

Winter Heat

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Winter Heat

by [orphan_account](#)

Summary

Gym owner Shane Hollander is captivated by new member Ilya Rozanov, a mysterious former hockey player turned youth coach. As their connection grows through workouts, walks, and quiet moments, both struggle with honesty and vulnerability.

Chapter 1: Chapter 1

Shane Hollander had owned Iron North Gym for three years, and the routine of winter mornings usually soothed him. The world outside was cold and sharp; inside, the hum of treadmills and the steady clank of barbells made a rhythm he could sink into. He liked this place. Loved it. Knew every regular by name, knew exactly who needed encouragement and who needed to be left the hell alone before they'd had their second coffee.

He'd been in since six, already trained two clients, already done his own warm-up. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Until the front door opened at 9:12 a.m., and everything in his well-organized brain short-circuited.

The guy who walked in was—

Well. A guy. A normal guy. Probably. Except his presence hit Shane like a free weight dropped straight on the chest.

He didn't recognize him—must be a new member. The front desk handled sign-ups for him during his morning rush, and whoever this was, he must've been processed already because Shane didn't hear the receptionist call his name.

Shane only heard the receptionist say, "Locker room's to the left. Trainer availability schedule is on the desk if you need help."

The new guy thanked her with a voice that made Shane's stomach tighten. Smooth. Warm. Something with an accent—Russian? Eastern European?

But the voice wasn't what made Shane stop mid-stride on his way to restock towels.

No, the problem—the *real* catastrophic problem—was the man's face. And body. And literal existence.

Tall, lean muscle under a snug black thermal shirt; sharp cheekbones and a mouth made for getting someone in trouble; hair slightly damp from the melting snow outside. He smelled faintly like cold wind and expensive cologne.

And he was smiling at the receptionist with a casual charm that looked entirely unintentional and incredibly devastating.

Shane stared for one beat too long.

Then another.

Then, embarrassingly, another.

He meant to stop staring. He *really* did. But something in his brain had been unplugged.

The new guy turned, eyes scanning the gym. Not searching—more like surveying. The way someone might look at a challenging trail before hiking it. Confidence. Curiosity.

Then those eyes—hazel, piercing, absolutely illegal—landed on Shane.

Shane felt his spine straighten on instinct. His hands tightened around the towel stack. He suddenly became aware that he was wearing a perfectly normal trainer outfit: fitted gym joggers, a sleeveless hoodie, a tank underneath. Absolutely fine. Totally professional.

So why the hell did he feel like a teenager caught staring at his crush across a cafeteria?

The guy's gaze dragged over him, head to toe. Slow. Appreciative. Unhurried. As if Shane were something worth taking time to look at.

Shane's ears warmed.

He forced his mouth to move. "Uh—hey. Morning."

The new guy's lips curved just slightly.

And then—then—he winked. A real wink. Deliberate. Smooth. Infuriatingly confident.

Shane's entire soul combusted. Not metaphorically. He was sure he felt heat bloom under his skin like a spark lighting dry tinder.

"Nope," Shane said under his breath. "Absolutely not. I cannot—nope—"

He spun on his heel so fast he nearly flung a towel across the room and marched toward the stairs that led up to his office. He passed two regulars on the way—Ed and Karen—both of whom stared as he stormed by.

"Everything all right, Shane?" Karen called, confused.

"Yep. Great. Fine. Very good," he said, voice cracking like a pubescent teenager discovering emotions for the first time.

He took the stairs two at a time.

Once inside his office, he shut the door, leaned back against it, and exhaled like he'd just escaped mortal danger.

He dragged both hands over his face. "What the hell was that?"

He'd seen attractive customers before. Plenty. He worked in a gym, for crying out loud. Attractive people were the baseline. But none of them had ever looked at him like *that*. None of them had winked like they already knew what they did to him.

Why had he reacted like a startled squirrel?

Shane pushed away from the door and paced. His office overlooked the gym floor through a half-wall window; he could see treadmills, weight racks, the turf stretch area. And, unfortunately, he could now also see the new guy.

Who had taken off his thermal shirt.

Which revealed a fitted, sleeveless compression top stretched across broad shoulders that absolutely did not look like they belonged to an average new gym-goer.

Shane slapped a hand against his own mouth to prevent a noise from escaping.

“Nope. Nope nope nope.”

He tried to look away. He did. But his eyes betrayed him, dragging back to where the guy was warming up with the kind of easy, fluid mobility that suggested training. Real training. Athlete-level training. He moved like he was born knowing how to own his body.

Shane leaned forward on his desk, forehead dropping to the cool surface.

He was a grown adult. A professional. The owner and head trainer of this entire gym. He could not—could not—allow himself to ogle a client like this.

Except his brain, traitorous thing, replayed the wink over and over like someone pressing a repeat button.

He groaned.

A knock on his door made him jolt upright.

Shit.

One of the trainers? Another client wanting to check availability? The receptionist needing him?

“Yeah?” he called, trying to smooth out his voice.

The door cracked open.

It was the receptionist—Jenna—holding a clipboard.

“Hey, sorry to bug you. I need your signature for the new member who came in. He didn’t choose a trainer yet, but he checked the box that says he might want sessions later, so we need your approval for the trial-class credit.”

“New member?” Shane squeaked, as if he hadn’t been mentally melting down specifically because of him.

Jenna raised a brow. “Tall, gorgeous, weirdly intimidating guy with cheekbones that could slice fruit? The one who came in ten minutes ago?”

Shane cleared his throat. “I—I don’t pay attention to faces.”

Jenna laughed in his face. “Sure. Anyway, name’s Ilya Rozanov. Here, sign.”

Shane froze mid-reach for the clipboard.

Ilya Rozanov. The name hit a faint bell, like he’d heard it somewhere. But the bell drowned under the louder wave of mortification that rose instantly.

Now he knew the guy’s name. Now the guy had an official status in his system. Now he had to act like a normal human being instead of a melting snowman in gym clothes.

He signed.

Jenna left.

Shane stared at the signature for a full ten seconds, then slowly, reluctantly, lifted his eyes to the window again. Below, Ilya Rozanov was now doing kettlebell swings. Perfect form. Powerful. Controlled. Focused.

Shane’s brain immediately betrayed him again.

He choked.

“This is going to kill me,” he muttered.

He lasted twenty-eight minutes before giving up on pretending he wasn’t watching Ilya.

He tried to reorganize his desk. He tried to check email. He tried to update a training program for one of his advanced clients. But every time he glanced down—just a small, totally professional glance—there Ilya was, moving through a workout with the kind of natural athleticism that made Shane’s trainer instincts flare.

Who the hell just *did* Turkish get-ups with a 65-pound kettlebell on their first day? And made it look like light work?

Finally, giving in to the inevitable, Shane stood, shook out his arms, and walked downstairs. He told himself he was doing a routine floor check, which was technically true. He needed to maintain the gym. Make sure people were using equipment right. Make sure no one was hogging machines. Make sure—

Make sure the dangerously attractive new guy wasn’t injuring himself.

Yes. That was professional. Absolutely.

He walked to the turf area, clipboard in hand for extra legitimacy.

Ilya noticed him immediately. “Hello,” Ilya said, breath steady despite the strenuous workout he’d just completed.

Up close, his voice sounded even richer. His accent was subtle but present, rolling gently through the vowels. Shane's insides scrambled like an egg on a hot pan.

"Hey," he said, trying so hard to sound normal that he heard his own voice crack again.

Ilya smiled. Slowly. Deliberately. "You are trainer here, yes?"

"Y—yeah," Shane said. "I'm—uh. Shane. I own the gym."

Something flickered in Ilya's eyes. Amusement? Interest? Both? Ilya extended his hand. Shane shook it.

Instant mistake.

Heat shot straight up his arm. Ilya's grip was warm, firm, confident. Exactly the kind of handshake that made Shane's brain unspool.

"It is good gym," Ilya said. "Very good."

"Oh," Shane said, still holding his hand. "Thanks."

Ilya tilted his head. "You okay?"

Shane immediately dropped his hand. "Yep! All good! Totally good! I—uh—you doing okay? Need anything? Water? Directions? Emergency escape route from me embarrassing myself?"

Ilya blinked, clearly piecing together the last part. Then he laughed softly. A sound that hit Shane so hard he almost swayed. "No," Ilya said. "I think I stay."

Shane made a small noise he hoped was inaudible.

Ilya lifted one corner of his mouth. "You show me proper form later?"

"Form?" Shane echoed, brain empty.

"For exercises," Ilya clarified. "If you have time."

Shane swallowed. "I—yeah. I have time."

Ilya's eyes warmed. "Good," he said. "Then I see you."

Not "I'll see you around." Not "Maybe." A statement. Concrete. Confident.

Shane nodded, backing away before he could melt into a puddle on the gym floor.

He fled again—less dramatic than before, but still absolutely a retreat—and when he reached the hallway behind the weight racks, he pressed both hands to his burning face.

"...I'm doomed," he whispered.

And for the first time in months, winter didn't feel cold at all.

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Three days passed.

Three long, torturous days in which Shane alternated between: hoping the dangerously attractive new member would never come back, and hoping he would walk through the doors immediately, if only so Shane could stop replaying that handshake like it was some kind of romantic trauma.

By the morning of day three, he had accepted one universal truth, he was screwed.

And not in the fun, hopeful way.

At 8:47 a.m., he was at the front desk with Hayden, his best friend since high school, roommate and part-time trainer at the gym. Hayden was lounging against the counter, sipping iced coffee like it wasn't freezing outside, while Shane was finishing paperwork for an upcoming group program.

"—and if I see one more person doing bicep curls in the squat rack," Shane said, "I'm going to staple a 'NO' sign directly to their forehead."

Hayden snorted into his straw. "God forbid someone disrupt the sacred space of your beloved squat rack."

"It *is* sacred. That's why it's called a power rack."

"You're so dramatic."

Shane opened his mouth to retort—but then, as if summoned by fate or punishment or some cosmic force that found him personally hilarious, the front door opened.

The cold air that swept in was sharp.

The man who walked through it was *sharper*.

Shane froze mid-breath.

Ilya Rozanov.

Beaming faint winter sunlight behind him, shoulders dusted with snowflakes that clung to his dark coat, hazel eyes scanning the gym before they landed—directly, unerringly—on Shane.

Shane's lungs collapsed.

Ilya walked toward the desk, unhurried, comfortable, a small, knowing smile already forming.

Shane backed up a half-step without meaning to.

Hayden—blessed, cursed Hayden—noticed instantly.

“Oh my God,” Hayden whispered gleefully. “That’s him, isn’t it? The guy who winked? Winky McRussian?”

“Please shut up,” Shane whispered back, eyes wide.

But Hayden was already grinning like a demon.

Ilya reached the front desk. “Good morning,” he said, voice warm, accent curling lightly around the words.

Shane opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Hayden jumped in, too delighted for his own good. “Morning! You must be Ilya. Shane mentioned you.”

Shane kicked him under the desk.

Ilya’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “He mentioned me?”

Hayden beamed. “Oh, *constantly*.”

Shane kicked him again—harder. This time Hayden wheezed.

Ilya turned his full attention to Shane. It was... a lot. Too much.

“How are you today, Shane?” Ilya asked, leaning one elbow casually on the counter, body angled toward him with an ease that should not have been legal.

Shane tried to be normal. He really did. “I—I’m fine,” he stammered. “Good. Great. Normal. I mean, not normal—wait, no, actually normal. Perfectly normal.”

Hayden had to cover his mouth to keep from bursting out laughing.

Ilya’s smile stretched, slow and warm and deeply amused. “I am happy to hear you are normal,” he said lightly.

Shane made a noise that could only be described as a dying steam kettle.

“So,” Hayden said, recovering enough to lean forward smugly. “What brings you in today, Ilya? Need help? A trainer? Emergency medical attention because Shane has been staring at you for twelve seconds straight—?”

Shane slapped a hand over Hayden’s mouth.

“I am so sorry,” Shane said quickly.

Ilya looked between them, eyes sparkling with something that made Shane’s skin feel too hot. “No apology needed,” Ilya said. “You two are... entertaining.”

Hayden wiggled free and pointed at Shane with his straw. “He’s especially entertaining.”

Shane glared daggers.

Ilya rested his forearm on the counter, leaning closer.

Shane swore he felt the warmth radiating off him.

“I wanted to ask,” Ilya said, “about the schedule for training sessions. You said you have time... but maybe today is busy?”

Shane blinked.

He remembered. Three days ago. On the turf, trying not to melt while talking to this man who moved like an athlete and smiled like he knew every effect he had. “I—uh—yeah,” Shane said, fumbling for equilibrium. “Yeah, I’ve got time today. Around eleven, if that works.”

Ilya tilted his head thoughtfully.

“It works,” he said. “For me.”

Shane nodded, trying not to combust.

Hayden watched the whole exchange like he was front-row at a Broadway performance.

Ilya, still leaning close enough that Shane could smell his cologne—clean, subtle, lethal—added, “I look forward to it.”

Shane’s heart did something alarming in his chest.

Hayden murmured, “Oh boy.”

Ilya shifted slightly, turning his body more toward Shane, as if the rest of the world had faded. “One more thing.”

Shane swallowed. “Y—yeah?”

“Three days ago,” Ilya said, gaze steady. “When I said I would see you?”

Shane nodded.

“I meant it.”

Shane stopped breathing.

Hayden choked on his iced coffee.

“Anyway,” Ilya said, straightening with a controlled stretch that absolutely did not need to look that good. “I go warm up. Until eleven, Shane.”

He turned, walking toward the locker rooms with the confidence of someone who knew exactly the effect he left behind.

Shane stared after him, stunned, brain fried.

Hayden let out a low whistle. “You,” Hayden said, poking Shane in the arm, “are *so* screwed.”

Shane pressed both hands over his face. “I know.”

“Like, professionally? Emotionally? Spiritually? Physically? In every way possible? Screwed.”

“Hayden.”

“Shane.”

Shane groaned. “He’s... he’s too much.”

“He’s perfect,” Hayden corrected, far too entertained. “And he definitely likes you.”

“He winked at me.”

“He winked again just now, dude.”

Shane’s head snapped up. “No he didn’t.”

Hayden grinned. “He did. Right before he turned away. And I know you didn’t see because you were too busy malfunctioning.”

Shane’s face felt like it was on fire. “This is not happening,” he muttered.

“It very much is.”

“This is unprofessional.”

“This is destiny,” Hayden said solemnly.

Shane grabbed the nearest notebook and threw it weakly at him. Hayden dodged, cackling then he leaned in, voice dropping to a teasing whisper. “Question.”

“What,” Shane snapped.

“What exactly is the part that’s scaring you more? The fact that he’s an athletic demigod—”

Shane glared.

“—or the fact that he clearly, one hundred percent, absolutely knows how cute you think he is?”

Shane froze.

Hayden saw it.

“Oh my God,” Hayden whispered, delighted. “You’re terrified because he’s confident. Like... aggressively confident.”

Shane clenched his fists at his sides. “I am *not* terrified.”

“You are,” Hayden said. “You’re quaking. You’re trembling. You’re an aspen tree in a breeze.”

Shane groaned again and thumped his forehead onto the counter.

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t,” Hayden chirped. “But you *are* in love.”

“I met him once!”

“And? Some things hit fast.”

Shane lifted his head just enough to glare at him. “It’s not love. It’s—” He didn’t have a word for it. The way Ilya looked at him had short-circuited something fundamental.

Hayden tapped the counter. “Forbidden lust?”

“Hayden.”

“Carnal panic?”

“Stop.”

“Gym-induced horn—”

“I’m going to ban you from this gym.”

Hayden laughed so hard he wheezed again.

Shane stood straighter, trying to restore some dignity. It didn’t work. His face was still burning.

Hayden slurped the last of his coffee and clapped him on the shoulder. “Well. Eleven a.m., huh?”

“Yeah.”

“You gonna survive?”

“...maybe.”

“You gonna pretend you’re not into him?”

Shane hesitated.

Hayden's eyebrows rose. "Oh?"

Shane exhaled. "I just... need to stay professional."

"Mm-hmm. Totally. Good luck with that when he starts doing warm-ups while staring into your soul."

Shane grabbed a pen and threw it at him.

Hayden caught it midair, smug. "See? *Athletes* are the worst. Now imagine you're training one with cheekbones of mass destruction."

Shane ran both hands through his hair. "Please stop. I need to mentally prepare."

Hayden grinned. "You need to mentally hydrate."

"Shut up."

"Nope. Not when this is the most fun I've had all week."

Shane, despite himself, smiled weakly.

Hayden bumped his shoulder. "Hey. For real? You're fine. He clearly likes you. And you deserve someone who looks at you the way he does."

The sincerity threw Shane off guard.

He shrugged, embarrassed. "I barely know him."

"Then fix that at eleven."

Shane swallowed.

He looked toward the turf area.

And there was Ilya—warming up, stretching, glancing toward the front desk like he fully expected Shane to look back.

Shane's pulse jumped.

Hayden elbowed him. "Go get your heart rate back down before you have to pretend it's not panic during his warm-up."

Shane blinked. "Hayden—"

"Go," Hayden said, laughing. "Before he walks over here and says something flirty that kills you on the spot."

Shane exhaled shakily.

Then he headed toward his office to breathe for a minute, gather himself, and remind his body that combusting was not, in fact, a training technique.

Behind him, Hayden called, “Try not to fall in love before lunch!”

Shane didn’t turn around, because he wasn’t falling in love. He wasn’t. He was just—

Terrified.

And excited.

And doomed.

Absolutely, utterly doomed.

-

Shane prided himself on being early to every appointment.

But at 10:57 a.m., he was already on the turf stretching out nerves he didn’t need to stretch. His leg bounced; his fingers fidgeted with the hem of his tank; his brain repeated calm down, calm down, CALM DOWN.

And then Ilya walked out of the locker room. Right on time.

Hair damp again — did he *shower* before every workout? — wearing a fitted charcoal tank and training pants. Simple. Clean. Devastating.

Shane’s brain short-circuited like someone had poured water directly onto exposed wiring.

Ilya spotted him, and the faint smile that curved his lips was small but deliberate. Like he was pleased. Like he’d been waiting to see Shane again.

Shane’s stomach flipped.

“Ready?” Ilya asked as he approached.

His voice. God. That voice.

“Yep,” Shane said, a full octave too high. He coughed. “Yes. Totally. Ready.”

Ilya’s gaze flickered with amusement — just for a second.

Shane cleared his throat and held onto professionalism like it was his last remaining lifeline. “So, uh, we’ll start with mobility and warm-up drills, then I’ll see where you’re at strength-wise.”

Ilya nodded. “Okay.”

They started with simple things. Arm circles. Hip mobility. Lunges with rotation. Things Shane could normally guide in his sleep. Except this time, he was hyperaware of every move

Ilya made, because Ilya moved like someone who didn't need a trainer. At all.

Controlled. Balanced. Strong. An athlete, plain as day.

Shane had seen professional-level movement before — he'd trained ex-college players, a few retired pros. He recognized the telltale precision.

He couldn't help himself. "You've trained before."

Ilya paused mid-warm-up, tilting his head slightly. "Yes."

Shane blinked. "Like... a lot."

A small shrug. "Some."

That was not "some." That was the kind of "some" people said when they didn't want to talk about the caliber.

"Are you... I mean — were you an athlete?" Shane asked carefully.

Ilya hesitated — the first real hesitation Shane had seen from him, then a single nod. "Yes. Something like that."

Something like that?

Shane opened his mouth to ask more, but Ilya smoothly transitioned into the next drill without waiting to be prompted.

Oh.

So he wasn't going to elaborate.

Shane found himself studying him more carefully then — not in a thirsty way (although, yes, that too), but in a professional way. Trying to see what, exactly, Ilya wasn't saying.

He could feel power in every rep, but not the showboaty kind. Efficient. Explosive control. Someone who'd drilled mechanics for years.

Why was he asking for a one-on-one session? A guy like this didn't need help learning squats or deadlifts.

Unless he wanted something else. Information? Structure? A way to observe the gym? Shane didn't know and the not-knowing made something coil warm and curious inside him.

They moved to kettlebells.

"Let's assess your strength baseline," Shane said, lifting a 24kg bell. "Start light. I want to see your form."

Ilya took the kettlebell. One-handed. Effortlessly.

Shane tried not to show how impressed he was. “Okay, cool, so we’ll start with—”

Ilya swung it up, smooth as silk. Perfect hip hinge. Perfect drive. Not a single wobble.

Shane’s mouth fell open. “Ilya,” he blurted. “This is... perfect form.”

Ilya glanced over, casual. “Good?”

“Good?” Shane echoed. “Good? It’s—” He bit down the rest. Calm. Professional. Normal. But damn, it was good.

He crossed his arms to keep himself from gesturing wildly. “Are you sure you need a one-on-one session? You look like you know your stuff.”

Ilya set the kettlebell down and wiped a hand on his thigh. “Maybe I do.”

“Then why—”

“Because,” Ilya interrupted gently, looking him in the eye, “I want to train with *you*.”

Shane forgot how to inhale.

The silence stretched between them.

Ilya didn’t break eye contact. Didn’t fidget. Didn’t look flustered, just stated it like a fact and it hit even harder because he wasn’t smiling. Flirting, yes — but quietly. Earnestly. Like he meant it.

Shane swallowed. “Okay. Sure. I, uh—yeah. That’s... okay.”

His voice cracked again. God. Kill him.

Ilya’s mouth twitched, the closest he came to laughing. But he didn’t tease. Didn’t push. He just followed Shane to the lifting platform.

They worked through deadlifts. Rows. A few plyometric tests. Ilya excelled at all of it — precise, technical, disciplined.

But he also didn’t speak much.

Shane asked, “What brought you to the city?”

“Work.”

“Oh — what kind?”

Ilya paused, just slightly, then said, “Something with sports.”

Vague. Non-answer.

Shane nodded slowly. “Okay. And you’re settling in alright?”

Another small shrug. “Trying.”

The way he said it felt heavier than the word itself.

Shane softened. “Well, you picked a good neighborhood. The gym’s pretty community-focused. Lots of regulars. People get chatty.”

Ilya huffed a quiet breath. Almost — almost — a laugh. “Yes. I noticed.”

“And we’ve got good food places nearby if you’re still exploring. You close by?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “Very close.”

“How close?”

Ilya looked at him, eyes warm with something unreadable. “One block.”

Shane blinked. “Seriously? That’s like spitting distance.”

Ilya’s lips curved. “I hope you do not spit at my window.”

Shane choked on air. “W-what? No! Obviously not, that’s— I wouldn’t — I wasn’t—”

Ilya broke. He laughed. Really laughed. Low and soft and warm, head tilting just slightly as if he couldn’t help it.

Shane felt that laugh like a physical thing. It loosened something in his chest, but almost as quickly as it appeared, Ilya’s expression settled back into calm neutrality. Not cold — just private.

Closed-off.

Shane noticed and somehow, it didn’t bother him. If anything, it made him want to know more.

“So,” Shane said under his breath. “You just moved here. Don’t talk much about your job. You train like you’ve been coached by actual professionals. And you live a block away.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Yes.”

“That’s... interesting.”

Another subtle curve of the lips. “Is it?”

Shane looked him dead in the eyes. “I’m a trainer. My job is to notice things.”

Ilya considered him for a quiet, thoughtful moment, then said simply, “Yes. I see that.”

The air between them thickened. Shane’s heart thudded. He turned quickly back to the workout sheet before he could spontaneously combust. “Okay — last test. Medicine ball throws. Upper-body power assessment.”

Ilya nodded.

Shane retrieved a 12-pound med ball and set up the stance.

“Explode through the chest,” he instructed. “Drive from the core. Don’t overthink it.”

Ilya didn’t. He launched the ball like it weighed nothing, thudding it into the wall so hard one of the regulars looked over in alarm.

Shane stared. “Okay,” he said weakly. “So... your power output is... uh... very good.”

Ilya walked back toward him, steps unhurried.

Shane backed up one step without meaning to.

Ilya noticed.

His voice dropped half an octave. “You are nervous.”

Shane bristled. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes,” Ilya said softly, “you are.”

Shane opened his mouth to argue.

Ilya leaned in just slightly — not enough to touch, just enough to invade the edge of his space. “Do I make you nervous, Shane?”

Shane’s breath caught. He forced something out. “You... you’re intense.”

Ilya’s eyes warmed. “And you are... easy to look at.”

Shane’s knees almost buckled. He stepped back again.

Ilya let him. He didn’t chase. Didn’t tease. Just watched him with that steady, unreadable gaze.

Professionalism shattered. Utterly.

“O-okay,” Shane sputtered, turning away, “that—that concludes the assessment.”

Ilya hummed. “I enjoyed it.”

Shane felt his face go hot. “It was—uh—fine.”

“Fine?” Ilya repeated, voice silky with disbelief. “Only fine?”

Shane flailed. “I—stop—don’t—this is training—”

Ilya tilted his head. “Yes.”

God. Help him.

Shane pretended to look at his clipboard. “I, um... I can build your program tonight. If you want to start a plan.”

“I want that,” Ilya said.

Shane looked up. Ilya held his gaze and in a quietly serious tone, he added, “I want to work with you. Only you.”

Something in Shane’s chest clenched tight, not fear, not embarrassment, but something warmer and dangerous. “I—yeah,” Shane managed. “Okay. Sure. We can do that.”

Ilya nodded once. Satisfied. “Good.” He picked up his things, slung his bag over his shoulder, and paused just long enough to say: “I will see you tomorrow, Shane.”

And then he walked away.

Leaving Shane standing alone on the turf, heart pounding, face burning, clipboard forgotten at his side.

He whispered to no one: “...I am not surviving this.”

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

The first time Ilya Rozanov ever saw Shane Hollander, he hadn't even stepped inside the gym yet.

He had been walking past Iron North on his way home — a block from his new apartment, a perfect distance — when he noticed the same man exit the gym doors twice in one morning. Once around seven, looking serious and focused. Once again around nine, looking frazzled, hair slightly messy, hoodie half-zipped like he'd rushed out.

It had been... amusing.

Ilya had paused on the sidewalk, watching the man pace for a moment before re-entering the building, muttering something under his breath that Ilya couldn't hear.

Interesting.

He didn't know the man's name then, but he remembered the freckles. A scatter across the bridge of his nose, faint but vivid enough to notice even from a distance.

Adorable, really.

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When Ilya signed up for the gym later that week, he didn't know Shane owned it. He didn't know Shane would be there, but he hoped.

He only knew he needed a place close to his apartment — a place with good equipment, a decent lifting platform, and enough space for mobility work. He was done with public recreation centers full of students who recognized him.

He didn't need the questions. The pity. The assumptions. He wanted privacy. Routine. Something small, not flashy.

Iron North seemed perfect.

And then he walked inside for the first time — and saw that the freckled man was there.

Talking to a client. Setting up barbells. Wiping sweat from his forehead with the hem of his shirt in a thoughtless, devastating movement that showed just a sliver of warm skin.

Ilya almost turned around and walked straight back out.

Not because he wasn't interested.

Because he was too interested.

He had come here for quiet. Normalcy. Not... whatever this was.

But then the receptionist asked him to fill out a form, and pride wouldn't let him retreat. So he stayed. He filled out his information. He smiled politely.

And when he turned around again — there he was.

Standing by the turf, holding towels, frozen in place like he had seen a ghost.

A very flustered ghost.

Ilya felt his lips curve.

The man stared. Then stared more.

It was cute, the way his expression shifted — surprise, panic, something close to admiration, then panic again.

Ilya rarely found people endearing. Not in the fragile, honest way the man seemed to be. He had met plenty of people who tried to impress him over the years — teammates, fans, parents of the kids he coached. People who talked too much, bragged too loudly.

The man was the opposite. His heart sat right on the surface.

He didn't hide when he felt something. It just showed up on his face, bold and honest and warm in a way that made Ilya's chest... tighten.

So yes, he winked.

He hadn't planned to. It simply happened — a small reward for the expression the freckled man made, wide-eyed and startled like someone had poured cold water down his back.

The reaction was priceless.

The man nearly dropped the towels. Then turned and bolted like his clothes were on fire.

Ilya had to bite back a laugh.

He'd come expecting to get a workout. He got entertainment instead.

-

The next days, he saw Shane from afar again — exiting the gym early in the morning, returning later, leaving again. Always moving. Always focused. Always earnest.

That was the word. Earnest.

A novelty to Ilya.

He wasn't sure why he was intrigued, honestly. Attraction, yes — he wasn't blind. But curiosity too.

Shane radiated something grounding. Solid. The kind of person who built things and stayed loyal to them.

And yet he startled like a nervous cat whenever Ilya looked at him too long.

The combination was... irresistible.

-

When he came back to the gym on his second visit, he didn't expect Shane to be at the front desk, but he was. With another man — tall, bright-eyed, sipping iced coffee in winter like he had no survival instincts.

From the moment Ilya approached, he could sense the shift in Shane.

Tension. Heat. Heart beating faster — he could practically *feel* it from two feet away.

Shane tried to hide it, but the freckles gave him away. When he blushed, the color spread across them.

Beautiful.

Ilya liked freckles.

He'd learned that that day.

He wasn't sure why he enjoyed making Shane flustered so much. Maybe it was because Shane reacted with such sincerity.

Most people either tried to flirt back with bravado or pretended not to notice him. Shane did neither. Shane combusted.

And it delighted Ilya more than it should have.

He hadn't meant to sign up for a one-on-one so quickly.

Not because he didn't want one — but because he didn't need it.

He knew his body. He knew how to train. He had been training since he was four, first on the ice, then in gyms far more intense than this.

He was an ex-professional hockey player. Former national league. Former big shot. Former everything.

An injury had ended it. Not life-threatening. Just career-ending.

Now he coached kids at a rink nearby.

Not what he imagined for himself. Not even close, but he loved it even when it hurt a little.

He liked seeing the passion in young players' eyes. Liked guiding them. Liked being something stable for them.

His own coaches had not always been that. So yes, he liked his job, but he missed being on the ice more. He missed being great at something and here, in a small independent gym, with a handsome, overwhelmed owner looking at him like he was a meteor crashing through the ceiling —

He felt something shift. Not the greatness, but maybe the spark.

Maybe something new.

So when he checked the box that said he might want personal training, he didn't hesitate and when Shane asked if he needed help, he said yes.

Because he wanted to spend more time near him.

Simple.

The training session was... better than expected.

Shane was professional. Precise, but nervous.

Deeply nervous.

It was adorable. A warm, golden kind of adorable that made Ilya's chest swell with something he didn't want to name.

And Shane's voice — God. When he tried to sound authoritative, the cracks made him even cuter.

Ilya enjoyed it.

He also enjoyed how Shane's eyes widened every time Ilya executed a perfect lift, like no one had ever moved beautifully in front of him before.

Shane looked at him like he was a marvel and a problem at the same time.

Ilya found that intoxicating.

He wasn't used to being seen that way anymore. Not since his injury. Not since stepping out of the spotlight.

But Shane saw him. Not the athlete. Not the résumé. Just... him.

And that felt good.

Too good.

When Shane asked why he needed a training session, Ilya almost laughed.

He didn't.

He just said the truth — or part of it, “I want to train with you.”

And it was true.

He wanted to see more of the man who owned this place. The one with freckles and a kind smile he tried so hard to hide. The one who looked at him like he was dangerous and fascinating at the same time.

He wanted to know Shane and he wanted Shane to know him, even if he wasn't ready to open up fully.

Not yet.

He didn't like talking about himself much, especially not the career he lost, but when Shane asked where he worked now, Ilya gave him the truth:

“Coaching. Kids.”

And when Shane lit up — when he said, “Oh! That's awesome”— Ilya felt something warm and strange settle in his chest.

Approval.

Admiration.

It had been a long time since someone looked at him with that kind of honest praise.

He found he liked it.

After the session, as he headed toward the locker rooms, he felt Shane watching him. Not in the way fans used to. Not like he was a trophy. More like he was a puzzle Shane wanted to figure out.

And Ilya... didn't mind being figured out.

By him.

So before leaving, he turned, met Shane's eyes, and said:

“I will see you tomorrow.”

Shane's breath hitched. Ilya caught it. Of course he did.

He let himself smile — small, private — and walked away.

And as he pushed open the gym door, he thought: This city might become home after all.

Because of the gym.

Because of the job.

Because of the boy with freckles who flushed like sunrise every time Ilya looked at him.

-

Ilya wasn't proud of himself.

He had told himself — firmly, repeatedly, logically — that going to the gym today would be normal. Routine. Nothing special. He'd work out. He'd stretch. Maybe talk to Shane for a minute or two if the universe was kind.

That was all.

He wasn't going because of Shane.

Of course not.

Except his heart did a stupid little leap when he pushed open the door and immediately spotted him across the room.

Shane.

Hoodie sleeves rolled up, freckles bright against winter-pale skin and hair slightly messy from running his hands through it.

Shane, who was...

Touching someone.

Training a client, obviously, but—

He had his hands on the guy's shoulders, adjusting his posture. Professional. Neutral. Absolutely nothing to get worked up over.

And yet Ilya stopped walking.

Just... stalled, like someone had unplugged him.

That was new.

He did not freeze. He did not get jealous. He was a grown man. He knew better.

Except right now he absolutely felt jealous, and the realization annoyed him so much he had to close his eyes and breathe out slowly through his nose.

Idiot.

That's what he was, because Shane was a trainer, because this was a gym, because that was his job and because Ilya and Shane had spoken a grand total of maybe five minutes in their entire lives. They were not... anything.

He had no right to feel anything. He knew that.

Still — the sight of Shane's hands on someone else made something unpleasant twist low in his stomach.

Not anger. Not exactly. More like... heat. Sharp and sour and stupid.

He hated it.

He forced himself to keep walking, grabbing a locker key, heading for the changing room.

He changed fast. Too fast, probably. His pulse was too high for someone who hadn't started his workout yet.

He splashed cold water on his face and glared at himself in the mirror.

"This is ridiculous," he muttered in Russian under his breath.

His reflection did not argue.

When he walked back out, Shane was still with the same guy. Still professional. Still focused. Still unaware that Ilya was fighting the urge to look away and stare at the same time.

He grabbed a mat, stretched and tried not to look.

He failed.

Every time Shane laughed — every time the client asked something — every time Shane reached out to correct a movement—

Ilya's breath caught like a teenager's.

Pathetic.

He wasn't used to this kind of reaction. He'd had crushes before, but nothing like this... sharp awareness. Nothing that made him feel off-balance and certainly nothing that made him jealous of a stranger receiving professional guidance.

He needed to get himself under control.

He needed to stop being—

What was the word? Possessive?

He hated it, especially because Shane wasn't his to be possessive about.

He barely knew the man. Didn't know what he liked, what he disliked, what he wanted besides running a gym and being too pretty for Ilya's peace of mind.

And yet... he wanted to know those things.

Wanted to know Shane's voice when it wasn't nervous. Wanted to know how his laugh sounded when it wasn't polite. Wanted to know what his freckles looked like up close, where he could count them.

Wanted—

God. He needed to stop.

Shane finally finished the session and Ilya hated that he noticed. The client thanked him, shook his hand, and walked past Ilya without a second glance and then Shane turned.

Their eyes met and suddenly Ilya wasn't jealous anymore, because Shane's face lit up. Not politely. Not professionally. He lit up like a man surprised and pleased to see someone he'd been thinking about.

His smile was small, shy, but real.

The heat inside Ilya flipped — jealousy dissolving into something gentle and wanting and a little dangerous. He stood slowly, stretching his shoulders, refusing to drop eye contact.

Shane swallowed and he made the mistake of stepping closer. "Ilya," he said, voice softer than usual. "Hey. I didn't know you'd be in today."

Ilya's chest tightened. He liked the way Shane said his name.

Too much.

"Wanted to train," he replied lightly. "And see if you survived the winter storm."

Shane blinked. Then blushed. Of course he did. God, he was unreal.

"Um. Yeah. I made it."

A beat.

Then another.

And Ilya realized something: Shane looked nervous. Not in the frazzled, startled way he'd been earlier, but in the way someone looked when they wanted something but didn't know how to ask.

His jealousy vanished completely, replaced with something warm and thrilling. Something hopeful.

He took a step closer — slow, careful, deliberate. "You free after your shift?" Ilya asked quietly.

Shane's breath hitched. "W-Why?"

Ilya's lips curved. Honest man. Sweet man.

“For coffee,” he said. “If you want.”

Shane blinked fast, like processing and then nodded, quick and small. “Yeah. Yes. I—I want.”

Ilya felt heat spread through his chest — real this time, good this time. “Good,” he murmured.

He reached for a dumbbell then, because if he didn’t start his workout soon, he’d do something unwise, like touch Shane or kiss him or say something else stupid.

Shane stepped back, flustered but glowing, cheeks flushed, freckles brighter than ever.

Ilya didn’t look at anyone else for the rest of his workout, he didn’t need to. He had gotten exactly what he wanted.

-

Ilya arrived early.

Not five minutes early, not ten — a full twenty minutes before seven — which was pathetic, and he knew it, but he couldn’t make himself wait at home any longer.

The winter air bit at his ears, sharp and dry, and the streetlights cast long gold reflections across the snowbanks. The gym was quiet at this hour, most people having abandoned their workouts for dinner and warmth.

He stood with his hands in his pockets, pacing once, twice, then stopping because pacing made it obvious he was nervous.

He *shouldn’t* be nervous. He’d handled championship games in front of thousands of screaming fans. He’d been hit in the ribs with a puck going seventy miles an hour. He’d blown out his knee on live television and still skated off on his own legs.

He could survive waiting for a man to show up for coffee.

And yet...

Every time the gym door opened, he straightened, heart rising in his throat.

And every time it wasn’t Shane, he felt a strange little sting of disappointment.

He hated that. Hated wanting something so openly, so obviously.

But then, right at seven — a little breathless, hair fluffy from rushed fingers, cheeks pink from hurrying in the cold — Shane stepped out.

And everything inside Ilya went warm.

Shane stopped when he saw him, eyes wide with relief. “You’re here,” he said, exhaling. “I wasn’t sure if— I mean, I hoped you’d still be—”

“I said I would come.” His voice came out softer than intended.

Shane blushed, smiling that small shy smile that made Ilya feel something unsteady in his ribcage.

“Okay,” Shane murmured. “Um. There’s a little coffee shop around the corner. If that’s okay? It’s... quiet.”

Quiet. Private. Safe. It fit Shane perfectly.

“Lead the way,” Ilya said.

The shop was small and warm, wooden tables, soft music, and the smell of cinnamon and roasted coffee beans. A few students were studying in the back, but most of the place was empty.

Shane rubbed his hands together when they sat down, still cold from the walk.

“So,” he said, nervous again. “What do you want? Coffee? Tea? Hot chocolate is good here.”

Ilya looked at him, amused. “So you’re recommending the chocolate?”

Shane’s freckles brightened. “It’s not... super healthy, but it’s good on winter days.”

“Is that allowed? For you?” He raised a teasing eyebrow.

Shane let out a soft, embarrassed laugh. “I’m not a machine. Just... I like routines. They help.”

He paused. “Like waking up at the same time. Eating similar meals. Ginger ale on weekends. It’s dumb, but—”

“Not dumb.” Ilya didn’t let him finish. “Just you.”

Shane blinked. Then smiled again — small, warm, real. “That’s good then,” he said quietly. “Being me.”

Ilya felt something twist sweetly behind his sternum.

When the server came, Shane ordered his ginger tea. Ilya ordered a black coffee.

They talked.

Not loudly — the shop felt too gentle for loud voices — but enough that time loosened and the nervousness eased.

Shane told him about the gym, about how he bought it from an older couple who wanted to retire, about how much he loved seeing people progress, about the early morning regulars and the troublemakers who didn’t re-rack weights. “I like seeing people get stronger,” Shane said, wrapping his hands around his mug. “Like... watching them change. Not just muscles. Confidence.”

“And you?” Ilya asked. “Are you changing?”

Shane went still for a moment. His eyes softened. “I hope so,” he murmured. He didn’t explain. Ilya didn’t push.

He liked this about Shane — the quiet honesty, even when it was incomplete.

When Shane finished his tea, he sat back, more relaxed now, freckled face glowing in the low lighting. He asked softly, “What about you? What do you do? Besides coming to the gym and making me nervous?”

Ilya nearly choked on his coffee.

Shane went mortified immediately. “Oh God— I didn’t mean— I mean—”

“It’s fine.” Ilya was laughing, genuinely, quietly.

Shane covered his face with his hands. “Ignore me.”

“Never.”

Shane peeked through his fingers like a startled rabbit.

Ilya felt warmth spread down his spine. He should tell Shane something, but not... everything. Not hockey. Not yet. He didn’t want to see that look — recognition, pity, the thousand unspoken questions.

So he offered what he *could* give.

“I work with kids,” he said. “Coaching. Small team. They’re good. Troublemakers sometimes. But they listen.”

Shane brightened. “You’re good with kids?”

Ilya shrugged. “I understand them.”

“Do you like the job?”

And there it was — the question that had weight. Not accusation. Not curiosity for gossip. Just... caring.

Ilya looked down at his hands for a moment. “It was not what I planned for my life,” he admitted. “But yes. I like it.”

Shane’s lips parted. A soft expression bloomed across his face — something gentle and heartbreaking and too earnest.

“Then I’m glad you have it.”

Ilya swallowed. He wasn’t used to people being glad for him without wanting something in return. He wasn’t used to kindness that didn’t sting. This — Shane’s simple sincerity —

disarmed him.

Completely.

They stayed until the shop dimmed its lights to signal closing.

When they walked back toward the gym, the cold air felt sharper, but Ilya barely noticed it.

Shane walked close enough that their arms almost brushed. Almost.

He didn't pull away. Neither did Ilya. Something warm hovered between them — fragile but certain.

Shane stopped at the gym entrance, turning to him with that same nervous, glowing expression.

"I... had a good time," he said.

Ilya stepped closer, just enough that Shane had to tilt his head up a little. "Me too."

Shane licked his lips. His breath puffed in the cold and for a moment, Ilya wanted to kiss him. He wanted to bend, slide a hand behind Shane's neck, feel that warmth up close, but Shane was flushed, overwhelmed, and sweet as new snow. He deserved slow.

So instead, Ilya lifted a hand and hesitated — then touched just the edge of Shane's sleeve, the softest brush of contact.

Shane shivered.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Ilya murmured.

Shane nodded, eyes bright. "Yes. Tomorrow."

Ilya walked away first.

If he didn't, he wouldn't be able to leave.

And behind him, he heard Shane exhale — a soft, happy sound that made Ilya smile into the winter night.

-

Ilya didn't sleep.

He tried. He turned off the lights, stretched out in his too-large bed, stared at the shadows on the ceiling. He listened to the hum of the heater, the muffled sounds of distant cars, the occasional creak of the building settling.

None of it worked, because every time he closed his eyes, he saw Shane.

That ridiculous smile. Those freckles. The way Shane's fingers trembled slightly when he held his mug. The soft way he'd said *I'm glad you have it*.

And the way he had shivered — actually *shivered* — when Ilya touched his sleeve.

Pathetic. He was pathetic.

A grown man, lying awake because a boy with warm eyes and a shy smile had said he enjoyed spending time with him. but it was more than that. It was the way Shane looked at him. Not like a coach. Not like an ex-athlete. Not like someone broken or someone impressive.

Shane looked at him like he was worth knowing. No one had looked at him like that in a long time.

Ilya exhaled and rolled onto his side, pressing a hand over his eyes.

He had never been fascinated like this before. Not with anyone.

Physical attraction? Sure. He had eyes. He had needs. He'd had flings, brief interest, curiosity.

But this? This restless stirring under his ribs? This want to know someone — *really* know them — to learn the way they thought, the shape of their routines, the things that made them laugh?

He'd never felt that. Not even once. He didn't understand it. He didn't understand *Shane*.

No—

That wasn't right. He understood Shane perfectly.

Shane was soft-hearted, earnest, easily flustered. The kind of man who cared too much and hid it badly. A man who liked routines and ginger ale and quiet coffee shops because the world was loud and he needed structure to breathe.

Shane made sense. It was *himself* he didn't understand.

Why his chest tightened when Shane smiled. Why he felt protective when he remembered Shane's pink cheeks in the cold. Why that tiny brush of his fingers against Shane's sleeve had made his pulse spike in a way a thousand stadiums never did. And why, for the first time in his adult life, he wanted something slow. Something real.

Dating.

He wanted to *date* Shane. The realization landed in his stomach like a weight. He had never wanted that with anyone. Not even close.

His life had always been too busy, too chaotic, too full of pressure and expectations and travel and noise. There had never been room for vulnerability. Never been room for someone

soft enough to matter.

He didn't even know *how* to date.

Flirting? Easy. Physical interest? Familiar. But letting someone in? Letting someone see him? That was new. Terrifying.

He pressed his fingertips against his temple. *What am I doing?*

He should stop. He should pull back before he wanted more than Shane could give. Before he wanted more than *he* could give.

Shane seemed interested, yes — but interested wasn't the same as prepared. Shane seemed careful. Shy. Easily overwhelmed.

Ilya could be blunt. Intense. Too much. He didn't want to scare him. He didn't know how to approach someone like Shane. Didn't know how to step gently when all he'd ever known was force, but when he imagined *not* seeing Shane again — imagined walking into the gym and pretending none of this existed — something inside him twisted so sharply he had to sit up, breathing hard.

No.

He didn't want to let Shane go.

He wanted to try. For the first time in his life, he wanted to try, even if he didn't know how, even if it made him feel raw and stupid and exposed, even if the idea of messing this up terrified him more than any game ever had.

He lay back down slowly, staring at the ceiling again.

Tomorrow, he'd see Shane. Shane with his shy eyes and gentle voice and hopeful smile.

And maybe Ilya would take a step. A small one.

He didn't know if he could be good at this — at romance, at softness, at not hiding behind sarcasm and silence.

But he wanted to learn, for Shane, he wanted to learn.

Chapter 3: Chapter 2

Shane barely slept.

He tried — he honestly tried — but every time he shut his eyes he saw Ilya in that coffee shop, long fingers wrapped around a mug, dark eyes steady and unreadable, looking at him like he was something worth paying attention to.

And it wasn't just attraction. Attraction Shane understood. Crushes he'd had before — fleeting, manageable, usually quiet enough that no one ever had to know.

But Ilya...

Ilya was something else, something magnetic, something mysterious, something that made Shane's stomach flip in a way both thrilling and terrifying at the same time.

He wanted to know more. He wanted to understand the things Ilya didn't say — the shadows between his words, the distance in his gaze, the way he gave pieces of himself but kept the important parts tucked away like they mattered too much to expose.

Shane wanted to know all of it.

And that, that was new.

By the time he got to the gym the next morning, he was buzzing with nerves. What if Ilya didn't come? What if he regretted the coffee? What if last night was just... a one-time thing, a moment that would disappear as quickly as it arrived?

Shane tried to work, tried to focus, but every time the door opened, his heart did a stupid jump.

When Ilya finally walked in — tall, quiet, wrapped in a dark winter jacket that made his shoulders look absurdly broad — Shane's breath caught.

Ilya's eyes found him immediately, not by accident because Shane knew the difference.

And something warm bloomed low in his chest and he didn't even pretend to be nonchalant, so he walked straight toward him. "Morning," Shane said, and winced at how breathless he sounded.

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Morning."

His voice was smoother today, lower somehow, warm in a way that made Shane's knees feel questionable.

Shane swallowed. He didn't want the moment to slip past him. He'd spent half the night replaying their conversation, analyzing every look, every smile.

So, he gathered what little boldness he possessed and asked, trying to sound casual, “Can I... ask you something?”

Ilya blinked. “You can ask.” A beat. “I might not answer.”

Shane’s laugh burst out before he could swallow it. “That sounds fair.”

Ilya’s lips curved — tiny, but real.

So Shane took a breath. “You said you work with kids. What age?”

“Teenagers,” Ilya replied. “Mostly.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

Shane waited, hoping for elaboration. None came. He tried again. “Do you, um... have family in the city?”

Ilya shook his head. “No.”

“From here originally?”

“No.”

Shane hesitated. “...Do you like the city so far?”

Ilya’s gaze softened, just barely. “It’s better this week.”

Shane’s heart flipped. He wanted to ask *why*, even though he knew the answer, but he was still too shy to say it out loud, instead, he asked the safer question. “And you moved for work?”

“Yes.”

Another simple answer, clipped at the edges, carefully measured.

Shane found himself smiling. “You’re very good at answering without answering.”

“I know.”

“You do it on purpose?”

“Sometimes.”

Shane tilted his head. “Why?”

Ilya looked at him for a long moment — long enough that Shane felt heat creep up his neck, then Ilya said quietly, “Some things are easier when people don’t know too much.”

Shane's chest tightened. He didn't know what that meant exactly — a job? A past? A heartbreak, but he understood the feeling of keeping the soft parts of yourself hidden.

So he nodded gently. "Okay," he said. "I won't push." And he meant it, because whatever Ilya wasn't saying... Ilya would tell him when he was ready. If he wanted to.

Ilya's expression flickered — something like surprise, then something like gratitude, though it vanished quickly. "Thank you," he murmured. Almost too quiet to hear.

Shane's pulse sped up. He reached for something to ground himself and asked the easiest question he could think of, "Do you want to stretch with me?"

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Stretch with you?"

Shane's face went hot. "I— I didn't mean— I just— you usually stretch alone but maybe—"

Ilya's mouth tugged into a small smile. Dangerous. Disarming. "I would like that," he said.

Shane went warm all over as they walked toward the mats, close enough that their arms brushed, he realized something simple but terrifying, he wanted to know Ilya. All the parts he hid. All the things he didn't say.

And for the first time in his life, he wanted someone to know *him* too.

He wasn't sure how to do it.

But he was willing to try.

-

Shane spent the rest of the day pretending to work.

He *looked* like he was working — clipboard in hand, shirt sleeves rolled up, occasionally shouting gentle reminders like "Don't lock your knees!" and "Try engaging your core!" — but his brain was absolutely, hopelessly somewhere else.

Somewhere tall. Somewhere with dark eyes and a quiet smile that made Shane's stomach flutter.

He wanted to see Ilya again outside the gym. He wanted something simple. Something safe. Something that wasn't too intimate, because coffee had already pushed him right to the edge of *I might panic and run away screaming*.

He needed something casual. Something wintery. Something that wouldn't terrify either of them.

He just... didn't know what.

He was pacing behind the desk when Hayden raised an eyebrow at him. "You okay, dude?" Hayden sipped his iced latte (in winter, because Hayden was allergic to normal human

behavior).

“Yes,” Shane lied.

“You look like you’re planning a heist.”

Shane groaned. “I want to ask Ilya to do something with me.”

Hayden lit up like someone had plugged him into a socket. “Oh my God, it’s happening—”

“Not a date,” Shane hissed. “Not— *yet*. Just... something.”

Hayden leaned over the desk. “Bowling? Bar? Movie?”

“No,” Shane said immediately. “Too intimate. Too loud. Too... close.”

“Knitting class?” Hayden deadpanned.

Shane threw a paperclip at him.

Hayden laughed. “Okay, okay! What do *you* want?”

Shane chewed the inside of his cheek. He wanted... a way to see Ilya’s softness. A way to ask questions without intruding. A way to watch that careful, quiet man relax a little. Something not too date-like.

And then he saw the snow falling outside. Soft flakes drifting under the streetlight.

And he thought of something. “Skating,” he whispered.

Hayden blinked. “Like... an ice rink?”

“Yes.” Shane’s heart sped up. “There’s an outdoor one near the park. It’s pretty. Not crowded in the evenings.”

Hayden narrowed his eyes. “Shane.”

“What?”

“You’re inviting a *Russian man* to skate.”

“So?”

Hayden wheezed laughing. “You sure he won’t skate circles around you and humiliate you in front of children?”

Shane groaned again. “It’s not about competition. I just— I want to see him doing something fun. Something comfortable. Maybe... maybe I’ll learn things about him.”

“You probably will,” Hayden said, softening. “Ask him.”

It took Shane three attempts.

He approached Ilya once — panicked and fled. Approached a second time — got distracted by a dropped dumbbell. By the third, he was determined.

Ilya had just finished stretching, wiping his hands on a towel, when Shane cleared his throat and immediately regretted everything.

“I have— um— a question,” Shane blurted.

Ilya looked at him calmly, towel draped over one shoulder. “Ask.”

Shane swallowed. Why was his mouth dry? Why did Ilya’s gaze feel like standing too close to a fireplace?

“Well,” Shane said, “I thought... since it’s winter... and things get kind of boring... for— for people— for humans— in winter—”

Oh god. Oh god he was malfunctioning.

Ilya’s eyebrows lifted a millimeter. “Humans,” he echoed, lips twitching.

“I MEAN—” Shane nearly choked. “Do you want to go skating?”

A beat. Two beats. Then Ilya blinked.

“Skating,” he said slowly.

“Yes.” Shane forced a shaky smile. “There’s a little rink in the park. Very low-pressure. I mean— unless you hate skating. Do you hate skating? Do you— uh— not skate? If you don’t, that’s totally fine—”

“Shane.”

He froze. “Y-Yes?”

Ilya stepped closer. Too close. Close enough that Shane could see the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw.

“I like skating,” Ilya said softly.

Shane brightened. “You do?”

Something unreadable flickered in Ilya’s eyes. A shadow. A memory, but it passed quickly.

“Yes,” Ilya said. “I haven’t gone in a long time. But I like it.”

Shane exhaled, relief flooding him.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay! Great. Good. Nice. Skating.”

Ilya’s lips curved — small, quiet, amused.

“When?” he asked.

“Tomorrow evening?” Shane’s voice cracked on “evening,” which was humiliating, but Ilya didn’t tease him.

Instead, he nodded. “I’ll be there,” he said.

And something about the certainty in his voice made Shane’s heart stumble.

-

That night, Shane lay awake again.

Not anxious this time. Just... full.

Full of anticipation. Full of questions he wanted to ask Ilya on the ice. Full of hope that Ilya would tell him something real tomorrow — not everything, not the deep things, but something.

He imagined Ilya skating, tall and steady, cold air turning his breath white. Maybe even smiling.

Shane wanted to see that smile. He wanted to be the person who made it happen.

-

The rink lights glowed a soft gold against the snow, and Shane rubbed his gloved hands together for warmth. He wasn’t cold—no, he was *terrified* and that apparently mimicked the same physical response.

He checked his phone for the seventh time.

7:03 PM.

“Maybe he forgot,” Shane muttered, even though he *knew* Ilya didn’t seem like the type to forget anything.

And then—

The air shifted.

Shane looked up just in time to see Ilya approaching through the light snowfall. Tall, bundled in a dark coat, hands in pockets, snowflakes catching on his hair like he was part of the scene rather than walking through it.

Shane swallowed hard. “You came,” he said before he could stop himself.

Ilya's mouth curved, faint but unmistakable. "I said I would."

Right. Yes. He did.

Shane managed a smile and gestured toward the benches where people tied their skates. "I, um— I brought my own skates. You can rent from that booth if you need."

Ilya glanced at him, expression unreadable. "I brought mine too," he said.

Shane blinked. "You did?"

"I hoped I would not embarrass myself in rentals," Ilya said dryly.

Shane laughed—quiet, surprised at how warm it felt. He sat on the bench, lacing his skates, very aware of Ilya doing the same beside him. His fingers trembled with nerves, but he tried to act casual.

Once they stepped onto the ice, Shane wobbled slightly.

Ilya, meanwhile... Well.

Ilya stepped onto the ice like he was stepping into his living room. Effortless, he pushed off, gliding forward with smooth strokes, posture relaxed, balanced, confident.

Shane's jaw actually dropped. "Ilya," he called, skating clumsily after him. "You said you hadn't skated in a while!"

Ilya turned slightly, coasting backward—backward— with the same ease most humans walked forward. He raised an eyebrow. "I haven't."

Shane barely avoided colliding with the boards. "You're— really good."

Ilya slowed, waiting for him to catch up. "I grew up with winter," he said simply. "You learn it young."

Shane knew there was more to it. This wasn't childhood ice pond skating. This was precision. This was training.

But he didn't press.

They settled into a rhythm, circling the rink. Shane clung to his dignity; Ilya floated like he was made of winter and discipline.

"So," Shane said, searching for something safe to ask, "what's your favorite winter food?"

Ilya blinked, amused. "Food?"

"Yeah," Shane said. "Like... soup? Hot chocolate? Roasted chestnuts?"

"Chestnuts," Ilya said after a moment. "When I was little, I used to get them on the street in winter."

“Oh,” Shane said, smiling. “That’s cute.”

Ilya’s eyes flicked toward him, warm in a way that made Shane’s breath catch. “You?” Ilya asked.

“Gingerbread,” Shane said instantly. “I have no self-control. Hayden hides it from me.”

Ilya huffed a soft laugh. “I will remember that.”

They skated again. Quiet. Easy.

Shane found himself relaxing, despite Ilya’s ridiculous talent, despite how beautiful the man looked with cold-pink cheeks, breath curling in the air, eyes reflecting rink lights like scattered stars.

They talked about simple things, Shane’s favorite winter playlist, Ilya’s hatred of heavy scarves, the worst holiday movies they’d ever seen.

But underneath it all, Shane kept feeling the same pull—

There was more to Ilya, more than he said, more than he let himself show. Like he was holding back pieces on purpose.

At one point, Ilya pushed off the ice and spun—not a dramatic one, not showy, but a neat, sharp half-turn that made Shane’s mouth fall open. “You definitely practiced,” Shane blurted.

Ilya stopped, boots scraping lightly, and for a moment something flickered across his face. Something like memory. Something like ache.

“I used to skate a lot,” he said quietly.

Shane wanted to ask. He wanted to know why Ilya looked like that answering such a small question, but he didn’t want to scare him away, so he kept it gentle.

“Well,” Shane said softly, “you’re incredible.”

Ilya’s gaze warmed, then softened further—almost shy. “Thank you.”

They skated until their cheeks burned from the cold and Shane’s legs trembled with exhaustion.

When they finally stepped off the ice, Ilya held out a hand automatically to steady Shane. Warm fingers. Steady grip. Shane’s heart did a backflip.

“Careful,” Ilya murmured.

Shane looked up at him, breathless for reasons that had nothing to do with skating.

“It was fun,” Shane said. “We should do it again.”

Ilya’s expression gentled. “I’d like that,” he said.

And Shane swore something inside him melted faster than snow on warm pavement.

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Ilya couldn't sleep.

He lay in bed staring at the ceiling, replaying the evening in looping fragments, Shane laughing as he nearly fell, Shane's cheeks flushed pink from cold, Shane's freckles brighter under the rink lights, Shane whispering "You're incredible" like it wasn't a throwaway compliment, like he *meant* it.

Ilya turned onto his side and pressed his hand over his face. He should have told him. He'd wanted to, God, he'd wanted to.

Every time Shane's eyes lingered on him with that open curiosity, Ilya felt the truth pushing up his throat like a bruise.

I used to play hockey, professionally. I trained for it my whole life. I was supposed to be someone. I lost it because of one hit, one crack, one moment I couldn't take back.

But he didn't say any of it, because he could already imagine Shane's face—not disgusted, no—but full of disappointment or pity, and somehow that was worse.

Failing in front of strangers was easy, failing in front of someone he liked... Someone who looked at him like he was interesting, not broken...

He couldn't risk that.

Not yet.

Ilya would tell him eventually, he could feel the path under his feet, slow and hesitant, but leading somewhere.

Just... not now.

-

He got up early the next morning and went to the rink.

The kids were already there, helmets in hand, skates half-tied. They shouted *Coach Ilya!* when they saw him, voices bouncing around the cold air.

He managed a smile—small, but real.

Teaching them didn't feel like failure. It didn't feel like punishment. It felt like breathing.

"Alright," he said, clapping his gloves together, "warm-up laps. And nobody races till I say."

They scattered immediately—*racing*.

Ilya sighed. “I said— never mind.”

He stepped onto the ice and his body relaxed instantly, muscles slipping into old patterns. The ache in his shoulder—his permanent reminder—twinged once but didn’t flare. He could do this. This was fine.

As he skated alongside the kids, correcting their posture, adjusting their grip on the stick, something flickered in his mind—

Shane, on the rink with him, Shane wobbling, laughing, Shane looking at him like he was... something warm.

Ilya felt a tightness in his chest, something tender and terrifying.

He’d never wanted to share this part of his life with anyone outside the sport. Never thought someone *should* see him like this.

But with Shane? He almost wanted to show him. Almost.

A small boy named Mark tugged his sleeve. “Coach,” he said seriously, “can you do the spin thing again? The one like—” He attempted to demonstrate and immediately fell.

Ilya snorted. “That is not how it looks,” he said, pulling him up. He grinned, missing a front tooth.

He skated to the center, took a breath, and performed the simple, controlled half-turn. Smooth, practiced.

The kids erupted into cheers as bowed dramatically, just to make them laugh. And as they clapped, he thought—

If Shane saw this, would he smile? Or would he see the ghost of what I used to be?

He didn’t know. That fear kept him quiet.

But the thought kept him warm.

-

After practice, he sat alone on the bleachers, staring at the frost forming on the boards. His phone buzzed with a message.

Shane:

I had fun last night, by the way.

If your legs aren’t destroyed, we could grab coffee later?

Ilya closed his eyes. He felt something unfold slowly in his chest—soft, cautious, hopeful.

He typed back:

Ilya:

Yes.

Tell me when.

He wasn't ready to tell Shane everything, but he was ready to keep going. Step by step. Like skating on new ice.

-

The café was warm compared to the cold winter street outside, with soft yellow lights and wooden tables polished until they glowed. Ilya chose a booth near the window, where the quiet didn't press against his ears so much. Shane slid into the seat across from him, cheeks flushed from the cold, hair messy under his beanie, smiling like he had no idea how dangerous he looked.

It was the third time they'd met outside the gym.

The third time Ilya pretended he was calm.

The waitress set down two ginger ales—Shane's fault, and Ilya had let himself be bullied into it. Shane looked unnecessarily pleased with himself.

"It's good," he insisted.

"It tastes like spicy medicine," Ilya deadpanned.

"Then you'll live forever."

That earned a reluctant snort from Ilya, and for a while they talked about nothing—snowfall predictions, the fact that Hayden had apparently broken the gym stereo *again*, the strange dog that lived on the corner that barked at snowflakes like they personally offended him.

Easy things. Light things, but Ilya kept feeling the weight of something unsaid lodged under his ribs, like ice that refused to melt.

Eventually, Shane's gaze shifted. Quiet. Steady. "Can I... ask something?" he said softly.

Ilya tensed before he could stop himself. "Ask."

"You mentioned you moved to this country a few years ago," Shane said. "Do you ever miss home?"

The question was simple. Normal. Innocent, but it cracked something inside him anyway.

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He didn't look away, though. He made himself meet Shane's eyes. Warm brown eyes, patiently waiting, not demanding.

You can say no, they seemed to say. You can say nothing, but Ilya was tired of silence.

He took a slow breath. "My father," he began, "did not like weakness."

Shane didn't flinch. Didn't look surprised. He just listened.

Ilya's voice felt like it belonged to someone else as he continued. "He believed... he believed that pressure made a man. That you must prove yourself always. Never stop, never break." He stared down at the condensation collecting on his glass. "So he pushed. Hard."

"How old were you?" Shane asked gently.

"Always," Ilya said. "My whole childhood. There was no age when he did not push."

He expected Shane to say *oh* or *I'm sorry* or something soft that would make Ilya's throat tighten with the urge to run, but Shane only nodded lightly.

"What about your mom?" he asked. "Was she like that too?"

Ilya closed his eyes. "I lost her," he said quietly. "When I was young."

Shane's posture softened, but still—no pity in his expression. Just sadness like a candle, not a spotlight. "How?" he asked, voice barely above a whisper.

"She killed herself." It was the first time Ilya had said the words aloud in years. Maybe a decade. "They said it was an accident," he went on. "They told my brother and me she fell asleep. They told us gentle stories. But I heard them talking later. They said she left a note." He swallowed. "I never saw it."

Shane didn't reach out to touch him, didn't stare at him like he was breakable. He just sat there, breathing with him, like the silence was something shared instead of a void. "I'm sorry she went through that," Shane said softly.

The phrasing struck Ilya. Not *I'm sorry for your loss*. Not *I'm sorry she left you*. But *I'm sorry she hurt*.

Ilya blinked, his chest tightening in a strange, unfamiliar way. He forced himself to continue before he could lose the nerve. "My father was worse after she died. Much worse. Not kind, not gentle." He hesitated, then added, "I think he blamed us. Or he blamed himself and couldn't bear it."

Shane's hands curled around his glass but his voice stayed even. "And now?" he asked.

"He is dead." Ilya exhaled slowly.

Shane nodded. "How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know." The honesty felt raw, like pulling skin away. "I should feel... something. Relief, maybe. Anger. But I feel empty. Like someone closed a door behind me and I cannot remember what was inside."

Shane looked at him with that steady, grounding gaze. "That sounds exhausting," he said.

"It is," Ilya admitted.

They sat in silence for a few beats, the kind that didn't suffocate.

Shane shifted, hesitating before asking, "Do you have any family left back home?"

"My brother," Ilya said. His jaw tightened. "We do not speak."

"Why?"

"He thinks I abandoned him." Ilya looked out the window, watching snow drift under the streetlights. "Maybe he's right, but we never got along, so I don't think he misses me too much."

"Why did you leave?" Shane asked.

This—this was the point where it would be so easy to slip. To say the word *hockey*. To spill everything—the rebuild, the injury, the humiliation, the surgery, the second rehab that never fixed anything, the articles calling him washed-up before he was even twenty-six, the pity he saw in the faces of men he'd once played with, but the weight of all that was too much for one night.

He wasn't ready.

Not yet.

So he built around the truth, leaving the core untouched.

"I left for work," he said. "I had an opportunity here. A fresh start." That part wasn't a lie, even if it wasn't the whole picture. "And I stayed because..." He searched for the word. "...because it didn't hurt as much here."

Shane didn't push, he didn't look suspicious or disappointed. He just nodded. Slowly. Thoughtfully.

"That makes sense," he said. "Sometimes distance makes breathing possible."

Ilya swallowed, the warmth of the statement hitting deeper than expected. "You think so?"

"I know so," Shane said. "I left home at eighteen. My parents were supportive but still felt lonely.."

Ilya's head tilted. "Do you talk to them?"

"Always," Shane said with a tiny shrug. "It's fine. They love me and I love them."

Something in Ilya's chest fluttered painfully. He took another sip of the ginger ale—it still tasted terrible—and let the burn ground him.

"Do you ever want to fix things with your brother?" Shane asked softly.

Ilya stiffened.

“I don’t know,” he said again. “He was older. When I left, he took it as betrayal.” He looked down at his hands. Strong hands. Steady hands. Hands that used to grip a stick with precision he couldn’t replicate anymore.

Shane didn’t offer comfort. He didn’t offer excuses. He didn’t rewrite the story. He just asked, “If you could talk to him now, what would you say?”

Ilya’s throat tightened. “I would say I’m not the person he remembers,” he said quietly. “I would say I tried. And I failed.” He exhaled. “And I would say I’m still trying.”

Shane breathed in, slow, deep. “That sounds honest,” he said. “And brave.”

“Brave?” Ilya huffed a bitter laugh. “It feels like drowning.”

“Sometimes drowning is what happens before you learn to swim,” Shane said.

It was cheesy. It was ridiculously cheesy, but it made something warm unfurl in Ilya’s stomach anyway.

He looked at Shane fully then, studying his freckles, the soft determination in his expression, the willingness to hold space without taking over. Most people either pressed too hard or backed away entirely. but Shane did neither. He simply stayed. Present. Open. Unjudging.

And Ilya felt something shift inside him—slow and quiet, like ice beginning to crack under the first warm touch of spring.

“Thank you,” Ilya said. Not out of politeness. Not because he felt obligated. But because he meant it.

Shane’s smile was small and bright. “For what?”

“For listening,” Ilya said. “Not... reacting.”

Shane’s head tilted. “Reacting how?”

“Like I am tragic,” Ilya murmured. “Or broken. Or a wounded animal to be treated gently.”

Shane shook his head. “I don’t think you’re any of those things.”

Ilya blinked. “You don’t?”

“No,” Shane said simply. “I think you’re someone who’s survived a lot, and that doesn’t make you broken.” His voice softened. “It just makes you *real*.”

Ilya felt something inside him ache at that. Something old and neglected and starved for gentleness.

Real.

No one had ever called him that before.

He let out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding and looked at Shane's warm eyes—steady and grounding. He didn't feel judged. He didn't feel pitied. He felt... seen.

And maybe—just maybe—he could trust that. Not tonight. Not all at once.

But soon.

Some things took time. Some truths took warmth. Some secrets needed gentle hands and for the first time in a long time, Ilya thought: *Maybe I could tell him everything someday. Maybe he wouldn't run.*

He hoped he was right.

-

Saturday was colder than usual, the kind of cold that settled into Ilya's bones despite hours of skating. Practice had gone well—exceptionally well, actually. The kids were sharper today, laughing more, complaining less. Even the rink manager commented that they sounded like a team this year instead of a group of chaotic gremlins on ice.

By the time he stepped out into the weak winter noon, Ilya felt... good. Light. Lighter than he had in weeks, maybe months.

He had a puck in his hand—an absent habit he'd carried since he was fourteen. He flipped it between his fingers, bounced it lightly off his palm, spinning it by reflex. Something to keep his hands busy, something to ground him when he felt too much.

Today, he simply forgot to put it away.

The walk from the rink to his apartment took fifteen minutes. But he only got as far as the small bakery on the corner before something warm brushed past his spine—awareness before recognition.

He looked up and froze.

Shane stood at the crosswalk, bundled in a navy coat, scarf crooked around his neck like he'd tied it in a hurry. His hair was windswept. His cheeks pink. And his eyes—They lit up when they landed on Ilya.

"Ilya!" he called, smile blooming like sun through clouds.

Ilya's entire chest tightened. In a good way. A terrifying way.

He hadn't expected to see Shane today, hadn't planned for it, and yet some part of him felt like he'd been waiting for exactly this moment.

Shane jogged across the street before the light changed. "Hey," he breathed, slightly out of breath. "Fancy running into you."

Fancy. Running into you.

Ilya almost laughed. Shane was terrible at pretending things weren't important. "You are up early," Ilya said instead, letting himself smile back.

"It's noon," Shane said, but he was grinning. "Where are you coming from?"

Ilya froze for half a second. He almost said the gym—habit. Almost said the store—lie. Almost said something simple that would keep things easy.

But he was tired of easy. Ilya held up the puck without thinking. "This," he said.

Shane blinked at it, processing. "You... carry hockey equipment with you?"

"I coach," Ilya said before he could overthink it. "Kids."

Shane's expression shifted. Soft surprise. Warm admiration.

"You're a hockey coach?" he asked, eyes brightening. "That's really cool."

Cool. Not *intense*. Not *serious*. Not *oh my god, hockey*.

Just cool.

A quiet breath of relief loosened Ilya's shoulders. "I am," he confirmed. "It is my job but I enjoy it."

Shane nodded enthusiastically. "Honestly? I don't know much about hockey. At all." He made a sheepish face. "I know there's a stick. A puck. And people yelling."

Ilya laughed. Actually laughed. A real sound, not the practiced polite chuckle he handed out to most people.

"People yelling is accurate," he said.

Shane's grin widened. "And you're the one telling kids to yell less?"

"I try." He flipped the puck again. "They ignore me."

"I can see that," Shane said, eyes flicking to the puck in Ilya's hands. "Do you always do that?"

"What?"

"Spin it like that."

Ilya looked down, realizing he'd been turning the puck around his fingers almost constantly. A nervous tell. A stress habit. A whisper of old routines. He froze mid-spin. "Ah." He cleared his throat. "It helps my hands stay busy."

"Does it help with stress?" Shane asked, tone gentle.

Ilya stiffened, but not because Shane had guessed wrong, because he guessed right.

“Yes,” Ilya admitted quietly. “Sometimes.”

Shane didn’t pry. Didn’t ask *why stress?* Didn’t ask what he was anxious about or why he needed grounding habits. He just said, “Makes sense,” with a little nod, as if spinning a puck in the street was normal human behavior.

Someone passing might have thought they were just two friends talking, but Ilya felt the difference. Felt the hum of something tentative but real threading between them.

Shane rocked back on his heels, then glanced toward the café down the street. “I was actually heading to get coffee,” he said. “And maybe brunch because I forgot breakfast.” His cheeks turned pink not from cold this time. “Do you— want to join me?”

Ilya was fairly certain his heart did something illegal in his chest. Coffee. Brunch. With Shane.

He should say no. He should think about this. He should— “Yes,” Ilya said with embarrassing speed. “I would like that.”

Shane brightened instantly, and Ilya felt warmth rush up his chest like standing too close to a fire.

They walked side by side toward the café, the silence between them easy and warm. Ilya’s fingers itched with the urge to tuck the puck away so he wouldn’t look ridiculous, but he couldn’t bring himself to stop the motion just yet.

It kept him steady.

Shane pushed open the café door and held it for him. The rush of warm air, coffee beans, and sugar wrapped around them. The café was packed with weekend customers, but Shane found them a small table near the wall.

Shane shrugged out of his coat. “Do you want anything specific?”

Ilya scanned the menu. “Something warm. Anything is fine.”

Shane gave him a soft look. “You always say that.”

“It is true.”

“But do you want something *you* like?”

Ilya hesitated.

He liked... a lot of things. He was just unused to saying them out loud. “Tea,” he said finally. “Mint, if they have it.”

Shane grinned. “Done.”

While Shane went to order, Ilya sat with the puck in his hand, absently turning it. His fingers molded around the familiar weight, the smooth rubber edges worn from years of use. He should put it away. He knew he should. It made him feel exposed, like someone seeing old scars.

But Shane returned a minute later, dropping into the seat across from him without staring at the puck or commenting. He just set down a mint tea and a ginger latte.

“Thanks,” Ilya said, surprised by how warm the gratitude felt.

They sipped in comfortable quiet for a moment before Shane leaned forward.

“So,” he said, chin resting in his hand. “Tell me about coaching. How’d you get into it?”

Ilya lifted a shoulder. “They needed someone. I had experience.”

Shane’s smile turned amused. “That’s the vaguest answer in history.”

Ilya smirked. “Maybe.”

“Come on,” Shane said, not pushing but inviting. “Do you like it?”

“Yes,” Ilya said without hesitation. “They are loud. Stubborn. They fall every five seconds. But they are trying. And they trust me.”

Shane’s expression softened. “That’s kind of amazing.”

Ilya blinked. He wasn’t used to hearing his life framed like that. Not for years.

“Do you ever get annoyed at them?” Shane asked.

“Yes,” Ilya said instantly. “They never listen. Not the first time, not the second time. Sometimes not even the fifth time.”

Shane laughed. “Kids.”

“But they improve,” Ilya added. “They get up again. They try again. And I... I like watching that.” He paused. “I like helping that.”

Shane’s gaze quieted. Warm. Something he didn’t have a word for.

“You’re good at teaching,” he said softly.

Ilya stilled.

“How do you know?” he asked.

“Because you care,” Shane said simply. “And because you explained proper skating posture to me without making me feel stupid once.”

Ilya flushed. He hadn’t realized Shane noticed that. Noticed *him* that closely.

“I liked teaching you,” Ilya admitted quietly.

Shane smiled so brightly it was almost painful.

“Then maybe,” Shane said, voice soft but playful, “you can teach me more.”

Ilya felt his breath catch.

Teach him more. Skating. Or... other things.

He swallowed. “Maybe,” he said, voice lower than intended.

Shane didn’t push forward. Didn’t lean back. Just... stayed there. Steady.

Safe.

Ilya looked down at the puck in his hand. For the first time, it didn’t feel like a shield. It felt like a step.

“Can I ask you something?” Shane said.

“Yes.”

“Does coaching make you happy?”

The question pierced him unexpectedly.

He took a slow breath.

“Yes,” he said. “It does.”

Shane smiled, relieved like he’d been hoping for that answer.

“Good,” he said. “You deserve things that make you happy.”

Ilya’s throat tightened. Maybe that was the moment he realized he didn’t fear Shane seeing the truth anymore. Not the full truth. Not yet. But one day. Soon.

He placed the puck on the table between them, a deliberate unspoken offering.

Shane didn’t stare. Didn’t question. Didn’t ask what it *really* meant.

He just smiled at Ilya like this—this moment, this small thing—made perfect sense.

And for the first time in years, Ilya let himself believe it did.

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

By the time they slipped into the small corner booth of the café, Shane's pulse still hadn't returned to normal. There was something about Ilya's smile—quick and almost shy when he'd agreed to coffee that day—that made Shane feel like he'd been handed a secret.

And a dangerous one.

The café was warm, crowded with weekend chatter, but their little corner was quiet enough that Shane could hear the soft clink of Ilya setting down the puck he'd been fidgeting with. Again. It felt like the puck is glued to Ilya's hands lately.

Shane smiled at it. "You planning to play with that while you eat?"

Ilya looked down as if he'd forgotten he'd brought it. "Maybe. Habit."

He offered a tiny shrug, like he wasn't used to explaining himself.

Shane didn't push. He liked being someone Ilya didn't have to perform for.

When the server left them with coffees and menus, Shane leaned his elbows on the table. "So," he said gently, "we never really finished that conversation the other day."

Ilya's eyes lifted. Not wary—but careful.

"You told me about your parents." Shane lowered his voice. "But I feel like there's more. You can tell me, you know. Or not. No pressure."

Ilya's fingers curled around his coffee cup, absorbing the warmth. Quietly, almost like he was letting words escape rather than choosing to offer them, he said, "My father was... difficult. Demanding. I think you understand this already."

Shane nodded. "You told me he pushed you hard."

"Yes." Ilya's gaze flicked to the window. "Everything was a test. Everything needed to be perfect. If I succeeded, it was expected. If I failed, it was... not good."

Shane's jaw tightened. "That sounds awful."

Ilya's mouth lifted in a humorless half-smile. "It was normal for me." He didn't say it with pride. He said it like a fact he hadn't let himself examine too closely.

"And your brother? Tell me more about him" Shane asked softly.

Ilya looked down at his cup, steam curling around his face. "We grew apart, like already I told you."

Shane's heart clenched. He didn't push more.

“And after that?” he asked. “You moved here alone?”

Ilya’s shoulders rose and fell with a small breath. “I wanted distance.”

Somewhere he could build a life on his own terms, somewhere he wasn’t being measured every day.

Shane swallowed the ache that stirred in him. Ilya always told the truth sideways—soft, vague, like he wasn’t sure how much the world wanted from him. Shane felt honored he was getting even this much. “Is it better here?” he asked.

Ilya hesitated, then said, “Yes. Mostly.”

Mostly. Mostly meant the shadows were still there. Mostly meant healing didn’t happen all at once. Mostly meant he was trying.

Shane wanted to reach across the table and take his hand. Wanted to tell him he didn’t have to be “mostly” anything around him.

He didn’t reach, instead, he said, “Thank you. For telling me.”

Ilya’s eyes softened—really softened. Not wide and surprised like before, but like something inside him eased, even if just a little.

“You listen well,” he said.

Shane felt his face warm. “I... try.”

“It is nice,” Ilya murmured.

Shane almost melted into his plate.

When their food arrived (Shane didn’t remember when they ordered), the conversation shifted, gentler now, and Ilya seemed to relax by degrees. He didn’t share much more about his past, but his voice was less guarded, less clipped. He asked questions. Real ones.

“You are very close with your family?” he asked, cutting into his eggs.

“Yeah,” Shane said, unable to hold back a smile. “Like, annoyingly close.”

“What is annoyingly close?”

Shane laughed. “Okay, well... my mom texts me every morning. Every single one. Sometimes with pictures of her breakfast for no reason. She’s convinced everyone needs to see it.”

Ilya blinked, then—softly—“This is cute.”

“My dad calls me on his lunch breaks. Says he’s checking in but then talks my ear off about his garden for fifteen minutes.”

Ilya took this in like Shane was describing another universe. “They sound... very kind.”

“They are,” Shane said, voice gentler. “I’ve been lucky.”

Ilya didn’t say it, but Shane could feel the thought sitting between them: I wasn’t. He hated that thought. Wanted to soothe it. Wanted to undo years of hardness, but he stayed patient.

“And what about you?” Ilya asked. “When you are not working?”

“Oh.” Shane rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m kind of boring.”

Ilya’s brow raised. “I do not believe that.”

Shane flushed. “I... really like routines. I cook. I bake. I’m obsessed with organizing things.”

Ilya tilted his head. “This is boring?”

Shane huffed a small laugh. “To some people.”

“Not to me,” Ilya murmured.

The warmth that sentence sent through Shane was entirely, embarrassingly disproportionate. He cleared his throat. “What about you? What do you like doing when you’re not coaching?”

Ilya froze—not visibly, but internally, Shane could tell. He chose his words carefully. “I like... quiet things. Books. Long walks. I like winter. I like early mornings before anyone else is awake.” He paused, fingers brushing the edge of the puck again. “And I like being here,” he added softly. “This city. It is... easier. There is space to breathe.”

Shane nodded, lips curving. “I’m glad you’re here.”

Ilya looked at him. Really looked and Shane felt his breath catch, because that expression—soft, uncertain, almost fond—hit him straight in the chest.

He wanted to kiss him. God, he wanted to kiss him so badly his fingers tingled with restraint.

Not a hungry kiss, not a rushed kiss. A soft one. Gentle. The kind of kiss that told someone you liked them for exactly who they were—quiet, complicated, secretive past and all.

Shane stared down at his hands, suddenly too warm. “Um. Sorry. I’m staring.”

Ilya blinked. “You can stare.”

Shane choked a little. “I—what?”

Ilya’s lips tugged up at the corner. Not a full smile. But warmer than any Shane had seen yet. “You look nice when you stare,” Ilya said softly.

Shane forgot how to breathe. His heart did an entire gymnastics routine. He looked at Ilya, then his lips, then his eyes, then forced himself to look literally anywhere else because—

He was going to embarrass himself. Shane swallowed hard. “You... you always surprise me.”

“Is this bad?” Ilya asked, genuinely concerned.

“No,” Shane whispered, honesty slipping out before he could stop it. “It’s... really not.”

They finished the coffee and food slowly, talking about small things—shows Ilya half-followed, the weather, the terrible pothole on 8th Street, pastry preferences. Nothing deep. Nothing heavy., but everything felt meaningful anyway.

By the time they stepped out into the cold, the world felt sharper, clearer. Breath puffed white between them. Ilya lifted his scarf a little, his cheeks pink from the wind and maybe something else.

Shane wanted to kiss him again. Harder now. Stronger now. He wanted to cup Ilya’s jaw, lean in, and—

He didn’t. Not yet.

“Today was nice,” Shane said softly.

“Yes,” Ilya replied. “I liked it.”

Shane’s pulse leapt. “Maybe we can do it again sometime?”

“I would like that,” Ilya answered immediately.

There was a moment—short, breathless—when their eyes met and neither of them moved. Ilya’s gaze dropped to Shane’s mouth—just for a second. Shane nearly stepped forward. Nearly, but something in Ilya’s posture said *not yet*. Not a no, just not yet.

“See you soon?” Shane asked.

“Yes.” Ilya’s voice was quiet. “Soon.”

Shane watched him go, heart pounding, wanting to chase after him and kiss him senseless, but instead he breathed out, smiling into the cold.

He’d wait. Happily, because some people were worth slow. Some kisses were worth savoring before they even happened.

And Ilya? Ilya was absolutely one of them.

-

Three days wasn’t a long time.

That’s what Shane kept telling himself. People missed gym days all the time. They got busy. They lived their lives. They weren’t obligated to show up just because *he* had gotten used to seeing them.

But three days of no Ilya felt... noticeable. Too noticeable.

Shane tried to play it cool at first. Tried not to look at the door every time it opened. Tried not to glance at the treadmill Ilya usually used. Tried not to check his phone at random intervals even though there was no reason Ilya would text him.

And of course, Hayden noticed.

On the second day, when Shane startled at the sound of someone entering the gym, Hayden actually had the audacity to smirk.

“You good, man?” Hayden asked as he wiped down a bench.

“Fine,” Shane said, absolutely unconvincing.

“Uh-huh.” Hayden leaned against the rack. “Just wondering why you keep staring at the door like a puppy waiting for its owner.”

Shane nearly threw a towel at him. “I’m not— I don’t— You’re annoying.”

Hayden grinned. “You miss your Russian mystery man.”

Shane went red instantly. “He’s not— Ilya isn’t— We’re not—”

“Exactly,” Hayden said, patting his shoulder. “You’re in agony. I support it.”

Shane groaned. “Please shut up.”

But Hayden didn’t. Not for the rest of the day.

By the third day, Shane wasn’t *worried* exactly... but the absence felt wrong. Empty. He kept thinking about their outings, about the way Ilya had looked at him—really looked—and the tiny almost-smile he’d given.

That had felt like a beginning and beginnings weren’t supposed to vanish into thin air.

Hayden caught him checking his phone during his break and raised an eyebrow. “You know,” Hayden drawled, “most people solve this problem by texting the person.”

“He doesn’t owe me anything,” Shane muttered.

“Yeah, and you don’t owe him a text.” Hayden shrugged. “But you want to send one. So send one.”

Shane hated that Hayden was right. He stared at Ilya’s contact for a solid minute before typing the least needy message he could manage.

Shane:

Hey. Haven’t seen you at the gym. Hope everything’s okay.

He hovered over “send.” His heartbeat did the stupid fluttering thing again. He pressed it.

For the next ten minutes, he regretted every choice that had led to this moment, but then the phone buzzed. He opened the message so quickly he almost dropped the phone.

Ilya:

Sorry. Away game with kids team. Out of city. Back tomorrow.

Shane blinked. Read it twice. Away game?

He didn't really understand what that meant, but the important part—

Ilya wasn't avoiding him. Ilya hadn't disappeared. Ilya had a perfectly normal, sensible reason for not showing up. The weight in Shane's chest dissolved so fast it made him sit back and breathe out hard.

He typed before thinking:

Shane:

Oh! That sounds fun. Hope it went well.

Another message appeared a moment later.

Ilya:

It was good. They did well. I will come to gym when back.

Shane could almost hear Ilya's voice in those short, clipped sentences—calm, direct, a tiny bit awkward in a way Shane found painfully endearing.

His shoulders relaxed for the first time in days.

Shane:

Looking forward to it.

The three dots appeared. Stopped. Appeared again.

Shane held his breath.

Then:

Ilya:

Me too.

Shane shut his phone and pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead, smiling like an idiot.

Hayden walked by at that exact moment.

“Oh my God,” Hayden said. “You're *glowing*.”

Shane didn't even bother denying it.

Shane had never been the kind of person who got overly invested in texting. He didn't do long message threads, didn't stay up late sending memes, didn't get excited when his phone buzzed

He was, generally speaking, composed. Moderate. Predictable.

And then there was Ilya.

Because last night, when Ilya mentioned finally getting back into the city, the conversation hadn't stopped. It wasn't dramatic or deep or flirty or anything his brain would usually obsess over. It was stupid things—Shane complaining about some guy who kept dropping weights loudly, Ilya sending a picture of a crooked sign at the bus station with the caption “*This is unsafe.*” Shane teasing him about how dramatic he was. Ilya answering with a single unimpressed emoji.

Nothing big. Nothing intense.

Yet Shane went to sleep with his phone on the pillow beside him like a teenager.

And when he woke up—way too early—his first thought wasn't *coffee* or *breakfast* or *things an actual adult should focus on*.

It was: *I'm seeing him today.*

He spent twelve whole minutes staring at his clothes trying to decide if wearing something *too nice* would look like he'd tried.

He finally settled on the same stuff he wore every morning—black hoodie, fitted joggers, the gym logo half-faded on the chest—but he kept smoothing the fabric like it would magically transform into something cooler.

“This is pathetic,” he muttered at himself.

But he didn't stop smoothing the hoodie.

By the time the gym opened, Shane had told himself twelve different times that he did *not* care. Ilya was just a client. A client he'd gone on not-dates with. A client who'd shared pieces of his past. A client who had smiled when Shane joked about ginger ale.

Okay, maybe not *just* a client.

Hayden was behind the front desk when Shane walked in, sipping iced coffee despite the freezing weather. He looked up and immediately narrowed his eyes. “What's with the hair?”

Shane's hand flew to his head. “What about it?”

“You did something to it.”

“It's called shampoo,” Shane said dryly.

Hayden snorted. “Dude. Stop. He’s not even here yet.”

Shane tried to scowl. It turned into something more like a blush. “I’m not doing anything special,” Shane insisted.

“You used the good conditioner.”

“I— what—”

Hayden raised a brow. “I live with you. I know things.”

Shane groaned. “I hate you.”

“No you don’t.” Hayden grinned. “But seriously, relax. Be yourself.”

Shane made a face. “That’s the problem.”

Hayden laughed so hard he almost spilled his coffee.

The morning dragged.

Shane trained three clients, reorganized the weights twice, answered emails, and absolutely did *not* keep checking the door every sixteen seconds. He wasn’t nervous. He wasn’t waiting.

He was fine. Totally fine. Then around eleven, the gym door swung open, and Ilya stepped inside and suddenly Shane was not fine at all.

Ilya wasn’t even doing anything dramatic—just walking in, gym bag slung over his shoulder, beanie pulled low over his hair, cheeks a little pink from the cold. But the second his eyes found Shane, they softened. Not a smile. Not exactly. Just... warmth. Recognition. Something that tightened low in Shane’s stomach.

Shane inhaled and reminded himself: *Play it cool. You’re an adult. You can handle one man walking into a room.*

Except when he moved, he dropped the clipboard he was holding. It clattered loud enough for Hayden to choke on his coffee.

Shane froze. Ilya blinked at him.

Smooth. Absolutely flawless behavior.

“Hey,” Shane said, forcing his voice into something calm, casual, not at all like he felt his pulse doing acrobatics. “You’re back.”

Ilya’s mouth pulled into the faintest smirk—tiny, but devastating. “I am.” His voice was rough from the cold. Somehow that didn’t help Shane’s sanity.

“Good trip?” Shane asked, leaning on the desk like he wasn’t two seconds away from melting through the floor.

“Long,” Ilya said. “Kids loud. But good.”

He stepped closer to the counter. Close enough that Shane could smell winter air and a hint of something warm—soap maybe, or laundry detergent.

Stop noticing that, brain. Stop.

“You didn’t have to text,” Shane said, then immediately wanted to punch himself in the face.

Ilya’s brows lifted slightly. “You wanted me to.”

Shane’s mouth opened, then closed, then opened again. “I— well— yeah, I mean— I was just checking—”

Behind him, Hayden muttered, “Bro. You are dying.”

Shane kicked backward blindly, hoping to hit him. He missed.

Ilya watched the exchange with amused confusion. “You are very energetic today.”

Shane sputtered. “No, I’m normal.”

“You dropped your clipboard,” Ilya said.

Shane cleared his throat. “Gravity exists. It happens.”

Ilya’s lips twitched. “If you say so.”

There it was again—affection in the smallest places. In the flat tone. In the amused eyes. In the quiet way he looked at Shane like he actually enjoyed being here.

Calm down, Shane begged himself. “So,” he said, forcing a steadier tone. “Back to your usual routine today?”

“Yes.” Ilya shifted his bag on his shoulder. “If you are not too busy, maybe... you could help me with something later.”

Shane blinked. “Help with what?”

Ilya hesitated, then said, “Some of the kids want different workout plans. Strength. Mobility. Maybe you know better.”

Shane’s heart did a weird happy-squeeze thing. “Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Whenever you want.”

“I will finish warm-up first.”

“Sure.”

Ilya gave him one last look—warm, intentional—and walked toward the locker room.

Shane stared after him until Hayden's voice cut through the daze. "You're in deep, dude."

Shane covered his face with both hands. "Shut. Up."

"Nope." Hayden leaned against the counter. "Because that was painful and adorable. You absolutely lost the ability to function."

Shane groaned. "I didn't lose the ability to function."

"You dropped a clipboard."

"It was slippery."

"It was plastic."

"Shut up."

Hayden snorted. "Just ask him out."

Shane's stomach dropped. "It's not that simple."

"Why? He clearly likes you."

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. He didn't know how to explain it. Not really. It wasn't fear, exactly. It wasn't insecurity—not the usual kind.

It was more like... Like wanting something so much that the idea of ruining it made his chest tighten. "He makes me nervous," Shane finally admitted.

Hayden blinked. "In a bad way?"

Shane shook his head.

"In a good way."

Hayden softened. "Then try. You deserve good things too, man."

Shane swallowed, throat tightening unexpectedly. "Yeah."

His gaze drifted toward the hallway where Ilya had disappeared.

Yeah, he thought. *Maybe I do.*

Ilya returned from the locker room wearing a fitted shirt and joggers, hair damp, expression focused. He tied the laces of his shoes with practiced efficiency, then headed toward the weights.

Shane didn't mean to stare. He really didn't. But every time Ilya moved—shoulders flexing, back straight, concentration sharp—something inside Shane pulled toward him.

He wasn't used to being this drawn to someone. Not by looks alone. Not by skill. Not even by personality.

But Ilya... Ilya was a quiet storm. Self-contained. A little unreachable and yet, he looked at Shane like he saw something worth staying for.

Shane approached when Ilya finished his set. "Ready for those plans?" he asked.

Ilya nodded. "Yes."

They stepped aside to an empty corner with a small table. As Shane pulled out forms and charts, he glanced up—and found Ilya already looking at him.

Not impatient. Not bored. Just watching.

Shane felt heat creep up his neck. "What?"

"Nothing," Ilya said, voice low. "Just good to see you again."

Shane's heart tripped over itself. He swallowed. Hard.

"Yeah," he said softly. "You too."

And for a second—just one—he let himself feel it. The wanting. The hope. The way Ilya's presence made the world feel a little warmer.

Maybe someday he'd have the courage to kiss him.

But for now, this... this was enough.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

He should not have invited Shane.

He knew that the second he saw Shane walk into the rink—hands shoved in his pockets, hair slightly messy from the wind, cheeks pink from cold. He looked... soft. Warm. Entirely out of place in a building filled with loud children and cold air and Ilya's completely out-of-control heart.

But Ilya had texted him anyway.

He told himself it was practical. The kids wanted help. Extra conditioning. More structure. Shane knew what he was doing.

He told himself it wasn't because he wanted to see Shane. He told himself many lies.

And then Shane smiled—shy, a little uncertain—when he spotted him across the rink, and Ilya felt his chest loosen in a way he hated admitting felt good.

"You came," Ilya said when he skated over.

Shane shrugged, but his eyes were warm. "Yeah. You asked."

Ilya had to look away for a breath. His own voice betrayed him when he answered, "Good."

It was too soft. Too honest.

Before he could recover, the kids descended: "Coach! Coach!" "Do the turn again!" "Who's that?"

Little hands grabbed at his sleeves, helmets bumped into his arms, and a boy with a purple helmet pointed at Shane like unveiling a mystery creature.

"That is Shane," Ilya said, trying for neutral.

"Why is he here?" he demanded.

Ilya opened his mouth to explain, but Shane started talking at the same time.

"I'm a trainer, so Ilya asked—"

And then the worst thing possible happened.

"Ohhhhhh," one of the boys said dramatically. "So he likes you."

Ilya's entire body locked. Shane's eyes went huge. His freckles practically glowed. He looked like someone had just set him on fire.

And of course—of course—another kid yelled: “COACH HAS A BOYFRIEND!”

Ilya felt heat explode across his face. Neck. Ears. Everything. “I—what—no—stop talking,” he said, but it only made the kids louder.

“We knew it!” “Coach is BLUSHING!” “What if they kiss?!”

Ilya wanted to die.

Shane looked like he might spontaneously combust. The poor man was red to the roots of his hair.

“I am not blushing,” Ilya snapped. He absolutely was.

One of the older boys elbowed another and whispered—very loudly—“Coach gets weird when he likes someone.”

“I do not—” Ilya began, horrified.

A boy leaned up to Shane. “Do you like him back? Because he gets all stiff and awkward.”

Shane made a noise that sounded like an implosion. “I—uh—”

“He does!” the boy screamed. “He likes him too!”

Ilya buried his face in both hands. “I am going to expel all of you.”

“You can’t,” one boy said cheerfully. “This isn’t school.”

The kids skated away, laughing, leaving Ilya standing there wishing the ice would swallow him.

He didn’t dare look at Shane. Not yet. Not until the heat in his face died down or he remembered how to speak without humiliating himself.

Eventually—miraculously—he got the kids organized into warm-up laps. They scattered, shouting and sliding and ignoring every instruction.

Ilya exhaled a long breath and finally risked a glance at Shane. Shane was smiling. Soft. Warm. Like the chaos hadn’t bothered him at all.

“They are... chaos,” Ilya muttered.

“They’re funny,” Shane said.

“They are monsters.”

“Cute monsters.”

Ilya fought the smile rising to his lips and lost. Just a little. Barely a curve.

But Shane noticed—because of course he did—and Ilya had to look away again before the heat returned to his face.

After a beat, Shane spoke gently, “So... I didn’t know you already have a trainer for them.”

A new embarrassment, quieter, crawled up Ilya’s spine.

He looked at the boards. The ice. The ceiling. Anywhere but Shane. “I said... maybe you could help,” Ilya murmured. “But kids already have someone. I know.”

Shane waited.

Ilya swallowed. “I just... wanted you to come.”

It was the truth. It was terrifying.

Shane sucked in a soft breath. “Oh.”

Ilya forced himself to continue. “Thought maybe... you want to see. To know more.” About him. About his world. About the thing he still couldn’t bring himself to say. “And... you came.”

Shane stepped a little closer, voice quiet but certain. “Yeah. I did.”

Ilya finally looked at him.

Shane was blushing again—softly this time. Gentle. His freckles brighter. His eyes warm in a way that made something deep in Ilya’s chest unfold slowly, like thawing ice.

The kids shrieked in the background, running into each other, but none of that mattered. Not when Shane smiled at him like this.

Ilya wondered—not for the first time—if this was danger. If letting someone this gentle close was a mistake. If he should’ve kept his distance.

But then Shane said, “I’m really glad you invited me.”

And Ilya’s doubts melted, just a fraction. “Good,” he said quietly, voice unsteady. “I am too.”

-

Shane knew absolutely nothing about hockey. Not the rules. Not the drills. Not the equipment. Not why the kids kept crashing into each other and then acting like it was normal.

He had never felt more out of place in his entire adult life, but he had still come because Ilya had asked and apparently that was enough.

The practice lasted almost two hours. Shane spent most of that time hovering near the boards, pretending he understood what was happening. He watched the kids sprint across the ice, slide, pivot, fall, shout, laugh, and ignore half of Ilya’s instructions.

Every now and then, Ilya glanced over, checking if Shane was okay, and each time that small flicker of attention made Shane's stomach twist pleasantly.

But in the end, Shane helped with nothing.

Not one thing.

Maybe if the kids were in a gym. Maybe if the training didn't involve blades and cold air and very fast children. But here? He was useless.

Still... he stayed.

He stayed because Ilya moved like the ice belonged to him. Because the kids adored him. Because the concentration on Ilya's face made Shane forget the cold. Because he liked watching him.

More than liked.

By the end, the kids waved goodbye to Shane as if he'd actually done something.

"Bye Coach Boyfriend!" a boy yelled before Ilya could silence him.

Shane wanted the ice to swallow him whole. Ilya looked like he wanted the universe to explode.

When the last kid left the rink and the echo of their voices faded, Shane leaned on the boards and said, "So, uh... confession."

Ilya raised an eyebrow warily. "Yes?"

"I have absolutely no idea how hockey works."

The corners of Ilya's mouth twitched—an almost-smile. "I know."

"You do?"

"I watched you try to understand drills. You looked... confused."

"That obvious?"

"Yes."

Shane groaned. "Great."

Ilya shook his head lightly. "It is fine. You still came." His voice dipped, soft in a way that hit Shane low in the stomach. "I am glad."

Shane looked away before his face betrayed him. "Well... if you ever need someone to just stand there and pretend they know sports, I'm... available."

"Good." Ilya slid his gloves into his bag. "I will remember."

They stood there for a moment, the cold air quiet around them. Shane's breath curled in small clouds. Ilya's hair was still damp from practice, falling across his forehead in messy strands Shane desperately wanted to brush away.

He swallowed. "Want to... walk back?" Shane asked.

Ilya blinked, surprised. "Walk?"

"Yeah. It's not that late. And cold air is nice. And there's a tea place on the way. Thought maybe we could—"

"Yes," Ilya interrupted quickly—too quickly.

Shane's heart jumped a little.

They walked out into the winter afternoon, the sky pale grey and the cold sharp but bearable. Their steps crunched on the thin crust of snow.

Shane shoved his hands deep in his pockets. Ilya didn't, and Shane noticed the way his fingers curled and uncurled, like he wasn't sure what to do with them.

"Your kids are insane," Shane said.

Ilya let out a short laugh. "Yes. They are."

"But they really like you."

"They like chaos."

"You still handle them well."

Ilya's breath puffed out in a long cloud. "It is... easier than other things."

Shane glanced at him, tempted to ask more. But Ilya's face was unreadable—closed the way it sometimes got when his thoughts turned inward. So Shane let it go.

They reached the small tea shop tucked between two bookstores. It was warm inside, the windows fogged from the temperature difference. Shane ordered ginger tea. Ilya ordered black tea with too much honey.

When they stepped back onto the street, both cradling warm cups in their hands, Shane felt the heat of the paper seep into his fingers. He took a sip and hissed. "Hot."

Ilya's lips twitched. "Tea usually is."

Shane nudged him lightly with his shoulder. "Don't make fun of me."

"I did not." Ilya hid a small smile behind his cup. "Yet."

Shane tried not to stare at his mouth. He immediately failed.

They walked in silence for a moment, but not an uncomfortable one. Ilya seemed calmer than he'd been at the rink—less on guard. His shoulders weren't so tense. His steps matched Shane's without effort.

"So," Shane said softly, "you really didn't need help today."

Ilya didn't answer immediately. He took a sip of tea, kept walking, eyes focused on the snow-dusted sidewalk. "No," he said at last. "Kids have trainer."

"And you still asked me to come."

Ilya's jaw tightened, just for a second. "Yes."

Shane waited. He didn't push. He didn't ask why. He just gave Ilya space. After a few breaths, Ilya spoke again. "I wanted you there," he said quietly. "Not because of work. Because... you understand things about me others do not."

Shane's chest tightened. He tried to breathe through it. "Like what?"

"Like..." Ilya hesitated, searching for words. "I do not talk much. You do not mind."

"I like listening to you," Shane said before he could stop himself.

The air went still.

Ilya slowed his steps. His breath caught—barely audible but there.

Shane felt heat rise up his neck. "Sorry, that was—maybe too—"

"No," Ilya said quickly. "Not too much."

Shane closed his eyes for a second, overwhelmed by how soft Ilya's voice had gone.

They reached the small park near the gym. The walking path wound through bare trees, branches thin and black against the winter sky. A few benches were dusted in snow.

Ilya stopped near one and looked at Shane. There was something in his eyes—something open, something cautious but hopeful. "I did not expect you to understand," Ilya said quietly. "But you do."

Shane swallowed. "I'm trying."

"I see that."

The silence stretched—not tense, but full. Heavy in a good way. As if both of them were standing on the edge of something neither quite knew how to step into.

Shane's fingers tightened around his cup. Say something, he told himself. Say anything. Tell him how you feel. Tell him you think about him too much, that you check your phone like an

idiot, that you liked watching him coach, that you would stay in the cold for hours just to be near him.

But the words stuck.

So he said the safest thing he could manage: “I like spending time with you.”

Ilya exhaled slowly, and the cloud of his breath looked like relief.

“I like it too,” he said. “More than I expected.”

Shane’s heartbeat thudded painfully hard. He dared to meet Ilya’s eyes. Something warm flickered there. Something that made Shane’s stomach flip and twist and do things he didn’t have the vocabulary for.

He wanted to kiss him.

God, he wanted to kiss him.

Not a dramatic kiss. Not a heated one. Just something small and soft and honest. Something that matched the quiet between them.

But he didn’t move. He didn’t want to ruin whatever fragile new thing they were building. Instead, he said, voice lower than before, “Maybe next time you can teach me something about hockey? I mean... if you want.”

Ilya’s smile was small but real. “I want.”

Shane felt warmth spread through him that had nothing to do with the tea.

They began walking again, shoulder to shoulder, cups steaming in their hands, the cold brushing against their faces.

Shane didn’t know much about hockey.

But he knew this, the warmth, the quiet closeness, the way Ilya kept glancing at him like he didn’t mind being seen, he wanted more of it.

As long as Ilya would let him.

-

The gym was warm compared to outside, the heating kicking up every time the front doors opened. Shane had been at the front desk for the last fifteen minutes, waiting for Hayden to finish his protein shake rant with a client. He was only half-listening, his mind still drifting to last night’s walk with Ilya—the tea, the quiet smiles, the little admissions that felt more intimate than anything else they’d shared.

He kept replaying certain things in his head. *I wanted you there. You understand things others do not.*

It was ridiculous how much those words meant.

When Hayden finally sauntered over, grinning like he'd swallowed the sun, Shane braced himself. That expression never meant anything good.

"I have," Hayden said, dropping his water bottle dramatically onto the counter, "come across something interesting."

"That tone never means actual interesting," Shane said, sorting sign-in papers. "It means annoying."

Hayden ignored him. "So. Your Russian mystery man—"

Shane froze. "Don't."

Hayden only smiled wider. "Relax. I didn't stalk him. I wasn't even looking for him. It came up because a client mentioned the local university team, and boom—guess whose name appears when you scroll a bit too far?"

Shane's stomach twisted. "Hayden."

Hayden lifted his phone, already pulling up a page.

"Don't—"

But it was too late. Hayden shoved the screen in front of him.

A headline stared back.

ILYA ROZANOV: THE FALL OF RUSSIA'S QUIET PRODIGY

Below it, a subheading:

Career-ending injury cuts short a rising star's trajectory.

Shane's breath left him.

He didn't immediately read the article. Just stared at the name. The photo. Ilya younger, maybe early twenties, no beard, hair slightly longer but still messy. He looked devastatingly familiar and impossibly distant all at once.

Hayden said something, but it was white noise under the thump of blood in Shane's ears.

Slowly—very slowly—he scrolled.

The words felt unreal.

A once-promising forward.

Known for his control and speed.

Projected for national team potential.

The injury that tore through ligament, bone, and career in one brutal moment.

His sudden disappearance from professional play.

Location unknown for months.
Resurfaced only as a youth coach years later.

Shane's vision blurred at the edges.

He read the last sentence three times: *Rozanov declined to comment. He refused all interviews.*

Shane put the phone down like it weighed too much. He didn't know what he was feeling. Shock, definitely. Confusion. Sadness for Ilya. And something tight in his chest—something like guilt.

Hayden whistled. "Some story, huh?"

"Why did you show me this?" Shane asked quietly.

"Because you're into him," Hayden said simply. "And the guy has a whole secret life."

Shane didn't respond.

Hayden softened. "Look, I'm not saying it's bad. I mean—he's allowed to have a past. You of all people know I'm not anti-mystery. But he clearly doesn't talk about this. And, Shane, it's big. I thought you should... you know. Be aware."

Shane dropped into the chair behind the desk. His hands were trembling slightly.

A professional athlete. A rising star. An injury that shattered everything. A silence he never broke.

And Ilya hadn't said a word. Not even a hint.

Shane didn't blame him—God, no—but something in his chest ached anyway.

Hayden nudged his knee. "You okay?"

"I don't know."

Hayden pulled up a chair and sat. "You're not mad, right? I didn't do anything creepy."

"No. It's not that."

"So what is it?"

Shane stared at the counter. "He told me things about his past. Hard things. About his family. About leaving Russia. About losing people. He didn't have to. He didn't owe me anything. But he didn't mention... this."

"Yeah," Hayden said gently. "But maybe he had a reason."

Shane rubbed his face with both hands. "I don't—what do I even do with this? Pretend I never saw it? Ask him? Wait for him to tell me? What if he doesn't? What if I'm not

supposed to know at all?”

Hayden shrugged. “Maybe you let him set the pace.”

“I am,” Shane said, frustrated with himself. “I think I am. I’m trying. But this—this feels huge.”

“It *is* huge,” Hayden agreed. “But dude... you’re not dating-dating yet.” He paused, giving Shane a look. “Right?”

Shane’s cheeks heated. “No.”

“But you want to.”

Shane didn’t answer.

He didn’t have to.

Hayden sighed dramatically. “Of course you do. Look, you always pick the complicated ones. Remember when you had a crush on the accountant who didn’t know how to emote? Or that guy in yoga class who spoke only in riddles?”

“He didn’t speak in riddles.”

“His job was literally ‘consultant.’ Nothing is real about him.”

Shane groaned. “Hayden.”

“Fine. Sorry. Serious time.” Hayden leaned forward. “You like this guy. A lot. And he clearly likes you back.”

The words made warmth flutter under Shane’s ribs.

“But,” Hayden added, “he’s also carrying a million tons of baggage. And apparently a whole former life.”

Shane stared down at his hands. “I don’t care about the baggage.”

“Sure,” Hayden said. “But does *he* think you won’t?”

Shane froze.

Because that—

That was a real question.

Ilya had dodged around his past like it was something shameful. He’d avoided talking about work beyond the bare minimum. He’d kept so much locked tight behind careful walls.

Maybe he wasn’t hiding hockey from Shane. Maybe he was hiding the pain.

Shane swallowed hard. “So what do I do?”

“Simple,” Hayden said. “Nothing.”

Shane blinked. “Nothing?”

“Yeah. Don’t bring it up. Don’t act weird. Don’t mention the article. If he wants you to know, he’ll tell you. If he doesn’t... well, maybe he will eventually.”

Shane’s stomach churned. “That sounds dishonest.”

“No,” Hayden said patiently. “Dishonest would be pretending you never saw it. But you’re not lying—you’re respecting his boundary. One you didn’t know existed until five minutes ago.”

“But—”

“But nothing,” Hayden said. “Shane, you like him, right?”

He hesitated. “Yeah.”

“And you want him to feel safe with you?”

“Yes.”

“Then let him come to you.” Hayden stood and clapped a hand onto Shane’s shoulder. “And maybe don’t stare at him tomorrow like he’s a ticking emotional time bomb.”

Shane groaned into his palms again. “I hate this.”

“I know,” Hayden said cheerfully. “Welcome to liking a human disaster.”

Shane didn’t laugh. He couldn’t.

He picked up the phone again. Looked at the picture of a younger Ilya—focused, fierce, almost glowing with something intense. Then he remembered the man he knew now—quieter, withdrawn, gentle in ways he didn’t seem to realize.

He put the phone down.

“I won’t bring it up,” he said quietly. “But what if he finds out I know and thinks I was keeping secrets?”

“Then,” Hayden said with a shrug, “tell him the truth. That you didn’t want to hurt him.”

Shane’s chest tightened painfully. “I just... don’t want him to think I see him differently.”

“Do you?”

Shane didn’t hesitate. “No.”

“Then that’s your answer.”

Hayden squeezed his shoulder. “He likes you, Shane. Probably more than he’s ready to admit. So don’t freak out and ruin it before it even starts.”

Shane nodded slowly, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

It wasn’t the information itself that shook him.

It was imagining how much Ilya must have gone through. The rise. The pressure. The sudden end. The disappearance. The silence. And the way he’d looked last night, small and honest and brave enough to say he liked spending time with Shane.

Shane wasn’t angry Ilya hadn’t told him. He wasn’t anything close to angry. He just felt... protective.

More than he should. Way more than he should.

Hayden headed toward the weights area. “Try not to implode, okay?”

“No promises,” Shane muttered.

But he already knew what he was going to do. He was going to act normal. Pretend nothing had changed. Give Ilya the space to tell him on his own terms.

Because this wasn’t about Shane’s curiosity. It was about trust.

And God—he wanted Ilya to trust him.

More than anything.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Ilya had lied.

Not in a cruel way, not out of malice or calculation—he just lied to protect Shane. To protect himself. To hold onto some tiny sliver of control in a world where he had spent years having none.

He didn't need time.

Not really.

Every moment since that Saturday afternoon—the tea, the walk, the quiet smiles, the small confessions—had made it painfully clear what he wanted. What he wanted, with all the insistence and clarity of a puck sliding straight into an open goal, was Shane.

Everything else—the hesitation, the carefully measured distance, the walls he had built around himself—was a lie he no longer had the patience to maintain.

And so, when the opportunity arose... he took it.

Shane was at the gym that evening, finishing up with a client near the free weights. The light was fading outside, soft and gray through the large windows, making the space feel intimate in an almost accidental way. Ilya's bag was slung over his shoulder, and he had told himself he was just stopping by to return a book he had borrowed from the lounge area. Just casual. Innocuous. Totally believable.

And yet, every step toward Shane made his pulse spike. His heart thudded with a rapid, reckless rhythm that demanded attention.

Shane glanced up, catching sight of him. The second their eyes met, Ilya felt the familiar pull in his chest, that ache that told him how much he wanted Shane, how much he had already wanted him for weeks.

Shane smiled. Warm. Open. Nervous, maybe, the way he always was around Ilya. And Ilya felt his resolve harden.

No more waiting.

He stepped closer, hands tightening on his bag straps. The client moved away just as if the universe had cleared a path for him. Shane's attention was entirely on him now, and Ilya felt a heat spread across his chest that had nothing to do with the room temperature.

"Hey," Shane said, his voice gentle, calm, like everything was ordinary.

Ordinary.

Ilya wanted ordinary. He wanted more than ordinary.

“Hey,” he answered, stepping even closer, letting the bag fall to the floor.

Shane tilted his head slightly, a smile tugging at his lips. “You’re... not supposed to be here yet.”

“I had to see you,” Ilya admitted, the words slipping out before he could second-guess them. “Couldn’t wait.”

Shane blinked. Then that small smile widened just a fraction, a subtle quirk of the mouth that Ilya had memorized in countless small, stolen moments.

“Yeah?” Shane asked softly.

Ilya didn’t answer. He didn’t need words. Not now. Not with the heat in his chest, not with the thrum in his ears, not with the way Shane’s eyes held him like he already knew everything Ilya wanted.

He leaned forward. Carefully. Tentatively. Testing the space, the response, the possibility.

Shane didn’t move. Didn’t step back. Didn’t flinch.

And so, he kissed him.

Softly, deliberately, like the world had shrunk until it consisted only of them. Shane’s lips were warm and firm, the faintest taste of ginger ale lingering from earlier that week. Ilya pressed closer, wishing he could do more—touch more, pull Shane closer, feel him fully against him—but not here. Not at the gym. Not while the fluorescent lights hummed overhead and the faint echo of machines and clattering weights filled the space.

He had to be patient. They would have time. Later. Somewhere private. Somewhere they could be reckless together. For now, he could only kiss him.

Shane’s hands rose slowly, hesitantly, to rest at Ilya’s shoulders. The warmth of contact, of intention, made Ilya’s chest ache in a way that was both agonizing and exquisite. Shane’s lips moved slightly against his, tentative, exploring. Ilya let himself melt into it, letting go of the walls he’d held up for so long.

He pressed a little closer, savoring the way Shane responded, the subtle way he leaned in without hesitation, the quiet surrender in the way Shane’s hands flexed against his shoulders.

When they pulled back, barely an inch, their foreheads resting together, Ilya felt breathless in a way he hadn’t in years.

“You...” Shane started, voice thick and low.

“I know,” Ilya said quickly, brushing his lips against Shane’s again, soft, almost playful. “I know. I didn’t wait.”

Shane’s lips curved into a small, shy smile. “Good. Because...” He trailed off, and Ilya felt the pull in his chest intensify. “Because I’ve wanted this too.”

Ilya's hands moved briefly, brushing at Shane's arms, wanting to anchor the moment, wanting to memorize the warmth, the feel, the reality of it. He had wanted Shane for weeks, but the truth—touching Shane, holding him, tasting him—was different. Real. Immediate. Terrifying. Perfect.

"I want more," Ilya admitted in a whisper, almost to himself. "But not here."

Shane nodded slowly, understanding, a flicker of relief and something else—anticipation—passing through his eyes. "We'll have time," he said softly.

Ilya smiled, tilting his head slightly. "Yeah. We will."

It wasn't a promise. It wasn't planning. It was recognition of possibility, acknowledgment of the truth they were both feeling but had been careful not to fully name.

And for Ilya, that was enough.

They broke apart just slightly, but stayed close, foreheads brushing, breaths mingling. The world beyond the gym—the fluorescent lights, the distant clatter of weights, the faint hum of the heating system—faded into a blur.

He could have stayed like this forever, with Shane's warmth and presence close enough to feel every subtle movement, every tiny breath. But reality reminded him of itself—the gym was public, the risk of being seen too great.

And yet, the knowledge that Shane wanted him too, that Shane hadn't pulled away, that Shane would be willing to wait for him, made Ilya's chest feel impossibly light.

He knew he could hold himself back, wait for the right place and time, and still feel like this. Still feel Shane.

The thought made him grin slightly. Shane noticed, his own lips quirking upward.

"You're smiling," Shane said softly.

"Because I can," Ilya said, brushing a thumb lightly along Shane's arm. "Because you're here. Because..." He swallowed, voice catching. "Because I like you. More than I ever expected."

Shane's eyes softened, the freckles on his cheeks visible even in the artificial light, warmth spreading through his face. "I like you too," he admitted.

It was simple. Honest. Enough.

Ilya wanted to say more, wanted to confess every hidden thing he'd felt for weeks, wanted to tear down every wall he'd ever built. But he didn't. Not now. Not here.

Not when there would be time.

Time to be reckless. Time to be honest. Time to explore.

For now, he could settle for the quiet certainty of Shane's presence, the warmth of their lips brushing together, the soft intimacy that existed in this stolen moment.

"I'll see you later," Ilya whispered, almost reluctantly, not wanting to move away.

Shane nodded, voice low. "I'll be here. Waiting."

Ilya smiled, letting Shane step back, giving them both space. He picked up his bag, slinging it over his shoulder, every step feeling lighter than it had in months. He had acted. He had been brave. He had kissed Shane.

And that was the beginning. Not the end. Not everything. But the start of what they could be.

As he left the gym, the winter air hit him again, cold against his cheeks, sharp and invigorating. And yet, for the first time in weeks, he didn't care about the cold, the distance, the complications. He had Shane.

Not all of Shane. Not yet. Not fully.

But enough.

And enough was... everything he could have asked for.

He smiled to himself, already thinking about the next time, the next place, the next moment.

Where they could kiss again. And maybe, just maybe, let the rest of the world fade completely away.

-

He wasn't sure when the idea had rooted itself in his mind. Maybe sometime during practice, when Shane laughed at one of the kids' terrible jokes. Maybe when Shane turned pink at a compliment. Maybe when he looked at Ilya like he was someone gentle instead of someone broken.

But by evening, Ilya couldn't ignore it anymore.

He wanted Shane near him. Not at the rink. Not at the gym. Not in some public place where the world hummed around them and he could pretend the tension was only in his head.

He wanted Shane alone.

So he invited him.

He expected a pause. A stutter. A polite excuse.

Instead, Shane said, "Yeah. I'd... I'd like that," with a shy smile and freckles warming across his cheeks.

Now, standing in his apartment—warm light, soft shadows, the quiet hum of the radiator—Ilya felt nervous in a way he wasn't used to. He had lived through pressure bigger than this. Crowds, coaches, games that could break him.

But this?

This felt like something that could undo him entirely.

Shane stood just inside the doorway, taking in Ilya's apartment like it was a secret offered carefully. It was small but clean, structured, cozy—the kitchen on the left, the couch on the right, shelves lined with plants (the only things Ilya allowed himself to care for consistently), and warm lights instead of cold overhead bulbs.

"I like it," Shane said softly.

Ilya pretended not to feel relief loosen his shoulders. "It is not much."

"It's... warm," Shane said, stepping in farther. "It feels like you."

That made something low in Ilya's chest twist.

"You hungry?" he asked, turning to the kitchen mostly to hide his face.

Shane hovered near the counter like he wasn't sure he was allowed to sit. "A little. Did you cook?"

"Yes." He tried to sound casual. He did not succeed. Shane's smile told him so.

Ilya's hands weren't steady while he plated the food. It wasn't fancy—chicken roasted with lemon and herbs, potatoes, a salad he made mostly because he knew Shane actually liked salad. He wasn't used to cooking for someone else.

He didn't look at Shane while they ate. He didn't trust what his expression might reveal. But he listened to the soft clink of Shane's fork, the quiet hum of approval when he took the first bite.

"This is really good," Shane murmured.

Ilya shrugged, though the warmth in his chest spread. "I can follow a recipe."

"No," Shane insisted gently. "It tastes like you care."

Ilya had to put his fork down for a moment.

Shane was dangerous with how softly he said things. With how much weight his kindness carried.

After dinner, Ilya made tea. Shane loved tea. Ilya didn't understand it—tea tasted like flavored water to him sometimes—but he made it anyway. Shane's face lit up when he realized.

“Thank you,” he said, truly touched.

“It is just tea,” Ilya muttered.

But Shane looked at him like it wasn’t.

They moved to the couch. Close enough to feel the heat of each other, not quite touching. The air buzzed. Every tiny movement pulled Ilya’s attention—the way Shane tucked one knee under himself, the way he held the mug in both hands, the soft curl of steam against his freckles.

They talked, but the details blurred. Something about Shane’s parents. Something about Ilya’s day at practice. Something about music, routines, foods they liked and didn’t like.

None of it mattered as much as the space shrinking between them.

There was a moment—quiet, natural—when Shane’s knee brushed Ilya’s. A tiny touch.

Shane froze. Ilya felt it like a spark.

And for the first time, he didn’t look away. He let himself take Shane in fully—the soft mouth, the wide brown eyes, the slight nervous bite to his lip. Beautiful. Earnest. So terribly earnest.

“Shane,” Ilya said, voice low, rougher than he intended.

Shane met his gaze, breath catching just slightly. “Yeah?”

There it was. The invitation. Wordless. Trembling. Wanting.

Ilya leaned in slowly, giving Shane every chance to stop him. He wasn’t reckless with this. Not with him.

Shane didn’t move away.

He tilted forward instead.

Their lips met softly, almost tentative. It wasn’t a crash or a claim, but something warm and careful, a slow press that curled heat low in Ilya’s stomach. Shane made a small, surprised noise—one Ilya immediately wanted to memorize, to hear again.

Shane’s hand touched his jaw, light as a breath. And Ilya couldn’t help it—his own hand slid around Shane’s waist, pulling him an inch closer, feeling the shape of him through his sweater.

It felt like something he’d been waiting for without knowing.

They kissed again, deeper now, but still slow. Sweet. Testing. Learning.

Shane tasted faintly of the tea he'd loved so much. His mouth was warm. His breathing uneven. He clung to Ilya with a softness that undid him in ways he didn't expect.

He wanted more. Not sex. Not rushing. Not something thoughtless.

More of *this*. More of Shane. More of the warmth that settled into his bones when Shane leaned into him like he belonged there.

They had time.

He pulled back slightly, enough to rest his forehead against Shane's.

Shane's eyes fluttered open, pupils blown, cheeks flushed. "Hi," he whispered, smiling.

Ilya's chest tightened. "Hi," he echoed.

Shane's hand slid down to hold his, fingers intertwining naturally, like they had always been meant to.

They sat like that for a long moment—hands held, breath shared, the quiet hum of the apartment surrounding them like a cocoon.

"Ilya?" Shane murmured.

"Yes?"

"I really... really like you."

The words were simple. But they hit hard.

Ilya exhaled slowly, thumb brushing Shane's knuckles. "Good," he whispered, unable to stop the small, honest smile growing on his lips. "Because I want you."

Not claimed. Not owned. Wanted.

His voice dropped. "And we will have time. For... everything."

Shane flushed deeper, eyes flicking to Ilya's mouth again.

Not tonight. But soon. Very soon.

For now, Ilya pulled him closer on the couch, letting Shane settle against his side, their hands still linked.

It was enough. For a beginning, it was perfect.

-

Ilya only wanted a normal workout.

Nothing dramatic, nothing complicated. Just weights, quiet, and enough endorphins to settle the restless energy in his chest—the kind that had been buzzing there since he'd kissed Shane. Since Shane kissed him back. Since everything started tilting into something terrifying and extraordinary at the same time.

But the second he walked into the gym, he knew something was off.

Hayden was at the front desk, leaning against it like he owned the place. He was usually easy-going, always smirking at some bad joke or teasing Shane about being too serious. Today... no smile. No joke. Just cool, sharp eyes that snapped to Ilya the moment he entered.

Great.

Ilya pretended not to notice and headed for the lockers. He made it maybe seven steps before Hayden pushed off the desk and cut him off cleanly.

No hesitation. No polite “hey.”, just a, “We need to talk.”

Ilya felt his shoulders stiffen automatically. Old instinct. Conflict-mode. He almost straightened the way he used to before stepping onto the ice for a game where he knew a fight might break out.

But this wasn't the same. He wasn't the same.

“About what?” Ilya asked, voice flat.

Hayden crossed his arms. He was shorter than Ilya by a good margin, but his stare didn't waver. It wasn't aggressive. It was... assessing. Protective in the way only someone who deeply loved and fiercely guarded their people could be.

“Shane,” Hayden said.

Ilya's stomach did a stupid, embarrassing twist. He tried to keep his face neutral. “What about him?”

Hayden huffed a laugh—disbelieving, humorless. “Don't play dumb. Not with me.”

“I am not—”

“Save it.”

Ilya shut up.

Hayden stepped closer, voice lowering. “I know you and Shane are... whatever you are. I don't care what stage you're at. I don't care if you've only kissed or if you're planning a wedding tomorrow. What I care about is one thing.”

Ilya felt it before hearing it. He knew where this was going.

“Don't hurt him.”

The words were simple. Too simple. They hit harder than any threat.

Ilya had been yelled at by coaches, shoved into boards, called names in the heat of games. He'd been confronted by teammates, opponents, journalists. He knew how to raise his defenses, how to push back, how to let anger sharpen him.

But this?

This was something he didn't have armor for.

He straightened. "I am not planning to hurt him."

"Good," Hayden said. "But listen carefully." He jabbed a finger toward Ilya's chest. "Shane... he doesn't open up easily. He's shy. He's anxious. He overthinks everything. He likes you, Ilya. Really likes you. I've never seen him this... flustered. Or this hopeful."

Ilya swallowed once. Hard.

Hopeful. For him.

Hayden continued, relentless. "So if you're here for something casual, or something temporary, or something you're going to vanish from when it gets too real—don't bother. Walk away now."

"I did not say—"

"You didn't have to." Hayden's eyes narrowed. "I did my homework. I know about your hockey career. The injury. The drop-off. The... everything. Shane hasn't asked, and you haven't told him. That's your business, fine. But what isn't fine is letting him stumble into something blind."

Ilya felt heat crawl into his throat—not wrongness, not guilt—just old shame, the kind buried deep in places he didn't let anyone look.

He forced himself to stay steady. "I am not lying to him."

"Maybe not," Hayden said. "But you're leaving things out. You get why that looks risky, right?"

Ilya opened his mouth. Closed it.

Risky. Yes. It was risky. He knew that. He lived with that.

But hearing it from someone who loved Shane—it hit different.

"I am figuring things out," Ilya said quietly. "It is not easy."

Hayden studied him for a long moment. Something in his posture softened—but only barely.

"Good," he finally said. "Figure them out. Just don't do it at Shane's expense."

Ilya felt the words settle like cold water inside him. Heavy. Sobering.

“I care about him,” Ilya said, surprising himself with how steady it came out. “More than I was prepared for. I am not going to disappear on him. I am not going to hurt him.”

Hayden held his gaze another beat, then nodded. “Then we’re fine.”

He stepped back, tension easing from his shoulders.

“But,” he added, eyes still sharp, “if you screw up—if you make him cry—you’re dealing with me.”

Ilya almost smiled. It wasn’t amusement. It was something warmer.

“I understand,” he said.

Hayden’s mouth twitched like he wasn’t expecting that answer. He gave a short nod, clapped Ilya once on the shoulder—hard enough to be a warning, soft enough to be acknowledgment—and walked back to the front desk.

Leaving Ilya standing there in the middle of the gym, pulse tight, hands curled, chest strangely full.

He’d had confrontations before. He’d had people try to intimidate him, provoke him, push him.

But this one mattered. Because Shane mattered. Because he wanted to do right by him. Because the thought of hurting him—even by accident—made something cold and panicked curl inside his ribs.

Hayden wasn’t wrong.

Shane deserved honesty. He deserved gentleness. He deserved someone who didn’t run at the first sign of depth.

And for the first time in a long time, Ilya hoped—really hoped—that he could be that someone.

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Shane hadn't stopped smiling since it happened.

He tried—honestly, he tried—but the stupid grin kept creeping back onto his face like his cheeks were in open rebellion. He'd be reorganizing dumbbells, wiping down a machine, checking invoices, and suddenly... the memory would hit him again.

Ilya kissing him.

Not a dream. Not a desperate wish or a scenario he replayed while lying awake at night.

A real kiss. Ilya's hands on his waist, Ilya's breath warm against his cheek, Ilya pulling him in like he was something wanted, something chosen. Something he wasn't sure he'd ever been before.

And Shane just—floated.

Literally. He felt weightless. Ridiculous. Light enough to drift off the floor. He'd walked home only to realize halfway there that he didn't remember half the journey.

And Hayden noticed immediately.

The next morning at the gym, Shane lasted all of two minutes before Hayden narrowed his eyes like a hawk catching the scent of gossip.

"You," Hayden said, pointing at him with a protein bar, "are disgusting."

Shane blinked. "Good morning to you too?"

Hayden bit off half the protein bar without breaking eye contact. "You're smiling."

"I smile sometimes."

"Not like that. That's a 'my crush finally kissed me' smile. That's a 'somebody held my hand and now I believe in angels' smile. It's gross. Stop it."

Shane rolled his eyes, but his cheeks burned. "You're imagining things."

"Am I?" Hayden leaned his elbows on the desk, smirk widening. "You look like you're floating. Actually floating. Did Ilya kiss you or did he teach you how to levitate?"

Shane groaned. Loudly. "Please stop."

"Oh my God, he did," Hayden said, practically vibrating. "He actually did. Shane Hollander finally got kissed by the hockey man."

Shane froze.

Hayden didn't notice—thank God—too caught up in his teasing to see Shane's heartbeat launching itself into his throat.

"Hockey man," Hayden had said.

So Hayden knew, of course he knew. Shane wasn't sure, but the effect was the same—an icy crack right through the warm fog he'd been floating in.

Hayden was still rambling, "I bet it was good. It was good, right? Did he pick you up? He looks like he could pick you up—"

"Hayden," Shane said sharply.

That got his attention. Hayden paused mid-sentence, eyebrows lifting. "What's wrong with you?" he asked, genuine concern replacing smugness.

Shane swallowed. "Nothing. Just—drop it. Please."

Hayden studied him, then nodded once. "Okay. But you know you can talk to me if—"

"I know," Shane said quietly.

But he didn't know how to talk about this. How could he? He wasn't even sure what he *felt*.

He was floating, yes—glowing, even—but beneath it was something tangled and heavy. Because Shane knew Ilya's secret.

Not from Ilya. Not because Ilya trusted him. Not because Ilya opened up.

But because Hayden found an old article and showed it to him like it was nothing more than interesting trivia.

Ilya Rozanov: prodigy winger drafted young, career cut short, severe injury, controversy, disappearance from pro hockey.

Shane didn't know anything about hockey. He didn't understand most of the terms in the article. But he understood heartbreak. He understood shame. He understood loss. He understood why Ilya never talked about it.

And now Shane had to pretend he didn't know. Pretend like nothing was swirling in the back of his mind. Pretend he wasn't carrying something that didn't belong to him.

He wasn't angry at Ilya. Not at all.

He was just... stuck.

He wanted to talk to Ilya. He wanted to say, *You don't have to hide that from me*. He wanted to prove he could handle all the pieces of Ilya, even the broken ones.

But how was he supposed to bring it up? *Hey, I found out about your past because my best friend is nosy and the internet exists*—yeah, no. That wasn't happening.

He hated secrets. Hated being the one who knew something he shouldn't and hated that the one person he wanted to be honest with—completely honest with—hadn't chosen to be honest with him first.

And yet... Shane understood why.

He really did.

Everyone had timelines for their wounds.

But understanding didn't make it simpler to navigate the lie-by-omission building between them.

He'd texted Ilya the night before—light, flirty, careful—and Ilya texted back. Slow, dry-humored, charming in a way Shane hadn't realized could be charming.

They had plans to meet again sometime this week. Maybe tonight if schedules aligned. Maybe tomorrow.

Shane wanted to kiss him again. God, he wanted to kiss him again so badly.

He just didn't know how to hold both things at once: the joy and the fear. The floating and the sinking.

He tried to shake it off, went to check the squat racks, did a round on the floor, but the tension didn't fade.

Around noon, he ended up back at the front desk, staring blankly at the scheduling software.

Hayden wandered over, sipping a smoothie. "You good? You look like someone told you leg day was banned."

Shane exhaled through his nose. "I'm fine."

"Liar."

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are," Hayden said. "Is this about Ilya?"

Shane stiffened. Too obvious.

Hayden sighed. "Look, I'm not trying to get in your business. I'm just saying—you like him. He clearly likes you. Don't overthink yourself into a hole. Don't make problems that aren't problems."

Shane rubbed his forehead. "I'm not overthinking."

“You definitely are.”

Shane stared at the computer screen until his reflection blurred.

He wanted to tell Hayden everything. He couldn't. It wasn't his story. And the thought of betraying Ilya's privacy—even unintentionally—made his stomach twist.

After all, Ilya had shared so much already—his family, his childhood, things that must have been so hard to speak aloud.

Just not hockey and not the wound that shaped everything.

And maybe... one kiss wasn't enough to bridge that gap. Maybe they weren't there yet.

Shane took a deep breath.

He needed to trust Ilya to tell him when he was ready.

He needed to trust himself not to push. Finally, he said, “I'm... trying, okay?”

Hayden softened. “Shane. Buddy. You don't have to try so hard. Let him tell you things when he wants to.”

Shane nodded, throat tight. “Yeah.”

“And until then,” Hayden added with a grin, “maybe enjoy the fact that you got kissed by the hottest man in a fifty-mile radius?”

Shane snorted despite himself. “Hayden.”

“What? It's true.”

Shane rolled his eyes—then froze as the door chimed.

Because Ilya had just walked in.

In workout clothes. Hair still damp from a shower, maybe. Shoulders broad enough to block the doorway. Eyes searching the room until they landed on Shane—softening instantly.

And Shane felt it again.

That floating. That helpless smiling. That pull in his chest that was half joy, half fear.

Ilya walked toward him with a small, private smile—the kind he didn't show anyone else.

Hayden muttered, “Oh boy. You're gone,” and stepped aside.

And Shane, heart racing, met Ilya halfway.

“Hi,” Ilya murmured, voice low and warm.

“Hi,” Shane breathed.

And all his worries—the article, the secret, the uncertainty—shifted, not disappearing, but moving aside long enough for him to feel what mattered most:

Ilya was here.

-

When Ilya invited him out—really invited him out, not coffee-after-practice or a shared walk home—Shane almost dropped his phone.

A date? With him?

He typed back *yes* too fast, stared at the sent message like an idiot, then spent the rest of the day pretending he was normal.

He wasn't normal. Not even close.

He floated through work. He reorganized an entire shelf of supplements twice. He told Hayden, who whistled like he'd just witnessed a miracle and said, “Well, you're screwed now. Better wear something kissable.” Then he cackled when Shane nearly choked on his smoothie.

But by seven, Shane was calmer. Well—calm-ish. His stomach fizzed. His fingers wouldn't stop fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. But he walked to the little burger place a few blocks from the gym like a functioning adult.

Ilya was already there, hands in his pockets, leaning against the wall like he wasn't aware of how stupidly attractive he looked in the winter light. When he saw Shane, something softened—his shoulders, his eyes, his whole expression.

“You came,” Ilya said quietly.

“Yeah,” Shane breathed. “Of course.”

Ilya held the door open, and they went inside.

It was simple. Warm. Smelled like grilled onions and nostalgia. A place where no one knew them or cared who they were. Perfect.

Ilya ordered the whole menu—burger, fries, a milkshake, something else fried Shane didn't even recognize. Shane ordered... a grilled chicken salad.

Ilya stared at him over the counter. “Really?”

“What?” Shane asked, defensively.

“You come to burger place,” Ilya said, “and order grass.”

“It’s not grass.”

“Looks like grass,” Ilya said, deadpan.

Shane fought a smile. “It’s good.”

Ilya shook his head like he was suffering. “You are strange.”

“Healthy,” Shane corrected.

“Strange,” Ilya insisted, but his mouth twitched, betraying the fondness under the tease.

They ate in a booth tucked in the corner. Ilya demolished his food with the enthusiasm of a man who lifted teenagers on skates for fun. Shane poked at his salad while stealing glances at Ilya, who kept stealing glances right back, neither of them subtle.

It wasn’t awkward. It wasn’t tense. It wasn’t anything except... good.

Simple. Easy. Warm.

Shane laughed more in that hour than he had all week. Ilya told him about a kid on his team who tried to skate with a sticky note stuck to his face. Shane told him about an elderly gym member who insisted the treadmill was haunted.

When they finished, Ilya nudged his knee under the table. Just a little. Just enough that Shane felt his pulse jump.

“You want to... come over?” Ilya asked.

Shane froze.

Not because he didn’t want to. Because he did. Too much.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

-

“Make yourself comfortable,” Ilya said, hanging up his coat.

Shane sat on the couch. His heart was beating in his throat.

He didn’t know who moved first. Maybe neither of them. Maybe both. One second they were sitting apart, the next—

Ilya’s hand was on Shane’s jaw, warm and directive, and his mouth was on Shane’s, and Shane didn’t have time to think, only to feel—

The kiss hit him like stepping into sunlight. Confident. Hungry. Real.

Shane gripped Ilya’s shirt, pulled him closer. Ilya made a low sound—God, that sound—and kissed him deeper. Their knees bumped, their chests pressed, their breathing tangled.

Ilya shifted, pushing Shane gently back against the couch cushions, bracketing him with his arms. Shane gasped into his mouth, fingers sliding up the hard lines of Ilya's back.

Heat built fast, sharp, consuming. Kissing turned into kissing harder, then into mouths brushing open, then into hands slipping—

Ilya's lips trailed to Shane's jaw, his throat. Shane's head tipped back helplessly. His hands slid under the hem of Ilya's shirt, feeling skin, muscle, warmth.

And then—Ilya froze.

Completely.

His breath stuttered. His hands went still. Shane blinked, dazed and confused, as Ilya pushed up and away, sitting back abruptly like something had burned him.

Shane sat up too, breath shaky. "What—what's wrong?"

"I can't," Ilya said, voice raw.

Shane's heart dropped so fast it hurt. "Did I—did I do something wrong?"

"No." Ilya scrubbed a hand through his hair. He wouldn't look at him. "No, you didn't do anything."

"Then what is it?"

"It's..." Ilya swallowed hard. "It's too fast."

Shane felt heat flood his face—embarrassment, confusion, frustration all wound into one. "Okay, but—you invited me here."

"I know."

"You kissed me."

"I know."

"You—" Shane gestured vaguely at the couch, at their rumpled clothes, at everything they had been doing. "We were literally—"

"I know," Ilya said again, pained. "I want you. God, Shane, I want you so much it scares me."

Shane's chest tightened. "Then why stop?"

"Because—" Ilya exhaled sharply. "Because I don't want to mess this up."

And that... that made Shane freeze.

"This?" he whispered.

“Yes,” Ilya said roughly. “You and me. Whatever this is. I don’t want to ruin it by moving too fast.”

Shane blinked hard. Something stung behind his eyes. “You think sleeping with me would ruin things?”

“I think I would lose control,” Ilya said, voice trembling in a way that did not match the composed man Shane thought he knew. “And I cannot—cannot let myself do that with you. Not yet.”

Shane wanted to laugh, Ilya is acting like he lives in Vampire Diaries or something.

Shane stared at him. At the strong, controlled coach who never let anything slip. At the man who pulled him in and then pushed himself away with equal desperation.

And for the first time, Shane felt something sharp.

Not hurt. Not anger. Something very close to frustration—because he knew Ilya wasn’t seeing him clearly.

“Ilya,” Shane said, quieter now but steadier. “I’m not fragile.”

Ilya’s head snapped up.

Shane continued, voice thick. “I know I wear my heart on my sleeve. I know I get nervous and blush and overthink. I know I’m... soft.”

Ilya’s expression softened immediately, painfully.

“But that doesn’t mean I can’t handle intimacy,” Shane said. “Not just sex. All of it. Wanting. Being wanted. Being close.”

Ilya swallowed, chest rising and falling too fast.

“I can take the next step,” Shane said, eyes locked on his. “If you want to. If you’re scared, we can go slow. But don’t stop because you think you’re protecting me.”

Silence.

Hot, heavy, charged.

Ilya looked at him like he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. Like Shane had just shifted into someone he didn’t expect—and maybe should have.

Finally, Ilya whispered, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Shane exhaled slowly. “Then trust me to tell you if something’s too much.”

Ilya closed his eyes.

Shane waited.

After a long moment, Ilya moved back toward him—slowly this time. Carefully. He cupped Shane’s face again, forehead leaning against his.

“I want you,” he whispered. “So much.”

Shane’s heartbeat skipped. “I want you too.”

Ilya kissed him again—gentler this time, like apology and promise all at once.

And when he pulled back, breath unsteady, he said, “Stay. Not for... that. Just stay.”

Shane nodded.

-

Shane woke up to warmth.

Not the sunlight kind. The *person* kind.

The kind where someone’s arm is draped across his waist. The kind where someone’s steady breath ghosts over the back of his neck. The kind where his body aches in ways that felt—well.

Good. Really, really *good*.

For a moment, he didn’t move. Didn’t open his eyes. Didn’t risk breaking the perfect stillness of the morning. He just lay there, letting every awareness settle.

He was in Ilya’s bed. He had spent the night in Ilya’s bed. They had kissed—God, they had kissed—and then taken the next step, slow and careful and full of whispered checks and touches that felt more like trust than anything Shane had ever done before.

No regret. Zero. None.

Shane smiled into the pillow.

He’d worried he might feel overwhelmed afterward, or embarrassed, or unsure. He’d worried he’d wake up and overthink everything until the edges of joy dulled.

Instead? He felt grounded. Soft. Safe.

And maybe a little sore. But in a nice, brag-about-it-to-your-best-friend way. If Hayden weren’t such a little gremlin, Shane might’ve considered telling him.

Behind him, Ilya shifted. His arm tightened instinctively around Shane’s middle before he went still again.

Shane turned slightly.

Ilya was half asleep, hair mussed, face relaxed in a way Shane never saw during the day—even when he smiled. His guard was down completely.

It did something awful and warm to Shane's chest.

He reached up, brushing a strand of hair off Ilya's forehead.

Ilya's eyes cracked open. "Morning," he murmured, voice low and rough with sleep.

Shane melted. Actually melted. "Morning."

There was a small pause, then Ilya touched Shane's cheek gently. "Are you... okay?"

Shane's throat tightened. He nodded. "More than okay."

Relief flickered over Ilya's face—so visible it made Shane's stomach dip. Ilya wasn't casual about last night, then. He hadn't treated it like nothing. He cared.

Good.

Because Shane cared too. Maybe too much. Maybe in a way that terrified him a little.

But he wasn't going to run.

Ilya kissed his forehead—slow, lingering—and then pulled away with clear reluctance. "I have to go. The kids have early practice."

"Right," Shane whispered, sitting up as Ilya did. "I should head home to change."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "You mean Hayden's."

"Yes," Shane groaned. "I live with him."

"And he will say something," Ilya said, deadpan.

"He will say *everything*," Shane corrected.

Ilya smirked. "I look forward to it."

"Why?" Shane asked, horrified.

"Because he will tease *you*, not me."

"Unfair."

"Very," Ilya agreed, leaning over to kiss him again.

Shane kissed back, slower this time, already wanting the next time, already planning excuses for why he might need to stop by Ilya's place tonight.

When they finally separated—after far too long—Ilya walked him to the door, touched his jaw one more time, and sent him off with a soft, "Text me later."

Shane left the apartment grinning like he had a secret.

Which... he did. A very big one. One named Ilya Rozanov.

-

Hayden wasn't home when Shane slipped in to grab clothes and shower. Thank God. Shane wasn't sure he could handle a full interrogation at eight in the morning.

But he also wasn't stupid—Hayden was absolutely going to notice that Shane hadn't slept there.

And then Shane would combust.

He showered fast, dressed faster, sent Ilya a good-morning text even though it had only been ten minutes since they parted, and headed out the door with a stupid soft smile he could not wipe off.

Everything hurt in a good way. Everything felt warm.

He walked into the gym and Hayden was waiting.

Literally waiting. Arms crossed. Foot tapping. Smirk so wide it should've been illegal.

"Ohhhhhh ho ho," Hayden said the exact second Shane stepped inside.

Shane froze like he'd been caught stealing.

"No," Shane said immediately. "Whatever you think, no."

Hayden's eyes sparkled like a cartoon villain. "Buddy."

"Don't."

"You didn't come home last night."

Shane's face burst into flames. "I—fell asleep."

"At whose place?" Hayden demanded, even though the answer was obvious.

Shane made a noise that was probably English but maybe not.

Hayden gasped dramatically. "Oh my GOD, he got you."

"He did NOT 'get me'," Shane hissed, mortified.

"So you got *him*?"

"HAYDEN!"

Hayden held up his hands, grinning like a man possessed. "I'm just asking! For clarity! For science!"

“We’re not discussing this.”

“Oh, this is ABSOLUTELY being discussed.”

Shane covered his face with both hands. “Please stop.”

“Nope,” Hayden said cheerfully. “I live for this. Eat this for breakfast. This fuels my soul.”

Shane groaned into his palms.

Hayden leaned forward. “You’re glowing.”

“I am not—”

“You are literally glowing.” Hayden circled him like he was inspecting a prize cow at a county fair. “Hair slightly messy. Walk a little stiff—hello, cardio. And—” he pointed at Shane’s dumb, involuntary smile, “—that.”

Shane tried to wipe his expression neutral but his mouth refused to cooperate. “Hayden.”

“Shane.”

“Please,” Shane begged. “Please just... let me have this without—”

“Without me celebrating your sexual liberation?”

“Goodbye,” Shane snapped, trying to walk away.

Hayden followed him. “I am *so proud*.”

“You’re the worst.”

“I’m the best.”

“I hate you.”

“You adore me, don’t lie.” Hayden wiggled his eyebrows. “Come on. Tell your best friend the details. Ilya looks like the type who—”

“Stop talking.”

Hayden cackled loud enough to echo off the weights.

Shane wanted to sink into the floor.

But under the humiliation, under the embarrassment and the heat flooding his cheeks...

He felt happy. Really, truly happy.

Because last night had been good. Because Ilya had been gentle and attentive, checking every step, asking permission with touch and breath instead of words. Because Shane had felt safe.

Wanted. Seen.

And because waking up next to Ilya hadn't scared him away—it had made him want more. A whole lot more.

Hayden finally took pity, slinging an arm around Shane's shoulders. "I'm happy for you," Hayden said quietly this time, just genuine warmth under the teasing. "Really."

Shane let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "Thanks."

"But also?" Hayden added brightly.

"Oh God."

"I reserve the right to be absolutely insufferable about this forever."

Shane groaned again. Hayden laughed again.

And even through the mortification, Shane smiled.

Because yeah—he'd just spent the night with Ilya Rozanov. Yeah—he was walking strange. Yeah—his best friend was bullying him.

But also?

He didn't regret a single second. Not the dinner, not the kissing, not the closeness, not the morning. Not anything.

He couldn't wait to see Ilya again.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Shane fell asleep faster than Ilya expected.

Maybe he shouldn't have been surprised. Shane had spent the whole evening glowing, buzzing with that mix of shyness and want that made Ilya's pulse jump every time he looked at him. Dinner, walking back to Ilya's place with their hands bumping together but never fully holding until Shane finally reached out—hesitant, warm. Then the soft kiss at the door. Then not-so-soft kisses inside. Clothes hitting the floor. Whispered things Ilya still wasn't sure he deserved.

And now Shane slept like a man who trusted him.

That was the part that undid Ilya the most.

Trust wasn't something he was used to receiving. Not like this. Not warm, unguarded, full-body trust, wrapped in the shape of a man who made Ilya feel like he'd stepped into a life he hadn't known he wanted.

Shane lay on his stomach, cheek pressed into Ilya's pillow, one hand tucked under it. His hair was a mess—flattened on one side, wild on the other, falling across his forehead. The freckles scattered over his nose and the tops of his cheeks looked even softer in the low light, like constellations someone painted just for Ilya to memorize.

He shouldn't stare. He knew that.

He did it anyway.

His bed smelled like Shane now. Warm sugar and the faintest hint of soap. And underneath it all: heat. The kind that lingered even after everything slowed down.

Ilya pushed himself up on one elbow, careful not to disturb the man sleeping against his shoulder. Shane made a small sound—half sigh, half contented hum—and nuzzled closer.

Ilya froze.

Then melted.

How long had it been since someone held him like this? Since someone drifted to sleep without fear beside him? Since he'd been allowed to look at another person and think *I want to keep this*?

Years. Maybe never.

He brushed a curl back from Shane's forehead. His fingers trembled.

Not from nerves.

From something bigger. Something heavier. Something that lodged in his chest with the weight of a truth he wasn't ready to name aloud.

He wanted Shane. He wanted *this*. He wanted tomorrow morning, and the one after it, and the one after that.

And that terrified him.

He wasn't good at this part. Feelings. Soft things. Things that asked him to open his mouth and say what hurt, what mattered, what scared him.

He'd been raised to fight, to skate, to endure. Not to need.

But then Shane shifted, pressing his face into Ilya's ribs, breath warm on his skin, and needing didn't feel like weakness. It felt like being human. Like waking up from a life he'd been half-asleep inside.

Shane's eyelashes fluttered. Not waking—just dreaming. His lips parted slightly.

Beautiful.

God, he was *beautiful*.

Ilya bit the inside of his cheek, trying to steady himself, but the ache didn't dull. It sharpened. It made his chest feel full enough to crack open.

What was he supposed to do with emotions like these?

He traced a fingertip along one freckle on Shane's shoulder. Just a soft touch, nothing that would wake him. Shane's skin was warm beneath his fingers, the kind of warmth that seeped slowly into Ilya's hand and curled around his heart.

He remembered earlier—Shane pulling him closer with unexpected confidence, whispering his name like a promise. The way Shane touched him, careful and sure, as though he already knew the contours of Ilya's edges and refused to be cut by them.

Why?

Why did Shane choose him?

Ilya didn't deserve someone gentle. Someone patient. Someone who laughed like sunlight and looked at Ilya like he wasn't a ruin held together by tape and stubbornness.

But here he was.

In Ilya's bed.

Wrapped around him like something precious.

Ilya's throat tightened. He dropped his head back to the pillow and stared at the ceiling for a long moment, trying to breathe around the feeling swelling inside him.

He'd thought playing professionally had taught him intensity. That pressure, adrenaline, high-stakes moments—those were the peak of feeling.

He'd been wrong.

This was worse. This was better. This was everything.

Slowly, he looked back down at Shane.

The freckles. The soft parting of his lips. The faint flush on his cheeks that hadn't faded yet. The curve of muscle along his back where the sheet slipped low.

Mine, something inside Ilya whispered.

He shut his eyes. No. He couldn't think like that. Not yet. Not until he knew Shane wanted something that lasting. But the thought lingered, whispering again each time he looked at him.

Mine.

He breathed out slowly, brushing his thumb over Shane's knuckles. "You do not even know," he murmured softly, barely a sound, "what you are doing to me."

Shane stirred but didn't wake.

Ilya let the back of his fingers skim lightly down Shane's arm, admiring the way his skin dimpled under the touch. He traced another freckle. And another. And another. He had no idea why he was so drawn to them, only that they made Shane feel real in a way nothing else ever had.

Maybe that was the truth: Shane made everything real.

The laughter. The gentleness. The fragile hope Ilya thought had died years ago. The good things that came after bad things. The simple joys, like holding hands on a walk or leaning together on a couch or sharing ginger ale.

He swallowed.

He was falling.

Hard.

He never fell.

Not like this. Not into someone whose smile felt like a hand around his heart. Not into someone who made him think about coming home instead of running.

A soft sound escaped Shane's lips—something between a sigh and a tiny giggle, like he was dreaming of something good.

Ilya smiled without meaning to.

He reached out and brushed his thumb along the curve of Shane's cheek.

"You are trouble," he whispered. "Beautiful trouble."

Shane breathed in, slow and deep, before settling again. His hand slid instinctively across Ilya's waist, holding him even in sleep.

That nearly undid him.

Ilya closed his eyes. Let the warmth settle. Let the fear settle beside it. Let the possibility bloom in the quiet.

Maybe he didn't know how to do this. Maybe he didn't know how to talk about feelings. Maybe he didn't know where this was headed.

But he knew one thing with terrifying, steady certainty, he didn't want this night to be the only one.

He didn't want this—Shane, freckles, warmth, trust—to become a memory he'd avoid thinking about.

He wanted to wake up beside him. He wanted to cook breakfast badly and pretend he'd done fine. He wanted to listen to Shane ramble about clients and ginger ale preferences. He wanted to see him in the rink stands someday. He wanted... more. Whatever "more" looked like.

Ilya exhaled shakily and leaned down, pressing a gentle kiss to Shane's temple.

"Spokoynoy nochi," he murmured—a rare softness in his mother tongue.

Shane didn't stir. He only curled closer, face pressed to Ilya's chest like that was where he belonged.

Ilya wrapped an arm around him carefully.

And for the first time in a long time, he let himself feel it all.

The fear. The hope. The want. The quiet, impossible wonder of holding something gentle and choosing not to let go.

He whispered into Shane's hair, so quietly no one could call it brave, "I think I am falling for you."

Shane didn't hear him.

But Ilya did.

And that was enough to change everything.

-

Ilya could always tell when he wasn't fully paying attention on the ice.

It was in the way the puck taps sounded—just half a second late. In the way the kids' lines felt a little looser. In the way he kept forgetting which group was supposed to be doing edge work and which was doing shooting drills.

It was in how many times his eyes drifted up toward the bleachers, even though he knew, logically, Shane would be at work, not secretly watching morning practice.

He exhaled through his nose and told himself—again—to focus.

But it was useless.

Every thought, every space between instructions, slid right back to one person.

Shane.

Shane, who had stayed in his bed last night. Shane, who had looked soft and rumpled and impossibly kissable in the morning light. Shane, whose quiet smile still pulled at something inside Ilya like a hook he didn't want removed.

He'd told himself he could take things slow. That he would hold himself back until he knew he wasn't making a mistake, until he understood how to balance this new thing with the rest of his life. But then Shane had said he wasn't fragile. Then he'd reached for Ilya with such open want, such trust—

And Ilya had snapped.

Not in a bad way. In a way that felt like the first deep breath after years underwater.

None of that helped him run this practice, though.

“Coach!” one of the defensemen called. “You okay?”

Ilya blinked. The line of kids in front of him waited for instructions, some tapping their blades impatiently.

“Of course I am okay,” he said. “Why you ask?”

“Because you keep staring at the scoreboard like you owe it money.”

A few snickers.

Ilya cleared his throat and forced himself to focus. “Less worrying, more skating. Back to positions.”

They scattered, laughing, which at least meant they weren't actually concerned.

He ran them through the last twenty minutes of drills, correcting stances, adjusting grip, placing hands on shoulders to nudge posture straight. It grounded him the way coaching usually did—simple, physical, immediate.

Still, every time a lull hit, his mind tugged back to the memory of waking up with Shane tucked against him, warm and trusting.

Ilya hated and loved that feeling at the same time.

Practice ended. Kids clattered off the ice toward locker rooms. Parents waved, some stopping him with questions, some thanking him, some simply offering sympathetic smiles that said *yes, children are chaos—we know*.

When the last helmet disappeared and the ice finally quieted, Ilya checked the time.

Shane would be done with his session at the gym soon.

Ilya hesitated.

He didn't want to be clingy. He didn't want to show up uninvited. He didn't want to be the kind of man who hovered.

But he also hadn't stopped thinking about Shane for more than thirty seconds all morning.

He wanted to see him. Even for a minute. Even just to hand him a drink.

He told himself that was reasonable.

He told himself he wasn't being obvious.

He told himself Hayden would not make a scene.

He knew he was lying to himself on all three counts.

Still, he left the rink, stopped at the corner store, and purchased a ginger ale—the brand Shane always chose, with the ridiculous “real ginger!” label that made Ilya roll his eyes every time.

He arrived at the gym just as Shane was finishing with a client.

Shane looked up and smiled. It wasn't big. It wasn't flashy. It wasn't the bright, easy smile he used for clients.

It was the private one. The one he'd given Ilya in bed last night. The one that made Ilya's stomach drop through the floor.

“Hey,” Shane said softly.

Ilya offered the ginger ale, trying to look casual even as his pulse jumped. “For you.”

Shane blinked, surprised—and then his face did that pink, flustered, delighted thing that Ilya would kill to see every day for the rest of his life.

“Oh,” Shane breathed. “You didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” Ilya said simply.

Shane bit his lip, bashful and glowing.

And then Hayden rounded the corner.

Of course.

Hayden took one look at the ginger ale, another look at Shane’s face, another at Ilya, and inhaled like he was preparing for a dramatic monologue.

“Well,” he announced loudly.

Shane made a strangled noise. “Hayden—”

“No, no, don’t stop him,” Ilya muttered drily.

Hayden gasped as though deeply wounded. “You wound me. I am the beating heart of romance in this establishment.”

“No,” Shane said immediately. “You are the beating heart of chaos.”

Hayden ignored him. “So. Let me get this straight.” He pointed at the ginger ale. “You brought him a drink.”

Ilya nodded. “Yes.”

“You *brought* him a drink.”

“Yes.”

“You, Ilya ‘I am emotionally constipated and allergic to feelings’ Rozanov, voluntarily purchased and hand-delivered ginger ale to this man.”

Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose. “It is just drink.”

“Oh my GOD,” Hayden crowed. “You’re in SO deep.”

Shane covered his face. “Please stop talking.”

“No, no, this is historical,” Hayden insisted. “I should take notes. Ilya Rozanov, the human snow fortress, did something thoughtful. This is... national holiday material.”

Ilya fought a smile—lost.

He liked Hayden more than he wanted to admit. Annoying man. Loud man. But good man.

Even if he once threatened Ilya with bodily harm if he hurt Shane.

Shane peeked between his fingers. “Hayden, go away.”

“Oh, I will,” Hayden said, backing up with exaggerated steps. “But know that I leave with joy in my heart. And the knowledge”—he pointed dramatically—“that you two are disgusting and adorable.”

Then he vanished.

Silence returned.

Shane groaned. “I’m so sorry.”

“Do not be,” Ilya said. “He is... friend.”

“Yeah. He is.” Shane laughed softly. “A disaster, but a friend.”

Ilya hummed in agreement. Then he nodded toward the bottle in Shane’s hand. “You will drink it?”

Shane’s smile blossomed again—gentle, warm, almost shy. “Yeah. Thank you.”

For a moment, they simply stood there.

It wasn’t like last night, hot and breathless and full of touches that made Ilya’s heart stutter. But it was intimate in its own way.

Quiet. Soft. A new step.

“Ilya,” Shane said quietly, “I’m glad you came.”

He meant it. Ilya could hear it in his voice.

Something inside Ilya loosened—a knot he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying since his injury, since the end of his playing days, since his parents, since everything.

He reached out, hesitant but wanting.

Shane stepped into the touch without hesitation.

Not a kiss. Not even a hug. Just Ilya’s fingers brushing Shane’s wrist. Shane leaning toward him like it was the most natural thing in the world.

He could get used to this. He already was.

“You have break now?” Ilya asked.

Shane nodded. “Fifteen minutes.”

Ilya nodded back. “Then... walk with me?”

Shane's eyes softened. "Yeah. Of course."

And just like that, they slipped out the door together—past the corner store, down the street, through the small park where the wind was gentle and the world felt quiet.

Ilya listened to Shane talk about clients, about his morning, about how tired he was but in a good way.

Ilya didn't say much. He didn't need to.

He just watched Shane. Listened. Let himself feel the simple pull of wanting.

When they looped back to the gym doors, Shane hesitated.

"I'll text you later," he promised.

Ilya nodded. "I will wait."

Shane bit his lip, smiled, and slipped inside.

Ilya watched the door close. Then he breathed out slowly, letting the warmth settle under his ribs.

He'd been distracted all morning, yes. But seeing Shane? Worth it.

He already felt lighter.

And maybe—just maybe—he was ready to let himself fall.

-

Ilya woke to warmth again.

Not the warmth of the sun slipping through blinds, not the low hum of morning city streets, not even the faint hiss of the radiator. This was Shane—the gentle weight of him pressed against Ilya, half-turned onto his side, hair a little tousled, chest rising and falling in easy rhythm.

Ilya blinked once, then again, taking a slow, steadying breath.

He'd fallen asleep too, somewhere in the middle of the night, after they'd collapsed together into the tangle of sheets and warmth. But Shane had still been lighter, more open than Ilya had expected. Lying there watching him now, Ilya felt something unsteady inside his chest—the mixture of awe, protectiveness, and a little panic that this feeling was larger than anything he'd allowed himself before.

Shane shifted slightly in his sleep, curling his hand beneath his pillow. The tip of his nose brushed Ilya's arm. That small, instinctive movement made Ilya's heart lurch. He leaned

forward, pressing his lips softly to Shane's temple, just enough to feel the warmth of skin against his lips, careful not to wake him.

He wanted to memorize this—every detail of Shane's face, the freckles across his cheeks and nose, the way his eyelashes caught the early light, the faint furrow of his brows even in rest. He wanted to keep it, store it somewhere deep inside him, a secret he could touch again in the moments he was alone.

Shane stirred, murmuring something half-awake, and Ilya held still, letting him settle back into sleep.

When Shane finally opened his eyes, blinking up at him with that soft, sleepy grin, Ilya melted.

"Morning," Shane whispered, voice hoarse from sleep.

"Morning," Ilya replied, voice low, careful not to sound too eager, though the way his chest lifted and fell betrayed him.

Shane reached up to rub his eyes and yawned. "Coffee?" he suggested. His grin widened, crooked and adorable.

"Yes," Ilya said immediately, already reaching for his phone. "I will make it."

The small apartment kitchen was warm with the smell of brewing coffee. Ilya poured the dark liquid into mugs, carefully balancing them between the counter and his hands, and handed one to Shane. Shane's fingers brushed his, just enough to make him pause.

"Careful," Shane said, eyes twinkling, "I don't want to burn your hand."

Ilya smiled, though it didn't reach the tension behind his eyes. "I am careful," he murmured. "Mostly."

They sipped together in silence for a moment. Shane leaned against the counter, mug warm between his hands, his hair messy, his smile easy. Ilya let himself take it in.

"You look... happy," he said softly.

Shane blinked, then laughed a little, shaking his head. "I am. Last night... that was..." He trailed off, cheeks warming, and Ilya caught the faint lilt of something unspoken, vulnerable, but full of trust.

Ilya felt it too—the hum of a bond forming in these quiet, ordinary moments. He wanted to put words to it but couldn't quite manage it. Words were always slippery, especially when he wasn't ready to show all of himself. Not yet.

"Last night was... good," Shane finally said. "Really good."

Ilya nodded, eyes lowering to the mug in his hands. "Yes. It was good," he agreed quietly.

Eventually, they parted for the day, Shane heading toward the gym to change and Ilya back to the rink. But the weight of the morning lingered—warm, heavy, and impossible to ignore.

Ilya's mind followed Shane during his coaching. He found himself smiling at nothing, replaying the way Shane's hand had brushed his when taking the coffee, the way his laugh had floated through the small apartment, the curve of his shoulder as he leaned forward in his chair.

And he realized something he hadn't quite admitted before: these feelings were bigger than just desire. They were tethered to something deeper, to the longing he hadn't allowed himself to name. And now, with Shane, the tether had tightened.

That evening, Ilya found himself waiting outside the rink as Shane arrived for their training session. Shane had insisted on trying some basic skating drills alongside him—to see Ilya's world.

Ilya's chest tightened at the sight of him: gym clothes neat, hair slightly damp from an earlier shower, hands tucked into pockets, smile lingering. He waved, and Shane jogged over, dropping his bag and grinning.

“Ready?” Shane asked.

Ilya nodded. “Yes. But... I will show you only some things. Not everything.”

Shane tilted his head, playful but earnest. “That's fine. Just... teach me a little.”

Ilya hesitated. He wasn't used to opening this part of himself to anyone—not really. Not the hockey. Not the years on ice, the competitions, the injuries, the triumphs and failures. Shane had never asked for it. Shane had only wanted to be near him, and that alone made Ilya's chest ache in a way he hadn't expected.

But he realized something: maybe it was time. Not the whole story, not the complete record of a life broken by injury, but small pieces. A little insight. Enough for Shane to see what had shaped him, without the weight of it all.

They laced up skates in silence, the familiar scrape of blades against the rubber mat comforting. Shane fumbled a little at first, wobbling on the ice, and Ilya stayed close, steadying him with gentle hands.

“You're... surprisingly good at balance,” Shane said, laughing nervously.

“Skating is skill,” Ilya said. “Not... luck.” His tone was casual, but he let Shane stumble against him just slightly, just enough to feel contact, warmth, grounding.

They practiced passing drills first. Ilya held the puck lightly, showing Shane how to angle his stick. Shane mimicked, clumsy but eager, and Ilya couldn't help but smile. There was something intoxicating about the eagerness, the trust, the way Shane hung on every tiny instruction as if it mattered more than the world.

After several rounds, Ilya decided it was time to show him a small piece of his past. He skated a few strides, demonstrating a subtle move from his old technique. Shane watched carefully, trying to mimic him, and Ilya felt a pang of nostalgia—and something else.

Shane's eyes were wide with curiosity, admiration, and something Ilya didn't dare name.

"You... used to be amazing," Shane said softly, breath fogging in the rink.

Ilya's heart skipped. "Used to be?"

"You... I mean, I can see why people would... you know... notice you." Shane's words were hesitant but genuine. "You're... graceful. Powerful."

Ilya's chest tightened. He wanted to tell Shane more, to show him medals, pictures, stories—but he didn't. Not yet. Not tonight. Tonight, it was enough to let Shane see the motion, the skill, the edge of what had been. The rest could wait.

Instead, he skated closer, steadying Shane's hands on the stick. "Good," he said quietly. "Again."

They practiced, laps and passes and spins filling the evening. Each time Shane looked at him with that soft intensity, Ilya felt himself unravel a little, pieces of his wall sliding down in small, careful increments.

Finally, they stopped, panting, skates scraping the ice. Shane leaned against the boards, flushed and smiling.

"Not bad for a beginner," Ilya said, brushing a hand over his own face, trying to ignore the heat in his chest.

Shane grinned. "Not bad for you either, hockey legend."

Ilya froze at the words. *Legend*. Not pro, not survivor of injury, not someone crushed under expectation—just *legend*. Shane's tone wasn't mocking. It was admiring. Warm. Honest.

And Ilya felt it—the pull, the weight, the longing, the trust building into something heavier than ice or skill.

They walked off the rink together, shoulders brushing, the contact light but meaningful. Shane talked about nothing and everything—his day, a client who had fallen on a treadmill, the way Hayden tried to "coach" him in ridiculous ways. Ilya listened, smiling, catching snippets of laughter that made his chest ache in a good way.

As they reached the parking lot, Ilya paused. "Tomorrow?" he asked, voice quieter than usual.

Shane raised an eyebrow. "Tomorrow what?"

"Skating. Training. Just... together."

Shane smiled that crooked, private smile, eyes glinting. “Tomorrow. I wouldn’t miss it.”

Ilya let the words settle. He wanted more—more contact, more closeness, more of Shane’s trust—but he didn’t push. Not yet. He let the evening, the warmth, the small glimpses of shared life and shared skills, be enough.

Because this—Shane, laughter, trust, the brush of hands, the soft intensity in his eyes—was worth more than rushing. Worth more than anything.

And for the first time in a long time, Ilya felt something like hope.

Something like... belonging.

And when Shane turned toward his car, glancing back with that small, uncertain, trusting smile, Ilya’s chest swelled, his heart raced, and he thought: *This is mine. In pieces, yes—but mine. And I will treasure it.*

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Shane had known, logically, that secrets didn't last forever.

He just hadn't known how *fast* everything would unravel once it started.

They were sitting in their usual coffee place—the one close to the gym, the one that smelled like burnt espresso and cinnamon pastries and felt neutral enough that Shane didn't overthink every breath he took around Ilya. It was late afternoon, quiet enough that the barista had stopped pretending not to listen to conversations.

Ilya sat across from him, jacket shrugged off, sleeves pushed up, fingers wrapped around a mug like he needed the warmth. He looked relaxed. Comfortable. Guard down in that rare way Shane had started to recognize.

And Shane felt sick.

Not because he didn't want to be there. God, no. He wanted to be there so badly it hurt. But because every time Ilya smiled at him, every time he reached across the table and brushed Shane's knuckles like it was unconscious—

The secret burned hotter.

Shane didn't know how long he could keep pretending.

He'd told himself there would be a right moment. That Ilya would bring it up first. That one day, maybe, Ilya would sit down and say, *There's something I need to tell you.*

But days passed. Then weeks.

And nothing.

No mention of professional hockey. No mention of injuries. No mention of the articles Hayden had shoved under Shane's nose with a look that had been equal parts smug and concerned.

He didn't tell you? Hayden had asked.

Shane had shaken his head, throat tight. *Then that's a problem.*

It had been sitting between them ever since.

"I'm thinking about adding interval sled pushes to my routine," Shane said now, mostly because silence felt dangerous. "But I don't know if it'll mess with my knees long-term."

Ilya hummed thoughtfully. "Depends how you do it. And how stubborn you are."

Shane snorted. "Rude."

“Accurate,” Ilya replied, mouth twitching.

Shane smiled automatically—and then froze as the bell over the café door jingled.

A kid barreled in, maybe ten or eleven, cheeks red from cold, hockey bag slung over one shoulder that was far too small for it. His dad followed behind, distracted, phone in hand.

The kid’s eyes landed on Ilya.

And went wide.

No.

No no no no no.

The kid stopped dead in his tracks, staring openly now.

Ilya noticed. His posture shifted—subtle, but Shane saw it. The way his shoulders squared. The way his face closed off just a fraction.

The kid took a step closer.

“Hey,” the kid said, voice loud in the quiet café. “You’re—I know you.”

Ilya stiffened. “No,” he said gently. “I don’t think so.”

“Yes!” The kid’s eyes lit up. “You’re Ilya Rozanov. You played—” He stopped, frowning, then blurted, “You’re the hockey guy who got injured.”

The café went very, very quiet.

Shane’s heart dropped into his stomach.

Ilya didn’t move. Didn’t speak. His jaw clenched so hard Shane could almost hear it.

The dad looked up then, eyes darting between them. “Uh—sorry,” he said awkwardly. “He’s... big into hockey.”

“It’s okay,” Ilya said, voice tight. Too tight. “I am not—”

“You were on TV,” the kid insisted. “My coach showed us your clips! You were really good.”

Shane couldn’t breathe.

Ilya’s hand tightened around his mug. “That was long time ago.”

“But—”

“Hey, bud,” the dad cut in, finally catching the tension. “Let’s get our drinks.”

The kid hesitated, still staring at Ilya with open awe.

“You were my favorite player,” he said softly.

Then he was gone, dragged gently toward the counter, leaving silence like a wreckage behind him.

Ilya stared into his coffee. Didn’t look at Shane. Didn’t say a word.

Shane’s chest burned. He couldn’t do this anymore. “Ilya,” Shane said quietly.

Nothing.

“Ilya, look at me.”

Slowly—so slowly—Ilya lifted his gaze.

His eyes were dark. Guarded. Hurt. Angry in a way Shane had never seen directed at him before.

“I know,” Shane said.

The words dropped between them like glass. Ilya blinked once. “Know what.”

“I know about your hockey career,” Shane said, voice shaking despite his effort. “I know you played professionally. I know about the injury. I know it ended your career.”

Ilya went completely still. “You knew,” he said.

“Yes.”

“How long.”

Shane swallowed. “Since Hayden showed me the article.”

Silence.

Then Ilya laughed.

It was sharp. Humorless. “So you lied.”

“No,” Shane said quickly. “I didn’t—”

“You knew and you said nothing,” Ilya snapped, leaning forward now, voice low but dangerous. “You let me talk around it. You let me avoid it.”

“I didn’t *let* you,” Shane said, heat rising. “I waited. Because you didn’t tell me. Because every time I thought about bringing it up, I realized—it wasn’t my story to tell.”

“You should have said something,” Ilya shot back.

“And how?” Shane demanded, frustration finally breaking through. “You shut down every time I get close to that part of your life. You dodge. You deflect. You go quiet. What was I

supposed to do—corner you with it?”

“Yes,” Ilya said harshly. “You should have.”

Shane recoiled. “You didn’t mean that.”

“I meant that you don’t get to decide when I talk about it,” Ilya said. “You don’t get to sit there knowing something about me I didn’t give you.”

Shane’s hands trembled. “I didn’t want power over you.”

“But you had it.”

That hit harder than anything else.

“I was scared,” Shane admitted, voice low. “I was scared that if I said it, you’d shut me out completely. That you’d think I was judging you or pitying you or—”

“Or seeing me as a failure,” Ilya said flatly.

Shane’s breath caught. “No. Never.”

“You don’t get to decide that either,” Ilya said.

“Ilya—”

“I didn’t tell you because it *still hurts*,” Ilya said, anger cracking now into something raw. “Because every time someone recognizes me, they only remember the injury. The end. Not the work. Not the years. Just the part where I broke.”

Shane’s eyes burned. “I don’t see you that way.”

“But you *knew*,” Ilya insisted. “You knew, and you watched me avoid it.”

“I watched you survive it,” Shane said quietly.

That stopped Ilya.

Shane leaned forward, voice steady now even as his heart hammered. “I watched you build a life anyway. Coach kids. Show up every day. Care. I didn’t want to rip open something you were clearly protecting.”

Ilya’s jaw worked. His eyes flickered—not angry now, but uncertain.

“You should have trusted me,” Ilya said.

“I did,” Shane replied. “Enough to wait.”

Silence stretched between them again—thick, heavy, unresolved.

Finally, Ilya stood abruptly. “I need air.”

“Ilya—”

“Not now,” he said sharply.

He grabbed his jacket and walked out, the bell over the door ringing far too cheerfully behind him.

Shane stayed seated.

Hands clenched. Heart racing. Chest aching.

He didn’t know if he’d done the right thing. He only knew he couldn’t pretend anymore.

And as the door swung shut, leaving Shane alone with two cooling cups of coffee and the weight of everything unsaid—

He feared, for the first time, that this might be the moment he’d finally gone too far.

-

Shane told himself he was doing the right thing.

That was the mantra he repeated as he lay awake staring at the ceiling at two in the morning, phone face-down on his nightstand like it might explode if he touched it.

Give him space. Don’t chase. Don’t make it worse.

Those words sounded reasonable when Hayden said them the night before. They sounded mature. Respectful. Adult.

They sounded like absolute torture at two in the morning.

Ilya hadn’t texted.

Not a single message. Not an angry one, not a clipped one, not even a cold *I need time* that Shane could’ve clung to like a lifeline.

Nothing.

The silence pressed in around him, heavy and suffocating, filling every corner of his chest. He replayed the café over and over again, the kid’s voice echoing in his head, the way Ilya’s eyes had gone dark when Shane said *I know*.

Maybe he should’ve lied. Maybe he should’ve kept pretending. Maybe he should’ve waited longer.

Or maybe—his worst thought, the one he kept shoving away—maybe Ilya had needed the truth sooner, and Shane had already failed him by waiting at all.

By the time Shane dragged himself out of bed, his head hurt and his chest felt hollow.

He showered on autopilot. Dressed on autopilot. Ate half a protein bar and forgot the rest. The mirror reflected someone who looked fine—clean, put together, functional—but his eyes were tired in a way sleep wouldn't fix.

Hayden noticed immediately.

“Okay,” Hayden said, leaning against the kitchen counter with his coffee. “You look like shit.”

“Good morning to you too,” Shane muttered.

Hayden squinted at him. “Did he text?”

Shane shook his head.

Hayden sighed. Not dramatically. Not teasingly. Just... tired. Concerned. He set his mug down. “All right. Come here.”

Shane didn't argue when Hayden pulled him into a quick hug. He didn't even feel embarrassed when his chest tightened unexpectedly.

“I know it sucks,” Hayden said quietly. “But you didn't do anything wrong.”

“I did,” Shane said immediately. “I knew. I should've said something.”

“Or you should've respected his boundaries,” Hayden countered. “Which you did.”

“I should've trusted him more.”

“You trusted him enough not to ambush him with it,” Hayden said firmly. “That counts.”

Shane didn't respond. His thoughts were already spiraling ahead of him—imagining Ilya replaying the moment in his own head, deciding Shane had betrayed him, deciding this was too much, deciding he didn't need someone who knew him this deeply.

The gym felt too quiet that morning.

Shane went through his sessions like a ghost, correcting form, offering encouragement, smiling when required. But every time the door opened, his heart jumped stupidly, irrationally.

Every time, it wasn't Ilya.

By noon, his phone still hadn't buzzed.

Hayden cornered him near the water cooler. “Hey.”

Shane looked up. “Yeah?”

“You’re spiraling.”

“I’m managing.”

“You reorganized the kettlebells by weight *and* color,” Hayden said. “You never do that.”

Shane sighed. “I just—what if he never talks to me again?”

Hayden leaned back against the wall. “Then it’ll hurt. And it’ll suck. And you’ll survive.”

Shane swallowed. “I don’t want to survive. I want him.”

Hayden’s expression softened. “I know.”

They sat in the office for Shane’s break, not talking much. Hayden didn’t push. He never did when Shane was like this. He just stayed close, grounded, a quiet presence anchoring Shane when his thoughts tried to drag him under.

By late afternoon, Shane’s hands were shaking again.

He checked his phone.

Nothing.

He checked again.

Still nothing.

Don’t text him. You said you’d give him space.

Space felt endless. Space felt like abandonment, even though Shane knew that wasn’t fair. Ilya had every right to step back, to breathe, to process something that clearly cut deep.

But knowing that didn’t make the waiting easier.

Hayden found him sitting on the floor of the locker room, back against the lockers, knees pulled to his chest.

“Okay,” Hayden said gently. “This is the part where we intervene.”

“I’m fine,” Shane said weakly.

“No, you’re not,” Hayden replied. “You’re catastrophizing. Again.”

Shane laughed humorlessly. “That’s my brand.”

Hayden slid down next to him. “Listen to me. You were honest. Maybe late, but honest. You didn’t expose him. You didn’t corner him. You didn’t tell anyone else. You waited because you cared.”

Shane stared at the floor. “What if caring wasn’t enough?”

“Then that’s not on you,” Hayden said firmly. “Relationships don’t end because someone tried to be kind.”

Shane’s throat burned. “I miss him.”

“I know,” Hayden said. “And he probably misses you too. He’s just... scared.”

Shane nodded slowly. That made sense. Ilya was always careful. Always guarded. Shane had known this from the beginning.

“Can I text him?” Shane asked quietly.

Hayden considered it. “What would you say?”

Shane thought for a moment. Then: “That I’m here. That I’m not mad. That I’m not going anywhere.”

Hayden nodded. “That sounds okay.”

Shane hesitated. “What if he doesn’t answer?”

“Then you’ll still have said what you needed to say,” Hayden replied. “And that matters.”

Shane pulled out his phone, hands trembling just a little.

He typed slowly.

Shane:

Hey. I just wanted to say I’m giving you space like you asked. But I’m here. I’m not upset. And I’m not going anywhere.

He stared at the message. Then he sent it.

The phone felt heavy in his hand afterward.

He didn’t get a response that night.

But somehow—maybe because he’d finally said something, maybe because Hayden was there, maybe because exhaustion finally caught up with him—Shane slept.

Not well.

But enough.

And when he woke up the next morning, phone still silent, chest still aching, he reminded himself of one thing Hayden had said, the only thing he could hold onto: *Relationships don’t end because someone tried to be kind.*

He hoped that was true, because he wasn’t ready to let Ilya go. Not yet. Not without a fight.

Shane was midway through explaining shoulder engagement to a client when his phone buzzed in his pocket.

He ignored it at first. He'd trained himself to. Hope was dangerous, and disappointment even more so. But the vibration lingered—one short pulse, then stillness—and something in his chest tightened instinctively.

He finished the rep count. Gave a nod. Turned away.

Only then did he pull his phone out.

The name on the screen nearly made his knees buckle.

Ilya.

Shane's breath caught so sharply it almost hurt.

For a second, he just stared. Afraid to open it. Afraid it would be too little. Afraid it would be goodbye dressed up as politeness.

He forced himself to breathe and tapped the notification.

Ilya:

I am okay. I just need time. Thank you for giving it.

That was it.

No apology. No explanation. No reassurance beyond those few words.

And yet—

Shane sagged against the wall, pressing the phone to his chest like it might anchor him in place.

He could breathe again.

It wasn't rejection. It wasn't anger. It wasn't silence. It was something fragile and tentative and *real*.

Time. Shane could do time.

He typed back carefully, deliberately.

Shane:

Take all the time you need. I'm here.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again. Then nothing.

And somehow, that was okay.

The rest of the day passed in a blur that felt lighter than the one before. Shane still thought about Ilya constantly—but now the thoughts didn't spiral into worst-case scenarios. They softened instead. Settled into something that felt like patience.

Hayden noticed immediately.

"You got a message," Hayden said later, not even looking up from his clipboard.

Shane blinked. "How do you—"

"You're not vibrating with anxiety anymore," Hayden replied. "Also, you smiled at a wall."

Shane huffed a laugh. "He's okay."

Hayden glanced up then, eyes warm. "Good."

"He needs time."

"Also good," Hayden said. "Time means he's processing, not disappearing."

Shane nodded. "Yeah."

That evening, Shane was wiping down equipment when the gym door opened.

He didn't look up right away.

He didn't want to hope too hard.

But something shifted in the air—something familiar, grounding, heavy in a way that made Shane's chest tighten before his brain caught up.

He looked.

Ilya stood just inside the door, jacket zipped up, hands in his pockets. He looked tired. Thoughtful. A little closed off—but he was there.

Shane didn't move.

Neither did Ilya.

For a moment, the noise of the gym faded—the clank of weights, the hum of treadmills, the low chatter. It was just the two of them, looking at each other across familiar space.

Then Ilya walked in. Not fast. Not hesitant. Just... steady.

Shane's heart kicked painfully against his ribs. "Hey," Shane said, quietly.

"Hey," Ilya replied.

They stood there, awkward and careful, neither quite sure what the rules were now. Shane wanted to touch him—just his arm, his hand, anything—but he stayed where he was.

Ilya seemed to notice. His shoulders loosened a fraction. “I... did not want to disappear,” Ilya said finally. “I just needed to think.”

“I know,” Shane said. And he meant it. “I’m really glad you came.”

Ilya nodded. “Me too.”

They didn’t talk about the café. Or the kid. Or hockey. Or secrets.

They didn’t need to.

Ilya stayed near Shane while he finished his shift, occasionally asking quiet questions, occasionally offering a nod or a half-smile. It felt like relearning each other—careful steps, checking the ground before placing weight.

At one point, Shane caught Ilya watching him adjust a client’s form, his expression thoughtful but not tense.

“You’re good at this,” Ilya said softly when the client moved on.

Shane smiled, warmth blooming in his chest. “Thanks.”

Ilya hesitated, then added, “I did not... feel judged. That day.”

Shane met his eyes. “I would never.”

“I know,” Ilya said after a moment. “I just... needed to believe it.”

Shane nodded. “I get that.”

They stood side by side near the front desk as the gym began to empty, the quiet between them no longer heavy—just calm.

Not fixed, but not broken either.

When Ilya finally grabbed his jacket again, he paused. “I will text you.”

Shane smiled, gently. “I’ll be here.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched, just a little. “I know.”

And when the door closed behind him, Shane didn’t feel hollow.

He felt steady.

Because he hadn’t lost Ilya.

Ilya just needed time to sort through thoughts that had been buried for years.

And Shane—heart on his sleeve and all—was willing to wait.

As long as it took.

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

Ilya hadn't meant to freeze Shane out.

It wasn't a decision he'd made consciously, not something he'd weighed and chosen. It happened the way these things always did—with a quiet heaviness that settled into his chest without warning, turning ordinary actions into effort and words into obstacles.

He'd felt it creeping in for days.

The familiar dull pressure behind his eyes. The way time stretched strangely, minutes dragging while hours disappeared. The way answering a text suddenly felt like something he had to brace himself for, even when the name on the screen made his chest ache in a way that should have been good.

Depression didn't come crashing back into Ilya's life anymore. It slipped in quietly, like a memory he hadn't invited but couldn't ignore.

He'd fought this before. After the injury. After hockey ended. Those months—sometimes whole years—had been worse. Back then, he hadn't known who he was without the ice, without the routine, without the certainty of purpose. Coaching had helped. The kids had helped. Building a life that wasn't measured in goals and stats had helped.

But sometimes, despite all of that, the darkness still found him.

And this time, Shane was there.

That made it harder.

Shane was light in a way Ilya wasn't sure he'd ever fully understand. Open. Earnest. Unafraid of caring too much. He wore his heart openly, like it wasn't something that could be bruised or broken.

Ilya saw it in the way Shane trained people—with patience, with encouragement, with belief. He saw it in the way Shane waited for answers without demanding them. In the way he gave space without pulling away.

And Ilya was terrified of pulling him down.

When the heaviness settled into him, Ilya's instinct was the same as it had always been: retreat. Go quiet. Reduce the damage radius. He told himself it was kindness, that it was better to be distant than to let Shane see the version of him that felt hollow and unsure and tired.

He didn't want to stain Shane's warmth with his own shadows.

So he pulled back.

Not enough to disappear entirely—just enough to breathe. Just enough to keep himself from unraveling in front of someone who mattered too much.

But Shane didn't leave.

He didn't push, either.

He stayed exactly where he was, steady and patient, and that patience cracked something open inside Ilya.

It happened on an afternoon that felt unbearably still. Ilya stood in his kitchen, staring at an unwashed mug on the counter, unsure how long he'd been there. The apartment felt too quiet, the kind of quiet that amplified thoughts instead of soothing them.

He thought of Shane. Of the careful way he listened. Of the way his presence felt grounding without ever being demanding.

Ilya realized then that the distance wasn't protecting Shane.

It was protecting him.

And he was tired of hiding.

The decision came suddenly, with surprising clarity. Before he could overthink it, Ilya picked up his phone and typed a message.

Come over tonight. I'll cook.

The reply came quickly.

I'd love that.

Something loosened in his chest.

He cooked with intention that evening, moving slowly, deliberately. Chopping vegetables, stirring sauces, grounding himself in the rhythm of it. The smell of food filled the apartment, warming the space until it felt lived-in again instead of hollow.

When Shane arrived, he looked cautious—like he wasn't sure what version of Ilya he'd be stepping into.

"Hey," Shane said softly.

"Hey," Ilya replied.

They stood there for a moment, suspended in something fragile, before Ilya stepped aside to let him in. There was no dramatic tension, no confrontation waiting to happen. Just a quiet understanding that something important hovered between them.

Shane kicked off his shoes and glanced around. "It smells amazing."

“Good,” Ilya said. “I was afraid I forgot how.”

Shane laughed, gentle and unguarded, and the sound eased something tight in Ilya’s chest.

They ate together at the small kitchen table. At first, the conversation stayed light—work, the gym, the kids Ilya coached, an amusing story Shane shared about a client. Shane didn’t pry. He didn’t fill the silences with questions. He let them exist.

Halfway through the meal, Ilya felt the weight of what he hadn’t said pressing harder.

He set his fork down.

“Shane,” he said.

Shane looked up immediately. “Yeah?”

“I need to tell you something,” Ilya said. “And I need you to let me finish before you say anything.”

Shane nodded without hesitation. “Okay.”

Ilya stared at the tabletop for a long moment, steadying himself.

“I was drafted when I was nineteen,” he said finally. “Second round.”

Shane stayed quiet.

“They said it was early,” Ilya continued. “That I had potential. That I was special.” His mouth curved into a faint, bitter smile. “I believed them.”

He swallowed and went on. “I loved hockey. The structure. The clarity. On the ice, everything made sense. I knew exactly who I was.”

His hands tightened slightly around the edge of the table.

“I got injured during my second professional season. It wasn’t dramatic. No big hit. Just... wrong movement. Knee injury. Surgery. Rehab. Then another surgery.”

He let out a quiet breath. “I kept telling myself it was temporary. That I’d come back better.”

Shane’s attention never wavered.

“I didn’t,” Ilya said. “Not really. My body could still play, but my speed was gone. And my confidence.” He paused. “Every time I stepped onto the ice, I was afraid.”

Fear, he knew, was death for a hockey player.

“They dropped me,” he said softly. “Politely. Like it was no one’s fault. And suddenly I wasn’t the player with potential anymore. I was the one who used to be.”

The silence stretched.

“That’s the part that scares me the most,” Ilya admitted. “Being remembered only for what I lost.”

He finally looked up.

“I didn’t want you to see me as a failure,” he said. “Someone who peaked early and couldn’t recover.”

Shane shook his head slowly. “I don’t see you like that.”

“I know,” Ilya said quietly. “But fear doesn’t always listen to logic.”

He leaned back in his chair, drained now that the words were out.

“I’ve dealt with depression before,” he added. “After hockey ended, it was bad. Coaching helped. The kids helped. But sometimes it still comes back. And when it does, I pull away. Not because I don’t care—but because I care too much.”

Shane stood then, moving slowly, deliberately. He crouched in front of Ilya, bringing himself to eye level.

“You don’t bring me down,” Shane said softly. “You don’t.”

Something in Ilya’s chest twisted.

“I don’t need you to be okay all the time,” Shane continued. “I just need you to let me be there when you’re not.”

Ilya closed his eyes briefly.

“I am not good at that,” he admitted.

“I know,” Shane said. “But you’re trying.”

Shane waited for permission before touching him. When Ilya nodded, Shane’s hands settled gently on his arms—warm, grounding, real.

Ilya leaned forward, resting his forehead against Shane’s shoulder. Shane didn’t tighten his hold or overwhelm him. He simply stayed.

“I don’t want to be alone with this anymore,” Ilya said quietly.

“You’re not,” Shane replied immediately.

They stayed like that for a long time, the remains of dinner forgotten. The apartment was quiet, but it no longer felt empty.

Ilya had been afraid that telling Shane would change the way he looked at him.

Instead, it felt like he’d finally allowed himself to be seen.

And for the first time in a long while, the idea of staying—of not running—felt possible.

-

Not everything snapped back into place after that night.

Ilya hadn't expected it to. If anything, he would've been suspicious if it had. He knew himself well enough to know that honesty didn't magically erase years of instinct, of withdrawal, of self-protection. And Shane—patient, careful Shane—seemed to understand that too.

So they didn't rush.

They eased. back into routine.

It started with coffee.

Not dates, not long conversations about feelings or futures. Just coffee after workouts, the kind that fit neatly into the existing shape of their days. Shane would finish his shift, towel slung over one shoulder, hair still damp, freckles more visible when he was tired. Ilya would already be waiting or arrive just after, jacket zipped up, hands tucked into the sleeves the way he always did when he was thinking too much.

They'd sit side by side, sometimes at the same small table, sometimes at the counter if it was crowded. They talked—but not constantly. Not to fill space.

The silence between them didn't itch.

That was new.

Before, silence had felt like something waiting to be broken, a sign that something was wrong or unfinished. Now it felt... companionable. Like both of them understood that presence didn't always require performance.

Shane stirred his coffee slowly, methodically, the same way he did everything. Ilya noticed things like that now—how Shane's routines weren't rigid, just grounding. How he returned to the same habits because they made the world feel manageable.

Sometimes Shane would glance at Ilya mid-sip, eyes soft, curious, like he was checking in without words.

Sometimes Ilya would meet that look.

Sometimes he wouldn't.

And that was okay.

They walked home together more often than not, especially on evenings when the cold crept into the city early. The sidewalks were slick with winter residue, the streetlights already

glowing by late afternoon. Their shoulders occasionally brushed, not accidentally—but neither of them acknowledged it.

Less touching.

More meaning.

Ilya found himself hyperaware of his own body again—not in the tense way he'd been during the worst days, but in a quieter, observational way. He noticed when Shane walked closer without realizing it. When their steps fell into rhythm. When Shane slowed slightly so Ilya didn't have to adjust.

Sometimes they walked in complete silence from the gym to the corner where they parted ways.

And it felt good. No pressure to entertain. No expectation to confess or reassure.

Just walking. Together.

At first, Ilya thought Shane might get tired of it.

Of the restraint. Of the careful distance. Of the way Ilya still held parts of himself back, not out of secrecy now, but out of habit.

But Shane didn't push.

He never did.

Instead, he communicated in small, precise ways—ones that felt safer for Ilya to receive.

Like the hoodie string.

They were standing just inside the gym entrance one evening, snow clinging to the edges of Ilya's coat. He was half-listening to something Shane was saying about a client when Shane's gaze dropped briefly.

“Hold on,” Shane said.

Before Ilya could ask why, Shane reached up and gently tugged one of the strings on Ilya's hoodie, evening it out with the other. His fingers brushed Ilya's collarbone for barely a second.

There was no rush to pull away.

No spark of panic.

Just warmth.

Shane didn't even comment on it. He stepped back like it was the most natural thing in the world and continued his sentence.

Ilya stood there, chest tight—not with fear, but with something dangerously close to tenderness.

That night, when Ilya got home, he stood in front of the mirror and stared at the hoodie longer than necessary.

He didn't know when small things had started to mean so much.

Another day, another quiet gesture.

Ilya showed up at the gym late afternoon with a bag from the convenience store near his apartment. He didn't say anything when he handed Shane a cold ginger ale—just placed it on the counter while Shane was mid-conversation with Hayden.

Shane froze.

Then he smiled. Not wide. Not flashy. Just that soft, private smile he seemed to reserve for moments that mattered more than they looked.

“Thanks,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya nodded, equally quiet.

Hayden, of course, noticed everything.

“Wow,” Hayden said, glancing between them. “No commentary? No flirting? This is growth.”

“Don't start,” Shane muttered, but there was no heat behind it.

Ilya didn't mind Hayden's presence as much lately. Maybe because things between him and Shane felt more solid now—less fragile, less easily shaken. Or maybe because Ilya understood something now that he hadn't before: people who loved Shane would always orbit close.

That wasn't a threat.

It was a privilege.

Training together felt different too.

They kept it professional—careful not to blur lines in public spaces—but there was a new awareness in the way they moved around each other. Shane corrected Ilya's form once, hands hovering before touching, waiting for permission that Ilya gave with a nod.

When Shane's palm settled briefly against Ilya's shoulder blade, Ilya didn't tense.

He breathed.

They didn't talk about hockey much. Not directly. But bits of it surfaced naturally now, no longer charged with the same fear.

Ilya would reference drills the kids were working on. Shane would ask questions—not prying, just curious. Interested.

One evening, while they were cooling down after a workout, Shane said casually, “You move like someone who learned discipline young.”

Ilya blinked. “Is that good?”

Shane shrugged. “It's... intentional. You don't waste movement.”

Ilya considered that. “Hockey teaches that.”

Shane nodded. Didn't say anything else. Didn't push.

And for the first time, Ilya didn't feel the familiar spike of panic after mentioning it.

Some days were harder than others.

There were mornings when the fog pressed in again, when Ilya felt the weight of himself before he even got out of bed. On those days, he was quieter. More reserved. He worried Shane would notice and start to worry too.

But Shane seemed to understand the difference now.

He didn't mistake quiet for distance anymore.

He met Ilya where he was.

Sometimes that meant sitting across from each other with coffee and barely speaking. Sometimes it meant Shane sending a simple text later that night—*Home safe?*—with no expectation of a conversation.

Ilya always replied. Sometimes with more words. Sometimes with just *Yeah*.

And that was enough.

One evening, as they stood outside the gym saying goodbye, Shane hesitated.

“I'll see you tomorrow?” he asked—not as an assumption, but an invitation.

Ilya nodded. “Yeah.”

Shane smiled, relief flickering briefly across his face before he masked it.

As Shane turned to leave, Ilya watched him go, feeling something unfamiliar settle in his chest.

Not fear. Not dread. Something steadier. Trust, maybe.

Not the kind that demanded certainty or guarantees—but the kind that grew quietly, through repetition and care and patience.

Not everything was back to normal.

But Ilya realized, standing there under the streetlight, that he didn't want it to be.

This—this slow rebuilding, this gentle learning, this version of closeness that didn't demand perfection—felt better.

Felt real.

And for the first time in a long time, Ilya wasn't bracing for the moment it would disappear.

-

Ilya felt better.

Not fixed, not cured, not suddenly free of the shadows he'd learned to live with—but lighter. Like something tight inside him had finally loosened its grip. The days didn't feel like something he had to get through anymore. They felt... livable. Sometimes even good.

And Shane was a big part of that.

There was a subtle shift in him that Ilya noticed almost immediately. It showed up in the way his shoulders sat easier, in how his laughter came quicker, in how his thoughts no longer spiraled as sharply when things went quiet. The fog hadn't vanished, but it had thinned enough that he could see where he was going again.

And with that clarity came something else.

Flirting.

It surprised even him at first.

It started small—almost accidental. A glance held a second too long. A comment delivered a little too smoothly. A smile that lingered after Shane looked away. Ilya hadn't realized how much he'd been holding himself back until he stopped doing it.

Shane noticed immediately.

Shane always noticed.

The first time it happened, they were at the gym late in the evening, most of the clients already gone. Shane was wiping down a bench, hair curling slightly at the edges where sweat had dried. Ilya leaned against the counter nearby, pretending to scroll through his phone.

"You always this focused?" Ilya asked casually.

Shane glanced up. "What?"

“When you clean,” Ilya said. “It’s impressive. Intimidating, even.”

Shane blinked. Once. Twice.

“I—what?”

Ilya smiled slowly, deliberately.

Shane flushed so fast it was almost alarming.

Hayden, from across the room, let out an unmistakable snort. “Oh,” Hayden said. “He’s back.”

Shane groaned. “Don’t encourage him.”

Ilya felt warmth bloom in his chest—pure, uncomplicated satisfaction. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed this version of himself. The one who teased. The one who enjoyed reaction. The one who wasn’t constantly monitoring his own edges.

From then on, it was like something had clicked into place.

Ilya brushed past Shane more often, just close enough to be felt. He leaned in to say things that didn’t need to be said quietly. He let his knee bump Shane’s under the table when they had coffee, didn’t move it away immediately.

Every time, Shane looked like he might combust.

And Ilya loved it.

Not in a cruel way. Never that. It was affection, pure and bright. A private language they were slowly rebuilding—one that said *I’m here* without needing words.

The intimacy returned the same way everything else had: gradually.

Carefully.

They didn’t rush back into anything physical beyond what felt natural. A hand resting briefly on Shane’s lower back. Fingers brushing when they passed something back and forth. A shoulder leaned into during a quiet moment.

But the tension was there again—different now. Less sharp, more grounded. Charged with trust instead of fear.

One evening, after the gym closed, they found themselves alone near the front desk. Shane was finishing paperwork, brow furrowed in concentration. Ilya watched him for a moment before speaking.

“You do that thing,” Ilya said.

Shane glanced up. “What thing?”

“That,” Ilya said, gesturing vaguely at Shane’s face. “When you’re thinking. You press your lips together like the answer might escape.”

Shane froze. “I do not.”

“You do,” Ilya said calmly. “It’s adorable.”

Shane dropped his pen. Literally dropped it.

Ilya laughed—soft, genuine, a sound that surprised him with how easily it came.

Shane stared at him for a moment, then shook his head. “You’re dangerous.”

Ilya stepped closer. “You like it.”

Shane swallowed. “Yeah. I do.”

The admission settled between them, unforced.

That night, intimacy finally crossed a threshold again—not rushed, not desperate. Just inevitable.

They kissed like people who already knew what it meant. No uncertainty. No question of permission. Ilya’s hands were steady, confident, his attention wholly on Shane—on the way he responded, the way his breath stuttered, the way he leaned in without hesitation.

When things deepened, it was with intention. With pauses. With quiet check-ins that didn’t need words.

And afterward—curled together, warmth shared, the world outside distant—Ilya felt something unfamiliar settle into his chest.

Contentment.

He watched Shane sleep, freckles soft in the low light, expression open and unguarded. There was no fear attached to it this time. No voice whispering that this would be taken away.

Just gratitude.

Shane knew now.

Not just about hockey. About the injury. About the loss.

About the fear.

More than anyone else ever had.

And he was still here.

That knowledge changed something fundamental in Ilya. It loosened the tight knot of shame he’d carried for years. He didn’t feel like a version of himself that needed explaining or

defending anymore.

He felt... known.

In the days that followed, the ease between them only grew.

Ilya flirted openly now, shameless in a way that felt earned. He teased Shane about his routines, about his healthy food choices, about the way he pretended not to like attention when he clearly loved it.

Shane took it all with flushed cheeks and bright eyes and an expression that told Ilya everything he needed to know.

Sometimes Shane flirted back—awkward, earnest, devastating in its sincerity.

“You know,” Shane said once, while Ilya was stretching after a workout, “you’re very distracting.”

Ilya arched an eyebrow. “In a good way?”

Shane smiled. “In every way.”

Ilya laughed and leaned in, pressing a quick kiss to Shane’s cheek. Shane’s entire face turned red.

Hayden gagged loudly from across the room. “Get a room,” he said. “Or at least warn me.”

Ilya just smiled wider. He was happier than he’d been in a long time.

Not euphoric. Not unrealistically so.

But steady.

There were still moments when the old thoughts tried to creep back in—when he caught sight of a hockey highlight on a screen, or heard his name spoken with recognition he wasn’t prepared for. But now, when that happened, he had somewhere to put it.

Someone to sit beside.

Shane didn’t fix him. He didn’t save him. He simply stayed.

And that, Ilya realized, was everything.

As they walked home together one evening, hands brushing but not quite holding, Ilya glanced at Shane and felt a quiet certainty settle in his chest.

This wasn’t a fleeting thing.

This wasn’t something built on illusion or ignorance.

This was something real—built slowly, honestly, with space for flaws and fear and growth.

And for the first time in years, Ilya wasn't afraid of being remembered.

Not for what he lost, but for who he was becoming.

With Shane. Still there. Still choosing him.

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Shane told himself he wasn't unhappy.

That wasn't entirely true—but it was close enough to feel manageable.

He understood why Ilya had to go. He really did. Away games weren't common for the kids, and when they happened, they mattered—not because of the score or the competition, but because of the experience. The bus rides, the unfamiliar locker rooms, the nerves, the way being somewhere else made everything feel bigger and more real.

Ilya had explained it carefully, like he always did when something disrupted routine.

“Two days,” he'd said. “One night. It does not happen often.”

Shane had smiled. Told him it was fine. Told him he was proud.

All of that was true.

And still—when Ilya left that morning with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder and that familiar, slightly hesitant look on his face—Shane felt the absence immediately. Like someone had moved a piece of furniture in a room he'd just gotten used to.

The gym felt quieter without him.

That was ridiculous, Shane knew. Ilya didn't work there. He wasn't supposed to be part of the rhythm of the place. And yet—Shane kept glancing toward the door anyway. Kept expecting to see him leaning against the counter, phone in hand, pretending not to watch.

Hayden noticed within an hour.

“Oh my god,” Hayden said, grinning as he leaned against the front desk. “You're moping.”

“I am not,” Shane said automatically.

“You reorganized the resistance bands again,” Hayden replied. “You do that when you're emotionally compromised.”

Shane sighed. “He's gone for two days.”

Hayden made a dramatic face. “Tragic. How will you survive?”

“Barely,” Shane muttered.

Despite himself, Shane checked his phone more than usual that morning. He didn't expect Ilya to text right away—he knew how hectic travel days were—but the quiet stretched longer than Shane liked.

Then, finally, his phone buzzed.

Ilya:

On the bus. Kids are loud. Very excited.

Shane smiled so hard his cheeks hurt.

Shane:

That sounds about right. You good?

Ilya:

Yes. Tired already.

Shane could picture it perfectly—kids bouncing in their seats, Ilya trying to maintain some semblance of order while pretending not to enjoy the chaos.

Shane:

You'll do great. They're lucky to have you.

Three dots appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Ilya:

Thank you. I wish you were here.

Shane's chest tightened.

He stared at the message longer than necessary before replying.

Shane:

Me too.

The rest of the day went by more easily after that.

They didn't text constantly—just small check-ins between workouts and coaching sessions. Ilya sent a blurry photo of the rink. Shane replied with a picture of the gym, conspicuously empty of Ilya-shaped presence.

Hayden, unfortunately, saw everything.

“Are you two texting?” Hayden asked, peering over Shane's shoulder.

“No,” Shane said, turning his phone slightly away.

Hayden snorted. “You're smiling at your screen like it just proposed to you.”

Shane flushed. “Stop.”

“Absolutely not,” Hayden said cheerfully. “This is the most entertainment I've had all week.”

That night, Shane lay in bed scrolling through old messages, something he told himself he would *not* make a habit of. But the quiet felt louder without Ilya there. Too much space. Too

much time.

His phone buzzed again.

Ilya:

Kids won their first game. They are very proud.

Shane:

As they should be. How about you?

A pause.

Ilya:

I am proud too. And very tired.

Shane smiled into his pillow.

Shane:

Get some rest. I'll be here when you're back.

This time, the typing dots stayed longer.

Ilya:

I know.

Day two was harder.

Not because anything was wrong—just because the novelty of absence had worn off, leaving only the quiet knowledge that someone Shane cared about deeply was somewhere else.

He went through his routines on autopilot. Trained clients. Corrected form. Smiled when appropriate. But there was a low-level hum of restlessness under everything.

Hayden cornered him near the squat racks.

“You’re doing that thing again,” Hayden said.

“What thing?”

“Being proud and miserable at the same time.”

Shane sighed. “I don’t like not seeing him.”

“Yeah,” Hayden said. “That’s called missing someone.”

“I know that,” Shane replied. “I just don’t like how much I do.”

Hayden softened. “That’s not a bad thing.”

Shane nodded, but the feeling lingered.

The texts that day were shorter. Ilya was busy. The kids were exhausted. There was another game, another long bus ride, another unfamiliar hotel.

Still—he checked in. Still—Shane replied.

That evening, Shane got one final message.

Ilya:

One more sleep. Then home.

Shane exhaled slowly.

Shane:

I'm proud of you.

A few seconds passed.

Ilya:

That means a lot. Truly.

Shane lay back against his pillows, phone resting against his chest. The pride outweighed the unhappiness now. He liked knowing Ilya was out there—doing something meaningful, shaping lives, building confidence in kids who needed it.

He liked knowing he didn't have to be there to matter.

When Ilya returned two days later, tired and smiling and just slightly sunburned from rink lights, Shane didn't hesitate.

He hugged him right there in the gym lobby—brief, contained, but full.

Ilya leaned into it without question.

And in that moment, Shane knew something important, missing someone didn't weaken what they had.

It proved it.

-

Everything moved on.

Not abruptly, not with fireworks or declarations—but steadily, the way good things did when they were allowed to grow without fear. Shane noticed it in the quiet moments first. In how he woke up without the familiar knot of anxiety in his chest. In how he smiled for no reason while brushing his teeth. In how the gym felt less like something he managed and more like a place he belonged.

He was happy.

Really happy.

And Ilya—who had once hovered at the edge of closeness like it might burn him—was happier too. Lighter. More present. He didn't pull away anymore. Didn't retreat into silence when things felt good. When he needed space, he said so. When he needed Shane, he reached for him.

That alone felt like a small miracle.

They slipped into something that felt natural, almost domestic in its rhythm. Mornings when they woke tangled together, not rushing to separate. Evenings where they cooked—or ordered takeout when neither of them felt like trying—and ate standing in the kitchen, sharing bites off the same fork.

Their intimacy settled into a place that felt both exciting and grounding. It wasn't frantic or uncertain anymore. It was attentive, generous, full of laughter as much as heat. Shane had never felt so comfortable in his own skin with someone else—never felt so seen without feeling exposed.

He didn't need more.

That realization came to him one evening as they lay side by side on Ilya's couch, the TV murmuring in the background. Ilya was half-asleep, warm and solid against Shane's shoulder, fingers absently tracing circles on Shane's arm.

This was it, Shane thought.

Not the end—just the shape of something real.

And with that realization came another one, quieter but impossible to ignore.

They hadn't talked about what they were.

Not properly.

They existed in a space that was clearly more than casual, more than undefined—but still unnamed. Shane didn't need labels to feel secure, but he wanted clarity. Not because he was afraid—but because he wanted to choose this consciously.

To choose Ilya.

He waited until the next night, when the air felt calm and open. They were in bed, lights low, both relaxed in that post-intimacy quiet where honesty came easier.

“Ilya?” Shane said softly.

Ilya hummed, eyes still closed. “Yes?”

Shane took a breath. “Can we talk about... us?”

Ilya's eyes opened immediately.

There was no panic there anymore. No flinch. Just attention.

"Okay," Ilya said. "What about us?"

Shane shifted slightly, propping himself on one elbow. He studied Ilya's face—the familiar lines, the way his expression softened when he focused.

"I'm really happy," Shane said. "And I don't want to assume anything. I just... I want to know where we're standing. What this is to you."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Shane resisted the urge to fill the space.

Finally, Ilya spoke. "I was afraid of this conversation once."

"I know," Shane said gently.

"I am not afraid now," Ilya continued. "Just careful."

Shane smiled. "Me too."

Ilya turned onto his side so they were facing each other. "I am not good with labels," he admitted. "They used to feel like expectations I could fail."

Shane nodded. "I don't need a label. I just want to know if we're... choosing each other."

Ilya didn't hesitate this time.

"Yes," he said simply. "I am choosing you."

Shane felt something warm and steady bloom in his chest—not the rush of infatuation, but the deep satisfaction of certainty.

"Good," Shane said, voice soft. "Because I'm choosing you too."

Ilya exhaled slowly, like he'd been holding that breath longer than he realized. He reached out, cupping Shane's cheek.

"I am not going anywhere," Ilya said. "Even when my head gets loud."

Shane leaned into the touch. "I know. And when it does—you don't have to push me away."

"I won't," Ilya said. "I promise."

They lay there for a while after that, the conversation settling between them like something complete. Not finished—but understood.

Shane thought about how far they'd come. The awkward beginnings. The hesitation. The fear. The silence. The honesty that followed.

He thought about how Ilya laughed more now. How he teased Shane openly. How he reached for him without checking himself.

He thought about how safe he felt.

“I like us,” Shane said suddenly.

Ilya smiled. “I like us too.”

Outside, the city moved on as it always did. Inside, Shane felt something rare and precious take root.

This wasn’t a whirlwind romance or a fragile truce with happiness.

It was a choice.

And Shane had never been more sure of one in his life.

-

Shane didn’t expect it to happen at the gym.

If he’d thought about it at all, he would’ve assumed Ilya’s possessiveness—if it existed—would be quiet. Subtle. Something in the way he stood a little closer, or how his hand lingered at Shane’s lower back when no one was looking.

This wasn’t subtle.

It started innocently enough.

It was late afternoon, the gym in that comfortable lull between post-work rush and evening regulars. Shane was finishing up with a client when he noticed a guy hovering near the front desk—early thirties, confident posture, too much cologne. The type who smiled like he expected it to work.

Shane clocked it and promptly forgot about it. He’d learned not to overthink those moments.

Then the guy leaned over the counter.

“Hey,” he said, voice just loud enough to carry. “Do you own this place, or do you just look like you should?”

Shane blinked, caught off guard. He smiled politely—automatic, practiced. “I own it.”

The guy’s grin widened. “Lucky members, then.”

Shane felt the familiar flicker of discomfort, but before he could redirect the conversation, he felt it.

Presence. Warmth. A shift in the air behind him.

Ilya.

Shane didn't even hear him approach. One second he was alone at the desk, the next there was a solid chest at his back, close enough that Shane could feel the heat through his shirt. Not touching—not quite—but unmistakably there.

Ilya's hand came down on the counter beside Shane's, palm flat, casual and territorial all at once.

"He is taken," Ilya said.

His voice was calm. Low. Not raised. Not aggressive.

Final.

Shane's breath caught.

The guy laughed awkwardly. "Oh—sorry, man. Didn't realize."

Ilya leaned in closer, his shoulder brushing Shane's arm now. "You should ask next time."

There was something in his tone—controlled, deliberate—that made Shane's spine light up like someone had traced a match down it.

The guy muttered an apology and backed away.

Ilya didn't move right away.

He stayed there, close, like he was anchoring Shane in place. When he finally shifted, it was only to rest his hand briefly at Shane's waist—not squeezing, not gripping. Just there.

Then he leaned down, mouth near Shane's ear.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked quietly.

Shane swallowed. "Yeah," he said, voice a little rough. "I was just... surprised."

Ilya nodded once. His hand lingered for half a second longer before dropping away. "I do not like when people talk to you like that," Ilya said.

Shane turned to look at him.

Ilya's expression wasn't angry. It wasn't wild or jealous in an uncontrolled way. It was steady. Protective. Like a line had been drawn—not aggressively, but unmistakably.

And Shane—

Shane found it *ridiculously* hot.

His face warmed, freckles standing out sharply as heat rushed to his cheeks. "You didn't have to do that," Shane said, though he didn't sound upset.

“I know,” Ilya replied. “I wanted to.”

That did it. Something settled deep in Shane’s chest—a mix of being seen, claimed, wanted. Not owned. Not controlled.

Chosen.

He cleared his throat. “You... uh. You good?”

Ilya’s mouth curved, just slightly. “I am now.”

They didn’t talk about it right away.

They couldn’t—not with people around, not with Shane trying very hard not to grin like an idiot. But the moment followed him for the rest of the day, buzzing under his skin.

When the gym finally closed, Shane locked the doors and turned to find Ilya waiting by the wall, arms crossed, expression unreadable.

Shane stepped closer. “So,” he said lightly. “That was new.”

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “Did I cross a line?”

Shane shook his head immediately. “No. I just—” He hesitated, then decided honesty was better. “I liked it.”

Ilya’s gaze sharpened. “You liked it?”

Shane nodded, heart thumping. “I did.”

A slow smile spread across Ilya’s face—one Shane had only seen in private moments. It wasn’t smug. It was warm. Satisfied.

“I would never embarrass you,” Ilya said. “Or speak for you if you didn’t want it.”

“I know,” Shane said. “That’s why it worked.”

Ilya stepped closer, crowding Shane into the wall without touching him. The space between them felt charged, electric.

“You are mine,” Ilya said quietly. Not as a demand. As a fact.

“And you,” Shane replied, voice steady despite the way his pulse jumped, “are very good at that.”

Ilya laughed softly, leaning in just enough that Shane could feel his breath. “Good to know.”

They didn’t kiss there. They didn’t need to.

The heat lingered long after, coiling low and warm and certain.

And Shane knew—absolutely, undeniably—that if Ilya ever chose to be possessive again, Shane would melt every single time.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Ilya was midway through a set when he heard someone shout Shane's name.

Not call it. Shout it.

“Shaaaaane!”

The sound cut cleanly through the low hum of the gym—the music, the clank of weights, the soft rhythm of breath and movement. It was loud enough that several heads turned at once.

Ilya paused, hands still gripping the bar, and glanced toward the front desk.

Shane froze.

It wasn't subtle. One second he was correcting a client's posture, hands hovering politely near their shoulders, voice calm and steady. The next, his entire body went rigid, like someone had flipped a switch. His shoulders pulled up a fraction, his jaw tightened, and his freckles seemed to stand out sharply as color rushed to his face.

“Oh no,” Shane muttered.

Ilya straightened slowly, attention sharpening.

Another voice joined the first—lighter, cheerful, unmistakably delighted. “There he is! Oh my god, look at him, he looks so professional!”

Ilya watched as Shane closed his eyes for half a second, like he was bracing for impact.

Hayden, standing behind the desk, looked delighted. “Oh,” Hayden said softly. “This is going to be *good*.”

Two people burst fully into the gym then—a woman and a man, both bundled up in winter coats, both radiating an alarming amount of enthusiasm. They looked... normal, for lack of a better word. Comfortable. The kind of people who smiled easily and took up space without apology.

The woman spotted Shane immediately and waved like she was flagging down a plane.

“Shane Hollander!” she called. “Is this really your gym? It smells like rubber and ambition!”

Shane turned, mortified. “Mom,” he said, voice strained. “Dad.”

Ah.

Parents.

Ilya felt something inside him soften instantly.

Shane's parents didn't hesitate. They crossed the gym floor like they owned it, stopping just short of colliding with the poor client Shane had been helping.

"Oh, sorry!" the woman said brightly. "We're his parents. He made this one from scratch."

She gestured at Shane like he was both a miracle and a science project.

Shane made a sound that might have been a whimper.

"Mom, you can't just yell in the gym," he hissed under his breath.

"We absolutely can," his father replied cheerfully. "You're the owner. This is technically our gym too."

"It is not," Shane said weakly.

Ilya bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling.

The woman—Shane's mother—finally noticed Ilya standing nearby, still half-sweaty from his workout, watching with open curiosity.

"Oh!" she said, eyes lighting up. "And who is *this*?"

Before Shane could intervene, she was already striding toward Ilya.

"This," Shane said quickly, "is Ilya. He—he trains here."

Ilya raised an eyebrow slightly at that. *Trains here.*

Interesting choice of words.

Shane's mother took Ilya in with a single, assessing glance—the kind that made him feel like she was seeing straight through his ribs and into his intentions.

"Well," she said finally, smiling. "You're very tall."

"Thank you," Ilya said politely.

"And handsome," she added. "Shane, why didn't you tell us about him?"

Shane looked like he might actually combust this time. "I didn't—Mom—this is not—"

"He's Russian," Shane's father added thoughtfully, peering at Ilya. "I can tell by the cheekbones."

Ilya blinked. "That is... impressive."

"I read faces," the man said solemnly. "And espionage novels."

Shane dragged a hand down his face. "Please stop talking."

His parents ignored him completely.

“So,” Shane’s mother said, turning back to Ilya, “how long have you known our son?”

Ilya paused.

He could feel Shane’s panic like a physical thing now, radiating off him in waves. His shoulders were tight, posture defensive, like he was preparing to apologize for something that hadn’t even happened yet.

Ilya chose his words carefully.

“A while,” he said. “Long enough to know he is very good at what he does.”

Shane glanced at him, startled.

“Oh, we know,” his mother said proudly. “He’s always been like this. Organizing things. Helping people. Fixing problems.”

She leaned closer to Ilya conspiratorially. “When he was six, he reorganized the pantry because the labels ‘felt anxious.’”

“They were crooked,” Shane muttered.

His father laughed. “He cried when we bought a couch that didn’t match the coffee table.”

“I was eight,” Shane protested.

Ilya’s chest warmed.

This version of Shane—the embarrassed one, flushed and defensive and surrounded by people who clearly adored him—felt intimate in a way Ilya hadn’t expected.

“You should see his old report cards,” his mother continued. “So many comments about ‘leadership potential.’”

“Mom,” Shane begged.

“Oh hush,” she said affectionately. “We’re proud of you.”

She turned back to Ilya again. “Are you... friends?”

Shane inhaled sharply.

Ilya didn’t look away.

“Yes,” he said calmly.

Shane’s parents exchanged a look.

“Aha,” his father said.

“That tone,” Shane said. “I don’t like that tone.”

His mother smiled at Ilya, warm and knowing. “Well, it’s very nice to meet you. Shane doesn’t bring just anyone around.”

Ilya felt that land somewhere deep. “Thank you,” he said quietly. “It’s nice to meet you too.”

They stayed for another fifteen minutes—fifteen long, excruciating minutes for Shane, and fifteen unexpectedly revealing ones for Ilya. They asked questions about the gym, about the city, about whether Shane was eating enough vegetables.

“Yes, Mom,” Shane said. “I still eat vegetables.”

“Leafy ones?” she pressed.

“I drink green smoothies,” Shane said.

“Oh good,” she said. “Because he used to avoid spinach like it personally offended him.”

“I was allergic!”

“You were *dramatic*.”

Ilya laughed before he could stop himself.

Shane looked at him, scandalized. “You’re enjoying this,” Shane accused.

“A little,” Ilya admitted.

When his parents finally left—after hugging Shane in full view of the gym and loudly declaring they would “come back and bring friends”—Shane stood rooted in place, staring at the door like it had betrayed him.

“I am so sorry,” he said finally.

Ilya stepped closer. “For what?”

“For them,” Shane said. “They’re... a lot.”

Ilya studied him for a moment—the tension slowly draining from his posture, the embarrassment giving way to something softer.

“They love you,” Ilya said.

Shane blinked. “Yeah.”

Ilya smiled. “It shows.”

Shane’s mouth curved, just slightly. “They really embarrassed me,” he said.

Ilya leaned in, lowering his voice. “If it helps, I find it very attractive.”

Shane groaned. “You would.”

But he didn’t pull away.

And as Ilya picked up his weights again, heart warm and steady, he realized something important.

This—this loud, affectionate, unapologetic family. This version of Shane, loved loudly and openly.

It didn’t scare him.

It made him want to stay.

-

Ilya agreed because Shane asked like it mattered.

They were walking home from the gym, the air sharp with winter, their breath visible between them. Shane’s hands were tucked into his jacket sleeves, shoulders hunched against the cold. He’d been quiet for most of the walk, glancing at Ilya like he was rehearsing something in his head.

“My parents are in town,” Shane said finally.

Ilya slowed half a step. “Yeah, I’ve noticed.”

“They’re only here for a couple of days,” Shane continued. “They want to go out to dinner tonight. And I was thinking maybe—” He stopped, took a breath, then looked at Ilya fully. “I want to introduce you to them again. As my boyfriend.”

The word hit Ilya square in the chest.

Boyfriend.

His first instinct was to step back—not physically, but internally. Old reflexes stirred. Parents meant expectations, judgment, weight. Parents meant being seen too closely. Being measured.

He thought of his father’s voice, sharp and unforgiving. Of meals that felt like evaluations. Of love that came with conditions and consequences.

Shane noticed the hesitation immediately.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to,” Shane said quickly. “Really. I don’t want to pressure you. I just... I’d like to.”

Ilya swallowed. He didn’t want to let fear decide this. He didn’t want to let his past keep stealing things from him.

“I’m scared,” he admitted.

Shane nodded. “Me too.”

That helped, somehow.

“I’ll come,” Ilya said. “If you’re sure.”

Shane’s smile was immediate and unguarded. “I’m sure.”

That evening, standing in front of his closet, Ilya wondered if nervous was an understatement.

He stared at his clothes like they might personally betray him. Everything felt wrong—too casual, too serious, too much like trying. He changed shirts three times before settling on something simple: dark jeans, a soft sweater, clean boots. He wanted to look like himself. Whatever that meant now.

When Shane arrived to pick him up, Ilya’s chest tightened.

Shane looked good—of course he did. He always did. But there was something different tonight. A carefulness. A quiet excitement barely contained.

“You look great,” Shane said immediately.

“You say that every time,” Ilya replied.

“Because it’s always true.”

Ilya smiled despite himself.

The restaurant was small and warm, tucked between a bookstore and a bakery, the kind of place that smelled like bread and garlic and comfort. When they walked in, Shane’s parents were already there, seated at a corner table.

They spotted Shane instantly.

“There he is!” his mother said, standing so fast her chair scraped the floor.

She hugged Shane before he could protest, pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You look good. Are you sleeping?”

“Yes,” Shane said. “Hi, Mom.”

His father clapped him on the shoulder. “Gym looks successful. We passed by earlier again.”

Shane groaned. “Of course you did.”

Then their attention turned to Ilya.

Shane took a breath. “This is Ilya, you already met him, but” he said, voice steady. “My boyfriend.”

The moment stretched.

Ilya braced himself without meaning to.

Then Shane’s mother smiled—wide, warm, immediate. “Oh,” she said. “Well, it’s about time.”

His father nodded approvingly. “Nice to meet you again.”

Ilya blinked. He didn’t expect the acceptance so quickly.

“You’ve been happier,” his mother said to Shane. “We knew it was someone.”

Shane turned red. “I was not—”

“You absolutely were.”

They laughed, and just like that, something in Ilya’s chest loosened.

Dinner unfolded easily.

Shane’s parents asked questions that felt genuine, not invasive. They listened when Ilya spoke about coaching kids, about moving cities, about learning to settle into a place that didn’t feel temporary anymore. They didn’t press when he kept things vague. They didn’t ask about his past in ways that hurt.

Shane, meanwhile, was relaxed in a way Ilya hadn’t seen before—teased affectionately, rolling his eyes, leaning closer to Ilya without thinking about it.

At one point, Shane’s mother watched them quietly for a moment before speaking. “You seem good for each other,” she said.

Ilya felt his throat tighten. “Thank you.”

Later, while Shane was in the restroom, his father leaned toward Ilya.

“He’s happy,” he said simply. “That’s not something we take lightly.”

Ilya met his gaze. “Neither do I.”

When Shane returned, they ordered dessert, shared bites, laughed over stories from Shane’s childhood that made him bury his face in his hands.

By the time they stepped back out into the cold, Ilya felt wrung out—but not in a bad way.

Shane reached for his hand immediately, fingers warm despite the cold.

“You okay?” Shane asked softly.

Ilya nodded. “Yeah. Just... processing.”

“Good processing or bad?”

Ilya thought of the way Shane’s parents had looked at him—not like a test, not like a threat. Just like someone their son cared about.

“Good,” Ilya said. “Different.”

Shane smiled, relief flooding his face.

They walked in comfortable silence for a while, hands linked, the city quiet around them.

“I’m really glad you came,” Shane said eventually.

“I’m glad you asked,” Ilya replied.

And for the first time in a long while, the idea of being part of someone’s family—even briefly—didn’t feel terrifying.

It felt possible.

-

The next day felt softer than Ilya expected.

He woke up with the dull, pleasant ache of too many thoughts and too little sleep, the memory of the restaurant still clinging to him like a lingering warmth. Shane’s parents’ laughter. The way Shane had said *boyfriend* without hesitation. The way no one had looked at Ilya like he was something fragile or suspicious or temporary.

Still, when morning came, reality returned with its familiar weight.

Shane had told him his parents wanted to spend the day together—walking around the city, doing tourist things, catching up. He’d said it carefully, with an easy smile that hid the fact that he was bracing for Ilya to pull back.

Ilya didn’t.

Instead, he nodded and said, “I’ll come if you want me there.”

Shane’s relief had been immediate and almost comical.

So now Ilya found himself standing on a cold sidewalk, hands tucked into his coat pockets, watching Shane animatedly explain something about the history of a building while his parents listened with indulgent smiles. Shane talked with his whole body—hands moving, posture expressive, freckles bright against the winter air.

Ilya stayed half a step back, letting himself observe.

Shane kept trying to include him without making it obvious. A hand reaching back to tug Ilya closer. A question turned his way. A glance that silently asked, *You okay?*

Ilya answered every time with a nod, a squeeze of Shane's hand, a quiet smile.

They went to a small museum first. Shane's mother lingered over displays, reading every plaque. His father made dry comments under his breath that made Shane snort. Ilya drifted between them, listening, absorbing the rhythm of a family that had practiced being together for decades.

It felt foreign.

Not bad—just unfamiliar.

At lunch, they crowded into a booth at a diner that smelled like coffee and fried food. Shane ordered something healthy, as expected. His mother immediately raised an eyebrow.

"You still doing that?" she asked.

"It makes me feel good," Shane replied.

She smiled. "Then that's what matters."

Ilya watched that exchange carefully. No arguing. No pressure. Just acceptance.

It did something strange to his chest.

At one point, Shane excused himself to the restroom, leaving Ilya sitting across from his parents with steaming mugs of coffee between them. The moment stretched—not uncomfortable, but weighted.

Shane's mother was the first to speak.

"He really likes you," she said plainly.

Ilya stiffened instinctively, then forced himself to breathe. "I like him too."

His father nodded. "He's always been cautious with his heart. It means something that he brought you to dinner."

Ilya swallowed. "I don't take that lightly."

They seemed satisfied with that answer.

The rest of the afternoon passed easily. Walking. Talking. Small stories from Shane's childhood that he pretended to be embarrassed by but clearly didn't mind sharing. Ilya found himself laughing more than he expected, the sound surprising even him.

When evening came, it arrived too quickly.

They stood outside the hotel where Shane's parents were staying, the sky darkening, the city lights flickering on one by one. Shane shifted from foot to foot, hands shoved into his jacket sleeves like he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

"Well," his father said, clapping his hands together once. "That was a good visit."

"Too short," his mother added, then immediately hugged Shane. Tight. Lingered.

"You'll visit us soon," she said firmly. "Both of you."

Shane smiled. "Yeah. We will."

Then she turned to Ilya.

For a split second, Ilya didn't move.

Hugs were complicated. Hugs from parents—especially parents who weren't his—came with too many memories, too much history. His body remembered things his mind tried to forget.

Shane's mother didn't rush him. She simply opened her arms and waited.

Ilya stepped forward.

The hug was warm. Solid. Uncomplicated.

He stiffened at first, muscles locked out of habit—but slowly, unexpectedly, he melted into it. Her hand rested between his shoulder blades, grounding. Safe.

"Take care of each other," she said softly.

"I will," Ilya replied, his voice quieter than usual.

His father shook Ilya's hand, firm and sincere. "Good luck," he said, and somehow it didn't sound ominous.

Then they were gone.

The sidewalk felt emptier without them.

Shane watched until they disappeared inside, then let out a long breath. He turned to Ilya with a grin that was equal parts relief and mischief.

"Well," he said, clapping his hands together. "That's done."

Ilya blinked. "What's done?"

"Meeting the parents," Shane said. "Huge milestone. Very serious."

Ilya felt heat crawl up his neck. "Is it?"

"Oh yeah," Shane said cheerfully. "Which brings us to the next logical step."

Ilya eyed him warily. “I do not like the way you said that.”

Shane leaned closer, eyes bright with teasing. “So. Wedding when?”

Ilya stopped walking.

Shane laughed immediately. “I’m joking. I’m joking! Mostly.”

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, then shook his head. “You are impossible.”

Shane bumped his shoulder affectionately. “You love it.”

Ilya sighed, but there was no real irritation there. Just warmth. Something steady and real settling in his chest.

“Your parents hugged me,” Ilya said instead.

Shane smiled softly. “Yeah. They do that.”

“I was... surprised,” Ilya admitted. “I did not expect it to feel like that.”

Shane slowed, turning more serious. “Good like that?”

Ilya nodded. “Good.”

They walked the rest of the way in comfortable silence, hands brushing, occasionally intertwining. Ilya thought about the hug. About the invitation to visit. About the way Shane had stood beside him without trying to manage or explain him.

Later, alone, Ilya lay awake and stared at the ceiling.

He thought about families—not the one he’d come from, but the ones people built. The ones they chose. The ones that didn’t demand perfection or sacrifice.

He wasn’t naïve enough to believe everything was easy now.

But for the first time in a long while, he didn’t feel like he was waiting for something to be taken away.

He felt... included.

And that, more than anything, scared him a little—and made him want to stay.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

The next two weeks passed in a blur for Shane.

Not the bad kind—the kind that felt full in a way he wasn't used to. Days slipped into each other, marked by early mornings at the gym, familiar routines, and the quiet thrill of knowing Ilya would show up at some point. Sometimes for a workout. Sometimes just to sit on the edge of the mat and talk while Shane finished paperwork. Sometimes to hand him a ginger ale without a word, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

They went on dates—small ones. Coffee that turned into long walks. Dinner that ended with shared fries and Shane pretending not to enjoy them. Movie nights at Ilya's place where they didn't always finish the movie. Mornings that began slow and unhurried, the city still half-asleep around them.

Shane felt... good.

Centered. Lighter.

Even the gym felt different, like it had absorbed some of that warmth. He caught himself smiling at nothing more than the sound of Ilya's laugh drifting from across the room, or the way he leaned against the counter when he was tired, like his body trusted the space.

Hayden, of course, noticed everything.

"You're disgusting," Hayden announced one afternoon, leaning against the front desk while Shane wiped down equipment. "Do you know that?"

Shane didn't even look up. "You say that every day."

"Yes," Hayden replied. "But now it's affectionate."

Shane snorted despite himself.

Hayden had been unbearable lately—commenting on Shane's softer expressions, the way he hummed under his breath, the fact that he no longer flinched when his phone buzzed because it was usually Ilya. He'd caught Hayden watching him once with a smirk that said *oh, you're gone-gone*.

Still, Shane didn't mind. Not really.

He was happy. And that felt new enough that he was willing to tolerate a little teasing.

It was late afternoon, the gym in its quieter lull between rushes. Shane was updating schedules on the computer when Hayden slid into the chair beside him, spinning once before stopping.

"So," Hayden said casually. Too casually.

Shane tensed without knowing why. “What.”

Hayden grinned. “How are you celebrating Valentine’s Day?”

The words landed like a dropped weight.

Shane’s fingers froze over the keyboard.

Valentine’s Day.

Oh.

Oh no.

His face did something—fell, probably, because Hayden’s grin widened immediately.

“You forgot,” Hayden said, delighted.

“I didn’t—” Shane started, then stopped. He exhaled slowly. “I forgot.”

“Wow,” Hayden said. “That’s impressive. You’ve been dating for weeks.”

“Four weeks,” Shane corrected automatically. “It’s not—”

“In four days,” Hayden continued, undeterred, “the entire world will drown in red hearts and bad prix-fixe menus. And you forgot.”

Shane leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face. “I don’t... do Valentine’s Day.”

Hayden tilted his head. “Didn’t do it, or don’t do it?”

Shane hesitated.

“I’ve never really cared,” he admitted. “It always felt... performative. Like you’re supposed to prove something on one specific day.”

Hayden hummed. “And now?”

Shane dropped his hands. “Now I’m dating someone who might care.”

Hayden sobered a little. “Does Ilya seem like the type?”

Shane thought about it.

About the way Ilya approached things carefully. The way he valued routine but still surprised Shane with small gestures. The way he didn’t talk much about expectations or labels but showed up consistently, attentively.

“I don’t know,” Shane said honestly. “He hasn’t said anything.”

“And you haven’t asked.”

Shane winced. “No.”

Hayden leaned back. “So what’s the panic?”

Shane stared at the screen without really seeing it. “What if he expects something?” Shane said. “What if he doesn’t, and I make it weird? What if I mess it up?”

Hayden snorted. “You already sound like someone who cares about Valentine’s Day.”

“I care about *him*,” Shane shot back, then stopped.

Hayden’s eyebrows lifted.

“Well,” Hayden said lightly, “there it is.”

That was the problem, Shane realized.

He cared. A lot.

Which meant suddenly every small decision felt loaded. Valentine’s Day wasn’t just a date on the calendar—it was a test he hadn’t studied for. A thing with rules he didn’t know, expectations he couldn’t predict.

He thought of Ilya’s past, the way he sometimes retreated when things got heavy. The care Shane took not to push, not to demand. He didn’t want to overwhelm him with roses and grand gestures if that wasn’t what Ilya wanted.

But he also didn’t want to seem indifferent.

“Maybe just ask him,” Hayden suggested.

Shane shook his head immediately. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because then it’s... forced,” Shane said. “I don’t want it to sound like an obligation.”

Hayden studied him for a moment. “You know,” he said slowly, “you’re overthinking this.”

“I do that.”

“Yes,” Hayden agreed. “But listen—Valentine’s Day doesn’t have to be a big thing. It can just be... intentional.”

Shane frowned. “What does that even mean?”

“It means you do something that feels like *you*,” Hayden said. “And him. Not the holiday.”

Shane considered that.

Something intentional. Something that wasn't about proving anything, just... choosing each other.

That felt more manageable.

The rest of the day passed with Shane distracted. He caught himself glancing at the calendar, counting days. Four. Plenty of time. And somehow, no time at all.

Ilya texted him that evening—*Practice ran late. Kids exhausted. I am too.*

Shane smiled at his phone.

Want company? he typed, then erased it. Too clingy?

He typed again. *I have ginger ale.*

The response came almost immediately. *Then yes.*

They ended up on Ilya's couch, legs tangled, eating takeout Shane pretended not to judge. Ilya leaned against him, head tipped back, eyes half-closed.

"You're quiet," Ilya said.

Shane hesitated. "Just tired."

Not a lie. Not the whole truth.

Ilya nodded, accepting it without pressing. Shane appreciated that more than he could say.

As the night wore on and Ilya dozed against his shoulder, Shane stared at the ceiling and thought about what he wanted.

Not roses. Not candlelit clichés.

Time. Attention. Something that said *I see you. I choose you. Not because a calendar told me to.*

He didn't know yet what that would look like.

But for the first time, Valentine's Day didn't feel pointless.

It felt... possible.

And that scared him just enough to know it mattered.

-

The decision settles into Shane slowly, the way most of his decisions do—not with fireworks, but with a quiet sense of rightness.

He doesn't want extravagant. No overpriced tasting menu, no forced romance, no social-media version of a relationship that feels like it belongs to someone else. He wants something that feels like *them*. Comfortable. Intentional. Real.

So two days before Valentine's Day, while they're standing outside the gym and the air is cold enough to sting, Shane clears his throat and says, "Hey. Do you want to go out on Friday?"

Ilya blinks at him. "We... already go out."

Shane huffs a laugh. "I mean—yeah. I mean, like. A date-date."

There's a pause. Not a bad one. Just Ilya considering. "Okay," Ilya says simply. "What kind?"

Shane relaxes immediately. "Nothing big. Dinner. Maybe a walk. Something casual."

Ilya's mouth curves into a soft smile. "I like casual."

Good, Shane thinks. Because casual he can do.

By the time Valentine's Day actually arrives, Shane is a wreck anyway.

He tells himself it's ridiculous. He's dated before. He's kissed Ilya before, slept with Ilya before, navigated firsts and expectations. But this feels different. The stakes feel higher, even though he's the one who deliberately chose *lower* expectations.

Hayden, unfortunately, has noticed.

"You're pacing," Hayden says from the couch, where he's sprawled far too comfortably for someone who does not have a date. "That's new."

"I am not pacing," Shane mutters, adjusting the collar of his sweater for the fourth time.

"You adjusted that already," Hayden says. "Also new."

Shane shoots him a look. "Can you not?"

Hayden grins. "I absolutely cannot."

Shane exhales slowly, forcing himself to stop moving. He checks the time on his phone. Five minutes. Ilya said he'd pick him up.

Pick him up. Shane had argued against that for a full minute before giving in. It's cold, Ilya had said.

The doorbell rings. Shane's heart jumps into his throat.

"Oh my god," Hayden says. "He's here. Please tell me you're wearing something embarrassing."

"I am not," Shane snaps, already halfway to the door.

He opens it—and immediately forgets how to breathe.

Ilya stands there, bundled in his coat, cheeks flushed from the cold. He looks good, as always—effortlessly so. But that’s not what makes Shane’s brain short-circuit.

It’s the roses.

A modest bouquet. Red, but not ostentatious. Thoughtful. Intentional.

Ilya lifts them slightly, suddenly a little unsure. “Is this... too much?”

Shane just stares.

Hayden, from behind him, makes a delighted choking sound.

“Wow,” Hayden says. “I love love.”

“Ilya,” Shane manages, voice cracking slightly. “You—you didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to,” Ilya says gently. “It’s Valentine’s Day.”

Shane feels heat crawl up his neck, into his ears, across his freckles like they’re actively betraying him.

“Oh,” Hayden adds. “He’s *blushing*. This is priceless.”

Shane turns halfway. “Go away.”

“No,” Hayden says cheerfully. “I live here.”

Ilya smiles, eyes warm, clearly amused but not unkind. He holds the flowers out again, patiently.

Shane takes them with hands that feel suspiciously unsteady. “Thank you,” he says, softer now. “They’re... really nice.”

“Good,” Ilya says, relief evident. “I wasn’t sure. I don’t usually—”

Shane steps forward before he can overthink it and presses a quick kiss to Ilya’s cheek. It’s instinctive. Gratitude and affection all tangled together.

Ilya freezes for half a second, then relaxes, smiling to himself.

Hayden fans himself dramatically. “Okay, I’m going to need both of you to leave before I combust from secondhand romance.”

Shane laughs, finally, the tension breaking. He grabs his coat, carefully sets the roses in a vase Hayden shoves at him, and follows Ilya out into the cold night.

The date is exactly what Shane hoped for.

They eat at a small place neither of them has been to before. Nothing fancy. Warm lighting, good food, no pressure to whisper or impress. They talk about everything and nothing—about the gym, about the kids Ilya coaches, about a terrible movie Shane watched on a plane once.

Ilya listens the way he always does, fully present. Shane finds himself reaching across the table without thinking, brushing his fingers against Ilya's. Ilya laces their hands together like it's the most natural thing in the world.

After dinner, they walk. The city is quieter than usual, the cold keeping people indoors. Their breath fogs in the air. Ilya offers Shane his scarf without comment. Shane takes it, heart doing something inconveniently soft.

At one point, they stop under a streetlight, just standing there, reluctant to move on.

"This was nice," Shane says.

Ilya nods. "Very."

Shane hesitates, then adds, "I was worried I'd get it wrong."

Ilya studies him. "You didn't."

Shane smiles, something easing in his chest. "You surprised me."

"With the flowers?"

"Yes," Shane admits. "In a good way."

Ilya's mouth tilts into a small, fond smile. "You looked like you were going to combust."

Shane groans. "I did not."

"You did," Ilya insists. "Your freckles were... very expressive."

Shane laughs, ducking his head. "I hate you."

"You do not," Ilya says softly.

And he's right.

When Ilya drops Shane back off at the apartment later, neither of them rushes to say goodnight. They linger, hands brushing, the quiet full rather than awkward.

"Thank you," Shane says again. "For tonight. For... everything."

Ilya leans in, resting his forehead against Shane's. "I'm glad we did something," he says. "Simple is good."

Shane closes his eyes, breathing him in. "Yeah."

They kiss—slow, unhurried, full of intention.

Upstairs, Hayden is absolutely insufferable about it. “You’re smiling,” he announces as soon as Shane walks in. “Like an idiot.”

Shane doesn’t bother denying it. “Shut up,” he says fondly.

Hayden grins. “Happy Valentine’s Day, Romeo.”

Shane looks at the flowers, at the quiet proof that this—whatever this is—is real.

“Yeah,” he says, to no one in particular. “Happy Valentine’s Day.”

-

The gym smells like rubber mats, disinfectant, and familiarity.

Normally, that steadies Shane. Normally, it’s the one place where his thoughts line up neatly, where routines anchor him and everything makes sense. Today, it does absolutely nothing to help.

Because Ilya walks in at nine seventeen a.m., and Shane’s brain immediately stops being professional.

It’s not dramatic. Ilya doesn’t make an entrance. He just steps through the doors, shrugging out of his coat, hair still slightly damp from melted snow. He looks... comfortable. Relaxed. Like someone who slept well.

Shane, unfortunately, remembers *why*.

He remembers the way the city lights reflected in Ilya’s eyes last night. The roses—still sitting in a vase on the kitchen counter, proof that it all actually happened. The walk, slow and unhurried. The kiss at the end of the night that lingered just long enough to make Shane ache when he went home alone.

He remembers thinking it was okay. That it was good to end the night gently.

This morning, he regrets that decision immensely.

“Morning,” Hayden says from the front desk, watching Shane stare a little too obviously. “You’re doing the thing again.”

“I am not,” Shane mutters.

Hayden hums. “You are. It’s the eyes. You look like you’re undressing him with them.”

Shane’s face goes hot instantly. “I absolutely am not.”

“Sure,” Hayden says. “Anyway, your boyfriend’s here.”

Shane doesn't respond. He can't. Because Ilya is already pulling his hoodie over his head, muscles shifting under fabric, completely unaware—or pretending to be—of the effect he's having.

Shane forces himself to look away.

He focuses on his clipboard. On the schedule. On a client who needs help with their deadlift form. He moves automatically, slipping into trainer mode like a well-worn jacket. His hands are steady. His voice is calm.

But every so often, his gaze betrays him.

Ilya stretches near the free weights, long and unhurried. He lifts with practiced ease, posture precise, movements economical. There's something mesmerizing about watching him—about knowing him well enough now to read the subtle tells in his body language.

Shane knows when Ilya is relaxed.

He knows when he's thinking.

And he knows exactly when Ilya realizes he's being watched.

Their eyes meet across the room.

Ilya's expression changes—not much. Just a small shift. A slow curve of his mouth. Something knowing, deliberate. His gaze flicks briefly, unmistakably, over Shane's body.

Shane swallows.

It feels like a challenge.

Ilya finishes his set and towels off, not rushing. When he walks past Shane, it's close enough that Shane catches the warmth of him, the familiar scent of soap and clean cotton.

"I'll be in your office," Ilya murmurs quietly. "You look distracted."

Then he's gone, footsteps retreating up the stairs like nothing happened.

Shane stands frozen for a moment.

Hayden leans over the desk. "Go."

"I can't," Shane says weakly.

"You absolutely can," Hayden replies. "And if you don't, I'm going to start narrating what's happening in your head."

Shane glares at him. "I hate you."

"Love you too."

Shane wraps up with his client as efficiently as possible, heart racing in a way that has nothing to do with cardio. By the time he climbs the stairs, his pulse is loud in his ears.

His office door is closed. That alone sends a jolt through him.

He hesitates, then knocks lightly before pushing it open.

Ilya is leaning against Shane's desk, arms folded loosely, posture relaxed but eyes sharp. He looks entirely too at home in the space—like he belongs there.

The door clicks shut behind Shane.

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

"You're staring again," Ilya says eventually, voice low.

Shane exhales, some of the tension bleeding out of him. "You started it."

Ilya's mouth tilts up. "I finished my workout."

"You knew what you were doing."

"Yes," Ilya says calmly.

Shane laughs under his breath, shaking his head. "You're impossible."

"And yet," Ilya says, pushing off the desk and stepping closer, "you didn't stop."

He stops a careful distance away. Close enough that Shane feels him—heat, presence—but not touching.

"You didn't come over last night," Ilya says.

It's not an accusation. Just a statement.

Shane swallows. "I wanted to."

"I know."

That simple understanding makes Shane's chest tighten.

"I didn't want to rush," Shane admits. "I was happy. I didn't want to ruin that."

Ilya studies him for a long moment. Then he reaches out and takes Shane's wrist gently, thumb pressing into the pulse there.

"You didn't ruin anything," he says quietly. "But you were thinking about it today."

Shane flushes. "Was I that obvious?"

Ilya's eyes darken slightly. "Only to me."

The way he says it—certain, almost proprietary—sends a shiver down Shane’s spine.

Ilya steps closer, closing the gap fully now. He lifts Shane’s chin, tilting his face up until their eyes meet.

“This,” Ilya murmurs, “is me fixing that.”

The kiss is slow.

Not rushed. Not desperate. Just... intentional.

Shane melts into it, hands gripping the front of Ilya’s jacket without thinking. His head spins, senses narrowing to the warmth of Ilya’s mouth, the steady pressure, the restraint that somehow makes it worse.

They don’t have much time. They both know it.

That knowledge hums between them, electric.

Ilya breaks the kiss first, resting his forehead briefly against Shane’s.

“Tonight,” he says softly. “My place.”

Shane lets out a shaky breath. “You’re not even pretending to ask.”

Ilya smiles. “No.”

He smooths Shane’s shirt, grounding him again, then steps back. “Finish work,” Ilya adds. “I’ll be waiting.”

Then he opens the door and leaves like nothing happened.

Shane stands there for several seconds, heart pounding, mind completely scrambled.

When he finally makes it back downstairs, Hayden takes one look at his face and grins.

“Well,” Hayden says. “That answers some questions.”

Shane drops into the chair behind the desk and buries his face in his hands. “I’m going to lose my job.”

“You own the place.”

“I’m still going to lose it.”

Hayden laughs. “You look happy.”

Shane peeks through his fingers. He is smiling. He can’t help it.

“Yeah,” he admits quietly. “I am.”

The rest of the day passes in a haze of anticipation.

Every task feels like it's happening underwater. Every glance at the clock is torture. By the time Shane locks up the gym, his nerves are buzzing, excitement and nervousness tangled together in a way that makes his chest feel too full.

Tonight feels... different.

Not rushed. Not uncertain.

Chosen.

And as he steps out into the cold evening, thinking of Ilya waiting for him, Shane knows one thing for certain:

Whatever happens next, he isn't going to regret it.

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Ilya knows the moment Shane steps into his apartment that tonight is different.

It's not dramatic. There's no pause in the doorway, no nervous laughter, no fumbling excuses. Shane just shrugs off his jacket and looks around like he belongs here now, like this space has already accepted him. That, more than anything, sends a slow, deliberate heat curling through Ilya's chest.

"Hey," Shane says.

His voice is steady. Casual. Which is impressive, considering the way his eyes keep catching on Ilya—on the way he's leaning against the counter, arms crossed, expression unreadable.

"Hey," Ilya replies.

The door clicks shut behind Shane. The sound lands heavier than it should.

They stand there for a moment, neither of them moving, the air between them thick with everything that's been waiting since this morning. Since the office. Since the promise.

Ilya takes his time.

He watches Shane the way he did on the ice once—patient, deliberate, cataloging tells. Shane's shoulders are relaxed, but his hands flex once at his sides, like he's resisting the urge to reach out. His freckles stand out more when he's flushed, a constellation Ilya already knows by heart.

"You came fast," Ilya says mildly.

Shane huffs a laugh. "You told me you'd be waiting."

"I did."

Ilya pushes off the counter and steps closer, slow enough to make the space feel smaller by degrees. Shane doesn't retreat. If anything, he leans in slightly, like he's meeting Ilya halfway without realizing it.

"You were distracted all day," Ilya says.

Shane's mouth twitches. "You're enjoying this."

"Yes," Ilya admits easily.

He reaches out—not to touch Shane, not yet—but to take his jacket and hang it neatly by the door. It's a small thing. Intentional. Controlled. Shane watches him do it, throat bobbing.

"Sit," Ilya says, nodding toward the couch.

Shane raises an eyebrow. “That wasn’t a question.”

“No,” Ilya agrees.

There’s a beat—just enough for Shane to decide whether he’s going to push back.

He doesn’t.

He sits.

Ilya stays standing.

The power shift is subtle, but it’s there. Ilya lets it settle, lets Shane feel it without naming it. He moves to the kitchen instead, pouring water, unhurried, aware of Shane’s gaze following him.

“You didn’t regret going home last night,” Ilya says lightly.

It’s not a question. It’s an invitation.

Shane leans back against the couch cushions. “I didn’t,” he says honestly. “I regret not coming over.”

Ilya turns, glass in hand, studying him. “There’s a difference.”

Shane nods. “Yeah.”

Ilya hands him the glass, fingers brushing Shane’s for just a second longer than necessary. Shane inhales sharply, like the contact caught him off guard.

“Drink,” Ilya says.

Shane does, eyes never leaving Ilya’s.

“You looked at me like that today,” Ilya continues, voice low, conversational. “At the gym.”

Shane groans quietly. “You noticed.”

“I always notice,” Ilya says.

He steps closer, stopping right in front of Shane now. Close enough that Shane has to tilt his head back to look at him. Ilya braces one hand on the back of the couch, boxing Shane in without touching him.

“You undressed me with your eyes,” Ilya says.

Shane swallows. “You started it.”

Ilya smiles faintly. “You’re right. I did.”

He leans down—not to kiss Shane, not yet—but to speak close enough that Shane can feel his breath.

“And then you followed me into your office,” Ilya murmurs.

Shane’s fingers curl into the couch. “You invited me.”

“Yes.”

Ilya straightens slightly, just enough to make Shane chase the closeness without realizing he’s doing it.

“You like it when I’m direct,” Ilya says. “But you like it more when I make you wait.”

Shane laughs breathlessly. “You’re not wrong.”

Ilya reaches out then, finally, placing two fingers under Shane’s chin, guiding his face up. He doesn’t rush the kiss when it comes. He lets it build, lets Shane’s anticipation peak before he presses their mouths together.

The kiss is slow. Measured. Deepening only when Shane sighs into it, giving in.

Ilya breaks it deliberately, resting his forehead against Shane’s.

“This,” he says quietly, “is why we didn’t rush last night.”

Shane’s voice is a whisper. “You’re killing me.”

Ilya smiles. “Not yet.”

He straightens, stepping back just enough to give Shane space. Shane looks wrecked already—eyes dark, lips parted, breathing uneven.

“Come here,” Ilya says, holding out a hand.

Shane takes it without hesitation.

Ilya leads him deeper into the apartment, not to the bedroom yet. Instead, he stops near the window, the city lights spilling in, throwing shadows across Shane’s face.

Ilya turns him gently, backing him up until Shane’s shoulders hit the wall.

“Tell me to stop,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane meets his gaze, steady despite everything. “I don’t want you to.”

Ilya nods once.

“Good.”

The next kiss is deeper. Hungrier. Ilya lets himself linger now, lets the restraint ease just enough to make Shane gasp softly against his mouth. His hands slide to Shane's waist, firm but careful, anchoring him there.

Shane's hands come up, gripping Ilya's sweater, pulling him closer like he's afraid Ilya might disappear.

"You okay?" Ilya murmurs between kisses.

"Yes," Shane breathes. "Very."

Ilya smiles into the kiss.

He pulls back again—because control matters, because anticipation is its own language—and presses his forehead to Shane's, breathing him in.

"Bedroom," Ilya says softly.

Shane nods immediately.

Ilya leads him there at last, fingers laced, the tension following them like a living thing. When the door closes behind them, the world narrows to breath and warmth and the steady rhythm of two people choosing each other.

Ilya takes his time undressing Shane, reverent and deliberate, like he's memorizing him all over again. Shane's eagerness is palpable, but he doesn't rush. He trusts Ilya to set the pace.

That trust settles something deep in Ilya's chest.

When he finally kisses Shane again, it's unhurried, grounding, full of intent rather than urgency. He lets the rest fade out naturally, the moment stretching and deepening until there's nothing left but closeness.

Now Ilya was settled between Shane's legs, braced on his forearms, completely caging Shane in. He kissed him slowly, deeply, his tongue slipping into Shane's mouth with unhurried confidence. The slide of their tongues together made something in Ilya snap; the control he'd been holding onto thinned dangerously.

He broke the kiss only to trail his mouth along Shane's jaw, lingering there until Shane gasped beneath him. Shane's hands moved restlessly over Ilya's back, mapping every line of muscle, every flex and shift as he breathed.

Ilya's lips traveled lower, pausing to tease at one of Shane's nipples, licking before catching it gently between his teeth. Shane arched instinctively, chasing friction, a soft, needy sound spilling from his mouth. Ilya loved that sound—loved the way Shane reacted so openly, the way his body answered without hesitation. He loved knowing he could make Shane breathless like this.

Impatience thrummed through Ilya—he wanted to make Shane ache with pleasure, to stretch the night endlessly, yet he also craved the pull of Shane's warmth around him, drawing him

in.

His lips traced a slow path over Shane's stomach, savoring the hard lines of muscle shaped by hours in the gym. He lingered, tasting the warmth of his skin, listening to the soft, helpless gasps Shane let slip. Every subtle movement, every shiver, every tug of Shane's hands in his hair, fueled Ilya's desire. He reveled in the way Shane claimed him, even in the smallest gestures, and in that moment, nothing else existed but the heat between them.

Ilya kissed his way down toward Shane's hips, lingering on the powerful thighs he loved, tracing the lines that wrapped tight and strong around his waist when Ilya fucked him.

Shane's impatience was audible now, a sharp, needy edge in every moan, and Ilya reveled in it—the way he could make Shane lose control with just a touch.

"Fuck, Ilya!" Shane gasped, tugging at his hair, desperate.

"No... fuck, Shane," Ilya countered, his voice low, teasing, just before taking Shane into his mouth.

"Yes!" Shane moaned loudly, voice breaking, incoherent with need.

Ilya loved that—loved the way Shane's words fell apart, raw and uncontrolled. He moved slowly, deliberately, drawing out every inch, every sound, every shiver, sensing Shane's patience fraying, inch by delicious inch.

Ilya pulled back with a soft pop and kissed Shane again, eliciting a reflexive wrap of Shane's thighs around him. He groaned, pressing their mouths together, tongues tangling as he rubbed himself against Shane's length, slow, deliberate, savoring every reaction.

The need to feel Shane fully grew urgent. Ilya's hand reached for the nightstand, bringing back the bottle of lube and coating his fingers with a soft, deliberate touch.

Still locked in a heated kiss, he traced one lubricated finger slowly over Shane's sensitive hole, circling before brushing against his entrance. Shane's moan was immediate, sharp, breathless, and instinctively Ilya pushed in just a little. Shane clenched around him, and the sound he made made Ilya's chest tighten.

"More," Shane breathed, voice ragged and desperate, and Ilya felt the weight of his need pressing back, sweet and insistent.

Ilya eased his finger deeper, moving slowly inside Shane, feeling the heat and tightness of him clenching instinctively around every motion. The sensation made Ilya ache—he wanted to be inside Shane as soon as possible.

He added a second finger, leaning in to kiss Shane's jaw. Shane's moans grew louder, body arching, moving against Ilya's hands as if he couldn't get enough.

"Come on, I'm good," Shane gasped, breathless.

Ilya withdrew his fingers and murmured, "Turn around."

As Shane shifted, Ilya coated his length with lube, anticipation tightening his chest. He couldn't resist, sliding a hand over Shane's ass, biting gently on a cheek, drawing a sharp gasp that sent a shiver through both of them.

Ilya aligned himself with Shane and eased in slowly, giving him time to adjust. Every inch was deliberate; he wanted to press in with force, but patience made the sensation richer, more consuming. When he bottomed out, a soft moan escaped both of them in perfect unison, Shane clenching instinctively around him.

At first, Ilya gave a few tentative thrusts, letting Shane feel each movement without overwhelming him. When he hit just the right spot, Shane gasped sharply, as if the air had been stolen from his lungs.

Ilya's hands gripped Shane's hips, anchoring him as he began to move with more intent, thrusting harder and faster. Shane's fingers curled into the bedsheets, clutching the soft material so tightly it threatened to tear, his body reacting in every possible way to Ilya's relentless rhythm.

Ilya moved in and out, finding a rhythm that was perfect for both of them, a pulse that matched their need and built it higher with every stroke.

"Oh god, Ilya," Shane moaned, burying his face into one of Ilya's pillows, letting the sound escape freely.

That only spurred Ilya on, moving faster, more deliberately, pushing them both closer to the edge. When Shane's reactions became too much to contain, Ilya shifted him to his knees, one arm wrapped across Shane's chest, the other wrapped around Shane's cock stroking.

He thrust with abandon, lips seeking any patch of skin he could claim along Shane's neck, biting and kissing as he moved. The sensation built inside him, the edge of his own release approaching fast, but he held back, craving Shane's release first, wanting to savor every shiver and gasp before giving in himself.

He stroked Shane faster and harder, driving himself as deep as he could, chasing the edge with reckless abandon.

When Shane cried out, his release washing over him, his walls clenched instinctively around Ilya, pulling him over the edge as well. Ilya followed moments later, letting himself go inside Shane, the rhythm of their shared climax leaving them both breathless.

For a long moment, they stayed still, hearts hammering, chests rising and falling in tandem. When Shane finally collapsed onto the bed, spent and trembling, Ilya sank down beside him, their warmth mingling as they came down from the intensity together.

Later—much later—Shane is warm and pliant against him, breath slow and even.

Ilya watches him for a long moment, thumb brushing absently over freckles, heart doing something unfamiliar and dangerously full.

“Stay,” Shane murmurs sleepily.

Ilya presses a kiss to his temple. “I am.”

And for once, he means it without fear.

-

The sunlight came in thin and pale through the blinds, falling across the apartment in slanted stripes. Ilya woke first, as he usually did, lying still in the quiet, listening. Shane’s breathing was soft beside him, steady, and the small sounds he made—the hum of contentment, the faint shifting against the sheets—made Ilya’s chest tighten in a way that was entirely unfamiliar.

He turned slightly, careful not to wake Shane, and took in the view. Shane was still half-curved under the blanket, hair tousled, freckles catching the light. The way he was tucked in, still, completely at ease—it made Ilya want to pause time.

Ilya felt a slow, growing warmth, not just in his chest but through the way his hands itched to reach out. There was a tenderness in Shane that pulled something protective and possessive from him simultaneously. He leaned over just slightly, brushing a loose strand of hair from Shane’s forehead, careful not to disturb him, just marking his presence.

A soft groan, half-awake, told Ilya he’d noticed. Shane opened one eye, blinked, and then smiled—a small, crooked thing that made Ilya want to melt into him on the spot.

“Morning,” Shane murmured, voice rough with sleep.

“Morning,” Ilya said softly, brushing the hair back again.

Shane shifted, and the blanket fell away just enough for Ilya to see it—Shane’s shoulders tight, jaw slightly clenched, muscles taut. The soreness hit Ilya instantly—not just from the lingering memory of last night, but from seeing Shane’s body react to it even now.

“You’re sore,” Ilya said, low. Not accusing. Just an observation, though his voice carried something more.

Shane blinked, then bit his lip. “Yeah... a little,” he admitted, voice almost sheepish. He turned slightly toward Ilya. “You know... not complaining. Just... sore.”

Ilya’s lips curved. “I can help with that.”

Shane’s eyes widened slightly, and then a smile tugged at his lips. “You... you’re offering to kiss it better?” he teased, but there was a softness underneath, a hint of vulnerability.

“Of course,” Ilya said, leaning closer. He pressed a soft kiss along Shane’s shoulder, careful, gentle, letting his lips linger over each knot of tension he could feel even through the thin blanket. Shane’s body responded immediately, a small shiver, a relaxation, and Ilya smiled to himself.

There was a quiet intimacy in that moment, stronger than any rush or heat of last night's passion. It wasn't about urgency. It wasn't about power. It was about noticing, understanding, touching in a way that didn't demand anything but presence. Shane let him, willingly, and that trust made Ilya ache in a good way.

"I don't know if that's helping or making it worse," Shane muttered, voice muffled against the pillow.

"I think it's helping," Ilya said, voice low, teasing. "Mostly me, though. Mostly me."

Shane laughed softly, the sound sleepy but warm. He rolled slightly, bringing his face closer to Ilya. "You're terrible," he said.

"I know," Ilya replied, brushing his thumb over Shane's freckles. "You like it."

Shane didn't answer. He just closed his eyes and let the sensation take him. Ilya pressed another kiss along Shane's neck, careful, measured, savoring the shiver that went through him every time. Shane's hands found Ilya's arms without thinking, clinging, seeking. Ilya let them, letting the tenderness grow between them before ever demanding anything.

The room smelled faintly of last night—Shane's shampoo, their combined heat, faint traces of lingering clothes—and Ilya inhaled it deeply. He loved this domesticity. He loved the quiet. He loved Shane in ways he hadn't expected, and the realization made him smile inwardly, careful not to disturb Shane.

He moved slightly, brushing the blanket down and letting Shane shift more comfortably against him. Shane relaxed further, curling against his side. Ilya let his hand trace over Shane's back, slow, gentle, mapping the muscles with the tip of his fingers. Every slight flinch or sigh made Ilya adjust, careful, attentive.

"You're too attentive," Shane murmured, half-awake.

"And you like it," Ilya countered softly.

Shane's lips curved into a small smile, tired but real. "Maybe," he admitted.

Ilya leaned in again, soft kiss to Shane's forehead this time, then cheek, letting Shane nuzzle against him. There was no rush, no expectation. Just the quiet press of bodies, warm, living, breathing together. Ilya felt a contented pulse in his chest, a slow-burning satisfaction in the way Shane fit so naturally against him.

Minutes passed like this. Soft touches, whispered murmurs, long, lingering eye contact when Shane opened his eyes just enough to meet his. Ilya pressed gentle kisses along Shane's jawline, teasing him, marking the tension, the soreness, the memory of last night without rushing. Shane's soft moans and sighs, tiny and unguarded, filled the space more than any words could.

"I think you like being kissed awake," Ilya said finally, voice a low rumble.

Shane tilted his head back, lips parted slightly, eyes half-lidded. "Maybe," he admitted. "Maybe I like being kissed like that by you."

Ilya smiled, brushing a thumb over Shane's lips, then tracing down his chin to his neck. He could feel Shane's pulse, fast but steady, beneath his fingers. He leaned down, lips close but not pressing, whispering, "You're mine this morning. Do you know that?"

Shane's laugh was quiet but full, eyes sparkling. "You already said that last night."

"And I'll say it again," Ilya said. "Until you believe me."

Shane blinked, breath catching slightly. "I believe you," he said softly.

Ilya's chest tightened at the confession. He pressed a soft kiss to Shane's temple, then pulled back just enough to look at him properly. The sunlight caught Shane's hair and freckles, highlighted the gentle curve of his smile, and Ilya felt that same ache, that same heat, grow anew.

"I could stay like this all day," Ilya murmured, voice low.

"Please don't," Shane said with mock protest, though he melted against the comfort anyway.

Ilya laughed softly, brushing fingers through Shane's hair, and then let himself rest his forehead against Shane's. The apartment was quiet except for the hum of the city outside, the soft sound of breathing and movement, and the gentle thrum of something deeper between them.

They didn't move for a long time, just enjoying the intimacy of each other's presence. No plans, no expectations, just the warmth, the trust, the closeness. Shane pressed his cheek into Ilya's shoulder, sighing. Ilya tightened his hold, letting him.

"You're warm," Shane murmured.

"You always are," Ilya replied. "When you're like this... soft, relaxed... it's impossible not to notice."

Shane's hand found Ilya's, fingers curling into his palm, thumb brushing along the back. "You're really good at noticing things," he said softly.

"And you're really good at letting me," Ilya countered, pressing a soft kiss along Shane's wrist.

Shane laughed quietly. "I think I'm addicted to you."

Ilya grinned. "It's mutual."

For a while, neither of them spoke, letting the quiet settle around them. Ilya watched Shane's chest rise and fall, the faint warmth still lingering from last night. He felt a satisfaction deeper than desire, a calm he hadn't expected to feel. This was intimate. Real. The kind of closeness that made everything else in the world fade.

Eventually, Shane shifted slightly, stretching, rubbing at his shoulders. Ilya noticed and offered a teasing grin.

“You’re still sore,” he said.

Shane groaned. “Not enough. Maybe you could...” He trailed off, voice low and suggestive.

Ilya caught the hint, smirk tugging at his lips. “Maybe I could kiss it better?”

Shane’s eyes widened, a slow smile spreading. “Exactly that.”

Ilya leaned in again, soft pressure along Shane’s neck and shoulders, teasing, deliberate. Shane moaned softly, letting himself relax completely into Ilya’s touch. Ilya felt the power, the tease, the intimacy—the balance of giving Shane what he wanted while controlling the pace, making Shane wait, making the anticipation burn longer.

Hours could pass like this, and Ilya wouldn’t care. The heat, the teasing, the quiet, intimate care—it was better than anything else. Shane’s trust, his vulnerability, the way he let Ilya lead, it all made Ilya’s chest swell.

Shane shifted slightly, looking up at him with that soft, open expression that made Ilya ache. “Promise me round two tonight?” Shane murmured, voice rough.

Ilya’s grin was slow and deliberate. “Always,” he said.

Shane relaxed against him, and Ilya let his hands linger just a little longer, memorizing the warmth, the shape, the trust.

He pressed a final, gentle kiss to Shane’s temple. “I could stay like this forever,” he murmured.

Shane tilted his head into him. “I wouldn’t complain.”

And Ilya knew it wasn’t just lust or desire—they had something deeper now. Quiet. Intimate. Domestic. And for the first time in a long time, Ilya allowed himself to savor it without fear.

Because Shane was here. Shane was real. And this—whatever it was between them—was theirs.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Shane doesn't realize how light he feels until he steps into the apartment and almost forgets to close the door behind him.

He stands there for a second too long, keys still in his hand, jacket half off his shoulders, body humming with leftover warmth that has nothing to do with the heater being on. His muscles ache in that slow, pleasant way that reminds him of effort and reward. Of being wanted. Of being touched with intention.

He exhales, long and content, and lets the door click shut.

Then—

“Oh my god.”

Shane flinches.

Hayden is sprawled across the couch, socked feet on the coffee table, phone in hand. He looks up slowly, eyes narrowing with the precision of a predator who has just scented blood.

“You,” Hayden says, sitting up. “Look *disgusting*.”

Shane groans. “Good morning to you too.”

Hayden ignores that completely. He stands, circles Shane once, twice, head tilted like he's examining a museum exhibit.

“You're glowing,” Hayden says. “Like a Hallmark movie lead who just learned the true meaning of Christmas.”

Shane drops his keys onto the counter and tries very hard to act normal. He fails immediately.

“I'm tired,” he says weakly.

Hayden snorts. “You're wrecked. Emotionally. Physically. Spiritually.”

Shane opens the fridge, mostly to have something to do with his hands. He grabs water, stares into the shelves without seeing them.

“You weren't home,” Hayden continues, smug. “You didn't text. You didn't even pretend to lie.”

“I wasn't required to,” Shane mutters.

Hayden gasps dramatically. “Oh my god. He didn't even deny it.”

Shane closes the fridge harder than necessary and turns. “Can you not?”

Hayden grins wider. “I could. But where’s the fun in that?”

Shane sinks onto the opposite end of the couch, exhaustion finally catching up to him now that the adrenaline has faded. He runs a hand through his hair, fingers catching slightly in the mess. His body still feels... warm. Loose. Safe.

Hayden watches him like he’s watching a very entertaining movie.

“So,” Hayden says. “Tell me everything.”

“No.”

“Fine. Tell me *nothing* but confirm my assumptions.”

Shane glares. “There are no assumptions.”

Hayden raises an eyebrow. “You stayed over.”

Shane opens his mouth. Closes it.

Hayden beams. “You stayed over.”

Shane rubs his face. “We slept.”

“Together.”

“Yes.”

“In the same bed.”

Shane sighs. “Yes, oh my god, like is the first time”

Hayden clasps his hands together. “I win.”

Shane sinks deeper into the couch. His body protests slightly at the movement—nothing painful, just a reminder. His mind drifts, uninvited, to sunlight through blinds. To quiet laughter. To the way Ilya had looked at him like he was something precious, not fragile.

Hayden notices the distant look immediately.

“Oh,” Hayden says softly. Then louder. “Oh *no*.”

Shane blinks. “What?”

Hayden points at his face. “That. That right there. That’s not just sex.”

Shane stiffens.

“It is,” he says automatically.

Hayden squints. “You said that about your last three gym crushes. You did *not* look like this after them.”

Shane swallows.

He hadn’t meant to think about it. About what this means. About how different it feels. He’s been letting himself enjoy it moment by moment, because the moment feels good. Because Ilya feels good. Because everything has felt... easy.

Hayden leans forward, elbows on knees. “You like him.”

Shane shrugs. “Obviously.”

“No,” Hayden says. “You *like* him.”

Shane’s chest tightens, just slightly. “He’s... important,” Shane says carefully.

Hayden nods slowly, smile softening. “Yeah.”

Silence settles between them, not uncomfortable, just... loaded.

Hayden tilts his head. “You know what this looks like?”

Shane doesn’t answer.

“It looks like you’re falling in love.”

The words hit Shane like a physical force.

He freezes.

Actually freezes—body going still, breath stopping halfway through his chest, fingers curling into the fabric of the couch cushion. His brain stutters, then blanks entirely.

Love.

The word echoes, loud and unwelcome.

Hayden immediately notices. “Oh shit,” he says. “I broke him.”

Shane stares at the wall, heart suddenly hammering. “Don’t—don’t say that.”

Hayden frowns. “Why?”

“Because,” Shane says, voice thin, “it’s too soon.”

Hayden sits back, studying him. “Is it?”

Shane swallows hard.

He thinks of Ilya's apartment. The quiet. The way Ilya watched him like he was worth memorizing. The way he'd been careful, attentive, gentle without making Shane feel small.

He thinks of the way he'd woken up feeling safe.

"I don't know," Shane says honestly. "I've never—"

He trails off.

Hayden waits.

"I've never wanted to keep something like this quiet," Shane admits. "Or... protect it. Or worry about messing it up."

Hayden softens further. "That's usually the sign."

Shane shakes his head, panic blooming. "No. No, it's just—new. He's new."

"New doesn't usually rearrange your soul," Hayden says gently.

Shane laughs weakly. "You're being dramatic."

"Am I?"

Shane doesn't answer.

Because the truth is—he's scared.

Not of Ilya. Not of the relationship. But of the depth of it. Of how easily Ilya has slipped under his skin, past his defenses, into places Shane didn't even know were open.

Hayden watches him quietly for a moment, then nudges his knee.

"Hey," Hayden says. "You don't have to define it. You don't have to say anything. Feeling something doesn't mean you owe it a label."

Shane exhales shakily.

"I don't want to lose him," he says, barely audible.

Hayden nods. "Then don't rush him."

Shane looks up. "I won't."

"I know," Hayden says. "You're very good at patience when it matters."

Shane leans back into the couch, exhaustion settling fully now. His body aches. His heart feels... stretched.

"I just," he says, quieter now, "didn't expect this."

Hayden smiles softly. “Nobody ever does.”

They sit in silence for a while longer.

Eventually, Hayden grins again, the menace returning. “So. Should I start planning the wedding or—”

Shane groans and throws a pillow at him. “Absolutely not.”

Hayden laughs, dodging easily. “I’m just saying. If you need a best man—”

“Stop.”

Hayden holds up his hands. “Okay, okay. I’ll behave.”

Shane doesn’t believe him for a second.

But as he stands to head to his room, body tired, mind still spinning, one thought follows him unbidden.

Love.

The word still scares him.

But it doesn’t feel wrong.

And that might be the most terrifying—and hopeful—part of all.

-

Shane doesn’t plan to almost say it.

It sneaks up on him the way everything with Ilya has—quietly, without warning, slipping past his defenses when he’s not looking. If he’d known, he would have stopped it. Prepared himself. Taken a breath.

But Shane has never been good at guarding his heart when he feels safe.

They’re walking home together, late afternoon light stretched thin across the sidewalks. The air is cold enough to sting, but not unpleasant. Ilya’s hands are tucked into his jacket pockets, shoulders relaxed, steps easy. Shane matches him without thinking, the rhythm of it comfortable, familiar.

They don’t talk much.

And that’s the thing—it doesn’t feel awkward. It feels... right. Companionable. The kind of silence that hums instead of presses.

Shane glances sideways at Ilya, just to look.

Ilya's expression is calm, but there's something attentive in it, like he's always half-aware of Shane's presence even when he's not looking directly at him. It's subtle, the way his posture shifts just enough to stay aligned, the way he slows slightly when Shane does.

Protective, Shane thinks.

The thought sends a strange warmth through his chest.

"Hayden's been unbearable," Shane says finally, breaking the quiet.

Ilya hums. "I assume that's his natural state."

Shane laughs, relief blooming at the sound of it. "He thinks he's hilarious."

"He is," Ilya says. "Just not always on purpose."

Shane smiles, then hesitates. His chest tightens, just a little. He doesn't know why. Or maybe he does, and he's avoiding it.

"I just..." Shane trails off, fingers flexing inside his gloves. "I'm not used to this. Being—comfortable."

Ilya slows, stopping entirely. Shane doesn't even realize they've paused until he's facing him fully.

Ilya studies him carefully, eyes soft but sharp. "Does that scare you?"

Shane swallows. "A little."

Ilya nods like that makes sense. "Me too."

The admission surprises Shane. He hadn't expected it. Ilya always seems so steady, so grounded.

"You don't look scared," Shane says quietly.

Ilya's gaze flickers. "I hide it better."

Something in his tone makes Shane's chest ache.

They start walking again, closer now. Their arms brush. Shane doesn't pull away. "I keep thinking about last night," Shane says before he can stop himself.

Ilya's steps falter, just barely. "Yeah?"

"The way you looked at me," Shane continues, words spilling now, unfiltered. "Like I was—like I mattered."

Ilya stops again, fully this time.

"Shane," he says softly.

Shane's heart is pounding. His mouth feels dry. He doesn't know where this is going, only that it feels inevitable.

"I don't usually feel like this," Shane says. "I don't—"

He almost says it then. The word rises up, hot and terrifying, pressing against his teeth.

Love.

His breath catches.

Ilya sees it.

Shane knows he does because Ilya's expression shifts—not dramatically, not suddenly, but in a way that feels seismic. His shoulders square. His gaze sharpens, then softens, like he's bracing for something precious and dangerous at the same time.

Shane panics.

"I mean," he rushes, voice cracking just slightly, "I don't usually get attached so fast. It's probably just—"

He stops himself, biting down on the rest.

Ilya steps closer.

He doesn't touch Shane. He just closes the distance enough that Shane can feel the warmth of him, the presence, the solid reality.

"You don't have to explain," Ilya says quietly.

Shane's chest tightens painfully. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know," Ilya says. "And you don't have to say anything you're not ready to."

Shane nods, but his eyes burn.

They stand there for a moment, the city moving around them, noise and life and motion continuing as if nothing monumental has just almost happened.

Ilya reaches out then—not to pull Shane closer, not to claim him—but to rest a hand briefly on Shane's sleeve, grounding and warm.

"Come on," Ilya says. "Let's get you home."

The rest of the walk is quieter.

Not strained. Not awkward. Just... weighted.

Shane keeps replaying the moment in his head. The way the word had nearly slipped free. The way Ilya had seen it without needing to hear it.

And worse—the way Ilya hadn't pulled away.

At the gym the next day, Shane tries to pretend everything is normal.

It works for about ten minutes.

Ilya is there for his workout, moving through the space with that same calm confidence, but something has shifted. Shane can feel it like a low vibration under his skin.

Every time someone gets too close to Shane—too friendly, too lingering—Ilya notices.

Not obviously. Not aggressively. Just... aware.

A man at the front desk chats too long. Ilya's gaze flicks over, sharp. A woman laughs a little too brightly at something Shane says. Ilya's jaw tightens, just slightly.

Shane notices it all.

And he hates himself a little for how much he likes it.

During a break, Shane finds Ilya near the water fountain. "You're being weird," Shane says quietly.

Ilya glances at him. "Am I?"

"Yes," Shane says. Then softer, "You're watching me."

Ilya's expression doesn't change. "I always watch you."

The honesty of it makes Shane's stomach flip.

"That's not what I meant."

Ilya steps closer, lowering his voice. "You almost said something yesterday."

Shane freezes.

"I felt it," Ilya continues. "I don't need you to confirm it. I just want you to know—"

He pauses, choosing his words carefully.

"I'm not going anywhere."

Shane exhales, shaky. "That's... not what scares me."

Ilya's gaze softens. "I know."

That's the worst part.

Later that night, alone in his room, Shane lies awake staring at the ceiling.

He thinks about the almost-word. About how easily it had come to him. About how terrifyingly right it had felt.

He thinks about the way Ilya looks at him like he's something worth protecting. About how safe he feels in Ilya's presence. About how deeply, irrevocably this has already woven itself into his life.

He presses a hand to his chest, feeling his heartbeat.

Too deep, a voice whispers.

He's already there.

Shane turns onto his side, pulling his pillow close, breathing in slowly.

He doesn't know when he crossed the line from interest to attachment. From desire to something heavier, something riskier.

But he knows this—

Whatever this is with Ilya, it's not casual.

And Shane doesn't think he wants it to be, even if the word still scares him.

Especially because it does.

-

Shane realizes he's already too deep on a Wednesday afternoon, in the most inconvenient way possible.

He's not with Ilya when it happens. That's the problem.

He's at the gym, doing what he's done a thousand times before—correcting form, adjusting weights, calling out encouragement, moving through the familiar rhythm of his space. His gym. His routines. The place where he's always felt grounded, competent, in control.

And yet, his mind keeps drifting.

Not in a distracted way. In a tethered way.

Every time the door opens, his attention flicks up automatically, heart giving a stupid little jump before he can stop it. Every time his phone buzzes in his pocket, he wonders—just for half a second—if it's Ilya.

It's ridiculous. He knows it's ridiculous.

Ilya has a job. A life. A schedule that doesn't revolve around Shane.

And still.

Hayden notices, because of course he does. “You’re pacing,” Hayden says from behind the desk, not even looking up from his tablet.

“I am not,” Shane replies automatically.

Hayden finally looks up, one eyebrow raised. “You’ve crossed the floor seventeen times in the last ten minutes.”

Shane stops mid-step, exhales. “I’m restless.”

Hayden hums. “Uh-huh.”

Shane turns away before Hayden can say more. He helps another client, smiles when appropriate, laughs when it’s expected. On the outside, he’s fine. Normal. Functional.

On the inside, something feels... stretched. Like a rubber band pulled too far, vibrating with tension.

It’s not longing. Not exactly.

It’s the absence. That’s what scares him.

He doesn’t need Ilya here to function. But he feels the difference when he isn’t. The quiet hum under his skin goes slightly off-key, like a song missing a note.

That shouldn’t happen this fast.

Shane has had crushes before. Flings. Almost-things. He’s been interested, attracted, even infatuated.

But this feels different.

This feels like orientation. Like gravity.

He finishes his shift on autopilot and heads upstairs to his office, closing the door behind him harder than necessary. He leans back against it, eyes closed, breathing through the sudden tightness in his chest.

This is dangerous territory.

He pulls out his phone, stares at the screen.

No new messages.

He tells himself—firmly—that this is fine. That he’s being dramatic. That missing someone doesn’t mean anything definitive.

Except... he knows himself better than that.

Shane doesn’t miss people casually.

He sits at his desk, staring at nothing, mind drifting back through moments he hadn't thought were significant when they happened.

The way Ilya always waited for him to finish locking up before they walked together. The way he remembered Shane's routines without being told. The way he watched Shane like he was learning him, not evaluating. The way he'd said *I'm not going anywhere* without hesitation.

Shane presses his palms flat against the desk.

He's already reorganized his days around Ilya without realizing it.

Coffee tastes better when Ilya's there. Silence feels fuller. The gym feels warmer. His apartment feels emptier.

That's not infatuation.

That's attachment.

And Shane has always been careful with attachment.

Because attachment means vulnerability. Means expectation. Means loss is possible.

He learned that early.

By the time Shane gets home that evening, the realization has settled deeper, heavier. He drops his bag by the door and sinks onto the couch, staring at the ceiling.

Hayden isn't home yet. The apartment is quiet.

Too quiet.

Shane reaches for his phone again, hesitates, then sets it face-down on his chest. He doesn't want to text just because he needs reassurance.

That feels unfair.

But the need doesn't disappear just because he doesn't act on it.

He closes his eyes, lets the feeling wash over him.

He's in too deep.

Not falling.

Already fallen.

The realization doesn't come with fireworks or panic at first. It's quieter than that. Heavier. Like realizing you've been holding your breath for a long time without noticing.

Shane opens his eyes and exhales slowly. He doesn't regret it. That's the part that scares him the most.

The next time he sees Ilya is the following day, late afternoon.

Ilya comes into the gym with his usual calm presence, but Shane notices immediately—he looks tired. Not exhausted. Just... weighed down. His shoulders are tight, jaw set like he's carrying something internally.

Shane feels it like a pull in his chest.

He watches from across the room as Ilya stretches, moves, settles into his workout. Shane pretends to be busy, but his attention keeps snapping back.

He doesn't approach right away.

He's suddenly aware that if he does, he might give something away. Something he's not ready to articulate yet.

But Ilya looks up eventually and finds him anyway.

Their eyes meet and something passes between them—recognition, warmth, relief.

Ilya's expression softens instantly.

There it is, Shane thinks. That's it. That's the thing he's already anchored himself to.

Ilya finishes his set and walks over, stopping just close enough that their space overlaps without touching.

"Hey," Ilya says quietly.

"Hey," Shane replies, voice softer than he intends.

Ilya studies him for a moment. "You okay?"

Shane almost lies. Instead, he nods. "Yeah. Just... tired."

Ilya doesn't call him on it. He never does. He just nods slowly and says, "You want to walk later?"

Shane's chest loosens. "Yeah," he says. "I'd like that."

They don't say anything else about it. They don't need to.

The walk is quiet, the kind of quiet that holds instead of presses. They move in sync without trying, steps falling into rhythm naturally.

Shane keeps his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching out.

At one point, Ilya glances sideways at him. "You've been thinking a lot," Ilya says.

Shane huffs a quiet laugh. “Am I that obvious?”

“To me,” Ilya says simply.

That shouldn’t feel as intimate as it does.

They stop at a crosswalk, red light holding them in place. The city moves around them, uncaring.

Shane looks at Ilya. “I don’t do this lightly,” Shane says suddenly.

Ilya turns fully toward him, attention sharp. “Do what?” he asks.

“Care,” Shane says.

The word lands between them, solid and undeniable.

Ilya doesn’t interrupt.

“I don’t let people in fast,” Shane continues, heart pounding now. “And I don’t rearrange my life for someone unless it matters.”

Ilya’s expression shifts—softens, but something fierce flickers beneath it.

“And you’re telling me this because?” Ilya asks gently.

“Because,” Shane says, voice steady despite the chaos inside him, “I think I already crossed that line.”

The light changes, but neither of them moves.

Ilya exhales slowly. He steps closer—not touching, but close enough that Shane can feel the warmth of him.

“Shane,” Ilya says quietly, “I know.”

Shane swallows. “That’s not comforting.”

Ilya’s mouth curves into a small, fond smile. “It’s not meant to be.”

He pauses, then adds, “You’re not alone in it.”

Something in Shane breaks open. Not catastrophically. Just enough to let the truth settle fully.

He’s in love.

The word doesn’t need to be said out loud to exist.

Shane nods once, accepting it. “Okay,” he says softly.

Ilya watches him like he’s waiting, ready to catch him if he falls.

And Shane realizes something else, just as important—

Being in too deep doesn't feel like drowning. It feels like standing on solid ground and realizing you don't want to leave.

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Ilya hadn't planned to take Shane skating that day.

The idea came to him in the quiet space between thoughts, the kind that feel more like instinct than intention. Shane had mentioned once—offhand, casual—that he would like to skate again. That he'd liked it back then. That it made him feel light, in a way running never quite did.

So Ilya suggested it.

The mall rink wasn't glamorous. It was crowded and loud, tucked into the center of the building like an afterthought, surrounded by glass railings and curious onlookers with shopping bags and coffee cups. Kids wobbled past in helmets two sizes too big. Teenagers clung to each other, laughing too loudly. The ice was scuffed, imperfect.

And yet.

The moment Shane stepped onto the ice, something in Ilya's chest loosened.

Shane was cautious at first. He always was when he cared about something. He tested the surface with careful pushes, shoulders slightly tense, jaw set in concentration. Ilya skated beside him, not touching, letting Shane find his balance on his own.

"You're allowed to trust it," Ilya said gently.

Shane laughed, breath fogging the air. "Easy for you to say."

"I won't let you fall," Ilya replied, without thinking.

Shane glanced at him, surprised—and then smiled.

That smile stayed with Ilya.

As the minutes passed, Shane loosened. His shoulders dropped. His movements grew smoother, more instinctive. He wasn't graceful in a polished way, but there was a natural rhythm to him, a sincerity in how he moved that made Ilya's chest ache.

Shane skated like he did everything else—with care.

He avoided smaller kids automatically, adjusting his path without thinking. He apologized when someone bumped into him, even when it wasn't his fault. He laughed when he nearly lost balance, cheeks flushed pink from the cold, freckles standing out like constellations across his skin.

Ilya followed a few feet behind, heart full to the point of discomfort.

He had seen beauty before. He'd spent years surrounded by it—talent sharpened into perfection, bodies trained into symmetry, moments choreographed for applause.

None of it had felt like this.

Shane wasn't performing. He wasn't trying to be impressive. He was simply... happy.

And it was the most beautiful thing Ilya had ever seen.

Shane glanced back at him, eyes bright. "You're staring."

Ilya didn't deny it. "You're enjoying yourself."

"I am," Shane said, surprised by his own admission. "I forgot how much I missed this."

He pushed off again, faster now, weaving gently through the crowd, movement easy and unforced. Ilya watched the way his laugh carried, the way he leaned into the turns, the way his whole body seemed to exist in the moment.

Free.

The word hit Ilya hard.

Free was something he had once chased with everything he had—and lost.

And here was Shane, finding it by accident, just by being himself.

Ilya skated up beside him. "You're good."

Shane scoffed. "No, I'm not."

"You are," Ilya said firmly. "Not technically. But... in all the ways that matter."

Shane blinked at him, then ducked his head, flustered. "You're biased."

"Yes," Ilya said easily. "Very."

They skated in companionable silence after that. At one point, Shane reached out without looking and hooked his fingers briefly through Ilya's glove, just for balance. The contact was fleeting—but it sent a jolt straight through Ilya's chest.

He'd felt this before. On the ice. Right before something important happened.

That scared him.

They slowed near the edge, resting by the barrier. Shane leaned back against it, breathing hard, smiling like he'd just rediscovered something precious.

"Thank you," Shane said softly. "For bringing me here."

Ilya swallowed. "You look... like yourself."

Shane tilted his head. “You say that like you know what that means.”

“I do,” Ilya said.

He watched Shane carefully, memorizing him in this moment—the light in his eyes, the warmth in his expression, the openness. He realized with sudden clarity that this was how he wanted to remember Shane always.

Not guarded. Not afraid.

Alive.

Something inside Ilya shifted. A pressure he’d been holding back without realizing it finally broke through.

He hadn’t prepared to say the words.

He hadn’t rehearsed them, or decided on the right moment, or weighed the consequences. He’d spent years learning how dangerous honesty could be.

But the truth had been building quietly, patiently, waiting for him to stop running.

“I love you,” Ilya said.

The words left him easily.

Effortlessly.

As if they had been waiting for this exact second.

Shane froze.

Not dramatically. Just... stopped. His smile faltered, eyes widening slightly, breath catching in a way Ilya recognized instantly. Shock. Processing. Fear.

For half a heartbeat, Ilya wondered if he’d ruined everything.

“I—” Shane started, then stopped.

Ilya’s chest tightened. He didn’t take it back. He wouldn’t. But he forced himself to stay still, to give Shane space, to let him choose.

“I didn’t plan to say that,” Ilya added quietly. “You don’t have to—”

“I love you too,” Shane said.

The words came out rushed, like he was afraid they’d disappear if he didn’t grab them fast enough.

Ilya felt the world tilt.

Shane laughed nervously, cheeks flushing even deeper. “I mean—I wasn’t ready either, and you scared the hell out of me just now, but—yeah. Yeah, I love you.”

Ilya stared at him.

Really stared.

Shane’s eyes were bright, unguarded. Honest. Terrified and brave all at once.

“Ilya?” Shane asked softly. “You okay?”

Ilya exhaled a shaky laugh. “I didn’t think you’d say it back.”

Shane’s smile softened. “I didn’t think you’d say it first.”

They stood there, surrounded by noise and movement, the rink alive around them, and yet the moment felt impossibly quiet. Intimate. Sacred.

Ilya reached out slowly, giving Shane time to pull away if he wanted to.

Shane didn’t.

Their gloves touched. Fingers laced.

“I meant it,” Ilya said. “I don’t say things like that lightly.”

“I know,” Shane replied. “That’s why I believe you.”

Something warm and painful bloomed in Ilya’s chest. He leaned his forehead gently against Shane’s helmetless head, careful, grounding.

“I was scared,” Ilya admitted. “Still am.”

Shane squeezed his hand. “Me too.”

They pulled apart just enough to look at each other again. Shane laughed softly, incredulous. “We just said that. On a mall ice rink.”

Ilya smiled. “Romantic.”

Shane snorted. “You’re ridiculous.”

“But you love me,” Ilya said, teasing.

Shane rolled his eyes, smiling. “Unfortunately.”

They skated again after that, slower now, closer. Shane stayed near Ilya’s side, brushing against him on purpose, laughter easy and bright. Ilya felt lighter than he had in years.

He hadn’t lost himself by saying the words.

He'd found something instead.

When they finally stepped off the ice, cheeks flushed and fingers cold, Shane leaned into Ilya's side without hesitation.

"Hey," Shane said quietly. "Just so you know."

"Yes?"

"I'm not going anywhere."

Ilya smiled, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "Good."

Because for the first time in a long time, the future didn't feel like something to fear.

It felt like something to skate toward—together.

-

Ilya hadn't realized how nervous he was until Shane buzzed him into the building.

The sound echoed through the small lobby, sharp and sudden, and Ilya found himself straightening his jacket like he was heading into an interview instead of dinner. He huffed out a quiet laugh at himself, shook his head, and headed for the stairs.

It was ridiculous. He knew Hayden. They'd talked plenty—at the gym, in passing, in teasing half-conversations that had more affection than bite. Hayden had been there from the beginning, watching Shane with sharp eyes and a softer heart than he liked to pretend he had.

Still, this felt different.

This wasn't neutral ground. This wasn't the gym or a coffee shop or the street between places.

This was Shane's home.

And now, apparently, Ilya was being invited into it.

The door swung open before he could knock.

Shane stood there barefoot, sleeves rolled up, hair still damp like he'd rushed out of the shower. He smiled when he saw Ilya, wide and unguarded, the kind of smile that made Ilya's chest ache in the best way.

"Hey," Shane said.

"Hey," Ilya replied, mirroring it without thinking.

Shane leaned forward immediately, pressing a quick kiss to Ilya's cheek, then another to the corner of his mouth—easy, familiar, like it belonged there. Like Ilya belonged there.

“Come in,” Shane said, stepping aside.

The apartment was warm. Not just temperature-wise, but lived-in, comfortable. Shoes by the door, a jacket slung over the back of a chair, a faint scent of garlic and something rich drifting from the kitchen.

“Okay,” Ilya said, eyebrows lifting. “Something smells... suspiciously good.”

From the kitchen, Hayden’s voice rang out. “That’s because *I* cooked.”

Ilya blinked. “You cooked?”

Hayden appeared in the doorway holding a wooden spoon like a weapon. “I will not stand for this disbelief.”

Shane grinned. “Ignore him. He’s been bragging for an hour.”

“For good reason,” Hayden said. “I’m incredible.”

Ilya laughed, the sound surprising even himself with how easy it came. He shrugged off his jacket, hanging it where Shane gestured, then followed them into the kitchen.

The space was small but cozy, cluttered in a way that spoke of shared routines. A couple of mismatched mugs by the sink. A cutting board still dusted with flour. A pot simmering gently on the stove.

Ilya leaned against the counter, watching as Shane checked the oven and Hayden stirred something with theatrical seriousness.

“You actually let him cook?” Ilya asked Shane quietly.

Shane shrugged. “I supervise.”

Hayden scoffed. “He tastes.”

“I quality control,” Shane corrected.

Ilya smiled to himself.

This—this banter, this rhythm—it felt intimate in a way that had nothing to do with romance. It felt like something established, solid. And the fact that he was being folded into it, naturally, without effort or ceremony, made his chest warm.

Dinner itself was... surprisingly incredible.

Ilya had expected something passable. He hadn’t expected layers of flavor, careful seasoning, food that tasted like someone had taken their time.

He took a bite, then paused. “Oh,” he said.

Hayden smirked. “That’s the sound of respect.”

Shane laughed. “Told you.”

“This is really good,” Ilya said honestly, looking at Hayden. “I owe you an apology.”

Hayden pointed the spoon at him. “Damn right you do.”

They ate at the small table, knees bumping occasionally, conversation flowing easily. Hayden told stories about gym mishaps and clients who refused to stretch. Shane chimed in with dry commentary, rolling his eyes fondly.

Ilya listened more than he spoke, content to absorb it all.

He found himself laughing—real laughter, not polite or restrained. He felt... relaxed. Included.

At one point, Hayden glanced between them, eyes narrowing thoughtfully.

“So,” he said. “You two said it, huh.”

Shane nearly choked on his water.

Ilya froze, fork halfway to his mouth.

“Said—what?” Shane croaked.

Hayden grinned. “Relax. You don’t exactly hide it well.”

Shane’s ears turned pink instantly. “Hayden—”

Ilya felt a smile tug at his lips. “He’s not wrong.”

Hayden softened then, just a little. “I’m happy for you,” he said, more sincere than teasing for once. “Both of you.”

Something in Ilya’s chest tightened unexpectedly. “Thank you,” he said quietly.

After dinner, they moved to the couch. Plates stacked in the sink, lights dimmed just enough to make the space feel softer. Shane curled into the corner, legs tucked up, Ilya beside him, their shoulders touching.

Hayden stretched out in the armchair, satisfied. “Okay,” he said. “I’m officially adopting you.”

Ilya blinked. “Adopting?”

“Yeah,” Hayden said. “You’re ours now.”

Shane laughed. “He’s dramatic.”

“I am *protective*,” Hayden corrected.

Ilya felt something settle in his chest at that.

Not pressure. Not fear.

Belonging.

They talked for a long while after that—about nothing important and everything at once. Movies. Music. Places they'd lived. Shane leaned into Ilya more and more as the night went on, eventually resting his head against Ilya's shoulder without thinking.

Ilya wrapped an arm around him instinctively.

At some point, Hayden stood, stretching. "I'm going to bed," he announced. "Try not to scandalize the furniture."

Shane groaned. "Please leave."

Hayden grinned at Ilya. "You're good for him."

Ilya met his gaze steadily. "I know."

Hayden nodded once, satisfied, then disappeared down the hall.

The apartment fell quiet.

Shane shifted, looking up at Ilya. "You okay?"

Ilya smiled softly. "I feel... good."

Shane's expression warmed. "Yeah?"

"I like this," Ilya said. "This feels... real."

Shane leaned in, pressing a gentle kiss to Ilya's lips. Slow. Unhurried. Affectionate.

"I'm glad," Shane murmured.

They lingered like that for a moment, foreheads touching, breathing in sync. Then Shane pulled Ilya into a hug—tight, full, grounding.

Ilya held him just as tightly.

When it was time to go, Shane walked him to the door. Another kiss, another hug, unspoken promises wrapped into both.

"Text me when you get home," Shane said.

"I will," Ilya replied.

As he stepped out into the night, Ilya realized something.

This wasn't just Shane anymore.

It was friends. Shared spaces. Quiet dinners. Laughter that didn't ask anything in return.

It was a life, slowly opening its doors to him.

And Ilya loved it.

Loved them.

Loved how it felt to finally, gently, belong.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Shane is happy.

The realization sneaks up on him in quiet moments, the kind that don't announce themselves as important until later. It's there when he's brushing his teeth in the morning and catches himself smiling at nothing. It's there when he's closing the gym at night and doesn't feel the usual bone-deep exhaustion, just a pleasant tiredness. It's there when he reaches for his phone without thinking and sees Ilya's name already waiting for him.

He keeps expecting something to go wrong.

For the other shoe to drop.

But it doesn't.

Instead, everything just... works.

He loves Ilya. That part is simple, undeniable, solid. Shane has never been good at hiding what he feels, and he doesn't try to start now. He shows it in small, constant ways—bringing Ilya mint tea without being asked, adjusting his scarf before they head outside, resting a hand at the small of Ilya's back when they walk through crowded spaces.

And Ilya loves him back.

Not loudly. Not performatively. But steadily, deeply, in ways that make Shane feel anchored rather than swept away.

They fall into a rhythm that feels inevitable.

Mornings sometimes start together at Ilya's place, the apartment still half-dark, the city quiet. Shane learns the sounds of Ilya's routines—the kettle clicking on, the soft hum of music, the way Ilya moves through space with careful efficiency. They drink coffee shoulder to shoulder, sometimes talking, sometimes just existing together.

Other days, they train together.

Shane loves those days most.

They push each other without competing. Shane corrects Ilya's form, murmurs encouragement, keeps his touch brief and professional even when it's hard. Ilya listens, focused, serious, occasionally smirking when Shane gets particularly intense about posture or breathing.

"You're very passionate," Ilya tells him once, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"It's my job," Shane replies, deadpan.

Ilya grins. “It’s adorable.”

Shane nearly combusts.

After workouts, they linger. Stretching turns into conversation, conversation turns into laughter, and before Shane knows it, an hour has passed without either of them noticing. Hayden watches from the desk with a knowing expression and offers commentary only when Shane least expects it.

“You know,” Hayden says one afternoon, “you smile differently now.”

Shane glances at him. “Do I?”

“Oh yeah,” Hayden replies. “It’s disgusting.”

Shane doesn’t even argue. He just smiles more.

They spend more and more time at Ilya’s place. It happens naturally, without discussion. Shane leaves spare clothes there. A toothbrush appears by the sink. His favorite mug ends up in the cabinet like it’s always belonged.

Shane likes cooking together most. Or rather—he likes watching Ilya cook, hovering uselessly nearby, occasionally chopping vegetables or stealing bites. Ilya pretends to scold him but always smiles when Shane leans in to kiss his cheek.

Sometimes they eat at the small table. Sometimes on the couch. Sometimes they forget to eat entirely because they get distracted by conversation and closeness and the quiet joy of being together.

Life feels... full.

On certain evenings, Ilya invites Shane to the rink.

The first time, Shane hesitates. He doesn’t want to intrude. He doesn’t want to feel like an outsider in Ilya’s space.

But Ilya squeezes his hand and says, “Come. I want you there.”

So Shane goes.

The kids adore Ilya. Shane sees it immediately—the way they look at him, how they listen, how they light up when he praises them. Ilya is patient, firm, encouraging in a way that makes Shane’s chest ache.

Shane stands at the edge of the rink, hands tucked into his jacket pockets, watching.

This is a side of Ilya that feels sacred.

When Ilya glances over and catches Shane watching, his expression softens. He smiles—not the controlled, confident smile he wears with the kids, but something warmer, more personal.

Pride blooms in Shane's chest.

After practice, the kids swarm Ilya with questions and chatter. One of them tugs at Shane's sleeve.

"Are you his boyfriend?" the kid asks bluntly.

Shane freezes for half a second—then smiles. "Yeah."

The kid nods, satisfied. "Cool."

Ilya pretends not to hear but later, when they're walking out together, he nudges Shane with his shoulder.

"You said that very easily," Ilya says.

Shane shrugs, heart full. "It's true."

Ilya's hand finds his, fingers lacing together. No hesitation.

Life is good.

It's not dramatic. It's not loud. It's made of small moments that stack up until Shane realizes he's building something real.

He feels steady.

Grounded.

Loved.

Some nights, Shane lies awake beside Ilya, listening to his breathing, tracing his face with his eyes, feeling a quiet gratitude so deep it almost hurts. He doesn't feel like he's holding his breath anymore. He doesn't feel like he's waiting.

He's here.

And for the first time in his life, Shane doesn't feel like happiness is temporary or fragile. It feels earned. Chosen. Shared.

One evening, after a long day, Shane rests his head against Ilya's chest and murmurs, "I like our life."

Ilya's arm tightens around him. "Me too."

And Shane believes it—completely.

Because everything really has fallen into place.

And for once, he lets himself enjoy it without fear.

Shane wakes up warm.

Not just physically—though that’s part of it—but warm in the deeper sense, the kind that settles in his chest before he’s even fully conscious. The room is dim, curtains half-drawn, winter light bleeding in slowly. Ilya’s apartment smells faintly like coffee and clean laundry and something comforting Shane can’t quite name.

He’s tangled with Ilya, their legs hooked together, Ilya’s arm draped heavy and familiar around Shane’s waist. Shane doesn’t move at first. He’s learned that stillness is sometimes the best way to savor things. The quiet. The weight of another person choosing to stay.

Ilya is awake. Shane knows without looking. He can feel it in the way Ilya’s thumb brushes absentminded circles against his hip, unhurried, grounding.

“You’re staring,” Ilya murmurs.

Shane smiles into the pillow. “I’m appreciating.”

Ilya hums softly, amused. “That sounds dangerous.”

“Everything about you is dangerous,” Shane says, and means it.

They don’t rush the morning. They never do when they wake up together. There’s no alarm blaring, no frantic scramble to get dressed. Just the slow stretch of limbs, the quiet negotiation of who gets out of bed first.

Eventually, Ilya does. Shane watches him move through the apartment—shirtless, hair still sleep-messy, entirely unselfconscious. There’s something deeply domestic about it that hits Shane square in the chest.

This is what he didn’t know he was missing.

Ilya starts coffee. Shane drags himself out of bed and pads into the kitchen, hoodie pulled on backwards, eyes still heavy. He leans against the counter, arms folded, watching Ilya work like it’s the most fascinating thing in the world.

“You’re doing it again,” Ilya says.

“Doing what?”

“Looking at me like that.”

Shane shrugs, unrepentant. “Can’t help it.”

Ilya steps closer, crowding Shane into the counter, one hand braced beside him. Their noses nearly touch.

“Good,” Ilya says quietly. “Don’t.”

The kiss is slow. Unhurried. The kind that's more about presence than urgency. Shane melts into it, hands curling into Ilya's shirt, grounding himself there. It's warm and familiar and still somehow makes his pulse spike.

They separate only because the coffee finishes brewing.

Breakfast is simple. Toast. Eggs. Fruit Shane insists on cutting neatly, because apparently that matters. Ilya teases him for it, flicking a piece of fruit at him across the counter.

"You're ridiculous," Ilya says.

"You love it."

"I do," Ilya admits easily.

That still gets Shane every time. The way Ilya says things plainly now. No hesitation. No deflection.

After breakfast, they sit together on the couch, legs tangled, Shane's head resting against Ilya's shoulder while they scroll idly on their phones. Shane barely absorbs what he's looking at. He's too busy listening to the steady rhythm of Ilya's breathing.

Eventually, reality creeps in.

"I have to go in later," Shane says reluctantly.

Ilya nods. "I know."

They don't like parting, but it doesn't hurt the way it used to. There's an understanding now. A certainty that this isn't temporary.

Shane gets dressed slowly, deliberately. Ilya watches him with that same quiet attention Shane's been giving him all morning.

"You know," Ilya says, "you're doing that thing again."

Shane grins. "Payback."

Ilya steps in close, fingers hooking into the hem of Shane's shirt, tugging him forward just enough to steal another kiss. This one is warmer. Heavier. Shane's hands slide instinctively to Ilya's waist.

For a moment, the world narrows.

Then Ilya pulls back, resting his forehead against Shane's.

"Later," he murmurs. "When you're done."

Shane swallows. "Promise?"

Ilya's smile is slow. Certain. "Promise."

The gym is busy that afternoon. Shane throws himself into work, grateful for the distraction but painfully aware of every passing minute. His body remembers. His mind wanders. Hayden notices immediately.

“You’re insufferable today,” Hayden says.

Shane barely looks up. “I’m motivated.”

“You’re distracted.”

“Same thing.”

Hayden snorts. “You’re going to break something if you don’t chill.”

Shane just smiles to himself.

When the day finally winds down, Shane doesn’t bother playing it cool. He locks up, grabs his jacket, and heads straight for Ilya’s.

This time, it’s Ilya who opens the door and pulls him inside without a word.

The kiss is immediate. Pressed up against the door. Heated in a way that makes Shane’s breath catch. Ilya’s hands are everywhere—steady, confident, grounding.

Shane grips Ilya’s shoulders, grounding himself in the sensation. This isn’t frantic. It’s intentional. Built-up tension finally being acknowledged.

They break apart only long enough to breathe.

“Hi,” Shane says faintly.

Ilya laughs, low and warm. “Hi.”

They move to the couch. Then the kitchen. Then back to the couch again, laughter mixing with kisses, hands roaming but never crossing into anything rushed or careless.

At some point, Shane ends up straddling Ilya’s lap, forehead resting against his, both of them breathing harder than they were a minute ago.

“This,” Shane says softly, “feels really good.”

Ilya’s hands rest securely at Shane’s waist. “It does.”

They take their time. They always do now.

Shane loved the feel of Ilya inside him, their movements perfectly in sync. Shane’s body clung to Ilya’s as if he couldn’t get close enough, every movement perfectly synced with the deliberate rhythm Ilya set.

On the couch, straddling Ilya’s lap, Shane gasped and trembled, caught between pleasure and breathlessness as Ilya took the lead, deliberate, claiming him fully.

Ilya moved with control, deliberate and unyielding, his dominance threaded through every touch. His lips traced Shane's chest, lingering, teasing, biting just enough to make Shane arch, whimper, lose himself in the sensation. Each kiss, each press of his body reminded Shane how completely Ilya owned him—not just physically, but entirely, mind and body.

Shane wrapped an arm around Ilya's shoulders, leaning in closer, surrendering fully, letting himself be carried by the rhythm, the weight, the pressure of Ilya beneath him. His hands dug into Ilya's back, feeling the strength of him, memorizing every curve, every line of muscle, every heartbeat that mirrored his own.

The pace quickened, deliberate yet consuming, and Shane felt the heat coil tighter, the ache building until he was unrecognizable to himself—breathless, trembling, undone. Every thrust, every calculated press, every shiver from Ilya pushed him closer to the edge.

And even as desire burned through him, even as he teetered on the brink, he couldn't stop surrendering. He wanted this—wanted Ilya, wanted to be lost in him, wanted the exquisite tension of control and release. Every gasp, every moan, every tremor became a confession of trust, and the thought that he could let himself fall like this—completely, without reserve—made it feel all the more consuming.

The tension coiled tighter and tighter, every movement, every press of Ilya beneath him pushing Shane closer to the edge. His breaths came in ragged gasps, chest heaving, every nerve alight with sensation. Ilya's hands gripped his hips firmly, guiding, controlling, every thrust deliberate, precise, sending shivers of heat and need straight to Shane's core.

Shane's mind began to unravel—there was nothing left but Ilya, the press of his body, the rhythm that consumed him. He couldn't think, couldn't stop himself; he only reacted, letting the pleasure build until it felt like it would swallow him whole. His moans filled the room, raw and unrestrained, vibrating through Ilya's body as if they were one entity, each sound fueling the other's need.

And then it broke. Shane's body clenched, shuddering violently as wave after wave of sensation crashed through him. His mind went blank, entirely lost to the intensity, to the heat, to Ilya, and he cried out without shame, giving himself over completely. Ilya followed almost immediately, grunting as he let himself go, every movement sharp, claiming, and necessary, until they both hung there, breathless, trembling, pressed together.

When it was over, they stayed connected, Shane draped over Ilya's chest, heartbeat matching heartbeat. Ilya's lips found Shane's temple, brushing soft kisses as his hands trailed over Shane's back, gentle now, reverent. The urgency faded into warmth, into closeness, into the quiet satisfaction of shared surrender. Every gasp and moan had left them raw and spent, but also tethered in a way neither of them could deny—intense, intimate, utterly theirs.

Later, when the heat settles into something calmer, they curl together under a blanket, the apartment quiet again. Shane rests his hand over Ilya's heart, feeling it steady beneath his palm.

"I like this," Shane says. "The quiet parts."

Ilya presses a kiss to Shane's hair. "Me too."

Shane smiles, eyes drifting shut.

Domestic. Heated. Safe.

He doesn't need anything more than this.

And for the first time, he knows he never will.

-

Winter had loosened its grip, the air softening, sunlight lingering longer in the evenings. Shane watched it all unfold with quiet wonder, the way seasons always slipped in, unnoticed at first, until they changed everything. And somehow, it felt like that for him and Ilya too. What had started as caution and curiosity, as slow, careful steps toward each other, had grown into something solid and undeniable.

He had taken Ilya to meet his parents that spring. Not the formal, tense introductions of movies or awkwardly staged dates, but real moments—laughter over shared food, teasing, warmth that made even Ilya's defenses soften. He saw it in Ilya's eyes, the way he relaxed, the way he moved through the space as though he belonged.

"I never thought I'd feel like this," Ilya admitted quietly one evening after dinner. They had stepped onto the porch, breathing in the fresh spring air, the scent of blooming flowers brushing past them. "Like I'm... part of something. Part of a life. Part of a family, maybe."

Shane's hand found his without thinking, fingers intertwining. "You are," he said simply. "You're part of mine."

The words weren't dramatic. They didn't need to be. But Ilya's eyes glistened, and Shane knew he meant every syllable. That feeling—the sense of belonging Ilya had spent so long denying himself—was real, and Shane was grateful to be the one he shared it with.

From that day forward, they spent as much time together as possible. Mornings became rituals of coffee and quiet conversation, sometimes interrupted by laughter or a kiss. Days at the gym carried an undercurrent of playfulness—small touches, shared smiles, stolen moments that left Shane's chest buzzing. Even when Ilya brought Shane to watch the kids' practices or skated together at the rink, the world felt lighter, warmer, shared.

Of course, there were days when the weight of the past pressed down on Ilya. Shadows he'd carried for years, sometimes decades, would creep back in. Shane noticed them instantly—the way Ilya's shoulders slumped, the way his smile faltered, the quiet moments of withdrawal. Shane never forced conversation, never rushed him. He simply stayed.

"You're not alone," Shane would say softly. Sometimes it was just a hand on his shoulder, a kiss to his temple, a brush of fingers along Ilya's back as they walked. "I'm here. Ups, downs, everything. I'm here."

Ilya learned, slowly, that he didn't have to hide from Shane, didn't have to mask the low tides he sometimes felt. Shane didn't flinch, didn't judge. He simply accepted, simply loved, in the way that made love feel like a shelter rather than a weight.

Spring ripened into long evenings, walks through parks, sunsets viewed hand in hand. Shane loved watching Ilya relax into the simple joys, seeing him laugh freely, seeing him feel at home—not just in Shane's presence but in his life. It was intoxicating and grounding all at once.

And Shane loved the reciprocal nature of it—the quiet, unspoken care Ilya offered him in turn. The way he lingered close, fingers brushing over Shane's knuckles, the little teasing remarks that made Shane laugh until his ribs hurt, the way Ilya would rest his head against Shane's shoulder in silent acknowledgment that they were, always, together.

It wasn't dramatic. It didn't need to be. Life had a way of weaving itself around them, a tapestry of routines and shared moments that felt effortless yet profound. They had kissed, laughed, argued gently over trivial things, and come together again every time, stronger, steadier.

Shane marveled at it all. He had never thought he could feel so completely at home with someone. And yet here he was, utterly devoted, utterly certain.

Ilya, in turn, felt it too. He felt the warmth of being wanted, being needed, being chosen. He felt the power of being seen fully and accepted completely. And he let himself lean into it, trust it, revel in it. He let Shane in entirely, and in doing so, found a space he hadn't known he could have: one of comfort, of safety, of love.

Some evenings, they would collapse together on the couch after a long day. Shane would rest his head on Ilya's chest, listening to the steady beat beneath his hand. Ilya would run fingers through Shane's hair absentmindedly, murmuring softly about the day, about nothing, about everything. Sometimes they'd drift into sleep, warm and tangled, the world outside irrelevant.

They had discovered that love didn't need to be fiery all the time. It could be quiet, domestic, reassuring. It could be heated and passionate in moments, playful in others, and gentle always. It could be whispered promises across the kitchen table, fingers hooked in each other's during walks, soft words in the dark, and laughter that carried long into the night.

And in all of it, Shane never doubted Ilya's love. He never doubted that he was seen, cherished, and wanted. The small insecurities of the past—the fear of loss, the fear of being unworthy—dissolved under the weight of shared mornings, shared sweat, shared warmth.

Spring settled fully, and with it came long afternoons wandering together, sitting on benches under cherry trees, holding hands while children's laughter echoed from nearby playgrounds. Shane noticed everything—the way Ilya's lips curved in concentration while reading a menu, the way his eyes softened when he laughed, the way his fingers always sought Shane's.

He felt, finally, the rare, quiet bliss of certainty. Love that was mutual, steady, enduring. Life that was full, not because everything was perfect, but because they had each other. Through

ups and downs, through laughter and tears, through the mundane and the extraordinary, they were together.

And Shane knew, with every fiber of his being, that he would stay that way. That he would continue to show Ilya, every day, in every small way, that he was loved. That he would never leave, not for a season, not for a moment, not for anything that could come.

Ilya had found home. And Shane had found it in him.

The world outside changed with the seasons, sure, but in their shared space—on the couch, in the kitchen, at the rink, in quiet streets hand in hand—it felt eternal. Safe. Perfect in its imperfection.

Shane pressed his lips to Ilya's temple one evening as they watched the sun set over the city skyline. "I love you," he whispered.

Ilya smiled, head resting on Shane's shoulder. "I know," he said softly.

And Shane believed him.

Because this—everything they had built together, everything they had found in each other—was steady. Real. Unshakable.

And that, Shane thought as he held Ilya close, was more than enough.

The end of winter had brought spring. But the warmth, the love, the home they had created together—it would last far beyond any season.

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