

HOW THE STORY ENDS

Blue

It's been six months since Venya died.

Evan sat in Venya's chair, in the flat he used to share with Venya, staring at the coffee machine that Venya never quite learnt how to use. It was ridiculous, really, that the one place that could still bring a smile to his face was the same place that could have him broken on the floor, in tears. That the one place he never wanted to see again was also the one place he never wanted to leave.

Evan took a deep breath. The smell of fine sugar tickled his nose, bringing with it rich connotations of Venya stuffing a full cupcake into his mouth, liner and all, a sweet memory laced with bitter pain.

He got up, itching for something to do. Maybe he could flick through the autopsy reports again. He was halfway across the room when a familiar voice froze him in his tracks.

"Evander."

No one but Venya called him Evander.

But in Venya's mouth, it sounded different. Venya, who *did* belong to the upper circles, who rejected all his thick invitations to luxurious parties by sending elegant cursive on golden paper, who painted and made music and discussed historians who lived thousands of years ago, who let the name 'Evander' roll off his tongue like it was the most natural thing in the world—



And whose voice Evan swore he had just heard.

He turned around, slowly, and met a pair of familiar eyes.

Venya, in all his tousle-haired, mischievous glory, stood by the window, the fading sunlight curling around his slight shoulders, clad in a soft cardigan – a present from Evan for his birthday, after which Venya had never been seen without it on.

He looked so real.

“Hi.” Evan said. What else were you meant to say to a figment of your imagination? He looked away, unable to deal with the sharp flare of pain.

“Did you miss me?” There was a coy smile twined in Venya’s words.

Evan’s eyes stung. Oh, he was going to cry. He was going to bawl his eyes out because of something his mind made up. How absolutely pathetic. “More than you’d ever know.”

Venya paused. His smile wavered. “I do know, Evander. I’m here.”



It even sounded like him. Evan wondered briefly whether he should make an appointment with his therapist. A friend and colleague of his, Marian, had forcefully dragged him to see a psychologist after finding him sitting in Venya's chair in the kitchen, stirring a cup of cold coffee, torn-up pieces of autopsy reports and hospital documents strewn everywhere except for a corner in the living room where Venya's cello stood casting grey shadows on the wall. He had started hallucinating back then too. Marian had been very worried.

But the therapists he went to didn't help at all. They coddled him with words of sympathy and understanding. They suffocated him with soft blankets and too-sweet tea. They acted as if he wasn't a police officer whose primary purpose was to get his knuckles bloodied with criminal red in darkened alleys.

They treated him like he was cracked glass held by masking tape, when really he was just shattered pieces, because the only one that could still hold him together was already gone.

And who to blame but himself?

"Evander." Venya's voice dragged him back to reality. "Evander, please. Look at me."

His head snapped up, almost by instinct. Venya looked as though he was about to cry, too, drops of silver glistening in his eyes. "Evander, I'm here. It's me."



Evan took a soft step back. No, Venya wasn't really here. He couldn't be here.

Because Evan had watched him die.

More than that, Evan had held him while he died. Had put pressure on the wound while Venya bled to death in an alleyway, a bullet embedded in his chest. By the time the ambulance had gotten there, Venya was unconscious and barely breathing. The look on the medic's face had said everything.

But even before that, Evan knew. He knew the moment Venya leapt in front of him with pure panic on his face. He knew the moment Venya took a bullet for him — that it was too late.

Too late.

"I'm sorry." Evan said now. The same words he had whispered to Venya while he laid on the cold cobblestones, again and again and again. Venya shouldn't have been the one to die — it was Evan that should've been bleeding out on the ground. It was Evan's lungs that the bullet should've punched through. It was Evan's life that Death had come to collect.

He let the guilt claw up his throat with a grim satisfaction. Better to feel guilty than hopeful.



“Evander, don’t be sorry.” Venya took a step forward, slowly, carefully, like he was approaching a wounded animal. “It was my decision to make. Mine alone. And it was the best decision I’ve ever made.”

The ground lurched dangerously under Evan’s feet. Christ, just how selfish was he that his own mind could conjure up Venya telling him that it wasn’t his fault? He staggered. Venya was next to him in a second, strong hands holding him up, impossibly warm and solid on his waist.

Is he real? He felt real. For a second Evan forgot to be realistic, allowing himself a glimmer of hope that erupted inside his chest, a warmth that filled the cracks in his emotions in a way that he hadn’t felt for months.

He shoved it down furiously. Hallucinations could feel real.

Still, he leaned into Venya, or the image of Venya, who still had the wiry build of a long-distance runner he remembered. If he closed his eyes and breathed in the taste of sugar, it almost felt like the old times back at the station. Two halves of the golden double in crime-fighting, together once more.

“I’m sorry.” Venya’s voice broke against Evan’s hair. “I should be the one that’s sorry.”

“What nonsense are you spilling this time?” Evan said, before his mind really thought about what he was saying. “Christ, you haven’t changed a bit. Taking responsibility like it’s the last slice of cake or something.”



“Venya’s hand on his waist squeezed harder, a small chuckle escaping his throat, resonating through Evan’s entire body. “How I’ve missed you. Perhaps even a bit more than I missed cake, though that sentiment is still debat—.”

The door clicked open.

They both flinched. Evan spun around, hand already reaching for his gun, only to find a wide-eyed Marian standing in the doorway, holding a plastic bag of what looked like takeaway.

“Hey, Marian.” He greeted, letting himself relax. “Could you call a psychiatrist for me? I would do it myself, but it might be better if—”

“Venya?” She whispered.

Evan froze.

She can see him. Jesus Christ. She can see him. He’s real. He’s alive. He’s here. Evan’s mind reeled from the realisations exploding in his head. Venya was alive. Oh god.

He’s alive.

He spun around and crushed his friend’s bony frame in a hug, gasping in the smell of sweet sugar like it was oxygen and he was a drowning man, squeezing Venya so hard he heard a small wheeze.



Venya didn't complain though. On the contrary, he hugged Evan back with just as much ferocity, his chin pressing into Evan's shoulder, his hair fluttering against Evan's neck, silky-smooth and soft. Evan could hear his heartbeat, strong and unwavering, thudding hard in his chest like it had never stopped.

God, he was alive.

Marian cleared her throat by the door. She was already calm and composed again, and was taking off her shoes while giving them a raised eyebrow with practised ease. "As much as this is terribly heartwarming to watch, I have questions. How did you come back from the dead, Venya?"

Venya laughed. It made Evan hold on to him tighter, because it was the laugh of someone who had been exhausted, tired to the bone, finally home once more. "Good to see you too, Marian. I shall explain in due time. In the meantime, would you care for some tea? Unfortunately I have yet to puzzle out how to use the coffee machine..."

