

mine (in another lifetime)

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by [luverslilac](#)

Summary

“Don’t marry her. Don’t leave me.”

Ilya Rozanov has planned dozens of perfect weddings.

This one just happens to belong to the man he's been in love with for his for years.

Reuploaded after random deletion a while back

Notes

If you saw this when it was being uploaded a few weeks ago, no, you didn't jk lol! (if you remember this fic when it was first uploaded hiii!!!!) I don't know what happened, it randomly decided to delete on me, so I decided to edit it a lot and finish the whole thing before I reuploaded it... SO YEAH! sorry for the few weeks delay of putting it back on ao3!

i'm antsy to get this fic out and done with so i can start working on another hr fic! it's been multiple weeks of writing and editing lmao 🤔 (even though i love this fic and it's my baby, im ready to move on from it, it was EXTREMELY difficult to write!)

So with all that info in mind, uploads are pretty frequent since the fic is done, so every 1-3 days!

ENJOYYYYY 💕💕

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

Chapter 1: The Wrong Kind of Familiar

Chapter Summary

just in case anyone was wondering, this fic is inspired by [this tiktok!](#)

follow my author tiktok for snippets of future chapters and updates!: @luverslilac !!

The call came on a Tuesday, which felt appropriate. Nothing good had ever happened to Ilya Rozanov on a Tuesday.

He was elbow-deep in fabric swatches at the time, blush versus dusty rose versus something the vendor was calling "antique petal," which appeared to be the exact same colour as the other two, when his phone lit up on the worktable and he saw the name on the screen. He stared at it for long enough that it almost rang out, almost.

"Shane," he said, and was annoyed at how easily the name came out, like breathing. Like something he'd been doing his whole life, which, he supposed, he had.

"Roz." The voice on the other end was warm and familiar and still—still, after all this time, capable of doing something inconvenient to Ilya's chest.

"You got a second?"

"I have many second. I am surrounded by fabric and suffering, please distract me."

Shane laughed, low and a little rough, the way he always laughed when he was about to ask for something and knew it. Ilya had catalogued that laugh somewhere around age twelve. He'd been cataloguing Shane Hollander's sounds and expressions and habits for the better part of twenty-five years, which was, objectively, a pathetic way to spend a life, and yet.

"So," Shane said. "I'm getting married."

Here is what Ilya knew about loving Shane Hollander: it was inconvenient, it was chronic, and it had started so early that he could not identify a before.

After moving from Russia when he was five, they had grown up three houses apart in a quiet suburb of Ottawa, two restless boys with too much energy and not enough outlet for it, forever in each other's orbit.

Shane had been the kind of kid who organized things: neighborhood games, weekend plans, the seating chart at his own birthday party, and Ilya had been the kind of kid who disrupted them, and somehow this had made them inseparable rather than incompatible.

They had played hockey together on frozen ponds and in damp arenas, had shared school lunches and summer afternoons and the particular, formless grief of late adolescence. They

had been, for a long time, each other's most important person.

Then Shane had gone to university in Halifax and Ilya had gone to Montreal, and the geography had done what geography does: it had pulled them slowly, quietly apart. Visits that grew less frequent, calls that grew shorter.

The comfortable, devastating assumption that they would always be there for each other, receding gradually into the background of adult life like a painting you stop noticing because it's always hung in the same spot.

Ilya had moved to Toronto and built himself a career. He was good at weddings, terrifyingly good. Some clients said, as though his talent were something slightly threatening, which perhaps it was. He had an eye for the gap between what people said they wanted and what they actually wanted, and a gift for bridging it, he made beautiful things, he was proud of this.

He saw Shane maybe twice a year. At Christmas, occasionally, once at a mutual friend's birthday in Montreal. He had been to Shane's apartment in Vancouver exactly once, had slept on his couch, had spent an entire weekend carefully not looking at Shane for too long, and had flown home on the Sunday with the particular exhaustion of someone who has been performing calm for forty-eight consecutive hours.

Rose, he knew, vaguely, Rose Landry. Shane had mentioned her in the last year or so. First casually, then with increasing warmth, then with the specific, helpless quality of a man who has stopped trying to sound nonchalant. She was lovely, from everything Shane had said. She was a teacher Shane had also mentioned to him. Kind, funny, good for him. Ilya had been glad, he was extremely practiced at being glad for Shane.

"Congratulations," Ilya said, and his voice came out smoothly, which he considered a personal triumph.

"This is wonderful, Shane. I am very happy for you."

"Thanks, Roz." A pause. "I mean it. She's... she's really great, you'll love her."

"I am sure I will."

"We're thinking next September. The wedding, Rose's family is, they're very into it, there's going to be like two hundred people, which honestly terrifies me a little, but," Shane laughed again, nervous, this time. A different entry in Ilya's internal catalogue. "Anyway, I was actually calling because, well."

Ilya set down the swatch he'd been holding, he had a premonition. He did not like it.

"Rose has been looking at planners," Shane said. "And she came across your website. And she... she kind of lost her mind a little, honestly, she loves your work. The Beaumont wedding, the one with the greenhouse? She's shown me the photos maybe fifteen times."

"The Henderson-Beaumont wedding," Ilya said automatically.

"Yes, that was good one_."

"So she wants to ask you to, to plan ours." Another pause, freighted with something Ilya couldn't quite name.

"And I wanted to call first. To ask if that would be... weird? For you."

"Would it be weird for you?" What a question..... What an exquisite, unknowable question.

Ilya looked at the swatches spread across his worktable. Blush, dusty rose, antique petal. All of them the same colour, really. All of them pretending to be distinct.

"It would not be weird," he said. "It would be honor."

He heard Shane exhale, relief, warm and uncomplicated. And felt something in his own chest go very quiet.

"Yeah? You sure? I don't want it to be, I know we haven't seen each other in a while, I know things have been-"

"Shane." Ilya kept his voice easy, fond, the voice he reserved for Shane specifically. "I will plan your wedding, It will be beautiful, stop worrying."

"Right, Okay, Yeah." A beat..... Then, softer: "I've missed you, Roz. It'll be good to actually spend some time together. Even if it's... you know. Spreadsheets and venue tours."

"Especially if it is spreadsheet and venue tour," Ilya said. "This is my love language."

Shane laughed, the real one this time, the one that went on a second longer than it needed to, and Ilya stood very still and let himself have it. Just for a moment, just the soundd' of it.

"I'll have Rose email you," Shane said. "She's going to be so excited. Thank you, seriously."

"Do not thank me yet. Wait until you see my invoice." Ilya said with his thick Russian accent.

"Terrifying as always. Talk soon, Roz."

"Talk soon."

The call ended, Ilya put his phone face-down on the worktable and stood for a moment in the silence of his studio, surrounded by every shade of pink that existed in the world, and said nothing, and thought nothing useful, and felt everything he was not allowed to feel move quietly through him like a tide.

Then he picked up his phone and opened a new project file.
He titled it: Hollander-Landry Wedding, September.

He stared at it for a long time.

The first consultation was held at a wine bar in Vancouver on a rainy Thursday in March, which gave Ilya something to do with his hands during the flight, fidget with his portfolio,

rearrange his notes, pretend to sleep. He was good at pretending to sleep, he was good at most forms of pretending.

He arrived at the bar twelve minutes early, because he was always early, and ordered something sparkling and sat with his back to the wall and watched the door.

They came in together, which was, of course they did, of course. Shane had his hand at the small of Rose's back, that easy, proprietary tenderness that people in love don't notice themselves doing, and Rose was laughing at something, her light hair damp from the rain, her face open and bright and immediately, obviously lovely.

She was exactly the kind of woman Ilya would have liked very much if she were not marrying his best friend, which meant he was going to like her very much indeed, because he had never yet been permitted the luxury of resenting Shane's happiness, and Shane.

Ilya had had eight weeks to prepare for seeing Shane, which had turned out to be approximately eight weeks less than he needed.

He was taller than Ilya remembered, but still a few inches shorter than Ilya himself. Or perhaps that was only the way Ilya always felt in his vicinity, slightly reduced, slightly off-axis, like standing too close to something vast.

He was wearing a dark green jacket and his hair was doing the thing it sometimes did where it fell slightly across his forehead, and his eyes found Ilya across the bar with the particular directness that had always been Shane's way of looking at people he was genuinely glad to see.

He was, unfortunately, beautiful. He had always been, unfortunately, beautiful.

"Roz," Shane said, crossing the room, and then Ilya was on his feet and they were embracing the way they always did, brief and solid, Shane's hand clapping once between his shoulder blades, and Ilya counted the seconds: one, two, three, before he stepped back.

"You look good," Shane said, studying him with that direct gaze. "Toronto's been good to you."

"Toronto is nightmare," Ilya said. "But am resilient."

He turned to Rose, who was watching them both with an expression he could not quite read. "You must be Rose. I have heard many things about you."

"All good things, I hope," Rose said, extending her hand, and her grip was firm and her smile was genuine and Ilya liked her immediately and completely and felt, somewhere beneath his sternum, the first thin edge of something that was going to be very, very difficult.

"Only excellent things," he said. "Please, sit. Let us talk about your wedding."

They sat, Shane poured wine. Rose pulled out a notebook that was already dense with handwriting and small clipped images, and Ilya opened his portfolio, and the conversation began: venues and seasons and flowers and the particular, intimate chaos of planning a celebration of two lives becoming one.

Ilya asked questions and listened to the answers and took careful notes and made Rose laugh twice and caught Shane watching him once with an expression he filed away to think about later, when he was alone and could afford to.

He was very good at his job, he was going to do this job perfectly.

Ilya Rozanov was going to be absolutely fine.

Chapter 2: Fraser Valley

The venue was a converted estate on the edge of the Fraser Valley, all pale stone and overgrown wisteria and tall windows that caught the late April light like they had been placed there specifically to make people feel things they were not prepared for.

Ilya had arranged three venues for this weekend. He had known, looking at the photographs, that this one would be the one Rose chose, he always knew.

It was part of what made him very good at his job and occasionally insufferable to his colleagues, who he suspected both admired and resented this quality in equal measure.

He had driven up the night before, alone, and walked the grounds in the early evening when the light was going gold and the air smelled of damp grass and the first warmth of spring trying to establish itself.

He did this with every significant venue. He needed to know a space before he introduced it to clients, needed to understand how it breathed, where the light moved, which corners held cold and which held warmth.

His mentor, a terrifying Quebecoise woman named Sylvie who had retired to Provence and sent him postcards with single sentences of advice on the back, had taught him this.

A room has a personality, she had written once, in her sharp slanted hand. Your job is to match it to the right people, get it wrong and the whole day fights itself.

He had not gotten it wrong yet, he did not intend to start now.

He had stood in the empty ballroom the previous evening for a long time, listening to it. Herringbone floors, original, worn to a soft glow by a century of feet. A ceiling that arched like the inside of a held breath. Tall windows on the south wall that would, in September, catch the afternoon sun and throw it in long warm shapes across the floor right around the time the ceremony would be ending. A fireplace at the far end, enormous, the kind of fireplace that made a room feel safe.

The wisteria outside was not yet fully out but it was coming, purple and insistent, pressing soft fingers against the glass.

He had thought yes, he had written nothing, in his notebook, he had just stood there in the quiet of the empty room and let it confirm what he already knew, and then he had gone back to his hotel and ordered room service and spent two hours on his laptop doing the kind of administrative work that was not glamorous but was, in his experience, the actual architecture underneath every beautiful event.

He had not thought about Shane. He had thought about Shane constantly. Both of these things were true and he was practiced at holding both.

They arrived at half past ten, Shane's rental car crunching up the long gravel drive, and Ilya watched from the front steps as they got out. Rose first, on the passenger side, straightening up and going immediately still as she looked at the facade of the building. Her hair was light, almost blonde in the April sun, pulled back loosely, a few strands escaping around her face. She had a quality of stillness when something moved her, Ilya had noticed this at the consultation as well, a kind of held suspension, like a person trying to make sure the feeling was real before they let themselves have it fully.

She turned to Shane over the roof of the car and said something Ilya could not hear. Shane looked up at the building and then back at her and smiled, the specific smile of a man watching someone he loves be happy, which was a smile Ilya had filed away already in the category of things he was not going to examine too closely.

Shane was wearing a dark jacket over a grey shirt and his hair was doing the thing it sometimes did, falling slightly across his forehead in a way that had been annoying Ilya since the early 2000's, he looked well. He looked, if anything, better than he had at the wine bar two weeks ago, which was inconvenient and should not have been surprising and was somehow both.

"Rozanov," Shane said, coming up the steps with his hand already extended, and Ilya shook it and was briefly, acutely aware of the warmth of his grip before releasing it.

"Hollander," Ilya said. "You are late."

"We're seven minutes late."

"Yes, seven minutes late is late."

"It's good to see you too, Roz."

Rose reached them and laughed, a bright easy sound.

"He's been like this the whole drive, I want you to know. Checking the time every five minutes."

"This does not surprise me," Ilya said, and extended his hand to her. "Rose, welcome. How was your drive?"

"Beautiful," she said, looking past him at the estate. "Is it always like this? The light out here?"

"In the morning, yes. In September the afternoon light will come through the south windows during the ceremony. It is very good light."

She looked at him with an expression that was warm and slightly searching. "You've already been inside."

"Last night. I always visit a venue alone first."

"Why?"

He considered how to explain this without sounding strange. "Because a room behaves differently when it is empty. I need to know what it is before I show you what it could be."

Rose was quiet for a moment, looking at him. Then she said: "Shane told me you were good at this, he undersold it."

Shane made a sound beside her that might have been protest and might have been agreement. Ilya did not look at him. "Come," he said. "I will show you the grounds first, then the interior."

He took them around the gardens first, which were extensive and slightly overgrown in the particular way that looked accidental but was actually the result of a great deal of careful tending.

A gardener who understood that wilderness, controlled, was more beautiful than order. The wisteria covered the south-facing wall in dense ropes, the blooms just beginning to open, and Rose stopped underneath it and looked up and said nothing for a moment, just stood with her head tilted back and her light hair falling away from her face.

"In September it will be finished blooming," Ilya said. "But the vine itself is very beautiful. Green, dense, and there is a climbing rose on the east wall, the variety blooms late, it will still be going in early September if the summer is warm."

"What color?" Rose asked, still looking up.

"Deep pink, almost red."

She lowered her head and looked at Shane. Something passed between them, quick and private, and Shane's mouth curved. "She likes pink," he told Ilya, as though this were useful information Ilya would file somewhere.

"I noticed," Ilya said. He had noticed at the consultation, the small pink enamel pin on her bag, the blush tone of her blouse, he noticed these things.

They walked the rest of the grounds, Ilya pointing out the ceremony lawn and the kitchen garden that could be used for a cocktail hour and the old stone terrace that wrapped around the south side of the building.

Shane asked practical questions, the kind that revealed he had been thinking about this more carefully than he perhaps wanted to appear: capacity numbers, parking, whether the kitchens could handle the catering volume he was imagining. Ilya answered everything, he had done the research.

Rose drifted slightly ahead of them at one point, drawn toward a gap in the hedge that opened onto a small secret garden, a circular space with a stone bench at its centre and an old apple tree that had been allowed to grow sideways, its branches forming a low canopy.

She stood at the entrance to it and pressed her hand to her mouth and Ilya thought: there is your ceremony space, and felt the familiar satisfaction of being right about a room.

He glanced at Shane beside him, Shane was watching Rose with the same expression as before, the uncomplicated one, and there was something about the quality of his attention that made Ilya look away.

"She is going to want to get married under that tree," Ilya said quietly.

"Yeah," Shane said. His voice was soft. "Yeah, she is."

A pause.... The garden was very quiet.

Somewhere above them a bird was working through the same four notes repeatedly, with great conviction.

"You are happy," Ilya said. He had not meant to say it aloud. It came out in his voice exactly as it was, which was an observation and also something else underneath that he was not going to name.

Shane looked at him, a slight shift of attention. "Yeah," he said again.

"I am." Then, after a moment: "Is that weird to say to you?"

"Why would it be weird?"

"I don't know. We haven't really talked about this stuff; Me and Rose.... I don't know how much you want to hear."

"I want to hear whatever you want to tell me," Ilya said, which was true in the way that many things he said to Shane were true, technically, and incomplete in ways that mattered enormously.

Shane studied him for a moment with that direct gaze, the one Ilya had been the subject of since childhood, the one that had always made him feel both seen and endangered.

Then he looked back at Rose, who had moved into the small garden now and was standing under the apple tree with her arms slightly open, like she was measuring the space with her body.

"She's the kind of person," Shane said slowly, "who makes me feel like I don't have to explain myself. You know? Like I can just be whatever I am and she already gets it." He paused. "I didn't know that was possible. I thought it was something people made up."

Ilya said nothing. He was looking at Rose under the apple tree and thinking about what Shane had just described and feeling it move through him like something very cold and very quiet.

"That is a good thing to have found," he said at last.

"Yeah," Shane said. "It is."

They moved inside after that, through the tall front doors and into the entrance hall, which

had original black and white tile floors and a sweeping staircase and the particular quality of interior light that old stone buildings hold, cool and even and somehow ancient.

Rose made a small sound beside him, involuntary, the sound of a person whose body reacts before their mind catches up.

"The bridal suite is upstairs," Ilya said. "We can look at it later, first I want to show you the ballroom."

He led them through the hall and down the short corridor and opened the double doors, and stood back, and watched them see it.

Rose stepped inside first and stopped.

The room was flooded with morning light from the south windows, the herringbone floors glowing, the arched ceiling doing its held-breath thing overhead. She turned in a slow circle, taking it in, her light hair catching the light as she moved.

"Oh," she said, Just that.

Shane came to stand beside her and put his hand at the small of her back and they stood there together in the middle of the empty ballroom and Ilya stayed in the doorway and did not move, because the moment was not his and he understood this, he had always understood how to stand at the edge of other people's moments, it was part of the job and also, in this particular case, part of something older and more personal that he was not going to examine right now.

He gave them a minute, he looked at his notebook. He wrote: Ballroom, south light, morning and afternoon: capacity 220 seated, check linen suppliers for herringbone-adjacent tablecloth options.

He was aware that he was using the notebook as a prop. He was fine with this.

"Ilya," Rose said. She had turned to face him, her expression was open in a way that made something in his chest do something uncomfortable. "This is it. Isn't it? This is the place!"

"I thought it might be," he said.

"You knew before we got here."

"I had a strong feeling."

"How?" She crossed toward him, curious, genuinely curious, the way she was about things, he was learning. "How did you know this would be the one?"

He considered. "At the consultation, you said you wanted something that felt lived-in, not a blank canvas. Somewhere with history already in the walls. You said you did not want a room that needed the wedding to give it meaning.

You wanted a room that already had meaning, and then you would add to it." He paused. "This building has been holding people's significant moments for a hundred and thirty years.

You can feel it when you stand in here. The room does not need you to justify it. It just welcomes you."

Rose stared at him for a moment. Then she looked back at Shane. "I love him," she said, with great conviction.

Shane laughed. "Yeah, he has that effect."

"I am standing right here," Ilya said.

"We know," they said, nearly simultaneously, and then Rose laughed and Shane grinned and Ilya felt the bizarre, aching warmth of being included in something, of being the third point in a triangle that he had no business wanting to be part of in the way that he wanted to be part of it.

Rose's phone rang an hour into the ballroom walkthrough, while Ilya was explaining the logistics of the evening lighting and the options for a band versus a DJ and the placement of the head table. She looked at the screen and her expression shifted, the specific shift of a teacher who has learned to be perpetually on call even on weekends.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "It's the school. One of my students, his parents have been having some issues and I said they could reach me, I have to take this."

"Of course," Ilya said.

"I'll be fast." She was already moving toward the tall glass doors that opened onto the terrace, already bringing the phone to her ear, already switching registers from fiancée-looking-at-her-wedding-venue to teacher-managing-a-crisis with the ease of someone who moved between selves fluidly. "Hello, Mr. Patterson, yes, I'm here..."

The glass doors swung shut behind her. Ilya watched her through the glass for a moment, pacing the terrace in the pale spring sunshine, her free hand moving as she talked. Then he looked back at the room and became aware that he was alone in it with Shane.

This had happened before, in the twenty-five years of their friendship. Being alone together was not a novel condition. And yet, he wrote something in his notebook. A note about the evening lighting. An actual note, this time.

"Walk me through it," Shane said.

Ilya looked up. "The lighting?"

"No, what you're seeing when you look at a room like this." Shane had his hands in his jacket pockets, watching Ilya with that quality of attention he had always had, the kind that made you feel like the most interesting thing in the room. "Not the professional answer. The real one."

Ilya felt something in him shift slightly, the way it always did when Shane asked him a real question.

It had been like this since they were boys. Shane had always wanted the actual answer, not the performed one, and Ilya had always found it nearly impossible to give him anything else, which was its own particular problem.

"The real answer," he said. He turned to look at the room, because it was easier to talk about it without looking at Shane.

"When I walk into a space I am always thinking about the last hour of the night. The last hour, when the speeches are finished and the dancing has been going for a while and everyone is tired and happy and the flowers have started to droop a little. The candles are lower. People have taken their shoes off." He paused. "I am thinking: what does this room feel like then? Does it hold people, or does it start to feel like somewhere you are meant to leave?"

"And this room?"

"This room holds people.... At the end of the night you will not want to go. The ceiling will feel lower, the way ceilings do when a room is full of warm air and candlelight. The floors will have been danced on. The flowers will have opened fully by then, they are always tighter in the morning and they open through the day with the warmth." He stopped. He was aware that he was talking too much, or perhaps the right amount, it was difficult to calibrate with Shane.

"You will not want to leave," he said again, more quietly. "That is what I want for a room. That it makes the people inside it not want to leave."

Silence.... The herringbone floors were warm in the light. Outside, through the glass doors, Rose paced the terrace, still talking, her light hair moving in the wind. This was the problem, not one of the problems, not a problem among others, but the specific, weight-bearing problem at the centre of everything: Shane still talked to him like this.

Like no time had passed. Like the years of drift and distance and careful, managed contact had not happened at all. Like they were still teenagers sitting on the roof of someone's garage at two in the morning, saying the things they couldn't say to anyone else, the sky very large and very dark above them.

Shane had always had this quality, this specific frequency of attention that meant I want to know what you actually think, and it had always, without exception, dismantled Ilya's defences in ways that nothing else could.

He had spent a long time, in his twenties, trying to figure out if what he felt for Shane was love in the way that the word usually meant or something else, some other kind of attachment that merely resembled it.

He had dated other people. He had, at various points, been very nearly happy. He had told himself that what he felt for Shane was the residue of adolescence, the particular intensity of early friendship, something that would metabolise eventually into ordinary affection if he just gave it enough time and enough distance.

He was thirty-four years old. He had given it a great deal of time and a great deal of distance.

It had not metabolised into anything. It sat in him exactly where it had always sat, quiet and patient and completely immovable, like a piece of furniture that had been there so long you had stopped seeing it but that would make the room unrecognizable if it were gone.

He was irreversibly, absolutely, in love with Shane Hollander.

And now he was planning Shane's wedding.

Fucking perfect.

Chapter 3: Dmitiri

Shane pushed off the window frame and came back toward the centre of the room. He moved the way he had always moved, with a kind of easy physical confidence that was not arrogance exactly but something adjacent to it, the confidence of a person who had spent a long time being comfortable in their body. Ilya had always noticed this.

He had always tried not to.

"Can I ask you something?" Shane said.

"You are going to ask me regardless of what I say."

"True." Shane stopped a few feet away. Close enough that Ilya was aware of him in that specific peripheral way, the way you are aware of a source of warmth or light.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

Ilya looked up from the notebook. "Why?"

"Just wondering, you never talk about it."

"I never talk about many things."

"Yeah, I know." Shane's expression was easy, but there was something attentive underneath it, something that was paying more careful attention than the ease suggested. "But specifically that, you were with someone for a while, a few years ago. The architect."

"Dmitri."

"Dmitri, yeah. And then that ended and you never really said much about it and I didn't push because it seemed like you didn't want to talk about it, but..." He trailed off. Tried again.

"I just wonder sometimes... If you're okay."

Ilya looked at him for a moment.

Shane's face was open, genuinely open, asking because he wanted to know, because he had always wanted to know how Ilya was, it was one of the things that had made their friendship feel like something real even during the years when they had been bad at maintaining it. Shane actually wanted to know. He had always actually wanted to know.

"I am fine," Ilya said. "I am not seeing anyone at the moment. I am busy, the business takes up a great deal of time."

"That's not an answer."

"It is answer. It is not the one you wanted."
Shane studied him. "Are you lonely?"

The word landed with more precision than Ilya was prepared for. He looked back at the notebook. "Everyone is lonely sometimes," he said. "This is not a unique condition."

"Roz."

"Shane."

"I'm asking because I care about you. Not because I'm being nosy. You know that, right?"

"I know that," Ilya said, and he did know it, had always known it, which was not a comfort but was something, was at least something.

"I am fine, I promise you I am fine. Now please stop looking at me like I am a problem you are trying to solve."

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are. You have been doing this since we were eight years old. You see something you think is wrong and you want to fix it. It is one of your most exhausting qualities and also one of the things I like most about you, so I find it very hard to be annoyed by it."

Shane stared at him for a moment. Then he laughed, the real laugh, the one that went on a beat longer than it needed to, the one that Ilya had been cataloguing since they were children. "Okay," he said. "Fine, I'll drop it."

"Thank you."

"For now."

"Of course for now. With you it is always only for now."

Shane grinned and Ilya looked away before the grin could do what it invariably did, which was make everything significantly more difficult.

Rose came back in through the glass doors twenty minutes later, slightly flushed from the cold and the conversation, pulling the door shut behind her with both hands against the wind.

"Sorry, sorry! All resolved, He's a sweet kid, just a hard home situation, anyway." She looked between them. "Did I miss anything?"

"Only Ilya explaining the philosophy of endings," Shane said.

"Weddings are not about endings," Ilya said, on reflex.

"I didn't mean the marriage."

"I know what you meant."

"What did he say?" Rose asked, looking from one of them to the other with the expression of someone watching a tennis match they find mildly confusing but entertaining.

"He said the point of a room is whether it makes you want to stay," Shane told her. Rose looked at Ilya.

Something in her expression softened further, went thoughtful. "That's the whole thing, isn't it," she said quietly. "That's the whole thing about a wedding. Whether the people inside it want to stay in it."

"Yes," Ilya said. "That is exactly it."

He looked at his notebook. "I would like to show you the bridal suite," he said. "And then the catering kitchen. And then I think we should have lunch, there is a good restaurant in the village, and we can talk through the questions you have and I will begin to put together a preliminary proposal for your consideration."

"That sounds perfect," Rose said. She reached out and touched his arm briefly, just her hand on his sleeve for a moment, a small warm gesture. "Thank you for this, Ilya, really. This has been extraordinary."

"It is my job," he said.

"It's more than that," she said. "Anyone can have a job. This is, this is something else."

He did not know what to do with this, so he nodded and turned to lead them out of the ballroom, and did not look at Shane, who he could feel watching him from two steps back, that same careful attention, that same quality of seeing.

The herringbone floors creaked softly underfoot as they went. The light came through the tall windows and fell across the room in long warm shapes. Outside, the wisteria moved against the glass, purple and slow, blooming the way things do when they cannot help it, when the season turns and the warmth arrives and there is simply no stopping it.

Lunch was at a small restaurant in the village, dark wood and mismatched chairs and a chalkboard menu that changed daily.

They took a corner table and ordered wine, and the conversation moved easily between the three of them, easier than Ilya had expected or perhaps than he had let himself hope for.

Rose was funny in a dry, quick way that caught him off guard repeatedly. She had opinions about things and expressed them without apology and changed them when presented with new information, which Ilya considered a rare and admirable quality.

She asked him questions about his work, about specific weddings he had done, about what had made him choose this field, and she listened to the answers with full attention and then asked the next question that followed naturally from them.

He found himself, by the second glass of wine, talking about Sylvie.

About the year he had spent assisting her in Montreal before she retired, how she had been exacting and occasionally cruel in the way that only truly gifted people permit themselves to be with their apprentices, how she had taught him to see spaces and events as living things with their own requirements, how she had told him once, with great seriousness, that he had a better eye than she did but worse instincts about people, and that he needed to fix this or the eye would be wasted.

"And did you?" Rose asked. "Fix it?"

"I am still working on it," Ilya said. "The instincts about people. I think I am better, but I am not sure Sylvie would agree."

"Do you still talk to her?"

"She sends me postcards. One sentence, always advice." He paused. "Last month she sent one that said: Stop being so careful with everything. Careful is just afraid with better posture."

Rose laughed, delighted. "I love her."

"She would like you," Ilya said, and meant it.

He glanced at Shane, who was watching him with a look that Ilya recognised from a long time ago, from late nights and long conversations, a look that meant Shane was listening to something underneath the thing being said. Ilya reached for his wine glass and looked away.

"How long have you two been friends?" Rose asked. She was looking between them with open curiosity. "Shane told me since you were kids but I want the full version."

"Since we were five," Ilya said.

"Since we were five," Shane confirmed. "He moved in three houses down and within a week he had reorganised the neighbourhood ice hockey teams and made everyone mad at him."

"I made them better," Ilya said. "They were not mad. They were resistant to improvement, which is different."

"He was terrifying," Shane told Rose, with great affection. "Even at five, just completely certain about everything."

"You were not much better," Ilya said. "You wanted to be in charge of everything. Every game, every plan. You made a schedule for our summer once, a schedule.... we were nine,"

"It was a good schedule."

"It had time blocks."

"Efficiency is important."

Rose was laughing, looking between them. "You're exactly the same," she said. "You're both exactly the same, just. Turned in different directions."

Ilya considered this. He thought she was probably right. He thought Shane would agree with her. He thought that this was perhaps the most economical description of twenty-five plus years of friendship he had ever heard, and that she had arrived at it after knowing them both for approximately three weeks, which said something about her that he was still in the process of cataloguing.

"Turned in different directions," Shane repeated, smiling at her. "Yeah, that's about right."

His hand found hers on the table, easy and unconscious, and Rose turned her hand over and their fingers laced together and Ilya looked at the window and thought about the proposal he would write tonight, the spreadsheets, the vendor contacts, the September dates he needed to confirm with the estate.

He thought about being five years old and watching Shane Hollander come out of the house three doors down and immediately start reorganising the afternoon, and feeling, even then, some pull toward him that he had not had words for yet.

Some things, it turned out, you did not develop words for. You just carried them, you got very good at carrying them and you did not put them down and eventually carrying them became so ordinary that you almost forgot there was a time before. Almost....

They said goodbye in the car park outside the restaurant. Rose hugged him, which surprised him slightly, a brief warm thing, and said: "I'm so glad it's you doing this. Shane always talked about you like you were something special and I think he was right."

"He talked about me?" Ilya said, before he could help it.

"All the time," Rose said simply, like this was not information of any particular weight, like she did not notice the way it landed. "Like all the time." Rose confirmed whispering in Ilya's ear. She pulled back and smiled at him, her light hair bright in the afternoon sun.

"We'll see you at the tasting next month?" Rose stated.

"I will send the details this week," Ilya said.

She went to the car. Shane lingered, the way he sometimes did at the end of things, with the particular reluctance of a person who is not finished but knows they are supposed to be.

"It was good to see you, Roz," he said. "Really."

"You also," Ilya said.

"The place is perfect. You were right."

"I am usually right."

"Yeah, you are." Shane looked at him for a moment. The afternoon light was very particular, the way light gets in spring when it is trying to become something warmer than it has been.

"Are you driving back tonight?"

"Tomorrow morning. I have some work to do this evening."

"You work too much."

"You make schedules for nine year olds. We all have our things."

Shane laughed, the short soft one. He put his hand briefly on Ilya's shoulder, just for a moment, and Ilya stayed very still. "Get some sleep," Shane said. "Don't just work all night."

"I will sleep," Ilya said. "Go, your fiancé is waiting."

Shane went. Ilya watched the car pull out of the car park and turn onto the village road and disappear. He stood in the empty car park for a moment in the afternoon light and did not move.

Then he took out his phone and opened the project file.

Hollander-Landry Wedding. September.

He added a note: Fraser Valley Estate, confirmed preferred venue, begin availability check, catering consult to follow, bridal suite approved, ceremony space: secret garden, apple tree, client note: late-blooming climbing rose on east wall, deep pink, confirm with estate gardener re: September bloom timing.

He put his phone away. He looked at the road where the car had gone. The village was quiet around him, the afternoon moving toward evening, the light going slowly gold.

He had six months..... He was going to make it the most beautiful wedding the Fraser Valley estate had ever seen. He was going to do his job so well that there would be no room in it for anything else.

He walked back to his hotel, he opened his laptop and he started the proposal.

He did not think about Shane's hand on his shoulder. He thought about it constantly. Both of these things were true, and he was very practiced at holding both, and he was going to be, he told himself, absolutely fine.

Outside his hotel window, the valley was going dark and the first stars were coming out over the mountains, one at a time, with no particular urgency, the way things appear when they have always been there and are simply becoming visible.

Chapter 4: Linger

The catering studio smelled extraordinary, and Rose grabbed Shane's arm the moment they walked through the door and said,

"Shane, do you smell that?" and Shane laughed and said, "Yeah, I smell it," and looked down at her the way he looked at her, warm and unhurried and completely unguarded, and Ilya walked ahead of them both and told himself he was checking the layout of the tasting room.

He had been doing a great deal of this lately— Walking ahead. Finding something professional to look at.

Shane had always had more warmth and specific, unbearable detail up close than at a safe distance, and Ilya had apparently lost his tolerance for proximity somewhere in the years of careful separation and was now paying for it on a biweekly basis.

He positioned himself at the end of the long linen-covered table, opened his notebook, and waited for it to begin.

Shane reached for the ginger ale at his setting before he had even fully sat down.

Rose said, "You and the ginger ale," with the fond exasperation of someone who had said this many times and expected to say it many times more.

Shane said it was a practical palate cleanser. Rose said he simply liked it. Shane said these were not competing facts, and they were both smiling before they finished the exchange, the easy smiles of two people who enjoy their own recurring arguments.

Ilya watched from the end of the table and felt the familiar, quiet ache of it settle into his chest like something that had always lived there.

"Adaeze put it out because I told her you would want it," he said, not looking up from his notebook.

The table went quiet. He felt Shane looking at him.

"You told her that," Shane said.

"You brought your own can to the venue tour," Ilya said. "It seemed worth mentioning."

A pause, one beat longer than necessary.

"Thanks, Roz," Shane said, voice dropping into that lower, quieter register, the one that meant more than what was being said, and Ilya kept his pen moving and his face arranged into something professional and thought about nothing, specifically and deliberately nothing, until the moment passed.

He had always known about the ginger ale. Had known since they were teenagers, had filed it alongside every other Shane-specific detail that his memory refused to release regardless of how little use the information served him.

He had told Adaeze without thinking, the way you do things that are so natural they precede thought entirely.

This was the problem with loving someone for 25 years. The caring became indistinguishable from breathing, you did not decide to do it. You simply did, constantly, without being asked and without any expectation of return, because it had long since stopped being a choice.

Adaeze moved them through the appetisers and then stepped out to the kitchen to prepare the main courses, and the tasting room settled into a quieter register.

Rose excused herself to the bathroom, and just like that, without ceremony or warning, Ilya was alone at the table with Shane.

Shane leaned back in his chair and looked at Ilya with the easy, unhurried quality he had when he was content, and Ilya looked back, and neither of them said anything for a moment.

This happened sometimes. It had always happened, these pockets of comfortable silence that required nothing, that had been part of their friendship so long that Ilya had stopped noticing them except in the moments when he noticed them acutely, when the silence had a particular quality of fullness to it, as though it were holding something neither of them was naming.

This was one of those moments.

Shane's eyes were steady on his face, warm and direct and completely unselfconscious the way Shane's attention always was, and Ilya held it the way he usually didn't let himself hold it, for two seconds, then three, then four, the candlelight sitting between them and the room very quiet and something in the air that Ilya could not name and was not going to try to name.

Shane's freckles were dark in the low light, the scatter of them across his nose and cheeks, the specific one at the corner of his left eye, and his expression was open in a way that made Ilya's chest do something slow and involuntary.

He did not know what Shane saw when he looked back at him, he had never known.

That was the thing that had kept him careful for twenty-five years, the fundamental unknowability of what lived on the other side of Shane's attention, whether it was simply the warmth of an old friendship or something that, if named, might rearrange everything.

He had never asked, he was never going to ask. But in moments like this one, with the silence sitting full and warm between them and Shane's eyes on his face and nowhere to look away to, the not-knowing had a weight to it that was almost unbearable.

It was Shane who looked away first, glancing down at his ginger ale, and the moment released like a held breath, and Ilya looked at his notebook and wrote nothing and waited for

Rose to come back.

The main courses came and went, and it was halfway through them that Shane set down his fork and said, "Can I tell you something?"

"You are going to regardless," Ilya said.

Shane huffed a small laugh. "I've been thinking about the speeches. At the wedding. I want you to give one." He paused, turning his ginger ale glass in a slow circle on the tablecloth, the thing his hands did when he was approaching something carefully.

"You're my oldest friend, Roz. There's nobody else I'd want up there."

Ilya went very still. He did not let it show, had a great deal of practice not letting things show, but something in his chest moved through something slow and complicated and he needed a moment before he trusted his voice entirely.

He looked up. Shane was watching him with an open, earnest expression, the freckle at the corner of his left eye catching the warm light, looking so thoroughly and painfully sincere that Ilya thought: of all the things you could have asked me. Of all the things available to you.

"You want me to give a speech," Ilya said. "At your wedding."

"Yeah."

"Standing up in front of two hundred people and talking about how wonderful you are."

"You don't have to make it sound like a punishment," Shane said, and his mouth curved, the crooked smile going slightly self-conscious.

"I just want you there, properly there. Not just as the guy running things in the background."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment and felt the full and specific weight of it.

He was going to stand in front of a room full of people and make Shane's love story sound like something inevitable.

He was going to find the words for it, shape them carefully, deliver them with the warmth and conviction they deserved, and every single one of them was going to be true, and it was going to be the hardest thing he had ever done.

"I will give the speech," he said.

Shane's whole face shifted, relief and genuine warmth moving through it together. "Yeah?"

"Of course," Ilya said, keeping his voice easy and fond and utterly steady, because he was very good at this, had been practicing it for longer than Shane knew.

"You could not stop me if you tried."

Shane laughed, the real one, the one that went a beat longer than it needed to, and Ilya looked at his notebook and let himself have it for exactly that long and not a second more.

"Rose is going to be so pleased," Shane said.

"I know," Ilya said. "Tell me about the guest list. I need the final count by Friday."

The cake was last. Six small slices, each labelled in Adaeze's precise handwriting, and Ilya tasted the cardamom rose water because it was his private favorite and because he had decided he had earned one small thing today that was simply for himself, with no professional justification required.

He looked up to find Shane watching him.

"You made a face," Shane said.

"I did not make a face."

"A good face, definitely a face."

He was smiling, the real one, slightly crooked on the left side, the freckles shifting with it, and Ilya thought: twenty-five years and I am not even remotely immune to this smile, which is genuinely unfair and I would like to register a formal complaint.

"The cardamom rose water is very good," Ilya said. "This is a professional assessment."

"It's your favorite," Shane said, with the easy certainty of someone who has known you long enough to read you even when you are actively trying not to be read.

"I have informed assessments. Not favorites."

"Roz, It's your favorite."

Ilya looked at him. Shane looked back, completely comfortable in the knowledge of Ilya he had accumulated over 25 years and carried so lightly, as though knowing Ilya's small secret preferences were simply part of the ordinary furniture of being his friend. Unremarkable. Just a thing that was true. Ilya wanted, briefly and helplessly, to put his forehead on the table and stay there for a reasonable length of time.

Instead he said, "Try the vanilla raspberry," and turned back to his notebook.

Shane and Rose tasted it and looked at each other and Rose said, "That's it, isn't it?"

Shane said, "Yeah, that's it," and they did the wordless thing they did, the fluent private language of two people who have outgrown needing words for certain conversations, and Ilya wrote: vanilla raspberry, main tier, confirmed.

"The cardamom rose water as a second tier," Ilya said. "For the late-night dessert table. It will surprise people. They will remember it."

Rose said to Shane, "I love him," and Shane said, "I know," and Ilya looked at the table and felt the word move through him in the complicated way it always did when Shane said it about him, in whatever small capacity, because he was thirty-four years old and still completely helpless about this, and that was simply the truth of his life and he had made his peace with it, every single day, for a very long time.

They walked out into the warm May evening, Rose looping her arm through Shane's, her light hair bright in the last of the afternoon sun. Shane looked at Ilya and said, "Come to dinner. Georgian place on Main Street. You would lose your mind."

Ilya had a policy. He had reminded himself of it on the flight over, in the hotel last night, and again this morning.

He looked at Shane's face in the evening light, the freckles across his cheekbones, the crooked smile, the total absence of any awareness of what simply being himself cost the person standing across from him, and thought: there is almost nothing left of this specific version of my time with him, and I am going to have the dumplings.

"Fine," he said. "Show me these dumplings."

Shane grinned and led them down the warm street, and Ilya fell into step beside him and let himself have this too, just this small ordinary thing, the evening air and the city going gold and Shane Hollander walking next to him like it required no effort at all.

For Shane, it probably didn't. For Ilya it was the whole world compressed into an evening, and he was grateful for it and it was not enough and it was what he had, and he walked beside Shane and held all of it the way he always had, with the particular care of a person who has understood for a very long time that some things are simply not going to be put down.

At some point Shane reached across Rose to hand Ilya the last of his ginger ale, and their fingers overlapped briefly on the cold glass, and Shane did not notice, and Ilya noticed everything, catalogued it with the helpless precision of someone collecting the only currency available to them, and held the cold glass, and kept walking.

Chapter 5: The Sound of Your Voice

It was 11:47 on a Wednesday when Ilya's phone lit up on his nightstand and Shane's name appeared on the screen, and Ilya looked at it for a moment in the dark of his Toronto apartment and felt something in his chest do the thing it always did when Shane called unexpectedly, which was a complicated and involuntary thing that he had long since stopped trying to suppress and had simply learned to allow, the way you allow weather.

He picked up. "It is almost midnight," he said, instead of hello, because this was how they had always answered each other's late calls, with the time, as a greeting and a gentle accusation both.

"11:47," Shane said. "That's not midnight."

"It is close enough to midnight that the distinction is not meaningful."

"You're awake though," Shane said, and Ilya could hear the smile in it, the specific warmth of a person who knows you well enough to know that you were already awake, that you are almost always awake at this hour, working or thinking or staring at the ceiling doing neither, and that the lateness of the call was not actually an inconvenience at all.

"I am awake," Ilya confirmed, and settled back against his pillow and looked at the ceiling and waited, because Shane always called late when he had something real to say, something he had been carrying around all day and hadn't found the right moment for, and the late hour was its own kind of permission, the dark making it easier to say true things.

"Rose is asleep," Shane said, which explained the quietness in his voice, the particular hush of someone talking in a room adjacent to a sleeping person. "I didn't want to wake her. But I couldn't sleep and I just—I wanted to talk to you."

Ilya closed his eyes. He wanted to talk to you.

Said so simply, so without elaboration or apology, in the way that Shane said most things, as though wanting to talk to Ilya were simply a fact of his life that required no justification, as ordinary and unremarkable as being thirsty or tired. As though Ilya were simply a thing he reached for when he needed something, a comfort so established it had stopped requiring acknowledgement.

The thing in Ilya's chest did something slow and thorough that he was not going to examine too closely at 11:47 in the dark.

"Then talk," he said.

...

They talked for a long time.

This was the thing about late calls with Shane, the thing Ilya had forgotten in the years of careful distance and was now remembering with an acuteness that was almost painful—once they started they didn't stop easily, the conversation moving the way it had always moved between them, one thing finding the next without effort, the thread of it never quite running out.

Shane talked about work first, a project that had been frustrating him for weeks, a structural problem he couldn't find the elegant solution to, and Ilya listened and asked questions and offered the kind of outside perspective that he had always been able to give Shane because he was not inside the problem and could see its shape clearly from where he stood.

Shane talked through it and then went quiet for a moment and then said, "Yeah, okay, that's it actually," with the quiet satisfaction of someone who has found the thing they were looking for, and Ilya felt the specific pleasure of being useful to Shane in this way, of being the person whose particular kind of thinking fit around Shane's in a way that made both of them sharper.

They had always been like this.

Even as boys, the two of them thinking together had produced something neither of them produced alone, and Ilya had spent a long time trying to find this with other people, with colleagues and friends and the people he had dated, and he had found versions of it, approximations, but never quite the same fit, never quite the same ease, and he was not going to think about what that meant at 11:53 on a Wednesday night lying in the dark with Shane's voice in his ear.

...

"Can I ask you something weird?" Shane said.

"All of your questions are weird," Ilya said.

"This has always been true."

"That's fair." A pause, and Ilya heard the soft sound of Shane shifting position, settling deeper into wherever he was sitting. "Do you ever think about when we were kids? Like actually think about it, not just the highlights. The ordinary stuff."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Outside his window the city moved through its late-night register, quieter than the day but never fully silent, and he thought about Shane's question with the honesty it deserved.

"Yes," he said.

"I think about it more than is probably sensible."

"Me too," Shane said, and something in his voice had shifted, gone softer and more careful, the voice he used for things he didn't say to many people.

“I think about that winter we were 15 and we used to take the long way home from practice just to keep talking. You remember that? It was -20 some of those nights and we just kept walking.” Ilya remembered.

He remembered with the precise, unhelpful clarity with which he remembered most things involving Shane, the cold and the dark and their breath coming out in clouds and Shane talking about something, always something, his voice animated and certain, and Ilya walking beside him thinking even then, at 15, with no words for it yet, that he would walk in -20 weather indefinitely if it meant he got to stay in this specific orbit.

“I remember,” he said, and kept his voice even.

“I don’t know why I think about that so much,” Shane said. “Just those walks. Just talking about nothing.”

“It was not nothing,” Ilya said, before he could stop himself.

“We talked about everything on those walks. You told me things on those walks that you did not tell anyone else.”

A silence, warm and slightly full. “Yeah,” Shane said quietly. “I did.”

...

Ilya stared at the ceiling and felt the ache of it move through him from the top of his chest all the way down, slow and complete, the specific ache of loving someone across time, of having 25 years of a person stored inside you like a country you can never fully leave, its geography so familiar that you navigate it in your sleep, in the dark, without even trying.

“I miss you,” Shane said. “Even when you’re right there at the appointments, I miss you. Does that make sense? Like I miss the version of us that just talked to each other without it being about anything.”

Ilya thought it makes every sense. He thought I have been missing you for years, I have been missing you since Halifax, I have been missing you so long that the missing has its own shape inside me, its own room, its own specific weight that I carry everywhere.

He thought you are on the phone in the dark talking to me about missing me and you are engaged to someone else and I am lying here letting you say these things because I am not strong enough to tell you to stop and also because stopping you would require explaining why, and I am never going to explain why.

“It makes sense,” he said.

...

They were quiet for a moment, the comfortable kind, the kind that had always been available to them and that Ilya had missed, specifically and separately from missing Shane himself, the way you can miss a place and also miss the particular quality of light in that place as its own distinct loss.

“Tell me something,” Shane said. “Something I don’t know about you. Something that happened while we were being bad at keeping in touch.”

Ilya considered this. There were many things Shane did not know about the years of careful distance. Most of them Ilya had no intention of sharing. But there were others, smaller ones, things that were simply true and that he had kept to himself not out of protection but simply out of the habit of solitude.

“I went to Russia,” he said. “Three years ago. After my grandmother died. I went back to the town where she grew up, in the Ural mountains. I had never been. She talked about it my whole childhood and I had never gone while she was alive to take me, and after she died I just—I bought a ticket.” He paused. “I stayed for two weeks. I walked around a town where nobody knew me and I thought about her and I ate in small restaurants alone and it was one of the best things I have ever done.”

A silence. “You didn’t tell me she died,” Shane said, and his voice had changed, gone very quiet.

“We were not talking very much then,” Ilya said.

“Roz.” Shane’s voice had a quality in it that Ilya did not know how to hold, something pained and earnest and reaching. “I’m sorry. I should have been there for that.”

“You did not know.”

“I should have known. I should have been paying better attention.” Another pause, and Ilya could hear Shane breathing on the other end of the line, slow and deliberate, the way he breathed when he was feeling something and trying to hold it steady.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t paying attention.”

Ilya closed his eyes. This was Shane, this specific quality of Shane, the way he took responsibility for things with his whole chest, the way he did not deflect or minimise, the way he looked directly at the ways he had fallen short and said so without performing it. This had always been one of the things Ilya loved most about him and also one of the things that made loving him the most difficult, because a person with less integrity would be so much easier to stop wanting.

“You are here now,” Ilya said. “It is enough.”

“Is it?” Shane asked, and the question was quiet and genuine and not rhetorical, and Ilya felt it land in the particular way that Shane’s real questions always landed, like something with weight and a sharp edge.

“Yes,” Ilya said, and meant it, and also did not mean it at all, and held both of these things in the dark the way he had been holding both things for most of his adult life.

...

They kept talking. Past midnight, past one, the conversation loosening the way conversations do in the very late hours when the defenses come down not by choice but simply by attrition, when you are too tired to be careful and so you are just honest instead.

Shane talked about being nervous for the wedding, not about marrying Rose, he was clear about this, not about that, but about the day itself, the scale of it, two hundred people all looking at him at once, which had always made him uncomfortable in a way he didn't fully understand given that he was a person who projected easy confidence in most situations.

Ilya told him that this was normal, that almost every groom he had ever worked with felt this way, that the ceremony itself had a way of narrowing down to just the two people at the front of the room once it began, that the two hundred people would stop existing in any meaningful way once he saw Rose coming toward him.

"How do you know that?" Shane asked.

"Because I have watched it happen many times," Ilya said. "And because it is true of most things that you love. They have a way of becoming the only thing in the room."

A pause. "Yeah," Shane said softly. "Yeah, I think that's right."

Ilya looked at his ceiling and thought about the specific and complete silence of his apartment at one in the morning, how it was the same silence every night, how he had gotten very good at inhabiting it, and how tonight it felt different, populated by Shane's voice coming through the phone, and how the difference between these two versions of the same silence was almost too large to look at directly.

"Roz," Shane said.

"Still here," Ilya said.

"Good," Shane said, simply, and the word was so uncomplicated and so complete that Ilya felt it somewhere deep and quiet, somewhere he did not usually let things reach.

...

They talked a little longer, winding down the way the best conversations wound down, not because they had run out of things to say but because the night had gotten very late and the talking had done what it needed to do and they were both, finally, tired.

Shane said he thought he could sleep now. Ilya said good. Shane said he was glad he called. Ilya said he was glad too, which was the truest thing he had said all night, which was saying something.

"Same time next week?" Shane said, and there was a lightness in it, a callback to the way they used to talk when they were younger and the calls were regular and expected, and Ilya felt something in him pull tight and then release at the ease of it, at being offered this thing as though it were simple, as though it were just two old friends making a standing arrangement,

as though it did not cost Ilya anything at all to be this close to Shane Hollander on a regular basis.

“Same time next week,” he said.

“Goodnight, Roz.”

“Goodnight, Shane.”

...

The call ended. Ilya lay in the dark with his phone on his chest and the silence of his apartment settling back in around him, and he stared at the ceiling for a long time without moving, listening to the city outside and the particular quality of quiet that follows a conversation with someone you love, the way their absence becomes more present after they’ve gone than it was before they arrived.

He had known, going into this project, that it was going to be difficult. He had understood the shape of the difficulty in advance, had accounted for it, had built what he believed were adequate structures around it.

What he had not accounted for was this. Not the appointments, not the venues and the tastings and the professional proximity—This. A phone call at midnight. Shane’s voice in the dark saying I wanted to talk to you as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The way 25 years of friendship could compress itself into a single late-night hour and feel more intimate than anything Ilya had managed with anyone else in all the time in between.

He was not going to be fine. He had been telling himself he was going to be fine for months now and he was, at 1:17 in the morning with Shane’s voice still sitting in the room like something that had decided to stay, prepared to admit that this was not a thing he was going to be fine about, not during and possibly not after, and that the structures he had built were not going to hold, and that the only thing left to do was exactly what he had always done, which was carry it, and be present, and do his job, and love Shane Hollander quietly and completely and without any expectation of return until the wedding was over and he could go back to managing it from a safe distance.

He closed his eyes. Outside, the city was very quiet.

Somewhere across the country, Shane was falling asleep next to Rose, and Ilya was lying in the dark in his Toronto apartment holding a phone that had gone cold, and the distance between these two images was exactly the size and shape of his entire adult life, and he knew it, and he was, in his own way, at peace with it.

Or he was getting there. He was always getting there. The getting there was the whole point.

Chapter 6: You Should Have Called

Chapter Notes

NOWWWWW we're getting into the good stuff👁👁 (no smut yet), but we're getting somewhere!!! This is definitely my favorite chapter out so far💖

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

The knock comes on a Saturday morning in June, which is the first warning sign, because nobody knocks on Ilya's door on a Saturday morning. His building has a buzzer system and his friends, such as they are, use it like civilised people, and his assistant Priya communicates exclusively through a series of increasingly pointed calendar notifications, and so when the knock comes Ilya stands in his kitchen in his oldest sweater with a coffee in his hand and looks at the door with the suspicion of a person who has learned that unexpected things arriving at his door are rarely uncomplicated.

He opens it.

Shane is standing in the hallway with a duffel bag over one shoulder and a tray of two coffees in his hand and his freckles very visible in the bright June light coming through the hallway window, looking for all the world like a person who has not just appeared unannounced at someone's apartment in another city on a Saturday morning, looking instead like a person who has simply arrived somewhere he was always going to arrive, unhurried and certain and completely at ease.

"I had a work thing in Toronto," he says. "It finished yesterday. Rose is visiting her sister this weekend." He holds out one of the coffees. "I looked up your order."

Ilya looks at the coffee. He looks at Shane. He looks at the coffee again. "You looked up my order," he says.

"You've mentioned it. Oat milk, one sugar, whatever the most complicated thing on the menu is."

Ilya has absolutely no memory of mentioning this. He takes the coffee. "You should have called," he says, and steps back from the door.

...

Shane walks in like he has been there before, which he hasn't, and looks around Ilya's apartment with the open curiosity of someone who is very interested in spaces and what they say about people. The apartment is clean because Ilya is always clean, but it is also, at this particular moment on this particular Saturday, slightly more himself than it usually is when he has guests. The cookbook open on the counter. The notebook full of wedding notes

splayed on the coffee table. A half-finished glass of water on the windowsill where he had been standing last night looking at the city before bed.

And on the bookshelf by the window, which Ilya realises approximately three seconds too late, a photograph. Him and Shane at eighteen, the summer before Halifax, standing outside Shane's mother's house in Ottawa with their arms around each other's shoulders, squinting into the sun. Ilya has had it for sixteen years. He has never thought of it as something to hide because it has never, until this moment, felt like evidence of anything.

Shane sees it.

He crosses to the bookshelf without saying anything and picks it up and looks at it for a long moment, and Ilya stands in the middle of his own living room and does not move and waits.

"I forgot this existed," Shane says, quietly.

"I have had it a long time," Ilya says.

Shane looks at the photograph and then looks at Ilya, and his expression is doing something complicated and careful, something that Ilya cannot fully read and does not try to, and then he sets the photograph back on the shelf with a gentleness that is almost deliberate, almost like he is putting something down carefully rather than just replacing it, and he says, "It's a good picture," in a voice that is not quite steady, and turns away.

Ilya looks at his coffee. "I will make breakfast," he says.

"Yeah," Shane says, and his voice has found its usual ease again, or most of it. "Yeah, okay."

...

He makes eggs with herbs and the good bread from the bakery around the corner and Shane sits at the kitchen counter on a stool the way he used to sit in Ilya's mother's kitchen when they were teenagers, keeping up a running commentary on whatever is in his head, and Ilya cooks and listens and says things back and the whole shape of it is so familiar and so right that it sits in his chest like something he did not know he was hungry for until it was right in front of him.

Shane eats with the focused appreciation of someone who has not had a real breakfast in some time and says, "This is incredible, Roz," with his mouth full, and Ilya says, "Do not talk with food in your mouth," and Shane swallows and says, "This is incredible, Roz," again with exaggerated clarity, and Ilya sits across from him at his own kitchen table and feels something that is dangerously close to joy.

After breakfast Shane picks up the wedding notebook from the coffee table without asking, because Shane has never required permission to pick up things that interest him, and flips through it with the focused attention he brings to things that matter to him.

"You have a note in here about the specific angle of the afternoon light in September at the estate," Shane says, looking up.

“Yes,” Ilya says.

“You had someone measure the angle of the light.”

“There is a difference between measuring it myself and having it measured.”

Shane looks at him with an expression that is somewhere between impressed and something else, something Ilya does not name. “Ilya,” he says, using the full name, which he only does when he means something seriously. “Why are you so good at this?”

“Because I care about doing it well,” Ilya says simply.

“No, I mean—” Shane stops. He looks down at the notebook and then back up, and there is something in his face that is searching for the expression of a thing he does not quite have the language for, and Ilya holds very still and waits and watches Shane not find it. “Never mind,” Shane says, and looks back at the notebook, and the moment closes over itself like water.

Ilya breathes. He looks at his coffee. He thinks: I know what you were going to say. He thinks: I am very glad you did not say it.

...

In the afternoon Ilya puts music on while they sit in the living room, something low and unhurried, and Shane goes quiet in a specific way approximately thirty seconds after it starts. Ilya notices but keeps his eyes on the window.

“This is that album,” Shane says.

“Yes,” Ilya says.

“We used to listen to this constantly. That summer. Before I left for Halifax.”

“Yes,” Ilya says again.

Shane is quiet for a moment. “You still have it,” he says, and his voice has a quality in it that Ilya does not examine too closely, something soft and slightly undone.

“I still have it,” Ilya says.

Shane looks at him across the room, and the music moves between them, low and familiar, the sound of a summer that was a long time ago and feels, in this particular moment in this particular room, very close. Neither of them says anything for a while. The music does the talking, the way it sometimes can, and Ilya lets it, because there are things he cannot say out loud that the music has always been able to say for him, and today, with Shane on his couch and the June light coming through the windows and the photograph still sitting on the shelf where Shane put it back carefully, today he is not going to deny himself even that much.

“I think about it sometimes,” Shane says, eventually. He is looking at the ceiling, his head resting back against the couch. “That summer. How everything felt like it was just beginning.”

“It was,” Ilya says.

“Yeah.” A pause. “I think about what my life would look like if things had gone differently.” He says it simply, without elaboration, without explanation, the way you say things when you are not quite ready to say the full version but cannot keep the partial version in any longer. “I don’t know. I just think about it sometimes.”

...

The room is very quiet beneath the music. Ilya looks at Shane and Shane looks at the ceiling and the summer that was a long time ago sits in the room between them with all its specific, accumulated weight, and Ilya thinks: I know. He thinks: I think about it too, I have thought about it every day for twenty-five years, I have built an entire interior life around thinking about it, and if you told me what version you are imagining I think it would undo me completely.

“I think about it too,” is what he says.

Shane turns his head and looks at him. Something moves across his face, open and careful and real, and Ilya holds his gaze and gives him the full weight of it and does not look away, and Shane looks back and the music moves between them and neither of them says anything more, and it is enough, for this moment it is exactly enough, and Ilya does not reach for more than the moment is offering.

...

In the afternoon they walk. Shane’s suggestion, made with the energy of someone who needs to move through the world, and Ilya leads them through his neighbourhood in the June warmth, the streets he knows well, and Shane walks beside him and they talk about nothing in particular and everything in general.

At some point their hands brush as they walk, the backs of them touching briefly as their arms swing, and neither of them comments and neither of them moves away, and it happens again a minute later, and again after that... Neither of them mention it. It feels too sacred to Ilya to mention. Almost like bringing it up would ruin it.

They stop at a coffee shop that Ilya likes for its quiet and its good pastries and sit at a corner table, and Shane looks at him with that direct warm gaze and says, “I’m really glad I came.”

“You should have called first,” Ilya says.

“Would you have told me to come?”

Ilya looks at him. Shane looks back, waiting, the freckles across his nose catching the light through the window, and Ilya thinks about the honest answer, which is: no, probably not, because I have a policy, because every time you are near me it gets harder to remember why the policy matters. And the other honest answer, which is: yes, immediately, before you finished asking.

“I would have told you to call ahead next time,” Ilya says.

Shane smiles, slow and warm. “That’s not a no,” he says, and Ilya looks at his coffee and says nothing, because it isn’t, and they both know it isn’t, Ilya could never say no to Shane and never would want to. He doesn’t think his heart could take seeing the sad look on Shane’s face if Ilya ever told Shane no. The knowing sits between them on the small table in the warm afternoon light, unaddressed and present and going nowhere.

...

Shane leaves in the early evening. He is supposed to catch a flight and he is slightly cutting it close, standing in Ilya’s doorway with his bag and the particular reluctance of someone who is not finished with a place but knows they are supposed to leave it. He says, “Same time Wednesday?” and Ilya says, “Same time Wednesday,” and then Shane is gone, footsteps down the corridor, the elevator, silence.

Ilya stands in the open doorway for a moment. The hallway is empty. Behind him the apartment holds the specific quality of air that a space keeps after someone has spent the day in it, warmer somehow, more inhabited, and Ilya breathes it in and then goes inside and closes the door and leans against it.

He stays there for a long moment. He does not push off the door.

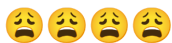
...

He is thinking about Shane’s hand on his for the length of half a block. He is thinking about the photograph put back carefully on the shelf. He is thinking about the music and the ceiling and I think about what my life would look like if things had gone differently said simply, without elaboration, sitting in the room where it was said like something that is still there.

He pushes off the door. He goes to the kitchen. He starts the borscht, the long version, and stands at the stove and stirs it, and the apartment smells like something warm and old and almost remembered, and outside the city is going dark, and somewhere above the clouds the plane carrying Shane Hollander back to his life is cutting west through the evening sky.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya telling Shane he should have called and is hesitant to have him staying at his place because he doesn’t trust himself around Shane because he wants him so bad has me like



Also can we talk about the hand grazeeee??? AHHHH!! what was your favorite part of this chapter???

Chapter 7: Everything Could Go So So Wrong

Chapter Notes

HI!!! Welcome back to Ilya's yearning hour 😊

I hope everyone is enjoying this fic so far 🥰 I've enjoyed interacting and getting feedback from all of you, your comments are seriously so sweet! Keep them coming! I absolutely LOVE reading them 😊💖

My posting schedule is every 1-3 days since the fic is pretty much complete. Just have some editing to do in the later chapters!

ENJOY ILY ALL 💖🌈

P.S. follow my ao3 author TikTok and Twitter!! @luverslilac

I have a few things fic related things up, but i'm going to start posting new fic updates, snippets, and more!

The crisis begins on a Monday, which feels appropriate. Nothing good, in Ilya's experience, ever announces itself on a Monday with any particular grace.

The estate manager calls at half past nine and tells Ilya about the burst pipe and the flooded ballroom and the six to eight weeks of potential repair time, and Ilya sits very still at his desk and does the maths and says, "I will call you Thursday," and hangs up and looks at his wall for exactly thirty seconds before picking up his phone and calling Shane.

Shane answers on the second ring. "Roz, hey –"

"There is a problem with the venue," Ilya says.

The warmth in Shane's voice shifts immediately into the focused, present quality he has when something requires his full attention, and this is one of the things about Shane that Ilya has always found quietly devastating, the speed of him, the way he is never half-present when something matters. It makes him very good in a crisis. It also makes him very difficult to be in love with, because a person who shows up that completely for everything shows up that completely for you too, and it is nearly impossible, in those moments, to remember that the showing up is not the same as the wanting.

Ilya explains. Shane listens. When Ilya finishes there is a brief silence and then Shane says, "Okay. What do we do?"

"I have calls to make," Ilya says. "I will have a full picture by Wednesday."

“I’m coming to Toronto,” Shane says.

“Shane –”

“Eleven weeks out and the venue is flooded, Roz. I’m not sitting in Vancouver.” His voice is calm and completely immovable, and underneath the calm there is something else, something that sounds less like a client managing a wedding crisis and more like a person who has found a reason to go somewhere and is taking it. Ilya notes this and files it in the category of things he is not going to examine, which is a category that has been growing steadily since March.

“There is a hotel two streets from my studio,” Ilya says.

“I’ll stay with you,” Shane says.

“You will stay at the hotel.”

A pause, long enough to be deliberate. “You have a couch,” Shane says. “I’ve seen it.”

“Whether it is comfortable is not the relevant issue.”

“Then what’s the relevant issue?”

Ilya looks at his studio wall, at the Hollander-Landry file that has been living at the centre of his professional life for four months, and thinks about Shane on his couch in his apartment in his space for multiple consecutive days, and thinks about his policy, and thinks about how his policy has been performing lately, which is not well, which is not well at all.

“Ok, sorry,” he says. “The couch pulls out. I will find you a fitted sheet.”

He hears something in Shane’s exhale that might have been relief, and tries not to think about why relief would be the appropriate response to being allowed onto a friend’s pull-out couch, and ends the call.

...

Shane arrives Tuesday evening looking tired in a way that goes beyond travel tired, a deeper tiredness, the kind that lives behind the eyes, and Ilya notices it immediately and says nothing because noticing things about Shane and saying nothing about them is the central and organising principle of his entire adult life.

They work. By ten o’clock they have a contingency plan and a shortlist and a clear path to Thursday’s assessment call and Ilya sits back and feels the relief of it move through him cleanly.

“Good,” he says.

Shane is on the couch with his laptop, jacket off, his freckles soft in the lamp light. “Yeah,” he says. “Good.” He looks at Ilya with an expression that is hard to read and that he seems, after a moment, to decide not to say anything about.

The tiredness is still there. Behind his eyes, in the set of his shoulders. Ilya wants to ask about it. He looks at his notebook instead.

They order food. This is Shane's suggestion, made with the energy of someone who has just noticed he has not eaten since the plane, and Ilya finds a Thai place that is still delivering and Shane eats with the single-minded focus of a hungry person and then sits back on the couch with his second ginger ale of the evening looking more human than he has since he arrived, and Ilya clears the containers and thinks to himself having Shane on his couch eating takeaway in his apartment is a completely manageable situation and he is handling it with great maturity and professionalism.

Then Shane says, "Do you have anything to drink? Actually drink, I mean. Not ginger ale."

Ilya looks at him. "You want to drink."

"It's been a week," Shane says, simply, and something in the way he says it makes Ilya not ask further questions, just go to the cabinet and find the bottle of whisky that lives there for occasions when Priya has had a difficult client call and needs something at the end of the day, and pour two glasses, and bring them back, and sit down.

...

This is, in retrospect, where things go sideways.

Not immediately. They drink slowly and the conversation stays easy for a while, ranging across the same comfortable territory it always finds, work and memories and the small details of each other's lives that have been accumulating since they started talking properly again. Shane has two glasses of whisky and then, when Ilya gets up to refill his own, holds his glass out without asking, and Ilya refills it because it is not his place to manage Shane's drinking and because Shane is a grown adult and because he is not going to examine why his hand is slightly unsteady when he pours.

By the third glass Shane is not drunk, exactly, but he is looser, the careful ease he usually maintains sitting lower on him, the edges of things softening, and he is looking at Ilya from the couch with the particular quality of attention he has when his defences have come down enough to let him look at things directly.

"Can I tell you something?" Shane says.

"You always can," Ilya says.

"Something real," Shane says. "Not wedding stuff. Not catch-up stuff. Something actually real."

Ilya looks at him. The lamp is low between them and the city is quiet outside and Shane's freckles are soft in the warm light and his expression is open in the specific way that whisky and late hours produce in people, the guards down, the usual careful management of what gets said and what doesn't temporarily suspended. "Yes," Ilya says, carefully. "Tell me something real."

Shane is quiet for a moment, turning his glass in his hands. “I’m not—” he starts, and stops. He looks at the glass. “I’m not sure I’m doing the right thing,” he says, finally, so quietly that Ilya almost doesn’t catch it.

The room goes very still.

Ilya does not move. He does not say anything. He understands, with the clarity of someone paying very close attention, that what happens in the next thirty seconds matters enormously, that Shane is standing at the edge of something and the wrong response will send him back from it, and so Ilya sits in the careful silence and waits and gives him the room to keep going.

Shane looks up. His eyes find Ilya’s face across the low lamp light and they stay there, and his expression is doing something complicated and raw and real, and Ilya thinks say it. whatever it is, I am here, I have always been here, just say it.

“There’s something I haven’t—” Shane starts. He stops again. His jaw tightens slightly, the way it does when he is fighting with himself. “There’s something I should have said a long time ago and I didn’t and now I don’t—” He stops a third time. He looks at his glass. He looks back at Ilya. “Roz,” he says, and his voice has something in it that Ilya has never heard before, something stripped all the way back, something that sounds terrifyingly like the thing Ilya has been waiting twenty-five years to hear.

“I’m here,” Ilya says, very quietly.

Shane opens his mouth.

He closes it.

He looks down at his glass and something moves across his face, a decision being made, a door being considered and then very deliberately, very quietly, being closed, and the breath he lets out is slow and controlled and when he looks back up his expression has changed, smoothed over, the raw thing tucked away somewhere Ilya can no longer see it.

“Never mind,” Shane says. “I’m tired. Ignore me.”

Ilya looks at him for a long moment. He thinks about pushing. He thinks about all the words available to him, all the ways he could reach across the space between them and take hold of whatever Shane just put away, and he thinks about the wedding eleven weeks from now and the speech and the thirty-two degrees of light and all the things that are already in motion, and thinks not like this. Not with three glasses of whisky and a flooded venue and Shane looking like he hasn’t slept properly in weeks. Not like this.

“You do not have to ignore yourself,” Ilya says, gently. “But I am also not going anywhere. Whatever it is will still be true tomorrow.”

Shane looks at him. Something in his expression cracks slightly, just at the edges, and then he nods, once, and looks away, and the moment is over.

...

They watch something on Netflix that neither of them will remember afterward. Shane falls asleep on the pull-out couch somewhere around midnight, one arm over his face, his breathing going slow and even, and Ilya sits in the chair across from him in the dark and looks at him for a long moment, this person he has loved for twenty-five years, and thinks about what he almost said and what he pulled back from and what any of it means.

He goes to bed. He does not sleep for a long time.

...

Thursday the assessment confirms the ballroom will be ready in time. Shane, on the couch with his ginger ale, says “yes” softly when Ilya tells him, and then sits very still for a moment, staring at nothing, before he smiles and says, “Okay. What’s next?”

Ilya watches him for a half second longer than he should. “The florist,” he says. “September varieties.”

“Right,” Shane says, and pulls up his calendar, and the afternoon moves forward.

...

Shane leaves Friday morning. He stands in the doorway with his bag and looks at Ilya in the morning light and neither of them says anything for a moment that is slightly too long to be casual.

“Thank you,” Shane says. “For the couch.”

“You are welcome,” Ilya says. “For the couch.”

Shane’s mouth curves slightly. He looks at Ilya one more moment with that expression that Ilya is not going to name and is absolutely going to think about at two in the morning for the foreseeable future, and then he turns and goes, and Ilya closes the door and stands in the hallway and presses his hand flat against it.

I do not know if four more months is enough time or far too much, Ilya thinks.

He almost said it. Whatever it is, he almost said it.

Ilya is going to need to find out what it is before he stands up in front of two hundred people and embarrasses himself.

He pushes off the door and goes to make coffee with a plan stirring in his mind.

Chapter 8: But Svetlana I Love Him

Chapter Notes

WELCOME TO ANOTHER CHAPTERRRRR!!! 

tysm for all the love on the last chapter, we are so close to the confessions!!

check end notes! i have some ideas for my next fic and want some opinions!

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

The speech has been living in Ilya's notebook since July, in fragments. A sentence here, a crossed-out paragraph there, a margin note that says simply: start with Ottawa and then nothing after it, because every time he sits down to write what comes after Ottawa he finds that he cannot, that the words are there but they are the wrong ones, too careful, too managed, shaped by fifteen years of professional habit into something that sounds like a speech and does not sound like the truth.

He has been telling himself he will write it when there is more time. When the venue crisis is resolved. When the florist is confirmed. When there are fewer urgent things requiring his attention. He is very good at telling himself things like this. He has had a great deal of practice.

It is the first week of August. There are four weeks until the wedding. He sits down at his desk on a Thursday evening when the studio is empty and Priya has gone home and the city outside is warm and orange with late summer light, and he makes a cup of tea, and he opens his notebook to a fresh page, and he looks at it for a long time before he writes anything at all.

He writes the date. He looks at it.

He writes: Shane.

He looks at that too.

...

He has given speeches before. He has stood at the front of rooms full of strangers and talked about love with the clarity and conviction of someone who understands it, who has spent fifteen years arranging the conditions for it to flourish in other people's lives, who has watched it happen up close enough times to know its shape and its weight and its specific, particular gravity. He has made rooms full of strangers cry. He has been told he is very good at this.

This is Shane.

This is twenty-five years of actual knowledge, actual memory, actual feeling, and the problem with actual feeling is that it does not stay where you put it. You cannot arrange it on the page the way you arrange flowers or seating charts or the angle of afternoon light. It does not hold its shape. It comes back up.

He writes: I have known Shane Hollander for twenty-five years.

He stops.

...

He thinks about being seven years old and watching Shane Hollander come out of the house three doors down and immediately start reorganising the afternoon, and feeling, even then, some pull toward him that he did not have words for yet. He thinks about the winter walks at fifteen, minus twenty degrees and neither of them willing to go inside because going inside would mean stopping talking, and how he had understood even then, without words for it, that he would walk in any weather for any distance if it meant staying in this specific orbit. He thinks about Halifax and the drift and all the years of careful managed distance and what they cost him, in increments so small he could pretend for a long time that they did not add up to anything significant.

They added up to this. They added up to a Thursday evening in August with a half-empty cup of tea and two sentences on a page and four weeks left.

He writes: In that time I have watched him be many things.

He stops again. He looks at what he has written. He thinks this is true. Every word of this is true and none of it is the most true thing and I am going to have to stand up in front of two hundred people and say the true things I am allowed to say while the most true thing sits in my chest like it has always sat, like furniture, like a room I have been living in alone for twenty-five years.

...

He is going to stand in front of a room full of people and make Shane's love story sound like something inevitable. He is going to find the words for it and deliver them with warmth and conviction and every single one of them is going to be true, and Shane is never going to know what it cost, and this is the life Ilya has chosen, or failed to choose differently, which amounts to the same thing.

He puts his pen down.

He presses both hands flat on the open notebook.

He looks at the ceiling.

...

What surfaces is undramatic. The kind of grief that stays quiet rather than announcing itself, that arrives without ceremony. It's subtle but thorough, the kind that moves through you like cold through a room, slowly, finding every corner, reaching the spaces you thought were protected, the ones you've been guarding for years, and settling into them with the patient permanence of something that's been waiting a long time to be let in.

He feels it in his chest first. Then in his throat. Then, to his considerable surprise and what he will later describe to himself as mild humiliation, in his eyes, which have not done this in a very long time, not since his mother's funeral, not since a small Russian town in the Ural mountains where he stood in a restaurant eating alone and understood for the first time the full dimensions of what he had been carrying and for how long and what it had cost him to carry it so quietly.

He thinks to himself *I am so fucking in love with Shane Hollander*. I have been in love with Shane Hollander for the majority of my life. I am going to sit in this empty studio and write this stupid speech and feel this, all of it, every part of it that I have been folding up and filing away and managing for twenty-five years, because no one is going to see it and I have, I think, earned at least this much. One evening. One hour. The full and unmanaged truth of it, just once, before I put it away again and go back to being professional.

He sits in his empty studio and lets it happen. He cries.

...

It takes a while. The city outside goes from orange to amber to the particular blue of late summer dusk, and the music from down the street comes through the window and then stops, and the tea goes completely cold, and Ilya sits with his hands pressed flat on the notebook and feels twenty-five years of loving Shane Hollander move through him like weather, unhurried and total, and does not try to stop it, and does not try to manage it, and does not try to make it into something smaller than it is.

It is not small. It has never been small. It is the size of his whole adult life, is the shape of every choice he has made and every choice he has not made, is the thing that has been in the room every time he has been in a room with Shane and every time he has not, and it is, he thinks, sitting in the amber studio light with the tears drying on his face, the truest thing about him, the most constant thing, the thing that has outlasted every careful distance and every managed silence and every version of himself he has tried to be instead.

He picks up his phone and calls Svetlana.

...

She answers on the third ring. "Ilya," she says, not as a greeting, just as an acknowledgement that she has seen his face on the screen and assessed the situation and is here.

"I am writing the speech," he says. His voice comes out steadier than he expects, which says something about how much practice he has had at this.

A pause. "Ah," Svetlana says.

“Yes.”

He hears her move, a door closing, the sound of her settling somewhere quiet, giving him her full attention the way she always does, without making a performance of it, without requiring him to ask. He has loved her for twenty years. Moments like this one are a significant part of why.

“Tell me,” she says.

...

“I cannot write it,” he says. “I have been a professional for fifteen years. I have written speeches for strangers and I have meant them and I have been good at them, and I cannot write four paragraphs about Shane without—” He stops. He presses his free hand flat on the desk. He starts again. “I sat down tonight and I wrote his name and I could not go further. Not properly. Not in a way that is actually true.”

“Because the true version is not the version you are allowed to give,” Svetlana says.

“Yes,” he says, and his voice does something on the word that he does not entirely manage to prevent, something that comes through the steadiness, and he hears Svetlana hear it, hears the quality of her silence change.

“Ilya,” she says, very gently.

“I am fine,” he says, reflexively.

“You have been crying,” she says, not as an accusation, just as a fact she is naming so they do not have to pretend around it.

...

He does not answer. Outside the window the city has gone fully blue, the last of the summer light gone, the first lights of the evening coming on across the skyline, and Ilya sits in his studio and looks at them and thinks about how many evenings he has sat in this room alone and how ordinary it has always felt and how tonight it feels like something different, like a reckoning of some kind, like arriving at the end of a very long road and finding it is not the end he expected.

“It is harder than I thought it would be,” he says, finally. “I thought I had managed it well enough that it would not be this hard. I thought the years and the distance and the work had... I thought I was further along than this.”

“You are not further along,” Svetlana says, with the plain, unsparing kindness that is her specific gift. “You are exactly where you have always been, which is completely in love with him, and that has not changed because you have been professional about it. It has not changed because you have been sensible about it. It is not going to change because you write a good speech about it.” A pause. “Ilya. You have been in love with Shane Hollander since

you were children. When did you decide that was something to manage rather than something to say out loud?"

...

The question lands somewhere that has not been touched in a long time. He sits with it. He thinks about being a teen and understanding for the first time what the feeling was and deciding, somewhere in the quiet of that understanding, that saying it would change things in ways he was not sure he could recover from if the answer was wrong. He thinks about all the years of that decision, accumulated, compounding, becoming the architecture of his entire adult life.

"A long time ago," he says.

"Yes," Svetlana says. "I know." She is quiet for a moment. "I think you should tell him."

"Sveta—"

...

"I know what you are going to say," she says. "I know all of it. I am not asking you to do it tonight. I am not asking you to do it before the wedding. I am asking you to consider, seriously consider, that the reason you cannot write this speech is not because you are bad at writing speeches. It is because some part of you has finally stopped being willing to pretend that the words you are allowed to say are the ones that need to be said."

The studio is very quiet. Ilya looks at the page. I have known Shane Hollander for over 30 years. In that time I have watched him be many things.

He thinks about Shane almost saying something in his apartment with three glasses of whisky in him and the lamp low and the city dark outside. He thinks about the phone call at eleven forty-seven.

He thinks something is different this time. He thinks something has been different for a while and I have been managing it and I am running out of time to keep managing it.

...

"He is getting married very soon," he says.

"I know," Svetlana says.

"If I say it and I am wrong it will ruin everything."

"And if you say it and you are right?" she says, quietly. "What happens then?"

Ilya has no answer for this. He has spent twenty-five years not asking this question and he does not have an answer for it now and the not-having is its own kind of vertigo, the feeling of standing at the edge of something without being able to see the bottom.

“I do not know,” he says, honestly.

...

“I know,” Svetlana says. “That is the thing about true things. You do not know what happens when you say them. You just know that not saying them is its own kind of cost.” She pauses. “Now. Tell me what you have written and we will work on it together. What comes next, not what should come next. What actually does.”

Ilya picks up his pen. He thinks about Shane at his grandmother’s kitchen table on Saturday mornings. He thinks about minus twenty degrees and neither of them willing to go inside. He thinks about good, said quietly into a phone at midnight, landing somewhere deep and staying there.

He writes: In that time I have watched him be many things. Certain, when certainty was hard. Present, when presence cost something. Kind, in the specific and deliberate way that is not a temperament but a choice.

...

He reads it back. He thinks this is true. He thinks every word of this is true and none of it is the most true thing and I am going to write it anyway because I have to write something, and the most true thing is still mine to decide about, and I have four weeks, and something has shifted tonight that I do not think is going to shift back.

“I have something,” he says.

“Read it to me,” Svetlana says.

He reads it. She is quiet afterward for long enough that he wonders if the line has dropped. Then she says, very softly, “Ilya. That is not a speech about his wedding.”

He looks at the words on the page. “No,” he says.

“That is a speech about how you love him.”

“Yes,” he says, and his voice does the thing again, the thing that comes through the steadiness, and this time he does not try to stop it. “I know.”

...

Svetlana is quiet for a moment. When she speaks her voice is warm and careful and completely serious. “Write the rest of it,” she says. “Write all of it. The true version, the one you are not going to give. Write it for yourself. And then we will see.”

“We will see what?” he says.

“We will see,” she says simply, “what you decide to do with it.”

...

He looks at the page. He picks up his pen. Outside the city is fully dark now, the summer evening gone, and the studio is quiet around him and the tea is cold and there are four weeks left and something has shifted tonight that he does not think is going to shift back.

He starts to write.

Chapter End Notes

also for my next fic i'm thinking hollanov rival coffee shop owners, enemy teachers working at the same school, rival surgeons, or surgeon ilya x nurse shane, which one do y'all like the most? lmk 🤔

Chapter 9: Almost

Chapter Notes

hellloooo!!! i feel like a lot of you might be getting antsy for the confession! which is totally ok! i'm glad you're engaged in the fic! just a quick reminder this is a slow burn 😁 BUT rest assured! the confessions/smut are all in the next 3 and 4 chapters! and SURPRISE!!! tomorrow well technically later tonight (04/26) since it's already midnight, i'm releasing a double chapter!!! so stay tuned for that!! so technically you'll on have to wait less than 2 full days for it 😊

also just a reminder!!! i write for free! everyone begging me to release a new chapter rudely will be ignored. if you are saying it in a funny/nice way like for example "OMG I NEED MORE" great i love it! but i'm seeing a lot of comments on my author tiktok and on this fic of people totally ignoring fandom ettiequite and demanding chapters. that just makes me want to block you so you can't read my fic. to the people doing it, you have one warning. this is it! stop demanding me to release chapters! it's rude! ask kindly and i will. i'm already releasing a chapter a day. come on now 😭

to everyone else (especially the people who leave paragraph comments on my fic) ily all
💕💕

The appointment is at two. Shane is early, which Ilya notes and says nothing about, because Shane is never early, Shane operates on his own internal clock that runs approximately seven minutes behind the rest of the world at all times, and the fact that he is standing in Ilya's studio doorway at one fifty-three with his jacket on and his hair doing the thing means something that Ilya is not going to examine.

"You are early," Ilya says anyway, because he cannot help it.

"First time for everything," Shane says, and comes in, and Priya makes tea without being asked and gives Ilya a look as she sets it down that he pointedly does not receive, and then she pulls the door mostly closed behind her and it is just the two of them and the timeline spread across Ilya's desk and the late August light coming in wide and warm through the studio windows.

Ilya sits.

Shane sits across from him. They go through the timeline the way they always go through things, efficiently and without much friction, Shane asking the right questions, Ilya having the answers ready, the back and forth of it easy and familiar in the way that most things between them are easy and familiar, the 29 years of knowing each other making even professional conversations feel like something more personal than they are supposed to be.

They get through the ceremony sequence and the cocktail hour logistics and the seating arrangement for the head table, and then Shane leans back in his chair and picks up his ginger ale and looks at Ilya with that look, the one that means the business portion of the conversation is finished and he wants to talk about something else now, and Ilya looks at his notebook and waits.

“Can I ask you something that has nothing to do with the wedding?” Shane says.

“You can try,” Ilya says.

Shane is quiet for a moment, turning his ginger ale glass in a slow circle the way his hands do when he is thinking carefully about how to say something. The afternoon light is coming through the window behind him and catching the freckles across his nose and cheekbones, the scatter of them warm and specific in the late summer sun, and Ilya looks at his notebook.

“Do you ever regret it?” Shane says. “The distance. The years we were bad at this.”

Ilya looks up. Shane is watching him steadily, and the question is genuine, sitting in his expression without deflection, the way Shane asks things when he actually wants the answer.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “I think about it more than is useful.”

“Me too.” Shane sets his ginger ale down.

“I keep thinking about all the things I didn’t know. That happened to you while we weren’t talking properly. Your mother.” He pauses.

“I should have been there for that.”

“We have had this conversation,” Ilya says, gently.

“I know. I’m not done having it.” Shane looks at him, and there is something underneath the words, something that has been sitting underneath a lot of things Shane says lately, and Ilya holds his gaze and waits. “I don’t want to miss things anymore,” Shane says. “I don’t want to be the person who finds out later. I want to be—” He stops. Starts again.

“I want to be where you are. Does that make sense?”

The studio is very quiet. Ilya thinks, yes. He thinks it makes every sense and also no sense at all and also you are getting married in a few weeks, Shane, you are getting married and I am planning it, and you are sitting across my desk saying things like this with your freckles in the afternoon light,. But that’s exactly where I want to be too.

“It makes sense,” he says.

Shane holds his gaze for a moment, something working in his expression, and then he nods and picks up the timeline and says,

“Okay. The gap between the readings and the vows —”

and Ilya exhales and looks at the page, and they go back to the timeline, and Ilya tells himself this is fine, this is manageable, he has been managing this for six months and he can manage it for three more weeks.

Then Shane stands up to look at something on Ilya's copy of the run sheet, some staging note in the margin that he wants to see in context, and he comes around to Ilya's side of the desk.

This is where it starts.

Nothin' dramatic, Shane just stands next to Ilya's chair and leans over the desk to look at the run sheet, and he is close, closer than he needs to be, close enough that Ilya can feel the warmth coming off him and smell his jacket, the clean familiar smell that Ilya's memory has filed under Shane since they were teenagers, and Ilya keeps his eyes on the page and points to the staging note and explains it in his most professional voice and is completely fine.

Shane asks a follow-up question. Ilya answers it. Shane does not move back.

Ilya turns his head to look at the section Shane is pointing at, and Shane turns his head at the same moment to say something, and they are suddenly much closer than either of them had calculated, eight inches apart, maybe less, and Shane stops mid-sentence and Ilya stops breathing and the run sheet is completely forgotten.

Shane looks at him. Not at the page—at Ilya. With that expression, the one Ilya has been catching the edges of for months, the one that lives just underneath the ease and the warmth, the one that is not about the wedding and has never been about the wedding, and it is right there now, all of it, fully visible in the warm studio light with nowhere left to hide.

Ilya does not move.

Shane's eyes drop to his mouth, just for a second and just long enough that the universe has officially recorded it as intentional, and Ilya's entire chest does something large and poorly timed and completely beyond his control.

And then Shane's hand finds Ilya's thigh.

Fuck.

Just above the knee. Warm and steady and absolutely deliberate, and Ilya feels it everywhere, the specific weight of it, and he does not move, does not breathe, and Shane's eyes come back up to his face and they are very close and the light is very warm and Ilya thinks, this is happening. He think, after twenty-five years this is actually happening. He thinks, do not do anything to make it stop—

The studio door opens.

“Sorry,” Priya says, walking in with her tablet, already talking, not looking up. “The Marchetti florist is on the phone and they’re asking about the September dahlia order and whether we want—”

She looks up then stops.

Her eyes move across the scene with the swift, comprehensive accuracy of someone who misses nothing, who has been watching this particular situation develop since March with the patient attention of someone waiting for a very slow train to arrive, and what she sees is Shane on the wrong side of the desk, eight inches from Ilya's face, his hand somewhere below the frame of Priya's vision but the implication of it visible in every line of both of their bodies.

Shane straightens up. His hand disappears. He looks at the timeline.

Ilya looks at the timeline.

The studio is extremely quiet.

“I will take it.” He stands. He does not look at Shane.

“Excuse me,” he says, and follows Priya into the hallway and closes the door behind him and puts his back against the wall and looks at the ceiling.

Priya holds out the tablet. There is no florist on the phone. The screen is showing her grocery list.

“Priya,” Ilya says.

“You looked like you needed a minute,” she says, without a trace of apology.

Damnit Priya.

He looks at her for a long moment. She looks back with the steady patience of someone who has made a decision and is comfortable with it.

“Ok,” he says.

“Anytime,” she says, and goes back to her desk.

Ilya stands in the hallway and breathes. He thinks about Shane’s hand on his thigh, the warm deliberate weight of it. He thinks about eight inches and Shane’s eyes dropping to his mouth and the look on his face, open and unguarded and real in a way that Ilya has been waiting twenty-five years to see directed at him.

He pushes off the wall and goes back into the studio.

Shane is at the window with his hands in his pockets, looking out at the street. He turns when Ilya comes in and his expression has been rearranged, mostly, into something more familiar, but not entirely, not all the way, and in the gap between what his face is doing and what it was doing twelve minutes ago Ilya can still see the edges of the real thing.

“Everything okay?” Shane says.

“Fine,” Ilya says. “Florist. Resolved.” He sits down and looks at the timeline. “The gap between the readings and the vows gives the officiant time to settle the room. It is intentional.”

Shane looks at him for a moment. Something moves across his face that might be disappointment or relief or some combination of both that Ilya does not have the courage to try and read right now.

Then Shane nods and comes back to the desk and sits down across from Ilya, the correct side of the desk this time, and they finish the run-through, and they are both very professional, and neither of them says a single word about any of it.

Shane leaves an hour later. He says “see you at my bachelor party” and Ilya says “see you” and the door closes and Ilya sits in the empty studio and puts his face in his hands and stays there for a long time.

His phone buzzes. A text from Priya: you’re welcome.

He stares at it. He puts his phone face down. He picks up his pen. He looks his “speech”

As much as he appreciates her help, he honestly wishes Priya hadn’t interrupted them...

Chapter 10: Dangerous, Dangerous Words

Chapter Summary

small confession this chapter, big confession tomorrow! remember double chapter today!

Chapter Notes

DOUBLE CHAPTER TIMMEEE!!!

yall are going to FREAK OUT at the next chapter 🙄👁️👁️😡

just give me a little bit to post the next chapter!

i really loved this chapter, it's one of my faves 💕💕 i hope you enjoy it as much as i loved writing it!!

Shane calls on a Wednesday night, less than a month before the wedding, and Ilya is in his kitchen making the borscht again, the long version, the one that takes three hours and still isn't quite right. When Shane's name appears on his phone screen he looks at it for a moment with the specific, complicated feeling he has had about Shane calling ever since the evening in the studio, which is that he both desperately wants to answer and is not entirely sure his composure is up to the task.

He answers anyway. He always answers.

"You are calling early," he says. "It is only ten."

"Couldn't sleep," Shane says, and his voice has that quality again, the one Ilya has been noticing since Toronto, the tiredness that lives behind the eyes and does not go away. Ilya stirs the borscht and does not ask about it. Shane will tell him when he is ready. Pushing has never worked with Shane. It has always produced the opposite of the intended result.

"How is the borscht?" Shane asks.

Ilya looks at the pot. "Getting closer," he says.

"You've been saying that for months."

"It is still true. Every time it is closer. Tonight I think I have the balance of the vinegar right."

“What was wrong with it before?”

“Too sharp.” He pauses, considering. “Like a good sentence. You want the end to feel inevitable, not abrupt.”

...

Shane is quiet for a moment. “You think about food the way you think about everything,” he says. “Like there’s a philosophy to it.”

“There is a philosophy to everything,” Ilya says. “This is not a controversial position.”

Shane laughs, low and warm, and Ilya takes it in and stores it the way he stores all of them, in the part of his memory that is specifically and exclusively Shane, the part that has been accumulating for over twenty-five years and shows no signs of reaching capacity.

They talk about easy things for a while. Shane’s work, he took some time off for the wedding, but he’s a sports journalist so he works on his own time anyway. A film Ilya has watched twice in the past week that he recommends with more enthusiasm than he usually permits himself about things. The wedding, briefly, because it is unavoidable, and then they move away from it just as quickly because neither of them, Ilya notices, seems to want to spend the phone call on the wedding tonight.

...

Then the conversation finds one of its natural quiet moments, the kind that settle between them like something comfortable, and Ilya turns the heat down on the borscht and leans against the counter and looks at his kitchen and waits, because Shane has been building toward something all call and Ilya has learned to recognise the shape of it, the way the conversation moves around the real thing before it arrives there.

“Can I tell you something?” Shane says.

“Yes,” Ilya says.

A pause. The particular pause of someone choosing their words carefully, not because they do not know what they want to say but because they are deciding how much of it to say.

“The other day,” Shane says, and stops.

Ilya’s hand tightens slightly on the phone. “Tuesday,” he says, keeping his voice level.

“Yeah.” Another pause. “I’ve been thinking about it.”

...

“Shane—”

“I’m not going to... I’m not trying to make it into something,” Shane says quickly, like he has prepared this, like he has been deciding how to say it. “I just want you to know that it

wasn't nothing. For me. It wasn't– I wasn't just–” He stops. Starts again. “I don't do things like that by accident, Roz. I need you to know that.”

The kitchen is very quiet. The borscht is doing something gentle and unhurried on the stove and the city is outside the window doing its late night thing, and Ilya stands very still and holds the phone and thinks say it. He thinks whatever it is, just say it, I have been waiting twenty-five years, I can wait another thirty seconds.

“I know,” Ilya says carefully, because it is the safest true thing available to him right now.

“Do you?” Shane says, and there is something in his voice that is not quite a challenge and not quite a plea and sits somewhere in the charged space between the two, something that has the quality of a person standing at the edge of something and looking down.

...

Ilya closes his eyes. He thinks about the almost kiss and the hand on his thigh and Shane at his window in Toronto looking tired in a way that had nothing to do with travel. He thinks about the winter walks and the phone calls and Shane showing up at his door with his exact coffee order. He thinks about twenty-five years of loving someone quietly and the specific, unbearable possibility that the quietly has been unnecessary, that there was another option available to him all along that he has simply been too careful to reach for.

“What are you telling me, Shane?” he says, and his voice comes out softer than he intends, the careful professional register slipping just slightly, just enough.

A long pause. The longest one yet. Ilya counts the seconds without meaning to, the way you count seconds in the dark when you are waiting for something and cannot make yourself stop waiting.

...

“I don't know how to say it,” Shane says finally, and his voice is very quiet and very honest and has none of its usual ease in it, just the thing itself, stripped back, and Ilya feels it land in the middle of his chest with a precision that takes his breath away. “I've been trying to figure out how to say it for a long time and I don't– I can't find the right l–” He stops. Exhales. “I just need you to know that Tuesday wasn't nothing. And that you are not– you have never been nothing to me.”

Ilya stands in his kitchen with the phone pressed to his ear and his eyes still closed and thinks about all the words available to him right now, all the true ones, all the things he could say that would rearrange everything, and feels them sit in his throat like something he cannot swallow and cannot release, because Shane is getting married in less than a month and this phone call is a door left slightly open that Ilya does not know how to walk through without breaking something, and so he stands in his kitchen and breathes.

The three words almost slip. Almost. But they shouldn't, not when Shane's getting married to someone that should be him. Ilya dies a little bit inside.

Instead he says the much safer option: “You have never been nothing to me either,” he says. “You have never been anything close to nothing.”

...

The silence that follows this is different from the other silences. It has a weight to it, a fullness, the quality of two people standing on either side of the same door and both having their hands on it without either of them turning the handle. Ilya feels it in his chest and in his throat and in the hand that is holding the phone a little too tightly against his ear.

“Roz,” Shane says.

“I know,” Ilya says.

“I just—”

“I know, Shane.”

Chapter 11: All Yours

Chapter Summary

shane's bachelor party + 🤔🤔🤔 + possessive ilya is hereeeee + engagement reveal

Chapter Notes

here's a longer chapter for you guys💕 over 4.2k words!

also i've only written smut a few times, but i think it's not terrible so please... no hate comments🙄💔 usually the stuff i write is clean lollll

I HOPE YOU LOVE IT💕💕💕

Ilya had been to plenty of bars in his life, but walking into Shane's bachelor party felt like stepping into a nightmare dressed up as a celebration. The music was too loud, the lights were too dim, and everyone kept clapping Shane on the back like this was something worth congratulating.

Like Shane marrying Rose made any kind of sense at all.

Ilya plastered on his best smile and made his way through the small crowd. Cliff was already at the bar ordering drinks, Svetlana close behind him looking skeptical about the whole affair. Scott and Kip had claimed a pool table in the corner, and Shane stood near them accepting a beer from someone Ilya didn't recognize.

Their eyes met across the room, just for a second, and something flickered in Shane's expression before he looked away. That had been happening a lot lately. Shane looking at him like he wanted to say something, then retreating behind that careful mask he'd perfected over the years.

Ilya hated it. Hated that mask, hated Rose's ring that wasn't even here tonight but somehow felt present anyway, hated that he was supposed to celebrate Shane promising himself to someone else when Ilya had been in love with him since they were kids.

"You look like you're at a funeral," Svetlana said, appearing at his elbow with two drinks in hand. She passed him one and raised an eyebrow. "Try to at least pretend you're happy for him."

“I am happy for him,” Ilya lied, taking the drink and immediately regretting how bitter it tasted going down.

Svetlana’s look said she didn’t believe him for a second, but she didn’t push. Instead, she nodded toward where Shane stood talking to Cliff, his laugh sounding forced even from across the room.

“He doesn’t seem happy either.”

“He’s getting what he wants,” Ilya said, the words coming out sharper than he intended.

“Is he?” Svetlana asked quietly, but before Ilya could respond, Scott called them over to the pool table.

The next hour passed in a blur of games Ilya barely paid attention to and drinks he didn’t really want. He laughed at the right moments, made the appropriate jokes, acted like his best friend’s bachelor party wasn’t slowly killing him from the inside out. Shane stayed mostly on the other side of the room, and Ilya told himself that was fine. Better, even. Less complicated.

But he couldn’t stop watching him. Couldn’t stop cataloging every forced smile, every time Shane’s fingers tightened around his beer bottle, every moment his gaze drifted somewhere distant like he was trying to escape his own party.

The music shifted to something with a heavier beat, and Ilya was lining up a shot at the pool table when someone tapped his shoulder. He turned to find a man he didn’t recognize standing there, dark hair and an easy confidence that would have been attractive under different circumstances.

“You look like you could use a dance,” the stranger said, his smile warm and inviting.

Ilya should have said no. Should have made some excuse about needing to finish the game or get another drink or literally anything else. But he glanced across the room and saw Shane watching them, something tight and pained in his expression, and a reckless, desperate part of Ilya thought maybe this would finally make Shane do something.

“Sure,” Ilya heard himself say, even though everything in him was screaming that this was a mistake.

The stranger’s hand found his forearm, warm and steady, and guided him toward the small clearing that passed for a dance floor. Ilya let himself be led, hyperaware of Shane’s eyes following them, hoping against hope that this would be the thing that finally broke through Shane’s careful control.

The stranger pulled him close, hands settling on Ilya’s waist, and Ilya forced himself to put his hands on broad shoulders that felt wrong under his palms. Nothing like Shane’s shoulders, nothing like the body Ilya had memorized through years of casual touches and friendly embraces that always lasted a second too long.

They started moving to the music, and Ilya felt sick.

The stranger's grip was confident but impersonal, his body too close but somehow not close enough, his cologne all wrong. Ilya tried to focus on the rhythm, tried to make his body cooperate, but all he could think about was how much he wanted this to be Shane instead. How many times he'd imagined dancing with Shane like this, Shane's hands on him, Shane's breath against his neck.

The stranger leaned in, said something Ilya didn't process, and Ilya made himself smile even though his chest felt like it was caving in. This was supposed to make Shane jealous. Was supposed to make him realize what he was throwing away. But all it was doing was making Ilya painfully aware that no one else would ever be Shane, and pretending otherwise just made everything hurt worse.

He glanced over the stranger's shoulder, searching for Shane in the crowd, needing to see his reaction, needing to know if this was doing anything at all.

Shane was gone.

Ilya's heart dropped into his stomach. He scanned the bar frantically, but Shane's dark hair was nowhere to be seen. The spot where he'd been standing was empty, and Scott was looking around with a confused expression like he was wondering the same thing.

"Excuse me," Ilya said abruptly, pulling away from the stranger mid-song. "I need to go, I'm sorry."

He didn't wait for a response. Just pushed through the small crowd toward where he'd last seen Shane, his pulse hammering in his throat. Svetlana caught his arm as he passed.

"He left," she said, her expression grave. "Walked out about thirty seconds ago.." Svetlana pointed towards and exit.

But Ilya was already moving, already heading for the exit, because Shane had left his own bachelor party and Ilya knew with absolute certainty it was because of him. Because of the dancing. Because Ilya had finally pushed too hard and broken something he didn't know how to fix.

The cool night air hit him like a slap when he burst outside, and he spotted Shane immediately. Walking away with his hands shoved in his pockets, shoulders tense, moving like he was trying to outrun something he couldn't escape.

"Shane!" Ilya called, his voice coming out more desperate than he'd intended.

Shane kept walking.

"Shane, wait, please just wait."

That made him stop. Shane's feet halted on the sidewalk, but he didn't turn around, didn't move, just stood there like a man waiting for execution.

Ilya closed the distance between them, his breath coming too fast from the sudden sprint. When he reached Shane, he could see the tension radiating through every line of his body,

could see his hands clenched into fists in his pockets.

“What the hell was that?” Ilya demanded, and he could hear how raw his own voice sounded. “You just left. It’s your bachelor party and you just walked out.”

Shane still wouldn’t look at him. “I needed some air.”

“Bullshit.” Ilya moved around to stand in front of him, forcing Shane to either look at him or make it obvious he was avoiding his eyes. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.” Shane’s jaw was so tight Ilya could see the muscle jumping.

“You’re not fine. You’ve been off all night, and then you see me dancing with someone and suddenly you can’t get out of there fast enough.” Ilya reached out without thinking, his hand finding Shane’s hand, fingers curling around it. The contact sent electricity through Ilya’s entire body, the way it always did, the way it had for years.

“Shane, look at me.”

Shane did. Finally, he did.

And the look in his eyes nearly broke Ilya in half. There was so much pain there, so much longing barely held in check, so much careful control fracturing at the edges. Ilya had seen Shane happy, angry, drunk, devastated, but he’d never seen him look quite like this. Like he was holding himself together by sheer force of will and losing the battle.

“I couldn’t watch it,” Shane said, his voice hoarse and broken in a way that made Ilya’s chest ache. “I couldn’t stand there and watch you dance with him.”

Ilya’s heart was pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears.

“Why not?”

“You know why.”

“Say it.” Ilya’s grip on Shane’s hand tightened, and he could hear the desperation bleeding into his own voice but he was past caring.

“Say it, Shane, because I’ve been waiting for you to say it for years and I can’t keep pretending anymore.”

Shane’s eyes squeezed shut like he was in physical pain.

“Ilya, I can’t. I’m getting married in three weeks.”

“To someone you don’t love.” Ilya stepped closer, close enough that he could feel Shane’s breath on his face, close enough to see the exact moment something in Shane cracked.

“You don’t love her, Shane. You’ve never loved her.”

“That doesn’t matter.” But Shane’s voice was shaking now.

“It’s the only thing that matters.” Ilya’s free hand came up to cup Shane’s jaw, his thumb brushing over the constellation of freckles he’d memorized a decade ago.

“Tell me I’m wrong. Tell me you love Rose and I’ll walk away right now. I’ll go back in there and finish dancing with that guy whose name I don’t even remember and I’ll never bring this up again.”

Shane’s eyes opened, and they were wet. “Ilya—”

“Tell me,” Ilya whispered, and he was begging now, shameless and desperate and past the point of caring. “Tell me you don’t feel this too.”

“I can’t.” Shane’s hand came up to cover Ilya’s where it rested against his face. “I can’t tell you that because it would be a lie.”

Something in Ilya’s chest exploded. Years of careful distance, of watching Shane date people who weren’t him, of pretending friendship was enough when it was slowly killing him, all of it shattered in the space between one heartbeat and the next.

He crashed their mouths together with all the desperation he’d been holding back for what felt like his entire life, and Shane made a sound against his lips that was half sob, half surrender. Shane’s hands came up to fist in Ilya’s shirt, yanking him closer, and Ilya went willingly, pressing Shane back against the brick wall of the building behind them.

It wasn’t gentle. Wasn’t soft or tentative or any of the things Ilya had imagined their first kiss might be during all those years of wanting. It was so much better. It was messy and desperate and tasted like whiskey and years of pent-up longing, Shane’s mouth opening under his like he’d been starving for this, like Ilya was air and he’d been drowning.

Ilya’s hands were in Shane’s hair, tilting his head back for better access, and Shane was making these small, broken sounds that went straight through Ilya like lightning. When they finally broke apart for air, both breathing hard, Shane’s eyes were glazed and his lips were swollen and he’d never looked more beautiful.

“Your apartment,” Ilya managed, his voice wrecked. “We need to go to your apartment right now.”

They practically ran the six blocks to Shane’s apartment.

The door swung open and they stumbled inside together, Shane barely remembering to close it behind them before Ilya was on him again.

Ilya backed him against the door, kissing him like he was trying to make up for every kiss they’d never had, and Shane surrendered to it completely. Let himself get lost in the slide of Ilya’s tongue against his, the press of Ilya’s body, the way Ilya’s hands mapped his ribs through his shirt like he was memorizing the geography of Shane’s body.

“Bedroom,” Shane gasped when Ilya’s mouth moved to his neck, and Ilya made a sound of agreement against his throat that made Shane’s knees go weak.

Somehow they made it down the hall without separating, Shane walking backward while Ilya guided him, Ilya’s hands already working at the buttons of Shane’s shirt. They hit the bedroom doorframe, then the dresser, then finally the bed, and Ilya pushed Shane down onto it with a gentleness that contrasted sharply with the hunger in his eyes.

“Are you sure?” Ilya asked, hovering over him, and Shane could see how much it cost him to pause, to check, to make sure this was really what Shane wanted.

Shane reached up and pulled him down.

“I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

That was all the permission Ilya needed. He kissed Shane again, deeper this time, more thorough, like he had all the time in the world to learn every inch of Shane’s mouth. His hands finished unbuttoning Shane’s shirt and pushed it off his shoulders, and Shane shivered at the first touch of Ilya’s palms against his bare skin.

“You’re so beautiful,” Ilya breathed against his collarbone, and Shane made an embarrassing sound that was half laugh, half whimper.

“Shut up.”

“Never.”

Ilya’s mouth traced a path down Shane’s chest, pausing to bite gently at his hip bone, and Shane’s back arched off the bed.

“I’ve wanted to tell you that for years. You’re beautiful, baby, and I’m going to spend all night proving it to you.”

The endearment sent heat flooding through Shane’s entire body. Baby. Ilya had never called him that before, had always been so careful to keep things friendly and distant, and hearing it now felt like a revelation.

Ilya’s hands made quick work of Shane’s belt, and Shane lifted his hips to help as Ilya stripped him efficiently. Then Ilya sat back on his heels, still fully clothed, and just looked at Shane spread out beneath him.

“Not fair,” Shane managed, tugging at Ilya’s shirt. “You’re wearing too many clothes.”

Ilya smiled, something wicked and fond all at once, and pulled his shirt over his head in one smooth motion. Shane had seen Ilya shirtless hundreds of times over the years, at beaches and pools. But this was different. This was Ilya above him, bathed in moonlight from the window, looking at Shane like he was something precious.

Shane reached up to trace the lines of Ilya’s chest, the ridges of muscle, the path of hair that disappeared into his jeans. Ilya shuddered under his touch, and Shane felt powerful for the

first time all night. Like maybe he wasn't the only one falling apart here.

"Off," Shane said, tugging at Ilya's jeans, and Ilya obliged quickly, stripping until he was just as bare as Shane.

When Ilya settled back over him, skin to skin, Shane thought he might actually die from how good it felt. Ilya was warm and solid and perfect, his weight pressing Shane into the mattress in a way that made Shane feel safe and wanted and completely overwhelmed.

"Tell me what you need," Ilya murmured against Shane's ear, one hand stroking down his side.

"Tell me what you want."

"You." Shane's voice came out wrecked, desperate. "Just you. I need you."

Ilya kissed him again, softer this time, almost reverent.

"You have me. You've always had me."

His hand wrapped around Shane, and Shane nearly came apart right there from just that simple touch. It had been so long since anyone had touched him like this, and it had never been Ilya, had never been the person Shane actually wanted. He whimpered, unable to help himself, and Ilya made a soothing sound against his neck.

"I've got you," Ilya promised. "I've got you, baby. Let me take care of you."

Shane nodded frantically, past words, past anything except the desperate need building in his core. Ilya reached for the nightstand, found what he needed without asking because he knew Shane's apartment as well as his own, and Shane spread his legs wider in invitation.

The first press of Ilya's finger made Shane gasp. The second made him moan. By the time Ilya had worked him open enough, Shane was begging.

"Please, please, Roz, I need—"

"I know." Ilya kissed him, swallowing the rest of his pleas.

"I know what you need, sweetheart. I'm going to give it to you."

Ilya positioned himself, and Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist, pulling him closer. Their eyes met, and Shane saw his own desperation reflected back at him, saw years of wanting finally about to break open into something real.

When Ilya pushed inside, slow and careful, Shane's whole world narrowed to that single point of connection. To the stretch and burn and overwhelming fullness of finally, finally having what he'd wanted for so long.

Shane kissed him, pouring every ounce of feeling he couldn't articulate into the press of their lips. "I'm yours," he whispered. "I'm yours, Ilya. I've always been yours."

Something in Ilya's expression shifted, went fierce and possessive, and he started to move. Slowly at first, letting Shane adjust, but then faster as Shane's body opened for him, as Shane started making those desperate little sounds that seemed to drive Ilya wild.

Ilya made a sound like a wounded animal and increased his pace, driving into Shane harder, deeper, like he was trying to permanently mark himself on Shane's body.

"You're mine, Shane. Not Rose's. Mine. Say it."

"Yours. All yours. Mhmm" Shane moans as Ilya nails his prostate multiple times in a row.

His orgasm hit him like a freight train, pleasure crashing through his system so intensely he saw stars. He cried out, Ilya's name torn from his throat, and Ilya followed moments later with a shout, burying himself deep as he shook apart.

They collapsed together, breathing hard, still tangled up in each other. Ilya pulled out carefully and Shane made a sound of loss, immediately feeling too empty. Ilya cleaned them up with his shirt from the floor, gentle and thorough, then pulled Shane against his chest.

Shane fit there perfectly. Always had.

For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Ilya's fingers traced idle patterns on Shane's shoulder, and Shane tried not to think about the morning, about what they'd just done, about the engagement.

"Does Rose know?" Ilya asked quietly, and Shane could feel him pressing a kiss to his hair.

Shane nodded against Ilya's chest. "Yeah."

"Is she okay with it?"

"Yeah." Shane closed his eyes, not wanting to elaborate, not wanting to explain the complicated arrangement they had fallen into.

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his hand still moving over Shane's skin in soothing circles. Then he tilted Shane's face up and kissed him, soft and sweet and heartbreaking.

"Then don't marry her," he whispered against Shane's lips. "Be with me instead."

The words hit Shane like a physical blow. Be with me. Like it was that simple. Like Shane could just call off the wedding and walk away from the promises he'd made, the obligations he'd agreed to.

"It's not that simple," Shane said, his voice thick.

"Why not?" Ilya kissed the corner of his mouth, his jaw, the sensitive spot behind his ear that made Shane shiver.

"Rose's family—" Shane started, but Ilya cut him off with another kiss.

“I don’t care about Rose’s family.” Ilya’s hands framed Shane’s face, holding him gently. “I care about you, sweetheart. I care about the fact that you’re miserable and you’re about to promise yourself to someone you don’t love.”

It is Shane who breaks it. It is always Shane who breaks it.

“I have to tell you something,” he says. His voice is low and careful, the voice he uses for real things, and Ilya turns his head to look at his profile in the low light, the freckles across his cheek, the line of his jaw, all of it so familiar and so close and so finally, finally his to look at without having to look away.

“Then tell me,” Ilya says.

Shane takes a breath. “The engagement isn’t real,” he says. “Rose and I. It was never— it isn’t what everyone thinks it is.”

Ilya goes still. He waits.

“Her parents,” Shane says.

Silence.

“Rose’s parents are very old fashioned. They have been harassing her to get married for years now because they own this huge company and ‘it looks bad for their heir to not be married’. It’s stupid if you ask me it’s not like Rose will ever take over the company, she’s a teacher for crying out loud! So a few years ago we made this elaborate plan to fake date just until Rose could find a real partner, but it got out of hand because Rose’s family ended up loving me and it ended up going way too far. Now we’re here. A gay man fake marrying a woman. A real joke if I do say so myself.”

He pauses.

“But I love Rose, she’s a great friend, and I’d do anything for her. So I agreed to do it, but now I’m really torn. If we break off the engagement I’m not sure what they’ll do. She asked me. I said yes because she needed me to and because I thought—“

The room is very quiet. Ilya looks at the ceiling and feels something move through him that is so large and so warm and so completely different from everything he has been carrying for the past six months that for a moment he cannot identify it. Then he does. It is relief. It is the specific, total, devastating relief of a weight being lifted that you have carried for so long you had forgotten it was not simply part of you.

“Rose knows everything,” Shane continues. “She has always known. About me. About—” He turns his head and looks at Ilya, and his expression is completely open, stripped of everything he usually keeps in reserve. “About you,” he says. “She has known about you since the beginning. She agreed anyway. She said—” His mouth curves, something fond and slightly undone in it.

“She said someone had to do something about it eventually.”

Ilya thinks about Rose's quiet, precise attention at every appointment. The way she watched the two of them together with that expression he could never quite read. He thinks about how thoroughly and how completely she had been rooting for them this entire time, from the very first venue tour, from the very first tasting, while Ilya was planning her wedding and quietly falling apart at the seams, and feels something for her that is enormous and grateful and not entirely expressible.

"She is a remarkable person," Ilya says.

"The best," Shane agrees. "I don't deserve her."

"No," Ilya says. "But she did not do it for you to deserve it. She did it because she loves you."

Shane makes a sound that is almost a laugh and not quite, something that has too much feeling in it to be only a laugh, and he turns onto his side and looks at Ilya, and Ilya looks back, and the low light is warm between them and the city is quiet outside and twenty-five years of loving this person quietly and carefully and without any expectation of return are sitting in the room with them, witnessed finally, finally witnessed.

"I'm sorry it took this long," Shane says. "I'm sorry I made you wait."

"You did not make me wait," Ilya says. "I chose to. There is a difference."

He reaches out and takes Shane's face in his hand, his thumb tracing the freckles across his cheekbone, slow and deliberate, like something he has been wanting to do for a very long time because he has been wanting to do it for a very long time. "I would choose it again," he says. "All of it. Every year of it. Even if it only ends here."

Shane closes his eyes and leans into his hand and says nothing for a moment, and Ilya holds him there in the quiet and thinks, there it is. After everything. After all of it. There it finally, completely, irreversibly is.

"I'll talk to Rose," Shane whispered.

"We'll figure it out together." Ilya's hand traced down Shane's spine, a gentle, grounding touch. "I'm not letting you go now that I finally have you. You're mine, remember?"

Shane laughed wetly against Ilya's chest. "Yeah. I remember."

They fell quiet again, Ilya's fingers drawing abstract patterns on Shane's skin, Shane listening to the steady thrum of Ilya's heartbeat. Outside, the city carried on, oblivious to the fact that Shane's entire world had just rearranged itself.

"Stay with me tonight," Shane said finally. "Please."

"I'm not going anywhere, my love." Ilya kissed his hair again, his arms tightening around Shane. "I'm right here. I'll be right here when you wake up."

Shane believed him. For the first time in months, maybe years, he let himself believe that things could be different. That he didn't have to marry Rose. That he could have this instead.

That he could be loved loudly by the person who'd always mattered most.

He tilted his face up and Ilya met him halfway, kissing him slow and deep, like they had all the time in the world. Like this was just the beginning instead of something stolen and temporary.

Shane kissed him again, and again, and again, until they were both breathless and laughing and tangled up so completely it was impossible to tell where one of them ended and the other began.

The wedding was still a few weeks away. Rose's family was still expecting a ceremony. The invitations were still printed and addressed and waiting to be mailed.

But right now, in this moment, none of that mattered. Right now, Shane had Ilya's arms around him and Ilya's kisses warming his skin and Ilya's voice promising him that everything would be okay.

And for tonight, that was enough.

Chapter 12: In the Morning Light: Shane's POV

Chapter Notes

saw multiple people say i should do a shane pov of this fic (and maybe) but i thought i'd satisfy your craving by giving you a shane pov chapter! SURPRISE! i rewrote the confessions chapter to be shane's pov a few days ago 🥰💖

TYSM FOR READING 🥰🥰 enjoy :)

Shane woke up warm.

That was the first thing he registered, before his brain had fully come online, before he remembered where he was or what had happened the night before.

Just the sensation of warmth pressed against his back, an arm draped over his waist, breath tickling the nape of his neck in slow, even intervals.

The second thing he registered was that he was in his own bed, in his own apartment, and the person wrapped around him was Ilya.

Everything from the bachelor party came rushing back in a flood. The bar, the dancing, the kiss against the brick wall, stumbling back here like they couldn't get close enough fast enough. The way Ilya had touched him, the way he'd fallen apart under Ilya's hands, the things they'd said to each other in the aftermath.

Shane's chest tightened with something that felt dangerously close to hope.

He shifted slightly, testing whether Ilya was awake, and the arm around his waist tightened in response. Not awake, then. Still sleeping, still holding onto Shane like he was afraid Shane might disappear if he let go.

Shane carefully turned over in Ilya's embrace, trying not to wake him, wanting just a moment to look at him without those eyes watching back. Ilya's face was soft in sleep, his curls falling across his forehead in a way that made Shane's fingers itch to brush them back. His mouth was slightly parted, his breathing deep and even, and there was something almost vulnerable about seeing him like this.

Shane had seen Ilya sleep before. Countless times over the years, crashed on couches after late nights, sprawled across hotel beds during road trips, passed out on Shane's shoulder during long flights. But this was different. This was Ilya in Shane's bed, naked under Shane's sheets, his body curved around Shane's like they'd been doing this for years instead of hours.

This was Ilya having chosen to stay.

Shane's heart did something complicated in his chest, and he had to close his eyes against the sudden wave of emotion. He'd spent so long telling himself this would never happen, that Ilya didn't feel the same way, that Shane would just have to learn to be happy with friendship. And now here they were, and Shane didn't know what to do with the reality of it except want it so desperately it scared him.

When he opened his eyes again, Ilya was watching him.

Not just watching. Staring, with a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth, like he'd been awake for a while and had been content just to look at Shane while he slept.

"Hi," Ilya said softly, his voice still rough with sleep.

Shane felt heat creep up his neck.

"How long have you been awake?"

"Long enough." Ilya's smile widened slightly, and his hand moved from Shane's waist to his face, thumb brushing over his cheekbone.

"You're beautiful when you sleep. Did you know that?"

"Shut up," Shane mumbled, but he couldn't help the way his lips curved upward.

"I'm serious." Ilya's eyes were impossibly soft, impossibly warm.

"I've thought about this so many times. Waking up next to you. Getting to see you like this."

Something in Shane's chest cracked open a little wider.

"You have?"

"Yeah." Ilya leaned in and kissed him, gentle and unhurried, like they had all the time in the world.

"For years, Shane. I've thought about it for years."

Shane's breath caught. They'd said a lot of things last night in the heat of the moment, desperate confessions torn from them by want and years of denial. But this felt different somehow. Quieter and perhaps more deliberate. Like Ilya was choosing to say it again in the clear light of morning, when they were both sober and thinking straight and couldn't blame it on the moment.

"Me too," Shane admitted quietly.

"I used to have dreams about it. About you staying over and it meaning something different than it usually did."

Ilya's expression did something complicated, pleasure and pain mixing together. "How long?" he asked. "How long have you felt like this?"

Shane thought about lying, about downplaying it, about protecting himself the way he'd learned to do over the years. But Ilya was looking at him with such open vulnerability, such naked hope, that Shane found he couldn't do it.

"Since High School," he said. "Maybe before that. I don't know exactly when it started, just that one day I looked at you and realized you weren't just my best friend anymore. That somewhere along the way, you'd become the person I measured everyone else against and they all came up short."

Ilya made a sound like he'd been punched. "Shane—"

"I tried to get over it," Shane continued, the words spilling out now that he'd started. "I dated other people, I told myself it would fade, I convinced myself that keeping you in my life as a friend was better than risking everything by telling you how I felt. And then Rose happened, and she needed someone, and I thought maybe if I just committed to something else, forced myself into a different life, I could stop wanting someone I thought I couldn't have."

"You could have had me." Ilya's voice was rough, his eyes bright.

"Shane, you could have had me this whole time. Do you know how many times I almost told you? How many moments I came this close to just saying fuck it and kissing you?"

"Why didn't you?"

"Because you're my best friend." Ilya's hand moved to the back of Shane's neck, fingers threading through his hair.

"Because losing you completely was worse than having you like this. Because I didn't want to be the person who ruined everything by wanting too much."

Shane understood that feeling intimately. Had lived it for years, that careful balance between staying close and not getting too close, between wanting everything and settling for what he could have.

"I'm sorry," Shane said, and he wasn't entirely sure what he was apologizing for. For not saying something sooner, maybe. For agreeing to marry Rose. For all the years they'd wasted dancing around this.

"Don't be sorry." Ilya kissed him again, deeper this time.

"We're here now. That's what matters."

Shane wanted to believe that. Wanted to let himself fall into the simplicity of it, the idea that being here now was enough to make up for everything that came before. But there was still the matter of the wedding, of Rose and her family's expectations, of the promises Shane had made that he didn't know how to break.

"I don't know how to fix this," Shane admitted. "Rose and the wedding and everything."

“We’ll figure it out.” Ilya’s thumb traced Shane’s lower lip, and Shane’s breath hitched. “I meant what I said last night. I’m not letting you go now that I have you. We’ll find a way.”

“What if we can’t?”

“Then we’ll deal with that when it happens.” Ilya’s eyes were steady on his, certain in a way Shane envied.

“But I’m not giving up on this, Shane. I’ve spent too long wanting you to walk away now just because it’s complicated.”

Shane felt something tight in his chest start to loosen.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he heard himself say, the confession easier now in the quiet morning light.

“So long that I forgot what it felt like to want anything else.”

Ilya’s expression went soft, went tender, and he pulled Shane closer until there was no space left between them.

“I love you,” Ilya said simply. “I’m in love with you. I have been for years, and I’m tired of pretending I’m not.”

The words hit Shane like a physical thing, warm and devastating and perfect.

“I love you too,” he whispered back. “God, Ilya, I love you so much.”

Ilya kissed him, and this time there was nothing gentle about it.

This was desperate and claiming and full of years of want finally given permission to exist. Shane opened for him immediately, his hands coming up to fist in Ilya’s hair, and Ilya made a sound low in his throat that sent heat flooding through Shane’s entire body.

“Can I—” Ilya broke away just long enough to breathe the question against Shane’s lips. “I want to take care of you. Want to show you how much I love you. Can I do that, baby?”

Shane nodded, already breathless, and Ilya’s smile was bright enough to hurt.

Ilya kissed down Shane’s neck, his chest, taking his time in a way he hadn’t been able to last night. Last night had been frantic and desperate, years of denial breaking open all at once. This was different. This was Ilya mapping Shane’s body like he wanted to memorize every inch, like he had all the time in the world to learn what made Shane gasp and shiver and fall apart.

When Ilya’s mouth closed around him, Shane’s back arched off the bed with a sound he couldn’t have contained if he’d tried.

Ilya’s hands held his hips steady, and Shane looked down to find Ilya watching him, blue eyes dark with want but also something softer. Something that looked a lot like reverence.

“Ilya,” Shane managed, his voice already wrecked.

“Please—”

Ilya pulled off just long enough to speak. “I’ve got you, sweetheart. Just let me make you feel good.”

He did. God, he did. Ilya took him apart with his mouth, slow and thorough and devastating, and Shane could only lie there and take it, his hands fisted in the sheets, Ilya’s name falling from his lips like a prayer. When he got close, thighs shaking, Ilya pulled back with a pleased smile.

“Not yet,” Ilya murmured, pressing kisses to Shane’s hip bones. “I want to be inside you when you come. Want to feel you fall apart around me.”

Shane whimpered at the words, at the promise in them, and Ilya kissed him quiet. The stretch and press when Ilya worked him open again was familiar now, but no less intense. Shane was still tender from last night, oversensitive in the best way, and he could feel every careful touch like electricity.

“Okay?” Ilya asked, two fingers deep, and Shane nodded frantically.

“More. I need more. I need you.”

Ilya’s expression went fierce with affection. “You have me, baby. You’ve always had me.”

When Ilya finally pushed inside, Shane’s whole world narrowed to that point of connection. To the feeling of being filled, of being claimed, of Ilya’s body pressed against his like they were two halves of the same whole. Ilya moved slowly this time, each thrust deliberate and deep, and Shane wrapped his legs around Ilya’s waist to pull him closer.

“I love you,” Ilya breathed against Shane’s mouth. “I love you so much, Shane. You’re everything to me. Do you know that? You’re everything.”

Shane couldn’t speak, could only hold on as Ilya moved inside him, as the pleasure built slowly and inevitably. Ilya’s hand found his again, fingers lacing together, and Shane squeezed tight.

“Look at me,” Ilya said softly. “I want to see you.”

Shane opened his eyes, met Ilya’s gaze, and felt something in his chest crack wide open. Ilya looked at him like he was precious, like he was something to be cherished, and Shane had never felt more seen in his entire life.

“There you are,” Ilya murmured, smiling. “There’s my beautiful boy.”

The orgasm built slowly, a warm wave that started in Shane’s core and spread outward until his whole body was trembling with it. When it finally crested, Shane came with Ilya’s name on his lips and Ilya’s hand in his and Ilya’s eyes on his face, watching him fall apart with an expression so full of love it made Shane’s chest ache.

Ilya followed moments later, pressing deep and holding there as he shook through his release. Shane held him through it, arms wrapped tight around his back, and when Ilya collapsed against him after, Shane didn't let go.

They lay tangled together, breathing hard, Shane's fingers tracing idle patterns on Ilya's spine. Ilya pressed lazy kisses to Shane's shoulder, his neck, anywhere he could reach without moving too much.

"I meant it," Ilya said after a long moment. "What I said before. I love you. I'm in love with you. And I know everything's complicated right now, but we'll figure it out."

Shane believed him. For the first time in months, maybe years, he let himself believe that things could work out. That he didn't have to marry Rose. That he could have this instead.

"I love you too," Shane said, turning his head to kiss Ilya's temple. "For years, Ilya. I've been in love with you for years."

Ilya lifted his head, his smile bright and beautiful and slightly disbelieving, like he couldn't quite process that this was real. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Shane cupped his face, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. "It's always been you."

Ilya's eyes went bright with tears, and he kissed Shane again, soft and lingering. "It's always been you for me too," he whispered. "Always, Shane. There's never been anyone else."

Shane pulled him close, until they were pressed together from chest to hip, until he could feel Ilya's heartbeat against his own. Outside, the city was waking up, morning traffic starting to build, the world carrying on like nothing had changed.

But everything had changed. Shane had spent years trying to bury what he felt, trying to convince himself he could be happy with less than what he wanted. And now he had Ilya in his arms, Ilya's love confession still ringing in his ears, and he didn't know how he was supposed to go back to pretending after this.

"Stay," Shane said quietly. "Stay here with me today. I don't want to think about anything else right now."

"Okay." Ilya settled more comfortably against him, his head on Shane's chest. "I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart. I promise."

Shane closed his eyes and let himself believe it. Let himself have this one perfect morning where the wedding didn't matter and Rose's family didn't matter and nothing existed except the two of them in this bed.

It couldn't last forever. Shane knew that. Eventually they'd have to get up, have to face reality, have to figure out how to untangle the mess Shane had made of his life.

But for now, for this moment, he had Ilya. And that was enough.

Chapter 13: The Last Five Days

Chapter Summary

angstttt 😞😞😞 don't worry, this fic will have a happy ending!

Chapter Notes

i'm sincerely sorry for what i'm about to do :(but things get worse before they get better!

also if you saw the chapter delete, no you didn't lol! i realized i make a mistake when rereading it needed to edit it!

sorry for not uploading! i've been sick with the flu! feel a little better now, so should be posting on a normal schedule now!

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

Ilya had always thought he knew what happiness felt like.

He'd been wrong.

The past three days had been a revelation, a complete rewriting of everything Ilya thought he understood about joy and contentment and what it meant to be with someone. Three days of waking up tangled in Shane's sheets, of lazy mornings that bled into afternoons, of learning the exact way Shane liked his coffee and the sound he made when Ilya kissed the back of his neck and the way his eyes went soft when Ilya told him he loved him.

Three days of finally, finally having what he'd wanted for years.

Ilya should have known it was too good to last.

He was sprawled on Shane's couch, half-watching some documentary Shane had put on, when Shane's phone rang. Rose's name lit up the screen, and Shane's expression did something complicated as he answered.

"Hey," Shane said, his voice careful. "How did it go?"

Ilya couldn't hear Rose's response, but he watched Shane's face shift from cautious optimism to something that looked like dread. Shane stood up from the couch, pacing toward the window, one hand coming up to press against his forehead.

“Wait, slow down,” Shane said. “What do you mean they overheard?”

Ilya’s stomach dropped. He sat up straighter, his attention fully on Shane now, trying to piece together the conversation from Shane’s half of it.

“Rose, I—” Shane’s voice was tight. “Okay. Okay, just breathe. We’ll figure this out.”

But Shane didn’t sound like someone who thought they could figure it out. He sounded like someone watching a car crash in slow motion, powerless to stop it.

“I know,” Shane said quietly. “I know you can’t. I’m not asking you to.”

A long pause. Shane’s shoulders were tense, his free hand clenched into a fist at his side.

“No, you’re right. It’s not your fault.” Another pause. “Rose, don’t apologize. This isn’t—” He stopped, took a breath. “We’ll talk later, okay? I need to think.”

Shane ended the call and just stood there for a moment, staring out the window like he could find answers in the city skyline. Ilya’s heart was pounding so hard he could hear it in his ears.

“Shane?” Ilya’s voice came out smaller than he intended. “What happened?”

Shane turned slowly, and the look on his face made Ilya’s chest constrict. This was bad. Whatever had just happened, it was bad.

“Rose’s parents overheard us on the phone yesterday,” Shane said, his voice flat. “When we were talking about calling off the wedding.”

Ilya’s breath caught. They’d been so careful, or at least he’d thought they had. Shane and Rose had talked about how to approach her parents, how to explain that the engagement had been a mistake, how to frame it in a way that wouldn’t cause too much damage.

“What did they say?” Ilya asked, even though part of him didn’t want to know the answer.

Shane ran a hand through his hair, and Ilya could see how badly it was shaking. “They’re threatening to cut her off completely. The apartment they’re paying for, which would leave me homeless as well, her health insurance, all the financial support. Everything. And they’re moving the wedding up.”

“What?” The word came out sharp. “Moving it up to when?”

“Five days.” Shane’s voice cracked on the number. “They want us married in five days, Ilya. They said if Rose tries to back out now, they’ll make sure she has nothing. And she can’t—” He stopped, his jaw working. “She can’t survive on just her teacher salary. Not in this city. Not without their help.”

Ilya felt like the floor had dropped out from under him. Five days. Shane was supposed to marry Rose in five days.

“There has to be another way,” Ilya heard himself say, even though his voice sounded distant to his own ears. “We can figure something out. We can help her, we can—”

“With what money, Ilya? We couldn’t even afford the wedding! Her parents are paying for it. We didn’t tell you.” Shane’s laugh was bitter. “I’m a journalist. You work in wedding planning. Neither of us can afford to support Rose on top of our own expenses. Her parents know that. That’s why they’re doing this.”

“Then she finds a cheaper apartment. She gets a roommate. She figures it out.” Ilya was standing now, moving toward Shane, needing to be close to him. “Shane, you can’t actually be considering going through with this.”

Shane’s eyes met his, and they were full of so much pain it physically hurt to look at. “I don’t know what else to do.”

“You tell them no.” Ilya’s voice was rising now, desperation bleeding through. “You tell Rose you’re sorry but you can’t do this. You can’t marry someone you don’t love just because her parents are terrible people.”

“And leave us homeless?” Shane’s voice rose to match. “Leave her with nothing? I promised to help her, Ilya. I gave her my word.”

“You didn’t promise to destroy your own life for her!” Ilya felt tears burning at the back of his eyes and tried to blink them away. “Shane, please. Please don’t do this.”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, you do!” Ilya grabbed Shane’s arms, needing him to understand. “You always have a choice. You’re choosing to save Rose instead of choosing us.”

“That’s not fair.” But Shane’s voice was weak, and he wouldn’t meet Ilya’s eyes.

“Isn’t it?” Ilya could feel the tears starting now, hot and humiliating on his cheeks. “We just found each other, Shane. After all these years of wanting you, of watching you be with other people and pretending I was fine with it, we finally have this. And you’re just going to throw it away?”

“I’m not throwing it away.” Shane’s hands came up to cup Ilya’s face, his thumbs brushing away tears. “Ilya, I love you. That doesn’t change.”

“Then don’t marry her.” Ilya’s voice broke on the words. “Please, baby, please don’t marry her. We’ll find another way to help Rose. We’ll figure something out together. Just don’t do this.”

Shane’s own eyes were wet now, and seeing him cry made something in Ilya’s chest crack wide open. “I can’t let her lose everything because of me.”

“What about me?” The question came out raw and desperate. “What about what I lose? I just got you, Shane. I just finally got to have you after years of loving you, and now you’re telling me I have to watch you marry someone else in five days?”

“Ilya—”

“I’ve loved you since we were kids.” Ilya was full-on crying now, past the point of caring how pathetic he sounded. “Do you know what that’s been like? Watching you date people, watching you get engaged, pretending to be happy for you when every time felt like dying? And then we finally had our chance, and it was everything I’d ever wanted, and now you’re taking it away.”

“I don’t want to.” Shane’s voice was wrecked, tears streaming down his face now too. “God, Ilya, I don’t want to. If there was any other way—”

“There is another way!” Ilya’s hands fisted in Shane’s shirt. “The other way is you choose me. You choose us. You tell Rose you’re sorry but you can’t do this, and we figure out how to help her together.”

“And if we can’t?” Shane asked quietly. “If there’s no way to help her that doesn’t involve me going through with this wedding, what then? I just let her parents destroy her life?”

“What about your life?” Ilya demanded. “What about the fact that you’re destroying your own life by doing this? You’ll be married to someone you don’t love, living a lie, and for what? So Rose’s parents can control her for the rest of her life?”

Shane pulled away from him, turning back to the window, and the distance between them felt like a chasm. “I made a promise.”

“You made a promise to me too.” Ilya’s voice was barely above a whisper now. “Three days ago, in your bed, you told me you loved me. You told me it had always been me. Was that a lie?”

“Of course it wasn’t a lie.” Shane spun back around, and the anguish on his face was almost unbearable. “Ilya, I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything. But I can’t just abandon Rose. I can’t be that person.”

“So you’d rather be the person who abandons me?” The words came out bitter, and Ilya watched them land like a physical blow.

“That’s not what I’m doing.”

“Yes, it is.” Ilya wiped at his face roughly, hating the tears that wouldn’t stop falling. “You’re choosing her over me, Shane. I know you’re trying to do the right thing, I know you feel obligated to help her, but at the end of the day, you’re choosing to marry someone else instead of being with me.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple!” Ilya’s voice broke. “I love you, and you love me, and you’re still going to marry her. That’s as simple as it gets.”

Shane looked like he wanted to argue, but no words came out. He just stood there, tears on his face, looking more lost than Ilya had ever seen him.

“Is there anything I can say?” Ilya asked after a long moment, his voice hoarse. “Anything at all that would make you change your mind?”

Shane’s silence was answer enough.

Ilya felt something inside him shatter.

“I need space,” Ilya said quietly, moving toward where he’d left his shoes by the door. “I can’t—I can’t be here right now.”

“Ilya, wait—” Shane reached for him, but Ilya pulled away.

“Don’t.” His voice came out sharper than he intended. “Please don’t make this harder than it already is.”

“I’ll see you at the rehearsal,” Ilya said without looking back, his hand on the doorknob. “In two days.”

“Ilya, please—”

“I love you.” Ilya’s voice broke on the words. “I love you so much it’s killing me. But I can’t watch you do this. Not right now. I just can’t.”

He pulled the door open and walked out before Shane could say anything else.

The door clicked shut behind him, and Ilya made it exactly three steps down the hallway before he had to stop and lean against the wall, his whole body shaking with sobs he couldn’t contain.

Five days.

Five days until Shane married someone else.

He forced himself to keep walking, to make it to the elevator, to get out of Shane’s building before he did something stupid like turn around and beg Shane one more time.

He just needed to get home.

Three days.

That was all he’d had.

Three perfect days of finally having everything he’d ever wanted.

And now he had to let it go.

In five days, Shane would belong to someone else, and Ilya would have to figure out how to live with that.

He didn’t know if he could.

Chapter End Notes

btw rose is out of town at her bachelorette party during this and that is where her mom was and heard her conversation with shane! forgot to mention that.

shane and rose are not  in love! they are friends! shane is 100% gay and just feels guilty for leaving rose homeless and broke if he breaks off the engagement. also, he would be homeless too since they live together :(they only live together to make the engagement seem more real to rose's parents.

i rushed this chapter when i wrote it so sorry if it doesn't really make sense  i rewrote the whole thing a few days ago because i hated it. lmaooo. if you noticed any mistakes, no you didn't <3

Chapter 14: Hope

Chapter Summary

emoji review: 😞 + ❤️ + 🤔 + 😊

please read the end note after reading!

Chapter Notes

SURPRISEEEE DOUBLE CHAPTERRR!! 💕💕

the ending of this chapter thooooo👁️👁️

also, let's talk about the LENGTHH of this chapter??? 4.1k words? yeah, you're welcome! lmaoo😂

hope you enjoy!

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

The rehearsal was being held at Fraser Valley, all pale stone and overgrown wisteria and tall windows that caught the late April light. The kind of place that made everything feel more significant, more permanent, more real than Ilya was prepared to handle.

He'd arrived exactly on time, not early enough to have to make small talk with anyone, but not late enough to draw attention to himself.

Shane was already there when Ilya walked in.

Their eyes met across the room, and Ilya felt the impact of it like a physical blow. Shane looked terrible. His eyes were red-rimmed and exhausted, his shoulders hunched in a way that made him look smaller than he was, and there was something hollow in his expression that made Ilya's chest ache.

Ilya looked away first. He couldn't keep staring at Shane without falling apart completely, and he'd promised himself he'd get through this rehearsal with some semblance of dignity intact.

Rose spotted him and waved, her smile strained and apologetic. She'd texted him yesterday, a long rambling message about how sorry she was, how she never wanted this to happen, how she wished there was another way. Ilya had read it three times and then deleted it without

responding because he didn't know what to say. It wasn't Rose's fault, not really, but that didn't make any of this hurt less.

"Hello everyone, I'm Priya, your main wedding coordinator just for today and Ilya's assistant. Since Ilya is a part of the wedding, therefore needs to be a part of rehearsals, I'll be running you through the rehearsal today. Let's get started, shall we?"

"Everyone, please take your seats," Priya called out, her voice warm but authoritative. "We're going to run through the ceremony first, then move on to the reception logistics."

Ilya found himself directed to a seat in the front row, right across the aisle from where Shane would be standing during the actual ceremony. Of course. Of course they'd put him exactly where he'd have the best view of Shane promising himself to someone else.

The universe had a cruel sense of humor.

Shane took his position at the front, next to where the officiant would stand, and Ilya couldn't help but look at him. Couldn't help cataloging the way Shane's hands were shaking slightly at his sides, the tightness around his mouth, the way his eyes kept darting to Ilya and then away like he couldn't help himself either.

Priya started explaining the processional, who would walk in what order, where everyone would stand. Ilya tried to focus on her words, but they kept sliding off his brain like water off glass. All he could think about was Shane standing up there in three days, watching Rose walk down the aisle toward him, saying vows he didn't mean to someone he didn't love.

While Ilya sat in the audience and watched it happen.

"Now, Shane, when Rose reaches you, you'll take her hands like this," Priya demonstrated with her iPad. "And you'll both face the officiant."

Shane nodded mechanically. His jaw was clenched so tight Ilya could see the muscle jumping from across the room.

"We're going to practice the vows now. Rose, if you'll come stand here."

Rose moved into position, and Ilya watched as she and Shane faced each other. Rose reached for Shane's hands, and Shane took them, but there was nothing intimate about the gesture. They looked like two actors going through the motions of a play neither of them wanted to be in.

"Repeat after me," Priya said. "I, Shane, take you, Rose—"

Shane's voice came out hoarse. "I, Shane, take you, Rose—"

Ilya's hands clenched into fists in his lap. He couldn't do this. Couldn't sit here and listen to Shane practice promising himself to someone else. But he couldn't leave either, couldn't make a scene, couldn't do anything except sit here and endure it.

"To be my lawfully wedded wife."

“To be my lawfully wedded wife.” Shane’s voice cracked on the last word, and Ilya saw it. Saw the single tear that slipped down Shane’s cheek before he could stop it.

Shane’s eyes found Ilya’s across the space between them, and the devastation in them was so raw that Ilya had to look away. If he kept looking at Shane like this, he was going to start crying too, and he couldn’t do that here. Not in front of Rose’s parents, who were sitting in the back row watching everything with satisfied expressions. Not in front of Cliff and Svetlana and Scott and Kip, who kept shooting Ilya concerned looks like they knew exactly what was happening and didn’t know how to help.

“To have and to hold, from this day forward.”

Shane repeated the words, but his eyes never left Ilya. It felt like Shane was saying them to him instead of to Rose, like he was trying to tell Ilya something he couldn’t say out loud.

Ilya’s vision blurred. He blinked hard, forcing the tears back, and made himself look at Priya instead of Shane. At the flowers being used as markers for where the real arrangements would be. At the fake wedding arch that would be replaced with something more elaborate. At anything except the man he loved practicing marrying someone else.

“For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer.”

The words felt like knives. Ilya had imagined hearing Shane say vows before, late at night when he couldn’t sleep and his mind wandered to impossible futures. But in those fantasies, Shane had been saying them to him. They’d been standing together, choosing each other, promising forever in front of everyone they loved.

Not this. Never this.

“In sickness and in health, to love and to cherish.”

Shane’s voice was barely audible now, and Ilya could see his hands trembling in Rose’s grip. Rose herself looked close to tears, her guilt written all over her face. This was a nightmare for everyone involved except her parents, who probably thought they’d won.

“Till death do us part.”

The finality of the words hit Ilya like a punch to the gut. Till death do us part. Shane was going to stand up there in three days and say those words for real, and they would be binding. Legal. Permanent.

And Ilya would have to live with it.

Something brushed against his foot under the chairs. Ilya glanced down to see Shane’s shoe pressed against his, deliberate and unmistakable. Shane had shifted his position slightly, angling himself so his foot could reach across the aisle to where Ilya sat.

Ilya should have pulled away. Should have moved his foot, should have broken the contact, should have maintained the distance he desperately needed to get through this. But he didn’t. He pressed back instead, just slightly, and felt Shane’s answering pressure.

It was such a small thing. Just their feet touching through their shoes, hidden from view by the chairs in front of them. But it felt monumental. Felt like Shane reaching across the impossible space between them to say I'm still here, I still want you, this is killing me too.

Priya moved on to Rose's vows, and Ilya only half-listened. His entire focus was on the point of contact between his foot and Shane's, on the way Shane was still looking at him even as Rose practiced promising to love him forever.

This was torture. Beautiful, devastating torture.

When the vow section finally ended, Priya started explaining the ring exchange. Shane's foot stayed pressed against Ilya's the entire time, neither of them willing to break the connection. Ilya stared straight ahead, not trusting himself to look at Shane again, afraid of what he'd see in those eyes.

Afraid of what Shane would see in his.

"And then you'll kiss," Priya said briskly. "We won't practice that part today obviously, but on the actual day, make it nice but keep it appropriate for the audience. Three to five seconds, nothing too theatrical."

Three to five seconds. Shane would kiss Rose for three to five seconds while Ilya watched, and then they'd be married, and that would be it. Game over. Done.

Ilya felt like he was going to be sick.

"Alright, that's the ceremony portion," Priya announced, consulting her iPad. "Let's take a ten minute break before we move into the reception logistics. There are refreshments in the back room."

Everyone stood, the spell broken, and Shane's foot finally left Ilya's. The loss of contact felt catastrophic, like the last tether holding Ilya together had just snapped.

He needed to get out of this room. Needed air, needed space, needed to be somewhere he could breathe without feeling like he was drowning.

"Excuse me," Ilya muttered to no one in particular, pushing past Svetlana and heading for the hallway. He'd seen a bathroom on the way in, and if he could just make it there, if he could just have two minutes alone to pull himself together—

The bathroom was blessedly empty. Ilya locked himself in a stall and braced his hands against the walls, trying to steady his breathing. In through his nose, out through his mouth, just like Svetlana had taught him years ago when he'd had his first panic attack during finals week.

This felt worse than a panic attack. This felt like his entire world was ending in slow motion and he was powerless to stop it.

He heard the bathroom door open and forced himself to be quiet, to keep his breathing even and silent. Whoever had just come in would use the bathroom and leave and Ilya could go

back to falling apart in peace.

“Ilya?”

Shane’s voice. Of course it was Shane’s voice.

“Go away,” Ilya managed, his voice rough.

“I can’t.” Footsteps approached his stall, stopped just outside. “Please come out. Please talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Ilya closed his eyes, resting his forehead against the cool metal of the stall door. “You’re getting married in three days. That’s all there is to say.”

“I don’t want to marry her.”

“Then don’t.” The words came out sharper than Ilya intended. “But we both know you’re going to anyway, so what’s the point of this conversation?”

Silence. Then, quietly, “I need to see you. Please.”

Ilya shouldn’t unlock the door. Should stay in here until Shane gave up and left, should maintain the distance that was the only thing keeping him from completely shattering. But his hand was already moving, already sliding the lock open, already pulling the door inward.

Shane looked worse up close. His eyes were red and swollen, his face blotchy from crying, and there was such naked desperation in his expression that Ilya’s breath caught.

“I’m sorry,” Shane whispered. “I’m so sorry, Ilya. I don’t know what else to say except I’m sorry.”

“Sorry doesn’t change anything.”

“I know.” Shane took a step closer, and Ilya should have backed away but he was frozen in place. “I know it doesn’t. But I need you to know that this is killing me. Being out there, saying those vows, knowing you’re watching—I can barely breathe, Ilya.”

“You think this is easy for me?” Ilya’s voice cracked. “You think I want to watch you marry someone else? I have to sit there and smile and pretend I’m happy for you when all I want to do is stand up and scream that this is wrong, that you’re mine, that—”

He stopped, shaking his head. This wasn’t fair. None of this was fair to either of them.

Shane moved closer, close enough that Ilya could feel his body heat, could smell his cologne, could see the exact moment Shane’s eyes dropped to his lips.

“Don’t,” Ilya said, but it came out weak.

“I need to kiss you.” Shane’s voice was wrecked. “Please, Ilya. I know I don’t have the right to ask, I know this is selfish, but I need—”

Shane didn't finish the sentence. Just closed the remaining distance between them and kissed Ilya like he was drowning and Ilya was air.

Ilya sank into it for a moment, helpless against the familiar taste of Shane's mouth, the desperate press of his lips. This was what he'd been craving since he walked out of Shane's apartment two days ago, this connection, this confirmation that Shane still wanted him even if he couldn't have him.

But then reality crashed back in, and Ilya pulled away with a gasp.

"We can't," he said, putting space between them even though it felt like tearing off his own skin. "Shane, we can't do this."

"Why not?" Shane followed him, reaching for him. "Ilya, please—"

"Because you're not mine anymore." The words felt like glass in Ilya's throat. "I can't kiss you when you're not mine."

"I am yours." Shane's eyes were bright with tears. "I'll always be yours, Ilya. That doesn't change just because I'm—"

"Don't." Ilya held up a hand, stopping him. "Don't say you're always mine when you're about to marry someone else. That's not how this works."

"Then how does it work?" Shane demanded, and there was an edge of desperation in his voice now. "Tell me how to make this okay, because I don't know. I don't know how to be without you."

"You're going to have to figure it out." Ilya's voice was flat now, all the emotion drained out of him. "Because in three days, you're going to be someone's husband, and that someone isn't me."

A tear slipped down Shane's cheek. Just one, tracking slowly down to his jaw before he wiped it away roughly. "I don't want this."

"I know you don't." Ilya softened slightly, because Shane looked so broken standing there. "But you're doing it anyway. And I can't—I can't keep doing this, Shane. I can't keep being close to you and pretending everything's fine. It's too hard."

"So what are you saying?" Shane's voice was barely above a whisper. "That we're done? That after the wedding, we just—what? Stop being friends?"

The thought made Ilya want to throw up. Shane had been his best friend for over a decade, the most important person in his life long before Ilya had fallen in love with him. The idea of losing that, of losing Shane completely, was almost worse than watching him marry Rose.

Almost.

"I don't know," Ilya admitted. "I don't know what happens after the wedding. I just know I can't think about it right now."

Shane looked like he wanted to argue, but voices in the hallway made them both freeze. The break must be ending, people heading back for the reception portion of the rehearsal.

“We should go back,” Ilya said quietly.

“I don’t want to.”

“Neither do I.” Ilya managed something that might have been a smile. “But standing here isn’t going to change anything either.”

Shane reached out and caught Ilya’s hand before he could move away. His fingers laced through Ilya’s, holding tight, and Ilya let him. Just for a moment. Just long enough to memorize the feeling of Shane’s hand in his, the warmth of his palm, the way their fingers fit together like they’d been designed for it.

Then he pulled away and walked out of the bathroom.

The reception portion of the rehearsal took place in an adjacent room with tables set up to mirror the actual seating arrangement for the wedding. Priya directed everyone to their assigned seats, consulting her iPad with practiced efficiency.

“Ilya, you’ll be here at table three,” she said, pointing. “Next to Shane.”

Of course. Of course they’d be sitting next to each other. Ilya had probably been assigned there weeks ago, back when the seating chart was made and no one knew that sitting next to Shane would feel like slow torture.

Shane appeared at his elbow as they both moved toward the table, and Ilya felt hyperaware of every inch of space between them. Too close and too far away at the same time.

They sat down without speaking. Cliff, Hayden, and Svetlana were at their table too, along with Scott and Kip and a couple of Rose’s friends Ilya had met once or twice. Everyone made small talk while Priya explained the flow of the evening, where the speeches would happen, when the first dance would be, all the logistics of a wedding reception that Ilya desperately didn’t want to think about.

Shane’s thigh pressed against Ilya’s under the table, and Ilya stiffened at the contact. Shane didn’t move away. Just sat there with their legs touching, that same deliberate connection he’d made with their feet during the ceremony rehearsal.

Ilya should have shifted away. Should have put distance between them. But he couldn’t make himself do it.

Priya droned on about the timing of dinner service and where the DJ would be set up, and Ilya tried to focus on her words instead of the warmth of Shane’s body next to his. It was impossible. All he could think about was how right it felt to have Shane this close, and how wrong it was that Shane would be sitting next to Rose at the real reception, not him.

Shane’s hand dropped below the table, searching, and found Ilya’s where it rested on his thigh. His fingers wrapped around Ilya’s palm, tentative at first, like he was expecting Ilya to

pull away.

Ilya should have pulled away.

He didn't.

He squeezed Shane's hand instead, holding on like it was the only solid thing in a world that was falling apart. Shane's thumb rubbed over his knuckles, a soothing gesture that made Ilya want to cry.

This was all they had now. Stolen touches under tables, desperate kisses in bathroom stalls, moments of connection that couldn't last. Three days from now, Shane wouldn't even be able to do this anymore. Wouldn't be able to hold Ilya's hand or press their legs together or look at him the way he was looking at him now when he thought no one else was paying attention.

Shane's finger started moving against Ilya's palm. Slow, deliberate strokes that took Ilya a moment to recognize as letters.

I.

Then a shape that might have been a heart, traced carefully in the center of Ilya's hand.

Y-O-U.

I love you.

Ilya's throat went tight. He squeezed Shane's hand once, hard, acknowledgment and reciprocation and goodbye all at once. Because that's what this was, really. They were saying goodbye in tiny increments, piece by piece, stolen touch by stolen touch.

Shane kept tracing patterns on Ilya's palm. Letters and shapes and nonsense circles, like he couldn't stop himself, like the contact was the only thing keeping him tethered. Ilya let him, even though it hurt, even though every touch felt like a fresh wound.

"Now, the best man speech will happen here, after the main course," Priya said, and Ilya realized with a start that she was looking at him. "Ilya, you'll have the floor for approximately three to five minutes. Keep it light, keep it heartfelt, nothing too embarrassing."

Ilya felt sick. He felt the speech burning a hole in his pocket. He brought it with him just in case they wanted him to practice his speech too. He couldn't believe that he was expected to stand up in front of everyone at the reception and talk about Shane and Rose's love, their beautiful relationship, how perfect they were together.

How was he supposed to do that? How was he supposed to stand up there and lie through his teeth while Shane sat at the head table watching him, both of them knowing it was all fake?

"Any questions?" Priya asked.

Ilya shook his head mutely. Shane's hand tightened around his under the table, and Ilya wanted to scream.

The rehearsal finally, mercifully ended an hour later. Priya dismissed them with instructions to get a good night's sleep and be at the venue by two PM on the wedding day for hair and makeup and photos. Rose's parents swept her away immediately, probably to make sure she didn't have any more treasonous phone calls with Shane about canceling.

Ilya stood slowly, reluctant to break the contact with Shane but knowing he had to. Shane's hand slipped out of his as they both rose, and the loss felt catastrophic.

"Ilya," Shane started, but Ilya was already moving.

"I'll see you at the wedding," he said without looking back, and pushed through the crowd toward the exit.

He made it outside before Shane caught up with him, a hand on his arm stopping him on the sidewalk.

"Wait," Shane said. "Please, just wait."

Ilya turned, and the look on Shane's face nearly broke him. "What do you want me to say, Shane? What do you want from me?"

"I don't know." Shane's eyes were desperate. "I just—I can't let you leave like this. Not again."

"Then what?" Ilya heard his voice rising and couldn't stop it. "What are we supposed to do? Stand here on the sidewalk and have the same conversation we've been having for two days? You're getting married, I love you, there's no way out, repeat until one of us breaks?"

"I'm already broken," Shane whispered.

That deflated Ilya's anger instantly, left him feeling hollow and exhausted. "So am I," he admitted. "Shane, I'm so broken over this I don't know how to function. I wake up and for half a second everything's fine, and then I remember that you're marrying someone else in three days and it feels like dying."

Shane stepped closer, his hands coming up to frame Ilya's face. "Come home with me tonight. Please. I know it's selfish, I know I don't deserve to ask, but I need—I just need one more night with you. Before everything changes."

Ilya closed his eyes against the temptation. It would be so easy to say yes. To go back to Shane's apartment and pretend for a few more hours that none of this was happening, that they had more time, that Shane wasn't about to become someone else's husband.

But it would also make everything so much harder.

"I can't," Ilya said, even though the words felt like they were being torn out of him. "Shane, if I spend another night with you, I don't think I'll survive the wedding. I need—I need to

start letting go now, before it destroys me completely.”

“It’s already destroying me.” Shane’s forehead pressed against Ilya’s, and Ilya could feel him shaking. “I love you. I’m so in love with you and I don’t know how to stop.”

“You don’t have to stop.” Ilya’s hands came up to rest on Shane’s chest, feeling his heartbeat racing under his palms. “You just have to let me go.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Neither do I.” Ilya pulled back, putting space between them even though it physically hurt. “But we’re going to have to figure it out.”

Shane looked like he wanted to argue, but something in Ilya’s expression must have told him it was pointless. His hands dropped from Ilya’s face, and the absence of his touch felt like a preview of the rest of Ilya’s life.

“I’ll see you at the wedding,” Ilya said again, and this time he didn’t let Shane stop him from walking away.

He made it three blocks before he had to stop and lean against a building, his whole body shaking with silent sobs. This was impossible. He couldn’t watch Shane get married, couldn’t stand up there and give a speech about love and happiness, couldn’t pretend any of this was okay.

But he also couldn’t not go. Couldn’t abandon Shane on what was supposed to be one of the most important days of his life, even if it was for all the wrong reasons. Shane needed him there, needed to know that Ilya wasn’t giving up on him completely even if their relationship had to change.

So Ilya would go. Would put on a suit and paste on a smile and stand next to Shane as his best man. Would give a speech full of lies about happiness and forever. Would watch Shane kiss Rose and be pronounced husband and wife.

And then he would go home and figure out how to live with a broken heart.

Three more days. He just had to survive three more days.

He felt a buzz in his pocket and pulled out his phone.

#1221. Hotel on Monroe BLVD. I will always choose you.

Chapter End Notes

edit: i’m getting a few negative comments about shane and how they don’t want them together anymore! let’s remember! shane is still in the closet and is probably dealing

with some internalized homophobia, dealing with his feelings for ilya, and dealing with being stuck between two people, his friend he made a promise to and the love of his life. he's scared of being homeless and on the street! most of us would pick the same thing as him if it avoided fucking up our whole life! plus rose being pushy with the marriage (not her fault she's scared) i lowkey regret writing it this angsty since i'm getting some negativity. i'm sorry if you don't like this chapter and the last one, there is a angst tag after all. shane does definitely redeem himself though in chapter 15!

comments will be off until the next chapter is released. no hard feelings :) i just don't like reading negative comments about my fic and i keep getting comment emails reminding me lol.

i'm glad everyone is reading my fic, just please be mindful when commenting and remember the author has feeling!

Chapter 15: Room 1221

Chapter Summary

shane's redemption arc 😊

Chapter Notes

we're almost at the enddddd :)

hope everyone enjoys this chapter!

chapter is out early today because i'm going to the movie theaters tonight!

enjoy!!!! 😊

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

Shane's hands were shaking so badly he could barely hold his phone as he ran down the street toward the hotel. His heart was pounding, his breath coming in gasps that had nothing to do with the physical exertion and everything to do with the panic clawing at his chest.

What had he been thinking? How had he convinced himself he could go through with marrying Rose when the person he loved was Ilya? When watching Ilya walk away from him at the rehearsal had felt like dying?

He stopped on the sidewalk, pulling up Rose's contact with trembling fingers. She answered on the second ring.

"Shane? Are you okay?"

"I can't do it." The words came out in a rush, choked and desperate. "Rose, I can't marry you. I'm so sorry, I know your parents are going to lose their minds, but I can't—I can't do that to Ilya. I can't do it to myself. I don't know what the fuck I was thinking."

There was a pause on the other end, and Shane could hear her breathing. When she spoke, her voice was surprisingly calm. "Okay."

"Okay?" Shane felt tears starting, hot and humiliating on his cheeks. "That's it? Just okay?"

"Shane, I've been watching you fall apart for days. Watching both of you fall apart. I knew this was coming." Rose sighed, and Shane could picture her sitting in her apartment,

probably relieved despite everything.

“I should have called it off myself. I should have stood up to my parents weeks ago instead of letting them push us into this. “Go be with Ilya,” she said, and there was a smile in her voice. “That’s where you need to be right now. I’ll handle my parents. We’ll figure something out.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be there for that conversation.” Shane wiped at his face roughly. “I just—I need to see him. I need to tell him—”

“I know.” Rose’s voice was gentle. “Go. And Shane? Thank you for being honest. With both of us.”

Shane ended the call and started running again, his lungs burning, his vision blurred with tears. The hotel was only two more blocks away. He made it to the lobby and took the stairs two at a time because he couldn’t wait for the elevator. Third floor, room 1221. Shane fumbled with the key card, finally getting the door open and stumbling inside.

The room was empty. Ilya wasn’t here yet.

Shane collapsed onto the edge of the bed, his whole body shaking with the adrenaline crash. He’d done it. He’d called it off. The wedding wasn’t happening, and Rose was going to talk to her parents, and Shane was going to have to figure out how to explain all of this to everyone who’d already traveled here for tomorrow.

But none of that mattered as much as Ilya. As making sure Ilya knew that Shane had chosen him, that Shane was done running scared, that Shane loved him more than he was afraid of anything else.

If Ilya would even forgive him.

Shane had put him through hell these past few months. Had asked him to watch the rehearsal, had held his hand under the table while practicing vows to someone else, had made Ilya feel like he was second choice when he’d always been Shane’s first choice. Shane just hadn’t been brave enough to admit it.

The door handle turned, and Shane’s head snapped up. Ilya walked in, and Shane’s breath caught at the sight of him. He looked exhausted, his eyes red-rimmed, his shoulders hunched. But he was here. He’d come.

Shane stood up from the bed automatically, his body moving before his brain could catch up. Ilya’s eyes met his, and Shane saw surprise flicker across his face.

“Shane, what—”

“Please let me speak.” The words came out desperate, urgent. “Please, Ilya. I need to say this before I lose my nerve.”

Ilya stopped in the middle of the room, his expression guarded but listening. Shane took a shaky breath.

“I called it off,” Shane said, and his voice broke on the words. “The wedding. I called Rose twenty minutes ago and told her I couldn’t go through with it. I can’t marry her, Ilya. I have no idea what I was doing, what I was thinking. I was just—I was so scared.”

Ilya’s eyes went wide, but Shane kept talking, the words spilling out now that he’d started.

“I was scared of being homeless, of betraying someone who trusted me, of coming out, of losing everything I thought I had under control. And that fear made me stupid. Made me listen to her parents, made me think I could somehow make this work when it was never going to work because I’m in love with you.” Shane was crying openly now, tears streaming down his face.

Shane continued “And I know that’s not an excuse at all. I’m not trying to guilt trip you or make this about my feelings. I just need you to know that I’m so, so sorry I put you through all of this. Watching the rehearsal, holding my hand while I practiced vows to someone else, making you feel like you weren’t my first choice when you’ve always been my first choice. I was just too much of a coward to choose you out loud.”

Ilya was staring at him, something complicated working across his face. Shane wiped at his eyes roughly, his whole body trembling.

“I was horrified of what Rose’s parents might do, and I wasn’t thinking clearly, and I convinced myself there was no other way when I should have talked to you. Should have trusted you. Should have—”

“You don’t get to just say sorry and fix this,” Ilya said, even as his voice broke.

Ilya crossed the distance between them in three strides and kissed him.

Shane made a sound of surprise that dissolved into something like a sob, his hands coming up to fist in Ilya’s shirt. Ilya kissed him like he was trying to physically absorb Shane.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing hard, Ilya’s hands came up to frame Shane’s face.

“I would never let you be homeless,” Ilya said, his voice rough with emotion. “Shane, if you’d just talked to me instead of immediately running to fear, we could have worked through it together. We could have figured something out. You didn’t have to go back to thinking you had to marry her.”

“I know that now..” Shane’s voice was wrecked. “I know, and I’m so sorry. I was terrified and I wasn’t thinking clearly and I feel horrible about what I put you through. Ilya, I’m so, so sorry.”

“I know you are.” Ilya’s thumb brushed away Shane’s tears, gentle and grounding. “But Shane, you have to promise me that next time something scares you, you come to me first. We face it together. No more running.”

“I promise.” Shane’s hands covered Ilya’s where they rested against his face. “I swear to god, Ilya, I promise. No more running. I choose you. I choose us.”

“Fuck, it’s impossible to stay mad at you.”

Ilya kissed him again, softer this time but no less intense. Shane melted into it, into the familiar taste of Ilya’s mouth, the solid warmth of his body, the feeling of finally, finally being able to have this without the shadow of the wedding hanging over them.

“I love you,” Shane whispered against Ilya’s lips. “I love you so much.”

“I love you too, baby.” Ilya’s hands moved from Shane’s face to his waist, pulling him closer. “God, Shane, I love you so much it scares me.”

Shane laughed wetly, relief flooding through him so intensely he felt lightheaded. “The wedding’s off. Rose is talking to her parents right now. We can finally be together. Actually be together, without hiding or feeling guilty or—”

Ilya kissed him again, cutting off his rambling, and this time there was heat behind it. Want. Shane responded immediately, his body lighting up under Ilya’s touch in a way that felt like coming home.

“Bed,” Ilya murmured against his mouth. “This doesn’t fix everything, but i’m not letting you go.” Ilya says shuffling Shane over to the bed.

“I need you. Need to show you how much I love you.” Ilya smiles at Shane.

Shane nodded frantically, letting Ilya walk him backward until his knees hit the mattress. They fell onto it together, Shane on his back with Ilya covering him, and Shane thought this was what he’d been missing. This rightness. This certainty that he was exactly where he was supposed to be.

Ilya’s hands made quick work of Shane’s shirt, pushing it off his shoulders and tossing it aside. Shane helped with Ilya’s, needing to feel skin against skin, needing the confirmation that this was real and happening and he hadn’t ruined everything beyond repair.

“You’re so pretty. I love your freckles” Ilya breathed, his hands mapping Shane’s chest, his ribs, the slight dip of his waist.

“Don’t let me go.” Shane’s voice came out desperate, needy. “Please, Ilya. I need you.”

Ilya’s mouth found Shane’s neck, kissing and biting a path down to his collarbone that made Shane gasp. “I’ve got you, sweetheart. I’m going to take such good care of you.”

His hands worked at Shane’s belt, stripping him efficiently until Shane was bare beneath him. Ilya sat back on his heels, still in his jeans, and just looked at Shane spread out on the bed.

“Take them off,” Shane said, tugging at Ilya’s waistband.

“I want to see you.”

Ilya obliged quickly, stripping until he was just as naked, and Shane drank in the sight of him. The broad shoulders, the planes of muscle, the way his body had filled out since college. Shane had seen Ilya naked before, but never like this. Never as his.

“Roll over,” Ilya said softly, his hands guiding Shane onto his stomach. “Let me worship you properly.”

Shane obeyed, his heart racing, and felt Ilya’s hands on his shoulders, his back, massaging and soothing before moving lower. Ilya’s mouth followed the path of his hands, kissing down Shane’s spine, and Shane shivered at the intimacy of it.

When Ilya’s hands spread Shane’s thighs wider, Shane’s breath caught. He knew what Ilya was planning, had fantasized about it more times than he could count, but the reality of it made his whole body tremble with anticipation.

Ilya’s tongue against him was hot and wet and perfect. Shane moaned into the pillow, his hands fisting in the sheets as Ilya worked him open with his mouth, patient and thorough and devastating. Every nerve ending in Shane’s body felt like it was on fire, pleasure building in waves that made his toes curl.

“Ilya,” Shane gasped. “Please, I need—”

“I know what you need, baby.” Ilya’s voice was rough with want. “Turn over. I want to see your face.”

Shane rolled onto his back, and Ilya moved up his body to kiss him. Shane could taste himself on Ilya’s tongue, filthy and perfect, and he wrapped his legs around Ilya’s waist to pull him closer.

“Want to taste you,” Shane managed between kisses. “Please, let me—”

Ilya groaned, pulling back to kneel on the bed. Shane sat up immediately, his hands on Ilya’s thighs, and took him into his mouth with a desperation that probably should have embarrassed him but didn’t. This was Ilya. Shane wanted to make him feel good, wanted to show him without words how much he loved him, how sorry he was, how grateful he was that Ilya had forgiven him.

Ilya’s hand threaded through Shane’s hair, gentle and grounding, and the sounds he was making went straight to Shane’s core. Shane worked him with his mouth and hands, learning what made Ilya gasp, what made his grip tighten, what made his thighs shake.

“Shane, baby, you need to stop or I’m going to—” Ilya’s voice was strained, and Shane pulled off with a wet sound.

“Don’t want you to finish yet,” Shane said, his voice wrecked. “Want you inside me.”

Ilya’s eyes went dark with want. “Yeah?”

“Please.” Shane lay back against the pillows, spreading his legs in invitation. “I need you, Ilya. Need to feel you.”

Ilya found the lube in Shane's bag, must have remembered where Shane always kept it from their college days of living together. He worked Shane open with his fingers, careful and patient even though Shane could see how much he wanted to rush. When Ilya finally pushed inside, slow and careful, Shane's whole world narrowed to that point of connection.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed, his forehead pressing against Shane's. "You feel so good, sweetheart. So perfect for me."

Shane whimpered, his hands coming up to grip Ilya's shoulders as Ilya started to move. It was slow at first, deep and rolling, but it wasn't enough. Shane needed more, needed to feel claimed and possessed and loved.

"Harder," Shane gasped. "Please, Ilya, I need—"

Ilya's pace increased, his hips snapping forward with more force, and Shane cried out at the pleasure of it. This was what he needed, what he'd been craving. Ilya above him, inside him, looking at him like Shane was the most important thing in the world.

"Don't marry her," Ilya said, his voice rough and possessive. "Don't leave me, Shane. Promise me you'll never leave me again."

"I won't." Shane's voice broke on the words. "The only person I'll ever marry is you. I swear to god, Ilya, it's only ever going to be you."

Ilya made a sound like he'd been punched, his rhythm faltering for a moment before he drove in harder, deeper. His hand wrapped around Shane, stroking him in time with his thrusts, and Shane felt the pleasure building to an unbearable peak.

"I love you," Ilya said, his eyes locked on Shane's face. "I love you so much, baby. You're mine. Say you're mine."

"I'm yours." Shane was babbling now, too far gone to care. "I'm yours, Ilya. Always yours. I love you, I love you—"

His orgasm hit him like a freight train, pleasure crashing through him so intensely he couldn't breathe. He heard himself cry out Ilya's name, felt Ilya's rhythm go erratic as he chased his own release.

"I love you," Ilya gasped, and then he was coming too, buried deep inside Shane, both of them shaking through it together.

They collapsed in a tangle of limbs, breathing hard, Shane's body still trembling with aftershocks. Ilya pulled out carefully and Shane made a sound of protest at the loss, immediately feeling too empty. Ilya cleaned them up with tissues from the nightstand, then pulled Shane against his chest.

Shane fit there perfectly.

"Is Rose going to be okay?" Ilya's fingers traced idle patterns on Shane's shoulder.

“I think so, I hope so. She’s talking to her parentss right now.” Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya’s chest.

“She sounded relieved, honestly. Like she’d been waiting for one of us to be brave enough to call it off.”

“And you’re sure?” Ilya’s voice was soft. “You’re sure this is what you want? Because Shane, I need to know that you’re not going to wake up tomorrow and regret this. That you’re not going to panic again and—”

“I’m sure.” Shane tilted his head up to look at Ilya. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life. I love you, Ilya. I want to be with you. Actually be with you, out in the open, no more hiding. I’m done being scared.”

Ilya’s expression softened, and he leaned down to kiss Shane gently. “I love you too, my love. So much.”

“We can finally be together.” Shane felt tears pricking at his eyes again, but this time they were happy tears. Relief and joy and the overwhelming sense that everything was finally going to be okay. “No more pretending. No more wedding hanging over us. Just us.”

“Just us,” Ilya echoed, pulling Shane closer. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

They lay there in comfortable silence, Shane listening to Ilya’s heartbeat, Ilya’s fingers running through Shane’s hair. Outside, the city carried on, oblivious to the fact that Shane’s entire life had just rearranged itself in the best possible way.

“What do we do now?” Shane asked after a while. “About telling people, about the wedding guests who are already here—”

“We’ll figure it out.” Ilya kissed the top of his head.

“Together this time. No more running scared, remember?”

Shane smiled against Ilya’s chest. “Together. I like the sound of that.”

“Me too, sweetheart.” Ilya’s arms tightened around him.

“Me too.”

Shane closed his eyes, letting himself relax completely for the first time in weeks. The wedding was off. Rose was handling her parents. And Shane was exactly where he was supposed to be, in Ilya’s arms, with their entire future stretching out ahead of them.

It wasn’t going to be easy. They’d have to face questions, deal with disappointed wedding guests, figure out how to help Rose if her parents followed through on their threats. But they’d do it together. And that made all the difference.

“I love you,” Shane whispered again, because he could now. Because there was no wedding in three days, no obligations pulling him away, nothing standing between him and the person

he loved.

“I love you too, baby.” Ilya’s voice was soft with contentment.

“Always have. Always will.”

Shane smiled and let himself drift, safe and warm and finally, finally home.

Chapter End Notes

comments are back on. please be nice and don’t comment unless you have something nice to say. it’s basic fandom etiquette. i’m sensitive to rejection LMAO

also, if you notice some of the smut is the same from other chapters, i copied and pasted some phrases from other chapters because i hate writing smut because i feel i’m so bad at it lol 😭😭😭

Chapter 16: Mine (In This Lifetime)

Chapter Summary

epilogue aka last chapter :,)

i hate writing endings so sorry if it's not up to par with what you guys were thinking (no hate though please!)

Chapter Notes

WE ARE AT THE ENDDDDDD!!

i hope you all enjoyed this fic as much as i enjoyed writing it  i truly enjoyed reading and replying to all your comments!

i have another fic i've been working on coming out very soon! i already have over 30% of it finished so stay tuned 

TYSM  ily all!

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

Four Weeks Later

...

Four weeks had passed since the wedding that never happened, and Shane was still getting used to the feeling of breathing freely.

He sat across from Ilya at their favorite restaurant, the one with the terrible lighting and the best pasta in the city, and watched Ilya twirl linguine around his fork with the kind of focused concentration that made Shane's chest warm.

This was their third dinner here this month.

They'd fallen into a comfortable rhythm over the past few weeks, no longer hiding their relationship, no longer stealing moments in secret.

"Rose texted me today," Shane said, setting down his water glass. "She got the job."

Ilya looked up, his face brightening. “The private school in Seattle?”

“Yeah. Some fancy academy, apparently pays twice what she was making here. She starts in two weeks.” Shane smiled, genuine relief flooding through him.

“Her parents cut her off completely like they threatened, but she sounds happy. Excited, even.”

“That’s really good.” Ilya reached across the table to squeeze Shane’s hand. “I’m glad she’s okay.”

“Me too.” Shane squeezed back. “She said to tell you thank you, by the way. For the reference letter you wrote.”

Ilya shrugged, but Shane could see the pleased flush on his cheeks. “It was the least I could do. She deserved something good after everything.”

They fell into comfortable silence, both focused on their food for a moment. Shane had been living in his apartment alone since Rose moved out two weeks ago, living off the last penny’s in his savings and some help from Ilya, and while he’d thought he’d enjoy the solitude, the space felt emptier than he’d expected. He’d gotten used to having someone around, to the ambient noise of another person existing in his space.

He’d been thinking about finding a roommate, maybe. Someone to split rent with while he figured out his next steps.

“So I’ve been thinking,” Ilya said, his voice carefully casual in a way that made Shane look up. “About your living situation.”

Shane raised an eyebrow. “My living situation?”

“Rose is moving to Seattle. You’ve been alone in that apartment for two weeks.” Ilya was playing with his napkin now, not quite meeting Shane’s eyes. “And I was thinking that maybe, if you wanted, you could move in with me. Temporarily. Until you find a place of your own.”

Shane’s heart did something complicated in his chest. “You want me to live with you?”

“I wouldn’t want anything more.” Ilya finally looked up, and the softness in his eyes made Shane’s breath catch. “Shane, we’ve been together practically every night anyway. You have a drawer at my place, half your clothes are in my closet, and I keep finding your books on my nightstand. It just makes sense.”

“Just makes sense,” Shane repeated, a smile tugging at his lips.

“Okay, fine.” Ilya’s own smile was shy now, almost nervous. “It makes sense and I love waking up next to you and I love coming home to you and I love the way you leave coffee mugs everywhere and forget to close cabinet doors. I just want you there. All the time. Not just when we plan it.”

Shane felt tears pricking at his eyes, the good kind.

“That’s the sappiest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.” Shane laughed, slightly watery. “Of course it’s a yes, you idiot. I love you.”

Ilya’s face broke into the brightest smile Shane had ever seen. “I love you too, baby. So much.”

They finished dinner in a haze of happiness, making plans about when Shane would move his stuff, what furniture they’d keep, how they’d organize the space. It felt right in a way that made Shane’s chest ache with how good it was. How easy.

Four weeks ago, he’d been preparing to marry someone he didn’t love. Now he was moving in with the person who’d always been meant to be his.

Sometimes life worked out exactly the way it was supposed to.

Three years later

...

Shane knew something was up the moment Ilya suggested they take a walk through the park.

It was a Saturday afternoon in late April, the weather finally warm enough to be outside without a jacket, and Ilya had been acting strange all day. Nervous energy radiating off him, checking his phone more than usual, that particular smile he got when he was planning something.

“Where are we going?” Shane asked as Ilya led him down a path he didn’t recognize.

“You’ll see.” Ilya’s hand was warm in his, their fingers laced together. “Trust me.”

Shane did trust him. Had trusted him for years before they’d ever gotten together, and trusted him even more now.

Three years of living together, of building a life together, of learning each other’s rhythms and quirks and the exact right way to make coffee in the morning. Shane never did move out when Ilya asked him to move in that day three years ago.

Three years of being loved loudly, the way Shane had always wanted but never thought he’d have.

They rounded a corner, and Shane stopped short. The clearing ahead of them was filled with fairy lights strung between trees, even though it was still daylight. Candles lined a small path leading to the center, where a blanket was spread out with a bottle of wine and two glasses.

“Ilya,” Shane breathed. “What is this?”

“Come here.” Ilya tugged him forward gently, leading him to the center of the clearing. “I have something I want to say.”

Suddenly a song from their album starts to play.

Shane’s heart was pounding now, realization dawning slowly but surely. Ilya was nervous, his hands shaking slightly as he took both of Shane’s in his.

“I’ve been planning this for months,” Ilya started, his voice already thick with emotion. “Trying to figure out the perfect thing to say, the perfect way to tell you what you mean to me. But every time I try to write it down, it just feels inadequate. Because Shane, there aren’t words big enough for how much I love you.”

Shane’s vision was already blurring with tears.

“You’ve been my best friend for almost thirty years. You’ve been the person I measured everyone else against, the one I wanted to tell all my good news to, the one whose opinion mattered more than anyone else’s. And three years ago, you became mine in a different way. In the way I’d always wanted but never thought I’d get.”

Ilya took a shaky breath, and Shane watched as tears started tracking down his face too.

“Every day with you is a gift. Every morning I wake up next to you, every dinner we cook together, every stupid argument about whose turn it is to do laundry—it’s all perfect because it’s with you. You make me laugh, you challenge me, you make me want to be better. And I can’t imagine spending the rest of my life with anyone else.”

Ilya let go of Shane’s hands and reached into his pocket, pulling out a small velvet box. Shane’s breath caught as Ilya dropped to one knee, opening the box to reveal a simple silver band.

“Shane, will you marry me?”

“Yes.” The word came out before Ilya had even finished the question, choked and desperate. “Yes, of course, yes—”

Ilya stood up and kissed him, both of them crying now, Shane’s hands cupping Ilya’s face as they pressed their foreheads together. When they pulled apart, Ilya slipped the ring onto Shane’s finger with shaking hands.

“I love you,” Ilya whispered, his thumb tracing over the ring on Shane’s hand. “You’re mine, in this lifetime.”

“In this lifetime,” Shane repeated, his voice breaking.

“And every one after. I love you so much, Ilya.”

They kissed again, softer this time, both of them smiling too much for it to be anything but messy and perfect.

Shane couldn't stop looking at the ring on his finger, couldn't stop touching it to make sure it was real.

"I can't believe you did all this," Shane said, gesturing to the lights and candles. "How did you even—"

"Svetlana helped." Ilya was grinning now, all nervous energy replaced with pure joy. "And Hayden. They've been conspiring with me for weeks."

Shane laughed, slightly hysterical with happiness. "I'm going to marry you."

"You're going to marry me," Ilya echoed, wonder in his voice. "Shane, you're going to be my husband."

"Your husband." Shane tested the words, loving how they felt in his mouth. "God, I love the sound of that."

They stayed in the clearing for hours, drinking wine, and listening to their couple album, and talking about wedding plans and their future together.

About the life they were going to build, the home they already had, the years stretching ahead of them.

And when they finally headed back to their apartment—their home—Shane couldn't stop smiling.

Couldn't stop touching the ring on his finger, physical proof that this was real and happening and his.

...

Ilya found the speech three days after proposing, tucked away in an old notebook he'd shoved in the back of his closet.

He'd written it three weeks before Shane's almost-wedding, sitting in his apartment at two in the morning, unable to sleep because in less than a month he was going to have to stand up at Shane's wedding and pretend to be happy about it.

His handwriting was messier than usual, evidence of how emotional he'd been while writing it. Ilya sat on the edge of their bed and read it through, his chest tightening at the memory of who he'd been then. How hopeless it had all felt.

I've known Shane Hollander since we were 5 years old. I've watched him grow from a kid who played ice hockey on the neighborhood rink, to the incredible man standing before you today. He's my best friend. The person I trust most in the world. The one I call when something good happens, when something bad happens, when nothing happens at all and I just want to hear his voice.

Shane is one of the kindest people I've ever met. He's loyal to a fault, generous with his time and his heart, and he makes everyone around him better just by existing. He sees the good in

people, even when they can't see it in themselves. And he loves with his whole heart, holding nothing back.

I've had the privilege of watching Shane fall in love over the years. I've seen him with other people, seen the way his face lights up when he's happy, the way he gives everything to the person who has his heart. And I always thought that if someone could make Shane this happy, then I'd be happy for him too. Because he deserves that. He deserves to be loved the way he loves others—fully, loudly, without reservation.

But I have to be honest with you all. Standing here today, watching Shane marry someone else, is one of the hardest things I've ever done. Because somewhere along the way, my best friend became something more to me. He became the person I measured everyone else against. The one I wanted all my good news to be about, the one whose happiness mattered more than my own.

I fell in love with Shane, and I never told him. I watched him build a life with someone else, and I convinced myself that being his friend was enough. That loving him from a distance was better than risking everything by saying the words out loud.

I know this isn't the speech I'm supposed to give today. I'm supposed to talk about how perfect they are together, how happy I am for them, how excited I am to watch their love story unfold. And I am happy for Shane. I want him to have everything he's ever wanted. I want him to be loved the way he deserves.

But if I'm being completely honest—which I suppose I am now, since I'll never actually deliver this speech—I hoped that one day I'd get to love him loudly. That maybe, in some impossible future, Shane would look at me the way he looks at his partner. That I'd get to be the person who made him smile like that.

I know that's impossible now. In a few minutes, Shane will be someone's husband, and I'll go back to being his best friend who loves him in secret. And I'll learn to live with that. I'll learn to be happy for him, to celebrate his marriage, to be the supportive friend he deserves.

But tonight, in this moment before everything changes, I'm letting myself grieve what could have been. I'm letting myself feel the full weight of loving someone I can't have. And then tomorrow, I'll pack it all away and go back to being the friend Shane needs me to be.

Because that's what love is, sometimes. It's wanting someone to be happy even when their happiness doesn't include you. It's standing by their side even when it breaks your heart. It's being grateful for whatever pieces of them you get to keep, even when you want all of them.

I love you, Shane. I've loved you for years, and I'll love you for years more. But you'll never know, and maybe that's how it's supposed to be.

So here's to the happy couple. May your love be everything Shane deserves. May you make each other laugh, challenge each other to be better, build a life full of joy and adventure and the kind of love that makes everyone around you believe in it too.

And may you never know that the best man standing beside you has been in love with the groom since before either of you knew what love was supposed to feel like.

Ilya set the notebook down carefully, tears streaming down his face. Not sad tears, exactly. More like the tears you cry when you realize just how far you've come, how much has changed, how something that once felt impossible is now your everyday reality.

"Hey, what are you doing in here?" Shane appeared in the doorway, already in his pajamas.

"I thought you were coming to bed—" He stopped, seeing Ilya's face.

"Baby, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Ilya wiped at his eyes, smiling even as more tears fell.

"I just found something I wrote a long time ago."

Shane crossed the room and sat down next to him, concern written all over his face.

"What is it?"

Ilya hesitated, then handed him the notebook. "The best man speech I wrote for your wedding. The one I never gave."

Shane read it in silence, his expression shifting from confusion to understanding to something that looked a lot like heartbreak. When he finished, he set the notebook aside and pulled Ilya into his arms.

"I had no idea," Shane whispered against Ilya's hair. "I didn't know you were feeling all of that."

"How could you have known?" Ilya's voice was muffled against Shane's shoulder. "I never told you. I was so good at hiding it, even from myself sometimes."

"I'm so sorry." Shane pulled back to look at him, his own eyes wet now. "I'm sorry you had to go through that alone. That you thought you'd never get to have this."

"But I do have it now." Ilya cupped Shane's face, thumbs brushing away his tears. "That's the point. I get to love you loudly now. I get to wake up next to you and call you my fiancé and in a few months I'll get to call you my husband. Everything I thought was impossible became real."

Shane kissed him, soft and lingering. "I love you so much."

"I love you too, sweetheart." Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's. "And I'm so grateful that the universe gave us a second chance. That you were brave enough to call off that wedding. That we both stopped being scared and chose each other."

"Best and easiest decision I ever made," Shane said, his smile watery but genuine. "Choosing you."

They sat there for a long moment, holding each other, the old speech lying forgotten on the bed beside them. It was a relic from a different time, a different version of themselves. Important to remember, but no longer relevant.

Because Ilya didn't have to love Shane in secret anymore. Didn't have to watch from the sidelines while Shane built a life with someone else. Didn't have to wonder what it would feel like to be chose

He knew now. He lived it every day.

"Come to bed," Shane said eventually, standing and pulling Ilya with him. "It's late."

Ilya let himself be led to their bed—their bed, in their apartment, in the life they'd built together. He curled up against Shane's chest, Shane's arms coming around him automatically, and closed his eyes.

"Thank you," Ilya whispered into the darkness.

"For what?"

"For choosing me back." Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's chest. "For letting me love you the way I always wanted to."

Shane's arms tightened around him. "Always, baby. In this lifetime and every one after."

Ilya smiled and let himself drift off, safe and warm and so completely loved that sometimes he still couldn't believe it was real.

But it was real. Shane's ring on his finger was real, their wedding plans were real, their future together was real.

Everything Ilya had once thought was impossible had become his everyday reality.

And he'd never been more grateful for anything in his entire life.

Chapter End Notes

THEEEEE ENDDDD 😊

very bittersweet to have finally finished my first fic. i hope you'll join me on my next fic coming out soon👁👁

edit: my new fic is up! it's called "don't tell your brother". it's a brothers best friend college roommates au!! first chapter is up now 😊

End Notes

If you enjoyed this so far please leave kudos, share, and comment! It really motivates me to keep writing <3

Thank you so much :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!