightly, one hand at the back of her head, they looked like two people who had hugged each other enough times to know exactly where to put their hands. Svetlana said something in Russian, fast and warm, and Ilya responded, soft and kind. Shane stayed where he was and watched it happen. He felt something in his chest that he’s not sure what.

What he noticed, what he couldn’t stop noticing, was Ilya’s face.

Over Svetlana’s shoulder, Ilya’s expression was doing something complicated and private that lasted only a second, maybe less, before the smile arrived. The smile was real. Shane could see that it was real. But the thing before it had also been real, something passing through Ilya’s face, grief or something so adjacent to grief that the difference didn’t matter. Then it was gone, replaced by a smile as if it had never been there. Ilya said something that made Svetlana laugh and lean back to look at him.

Shane looked away.

He wasn’t sure why. It felt like he’d seen something he wasn’t supposed to see, something that hadn’t been meant for him, and the decent thing was to look away.

He looked at the Adriatic sea through the lobby window instead. It was still unreasonably blue.

“Shane,” Svetlana said.

He looked up.

She was beaming, one hand still on Ilya's arm, gesturing between them with the satisfaction of someone making an introduction they were very pleased about. "This is Ilya, one of my oldest and dearest friend, he came all the way from Moscow," she squeezed Ilya's arm, "Ilya, this is Shane, Rhys's best man, I've been so excited for you two to meet,"

Ilya looked at Shane.

Shane looked at Ilya.

The lobby was very quiet for a moment.

"We've met," Ilya said. His voice was even and pleasant. Completely ordinary. "Briefly. In the airport."

The word *briefly* sat between them and stayed there.

Shane felt something shift in his face. He wasn't sure what exactly, he was too busy managing the rest of himself to conduct a full audit of his expression. But something happened in the vicinity of his jaw and his eyes that he hoped, sincerely, read as a polite recognition rather than whatever it actually was.

"Right," Shane said. "Yes. The delay."

"The delay." Ilya agreed with the tone so flat it sounded like a man confirming a weather report.

Svetlana looked between them with bright eyes. "Oh, perfect. I'm glad you had a chance to talk. This makes the situation much easier actually," she was already moving, steering them both toward the chairs. She looked like someone who had been managing people all weekend and was very good at it. "Because the room situation, I was just explaining to Shane—"

Then she explained again.

The Russian relative. The Volgograd uncle. The collapsed room arrangements. The two queen beds. The enormous room. So sorry. Blame the delayed flight. Blame the uncle. Blame, frankly, the general chaos of trying to get fifty people from three countries to the same Croatian cliff for a weekend.

Shane listened. Nodded in the right places.

He was very aware of Ilya standing approximately two feet to his left, looking at the side of Shane's face with the expression of a man who was also listening and nodding in the right places and was also, possibly, thinking about Helsinki.

Or possibly not. Possibly Ilya was simply listening to Svetlana explain the room situation and had zero feelings about any of it.

Shane looked at him.

Ilya looked back.

The expression on Ilya's face was perfectly composed and entirely unreadable. But his eyes, they were doing something that was not unreadable at all.

*Briefly*, Shane thought. *He said briefly*.

"So," Svetlana said, looking between them with an apologetic smile. "Is that okay? You're both adults, the suite is enormous, everything else booked out, the closest hotel is 30 minutes from here, and it's only three nights—"

"Fine for me," Shane said.

"Of course," Ilya said, at the same moment.

They didn't look at each other when they said it.

Svetlana clapped her hands together once, relieved. "Perfect. Wonderful. The porter will take you up." She hugged Shane again, quick and warm, then Ilya, and then she was already moving toward the corridor that presumably led to wherever the rest of the wedding chaos was happening. She called back over her shoulder something about breakfast at nine and the rehearsal schedule and the uncle, who was apparently still a situation.

The lobby went quiet.

Shane and Ilya stood in it.

A porter appeared with their carry-on on a trolley, waiting.

"After you," Ilya said.

"Thanks," Shane said.

They followed the porter toward the elevator in the silence of two people who had five hours of something between them and were currently pretending, in a Croatian hotel lobby at eight in the morning, that *briefly* was an accurate description of any of it.

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The room was, as promised, *enormous*.

Two queen beds on opposite sides, a generous amount of floor between them, a terrace that looked out over the Adriatic as if the architect had known exactly what they were doing and had wanted everyone to know it. The walls were pale stone. The light coming through the terrace doors was the very gold and early Croatian morning. It felt soft and warm and absolutely did nothing to help Shane feel less like he'd been awake for twenty-two hours.

He stood in the middle of it for a moment with his carry-on and looked at the two beds on opposite sides of the room and thought, *he could do this*. This is fine. Three nights. Two adults. Enormous room. *Totally fine*.

The porter set their bags down, accepted Ilya's tip with a nod, and left.

The door clicked shut.

Shane unzipped his carry-on.

Ilya, across the room, did the same.

The silence had a texture to it. Not uncomfortable exactly, but present. It existed because both of them needed it to. They moved around each other with such careful politeness. Two people who knew too much and had silently agreed to leave it untouched. Shane unpacked with his usual efficiency: toiletries to the bathroom, charger into the nearest outlet, suit hung carefully in the wardrobe. The suit he'd been thinking about wearing for six months.

Ilya unpacked with the efficiency of someone intending to do the absolute minimum effort before going to bed.

"If you need the bathroom," Ilya started, not looking up from his bag. "You can go first."

"I'm fine," Shane said. "Take it."

"You were awake longer."

"I don't know about that."

Ilya looked at him. "You look like someone who didn't sleep on the plane."

"I slept," Shane lied.

Ilya's expression suggested he found this highly unlikely but was choosing, as a professional courtesy, not to pursue it. He went back to unpacking. Shane hung up the last of his things and sat on the edge of his bed. He looked at his phone and found seventeen unread messages in the wedding group chat, most of them about the uncle. He put it face down on the nightstand.

The room was very quiet.

Outside, the Adriatic sea was doing its thing.

Shane looked at the wardrobe. At the charcoal suit hanging there, bought specifically for this weekend. He'd bought it in February, tried it on in a changing room in Montreal, looked at himself in the mirror and thought, *this is the suit I'll wear when Rhys gets married*.

He hadn't allowed himself to think anything beyond that. He'd been very careful about it.

The thing about Rhys was that it wasn't simple and it wasn't dramatic. It wasn't the sort of story people expected when they heard the words *best friend*. Maybe that was why Shane had never told it. There had been no moment. No single afternoon when he'd looked at Rhys and realized, with sudden certainty, that he was in love with him. It had happened gradually. Over years of calling him first with every piece of news, good or bad. Of measuring his own

happiness against Rhys's. Of missing him so completely that his absence felt like something missing from the room.

Eight years old. Alphabetical order. Hollander and Hunt, two seats apart.

Shane had spent twenty years being the person Rhys called first. The person who showed up. The person who knew where the spare key was and what Rhys ordered when he was hungover and which of his family members to avoid at Christmas. He had spent twenty years being completely, fluently, exhaustively Rhys's best friend, and somewhere in that time the *love* had gone from one kind to another. Shane had noticed it gradually changed but said nothing because what was there to say. He said nothing for so long that it became the only available option.

He was fine about it.

He had been fine about it for years.

Rhys was getting married tomorrow and Shane was his best man and there were four drafted speeches in his bag and he was fine.

He looked up.

Ilya was watching him from across the room with the expression Shane was beginning to recognize as Ilya's observational mode, it didn't feel intrusive, it felt more like a present. The gaze of someone who noticed things.

Shane looked back at him.

Neither of them said anything.

Then Ilya looked away, back to his open luggage, and said, "I'm going to sleep for a bit. I cannot function like this."

Shane felt like he should say something. He'd planned to say something on the plane. He'd had four hours to think about it. He'd drafted it the same way he drafted everything else in his life. He did it methodically, in versions, each one slightly better than the last. By the end of the flight, he'd arrived at something clean, simple, and mature.

"About last night," Shane said.

Ilya paused, unlacing his shoes and looked up.

"I was pretty drunk," Shane said. "We both were. And it was— I mean, I didn't mean," he stopped. The clean simple mature version had apparently not made the journey from the plane to the room. "I just wanted to say. If I made things weird—"

"Shane," Ilya said.

Shane stopped.

“It was the alcohol,” Ilya said. His voice sounded easy with no judgment in it, no subtext Shane could find. “Long night. Strange situation. It happens.” He held Shane’s gaze for a moment and then, very simply said “It never happened.”

“Right,” Shane said. “Good. Yeah.”

“Yeah,” Ilya said.

A moment passed.

“Good,” Shane said again, which was one *good* too many but was already out there.

Ilya nodded once and went back to his shoes. Shane stood in the middle of the room, phone in hand, feeling, obscurely, like he'd just lost something he hadn't yet decided he wanted to keep.

Shane picked up his key card and left.

He stood in the hallway with the door closed behind him, the key card still in his hand, and thought: *okay, good*. That was the right outcome. The clean, sensible, responsible resolution to a situation that had required a clean, sensible, responsible resolution.

He stood there for another moment.

It felt terrible.

\*\*\*

The resort at eight thirty in the morning was beautiful in a way that things were beautiful when you were too tired and too hungover and too inside your own head to properly appreciate them.

Shane walked.

The terrace off the lobby opened onto a series of stone pathways that wound down toward the water, past gardens that smelled like rosemary and salt. Past a pool that nobody was using yet, past a breakfast terrace where two staff members were setting up for service with the practiced efficiency of people who did this every morning and found it neither remarkable nor unremarkable. Shane found a table at the edge of the terrace with an unobstructed view of the Adriatic sea and sat down. He ordered coffee from a server who appeared and disappeared with equal grace.

He looked at the water.

The water looked back.

It was very blue. Offensively blue. The old city walls were visible from here, pale stone against pale sky, the morning light doing something to them that would have made Shane reach for his phone to take a picture under different circumstances.

He drank his coffee.

He thought about Rhys.

Stripped of the twenty years of complication, it was just the man himself. Who had always been right there. The simple fact of him. The laugh he gave at his own jokes before he reached the punchline. The way he called Shane at two in the morning from Moscow, in the middle of a business trip, voice slightly wrecked, saying, *Shane, I think something has happened to me*. That was how Rhys announced things, so obliquely, circling around the actual point until Shane helped him land on it. Another thing Shane had always done for him. Another fluency between them.

*Something has happened to me.*

Shane had sat up in his Montreal apartment at two in the morning and said, *tell me*.

And Rhys had told him about Svetlana. The curly hair. The laugh. The way she'd argued with him about something at a business dinner and he'd found himself hoping she'd keep arguing, just to have a reason to keep listening. Six weeks in Moscow, the longest business trip of his career, and he'd spent most of it finding reasons to be in the same room as her.

Shane had listened.

He was good at listening to Rhys. He'd had twenty years of practice.

*I think I'm in love with her*. Rhys had said, his voice carrying the weight of someone announcing something enormous that he hadn't quite caught up to yet. *Is that insane? We've only known each other for six weeks*.

*No*, Shane had said. *It's not insane*.

And he'd meant it. That was the thing. He had sat in his apartment at two in the morning and listened to his best friend fall in love in real time. He had meant all of it, because Rhys was happy, and Rhys being happy had always been the thing Shane wanted the most. Even when the specific shape of Rhys's happiness was something Shane had to make room for in his chest by moving other things out of the way.

He was good at moving things out of the way. He'd had twenty years of practice at that too.

Shane picked up his coffee cup. Put it down. It was empty. He didn't remember finishing it.

The server materialized and refilled it without being asked, which Shane appreciated, and disappeared again.

He thought about the suit in the wardrobe upstairs.

He thought about the four drafted speeches in his bag, each one correct, each one right, each one exactly the sort of speech a best man gave when he was very good at being a best man, had been preparing for this specific occasion for six months, and was absolutely, completely fine.

His thoughts drifted back to Ilya saying *it never happened* with such an easy generosity attached to it. Someone offering a clean exit. To the specific way Shane had said, *yeah, good, thanks*, and meant none of it. That was the more complicated part.

He sat with that for a moment.

Then he put it away, in the place where he put things he wasn't examining right now, which was getting crowded but was still functional. He looked at the Adriatic sea and breathed.

He stayed until the breakfast terrace started filling up with other guests, until the sun got high enough to be properly warm, until his second coffee was gone and his hangover had moved from the background into the foreground. It made the light too bright and the ambient sound of the terrace slightly too loud.

He thought, *I can do this. I'm going back to the room. I'm fine.*

He stood up.

The world tilted very slightly.

He held onto the table for a moment, waiting for it to stop, and it did, mostly. He let go, straightened, picked up his key card, and walked back through the resort. He had the posture of a man who was *fine* and was demonstrating this through the way he carried himself.

He was fine.

He pressed the elevator button.

He was absolutely fine.

The elevator arrived. He got in. He pressed his floor. He watched the numbers go up and thought about nothing in particular and was fine.

The doors opened.

He walked to the room.

He put his key card to the door.

He was going to lie down for one hour. *Exactly one hour*. Then he was going to get up, shower, eat something, and be the best man. That was what he was here to be. That was the plan. It was fine.

He opened the door.

Ilya was not in bed.

The shower was running.

Shane stood in the doorway for a moment. Then he went in, let the door close behind him, sat on the edge of the bed, and looked at his phone. Twenty-three new messages in the wedding group chat, still mostly about the uncle. He turned the phone face down on the nightstand.

The shower stopped.

Shane looked at the bathroom door.

He looked at the ceiling.

He looked at his hands.

The bathroom door opened.

Ilya came out of the bathroom in a towel.

This was, objectively, not an unusual thing for a person to do. People came out of bathrooms in towels. It was a completely standard post-shower occurrence that Shane had witnessed many times in his life and had never previously found particularly significant.

This was different.

This was Ilya at nine in the morning with his hair wet and pushed back from his face and water still tracking down his shoulders, his chest, the landscape of him that Shane's eyes moved over before his brain had the chance to issue any instructions about where his eyes were and weren't allowed to go. The towel hung low on his hips. Significantly low. As if it was there more as a formality than a practical measure.

Shane looked away.

He looked at the ceiling.

He looked at his phone, face down on the nightstand. He looked at the nightstand. He looked at the wall above the nightstand, it was pale stone and completely featureless and was, right now, the safest thing in the room to look at.

He heard Ilya cross to his bag. The zip sound of it. The rustle of clothes.

Shane had known Ilya had a body. He had, in fact, been in close contact with that body for a significant portion of last night, which he was not thinking about. What he was currently struggling with was the actual presentation of *that* body in the Croatian morning light. The light fell on Ilya, golden, warm, and honest, unlike the dimmed lighting of the Helsinki bar. There was nowhere to hide from what he was looking at, which meant he needed to stop looking at it immediately.

He looked up.

Ilya had his back to him. Water still tracked down his shoulders, the breadth of them, the muscle of his back tapering to his waist and then the towel, hanging low enough that Shane could see the dimples at the base of his spine, the upper curve of his—

Shane looked at his hands.

His hands were on his knees. They were fine. They were completely fine.

Ilya turned around to look for something in his bag, and Shane got the front view, which was significantly worse. His gaze tracked down from Ilya's collarbone to his chest, the water still running down the lines of his stomach, the definition of his abs catching the morning light. It made Shane's mouth go dry in a manner that had nothing to do with dehydration. The V of his pelvic muscle, the towel hanging low from it, the downward direction of it that Shane's eyes followed for approximately one catastrophic second before he looked away.

He looked back at his hands.

His hands were still there. Still the most aggressively uninteresting thing in the room. He was going to marry his hands. He was going to look at nothing but his hands for the rest of this weekend.

He was suddenly so thirsty.

*That was the dehydration. That was absolutely the dehydration.*

"Oh. You came back," Ilya said.

"Yeah," Shane said.

"How was breakfast?"

"Good." He had eaten nothing. "Fine."

He heard Ilya cross to his side of the room, heard the sounds of someone getting dressed, and kept his eyes committed to his hands with the focused dedication of a man whose life depended on it. There was a pause. Then Ilya said, in a different tone.

"Shane?"

Shane looked up.

Ilya was standing near his bed, partially dressed now, trousers on, shirt not yet. He looked at Shane with the expression Shane recognized as Ilya's professional mode, the one he'd witnessed in Helsinki, before the *dare* and everything that followed.

"You look terrible," Ilya said. Not unkindly.

"Thank you."

"No. I mean—" Ilya tilted his head slightly. "You're very pale. And you're looking at your hands like they've done something wrong."

"I'm fine."

“You said that in the lobby too.”

“Because I am.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. “How much water did you drink today?”

“I had coffee.”

“That’s not water.”

“It has water in it.”

“Shane.”

Shane opened his mouth to say *I’m fine* once again but stood up instead. Because the best way to demonstrate that you were fine was to be upright and functional, and he was upright and he was—

The room tilted.

Then it shifted. Exactly how it shifted when you’d been awake for twenty-four hours and hungover for most of them and had drunk two coffees and no water and had been sitting very still and then stood up too fast. The ceiling did something brief and unconvincing. Shane sat back down on the bed, hard, his hands finding the mattress. He waited for everything to stop moving.

It stopped.

Mostly.

He was aware, distantly, of Ilya crossing the room.

“Okay,” Ilya said, crouching in front of him. Looking up at him. Still shirtless, which Shane noted and immediately stopped staring.

“Look at me.”

Shane looked at him.

Ilya’s eyes moved over his face with such an efficiency of someone who did this for a living. Someone who had spent years reading what people weren’t saying with their words and were saying with everything else. He reached up and pressed the back of his hand briefly to Shane’s forehead, then his cheek. Cool fingers. Steady.

“Dehydrated,” Ilya said. “And hungover. You didn’t sleep, you didn’t eat and you only had coffee, which is—” he made a small sound that covered his opinion of coffee. “When did you last have actual water?”

“I think.. Helsinki?” Shane said reluctantly.

Ilya looked at him.

“At the airport,” Shane clarified. “Before we boarded.”

“That was—” Ilya did the math. “six hours ago.”

“I had coffee.”

“Shane. Coffee is not—”

“You said that.”

“Because it remains true.” Ilya stood, and Shane was briefly, intensely grateful for this because it meant the eye level situation resolved itself. “Lie down.”

“I’m fine—”

“You nearly fell over.”

“I just stood up too fast.”

“You’re dehydrated and hungover, you don’t need to be stubborn too.” Ilya’s voice was matter of fact.

“Lie down. I’ll get you water.”

Shane looked at him.

Ilya looked back.

“I’m a doctor,” Ilya said. “Lie. Down.”

Shane lay down.

It was, immediately and completely, the right decision. The pillow was cool against his face. The bed was soft. The ceiling above him stopped tilting.

He heard Ilya move around the room. The sound of his bag. The bathroom tap ran briefly. Then Ilya was back, sitting on the edge of Shane’s bed, *the edge of his bed*, Shane noted, and pushed himself up onto one elbow.

Ilya was holding a glass of water and had, at some point in the last thirty seconds, put on a shirt, which Shane felt was considerate.

“Drink,” Ilya said.

Shane drank the water. All of it. He hadn’t known how thirsty he was until the water was gone, which seemed like a metaphor for something he wasn’t going to think about right now.

Ilya took the empty glass. Set it on the nightstand. Then he did something that Shane hadn’t expected, which was that he reached over and pressed his fingers lightly to Shane’s temple,

just for a moment, checking something. Ilya did it with the professional touch of someone assessing rather than offering comfort, except somehow it felt like both.

Shane's heart did something inconvenient.

"You'll feel better after you sleep," Ilya said. His voice had gone quieter, the matter-of-fact quality softening slightly. "Your body needs to recover. Don't get up until you feel ready."

"The rehearsal—"

"Is tonight. It's nine in the morning. Sleep. I just had 45 minutes nap and it helps with the hangover. Trust me."

Shane looked at him. At the careful expression on his face, the distance he was trying to keep, and everything underneath it that was much less controlled.

"Ilya," Shane said.

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

Ilya looked at him for a moment. Something moved across his face that didn't make it all the way to his expression before it was smoothed over. "Don't mention it," he said quietly.

Ilya stood. Picked up the empty glass. Said something about getting more water and electrolytes from the resort shop down the hall, said it quietly, and Shane heard the beginning of it and the middle of it and was drifting asleep before the end.

The last thing he was aware of was that the curtain being drawn across the terrace door, the room going dim and cool.

Everything felt so quiet. Ilya moved carefully, like someone who knew how to be in a space without disturbing it.

And then, from somewhere in the almost-dark, the thought that Shane had been *not-having* since Helsinki, arrived without permission, without warning, without any of the careful management he'd been applying to it since Helsinki.

*Last night. Ilya's mouth. The press of him against the wall. The water running down his stomach just now, the towel hanging low, the V of his hips pointing toward—*

He didn't think about that.

He was asleep before he could finish not thinking about it.

\*\*\*

He woke up to the Adriatic light.

Not directly, the curtain was drawn, the room dim, but the light coming through the gap in it had that gold and blue-adjacent shade, that could only be Croatian afternoon. The sounds filtering in from outside were the sounds of a resort that had been going about its day for several hours without him.

Shane lay still for a moment, taking inventory.

Head.. present, functional, the hangover downgraded from punishing to merely uncomfortable. Body.. horizontal, which it had needed to be. Room.. quiet. The other bed.. empty, neatly made, Ilya's bag still on the chair beside it.

He sat up slowly. He looked at the clock hanging on the wall, 12 PM, he had slept for three hours.

His gaze scanning the room. The nightstand first. Water, full glass. Electrolytes, the powder already dissolved, the drink a slightly alarming shade of orange. A headache pill, placed beside the water. Someone did it with such precision, like they had thought carefully about the order of things.

A wrapped sandwich on the desk.

And a note.

Shane picked it up.

The handwriting was small and slightly slanted, the letters more compressed than he'd expected.

*Eat the sandwich. Drink the electrolyte. Headache pill beside the water. Sleep as long as you need. I'll handle Svetlana if she asks.*

— Ilya

Shane read it.

Read it again.

Set it down. Picked it up. Set it down.

He sat there for a moment in the dim room with the Adriatic light coming through the curtain gap. He looked at the note on the nightstand and something happening in his chest that he was going to classify as gratitude and nothing else, because gratitude was a manageable thing and the other thing was not.

He ate the sandwich. Drank the electrolytes and the water. Took the pill.

He did it in the order Ilya had written them, which he noticed and tried not to think about.

\*\*\*

Ilya came back sometime in the early afternoon.

He came in quietly, the way he'd apparently been moving around the room all morning. He was slightly sun-warmed, his hair dry now, wearing a linen shirt with the sleeves rolled to the elbow. He looked like someone who had been outside in Croatian heat and had made sensible adjustments. He stopped when he saw Shane sitting up on the edge of the bed, sandwich wrapper on the desk, electrolytes in half empty glass.

He raised an eyebrow.

"You ate it," he said.

"Well. You told me to."

"I also told you coffee is not water."

"And apparently you were right about that," Shane said.

Ilya almost smiled. "How's your head?"

"Better." Shane paused. "Thank you. For—" he gestured at the nightstand, the desk, the general arrangement of things. "All of this."

Ilya made the Russian shrug, the one that meant several things and committed to none of them. "You were hungover and dehydrated. It was practical."

"Still."

Ilya looked at him for a moment. "You're welcome," he said, simply.

He set his room key on his nightstand and sat on the edge of his own bed, and there was a beat of quiet that wasn't uncomfortable, it's rather present. The room adjusting to two people in it again. Then Ilya said, conversationally, "I met Rhys."

Shane looked up. "Yeah?"

"At lunch. He was looking for you." He paused. "Nice guy. Very tall."

"He is." Shane was already reaching for his phone, the instinct immediate and automatic. Eleven missed messages. Three from Rhys. *Hey where are you, you good?* and then *Seriously mate you ok?* and then, an hour ago, a voice note Shane hadn't listened to yet. "I was supposed to help him this morning. There were things I said I'd handle,"

"He's fine," Ilya said.

"I know, but—"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was even. Not cutting him off, but still said it with enough weight that Shane stopped. "He's fine. You had a delayed flight and you were unwell. That is not your fault." He looked at Shane with the expression that Shane was starting to recognize as Ilya

meaning something more than he was saying. “It’s okay to make yourself a priority sometimes. Not always put other people first.”

Shane looked at him.

The words landed somewhere deeper than he wanted them to. Somewhere that hadn’t been touched in a long time. He felt it happen and couldn’t stop it. He just sat there while the sentence shifted something in his chest that had been carefully kept in place for years.

He looked back at his phone.

“Yeah,” he said. “Okay.”

A beat.

“Do you need anything else?” Ilya said. He stood, and crossed to Shane’s side of the room. The proximity of it registered, the way Ilya’s proximity had been registering since Helsinki. Shane sitting on the edge of the bed and Ilya standing beside him, close enough that Shane could see the sun had caught the skin of his forearms.

Shane’s brain, unhelpfully, produced the following thought: *I want someone to tell me it’s okay to not be okay right now.*

He was not going to say this.

He was a professional athlete with excellent physical conditioning and four drafted speeches and he was absolutely not going to say this to a man he’d met in an airport fourteen hours ago, no matter how that man was looking at him.

“I’m good,” Shane said. “Thank you.”

Ilya looked at him for a moment like he didn’t entirely believe this but was choosing not to pursue it. He went to the sink and filled another glass of water and came back and held it out.

“Here,” he said. “You need to drink more.”

Shane took the glass. “Are you always this bossy?”

“I’m a pediatrician,” Ilya said. “With children I use stickers as incentive. With you, I am improvising.”

Shane smiled, genuinely, despite himself. He reached for the glass—

Their hands touched.

Just briefly. Just the brush of Ilya’s fingers against Shane’s as the glass passed between them, nothing that would register as significant in any other context, nothing that was objectively more than accidental contact between two people in a room.

Shane looked at the glass.

Ilya didn't move his hand immediately.

Shane looked up.

Ilya was looking at him. Not with his usual politeness or the detached calm of a doctor. This was something else entirely. Something that didn't have any distance in it that Ilya usually maintained. He was looking at Shane the same way Shane had caught him looking at him in the airport bar, back when Ilya thought Shane wasn't paying attention.

Shane was always paying attention.

He started drinking slowly. The glass cool against his palm, the water cold, his eyes drifted back to Ilya over the rim.

Ilya watched him drink.

The room was very quiet. The Adriatic sea outside the curtain. The afternoon light. The silence didn't feel empty but rather full. Full of the five hours in Helsinki that they both agreed had never happened, full of *briefly* said in a hotel lobby, full of a note that said *I'll handle Svetlana if she asks*, like it was nothing, like Ilya was a practical person who did practical things and that was the whole of it.

Shane lowered the glass slightly.

Ilya's eyes dropped to his mouth.

Then back up.

Shane's grip on the glass tightened.

Ilya said, quietly, "More."

Just the one word. His voice low. His eyes on Shane's.

Shane held his gaze and drank. The water went down wrong, or right, he couldn't tell. His entire awareness narrowed to the distance between them, the exact way Ilya was looking at him, and the specific word that had been only one word but had sounded like something with more syllables in it. More weight.

He finished the glass.

A drop of water escaped. The corner of his mouth, tracking down his chin, cold against his skin.

Ilya reached up.

Shane didn't move.

Ilya's thumb found the drop at the corner of his mouth. He reached the line of his jaw, and wiped it away slowly, deliberately, his touch light and steady like he had all the time in the

world, like they were not in a Croatian resort room five hours before a rehearsal dinner, like none of the context existed.

Shane's lips parted.

Ilya's thumb stayed at the corner of his mouth for a moment longer than necessary.

Then Ilya's hand moved, tilting Shane's chin up slightly, just enough, like how you tilted something to look at it properly, his fingers warm under Shane's jaw.

He looked at Shane's face, and Shane realized that Ilya was looking at his freckles. Again. Still. He'd been looking at them since the airport bar at ten pm, like they were data he was still in the process of collecting and hadn't yet reached a conclusion about.

"*Vesnushki*," Ilya said softly. Almost to himself.

"What does that mean?" Shane said. His voice came out lower than he meant it to.

Ilya looked at him. Something in his expression shifted.

"You have constellation," Ilya said. "In your skin." His thumb moved, barely, tracing the line of Shane's jaw. "The freckles. Like stars."

Shane's lips parted and a sound escaped him before he could stop it, barely anything, just a breath, just an exhale. Ilya's thumb moved, just slightly, tracing the line of his jaw, and Shane felt it everywhere, felt it in his chest and his stomach and the space behind his ribs where he kept things he wasn't processing.

He swallowed.

Ilya's eyes tracked the movement. Down his throat and back up. Slow and steady. And Shane felt that too, being watched like that, being looked at like that, does *something* to him.

His hand came up before he realized it. It came up the way his mouth had come up in Helsinki when Ilya said *I dare you*, the way his body kept answering questions before his brain had finished reading them, and found Ilya's waist.

Pressed there.

The linen of Ilya's shirt warm under Shane's palm. The solidity of him. Shane's fingers curled, gripped, and pulled slightly, just enough to close the remaining distance by a fraction, just enough to mean something, his eyes never leaving Ilya's, not looking away.

Ilya looked back.

He moved.

One step.

Two step.

The space between them narrowed until there was almost none of it left, until Shane could see the way his jaw was set, could see his darkened eyes.

Shane's fingertips were at Ilya's waistband and it had moved, incrementally, without instructions, until his fingers were hooked just inside the fabric, just barely, the warm skin of Ilya's hip just beneath them, not quite touching, a hair's width away from touching. Shane's grip tightened and pulled the inch between them until it became half an inch and then less than that.

Ilya's thumb moved. From his jaw to his lips, slow, unrushed, the pad of it grazing Shane's lower lip. So light and that was somehow worse than pressure. It made Shane hyperaware of every nerve ending in his mouth, of the fact that his lips were parted, of the fact that Ilya was watching them with an expression that had stopped pretending to be anything other than what it was.

Shane's tongue touched his thumb. Just the tip. Just a graze. Just like it says *I dare you* back to Ilya.

Ilya's eyes flickered. Something moved through them, fast and dark.

He leaned down.

Shane's grip at his waist tightened, fingers pulling the fabric, pulling him, drawing him in, Shane could feel his breath now, warm and steady against his mouth, could feel the heat of him in the last remaining distance between them.

*I dare you*, the room said. Said it without words. Said it in Ilya's thumb at his lips and Shane's tongue against it and the breath between them and the grip of Shane's fingers at his waist and the slow inevitable lean of Ilya closing the last of it—

*Knock knock.*

"Shane?"

A voice, from the other side of the door. Warm and familiar.

"You're up, buddy?"

Shane's hand dropped from Ilya's waist.

Ilya stepped back. One step. Two. His hand leaving Shane's jaw.

They looked at each other.

Rhys.

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## Chapter End Notes

Yay you made it to the first two chapters, thank you for reading!

I want to talk about Svetlana for a second because she was the character I was most nervous about writing. She's the ex. She's the bride. She could so easily be the villain and she is absolutely not the villain and I hope that came through. She's just a person who loves Rhys and also still loves Ilya in the way you love someone in all capacity, and she invited him because she meant it, and that's it.

PS: The uncle from Volgograd has never appeared on the page and has already caused more problems than any character or any airline in this fic (yes you, Finnair.)

Also Ilya in a towel. Sorry about that. (Not sorry about that.)

Chapter three soon xx

## Chapter 3: Chlorine Is Not Good For Skin

### Chapter Summary

*Previously on Dare You Twice..(incase you need refresher)*

Finnair delayed their flight so they played truth or dare in a bar that was technically closed and it escalated quickly.

They landed in Dubrovnik. Same wedding. Forced to a shared room. Ilya left a note and a sandwich and said the freckles look like constellations. Shane almost did something about it. But then Rhys knocked.

We're going into chapter three now.

### Chapter Notes

Right so. First, I'm sorry in advance. Second, this part was supposed to be one chapter. And then Ilya did a thing—with zero regard for my outline, of course—and I blacked out, six hours passed and then another day, and now it's two chapters and apparently this is just my life now.

I am a vessel. The boys are driving. I have accepted this.

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

“There you are,” Rhys said. “I’ve been looking for you.”

He didn’t wait for Shane to process the sentence. He just opened his arms and pulled him in. Rhys has been doing this since they were eight years old and the gesture had never once required permission. Shane—who had been standing in a hotel room a few minutes ago with Ilya’s thumb at his jaw and his own hand at Ilya’s waist and approximately zero functional capacity—stood in the doorway and let himself be hugged.

He let himself have it.

Rhys Hunt was six foot two and had always hugged like he meant it. His whole body involved, one hand at the back of Shane’s neck, holding him tight with the certainty of someone who was genuinely glad to see him. He smelled like whatever expensive hotel soap Svetlana had probably chosen for the weekend, and underneath it was the *thing* Shane would have recognized anywhere, the impossible Rhys-ness that felt like home.

Shane had a policy about this thing. The policy was: *don’t*. The policy had been in place for twenty years and had an excellent track record and he was not abandoning it in a hotel doorway in Dubrovnik.

He let go first.

He stood in the doorway of the room. Aware, distantly, of Ilya somewhere behind him. There's a charged silence of a space between them that had been a certain thing a few minutes ago and was now a different thing entirely. He held onto his best friend and thought, *this is real. He is getting married tomorrow. He is happy.*

He was fine about it.

He had been fine about it for a very long time.

"You look terrible," Rhys said warmly, pulling back to look at him. His face was open and delighted, the kind of face that had never learned to be guarded because it had never needed to be. Green eyes, the specific Rhys warmth and the slightly rumpled hair. He looked like someone who had slept in late and was very pleased about it. "Did you sleep at all?"

"Some," Shane said.

"Liar." Rhys grinned. He looked past Shane into the room—taking in the two beds, the general arrangement of the space, Ilya somewhere in the background—and his grin widened. "Ah. You got the uncle room."

"Right, the uncle room," Shane repeated.

"Sveta's been going about it all morning. The uncle situation is—" Rhys made a gesture that covered the full scope of a disaster Shane was only partially informed about. "A whole thing. I'll tell you later." He looked past Shane again. "Ilya. Glad you made it down."

Shane turned slightly.

Ilya was standing near his bed with his hands in his pockets. His face was so completely composed and at ease that Shane recognized it immediately as the look Ilya wore when he was being very deliberate about appearing composed and at ease. He looked, from the outside, exactly like a man who had been taking a completely unremarkable afternoon nap and had been woken by a knock at the door.

He looked like nothing had happened. Shane had been doing this his entire life and he was genuinely impressed.

Rhys looked at Ilya. He had the expression of someone who had been charmed at lunch and was still affected by it. "He was in the room," he said, gesturing at Shane.

"I know," Ilya said. "I could have told you that."

"Right." Rhys seemed to find this funnier than it was. "Right, obviously." He looked between them. "This is going to be a good weekend actually." Still smiling.

Shane stood between them and thought, *of course. Of course they're going to like each other immediately. Of course this is going to be fine.*

\*\*\*

The pool was Rhys's idea.

*We've got hours before I have to be anywhere,* he said, steering Shane back down the corridor. He did it with such easy authority of someone who had been managing Shane's schedule for two decades, *and Sveta's already down there and I want you to actually talk to her properly because you're going to love her, Shane, I know you already met but I mean really talk to her, and also you look like you need a drink and some sun—*

Shane let himself be steered.

This was also something he'd been doing for twenty years. Rhys had always been like this. He moved through the world with the easy assumption that things would work out, that people would follow, that whatever came next would be good. Shane had watched him do it since they were eight years old and alphabetical order had put Hollander next to Hunt. Rhys had turned to Shane on the first day of third grade and said *you look like you know things, what's the teacher like* and Shane had said *I just got here* and Rhys had said *okay but what do you think* and that had been, more or less, the whole of it.

Twenty years of Rhys assuming Shane would follow.

Twenty years of Shane following.

He followed now, down the corridor toward the pool, Rhys talking about something—the rehearsal schedule, the uncle situation, a catering disagreement that had apparently been resolved but not without casualties—and Ilya somewhere behind them. Shane looked at the corridor walls and thought about nothing in particular with great concentration.

The pool terrace was everything Dubrovnik had been threatening since Shane arrived. Impossibly beautiful. The Adriatic sea below it doing its aggressive blue thing, bougainvillea spilling over the stone balustrade, the afternoon light doing something so specifically designed to make you feel small in the best possible way. A handful of other guests were distributed across lounge chairs. Music from somewhere, low and warm.

Svetlana was already there.

She was on a chaise lounge in the far corner with her sunglasses on, her hair loose and a book she appeared to be actually reading. She looked up when she heard them and had just enough time to smile before Rhys crossed to her, immediately, like there was no other direction he was ever going to go. He bent down and kissed her.

Slow and warm. Completely unselfconscious. The kiss of someone who had been doing this for six months and intended to do it for sixty years.

Shane watched the kiss and felt Ilya go still beside him. It was the stillness of someone who had made peace with what he was seeing, except for the parts that he hadn't. Those were still there too, just quieter.

“Shane,” she said, sitting up, and then immediately to Rhys. “You found him.”

“He was in the room,” Rhys said.

“I told you he’d be in the room.”

“You said the restaurant,”

“I said the room *or* the restaurant—”

Shane watched them do this, the easy back and forth of two people who had been finishing each other’s sentences for six months and had apparently been doing it since the first week. He felt something shift in his chest. The rearranging. The making room.

He was good at this.

From behind, he heard Ilya say something to Svetlana—in a low Russian voice, just for her—that made her laugh and said something back. She touched his arm briefly, a gesture of old familiarity, and Ilya smiled.

Shane watched the smile. He knew that smile. The smile you wore when you were happy for someone, and the happiness was real, but so was the thing underneath it. You just got very good at making sure only one of them showed.

He looked away.

“Drinks,” Rhys announced, already scanning for a server. He had the confidence of a man who had never once failed to catch a waiter’s attention. “Everyone’s having drinks. Shane, what do you want—actually, I know what you want, I’ll order for you, just sit down—”

“Rhys could you just—,” Shane said.

“What.”

“Just stop, please? I’m fine.”

“But you look terrible.”

“I’m aware, you’ve said that multiple times.”

Rhys found a server, raised his fingers, pointed at the table, and somehow communicated an entire table drink order through this. Shane had watched him do this in bars across North America for ten years and still didn’t fully understand the mechanism.

“Sit,” Rhys said, gesturing at the lounge chairs arranged around the low table. “All of you. We have—” he checked his phone, “—two hours before we have to be back.”

“Back for what?” Shane asked. “Rehearsal isn’t until nine.”

Rhys’s expression did something.

It was a very specific *something*. Shane had known Rhys for twenty years, which meant he knew the exact moment Rhys had decided that he was not going to answer this question because the answer was going to be awkward.

“Prep,” Rhys said.

“Prep?” Shane repeated.

“And.. stuff,” Rhys said, sounding like a man who had just realized his fiancée was sitting three feet away and that perhaps this line of conversation had not been fully thought through.

Svetlana, from behind her sunglasses, was smiling. Not helpfully.

Shane looked at his drink, which had arrived from somewhere, and took a long sip and did not say anything else about this *prep*.

Ilya said nothing beside him, which Shane had learned was not the same as Ilya having nothing to say. He had clocked the *prep* conversation. Shane knew he had clocked it. Neither of them was going to mention it. This was, apparently, how they operated now.

Shane looked away at the Adriatic sea. It was very blue and very there and had no opinions about any of this, which Shane appreciated.

“Okay then,” he said. “Two hours. What are we talking about?”

Rhys, who had the social instincts of someone who had been navigating group dynamics since he was eight and popular, understood that the subject was changed and shifted the gears immediately.

“You,” he said, pointing at Shane. “I want to know everything you’ve been up to. We’ve barely talked properly in months.”

“What? We talk every week,” Shane said.

“Talking on the phone is not the same,” Rhys said. “I want the real version. I want to look at your face while you tell me.”

Shane looked at his face.

Rhys was looking back at him with the open expression that had been getting Shane to tell him things since they were eight years old. Twenty years later, it still worked. Apparently it would keep working until one of them died.

*He is getting married tomorrow.*

*He is so happy.*

“Nothing new. I’m good,” Shane said. “Really. Things are good.”

Rhys studied him for a moment. The look was familiar, twenty years of knowing exactly when Shane was fine and when he was only saying he was.

“Okay,” he said, and Shane understood that *okay* meant *I don’t entirely believe you but I’m going to let it go for now* and felt very grateful.

The drinks arrived and Rhys started talking—about the wedding timeline, about the uncle, about a disagreement between the florist and the venue coordinator that had apparently reached diplomatic levels—and Shane nodded in the right places and watched the outside at the Adriatic and was fine.

He was very fine.

He was so fine that when Rhys said something about Svetlana’s cousin that required a response, Shane realized he hadn’t heard a single word of it. He opened his mouth and said, “*yeah, absolutely,*” with complete conviction. Rhys accepted this, which meant it had apparently been the correct answer. That was the thing about pretending to be fine for long enough. Eventually the pretending became so automatic it stopped needing to pay attention.

Ilya, beside him, said nothing.

Then Ilya said, abruptly, not quite to anyone, “I think I’m going to jump in the pool. Shane, you want to join?”

He said it easily and casually. Like he had noticed something and was offering an exit without making the exit obvious.

Shane looked at him.

Ilya was already standing, already reaching for the hem of his linen shirt, already in the process of doing something else and making it seem like a completely unremarkable decision. His expression was neutral but his eyes were not quite. They were doing the noticing thing, the perceptive thing, the—*I have been watching you for less than a day and I know exactly what that face means*—thing.

Shane felt something in his chest shift. The slightly alarming sensation of being read accurately by someone he had known for less than twenty-four hours, which was, apparently, all the time Ilya needed.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “Okay.”

He followed him.

\*\*\*

Ilya took off his shirt and Shane looked at the pool.

The pool was very blue and very there and had been an excellent decision on the part of whoever designed this resort. Shane was going to look at it continuously with great focus for as long as was necessary.

Ilya dropped his shirt on a lounge chair and rolled his shoulders back and walked to the edge of the pool. Shane looked at the water and thought about hockey statistics. He thought about his coffee shop spreadsheet. He thought about the four drafted speeches in his bag, each one correct, each one right, each one the product of a person who was very prepared and very fine.

He thought about Ilya's shoulders.

He was not thinking about Ilya's shoulders.

He was thinking about the water, which was very blue, which was—he was absolutely thinking about Ilya's shoulders, the broad width of them, how the afternoon light was doing something unhelpful to the muscle of his back as he stood at the pool's edge. Shane had a hands-on knowledge of that back, in detail, and his brain was providing this information with a great enthusiasm and there was nothing he could do about it.

Ilya dived in.

Shane sat on the edge and put his feet in the water. He tried to think about literally anything else.

\*\*\*

The water was cold. This was at least useful. Shane focused on the cold. He did not focus on Ilya surfacing a few feet away, water running down his face, pushing his hair back with one hand, his broad chest looked so defined when he was wet which was—

Shane looked at the far end of the pool.

The far end of the pool was also very blue.

There were children at the far end of the pool.

Ilya, apparently, also noticed the children.

He swam toward them so effortless, just like someone who had absolutely nowhere else to be. Shane watched him do it from the edge, and within approximately ninety seconds Ilya had been incorporated into whatever game the children were playing. Shane estimated the children aged seven, maybe eight. They were doing something involving a floating ring and a lot of splashing and very committed sound effects. Ilya was in the middle of it, being splashed, making a face of exaggerated offense that made the children shriek with delight, and then splashing back enthusiastically.

Shane watched this.

He felt something warm settled in his chest.

It was very inconvenient. He had been managing inconvenient feelings about this man for, what, nineteen hours now? He did not need another one. And yet here it was. Not the wanting

—he knew the wanting. He could manage the wanting. This was something *else*. Something *worse*.

Ilya said he's a pediatrician. Of course he was good with children. Shane knew this. He can't seem to look away from the far end of the pool.

Ilya said something to the children in what appeared to be a combination of Russian and English and Croatian hand gestures. The children dissolved into laughter and threw the floating ring at him. Ilya caught it and looked up, he found Shane watching from the edge and—

Shane looked at the water, way too fast.

"You can get in," Ilya said. "It's not so cold."

"I'm fine here."

"You've been staring at the same tile for four minutes."

"I like the tile."

Ilya swam to the edge and looked up at him slightly amused and Shane looked back and thought, *do not look at his shoulders, do not look at his chest, do not look at the water running down his—*

"Shane," Ilya said.

"What."

Ilya whispered something to the group of seven-year-olds. They turned to Shane with the serious, assessing look of children who had just received very important missions.

"What did you just say to them?" Shane said.

"Nothing," Ilya said as he scurried away.

"Ilya."

"I said you were very good swimmer and perhaps shy about showing it."

"You did not say that."

"Ask them."

Three children splashed Shane simultaneously from below. It was extremely coordinated for a group of people who had known him for four minutes.

"Get in the pool," Ilya said, grinning.

Shane, despite everything, got in the pool.

The water was cold and then it wasn't. Ilya splashed him immediately, without warning. Shane surfaced sputtering. Ilya was already swimming away, wearing the innocent expression of someone who had absolutely not just done that, while the group of children decided it was the funniest thing that had ever happened and announced this at considerable volume.

"That was rude—" Shane started.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ilya said, from six feet away.

"You just—"

"I was just swimming. This is pool. Splashing happens."

"You literally just told them to splashed—"

*"Sluchaetsya,"* Ilya said, which Shane didn't understand but it clearly meant something like *it happens* or possibly *not my fault*. The children all nodded in apparent agreement. Shane looked at them and thought, *I have been ambushed by a pediatrician and a group of children in Croatia and I am somehow losing.*

He splashed Ilya back.

Ilya looked at him for one second with a profound betrayal look on his face. Then he laughed and the group of children immediately allied with Shane on the basis of this being very funny. What followed was approximately ten minutes of a chaotic aquatic warfare that Shane had not participated in since he was a seven-year-old himself, and it was—

It was good. It was genuinely, uncomplicated-good, that Shane hadn't felt in—he didn't know how long. He was in a pool in a Croatian resort in the afternoon and Ilya was three feet away being outrageously competitive about a game whose rules he had made up himself. The children were shrieking and Shane was laughing and none of it required him to think, perform, or be careful.

He looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked back at him, water in his hair, slightly out of breath, his composed exterior entirely absent. For a moment, it was just them. The airport bar. The almost-kiss-in-the-room. The game. The easy thing that had been there, *waiting*.

Shane looked away first.

\*\*\*

They climbed out of the pool eventually. The children protested this decision, which Ilya handled with the practiced diplomacy of someone who spent his professional life negotiating with children who had strong opinions. He crossed back to the table where Rhys and Svetlana were waiting with fresh drinks and the warmth radiated off two people who had been happy in each other's company all afternoon and were glad to have more people join it.

Shane dried off, sat down and accepted his drink.

The conversation moved just how good conversations moved when everyone at the table genuinely liked each other. Which they did, and that was the cruelty of this afternoon. Rhys was funny and warm and asked Ilya things about his work with genuine curiosity. Ilya had answered them with a dry wit that Shane had learned meant he was comfortable. Svetlana kept adding details and corrections and Ilya kept pretending to be offended by the corrections, and the table laughed. Shane laughed with them because it was funny and because this was what you did when you supposedly had a good time.

He watched Ilya.

Out of the corner of his eyes, his peripheral awareness had been paying attention to Ilya since Helsinki and had not yet found a way to stop.

Svetlana was telling a story, something about Moscow, something that involved Ilya in his residency years, some catastrophe that she clearly found funnier in retrospect than it had been at the time. She was laughing while she told the story. Her laugh was so bright and unselfconscious that Shane had already identified as distinctly hers. Ilya was listening so intently, clearly looking like a man enduring something for the good of the group.

Then Svetlana looked away at Rhys, reaching for his hand across the table, and Ilya's expression changed.

Just for a second. Just in the space between one thing and the next, in the moment when nobody was watching him except Shane who was always watching him.

It was the same thing Shane had seen in the lobby. The subtle expression passed through his face. Love and something adjacent to loss moved across his face. It looked a lot like old feelings that had simply run out of new ways to show up.

Shane looked at his drink.

He knew that expression. He had worn it his entire adult life. He wore it right now, probably, at this table, watching Rhys tuck a strand of Svetlana's hair behind her ear with the ease of someone who had been doing that for six months and intended to do it for sixty years.

He looked at Ilya.

Ilya was looking at his drink.

Neither of them said anything.

\*\*\*

The drinks wound down as they always did at the end of a good afternoon—gradually, then all at once. The light shifting, the awareness of time reasserting itself. Rhys checked his phone, looked at Svetlana, and whatever passed between them in that look was very brief and private, it made Shane study his drink very carefully.

“Right,” Rhys said. He stood and held his hand out to Svetlana. “We should probably—”

“Yup. We should,” Svetlana agreed, already smiling.

“We have that—” Rhys glanced at Svetlana nervously.

“We do.” She cut him off.

Shane watched this exchange happen and made the executive decision that it was none of his business.

Rhys looked at him. “It’s a.. Couple massage,” he said, totally sounded like someone who had never once been embarrassed about anything in his life. “Sorry. Sveta booked it months ago. It’s a whole thing that involves.. you know—”

“Right. Don’t apologize,” Shane cut short.

“I’m not apologizing,” Rhys said, grinning. “I’m *informing*.” He leaned down and kissed the top of Shane’s head. The kiss was brotherly, easy, completely unselfconscious. Shane flinched. Rhys then straightened up and held his arms out to Svetlana. “Ready?”

“You’re not carrying me,” she said.

“Oh I’m absolutely carrying you.”

“Rhys—”

Rhys picked her up.

Svetlana made a sound of protest that had no conviction in it whatsoever and wrapped her arms around his neck and Rhys carried her across the terrace toward the resort entrance, saying something that made her laugh, her head dropping against his shoulder, the two of them disappearing through the doors. They looked like two people who had forgotten, again, that the rest of the world existed.

The pool terrace went quiet.

Shane looked at the space where they’d been.

Beside him, Ilya looked at the same space.

They sat with it for a moment. A different kind of quiet had settled over the table now that only two people remained, along with the remains of the afternoon.

“They’re really in love,” Ilya said, matter of fact, stated plainly.

“Yeah,” Shane said. He turned his glass slowly. “I’ve never seen Rhys that happy with anyone.”

He meant it. He had always meant everything where Rhys was concerned, which was the root of the whole problem, you couldn’t argue with something you meant. You could only carry it, and be glad for him, and hope that eventually the carrying got easier.

Except it hadn't gotten easier.

But sitting here, in Dubrovnik, in the late afternoon, with Ilya quiet beside him and the Adriatic doing its thing below, it felt, for the first time, like maybe it could.

Somewhere in the resort, the music was playing, low and warm.

Ilya said nothing.

Shane said nothing.

They sat in it. The quiet stretched between them. Two people in Dubrovnik who had come here carrying the same wound and were, for the first time, close enough to let the other see it. It might have been the most they had in common.

The afternoon light had shifted into something golden. The shadow grows longer around them. Outside, Dubrovnik looked like it was trying too hard, too beautiful, which Shane had stopped resenting somewhere around the second drink.

Ilya turned his glass slowly.

Shane watched the Adriatic.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. The comfortable silence they developed somewhere between Helsinki and here, filled the space between them. It didn't quite require any performance.

Then Ilya said, as if this had occurred to him just now, "Chlorine is not good for skin."

Shane looked at him.

"Extended exposure," Ilya continued, sounded like someone who had a medical degree and was going to use it in this argument. "Pool chemicals. I'm going to wash up before going back." He stood, picked up his towel. "You should also."

"I was going to shower in the room," Shane said.

Ilya looked at him and Shane looked back, and something passed between them that Shane didn't have a name for. This has become less surprising by the hour.

"There's a public shower," Ilya said. "Just on the corner. Come on."

\*\*\*

There were, Shane noted, four shower stations visible from the pool terrace.

Ilya walked past all of them.

The one he chose was at the far end of the facility, around a corner, partially obscured by a row of towel hooks and a trellis of something flowering. It was the furthest possible point

from the pool and the other guests. It was, objectively, the least convenient option, but the most private one.

Shane followed him without comment.

The shower facility itself was a massive open plan. Exactly what you expected of a facility that existed in upscale resorts. Multiple shower heads running along a tiled wall with no meaningful separation between them. It reminds him of a locker room situation, only fancier. Shane had been in approximately ten thousand locker rooms. He's a professional hockey player. This was a completely normal shower room situation.

He told himself this while Ilya turned on the shower at the far end and stepped under it without looking at him, giving Shane the privacy of being ignored, which Shane appreciated and desperately needed. Shane used that to turn on his own shower and stand under it and think about absolutely nothing.

He thought about Ilya's back.

He thought about the water running down it, the shoulders, the spine, the expanse of his back that Shane's hands had personal knowledge of. The exact detailed information that his brain kept producing without being asked.

He looked at the tile.

The tile was very clean. Completely average Croatian resort tile, as previously established, and Shane was going to keep looking at it for however long. He looked at it with such focus and dedication of a man whose life depended on it.

Ilya moved under the water.

Shane looked at the tile harder.

The problem was that his body had stopped waiting for his permission. Looking back, it had probably started at the airport bar. The towel in the hotel room had only confirmed it. The pool had made it impossible to ignore. His body had been making unilateral decisions since Thursday night and it was making one now. Shane was standing in a resort shower in Dubrovnik resort being extremely aware of it and extremely unable to do anything about it.

He looked at the ceiling.

The ceiling was also very clean.

From his peripheral vision, Shane caught Ilya turning slightly, reaching for something, adjusting the water temperature. The water caught the line of his shoulder, ran down the plane of his chest, traced the muscle of his stomach downward, downward, and Shane's eyes followed it before he could stop them, all the way down, and—

He looked at the tile again.

Too late.

He was visibly, undeniably *hard*. The water was cold but absolutely not helping. Shane stood there with his eyes on the tile and his jaw set and thought about *hockey statistics. Shooting percentage. Third period away games. Play-offs. Last two seasons.*

It didn't work.

Nothing worked.

Shane felt heat climbing his neck that had nothing to do with the water temperature. He was so busy being horrified that he didn't immediately register that the shower across from him had gone quiet.

Ilya was looking at him.

Not at his face exactly but *down*. Ilya is looking at his crotch.

"Ah. You're hard," Ilya said. His voice was even. The corner of his mouth moved, not quite a smile, something more dangerous than a smile.

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. "I was thinking about something else," he said, which was the worst possible thing he could have said and he knew it the moment it left his mouth.

Ilya looked at him. "Something else."

"Yes."

"In shower. Looking at me."

"I wasn't—"

"Shane."

Shane closed his mouth.

Ilya looked at him for a brief moment. At his face, then down, then back up, the look unrushed, the look of someone taking inventory and finding the results interesting.

He crossed the space between them. Close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of him even through the cold water.

"Ilya," Shane said. His voice came out lower than he meant it to.

"Hm," Ilya said. Like he was thinking about something.

Shane's eyes moved on their own. His chest, his hand, the fabric of his swim shorts pulled taut, his face, back down. He was *gone*. He had been gone since they entered the shower and was getting more gone by the second.

"I don't mind," Ilya said. Simply. "You looking."

Shane's throat went dry.

"I don't mind at all," Ilya continued, in the same even tone, like he was making a completely reasonable observation about the weather, like Shane's entire nervous system wasn't currently staging a revolt. His eyes moved over Shane thoroughly.

"You can look," Ilya said.

Shane swallowed.

Ilya's hand moved to his own stomach. Flat palm, trailing down slowly, following the line of his abs muscle. Shane watched it happen like someone whose brain had stopped issuing instructions entirely. Ilya's fingers found the waistband of his swim shorts and just traced along it, back and forth, teasing, while his eyes stayed on Shane's face.

Ilya's hand moved lower and closed around himself through the fabric—the shape of him clear, the size of him clear, all of it clear through the wet clinging shorts—and stroked, long and slow and torturous, his hips tilting slightly into his own hand. And Shane watched every second of it and could not have looked away if the building was on fire.

Shane's breath caught. Lips parted. Eyes couldn't look away from Ilya's hand. The way his fingers wrapped around himself, the slow drag from base to tip, the fabric clinging and shifting with each stroke, the outline of him significant and hard and getting more so. Shane's own erection was at the point of pain, pressing against his own shorts, demanding. He couldn't move, couldn't speak, couldn't do anything except to stand there in the water and watch Ilya touch himself and be completely undone.

"You look curious," Ilya said. His voice had gone rough at the edges.

"I—" Shane started. "I'm not—"

"You are," Ilya said. Not an accusation.

Shane said nothing. The water ran. Ilya's hand kept moving.

"I could let you touch it," Ilya said.

His voice is low and deep. Said like an offer made in good faith, like a perfectly reasonable thing to say to a person in a shower, like Ilya's eyes weren't blown wide and fixed on Shane's face with an intensity that made Shane forget what country he was in.

Shane took a step closer, his hand came up.

He didn't decide to raise it. It just rose as if his body reacted by itself, it kept doing things before his brain caught up, reaching across the space between them, toward Ilya, toward his hand, toward—

He stopped himself.

His hand hung in the air between them.

He was panting. Actually panting, breath short and uneven, the water running down his face, his own erection pressing against his shorts to the point of discomfort, to the point of *this needs to resolve immediately or I'm going to lose my mind, but—*

He looked at Ilya's face.

Ilya looked back at him with his darkened eyes. The composed exterior is entirely gone. His own breathing is not quite even.

"Not here," Shane said. His voice came out wrecked. "Someone could—"

"Right," Ilya cut him short. Immediately. Something flashed in his eyes, an unspoken understanding. The word landed like a door closing.

Like he snapped back into reality.

He stepped back.

One step. Two. His hand dropping away from his waistband, the space between them reasserting itself. Shane stood there with his breathing completely wrong and watched Ilya put himself back together.

It was faster this time than it had been in Helsinki. The jaw first, then the expression, the warmth pulling back, the professional distance returning, the composed exterior sliding into place piece by piece. He looked like someone who had done this many times over and had gotten good at it. Shane watched every second of it and felt something cold settled in his chest that had nothing to do with the shower.

Ilya looked at his own hands for a moment.

Then he looked at Shane.

"I'm sorry," he said. His voice was almost fully even. There was something at the edges of it that still sounded rough, residual, the last trace of what had just happened. And then, that was gone too. "I can't seem to—" He stopped, then tried again. "I can't seem to behave around you."

Shane looked at him. He didn't agree, didn't argue. He just stood there under the water and let Ilya see whatever was on his face.

"I don't want to make this more complicated. This weekend is already—"

He made a small gesture. The one that covered everything—the wedding, the room, Svetlana, Rhys, Helsinki, all nineteen hours of it—with one movement of his hand.

"Messy." Ilya said. "I'll try harder,"

A moment passed between them. Shane wanted to say something. He spent his entire life being prepared about everything and how none of it had prepared him for standing in a resort shower wanting to say *please don't go* to a man he'd known for less than a day.

He said nothing.

“I’m going to go check out the city. I’ll be back before rehearsal.”

He looked at Shane one more time. The look lasted barely a second. But it had something in it and Shane saw it. He understood it and felt it land somewhere in his chest and stayed there.

“See you later,” Ilya said.

He picked up his towel and left.

Shane stood under the shower.

He stood there and listened to Ilya’s footsteps fade. Past the towel hooks, past the trellis and out into the resort. And then there was just the water and the distant sound of the pool and the silence of a space that had contained something and now didn’t.

He was also still hard.

Achingly, *insistently* hard. It had nothing to do with choice or context or the fact that this was a public shower facility. Ilya had just walked away. Nothing about these made sense. His body had made a series of decisions completely independent of his brain.

He turned the water colder.

Cold. Colder. As cold as it went.

He stood in it with his arms braced against the tile and his head hung down. He let out a long exhale.

He breathed.

And breathed.

And breathed.

The controlled breath of someone who had been disciplined for a very long time and was applying that same discipline to this specific situation. His cock was pressed hard and aching against the inside of his swim shorts. The fabric doing nothing, the cold water doing nothing, the discipline doing absolutely nothing.

He thought about hockey statistics. Shooting percentage. Power play conversion rate last season. He knew these numbers. They were very specific numbers and he focused on them. He had the concentrated effort of a professional athlete who had excellent physical conditioning and self control and—

His hips rolled forward.

Involuntarily. The betrayal of a body that had been wound tight all day and had run out of patience for discipline.

Shane pressed his forehead against the tile.

He thought about the rehearsal dinner. He thought about this weekend—about the wedding, tomorrow, the ceremony, standing at the front and being the best man and being fine, being so fine—

*Not here*, his brain remembered. He said this to Ilya earlier.

*Not here* meaning not never, meaning could be somewhere else, meaning—

“*Fuck*,” Shane said, very quietly, to the tile.

The tile had no response.

His hand moved.

Sliding under the waistband of his swim shorts, wrapped around himself, the sound that came out of him was desperate. He swallowed immediately, his lip caught between his teeth. His free hand flat against the tile, his forehead still against it, his hips pressing forward into his own grip.

*This*, he thought, grip tightening. *Yes. This.*

He felt the relief of it. Such a simple physical relief of finally, *finally* giving in. It was almost enough to make him embarrassed about how badly he’d needed it. But he was past embarrassed. He was past most things.

He thought about Ilya.

He didn’t try to think about anyone else. He didn’t try to stop himself. Not for a single second. Didn’t manage. Didn’t redirect. Didn’t apply any of the frameworks he’d been stacking up since Helsinki to make this smaller or safer or something other than what it was.

*Ilya.*

The shower. The chest. The water tracking down the lines of his stomach earlier, the V of his hips, his thick ass muscle that Shane had been not-looking at all afternoon. Helsinki, the bar, the wall, the hard press of him, the sound Ilya made when Shane kissed him back, the *not here* that was not *no*. The *vesnushki*. The thumb moved slowly against his jaw. The dark eyes with nothing composed in them at all, just Ilya, wanting, wanting *him*, right there.

His strokes found a rhythm. His hips rolling forward to meet his hand, chasing friction, the wet fabric of his shorts pushed aside, the cold water warm now with the heat of him. He let himself have it, and the heat built quickly, faster than he expected. His grip tightening, the sound he made low and broken and absorbed by the water, his free hand finding the tile’s edge and gripping it—

He thought about Ilya mouthing the word *more*.

He thought about *come here* said in a low voice in a closing bar.

He thought about Ilya's hand on his jaw and his mouth, *his mouth*—

He came so hard, his hips snapping forward, a sound tearing out of him muffled by the water, his forehead against the tile and his knuckles white against the shower wall. His whole body shuddered through it. Thick pulses came out of him so intensely. The intensity of something that had been building since Helsinki and had finally, *finally*, found its way out. Ilya's face behind his eyes. Ilya's voice. Ilya's hands.

Nothing else.

Nobody else.

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Somehow he made it back to the room without walking into anything, which felt like an achievement given the state of his brain, which was currently occupied with one thing, or one *person*.

He lay on his bed, for god knows how long.

The room was quiet. Ilya's bed was made, his bag on the chair beside it, the curtain still drawn across the terrace door from this morning. The glass of water on the nightstand was empty.

Shane looked at the ceiling.

He picked up his phone.

Twenty-six unread messages in the wedding group chat. He scrolled through them without reading most of them—an update from Svetlana, three messages about the rehearsal dinner, someone's mother asking about parking, something else, something else—until he hit one that stopped him.

*Rhys: Has anyone seen Shane? He's not answering his phone. Sveta said he was sleeping but that was hours ago.*

*Rhys: Shane, mate if you see this lmk, just want to make sure you're good.*

Shane looked at these messages for a moment. Sent this morning. Rhys was worried.

Then he kept scrolling.

Six messages below Rhys's, sent an hour ago.

*Ilya R: Going to check out the old city. Will be back by rehearsal. If anyone need something from town, tell me.*

Shane stopped.

He read it again.

*If anyone need something from town, tell me.*

He stared at those eight words for a long time. They felt distinctly, unmistakably Ilya. Shane was beginning to recognize the pattern. Ilya had opened a group chat and offered to be useful. To bring things back. To take care of people. Shane had been watching him do it since the sandwich and the note and the glass of water. None of it was strategy, none of it was performance, it was just Ilya, being Ilya, who took care of people so naturally and so completely that he probably didn't even know he was doing it.

Shane scrolled back up to Ilya's name in the chat.

Tapped it.

*Ilya R.*

He looked at it for a moment. Then he saved the number. Then opened a new message.

The cursor blinked.

He started typing.

*You didn't have to leave.*

He looked at them.

Five words. True. The most honest thing he'd almost said since *not here* in the shower, which had itself been the most honest thing he'd said since *okay* in the closing bar at midnight. He couldn't remember what came before that. And maybe that was the problem.

His thumb hovered over the send button.

He deleted them.

Put the phone face down on the nightstand next to the empty glass.

He lay there.

*You didn't have to leave.*

He hadn't sent it. But those words didn't stop being true just because he deleted them. They just became the kind of true that lived quietly in his chest, waiting for the right moment, or the courage, or whatever it was that turned *almost* into *actually*.

He lay there until the light through the curtain changed.

Then he got up.

Got dressed.

Time for the rehearsal dinner.

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## Chapter End Notes

I SAID I'M SORRY OKAY. They're getting there, I promise.

## Chapter 4: He Wasn't Looking At The View

### Chapter Notes

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

The rehearsal dinner venue was, predictably, *devastating*.

It occupied the top terrace of a restaurant built into the old city walls. Stone and candlelight and the Adriatic sea below doing its dark evening thing. The old city lit up amber and gold, the setting that made it impossible to pretend you weren't feeling what you were feeling, which was, for Shane, a significant design flaw. He stood at the entrance for a moment and looked at it and thought, *of course. Of course it looks like this.*

He went in.

The table was long and warm and already half-full. Rhys's family on one side, Svetlana's on the other, the uncle from Volgograd prominent at the far end and already holding court that suggested the weekend's chaos had not diminished him. Svetlana was talking to her mother. Rhys was talking to everyone simultaneously, just like he always did at social gatherings.

Shane found his seat.

He looked at the place card beside his.

*Ilya Rozanov.*

He stood there for a moment.

*Of course.* Best man on one side, best friend turned ex turned closest friend on the other, neither of them with a plus one. The seating chart's logic was impeccable. Ilya had said earlier he'd keep his distance to make this weekend *easier*. Shane was aware of this. The seating chart was apparently not.

He sat down.

He looked at the empty chair beside him.

He looked at the menu, then at the Adriatic.

At some point, Ilya arrived, and Shane knew before he looked.

He came in from the entrance with such precise composure. He looked like someone who had spent several hours in the city being alone with his thoughts and had arrived at some kind of arrangement with them. He was wearing a black shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, and he looked so—

Shane swallowed, he looked down at the menu again.

Ilya glanced over the whole restaurant and found his seat.

He looked at the place card, then looked at Shane. Something moved across his face, he's wearing an expression of a man whose carefully-made-plan had just been undone by a place card, which was, even by the standards of this weekend, a new low. He scoffed a laugh.

Shane looked back at him.

One second to acknowledge the situation and each other. Between those second, they somehow also acknowledge the shower and the afternoon and the *not here* and everything since, without saying any of it.

Then Ilya pulled out his chair and sat down.

"Ah. Small table," Ilya said amused.

"Yep. Small table," Shane repeated, holding his smile.

Ilya looked at him for one more second.

Then Rhys appeared from somewhere and clapped them both on the shoulder. He said something about drinks. The moment passed and the dinner began.

The uncle from Volgograd—whose name was apparently Nikolay, though he went by something Shane couldn't pronounce—was exactly as advertised. He had arrived at the table with so much energy. He was the kind of man who within four minutes had established strong opinions about Croatian wine, the seating arrangement, and the bread. None of which he had been consulted about and all of which he felt were his business. Shane found him—despite everything—genuinely charming. Ilya exchanged a few words with him in Russian early in the evening and whatever was said made the uncle laugh and clap Ilya on the shoulder. He gave him the approval of a man recognizing one of his own.

Rhys's family were warm as always and immediately tried to feed Shane. Shane let them because it was easier than explaining that he wasn't hungry and he didn't want to get into *why*.

The candles flickered. The Adriatic sea was dark and enormous below the terrace. Somewhere in the old city, music was playing.

Shane drank his wine and he was fine.

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The question came somewhere between the main course and dessert, in the lull that happened at long tables when one conversation wound down and hadn't yet been replaced by another.

"I want to know something," Ilya said, his gaze moving between Shane and Rhys. He looked like someone who had been wondering about this for a while and had finally decided to ask. "How did you two become friends? Were you always.. close like this?"

Rhys, across the table, grinned. “Oh, this is a good story.”

“It’s not really a story,” Shane said defensively.

“It’s *absolutely* a story.” Rhys leaned forward, elbows on the table. Clearly he had told this story before and enjoyed repeating himself. “Tell him the beginning.”

Shane looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked back at him, and Shane immediately understood that this was not a question he was going to be able to avoid.

“Third grade,” Shane said with a sigh. “Eight years old. New class.” He picked up his wine glass. “They seated us alphabetically. Hollander, Hunt. I ended up next to him on the first day.”

“Fate,” Rhys said solemnly.

“Alphabetical order,” Shane countered.

“Same thing.”

Shane looked at him for a moment. Twenty years of this. Rhys, who found *poetry* in things Shane filed under *logistics*, who had always been the person who felt first and thought later, while Shane thought first and felt later, and sometimes never. Their dynamics never once changed.

“There were some kids,” Shane continued, looking back at Ilya. “Older ones. Who thought —” he paused, choosing the version of the story that was true without being everything. “I was small. Serious. Easy target.”

“Shane was very serious,” Rhys confirmed. “He still is. He was also very small. Back then obviously. Very earnest. You know that one kid who did all his homework and then helped other people with theirs, which some kids found annoying for reasons I’ve never understood.”

“Rhys—” Shane cut.

“So he defended you,” Ilya said. Not a question. He was looking at Rhys.

“First week,” Rhys said simply. “Didn’t think twice about it.” He shrugged, genuinely looked confused as to why this was even a question. “They were being idiots. Shane was just being Shane. Seemed obvious.”

Shane looked at his wine glass.

*Seemed obvious.* Twenty years of Rhys finding things obvious that Shane had been turning over and examining from every angle. Twenty years of Rhys moving through the world, so easy and confident that Shane had spent his entire life trying to approximate.

“Then, McGill after that,” Shane said, moving the story forward before it could stay in one place too long. “We ended up dorm roommates. Alphabetical order again.”

“Hollander and Hunt,” Rhys said. “We were always going to end up next to each other. The universe was very insistent about it.”

“You mean the school administration was very insistent about it.”

“Same thing,” Rhys said again, grinning.

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya was watching the back and forth between them. His expression was so warm and attentive. It had something underneath that looked a lot like someone piecing things together.

“Hockey team at McGill,” Shane continued. “That’s when things changed. For me, I mean. Before that I was just Rhys’s quiet roommate. After that I was—”

“Shane was captain of the hockey team at McGill,” Rhys finished Shane’s sentence, with a great deal of fond exasperation. “Which meant suddenly everyone wanted to know Shane. Girls especially.” He paused. “There was this one girl. Emma, her name was Emma I think. Absolutely crazy about Shane. Wouldn’t stop talking about him. And I had been—” he cleared his throat, “I had a bit of a thing for her, actually. I thought, brilliant, Shane can introduce us, easy.” He looked at Shane and made a face. “But Shane never introduced us.”

“I didn’t know you liked her,” Shane said.

“I told you I liked her.”

“You mentioned her once. Also, it’s not like you need my help,”

“Four times,” Rhys said. “I mentioned her four times. Anyway.” He turned back to the table. “I shoot my shot because Shane never played along with any of it. Always like this. Still don’t know why.”

Shane looked at his wine glass.

Rhys looked at Shane across the table with such open affection that had always been the most uncomplicated and most complicated thing about Rhys. The love that was so completely genuine and so completely what it was and nothing else.

The table had gone slightly quieter. Everyone at the table was listening and so did Svetlana. Her hand in Rhys’s, her expression soft. She looked like someone who heard a story they knew the shape of and loved it anyway.

Ilya was very still beside Shane.

Then Rhys said to Ilya, “Can I tell you the actual story? The one about Shane?”

“What do you mean? That was the story,” Shane said.

“That was the facts,” Rhys said. “There’s a difference.” He looked around the table, at his family, at Svetlana’s family, at Ilya, at Shane. He clearly had something to say and had decided to say it right this moment. “The real story is that Shane has been looking after me since we were eight. Not the other way around. Everyone always assumes it’s the other way around.”

Shane went still.

“When I had my first serious girlfriend and she broke up with me, Shane let me talk about it for four hours on the phone from Montreal to wherever I was at that time, and didn’t once tell me to stop.” Rhys said it simply and clearly. “When my dad was sick, Shane flew to Ontario. Didn’t ask, he just showed up. When I was—” he stopped, smiled slightly, “When I was falling in love with Sveta, Shane was the first person I called.”

Shane looked at the table.

“He’s been my person,” Rhys said. “Since we were eight. Just like my own little brother.” He said it with complete, uncomplicated love, the love of someone who had never once questioned what kind of love it was, who had never needed to. “I couldn’t do any of this without him. I genuinely couldn’t.”

The table was warm and quiet. Svetlana was looking at Rhys with a warm affection. Someone’s mother was dabbing her eyes. The uncle from Volgograd said something in Russian that Ilya translated as “*this is so sweet*” without elaborating.

Shane sat there.

*Just like my own little brother.*

Rhys said with complete love. Complete certainty. Complete absence of anything other than what it was. Rhys meant it entirely, Rhys never having thought of it as anything else, Rhys looking at Shane across a candlelit table in Dubrovnik with twenty years of genuine uncomplicated *brotherly* love on his face.

But Shane had known this.

He had always known *this*.

He had spent twenty years knowing this and managing it and rearranging himself around it and calling it fine. He was sitting here, in this specific chair, in this specific candlelight, with Ilya very still beside him and Rhys’s voice still warm in the air. He felt the full weight of all that managing landed on him at once.

He couldn’t breathe.

The air had gone somewhere. His chest was doing something wrong. The table was warm and full of people. Shane was sitting in the middle of it and suffocating quietly, which was, he thought distantly, very consistent with how he’d been doing everything for twenty years.

He put his napkin on the table.

“Sorry,” he said. His voice came out even. “I— I think I’m going to turn in.”

He looked at Rhys. Rhys was looking at him completely unaware. His face held the same open affection it always had. He had spent twenty years seeing Shane clearly, and still never truly seen him. He only saw his best friend Shane. His best man Shane. His little brother Shane.

Shane loved him. Completely. Both kinds. *Both true.*

“It’s been a long day. I’ll see you all tomorrow,” Shane said. “It’s going to be a great day.”

He meant that too.

He stood up. Said goodnight to the table and left.

He didn’t look at Ilya, but he didn’t need to. He could feel, in the stillness beside him as he pushed back his chair, that Ilya was watching him go. That Ilya understood. That Ilya, who had been right there, recognized exactly what he was watching.

Shane walked out into the Dubrovnik night.

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Once he arrived back at the resort, he didn’t stay in the room.

He went out instead, to the terrace that came with the room he and Ilya were sharing. It looked out over the old city and the Adriatic sea and all of Dubrovnik skyline.

He stood at the railing.

The night air was warm. The warmth that only existed in the Mediterranean summer. The salt air that had been heated all day and hadn’t let it go yet. It sat against his skin like something almost solid. The old city walls were lit amber below him. Shane stood there and let the dinner settled.

*Just like my own little brother.*

He’d known it was coming. He had always known it, not those exact words, but the shape. The love that was so complete and so genuine and exactly what it was and nothing else. He had been preparing for those words, or words like them, for as long as he remembered, yet nothing prepared him for sitting at a candlelit table in Dubrovnik and hearing Rhys say it out loud in front of everyone with that uncomplicated certainty.

Shane looked at the water.

He thought about all the spreadsheets he made in his life. The schedules, the four drafted speeches each one correct and right and none of them the actual thing he wanted to say. He thought about the suit he’d bought in February, about the preparation of a man who had known this weekend was coming and had decided the only way through was to be ready for everything.

Despite all that, he had not been ready for this.

He thought about twenty years of rearranging. All the moments he'd moved things in his chest to make room for Rhys's happiness, all the times he'd taken the feeling and put it somewhere smaller and called it fine. All the ways he'd organized his entire life around a love that had never once going to be returned in the way he needed. It's all been real anyway, had been completely real the entire time.

That was the thing nobody will understand about it. That this wasn't a mistake. It wasn't pathological or sad or a waste—it was real. Rhys was real. The twenty years were real. The love was real in every form it took, the brotherly form and the other form and all the forms in between. And Shane had been holding all of them simultaneously for so long that he'd forgotten there was any other way to be.

He suddenly felt so tired.

Not of Rhys. Never of Rhys. He was just tired of holding the weight of all of these. The exhaustion of carrying something carefully for twenty years, of never once putting it down, of being so afraid of breaking it or breaking something that he'd just kept on holding, kept managing, kept being fine.

The wedding is tomorrow.

Shane had been bracing for the crash for months. The suit. The speeches. The preparation. And he was standing here discovering that the crash he'd been bracing for had apparently already happened, somewhere in the last twenty years, in increments too small to register individually, and what was left was just the quiet aftermath.

The quietness of something that had been ending for a long time and finally, *finally* finishing.

He hadn't known it would feel a lot like *relief*.

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He didn't know how long he'd been standing there when he heard the terrace door open behind him.

Footsteps. Familiar.

He didn't turn around.

"Everyone went to bed already," Ilya said. His voice was carefully calibrated to the intimacy of open terrace at night. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Shane said. "Just tired."

A moment passed between them.

He heard footsteps crossed the terrace. Then Ilya was beside him at the railing, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of him through the night air. His forearms resting on the

stone, looking out at the same water Shane was looking at.

He didn't say anything for a moment.

They stood there together in the warm dark. The Adriatic sea enormous below them, the old city lights flickered gold above, and the hum of the music from distant kept playing. The music of a place that had been beautiful for eight hundred years and would keep being beautiful long after whatever this was between them had passed.

Then Ilya said, quietly, "Shane."

"Hmm."

"Just say it."

Shane's hands tightened on the railing.

Ilya turned to look at him. Shane felt it before he looked back. The weight of Ilya's attention. The same attention that had been seeing through Shane's performances since the airport bar in Helsinki.

"That you love him," Ilya said.

The silence that followed was heavy. Shane had been the only person in the world who knew this truth. And hearing it in Ilya's voice, out loud, in the dark, felt like something being lifted and something being broken simultaneously.

Shane didn't answer, he kept looking at the water.

The water looked back. Indifferent, patient and dark. Absolutely did not care whether Shane confirmed it or denied it.

He just stood there at the railing with his hands tight on the stone railing. Ilya's words went still in the air. It felt, for the first time in twenty years, like a relief of being *known*.

Something stung behind his eyes. Then suddenly, his eyes were wet.

Twenty years of not letting this happen, and it was happening anyway, on a terrace, in the dark, in front of someone he had known for a day.

He didn't have it in him to be embarrassed about it. The soft sob that escaped him was very small and almost nothing. And then his chest seized and the air stopped arriving properly. Shane stood there and realized distantly that his body had been waiting to do this for a very long time and had chosen now, specifically, to *stop holding*.

"Hey," Ilya said. His voice was different. Not the quiet careful voice from a moment ago but something more immediate, more present. The voice of someone who had assessed a situation and was already moving.

Ilya was already moving.

His hand found Shane's arm first. Steady, grounding and then he was turning Shane away from the railing, toward him. His other hand coming up to Shane's jaw, tilting his face up slightly.

"Look at me," Ilya said. "Shane. Look at me."

Shane's breathing completely rugged, his chest squeezed, but he managed to look back at him.

"Breathe," Ilya said clearly. "Through your nose. Slowly. With me."

Shane tried. He kept heaving.

"Again," Ilya said softly but still grounding. He was breathing deliberately, audibly, setting the pace, and Shane followed it.

In. Hold. Out. Slow. Again.

"Good," Ilya said. "Again."

Shane slowly breathed.

Ilya's hand was still on his jaw. The other had moved to his back, flat, warm and steady. Shane was aware of both points of contact where Ilya was touching him. His body seemed to be coming back online in stages, noticing things one at a time. The warmth of Ilya's palm, the pressure of his hand, the solid presence of him standing there, the fact that Ilya was real and here.

Ilya was holding Shane together on a terrace in Dubrovnik at eleven at night, steady and present, just like someone who had held frightened people before and knew that the first thing you did was make sure they knew they weren't alone.

Shane breathed.

And breathed.

And breathed.

The tightness in his chest loosened, reluctantly, but it loosened. The air started going to the right places. The tears that had been pressing behind his eyes did what they were going to do, which was, fall quietly, without fanfare, the way Shane did most things.

He didn't try to stop them.

Ilya said nothing about them.

His head dropped to Ilya's shoulder.

And for the very first time in as long as he could remember, Shane let someone else hold the weight of it.

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Shane didn't know how long they stood like that, but it was long enough for the breathing to stop being an effort and start being just breathing.

Ilya's hand was still on his back.

Shane became aware, slowly, of how this felt. Not the panic but the other thing. The feeling of being held by someone who wasn't asking anything of him. Not *are you okay*—he'd already said he was fine and they'd both known it wasn't true. Not *what do you need*—Ilya had just decided what he needed and provided it, the same way he'd left the sandwich and the electrolytes and the notes.

Shane pulled back slightly. Just enough to look at Ilya's face.

Ilya let him. His hands didn't drop entirely.

Ilya's expression was steady. Shane recognized the care there immediately. It was just there, visible and real. Ilya looked at him the same way he had since gate 14C, like Shane was the most interesting thing in whatever room they happened to be in, like he was worth looking at, like he had been worth it all along.

He exhaled a long heavy breath. Shane was so tired.

The exhaustion of being afraid for a very long time. Of making every decision carefully and defensively and with full awareness of everything that could go wrong. Of standing in front of his life and watching every option rot because he couldn't trust himself to choose and survive the choosing.

He was so tired of being afraid to make the wrong decision.

He had been afraid his entire life.

He looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked back at him. Steady and present. Not asking for anything, not going anywhere.

Shane thought: *What is the worst thing that could happen?*

He thought: *The worst thing has already happened.*

And then: *Fuck it.*

He closes the gap between them and Shane kissed him.

Their mouths collide. The kiss was hot and hard and completely out of control until Ilya slightly pulled back. The brief, helpless pause of someone who was trying to remember something important and was finding it difficult to remember with Shane's hands in his hair.

"Shane," he said. His voice was rough at the edges. "We should—"

“Don’t,” Shane said.

“I’m just trying to—”

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Shane looked at him. At his composed exterior that was not, currently, very composed. The flushed jaw, the dark eyes, the breathing that was not even. “You’re trying to be responsible again.”

“One of us should be.”

“You’ve been responsible all day,” Shane said. “I’m asking you to stop.”

Something moved across Ilya’s face.

“Shane—”

“Ilya.” Shane pulled him back in by the collar. “Stop trying to be careful with me.”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment. The war in his expression was obvious, the same struggle he’d been having since they met. The trying. The distance. The promise that he would keep his distance, made hours ago and already becoming harder to keep.

“You don’t make it easy,” Ilya said in a low voice. Almost to himself.

“Good,” Shane said.

Ilya’s mouth curved slightly, dangerously. “You are very—” he searched for the word, “*nastoychivy*.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Persistent,” Ilya said. “It means persistent.”

“Is that a complaint?”

“No,” Ilya said. His hand moved to the back of Shane’s neck. “It’s not a complaint.”

Ilya pulled in and kissed him.

And this time it was different.

Shane’s back was against the wall, Ilya’s hand at his jaw and the other at his waist, pulling him in. Shane stopped fighting it immediately. There was nowhere he would rather be, and no reason left to pretend otherwise. The caress of Ilya’s mouth and the strokes of his tongue steal every logical thought Shane ever had.

“You’ll hate me in the morning,” Ilya said. His mouth was at Shane’s jaw, moving hungrily, punctuating each word with a press of his lips. “You don’t. Really. Want. This.”

“Stop telling me what I want,” Shane said, gasping, and took Ilya’s lower lip between his teeth, pulled a gentle bite. He felt the sound Ilya made vibrate through both of them.

Whatever had been holding Ilya back gave way *entirely*.

He kissed Shane with his whole body—one hand fisting in Shane’s hair, angling his head back, the other at his waist pulling him in flush—his tongue sliding against Shane’s mouth, deep and hungry, and Shane kissed back with everything he had.

Then Ilya’s mouth moved down.

Tracing Shane’s collarbone, then his chest. Ilya’s hands moved to his shirt and Shane stopped thinking about anything at all. The buttons stand in his way. Ilya’s fingers work them open with such focused precision. Following each one with his mouth, pressing his lips to each new inch of exposed skin as it appeared. His chest, sternum, stomach, his hands spreading the fabric wide and his mouth following the path his hands made.

Shane’s head fell back and his hands found Ilya’s hair and he made a desperate sound. His back was arched against the terrace wall.

The Adriatic sea was below him, doing its indifferent thing. The old city was lit amber. The stars were scattered among the night sky. Shane looked at all of it and felt Ilya’s mouth move down his stomach, felt the press of his lips against each new place with the heightened awareness.

Ilya’s hands settled at his waist, fingers catching on the belt.

Shane’s hand tightened in his hair.

“Ilya,” he said between the gasps. His voice came out low and wrecked simultaneously.

“Is this okay,” Ilya said, looking up, hovering inches against his hardened cock.

“God yes, *please*,” Shane sounded desperate.

Ilya starts working on Shane’s belt.

He tipped his head back from where he knelt, eyes locking on Shane’s, the air between them going tight and dangerous.

Shane looked down at him.

Something about that specific image, Ilya on his knees on a Dubrovnik terrace, looking up at Shane like Shane is the only thing worth looking at, it went through his throat to his stomach to his cock and pressed there.

Then Ilya’s hands slid Shane’s pants down slowly, following the motion with his hands like he was unwrapping something he intended to take his time with. He settled Shane’s pants at his knees and stayed there, kneeling, and looked at Shane’s hardened cock.

Just looked. With the combination of adoration and hunger.

Dubrovnik at night was, by any measure, one of the most beautiful places either of them had ever been. The Adriatic sea is doing its magnetic thing, the old city walls lit amber. It has the kind of view that people put on their walls and call it art. Ilya was kneeling in front of all of it and had not looked at any of it.

He wasn't looking at the view. He doesn't care about it all.

Instead, he leaned in.

The first touch of his mouth was torturously slow, a single lick at the head, he tasted the precum beading at the slit of Shane's cock and flick it with his tongue. Shane shuddered. Then Ilya took a long drag from base to tip, taking his time. Shane's hand tightened in his hair and the sound that came out of him disappeared into the warm night air.

Ilya did it again. Slower.

Then he took him in fully.

Ilya's throat worked around him, controlled, breathing steady, he was very good at this. He pinned Shane exactly where he needed, asserting dominance. Shane looked up at the stars and gripped the railing with his free hand and tried to remember what country he was in.

He couldn't remember what country he was in.

Ilya focused on the head of Shane's cock, his tongue moving in slow circles, learning what worked, returning to it, the wet heat of his mouth precise and patient. Shane's breathing came apart entirely.

He swirled his tongue along the length of him. Pressing hard and taunting. He took his time with the movement, with every inch of it, like this was something to be done thoroughly or not at all.

Then the lick became lighter, teasing, the cruelty of *less* pressure after *more*. His tongue flickering at the head until Shane's grip in his hair tightened and a sound came out of him broken.

Then Ilya's mouth closed around him fully again. Firmer and deeper.

Shane's head fell back against the wall. He was not gonna survive another minute.

"Ilya." His voice came out wrecked. "*Ilya.*"

Ilya hummed around him and Shane's hips stuttered forward.

"*Ilya—*" He was panting. One hand white-knuckled on the railing and the other tight in Ilya's hair. The magnificent view of Dubrovnik in front of it and none of it—*none of it*—registering because Ilya's mouth was undoing him senseless.

He pulled on Ilya's hair. Gently and urgent.

“Wait,” Shane managed. “Wait, I—” His voice was completely gone. “*Please*. I’m going to—I need to—” He looked down at Ilya, at his face tilted up, dark eyes, his composed exterior entirely gone, his mouth swollen and his breathing not even. Something in Shane’s chest did the thing it always did when Ilya looked at him like that, which was, *come apart*.

“*I want to look at you*,” Shane said, desperate, wrecked. “When it happens. I want— come here. Come up here, I want to look at you, *please*—”

Ilya heard him once and understood.

He pulled back slowly, deliberately, one last press of his lips at the head of Shane’s cock. Then he stood, in one fluid motion, unfolding from his knees. Shane grabbed him by the collar the moment he was upright and kissed him.

Shane kissed him hard. Tasting himself in Ilya’s mouth, his hands fisting in Ilya’s shirt, pulling him in. Ilya kissed back with the same urgency. Both hands finding Shane’s face, tilting him, the kiss was deep and hungry and nothing careful about either of them.

“Inside,” Ilya said against his mouth. “Now. *Now*.”

\*\*\*

They didn’t make it to the bed.

The terrace door. The living room. The couch. Shane’s knees hitting the back of it and Ilya’s hands catching him, flipping him immediately and then Shane was on top of him. Shane pressed himself down into Ilya’s lap and they were straddling each other. The full weight of Shane pressing Ilya into the cushions and his hips finding Shane’s creating the friction that made both of them irrevocably *gone*.

Then Ilya rolled his hips. Feeling it out.

“Fuck. Shane,” he said, into Shane’s neck. “You feel so good. I want you—” He can’t seem to form any sentences.

Ilya’s hands found Shane’s hips and pulled—harder, *more*—and Shane obliged, the roll of his hips finding a rhythm, squeezed him with his thigh as he ground his cock against Ilya’s hard cock and stomach. Shane felt everything through the fabric of Ilya’s pants, the heat of him, the hardness of him, the weight and press of Ilya wanting him. Ilya’s head fell back against the armrest and his throat was exposed, Shane’s mouth found it immediately.

“Off,” Shane said, pulling at Ilya’s shirt. “Take this off, I want to see you—”

Ilya pulled his shirt over his head in one motion and Shane had approximately one second to look at him. His impossibly broad chest, his hard abs, the V of his hips, all of it, properly, finally, with no time to stare at and no management system to apply. Ilya pulled him back down to kiss him and the friction between their hardened cock resumed. Whatever thought Shane had been forming disappeared.

“Shane,” Ilya said in a low voice. His hips moving in long, slow desperate rolls. “Look at me.”

Shane looked at him.

Ilya looked back. Dark eyes and flushed jaw. His hair pushed back from his face. There’s no distance or composure left. Just Ilya, wanting, present, here, looking at Shane.

“*Ya tebya vizhu*,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane didn’t speak Russian, yet he understood the *shape* of the sentence.

His hand slid between them.

Ilya made a sound and his hips stuttered, the rhythm breaking for a second before resuming. Shane unzipped Ilya’s pants and pulled out his cock and gasp. He straddled Ilya’s hips, aligning their cock together perfectly, spread the leaked precum and began thrusting. Shane’s hand wrapped around both of them, fisted their throbbing cock, the heat of it torturous, and his forehead dropped to find Ilya’s.

The grind against Shane’s hand was dry and rough enough to feel real and exactly what Shane had been wanting.

“Wait” Ilya grabbed Shane’s wrist and paused the grinding. He pulled Shane’s hand to his face and spit in his hand. Shane wrapped his hand against the now slicked pair of cock, and stroked faster.

“*Eto—*” Ilya started but didn’t finish. He started moving again desperately, his hips finding Shane’s hand, and Shane fisted tighter and the friction building. The sounds Ilya was making against his throat were the most devastating sounds Shane had ever heard in his life.

“More. *More*,” Shane said. His mouth found Ilya’s jaw, moving up to nip that sensitive spot behind his ear.

Ilya’s breath caught.

“*Eto ty mne govorish’*,” Ilya said, half laughing, half wrecked. His hips rolled forward, harder, and Shane panting against Ilya’s temple

“Ilya—”

“*Da*,” Ilya said. “*Da, Shane—*”

“You gonna come for me,” Shane breathed heavily.

“Fucking *make me*.”

They came within seconds of each other. Shane first, his hips snapping forward, a sound tearing out of him that he pressed into Ilya’s shoulder, and then Ilya, immediately after, his back arching off the couch, Shane’s name on his lips, his whole body shuddering through it

with Shane's weight on him. Shane's hands on his face and Shane's eyes, open, watching him, seeing him—

The room went quiet.

Just their breathing. The distant sound of the city below. The warm dark of the room, the terrace door still open. Their suits and shirts and pants scattered between the terrace and the couch.

Shane's hand was still between them. Ilya's forehead was still against his. Their breathing eased together, gradually, like two bodies finding their way back from somewhere only they had gone. Beneath the heat and the wanting and the arrival of it all, Shane felt it—the warm, unshifting presence of Ilya. Stilled and staying. He hadn't stepped back.

Ilya lay there.

Shane lay on him.

Neither of them moved.

Then Ilya did.

He shifted carefully and Shane felt the loss of his warmth before he understood what was happening. The terrace, the couch and the reality of the two of them and what had just happened. He lay there and watched Ilya move through the room in the low light, and thought *this is the part where it ends*.

Unless, it didn't end.

Ilya crossed to the bathroom. Shane heard the sound of water running. Then a moment of quiet. Ilya came back with a damp cloth and a glass of water from the nightstand that he'd filled, apparently, while he was up, because that was what Ilya did, Shane was learning. He moved through the world taking quiet inventory of what people needed and providing it without asking.

"Here," Ilya said. His voice was low, calibrated to the dark. He sat on the edge of the cushion and handed Shane the glass.

Shane sat up and took it.

He drank and watched as Ilya waited. The same way he had waited in the airport bar, the pool, the shower, everywhere else. As if time with Shane was not something to move through or manage, but something to *simply be in*.

Then Ilya pressed the cloth to Shane's chest, his stomach, his hand, slow and full of care. The same hands that had been urgent twenty minutes ago now entirely steady. Shane watched him do it and felt something in his chest that was separate from everything else, something quieter and more alarming than all the wanting had been.

He didn't say anything.

Ilya didn't say anything either.

When he was done, he set the cloth aside and looked at Shane in the low light with a soft expression. Dark eyes. Steady attention. The feeling of being seen by someone who was not looking at a performance.

"How are you feeling?" Ilya asked.

"I don't know yet," Shane said honestly.

Ilya nodded. Like that was a reasonable answer. Like he'd been expecting it, even.

He reached over and set Shane's glass on the nightstand. He settled back against the armrest and looked at the ceiling for a moment, his forearms resting on his knees. Shane watched him and thought, *who is this man*. Who was he, really, where had he come from, and why had it taken all the way until Dubrovnik to get here.

"My mother used to say," Ilya said, to the ceiling, in the tone of someone who had not planned to say this. "That you can love someone completely and they can still be the wrong person."

Shane went still.

Ilya looked at his hands. "These are not contradictions. Love is not enough on its own. It needs—" he searched for it. "Somewhere to go. Love that has nowhere to go just sits in you and gets heavy."

Shane stared at the ceiling.

*Twenty years of love with nowhere to go.*

He hadn't thought about it like that. He had thought about it as a failure. His failure, his inability to stop, his stubborn attachment to something that was never going to be returned. Not as something that simply needed somewhere else to go.

"How do you know," Shane said quietly. "When you've found somewhere."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment.

"You stop feeling heavy," he said simply.

Shane looked at him. At his face in the dark. At the way Ilya was looking back.

Clarity came back in pieces. And he noticed that he hadn't felt heavy in—he tried to identify when—The bar? The game? The dare? The pool and the children and Ilya splashing him, and the laughter that came out of him unrehearsed.

He hadn't felt heavy with Ilya since Helsinki.

They looked at each other and neither of them said anything. Shane could feel something already there between them, something that had been growing quietly since the airport bar. The silence had stopped being empty a long time ago.

Shane looked at him for a long moment.

Ilya, who had left a sandwich and a note and a glass of water. Who had offered him an exit from the pool terrace situation. Who had been right there on the railing when everything broke open, and had not looked away from it, had not tried to fix it or manage it or make it smaller, had just said *say it* and held the weight of him while he did.

Ilya, who was telling him his mother's words in the dark like they hadn't been meant for the dark at all. Like they had been meant, specifically, for this moment.

Shane couldn't stop looking at him.

The impossibility of him. The width of his shoulders, the dry careful wit, the hands that were gentler than his exterior had ever suggested. And the way he looked at Shane like Shane was worth looking at, like he had been worth it all along. Since gate 14C. Since a dare in a closing airport bar. Since the exact moment they met.

Shane thought: *I have known this man for one day.*

He thought: *I know him.*

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"We should probably get to bed," Ilya said. His voice shifted back into that careful, practical tone Shane was starting to recognize. "The ceremony is in the morning. Reception at night. It's going to be a long day."

"Yeah," Shane said.

Neither of them moved for a moment.

Shane let out a long exhale.

Suddenly he felt so tired.

Not the tired of the last twenty hours, though that was also there. The older tired. The one he'd been carrying since before Helsinki, since receiving the wedding invitation in February, since the first time Rhys had said Sveta's name with a smile in his voice. Since Shane had understood what he was hearing and quietly rearranged himself around it, like he always did when it mattered.

He looked at Ilya.

"Can you—" he started. Stopped.

Ilya tilted his head and waited.

Shane looked at the bed. His bed. The one on the left, the one whose sheets were still perfectly made because everything else they had done had not made it that far. He looked at it, then at Ilya, and thought: *I'm so tired of being alone with this.*

“Stay,” he said. “Can you stay?” His voice came out low and completely undefended, that’s all the voice he apparently had left after everything tonight.

“In this bed. Just— I’m not asking for anything. I just don’t want to be—”

He stopped.

“I know,” Ilya said, and nodded. He said it without hesitation. He stood, crossed the room, and pulled back the cover on Shane’s side.

Shane got in and Ilya slipped in behind him. His arm came around Shane’s chest instinctively. Steady and warm. He pulled Shane back, close, and settled.

Shane lay there feeling the warmth of him. The solid presence of Ilya at his back, Ilya’s forearm across his chest, Ilya’s breath at the nape of his neck, slow and even, the breath of someone already finding their way toward sleep.

Shane looked at the room. The terrace door still slightly open, the warm Mediterranean air moving the curtain faintly. Dubrovnik outside, magnificent and quiet. The Adriatic somewhere beyond it, doing its patient ancient thing.

He thought, *tomorrow*.

The ceremony. The reception. The speech—one of four, whichever one came out—Rhys’s face when he saw Svetlana. Him standing right beside him as the best man. Rhys’s happiness.

He did want it. He had always wanted it. That had never been a lie.

He lay there and felt, for the first time, like maybe wanting it for Rhys and wanting something for himself were not the same wound. Like they could coexist. Like twenty years of carrying could be set down without dropping anything that mattered.

Behind him, Ilya shifted slightly. The arm across his chest tightened a fraction. It was a small, instinctive movement, just like when you settled into sleep and drew closer to the thing you’re already holding.

Shane closed his eyes.

Ilya’s breathing fell into the long, slow rhythm of sleep. Shane followed it the same way he had followed everything else tonight, without planning and resistance.

He followed it.

And drifting into sleep.

*Tomorrow*, he thought. *Tomorrow* waited for him.

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## Chapter End Notes

Shout out to The Excelsior Dubrovnik for the setting inspo, a girl could dream of having a wedding by the cliff and getting railed senseless on the presidential suites lol

Thank you so much for reading! I can't believe I got 500 subscriptions on this story alone. I know it's nothing in this fandom but **holy shit** the baby writer in me is fully freaking out. All the kind people saying nice things in the comments, I'M OBSESSED WITH EVERY SINGLE ONE OF YOU. Your comment is a crack I keep coming back to, *justsoyouknow*.

Next chapter I'm going back writing from Ilya's POV and not gonna lie, I'm a little scared lol. But I'm also really excited to share more of his backstory and his relationship with Irina. Plus, it's the wedding chapter.. which is probably going to be messy as fuck. Oh well.

Au revoir, we will suffer together again soon! ♥♥

# Chapter 5: Not Again

## Chapter Summary

*Previously on Dare You Twice:*

Shane spent the afternoon staring at a pool tile (and not at Ilya's very wet body, *obviously*), took a shower with Ilya he refuses to talk about. A rehearsal dinner happened, and so did a panic attack. Something something on the terrace. Shane asked Ilya to stay and Ilya did.

It's now six in the morning. They're still in the same bed.

## Chapter Notes

Remember last week when I freaked out I got 500 subscriptions from this story alone? Yeah, now it's multiplied sixfold. **Guys. What have you done?!** (*this author is losing it*)

Anyway. A little rumble before we start. I've been thinking a lot about the concept of love as an act of invention. The idea that certain people don't just know you, but they call out a version of you that didn't exist before they showed up. I've been thinking about that thematic idea for this entire fic, I hope it lands. Also, there are a bunch of moodboards dump at the end notes.

Okay. That's enough from me. Go read.

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

The light was wrong for six in the morning.

That was the first thing Ilya noticed. The light coming through the curtain gap doing something unreasonable, gold and full and completely indifferent to the early hour. Summer sunrise in Croatia apparently had no concept of appropriate timing. It arrived at full force and expected you to be grateful.

Ilya was not grateful for the croatian summer sunrise. Ilya was warm.

That was the second thing he noticed.

He felt warm, and heavy. The realization came slowly, before the rest of him had caught up. Someone was holding him. He wasn't alone. There was a weight and the pressure of another person's presence. It felt close and real and breathing.

He lay very still, his eyes still closed.

*Am I still asleep?*

He was not still asleep. He was awake in a Croatian resort room at six in the morning and the weight was Shane. Shane, whose head was somewhere near Ilya's shoulder. Shane, whose hand was loose on Ilya's chest, fingers slightly curled, the relaxed grip of someone in deep unconscious sleep. Shane, whose breathing was slow and even and entirely unguarded.

He remembered how they'd gotten here. Shane had asked, quietly, which is the most vulnerable thing Shane had said all night and Ilya answered it without hesitation. They slip between the covers and Shane's head finds his shoulder almost immediately, like it had been waiting the whole time.

He had chosen to be here.

And so had Shane.

He looked at Shane's face. The freckles—*always the freckles*—and the unreasonable number of them, the constellation of them in the morning light doing something to a part of Ilya's brain that had long stopped being careful. Ilya saw how Shane's jaw, finally unclenched. The same jaw that spent waking hours held in careful neutrality, part of the expression Shane had been managing since they met. In sleep, he had stopped. The armor, the performance, the constant effort of being fine—all of it *gone*. Just Shane. Here. With him.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment.

He thought, *I could stay here*.

He didn't examine that thought. That alone was unusual. Ilya had spent most of his life looking closely at things, learning early that understanding something before it happened made it easier to withstand. Patients. Rooms. Silences. People. The exact way Shane laughed. Nearly everything he encountered eventually became something to examine.

He didn't examine this.

*I could stay here*.

He let it sit.

He was still looking at Shane's face—at the freckles, at the unset jaw, at the hand loose on his chest—when the knock came.

Three raps of knocks. Bright and purposeful. The sound of someone who had decided that six am was a perfectly reasonable hour to knock and was prepared to defend this reasoning.

Ilya moved carefully.

Eight years of being a pediatrician. Eight years of not waking frightened small children who had finally, after much effort, gone to sleep. He extracted himself from Shane's weight

quietly. He knew exactly how to leave a sleeping person undisturbed. His hand moving Shane's gently, his shoulder withdrawing, the careful move of not disrupting something fragile.

Shane made a small sound but he didn't wake.

Ilya put on his clothes and crossed the room.

He opened the door.

Svetlana.

She was in full pre-wedding operational mode. Hair half up, the auburn curls pinned imperfectly and already escaping, silky white robe, the gold necklace already on—because Svetlana did not go anywhere without the gold necklace—and a list in her hand that covered both sides of the paper in two different colors of ink. She looked like someone who had been awake since five. Possibly four. She's radiating the energy of someone who had been managing logistics and had arrived—efficiently and without apology—at the next item.

She opened her mouth.

A logistical sentence was clearly incoming. Something about the schedule, or the ceremony timeline, or any of the things on her list.

But nothing came out of her mouth.

Her eyes moved past Ilya's shoulder into the room.

He watched Svetlana take it in. She understood things quickly, all at once, seeing the whole picture almost immediately.

His bed: made and untouched. Housekeeper-perfect, the pillows undisturbed, the duvet smooth, exactly as it had been left yesterday morning because Ilya had not slept in it.

Shane's bed: not housekeeper-perfect. Shane's bed clearly had been occupied by two people in it. Shane now slowly woke up, a confused expression on his face, he looked like someone whose consciousness had arrived approximately thirty seconds ago was still catching up to its surroundings. His hair doing what it did, ruffled and messy. Eyes not quite open. Shane at six in the morning, before the armor, before the performance, before any of the systems he ran to keep himself operational.

Svetlana looked at the general arrangement of the room. The very obvious evidence of a night that had gotten away from them. Their clothes scattered across the floor, the terrace door slightly opened. In the span of approximately five seconds, Ilya had realized what this might look like.

Svetlana looked at Ilya.

Ilya looked back at her.

The silence between them lasted exactly as long as it needed to. It belonged to two people who had known each other for a very long time and didn't require words for every piece of information.

Behind Ilya, Shane registered what he'd woken up to.

He watched the sequence unfold across Shane's face. The room. The door. Svetlana standing in it. Recognition arrived one piece at a time. The armor is nowhere in evidence. Shane did not yet have the thirty seconds of consciousness required to assemble it.

"Sveta," Shane said. Very quietly. Clearly sounded terrified.

"Good morning," Svetlana said. With extraordinary composure. "I'm so sorry to knock so early."

"*Give us a moment,*" Ilya said in Russian.

"*Of course.*" She stepped back into the corridor. The door closed.

Ilya turned around.

Shane was sitting up in bed. He had been conscious for less than a minute and had already identified several significant problems with his current situation.

Svetlana had seen them. The room was evidence enough. Shane was looking back at Ilya, seemingly more concerned and terrified by the situation than Ilya was.

They looked at each other and communicated entirely through the small shifts in their expressions.

Shane's face said: *how?!*

Ilya's face said: *it's okay.*

Shane's face said: *it is not okay.*

For the first time since Ilya met him, Shane clearly looked like he did not have a back up plan.

"Get dressed," Ilya said. "I'll talk to her."

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Ilya stepped into the corridor and pulled the door closed behind him.

Svetlana was leaning against the wall opposite, list in hand, perfectly composed, though something was clearly happening beneath the surface. Distress had never been her response. She processed, analyzed, understood. And she was looking at him now with that same complete attention she gave everything.

“So,” she said.

“So,” he agreed.

A beat. The corridor quiet around them, the resort still mostly asleep, morning sounds drifting from somewhere beyond, a door closing farther down the hall.

Svetlana nodded once. Ilya knew that nod. The one that meant she had received information and had decided to file it under *things I am choosing to feel later* so that the things she needed to do right now could still get done. The specific Svetlana nod. He had seen it many times. He had always found it both impressive and slightly devastating.

“Are you okay?” she asked, sounding genuine. It was the voice of someone who had loved him and still did in the way that didn’t require anything back.

Ilya looked at her.

“Yes,” he said.

He meant it.

He was aware, saying it, of the difference between this *yes* and the *yes* he had been saying when she called four months ago to say she was getting married.

That *yes* had been correct. This *yes* was true. The difference was small and massive at the same time, and Svetlana—who had known him long enough to hear the things he didn’t say—caught it immediately.

Something moved across her face. Not surprised—she didn’t look surprised—something warmer than surprise. Something that looked, Ilya thought, like relief.

“Come,” she said. “Walk with me.”

She pushed off the wall. Didn’t wait to see if he followed.

He followed her.

The lower terrace was empty.

Stone balustrade, pale in the morning light. Bougainvillea spilling over the edges in the abundance of something that had been growing there for decades and intended to continue. The Adriatic below, full and unobstructed and doing its unreasonable gold thing with the sunrise. The water catches the light.

Dubrovnik has been constantly being aggressively, unapologetically beautiful at all times regardless of whether you had the emotional bandwidth for it—which Ilya did not—which Dubrovnik did not care about in the slightest.

Nobody else was here. The resort is still mostly asleep. Just the two of them and the view.

They leaned on the balustrade side by side. Ilya looked at the water. Svetlana looked at the water. The old city was visible in the distance, pale stone catching the early light. The morning was warm already.

Neither of them spoke for a moment.

Then Svetlana said, without looking at him.

*"So. The best man."*

*"The best man."* Ilya agreed.

*"How long?"*

She's not asking about last night. Not about the room, the bed, or any evidence she saw. She's asking about the larger *thing* beneath it. The shape of what happened.

*"Since Helsinki,"* Ilya said. *"The delay."*

A small beat of warmth between them, the warmth of people who had known each other long enough to have their own shorthand, who could compress entire histories into two words and have the other person understand completely. He had missed this, he realized. Not her—he had made his peace with missing her—but *this*. The shorthand. The ease of being known.

Svetlana was quiet for a moment. Looking at the water.

*"You did seem different,"* she said. *"Since yesterday."* She paused. *"Lighter."*

The word struck clean on his chest.

Ilya did not deflect from it. Did not reach for the joke or the dry comment. Usually he would put up the distance, which has always been his first response to everything for as long as he could remember. He just let it land. Let her be right. Which she was.

*"Maybe,"* he said simply.

*"Good,"* she said, just that.

Another comfortable silence. They had been through enough together that neither of them felt the need to fill it.

Then Svetlana said, carefully, looking at the water:

*"I used to wonder. Whether it was me."*

Ilya went still.

*"Whether I was asking for something you weren't capable of giving,"* she continued. Her voice was even. She wasn't performing this, she was just saying it matter of fact, without softening the edges. *"I spent a long time wondering that."*

“Sveta—”

*“I’m not saying it to make you feel bad,” she said. “I’m saying it because I never got to ask you. And I think we both deserved better than that.”* She turned to look at him then, directly. Her directness had always been one of the things he loved most about her. It was also what made her the hardest person to perform around.

*“Was it me?”*

“No,” Ilya said without hesitation.

She held his gaze for a moment.

*“I know,” she said. “I think I knew. I made my peace with it a long time ago. You know this. But I needed—”*

*“You needed me to say it,”* Ilya said.

*“Yes.”*

He looked at her. At the face he had known for years. The auburn curls escaping their pins already, the warmth of her, the way she looked at things directly and completely and without apology.

*“You said I was right there and you couldn’t reach me.”* Ilya started. *“You were right. I knew you were right the moment you said it.”*

*“Then why—”*

*“Because admitting you were right meant admitting I knew,”* he said. *“And admitting I knew meant admitting that I had been watching you try to reach me and not.. not letting you. Not on purpose. But not stopping it either.”*

He paused.

*“I am a doctor, Sveta. I understand patterns. I understand when people are repeating patterns or making conscious decisions. The distance was my pattern. I admit it. I had been keeping people at a specific distance for so long that I had stopped experiencing it as a choice. It was all I ever knew. And you were—”*

He stopped.

*“You were the first person who made me understand that it was a choice,”* he said quietly. *“I just didn’t know how to make a different one yet. And it was killing me,”*

A beat.

*“Because I can’t do that to you, Sveta. Not you. Never you.”*

The words sat between them on the balustrade alongside the morning light and the view. She looked at the water. Something in her expression shifts. She looked like someone hearing the confirmation of what they had already understood, what they had both understood. The ending had felt less like a rupture and more like a door they had both walked toward from opposite sides and opened together.

Svetlana was quiet for a moment.

*"I knew you were going to let me go," she said finally. "I think I knew way before I said anything. You were.. already halfway out the door, Ilyusha. You just needed someone to open it."*

A beat. *"So I opened it."* she continued.

*"You opened it,"* he said.

*"And we both walked through it,"* she said. *"That part was both of us."*

The words sat between them on the balustrade alongside the morning light and the view. The silence was stretched a moment longer before Svetlana turned slightly towards him.

*"And now?"* she said. *"Do you know how to make a different choice yet?"*

Ilya thought about Shane on the terrace last night. The panic attack, the holding, the *I've got you, just breathe*. Shane kissed him first and he gave it back. The *fuck it* moment. The couch. The staying. Shane's voice in the dark saying *can you stay*. And Ilya had done something he had not done in as long as he could remember, *he had not reached for the distance*. He had made a *different choice*.

*"Someone is showing me,"* Ilya said.

Svetlana looked at him for a long moment. Something moved across her face. Her eyes went bright, then she smiled.

Then she turned back to the water.

They stood there in the quiet after the thing that had needed to be said for so long had finally been said. The relief of honesty that had been overdue.

*"I loved you, Ilyusha,"* Svetlana said. *"I want you to know I meant it. Every part of it."*

*"I know,"* Ilya said. *"I loved you also. Always."*

*"I know."* she said.

The Adriatic below them. The old city. The bougainvillea. Eight hundred years of stone holding them up while they finished something.

It was sweet and it was bitter and it was both true at once. These things that they shared were real, sitting together without canceling each other out. He had loved her. She had loved him.

It had been real and it had been wrong and they were standing here at the end of it, in the early morning in Dubrovnik and both of them were, *finally*, okay.

Not *fine*. But *okay*.

There was a difference.

The silence that followed was the cleanest silence Ilya had experienced in three years.

Then out of nowhere, Svetlana straightened.

It happened with impressive speed. The warm private version of her folding back into the operational wedding-morning version like a switch had been found and flipped, the bright eyes still slightly bright but the task list paper already coming up, the posture already different, this woman had endless things left to do before ten am and had decided that time was now up.

*“So. I need your help,”* A pause. *“Emergency. That’s why I came to your room,”*

Ilya blinked.

*“The florist can’t deliver my fresh bouquet,”* she said, already moving toward the corridor, already scanning the list. *“The main bouquet and some arrangements. I have ordered them to be delivered on the day because I want them fresh. But now they’re stuck somewhere on Ulica od Puča which is— ”* she rattled off an address in Croatian, then in approximate Russian-English, then pointed at his phone expecting him to write it down immediately.

*“The van they booked is stuck behind the morning market on.. it doesn’t matter where, the point is it’s stuck, the morning market won’t finish until nine and they can’t get through and the arrangements need to be here by exactly nine because the ceremony is at ten and the venue coordinator is already— ”* she spiralled and made a gesture that covered the full scope of the situation. *“I need at least two people who can navigate and carry and who ideally can go in the next thirty minutes. The florist is about thirty, forty minutes from here by walk, and you must walk, god forbid you got stuck as well, and—”*

She looked at him with a puppy eyes.

*“I need your help, Ilyusha.”*

He looked at her.

*“Shane and I will go,”* Ilya said.

*“Wonderful,”* she said, clapping her hand. Then continue moving. Already three steps down the corridor. *“The address is in your phone, the contact there, I’ve already texted them that someone is coming, they’re expecting you, the arrangements are white, all of them, twenty-seven, please don’t leave any behind because I counted them and I will know—”*

*“Sveta,”* Ilya said.

She stopped and turned. The list in one hand, the phone in the other, the bougainvillea visible through the corridor window behind her, the whole morning assembled and operational and already in motion.

Ilya looked at her and nodded.

*"I got you. Don't worry. And.. congratulations,"* he said simply. *"He is a good person."* A pause. *"Good choice."* Ilya truly smiled.

Svetlana looked at him for one more second. Then she stepped forward and hugged him, quick and tight, her arms wrapped around him properly. She hugged like someone who meant it completely but didn't have time to mean it for long. She pulled back before Ilya fully registered it was happening.

*"Go get my flowers,"* she said looking back from her shoulder. Already moving down the corridor.

Ilya watched her go.

Then he went back to the room.

\*\*\*

When Ilya came back into the room Shane was dressed.

Not fully—blue linen shirt, collar not yet sorted—but dressed nonetheless. Shane clearly had used the last ten minutes efficiently and with purpose. The armor was going back on. Ilya could see the process of it, piece by piece, the jaw setting itself, the expression arranging, Shane reassembling himself after the unguarded six-am version had been briefly, unavoidably visible.

His hair was still doing the unmanaged thing.

Ilya did not mention this.

Shane looked up when the door opened. They looked at each other across the room, the two beds between them, the curtain still drawn across the terrace door, the morning light coming through the gap doing its gold thing on the floor.

Neither of them said anything for a moment.

There was, Ilya thought, a significant amount that could be said. About last night. About the terrace and the couch and the *staying* and the weight of Shane's head on his shoulder at six in the morning. About Svetlana in the corridor with her list and her composure and the conversation on the lower terrace that had closed something. About the room, which looked exactly like what it was.

A significant amount could be said.

But neither of them said it.

The mutual unspoken decision arrived without either of them having to say it. The understanding of two people who had developed a language without deciding to, who had been communicating in gaps and silences since a Helsinki airport bar at ten pm and were surprisingly fluent in it now.

*Later. Not yet. There is a wedding in less than four hours and we have somewhere to be.*

“Sveta has a situation,” Ilya said.

Shane looked at him, eyebrows furrowed. “What kind of situation?”

“Florist situation.”

Shane closed his eyes briefly. Opened them. “Okay,”

“Her bouquet and some arrangements were stuck,” Ilya said. “In the old city. The van is stuck behind morning market or something like that. She needs two people who can pick it up.”

“Of course,” Shane said again. He picked up his phone from the chair. “Of course on the morning of the wedding there is a florist situation.”

“First the uncle situation, then the florist situation,” Ilya said. “This is how weddings work. Chaos, then ceremony. In this order.”

Something happened in Shane’s expression. The armor, which had been assembling efficiently, finding a gap and letting something through. Something loosening. The jaw slightly less set. The expression slightly less arranged.

“Right,” Shane said. Something in his voice gave away a little amusement. “Chaos, then ceremony.”

“*Da*,” Ilya said. “We are currently in chaos portion. Ceremony is later.”

Shane looked at him for a moment.

“Come on then,” Shane said. “Let’s go get flowers.”

Down the corridor, into the elevator, out through the lobby, into the morning, Dubrovnik waiting for them on the other side of the gate, cool and quiet and entirely indifferent to everything that had happened in the last twelve hours. They went without discussing any of it, because there was a florist situation and a wedding in four hours and the old city was waiting and everything else could be *later*.

Later was a place. They were both going there.

Just not yet.

\*\*\*

The Pile Gate was enormous up close.

Ilya had seen it from the resort terrace and passed through it briefly the day before. The old city walls, pale stone against pale sky, the silhouette of something that had been standing for eight hundred years and intended to stand for eight hundred more. He had seen it in photographs and tourism flyers and through the car window when passed by yesterday.

But walking through it was different.

The gate swallowed them briefly—the cool dark of it, the stone on all sides, the compression of passing through something that had been built to last—and then released them into the old city. The narrow limestone streets, pale and cool in the early morning, the light coming in at angles between the buildings and doing something warm to the stone. Before the tourists. Before the heat. The city at this hour was actually for itself, not for the people who came to look at it.

Nobody else was there.

Ilya stopped just inside the gate. Shane stopped beside him.

They both looked at it.

“We’ve been here for almost two days,” Shane said. Not quite to Ilya.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “We have been very busy not seeing it.”

Shane looked at the street ahead of them and something in his expression did the thing it sometimes did, Ilya had been noticing it since Helsinki. The armor found a gap and something real came through it. Ilya’s gaze lingered and absorbed it.

“It’s something,” Shane said. Looking up at the gate, amazed.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “It is something.” Looking straight at *him*.

They walked.

The streets were narrow enough that they moved close together. The natural compression of the old city, the buildings on either side, the intimacy of walking somewhere that hadn’t been designed for distance. Their shoulders occasionally touching. Neither of them moving away from it. Neither of them moving toward it. They’re walking, close, through the cool limestone morning, the light doing its gold thing on the walls around them.

Ilya felt something quite peculiar. Walking somewhere new with Shane felt somehow strange. Shane, a person who he knew impossibly well in some ways and not at all in others, whose laugh and the expression, the noises he made when *coming undone* all completely familiar, and whose middle name and favourite film and what he looked like on an ordinary Tuesday he had no idea whatsoever.

He found, walking beside him through the old city at seven in the morning, that he wanted to know all of it.

\*\*\*

The florist's courtyard was up three streets, through a gate that required some navigation, and up a flight of stairs that were narrower than he expected.

They found it.

The florist herself was a small Croatian woman in her fifties, carrying the unmistakable exhaustion of someone who had been awake since four am dealing with a logistical catastrophe and had run out of patience for it somewhere around five thirty. She was surrounded with bouquet and flower arrangements that took up most of the courtyard. She was on the phone to someone, her free hand moving through the same gesture she had probably been repeating for hours and would likely keep repeating.

She looked at them when they arrived.

Said something in Croatian.

Ilya said something back. In Russian, which was not Croatian, but was close enough in energy that she appeared to find it acceptable. He added some English. Some hand gestures. Ilya had the calmness of someone who had spent eight years dealing with patients and their frightened families and had developed, out of professional necessity, the ability to make any situation feel manageable through his own steadiness.

The florist's energy shifted incrementally.

Shane stood beside Ilya and watched this happen. Ilya could feel him watching. Had been able to feel Shane watching him since the pool yesterday. Shane's attention always felt like the right kind.

The florist explained the situation. Some of the arrangements had been damaged in transit—the van, the market—and needed to be reset before they could be moved. Twenty minutes, maybe. She gestured at a small café at the edge of the courtyard. Coffee written on its window.

Ilya looked at Shane.

Shane looked at the café. At his watch. At Ilya.

“We have time,” Ilya said.

“Okay. We have time,” Shane agreed.

\*\*\*

The café was three tables and a counter with a man behind it who looked like he had been making coffee in this courtyard since before the florist was born. He brought two coffees without being asked, as if he understood that people who arrived in his courtyard at seven thirty in the morning needed coffee and did not need to be asked what kind.

They sat.

The courtyard around them. The florist had returned to the arrangements, focused and efficient, the crisis already transformed into another task that could be handled. The morning light climbed over the tops of the walls.

Shane wrapped both hands around his coffee. Ilya looked at him.

“You’re going to say something about coffee not being water,” Shane said, without looking up.

“I was not,” Ilya said.

“You were thinking about it.”

“I was thinking,” Ilya said. “That this is very good coffee actually. Croatian coffee is underrated.”

Shane looked up. The expression on his face doing the almost-smile, the armor finding the gap. “Bet you also have opinions about Croatian coffee.”

“I have opinions about all coffee,” Ilya said. “I am Russian. We take beverages seriously.”

“You told me coffee is not water,” Shane said. “You can’t tell me coffee isn’t water and also have strong opinions about coffee.”

“These are not contradictions,” Ilya said. “Coffee is not water. Coffee is also, separately, something worth having opinions about. Both things are true. You knew this, you had a spreadsheet.”

Shane scoffed a laugh then looked at him for a moment. Something moving in his expression that was warm and slightly helpless. Ilya had been remembering it as the look Shane gets when he’s losing an argument and finding it more enjoyable than winning one.

Shane picked up his coffee and drank it. “It is good,” He said, reluctantly.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “It is.” With certainty.

Shane looked at him over the rim of his cup. “You’re very smug about this.”

“I am not smug,” Ilya said. “I am correct. These are different things.”

“They look the same from here.”

“Then you are not looking enough.”

Shane set his cup down and looked at Ilya with an amused expression. It was dry and slightly warm, his face did several things simultaneously.

“You know, for someone who said he was going to keep his distance—” Shane started.

“I said I would *try*,” Ilya said. “I tried. I was not successful. This is documented. You know this.”

“You tried for approximately—” Shane checked an imaginary watch. “Like.. three hours.”

“Four,” Ilya said. “I went to the city. I checked out the old city. I was *very* distant in the old city.”

“And then you came back.”

“And then I came back,” Ilya agreed.

Shane looked at him for a moment. Something in his expression that was warm and slightly helpless and not quite hiding anything.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “You did.”

They went quiet for a moment. Shane turned his cup. Ilya watched him turn it. Neither of them said *and then you stayed*.

“Fine. You were right about the coffee.” Shane finally said, breaking their silence.

“I’m often right,” Ilya said. “About coffee specifically. Also other things.”

“Name one other thing you’ve been right about.”

Ilya looked at him. “You needed the electrolytes.”

“That’s—” Shane paused. “Fine. That’s fair.”

“You needed the sandwich.”

“Okay—”

“Coffee is not water.”

“Now you’re just—”

“Chlorine is not good for skin,” Ilya said. “This is a medical fact. I was also correct.”

“Okay. You were correct,” Shane said, in the tone of someone conceding a point under duress.

“Also,” Ilya said, “The tile that you like staring so much. Was a very average tile. I said this.”

“The tile in the pool?” Shane stopped and looked at him. Ilya watched the inventory running. Shane putting together what the *tile* meant, what Ilya had noticed while Shane trying to *not-looking* so hard at Ilya in the pool. Something in his expression softened completely, the warmth and helplessness arriving all at once.

“You’ve been keeping a list?” Shane said, eyebrows furrowed, holding back a smile.

“I have very good memory,” Ilya said.

“Of every time you’ve been right.” Shane counter.

“Of every time I’ve been right about *you*,” Ilya said simply, without any joke underneath it.

Shane went quiet for a moment.

“That’s different,” Shane said.

“Mm,” Ilya said. “Is it?”

Out in the courtyard, the florist said something to her assistant. The morning moved around them. The old city remained magnificently indifferent. People crossed the square, chairs scraped against stone, coffee arrived and disappeared, and between them sat the thing that still had no name and was getting less unnamed by the hour.

Ilya looked at Shane.

Shane was looking at the courtyard, at the walls, at the light, at the florist working on the arrangements. His profile in the morning light.

*The freckles.*

Always the freckles. The morning sun doing something to them that was, Ilya thought, a genuine medical concern and also entirely his problem.

He looked away.

Then looked back.

Shane had turned his head and was looking at him with the expression that meant he’d been caught looking. Neither of them said anything about it.

“I think the florist is nearly done,” Shane said. Looking back at the arrangements.

“Nearly,” Ilya agreed.

“We should probably—”

“Five more minutes,” Ilya said.

Shane looked at him. Then back at his coffee. Then back at the courtyard.

“Fine. Five more minutes,” he agreed.

They sat in quiet.

They stayed for five more minutes.

The city indifferent. The coffee cooling. The florist behind them putting the last arrangements right. The morning moving around them.

Ilya had been to beautiful places. Had stood in front of beautiful views. Had watched the sunset over Moscow from his clinic window on late shifts and thought *yes, that is very beautiful*.

He was not looking at the view now.

He was looking at Shane.

It was the most beautiful morning he could remember.

\*\*\*

The streets of the old city were not designed for two men carrying many many white flower arrangements. They were designed for foot traffic. It was so narrow yet beautiful but also completely indifferent to the Croatian wedding's floral situation.

Ilya went first. Shane walked behind him. They carried the arrangements between them and above them and, at one point, briefly against the wall of a building that had been standing since the fourteenth century and had survived significantly worse things than Croatian wedding's floral situation.

"Left," Shane said.

"I know left," Ilya said.

"You were going right."

"I was going slightly right on the way to the left."

"That's just going right."

"It's quite a—" Ilya adjusted the arrangement, which had decided to lean. "A navigational approach. It's fine."

"It's not fine, there's a wall, be care—"

The flowers hit the wall again.

"Okay okay. I see the wall," Ilya said.

"I don't think so. You've hit it twice now." Shane counter.

"It keeps moving."

"The wall," Shane said, with great patience, "Is not moving, Ilya."

"Then it is very badly positioned," Ilya said.

Shane made a startled sound. It started as something controlled but ended as something that was absolutely a laugh. The laugh that got taken from him, the helpless one.

Ilya turned to look at him.

“You’re laughing,” Ilya observed.

“I’m not,” Shane said. Still laughing.

“You are.”

“I’m—” he stopped. The laugh is winning. “The wall keeps moving, Ilya.” He said sarcastically.

“It’s a very aggressive wall,” Ilya said.

Shane laughed harder.

Ilya watched him do it with a great deal of fondness in his face and then turned back to the street because there was another corner coming and he was going to navigate it correctly this time regardless of what the wall was doing.

“Left,” Shane said, still slightly wrecked.

“I know,” Ilya said with great dignity. “I am going left.”

\*\*\*

They found a rhythm eventually. Two people figuring out how to move through a space together. Ilya’s pace, Shane’s directions, the adjustments they made without discussing them, the navigation became easier as they went.

Ilya looked at Shane sideways. The morning light was doing its unreasonable thing on the limestone around them. The flowers framing his face, catching in his hair and tapping on his freckles every now and then. None of it was what Ilya had expected when he’d RSVP’d yes to a wedding in Croatia four months ago.

He was finding, with some frequency, that the things he hadn’t expected were the best ones.

“You’re staring,” Shane said. Not looking at him. Still smiling.

“I’m navigating,” Ilya said.

“You’re navigating at *me*.”

“The street is in this direction,” Ilya said. “You happen to be also in this direction.”

Shane looked at him then. The smile still there. Whatever armor he’d been wearing had slipped away, leaving only that warm, helpless look. The morning light, as always, found the freckles.

“Yeah right,” Shane said. Very quietly.

“Right,” Ilya agreed.

They kept walking.

The Pile Gate visible at the end of the street now, the resort beyond it, the wedding in—Ilya checked, briefly, the time—*less than two hours*.

Neither of them hurried.

\*\*\*

The cliff terrace was everything Dubrovnik had been threatening all weekend.

The ceremony space had been arranged along the edge of it. White silk covered chairs in rows, the kind of chairs that they used at weddings. The Adriatic sea below them, blue and enormous in the late morning light, the old city visible in the distance doing its pale golden thing in the morning. The sky above it all, blue and enormous and completely indifferent to what was about to happen beneath it.

Ilya found his seat.

Second row. The view from here was everything. The altar at the front where the officiant was arranging papers. He looked like someone who did this regularly and found it beautiful every time. The rows filled around him. Rhys’s family on one side, warm and Canadian and already emotional, Svetlana’s on the other, warm and Russian and pretending not to be. The uncle from Volgograd three seats to Ilya’s left, already holding a glass of something that had not come from the welcome table. He looked extremely pleased about the whole situation.

And at the front, Shane.

Standing beside Rhys at the altar, shoulders square, expression calm, every inch of him prepared for this moment. The dark suit. The jaw set. Shane’s expression was arranged into the warm professional version of *fine*, the best man expression, the expression that said *I am happy to be here and I am delighted for my best friend and everything is exactly as it should be*.

Ilya could see that armor from the second row. He had been able to see it since Helsinki.

Rhys was beside him, open, warm, present and so certain without any hesitation. His whole body was involved in being here. He looked like a man standing on the threshold of the life he wanted, carrying all the nervous hope that came with it. He kept looking at the aisle.

Shane kept looking at Rhys.

Then briefly, Shane looked at Ilya.

Their eyes met.

Something passed between them. It wasn't the look from the old city, and it wasn't the warmth from the gate. Those had already said what they needed to say. This was an acknowledgment.

*I see you there. I know you're there. I'm still here.* The acknowledgment passed quietly between them. They had spent the morning separated by rows, chairs, and wedding guests, and discovered that distance, in the end, wasn't measured that way.

Ilya gave him nothing dramatic. He just looked back. Steady and present.

Shane looked back at him.

The rows filled. The murmur of guests settling. Someone's child saying something at full volume that their parent dealt with in a whisper. The uncle brought up a handkerchief from somewhere, already. The music began to play, low strings filled the air, it's the wedding music that existed for this moment and no other.

Everyone turned.

Ilya turned.

Svetlana appeared at the end of the aisle.

She looked radiant. More than that, she looked like someone who had finally stopped managing herself. She was exactly in the place where there was no distance between who they were and where they were. She is completely present in the biggest moment of her life.

Ilya had loved her for years.

He had never seen her look like this.

He understood, watching her, that he had never been able to give her *the conditions* for it.

And Rhys had.

She was wearing ivory. A fluid silky gown that draped smoothly over her, catching the morning light as she moved, a plunging neckline on one side and a collar wrapped high on the other, the silhouette falling long and soft behind her on the stone in a subtle trail. Simple. Classic. Every detail chosen.

The dress was, Ilya thought, exactly right.

So was everything else about her being here.

She was looking at Rhys.

Only at Rhys. The aisle and the chairs and the guests and the whole of Dubrovnik behind her, none of it registered. Only Rhys, at the end of the aisle, who had looked at her and whose face had done something that Ilya suspected it only ever did for her. Rhys's face was the face

of a man who had arrived at the answer at last, and had neither the instinct nor the desire to pretend otherwise for a single second.

Rhys looked at Svetlana like she was the destination he had been navigating toward his entire life and had just arrived.

Ilya watched her walk.

He felt the grief arrive.

It arrived quietly, with clean edges. He felt it arrive and recognized it and let it, and then—watching her walk toward Rhys in the ivory dress in the Dubrovnik light—he felt it release. The same way things are released once you'd finally said what needed saying and heard what needed hearing. The grief releasing not into nothing but into a *clean space*. And in that space, the weight was gone, and all that remained was an easy stillness.

*This is what she needed*, Ilya thought. *This. Right here. This is what fully present looks like.*

Rhys, who crossed rooms immediately to find her. Who carried her across terraces. Who looked at her like that, like she was the only interesting thing in any space she occupied, like the question of where to direct his attention had been answered the moment she walked into it and had not required revisiting since.

*This is what she deserved.*

Ilya thought about the two years. About the gap between what he had given her and what she had needed. About the distance, the way he had loved her completely and been unreachable at the same time. About the door they had both walked toward from the opposite sides and opened together three years ago when she had said *I can't keep reaching for you* and he had not argued because she was right.

The door was closed now.

Properly and finally. No draft coming through.

He watched her reach Rhys.

Watched Rhys take her hands and look at her with the expression that Ilya recognized now, that he had been learning to recognize all weekend, that he was beginning, carefully, to wear himself.

Nothing held back and performed.

Just *this person*. Just *here*.

*She found him. And I am glad.*

Glad.

The grief sat beside the gladness and neither one canceled the other out. Ilya let both of them be there, clean-edged, finished and real.

He had come here to understand something.

He might understand it now.

\*\*\*

The vows began.

The officiant's voice sounded warm and accented, carrying over the air. Rhys's voice was steady, and certain. Svetlana's voice was clear and warm.

*I do.*

*I do.*

Ilya listened.

And looked at Shane.

Standing at the front in a dark suit, jaw set, Shane wore the warm professional version of *fine* that Ilya had been watching assemble and disassemble countless times before. He was performing the last duty.

*I see you*, Ilya thought.

Not a revelation. Not the first time he had thought about it either.

*I see you. I see what this costs you.*

*I see all of it. I am choosing to keep looking.*

Some parts of you only emerged for certain people. Ilya had understood this about his patients for years. Just like the child who saved their real laugh for one specific nurse, the teenager who would only speak honestly to one particular doctor. He had understood it as a feature of other people's emotional architecture and had not, until recently, considered applying it to his own.

The version of him that left notes. That said *more*. That stood on a terrace and did not step back. That slipped between the covers without hesitation when someone asked him to stay.

That version had been there the whole time.

He had just needed someone who made it impossible to keep it away.

\*\*\*

The ceremony dissolved gradually into movement, into noise, into the warm chaos of fifty people who had just witnessed something and needed to find each other to say so. Confetti in

the air. Someone's child running. Rhys's family finding Svetlana's family. The neat rows unraveled into conversations, embraces, and wandering clusters. People becoming themselves again.

Ilya moved with the crowd. Not toward anything specifically, just moving.

He ended up at a railing terrace.

He wasn't sure how. The crowd had moved him there.

He was aware, before he turned to check, that Shane was beside him.

Not because he had looked. He had been finding Shane across distances all weekend without realizing he was doing it. Apparently this applied to terraces as well.

He didn't turn.

Neither did Shane.

They stood at the railing together and looked at the view. The crowd moved around them and the afternoon light did its thing and neither of them said anything. The comfortable silence again.

Ilya's hand was on the railing and so was Shane.

At some point—Ilya couldn't have said exactly when, or which of them moved first, or if either of them had moved at all—their pinkies touched.

Just the smallest point of contact. The side of Ilya's smallest finger against the side of Shane's.

Neither of them moved away from it or toward it.

"So," Shane said. Still looking at the water. "Moscow."

"So," Ilya said. "Montreal."

A pause between them.

"What's Moscow like," Shane said. "In summer."

"Very beautiful," Ilya said. "You would hate it."

Shane looked at him. "Why would I hate it?"

"Too many opinions about everything," Ilya said. "Very strong feelings about the correct way to do things. Everyone is very certain they are right."

"That sounds—" Shane paused. "That sounds like me." He smiled.

"Yes," Ilya said. "You would fit in extremely well. This is why you would hate it."

Shane looked at him for a moment. Something warm in his face. Something slightly helpless.

“What’s Montreal like,” Ilya said. “In summer.”

“Beautiful,” Shane said. “There’s festivals, food market, parks,” he paused. “You’d like it.”

“Sounds beautiful,” Ilya said simply.

A beat.

“Yeah,” Shane said. Quieter. “You’d love Montreal.”

The banter reasserted itself. The easy Helsinki airport dynamic. It made hard things easier to take by making them funny first.

“Montreal,” Ilya said. “How far is it. From Moscow.”

“Nine hours, I think,” Shane said. “Direct. If there’s a direct flight. With connection, anywhere from twelve to fifteen hours, sometimes longer.”

“I see,” Ilya said.

“It’s not—” Shane paused. “It’s not close.”

“No,” Ilya said. “It’s not close.”

They stood there. The crowd moved behind them. The afternoon light was warm.

“Right,” Shane said.

“Right,” Ilya said.

The distance between them had a shape now. It had a name. It sat there between them, real and impossible to ignore. The weight of nine hours *or more*. Flights and two cities on opposite sides of the world. The distance landed at a railing in Dubrovnik on a Saturday afternoon.

“So. When are you—” Shane started.

Something rang. Ilya’s phone buzzed.

He looked at it.

His mother. Moscow. Confusion on his face.

“One moment,” he said. Stepped slightly away from the railing.

He answered.

*“Ilyusha.”*

Her voice. He hadn't heard it in a week. Still warm. Still direct. Still carrying that slight impatience with the world that came from fifty-six years of knowing exactly how things should be done—and usually being right.

Except tonight there was something underneath the warmth that he recognized immediately, that he had been trained to recognize in his patients, in anyone who had been holding something for too long and had gotten very good at holding it and was starting to show the holding.

"Mama," he said. In Russian. *"What's wrong?"*

*"Nothing is wrong,"* she said. *"Everything is fine."*

*"You're calling me randomly."*

*"I call when I want to call. I'm your mother."*

"Mama," he said. *"What's wrong?"*

The pause. Longer this time.

*"Your father,"* she said. *"He had—it was a difficult week, Ilyusha. He didn't know where he was. For two days and—"* she stopped and sounded like someone who had been very close to breaking. *"It doesn't matter. The point is it was difficult."*

"Mama," he said.

*"I'm fine, moy lyubimyy,"* she said. Warm with the tinge of firmness. Irina Rozanova is a woman of quiet authority, she could always settle a room without ever needing to raise her voice.

*"You're not fine,"* he said gently. *"You sound tired."*

A beat.

*"Yes,"* she said quietly. *"I am tired."*

Ilya closed his eyes briefly then opened them. The old city stretched in front of him. The afternoon light fell on the limestone.

*"I'll come home,"* he said. *"After the—"*

*"No, no,"* she said immediately. *"Don't cut the wedding short. I'm fine. I just wanted to hear your voice."*

"Mama—"

*"I mean it. Stay. Enjoy. How is Dubrovnik?"*

Such an Irina Rozanova move. She would pivot to practical warmth, the deflection disguised as interest. He had been watching her do this his entire life. He had inherited it, probably.

*“Dubrovnik is very beautiful,” he said. “Very aggressive about it.”*

She laughed. Short and warm. And underneath the laugh he can still hear the tiredness that is still there. He could hear it.

*“And Sveta,” she said. “How is she?”*

*“She’s—”* Ilya looked at the direction Svetlana had gone, at the warm noise of the reception preparation. *“She’s exactly where she’s supposed to be. I’m happy for her, truly.”*

*“Good,”* his mother said gently. *“Good, Ilyusha.”*

*“Da.”*

*“And you,”* she said. *“How are you?”*

The question was simple and direct. It went straight past the surface one.

Ilya looked at the Adriatic sea.

*“I—”* he started. Then a long pause.

*“Take your time,”* she said.

He took a breath.

*“I met someone,”* he said. *“Here. At the wedding.”*

His mother said nothing. Which meant *go on, continue*.

*“He’s—”* Ilya stopped. Found it. *“He is the most prepared person I have ever met. He performs fine,”* Ilya said. *“He is very good at it. But not with me, I think,”*

His mother made a sound that was not quite a laugh. Something warmer.

*“Ilyusha,”* she said.

*“But it’s impossible,”* Ilya said. *“He lives in Montreal. I live in Moscow. We have known each other for less than forty hours. And I’m at someone else’s wedding and—”* he exhaled. *“It’s just, I don’t even know how to—.”*

*“Tell me about him,”* she said.

*“Mama—”*

*“Tell me.”* The firmness again. The warmth inside it.

*"He said," Ilya stopped. Found the right version. "He told me to stop being careful with him." A pause. "Nobody has ever said that to me. Everyone let me be careful. But he just told me to stop."*

His mother was quiet.

*"What did you do," she asked.*

*"I stopped," Ilya answered.*

His mother made a sound. Something between a laugh and something else.

*"Good," she said. "Good, Ilyusha."*

There was a small shift in her voice, stripped of both its softness and its composure, something more honest than either.

*"Ilya," she said. "Can I tell you something?"*

*"You're going to tell me regardless," he said.*

*"Yes," she said. "But I'm asking. Because I'm polite."*

*"Mama, you're not polite," he said. "You're direct, as always."*

*"Listen," she said.*

He listened.

*"You have been afraid since you were seventeen," she said. "I know exactly when it started. I watched it start." Her voice was doing something careful, the way it always did when she was about to say something she had been thinking about for a long time. "Your father and I—the way we were. What you grew up in the middle of. I have carried this for years, Ilyusha. The knowledge that we gave you a very wrong image of what love looks like up close."*

*"Mama, you don't have to—"*

*"I do," she said. "I do have to. Because you are twenty eight years old and you are still keeping everyone at the distance you learned at seventeen because back then, the evidence suggested that closeness was dangerous." A pause. "The evidence was us. And we were not—we were not right. We were not a good example. And I am sorry for it. I am sorry every day."*

*"Mama."*

*"Let me finish." Her voice was firm and tired and loving all at once. "The voice telling you this is impossible, that it can't work, that you should create distance now before it costs you something—I know that voice. I gave you that voice. I watched you listen to that voice with Sveta. And I am asking you, now, to not listen to it. Not again,"* The tiredness shifting into something else. The certainty arriving underneath it.

*"It is scary," Ilya said.*

*"Yes," she said. Simply. "It's scary."*

*A beat.*

*"But Ilyusha." Her voice went quiet now. The firmness and the warmth and the tiredness all in it at once. "You're brave. You have always been braver than you think you are."*

Her words always struck him the same way. Clean, unsoftened but not unkindly. It's impossible to argue with.

He stood there with them.

And felt, standing there, the weight of nine hours between him and his mother who was tired and alone in a Moscow apartment. His mother who knew him better than anyone had known him. Better than any of his friends. Better than he knew himself, possibly. Mothers always knew things about their children that the children spent their entire lives trying to disprove.

He loved her. Completely. Without conditions. Without expectation. The one relationship in his life that simply existed.

*"I'm coming home tonight," he said.*

*"Ilyusha—"*

*"And when I land," he said, "I'm making an appointment. Dr. Petrov at the Pirogov center. The specialist Papa should have seen months ago. I'm doing it Monday morning. First thing. Not any day later, or else—" Ilya couldn't continue.*

His mother was quiet.

*"I should have done it sooner," he said. "I'm sorry."*

*"You've been busy," she said.*

*"That's not a reason," he said.*

*"No," she agreed. "It isn't." A beat. "Thank you, Ilyusha."*

He looked at the Adriatic.

Shane was somewhere in the crowd. The unfinished sentence between them. The distance. The *you'd love Montreal*.

Ilya had always been good at solving problems. Had spent his entire professional life finding solutions to problems that looked impossible from the outside and had edges if you looked carefully enough. He intended to look carefully. He intended to find the edges of this one.

But not tonight. Tonight was about showing up for the one relationship in his life that required nothing, yet had given him *everything*.

He would find the way.

There would be a way and he intended to find it.

*"I'll see you tomorrow night,"* he said.

*"I'll be awake,"* she said. *"Don't tell me not to wait."*

*"I wasn't going to,"* he said.

*"I know,"* she said. *"That's why I like you."*

*"You're my mother,"* he said. *"You have to like me."*

*"I don't have to do anything,"* she said. *"I choose to. There is a difference."*

A beat.

*"I'm coming home, mama."*

He hung up.

He stood there for a moment with his phone in his hand. The crowd moved somewhere behind him and the afternoon light remained unchanged.

Then he went back to the railing.

Shane watched him with the same careful attention he always gave him.

"Is everything alright?" Shane asked, his brows furrowed and he sounded worried.

Ilya stood at the railing. He put his phone in his pocket.

"My father," he said. "His dementia. It's—" he stopped. Found the English version. "It's getting worse. My mother, they are divorced, but he has no one to take care of him and she is alone with this, and tonight it was—" he stopped again. "It was too much for her."

Shane looked at him, his face doing the processing thing.

"I need to go back to Moscow," Ilya said.

A beat.

"Tonight."

Shane looked at him. Something crossed his face—unguarded, raw and gone in under a second—the expression of a man who had spent twenty years loving someone who needed to

be *somewhere else* and had just recognized that this was, *one more time*. The expression of a man who had loved people and had become very good at watching them go.

His face looked a lot like saying:

*Not again.*

\*\*\*

## Chapter End Notes

This story is nothing without my muse. Which has been, mostly, other people's words. The Substack essay open in a tab at 1am. The lyric I couldn't stop hearing. The sentence in someone else's book that suddenly made Shane and Ilya make sense to me. None of it was mine. All of it became this.

### ***Essays (and poetry) Moodboard:***

["some parts of you only emerge for certain people"](#)

*"We are reflections that don't exist until the mirror tilts, catching the light just so, showing us facets we couldn't see alone. One person draws out your voice, another your daring, another your steadiness."*

["the difference between being seen and being known"](#)

*"Sometimes I think the loneliest moments aren't when you're alone, but when you're surrounded by people who think they know you."*

[T.S. Eliot, \*The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock\* \(1915\)](#)

*"For I have known them all already, known them all — Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons."*

### ***Playlist moodboard:***

#### **Sombr — i wish i knew how to quit you**

*"I'll write a book with all the reasons I could call you my home.  
But I won't. 'Cause you're unavailable."*

*"I wish I knew how to quit you.  
You were never mine, but I was always yours"*

#### **Taylor Swift — This Is Me Trying**

*"I didn't know if you'd care if I came back.  
I have a lot of regrets about that"*

*“You're a flashback in a film reel on the one screen in my town.  
And I just wanted you to know that this is me trying.”*

**Lord Huron — The Night We Met**

*“I am not the only traveler.  
Who has not repaid his debt.  
I've been searching for a trail to follow again.”  
“I had all and then most of you.  
Some and now none of you.  
Take me back to the night we met.”*

# Chapter 6: In A Room Full Of People I Look For You

## Chapter Summary

*Previously on Dare You Twice:*

Ilya woke up with Shane asleep on his chest and Svetlana at the door. They picked up flowers in the old city at seven in the morning and Ilya kept walking into the wall. The wedding was perfect until Ilya's mother called. Ilya needs to go back to Moscow tonight.

And Shane thought, *not again*.

## Chapter Notes

So, did you know that the origin word of *desire* does not mean attraction or love-adjacent, but more as *lack*? Apparently in ancient Greek, the word desire is defined by what's missing. Want, in its truest form, is the *awareness of an absence*. I've been sitting with that idea for a while now, maybe for this chapter most of all. Shane wants what's impossible. He has spent so long performing a self that denies his desires at all costs. So, what happens when the absence gets too loud to contain? I guess we'll find out 😊

And, before you go, a cheeky question for you—what is it that your heart wants? what is it that your heart is missing?  
Just sit with it for a second.

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

“I need to go back to Moscow. Tonight.” Ilya said.

Shane heard it and felt it like a physical blow to his sternum.

The freefall of something that had been suspended and had just—with the word *tonight*—been released. He felt it happen. He noted it happening. And then, with twenty years of practice, he stepped over it.

“Tonight,” Shane repeated the word, not a question.

“My mother,” Ilya said. “I really need to be there for her. But Shane—”

“Yeah, of course,” Shane cut him short.

He meant it. He did mean it and had understood completely, the logic of it was clear and correct. Shane had no argument with any of it. He knew it was the right thing that Ilya had to do. It was the only thing.

He was fine.

“Shane, we need to—” Ilya started.

“You should go,” Shane said. “Don’t stay for the reception. Go.”

Ilya looked at him and Shane looked away at the water.

There was a beat of something. The same beat they had been having since Helsinki, since the closing bar. The beat means *there is a significant amount of space between what is being said and what is meant and we are both standing in it*.

“I will stay for the reception. But Shane—”

“I’m glad you came,” Shane said. It came out steady and a bit too fast. The voice he used for things he was putting down carefully. “I mean, for Sveta. She needed you here and you were here. At least. That matters.”

Another beat.

“Yes,” Ilya said quietly. “It does.”

Neither of them said anything for a moment. The afternoon moved around them. Someone laughed somewhere behind them, bright and easy. Shane heard it from the outside. The same way you heard things when you were somewhere else entirely. Present in body and elsewhere in every other sense.

He felt his armor find its pieces. Sliding into place with the efficiency of something that had been doing this for a very long time and did not require instruction. It happened almost without him. Like an automatic system that had learned to run itself.

“There is a good restaurant,” Ilya said. “In the old city. I found it this morning, when Sveta sent us for the flowers. I was thinking—” a pause, careful. “After the reception. If you wanted.”

Shane turned and looked at him.

Ilya was watching him with *that* expression he had.

Shane knew this expression. Had been on the receiving end of it since a Helsinki airport and had been trying, with diminishing success, to do something other than *fall apart* in the face of it. It was the expression that made all the careful systems he had built around himself feel suddenly, embarrassingly fragile.

Ilya had not stopped looking at him like that.

“I think I need a minute,” Shane said. “Alone.”

Something moved in Ilya’s face. He absorbed it.

“Okay,” Ilya said.

“I’ll see you later.”

Shane pushed off the railing and didn’t look at him.

He walked away from the view and from Ilya. He walked the way he always walked when things were being stepped over. Straight-backed, jaw set, the movement that communicated *fine* to anyone paying attention and *I have somewhere to be* to anyone who wasn’t. He had developed this walk over the course of his life whenever he had things to step over and needed to look like he wasn’t affected by it. He had refined it through game losses and press conferences and standing at the front of Rhys Hunt’s wedding being the best man and being fine about it. And it always worked, because people saw what you gave them and what he gave them was *this walk*.

It had never once failed to make people believe him.

Once again, *he was fine*.

He walked until the crowd thinned and disappeared entirely. Until he found a staircase he hadn’t been down before. It’s made of stone and narrow, winding somewhere below the terrace level. He followed it because it was going away from everything and *away* was the direction he needed right now.

The staircase ended in a small landing stone. Low wall, bougainvillea spilling over it. Below the wall, the cliff. Below the cliff, the Adriatic sea. Shane put his hands on the wall and looked at it and breathed.

*Tonight*, he thought.

*He’s leaving tonight*.

Shane stood there with that information and didn’t do anything with it. He just let it be the size it was, which was pretty significant he could be honest. Larger than the label he’d been trying to give their situation all weekend. He’d been calling it *this just because of the wedding* and *we live in different cities* and *forty hours is not enough to know anything* and all of those labels were technically accurate and none of them were the right ones.

He breathed.

The Adriatic did not care. It had no interest in what Shane was missing or what he was about to miss or the *lack* that was assembling itself in his chest at two thirty in the afternoon. It just existed, complete and indifferent and the wrong color for how he felt, and that was, somehow, the closest thing to comfort he’d found all day.

He was so tired.

He was—

“Thought I saw you disappear down here.”

Shane turned.

Rhys was at the top of the staircase, one hand on the wall, looking down at him like he had finally found what he was looking for and was deciding what to do with it. He was wearing his wedding suit still, the jacket off now, sleeves rolled up, his tie slightly loosened.

Shane turned back to the water. “Needed some air.”

“There’s air upstairs,” Rhys said. He came down the stairs anyway. Stood beside Shane at the low wall, shoulder-to-shoulder just like they always stood since they were small enough that the height difference didn’t matter.

“Sveta mentioned this morning,” Rhys said. “That I should check on you.”

“Sveta worries about me?” Shane eyebrow furrowed.

“Yes. But also she is perceptive,” Rhys said. “Slightly two different things but.. she’s both.”

Shane said nothing.

Rhys didn’t push. He’d never pushed. It was one of the things—Shane had a list, twenty years long, of the things—about Rhys Hunt that had made him the closest person in any room Shane had ever been in. The *not-pushing* was near the top. He simply showed up and waited, making it clear he had all the time there was, and let Shane arrive at things at his own pace.

Shane had spent six months preparing for this weekend. He had four speeches in the room upstairs, each one a different version of himself standing in front of a room and saying the right thing in the right order. He had contingencies. He had backup contingencies. He had spent decades building a system so airtight that the managing had stopped feeling like managing and started feeling like how he was. The distance between what he felt and what he said had collapsed into a single point so long ago that he couldn’t remember when they’d been two separate things.

He had not, in any of that time, built a contingency for Rhys beside him on a stone landing, not asking, not pushing, not doing anything except being exactly who he had always been. His best friend.

Still, after everything, that was the thing Shane was the least equipped to survive.

The Adriatic moved below them. The smell of salt air brushed their faces.

“I’m gay,” Shane said.

There. He hadn’t planned to say it. That was the part he kept returning to in the half-second after. He hadn’t made a choice, hadn’t prepared himself, and sure as hell hadn’t worked his way toward *this* moment. His mouth had simply opened and the truest thing he knew about

himself had come out. He heard the words in the air. He didn't take them back. He found, standing there, that he couldn't locate the part of himself that wanted to.

Shane stood in the strange new lightness of a structure that had just lost its central weight and was still, improbably, standing.

The silence after them lasted long enough.

Then Rhys said, "Okay."

Not *I know*. Not *of course*. Not any of the things people said in films. Or the tearful immediate acceptance, the arms-around-each-other, the *nothing changes*. Rhys just said *okay*. Said it with the same certainty Rhys brought to things that mattered, without decoration and with his full attention behind every word.

Shane felt the weight of Rhys looking at him intently. He kept looking at the water.

"There's more," Shane said.

"Tell me." Rhys said.

Another pause. Shane could feel Rhys not moving beside him, the stillness of someone who was going to let this take as long as it needed.

"I was in love with you," Shane said. "For a long time."

The pause this time was different.

Shane had been afraid of this pause his entire adult life. He had built systems around not arriving at it, had drafted and discarded and redirected every conversation for years to prevent this conversation and the silence that came after them. And now it was here and he was standing in it and—to his surprise—the world had not ended. This is an information he hadn't had before and didn't know what to do with now.

"*Was?*" Rhys responded.

"Was," Shane confirmed.

Rhys was quiet for a moment and Shane could feel him processing.

"Shane," he said.

"I know."

"No, let me—" Rhys stopped. "I'm not—" Another stop.

Shane waited. Twenty years of standing in Rhys's silences had given him a precise map of them. There's silences that felt comfortable, there's the processing ones, and then there's the ones where Rhys was working his way toward something true at the expense of something easier. This was the last kind.

The long exhale arrived. A man arrived somewhere after a search.

“What I’m about to say— first of all, I’m not upset at you for this,” Rhys said with his careful voice. “I want you to know that first. That’s not— that’s not what this is,”

“Okay,” Shane said.

“What this is,” Rhys said slowly. “Is that I’m standing here trying to figure out why I was apparently not—” he stopped again. “Why you didn’t think you couldn’t—”

His voice did something. Something quieter than breaking. He couldn’t seem to finish his sentences.

“I thought I was a safe place for you, Shane,” Rhys said. “I’ve always thought that. And right now I have to question that of myself,”

Shane closed his eyes.

“Rhys—”

“Twenty years,” Rhys said. “I’m not saying that as an accusation,” He exhaled. “That’s a long time to carry something alone. And I was *right there*.”

“I know,” Shane exhaled a long breath.

“I just—” Rhys turned. His voice had changed, gone quieter, the register he used when he was being careful with something. “Now I keep thinking about you. For all that time,” A pause. “I hate that you were alone with it.”

His voice broke on the word *alone*.

“Were you okay,” he said. “Back then. Were you ever actually okay?”

Shane turned and looked at him. He didn’t say anything.

He looked at Rhys, who was six foot two, with his defined cheekbones, and soft brown eyes. He had been the first person who was kind to him at age eight and had not stopped being kind to him since. Who hugged with his whole body, who had been looking for Shane in the wedding group chat this morning, who was standing on a stone landing above the Adriatic on his wedding day and was hurt—genuinely hurt—because somewhere in the years of their friendship, there had been a room that Shane had never let him into, and Rhys hadn’t even known the room existed.

“I didn’t want to lose you,” Shane said. It came out very small “If I told you— if you looked at me differently, if it changed anything, if I had to—” He sighed. “I just couldn’t. You were the one thing I wasn’t willing to risk.”

Rhys looked at him.

“You were the most important thing,” Shane said. “So you were the thing I was most afraid of losing.”

Something crossed Rhys’s face. The hurt still there, and underneath it, the comprehension arriving.

The armor and the secret had never been only for himself, Shane thought. He had been protecting Rhys from this truth for twenty years as much as he had been protecting himself. The knowledge that one of the rooms in Shane’s life had been dark for that long, on purpose, was also for him. He had thought that was kindness. He was only now arriving at the possibility that it might have been a different kind of distance.

“Oh,” Rhys said quietly. “Shane.”

“I know,” Shane said. “I know it doesn’t make any sense whatsoever, but—”

“No,” Rhys said. “I understand,” He looked at the water for a moment. Then back at Shane. “But you were never going to lose me, Shane. Not once. Not ever. I need you to know that.”

They stood there.

Shane had spent twenty years becoming fluent in *lack*. In wanting and not saying. In reaching and pulling back. In standing in front of things he needed and finding—*always*—a reason that they were impossible. He was very good at it. He had gotten so good at it that the wanting had started to feel like the shape of him. The absence at his center that he had stopped being able to see.

Rhys was beside him. Not going anywhere.

Shane was seeing it now.

“There’s someone,” Shane continued.

Rhys looked at him.

“I met at the wedding,” Shane said. “There’s— someone.”

He watched it happen in Rhys’s face. The calculation, the rapid inventory, the arrival at the only possible answer.

“Ilya,” Rhys said his name in reverence.

Shane said nothing.

“But he’s leaving tonight,” Rhys said. Not a question. “He just told us. He needs to go back earlier to Moscow because of his mother.”

“Yes.”

Rhys was quiet for a moment.

Shane waited for the calculation to complete, watched it move through him. The confirmation, the geometry of it, Ilya leaving tonight, Shane down here instead of up there with him, all of it arranging itself into a picture Rhys was only now seeing whole.

And then Rhys, being Rhys, skipped straight past every question he could have asked and arrived at the only one that mattered.

“Tell me about him,” he said.

Shane looked at him and Rhys looked back. The hurt still there—real, present and not going anywhere—and inside it, making room that said *tell me everything*. Because this was Rhys, who had always been the person who felt first and felt completely and made space for whatever arrived.

Shane looked at the water moved below them.

And then, for the first time in as long as he could remember, he told someone.

He told him about gate 14C. About the amber dark of a closing bar and a dare and the sound of Ilya’s voice saying *I dare you* like it was a completely reasonable thing to say to a stranger at midnight. He told him about the note and the sandwich and *the freckles look like constellations* which had been the first moment he’d understood he was in significant trouble. He told him about the terrace and the panic attack and *stay* and falling asleep to the slow rhythm of someone else’s breathing.

He told him about the phone call Ilya had taken standing at a railing overlooking the Adriatic.

Rhys listened and didn’t interrupt. He asked one question, at the end.

“And you’ll let him go?”

Shane was quiet for a moment.

“I don’t know what I did yet,” he said honestly. “Ask me later.”

Rhys looked at him for a long time. Then he put his arm around Shane’s shoulders, one-armed slung solid at his side and not asking for anything in return.

The arm that Shane had spent twenty years being terrified of losing.

Still there.

They looked at the expanse of the ocean in front of them. The afternoon light on the water doing its thing, entirely indifferent to what had just been said on this stone landing and what it had cost and what it had given back.

He closed his eyes, breathed and took it all in.

“For what it’s worth,” Rhys said finally. “He looked at you like you were the only person in the room. Every fucking time. All weekend,” His face was looking smug. “I noticed things

too, you know.”

Shane said nothing. *Notice things* he said, the irony of it, Shane thought, finding it funnier than sad this time.

The music upstairs got slightly louder. Someone’s laugh, high and delighted. The reception preparation assembling itself above them, piece by piece, the world around them moved on.

“You have a wedding to get back to,” Shane said.

“I do,” Rhys said. He didn’t move immediately. “You okay?”

Shane thought about it. The honest version of it, which he owed Rhys now and possibly always had.

“Not yet,” he said. “But I think I’m going to be, eventually.”

Rhys looked at him for one more second. Then he squeezed Shane’s shoulder once, brief and solid. Then he let go.

“Come up when you’re ready,” he said. “But don’t be too long, I need my best man.”

Shane exhaled something that almost sounded like a laugh.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sure you do.”

Rhys grinned and went up the stairs. Shane listened to his footsteps on the stone until they disappeared.

Then he stood there alone on the stone landing with twenty years of *I didn’t want to lose you* finally said out loud, and the lightness of something that had been carried so long, finally *eased*.

Except whatever was waiting for him upstairs.

He hadn’t figured out how to walk toward that yet. He had known, from the beginning, that this was a borrowed time. This weekend is ending and it is never going to be enough. He had understood this and had leaned towards it anyway. And that was the thing about borrowed time. It was still time and it still counted. The clock just wasn’t yours.

He breathed.

Then he went up the stairs.

*Chaos*, Ilya had said this morning, among the soft light of the old city barely awake around them. *Then ceremony. In this order.*

Shane looked at the water.

*We are currently in chaos portion*, he thought. *Ceremony is later.*

He straightened his jacket.

Then he went upstairs.

\*\*\*

The room was exactly as he'd left it.

That was the first thing Shane noticed. The curtain still half-drawn across the terrace door. The afternoon light coming through the gap, fell on the floor. His suit jacket from last night on the chair. The four drafted speeches on the nightstand, exactly where he'd put them this morning.

The second thing he noticed was the suitcase.

Ilya's. Open on his bed, half-packed folded clothes, toiletry bag and the black shirt from the rehearsal dinner folded neatly on top of everything. It's a significant improvement on where Shane had last seen it, which was on the floor.

Ilya was standing at the window with his phone. He looked up when Shane came in.

"Hey," Shane said.

"Hey," Ilya said.

The room carried the last twenty-four hours inside it. The terrace. Shane's panic attack. Ilya's decision to stay. The slow rhythm of each other's breathing in the morning light. It all lingered in the air between them, refusing to leave.

Shane looked at the suitcase.

*Okay, he thought. This is happening.*

He put his jacket on the chair. He picked up the speeches and put them down again. *He was fine. He was completely—*

"How was Rhys," Ilya said.

Shane looked up.

Ilya had put his phone down. He was watching Shane with the one expression that cost him something every time. It struck clean in that one place his armor hadn't been built to cover, because Shane hadn't known, until forty-eight hours ago, that the gap was even there.

"Good," Shane said. "He's good."

Ilya nodded. He looked at Shane for a moment longer than the answer required.

Then he said, "I booked the flight."

"Okay."

“It leaves at ten tonight.” A pause. “I have to be at the airport by eight, which means leaving here by—”

“Good,” Shane said. “Good for you.”

The word comes out flat. The armor doing its thing, clipping him short, managing the distance between what he was feeling and what he was saying. The carefully built system that had been doing this for as long as he remembered and had not, for once, let him down.

He was fine.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Shane could feel him deciding something. He had learned the shape of Ilya's silences by now. They were never empty. They always felt as though he was halfway to the truth and only needed a second more to reach it.

“Shane.”

“Mm.”

“Can I say something?”

Shane looked at him. “About what.”

Something moved in Ilya's face. His gaze settled on Shane and stayed there. “About us. About what this is,” he said. “Or what it could be.”

Shane's chest did something, his throat tightened. He looked at the window. “Go ahead.”

Ilya was quiet for one more second.

“This weekend was—” He stopped. Then tried again, taking the same care with the words he always did, only now there was nothing left to hide behind them. “I know what this looks like. We only met less than two days ago. I know Moscow and Montreal are not exactly close. I know how it looks. I'm not asking you to ignore how it looks,”

Shane said nothing.

“But I think you know,” Ilya said. “That this is not nothing. And I think—” The briefest pause between them, the pause of someone stepping off something high. “I would like to find out what it is. If you would.” Ilya's gaze never leaves Shane's.

The room was very quiet.

Shane looked at the suitcase. The half-packed clothes, the toiletry bag. Ilya's black shirt from the rehearsal dinner folded on top of everything. So neat, so careful. This is the same man who left notes, who brought sandwiches, who slipped between the covers without hesitation when he asked him to stay.

For a brief moment, Rhys surfaced in his thoughts. He had *just* survived Rhys. Twenty years and he had survived it, said it out loud today, finally, and the ground had not opened, and the

world had not ended.

But the Rhys thing had always had a ceiling. He had always known, somewhere below the wanting, that it was not going to be returned. The *knowing* had been its own kind of protection. The unrequitedness had kept it at a survivable size.

This, *right here*, had no ceiling he could identify and that was the problem. And Shane had learned, the hard way, that the things you couldn't frame were the things that cost you *everything*.

He was not sure he had *everything* left to spend.

"I don't know," he said.

Ilya waited.

Shane was quiet for a second. "I know what happened this weekend, I know it's not nothing," He said. "I'm not confused about that. But—" Shane trailed off, the sentence never quite finding its end.

"What is the problem then?" Ilya asked quietly. Not pushing.

Shane looked at him.

*The problem*, he thought, *is that I have been here before*. He had looked for the rational objection all weekend—the distance, the timing, the impossibility of this situation—and none of them were the actual thing. If Shane could be honest, the real reason was simpler and worse.

The real reason was that he wanted this so much it had already started to feel like something he could lose. Shane has been running on a deficit for a very long time, and he's not sure there is enough left to cover what losing *this* would take.

"I can't afford this going *wrong*," Shane said. The honest version "I don't recover well," He said. "From getting things wrong. Not the things that actually mattered to me." He stopped.

He looked at the window.

"When it's something I actually wanted," He started. "When I let myself want something and it goes wrong, I just.. stop. Everything stops. And it takes a long time to start again. Every time. I just go all the way back and start again and it takes—" A pause. "It takes a long time. And I'm already—" He stopped. The next part comes out very quiet. "I'm already tired. I'm really tired. And I don't think I have enough left to go back to the beginning again if this goes wrong. Not with this."

Ilya looked at him. The silence stretched between them.

"I understand," Ilya said. And the way he said it sounded like someone who actually did. The voice of someone who understood exactly what that cost because it had cost him the same. It *will* cost him the same. It made something in Shane's chest tighten almost past bearing.

“Maybe—” Shane started, then stopped. “Maybe we can just let it be what it is. Something that happened. Something real that—” He looked for the right frame of sentences, the one that made it survivable. “Something real that lives here. In this weekend. That we don’t have to pretend—” He stopped. *Was the beginning of something else.* He couldn’t finish the sentence.

He stopped.

Ilya was looking at him.

The hurt was clearly visible on his face. But he didn't argue. He simply looked at Shane as though he was still making room for the words he just heard.

“Okay,” Ilya said.

One word. The same word Shane had been using all weekend to mean *I’m managing this*. Ilya using it now to mean something different. *I hear you. I’m not going to push. I’ll hold whatever you give me.*

Shane exhaled.

“Okay,” he said.

Neither of them said anything for a moment. The suitcase sat open on the bed. The afternoon light moved slightly on the floor. Somewhere outside, the reception preparation was assembling itself, the day continuing forward.

“I’m going to—” Shane gestured toward the bathroom. “I just need a minute.”

“Of course,” Ilya said.

Shane went in.

The bathroom was dim, the afternoon light coming through the small frosted window above the shower, and Shane stood at the sink and turned the cold tap and put his hands under it. He looked at himself in the mirror.

He looked like a man who had been awake since six in the morning and had said more true things in the last ten hours than in the previous four years. He was not yet sure whether that had been a catastrophic mistake or the first thing he’d done right in a very long time.

*Let it be what it was,* he’d said. *Something that lives here. In this weekend.*

He looked at himself.

The mirror did not offer an opinion. It just showed him his own face. His jaw set, his eyes tired, his freckles scattered across the bridge of his nose and down his cheekbones. Ilya had once said it resembled a constellation. Heat crept up his neck remembering that.

He turned off the tap. His reflection looked back at him. The thing about missing someone, he thought, is that it starts before they're gone. It starts the moment you understand that they're going to be. He was already missing Ilya and he was still in the next room.

*Are you sure*, he thought.

His reflection said nothing.

*Are you sure this is the right—*

A soft knock on the door.

The bathroom door, which he hadn't closed properly, opened slightly.

Ilya.

Leaning in the doorframe with his shoulder against it, he looked completely at ease, like he had all the time there was. He looked at Shane in the mirror. Shane looked back at him in the mirror. Neither of them looked away.

"You said," Ilya said. "That you want this to only live in this weekend."

His voice was quiet and even. Shane knew that voice. It was the one Ilya used after he had made up his mind. He looked at Shane with darkened eyes that hadn't left him once.

"Um, yes." Shane said, less with certainty now.

Ilya stared down at him. There was something dangerous in his calm controlled posture, the kind that came from someone who already knew exactly what he was going to do.

"Then," he said, "I intend to make the most of it."

\*\*\*

Ilya crossed the bathroom without hesitation.

Shane recognized the difference immediately. The careful Ilya moved like a man who had already planned three steps ahead and was choosing which one to take. This Ilya moved like a man who had stopped planning. The *I intend to make the most of it* was still in the air between them, said thirty seconds ago in the doorframe, and Shane's nervous system had clocked it before his brain had finished processing the words and had been running ahead of him ever since.

Ilya reached his face. His thumb at Shane's lower lip, the lightest possible contact, barely there, the cruelty of *almost*. His heart thundered in his chest, the familiar reaction it had been having since Helsinki.

Ilya wet his own lip slowly. Watching Shane watch him do it.

Ilya's hand moved to his jaw. The column of his throat. Patiently, like they had all the time in the world, which they didn't, which both of them knew, which was somehow making everything worse and better simultaneously.

Shane's hands found his shirt.

The fabric bunched in his grip and he pulled. There was nothing subtle about that and he didn't care even slightly.

Ilya's mouth found his.

The kiss was nothing like the terrace. The terrace had started careful and building. The awareness of everything outside it, the view, the wedding incoming, the unanswered possibilities. This kiss had none of that. This was the version with the door closed, the decision already made. There was nothing left to be careful about. Shane kissed him back with the whole of it. Ilya made a sound low in his throat that did something catastrophic to Shane's ability to think in sequence.

Ilya walked him back.

The bathroom wall met Shane's shoulders and Ilya's hand moved from his throat to the wall beside his head and Shane felt the shift.

Ilya pulled back just enough. The smallest of the gap.

"Look at me," He said.

Shane looked at him. He didn't have a choice. He hadn't had a choice since Helsinki.

Ilya's pupils were blown wide. The composed exterior was not currently very composed. He looked like a man who had been patient for a finite amount of time and had reached the end of it.

"Open your mouth." Ilya hand slid into his hair. Fingers at the back of his head, and tilted his face to the angle Ilya wanted.

Shane opened his mouth. Ilya made a soft approving sound and kissed him deeper.

"Tongue."

Shane obeyed.

Ilya leaned in and sucked his tongue into his mouth slowly then hungrily. Shane's hands fisted in his shirt and his knees did something unreliable. A small needy sound escaped his mouth.

Ilya pulled back. When they broke apart, Shane's breathing was ragged and nowhere near controlled.

"Good." Ilya said quietly, like it was simply an observation.

Shane's chest was doing several things simultaneously.

"You're demanding, *doctor*," Shane said, teasing in his voice.

Something moved in Ilya's face. Dark and amused and not helping Shane's situation at all.

His fingers came up to Shane's mouth. Two of them, pressing lightly at his lower lip, the question implicit and Shane answered it by opening his mouth wider. He took Ilya's finger and started sucking, slow and torturous, holding Ilya's gaze the entire time. His tongue moved in between Ilya's fingers. His lower jaw moved up and down in smooth agonizing wet strokes, tongue flat against the pad, cheeks hollowing on the pull. He watched Ilya's composure slip another degree.

"Fuck, Shane."

Ilya's free hand found his waist and gripped hard.

"Your mouth feels so good."

His fingers pressed deeper and Shane sucked harder. They stayed like that for a moment that stretched, taut and aware. Then Ilya withdrew his hand and replaced it with his mouth and the kiss broke whatever had been holding Shane upright.

Shane dropped to his knees.

His hands found Ilya's belt. He started undoing it with the precision of a man who had decided what he wanted.

Ilya's hand came to rest in his hair and gripped softly.

Shane looked up at him once before he continued. He saw the dark eyes and the open hunger of it, the jaw set tight like he was holding something back by willpower alone and the willpower was losing. There he was, a man stripped of every careful layer, looking down at Shane like he was something Ilya intended to memorize.

Shane continued and took what he wanted.

His mouth found Ilya's cock immediately, eagerly licking at the precum slick head, swallowing him down. The sound that came from above was sharp and broken and immediately repeated. Shane's hand found his own cock before he'd decided to reach, grip settling, pace building.

He was lightheaded with it, the heat of Ilya's cock on his tongue, his own grip, the open bathroom door and the whole world reduced to this wall and this man and the groan Ilya was making was undoing him. He sucked harder. His head bobbed hungrily. His hand moved faster. The heat in his gut wound tighter and he chased it, he chased it harder, faster and—

Ilya's grip turned brutal.

"Eyes on me."

Shane looked up immediately.

Bad idea.

Ilya was staring down at him like he wanted to consume him. Dark eyes, blown wide. Jaw tight enough to ache. His chest rising and falling with the effort of someone fighting something they were losing. Utterly, completely *undone*.

“You’re close.” Ilya said, panting.

Shane whimpered around him in confirmation.

“No.” Ilya said. Firm, with his demanding doctor’s voice, the one that expected to be listened to. His grip tightened. “Not yet. You don’t come yet.”

Shane screwed his eyes shut. *Is he fucking serious*, he thought, frustrated. He can’t possibly last another second, he can’t—

His hand stilled. His mouth stilled. Apparently his body responded to Ilya’s voice regardless of what his head rationalized. He held himself there, shaking slightly, at the excruciating edge of it, and waited.

“Good boy.” Ilya whispered, his voice husky.

Something in Shane went very quiet and very *pleased* and he was not going to think about what that meant.

“I want to make this last,” Ilya said. “Come here.” as he pulled Shane up back to standing.

Shane’s whole body trembled and his cock was throbbing.

Ilya reached past Shane and turned the shower on. Hot, the knob turned all the way, the bathroom beginning its transformation immediately, steam rising, the mirror starting to blur at the edges, the small frosted window disappearing into fog. The bathroom became something else. Smaller and more intimate. The whole of the world narrowed to this tile, this steam and this dimmed bathroom light.

Ilya turned back to him.

He undressed Shane with attention. Button by button, pushing the shirt off his shoulders and then his mouth was there, at Shane’s collarbone, the curve of his shoulder, trailing down. Each place he uncovered he covered with his mouth first, licking, tasting, like he was cataloguing, like he was learning. Shane’s head fell back against the tile and his hands found Ilya’s hair and he stopped trying to think entirely.

By the time they were both naked under the water, Shane had lost the thread of several things, including time, and any argument he’d been making to himself for the last hour about what this *was* and *wasn’t* and *could* and *couldn’t* be.

The steam was doing something to the air, making it thick and warm and close. Ilya had him pinned against the wet tile and was kissing him like he had all the time he didn't have, like nine hours on a map didn't exist, like there was nothing outside this room worth attending to.

"Turn around," Ilya said against his mouth.

Shane obeyed and turned around.

The tile was warm under his palms. Ilya pressed behind him, his chest against Shane's back, his hard cock nudged between his ass, his mouth at the nape of his neck and then at his ear. The precision nip of his teeth at Shane's earlobe made Shane's fingers spread flat against the tile and tried to grip at something, *anything*.

Ilya's hand moved down and parted the cheeks of his ass. Shane gasps.

Ilya paused. His mouth at Shane's ear. "Is this okay?"

"Yes, *please*," Shane said. A desperate sound escaped his mouth. It's the most honest sound he'd made all day and he'd said some very honest things today.

He heard Ilya exhale a shaky breath. His mouth was back at Shane's neck and his hand was pressing lightly at his soft rim. Shane pressed his forehead to the tile and absolutely lost his mind. His own erection is to the point of pain.

Ilya was thorough.

Shane was losing the ability to hold himself still. His breathing had stopped being something he was managing and become something that was just happening to him.

*One finger. Then—*

Shane gasped loudly.

Ilya's free hand came around his face immediately, two fingers pressing at Shane's lips, and Shane opened his mouth and took them in and sucked the same way he had earlier.

"Such a needy mouth." Ilya breathed into his ear.

*Another finger.*

"Fuck, Ilya—," Shane gasp with Ilya's finger of his mouth.

He felt Ilya smile against his neck.

"Touch yourself." Ilya ordered.

Shane obeyed. He's minutes if not seconds from erupted. Ilya's mid and ring fingers still sitting at his tongue.

The steam had made everything heated and urgent. The world reduced this heat and Ilya's hands and the water came down on their bodies. Shane's own erection was unbearable.

*Montreal and Moscow be damned.* Whatever part of his brain usually formed coherent thoughts had gone away.

Ilya's fingers moved from his mouth to lightly gripped at his collarbone.

"I'm—Ilya, I'm close," Shane managed.

"Mm." Ilya's mouth at his ear. "Interesting."

Ilya's finger inside him presses deeper, curls up and brushes at the edge of his prostate.

Shane felt the jolt up to his spine, he made a sound of genuine frustration. His cock throbbed red and angry, being denied release.

"Wanna play something?" Ilya said.

Shane's hand stilled. "Don't."

"Truth or dare."

"Ilya—"

"I'll start," Ilya said. Like Shane had agreed. Like this was settled. "I dare you not to *come*."

A beat.

"Whoever lasts longest wins." He continued.

Shane stood there under the water with Ilya's fingers pressed inside him and his own hand on himself and the most inconvenient competitive instinct he'd ever possessed lighting up his entire nervous system. He does *competitive* for a living, after all.

"Fine," he said between gasps.

Ilya let out a small laugh. His voice low and real and Shane felt it against his neck. He felt it everywhere.

"Bed," Ilya said. "Now."

Shane was not going to survive this.

\*\*\*

The bedroom was cooler. The contrast of it—the air on his skin after the steam—made everything sharper. Shane registered the room with unusual clarity. His senses had been running at a heightened frequency for the last thirty minutes. The terrace light, still gold. The two beds. The half-packed suitcase opened on the far one.

He tried not to look at the suitcase.

Ilya had him on the bed before he could think about it. On his back, the sheets beneath him. Ilya flipped him on his stomach and suddenly Ilya's weight settled behind him. He can feel Ilya's mouth trailing his spine down to his ass. He spread open Shane's legs and lowered himself down to Shane's opening.

*One languid lick.*

Shane shuddered.

*Then another.*

Shane gripped the sheets. He found a pillow and muffled his moan.

"Are you going to come now, Shane?" Ilya said against the small of his back, the voice doing what it did, insufferably calm given the circumstances.

"No." Shane said into the pillow. With complete determination.

He felt Ilya smile. "No?"

"No."

"Interesting," Ilya said again. "What about—"

Ilya lowered himself again and pressed his tongue inside him.

Shane's determination held. Barely by a thread. His knuckles were white on the sheets and his breathing was happening without his cooperation and he was losing his absolute mind.

Ilya's own composure cracked by the minute. He kneeled up and Shane felt his hardened cock pressed between his ass.

"I'm going to fuck you now." Ilya sounded wrecked.

*"Fucking finally,"* Shane's attempt at sounded annoyed landed somewhere closer to desperate.

"Bossy. Patience, Shane."

Ilya pressed himself against Shane's opening. Slick wet, hard and ready. Ilya went slow. Agonizingly slow, like he was making a point about patience that Shane was in no position to argue with. Shane felt every inch of it and his body responded to every inch with moans and whine.

The first thrust pulled a sound out of Shane that he didn't try to muffle. The rhythm built fast, Ilya's hips snapping forward with a force that made Shane's whole body jolt, his hands scrabbling for grip on the sheets, the sounds he was making were completely broken and muffled by the pillow.

Ilya's hands found his hips. His grip is rough and steady. He pulled Shane back to meet the next thrust and Shane felt the air leave him completely.

Ilya thrust harder. Each time.

Shane held on.

"Shane," Ilya said, and the composure was essentially gone now, just the wrecked voice left in him. "You might actually win this."

Shane said something into the pillow that was not words.

"You're killing me," Ilya said between the thrust and the groan. "You know that?" Ilya breathed.

Shane said nothing. Shane was *gone*.

"Come here. Let me see your face," Ilya said urgently. "When I lose. At least I want to see those freckles."

Shane's focus snapped back and felt the words struck in his chest like something physical. Separate from everything else happening to his body, distinct from all of it, just the full force of *I want to see those freckles* arriving somewhere deep behind his sternum.

Ilya moved.

The shift happened before Shane caught up. Ilya moving them, rearranging their world, Shane ending up on his side with Ilya behind him and the new angle settled all at once. Ilya's mouth was at his shoulder, his nipple, his side ribcage, trailing his body, while his hip kept thrusting and snapping forward. Shane looked at the ceiling and felt each point of contact like something being marked. Ilya moved with complete attention and every measured thing about him undone.

Shane turned his head.

Their eyes met.

Shane didn't know when the dare had stopped being the point. Somewhere between the shower and here, somewhere between Ilya's mouth and the sheets and Ilya looking at him like this. The dare existed somewhere in the background. What was left was Ilya's eyes, dark and not looking anywhere else. Shane's chest cracked open quietly in the middle of everything and he let it.

They held each other's gaze between each desperate thrust. Shane was seconds from coming apart.

"Let me," Ilya said. His hand reached Shane's cock from behind. "I've got you."

Shane stopped thinking entirely.

He can feel the dare coming to an end when Ilya's hand wrapped around him and starts stroking. Ilya looked at him with the weight of lust and adoration. And underneath all of that, Shane registered *the look*. The one with nothing between Ilya and the wanting. The one that said: *you're mine*.

Shane held that look. He held it the same way he'd held the dare. So stubbornly, so completely, with no part of himself left behind. Shane's chest heaving, Ilya's breath coming in short uneven pulls against Shane's shoulder and his throat.

"Now, Shane," Ilya said. The voice with no composure left in it. "Now—"

Shane came so hard his vision went blank and he stopped being able to think. It ripped through him in waves, hips jerking up off the sheets, his cock spilling hot thick pulses against Ilya's hand. His ass clenching tight around Ilya's cock, dragging him down with him. He heard Ilya follow, felt the full-body shudder of him, the sharp bitten-off sound, hips slamming forward one final time and staying there, Shane's name torn out of his throat low and broken.

"Shane—"

And *that* sound undid him.

Shane's name in Ilya's voice. The only thing that was left when everything else dissolved.

He had not known he was hungry for it.

That was the thing about certain kinds of wanting. They didn't make themselves known until something arrived that fit the shape of them, and then the shape was suddenly everywhere, and you realized it had always been everywhere. At last, you understood that you had been building your entire life around an absence you couldn't see.

Shane lay there in the aftermath of it thinking:

*That's it. That's the thing I'm not going to recover from. Not the leaving or the distance.*

*That.*

\*\*\*

Ilya moved first and Shane noticed. In the blurred aftermath of it. He shifted slowly. The warmth beside him disappeared, replaced by the sound of Ilya moving around the room with the unmistakable presence of someone who had made a decision and was following through.

Shane lay there in the aftermath.

He heard the bathroom door open. Water ran briefly and a moment later, Ilya came back.

"Here," Ilya said as he pressed the warm towel to his ass and thighs.

Shane let him.

He lay there and let Ilya clean him. He looked at the ceiling and felt the drop begin its arrival.

It came in increments and his mind slowly registering back the situation he's in. The suitcase on the far bed. The afternoon light. The clock on the nightstand that Shane did not look at but was aware of.

The towel. Ilya's hands. Both warm.

"Drink some water," Ilya said as he handed him a glass.

Shane sat up enough to take the glass. Drank it then put it on the nightstand. Lay back down.

Ilya lay beside him. Shane looked at the ceiling and felt the drop continue its arrival and did not try to step over it this time.

He let it come.

Ilya's hand found his.

It wasn't the demanding grip from before or the hand in his hair or any of the versions Shane had already catalogued. It settled over his instead, certain, like it belonged there.

Shane looked at the ceiling.

The towel had been warm.

Shane noticed everything Ilya did and had been recognizing something.

He had been recognizing the language of someone who took care of people as naturally as breathing, who showed up before being asked, who ran the towel under warm water first, and he had been recognizing it because he spoke this language. Had been speaking it his whole life. To everyone that had mattered. To every room he'd walked into.

He had just never had it spoken *back* to him.

The understanding, arriving quietly in the aftermath, that this was what he had been doing for other people for as long as he could remember without ever receiving it and without ever knowing he wasn't receiving it. Because you cannot notice the shape of something you have never seen the outside of.

He had not known what it felt like from the other side and he knew now. He was going to have to figure out what to do with the knowing.

"Hey," Ilya said quietly.

Shane turned his head and looked at him.

Ilya was looking back with his soft composure.

"You okay?" Ilya asked.

Shane looked at him for a beat longer.

“Getting there,” Shane said.

Ilya stared at him for a moment. Then he nodded, and didn’t push.

Shane looked back at the ceiling.

The drop sat in his chest. Bittersweet, the quiet sadness of watching something good finish, not because it went wrong but because it went very right. And right things ended too and the ending was the cost of the having.

It had been *very good*.

It had been the best forty-eight hours of his life

Also the worst.

He let both be true.

“Ilya,” Shane said.

“Mm.”

Shane didn’t say anything for a moment.

“The restaurant,” He said finally. “In the old city. The one you mentioned.”

A pause.

“I would have gone,” Shane said. “I know you just booked your ticket and there’s not enough time now, but I think I would have wanted to go.”

Ilya was quiet for a moment. His gaze never leaving Shane’s. His gaze didn’t move and he didn’t fill the silence. He didn’t make it easier or harder and Shane lay there and felt the expression land where it always landed and looked at the ceiling instead.

“But that’s okay,” Shane continued. “It’s better this way,”

*It’s easier this way, he thought. An ending I can see coming is an ending I can survive.*

Shane looked at the ceiling.

They lay there.

The afternoon light moved slowly on the wall. The suitcase on the far bed. The clock is ticking. The Adriatic sea outside the window doing its ancient indifferent thing, entirely unbothered by what had just happened in this room and what it had cost and what it had given and what it was about to become.

\*\*\*

Shane left the room at half past five.

It wasn't because he was ready. The clock on the nightstand said what it said. The reception started at six. There were things that needed doing, and Shane was still the best man, regardless of everything that had happened in the last hour.

Ilya was in the shower while he put on the suit. The monotone black one, the correct one for evening reception, the one that had been hanging on the back of the door since Friday. He picked up the four speeches from the nightstand.

He looked at them for a moment.

He put them in his jacket pocket.

He did not look at Ilya's suitcase on the way out.

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He found Svetlana at the edge of the venue, her reception dress on. Crisp white mini dress with a sheer tulle halter that crosses at the neck, knotting a bow on her nape. Her hair up, gold earrings catching the light, a glass of something in her hand. She had the expression of someone who had just gotten married and was still catching up to the reality of it.

She saw him and her face lit up, she crossed to him before he'd finished crossing to her.

"Shane."

"Hey," he said. "You look amazing. Congratulations again, by the way," He paused "You both are perfect for each other." He smiled.

"Thank you, Shane," She hugged him with both arms. "That meant a lot coming from you," Then she pulled back and looked at him with the perceptive eyes and her warm expression.

"How does it feel," Shane continued. "Being Svetlana Hunt?"

She pointed at him immediately. "Vetrova-Hunt."

"Right. Sorry," Shane corrected himself.

She laughed with her bright uncomplicated laugh. Then she looked at her glass and turned it slowly and the laugh settled into something softer, more honest.

"It's strange," she said. "Not *bad* strange. Just—" she paused, finding it. "Six months ago I did not know Rhys Hunt existed. Six months ago I was in Moscow having a completely ordinary life." She looked up. "And now I am in Dubrovnik and I am married and my whole life is—" she made a gesture that encompassed all of it. "This. Completely different. Everything is different. Better."

"I know, pretty crazy. It happened so fast." Shane said.

“Everyone said so,” Svetlana said. “My mother. My colleagues. Even Ilyusha—” she stopped briefly, the name sat between them, and neither of them acknowledged it. “Everyone said *six months is too fast, you don’t know him, what are you doing.*” She looked at her glass. “And maybe they were right. Maybe it is fast. Maybe I am crazy.”

A pause.

“But,” She said.

“But?” Shane said.

“When you know,” Svetlana said simply. “You know.”

“I think people believe,” She continued. “That the time is like a proof or something. That the longer you are with someone the more certain you can be. That knowing takes.. accumulation.” A pause. “But I don’t think that’s true. I think you can be with someone for years and never quite *arrive*. And you can meet someone and arrive in the first conversation.” She looked at the open doors. “I have had both. The years that didn’t arrive and the conversation that did.”

Shane looked at her.

“The years,” Svetlana said. “Were not wasted. But they were not.. *this.*”

She said it as she always did. The truth, stated plainly. True things deserved nothing less.

He knew she was talking about Ilya.

Shane looked at Svetlana Vetrova-Hunt, who six months ago had been in Moscow having a completely ordinary life and had walked into something that had rearranged everything and had not run from the rearranging. Who had looked at something impossible—the timing, the speed, the everyone-saying-six-months-is-too-fast—and had decided to said *fuck it*.

“You’re not crazy.” Shane said.

Svetlana looked at him with her perceptive eyes. Shane got her full attention.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think I am.”

She smiled at him and squeezed his arm once, brief and real.

“Go check your playlist, Shane,” she said. “I’m going to go find my husband.”

She said the last word like someone saying something for the first time, already knowing she meant to say it for the rest of her life.

Shane watched her go.

He stood there for a moment in the warm assembling noise of the reception preparation, the staff moving through it, the flowers everywhere, the salt summer air through the open doors,

the Adriatic sea doing its indifferent blue thing.

*When you know, you know.*

\*\*\*

The reception, partly, was Shane's doing, which everyone knew because the playlist was too good for it not to be.

He had spent three weeks on it. Not the speeches—the speeches had been six months in the making—but the playlist had taken three weeks of complete, focused pleasure. Shane made playlists the same way other people curated art. The focused pleasure of adding and reordering and finding the exact sequence that made the whole thing feel inevitable.

He had not told anyone it was three weeks.

The point was that the reception was warm and loud and the music was exactly right and people were dancing and the flowers—the ones he and Ilya had carried through limestone streets at seven in the morning—were everywhere, white and beautiful and doing what they were supposed to do. Rhys was dancing with Svetlana in the center of it all. He had the expression of a man who could not believe his luck and had the best time of his life.

Shane stood at the edge of it.

He was fine. And this time, he actually meant it.

He was holding a drink he hadn't tasted yet and he was fine. The armor was on. The expression was right. He was the best man at the reception party looking warm, present, and completely reliable. And he was scanning the room.

He had been scanning the room since he arrived.

He told himself this was best man duties. Making sure everything was running correctly, the drinks being circulated, the music transitioning properly, the guests finding each other and the tables and the warmth of a reception that had been planned well and was executing accordingly.

He was absolutely looking for Ilya.

The playlist shifted. A new song arrived, the one he had added at two in the morning a week ago, when the playlist had been almost finished and he had found this one and had known, immediately, that it belonged in the middle of the reception when the room was warm and full and the dancing had started. That point in the night when a party turned into a memory everyone will remember.

12 to 12 by sombr played.

 *In a room full of people, I look for you.*

Shane looked at his drink.

♪♪ *Would you avoid me or would you look for me too?*

He looked up.

Ilya was across the room.

He wasn't sure how long Ilya had been there. Long enough that he was holding a drink and had found a position with a wall behind him and a full view of the room.

He was looking at Shane. Already looking, like he had been looking since before Shane looked up.

Shane looked back at him.

The room moved around them. People dancing, talking, the warmth of the reception enveloping him, the music continuing.

♪♪ *Was it always in your plan to leave eventually*

Shane and Ilya looked at each other across the room.

Ilya started walking toward Shane. His gaze not leaving Shane's for a single step.

Shane stood still.

♪♪ *Because to me there's no one else that could make sense to me*

Shane cursed under his breath and thought *this fucking song, I did this to myself.*

Ilya arrived.

He stopped in front of Shane.

"Hi," Shane said.

♪♪ *Tell me, is our story through?*

"Hi," Ilya said.

♪♪ *Or do our hearts still beat in tune?*

A beat.

The reception warm around them. Someone laughing somewhere. The music played.

"You look nice." Shane said.

He meant it. Ilya is wearing a black pinstripe suit. Dark shirt underneath, collar open. Shane had seen Ilya in a towel. In a linen shirt. In wet swim shorts in a pool. This somehow had a worse impact on him.

Ilya looked at him for a moment. His gaze moved down, taking its time and then back up, arrived finally at Shane's face.

The weight of Ilya's gaze, and Shane stood in it. He had gotten better at standing in Ilya's attention over the course of the weekend. He was not sure this was going to be a useful skill going forward.

"You too." Ilya said.

They stood there.

The room moved around them and the music played, and neither of them said anything. They were two people who had finally said the things that mattered and now standing in the strange, quiet aftermath of it.

Shane thought *There's no way I can forget this.*

The song moved toward its ending. The last line.

 *Tell me, is our story through? Or do our hearts still beat in tune?*

They looked at each other and neither of them looked away.

\*\*\*

A glass clinked.

The sound cut through the warm noise of the reception. That sound had only one meaning and everyone knew it. Speeches time. The room began to orient itself. The MC moving toward the microphone and the warm expectant attention of a room turning toward the front.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the MC said. "We'll now hear from the best man, Shane Hollander."

The crowd cheered. Shane looked at Ilya and handed over his drink. Ilya didn't say anything. He took the glass and their fingers touched briefly in the transfer. Shane turned and walked toward the reception stage.

The room slowed.

He cleared his throat once. Adjusted the mic, which did not need adjusting. He set the small folded paper in front of him on the standing table. He had four speeches ready for this exact moment.

"Good evening." He started.

"For those of you who don't know me, I'm Shane. I've known Rhys since we were eight years old, which means I have, at minimum, two decades of stories I have been instructed not to tell tonight,"

Light laughter filled the room. Rhys covered his face briefly. Sveta laughed.

“I had a speech prepared,” A beat. “Well, four actually, I wrote it months ago,”

He glanced at the folded paper. The room silenced.

“But it turns out I had more to say than I thought.”

The room settled in.

“Six months ago, I got a phone call. It was two in the morning, which would explain why I almost ignored it,”

Some people laughed.

“I picked up and the first thing Rhys said was, *Shane, something just happened to me, I think I’m in love.*”

Some people let out an *aww* sound from the crowd.

“Now, I have heard my best friend say this sentence many times. I have heard it about women, about restaurants, and once I think he even said it about a brand of running shoe,”

Rhys, from his seat shouting “*Hey! It was a good shoe!*”

More laughs.

“But this time, and I remember this exactly, because I was basically half asleep then went fully awake when I realized that I have never in my life heard him *sound* like that,”

Shane paused. The room was very quiet now. Somewhere outside, a soft summer air moved. The sound of the old city faintly in the background.

“I want to say something about Rhys. He is not a man who *almost*. He doesn’t *almost* ask. He doesn’t *almost* stay. He doesn’t *almost* reach. He just.. does,”

He paused.

“And I think about that a lot,”

The crowd was watching him intently now.

“I have spent a lot of my life being told that the worst thing in the world is to lose something good. That the tragedy is always the loss,”

“And, I think I had that wrong,”

“I think the worst thing is to be the person who *almost*. Almost asked. Almost stayed. Almost reached. The worst thing is the un-lived thing. The version of your life you didn’t dare have. And Rhys, you’re a testament to what happens when someone decides not to almost, ”

He paused. Somewhere in the crowd, Ilya was watching him steadily now. A small wave of warmth through the room.

Shane took a breath. Shifted slightly.

“I want to say something about Sveta,”

He found her in the crowd. Sveta pressed a hand briefly to her mouth. Smiled slightly, softly, the real one.

“Sveta is the most lovingly direct and straightforward person I’ve ever met. She asks the question she actually wants to know the answer to. She doesn’t soften the edges. She doesn’t manage you. She tells you what she thinks, and she lets you respond,”

“And Rhys has spent his whole life being managed.”

A light laugh from the crowd.

“He’s a charming guy. People manage charming guys, because they like keeping them around.”

More laugh, Rhys protests with more “*Hey!*” from his seat.

“But Sveta, Sveta doesn’t manage him,”

A beat.

“She just sees him. Asks him things. Tells him when he’s wrong. You can see it work on him,”

A real laugh filled the room. People had noticed. They knew it was true.

Shane waited for it to settle. He looked at Ilya, their eyes met and Shane saw him smiling. The mic was steady in his hand.

“Here’s the thing I’ve been thinking about,”

“I have known Rhys for twenty years and I’m still finding new things about him,”

A beat.

“Most of them only show up around Sveta,”

“And they were parts of him I’d never seen,”

“It’s almost like they were waiting for someone specific,”

Shane was looking at Ilya now. Not at the room. At Ilya.

“She didn’t make him a different person,”

“She made him someone he could actually *be*.”

The room was very still. Shane looked down as if his brain just caught up on what came out of his mouth. Somewhere in the second row a woman exhaled audibly. The room held its breath.

Shane did not look up. Did not look at Ilya, did not look at Rhys, did not look at anything except at his shoes. He had said that last line and felt it arrive in his own chest like something that had been true for a while and had been waiting for him to say it out loud to understand that it was.

He waited exactly one beat. Then, gently, continuing.

“So,” He finally looked up and lifted his glass. The room moved with him, glasses rising.

“To Sveta. Welcome to the family. We’ve been waiting for you,”

The room echoed *to Sveta*.

“And to Rhys. Don’t screw it up.”

The room echoed again and laughed. Glasses raised and clinked. Someone from Rhys’s family let out a whistle. Sveta wiped a droplet of tear under one eye with the side of her finger like an elegant lady she is.

The room was still moving with the toast when Shane stepped back from the stage. He looked for Ilya immediately. He scanned the room, the tables, the dancing area, the bar, the edges.

The pinstripe suit.

There.

At the edge of the room. Moving toward the terrace doors. His empty glasses set down on a table as he passed it and then the doors and then, gone. Outside, into the dark.

Shane handed his microphone to whoever was nearest.

He didn’t say anything to anyone.

He followed.

\*\*\*

The terrace was empty.

Everyone was still inside the reception. Out here there was just the dark and the Adriatic below it and the old city lit amber in the distance. Ilya at the balustrade looking at the water.

Shane crossed to him.

He didn't announce himself and Ilya didn't turn. He just stepped aside to make room at the railing, a small shift of someone who had known Shane was coming. They stood there side by side and facing the Adriatic, close, not touching.

The water below. The dark surrounding them. The old city. Neither of them said anything for a moment.

"That was a good speech." Ilya broke the silence between them.

"I didn't prepare it." Shane said.

"I know," Ilya said. "That's why it was good."

Shane looked at the water.

"I meant it," he said. "All of it."

"I know," Ilya said again. The same two words. Different weights.

The music from inside muffled by the doors and the dark. The water below doing its ancient indifferent thing.

"I don't regret it," Shane said. "This weekend. Any of it."

Ilya was quiet for a moment.

"No," he said. "Neither do I."

"The bar," Shane said. "In Helsinki."

"That was fun,"

"The terrace."

"Right."

"The flowers." Shane almost smiled. "The very badly positioned wall."

Something moved in Ilya's expression. The bittersweet smile. "The wall was badly positioned," he said. "I stand by this."

"Don't blame the wall. You're the one who walked into it twice." Shane said. Amused.

"I told you it moved," Ilya said.

"The wall has always been there, Ilya." Shane said.

"Sure."

Shane looked at the water. The smile still there, the warmth of it, and underneath the warmth, *the drop*. The bittersweet weight of something that had been very good and was ending.

“I don’t know how to do this,” Shane said quietly. The honest version. “The— goodbye part,”

“No,” Ilya said. “I don’t think there is a guideline for this part.”

“That’s not helpful,” Shane said.

“No,” Ilya agreed. “It isn’t.”

They stood there.

The Adriatic below them and the surrounding dark. The amber of the old city lit up the night.

“It meant something,” Shane said. “I need you to know that. Whatever this was, forty-eight hours and some, it meant something.”

Ilya turned to look at him.

Shane looked back.

He noticed the expression that had been underneath everything all weekend, the one Shane had caught in flashes since Helsinki. It was there now, completely. Ilya wasn't managing it or hiding behind anything. He was simply looking at him.

“I have been keeping people at a specific distance,” Ilya finally said. “For a very long time. Since I was young.” He looked at the water. “I thought it was just— how I was. The way I was built.”

Shane said nothing. He was listening intently.

“I think you are the first person,” Ilya said. “In a very long time. Who I did not want to keep at a distance.”

Shane looked at him.

“Ilya—”

“I’m not saying this to make it harder,” Ilya said. “I know it makes it harder. I’m sorry but I need to say this,”

Ilya was quiet for a moment before he continued.

“Shane, I am *present*,” Ilya said. “With you. For the first time in— I don’t know how long. I was not reaching for the distance. I was just—” He stopped. The Russian words arriving at the edge of the English. “There. Completely there. I have not been completely there with anyone in years.”

“You were there with Sveta,” Shane said carefully. Not a challenge.

“Is not the same,” Ilya said.

Shane was quiet. His gaze never leaving Ilya’s.

“From the bar,” Ilya said. “In Helsinki. From the beginning.”

Ilya looked at him.

Shane said nothing. He had words for most things, had four drafted versions of words, had spent his entire adult life being prepared with words and he had none right now. Not because the situation didn’t deserve them. Because it deserved more than he had.

But deep down, Shane recognizes this. He knew it like you knew your own handwriting, not by studying it, just by the fact that it looked like yours. Ilya’s version of distance was a different shape than his own but they had been built for the same reason, against the same condition, and Shane had recognized it without knowing what he was recognizing.

They stood there. The Adriatic below them. The music inside. The dark around them and neither of them looking at anything except each other.

“I don’t know what to do with that,” Shane said. “What you just said.”

“You don’t have to do anything with it,” Ilya said. “That’s not why I said it.”

“Then why,” Shane said again.

Ilya looked at him for a long moment.

“Because,” He started. “You just stood at a stage, with a microphone tonight and said true things in front of a room full of people without preparing them first.” A pause. “The least I can do is say one true thing back.”

Shane looked at him. The expression on Ilya’s face had nothing left to protect itself with.

“You did that,” Ilya said. “The *presence*. You made that possible for me.” He said it with such weight, it sounded like the truest things. “I want you to know that before I go.”

Shane said nothing for a moment.

“I’m going to miss you,” Shane’s other honest words escaped his mouth. “So much. I feel sick thinking about it,”

Shane took a step closer to Ilya.

Ilya held his gaze.

“At first,” he said. “But it will get better. Then *it will pass*,”

Ilya’s hand reached his face. Brushed his thumb against the scattered pattern of Shane’s freckles.

Shane stood there and the doubt started creeping in his thought, *why are you letting him go. What are you doing?* He can feel the armor and the doubt fighting in real time and left him utterly wordless.

“Shane, as much as this is killing me, I’m not going to push you,” Ilya said. “I know what it looks like when someone pushes. I know what it does.” He paused. Ilya’s thumb is still moving, brushing Shane’s jaw. “I was the person who couldn’t be pushed. For years. And the people who tried— they didn’t get through and I just got better with the distance. Every time someone pushed I built another wall.”

He looked at Shane directly.

“I’ve been where you are,” he said. “I know what it feels like to have someone required you to be somewhere you’re not *yet*.” A pause. “It doesn’t end well. For either person.”

“Ilya—”

“So I’m not going to do that,” Ilya said. “You don’t have to be ready. You don’t have to be anything. I’m just— I wanted you to know that when you are ready, if you are, I’m not going to be difficult to find.” The thumb, one last time, grazing across his cheek.

“I don’t move around very much. You’ll find me.” Ilya winked.

Shane let out a broken, devastated laugh.

“Come here.” Shane said.

Ilya closes the gap between them.

The kiss was nothing like anything that had come before

The terrace had been the *fuck-it* moment, urgent, desperate, the armor finally failing. The shower had been the heat and the *dare* and the combustion of forty-eight hours arriving all at once.

This was different.

This was slow. Careful in the way that was not distant, every move paid full attention, and didn’t want to miss anything. Ilya’s hand at Shane’s jaw, tilting, the same way he had in the bathroom but gentler now, and Shane’s hands finding the lapels of the suit and holding, anchoring. Being here for as long as here lasted.

Ilya kissed him like he was memorizing something.

Shane let himself be memorized.

Ilya made a sound against his mouth. The sound of someone who was devastated and choosing to be present anyway, choosing to be here for the full length of the ending rather than stepping back from it.

Shane felt it struck clean at his core.

He held on.

Ilya pulled back slightly. His forehead against Shane's. Both of them still close, the space between them so small it was almost not space.

"Shane," Ilya said quietly, still panting.

"Ilya," Shane said his name back, his breathing not even.

They stood there. Foreheads together. Breathing. Savoring the last moment they could breathe the same air.

"*Vesnushki*," Ilya said quietly, almost to himself. Just like he'd said it the first time, like it escaped his mouth because he couldn't help it.

Shane closed his eyes, took a long exhaled breath.

Above them the sky had filled itself with stars. The Mediterranean summer excess of them, the density that existed nowhere near Montreal or Moscow, the sky that made the word *constellation* feel earned. They were up there, the old patterns, the ones people had been looking at from this coastline for centuries. The constellations looked down at the terrace and the two people on it and the Adriatic below them with the complete impartiality of things that had been there before and would be there long after.

The constellations were watching them.

Shane pulled back.

He had not known, before this moment, that there was a version of strength that felt exactly like loss. That doing the hard thing and losing something could feel identical from the inside and it arrives with the same weight.

"Take care of yourself," Ilya finally said.

"You too," Shane said.

Ilya nodded.

He pushed off the railing and started walking toward the hotel.

Shane watched him go.

The pinstripe suit, the measured steps, the effortless certainty of Ilya moving through a space.

At the corner Ilya stopped and turned.

Just half his profile, caught for one second as he stopped and turned. Amber light from the old city behind him. Stars overhead. The Adriatic below them. Eight hundred years of Dubrovnik holding its breath around a man in a pinstripe suit looking back at Shane from a corner in the dark.

Shane didn't move.

The look lasted exactly as long as it needed to.

Then Ilya turned back and went around the corner and was *gone*. Shane stood at the railing with the drop in his chest and the stars overhead and the music inside. He felt the weight of having watched the best thing that had happened to him in years walk around a corner and not followed.

He thought: *the way is findable*.

He thought: *and so is he*.

He closed his eyes and breathed. He felt the twist in his chest as he started to realize something.

The version of you that only existed in someone else's presence simply had nowhere to go once they were *gone*.

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## Chapter End Notes

I know this weekend keeps making things harder for them. I know. One after another and it just keeps going. But here's what I want you to know: none of it is random or written just for the sake of a cliffhanger (although it's been fun lol). Everything this trip has thrown at them has also been *making* them, so the complications are doing something. I need them to keep hitting the wall to realize there's a wall to begin with. And just like Ilya said, *it's a very aggressive wall*. We'll get there, I promise 😊

That said, the remaining chapters of this part are going to be released together, because they deserve to land as one thing and I want to make sure they do. It might take me a little while to get there though. Partly because I want to get it right, partly because my dissy exists and is, unfortunately, also due. (*scream in agony*)

Lastly, this story is nothing without my muse. Here's a bunch of them:

### ***Theme Moodboard:***

[Anne Carson, \*Eros the Bittersweet\*](#).

*"A central aspect of the ancient Greek understanding of Eros—particularly in philosophy—is that it is defined by a lack, want, or desire for that which is missing"*

[Susan Sontag, journal entries on H.](#)

*"To be lonely with another person is a torture I cannot bear."*

**Maggie Nelson, Bluets.**

*"We want to be held and we want to be left alone—simultaneously, and with equal desperation."*

**Amanda Brown, You can't say the wrong thing to the right person**

*"It's fascinating how we all crave to be understood, yet are so quick to place others and ourselves into tidy little categories. It makes the world easier to digest, but people aren't meant to be easily digested for all to enjoy. We're not meant to be boxed or branded. We're meant to be known in all of our contradictions and complexity."*

***Playlist Moodboard***

**Bon Iver — Skinny Love**

*"And now all your love is wasted.  
And then who the hell was I?  
And I'm breaking at the breaches.  
And at the end of all your lines."*

**Cigarettes After Sex — Apocalypse**

*"Your lips, my lips, Apocalypse.  
"Come out and haunt me, I know you want me."*

**Hozier — From Eden**

*"Honey, you're familiar like my mirror years ago.  
Idealism sits in prison, chivalry fell on its sword"*

**Taylor Swift — The 1**

*"And if my wishes came true.  
It would've been you.  
In my defense, I have none."  
"For never leaving well enough alone.  
But it would've been fun.  
If you would've been the one."*

# Chapter 7: Eight Hundred Years

## Chapter Summary

***Previously on Dare You Twice:*** Shane said *of course, you should go* and meant it (or did he really?). He told Rhys the truth that he kept for twenty years. Ilya said *I intend to make the most of it*, and they played one dare game. The reception happened. The speech happened. And then Ilya was gone. Shane stood at the railing and felt the version of himself that only existed around Ilya had nowhere left to go.

## Chapter Notes

I know I said I'd drop the last two chapters in tandem, but apparently the boys had other ideas. I was outlining Chapter 8—it was supposed to be an epilogue type short conclusion—but I got carried away, and now it's a full blown 6-act chapter, and no matter how much trimming I did, some scenes really persisted to stay. So yeah, we're back to single chapter drop in the meantime, yay!

Also, a lot of you are (lovingly) questioning why Shane's actions did not match his speech at the previous chapter—and I want to ask you something back: *have you ever done the opposite of what your heart wanted because you thought you knew better?* Because you built something that worked, called it safety, and couldn't bring yourself to dismantle it even when part of you was desperate to? That's our Shane 😊 He knows but he can't unlearn a whole architecture of control just because someone walks around a corner. (*But I don't know, maybe he will?*)

*PS: Some of the logistics in these scenes are questionable but I need it for the plot, so don't come after me.*

*PPS: OH, and this is a dual POV chapter. Enjoy!*

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

The reception kept going without Shane.

He could hear it from the corridor. The music, still exactly right, still the playlist he'd spent three weeks on, now playing for a room he left. He stood in the hallway outside the ballroom with his hands in his jacket pockets and listened to a few song changes and told himself he was going back in. He was the best man after all and he had duties. He had delivered the speech and had done the thing and the night wasn't finished and he was—

He was not going back in.

He walked to the room instead.

\*\*\*

The room was exactly as Ilya had left it.

The bed made, the suitcase and the toiletry bag gone. The surface of the bed where the suitcase had been was just a surface. Just the white duvet with the shallow impression where the suitcase had sat, the fabric not quite settled back, the ghost of it.

Shane stood in the doorway for a moment.

The room was exactly as Ilya had left it *and Ilya was not in it.*

He dragged a long exhale and went in.

He sat on the edge of his own bed—the one Ilya had slipped into beside him yesterday with no hesitation—and looked at the room and felt it looking back, holding the shape of its own emptiness. The curtains were half-open. The terrace door was closed. The Adriatic sea was out there. The silence was deafening.

He was fine.

He was—

*What am I doing here,* he thought. He wasn't going to sleep.

He knew this within approximately four minutes of lying down, staring at the ceiling, still fully dressed, jacket suit still on. The ceiling gave him nothing back and he just stared at it. The music from the reception filtered up through the building, muffled and warm. He just lay there and felt the weight of a room that had been two people and was now one.

He got up and sat in the chair by the window.

He looked at the terrace door.

He thought, *no, don't.*

*I don't recover well,* he had said. Standing in this room, four hours ago, with Ilya's suitcase open on the bed and the afternoon light fell across the floor. *When it's something I actually wanted. When I let myself want something and it goes wrong, I just stop. Everything stops.*

He had meant it when he said it and still meant it.

He sat there and the silence was deafening.

The music downstairs changed. Something slower. Someone must be dancing.

His mind starts wandering to places.

*How the fuck did I ended up here and lose the absolute control of the situation.*

The thing about control was that it worked. He needed to start there. He needed to be precise about this because he can feel the spiral coming. And the spiral was going to try to convince him that control had never worked and he needed to correct it that *it worked*. The four speeches worked. The playlist worked. Being fine his whole life worked. All that was the result of control and control worked.

*Has it?*

He was lying on a hotel bed and it smelled faintly of Ilya. The reception was still going somewhere and Shane had not been able to stay at it because Ilya had gone around a corner and he did *nothing*. He doesn't even fully understand why he did nothing. It's almost like he'd been held hostage by this invisible cage restraining him from *himself*. The version of himself that would have run and followed. That version had been right there, but the cage had been there too.

And the cage was older.

He put his face in his hands.

*Has control been my prison?*

The question arrived fully formed and delivered. The weight of a true thing that has been waiting in a room you haven't opened and arrives the moment you stop moving long enough for it to catch up.

It had finally caught up.

*Control has been my prison.*

He sat there with it.

He had built the cage and the prison himself. He had been both the architect and the occupant and had looked at what he had built and called it *mine*, called it *safe*, called it *this is how I am*.

The thing was—and he needed to be precise about this too—that the cage had felt like *protection*. That was the lie that made the system work. You didn't feel the bars when you were the one who put them there. You felt *prepared*. You felt *ready*. You felt like an armored prepared man with four speeches and a coffee shop spreadsheet and a playlist for every occasion who was never once caught without a plan.

Because if you had a plan, you couldn't be ambushed. If you decided that you were fine, nothing could make you *not-fine*. If you kept the distance at a managed length, nobody could close it without your permission. This is what safety meant.

And the cruelest part was that he had believed it. He had tricked himself so completely and so early that it felt like the truth. Because the alternative is to answer a question he had never let himself finish asking, *who's going to keep you safe*. And he already knew the answer.

Nobody.

Nobody was coming to save him.

So he had become the answer himself and had to believe that is *enough*.

He had worn his armor and built control over everything and called it safety. Never once realized that control was what you did when you didn't have anyone you trusted enough to put the armor down for.

He sat in the chair by the window and felt the full weight of that understanding arrive and did not step over it.

He was so tired of stepping over things.

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*"Hi, this is Ilya. I don't listen to voicemail. Please text."*

Shane sat there with the phone against his ear and the beep and the silence of a voicemail box that was never going to be checked by the person it belonged to.

He hung up.

He checked the time. Boarding time. Ilya's phone must be in airplane mode, because Ilya was apparently the kind of person who put his phone in airplane mode immediately, which Shane had not known and was now unreasonably annoyed about.

Underneath the annoyance was the understanding that there were approximately ten thousand things he didn't know about this man.

He intended to find out all of them.

He grabbed his passport.

\*\*\*

He was halfway down the corridor before he fully realized what he's about to do, which was, he was finding, just how decisions worked when they were the right ones.

He pulled up the Dubrovnik Airport departures page from his phone while walking and found two routes.

*Dubrovnik — Zagreb — Moscow.*

*Dubrovnik — Helsinki — Moscow.*

He stopped at the elevator. Pressed the button and looked at the screen.

Both departing within twenty minutes of each other. Both connecting flights to Moscow. He fell into the familiar habit of running the math in his head, as though this, too, had an answer if he calculated hard enough.

*Zagreb*: Short connection. Logical and efficient. The route a practical person would take. A person who left notes. Who brought sandwiches. Who ran the towel under warm water first. A practical person going home from a wedding would look at two routes and take the shorter one.

*Helsinki*: Longer and less efficient. Historically prone to delay because Finnair had a particular relationship with the word *delayed* that Shane had experienced firsthand.

Shane stood at the elevator with the departures page open and felt something arrive that was not math and not calculation. He looked at both routes one last time, giving himself a final chance to be wrong.

\*\*\*

The lobby was quiet. The night staff looked up to greet him. Shane smiled and did not stop. He moved through the lobby as fast as he could and out the front doors into the Dubrovnik night.

He pulled up a taxi app on his phone.

*Nearest available driver: 30 minutes.*

Shane looked at this information.

*Thirty minutes?*

He did not have thirty minutes. He was not sure exactly how much time he had but he had done the math and thirty minutes was not a number that appeared anywhere in the math as an acceptable interval. He tried another app. *Thirty-five minutes.*

*Fuck.*

He went back to the lobby.

The night receptionist looked up from the desk and greeted him. “Good evening, how may I help you?”

“Hi, I need a taxi,” Shane said. “To the airport. Can you help calling one now?”

The receptionist nodded, already reaching for the phone. “Of course. At this hour the wait will be approximately—”

“How long?” Shane asked impatiently.

“Thirty minutes, Mr. Hollander.”

Shane looked at him.

“Taxi will be here thirty minutes minimum, Mr. Hollander, it’s Saturday night—”

“I don’t have thirty minutes,” Shane said.

“I understand, but—”

“Is there anything else? Hotel transfer or—”

“Mr. Hollander, at this hour—”

He cursed under his breath. Frustrated, he tried the taxi app again and went outside the resort entrance with his passport in one hand and his phone in the other.

The airport somewhere in the dark ahead of him and no way to get there in the time he needed.

“You need to go to the airport?”

A voice from the back. Shane turned.

The uncle from Volgograd was sitting in a silver Mercedes rental at the edge of the resort driveway. The window was down and the engine was running. The uncle had the expression of a man who had been expecting this and had positioned himself accordingly, which raised several questions that Shane did not have time to ask.

Shane stared at him.

“I—”

“*Davai*. Get in,” the uncle said. The finality and the tone coming out of him suggesting that this was not a question and never had been.

Shane got in.

The Mercedes pulled away immediately, tires screeching against the pavement, moving like it knew where it was going. The uncle did not ask for the destination. He appeared to have already known the destination. Shane looked at him, at the side of his face, calm and slightly smug like someone who had done a correct thing.

They drove into the night.

Shane sat in the passenger seat with his passport in his hand and watched Dubrovnik recede in the side mirror.

“Uh, thank you.” Shane finally said.

The uncle waved a hand. As though gratitude was beside the point.

They drove in silence for a moment. The road opening up, the hills on either side, the sea visible occasionally between them, dark and endless.

Shane looked at the uncle. At the side of his face. At the man who had been the sole reason why he ended up in the same room as Ilya. The same uncle, who was now driving Shane to the airport without being asked.

“How did you know,” Shane said. “That I needed to—”

“I see your face,” The uncle said simply. “When he leave.”

Shane went still and said nothing. A little dumbfounded like a deer caught in a headlight.

“Did you see that we—”

“*Da*, like a very sad movie,” A pause. “But love is love.”

Shane couldn’t comprehend the weight of what he just heard. A Russian uncle, just said that *love is love* like it was the simplest thing in the world, like there was nothing complicated about it. He said it with the serene authority of a man who had been watching this very sad movie all weekend and had, quietly, been rooting for it the entire time.

“Also, is a same face,” The uncle said, “I make in 1987. Volgograd train station.” A pause. The Mercedes taking a dramatic curve. “She wait for me anyway.”

Shane looked at the road and didn’t say anything.

*She wait for me anyway.*

He thought about the hotel room. About Ilya’s carry-on on the floor and the two beds and the florist situation, the limestone streets, the terrace, the bathroom, everything that had happened in the last 48 hours.

If not for this uncle, Shane thought, *probably* none of it.

The uncle had caused all of it without knowing he was causing it, which was either the most random thing that had ever happened to Shane or the least random thing, and Shane was not currently in a position to work out which.

The airport lights appeared in the distance. The constellation of them against the dark.

Shane looked at the lights.

“Thank you.” Shane said again.

The uncle waved his hand. The Mercedes pulled into the drop-off lane and stopped. There’s a finality to it, the certainty of something that had arrived exactly where it was going.

“Go,” the uncle said. “Good luck.”

Shane ran.

\*\*\*

Ilya's seat was 24A.

Window seat, same as always. Phone in airplane mode at boarding, same as always. The small habit that persisted when everything else had shifted, he's incrementally reassembling the ordinary version of himself.

Only now, he was not sure *that* ordinary version of himself would fit the same way it had before the weekend, before Shane.

He put his carry-on in the overhead. He sat down and put on his seatbelt automatically. He had done this enough times that the body did it without being asked.

The boarding is still in progress around him. The overhead bins, the shuffle of people finding seats, the specific noise of a plane that was not yet a plane and was still, temporarily, a room. He looked at his phone. The screen, the music app.

He put his earphones in.

*Sailor Song* came on because it had been coming on all evening. It had been the song the shuffle kept returning to with such persistence like it had decided that it was relevant. He had let it play over and over.

♪♪ *And then, she came up to my knees—*

He looked at the window.

The tarmac outside. The dark beyond. The airport lights slid slowly past as the plane began to taxi. He watched them and did not think about where he was.

He was not thinking about where he was.

He was thinking about Shane.

♪♪ *Begging, baby, would you please—*

The bathroom. The tile. Him looking down and finding Shane already looking up, his soft brown eyes and the open wanting on his face and the parted lips and freckles under the bathroom lights. Ilya had looked down and had felt something in his chest *detonated*.

♪♪ *Do the things you said you'd do to me, to me—*

He closed his eyes briefly. The plane was beginning to move now, the slow taxi away from the gate, the airport receding. He watched it go.

♪♪ *Oh, won't you kiss me on the mouth—*

All the kisses flashed between his eyes. The desperate ones, the hungry ones, the slow agonizing ones, *the last one*. He was not going to think about which one he was going to carry the longest because the answer was obviously *all of them*. They would live in him as long as his body remembered how to ache.

♪♪ *And love me like a sailor—*

The terrace, Shane on the railing, him on the corner and the one second he had turned back and found Shane still standing there and not moving. The constellations above in the night sky hold nothing compared to the constellations on his face. The view of Dubrovnik arranged around him like it had been waiting all eight hundred years of its existence for exactly *that* composition.

♪♪ *And when you get a taste, can you tell me what's my flavor—*

He thought about timing. About the cruelty of two people reading the same book from different pages. About how you couldn't rush someone's chapter. You could not demand someone speak to an ending they hadn't reached. You could only be at your page and trust they were turning toward theirs.

♪♪ *I know that you've been worried—*

The song continued and Ilya let it.

♪♪ *But you're dripping in my favor—*

He looked across the aisle.

He saw an old couple. The age of people for whom time had done its slow work, as though time had compressed things into their most essential form. The woman was asleep against the man's shoulder. The man had a book but was not entirely reading it. Every few minutes he looked at her, the quick glance of someone checking something precious and had never once found a reason to stop checking.

Ilya watched this for a moment.

♪♪ *And when we're getting dirty, I forget all that is wrong—*

He thought about odds. About the mathematics of finding someone in a world of eight billion people when the average lifetime gave you eighty thousand chances. One in a hundred thousand. Zero point zero zero one percent chance.

He looked at the two people across the aisle.

He thought, *and yet, here they are.*

The magnificence of shared timelines. Of two people arriving at the same page at the same moment and finding, against every reasonable probability, that the other person is already there.

He thought about gate 14C in Helsinki Airport. About a man in the far corner, sitting very still, performing relaxed. The same flight, the same delay, the bar that still open at ten pm in a Helsinki airport.

He thought, *zero point zero zero one percent chance, and yet there they were.*

*♪♪ I sleep so I can see you, and I hate to wait so long—*

The plane lifted. The ground fell away. The familiar tilt and the dark falling away beneath them. Ilya felt it in his chest, as he always did at takeoff. The unreasonable reminder that you were choosing to trust something big about to happen.

*♪♪ I sleep so I can see you, and I hate to wait so long—*

Ilya closed his eyes.

He thought about how Dubrovnik had needed eight hundred years to be exactly what it was. Eight hundred years of the walls finding their height and the streets finding their width and the limestone finding its particular shade of pale gold in the morning light. Eight hundred years for the city to become the place where a florist had a situation and a wall was badly positioned and two people spent five more minutes in a courtyard than was strictly necessary.

You could not have rushed any of it.

*♪♪ We can go forever, until you wanna sit it out*

He exhaled, let the altitude take him and trusted that somewhere below the cloud cover, Shane was exactly where he needed to be in his chapter, moving at the pace his chapter required, toward whatever came next.

He let the sleep take him.

He trusted the eight hundred years.

\*\*\*

Dubrovnik airport was a small regional airport. Shane realized this by watching how people passed through it. Seemingly its job was only to release people into the world and receive them back and not to be particularly interested in between.

Shane moved through it like someone who had spent years waiting for permission to move and had finally stopped waiting.

He found the ticket desk. The woman behind it looked up. Calm and professional, just like an airport staff who had seen most things and were prepared to see more.

“Hi, I need a ticket,” Shane said.

“Of course,” she said. “Where to?”

Shane looked at her.

“Helsinki,” he said. He had decided this in the car.

“Or Zagreb,” he added.

The woman looked at him with suspicion.

“I—” Shane stopped. “Which one departs first?”

She typed something. Looked at the screen. Typed something else.

“Both have departures in the next hour,” She paused. “It would be very close, Mr.—”

“Hollander,” Shane said. “Shane Hollander.”

“Mr. Hollander.” She was looking at her screen and did several calculations simultaneously.

“The Zagreb departure is in forty-five minutes. The Helsinki departure is in an hour exactly.”

Shane did the math.

He checked his pockets. Phone. Passport. Wallets. He had come to the airport with these exact three items and nothing else.

“Zagreb,” he said.

The woman smiled and started typing on the computer.

“Actually—” He started.

The woman exhaled and waited. She looked like had worked enough late-night airport shifts to know that people rarely knew what they wanted until they heard themselves say it.

“I’ll take both. One way. Both of them. I can explain,”

She looked at him for a moment. At the shirt with an open collar. At the passport. At a man who had arrived at an airport with no luggage and was attempting to purchase two one-way tickets to two different cities because he was not entirely sure where he wanted to go.

“I can check you in for both departures, but security will only process one boarding pass. You’ll need to choose at the checkpoint.”

She typed. Her expression remained unchanged. She looked like she had worked enough night shifts to know exactly which arguments deserved her attention. This one, her expression made clear, did not.

The prices appeared on the screen.

“That’s fine,” Shane said and he paid.

She printed two boarding passes and laid them on the counter side by side.

*Zagreb.*

*Helsinki.*

Shane moved through the terminal with the focus he brought to anything that mattered. His peripheral vision scanned the crowd-navigation while the rest of him ran the calculation.

Zagreb. Helsinki. Zagreb. Helsinki.

The same variables arriving at the same impasse every time. He dodged a luggage trolley and a slow-moving family and a man who had stopped in the middle of the walkway for reasons Shane would never know. He kept moving and kept calculating and kept arriving at the same problem, *he could not afford to catch the wrong flight*.

He could not afford to land in the wrong city. He had one shot at this. Ilya was heading somewhere to transit, whether Zagreb or Helsinki, one connection, one layover, and if Shane got on the wrong plane he would land in an empty airport with no Ilya and no time and no way to fix this.

He arrived at the checkpoint with both boarding passes and stood there for the last second in which he still had two options and then—without finishing the math and calculation—he scanned one.

The gate opened.

He ran.

\*\*\*

Ilya came off the jetway with his carry-on and his jacket over one arm. He walked in that strange state that came after sleeping somewhere between the ground and the clouds, when the body had stopped but the mind never quite did. His body had decided to perform the functions of a rested person with reasonable accuracy. The rest of him was doing something else entirely.

He followed the transit signs. Everyone was going forward and he went with them.

The hall was quiet in the same way liminal spaces became quiet after midnight. It was painstakingly honest, stripped of anything unnecessary. The shops were half-shuttered, the café technically open but empty. A few other passengers from his flight passed around him and kept moving. He let them.

He found the departure board.

His gate was to the right side and he had fifty-five minutes. Which was relevant information to the only thing that should have been guiding his next decision. He had a connection and a gate and a direction and none of them were going left.

He looked up at the hall and saw Gate 14C on the left. Three days narrowed down to that one point, carrying the strange weight of something that had been both felt temporary and forever.

Three days. A lifetime. Both accurate.

*Before and after. You are standing in the after. You were a different person in the before.*

The bar across from Gate 14C had its lights on.

He stood there and thought about two strangers sitting in it three days ago. Both performing and both watching the other perform. Both recognizing the performance because they were wearing the same one.

Three days ago.

He turned left and walked toward the bar.

Some delays, he was finding, were the best thing that had ever happened to him.

\*\*\*

The bar was empty except for the bartender. Ilya sat down in the same place he had sat before, which was either a meaningful thing or an entirely meaningless one, depending on how honest a person is willing to be with himself at an airport bar at this particular hour.

He looked at the empty seat beside him.

The bartender appeared. Young, but carrying the tired eyes of someone who had worked enough late shifts to stop pretending to be too friendly.

“What can I get you?”

Ilya looked at the counter.

He thought about three days ago. About this counter, this bar, this specific dim light. About sitting down with a whiskey and finding, beside him, a man who had looked at the menu for four seconds and ordered a Moscow mule. Ilya had immediately said *suspicious* for absolutely no reason. And the man had said *it's a preference* and Ilya had said *very suspicious preference* and the man had tried to be annoyed but didn't quite manage.

That had been the first bad joke they'd made.

Ilya had not known, making it, that it was the first of anything.

“Moscow mule,” Ilya said. The bartender nodded and started making the drink.

He looked at the empty seat.

He was buying himself time inside the weekend. He knew this. He recognized it as something he would not have done a week ago, chosen sentimentality over efficiency, chosen the long way home because he wasn't ready for home to start yet. He looked at this in himself and tried to understand why and found that it did not embarrass him. That was also new.

The drink arrived. Copper cup. Lime wedge. The fizz of ginger beer.

He had never ordered a Moscow mule in his life.

He picked it up anyway. The ginger bite of it, the cold through the metal. He sat with it and looked at where the bartender had gone and then at the counter and then, eventually, at the empty seat beside him. He'd been doing it since he sat down.

He set the cup down.

*I don't move around very much. You'll find me.*

He had said this. Had meant it. Still meant it. Would mean it in Moscow tomorrow when he landed and called his mother and went to the clinic and resumed the ordinary life that had been waiting for him all weekend. He would mean it through all of it. The days and the weeks and however long it took. He was not good at many things but he was good at meaning what he said.

He looked at the drink in his hand. He had ordered a Moscow mule.

He stayed with it for a moment. The fact of being at this exact bar, ordering Shane's drink, feeling something in his chest that was not quite grief and not quite longing, but something more specific: the shape of a person who was not there.

He finished the drink.

He set the copper cup down carefully, like returning something borrowed.

"Another one?" the bartender said.

"No." He looked at the cup for a moment. "Thank you."

\*\*\*

Shane landed at 01:57am.

He knew this because he looked at his phone the moment the wheels touched down. He had been looking at his phone every ten minutes for the entire flight, each time hoping the numbers had somehow rearranged themselves into something more favorable, each time finding they had not.

01:57am. He stared at it. The math was the same math. Ilya's connection to Moscow—if he had taken this route—had been scheduled for 02:30. Boarding typically began thirty minutes prior. Which meant boarding had begun. Was either still in progress or if it was an empty flight, was complete. There was no third option. The difference between those two things was the difference between *this* having been worth it and *this* having been the dumbest decision Shane had ever made in a life.

Shane was still on a plane.

On a tarmac.

In Helsinki, which he had chosen.

He stood in the jetway behind the other passengers—moving too slowly with a maddening pace of people who had nowhere urgent to be—and thought about the math. The original math. Zagreb was technically shorter and logical. Zagreb was the route a practical person took and Ilya was a practical person. Shane had stood in the middle of a terminal at midnight with two boarding passes and had chosen the feeling instead of the math and was now in Helsinki at 01:57am and the feeling had better be right.

The feeling had better be right.

He moved through the jetway and into the terminal and did not stop moving.

The terminal was dead quiet at 2 a.m. Shane had no time. He had approximately sixteen minutes, a gate number he didn't know yet, and a body that had spent three hours on a plane and was now being asked to remember how to move.

*He ran.*

And not the careful run. This was a man in an open collared shirt with eleven percent battery and no luggage running through a Finnish airport at 2am because he had a feeling and it said *Helsinki route*, which was the least controlled thing Shane had done all his life. His body moved, as fast as it could go.

He was aware that he looked like an insane person. Insane and unprepared and between the two, he had never been either.

Until tonight.

Tonight he was both.

He kept running.

*Not again*, something said, underneath the running.

He had been hearing it since the railing yesterday afternoon, since *I need to go back to Moscow tonight* and the drop behind his sternum and the twenty years of this, of watching people go, of standing at railings while things left and calling the standing still a good judgment.

*Not again.*

Except.

This time the words meant something different.

He had heard them yesterday afternoon at the railing, watching Ilya walk away—*this is happening to me again, this is the shape of my life, I am the person this keeps happening to*. He stepped over them as he always did, carrying the habit he had built since he was old enough to understand that some things could only be survived if you see it coming.

He was not stepping over them now.

*Not again*, he thought, running. And what it meant was,

*No, not this time. Not one more time. I am not standing at one more railing watching one more thing leave because the unlive d life was the safe choice and I have been making the safe choice since as long as I could remember. I am so tired of the safe choice and what it has cost me and what it has kept from me and what it looks like from the inside which is nothing. The safe choice looks like nothing.*

His stream of consciousness was so loud he could barely hear the announcement.

He kept running until he found the departure board.

He found two flights to Moscow with boarding status. Two different gates.

He looked at the time. Picked the closest gate.

He ran to it with everything he had.

It was empty.

*Fuck.*

And then the voice came back. The one he knew all too well, that had been there since he was old enough to have opinions about preparation and contingencies and the cost of acting without a plan. It had been the background noise of his entire adult life and had, until approximately three days ago, always been right.

*This is why*, it said. *This is exactly why. This is what happens when you don't prepare. You're in the wrong airport in the wrong country and the gate is closed and Ilya is on a plane to Moscow and you did this. This is your fault.*

Shane looked at the closed gate.

He thought about twenty years of the prepared thing. About what preparing for everything had actually given him, when he looked at it directly, when he held it up to the light and examined it honestly.

Four speeches *he had not used*.

A spreadsheet for coffee shops *in cities he visited alone*.

A playlist he kept adding but *never listened from start to finish*.

A walk that had never once failed to make people believe he was fine which he was only now understanding *was not the same thing as being actually fine*.

He turned and ran to the second gate.

*Not again*, he thought. With every step now.

The rhythm of it.

*Not again.*

*Not again.*

*Not again.*

He refused to succumb to the voice but it came back stronger.

*You chose Helsinki with what evidence. You acted without a plan. You are the person who acts without plans now, apparently, and this is what that gets you. An empty gate. A wrong route. Eleven percent battery. This is what the feeling gets you.*

He arrived at the second gate breathless.

The gate area was not empty, that was the first thing he registered, there were people, movement, the gate was still active. But then he looked closer and understood what he was seeing, which was, the end of boarding. A woman in the final position of a boarding queue, her carry-on already through, her boarding pass already scanned, already moving down the jetway.

The flight attendant at the desk was reaching for the glass door.

“Wait—” Shane said.

He said it too loud. The voice of someone who had sprinted through an airport and was now trying to explain himself while looking completely insane.

The flight attendant looked at him suspiciously.

“Sir—”

“I need to find someone on this flight,” Shane said. He moved to the desk. He was aware of how he looked but he was past caring. “His name is Ilya Rozanov. I just need one minute. Can you call him out? Just for one minute. Please.”

The flight attendant looked like someone who had seen this before, not exactly this, but something in this vicinity, and was deciding what to do about it.

“Sir, I’m afraid we can’t—”

“Ilya Rozanov,” Shane said. “R-O-Z-A-N-O-V. He would have boarded, he’s Russian, he’s a doctor, he’s— please, I just need one minute with him, sixty seconds, I promise, I just need to —”

“Sir.” The flight attendant’s voice sounded patient but firm. The voice of someone de-escalating a situation. “We cannot call a passenger off the aircraft. The boarding is closed. We need to depart on schedule and I’m going to have to ask you to—”

“Please?” Shane pleaded.

The word came out smaller than he intended. He heard it land out loud and felt it land in his own chest and did not step over it this time. Because for once, he was done stepping over things and because this was the last one, this was the last gate on the board, and if Ilya was not on this plane then Shane had chosen the wrong airport and the wrong feeling and the wrong everything and—

“Ilya Rozanov,” He said again. To the flight attendant. To the gate area. To anyone who was listening. “Please. His name is Ilya Rozanov. If he’s on this plane I just need— I need thirty seconds. Twenty. I just need to—”

“Sir, I’m going to have to call security if you don’t move away,”

The flight attendant reached for the phone.

“But— Please, I just need less than a minute,” Shane stood at the desk, still pleading.

He was aware of the other passengers in the gate area watching him, the people waiting for different flights, the overnight travelers, the people who had been there long enough and were now watching a man repeating a Russian name to a flight attendant who had picked up a phone.

Two airport security officers appeared from somewhere to the left.

Shane looked at them.

“Sir,” One of the airport security said. “We’re going to need you to step away from the gate.”

“I’m looking for someone,” Shane said. “His name is—”

“Sir—”

“Ilya Rozanov,” Shane said. “He’s on this flight, I need to find him. I need to—”

“Sir, you need to come with us—”

“*Shane?*”

He stopped.

The voice came from behind him. From somewhere in the gate area, from the direction he had come from, from—

He turned.

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Ilya heard his own voice say it before he processed what he was seeing, before he finished walking out of the bar toward gate 14C and toward the man held between two security guards

and a very concerned flight attendant.

He looked at the man who had come through the gate area entrance looking breathless, and disheveled with no luggage.

The man was looking back at him.

*Shane.*

Ilya stood behind the bar entrance with his carry-on and looked at Shane Hollander, whose expression belonged to someone whose body had only just caught up to something his mind had been processing for much longer.

Then Shane crossed the gate area.

He came across the gate area without anything covering anything in his face, no jaw-set, no armor. This was the version with nothing between Shane and the direction he was going. The *toward walk*, finally, at full speed, across an airport gate area at 2:30am, *toward Ilya*.

And then the arms. And then Ilya, who had spent years keeping people at a specific distance found himself, for the first time, being reached for and being held completely. The whole of it struck him all at once.

He had not known what that felt like from this side. He let himself stand in it.

“Hi,” Shane said, still panting, into his shoulder.

“Hi,” Ilya said, something cracked in his voice.

They stood there for a moment. The gate area around them, the board blinking, the bar behind Ilya with its light flickering in the background.

Shane pulled back and looked at him. The expression on his face was doing several things simultaneously. The relief was there, along with the specific kind of breathlessness that belonged to someone who had been running and had finally arrived, only now beginning to understand he had reached the only destination that mattered.

“I was afraid,” Shane said with a cracked voice. “I was afraid at the terrace and I was afraid when you went around the corner. I’ve been afraid my whole life of the thing going wrong and I—”

He stopped.

Started again.

“I want to try this,” Shane said. “For real. I don’t want it to only live on this weekend. I know what I want. I should have said it at the hotel but I didn’t and I’m saying it now,” A breath.

“I’m saying it now.”

Ilya looked at him.

He thought about all the things that had needed for this exact moment to happen.

Ilya did not believe in fate. He had always understood the world as a series of probabilities that required someone to collapse them into actuality. The flight delay had been a probability. The bar being open had been a probability. The bartender leaving had been a probability. The uncle room situation had been a probability. Every small improbable thing, accumulating, building toward a moment that had required someone to act and turned it from something that had been *possible* into something that was *real*. This was the part that mattered.

The accumulation of small improbable things did nothing on its own.

It waited.

It waited for someone to *act*.

Ilya had looked at a man in the far corner of a 14C gate three days ago. And the man had turned. Two probability clouds, each existing in many possible states, had been observed by each other and had collapsed into each other, into actuality, into a Moscow mule and a truth or dare and a bathroom and a terrace and now, *this*.

A man who had flown from Dubrovnik to say the words.

“Shane,” Ilya said. His voice broke open. “You are here.”

“I’m here,” Shane said breathlessly.

“You came,” Ilya said quietly. As if still arriving at the fact.

“I came,” Shane said.

Ilya looked at him and found, for the first time in recent memory, that he had utterly, completely, loss for words.

Shane had not made him wait.

Shane had beaten the chapter entirely.

Ilya had so many things to say about this. He had a speech about probability and observation and the threads that accumulated. He had words about being in different chapters of the same book. He had the whole explanation of it but now that he was standing in front of Shane, he could not locate a single one.

Shane looked at him confused. “Wait— why are you not boarding?”

Ilya looked at the board. Then back at Shane. “Ah, this is not my flight.”

Shane blinked.

“My flight,” Ilya said. “Is delayed. I just found out five minutes ago.” He paused. “Finnair. Again.”

Shane stared at him in disbelief.

“Always Finnair,” Ilya said simply.

Something happened in Shane’s expression. The moment all the pieces fell into place and he realized the truth was somehow better—and far more ridiculous—than anything he had imagined.

“I flew from Dubrovnik,” Shane said slowly. “To catch you at your layover.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I can see this.”

“Your phone,” Shane said. “Was in airplane mode?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I board the plane and put—”

“Immediately?” Shane cut. “You put it in airplane mode immediately, at boarding, not at takeoff, at boarding?”

“This is,” Ilya started. “The correct time to—”

“I know, that’s not my point,” Shane said. “I was just—” He stopped. Something moved in his expression. The relief becomes something warmer. “I didn’t know that about you.”

Ilya said nothing, his eyes not leaving Shane’s.

“There are,” Shane said, “a lot of things I don’t know about you.”

Ilya stared at him.

“And,” Shane said, “I wanna know *all of them*.”

Ilya stood in that for a moment.

He thought about what all of it meant. Not only the weekend version of Ilya that Shane had already seen, but the rest of him too. The Ilya who existed in Moscow in January, when the cold was brutal and the city was somehow still magical. The Ilya who sat with difficult parents in difficult hospital rooms. The Ilya who called his mother every Sunday. The Ilya with the window seat, the airplane mode, and the thousands of other mundane ordinary things about himself.

The ordinary version.

*All of them*, Shane said. The weight of being wanted landed in his chest. He had not known, until this moment, how much he had wanted to be wanted like that.

“Okay,” Ilya finally said.

A beat.

“For what it is worth,” Ilya said, “I also did not know that you’re the kind of person who would fly from Dubrovnik to Helsinki in the middle of the night.” A pause. “I am adding this to the list of things I did not know about you.” He looked at Shane. “It is a good list.”

He looked at Shane for a moment longer, taking in the gate area around them, the board blinking overhead, and the flickering light spilling from the bar behind him.

“And Shane, I told you,” Ilya said. “That I would not be hard to find. That I don’t move around,” A pause. “I meant this. I was prepared to mean it for a long time.” He looked at Shane. “But I didn’t expect you to actually find me here.”

He glanced back at the bar.

“Same bar,” He said, smiling.

“Same delay,” Shane said, still looking like he could not believe the absurdity of the situation.

“*Da*,” Ilya said. “Come. We have time.”

\*\*\*

The bar was somewhat still open.

The light still on, the bartender visible through the entrance doing the end-of-shift routine looking like they were almost done but not yet.

They walked over and sat at the same corner, the same two stools. They took in the atmosphere of the bar that had been the beginning of everything. Ilya sat down and felt the familiarity of it.

The young bartender appeared, seemingly annoyed that his plan to close down early was now disturbed.

“Last orders,” He said flatly.

Ilya looked at Shane.

Shane did not even bother to look at the menu.

“Moscow mule,” Shane said. “Please.”

Ilya looked at him amused.

“What,” Shane said.

“Nothing,” Ilya said, holding back a smile.

“You’re making that face again.”

“I told you I don’t make faces,” Ilya said. “I am Russian. We have one face.” He looked at the bartender. “Whiskey,” He said. “Thank you.”

It occurred to Ilya, sitting down, that the universe had a very specific sense of humor. Three days, one wedding, one shared room, one airport and they had arrived, with complete precision, at the same bar across from gate 14C, having the same drink and the same conversation. What an absurd full-circle moment.

*Finnair*, he thought, had planned this.

The drinks arrived. The bartender moved to the far end of the counter and began the closing routine, wiping down, stacking. The bar is emptying around them.

Shane wrapped both hands around his Moscow mule.

Ilya watched him do it.

“You said something,” Shane said. “Last time we’re here,”

Ilya looked at him.

“You said—” Shane paused. Found the right words. “You said, *ask me again at the end of the weekend*.” He looked at his drink. “About Sveta.” He looked up. “Is it— *closing*?”

Ilya was quiet for a moment.

The bar around them is now empty. The bartender at the far end.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I think it is.”

He picked up his whiskey. Turned it. Put it down.

“I came to this wedding,” He started. “To understand if I could stand in a room with Sveta and Rhys and feel some sort of closure. Rather than,” He paused. “Still standing in the doorway of something that already ended.”

Shane said nothing. He’s listening intently.

“For the longest time, I knew that it was a grief that I couldn’t process,” Ilya said. “I understood this today. Watching her walk down the aisle. That the door is closed. Properly. Finally. And It’s probably been closed for a while, but I just understand it today,” A pause. He looked at his glass. “I am genuinely happy for her.” He looked at Shane. “And then, I realized,”

Shane waited.

“In the space,” Ilya said carefully. “Where the grief had been,” He paused and looked at Shane’s eyes. “There was only—”

He trailed and stopped again.

Something moved in his face. The composed exterior finding its limit. It arrived when the thing to be said was the truest thing and it did not have adequate language.

He looked at Shane. At the man who had been, for the last few days, the most present person Ilya had been with in years. At the man with the freckles that looked like constellations. The man who took the flight from Dubrovnik to Helsinki in the middle of the night because he needed to say some words.

“I am not good at saying things like this,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane was very still.

“So,” Ilya said. “Let me show you instead,”

He leaned forward

His hand came to Shane’s jaw with the gentleness of someone who had touched this face before, but was touching it now with an entirely different meaning. *This is what I mean, this is the thing I couldn’t say. This.*

He kissed him.

A soft, brief kiss. A moment measured in seconds and somehow containing far more than that, carrying the kind of attention and recognition that came from trying to say something words had never managed to reach.

Shane’s breath changed.

Ilya felt it change the moment Shane stopped receiving and started giving back, the push and pull of two people kissing when both of them have stopped being afraid of what it means.

After a brief moment, they finally pulled back.

The bar around them and the dim light. The bartender had left and nowhere to be found, yet again.

Ilya looked at Shane, his gaze moved between Shane’s mouth and eyes.

“This,” He said. “There was only this.” Ilya continued what he was meant to say.

Shane looked at him with his honest open expression, in a bar that had been the beginning of this, with nothing between the feeling and the face.

Ilya stared back.

He had things to say and had been trying to say them since the ceremony, since he had watched Sveta walk down the aisle and had felt the grief close and understood, in the closing, that something else had been there all along, sitting beside the grief, waiting for the grief to finish patiently.

“There was just you,” Ilya said.

He said it quietly. His voice slowly breaking.

“From the ceremony. From the whole weekend.” He looked at Shane. “When the grief finished— you were what was left. I know this sounds crazy. But I want you to know that this is not a consolation or, what people say, *rebound*? This is not anything I did because the other thing was gone.” A pause. Longer than usual. The truest thing requires the most room. “You were already there, Shane. You had been there but the grief was in the way. And then suddenly it wasn’t.”

Shane was very still.

“You were what was there,” Ilya said again.

The second time he said it was softer. Like he said for himself, the truest thing said twice, once to give it to the other person and once to hear it in your own voice, to confirm that you had said it, that it was real, that it existed now outside of you where it could not be taken back.

He did not want to take it back.

Shane’s eyes were bright.

Shane reached across the bar, slowly, and his hand found Ilya’s where it rested on the counter. Ilya’s hand turned over and opened just like it had been closed for a very long time and had finally found the right reason to open.

Shane held it for a moment. Their fingers intertwined.

Then he lifted it slowly and brought it to his mouth. His lips against Ilya’s knuckles give it a soft tender kiss.

He held it there.

He lowered it, and he looked at Ilya.

“I came here,” Shane started. “To survive a wedding.” A pause. “I didn’t know—” He stopped. “I didn’t know there was something to find. Well, I didn’t know I was looking in the first place.” He looked at their hands. “But then, against all odds, in the last few days, I sort of just— found it. And then stupidly, I almost let it go.” He looked at Ilya. “So I think I know what you mean. About the space. About what was there,”

A beat.

“Because, I was there too,” Shane said. “The whole time.”

Ilya did not breathe.

Shane placed Ilya's palm on his face. Ilya adjusted his grip softly so his thumb was positioned against Shane's freckles scattered on his cheekbones. His thumb grazed it lightly.

"Ilya, I spent twenty years," Shane said. "Loving someone who was never going to be in the same space I do." He looked at Ilya's eyes. "And I spent this weekend with someone who was already there. Who had been there the whole time too, apparently. Who—" He stopped. "Who made me feel like I'm the most important thing in the room just by looking at me." He let out a soft breath. "I didn't know what that felt like before. I do now,"

A beat.

"And I'm not letting it go again." Shane said. He closed his eyes briefly and kissed the inside of Ilya's palm.

"And I'm not gonna let you." Ilya said back, not holding any smile now.

The silence that followed was different from all the other silences of the weekend, different from the careful silences on the terrace and the loaded silences at the railing and the managed silences in the hotel room. Those had all contained things like the unsaid words, unfinished sentences, the weight of two people standing in the space between what was being said and what was actually meant.

This silence contained nothing except the two of them.

Which was, Ilya thought, *everything*.

"Tell me something real," Ilya broke the silence.

Shane looked at him and rolled his eyes. "I'm not playing truth or dare again."

"No," Ilya said. "Just, tell me things."

"What kind of things?"

"Things I don't know about you."

Shane looked at his glass. "Oh. It's gonna be a very long list."

"I don't mind," Ilya said. "Start anywhere."

Shane considered this for a moment.

"I don't have a middle name," Shane said.

Ilya looked at him. "What?"

"No middle name. Just Shane Hollander."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "You don't have a middle name."

"No."

“That’s—” Ilya paused. “That’s unsettling.”

“Why is that unsettling?” Shane said.

“In Russia,” Ilya said, sounding like someone delivering medical information. “Everyone has a middle name. It is structural. It is how you know who a person is. Which family you tied to,”

“Okay. I have a last name, and people already know who I am.” Shane said it with a smug smile.

“Right. Of course. The famous Shane Hollander.”

Shane scoffed.

“Did you look me up or something?” He looked at Ilya suspiciously.

“Maybe,” Ilya said. “Maybe not”

“You can just ask me, you know.” Shane took another sip from his glass.

“You’re thinking too highly of yourself Shane Hollander, the famous captain of Montreal Metros.”

Shane let out a helpless little laugh. Ilya watched it happen, pleased in the familiar way of someone who had been causing this laugh all weekend and had not gotten tired of it.

“Okay, fine,” Shane said, when he had recovered. “Your turn. Middle name.”

“Grigoryevich.”

“Grigoryevich,” Shane said. Then, slowly, placing it correctly, “Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov.”

Ilya went still. Shane had said his full name and it did something to him.

Shane had said it in the Russian rhythm. The patronymic in its correct position, the stress landing where it was supposed to land. He had not stumbled and not approximated. He had said it the way it was meant to be said.

“Yes, correct.” Ilya said quieter.

“That’s a good name,” Shane said.

“Thank you,” Ilya said it simply.

They sat with that for a moment. Two people who had run out of the need to fill silence.

“Tell me another one,” Ilya said.

Shane turned his glass. “Okay. Ask me.”

“The longest you’ve been alone,” Ilya said. “Without someone.”

Shane looked at the bar. Pierced his eyes, as if trying to calculate something.

“Always,” he said. “Basically.”

“What do you mean always?” *That can’t be right*, Ilya thought.

“I had girlfriends,” Shane said. “High school. First couple years of college.” He paused. “I was— trying. To be what I was not.”

“And?” Ilya said. Not pressing.

“They were good people. But, it wasn’t fair to them. I knew that.” Shane’s thumb moved against his glass. “I thought if I kept trying, I would just—”

A beat. He cleared his throat. He couldn’t finish his sentence.

“And then I figured it out,” Shane said. “That it wasn’t going to be the right woman. Well, any woman really.”

“I see,” Ilya said.

“Also, because you know, Rhys,” A pause. “I was not able to get past it. No matter how hard I tried.”

Ilya didn’t say anything for a while and then “I know Rhys is a good man, but I just want to punch him for making you feel that way for so long. Stupid man.”

Shane let out a small laugh and didn’t react to it.

“And then I didn’t do anything about it either. For a long time.” He looked at the bar. “There were a few during off-season. Discreet and casual fling. Nothing that was—” he stopped. “None of it was *this*.”

He said it without looking up. Like it had come out before he decided to say it. The way the truest things came out.

“So the answer is,” Shane said. “Always. By the version that matters.”

“Shane,” Ilya said.

“Don’t feel bad about me,” Shane said quickly. “It’s just— well, you asked.”

“I know,” Ilya said. “Thank you for telling me.”

His hand found Shane’s on the bar and stayed there.

A long moment. Shane looked at their hands. Then up to Ilya’s face.

“My turn,” He said.

“Yes.”

The corner of Shane’s mouth smirked. “Favorite food.”

Something relaxed in Ilya’s expression. “Easy. Blini.”

“Blini.” Shane repeated.

“It’s Russian. Like a crepe, but better.” Ilya said with such conviction. “My mother makes them with caviar, with jam, with sour cream. We eat them a lot during *Maslenitsa*. But honestly, I eat it whenever I can.”

“Your mother makes them?” Shane’s voice sounded curious and delighted at the same time.

“The best in the world.” Ilya didn’t even try to hide his pride.

“Yeah?” Shane smiled.

“I tried everywhere, for research purposes,” Ilya said. “Moscow, St. Petersburg, Paris, New York. I have eaten blini in all of these places. My mother’s are the best. It is true.”

“Sounds delicious, I’d like to try it,” Shane said.

“You will.”

“...I will?” Shane sounded unsure.

“When you visit,” Ilya said, as if this were obvious, as if this had already been decided. “You will eat them. You will love them.” A pause. “You will love her.”

Shane went still.

“That,” Ilya said. “Is non-negotiable. The blini and the loving her.”

“Okay,” Shane said. A small smile on his face.

They sat with it for a moment. With the weight of folding into each other’s life. Ilya was offering Shane the ordinary version of his life. The version that existed without a wedding or an airport or an occasion.

“Yeah, I’d like to meet her,” Shane said.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I’d like that too.” The smallest of smile.

“Tell me one more,” Ilya said. “Your life. Outside hockey. Is it good?”

Shane considered this with more seriousness than the question might seem to warrant, which Ilya found, just how Shane answered questions that mattered.

“Yeah,” Shane said. “Yeah, it’s good.” He turned his glass. “I have a small group of friends. People I’d trust with anything. Other than Rhys,” A pause. “Rhys, obviously as well. Rhys is

—”

“Rhys, I know, everyone’s friend.” Ilya said with a touch of annoyed tone.

“Yeah.” Shane smiled. “And there’s Hayden. He played with me in the league, lives in Montreal, has four kids, and we talk often. There’s Rose, she’s been there almost as long as Rhys, she’s just— she’s a family. And Jackie.” He paused. “She’s the best cook ever, married to Hayden. She’s the person I call when something goes really bad. Like an accident or something. Very reliable lady.”

“Huh,” Ilya said, trying to imagine Shane’s life outside of this weekend.

“Yeah.” Shane looked at the bar. “That’s my little circle. It’s small but they’re my people.”

A pause.

“You’ll meet them,” Shane said. “When you visit.”

“I will visit?” Ilya pointed a finger to his own chest.

“Yeah, of course you will. Whenever you want.”

“Whenever I want?” Ilya said.

“Whenever, Ilya.”

Ilya looked at him for a moment. “I already met Rhys,” He said, as if taking inventory, “And I will meet Hayden, and Rose, and Jackie.”

“Yes.”

“They will know who I am.”

“And they will like you,”

Ilya looked at him. “You sound certain.”

“I am certain,” Shane said. “Jackie is going to feed you constantly. Hayden is going to ask you medical questions about his knee, or his kids. Rose is going to watch you for about forty-five minutes and then decide if she approves.” A pause. “She takes forty-five minutes with everyone. It’s not personal.”

A beat. Both of them sat in it. The future that had names and places in it now, Hayden, Rose, Jackie, Montreal, Moscow and blini made by Ilya’s mother.

“Okay. My turn,” Shane said.

“Ask me.”

“Your work,” Shane said. “With the kids. Is it hard?”

Ilya was quiet for a moment, not really searching for an answer, only making sure he gave it the care it deserved.

“Yes.” He said. “In Russian there is a word. *Tyazhelo*. It means heavy, but it carries the weight of the thing itself,” He paused. “The work is heavy. The losses are even heavier. The sometimes-not-being-able-to-fix-things is—” He stopped. “Very very heavy.”

Shane was listening intently.

“But,” Ilya said. “I would not do it differently.”

“No?” Shane asked.

“No.” He looked at the bar. “When a child gets better. When a family gets to take their child home.” A long pause. “Or when a child draws me a picture sometimes,”

He stopped.

“I don’t have the word for that,” He said. “In English or in Russian. I think it is what I am here for. I am very aware that I am lucky to know what I am here for.”

Shane was looking at him.

“Mr. Walsh used to say something like that,” Shane said quietly. “He said, the people who know what they’re for are the ones who survive the hard parts.”

“Who is Mr. Walsh?” Ilya said, his eyebrows furrowed.

“Ah, my high school English teacher,” Shane said. “My hero basically.”

Ilya looked at him with a fond expression. “Tell me about him.”

“Some other time.” Shane said as he smiled.

“Other time?”

“Yes,” Shane said. “Other times. I promise.”

Ilya smiled. The certainty that there will be another time. He kept that small promised future and guard it on his chest.

After another fifteen minutes, the bar lights turned dimmer.

“The bar is closing,” Ilya said.

“I know,” Shane said.

“I should probably check the flight status,” Ilya said.

“Yeah, you should.”

Ilya turned and looked behind his back, at the big boarding screen in the gate area and let out a big sigh.

“Still delayed.” He said.

“Shocking.” Shane said.

“*Finnair*.”

“Always.”

They exchanged an amused look. Shane looked at his drink. Then also at the departure screen blinking through the entrance. Then back at Ilya.

“I need to figure out what I’m doing,” Shane said. “Either find an airport hotel or stay and get on the first flight back to Dubrovnik in the morning.”

Ilya looked at him a moment longer.

“You are insane,” Ilya said.

“Probably,” Shane agreed. “Well in my defense, your phone was in airplane mode.”

“That’s not a defense.”

“Well, it’s a contributing factor. What else do you want me to do?”

“Shane. You flew from Croatia,” Ilya said. “To Finland, in the middle of the night, because my phone was in airplane mode. Do you hear what I’m saying?”

“Ehh. When you say it like that,”

“How else would you like me to say it?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said. “Maybe start with the part where it worked?”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment.

Then he answered composedly, holding back a laugh. “Yes. It worked. I’m glad you’re here like a crazy person.”

“Thank you,” Shane said, proudly.

Shane turned his empty glass. Looked at the bar then at Ilya.

“I still can’t believe,” Shane said. “That this is what happened to us.” He shook his head slightly. “A delayed flight, a truth or dare game in the airport bar.”

“It was a very good game,” Ilya said.

“It was,” Shane said. “Although—” He considered. “I think it was more truth than dare, actually. A lot more truth.”

“Mm,” Ilya murmured. “Yes. I think I know approximately ten things about you now.”

“A thousand more to go,” Shane countered.

“More like a million,” Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Whatever you say, *doctor*.” Shane punctuated the last word with a teasing voice and teasing eyes.

“Shane, *don’t*.” Ilya pointed a finger at him lovingly. “I can’t have you calling me that when I’m about to go. It will be the end of me.”

“Okay, *doctor*.” Shane said it one more time.

“You—”

Shane bit his lower lip and raised his eyebrow. “Okay, fine,” Shane said. “It was a good game.” A beat. “Although I would argue the game never actually ended.”

“No,” Ilya agreed. “It didn’t.” He picked up his whiskey. “And for the record, you owe me a dare, I think, because I *dare you twice*.”

Shane looked at him with a calculating expression.

“I dare you twice, Shane. First time in this bar,” Ilya said. “And then,” The corner of his mouth twisted. “Hotel bathroom.”

“I remember,” Shane said. He swallowed. “Probably the hottest thing that has ever happened to me,” Shane said. “In an airport bar and in a hotel bathroom in Dubrovnik. In all my life basically.”

A silence falls between them again. This time warm and filled with the memories of these exact chairs three days ago and those exact tiles from their hotel bathroom.

“I cannot wait,” Ilya said. “To do all of that again.”

Shane looked at him.

“All of it,” Ilya said. His eyes darken. The Ilya Rozanov that existed beneath all that composure. “I cannot wait to watch you fall apart again.”

“Is that so,” Shane said, his eyes moved from Ilya’s eyes to his mouth and stayed there.

“That’s all I have been thinking about, Shane,” Ilya said.

“Watching me.. fall apart?”

“Among other things,” Ilya said.

Shane looked at him for a long moment. Something shifted in his expression, that same warm helpless look that appeared whenever he was losing an argument and enjoying it far more than winning. He picked up his glass, only to set it back down and look toward the bar.

“Okay then.” Shane said.

“Okay what?”

“It’s my turn,” Shane said. He looked at Ilya. “You dare me twice already. The bar and the shower.” A breath. “Which means—”

“Ah, right. It is your turn,” Ilya said. Settling back slightly. The expression of someone who had been waiting for this and was not going to rush it. “Go on.”

Shane looked at him.

The bar around them and the same flickering light that had been doing this since Thursday evening, since two strangers had sat at this corner. One had ordered a whiskey and one had ordered a Moscow mule and neither of them had known what they were beginning.

He felt his face doing something warm and slightly helpless and not entirely dignified.

“I dare you,” Shane said. “To come to my cottage this summer.”

Ilya went still, his gaze not leaving Shane’s.

“Come to my house. We will have so much fun. It is so private,” Shane stopped. Then sounded more honest. “We can have a week or even two. We will be completely alone, together.”

He looked at Ilya with a hopeful expression on his face.

“I need more time with you. I want to learn everything. Every possible version,” Shane continued quietly. “Of you. I want the Monday version, the morning, afternoon, late night version. I want to find out what you’re like when nothing is happening.”

Ilya looked at him.

The distance entirely gone, he is looking at Shane who had flown from Dubrovnik to Helsinki in the middle of the night and had said the words and had stayed to say more words and was now, at an airport bar at 3am, daring him to come to his cottage this summer.

Ilya smiled. All the way.

“Okay,” Ilya said.

He looked at Shane.

“I’m coming to the cottage.” Ilya said.

Shane looked at him and his eyes were bright and hopeful. He reached across the bar and his hand found Ilya's and it was already there. They sat in the dim light, a week at a cottage somewhere in their near future and Ilya thought, *some delays are the best thing that has ever happened to you.*

He had not been looking for any of this. Neither had Shane, probably. And apparently that was the whole point.

The thing you find when you've stopped looking is the thing you were actually *running toward* all along. It has been there the whole time. You just had to run in enough wrong directions to arrive at the right one.

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## Chapter End Notes

Yep, we're going to the cottage next 😊 and there may or may not be one last round of truth or dare. So consider this your formal invitation: **I DARE YOU ALL** to leave your most fun/sexy/fluff or whatever truth or dare ideas in the comments. I'm dedicating the last chapter to you, so I'll pick a few and write them into scenes.

Don't hold back 😊

### ***Theme Moodboard:***

#### **Mary Oliver — The Summer Day (1990)**

*"Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life*

#### **Adam Phillips — Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life (2012)**

*"It is as if, oddly, you were waiting for someone but you didn't know who they were until they arrived. Whether or not you were aware that there was something missing in your life, you will be when you meet the person you want... You recognize them with such certainty because you already, in a certain sense, know them; and because you have quite literally been expecting them, you feel as though you have known them for ever, and yet, at the same time, they are quite foreign to you. They are familiar foreign bodies."*

#### **Jorge Luis Borges — The Garden of Forking Paths (1941)**

*"This web of time—the strands of which approach one another, bifurcate, intersect or ignore each other through the centuries—embraces every possibility. We do not exist in most of them. In some you exist and not I, while in others I do, and you do not."*

### ***Playlist Moodboard***

**Gracie Abrams — Risk**

*"Look at me now.  
Said I wouldn't do it, but I hunted you down."  
"God, I'm jumping in the deep end.  
It's more fun to swim in.  
Heard the risk is drownin', but I'm gonna take it."*

**The Script — The Man Who Can't Be Moved**

*"Going back to the corner where I first saw you.  
Gonna camp in my sleeping bag, I'm not gonna move."  
"Cause if one day you wake up and find that you're missing me.  
And your heart starts to wonder where on this Earth I could be.  
Thinkin' maybe you'll come back here to the place that we'd meet.  
And you'll see me waiting for you on the corner of the street.  
So I'm not moving, I'm not moving."*

**Paramore — You Are The Only Exception**

*"Maybe I know somewhere.  
Deep in my soul, that love never lasts.  
And we've got to find other ways.  
To make it alone or keep a straight face.  
And I've always lived like this.  
Keeping a comfortable distance.  
And up until now, I had sworn to myself.  
That I'm content with loneliness.  
Because none of it was ever worth the risk.  
Well, you are the only exception."*

**Alex Warren — Before You Leave Me**

*"I'm not ready to let you go, so.  
Just give me one more night.  
Hold me like you're still mine.  
Oh, love me for right now.  
Before you leave me."*

Complete Spotify playlist [here](#).

## Chapter 8: Elevated Heart Rate

### Chapter Summary

***Previously on Dare You Twice:*** Shane left the wedding reception and finally realized that the safe little life he'd built was a *cage*, and he'd been holding the key the whole time. Ilya is gone and he decided to do something about it. No taxi, no time, until the uncle from Volgograd, rolled up in a Mercedes and drove him to the airport. *Love is love*, the man said, end of discussion. So Shane fly to Helsinki, ran for his life and caught Ilya at the gate (not even the right gate) and somewhere past midnight at the same bar where it all started, he dared him one last time: *come to the cottage*. Ilya said yes.

### Chapter Notes

This last chapter was such a joy to write, I can't even explain it. I mentally packed my bags, moved into the cottage, and stayed there until it was done (*hence the delay and the 19k extended chapter but I regret nothing!*). There are also a few easter eggs in here, homage and love letters to some fics and authors I've absolutely adored lately. You'll know them if you know them ♥ and for the record, I tried to work in as many of your truth or dare suggestions as I could but I couldn't fit everything and it genuinely pained me 😞 You'll be alternating from both Shane and Ilya POV!

So, without further ado,  
♪♪ *I wave goodbye to the end of beginning—*

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

Moscow had a particular quiet sense to it at midnight, and Ilya had always been someone who liked it.

The apartment helped. It was a good apartment. Not too small, efficient and everything where it should be. The books were arranged by a logic only he used and the single chair by the window angled at exactly the degree that caught the morning light. He had chosen every object in it on purpose. He had lived in it for six years, and in that time it had been, reliably enough. A place to return to. A place that asked nothing of him and gave him back precisely what he put in.

Although, it was not enough tonight.

He had noticed this around eleven, and he had noticed it again at half past. Now it was past midnight and he was lying on top of the covers, fully dressed and fully awake, staring at a ceiling with a full realization that he should have been asleep two hours ago because he had a clinic at seven in the morning. He knew the math. He was a doctor. He counted things. He could have told anyone the exact cost of being awake this late in the morning.

He picked up his phone anyway.

He had been doing this lately and he was aware of it the same way he was aware of any symptom. Which with interest and a certain clinical detachment. And the cause of the symptoms, he realized, was nine time zones to the west and just finished hockey practice, probably. And Ilya was here, in the dark, opening an application he had reinstalled for the sole and undignified purpose of looking at *him*.

Ilya had not been built for wanting like this. It felt wrong, almost. To want someone this much, this early, this badly. It ran against everything he understood about himself. Against the ordered, sufficient man in the ordered, sufficient apartment. The one for whom *enough* had always been, exactly and unremarkably, enough.

And yet.

He moved through Shane's instagram profile with what he told himself was detached curiosity.

Hockey posts first. Shane on the ice, fast and certain. The short video was a slow goal replay Ilya had watched more times than he would ever admit out loud. The way the arena came up out of its seats and the way Shane's face broke open into something completely unguarded for exactly one second before the helmet and the gloves and the bodies of his teammates swallowed him back up. Just that *one second*. Ilya kept finding the one second.

Then the interview clips. Shane in a suit, saying media-trained nothings in his careful public voice.

And then there was the Tag Heuer Aquaracer campaign, the watch he was currently the face of. Shane shot in expensive grey light and styled to within an inch of his life. Composed, immaculate, his jaw set at the precise angle. The brand-ambassador version of Shane Hollander. A performance within a performance. He looked, in it, like a man who had never gotten lost in his own arena, who had never sat in an airport bar at midnight and turned a copper cup in slow circles because he could not work out how to say the thing he wanted to say.

Ilya knew that man too.

He looked at the photograph—the suited, retouched, magnificent stranger—and thought about the freckles they had edited off the bridge of his nose. The freckles that Ilya had counted once, in better light, and had planned to count again when the opportunity arises.

He kept scrolling.

And then he stopped.

There was a new post that was put up that day, by the look of it. Shane by a lake in the early morning light. He stood on top of a yoga mat that laid out on the boards of a dock. He wears soft clothes and barefoot, moving like he'd forgotten the camera was recording him.

Ilya stilled.

There it was. The version inside the version. It's not the Aquaracer ambassador and not the media-trained hockey golden boy but the actual man that Ilya had found in the dark airport bar a few weeks ago and shared a room and a hotel bathroom in Dubrovnik.

He should have kept scrolling but he watched the video instead.

Shane moved through the poses with an ease Ilya had not expected of a man whose whole profession basically depended on speed and body collision. Shane moved in a slow, controlled wave, his body lengthening and folding in the early light. Ilya noticed that it was a downward dog yoga pose, the body folding down into it, hips lifting, that long line running from wrists to the high point of him. And Ilya's brain, unhelpfully, created the following scenario: himself behind Shane, hands spread over those hips, pressing in against the precise tilt of Shane's ass.

He shifted on the bed.

Then Shane moved to the next pose. There was the cobra pose, Ilya noticed. The chest lifting, the throat bared to the morning, and the unhelpful part of Ilya's brain put him directly underneath Shane. Ilya on his back. Shane braced over him, arched into that lift, that bared throat hung above Ilya's mouth at precisely the right height, close enough to set his mouth to.

His pants felt tighter now.

Then the bridge pose. Shane's hips pressing up, holding at the top, lowering, pressing up again in a really *really* slow rhythm. And Ilya's mind, fully on the gutter now, met each lift with a thrust of its own, finding the precise place Shane's hips would come up against him, the pace already his, he would thrust again, and again, and—

He swallowed.

Then his thumb moved.

It was muscle memory, that small automatic gesture of someone who had been looking too long at a thing he liked and double tapped it.

*Blyat.* Ilya cursed under his breath.

He sat up.

He stared at it. The red heart icon. He had tapped the *liked* button. And his name attached to it, timestamped, undeniable, sitting now in a notification nine time zones west that said with perfect clarity, *I am awake at this hour, and I am looking at you.*

His thumb hovered over it. One tap back and he can undo this. That would be the rational move. Ilya looked at the little red heart a moment longer and he let it stay.

He was not entirely sure when, exactly, he had become someone who left the vulnerable evidence like this. Somewhere over the Adriatic, maybe. Somewhere in an airport bar. But there it was, and there he was, and he found that the embarrassment did not come. What came instead was something closer to relief. *I am awake at this hour, and I am looking at you, and I want you to know.*

A few seconds later, the phone buzzed in his hand.

The screen lit with a name and a candid photo from the Dubrovnik wedding reception, he was mid-laugh and not looking at the camera.

*Shane.*

He answered on the second rung.

“Hi,” Ilya said.

“So.” He could hear Shane’s grin in his voice. He could hear, behind it, the whole of Shane’s late afternoon, a window open somewhere, a bright city going about its business. “It’s midnight there.”

“Past midnight.”

“Right, it’s past midnight. And you’re awake?”

“Well, haven’t you heard, I am a doctor. We do not sleep. It is in the oath.”

“Uh-huh.” Insufferably pleased with himself. “See, the funny thing is, I just got a notification. Somebody liked my post from this morning. At—” the sound of him checking, drawing it out, a man enjoying himself enormously, “twelve forty-one a.m. Moscow time. Wild hour for an Instagram like, Ilya.”

Ilya looked at the small red heart, still glowing there, entirely unrepentant.

“Instagram is malfunctioning,” he said. “Known bug. I will write to them.”

“You liked my yoga video.”

Ilya can hear the smug grin in Shane’s voice, he holds the smile himself.

“It’s right there. I’m looking at it right now.” Shane continued before Ilya could say anything.

“Then we are both awake looking at things we should not,” Ilya countered.

Shane let out a small amused laugh and it landed under Ilya’s ribs like it always did. Nine time zones of dark and ocean between them, the sound landing as if the distance between them had simply ceased to exist.

This was the shape of it now. Three weeks of it.

They had built a rhythm. The same hour each day bent slightly to fit two schedules a world apart. Shane at the tail of his afternoon. Ilya at the dead center of his night. They had tried, the first week, to find a sensible hour, and failed, because there was simply no such thing as sensible hour, because one of them was always going to be standing in a different part of the day. So they had stopped trying for *sensible*. Shane called from his bright penthouse and Ilya answered from his dark bedroom and somewhere over the top of the world the two halves of the day met in the middle and held.

“What’s it like there,” Shane said. He always asked this and it had become a thing.

“Dark.”

“Yeah?”

“Very dark. I’m just laying in my bed now,” Ilya looked at the window, the city low and quiet beyond it. “And there?”

“Sun’s still up. It’s almost sunset now, I think. There’s this golden light reflection on the floor,” A pause, softer. “Not like Dubrovnik sunset but I think you’d like it.”

“I would like the floor?”

“Shut up. You know what I mean.”

Ilya did know what Shane meant, even under the chirping, *especially* under the chirping, the *want* and *longing* sitting there plain as day.

And on it went for another thirty minutes of easy conversation. The minutes slipped past as though there were no clinic shift in the morning. Ilya watching the dark ceiling and not minding the cost that he had to pay tomorrow.

“Go to sleep,” Shane said eventually. Gentle now, the tease gone out of him. “You’ve got patients in the morning.”

“I know.”

“Ilya.”

“I know.” He lay in the dark with the phone warm against his face. “Shane,” he stopped.

It came over him like this sometimes, at the end of the calls, when there was nothing left to say. A specific ache and longing. He missed Shane in the body. The weight of him asleep, the heat he threw off like a furnace, the freckles Ilya had counted once and meant to count again, the sound he made coming apart. The plain density of another person in a room that was, tonight, so very empty of him. He missed having him in the same hour and the same light. He was tired, he found, of longing for someone in a different part of the day.

“I miss you,” he said.

A silence on the line that was its own kind of answer.

“Six days,” Shane said in a low voice.

“Six days,” Ilya agreed.

And then came the choreography of two people who did not want to hang up hanging up anyway—the goodnights, the *go to sleep*, the *okay, okay*—and the line went quiet, and the apartment settled back around him exactly as it had always been, ordered, sufficient and..

Enough.

It had been enough for six years.

Ilya lay there a while longer in the dark, the phone going cold in his hand, and found that he was no longer interested in just *enough*.

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Shane had said the sentence so many times in the last four weeks that it had started to feel like it belonged to someone else.

*I'm seeing someone and it's a man.* Or some version of that. He had a few versions now, calibrated to the audience, which was its own kind of exhausting. There is the short one, the careful one, the one with the joke built into it so the other person would know it was safe to laugh. He had become, in a month, fluent in a language he had spent most of his life refusing to learn and speak out loud.

It had started with Rhys on a balcony in Dubrovnik at two in the afternoon with the wedding still thudding away below them, Rhys newly and gloriously married to Svetlana and Shane had opened his mouth and said the true thing.

Then home to his parents, at the kitchen table, his mother's hands going still around her mug then pulled him into a long teary hug. Then Rose, then Jackie and Hayden, one careful conversation at a time. Jackie had cried and then apologized for crying. Rose had said she'd suspected for years and was mostly hurt he'd thought he had to hide it from her. Hayden had just hugged him, too hard and too long, and said nothing at all, which from Hayden meant everything.

All of them lovely. All of them good. He knew how lucky that made him, he had read enough in online forums, late at night, to know exactly how lucky.

And still.

And still it had taken something out of him he hadn't expected. Every conversation was like a small surgery. Being opened up, being looked at, being known in a new way by people who'd thought they already had the whole picture of him. Four weeks of it. Four weeks of watching the people he loved rearrange their idea of him in real time, gently and lovingly, while he sat very still and let them. It was good and frankly, it was the best thing he had ever done.

And still, it had left him feeling like a book everyone he loved had now read. Annotated in the margins, spine cracked open to the same few pages, no part of him left private.

He felt so worn out.

Which was why he'd been counting down to this. He needed the cottage, the two weeks and Ilya.

The light had turned gold across the passing highway, stretching long over the hood of the car. The same gold he'd described down the phone six days ago to a man laying in the dark. Six days. He'd counted those too, in his own way, daily calculation of *soon, soon, not yet, soon*. And now it was today.

The airport signs were starting to appear overhead, green and official, the word ARRIVALS doing something to his heart rate. Shane became aware that his whole body had been getting ready for this for a whole month.

His hands were too tight on the wheel. He made them loosen. They tightened again. He found a spot in the short-term parking lot. Checked the arrivals board on his phone for what was probably the ninth time.

*Moscow — Flight HR1410 — Landed.*

And the way his heart flipped.

His heart beating faster than normally would as he sent his real-time location so Ilya could find him.

He can see from where he parks how the entrance doors opened and closed, opened and closed, releasing travelers in groups. Shane watched them with his pulse going like he was about to take a faceoff, scanning, scanning, and then—

*Ilya.*

And it was stupid, how it hit him. Four weeks of a face on a screen and a voice in his ear at random hours. And now there he was, three-dimensional and unfairly real, coming through the doors in a black shirt with a bag over one shoulder, a suitcase and the little gold cross sat against a collarbone that had gone faintly tan. Shane's whole body lit up at the sight of him.

Then Ilya saw him.

And then he came, crossing the road toward Shane through the slow churn of the pickup lane in no apparent hurry at all, while Shane sat there gripping the wheel and dying by the minutes.

Ilya went around the back of the car.

Shane watched him in the rear-view mirror as Ilya caught his eyes in the glass and held them, and *smirked*. He dropped out of frame, the trunk opened, and the bags went in.

One minute later the passenger door opened and Ilya folded himself into the seat alongside him. Close, real, smelling of airplanes and cold air and *him*. Ilya pulled the door shut, and turned to look at Shane with the smirk still living at the corner of his mouth.

“Hi,” Shane said. It came out wrecked.

“Hello,” Ilya said. Composed and a little insufferable. Then, very slightly, the eyes glazed over Shane’s whole body and the car’s interior.

“This is yours.” Ilya continued.

“Yeah.”

“The captain of the Montreal team drives a Jeep.”

“It’s British. Practical, good in the snow.” Shane said.

Ilya regarded the Jeep a moment longer with the grave attention of a man examining a symptom. “Interesting,” he said.

“You can’t just say ‘*interesting*’ and not tell me what it means,” Shane said defensively.

“Nevermind, it’s just so you,” Ilya countered, still smirking and not leaving Shane’s gaze.

Shane’s face felt hot so he started to drive.

It was all fine, right up until Shane pulled into the highway and Ilya—looking out the window, perfectly casual—laid a hand on Shane’s thigh.

Just rested it there, at first. Then he moved it. Slow, up and down, the heel of his palm dragging along the inseam of Shane’s short linen pants while he asked some mild question about the drive that Shane did not hear a single word of. Shane swallowed. He gripped the wheel a little too hard until his knuckles hurt. He kept his eyes very hard on the road.

“You’re going to make me crash,” Shane managed.

“Then drive carefully,”

Ilya’s hand kept moving, patient, going nowhere and everywhere at once, and Shane understood with total clarity that this was a test, that Ilya knew exactly what he was doing.

“You’re doing this on purpose,” Shane said glaring at the road.

“Doing what?” Ilya said, and did not move his hand.

“You know what.”

Ilya’s gaze dropped into Shane’s crotch and there’s no hiding of the fabric pulled taut in his pants. Shane’s half-hard already. Ilya smirked, amused.

“Mm. I don’t know what you’re talking about. I am sitting in a car. I am looking at your city. It is very—” a considering pause, the heel of his palm dragging inside the inseam of Shane’s shorts and gliding over his skin. “smooth.”

Shane gasped. “It’s not smooth, it’s—okay, can you *not*, I’m driving, I need blood in my—”

“In your what?” Ilya cut, his head snapped into Shane’s direction.

“Jesus. In my *brain*, Ilya, I need it in my brain to operate the vehicle,”

“Mm,” Ilya said, supremely unbothered, and did not remove the hand. Shane made a strangled noise, changed lanes with enormous care, and thought about boring hockey stuff in great and deliberate detail until it was safe to have other thoughts again.

Then, to save his own life, he turned into a grocery store lot. “We need food,” he announced. “Actually, there’s some food at the cottage, but I still need to grab some stuff and you might need something? Anyway, we’re stopping here.” Shane blabbered a string of sentences and decided quickly that he needed to calm down and the supermarket was his salvation.

Ilya, finally, mercifully, took his hand back. He looked at the supermarket, then at Shane, and the corner of his mouth did the thing. “You are running away from me,” he observed, “into a grocery store.”

“I’m *not* running away.” Shane glared at him.

“Yes,” Ilya said, opening his door. “I said what I said.”

Inside, under the flat white light, it felt stranger than Shane had expected. Four weeks of Ilya as a voice, a screen, a held breath at midnight, and now here he was, solid, pushing a cart one-handed down the cereal aisle and frowning at the Canadian brands. *Here*. In the most ordinary place on earth. It undid something in Shane, the bigness of the feeling against the smallness of the errand. He kept sneaking looks. He kept finding Ilya already looking back.

Shane had a list, of course. It lived in his phone, categorized as: Produce, Protein, Pantry, the cottage stuff in its own section. He pulled it up in the first aisle.

Ilya landed a glance at the list and held out his hand. Shane gave him the phone, a little proud, as Ilya scrolled and read the whole thing. He handed it back to Shane and said nothing.

They got halfway through the store. Shane checked it again at Protein, and a third time around the dairy case, thumbing down through his own neat categories. On the third round of the aisle, Ilya said, mildly, not looking up from the yogurt he was examining.

“You know what you need. You don’t need to check every minute.”

“The list is efficient,” Shane said.

“The list is giving me and probably you, anxiety,” Ilya said.

Shane stood there in the dairy aisle with his neat glowing categories and felt, abruptly, seen straight through just like he'd been feeling all month. Except this time it didn't cost him anything. This time it just struck through him, soft and exact.

He put the phone in his pocket.

It happened near the freezers. Ilya stopped, opened a door, took out a box of chocolate mint ice cream and set it in the cart without comment.

Shane looked at it. "Is that for you? Because I don't really eat that."

"It's for you."

"No, I mean—" He picked the box up, then put it back. "I don't eat that. It's a thousand calories of nothing."

Ilya took it out again. He didn't put it in the cart this time. He just held it, the box sweating cold in his hand, and looked at Shane with an expression that was carefully, not a lecture.

"You said you loved chocolate mint ice cream growing up," he said softly, not a question.

"Yeah but, it's not good for—"

"Shane, I understand how you eat. I do. It makes sense, for performance, for the season, your body is an instrument and you keep it tuned. This is reasonable. I am not arguing with it." He turned the box in his hand. "But the season is over. It ended two weeks ago. You are not in training. You are here, with me, going to a cottage by a lake, for two weeks."

A beat.

"And eating a thing because it makes you happy is not the opposite of taking care of yourself." Ilya continued.

Shane didn't say anything.

"The body remembers pleasure," Ilya said, quieter. "It is allowed to. You are allowed to."

And he put the ice cream box back in the cart.

This time Shane left it there.

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They paid, then they loaded the bags into the back, around Ilya's suitcase, and got back on the road. The city thinned out around them. The light stretched long and gold again.

At some point Ilya reached over, unplugged Shane's phone from the aux, and plugged in his own. He didn't ask, he just did it. Just like how you do a thing in a space you've decided is partly yours.

A song came on. Something Shane half-knew, something slow. About You by 1975.

 *You and I, we're alive—*

Shane kept his eyes on the road. The trees went by. Ilya's hand had found his thigh again, lighter this time, not teasing, just resting where it wanted to rest.

 *With nothing to do, I could lay and just look in your eyes—*

And that was the whole luxury of it, wasn't it. Two weeks of nothing to do. Two weeks of a man in the passenger seat he was allowed to just look at. He snuck a look and caught Ilya already looking back, the cross at his throat catching the gold light. The song continued.

 *And I miss you on a train, I miss you in the morning—*

He thought about every morning he'd woken up to a screen instead of a person. Ilya's voice in his ear at Moscow's midnight while the sun was still up here, the two of them stranded in different parts of the day. All the ordinary places he'd missed a person he'd known for one weekend. It made no sense, *and yet*.

 *I never know what to think about, I think about you—*

"This is a dangerous song to play while I'm driving," Shane said.

"You said this about my hand also." Ilya glanced at him and smirked.

"Everything you do is dangerous while I'm driving, seems like."

Ilya huffed, pleased, and let the song play, and did not move his hand.

After a while, "So what is the plan?"

"The plan?" Shane looked at him for a beat.

"Two weeks. You are a man with spreadsheets of plans," A glance. "What is the plan, for two weeks?"

And Shane, who genuinely had not made one, who'd thought of almost nothing else for a whole month except this moment and still produced neither plan or itinerary at all, said, "I actually don't have one."

Ilya went still.

"You don't have a plan," Ilya said.

"No."

"You. No plan." Ilya raised his eyebrows.

"No." Shane's heart did something reckless. "You're my only plan."

The stillness after that sentence had a different texture.

When Ilya spoke again his voice had gone careful, reaching for an amused witty tone but not quite making it. “So. What. You are going to— what?” A beat. “Do me? For two weeks?”

“Yep. Precisely,” Shane said, smug on his face.

And then it was very quiet in the car, and Shane’s face was on fire, and when he risked a look, he found that Ilya—the composed, contained, insufferable Ilya—had gone faintly and definitely pink at the tops of his ears, looking very hard out the window at absolutely nothing.

Shane grinned at the road. He’d done that. He’d made Ilya Rozanov blush.

The song played on. The trees opened up.

And then there it was. The lake came up first, flat and bright and gold-surfaced in the late afternoon. Then the cottage above it, solid and waiting, the whole of the next two weeks sitting there in the windshield, exactly the size of a beginning.

Shane slowed the car.

“Okay,” he said, quietly. “We’re here.”

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Ilya stepped through the door and into part of Shane’s life.

That was what it was. He understood it the moment the door swung in. A place could tell you about the person who lived in it if you knew how to read it. The small evidence of accumulated habit, the things kept, the things placed, the things returned to. And Ilya always knew how to read rooms.

He set his bags down and moved through the cottage at his own pace while Shane carried groceries past him with a slightly nervous energy.

He slowly scanned the whole place. The lake first, through the big window, the whole reason for the cottage, clearly, the room arranged to face it the way a plant faces a sun. Then the furniture, they looked worn, soft, some stuff mismatched, a sofa with a sag in one cushion that meant a person sat there and only there, year after year. There were water rings on the coffee table that had been there longer than Ilya had known Shane existed.

Books that hadn’t moved in a long time, their spines sun-faded in a row. A shelf of video games, the cases scuffed. The Criterion films collection lined up with a care that the rest of the room did not otherwise display.

And the kitchen, which was painted a shade of yellow so strange and so specific, not too bright, faintly aged, a colour no one would choose, that it could only have been chosen for a specific unknown reason. Ilya stood in the doorway of that yellow kitchen and felt something move through him that he did not, for once, immediately name.

This was the thing about it. He had known Shane in an airport, which belonged to no one. In a resort in Dubrovnik, which belonged to everyone. On social media, which belonged to a curated media image. In all of those places he had longed for Shane and never once stood inside his real life. He'd only ever had the version Shane packed and brought with him. This version was none of that, this was *just* Shane.

"I love it here," Ilya said plainly, stating the fact.

Shane, setting a groceries bag on the counter, went still. Ilya was starting to recognize that as the prelude to Shane about to say something he hadn't finished deciding to say. But then, he said it anyway, eyes still on the groceries.

"Well, you can always stay longer, or.. move here. I mean Canada, not—" Shane stuttered to finish his sentence. "You know what I mean."

A beat.

The refrigerator hummed. The lake did its bright work through the window. Shane looked like a man who wanted very much to take the sentence back and put it somewhere safe.

Ilya let it sit for a moment. Then, too casually, he said, "I have been looking into transferring out of Moscow, actually."

Shane's hands stopped. He looked up to face Ilya.

"There is a fellowship through my hospital. Two years, possibly three," Ilya turned a faded paperback over in his hands, examining the cover with great attention, not looking up. "The placements are in America." A pause, precisely weighted. "Or Canada."

Ilya did not say, *and now, I think mostly Canada*. He did not say, *I started looking the week after Dubrovnik*. He did not say, *I have already, in fact, narrowed down the choice into only Canada*. He set the paperback down, squared it to the edge of the shelf, and let Shane do the processing himself.

He could hear him doing it. The silence stretched as he counted something to himself.

When Ilya finally looked up, Shane was wearing an expression of such undefended, slightly stunned happiness. He clearly did not know what to do with that information. Ilya had to look at the lake for a moment, because the sight of Shane's hopeful face did something to his chest that he was not prepared to do anything about yet.

"So, Canada then?" Shane said carefully and hopefully.

"Possibly," Ilya said. And let him have it.

For a moment Shane just stood there glowing, and then he turned back to the groceries and started unpacking them with great unnecessary focus. A little smile escaped his face. Ilya saw it and immediately leaned close against the counter beside him. He passed him things to be put away. They fell into it easily, the small choreography of two people in a kitchen, the

questions about which cupboard, the chocolate mint ice cream going into the freezer where it would, Ilya intended, not be forgotten.

“What’s it actually like,” Shane asked, fitting cans onto a shelf. “The hospital. Your day. I only ever get you at the end of it.”

So Ilya told him all about it. The early start, the rounds, the particular ward, the colleague he tolerated and the one he didn’t. He doesn’t like to narrate himself often, but he found, telling it to Shane in the golden light, that he didn’t mind. Shane listened to the boring parts as carefully as the rest, the way he listened to everything, like the boring parts were where a person actually kept themselves.

“I can’t picture it,” Shane admitted. “Like, I know you’re a pediatrician. I *know* that. But I keep picturing you in the bar or the hotel room. Hard to see you in a white coat telling someone bad news.”

“I looked very good in a white coat.” Ilya said.

“Oh, I bet.” Shane smiled as he shut the cupboard. He turned and leaned back against the counter to face him, closer now, the groceries done, nothing left between them but the conversation and the dwindling gold light. “Bedside manners and everything?”

“Excellent bedside manner.” Ilya held his gaze. “Parents of patients always request me.”

“Yeah?” Shane said. It came out a little too quick. And then, recovering, slightly off-balance, reaching for a casual remark, “I wonder what you’d be like. As a doctor.”

It was a nothing line, just something a person said to fill a silence. But Ilya had spent thirty days thinking about this exact mouth saying things it hadn’t planned to say, and so he did not let it be nothing. He turned the words over.

“You don’t have to wonder,” Ilya said in a low voice. “I am very good at it.” He let that sit. “I’ll show you.” Ilya took a step toward and walked Shane back to the couch one step at a time.

Shane made a protest sound. “That’s— oh, okay, you mean like now?”

“If you want. But I’m going to need you to be *very* still,” Ilya said, with a certain register. “This is a medical examination.”

“Ilya, you can’t—” Shane started.

“I can,” Ilya said. “I’m the doctor.”

Shane made a sound that was not quite a laugh and not quite anything else.

Ilya lifted his hand and pressed two fingers to the pulse point at the side of Shane’s throat. He had found a thousand pulses, it was the most ordinary thing in the world for doctors like him, his fingers knew the place the same way they knew a doorknob, except that this pulse was

going fast, faster than rest, faster than the conversation warranted, hammering up against his fingertips like it wanted out.

“Elevated heart rate,” Ilya said. “Interesting.” He smirked.

He looked up at Shane’s face and noticed the open, wanting expression of it. The color high in his cheeks. The eyes went dark.

“Hm. Pupils are dilated,” Ilya said, his gaze never leaving Shane’s. He let his thumb drag, once, across the side of Shane’s throat before releasing it. “This is a symptom.”

“Of *what*,” Shane said, and it was supposed to be a chirp but his voice had gone soft in the middle and given him away.

Ilya didn’t answer that. He tipped Shane’s chin up with two knuckles, examining. The light caught the flush spreading down from Shane’s cheekbones to jaw to the open collar of his shirt. “You’re flushed. Are you running a fever or—” He stopped and watched Shane face losing its composure.

“Didn’t know doctors could be such a tease,” Shane rolled his eyes clearly trying to look annoyed but Ilya noticed the way Shane tracked his gaze from Ilya’s mouth to eyes as he wet his lips. Shane wanted this.

“Lie down.” Ilya said as he pushed Shane back to the couch.

Thirty days crashing in at once when their mouths met. Shane surged up into it with both hands fisted in Ilya’s shirt and a noise in his throat like something coming loose. Ilya let him have that. He let Shane drag him down onto the couch, let himself be pulled into the heat of it, kissed him hard and open. One hand bracing beside Shane’s head and the other already pushing up under the hem of his shirt to find the warm plane of his stomach. Shane gasped into his mouth. Arched up. Thirty days, gone, collapsed, only this.

And then, against his own better instincts and entirely on purpose, Ilya pulled back.

“I said, be still,” he said. “I’m not finished examining you.”

Shane’s eyes opened. “You’re *joking*.”

“I never joke about medical examinations.”

He pressed Shane back down into the cushions with the flat of one hand against his sternum, one hand holding his wrist. His touch is gentle but certain, the pressure of someone listening to a heartbeat. He pressed two fingers below Shane’s collarbone. Skated his palm, slowed down the line of his ribs, counting them, actually counting them, *one two three*, and watched Shane’s stomach jump under his hand. He thumbed at the soft skin inside his wrist. Lifted the wrist, pressed his mouth to the pulse there, and felt it go wild.

“Mm. Responsive,” Ilya said, against Shane’s wrist, like he was writing it down somewhere. *Responsive*. As if his own pulse weren’t doing precisely the same thing.

Shane's hips shifted up, searching and chasing, then Ilya pressed him flat again.

"Don't move," he said. "I didn't say you could move."

"You're being—" Shane's breath caught. "You're unbelievable, oh my god Ilya—"

"I need you to breathe," Ilya said flat and even. "In and out." He waited. Watched Shane try, watched the inhale go ragged and the exhale shake on its way out. "Yes. Like that."

He kept on like that for a long time. He took Shane apart with his hands and his mouth, slow, and thorough. Teeth at his throat, tongue at his nipple, a hand sliding low and gripping just enough to make Shane's hips buck and then going still. Every place that made him gasp and shudder, he learned, and saved. Every time Shane got close to something, every time his breathing started to climb and his hands started to grab, Ilya eased back and slowed down. Pressed two fingers to a pulse and pronounced it *interesting* and felt Shane come apart.

"Ilya." It was nearly a whine now. "Ilya, *please*, come on, can we just—"

Ilya moved his mouth from the length of Shane's neck to his jaw and stopped there. The lightest of the touch.

"If you're being a good patient," Ilya murmured, mouthing the words against the corner of Shane's jaw, "I'll reward you." A pause, while Shane shuddered. "*If*."

"I hate you. I hate you so much." Shane whimpered.

"Your heart rate disagrees."

Shane made a wrecked, furious sound and dropped his head back against the cushion, throat bared, hands twisting uselessly in Ilya's grip because Ilya had told him not to move and Shane clearly was trying to obey. That part undid Ilya more than anything else. He had to stop and just look at it for a moment. The flush all the way down his chest. The mouth red and open. The eyes wet at the corners with sheer painful want.

"You're—" Shane swallowed. "You're not even going to— we're just going to—"

"We have two weeks, *solnyshko*," Ilya said.

He said it against the corner of Shane's mouth, so close it was barely sound.

"Two weeks. I want to savor this." He brushed his lips along Shane's mouth to his jaw, slow. "I don't want to rush it. We have time. For once, we have time."

A month ago there had been no time at all. There had been a closing bar and a departure board and a dare made in the dark with the recklessness of people who believed they were never going to see each other again when the weekend ended. Everything between them had been built on borrowed minutes. And now there were not minutes. There were *days*. Fourteen of them, stacked up and waiting, and Ilya wanted to spend them like a rich man for once, slowly, on purpose, savoring every single one.

So he did the hardest thing he had done in as long as he remembered.

He pulled back.

He sat up, off Shane, off the couch, and stood. He ran a hand through his own hair, and arranged his face into something composed.

Shane stayed sprawled where he'd been left. Wrecked and breathing like he'd skated on ice for three periods non stop. Shane looked up at Ilya with an expression of such pure betrayed devotion that Ilya nearly lost his nerve entirely and got back down on that couch and gave him everything.

Nearly.

"Come on," Ilya said instead. He held out his hand. "I want to see the sunset over the lake."

"*Ilya*." Shane pleaded.

"It's a good sunset. Best time of the day." He flexed his offered fingers, patient. "You can be mad outside."

For a moment Shane just looked at Ilya's hand with such an annoyed expression. Shane huffed out a breath, and tried to glare but didn't manage, the almost-smile breaking through instead, helpless, like something being taken from him against his will.

He took Ilya's hand.

He let himself be pulled up off the couch, unsteady, flushed and furious. And he followed Ilya out toward the water, where the light was going down slow and gold and there was, for once, no flight to catch and no last call and no clock running out. It's just the two of them and a long evening and a long beginning.

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They'd done dinner, it was something simple, Shane cooking, Ilya offering commentary on the cooking that was forty percent questioning the recipe and sixty percent hovering close enough to count as affection. Now the light was off the lake and the cottage had gone soft, and somehow they'd ended up on the couch. All day they'd been doing the careful, controlled *savoring* pace. Now, a quiet house and the two of them, and the distance was finally allowed to close. They sat on the opposite side of the couch. Shane could feel the warmth of Ilya's feet against his. Neither of them moved away from it.

"Let's continue our game. Truth or dare," Shane said. Half a joke, he fully expected Ilya's eye-roll.

But Ilya didn't roll his eyes. He considered it seriously.

"Dare." Ilya said with a certain finality.

“Oh, okay, I didn’t think you’d actually—” Shane sat up a little straighter. The last time there’d been a dare between them it had been an airport bar at midnight and it had detonated his entire life, so he should probably take this seriously.

“Okay. Dare. I dare you, well— us, to be honest for the whole two weeks, let’s just say what we’re actually thinking and say how we really feel. No acting. No deflecting into a joke when it gets close to something real. We have to tell the truth, both of us.” Shane’s eyes went softer but with determination. “That’s the dare.”

Ilya looked at him a moment longer. Something moved behind his eyes.

“This is a dangerous dare, Shane,” he said quietly.

“Yeah, well. You started the first dangerous dare in the airport. Remember?” Heat crept through his face.

“I did.” A pause. “Alright. I can do honest. If we’re talking about truths,” Ilya settled back into the cushion, his feet against Shane’s. “then might as well I go next. Truth. What is your wildest fantasy?” The corner of his mouth smirked. “Be honest, remember.”

Shane glared, he wanted to deflect but he just made a dare that said he couldn’t. So he didn’t.

“So, there’s a bar in Montreal,” he started. “well, not a normal bar exactly. I think it’s called Wolfbird? It’s a private, secretive, exclusive member only. It’s a—” he gestured, his face going red, “a kink bar. I’ve heard about it for years. Never been. Couldn’t ever exactly walk in as, you know. Me.” He took a deep breath. “But now, I think about going with you. I thought about just being somewhere like that, with you, and being *allowed* to explore things and not hiding it. That’s my fantasy.”

Ilya held Shane’s eyes for a second, and said in a low voice, “Consider it done.”

Shane’s face lit up.

“Your turn. Ask me.” Ilya said.

Shane moved and adjusted his seat cushion. “Okay. Do you want a dog?”

Ilya was quiet for a beat. “Actually. I had one.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. His name is Chernysh. This was a long time ago. He’s a black labrador, the most intelligent and sleepy dog, the best animal I have ever known.” He said it with a solemn voice. “He passed when I was in medical school. Since then I have not been home enough to deserve another one. Maybe one day.” A small shrug, and then, turning it. “You? Dog or cat.”

“I’m more of a cat person.”

“Mm. Makes sense.” Ilya deadpan. “You look like an angry kitten sometimes.”

Shane threw the nearest pillow at his head. “I do *not*—”

“See? You do, *kotenok*. Especially now.” Ilya smirked.

“Stop being an asshole.”

“You keep saying this.” Ilya caught the pillow, set it neatly in his own lap, supremely pleased.

Shane let out an earnest laugh, and then the laugh settled into something more careful as he picked at the corner of the pillow. “Can I ask you something,” He kept his eyes down. “And I want to say first, I haven’t asked you this because it honestly doesn’t matter to me, not even a little, but I realized I don’t actually *know* for sure, and I want to know you, so.. I know you’ve been with Sveta but, since we’ve been together, I’m not sure if you just realized that you only liked men? Or..?” Shane danced around the question because he was not sure if it would land right.

“Both,” Ilya said it easily. No weight on it at all. “Men, women. Always both for me. I always know this.” A glance. “And you? Same question. Though I think I already know the answer.”

“Yeah, so— I thought I liked both too, for a long time.” Shane turned the pillow over. “I always knew I liked men because you know, *Rhys*. But also, I dated girls during my early freshman year. They’re nice girls. I liked them because they’re funny and easy to hangout with, but I never really wanna kiss or sleep with them, you know. Figured that was just what it was supposed to feel like in a relationship, that plain flat feeling,” He huffed. “And then one day, there was this house party. I sneaked to a roof and ended up next to some guy, don’t even remember his name, and we were smoking pot, and he did the thing where you breathe it into the other person’s mouth. Blowback style? Whatever it’s called.” His ears were on fire. “And it was— Ilya, it was *hotter* than everything I’d ever done with any girl combined. We literally just smoking. And I lay awake all night going, *oh*, is that what it’s supposed to feel like. That’s the night I figured out I wasn’t bisexual. I was just gay. Fully and completely gay.”

Ilya was quiet for a respectful beat. Then, with a perfectly dry remark, “Whoever that guy is, I need to thank him for your awakening.”

Shane lost it, he got up and shoved him, and Ilya let himself be shoved, and for a second it was just that, two people laughing on a couch in a warm yellow-lit house with the dark lake outside.

When it settled, Shane went quiet again. The honest dare pulling him somewhere truer.

“Okay. Last one.” Shane picked his words carefully. “Have you ever imagined us somewhere else? Somewhere that isn’t here. Maybe.. in the future?” Shane watched Ilya’s expression, the minute those words left his mouth, he wanted to take it back. *Is it too fast to ask this question* he wondered.

“Yes,” Ilya said immediately. No hesitation at all. “All sorts of places.” He continued.

“Moscow, my city, it’s complicated there, for us, you understand. But there are ways, if we are careful. I want to show you places where I grew up.” A breath. “Then, I see us in Helsinki. At least past the airport this time. We owe it to Helsinki. We sat in one bar in one airport and changed everything and never once stepped outside. We should go back and actually see it.” A small, private almost-smile. “Then Paris. Obviously. I don’t care that it’s obvious. Zurich, I can’t tell you why Zurich. I just see us there.” A pause, softer now. “And there is a village in Iceland. The west, between the fjords. Patreksfjörður. A tiny fishing village that I have never been. But I see us there too.”

He looked at Shane.

“I see us everywhere, Shane,” he said plainly. The honest dare, paid in full. “Everytime I think of places, you are already in it.”

And Shane couldn’t speak for a second, because this was *Ilya*, and he’d just laid out an entire atlas of the two of them, like he’d been furnishing a future of weeks, months, *years* ahead and simply never mentioned it.

“...Patreksfjörður,” Shane managed finally. “You even know how to say it.”

“I looked it up.” The faint pink at his ears, again. “Several times.”

So Shane gave up. He leaned in and kissed him slow and soft and felt Ilya smile against his mouth.

The kiss ended slow and they just stayed there for a while, tangled loosely on the sagging couch, trading the small unremarkable things about each other.

At some point Shane reached over the arm of the couch for his book.

It was the most ordinary thing in the world and he didn’t think about it until he’d already done it. He pulled the paperback off the side table, found his place, and put on his reading glasses. The ones approximately four people on earth had ever seen him wear. The captain of Montreal Metros didn’t wear glasses. The Tag Heuer ambassador also definitely didn’t. But here, at night, at the cottage by the lake, with no one to be anyone for, Shane wore his glasses and read his book, and it was such a small unguarded thing that he forgot, for a second, that he had company.

Then he felt Ilya go still beside him. He looked over.

Ilya was watching him with an expression Shane couldn’t immediately place. Something cracked open, something undone.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Ilya said, in the voice that meant it was not nothing. And then he slowly moved, crawled up and over. He settled himself half onto Shane with his head coming to rest on Shane’s chest and kissed him once, soft and almost helpless, before tucking in against him.

Shane started to set the book down.

“No.” Ilya’s hand found his wrist. “Please. Keep reading.” A beat, and then, muffled into Shane’s shirt with enormous dignity, Ilya said, “Watching you read is good. The glasses are good. Do not stop.”

“...The glasses are good?”

“Mhm. The glasses are extremely good, Shane.”

Shane huffed, embarrassed and delighted, and went back to his book. And Ilya stayed there against his chest, watching him read in the lamplight with the dark lake breathing outside the window, and Shane turned pages he wasn’t really following, hyperaware of the weight of him, the warmth, the slow drag of a thumb against his ribs that gradually slowed and eventually stopped.

The jetlag took Ilya all at once. Between one page and the next, Ilya was simply asleep, face gone slack against Shane’s chest, breath deep and even, nine time zones finally cashing in.

Shane looked down at him.

And here was the thing, he was still half out of his mind. The whole day had been one long exercise in being wound up and never released. All this teasing and edging in the name of *savoring*. Shane was still, technically, mad about all of it. He could wake him. It would take nothing. A hand, a mouth, Ilya’s name whispered in his ear. The man was *right there*, warm and pliant and his.

But Ilya looked tired. His composure finally off his face, he looked younger like this, undefended in the way he never let himself be while awake and there were thirteen more nights after this one, and the *want* could wait.

So, Shane just looked. At the dark lashes, at the rise and fall of him, at the gold chain gone still at his throat. A rush of warmth went through him that had nothing to do with the edging and everything to do with the plain fact of it. That this was the version of his life now. A cottage by the lake, a couch, a tired man asleep on his chest who had, an hour ago, imagined them together in all sorts of places.

He set the book face-down on the lampside table unread. He didn’t reach for the lamp. He wasn’t ready to stop looking at Ilya yet.

Outside, the lake did its dark and patient move. Inside, Ilya breathed against him, slow and even and unbothered, for once entirely off the clock.

Shane kissed the top of his head and he held on.

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Ilya woke to the knowledge that he was not the first one awake.

He knew it before he opened his eyes. He knew it the way he knew a fever in a room, by the heat of it, by the restless shift of the mattress, by the breathing beside him that had no business being that fast this early.

He was a doctor afterall. He noticed things even half-asleep, even before his own brain had agreed to start the day. And the thing he noticed now, is lying very still with the gray morning light coming soft through the curtains. Shane was awake, and worked up, and lying pressed along the length of him like a man who had been waiting some time for permission to move.

Ilya opened one eye.

“Good morning, *solnyshko*,” he said.

Shane made a noise into his shoulder that was not a word.

“You are very warm,” Ilya observed. “And very—” he shifted, felt exactly how worked up, and let his mouth curve against the top of Shane’s head, continuing in a low voice, “awake.”

“Don’t,” Shane said.

“Don’t what.”

“Don’t do the *voice*.” Shane lifted his head. His hair was a disaster and his eyes were dark and his face had the expression of a man who had been arguing with himself for at least an hour and had just now lost. “I know what you’re going to say. I know you want to savor it, or take it slow, or whatever, the whole *we have time* thing—” he did a cruel little impression of Ilya’s accent on *time*, which Ilya noted away to be offended about later, “and that’s, fine, that’s very romantic of you, but I’m telling you right now, *fuck that*. Fuck that, and fuck you. I have been awake since six. We agreed yesterday to be honest with what we feel. Now I’m saying the thing I actually feel and the thing is I’m *pissed*, and I’m done waiting.”

“Shane, it’s not even twenty-four hours yet since I landed, yes? You remember that?” Ilya counters with amusement in his voice.

And then, because Shane had apparently decided that words were insufficient, he rolled up and over, one knee planting on either side of Ilya’s hips, settling his whole warm weight down on top of him and bracing both hands flat against Ilya’s chest. Pinning him, or trying to. Looking down at him, flushed, furious, ridiculous, beautiful.

Ilya looked up at him and felt his own pulse pick up, traitorously, against the heel of Shane’s hand.

“Mm,” Ilya said. He let the amusement show. “You want to fuck me, Shane Hollander?”

“Don’t say it like that.”

“Like what.”

“Like it’s some sort of a *medical diagnosis*,”

“You are presenting very strong symptoms,” Ilya said gravely. “I’m only—”

“*Oh my god*. You’re unbelievable.” Shane let out an exasperated huff and rolled his eyes.

“I’m only making an assessment.”

“I will leave,” Shane threatened him. “I will get up and walk into that lake and you will never —”

Ilya burst into laughter, and reached up to pull him down, and that was his first mistake. Because Shane, who had spent four weeks and one very long night being the one who chased, who had been edged half out of his mind on that car and that couch and made to *breathe, in and out*, that Shane had clearly been taking notes.

He let Ilya pull him almost all the way in. And then, at the last possible centimeter, when Ilya’s mouth was already parting for it, Shane turned his head.

Ilya’s kiss landed on his jaw.

“Hm,” Shane said. Insufferable. “Elevated heart rate. Interesting.”

“You are—” Ilya started, and went for him again, and Shane pulled back *again*, just out of reach, smiling now, the wicked one, the one Ilya had not yet learned how to defend against.

“Shane.”

“Yeah?” Shane said with a smug face.

“Come here.”

“You said you wanted to take it slow.”

“Maybe I changed my mind.” Ilya said, trying to chase his mouth again but Shane is a strong professional athlete and he clearly meant to pinned Ilya.

“No, no.” Shane dragged the very tips of his fingers down Ilya’s chest, slow, deliberate, mapping, and Ilya understood with a cold and delighted horror that he was being given his own medicine back, every minute of it. “We have *time*, Ilya. For once. We should *savor* it.” He ducked in and breathed against Ilya’s mouth and pulled away before it could become anything. “I don’t want to *rush*.”

“You are a terrible patient,” Ilya said. His voice had gone rough. He hated how rough it had gone.

“I’m a great patient. I’m the best patient you’ve ever had. I’m just—” another almost-kiss, another retreat, Ilya actually chasing it now, lifting his head off the pillow to follow Shane’s mouth like it was the last warm thing in a cold country, “what did you say yesterday? Oh right, *savoring it*.”

Shane’s face is the combination of revenge and challenge at the same bit.

“This is not savoring. This is—” Ilya groped for the English, lost it, found something close enough, “this is *blackmail*,”

“No Ilya, it’s medical patience. You taught me.” Shane was laughing at him. Shane was *laughing* at him, breathless and pink and pleased with himself, and Ilya, who had walked away from this exact man eighteen hours ago in a heroic act of restraint, discovered that he had absolutely none left.

“*Vsyo. Hvatit.*” That’s it. Enough. The last of his patience burning off in his throat. “*Hvatit igrat.*”

Ilya flipped him.

It was easy. Shane let him, mostly, with a startled, gratified little *oh* and then Ilya had him on his back, had Shane’s wrists in one hand pinned up above his head against the sheets, had his weight settled down over him, and the laughing stopped being at his expense and turned into something lower.

“There he is,” Shane breathed, his voice low and uneven.

“You did that on purpose.” Ilya said.

“Took you long enough.” Shane smiled menacingly.

Ilya kissed him properly then, finally, the way he’d been refused, and Shane opened up under him with a groan and arched up into it and stopped arguing for nearly a full thirty seconds, which was, Ilya thought, probably some kind of record.

After that, it was less graceful and much better.

Shane kissed him deep and hungry now that he’d won the right to, tongue dragging slow along the backs of Ilya’s teeth, the roof of his mouth, like he meant to learn it by heart. Ilya was heavy where he’d settled over Shane’s hips, all that warm weight pinning Shane’s thighs to the mattress and Shane let him.

“Will you just—” Shane bit at his own lip, impatient. “Come on. I didn’t wait a month for you to diagnose me.”

Ilya let out a low huff, and that was the end of his patience too.

He ground down against the hard line of him, slow and filthy, just to take the edge off and to feel it. They grabbed at each other. Kissed messy. Ilya gripped his waist too hard and Shane hissed and arched into it, and the want of it climbed Ilya’s spine and pooled low and made him clumsy.

He broke off, breathing hard, and scrambled half-blind for the nightstand—lube, condom, tissues knocked sideways—uncoordinated, swearing softly in Russian when the lube bottle cap stuck.

Then he was back. Cock’s out, slicked warm, this time. Shane moaned as Ilya pressed his first finger into Shane’s opening while he panted into his mouth. Shane grabbed hard at Ilya’s arms, arched his hips, greedy for more. Ilya shushed him against his jaw—*easy, easy*—and stretched him slow. Then he crooked his finger and entered one more. More lube, then

another one, and Shane's whole body went pliant around the stretch with a sound Ilya felt in his teeth.

Ilya put his face in Shane's neck. Breathed his sleep-warm skin and smiled there, helpless, and laid wet open kisses against the pulse he'd spent all of yesterday pretending to examine.

"Okay?" Ilya managed.

"*God.* Yes. Yeah. I want you— Ilya, *now*—"

"So needy," Ilya pulled out his fingers and started rubbing the head of his cock against Shane's stretched opening.

And then he thrusted painfully slow. Making sure Shane could feel every inch of him. Shane gasps and lets out a loud frustrated moan.

"You're killing me Ilya, going *slow* like this on purpose," Shane accused, breathless, his nails biting into Ilya's shoulders.

"I am just being thorough," Ilya thrust. "Enjoying," another thrust. "Every," He's going deeper. "inch."

Shane is losing his mind.

"You are being a menace—"

"Let me show you the savoring," Ilya said, rolling his hips with deliberate, infuriating patience. Then slamming at once.

"Oh god—" Shane's head dropped back, throat working. "Faster. Ilya. I swear to—"

"Say. *Please.*" Ilya punctuated with a punishing thrust.

"I will *not*—" Shane's voice broke clean in half on the next slamming thrust. "*Please, faster,* you absolute—"

"See. Was that so hard." Ilya picked up a faster pace and gave him a little of what he wanted, just enough to feel Shane's whole body go loose and grateful beneath him, and then slowed again immediately, and Shane made a sound of such pure betrayal that Ilya nearly laughed himself out of rhythm.

"I hate you," Shane informed the ceiling.

"You said this yesterday. Your heart rate disagreed then also."

For a few minutes there were no words at all, just the catch of breath and the slide of skin and the old wooden bedframe complaining against the wall. Ilya set the pace deep and maddening, because some stubborn part of him still wanted to savor it, still wanted this to last the way he had promised himself it would last.

“Turn me over,” Shane gasped. “Do me from behind, I want—”

“No,” Ilya said with a finality.

Shane’s eyes flew open, glaring at him. “*What do you mean, no?*”

“No.” Ilya rolled his hips, slow and filthy, smirking, just to watch Shane’s argument fall apart in his mouth. “We stay like this.”

“*Why—*”

“So I can see your face,” Ilya said. And then, because that was too honest and had come out before he had decided to say it, he added, with a dry voice Shane hated, “And so we can keep arguing. I am winning.”

“You are *not* winning—”

“You are losing the argument and also losing your mind. It’s the same face.” Ilya snapped his hips harder, on purpose, and Shane’s whole spine bowed up off the bed. “See. You cannot even—”

“Shut *up—*” Shane tightens the grab at Ilya’s hair and Ilya let out a deep groan.

Ilya went harder and faster this time. He couldn’t help it. The careful patient thing in him was burning off layer by layer and what was underneath was just *want*, four weeks of it, thirty counted days of it, and he gave up the slow rhythm entirely and gave Shane what he was begging for, drove into him deep and hard while Shane scrabbled at his back and his shoulders.

The gold crucifix swung forward between them with every thrust. Shane caught the chain with his mouth between the thrust. His mouth closed around the warm metal and the warm skin beneath it, and held on to it like an anchor. He looked up at Ilya with his pupils blown dark and his control visibly slipping.

And Ilya thought, *I have him*. Thought it with satisfaction and a half-second too soon.

Because Shane, even wrecked, even barely there, was an athlete, and athletes are dangerous precisely when they look most beaten. With a noise that was half a sob and entirely a decision, he planted his heels, twisted his hips, and *flipped* them. It was fast and brutal. Ilya was on his back blinking at the ceiling and Shane was the one on top, sinking down onto him, one hand pinning Ilya’s wrist to the mattress, one hand rested at Ilya’s collarbone, twisting the gold chain. He loomed over him with his hair in his eyes and a grin that had no business being that smug given the noise he’d just made.

“Payback,” Shane said, grinning between his shallow breath.

“You—” Ilya had no words in any language.

“Yeah. I lost the argument, *apparently*,” Shane rolled his hips down, sinking in him deep, taking what he wanted, fully in the saddle now and riding Ilya into the mattress like he’d

been born to it, like he'd thought about nothing else since six o'clock that morning. "Who's savoring it now?" He said between his breaths.

And Ilya, pinned and undone, looking up at this furious gorgeous man who had waited eighteen hours and four weeks, had finally, gloriously, stopped waiting. Ilya gave up entirely. He let his head fall back. He let Shane have it, have everything, have all of him. His hands flexed uselessly under Shane's grip. His heart rate, he noted distantly, with the last clinical fragment of his brain, was *significantly* elevated.

Ilya came first. He was almost embarrassed by how fast, except that Shane made a triumphant, broken sound at the feel of it. He chased it down hard and came a few strokes later with the crucifix wound tight around his fingers and Ilya's name in his mouth, collapsing forward onto Ilya's chest, both of them slick and shaking and gasping.

For a long moment neither of them said anything.

The morning light had gone from gray to gold while they weren't looking. Out past the window, the lake was bright and flat and going about its business.

"So much," Ilya said finally, into Shane's hair, "for taking it slow."

Shane laughed, wrecked and helpless. "Told you," he mumbled. "I'm saying what I feel now."

Ilya wrapped an arm around Shane's back and held him there, heavy and warm and *his*.

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The days folded into themselves the way only happy days did. It collapsed into a handful of bright images that refused to stay in chronological order, a whole week folding into a few specific moments that would, Shane knew, be the ones he kept forever

Shane's cooking routine, which had been the arrangement from the first morning, decided without discussion. Him being tyrannical about salt and heat and the timing of things. Ilya with the tasks he could not ruin, like chopping with precision and washing things. The dock at sunset, two beers—one regular and one ginger—looking at the lake going pink and then purple and then gone, the silence between them was the kind that did not require filling because nothing was missing.

And the small gym off the side of the cottage, where what happened, happened in various scenarios. One scenario where Shane laid at the cold weight bench with his shorts shoved down his thighs and Ilya's fingers wrapped around him, four weeks of patience nowhere in evidence. Ilya gripping both of their hard cock and the back of Shane's neck and thrusting into his fist hard enough that the bench legs screamed against the floor.

Another scenario where Shane's cheek pressed to the vinyl surface of the bench, swearing, bent over as Ilya took him from behind, Ilya's voice low and filthy and entirely undone at his ear telling him exactly how good he was being.

The little gym and the cold weight bench had seen things. The aftermath where both of them ended up on the rubber floor, spent and slick. Ilya's softening weight half on top of him, or beside him, sweating worse than they had in the actual workout. Laughing with the kind of laugh that comes from being completely undone in front of someone and finding out it's the safest you've ever felt.

These were—Shane registered somewhere around day three—the best days of his life.

Then it was Tuesday.

Breakfast done, the plates drying in the dish rack, the cottage in that particular midweek hush where the weekend feels far in both directions. Ilya sat at the counter with coffee in one hand while scrolling something on his phone, and Shane was half-watching him do it, when Ilya looked up.

“Hey.” Ilya said casually. “Your Tuesday playlist.”

Shane went still. “Uh.. What about it?”

“The one you make and add to and never play? You told me one time in the Airport bar.” He set his coffee down. “You said you have never once listened to it all the way through.” A pause, and then, with the particular gravity he reserved for exactly this, “I dare you to play it.”

“*Oh*,” Shane understood the whole shape of what Ilya was doing.

He'd mentioned the playlist once, the first time they met, and was a little too honest about some meaningless, embarrassing facts that night. Shane had been adding songs to Tuesday Playlist for years and never let himself listen from start to finish. He'd said it and forgotten he'd said it. He just now realized that the person across from him was the kind of person who remembered things.

Shane looked at him. His chest did the warm stupid thing.

“You're using one of my truths against me,” he said.

“I am using them *for* you,” Ilya said. “There is a difference.”

And there it was. The dare didn't live between them as a weapon anymore. It wasn't *I dare you* as a way to push or to win or to make the other one flinch. It was *I dare you* as a way to say: *I see the thing you won't let yourself have, and I'm going to hand it to you.* They'd stopped using the game *on* each other. They were using it *with* each other now.

Shane could have just played the playlist. But instead he grinned and reached for the same mechanic right back.

“Okay,” he said. “I'll play it. Start to finish, the whole thing.” He folded his arms, leaned back against the counter, deeply pleased with himself. “But only if you dance for me. I want a show, Ilya. That's my counter-dare.”

Ilya regarded him for a long moment with an expression Shane couldn't read, and then, slowly, the slow tilt of his mouth, the dare caught and returned.

"Deal. You drive a hard bargain, *solnyshko*."

"I learned from the best."

Shane took out his phone and connected to the wireless speaker. He found the playlist: *Tuesday*, untouched at the bottom, years of small additions stacked up and never once played end to end. His thumb hovered over it.

He pressed play.

The minute the song played, Ilya made an absolute fool of himself on purpose.

He went big from the first track: mouthing the words with total commitment, pointing at Shane on the dramatic lines, doing something with his shoulders that no doctor's body should legally be able to do. Absolutely ridiculous and exaggerated. A one-man show staged entirely to dismantle Shane and it worked. Shane was laughing out of his mind, the sound echoed in the room. Ilya kept going. Ilya would clearly do anything, it turned out, to keep that laugh in the room.

Two or three songs in, the speakers eased into a slower intro, and Ilya stopped performing. Held out his hand instead. Palm up, waiting, the silliness still in his eyes, a question underneath it.

Shane took his hand and got pulled up off the couch.

It started stupid. Ilya spun him badly, Shane spun him back, worse. They knocked on the coffee table and didn't care. But the song kept slowing, and somewhere in there the spinning stopped being spinning and became just swaying and holding. Ilya's hands finding Shane's waist, Shane's arms going up around Ilya's neck, the two of them turning slow circles in the middle of a cottage living room in the late-morning light. The laughing quieted. The air in the room changed.

The song moved into something more upbeat but neither of them moved with it. They stayed in the slow they had found, held each other and listened to what the song was saying.

🎵 *That night, the stars aligned, heaven dropped a line—*

Shane thought about the first time they met. The airport, the delay, the bar. A whole life ahead of him rerouted by a cancelled Finnair flight. If you'd told him then, standing at that gate, that the worst delay of his life was about to be the best thing that ever happened to him, he would have laughed.

🎵 *Before you, I was just a flare in the sky—*

Ilya's hand spread flat and warm against his back. Shane felt it through his shirt and held on a little tighter.

♪♪ *A kid too afraid to go to play in the light—*

That one line landed a little hard. Because that was him. A whole life spent afraid of exactly this, of the light, of being seen wanting what he wanted, of stepping out where everyone could look, of the *sunshine*. Most of his life staying in the dark because the dark was safe. And here he was, dancing in a sunlit room in the middle of a Tuesday with a man's arms around his back, in the light, finally, and the sky had not fallen.

♪♪ *A colorless painter, a man with no sight—*

He thought about the years of *fine*. The colorless fine he'd mistaken for how it was supposed to feel. The going-through-the-motions, the hockey golden boy armor, the whole lonely competent life he'd built before he understood there was a color he'd been missing the entire time. He pressed his forehead to Ilya's.

♪♪ *Before you, I was nothing, I had nothing—*

Neither of them said anything. Shane's thumb moved once at the nape of Ilya's neck and he felt Ilya smile. Somehow, that was everything.

Shane slid his hands down from Ilya's neck to shoulders and found the little gold cross at the open collar, catching the light the way it had in a hundred phone-screen glimpses, the way it had wound around his own fingers in the dark. He touched it. Ilya let him. And then Ilya's arms came all the way around him. They just held on, swaying, Shane's face tucked into Ilya's neck. Somewhere in there they were kissing, slow and patient. Somewhere in there they were only breathing each other in. The song kept going underneath them.

♪♪ *Traveled the world, it got me nowhere, nothing could ever compare—*

And Shane thought of the atlas Ilya had laid out on that couch. Moscow, Helsinki, Paris, Zurich, the impossible little village in Iceland he'd looked up how to say. *Everywhere I think of, you're already in it.*

♪♪ *A kiss, a touch, a song that made me cry—*

Shane pulled back just far enough to look at him and found Ilya's eyes a little too bright, the composure gone soft at the edges, a man undone by a song in a borrowed living room and not bothering, for once, to hide it.

♪♪ *The drugs I've done, they never got me higher than the first time we met—*

He thought, absurdly, of a party and the roof back in college. Smoke and a stranger's mouth and the night he'd finally understood himself, the highest he'd ever been, or so he'd believed, back then. He'd been wrong. This was way way higher.

♪♪ *There's nothing like the first time we met—*

And there it was, the whole of it handed back to him in a single line. The first time they met. The dare, the kiss, the Adriatic and a man who had looked at him and *seen* him before Shane

knew how to see himself. There was nothing like it. There never would be.

The song ended, and another began, and they kept swaying. The Tuesday playlist played on through, song after song, start to finish, for the first time in its life.

Because that was the thing about Shane and playlists. He had one for everything—winning, losing, long drives, every specific shade of feeling he'd ever had—because a moment without the right song under it was a moment he hadn't properly controlled. If he *scored* each scene correctly, no feelings could catch him off guard. The Tuesday playlist was the one he never finished, because Tuesdays were nothing, ordinary and unscored on purpose, and some part of him had always known that if he played it through, he'd find out an ordinary Tuesday could hold everything.

He'd been avoiding what it would mean to hear it all the way to the end. *Had a Tuesday ever been allowed to mean something?*

It turned out it meant this. The thing he'd been guarding against was only ever *this*. Being held in the late-morning light by someone who had stayed. All that control he'd lived inside his whole life, the careful management of every want, every list, every door kept shut, it had only ever been a cage. And it was coming down now, strip by strip, in a cottage by a lake, to a song about the first time, and he was letting it.

He didn't reach to stop the music. He didn't want to stop any of it. He just held on, and was held, and turned slow circles in the light while the playlist played itself out. The cottage holding them both, the lake lying bright beyond the window, and all the days still ahead.

They kept on dancing.

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The kayak had been Shane's idea. Ilya had said yes because Shane's ideas this week had been, statistically, the kind you said yes to. Today that would be out to catch sunset with a kayak.

They drifted out longer than they meant to not because they were running behind, but because this week, the planning and timing had been pretty much non-existence. The hours passed and the lake went orange, then pink, then dark purple. At some point Shane realized it's probably a good idea to start paddling back, so Ilya paddled with him, and the kayak turned itself toward the dock that was now only a dark shade from a far.

The moon had come up while they were out there, laying a path of silver reflection across the water. Ilya watched it for a long moment just for the sake of watching it. He had not done this in years. He had forgotten that he could.

They finally reached the dock. They tied off the kayak and climbed out. The boards were cool under Ilya's bare feet but the day's warmth was still in the wood underneath it. He stood a moment registering the strange pleasure of it.

Shane stood beside him. Neither of them said anything.

The cottage was dark behind them. They hadn't left a light on, hadn't expected to be gone this long. And Ilya could feel, physically, in his chest, how far they were from anyone. There was a road somewhere and a town somewhere and friendly neighbors at the next cottage who were not really relevant at this exact moment. The world had narrowed to this dock, this lake, this man, this moon. It was the most specific kind of being alone you only got with one person.

"Ilya," Shane said. The voice he used when he let his guard down. The one Ilya had been hearing more of all week.

"Mm?"

"It's really nice out here."

Ilya looked at the shape of him against the dark, the freckles invisible in this light but still there, still his. "Yes," he said.

He looked back at the still water. Still enough to hold a face, if you leaned close. He hadn't been in a lake at night in twenty years. He'd given it up just like the way people give things up while they're busy being adults.

"It looked so peaceful out there." Ilya observed.

"Yeah." Shane agreed.

Ilya looked at the water, still as glass, and thought that he hadn't swam in a lake at night in twenty years. And then, an Idea—

"Shane, I dare you to swim."

Shane's first reaction was almost comical. The blink, the small disbelieving laugh, the glance at the lake and then back at Ilya as if checking whether this was a real proposal or a test of some kind, and then the dawning, betrayed understanding that it was, in fact, entirely real.

"We literally just came back," he said. "And it's almost nine. That water's going to take a year off my life."

"You have many years. You can spare one."

"Wow. Comforting. Thank you." Shane deadpanned

"..In nothing," Ilya added, as if Shane hadn't spoken.

Shane stopped. "...What?"

"The swim. In nothing. What do people called? Skin-dip?"

The helpless look in Shane's face resurfaced, the one that showed up whenever Shane was losing an argument and having the best time of his life. "You want me to skinny-dip. Right now. In a lake so cold it's basically a *glacier*."

“It is just a lake, Shane.”

“It’s basically a glacier, Ilya—” Shane protested.

“I’ll jump with you.”

Shane went still. He looked at the lake. At the moon. At the dark cottage that offered no help whatsoever. Then back at Ilya, who hadn’t moved, who had all night.

“I hate you so much,” Shane said, affectionately.

He pulled his shirt off.

Ilya smirked in satisfaction and started undressing himself.

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They stood on the dock. Two bodies in the moonlight, bare naked with no audience.

They looked at each other, eyes dragging slow, lingering at the places and creases that belonged to no one else but theirs. Neither of them moved. It was, Ilya thought, the kind of looking that could have outlasted the cold air.

“On three,” Shane started.

“On three.” Ilya countered.

“One—”

“Two—”

“*Three—*”

They jumped.

The water was unreasonably cold at this time of the year. Ilya knew, clinically, what cold water did to a body, but none of it prepared him for the actual fact of it. He came up gasping, swearing in mixed Russian and English. Shane broke the surface not far from him gasping harder making stuttered breath. And then, helplessly, they were both started laughing. It’s the *oh my god we actually did this* kind of laugh.

“Oh my god,” Shane got out.

“Fuck, it’s cold,” Ilya managed.

“This is stupid. Why did I—”

“You agreed.”

“I know, I know, I agreed,” Shane rolled his eyes exasperated. “Apparently I agree to anything you say now.”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I’m going to take terrible advantage of it.” He smirked in satisfaction.

Shane’s reply was a splash of water toward Ilya, who closed his eyes against it, let it run down his face, and said, perfectly even, “You’re going to pay for that.”

Shane grinned and swam closer toward him.

“You’re crazy,” Shane said in insufferable tone but the voice had something else in it now.

“Mm. I’m aware.” Ilya swam an inch closer toward Shane.

Shane’s hand found his shoulder under the water. Then the side of his neck. Then his other hand at Ilya’s waist, pulling him in. Suddenly, the cold turned into a contrast almost-unbearable warmth of a living body against his.

Ilya pressed closer.

The cold was, he thought, the entire reason a body had thermoregulation. So that the cold and the warm and the specific person could meet you skin-to-skin and your skin could tell you exactly what to do next.

So, Ilya kissed him because it’s the only thing that makes sense in this sequence of things. In the lake, under the moon, in a composition so much like a scene from some romance movie that the rational part of him almost laughed. The cold water moving around them and the warm of Shane’s body pressed all along his front.

His arms went up around Shane’s neck and he deepened the kiss. Ilya moved his mouth to Shane’s throat, to the pulse going far too elevated even for the swim, the same honest elevated heart rate he’d felt under his fingers in the kitchen days ago. He bit them gently. Felt Shane’s breath catching.

“Ilya—” Shane said, with no composure left at all.

“Mm,” Ilya mumbled against his throat, and let him feel the word.

They weren’t swimming anymore in any honest sense. Shane’s hand at the small of his back, their legs tangling, their body pulled taut and hard against each other. The cold now a thing that existed around them and not between them. Ilya pulled back just far enough to speak. Their foreheads still touching.

“We have a logistics problem.”

“...What?” Shane’s brows furrowed as he tried to catch his breath.

“The dock is five meters away. We are in a lake.” He kissed the corner of Shane’s mouth. “I would like to continue this somewhere we have leverage.”

Shane huffed a ragged laugh, recognizing exactly where this was going and finding it ridiculous and completely acceptable. “*Leverage.*”

“Leverage.” Ilya brushed the side of Shane’s cheekbone with a gaze pierced through his eyes, like a promise.

Shane pulled back and already swimming for the dock.

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They came back to the dock dripping of lake water and were still bare naked.

Shane didn’t say anything. He stepped forward and put his hand flat against Ilya’s sternum, over the gold crucifix and pushed.

Ilya went down onto the boards and settled back on his hands, knees falling open. An invitation.

And Shane came to him. Crawl on hands and knees across the dock, dripping wet, the moonlight running down the long wet line of his back, his eyes locked on Ilya’s the entire way and dark with intent.

Shane settled between his spread knees, mouth a breath away from Ilya’s cock, and did not move. Shane looked up and held his eyes.

“*Idi i voz’mi*,” Ilya said, his voice rough and wrecked.

The command he’d intended undercut by the wreck in his own voice. He’d meant it to sound like an order. It came out closer to a plea and beg. *Come and take it*. His hand found the wet hair at the back of Shane’s head, and the last of his control reduced to that single point of contact.

Shane pressed his mouth to the inside of Ilya’s thigh first. Warm and slow. Trailing kisses and slow drags of his tongue as he worked his way up.

Ilya gripped hard when the flat of Shane’s tongue slid over the slit of his cock. Ilya let his head fall back against the wood and felt Shane head bobbed as he took him deeper and deeper until Ilya felt the back of Shane’s throat.

“*Fuck*, Shane.” He watched Shane move his mouth faster as he felt his own release pooling in the low of his spine. And then, just before he’s about to warn him—

Shane pulled off. His mouth wet and his lips swollen and his eyes had gone dark. He looked up the whole length of Ilya’s body with his chin still resting against abs and said—

“Come on my face.”

And the words struck through Ilya like the cold lake water.

Ilya’s brain short-circuited as his hand tighten at the back of Shane’s head. He gripped and yanked it down as he straightened on his feet and angled himself up against Shane’s open mouth, the head of his cock dragging across that swollen bottom lip, smearing precum over his chin. Shane on his knees with his eyes slid shut and his jaw going slack. His whole face

tipping up toward Ilya like he'd done this a hundred times in his head and was finally allowed to.

"Look at me." Ilya's command cut through their panting breath.

Shane obeyed and the sight of his open wanting gaze undid something in Ilya's chest. It was an image that would leave a permanent imprint on his mind.

"*Vot tak*," he breathed, helpless. *Just like that*. "Good. Look at you."

Shane's whole face went molten at the praise, lips parting, lashes fluttering. And the sight of what a single *good* did to him, was what finished Ilya. "*Khoroshiy mal'chik*," he got out, wrecked, barely sound at all.

Ilya didn't last long after. He came with a deep, broken groan, spilling and spilling across Shane's wanting mouth and face, one hand fisted hard in his wet hair to hold him there through all of it. When he finally let go, Shane's lashes were wet and his lips were dripping and he was smiling. And then, holding Ilya's eyes the whole time, he dragged his tongue slow across his mouth and swallowed.

Ilya nearly went down right there on the dock.

"*Bozhe*," he breathed. It was the only word he had left in any language.

"So much for leverage," Shane said, voice shot to pieces, wrecked and smug all at once.

Ilya hauled him up off his knees and kissed him hard and tasted himself there, deep in Shane's mouth, on his tongue, salt and heat still on him. The knowledge of what Shane had just done, what Shane had just *taken*, went through him like a current, straight to the spine.

He drew Shane up off his knees and laid him back against the boards, guided his head down into his own lap, and for a moment just looked at him stretched out there, hard and flushed all the way down. The freckles the summer had been raising on him, the long line of him laid open under the moon like an offering.

Shane gasped as Ilya's hand lingered at his throat and dragged down through the hard plane of his stomach and wrapped around his erection.

He rolled Shane's balls in his palm, dragged up the length of him, thumbbed the slit until Shane's hips jumped, closed into a fist and Ilya stroked hard.

"*Ilya*—" Shane's voice cracked around it, his name broken open in Shane's mouth.

"I know," Ilya murmured, watching him. "I have you. Look how you give it to me. *Bozhe*, look at you, you do not even try to hide anymore."

Shane's face was open under him, mouth slack, eyes heavy-lidded with lust. Ilya could not stand how beautiful it was. He bent and kissed him and swallowed the moan down out of Shane's mouth, fed on it.

When he had to break for breath he didn't pull far. He slipped his thumb between Shane's lips instead and Shane took it, eyes fluttering, and sucked, helpless. Between Ilya's two hands working on him, Shane's body had nowhere to go but *apart*.

Ilya felt it coming up through him, the seconds running out.

He shifted fast and bent low and took Shane into his mouth just as Shane spilled. He felt it pulse hot down his throat, felt Shane go rigid and then come apart entirely, a sound tearing out of him with nowhere left to hide it.

Ilya held him through it. Took all of it. There was no part of this he would keep himself away from, and there were no words for that either.

Then he let his head drop back against the boards, Shane's head still heavy in his lap, his hand finding his dark wet hair of its own accord.

Neither of them could speak for a while. There was just the sound of them breathing, ragged and uneven, fogging in the cold air. Their chests heaving, two sets of lungs working hard in the dark, slowly, slowly coming down.

It was Shane who broke first, a laugh startled out of him helpless, the laugh of a man who has just understood exactly where he is. The lake knocking soft against the posts. Two grown men, sticky and bare and lit silver, under the moon.

Ilya caught it like a cold. Laughed into the cold air until Shane was shaking with it too.

"We're crazy," Shane said, to the sky, to the lake, to him.

"Mm," Ilya agreed. "We should do crazy more often."

And then because the alternative was lying there in their own mess getting cold, they hauled each other up and went into the water to clean themselves.

The cold took their breath. Shane came up gasping and grinning, hair flat to his head, and splashed him. When Ilya thought the days couldn't get any better, it somehow did, multiplied over.

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"No Shane— *less*. You are drowning the pan."

"This is a totally normal amount of batter—" Shane protested.

"It is a horrible amount of batter. It must be thin. Like lace. You are making—" Ilya took the ladle out of his hand with the weary patience of a man confiscating a weapon, "a cake or something, this is not a blini. Watch me."

Shane watched Ilya tipped a thin pale batter into the pan and swirled it with one practiced motion of his wrist. Shane thought, not for the first time that afternoon, that he could watch

this man do almost anything and find it interesting. Ilya in his yellow kitchen. Sleeves shoved up. Flour on his forearm. Completely in his element in a way Shane had never once seen.

“Okay, okay,” Shane said. “Give it back. Let me try.”

“You will drown the pan again.”

“I will *not*. Give me the—” Shane hassled the ladle from Ilya’s hand.

Ilya gave it back. Shane drowned the pan with batter *again*.

“It’s just— a thick one, okay?” Shane said defensively, as Ilya looked at the pan with open sorrow.

“It is a tragedy. That’s okay *solnyshko*, we will eat it anyway. Give me the next one.”

They fell into a rhythm, Shane pouring badly, Ilya correcting, the first sad lumpy blini going onto a plate, the second slightly better. The gold light was coming around to the lake side the way it did in the early afternoon, and Shane had time, for once, to notice it doing that.

They had hours before his parents coming up for barbeque dinner. Rhys and Sveta were coming as well. They had called him this morning, sunburnt and insufferable about the honeymoon, and Shane had invited them to stop by the cottage. The first four people who *knew* would be in this house in less than a few hours, and they would get to see him with a man in his kitchen acting like he lived there. The thought sat warm and a little terrifying under his ribs. But that was for later. For now it was just the two of them and the flour and the long unspooling afternoon.

“This recipe,” Shane said, scraping at the pan. “Is it, like, yours? I mean, your family recipe?”

“My mother’s. Her mother’s before that, and a whole generation back probably,” Ilya said it easy. “But it is my mother’s. She made them every Sunday when I was little. She is not a careful cook, but she is a confident one.” The corner of his mouth tugged. “The whole apartment smells of it. You always know what day it is. Best time of the week.”

“How is she?” Shane asked carefully. “Your mom.”

“Better, lately.” Ilya tipped the pan, considering. “We hired a live-in nurse, finally, to help with my father. The dementia is... it is a lot for one person. It was wearing her down, doing it alone. Now she has help. She sounds like herself again.” A small pause, and then, lighter, almost offhand, “She says hello, by the way. To you.”

Shane’s head came up. “She— wait. She knows? About—”

“She knows there’s a Canadian man.” A glance, dry and warm at once. “She actually know since we were in Dubrovnik. She asks about you more than she asks about me. It is becoming a problem.”

“Oh.” Shane felt his face go hot. “*Oh*.”

“Yes. ‘*Oh*. ” Ilya looked thoroughly amused by the colour Shane had turned. “Do not let it go to your head. She also says hello to the man at her pharmacy. You are in good company.”

“Okay, that’s— you can’t tell me your mom says hi and then immediately compare me to a *pharmacist*,”

“He is a very nice pharmacist.”

And there it was again, the thing that kept catching Shane off guard all week. That he was learning a piece of Ilya’s actual life with his own hands, in his own house. A Sunday from a Moscow he’d never seen, a mother he has not met, carried across an ocean and set down here, in this strange yellow kitchen. The future arriving in miniature, batter by batter, and Shane stood there with his hands in flour and understood, plainly, that this was what the rest of it would look like, if he was lucky. Exactly this.

Then Ilya reached past him for the flour and Shane turned at the same moment and knocked the bag, and a soft cloud of flour went up between them.

A beat and a gasp.

“You did that on purpose,” Ilya said, flour settling in his dark blonde hair, dusting his jaw.

“I swear to god I didn’t—” Shane blurted a laugh.

So Ilya flicked a handful of flour at him.

That was the end of the blini for a while. A handprint of flour on Shane’s shirt, a streak of flour along Ilya’s jaw that Shane put there and then had to kiss off, both of them laughing and slipping on the dusted tile until they gave up and slid down to the floor, backs against the cabinets. The gold light was full of drifting flour, like a slow snow.

The laughing wound down on its own, into something easy and quiet. Shane could hear the lake through the open window, and Ilya breathing beside him, and nothing else that needed doing. He let his head tip onto Ilya’s shoulder. Ilya rested his cheek against Shane’s hair.

Neither of them moved to clean it up. There was time. For once in his whole careful, guarded life, Shane convinced himself he had all the time in the world and someone to spend it doing nothing with.

Then Ilya said quietly, not lifting his head from Shane’s hair, “*Ya tebya lyublyu*.”

A pause.

Shane caught it immediately. He knew that one.

He went very still.

Ilya lifted his head then, and turned, and looked at him with flour on his jaw and his composure nowhere, looking at Shane like he’s the only thing worth looking. And he said it again. Slower with punctuation in each word.

“*Ya. Tebya. Lyublyu.*”

And the whole chapter of them, the whole month, all of it compressed into this single point on the floor of a yellow kitchen, two grown men sitting in spilled flour because they had been too content to be careful.

“Holy shit,” Shane said. His voice came out cracked. “I love you too. I— *holy shit*, Ilya, I love you too.”

Shane took his face in both hands. He had spent weeks learning this face and he kissed it now like he had all the time in the world.

When they broke apart Ilya pressed his forehead to Shane’s and breathed, and Shane could feel him shaking slightly.

“You are sure,” Ilya said. A man checking if the ground would hold.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything,” Shane said. “I’m sure of this.”

Ilya laughed with a broken voice, the most undefended sound Shane had ever heard him make. Shane gathered him in, flour and all, and held him on the floor of the yellow kitchen while the light moved slowly across them both, and outside the lake went on doing what lakes do, and neither of them got up to clean a single thing.

Shane had spent years not looking for this on purpose, because looking implied wanting and wanting implied being *seen wanting* and being seen wanting was the one exposure he had organised his entire life around avoiding.

You did not reach for things. Because things that were reached for could be taken away.

But sitting on the kitchen floor with flour on his hands and Ilya across from him saying the words again, Shane understood something he had been refusing to understand for years.

If every wrong turn was the price of this specific kitchen floor on this specific afternoon, then it had not been wasted.

It had been the long way around and he would have walked it all over again.

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The day ended the way the days had been ending all summer, the lake going molten, the sun lowering itself slow behind the far trees, the light turning everything the colour of something you’d remember later. Except this time had people in it. Smoke off the grill, the smell of char and woodsmoke, voices layered over each other across the deck. The same gold light Ilya had watched alone with Shane for nine evenings, now full of other faces.

He stood at the deck with a beer going warm in his hand and watched it happen.

Rhys and Sveta were back from the honeymoon, sun-darkened and loud and insufferably happy, Rhys narrating some catastrophe involving a rental scooter while Sveta corrected the

details in the dry way Ilya remembered. The four of them equal to two couples and it struck him, watching how impossible this arrangement would have looked a few months ago and how completely made sense now.

He had met Yuna and David an hour ago, and they had undone him a little, in the small way that mattered.

He had braced for the *meeting-the-parents* of it, had run the scenarios on his head the way he ran everything, prepared for politeness, for the careful courtesy of people deciding what to make of the man their son had brought home. None of it had been necessary. Yuna had taken one look at him and hugged him and then held him out at arm's length to look at him properly, beaming, her eyes already a little wet.

"Oh, *finally*," she said. "Do you know how long I've waited for this? Weeks. *Weeks*. This one —" she jabbed a thumb at Shane, who had gone the particular shade of red he turned around his mother, "would not let me anywhere near you since you came. Wouldn't even show me a picture. *It's new, Mom. Don't make it weird, Mom.*' As if I have ever once made anything weird." She rolled her eyes.

"It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Hollander," Ilya managed, which was as far as he got.

"*Yuna*. Mrs. Hollander is his grandmother, God rest her. And it is *wonderful* to meet you, I've been—" she pressed a hand briefly to her chest, "I've been beside myself, honestly."

"See. You make everything weird," Shane said.

"Don't know what you're talking about, sweetheart." She was still holding Ilya's arms, still looking at him like he was something she'd been promised and had begun to doubt the existence of. "He kept you all to himself, you know. Nine days up here and we weren't even allowed to *visit*. I had to threaten him."

"You did not threaten me—" Shane protested.

"I threatened him a little." She let go of Ilya only to loop her arm through his and steer him bodily toward the house. "Anyway. He's had you for almost two weeks and I've had you for two minutes, so he can wait his turn. Come. I have things to show you. You only have a few days left and *oh my god* you need to see this." She was already pulling a phone from her pocket, already scrolling. "This is Shane. He's nine. Look at this face."

She held her phone up. Shane at nine years old, gap-toothed and furious, drowning in a hockey jersey three sizes too big.

"*Mom*." Shane glared at his mom.

"He was so angry. Look how angry." Yuna beamed at the photo, then at Ilya, delighted. "He's still like this. You know that. You've met him."

"I have noticed some anger, yes," Ilya said gravely, a grin spread across his face.

"*Okay*," Shane said exasperated. "Great. Love this. This is going great."

And that had been that.

David had said almost nothing for the first twenty minutes and then, while they stood at the grill together, he had asked Ilya about his work. Not the small-talk version, but a real question, about the children's ward, about what it was like to do that particular job and had listened to the whole answer, and then put a hand on Ilya's shoulder briefly, and said, *that's good work, son. That matters.*

*Son.* Just like that. David clearly said that without thinking. And Ilya had to look very hard at the coals for a moment, because it had been a long time since anyone's father—and his own father—had put a hand on his shoulder and called him that and meant nothing complicated by it. He had not known he was hungry for it until it was simply handed to him, across a barbecue, by a man who had known him for an hour.

He would be keeping that one for a long time.

Sveta found him at the deck with a drink in her hand as the sunset light went amber.

*"Okay, this place,"* she said in Russian, looking out at the lake. *"This is ridiculous. This is a postcard view. No wonder he didn't want to share you."* She turned, studied him with that frank look she'd always had. *"You made it work, Ilyusha. I'm happy for you. I really am."*

*"Thank you."* Ilya turned to face his best friend and smiled genuinely.

*"I mean it. I wasn't sure you would."* She shrugged easy with no shadow in it. *"And here you are."*

*"Here I am."*

*"So tell me everything."* She picked her drink back up. *"Nine days, just the two of you. What do you even do all day. Has he made you watch one of those Criterion films yet, the three-hour ones, the ones where nothing happens?"*

*"There have been few documentaries. It was four hours."*

*"Oh, you poor man,"* Sveta said dramatically.

*"I liked it, actually."*

*"Ugh. You're perfect for each other, it's disgusting."* She grinned. *"What else. Does he snore? He snores, right? Tell me he snores."*

*"I'm not telling you anything else."*

*"Why not—"*

*"Because you will tell Rhys, and Rhys will tell Shane that you know, and then I have to live with it."*

She leaned in. *"Fine. Let's trade. Tell me one thing about your cottage time, I'll tell you one thing about my honeymoon."*

*"What. No."* Ilya made a disgusted face.

*"C'mon Ilyusha. It's a good trade. Do you wanna know, our honeymoon was very—"*

*"No, thank you."*

*"We barely left the—"* Sveta kept talking despite Ilya's protest.

*"Sveta."* He put his hand up. *"I am begging."*

She was laughing now, delighted at how easily she could still do this to him. *"You used to be impenetrable, you know. It was very intimidating. Now look at you. Love sick and all,"* She nudged his shoulder. *"I'm joking. He's good for you. It's perfect."*

Across the deck Shane glanced over and caught Ilya's eye, he read the look on Ilya's face, clocked Sveta beside him clearly mid-torment and just grinned, raised his beer an inch, and very deliberately did nothing to help.

Ilya narrowed his eyes at him. Shane mouthed *you're on your own*, and turned back to Rhys. So Ilya was left to it, surrounded on every side by people who had somehow become his, and the strange thing was that it didn't feel like exposure anymore. It felt like being kept.

Across the deck, Rhys clinked at Shane's drink and said something that Ilya heard faintly without needing the context. *You idiot. You did it.* And Shane caught that as he went red and pleased and ducked his head, avoiding the attention. He looked across the whole crowded deck to find Ilya already looking back, the way they kept finding each other, the way they had since an airport.

Then someone said, "Ilya— your phone," and the evening tilted into the thing he had not let himself expect.

Ilya answered and propped the phone against a bottle, her face filling the small screen, the familiar lamplight of her Moscow kitchen behind her.

*"Mama, can I call you later? We're in the middle of.. making dinner,"* Ilya blurted out strings of Russian sentences that made little sense.

*"Who is there,"* she demanded immediately, craning to see past him. *"Is that people? Ilyusha, are those people behind you?"*

*"It's a barbeque, Mama. Shane's family is here. His parents, his friends—"*

*"His parents."* Her whole face changed. *"His parents are there and you did not tell me. Turn me around. I want to say hello."*

*"Mama—"*

*“What? Turn me around.”*

*“You don’t have to—”*

*“What.”* She narrowed her eyes at him through the screen, delighted and dangerous. *“What is this face. You are embarrassed of me? Of your own mother? On the day you meet his family?”*

*“I am not embarrassed—”*

*“You are making the face. I know that face. Ilya. Turn the phone.”*

Ilya let out a long huff and he turned the phone. Her face filled the small screen and the familiar wallpaper of her Moscow kitchen behind her as she was waving, delighted, leaning too close to the camera, saying *hello, hello* to the deck full of strangers in her halting, fearless English.

And Yuna Hollander crossed the deck, wiped her hands on a dish towel, leaned into the frame, and said, *“Hello! Oh hi! It’s so nice to meet you—”*

Ilya watched the two of them find each other across nine time zones and a bad connection. His mother in the dark of her Moscow evening, Yuna in the gold of the Canadian sunset, the two of them leaning into their separate screens and talking over each other and laughing before either had finished a sentence.

Two women who had each, against considerable odds and on opposite sides of the world, raised a boy into a man who had somehow, impossibly, found the other one. They had never met. And still they wore the exact same expression. The one mothers wear when the worrying is finally, unexpectedly over. The one that says, *look at them. Look what they made of it. Look how it turned out alright after all.*

Ilya stepped back from the screen and let them finish the conversation.

It should have frightened him, seeing this. Too many things in one place. Too much exposure. Too many people he loved positioned within the same square of geography and the same span of minutes, this was the most dangerous possible arrangement of a life because so much could be lost at once.

He looked at his mother on the little screen, now talking to Shane and him about *when Shane is going to visit Moscow so I can make him the real blini*. He looked at the deck, David gesturing while he talked, Yuna laughing at something Sveta had said, Rhys with his hand on Sveta’s back. He looked at the whole arrangement and felt no alarm at all.

What he felt was the strange warm vertigo of a man watching the whole sum of himself assembled in one place and discovering that he had been tired of separate rooms.

The sun slowly disappeared. His mother said her goodnights and blew kisses and made him promise to call next week. Plates went around. The wine went around. The lake went from gold to bronze to a deep settling blue, and the conversations layered over each other, warm

and overlapping, and Ilya sat at the edge of it with Shane's shoulder against his and let it all simply happen around him.

Once upon a time he thought, what he had in his life was enough. He had built his whole life on not needing this.

But now here he was. On a deck in a Canadian cottage. Shane warm beside him. His mother's voice still echoing off the space she left. Two new parents who had decided to love him over the course of a single afternoon. Rhys and Sveta, who had once been complications and grief and an old wound, and were now just *family*.

And none of it terrified him.

Family, in his case. Not the loss of his own, but the addition of more.

Inside the cottage, someone put on music. It drifted out through the screen door, low and warm over the murmur of the deck.

♪♪ *Oh, home, let me come home. Home is whenever I'm with you—*

Under the table, Shane's hand found his. It settled there, warm and certain, fingers threading through his and stayed. They hold on to each other the way you hold a thing you have stopped being afraid of losing.

People talked about home like it was somewhere you went. Ilya looked at the hand in his and understood, finally, that home wasn't a room you stood in. It was a person you stood next to.

It was this man, this hand, this whole improbable life they now shared.

And Ilya, who had never quite had one, was finally, *finally* home.

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## Chapter End Notes

I started this during the worst stretch of my dissertation and it became the place I went to feel like myself. I'm the kind of person who needs to see the word on paper before it makes sense to me. I don't know what I think until it's written down, don't know what I feel until I've given it a sentence. That's what these two became. Shane and Ilya feeling their feelings so I could find out how to feel mine. *Control was the wallpaper over the loneliness*, etc etc. turns out writing it down helps.

So, silly of you thinking that I'll stop here, coming someday:

Dare You Twice Part 2: I'm too invested to let this story go so this is inevitable. If Dare You Twice is the *how-they-met* story arc, part 2 is where we get to see what it actually costs to make shit work. I want it realistic but I also don't want it to be too heavy, so I'm still finding the balance. I want fluff but also deep mature conversations but also, I don't know, sloppy bathtub sex and public edging or something.

Some other scenes I want to write in the next instalment:

- Shane meeting Irina
- Pediatric Ilya at work
- Shane visiting Ilya's hospital and (*accidentally*) bonding with the kids
- A little phone sex / sexting
- Shane taking Ilya to one of the games
- Montreal domestic days
- Ilya teaching Shane Russian and Shane keeps getting it wrong (Ilya may or may not teach him filthy words to embarrass him)

And that's only some of the staple fluff stuff, I have a long list of thematic ideas I can't wait to sink my teeth into, like the concept of inherited love, which is *the way we love is the way we were loved*. Ilya was loved badly by his father, well by his mother, and not at all by the country he grew up in. Whatever Ilya knows about love, he learned in those rooms. Part 2 is whether Ilya can love Shane *in a way that wasn't inherited*. Whether he can be the first person in his lineage to love without distance and whether the chain breaks here. Fun stuff! 😊

Ok I really need to stop yapping lol. As always, no promises on timing, but it's in the works (at least in my head) and it's getting there when the timing's right.

Good lord I'm so cooked. Fic author is a full time job I swear.

Au revoir for now. We'll suffer together again soon!

*Shane is obsessed with playlists and so am I.* [Moodboard Playlist.](#)

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### **Honorary mention to fics and authors I love:**

[Wolfbird by OpalApparition](#) (*Shane's wildest fantasy, Criterion Collection, Tag Heuer Aquaracer ad*)

[Home Economics by Anonymous](#) (*Shane's yellow kitchen and being in Zurich*)

[Select All by Regolith \(metonym\)](#) (*Tiny fishing village in Iceland called Patreksfjörður*)

[Blowback by 21cg](#) (*Shane's college awakening*)

[Closer to where you are \(is where I must be\) by sistercacao](#) (*Being in Paris*)

[Black Dog by delagauchetiere](#) (*Ilya's dog Chernys*)



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