

So Close

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So Close

by [Baybee00](#)

Summary

A devastating on-ice collision changes everything for Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, and everyone who loves them.

Notes

So major trigger warnings for main character deaths just in case the tags were missed. Please ignore inaccuracies with the hockey, I'm no closer to understanding it now than I was before (when the only Hockey related thing I knew was Sidney Crosby and his fat ass).

UPDATE to the the section marked ILYA as of 08/01/26

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

The night before the big game against Boston, Shane Hollander couldn't sleep. Every time he closed his eyes, his mind raced with anticipation and worry, haunted by the memory of Ilya Rozanov's lips on his skin the last time they were together. After seven years of secret meetings, it had become both easier and harder. Easier because they knew each other's bodies and hearts so well; harder because each stolen moment only made Shane crave a life where they didn't have to hide.

At half past midnight, a soft knock on the door broke the silence of Shane's Montreal apartment. Shane's heart leapt into his throat. He practically sprinted to open it. Standing in the dimly lit hallway was Ilya, still dressed in a dark hoodie and a baseball cap pulled low to hide his face. But Shane would recognise those stormy grey eyes anywhere. Without a word, Shane grabbed the front of Ilya's hoodie and pulled him inside. The door clicked shut, locking out the world.

They collided in a desperate kiss before either could speak. Ilya shoved Shane up against the wall, and Shane let out a soft gasp as his back thumped lightly against it. In the darkness, their mouths found each other with the familiarity of long practice. Shane's fingers tangled in the front of Ilya's hoodie, and Ilya pressed forward until every line of his body was flush against Shane's.

"Missed you," Shane mumbled against Ilya's lips. His voice was already breathless.

"Da, me too," Ilya rasped, sliding his hands down Shane's sides. His touch was rough with urgency. Seven years, and still it was never enough.

Shane tugged impatiently at Ilya's hoodie. They broke apart just long enough for Ilya to yank it off over his head and toss it aside. Shane's own shirt followed, discarded on the floor. The cool air of the apartment met hot skin, making Shane shiver. Ilya's hands were on him again in an instant, roaming over his bare chest, fingertips grazing over familiar scars and muscle. Shane arched into the touch.

They stumbled towards the bedroom, shedding clothing with each step. Ilya cursed under his breath in Russian as he fumbled with the buckle of Shane's belt. Shane huffed a quiet laugh and helped, fingers brushing Ilya's in the rush to get his trousers down. In turn, Shane reached for the drawstring of Ilya's sweatpants, giving them a tug. They joined the trail of clothing littering the hallway.

By the time they fell onto the bed, they were both stripped to their underwear. The bedsprings creaked under their combined weight. Shane rolled onto his back, pulling Ilya down on top of him. Their mouths met again feverishly. Ilya nipped at Shane's lower lip, drawing a sharp intake of breath from him. Shane hooked his legs around Ilya's waist, heels pressing into the backs of Ilya's thighs as if afraid to let him go even for a second.

Ilya growled low in his throat, grinding his hips down. The thin barrier of their briefs did little to dull the friction of hard length against hard length. Shane cried out softly, his head tipping back against the pillows. Ilya took advantage, latching his lips onto the exposed

column of Shane's throat. He sucked a mark there, the salt of Shane's sweat and skin on his tongue. Shane's pulse fluttered rapid under Ilya's mouth.

In the near silence, they could hear each other's ragged breathing. The only other sound was the wet slide of lips on skin as Ilya kissed his way down from Shane's neck to his chest. Shane was already trembling, his fingers clutching at Ilya's shoulders. When Ilya's mouth closed over a nipple, Shane let out a broken moan.

"Ah... Ilya..." Shane panted, his voice cracking in pleasure.

Hearing his name spoken like that sent a bolt of heat through Ilya. He reached up and caught Shane's wrists, pinning them down against the mattress on either side of Shane's head. Shane's eyes flew open in surprise, wide and dark with lust. Ilya met his gaze as he held Shane down firmly. He could feel the frantic beat of Shane's pulse at the delicate underside of his wrists.

"Keep them there," Ilya ordered, voice thick. Slowly, he released Shane's wrists. Shane obeyed, leaving his hands where Ilya had pressed them, gripping the sheets now to anchor himself. Ilya rewarded him with a rare, tender smile. It was gone in a blink as desire took over once more.

Ilya hooked his fingers into the waistband of Shane's briefs and dragged them down Shane's legs. Shane kicked them the rest of the way off. Ilya sat back on his heels for a moment, devouring the sight of Shane Hollander naked and flushed beneath him. Shane's chest heaved, his skin glowing in the faint city light that filtered through the bedroom curtains. His erection jutted up against his lower belly, already leaking at the tip. Ilya's mouth watered at the sight.

Shane bit his lower lip, his cheeks burning at the way Ilya was looking at him—like he was something cherished, not just a secret lover to slake an itch. "Ilya... please," he whispered, lifting his hips slightly in invitation.

The plea spurred Ilya to action. He slid off his own briefs, freeing his cock which was just as hard and aching for attention. He leaned down again, bracing one arm beside Shane while his other hand trailed between Shane's thighs. His fingers found Shane's entrance and rubbed teasingly.

Shane gasped and tried to press down, seeking more. "Don't tease," he begged in a ragged voice.

Ilya chuckled lowly. "I thought you liked when I make you beg."

Shane opened his mouth to protest, but it dissolved into a whine as Ilya slid a lube covered finger inside him.

The thought came to Ilya unprovoked, fully formed and brutal. I should end this.

Not because he wanted to. Because this was exactly the kind of closeness that made things impossible to stop. Because Shane was already giving more than Ilya could ever safely

return.

He told himself he would do it soon. After this trip. After the next stretch of games. He would say it carefully, kindly. He would tell Shane it was too dangerous, that it could not keep going like this.

He did not say any of it. He pressed his fingers deeper instead, choosing the moment over the damage it would cause later.

"Fuck," Shane swore, his toes curling.

"Shh, I know," Ilya murmured. He captured Shane's lips again to swallow his sounds as he worked his finger in deeper, stretching him. Shane groaned against Ilya's mouth. When Shane was rocking down to meet the thrust of his hand, Ilya added a second finger, scissoring gently.

Their kiss broke as Shane tossed his head back, overwhelmed. "Enough, I'm ready," he pleaded. There was desperation in his tone that echoed exactly how Ilya felt. They needed this, needed each other.

Ilya withdrew his fingers and shifted, lining himself up. He pushed Shane's knees towards his chest, opening him up.

"Look at me," Ilya said roughly, his eyes boring into Shane's. Shane forced his heavy eyelids open, gaze locking with Ilya's. In that shared look flickered something intense and fragile, an emotion neither dared name in the light of day.

"I'm here," Shane whispered, a hint of reassurance in his voice, as if sensing Ilya's unspoken fear. His legs trembled around Ilya's waist.

Ilya pressed forward, the tip of his cock stretching Shane inch by inch. Both of them gasped at the hot pressure. Shane's eyes squeezed shut as he bit out a curse, pain and pleasure twisting together. Ilya paused, chest heaving as he struggled for control. Shane was impossibly tight around him, and it took all his willpower not to spill immediately. He stroked a hand down Shane's thigh soothingly, waiting until Shane nodded for him to continue.

When Shane relaxed a little, Ilya sank the rest of the way in with a deep groan. His forehead dropped against Shane's shoulder. Being joined like this always felt like coming home and breaking apart all at once. Shane's arms came up from where they'd been resting and wrapped around Ilya now, clinging to him. Ilya didn't object; he needed the closeness too.

He began to move, slowly at first. The bed creaked in rhythm with each thrust. Shane met him halfway, lifting his hips desperately. It wasn't gentle or slow for long; they had neither the time nor patience for that tonight. The pace quickly turned frenzied. Each thrust drove gasps and moans from Shane's lips. Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck as he slammed into him, breathing in the heady scent of sweat and Shane's subtle cologne. He could feel Shane's pulse hammering against his nose with every frantic heartbeat.

"Il- Ilya... I'm..." Shane tried to speak, voice hitching on a sob of pleasure. One of his hands tangled in Ilya's hair.

"I know, me too," Ilya panted. His muscles burned with exertion, but he didn't stop. He couldn't stop. Not when Shane was squeezing around him like this, not when the world outside this room ceased to exist.

Shane came undone first. With a cry of Ilya's name, his whole body tensed. His release spilled hot and wet between them, stripes of it painting his abdomen. The sight and feel of Shane clenching around him was Ilya's undoing. He drove in one final time, as deep as he could, and let go with a shout muffled into Shane's shoulder. His climax ripped through him, leaving him shaking as he spilled inside Shane.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. They remained entangled, chest to chest, hearts pounding in unison. Ilya could feel Shane's heart racing beneath him as he caught his breath. He pressed his lips weakly to Shane's chest, right over that wild heartbeat, and closed his eyes.

Eventually, reality started to creep back in. The cooling air, the stickiness on their skin, the knowledge that dawn was approaching. Ilya carefully eased out of Shane, making them both hiss softly at the oversensitivity. He rolled onto his side and immediately Shane curled against him. Their legs tangled under the crumpled sheets as Shane pulled a blanket halfway up, covering their cooling bodies.

Silence settled, but it was a comfortable one. In the faint glow from the streetlights outside, Ilya could make out the profile of Shane's face relaxed against his shoulder. This was what he wished he could wake up to every day. Instead, he would have to slip away before sunrise as always. The thought made something in Ilya's chest squeeze painfully.

"I hate that you have to go," Shane whispered, echoing Ilya's thoughts. He lifted a hand to trace idle patterns on Ilya's arm, fingers running over old scars from past hockey fights. "Sometimes I wish we could just stay like this... and not worry about tomorrow."

Ilya swallowed. He wished it too—more than he could voice. But wishes didn't change reality. "One day," he murmured instead, voice cautious. "One day maybe we won't have to hide, hm?" He tried to sound optimistic, though certainty eluded him.

Shane shifted, propping himself up on one elbow to look at Ilya directly. His eyes shone with emotion. "Promise me," he said quietly. "Promise me that when that day comes... you'll be there with me." In the darkness, his plea was almost unbearably earnest.

Ilya's throat went tight. He reached up to brush a damp curl away from Shane's forehead. "I promise," he replied, barely above a whisper. It felt like a vow.

Shane smiled then, a soft, hopeful smile that made Ilya's chest ache. Shane lowered his head as if to kiss Ilya, but hovered uncertainly, their lips just a breath apart. "Ilya, I..." Shane began in a trembling voice. There was no mistaking what he was about to say.

Fear and love warred inside Ilya. His eyes stung. Before Shane could finish the sentence, Ilya closed the gap, capturing Shane's mouth in a deep kiss. He poured every ounce of feeling he had into it, hoping it would say what he could not bring himself to say out loud. Shane let out a small noise of surprise, then melted into the kiss, fingers curling in Ilya's hair. By the time they parted, both men were breathing hard again.

Shane pressed his forehead to Ilya's. Neither said the words hanging between them, but in the darkness their hearts were thundering in the same unspoken rhythm. Shane decided that was enough for now. He settled back down, nestling against Ilya's side. "Goodnight, Ilya," he murmured, voice heavy with sated exhaustion.

Ilya wrapped an arm around him and held him close, savouring the warmth and solidity of Shane in his arms. "Goodnight, solnyshko," he whispered, the Russian term of endearment slipping out before he could stop it. He felt Shane smile drowsily against his skin at the sound of it.

Within minutes, Shane was asleep, his breathing deep and even. Ilya lay awake a little longer, eyes fixed on the ceiling. He tried to ignore the dread creeping into his gut whenever he thought of the game tomorrow. He hated playing against Shane; hated the risk that came with it. But he pushed those thoughts away. Carefully, he turned his head to press a final kiss to the top of Shane's hair. Ilya held him like this might be the last time, without admitting to himself that it very well could be.

Later that morning, at the Metro's stadium, Shane went through the motions of the game-day morning skate. His body was loose and responsive, as always, but his mind kept drifting to the night before. He and Ilya had parted ways just before dawn, stealing one last kiss in the doorway before Ilya slipped into the predawn shadows. Now, under the bright fluorescents of the rink, that secret tenderness felt like a dream.

"You alright, Cap?" Hayden asked quietly as they stretched at centre ice. Shane had yawned for the third time in five minutes.

"Yeah," Shane lied, rolling his shoulders. He forced a grin. "Just didn't sleep great."

Hayden patted his back. "I hear you. Nerves before a game get me too." He had no idea Shane's jitters came from an entirely different source. Shane just nodded and glanced across the ice.

At the far end of the rink, the Boston team was wrapping up their own skate. Ilya was there, helmet on and stoic as ever in front of his teammates. Shane's heart skipped seeing him, but he maintained a neutral expression. As he skated a lap, he passed near the centre line where Ilya was standing. They never stopped moving, that would draw attention, but their eyes met for the briefest moment. Shane caught a flicker of warmth in Ilya's grey gaze that no one else would have noticed. It was gone in an instant, replaced by a trademark Rozanov smirk and an exaggerated wink that only Shane could see. Shane bit the inside of his cheek to hold back a laugh.

"Don't let Rozanov psych you out, Hollander!" one of the coaches barked from the bench, noticing the exchange. He thought their intense stares were just the usual pre-game trash talk. "He's nothing you haven't handled before."

"Yes, Coach," Shane replied, tearing his eyes away from Ilya. He felt simultaneously more at ease and more on edge. Ilya was right there, close enough to touch, yet untouchable in the public eye. If only they could fast-forward to tonight, to stolen moments after the game... but first, he had a job to do.

Shane tapped his stick on the ice, refocusing on warm up. Across the red line, Ilya gave a barely perceptible nod before skating off with his team. They would play their roles a little longer. By evening, on opposite sides of the centre ice faceoff circle, they would become fierce rivals once more, at least for as long as the world was watching.

Fifteen seconds. That was all the game clock had ticked off in the first period when everything shattered.

The locker room is never silent. There are skates clicking, a shower running somewhere, a couple guys laughing too loud at a joke that is not that funny. But there's a kind of quiet underneath it, the kind that sits in the back of your throat and makes you swallow more often than you should.

It has been there since he came back from Russia.

He had been in Moscow a week ago, in a black suit that smelled like someone else's cologne, standing over a hole in frozen earth while men who were supposed to be family stared at him like he was an enemy. He had flown back over an ocean with grief folded tight in his chest, careful as contraband, and landed to the sound of hockey again, because hockey did not care if your father died. Hockey did not pause. Hockey just asked for more.

It's been there since the funeral, since the dirt, since the way the cold had climbed into his bones and stayed there even after he flew back over an ocean.

It has been there since he sat on a bed in a hotel room with his phone in his hand, listened to the little whoosh sound of an audio message sending, and said words in Russian that Shane would not understand but would absolutely feel.

Words he did not even want to admit existed inside him, until grief cracked him open and they spilled out like blood.

Ilya keeps his face blank anyway. That's what captains do. That's what Russian boys are trained to do, whether it's by fathers or coaches or a whole culture that teaches you soft is dangerous.

He sits at his stall and stares at the toe of his skate, like the laces are a complex problem only he can solve.

He has been thinking about ending it.

He has been thinking about it all day, the thought circling like a vulture, never landing, never leaving.

It would be easy to end it in the way Ilya does everything that scares him.

Quickly. Efficiently. Cleanly.

A sentence that cuts. A wall that goes up. A door that shuts.

He tells himself it would be kinder. That Shane deserves a life that isn't built out of hotel rooms and lies and the constant knowledge that one wrong headline could ruin them both.

He tells himself it would protect Shane from Russia, from Ilya's family, from Ilya's mess.

He tells himself it would protect Ilya too, because he is tired. Because he is so tired he can taste it.

Because after the funeral, his brother had looked at him with contempt like Ilya was something weak, something shameful, and Ilya had thought, if Shane ever has to see me like this, if Shane ever has to be dragged into my home, my language, my rot, it will break him.

He tries not to think about the way Shane's eyes had looked in this morning, in the kitchen, sitting on the counter while Ilya flipped a stupid sandwich in a pan and pretended it was normal, like they were just two men who could wake up together and not have their lives collapse.

Shane had looked sleepy and pleased and annoyingly soft. Shane had comforted him because he always wanted to help. Because Shane, unbelievably, still believed in Ilya.

Ilya hates him for that sometimes. Not real hate. The helpless and hopeless kind. Like if you kept putting your hand into a lions mouth and trusting them not to bite.

Ilya stood.

"Look at me," he said, voice rough with the Russian edges that never softened no matter how long he lived here.

Heads turned. Even the guys who pretended they did not need speeches, even the rookies who tried to look like they were not watching.

Ilya let his eyes go over them. Fellers, jaw tight, always playing like he had something to prove. Kovalev, chewing his mouthguard like it had personally offended him. Cliff with his familiar half smirk that dared the universe to start something. The defensemen, big and grim, blinking slow.

"I know," Ilya said, and swallowed hard on the words he did not want to say. Not here. Not with cameras in the hallway. Not with reporters waiting to ask him if he was "back to normal."

Normal didn't exist anymore.

“I know it has been... weird,” he continued. “But you know what is not weird? Us. This room. We do this every day. We do it tired. We do it angry. We do it when we are happy. We do it even when we do not want to.”

He paused and leaned forward a fraction, like he was about to start a fight with the air.

“Montreal comes in here thinking they take points from us,” Ilya said. “They think it is their night because people love their captain. They love his face. They love his... little speeches.”

A couple guys chuckled. It was mean and affectionate at the same time, the way sports rivalries should be.

Ilya’s mouth twitched, because he did love Shane’s face. He loved it in a way he could not tell anyone without it becoming a weapon.

“We hit first,” he said. “We finish checks. We make them hate being in our building. We skate like it is ours because it is ours. We do not get cute. We do not get stupid penalties. We play our game.”

The room exhaled. Sticks banged against the floor. Someone yelled something that sounded brave. Guys stood, helmets going on, straps snapping.

Ilya put on his shoulder pads, and the weight felt familiar and wrong at the same time. He slid his arms through, tugged them into place, and for a second his hands shook.

He thought of Shane’s hands.

Shane’s hands were always warm. Shane’s hands touched like he meant it, even when he pretended he did not. Shane’s hands could make Ilya feel like the world narrowed to one point and that point was safe.

Ilya shoved the thought away and pulled on his jersey. The captain’s C stared up at him like an accusation and a promise.

He lifted his helmet, put it on, and the outside world became a smaller box. A place where you could only hear what was close. Your own breath. Your own heartbeat. Your own lies.

Down the tunnel, the roar of the crowd hit them like a wall.

Up in the broadcast booth, one of the commentators adjusted his headset and leaned toward the mic with the practiced, bright tone of a man who had learned how to sound excited no matter what was happening in his own life.

“Welcome back to Montreal,” he said, voice rolling over the arena noise like a wave. “Packed house tonight, rivalry game, Metros hosting the Raiders, and all eyes on the captains. Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov. These two never disappoint.”

the other chuckled, warm and sharp. “Never. And the storylines are everywhere. Rozanov’s first game back after... everything. Hollander coming in with Montreal riding a hot streak. You can feel it, Noah. This one’s got teeth.”

On the ice, the referees skated their slow circles. Sam Beaton checked his watch, checked with the linesmen, made the small gestures that kept order in a sport that constantly threatened chaos.

Then he saw Shane.

He was standing near the red line in a white Montreal sweater, visor catching light. He looked annoyingly composed. He always did. Shane's kind of calm was infuriating because it looked effortless and it never was.

Shane's eyes found Ilya immediately.

Of course they did.

There was a moment, brief enough to be deniable, where Shane's face softened. Not the smirk he used for cameras. Not the glare he used for rivalry. Something private. Something that had lived in hotel rooms and dark corners for years.

Ilya's throat closed around nothing. He forced his expression into stone even as Shane skated towards him.

Shane's lips pressed together, just a little. Like he understood. Like he was hurt by it. Like he would still come anyway, because Shane always came anyway.

"We still on for tonight? After?"

Ilya nodded but said nothing else.

"1919," Shane continued, "that's the code...fr the front door. Ill text it to you"

"Front door. Brave" Ilya replied sarcastically, Shane fought back a smile at the mocking tone.

"Fuck you." he said, the words coming out quickly out of reflex.

"Later." is all Ilya said back before Shane was skating away back to his side of the rink.

He stopped by Hayden Pike who had been eyeing the scene warily and nudged his shoulder with a look, saying something that made Shane's mouth twitch. Hayden always looked like a golden retriever who'd been given skates and a marriage and a hockey career and hadn't been told what to do with it all. He was also loyal in a way that made Ilya jealous and irritated at the same time.

Jersey number 99 took the other side, shoulders rolled forward, eyes locked on the puck like it had personally wronged him. On defense, Gagnon stood tall and still, and beside him JJ shifted his weight, tapping his stick against the ice in a steady rhythm. Behind them, Drapeau crouched low, mask gleaming, a statue waiting to become a blur.

Across from them, Boston's line set. Ilya at center, of course, because the universe loved irony. Marlow on his right. Fellers on his left. Kovalev hovering just behind, ready for the

first change. The other defenseman at the blue line, broad as walls. Boston's goalie in the crease, stick planted, eyes tracking everything.

Shane leaned in, stick on the ice, eyes up. The cameras zoomed because rivalry sold.

Ilya leaned in too and felt the air between them crackle with everything they were not allowed to be.

Shane looked up at him, pretty smile stretching across his face and Ilya could do nothing to stop the matching one on his own.

The puck dropped.

Up in the booth, the commentators narrate like they could feel the tension on the ice below them.

"Look at the pace," he said. "Right out of the gate. Hollander and Rozanov already jawing a bit, already setting the tone."

The other hummed. "Those two, Noah, they don't just play hockey, they perform."

On the bench, coaches shouted orders. People changed. The crowd rose and fell like a tide.

Shane gets there first by half a step, shoulder dipping, hips turning, using his body the way he has learned to since he was a kid getting shoved around by players bigger than him. Ilya's stick clashes against his, the familiar scrape of carbon and tape, and for a second they are locked together, skates chattering, momentum stalled.

They battle.

It is close enough that Shane can hear Ilya's breath through the visor, sharp and controlled. Close enough that Ilya can feel the heat coming off Shane's chest, the strength in his legs as he leans in. This is the part of the game where Ilya is usually better. Stronger. Meaner. He has stolen this puck from Shane before. He knows exactly how to pin him, how to muscle him off balance.

But this time Shane slips it.

He rolls his wrists, pulls the puck tight to his skates, and spins away clean, shoulder brushing past Ilya's chest. He wins it outright, smooth and decisive, and pushes the puck forward into open ice.

For a heartbeat, there is nothing but space.

Shane accelerates.

Ilya reacts instantly, pivots, drives his skates into the ice and gives chase. His stride is powerful, technically perfect, the kind that has burned entire lines before. But he knows it almost immediately.

He is not catching him.

The flight back from Russia still lives in his legs. The nights without sleep. The weight in his chest. He pushes anyway, teeth clenched, lungs burning, but the gap does not close.

Shane is already pulling away.

He knows it too.

He feels the absence behind him more than the pressure. The lack of stick on his hip. The quiet space where Ilya should be forcing him wide. He carries the puck through neutral ice with his head up, scanning lanes, JJ drifting inside, Hayden wide to his right.

This is his rush now.

Behind them, Cliff sees the same thing.

He sees Shane break free of the battle. He sees Ilya's stride open up and still come up short. He knows Rozanov is the better player overall, the scarier one, the one you usually worry about beating you to the spot.

But not this time.

Cliff reads the gap and makes the decision in a fraction of a second.

If he plays it passively, Shane walks in with speed and options. If he backs off, Shane controls the zone. Cliff is not built for backing off. He is built for stopping things violently before they become dangerous.

He angles in and commits to the hit.

Shane crosses the blue line just as Ilya reaches from behind, blade stretching for a poke check that is a hair too far away. Shane feels it brush nothing but air.

He should keep his eyes forward.

Instead, he glances back.

Just for a second.

He wants to see if Ilya is still there. Wants to see that familiar flash of frustration, that sharp focus that usually means the chase is not over yet. He turns his head and finds Ilya's eyes through the visor, wide and unguarded, something like fear breaking through the rivalry.

The look slows Shane in a way that Marlow couldn't have anticipated.

Shane is not where he is supposed to be anymore and the impact lands high on Shane's upper chest and collar area instead of square through his shoulder. The force lifts him because his balance is already compromised. His skates leave the ice. His stick flies out of his hands, clattering uselessly away.

For a split second he is airborne, twisted slightly, body loose in a way hockey players never are.

Then gravity finishes the job.

His helmet strikes first.

The sound is sharp and wrong, a hollow crack that slices straight through the roar of the crowd.

Shane's body follows, slamming down hard, shoulders and back hitting almost at once. His head snaps back, then forward, then goes still. A collective gasp swept through the crowd.

The puck keeps sliding for another heartbeat before the whistle shrieks.

Everything stops. Shane doesn't try to get up. He doesn't roll over. He doesn't even pull his arms in.

Get up, he willed Shane silently. **Please, get up.**

For a heartbeat, nobody moved. Then Shane's back arched once in a reflexive gasp—a single, awful inhale that rattled as it left his lungs. After that... nothing.

The arena fell deathly quiet. Thousands of fans held their breath, waiting for Shane Hollander to stir. He always got back up. Hollander was known for his toughness; he'd taken hard hits before and shaken them off. But this time, Shane lay utterly still on the cold ice, face-down.

On the Montreal bench, players stood with faces pressed against the boards, eyes wide in horror. On the ice, Hayden Pike was the first to react. Rage and fear contorted his face as he dropped his stick and tore off his gloves. His eyes locked on Cliff Marlow, the man who had levelled his best friend. With a furious yell, Hayden lunged at Marlow and grabbed the Boston player's jersey. He yanked Marlow down into a chokehold on the ice, fist drawn back to strike.

Marlow didn't even fight back. He looked ashen, his gaze darting from Hayden to Shane's motionless form. Before Hayden could throw a punch, a linesman and a fellow Boston player hauled him off Marlow. Hayden struggled, shouting curses that echoed in the silent arena, until another official intervened and urged him away.

No one else tried to fight. The remaining players from both teams were frozen in place, their attention riveted on where the Montreal captain lay unmoving. Coaches and referees shouted for calm, shepherding everyone a few steps back to give space as the medical team rushed onto the ice.

The first medic reached Shane and dropped to her knees at his side. Two more were close behind with a stretcher and medical bags. They rolled Shane gently onto his back. His arms flopped limply.

Ilya found himself skating closer without even realising it. His ears were ringing with a faint, whistling tone. He couldn't hear the worried murmur of the crowd or the commentary over

the speakers. All he could focus on was the sight of Shane's pale face and the medics working frantically around him.

One medic pressed two fingers to Shane's neck, searching for a pulse. Another was already cutting through the laces of Shane's jersey and shoulder pads to lay bare his chest.

Ilya tried to tell himself this was just another injury. Just a hard hit. Shane would be fine, maybe winded or concussed, but fine. **He's had worse**, Ilya's mind insisted desperately. **He'll open his eyes any second.**

But second after second ticked by, and Shane did not move. A cold dread crept into Ilya's veins. He hadn't felt terror like this since he was a twelve-year-old boy pounding on a locked bathroom door in Moscow, calling out for a mother who would never answer. Not since that day had he felt so helpless, so petrified of what might come next.

Ilya's skates seemed bolted to the ice. He stood a few metres away, trembling, as a medic tilted Shane's head back and placed a mask over his nose and mouth. Another medic began chest compressions, pressing hard and fast on Shane's sternum.

The bottom dropped out of Ilya's world. Compressions meant Shane's heart... Shane's heart wasn't beating.

"No..." Ilya choked out, though he couldn't even hear his own voice through the ringing in his ears. His vision tunneled, black edges creeping in. This could not be happening.

He lurched forward, legs finally obeying. An official tried to hold him back, a hand against Ilya's chest. "Stay back, Rozanov," the man barked, but Ilya shoved past him with unexpected strength.

"Shane!" Ilya shouted, his voice breaking. He half-ran, half-skated to where Shane lay. A Montreal trainer caught Ilya by the arm as he approached, trying to pull him aside. But Ilya refused to be kept away. He dropped to his knees on the ice, slipping out of the trainer's grasp, and crawled the last foot to Shane's side.

A medic was pushing rhythmically on Shane's chest, her face tight with concentration. Another medic was holding the ventilation mask over Shane's mouth, squeezing air into his lungs. Shane's head lolled to the side, eyes closed. He looked like he was sleeping, except for the unnatural stillness of his body and the alarming blue tinge starting to colour his lips.

"No, no, no..." The words spilled from Ilya in a high, keening whimper. He reached out with shaking hands. One hand found Shane's shoulder, gripping it. The other cradled the side of Shane's face. Shane's skin felt eerily cool against Ilya's palm.

"Please, Shane," Ilya begged, tears blurring his vision. "Please, you have to wake up."

A strong arm hooked around Ilya's chest from behind, trying to haul him away so the medics could work, but Ilya fought like a man possessed. "Get off me!" he snarled, wrenching free again. He leaned over Shane, heedless of the tears and mucus running down his own face.

"You promised me," Ilya sobbed, voice loud and ragged in the silence. "You promised you'd be here with me!"

One of Ilya's hands slid down to rest over the centre of Shane's chest, right beside the medic's pumping fists. He could feel the jarring force of CPR under his fingertips, but not even a flutter of Shane's heartbeat. Ilya's throat constricted with grief. "Tell me I didn't waste seven years hiding this, hiding *us*, for it to end like this," he cried, words tumbling out unfiltered.

The players and coaches standing nearby exchanged stunned, uncertain looks. Some of Shane's teammates had tears in their eyes. Hayden was kneeling on the ice now a short distance away, held back by a couple of fellow Voyagers. He watched Ilya's breakdown with anguish, realization dawning on his face. It was clear to everyone now that Shane and Ilya were far more than rivals.

"Ilya," someone murmured softly, perhaps a teammate or coach, as if approaching a wounded animal. Ilya barely heard them. He was beyond hearing anything but the desperate thunder of his own pulse.

"You can't do this," Ilya pleaded, pressing his forehead to Shane's. His tears dripped onto Shane's pale cheek. "Shane, please... I need you. I need you, *pozhaluysta*..."

When the medic paused compressions, reaching for a defibrillator that had been rushed out onto the ice, Ilya seized the moment of stillness. He cupped Shane's face between his trembling hands. "My love, my love," he whispered in English, then in Russian, voice cracking. "Moya lyubov'... If you can hear me, please come back. Take my heart, just... just come back to me!"

The other paramedic squeezes the bag on the mask over Shane's face in sync, watching for chest rise that does not come reliably, adjusting the seal, trying again.

The AED chirps in an emotionless voice. "Analysing rhythm." They're no longer allowed to touch the patient.

Everyone's hands lift off. The compressions stop for a moment that feels like forever.

The little screen draws a line that only the medics and the doctors really understand, but even to Ilya it looks wrong. Chaotic. Then flat. Then spikes.

"Shock advised," the AED says.

"Clear," the paramedic shouts, making sure no one is touching Shane.

Even Ilya backs up an inch, hands in fists, breath held.

The shock jumps Shane's body off the ice. His back arches, shoulders lifting.

Ilya makes a noise he has not made since he was a kid and his mother did not wake up.

The AED says, "Begin CPR."

Compressions start again, relentless.

The doctor calls for an airway. Someone hands him a weird lubed up jelly like green tube (I-Gel). He works quickly, pulling up Shane's jaw and seemingly ramming it down his throat. He tapes the tube in place, and reattaches the bag to this device instead of the mask.

"Keep bagging. Rotate compressions. You are already tiring."

From the stands, it looks like chaos. Trainers. Medics. Players standing in clusters, helmets off, faces blank.

People move around him with purpose. None of that changes the fact that his chest is not moving on its own.

Ilya tries to count compressions so his brain has something to do besides scream. He loses his place at thirty, at fifty, at a hundred. Time stretches out so long it stops having meaning.

"No... no, *Bozhe, net*," Ilya moaned, his nails scraping against the ice as he balled his hands into fists. This couldn't be it. It couldn't end this way. "Please, God... Don't let him die," he prayed brokenly in Russian. "Take me instead. Don't take my love. We... we were so close..."

Nearby, Shane's mother, Yuna, had made it past security and rushed onto the ice with David, Shane's father. Both parents fell to their knees beside their son, sobbing in disbelief. Yuna reached out to grasp Shane's limp hand, clutching it to her chest. David hovered behind her, one hand on her shoulder as tears streamed down his face.

It had been almost three minutes with no heartbeat.

The commentators start speaking again, "Every arena has an emergency action plan in place now. You are seeing that tonight. There are doctors on both benches. Paramedics. The best people you could hope to have if something like this happens. We can only hope they get the result everyone wants."

It's a nice thought. If it's true.

It does not shift the reality of what is happening in the circle on the ice.

After what feels like forever but is only two minutes, the lead medic looks at the AED screen again.

"Stop compressions," he orders. "Analysing."

The AED chirps again, tiny and obscene against the hush.

"Shock advised."

"Clear."

The second shock makes Ilya flinch like he is the one being hit.

He waits, like a child again, for movement afterwards.

There is none.

"Back on the chest," the doctor says, and the paramedic starts compressions again, sweat dripping down his face despite the cold.

They cannot stay on the ice forever.

The backboard is slid into place with practiced hands. They log roll Shane carefully onto it, maintaining his neck alignment, straps tightening across his chest and hips and legs. The tube in his throat is held steady. Someone is bagging with the tube attached to it every 30 compressions now, trying to give him oxygen.

The stretcher is wheeled through the open bench gate with a medic kneeling on it, continuing chest compressions as they go. It is ungainly, but it is better than stopping.

Ilya staggered to his feet and moved on pure instinct, following after them. He had abandoned his stick, his gloves; at some point he'd even ripped off his helmet, which now lay forgotten at centre ice.

"Shane!" Yuna cried, walking with the stretcher as far as she was allowed. "We're here, baby, we're right here!" Her voice cracked with anguish. David wrapped an arm around his wife to support her, his face etched in shock.

Ilya remained by the stretcher until they reached the waiting ambulance just outside the arena's service entrance. A paramedic gently but firmly held him back from climbing in. "Family only, sir," she said, not unkindly, as Shane's parents were helped into the ambulance.

The doors slammed shut, separating Ilya from Shane for the first time since the hit. The ambulance pulled away with a wail of its siren. Ilya stood there in nothing but his skates, hockey pants, and sweat-soaked base layer shirt, watching the vehicle disappear into the night.

He realized his entire body was shaking. Blood roared in his ears. Someone, he wasn't even sure who, draped a coat or blanket around his shoulders and guided him toward a car. In a haze, Ilya understood they were taking him to the hospital too.

As the car sped through the Montreal streets behind the ambulance, Ilya pressed his forehead to the cool window glass. He prayed with every shred of hope left in his soul: for a miracle, for Shane to open his eyes and smile at him again. But with each passing second, that hope continued to slip away.

Ilya stumbled through the hospital entrance moments after the ambulance arrived. He barely remembered the frantic ride over. One of the Boston coaches had driven him; now Ilya left the man behind without a word, single-minded in his desperation to get to Shane.

Inside the brightly lit A&E ward, the smell of antiseptic and the blare of a distant alarm assaulted Ilya's senses. A group of medics rushed past with Shane's stretcher, disappearing

behind double doors. Yuna and David Hollander were already there, running after the doctors. A nurse intercepted them, gently directing the distraught parents toward a waiting area just outside the trauma room.

Ilya approached on unsteady legs. He felt detached, as if watching himself from far away. Shane's mother was sobbing openly into her husband's chest. David Hollander's face was pale and drawn, his eyes rimmed red as he stared through the small window in the door at the medical team surrounding his son.

As Ilya drew near, David looked up. There was no anger or surprise in the man's expression, only a profound grief that Ilya knew was mirrored on his own face. On the ice, in that terrible moment, all truth had been laid bare. David reached out and clasped Ilya's shoulder, pulling him into their huddle. Without hesitation, Yuna wrapped her arm around Ilya as well, holding onto him as tightly as if he were family. Ilya's breath hitched at their kindness, and fresh tears slipped down his cheeks.

Together, they watched the doctors fight to save Shane. Through the glass, Ilya caught disjointed glimpses: a doctor performing CPR in frantic intervals; a nurse checking monitors; another preparing a syringe and injecting something into Shane's IV. An incessant, high-pitched monotone alarmed in the background, the flatline of Shane's heart.

Minutes crept by in agony. "Come on, Shane," Ilya whispered, voice raw. Yuna squeezed his hand. Nobody in that little waiting alcove breathed; their eyes were glued in hope and dread beyond the door.

At last, a tall doctor in blue scrubs pushed through the swinging doors and approached them. He pulled down his surgical mask, revealing a grim, apologetic expression.

"Mr. and Mrs. Hollander?" His tone was gentle, but those few words made Yuna wail softly, as if bracing for the worst. David's grip on Ilya's shoulder tightened.

Ilya felt his stomach drop and shake. "No..." he mumbled under his breath, barely audible.

"I'm Dr. Nguyen," the man introduced quietly. "I'm the attending physician. We did everything we could." His own eyes looked damp as he spoke. "We administered multiple rounds of epinephrine, and continued CPR for over twenty minutes... but there was no response. I'm so sorry. Shane is gone."

Yuna let out a piercing cry, doubling over. David caught her and slowly sank to the floor with her in his arms as her sobs grew uncontrollable. His own tears fell silently into her hair.

For a moment, Ilya forgot how to breathe. The world tilted. He stared at the doctor, waiting for a different outcome, a miracle, anything. Shane is gone. The words didn't seem real. Shane, his Shane... gone?

"No," Ilya protested hoarsely. He stumbled forward, nearly colliding with the doctor. "No, check again," he pleaded. "He can't be... You must have missed something. Please, just try again!" His voice rose, cracking on each word.

Dr. Nguyen shook his head, eyes full of sympathy. "I'm very sorry."

Ilya's knees buckled. He collapsed against the wall, sliding down to the polished hospital floor. A cold numbness crept over him, more terrifying than any pain. In the background, he vaguely heard Yuna and David's weeping, felt the vibrations of their grief echoing his own.

The doctor quietly left to give them a moment. Nurses hovered nearby, waiting to ask about formalities—an autopsy, releasing the body—but mercifully they held off for now.

After some time, Shane's parents rose and asked to see their son. A nurse led them through the doors into the trauma bay. Before she followed, Yuna turned back to where Ilya remained on the floor in a daze.

"Ilya, come," she said softly, tears still streaming down her face. "Come with us."

He looked up, startled that she would include him in such a private moment. But the invitation in her eyes was genuine. With effort, Ilya forced himself to his feet. His legs were trembling and his vision blurred, but he managed to follow them into the room.

Shane lay on a hospital gurney, a stark white sheet pulled up to his chest. Someone had removed his skates and the rest of his hockey gear. Without all that armour, he looked small and far too young. The green tube thing still remains lodged in his throat, pointless now. A nurse carefully detached it and the monitors, turning off the flatline alarm at last. The sudden quiet in the room was deafening.

Yuna approached her son and brushed a blood-matted lock of hair away from his forehead. Her hands were steady in that moment, as if a calm had overtaken her. "My beautiful boy," she whispered. She bent down and kissed Shane's temple. David stood at the other side of the gurney, one hand over Shane's and his other hand rubbing Yuna's back as she cried silently.

Ilya hovered a step behind, unsure if he had the right to be there. But David caught his gaze and gave a small nod, beckoning him closer.

Heart hammering dully, Ilya moved to the side of the bed. Shane's face was peaceful, almost like he was asleep. Only the unnatural pallor of his skin and the terrifying stillness of his chest betrayed the truth. Ilya's vision swam as he reached out a shaking hand and gently took Shane's lax hand in his. It was still faintly warm, but unresponsive.

"Shane..." Ilya croaked. No more words came. His throat clenched around a surge of anguish. He lifted Shane's hand and pressed it to his forehead, shoulders shaking with silent sobs. He had no more strength to wail or scream. All that remained was a hollow ache and the unbearable weight of regret.

"He loved you, you know," Yuna said softly, looking across the bed at Ilya. Her voice broke on a hiccup. "He never told us, but... a mother knows these things. I could see it in how he looked at you on the ice."

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut. Hearing her say that simultaneously warmed and shattered what was left of his heart. "I... I loved him," he confessed in a ragged whisper. "So much." The

words felt pitifully inadequate. How could he capture a seven-year story in so few syllables?

David gave a grief-tinged smile. "Thank you—for making him happy," he managed to say. "We didn't know, but... if he loved you, and you him, that's all that matters to us."

Ilya couldn't reply, tears choking him. Instead, he bowed his head and brought Shane's hand to his lips, kissing the knuckles gently.

They stayed a while longer with Shane, each saying quiet goodbyes no parent or lover ever wants to imagine saying. When at last a nurse informed them that the hospital needed to take Shane to the morgue, Yuna broke down anew. Ilya had to pry her hand free from Shane's in order for the attendants to wheel him away. It was like losing him all over again.

As they walked out of the hospital into the predawn darkness, snow had begun to fall over the city. Word of Shane's passing had already reached those outside—reporters huddled by the entrance and a few early rising fans clutching jerseys and candles. Cameras flashed, and someone wailed upon spotting Shane's parents.

Security hurried Yuna and David to a waiting car. Ilya, feeling utterly lost, started to drift toward the shadows, uncertain where to go or what to do now that the centre of his world was gone.

Before he could slip away, David Hollander turned back and pulled Ilya into a tight embrace. Yuna joined, wrapping both men in her arms. The three of them clung together in the gently falling snow, united in loss.

"We're family now, Ilya," Yuna whispered against his shoulder. "You'll always be welcome with us."

Ilya bit back a sob, nodding. He couldn't speak, but he held onto them as though it was the only solid thing left in the world.

Finally, they released each other. Yuna cupped Ilya's cheek for a moment, a sad, motherly smile on her lips, then she and David slipped into their car. The door closed, and just like that, Ilya was alone.

As the Hollanders' car disappeared into the dark, Ilya stood in the snow outside the hospital, numb to the cold. All around him the world was waking up to the news of Shane Hollander's death. But Ilya remained frozen in place, trapped in the moment he felt Shane's heartbeat stop. He did not know how to move forward from here; only that somehow, he was still breathing while Shane was not, and that thought was unbearable.

ESPN – The hockey world was in shock last night after Montreal Voyageurs captain Shane Hollander, 26, collapsed and died during a game against Boston.

The incident occurred just 25 seconds into the first period when Hollander was struck by Boston defenceman Cliff Marlow in what witnesses describe as a “devastating, yet clean” open-ice hit. Hollander’s heart reportedly stopped on impact. Medical personnel administered CPR on the ice for several minutes before transporting him to Montreal General Hospital, where he was later pronounced dead.

The National Ice Hockey League (NIHL) released a statement early this morning confirming Hollander’s passing and expressing condolences to his family, friends, and teammates. League Commissioner Allan Walsh stated, *“Shane Hollander was not only a remarkable athlete but an outstanding person. This tragedy is immeasurable. We will review the circumstances of this incident, but for now our focus is on supporting the Hollander family and the entire Montreal organisation.”*

News of Hollander’s death has sent ripples through the sports community. Fans gathered outside the Voyageurs’ home arena throughout the night, leaving flowers, team jerseys, and handwritten messages at an impromptu memorial that stretches for dozens of metres. On social media, #RIPShaneHollander and #ForShane trended worldwide within hours. Fellow athletes, public figures, and thousands of fans have shared their grief and memories:

@CanadiensFan69: *“Still in disbelief. We lost one of the greats tonight. Rest in peace, Captain. ❤️ #RIPShaneHollander”*

@NHLLegends: *“Shane Hollander’s legacy will live on in every young player who was inspired by his passion and skill. Deepest condolences to the Hollander family and the Voyageurs.”*

@TheofficialPike: *“I have no words. We love you, Hollie. We’ll do our best to honour you every day. #ForShane”*

@ProudHockeyMom: *“My son looked up to Shane Hollander. Tonight, we lit a candle in our window for him. This is heart-breaking.”*

Video clips of the moments after the hit have also surfaced, including footage of Boston’s captain Ilya Rozanov dropping to his knees on the ice in visible distress as medics battled to save Hollander. The raw display of emotion from Rozanov – seen crying out Shane’s name and pleading in both English and Russian – has been shared millions of times, prompting an outpouring of support for the star player. Neither Rozanov nor the Boston team have issued

an official comment yet, but sources close to the team say he is "absolutely heartbroken and inconsolable."

Cliff Marlow, the player involved in the hit, released a brief statement through the Boston organisation, saying, *"There are no words for the sorrow I feel. Shane was an incredible competitor and person. My heart goes out to his family. I never intended to hurt him. I wish I could undo what happened."* League officials have announced an investigation into the play, though preliminary consensus among analysts is that it was a tragic accident rather than foul play. Marlow's teammates described him as absolutely inconsolable in the aftermath. According to some on the scene, the veteran defenceman collapsed in tears upon hearing of Hollander's passing and had to be helped from the ice.

Funeral arrangements for Hollander have yet to be announced. All across Canada from Montreal to his home town, Ottawa, everyone is feeling the loss of this kind hearted hero. A moment of silence has been observed at arenas around the league as teams and fans grapple with the sudden loss of one of hockey's brightest stars.

[Excerpt from SportsNet evening news, 2017]

Hayden

Sunlight peeked through the kitchen window, but Hayden Pike felt like the night would never end. He sat at the table in the same clothes he had worn at the arena, a cold cup of tea untouched in front of him. His eyes were red and dry, he had run out of tears sometime around dawn. Now there was only a heavy, hollow ache in his chest.

On the table lay Shane's jersey, folded neatly on top of the duffel Hayden had carried home from the arena. He'd taken the whole bag with him when the game was suspended, acting on instinct more than thought, unwilling to leave any part of Shane behind in a locker room that would never hold him again. The rest of the equipment was still zipped away, untouched. He had only taken out the spare jersey. Clean. Unworn. It should have been reassuring. Instead, it felt unbearable.

Hayden smoothed his hand over the fabric, fingers tracing the stitched letters spelling out Hollander, pressing down as if the weight of his palm might anchor it to the table. He kept thinking Shane would text him, annoyed and amused, asking why Hayden had nicked his spare and telling him to bring it back tomorrow. The idea lodged painfully in his chest.

It still did not feel real that there would be no tomorrow where Shane came to collect it.

Hayden's phone buzzed intermittently with calls and texts—teammates checking in, reporters seeking a comment, friends from other teams offering condolences. He couldn't bring himself to answer any of them. What could he possibly say? There were no words that could capture the yawning void Shane had left behind.

His phone screen was still open to the news from earlier: Shane's smiling face under headlines declaring his death. Hayden had scrolled through countless tribute messages overnight, but every one felt like another nail in a coffin of truth he didn't want to accept. One video in particular had been replaying in his mind on a loop. It was the sight of Ilya Rozanov screaming Shane's name on the ice, utterly shattered. That image hurt almost as much as seeing Shane fall. In seven years of fierce friendship, Shane had never breathed a word about Ilya beyond hockey rivalry, yet it all made heartbreaking sense now. The furtive glances, the off-season trips that never quite added up, the reason Shane never seemed interested in dating... Hayden closed his eyes, jaw clenched. He wished Shane had felt he could confide in him. Perhaps he could have helped shoulder that secret, even given his friend a chance at happiness out in the open. But it was too late for that now.

A soft patter of footsteps pulled Hayden from his thoughts. One of his four-year-old daughters, Jade, stood hesitantly at the doorway in her pyjamas, clutching a threadbare stuffed bear. "Daddy?" she said in a small voice. "Why are you still up?"

Hayden forced a weary smile and opened his arms. Jade toddled over and climbed into his lap. He held her close, breathing in the innocence of baby shampoo and warmth.

"You're squeezing me," She giggled softly, unaware of the tears gathering in her father's eyes.

Hayden loosened his embrace slightly. "Sorry, bean." His voice came out hoarse. Jade looked up at him with her mother's curious green eyes.

"Did you have a bad game?" she asked, noticing the sadness on his face.

A trembling breath hitched in Hayden's chest. He didn't know how to begin to explain. How could he make a child understand that Uncle Shane—the man who built pillow forts with her and snuck her chocolates when Mum wasn't looking—wasn't coming back?

Hergaze drifted to the table and lit up. "That's Uncle Shane's shirt!" she exclaimed, reaching out to touch the jersey's logo. "Is he coming over? Can I show him the picture I drew?" She started to wiggle off Hayden's lap. "Mummy helped me draw us playing hockey. I want to show him!"

Hayden felt something inside him crack. His daughter's innocent joy was like a knife twisting in his heart. He gently caught Jade's small hand, stopping her.

"Sweetheart..." His voice broke. The tears he thought he had no more of began to flow again. "Uncle Shane had an accident, honey," he managed to whisper, tears falling into her soft curls. "He... he won't be able to visit anymore."

She was quiet for a moment, processing. "Is he hurt?" she asked.

Hayden swallowed the lump in his throat. "Y-yes. He got hurt very badly." He couldn't bring himself to say the word *dead*. Not yet. "He's gone to heaven."

His daughter sniffled, and Hayden realised she understood more than he thought. Her little arms tightened around his neck. "I don't want him to go to heaven," she said, voice trembling. "I want him here."

That undid Hayden completely. A ragged sob burst from him, and he held his daughter as they cried together. The jersey lay on the table beside them, a silent witness to their grief.

In that moment, Hayden promised himself he would do everything to keep Shane's memory alive: for Jade, for her twin, their brother and their baby sister, who was still asleep upstairs, for the whole world. But it felt impossible to imagine a future without Shane's laughter in it.

Jade eventually fell quiet in his arms, her tears damp on his shirt. Hayden gently stroked her hair, rocking slightly. "Do you remember what Uncle Shane always said when he left after visiting?" he whispered.

Jade rubbed her eyes. "He said, 'See you soon, Jellybean,'" she murmured. Shane's special nickname for her echoed in the small voice.

Hayden mustered a smile amid his tears. "That's right. See you soon." His voice broke again. "We'll see him again one day. We have to believe that, okay?"

The child nodded against his chest, her trust unbroken. Hayden wished he could share that simple faith. Right now, all he felt was a pain that reached the marrow of his bones.

He held Jade until she grew sleepy in his arms. As he carried her back to her room, Hayden passed the framed photos lining the hallway—pictures of his wedding, his children's births, and one of him and Shane grinning ear to ear with the championship trophy last year. He paused before that photo, the triumph and joy frozen in time. Gently, he reached out and touched Shane's face in the picture.

"I'm sorry, mate," Hayden whispered, voice shaking. "I should've protected you." Fresh tears welled, blurring the smiling image of his best friend. "You were supposed to know Amber, to watch them all grow... We had so many plans."

There was no answer in the silent hallway. Hayden bowed his head. "I'll take care of your mum and dad, and... I'll look out for Ilya too, I promise." Saying Ilya's name felt strange on his tongue, but Hayden knew it was what Shane would want. Despite the shock of learning about their relationship, Hayden's heart ached for Ilya almost as much as for himself. He had seen the Russian's soul shatter on that ice. In that grief, they were bonded.

"Goodbye, brother," Hayden whispered, pressing a kiss to his fingertips and touching them to Shane's face in the photograph. His tears dripped onto the glass. "Love you always."

He lingered a moment longer, then forced himself to move. The day was only just starting, and there were difficult calls to be made: teammates to support, funeral preparations to help with. Hayden straightened his shoulders and continued down the hall, carrying his daughter to bed as gently as if she were made of glass.

The weight of grief would remain, but for Shane's sake, Hayden would keep going. It was what his best friend would have wanted: for them all to live, love, and remember him. Even if right now, every step forward felt like walking through a world turned upside down.

Shane's Parents

The Hollander household was unnaturally quiet. Usually, at this hour, Shane would be barging through the front door with an easy grin and an armful of groceries or takeout for a family dinner. Now, only the ticking clock in the living room marked the passage of time.

Yuna sat on the edge of her son's neatly made childhood bed, running her fingers over a worn plush dolphin toy that Shane used to adore. He had won it at a carnival when he was ten and insisted on keeping it even into adulthood. She clutched it to her chest now, inhaling deeply as if she might catch a lingering hint of his cologne on its fabric. Beside her, a framed photo of a young Shane in hockey gear smiled brightly from the nightstand. Yuna's shoulders trembled as fresh tears formed.

David stood by the window, phone in hand. He had been fielding calls all day—relatives, the team's management, funeral service providers. Everyone needed decisions, quotes, confirmations. It was the cruelest irony that in the wake of their son's death, they had to manage so many mundane details. He rubbed a hand over his face, exhaustion etched in every line.

"The funeral home needs us to choose a coffin by tomorrow," David said quietly, his voice barely above a whisper, as if speaking too loudly might shatter what little composure they had left. A glossy pamphlet for casket selections lay open on his lap; he couldn't even fathom making such a choice for his child. He glanced over at Yuna, his eyes red. "They also want to know if we'll allow a public memorial at the arena."

Yuna pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes, trying to stem the tide of tears. "A coffin..." she echoed, voice cracking. The word felt impossible. Parents weren't meant to bury their child. "I don't care about those things," she whispered. "I just want him back." Her fingers tightened around the stuffed dolphin until her knuckles turned white.

David crossed the room in two strides and sank down next to his wife. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against him. "I know," he murmured, his own tears threatening to fall again. "I know, darling." They sat like that for a few moments, holding each other in the silence of Shane's old room.

Yuna sniffled and looked at the photo on the nightstand, reaching out to trace her son's cheek. "He was so happy that day," she said softly. It was a picture of Shane at nineteen, draft day, when Montreal had picked him. His grin stretched ear to ear, full of hope and excitement. "All his dreams were coming true."

"He made our dreams come true too," David replied, voice thick. "Watching him grow into the man he became... we were so proud."

Yuna nodded, a ghost of a smile touching her lips as she remembered. "Do you recall when he was five and told us he'd play in the NHL one day?" she asked. "He could barely skate without falling, but he was *so* determined."

David managed a soft chuckle at the memory, though it quickly turned into a sob. He cleared his throat. "He did everything he set his mind to. Except..." He trailed off, the unspoken *live a long, full life* hanging heavily in the air.

Yuna leaned her head on David's shoulder. "I keep thinking about Ilya," she confessed after a long pause, her voice nearly a whisper. "Seeing him on the ice like that..." Her composure faltered, recalling Ilya's anguished cries. "Have you heard anything from him?"

David shook his head. "Not since the hospital." He had tried calling Ilya earlier that day to check on him, but it had gone to voicemail. Understandable, given everything. "Hayden said the team has staff looking out for him, but..." He sighed. "That kind of pain, I don't think anyone can reach him right now."

"He loved Shane so much," Yuna whispered, tears spilling anew. "All those years, and we never knew. I wish... I wish they could have had more time. A chance to be happy."

"Me too." David squeezed his wife gently. "When I saw them together, in that moment... it was clear as day. Ilya looked at Shane like I look at you." His voice broke slightly at the end of the sentence.

They fell silent, wrapped in shared sorrow. Outside the window, dusk was settling, painting the sky in sombre greys and blues.

A soft knock at the front door downstairs interrupted the quiet. David frowned, glancing at the clock. It was past 7 PM. They weren't expecting visitors. Exchanging a cautious look, David stood up. "I'll see who it is."

Yuna followed him down the hall, both of them moving like people decades older, weighed down by grief. When David opened the door, they were surprised to find Ilya Rozanov standing on their doorstep.

Ilya looked like a ghost of himself: pale, hollow-eyed, hands trembling where he gripped the strap of a duffel bag slung over his shoulder. He had clearly been crying recently; his eyes were bloodshot, and stubble darkened his jaw as if he hadn't cared to shave in days.

He opened his mouth, but for a moment no sound came out. Then, in a cracked voice, "I'm sorry to come so late." His accent was thicker than usual, roughened by grief. "I... I didn't know where else to go."

Yuna stepped forward without hesitation and pulled Ilya into a hug. He stiffened in surprise, then collapsed against her, a muffled sob escaping as he clutched the back of her cardigan. "You're always welcome here, Ilya," she said softly, echoing the words she'd spoken at the hospital. Her own tears fell silently into his jacket.

David put a gentle hand on Ilya's back, guiding him inside. "Come in, son." His voice was kind but laden with sorrow.

They led Ilya to the living room and sat him down on the sofa. Yuna hurried to the kitchen to put on the kettle; an old habit, offering tea in a crisis, even when nothing could truly soothe

the pain.

Ilya sat hunched forward, elbows on his knees and face in his hands. David took a seat beside him, the silence heavy yet not uncomfortable. When Yuna returned with tea, she urged Ilya to take a warm mug. He did so obediently, though his hands shook so badly that a bit of the liquid sloshed over the rim.

"Thank you," he murmured, staring down at the steam as if he wasn't sure what to do with it.

They sat in a gentle quiet for a while, the only sounds the ticking clock and occasional snuffle. Finally, Yuna broke the silence. "Have you eaten anything today, Ilya?" she asked softly.

He shook his head, not looking up. Truthfully, he couldn't remember the last time he had eaten. Yuna disappeared into the kitchen again and returned with a plate of simple sandwiches. "Please try to have a bite," she urged, setting it on the coffee table. "Just a little."

Ilya's throat worked as he swallowed, emotion raw in his eyes. "Spasibo," he whispered, a Russian thank you, though he made no move to touch the food.

David cleared his throat gently. "We were just talking about Shane... about the two of you."

Ilya's shoulders flinched at Shane's name. He slowly lifted his gaze. "I never wanted you to find out like... like that," he said, voice breaking. "I'm sorry we kept it secret."

Yuna sat in the armchair across from him, clutching a tissue. "No, dear, you have nothing to apologise for," she insisted. "We only wish you both hadn't had to hide something so beautiful for so long." Her eyes shone with compassion. "Shane was always so private... We respected that, even if I sensed there was someone special in his life. A mother can tell, you know."

Ilya pressed his lips together, trying and failing to hold back the tears. "He wanted to tell you," he managed. "We talked about it, if things... if things changed with our careers, or if we won the Cup again and felt brave enough to go public. He was tired of hiding. I was too, but I—I was so afraid." He bit down on a sob, covering his mouth for a moment to regain control. "I wasted so much time being a coward. He deserved better."

David frowned. "You mustn't blame yourself for that. You both did what you thought you had to, given the circumstances." He hesitated, then placed a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "For what it's worth, Yuna and I... we couldn't be more honoured to know our son was loved by someone like you."

Ilya finally met David's eyes, surprise and gratitude mingling with pain. "He—he was everything to me," Ilya confessed, voice trembling. "And I never said it to him. Not properly. I thought we had time... I thought..." His composure shattered then. A wail tore from his chest and he doubled over, face in his hands. "I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..."

In an instant, Yuna was at his side, wrapping her arms around Ilya as he sobbed. David embraced him from the other side, and once more they formed a small circle of shared grief. They held Ilya as if he were their own son, whispering what comfort they could: that Shane

knew he was loved, that none of this was his fault, that he would always be part of their family.

After some time, Ilya's sobs subsided into quiet weeping. Yuna gently smoothed his hair, much as she used to do for Shane when he was upset. "Will you stay here tonight?" she asked softly. "It's already late. We'd feel better if you didn't have to be alone."

Ilya hesitated. The temptation to sink into the warmth of their kindness was strong. He was so bone-weary and heartsick. Still, a flicker of resolve hardened in his chest. "Thank you," he whispered, pulling back and wiping at his swollen eyes. "But... I should go home. I have some things to sort out." His voice wavered slightly on the last words, but neither Yuna nor David noticed in their concern.

"Are you sure?" David asked, brow creased.

Ilya mustered a faint, convincing smile. "I'll be okay. I promise." A lie, but the only gift he could give them was a little less worry, even if just for tonight.

Reluctantly, Yuna released him. "If you need anything—anything at all—you call us, alright?" She took his hand and squeezed it.

"I will," Ilya lied again softly. He rose unsteadily to his feet. David walked him to the door while Yuna hovered nearby, arms crossed protectively over her chest as if stopping herself from grabbing him and insisting he stay.

At the entryway, Ilya paused. He looked at Shane's parents—two people who had just lost their pride and joy, yet who still had compassion enough to worry about *him*. Fresh tears stung his eyes at their selflessness. "Spasibo... thank you, for everything," he said thickly. "And... for raising him. Shane was... he was extraordinary because of you."

Yuna pressed a trembling hand to her lips, and David gave a solemn nod, too choked up to speak.

In the fading light of evening, Ilya stepped outside. Yuna gently pulled the door closed behind him, but not before offering one last soft, "We care about you, Ilya."

Those words lingered in the air as Ilya stood on the porch, watching the lights go out one by one in the Hollander home. He clutched the strap of his duffel bag, tears slipping down his face. He had come here to say goodbye—to them, and in a way, to Shane. And now it was done.

When the last light in the house blinked off, Ilya finally turned and walked away into the darkness.

Early the next morning, the phone rang in the Hollander household. David answered, listening in mute disbelief as the news was delivered. When he hung up, his face was ashen. Yuna looked at him with dread, clutching a tissue in her hand.

"Ilya..." David managed to choke out. "They found him. He... he's gone, Yuna."

Yuna's wail rang through the quiet house as she collapsed against her husband. David held her tight, tears streaming down his own face. A fresh wave of grief crashed over them, compounding the immeasurable loss they were already drowning in. "We should have made him stay," Yuna sobbed over and over. "Oh God, we should have made him stay..." David could only bury his face in her hair, heartbroken and guilt-ridden, as they clung to each other. They had taken Ilya into their family in their son's final moments, and now they had lost him too.

A grim headline captured the world's attention once again: **Boston Hockey Star Ilya Rozanov Found Dead at 26, police say no foul play suspected.** Every channel runs the same footage. Ilya crying on the ice. Ilya skating backwards with a look of disbelief. Ilya lifting a trophy years ago, smiling like someone who still had their whole life ahead of them. And by nightfall, candles burn outside two arenas in two cities.

Ilya

The door to Shane's flat clicked shut behind him, the sound too loud in the quiet hallway. Ilya stood there for a moment with his hand still on the handle, like he might turn around and undo it. He did not turn on the lights. He dropped his duffel bag by the door, where Shane usually kicked his shoes off, and the thud echoed through the space. The flat smelled faintly of soap and coffee and something familiar that made his chest ache. This was not his home. It was worse than that. It was where Shane should have been.

His phone vibrated in his pocket as it had been doing all day. He pulled it out and saw dozens of unread messages: teammates, friends, even reporters. None of it mattered. Among them was one new text from an unknown number, but the country code was Russian. Ilya opened it with numb curiosity. It was from his uncle, a man he hadn't spoken to in years: "*Our condolences. Please call when you can.*"

A bitter, humourless laugh escaped Ilya's throat. It figured that his family would only reach out now, after the worst had already happened. He powered off the phone without replying and tossed it onto the couch.

In the silence that followed, Ilya stood motionless in the middle of the living room and let his eyes adjust. The furniture resolved slowly out of the dark, all of it ordinary and wrong without Shane in it. His gaze drifted to a framed photo on the wall. A team picture from last season. Shane in the front row, grin wide and unguarded, arm slung around a teammate. Ilya was there too, a few places down, expression carefully neutral. They had joked once, quietly, about how funny it was that they were always in the same frame but never touching. Now the distance between them in the photo felt deliberate, like a punishment.

Ilya's chest tightened until it hurt. He could not stay in the dark. He dragged a hand down his face and moved into the kitchen, flicking on the light. It was lived in, not sparse. A dish left to dry on the rack. A magnet holding up a takeaway menu. On the counter sat a half empty bottle of vodka Shane kept for guests and almost never drank himself. He didn't bother with a glass, just took a swig straight from the bottle. The alcohol burned down his throat, but it barely registered.

He braced his hands on the counter, head hanging. On the fridge door, a single photograph was held up by a magnet—one of him and Shane at the All-Star game two years ago. It wasn't an intimate photo by any means; they were in their gear on the ice, posing with forced smiles for the camera. But Ilya remembered that day vividly: how they'd snuck away after the skills competition, stealing kisses in a quiet corridor where no one would see. Shane had been so happy that whole weekend, getting to spend time together without the usual sneaking around. Ilya reached out and gently plucked the photo from under the magnet.

His vision blurred as he stared at Shane's face in the picture. "I'm sorry," he whispered to the smiling image. "I'm so sorry, *lyubimiy*." The term of endearment ("my beloved") fell from his lips effortlessly in the privacy of his empty home. How many times had he longed to say it to Shane in the light of day? Now he would never get the chance.

A sob shuddered through him. Ilya slid down to the kitchen floor, back against the cabinets. The cool tiles pressed through his shirt. He pulled his knees up and cradled the photo to his chest.

"I can't do this without you," he said hoarsely into the silent room. His words echoed faintly. He imagined for a moment that Shane was there, sitting across from him like he used to on nights they stayed up talking until dawn. "You promised you wouldn't leave..." His voice broke. The ache in his heart was a physical thing, a gaping wound that refused to heal.

Through his tears, Ilya's gaze fell on his phone again. On impulse, he crawled over and picked it up. Though it was powered off, he turned it back on and navigated to his saved voicemail messages. There was one he had kept, one he'd listened to countless times in the past two days despite how much it hurt.

Shane's voice, warm and gentle, filled the quiet: *"Hey, it's me. Just wanted to say I'm proud of you for the hat trick tonight, even if I won't admit it to the press."* A soft laugh. *"Sleep well, and... I can't wait to see you tomorrow. Good night, Roz."*

The message ended. A wretched sound tore from Ilya's throat as he clutched the phone to his heart. *Tomorrow*. Shane had said tomorrow. But tomorrow was here and Shane was gone. There was no future left that included him.

Ilya rose unsteadily to his feet, wiping his face with the back of his hand. His mind was oddly clear now, a cold calm settling over him as he made his decision. He wandered to the bedroom and opened the closet. From a high shelf, he pulled down a small wooden box. Inside were various prescription bottles—painkillers from old injuries, sleeping pills for long flights. Hockey players often collected these like unwanted souvenirs over their careers.

He emptied two bottles into his palm; a handful of mixed pills stared back at him. Next, he retrieved the vodka bottle from the kitchen. Returning to sit on the edge of his bed, he found a pen and paper in the nightstand. He wasn't sure what to write or who it was even for. In the end:

Yuna and David, it's not your fault.

I am sorry to let teams down, please forgive.

Светлана, мне очень жаль. Спасибо тебе за все.

Most of what I have goes in trust to my niece, to be hers alone when she is 18. The Moscow flat to Alexei. To Svetlana, I give my clothes. You can keep, sell, burn, I don't care. Keep the cars too. Anything left over to be for charity that would have made him happy.

I cannot do this without him.

The note fluttered from his fingers to the bedside table, held flat by his phone. With a final shaky breath, Ilya began swallowing the pills, washing them down with gulps of vodka. His body protested; he gagged once at the bitter taste, but he forced them down until none remained.

The half-empty bottle slipped from his hand to the floor as a wave of dizziness overtook him. Ilya lay back on the bed, clutching Shane's photo against his chest with one hand. With the other, he pulled Shane's pillow close, breathing in deeply. It faintly smelled of Shane's shampoo, maybe just a trick of his memory, but he let himself believe it.

A gentle hallucination stole over him in his final moments. Ilya found himself standing on the dock of a tranquil lake at sunset—*their* lake, a secret hideaway where he and Shane had spent a blissful week one summer in the off-season. Golden light danced on the water's surface. He could see Shane at the end of the dock, barefoot and wearing an old t-shirt and swim shorts, his silhouette outlined by the dying sun.

In the hush of that imagined evening, Shane turned and smiled at Ilya with all the warmth and love of those carefree days. "Took you long enough," he teased gently, holding out a hand.

Ilya's heart swelled. He walked forward, feet padding on weathered wood, until their fingers intertwined. Shane's palm was solid and warm, his thumb stroking the back of Ilya's hand. A soft laugh escaped Shane's lips—the same melodious laugh Ilya had fallen in love with years ago. They stood side by side, watching the sun melt into the horizon. In that peaceful twilight, there were no secrets, no fear, no pain—only the two of them.

"We have all the time in the world now," Shane murmured, leaning in to press a tender kiss to Ilya's temple. Ilya closed his eyes, a tear of relief slipping down his cheek. When he opened them again, the lake and sunset faded, but Shane's presence remained as a comforting warmth enveloping him.

He could feel it even now, as he lay on his bed. A faint smile ghosted over Ilya's lips. Shane was here, waiting for him.

"I'm coming, Shane," he murmured, words slurring as darkness crept in at the edges of his consciousness. A tear slipped down his temple, disappearing into his hair. "Wait for me..."

With that final whisper, Ilya Rozanov closed his eyes. His chest rose and fell in slow, shallow breaths until, at last, it fell still and he knew no more.

Svetlana

Svetlana saw the news before she felt it.

The headline was still loading when her stomach dropped. She recognised the photo immediately. Shane in a white jersey, visor tipped up, mouth open mid laugh. The caption finished rendering a second later.

Montreal Voyageurs captain Shane Hollander dead following on ice collision.

For a moment, she could not breathe.

Her first thought was not about the league or the fallout or the horror of it happening in front of thousands of people. Her first thought was Ilya.

She had seen his face on the ice. Everyone had. The way he had broken apart without even trying to stop himself. The way he had said Shane's name like it was the only word he had ever known. The way the cameras had lingered, obscene and hungry, as he had been pulled back from the stretcher.

She knew that look.

She had seen it once before, years ago, in a Moscow hospital corridor, when his mother died and he had stood very straight and very still and then folded in on himself the second he thought no one was watching.

Ilya was twenty six years old. He had never learned how to survive loss without turning it inward until it hollowed him out.

Svetlana was already moving before the article finished loading.

She did not pack carefully. She grabbed her passport, her phone charger, clean clothes without checking what they were. She booked the first flight to Montreal without looking at the price. She did not call him. She already knew he would not answer.

At the airport, she kept refreshing her phone, half expecting another notification to appear, something worse, something final. None came. That terrified her more.

By the time she landed, the city felt bruised. There were posters taped to lampposts near the arena. Flowers piled against metal barriers. Candles guttering in the cold. People moved around them quietly, as if Montreal itself had decided to speak in whispers.

She went straight to the hotel listed in the team itinerary. The one the Bears always used when they were in town.

At the desk, she forced her voice to stay steady.

"I am here to see Ilya Rozanov," she said. "I am worried about him."

The receptionist's expression softened immediately, which told her everything she needed to know.

"I am sorry," the woman said gently. "He has not returned to his room since check in. His room is still listed as occupied as he has not checked out."

Svetlana felt something cold slide down her spine.

"Can you let me in," she asked, already knowing the answer.

"I cannot without him present," the receptionist said. "But if you would like to wait, or if there is someone else we can contact..."

Svetlana shook her head.

Waiting was the last thing she could afford.

She stepped outside into the cold and stood on the pavement, phone in her hand, trying to think like Ilya. Not like a hockey player. Not like a public figure. Like a man who had just lost the only person he loved.

Where would he go.

Not the arena. Not the hotel. Not anywhere with people or cameras or noise.

Her chest tightened.

Shane's apartment.

She did not know the address. She had never needed to. She had known it existed in the abstract way you know something is important without being allowed near it.

She started calling everyone in her contact that she thought might have a clue. She eventually stumbled across Scott Hunter's. She had saved it years ago after the All Stars weekend, back when she had met him through Ilya in a hotel bar and ended up talking far too long about everything except hockey. She had not thought about that night in years. She was glad she had never deleted the number.

Her thumb hovered over the name.

She hesitated, then pressed call.

Scott answered on the second ring, his voice rough with sleep. "Svetlana?"

"Yes," she said quickly. "I am sorry to call like this. I would not if it was not important." She swallowed. "I feel like something bad has happened. I can't find Ilya."

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other end. "Jesus," Scott said. "What do you need?"

“I think he went to Shane’s apartment,” she said, words tumbling out now. “I don’t have the address. I don’t know who else to call.”

Scott did not hesitate. “Hold on,” he said. She could hear movement, the scrape of a chair, the low murmur of another voice in the background. “I don’t have it, but I know who does. Don’t hang up.”

There was a pause, then Scott came back on the line. “I’m going to give you Hayden Pike’s number. He’s Shane’s best friend. If anyone knows, it’s him.”

“Thank you,” Svetlana said, relief and fear crashing together. “Thank you so much.”

She hung up and stared at the new number for half a second before calling.

He answered on the third ring, sounding exhausted and distracted, a child crying faintly in the background.

“Svetlana,” he said, surprised. “Are you alright?”

“No,” she said, and her voice broke. She did not try to stop it. “Hayden, I cannot find him. I think he is at Shane’s place. I need the address.”

There was a long pause.

In the background, a child said, Daddy, over and over, the word fraying with panic.

“Oh god,” Hayden said quietly. “I was afraid of that.”

“Please,” Svetlana said. “I would not ask if it was not serious.”

Hayden exhaled shakily.

“I can come with you,” he said automatically. “I just... I have all four kids here. They have not let me out of their sight since yesterday. I do not think I can put them in a car right now.”

“I understand,” she said. “I just need to get there.”

Another pause. Then she heard him move somewhere quieter.

“I will give you the code,” he said. “He never changed it. Shane was bad about that.”

Svetlana closed her eyes as he read it out.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for trusting me.”

“Call me,” Hayden said. “If you find him. Call me no matter what.”

“I will.”

The building was quiet. Too quiet for a place where someone lived.

Svetlana let herself in with the code, her heart hammering so hard it hurt. She called his name as soon as the door opened.

“Ilya.”

No answer.

The flat smelled faintly of soap and coffee and something else she could not place. Familiar, domestic. There were shoes by the door that were not Shane’s. Bigger. Black. She recognised them instantly.

She moved down the hallway slowly, as if moving too fast would make something worse.

The bedroom door was closed.

Her hand shook as she pushed it open.

Ilya was there.

He was lying on the bed, fully dressed, hands folded on his chest like someone had arranged them that way. His face was calm. Too calm. His eyes were closed.

She knew before she touched him.

“No,” she whispered, and then she was crying so hard she had to brace herself against the doorframe to stay upright.

She crossed the room anyway. She knelt beside the bed and touched his arm. Cold.

She pressed her fingers to his neck, even though there was no point.

There was no pulse.

On the bedside table, there was a single sheet of paper. Folded neatly. Weighted with his phone.

Svetlana picked it up with hands that barely worked.

The note was short. Practical. Brutally direct.

There were no explanations.

He wrote that he was sorry.

He wrote apologies first. To Yuna and David Hollander. To the Montreal team. To his own team. To her.

He wrote instructions next.

A large portion of his money was to be placed in trust for his niece. Enough for university. Enough to set her up for life. The funds were to be inaccessible until she turned eighteen,

protected from everyone, including her father.

His Moscow apartment was to go to his brother, legally and cleanly, with no conditions.

All of his clothes were to go to Svetlana. He added a line telling her to do whatever she wanted with them, sell them, burn them, keep them, it did not matter.

He also gave her his collection of sports cars.

Every safe for work photograph he had of himself and Shane was to be given to Shane's parents. He specified digital and physical copies. He wanted them to have proof of happiness, even if it had been hidden.

Everything else was to be divided among charities of the Hollanders' choosing.

At the bottom, there was one final line.

I cannot do this without him.

Svetlana pressed the paper to her chest and made a sound that did not feel human.

She sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him, really looked, memorising the shape of his face, the stubborn set of his jaw even in death.

He was only 26 years old and he had loved someone so much it had undone him.

She reached for his hand and held it, even though it was cold, even though it was too late, because leaving him alone felt unbearable.

After a moment, she picked up his phone with shaking fingers and called Hayden.

"I found him," she said when he answered, her voice wrecked. "He is gone."

There was silence on the other end, then a dull sound that told her Hayden had slid down to the floor wherever he was.

She stayed until the authorities came. She handed over the note and answered questions without fully hearing them. She held herself together until the last officer left the building, taking his body with them. Only then did she weep.

A week later, over twenty thousand mourners packed the Bell Centre for a joint memorial. The ice had been covered and a sea of flowers and candles lay around two large portraits at centre ice, one of Shane in his Voyagers uniform, and one of Ilya in his Boston gear. Both teams stood together in solidarity, united in grief. The Hollander and Rozanov families sat in the front row, their faces drawn with sorrow yet grateful for the support surrounding them.

Hayden Pike stepped up to the podium set at centre ice. He gazed at his best friend's smiling portrait and then at Ilya's, swallowing hard against the lump in his throat. Cards with a

prepared speech trembled in his hands, but after a moment, he set them aside. Instead, he spoke from his heart, his voice echoing through the somber hush:

"Shane Hollander was the bravest, kindest soul I've ever known," Hayden began, his voice unsteady. "He was my captain, my best friend... more like a brother, really. Shane loved this game, and he loved all of us with everything he had." His eyes shifted to Ilya's picture, and a sad smile touched his lips. "And Ilya Rozanov—he was supposed to be our fiercest rival, but you all saw what I did. He loved just as hard."

Hayden paused, chest heaving as he fought back tears. "Some of us only learned in those final moments just how much Shane and Ilya meant to each other," he continued, voice cracking. "But looking back, it doesn't surprise me at all. To have that kind of bond, seven years in secret, yet so strong that it shone through even in tragedy, that's something rare and beautiful." A soft murmur rippled through the crowd as many wiped their eyes.

"Ilya once told me on the ice that nothing scared him," Hayden said, managing a faint, trembling chuckle. "I believed it. I think the only thing he was ever truly afraid of was losing Shane." His composure broke then; a tear rolled down his face unchecked. "Now they're... they're both gone, and we're left wondering how to go on without them." Hayden's voice faltered. Yuna stood and gently took his hand, lending him strength. Hayden squeezed her fingers gratefully and found his voice once more. "But we will go on. We'll do it by remembering them. By telling their stories, of Shane's goofy dance moves in the locker room that made everyone laugh, of Ilya secretly donating half his salary to children's charities without any fanfare." He smiled through his tears at the stunned expressions among teammates; clearly, even the Bears hadn't known that.

Hayden cleared his throat. "We'll honour them by playing the sport they loved with the same passion they did. Montreal and Boston, united." He looked up at the rafters, where the numbers 24 and 81—Shane's and Ilya's—were illuminated side by side in tribute. "Shane and Ilya showed us that some things are bigger than hockey. Love. Friendship. Loyalty. Those aren't just words; they lived them every day, even when they had to live in secrecy. They made each other better, and they made us better too."

His voice dropped to a gentle hush. "Rest easy, you two. You're together now, and I hope you know you'll always be loved." Unable to continue, Hayden stepped back from the microphone as a wave of quiet sobs and applause swept through the arena. Yuna reached up to hug him tightly, and one by one, players from both teams embraced each other in the centre of the ice.

Above it all, the two portraits smiled down, bathed in the glow of thousands of candles.

End Notes

I cried so much writing this that I could hardly see. I couldn't get the idea out of my head but I'm not sure it translated onto paper that well cause I've never had a close loved one die (especially not in front of me, and I hope to never experience that). I won't ask for help from those who've been in this position in real life, but if you feel comfortable enough let me know if there's anything you'd like me to add to my portrayal. I'm still tearing up as I write this end note.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!