

Night Shift

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Night Shift

by [The_green_fairy](#)

Summary

Shane Hollander is just trying to survive NYU biochemistry, hockey practice, and the graveyard shift at 7-Eleven. He's too exhausted to notice that his new regular customer is Russian mafia, or that Ilya's interest in him goes beyond terrible coffee and cookies.

When Ilya hands him a \$10,000 designer scarf and matching gloves, Shane doesn't panic. He sells them for next month's rent. Any normal person would be terrified. Instead, Shane uses the leftover money to buy a Hello Kitty watch, pastel pink, childish, utterly incongruous with the danger circling him. He wears it to his next night shift without irony or apology.

Ilya notices immediately. He is fascinated.

(Currently under major editing.)

Chapter 1: 10k for Gloves and a Scarf?!

Chapter Notes

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

The fluorescent lights of the 7-Eleven hummed their eternal, migraine-inducing song at 2:47 AM. Shane Hollander stood behind the counter, his eyelids heavy as concrete blocks, trying to focus on the organic chemistry notes spread across the scratched surface. The words blurred together. Electron configurations. Orbital hybridization as well as his Coach's voice screaming about his weak backcheck during practice four hours ago.

He should be sleeping. He had an 10 AM lecture and another practice at noon.

The electronic chime announced a customer, and Shane didn't bother looking up immediately. Probably another drunk college kid wanting Doritos and a Gatorade, or a taxi driver grabbing coffee. He finished highlighting a sentence about molecular geometry before lifting his head.

Three men walked in.

The two in front moved with the kind of purposeful awareness Shane associated with bouncers or cops. They were scanning the store, hands loose at their sides, expensive watches catching the harsh light. They wore dark suits despite the hour, despite the early September heat that still clung to the New York streets.

Behind them came a third man.

He was tall, maybe six-two, with sharp Slavic features and pale eyes that seemed to catalog everything in a single sweep. His suit probably cost more than Shane's tuition for the semester; charcoal gray, perfectly tailored, with a black shirt underneath and no tie. Dark hair swept back from his forehead. He moved like someone who'd never questioned whether a space belonged to him.

The two men in front fanned out, one heading toward the back of the store, the other taking up position near the door.

Shane blinked at them, then at the third man who approached the counter with measured steps.

"Hey," Shane said, his voice rough with exhaustion. "We don't allow loitering. If your friends aren't buying anything, they need to wait outside."

The man stopped. His pale eyes fixed on Shane with an intensity that should have meant something.

Shane just wanted to finish his chapter on VSEPR theory.

"My associates will purchase something," the man said. His accent was thick, Russian, each word precisely formed. "As will I."

"Cool." Shane straightened up, wincing as his lower back protested. He'd taken a hard check into the boards during practice, and his entire left side felt like one giant bruise. "What can I get you?"

The man tilted his head slightly, studying Shane with an expression that might have been curiosity. "You are not concerned?"

"About what? Look, man, I've got an exam tomorrow and I just spent three hours getting my ass handed to me at practice. I'm too tired to be concerned about anything except whether I can stay awake long enough to understand Lewis structures." Shane rubbed his eyes. "Do you want something or not?"

A pause. The man's lips twitched, a brief, involuntary response.

"Coffee," he said. "Black."

"Machine's over there." Shane gestured vaguely to the left without looking. "Cups are next to it. Small, medium, or large. There's a price list on the wall."

"You will not serve me?"

Shane finally looked at him properly, really looked. The guy was probably in his late-twenties, handsome in that severe, angular way. Definitely foreign money. Definitely someone used to people jumping when he spoke.

"Dude, this is a 7-Eleven, not a Starbucks. Self-serve." Shane yawned, not bothering to cover his mouth. "I'm not a barista. I'm a cashier who's questioning all his life choices."

The man stared at him. In the background, one of his associates had frozen in the act of reaching for a bag of chips, watching the interaction with visible tension.

Then the man laughed.

It was a short, sharp sound.

"I see," he said, and moved toward the coffee station without hesitation.

Shane returned to his notes. Molecular geometry. Tetrahedral. Trigonal planar. He was definitely going to fail this exam.

The man returned with a large coffee, black as promised. He set it on the counter along with a pack of Oreo cookies longer than Shane's forearm.

Shane rang it up. "\$8.47."

The man pulled out a wallet, black leather, thick with cash, and extracted a hundred-dollar bill.

"You've got to be kidding me," Shane muttered.

"There is a problem?"

"Yeah, there's a problem. It's almost 3 AM and you're paying for nine bucks worth of stuff with a hundred. Do you know how much that's going to clean out my register?" Shane looked up at him, too tired for customer service politeness. "You really don't have anything smaller?"

The man's expression shifted. "No."

"Of course not." Shane sighed and opened the register, counting out bills. "Rich people, I swear."

"You think I am rich?"

"Dude, your suit costs more than my rent. Which, granted, isn't saying much because my place is terrible, but still." Shane handed over the change. "There. Ninety-one dollars and fifty-three cents. Try not to spend it all in one place."

The man took the money slowly, his fingers brushing Shane's palm. His hands were warm, calloused in unexpected places. His eyes went to Shane's books he had hidden behind the counter studying them.

"You are a student," he said. It wasn't a question.

"Unfortunately." Shane gestured at his textbook. "NYU. Junior year. Biochemistry major because apparently I hate myself."

"And you play hockey."

Shane's attention sharpened slightly. "How'd you know that?"

The man gestured at Shane's face. "You have a bruise forming on your cheekbone. Your knuckles are taped. You move like an athlete, favoring your left side currently. And there is a hockey stick behind the counter."

Shane glanced back at his stick propped against the wall, his backup, the one he kept at work in case he had time to hit the rink before or after shifts.

"Observant," Shane admitted. "Yeah, I play. NYU has a team. Not that I've been playing well lately. Coach says my head's not in the game." He rubbed his neck. "Which is probably true. Hard to focus on hockey when you're running on four hours of sleep and caffeine."

"Why do you work here if you are so tired?"

"Because tuition doesn't pay itself, and my scholarship only covers so much." Shane shrugged. "Late shift pays an extra two bucks an hour, and nobody bothers me, so I can study. Usually."

The man picked up his coffee, regarding Shane over the rim. "What position do you play?"

"Center. Sometimes wing if we need it." Shane leaned against the counter. "You follow hockey?"

"I am Russian. Of course I follow hockey."

"Fair point. KHL or NHL?"

"Both. I prefer KHL. More aggressive play." The man sipped his coffee. "NHL has become too soft. Too many rules."

Shane snorted. "Spoken like someone who appreciates a good fight. Let me guess, you grew up watching Soviet hockey? The Big Red Machine era?"

"My father did. He made certain I understood what real hockey looked like." He paused. "Physical. Unforgiving. No weakness permitted."

"Sounds like my coach," Shane said. "He played semi-pro in Canada back in the day. Keeps telling me I'm too nice on the ice. Apparently I need to be more of an asshole."

"Perhaps he is correct."

"Yeah, well, I save my asshole energy for customer service." Shane grinned, gesturing around the empty store. "As you can see, it's really paying off."

The man's lips twitched. "You are not concerned about offending customers?"

"At 3 AM? The only people who come in here are insomniacs, shift workers, and drunk people. Nobody's writing Yelp reviews." Shane stretched, his spine popping. "Besides, I'm too tired to pretend to be perky. You want perky, come back during day shift. Those people are terrifying with their enthusiasm."

"I think not." The man set his coffee down, still watching Shane. "I prefer this shift."

One of the associates approached, the one who'd been near the door, he was tanner and stocky with a scar on his left eyebrow that made him look menacing. He leaned in and murmured something in Russian, too quick and low for Shane to catch more than a few words. The man's expression hardened, and he responded in the same language, his tone sharp with authority.

The associate nodded and stepped back.

"Problem?" Shane asked.

"Nothing that concerns you." The man picked up his coffee and cigarettes. "You should go home. Sleep. You will perform poorly on your examination otherwise."

"Can't. Shift doesn't end until six." Shane glanced at the clock. "Three more hours of this fluorescent hell." He immediately regretted giving up that info up as soon as it left his lips.

"You could close early."

"And get fired? No thanks. I need this job." Shane returned to his textbook, already dismissing the conversation. "Besides, I've got studying to do. Might as well get paid for it."

The man stood there for a moment longer. When Shane finally looked up, he was still watching.

"What?"

"You did not ask my name."

Shane blinked. "Was I supposed to? You didn't ask mine either."

"Most people..." The man paused. "Most people wish to know who I am."

"Okay. Who are you?"

The man smiled, a real smile this time, sharp and dangerous and somehow pleased. "Ilya."

"Shane." He offered a lazy two-fingered salute. "Nice to meet you, I guess. Enjoy your burnt coffee."

"Shane," Ilya repeated, as if testing the name. "Does not match your face."

"Oh, I'm half japanese on my mom's side. Dad's Canadian, which is where I get the hockey obsession and the inexplicable love of poutine." Shane yawned again. "The Japanese half is where I get the dark hair and the ability to look like I'm judging you even when I'm not."

"And are you? Judging me?"

Shane considered this. "I'm judging your choice to pay with a hundred-dollar bill. That was a dick move."

Ilya laughed again, that same surprised sound. "I suppose it was."

He turned to leave, his associates falling into step behind him. At the door, he paused and looked back.

"I will be back," he said.

"Cool. Bring smaller bills next time."

The door chimed as they left. Through the window, Shane watched them climb into a black Mercedes with tinted windows, the kind of car that screamed money and danger in equal measure. It pulled away from the curb smoothly, disappearing into the sparse late-night traffic.

Shane returned to his textbook.

Molecular geometry. Electron pairs. The exam was in seven hours.

He didn't think about the Russian man with the expensive suit and the pale, calculating eyes. Didn't wonder why someone like that would come to a shitty 7-Eleven at 3 AM, or why his associates had moved like trained security.

Shane Hollander, exhausted biochemistry major and mediocre hockey player, had more important things to worry about.

Like whether he could memorize the difference between molecular orbital theory and valence bond theory before his brain completely shut down.

He highlighted another sentence and reached for his energy drink.

Just three more hours.

Outside, in the back of the Mercedes, Ilya Rozanov sipped his coffee and stared at the receipt in his hand.

"Boss?" Dmitri, his head of security, glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Everything okay?"

Ilya looked at the name tag printed on the receipt. SHANE H.

Shane. Half-Japanese, half-Canadian. Biochemistry student. Hockey player. Working the graveyard shift at a convenience store, too exhausted to recognize danger when it walked through his door.

Too exhausted or too indifferent to treat Ilya with the fear that usually preceded him like a shadow.

You're worse than the guys who pay for a candy bar with a fifty.

Ilya smiled into his coffee.

"Yes," he said quietly. "Everything is fine."

He would return. Soon.

There was something refreshing about a man who looked at Ilya Rozanov, vor v zakone, authority in the Bratva, a man whose name made grown men nervous. And yet he'd seen only an annoying customer with poor bill denomination choices.

Something refreshing, and something dangerous.

Ilya had always been drawn to dangerous things.

Tuesday morning, 9 AM: Shane's alarm went off in his shoebox apartment in Washington Heights. He'd found the place on Craigslist, a room barely big enough for a twin bed and a desk, sharing a bathroom with three other guys, but it was cheap and the landlord didn't ask

too many questions. He rolled out of bed, every muscle protesting. His hamstrings were still tight from yesterday's conditioning.

The apartment was freezing. The radiator clanked and hissed but produced more noise than heat. Shane pulled on two pairs of socks, sweatpants under his jeans, and an old coat that wasn't doing the job, with a hole in it.

Morning skate was at ten. He grabbed a protein bar (the cheap kind that tasted like cardboard and protein powder) and headed out into oppressive morning light

The subway was packed even at this hour. Shane stood pressed between a woman in scrubs and a guy in a suit, trying to review his biochem notes on his phone. Enzyme kinetics. Michaelis-Menten equation. The words blurred together.

The thing about being broke in New York City was that it wasn't dramatic. It wasn't some movie montage with inspiring music. It was just... grinding. Day after day, a constant calculation of what Shane could and couldn't afford, what he could put off, what absolutely had to be dealt with now.

Practice was brutal. Coach was pushing them hard, and Shane's body was running on fumes. He'd pulled his groin during drills and spent the last twenty minutes with ice strapped to his thigh, trying not to think about how he couldn't afford to miss shifts at the store.

After practice: shower in the locker room (free hot water, he stayed under the spray as long as he could justify), then straight to his 2 PM organic chemistry lecture. He was supposed to have bought the textbook (\$340, used) but he'd been putting it off for three weeks now. He shared with the guy next to him, a finance major named Chris who looked at Shane like he was some kind of charity case.

"Dude, just rent it," Chris said. "It's like a hundred bucks."

Shane didn't bother explaining that he didn't have a hundred bucks. That his bank account currently had \$47 in it and he needed at least \$30 for groceries to last until his next paycheck.

Lunch was a sleeve of saltines he'd taken from the store and a cup of coffee from the dining hall (he'd learned to time it so he could slip in behind someone with a meal plan). His stomach growled through his entire biochem lab.

Then: two hours in the library trying to finish a problem set, his brain moving like sludge. The heating was better here than his apartment, so he stayed as long as possible, hunched over his laptop.

His phone buzzed. A text from his mom: How are classes going? Dad wants to know if you need anything.

Shane stared at the message. His parents had helped as much as they could. They'd covered his first semester, stretched themselves thin to do it. But his dad's restaurant had been struggling, and Shane knew they were barely keeping their heads above water themselves. He'd told them he had it handled. That the hockey scholarship and his job were enough.

He was lying.

All good, he texted back. Busy but good. Tell Dad I'm fine.

Another buzz. His landlord: Rent is due Friday. No extensions this month.

Shane closed his eyes. Rent was \$800. He had \$47. His paycheck from the store would be \$340 after taxes. He was short, and he had no idea where he was going to find the difference.

He opened his banking app and stared at his credit card balance: \$2,100. The limit was \$2,500. He'd been telling himself he wouldn't use it, that he'd keep it for emergencies, but apparently his life was just one long emergency now.

He put \$400 on the card for rent. The interest rate was 23%. He tried not to think about it.

By the time he got to his shift at the 7-Eleven, it was 10 PM and he'd been awake for sixteen hours. His shoulder still ached. He had a problem set due tomorrow that he hadn't started. And he was so hungry his hands were shaking.

He carefully opened up his pre-portioned chicken breast and rice heating it up in the microwave with a sigh.

The door chimed.

Shane looked up, and there was Ilya.

He'd been coming in regularly over the past few weeks, always late at night, always with at least one of his intimidating friends, always buying something small. Coffee. Cigarettes. Once, a bag of gummy bears, which had been surreal. He always paid with large bills and never seemed bothered when Shane gave him shit about it.

"Hey," Shane said around a mouthful of noodles. "Let me guess. Coffee?"

"Da." Ilya approached the counter, his eyes scanning Shane with that same unsettling intensity. "You look tired."

"I am tired. I'm always tired." Shane as the microwave dinged he removed his bland meal carrying it over to behind the counter. "It's kind of my default state at this point."

"You are eating rice for dinner?"

"I'm eating rice for dinner, lunch, and sometimes breakfast. It's called being a college student." Shane gestured at the cup.

"So what can I get you? And please tell me you brought normal bills this time."

"I have a twenty."

"Oh thank god. You're learning."

Ilya went to get his coffee, and Shane tried to focus on his textbook. Protein folding. Chaperones. His eyes kept drifting to the strange man perusing the sweets isle.

When Ilya returned, he set the coffee and powdered donuts down on the counter and didn't move, watching Shane.

Shane looked up. "What?"

"You are cold."

"What? No I'm not."

"You are wearing two sweatshirts and you are still shivering."

Shane glanced down at himself. He was wearing his coat over a hoodie over a long-sleeve shirt, and yeah, okay, he was shivering a little. The store's heating was shit and his coat was shit and everything was shit.

"It's fine," Shane said. "I'm fine."

"It is October."

"Yeah, I'm aware. I have a calendar." Shane rang up the coffee. "Three-fifty."

Ilya handed him the twenty but didn't take his change. Instead, he started unwinding the scarf from around his neck.

Shane blinked. "What are you doing?"

"You need this more than I do." Ilya set the scarf on the counter, a long, charcoal gray thing that looked incredibly soft. Then he pulled off his gloves, black leather, and set those down too.

"Dude, no. I'm not taking your stuff."

"You are freezing."

"I'm fine."

"Kid," Ilya's voice was firm, almost commanding. "Take them."

Shane stared at the scarf and gloves. They looked expensive, and everything Ilya wore looked expensive, but they also looked warm. And Shane was so fucking cold, all the time, and his hands were always numb by the end of his shift.

"Kid?! I'm in my twenties. I can't just take your scarf," Shane said, but his resolve was weakening.

"You can. You will." Ilya pushed them across the counter. "Consider it payment for your excellent customer service."

"My customer service is terrible. I told you the coffee tastes like ass."

"Exactly. Honesty is rare." Ilya picked up his coffee. "Wear them. I will be offended if you do not."

He left before Shane could argue further, the door chiming behind him.

Shane looked down at the scarf and gloves. He picked up the scarf. It was cashmere, incredibly soft, and still warm from Ilya's body heat. He wrapped it around his neck and immediately felt better.

The gloves fit perfectly.

He told himself he'd give them back next time Ilya came in. But for now, just for tonight, he'd let himself be warm.

The next two weeks were more of the same. Classes, practice, work, repeat. Shane wore the scarf and gloves everywhere. They were the warmest things he owned. He stopped shivering on the subway. His hands stopped going numb.

He didn't think much about them until he was in the locker room after practice and Tyler, one of his teammates, grabbed his wrist.

"Dude. Are those Merola?"

Shane looked down at the gloves. "I don't know. Maybe?"

"Let me see." Tyler turned Shane's hand over, examining the gloves. "Holy shit. These are Merola. Like, actual Merola. Where did you get these?"

"A friend gave them to me. Why?"

"A friend gave you—" Tyler started to speak, then laughed. "Shane, these gloves are like three grand. Minimum."

Shane's brain stuttered. "What?"

"Yeah, man. Merola. They're handmade in Italy. Custom-fitted. You have to special order them." Tyler was still holding Shane's wrist, looking at the gloves like they were holy relics. "And that scarf; is that Loro Piana??"

Shane touched the scarf around his neck. "I don't know what that is."

"Let me see the tag."

Shane unwound the scarf and found the small tag inside. Loro Piana. Tyler's eyes went wide.

"Okay, that's like seven grand. Easy. Maybe more depending on the weight." Tyler looked at Shane like he'd grown a second head. "Who the fuck gave you ten thousand dollars worth of accessories?"

Shane's mouth was dry. "You're joking."

"I'm not joking. My dad wears this shit. I know what it costs." Tyler handed the scarf back. "Seriously, who gave these to you?"

"Just... a guy. A customer at work." Shane's mind was reeling. Ten thousand dollars. He was wearing ten thousand dollars. He'd been wearing ten thousand dollars for two weeks, on the subway, to practice, to his shifts at the store.

He'd almost spilled soy sauce on seven thousand dollars worth of scarf last night.

"A customer gave you ten grand in clothes?" Tyler raised an eyebrow. "Is he like... your sugar daddy or something?"

"What? No. He's just." Shane stopped. He didn't actually know what Ilya was. A regular customer. A guy who came in late at night and bought coffee and made weird intense eye contact. "He's just a guy."

"A guy who gives out Loro Piana scarves. Sure." Tyler clapped him on the shoulder. "Well, don't lose them. That's like half a semester of tuition right there."

Shane sat on the bench after Tyler left, staring at the gloves in his hands.

His rent was due again in two weeks. He had three hundred dollars in his account. He'd been trying to figure out how to ask his manager for more shifts, but the store was cutting hours. He'd been living on chicken and rice and protein bars and the occasional free pizza at team events. His credit card balance was up to \$2,400.

He looked at the scarf.

Seven thousand dollars.

He pulled out his phone and googled "sell Loro Piana scarf NYC."

The consignment shop in SoHo was the kind of place Shane would never normally enter. Everything in the window cost more than his monthly rent. But they specialized in luxury goods, and according to their website, they bought items outright.

The woman behind the counter looked at Shane like he was tracking mud on her pristine floors. He was wearing his practice gear and his shitty coat, and he definitely didn't belong here.

"Can I help you?" she asked, in a tone that suggested she'd rather not.

"I want to sell these." Shane set the scarf and gloves on the counter.

Her expression changed immediately. She picked up the scarf, examining it carefully, checking the tags. Then the gloves.

"Where did you get these?"

"They were a gift."

"Do you have proof of purchase?"

"No. Like I said, they were a gift."

She studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "Wait here."

She disappeared into the back. Shane stood there, trying not to touch anything, very aware that he probably smelled like hockey equipment.

She returned with an older man in an expensive suit. He examined the scarf and gloves with the same careful attention, then looked at Shane.

"These are authentic," he said. "Excellent condition. We can offer you eight thousand."

Shane's heart jumped. "Eight thousand dollars?"

"Yes. Cash or Check?"

"Check." The word came out before Shane could think about it. "Check is good."

They had him sign some paperwork. He had to show his ID. And then the man went into the back and returned with a filled out check.

Shane walked out of the store in a daze, the check tucked into his inner coat pocket.

Eight thousand dollars.

He could pay rent for the next ten months. He could buy his textbooks. He could eat actual food. He could pay down his credit card. He could breathe.

His first stop was the bank to deposit the check. The clerk behind the counter was cordeil but her eyes were accusatory. He left quickly feeling lighter than he had in a long time.

He stopped at a Target on the way home and bought a new scarf and gloves for forty bucks. They were polyester and not nearly as soft, but they were warm enough.

That night, he paid his rent, bought groceries, ordered his textbooks, and paid off his entire credit card balance. He put the rest in his savings account and stared at the number.

\$5,847.

He'd never had that much money in his life.

He felt like he could breathe for the first time in months.

Ilya came in four nights later.

Shane was restocking the cooler when the door chimed. He glanced up and saw Ilya, flanked as always by his two shadows, Mr. Face Scar and Mr. Eyebrow scar. Ilya's eyes went

immediately to Shane's neck.

To the cheap Target scarf.

Shane straightened, wiping his hands on his jeans. "Hey. Coffee?"

Ilya approached the counter slowly. His face didn't change, but his eyes went cold. "Where is the scarf I gave you?"

"Oh." Shane touched the polyester around his neck. "I sold it."

Silence.

Ilya stared at him. Behind him, The left eyebrow scar guy made a choking sound.

"You sold it," Ilya repeated, his voice very quiet.

"Yeah. And the gloves." Shane shrugged. "They were worth like ten grand. I looked it up. That's insane. I can't just walk around wearing ten thousand dollars."

"I gave them to you."

"I know, and that was really nice, but dude, ten thousand dollars. Do you know what I can do with ten thousand dollars?" Shane started counting on his fingers. "I can pay rent for almost a year. I can buy all my textbooks. I can actually eat real food. I can pay off my credit card. It's literally life-changing money."

Ilya's expression was doing something complicated. He looked shocked, yes, but also... something else. Something Shane couldn't identify.

"You sold them," Ilya said again, like he was testing the words.

"Well, I got eight thousand for them. The consignment place takes a cut. But still. Eight thousand dollars." Shane gestured at his new scarf. "And I bought a new scarf for twenty bucks. It's not as nice, but it's warm. So really, I came out ahead."

One of the big guys muttered something in Russian. It sounded like a prayer.

Ilya was still staring at Shane. Then, slowly, his mouth curved into a smile. Not the small, controlled almost-smiles Shane had seen before. An actual smile, showing teeth, reaching his eyes.

"You sold them," he said, and he sounded... pleased? Proud?

Shane frowned. "Why do you keep saying it like that? Are you mad?"

"No." Ilya's smile widened. "No, Shane. I am not mad."

"Okay, good. Because I really needed the money, and it seemed stupid to just wear them when I could—"

"Most people," Ilya interrupted, "would not dare."

"Dare to what? Sell a scarf?"

"To sell a gift from me." Ilya leaned against the counter, still smiling that strange, sharp smile. "To treat something I gave them as a commodity. To choose practicality over sentimentality."

Shane blinked. "It's a scarf. It's not like you gave me your grandmother's wedding ring or something."

"No," Ilya agreed. "It is not."

There was a long pause. Shane had the distinct feeling he was missing something, some subtext he was too tired to parse.

"So... coffee?" Shane tried.

"Yes. Coffee." Ilya straightened.

He went to get his coffee, and Shane watched him go, confused but relieved he wasn't angry.

Behind the counter, Shane's phone buzzed. His bank app, showing his balance: \$4,047.

He smiled.

Maybe he'd actually survive this semester after all.

Chapter End Notes

If you got recommended this story via Tik Tok you gotta let me know who recommended it lol I need to thank them

Chapter 2: Hello Kitty

The bell chimed at 2:47 AM, and Shane didn't even need to look up from his book to know who it was. The pattern had been established over the past three weeks—same time, give or take fifteen minutes, every few nights.

"Coffee's fresh," Shane called out, which was a generous description of the sludge that had been sitting in the pot since midnight. "Well. Fresh-ish."

Ilya moved through the fluorescent-lit aisles with the kind of fluid grace that seemed out of place in a convenience store that smelled faintly of old hot dogs and floor cleaner. He was wearing what Shane had come to recognize as his usual: expensive-looking dark clothes that Shane couldn't have named a single brand if his life depended on it.

"Your coffee is terrible," Ilya said, as he always did, already reaching for the largest cup. "Yeah, well, you keep drinking it," Shane replied, as he always did, watching as Ilya filled the cup to the brim with the burnt-smelling brew. "So what does that say about you?"

"That I am a man of refined tastes," Ilya said dryly, moving to the cookie aisle. Shane snorted. This was the part that never failed to amuse him—watching this clearly dangerous, clearly wealthy man deliberate over the cookie selection like it was a wine list. Tonight, Ilya selected two packages of double-stuffed Oreos, a pack of those soft chocolate chip cookies that came in the red package, and—after a moment's consideration—a box of Nilla Wafers.

"You know they make actual good cookies, right?" Shane said as Ilya approached the counter. "Like, at bakeries and shit."

"These are good cookies," Ilya said, setting his haul down with the solemnity of a man presenting fine caviar. "You are a philistine."

"I'm a philistine? You're the one buying gas station cookies at three in the morning." "Convenience store," Ilya corrected. "Gas station cookies are inferior."

"Oh, excuse me. Convenience store cookies. Totally different."

Ilya's mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but close. Shane had learned to recognize these micro-expressions over the past few weeks. The guy was hard to read, all sharp edges and controlled movements, but every now and then something would crack through. Usually when Shane said something particularly stupid.

Shane rang up the items, the total coming to \$9.47, his usual give or take a dollar depending on Ilya's cookie selections. Ilya handed over a twenty without comment, and Shane made change, which Ilya never counted.

"Do you know what time it is?" Ilya asked suddenly, as Shane was handing back the bills.

Shane glanced at his phone on the counter. The screen stayed black. Dead. Had been dead since his shift started at eleven. He shrugged. "No."

"You don't know what time it is."

"Phone's dead. Clock's broken." Shane gestured at the wall clock, which had been stuck at 4:17 for the past six months. Mr. Park kept saying he'd fix it. "So, no. I don't know what time it is. Why, you got somewhere to be?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment, studying Shane with those unsettling pale eyes. Then, with deliberate movements, he reached for his wrist and began unfastening his watch.

"Whoa, hey—" Shane started, recognizing the beginning of what was apparently becoming a pattern.

"You need to know what time it is," Ilya said, as if this were perfectly logical reasoning for giving away what was clearly an expensive watch. The metal caught the fluorescent light as he held it out. "Take it."

"Dude, I'm not taking your watch."

"You took the scarf."

"The scarf was different—"

"How?"

"It was—" Shane gestured vaguely. "It was cold. That made sense. This is just—you need your watch."

"I have others." Ilya's tone suggested he had many others. He set the watch on the counter between them, sliding it forward. "Take it."

Shane stared at the watch. It was hefty-looking, metal, with a face that had a geometric pattern he couldn't quite make out in the shitty lighting. Nice, definitely. Probably cost a few hundred bucks. "This is weird. You know this is weird, right?"

"You think many things are weird."

"Because they are! Normal people don't just give away their watches to convenience store clerks!"

"You are not just a convenience store clerk," Ilya said, and something in his tone made Shane's stomach do a weird flip. Before Shane could figure out what the hell that meant, Ilya continued, "You are a convenience store clerk who does not know what time it is. This is unacceptable."

"I've been doing fine not knowing what time it is."

"Take it, the watch, I have others." Ilya's voice had dropped into that tone that probably made grown men piss themselves in whatever context Ilya usually used it. On Shane, it just made him roll his eyes.

"You're so fucking weird," Shane muttered, but he picked up the watch. It was heavier than he expected, solid in a way that made him think maybe it cost more than a few hundred bucks. The band was metal, linked in an intricate pattern, and the face had this geometric design that was actually pretty cool looking. "Fine. But if you come back next time asking for it back, I'm going to say I told you so."

"I will not ask for it back."

Shane fastened the watch around his wrist. It was slightly too loose, but not enough to be annoying. "There. Happy? I can tell time now."
"What time is it?"

Shane looked at the watch. "2:53 AM."

"Good." Ilya picked up his bag of cookies and terrible coffee. "I will see you later, Shane."
"Yeah, yeah. Enjoy your diabetes."

Ilya's mouth did that almost-smile thing again as he headed for the door. Shane watched him go, then looked down at the watch on his wrist. Really nice craftsmanship, actually. The weight of it felt substantial, quality. He'd have to be careful not to scratch it. The bell chimed as the door closed, and Shane went back to his phone, plugging it into the charger behind the counter.
Weird fucking guy.

Three days later, Shane was still wearing the watch. Ilya hadn't come back yet, which was unusual—he typically showed up every two or three nights. Shane had gotten used to the weight of it on his wrist, the way it caught the light when he moved.

It was during his day off, when he'd met up with his friend Hayden for lunch at a diner, that everything changed.

"Dude," Hayden said, mid-bite of his burger. "Is that a fucking Royal Oak?"

Shane looked at his wrist. "It's a watch."

"Let me see that." Hayden grabbed Shane's wrist before he could protest, pulling it across the table to examine the watch. His eyes went wide. "Holy shit. Holy shit, Shane. Where did you get this?"

"A guy gave it to me."

"A guy gave you—" Hayden looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "Do you know what this is?"

"A watch?"

"It's an Audemars Piguet Royal Oak, you absolute idiot. Do you know what these cost?" Shane shrugged. "Like, a hundred bucks?"

Hayden laughed, slightly hysterical. "Try twenty-five thousand. Minimum. Depending on the model, could be more."

The diner suddenly felt very far away. Shane's ears were ringing. "What?"

"Twenty-five. Thousand. Dollars." Hayden was still holding his wrist, staring at the watch like it might bite him. "On your wrist. Right now. Who the fuck gave you a twenty-five-thousand-dollar watch?"

"He didn't—" Shane's brain was struggling to process. "It can't be. He just gave it to me. People don't just give away twenty-five-thousand-dollar watches."

"Apparently this guy does." Hayden released his wrist, sitting back. "Shane. Who is this guy?"

"Just—a customer. He comes in late at night. Buys coffee and cookies." Even as he said it, Shane was remembering details. The expensive clothes. The way Ilya moved. "He's just—he's weird. He's a weird guy."

"He's a weird guy who's giving you luxury items." Hayden raised his eyebrows. "You know what that sounds like, right?"

"Don't."

"I'm just saying—"

"He's not—it's not like that. He's just weird." But Shane's face felt hot, and he couldn't quite meet Hayden's eyes. "He probably doesn't even know what it's worth. He said he has others."

"If he has multiple Audemars Piguet, he definitely knows what they're worth." Hayden leaned forward. "Shane. This guy is either a sugar daddy, a criminal, or both. Possibly trying to be your sugar daddy specifically."

"He's not—we barely talk. He just buys coffee and cookies."

"And gives you thousands of dollars in gifts."

Shane looked down at the watch. Twenty-five thousand dollars. On his wrist. Just sitting there. He thought about his student loans, the number that never seemed to get smaller no matter how many payments he made. He thought about his apartment with the heater that only worked sometimes and the landlord who kept threatening to raise the rent.

Twenty-five thousand dollars.

"I need to give it back," Shane said.

"Are you insane?"

"I can't keep a twenty-five-thousand-dollar watch. That's—that's insane."

"What's insane is giving it back." Hayden shook his head. "Look, if this guy is rich enough to have multiple watches like this, he's rich enough that this doesn't mean anything to him. It's like—it's like you or me giving someone a twenty-dollar bill. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing to me."

"Exactly." Hayden pointed at him. "So keep it. Or—" He paused. "Or sell it."

"Sell it?"

"You could pay off a huge chunk of your student loans. Actually have savings for the first time in your life." Hayden was warming to the idea. "I know a guy who deals in luxury watches, from when Jacki's dad died and we sold some of his watches. He'd give you a fair price, probably twenty grand cash."

Twenty thousand dollars.

Shane's head was spinning.

He left the restaurant without finishing his coffee, the conversation with Hayden still echoing in his ears as he navigated the crowded sidewalk. The drive across town gave him time to think—or try to, anyway—and by the time he pulled up to the small shop in the nicer part of the city, his hands had stopped shaking enough to grip the watch in his jacket pocket.

The watch dealer was in a small shop in a nice part of town Shane rarely visited. The guy—an older man named Tremblay with jeweler's loupes hanging around his neck—examined the watch for a full ten minutes before naming his price.

"Twenty-two thousand," Tremblay said. "Cash. I can have it for you tomorrow." Shane's mouth was dry. "Twenty-two."

"It's in excellent condition. Barely worn. The market for these is strong." Tremblay looked at him over the watch. "This is a serious piece. You're sure you want to sell it?"

No. Yes. Shane didn't know. But he thought about the number in his bank account, the one that was usually in the double digits by the end of the month. He thought about eating ramen for the fourth night in a row because it was that or skip meals. He thought about being twenty-six years old and feeling like he was drowning. "I'm sure," Shane said.

The next day, Shane walked out of Tremblay's shop with twenty-six thousand dollars transferred to his bank account. He'd opted for a direct transfer rather than cash—carrying that much cash seemed like a good way to get mugged, and also he didn't trust himself not to lose it somehow.

He sat on the bench just staring at his phone, at the banking app that showed a number he'd never seen in his account before. Twenty-two thousand, four hundred and seventeen dollars. The four hundred and seventeen had been there before. The rest was new. Shane felt like he might throw up.

He paid off half his student loans. He paid three months of rent in advance. He bought groceries—actual groceries, not just ramen and whatever was on sale. He bought a new pair of work shoes because his current ones had a hole in the sole he'd been ignoring for two months.

And then, because he was apparently having some kind of mental breakdown, he went to Target and bought a Hello Kitty watch for \$14.99.

It was pink and plastic and had Hello Kitty's face on the dial, and it was the most ridiculous thing Shane had ever purchased. But as he fastened it around his wrist in the Target parking lot, he couldn't stop grinning.

Ilya came back four nights later.

Shane had been starting to worry he wouldn't—that somehow Ilya had found out about the watch and was pissed, or that he'd just gotten bored of his weird convenience store visits. But at 2:34 AM, the bell chimed, and there he was. "Fresh coffee," Shane called out, relief washing through his chest.

Ilya moved through his usual routine—terrible coffee, cookie aisle deliberation. Tonight he selected Chips Ahoy, Oreos, and a package of those pink and white frosted animal cookies. Shane tried not to find it endearing.

When Ilya approached the counter, Shane was ready. As Ilya set down his items, Shane held up his wrist, showing off the Hello Kitty watch in all its plastic, pink glory.

"Look," Shane said, unable to keep the grin off his face. "Now I can tell time."

Ilya stared at the watch. Then at Shane. Then back at the watch.

"That," Ilya said slowly, "is a Hello Kitty watch."

"Yeah. It's great, right? It was only fifteen bucks. And it lights up." Shane pressed the button on the side, and the watch face illuminated with a soft pink glow. "See?"

Ilya was very still. Shane had learned to recognize this particular kind of stillness—it was the one that meant Ilya was processing something and didn't quite know how to respond. It was different from his usual controlled stillness. This one had a quality of barely restrained... something.

"You sold the Audemars Piguet," Ilya said. It wasn't a question.

Shane's grin faltered. "I—yeah. I looked it up. That was—dude, that was a really expensive watch. I couldn't keep something like that."

"So you sold it and bought a Hello Kitty watch."

"Well, I did other stuff with the money too. Paid some loans, bought groceries. Adult shit." Shane shrugged. "But yeah, I needed a watch since I got use to having one, so. Hello Kitty."

Ilya continued to stare at him. Shane was starting to feel uncomfortable under that pale gaze, like Ilya was looking for something specific and Shane didn't know if he was passing or failing whatever test this was.

"You are," Ilya said finally, "the most infuriating person I have ever met."

"Yeah, I get that a lot." Shane rang up the cookies and coffee. "\$17.83."

Ilya handed over a fifty, still staring at Shane's wrist. "It lights up."

"Yeah. Pretty cool, right?"

"It is pink."

"Hello Kitty is pink. That's kind of her whole thing."

"You sold a twenty-five-thousand-dollar watch and bought a fifteen-dollar Hello Kitty watch."

"Technically it was twenty-two thousand. The guy gave me a fair price, but you know, resale

value and all that." Shane counted out the change. "And yeah. I needed a watch. This one tells time just as good as the fancy one, plus it lights up and has a cat on it. Seems like a win to me."

Ilya took his change without counting it, as always. But he didn't pick up his bag. He just stood there, looking at Shane with an expression that Shane couldn't quite read. It was somewhere between exasperation and something else, something that made Shane's stomach do that weird flip again.

"You were supposed to keep it," Ilya said quietly.

"I couldn't keep a twenty-five-thousand-dollar watch. That's insane."

"Why?"

"Because—" Shane gestured vaguely. "Because that's not a normal thing to give someone. Because I'm a convenience store clerk and you're—whatever you are. Because it was worth more than my life. Because—" He stopped, trying to find the words. "Because I needed the money more than I needed a fancy watch."

Something shifted in Ilya's expression. "You really needed the money."

"Yeah. I mean—" Shane felt his face heat. "Not like, desperately. I wasn't going to starve or anything. But student loans are a bitch, and it's just—it's nice. To not be worried about money for five seconds. So. Yeah. I sold it. Sorry if that's—I don't know, offensive or whatever."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then he picked up his bag of cookies and coffee. "The Hello Kitty watch is ridiculous."

"You're ridiculous. You keep coming here for terrible coffee."

"The coffee is not why I come here." Ilya said it casually, like it didn't make Shane's heart rate pick up, like it was just a normal thing to say.

"Then why do you come here?" Shane asked before he could stop himself.

Ilya looked at him, and Shane saw that almost-smile again, except this time it was fuller, more real. "To see what you will do next," he said. "You never disappoint."

And then he was gone, the bell chiming behind him, leaving Shane standing behind the counter with a pink plastic Hello Kitty watch on his wrist and the distinct feeling that he was missing something important.

He looked down at the watch. Hello Kitty smiled back at him, frozen in her eternal expression of cute blankness.

"I think that guy might be flirting with me," Shane told Hello Kitty. Hello Kitty had no comment.

Shane pressed the button to make the watch light up again, just because he could, and tried not to think about the way Ilya had smiled at him. Tried not to think about what it meant that Ilya kept coming back, kept giving him things, kept looking at him like Shane was a puzzle he was trying to solve.

Tried not to think about the fact that he'd been disappointed when Ilya hadn't shown up for four days.

"Definitely flirting," Shane muttered, and went back to his phone, ignoring the way his face felt hot and his heart was beating just a little too fast.

The Hello Kitty watch glowed pink on his wrist, and outside, somewhere in the night, Ilya drove away with his terrible coffee and his cookies, and something that might have been satisfaction curling in his chest.

Chapter 3: Dinner is My Treat

The bell chimed, and Shane didn't need to look up to know who it was. Tuesday, 2:47 AM. Like clockwork.

"Evening," Ilya said, his accent flattening the vowel, drawing the word out just slightly longer than it needed to go, making something ordinary sound almost formal.

Shane glanced up from the register where he'd been counting singles for the third time because his mind kept wandering. "Hey. Usual?"

"Please."

Ilya headed toward the coffee station in the back corner, and Shane turned to grab the package of butter cookies from the rack behind the counter, the expensive imported ones they kept there because teenagers liked to shoplift them.

When Ilya returned with his coffee, he was standing closer than expected, holding something out.

"You dropped your wallet," Ilya said.

Shane frowned, automatically reaching for his back pocket. His wallet was right there, exactly where it should be. "No I didn't."

"Yes," Ilya said, still holding out what was very clearly a wallet. Not Shane's beat-up canvas one with the fraying edges and the broken zipper, but a new leather wallet. Expensive-looking. The kind Shane would never buy for himself because what was the point when the cheap ones worked fine?

"That's not mine," Shane said.

Ilya's expression didn't change. He just kept holding it out, patient as always, like he had all the time in the world. "Keep it this time," he said quietly. "Use the money inside, but keep the gift. The wallet."

Shane stared at him. This again. The scarf and gloves incident had been awkward enough. Ilya wrapping a Loro Piana cashmere scarf and Merola leather gloves around Shane's neck and hands like that was normal, like customers just gave their convenience store clerks items worth thousands of dollars.

But this was different somehow. The way Ilya was looking at him, steady and certain, like this mattered. Like Shane keeping it mattered.

"Okay," Shane heard himself say.

Ilya's expression softened, just slightly. The corner of his mouth might have twitched upward. "Good."

Shane took the wallet, feeling the weight of it, the quality of the leather. He didn't open it. Didn't want to know how much money was inside, because he already knew it would be too much. Everything with Ilya was too much: too generous, too attentive, too something Shane couldn't quite name.

He set the wallet down next to the register and slid Ilya's coffee and cookies across the counter. "That'll be,"

"I know," Ilya said, paying with a fifty. "Keep the change."

Ilya picked up the coffee, took a sip, and made that small satisfied sound he always made. Like the mediocre convenience store coffee was the best thing he'd tasted all day. It was... nice. Comfortable. This weird routine they'd fallen into over the past few weeks, these late-night visits that had become the best part of Shane's shift.

Then the shouting started.

It came from outside, sudden and violent. Male voices, angry, the unmistakable sound of a scuffle, bodies hitting metal, maybe a car, the crash of something breaking.

Shane's head snapped toward the window, but he couldn't see much from this angle, just the edge of the parking lot and the glow of the streetlight.

When he looked back, Ilya had changed.

It was like watching someone flip a switch. The warmth was gone from his face, replaced by something cold and flat and dangerous. His posture had shifted too, still relaxed, but in a different way. Coiled. Ready.

"I'll deal with it," Ilya said, and his voice was different too. Harder. The accent somehow more pronounced and less friendly at the same time.

"Wait, you don't have to," Shane started, but Ilya was already moving, setting his coffee down on the counter with careful precision, leaving the cookies beside it.

The bell chimed as Ilya pushed through the door.

Shane moved to the window, pressing close to the glass. He could see them now, three men, two of them grappling with a third against a dark sedan. The one being held was younger, maybe early twenties, struggling hard. One of the others raised his fist.

Then Ilya was there, and he was yelling.

Russian. Sharp, authoritative Russian that cut through the night like a blade. Shane didn't understand a word of it, but he didn't need to. The tone said everything: the command in it, the absolute expectation of obedience.

The men froze.

Ilya kept talking, his voice lower now but no less intense. Shane watched as the two men released the younger one, stepping back with their hands partially raised. Not quite surrender, but close. Deferential. The body language of people who knew they'd fucked up.

Ilya gestured sharply, and they moved. Got in the sedan. The younger one stumbled toward a different car, and within thirty seconds, both vehicles were pulling out of the parking lot.

Shane waited for Ilya to come back inside.

He didn't.

Ilya walked to his own car, the black BMW Shane had seen him arrive in countless times, got in, and drove away. No goodbye. No explanation. Just gone.

The bell didn't chime again.

Shane stood there, staring out at the empty parking lot, at the space where Ilya's car had been. His heart was beating too fast, adrenaline flooding his system even though he'd been safely inside the whole time.

He turned back to the counter.

The coffee sat there, still steaming slightly. The package of butter cookies beside it, unopened. He had never once left without his coffee and cookies.

Shane stared at them, and something cold settled in his stomach.

The wallet felt heavy in his pocket suddenly. Too heavy. He pulled it out, opened it with shaking fingers. There had to be at least five thousand dollars inside, maybe more. All hundreds crisp and new.

Keep it this time. Use the money inside, but keep the gift.

This time. Like there would be other times. Like this was just the first of many.

Shane looked at the coffee again. It would be cold soon. The cookies would sit there until his shift ended, until he had to decide whether to throw them away or put them back on the shelf or leave it.

He didn't know what to do with them.

He didn't know what to do with any of this.

The store was too quiet now. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, the refrigerators rattled, and Shane stood behind the counter with an expensive wallet full of cash and a growing certainty that he'd been wrong about Ilya. About what these visits meant. About what kind of man showed up at a convenience store at the same time every week, always

polite, always generous, always just a little too interested in the clerk who worked the graveyard shift.

Shane's phone was in his pocket. He could call someone. Should call someone, maybe. But who? And say what? That a regular customer had broken up a fight and then left without his coffee?

That he was worried?

He was worried. His jaw clenched so hard his back teeth ached. The worry came in fragments: images of Ilya's voice flattening, the men scrambling backward, the casual way he'd stepped between Shane and violence like it was nothing. Shane's fingers kept reaching for the wallet, pulling it out, checking it was still there, like the money might disappear if he stopped paying attention. His mind wouldn't settle. It kept circling: *what does he do, what does he actually do, why would he do that for a stranger, what does he want*. He was worried about Ilya, and he didn't even know Ilya's last name. Didn't know where he lived or what he did or why men in a parking lot responded to his voice like he was someone who mattered. Someone dangerous.

Someone Shane should probably be afraid of.

But he wasn't afraid. Not of Ilya. Not exactly.

He was afraid *for* him, and that was somehow worse.

The coffee sat on the counter, going cold. The cookies sat beside it, untouched.

And Shane stood there in the fluorescent silence of the convenience store, holding a wallet he didn't want and understanding, finally, that something was very wrong.

Shane stared at the coffee cup for a long moment. It had been sitting there for almost an hour now, the liquid inside probably lukewarm at best. He could drink it, waste not, want not, and all that, but something about it felt wrong. Like drinking it would be crossing some line he couldn't uncross.

It was Ilya's coffee. Ilya had made it. Ilya had left it.

Shane picked up the cup and walked to the back, dumping it down the sink. The dark liquid swirled down the drain, and his fingers gripped the edge of the sink so hard his knuckles went white.

The cookies, though. He wrapped those up carefully in a napkin and tucked them into his backpack. He'd eat them later. Or maybe he wouldn't. Maybe he'd just keep them, like some kind of weird talisman, proof that Ilya had been here and that this whole thing had actually happened.

God, he was losing it.

The next morning, Shane stood in a real grocery store, the money in his wallet burning a hole in his pocket, but the cash inside felt like Monopoly money. Fake. Too much. Wrong.

But also... right?

Shane grabbed a cart and started walking.

He bought chicken breast. Real chicken, not the frozen nuggets that were mostly breading. He bought vegetables that weren't canned or wilted. He bought rice that came in a bag bigger than his head, the kind that would last him weeks. He bought eggs and bread and peanut butter and the good kind of coffee, the kind that didn't taste like it had been filtered through a gym sock.

At the register, he handed over cash and watched the total tick down. Sixty-three dollars. Sixty-three dollars for more food than he'd bought in the last month combined.

He still had money left over.

The cashier handed him his change, and Shane stood there for a second, staring at the bills in his hand. This was insane.

He gathered up his groceries and started the short trek home.

The walk back to his apartment building took fifteen minutes, the plastic bags cutting into his palms with their unfamiliar weight. He climbed the three flights of stairs to his studio, unlocking the door to reveal the shoebox he called home, barely three hundred square feet, with a kitchenette crammed into one corner and his hockey gear perpetually drying on every available surface. But it was his, and right now, with actual groceries in his hands, it felt like enough.

Shane carefully put away his groceries, marveling. Fresh produce in the tiny mini-fridge. Actual protein in the freezer. Real coffee in the cabinet. It felt like a miracle.

His phone buzzed.

HAYDEN: yo. beer tonight?

SHANE: im down. usual spot?

HAYDEN: 8. i'm starving. you eating?

SHANE: yeah. i'll buy.

HAYDEN: who are you and what have you done with shane

SHANE: 🙌

By 8 PM, they were settled into their favorite dive bar, Shane feeling lighter than he'd felt in months.

"Dude, I'm not letting you pay for this," Hayden said, reaching for his wallet.

Shane batted his hand away. "Shut up. I'm buying."

"Since when do you have buying-dinner money?"

"Since now. Drink your beer and stop asking questions."

They were at a dive bar near campus, the kind of place that had sticky floors and dartboards with half the darts missing. The kind of place Shane usually avoided because even the cheap beer added up when you were counting every dollar. But tonight, Shane had ordered a pitcher without wincing at the price, and when Hayden had mentioned being hungry, Shane had flagged down the waitress and ordered them both burgers and fries.

Hayden was looking at him like he'd grown a second head.

"Okay, seriously," Hayden said, leaning back in his chair. "Did you rob a bank? Sell a kidney? Join a cult?"

"I got a tip."

"A tip."

"Yeah. A really good tip."

Hayden squinted at him. "How good are we talking?"

Shane shrugged, taking a long drink of his beer. "Good enough."

"You're being weird."

"I'm always weird."

"Weirder than usual." Hayden grabbed a handful of fries from the basket between them. "But hey, I'm not complaining. Free food is free food." He paused, his eyes catching on Shane's wrist. "Dude. Is that a Hello Kitty watch?"

Shane glanced down at his wrist, where the pink plastic watch gleamed under the bar lights. "Yeah. It lights up."

Hayden stared at him. Then he started laughing, the kind of full-body laugh that made his shoulders shake. "You sold a twenty-five-thousand-dollar watch and replaced it with *Hello Kitty*?"

"It tells time just as good. Plus, it lights up." Shane pressed the button on the side, and the watch face illuminated with a soft pink glow. "See? Practical."

"You're insane."

"I'm efficient."

Hayden was still laughing, wiping at his eyes. "Oh my god. I love you, man. You're the weirdest person I know."

Shane grinned, feeling lighter than he had in weeks. This was good. This was normal. Just him and Hayden, drinking cheap beer and eating greasy food and not thinking about anything more complicated than whether they should order another pitcher.

But then Hayden's laughter faded, and he leaned forward, his expression shifting into something more curious. "So," he said, drawing out the word. "You gonna tell me about your sugar daddy?"

Shane choked on his beer. "My *what*?"

"Your sugar daddy. The guy who keeps giving you expensive shit." Hayden grinned. "Come on, man. You sold a scarf and gloves for eight grand, then a watch for twenty-five. Now you're flush with cash and buying me dinner. Either you've got a sugar daddy or you're running some kind of elaborate insurance scam."

"I don't have a," Shane stopped, his brain catching up to his mouth. Did he? Was that what this was? "He's just... a regular. At the store."

"Uh-huh. And does this regular have a name?"

"Ilya."

"Ilya," Hayden repeated, like he was testing how it sounded. "Okay. And Ilya just... gives you ten-thousand-dollar accessories for fun?"

"I guess?"

"Shane."

"What?"

Hayden reached across the table and flicked him in the forehead. "You're so dumb. Show me the wallet."

Shane hesitated, then pulled the wallet out of his pocket and slid it across the table. He didn't mention the cash that had been inside. That felt private, somehow. Like something between him and Ilya that he wasn't ready to share.

Hayden picked up the wallet, turning it over in his hands. His eyes widened. "Holy shit."

"What?"

"This is a Hermès Bearn wallet." Hayden looked up at him, his expression somewhere between impressed and horrified. "Shane, this thing costs like three grand. Minimum."

Shane blinked. "For a wallet?"

"For a *Hermès* wallet, yeah." Hayden set it down carefully, like it might explode. "Dude. This guy definitely has a crush on you."

Shane's stomach did a weird flip. "What? No. He's just,"

"Just what? Just giving you thousands of dollars in gifts for no reason?" Hayden raised an eyebrow. "Come on, man. He's either into you or he wants to be your sugar daddy. Probably both."

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. "I... don't think..."

But he did think. That was the problem. He'd been thinking about it ever since Ilya had handed him the wallet, ever since he'd realized that all of this: the gifts, the visits, the way Ilya looked at him like he was something worth paying attention to, meant something.

And the weirdest part?

Shane wasn't disgusted by the idea.

He should be, maybe. Or at least weirded out. But instead, his pulse had picked up the moment Hayden said it, his attention sharpening on the wallet like it was the only thing in the room. His throat felt tight. His mind was doing something strange, scattered and hyperaware at once, cycling through images of Ilya's face, Ilya's hands, the way Ilya had looked at him in the parking lot like he was solving a problem worth his time. And underneath all of it, a low hum of want that Shane wasn't quite ready to name.

Hayden must have seen something on his face, because his expression softened. "Hey," he said. "That's not a bad thing, you know. If you're into it."

"I'm not—"

"Shane." Hayden's voice was gentle now, the teasing edge gone. "It's okay. Seriously. If this guy wants to take care of you, and you're cool with it, then why not? As long as he's not, like, a serial killer or something."

Shane thought about Ilya standing in the parking lot, his voice cutting through the chaos like a knife. Thought about the way those men had responded to him, immediate and unquestioning. Thought about the expensive clothes and the watch and the way Ilya moved through the world like he owned it.

"I don't think he's a serial killer," Shane said slowly.

"Is he hot?"

Shane choked on his beer again, coughing hard enough that his eyes watered. Hayden started laughing, loud and bright, and Shane wanted to be annoyed but he couldn't quite manage it.

"I'll take that as a yes," Hayden said, grinning.

"Shut up."

"You're blushing."

"I'm not—" Shane pressed his hands to his face, feeling the heat there. "Oh my god."

"It's fine, dude. Seriously." Hayden leaned back in his chair, still grinning. "If he's hot and rich and into you, then honestly? Go for it. You deserve someone taking care of you for once."

Shane didn't know what to say to that. He just sat there, his face still hot, his brain spinning with thoughts he didn't know how to organize.

Ilya. Ilya with intense eyes and his expensive clothes and his coffee that tasted like battery acid. Ilya who had given him a scarf and gloves and a watch and a wallet, who had looked at him like he mattered, who had walked out into a parking lot full of dangerous men and made them stop with nothing but his voice.

Ilya, who hadn't come back for his coffee.

The sharp focus that had been locked on Ilya scattered. His throat, which had been tight with want, went hollow. The absence of him—two days, no explanation, no return—suddenly felt like the only thing in the room. Shane's mind snapped into it like a trap closing: *where is he, what happened, is he coming back*. The worry came clean and cold, cutting through everything else.

"Hey." Hayden's voice cut through his thoughts. "You good?"

Shane blinked, focusing on his friend. "Yeah. I'm good."

"You sure? You look like you're about to have an existential crisis."

"Just thinking."

"About your sugar daddy?"

"He's not—" Shane stopped, sighing. "Yeah. About Ilya."

Hayden's grin softened into something more genuine. "You like him."

It wasn't a question. Shane didn't answer it anyway.

He just took another drink of his beer and tried not to think about the untouched cookies in his backpack, or the way Ilya's voice had sounded when he'd yelled in Russian, or the fact that it had been two days and Shane hadn't seen him since.

He tried not to think about how much he wanted to.

Chapter 4: Groceries and Hayden

The bell above the door chimed, and Shane's head snapped up from the register he'd been mindlessly wiping down for the third time that hour.

Ilya.

His shoulders dropped. His breath came easier, and he hadn't realized he'd been holding it, tension locked in his chest all day. He'd been checking the door every five minutes since his shift started, telling himself he wasn't worried, that Ilya was a grown man who didn't owe him a schedule, that missing one day didn't mean anything. But his jaw unclenched the moment he saw Ilya walk through that door, and his fingers stopped their restless fidgeting against the counter. His attention sharpened, narrowing to just him.

He'd been worried. He was still worried.

"Hey," Shane said, the word coming out warmer than he'd intended. "I was starting to think."

He stopped.

Something was wrong.

Ilya moved through the store with his usual purposeful stride, but there was a tightness to his shoulders that Shane had never seen before. His jaw was set, his expression closed off in a way that made him look like a stranger. The slight quirk at the corners of Ilya's mouth was gone. The softness around his eyes when he looked at Shane, the warmth that usually lived there, had vanished entirely.

Shane's gaze dropped to Ilya's hands as he reached for one of the to-go cups stacked near the coffee maker.

His knuckles were scraped raw.

Not just scraped, torn up. The skin across three knuckles on his right hand was angry and red, with dark bruising already blooming purple-black around the edges. His left hand wasn't much better. There was dried blood crusted in the creases of his fingers.

"Ilya," Shane said, already moving around the counter. "What happened to your hands?"

"Coffee," Ilya interrupted, his voice flat and clipped. He didn't look at Shane, just grabbed the cup and moved to the coffee station.

Shane stopped mid-step, thrown by the tone. Ilya had never spoken to him like that before. Short, dismissive, like Shane was just another customer. Like they hadn't spent hours talking over the past few weeks, like Ilya hadn't left him that money, like something hadn't been building between them.

Shane watched as Ilya reached for the coffee pot, his movements stiff and controlled. He poured the coffee with his right hand, and Shane saw it, the barely perceptible wince, the way Ilya's fingers tightened fractionally around the hot cup before he forced them to relax. The micro-expression of pain that flashed across his face before he smoothed it away.

Shane knew that look.

He'd seen it a thousand times in the rink. The way players moved after taking a hard hit, after blocking a shot with their body, after fighting through an injury they didn't want the coach to notice. That particular brand of masculine stubbornness that said I'm fine even when every movement screamed otherwise. The way they'd skate back to the bench with their teeth gritted, trying to hide the limp, the wince, the way they favored one side.

Ilya was doing that now. Trying to act normal, trying to hide the pain, but his body betrayed him in small ways. The tension in his shoulders. The careful way he gripped the cup. The tightness around his eyes.

What the hell had happened?

Ilya moved to the cookies, grabbing his usual chocolate chip without a word. He brought everything to the counter and finally, finally looked at Shane.

His eyes were cold.

Not angry, exactly. Just... distant. Shuttered. Like he'd pulled down steel walls between them and Shane was on the wrong side.

"Just this," Ilya said.

Shane's hands moved on autopilot, ringing up the coffee and cookies, \$13.50, Ilya's usual, but his mind was racing. He wanted to ask what happened. He wanted to demand to know who'd hurt him, because those knuckles didn't get scraped up like that from an accident. That was fighting damage. That was someone's face meeting Ilya's fists, or a wall...

Shane's hand closed around the small packet of ibuprofen they kept behind the counter for emergencies. Without thinking about it, without asking, he added it to Ilya's order.

Ilya's gaze dropped to the ibuprofen. One dark eyebrow arched, a silent question.

Shane met his eyes steadily, not backing down. "Thirteen fifty," he said quietly.

For a moment, something flickered in Ilya's expression. Surprise, maybe, or something softer. But it was gone before Shane could identify it. Ilya pulled out his wallet and handed over a twenty-dollar bill without comment.

Shane made change, their fingers not quite touching during the exchange. His pulse quickened at the deliberate distance. The coldness of it, the way Ilya pulled his hand back before contact could happen. It felt like a door slamming.

Ilya took the ibuprofen packet, turned it over in his damaged hands, then tore it open right there at the counter. He shook out two pills. No, three. And tossed them back dry, swallowing them without even a sip of coffee to wash them down.

Shane winced in sympathy. "You know you're supposed to take those with food, right?"

"I have cookies," Ilya said flatly.

The silence stretched between them, awkward and heavy. This wasn't how their conversations went. Usually by now they'd be trading jokes, or Ilya would be telling him some story about his day, or Shane would be rambling about something stupid and Ilya would be watching him with those warm eyes, like everything Shane said was worth listening to.

Now Ilya just stood there, coffee in one hand, cookies in the other, looking at Shane like he was trying to solve an equation that wasn't adding up.

"What did you spend it on?" Ilya asked suddenly.

Shane blinked. "What?"

"The money. From the wallet." Ilya's tone was carefully casual, but there was something underneath it. Something tight and controlled. "What did you spend it on?"

Oh. Shane's throat tightened. He'd been wondering if Ilya would ask, if he'd want an accounting of how Shane had used his money. His fingers found the edge of the counter, gripping it. The question felt like a test. Like Ilya was waiting to see if Shane had wasted it, or worse, if he'd spent it on someone else.

"Groceries," Shane said honestly. "And Hayden."

The words were barely out of his mouth when Ilya's entire demeanor changed.

It wasn't dramatic. There was no explosion, no visible anger. But Shane watched as something in Ilya's expression went completely flat. His jaw tightened. His shoulders went rigid. The careful neutrality on his face became something harder, colder.

He went very, very still.

It reminded Shane of the moment before a fight broke out on the ice. That split second of absolute stillness, the held breath of violence about to fracture the air into chaos.

"Right," Ilya said, his voice devoid of inflection. "Groceries and Hayden."

He picked up his coffee and cookies, turned on his heel, and headed for the door.

"Ilya, wait," Shane started, moving around the counter.

But Ilya was already pushing through the door, the bell chiming cheerfully as he left. He didn't look back. Didn't say goodbye. Didn't do any of the things he normally did, no "see you tomorrow," no lingering by the door, no last smile thrown over his shoulder.

He just left.

Shane stood in the middle of the empty store, staring at the door as it swung shut, feeling like he'd just been sucker-punched.

What the hell just happened?

He replayed the conversation in his head, trying to figure out where it had gone wrong. Ilya had been off from the moment he walked in. The injuries, the bad mood, the terseness. But he'd gotten worse after Shane answered his question.

Groceries and Hayden.

Shane frowned, confusion churning in his gut. Why would that make Ilya angry? He'd asked what Shane spent the money on, and Shane had told him the truth. He'd bought groceries. Actual food, not just ramen and cereal for once. And he'd taken Hayden out for dinner and drinks to thank him for covering Shane's shifts when he'd been sick last month.

Was it the Hayden part? But why would Ilya care about that?

Unless...

No. That didn't make sense.

Shane shook his head, trying to clear it. He was reading too much into this. Ilya was clearly dealing with something. Something that had resulted in torn-up knuckles and a foul mood. Maybe he'd had a fight with someone. Maybe he was stressed about work. Maybe Shane had just caught him on a bad day and it had nothing to do with their conversation at all.

But that look on Ilya's face when Shane mentioned Hayden...

Shane ran a hand through his hair, pulling at it hard enough to hurt. His jaw clenched. He didn't understand. He'd thought they were friends. Good friends, maybe even heading toward something more, though Shane had been too chicken to examine that thought too closely. But friends didn't just shut down and walk out like that. Friends didn't look at you like you'd done something wrong when you were just answering a simple question.

The store felt too quiet now, too empty. Shane looked at the door again, half-hoping Ilya would come back, that he'd push through with an apology and an explanation.

But the door stayed closed.

Shane moved back behind the counter on autopilot, his mind still spinning. He picked up the twenty-dollar bill Ilya had left, smoothing it out before putting it in the register. His fingers were shaking slightly.

He was worried about Ilya. About his hands, about whatever had happened to put him in such a dark mood. But underneath the worry was something else. Something that felt uncomfortably like hurt.

Because Ilya had looked at him like Shane had disappointed him somehow. Like Shane had said exactly the wrong thing. And Shane had no idea what he'd done wrong.

Groceries and Hayden.

He turned the words over in his mind again, examining them from every angle. Groceries. That was fine, right?? That's what the money was for. Ilya had wanted Shane to buy food, to take care of himself. And Hayden... Shane had just been being responsible. Paying back a debt, taking care of his friendships.

So why had Ilya looked at him like that?

Why had he left without a word?

Shane slumped against the counter, staring at the door, waiting for answers that didn't come. The fluorescent lights hummed overhead, casting harsh shadows. His hands clenched and unclenched, searching for something to grip. His throat felt tight. That awful constricted feeling that came right before panic, before his mind fragmented into a loop of replaying moments, searching for the mistake he'd made.

Something had shifted between them, and Shane didn't know how to shift it back.

He didn't even know what he'd done.

All he knew was that Ilya had walked out that door looking hurt and angry, and Shane was left standing here alone, replaying five words over and over in his head.

Groceries and Hayden.

What the hell did he say wrong?

Ilya sat in the back of the Mercedes, his knuckles throbbing despite the ice pack Dimitri had wordlessly handed him. The city lights blurred past the tinted windows as they drove through Manhattan, heading back to his apartment in Tribeca. He should have gone to the office. There were things to handle. Kozlov's crew had been pushing into their territory again, hence the split knuckles and the three men currently nursing broken bones in a warehouse in Queens.

But he couldn't focus. His mind kept circling back to the convenience store. To Shane.

To the way Shane had said Hayden so casually, like it meant nothing.

Ilya pressed the ice harder against his knuckles, welcoming the sharp bite of cold. He was being ridiculous. Irrational. Shane was a college student who worked at a 7-Eleven and sold every gift Ilya gave him without a second thought. Shane didn't owe him anything. They weren't... anything.

Except Ilya couldn't stop thinking about him.

Couldn't stop going to that fucking store at three in the morning just to see Shane's tired smile, to hear him complain about his economics professor or his coach's conditioning drills. Couldn't stop finding excuses to give him things, even though Shane immediately turned around and sold them for rent money.

It should have been insulting. Anyone else would have been terrified to sell Ilya Rozanov's gifts. But Shane just shrugged and said he needed the money more than a fancy watch, and somehow that made Ilya want him even more.

And now Shane had spent Ilya's money on someone named Hayden.

Ilya pulled out his phone, jaw tight. He'd looked at Shane's Instagram before. He wasn't proud of it, but he'd needed to know more about this boy who treated him like a normal person, who had no idea who Ilya really was. Shane's handle was easy to find: @shollander_19.

The profile was public. Of course it was. Shane probably didn't even think about privacy settings.

Ilya scrolled through the feed. Hockey photos dominated. Shane in his NYU uniform, mid-game action shots, team photos in the locker room. There were casual pictures too: Shane with a group of friends at a bar, Shane eating pizza at 2 AM, Shane asleep on a couch with textbooks scattered around him and someone's commentary about "this is what finals week looks like."

Ilya's thumb paused on a photo from two weeks ago. Shane and another guy, arms slung around each other's shoulders, both grinning at the camera. The caption read: "this guy saved my ass in chem lab again @haydenpike you're a real one"

Ilya's jaw clenched. He tapped on the tag.

Hayden Pike's profile loaded. More photos of him and Shane. They were clearly close. Best friends, maybe. There were pictures from hockey games, from study sessions, from nights out. Ilya scrolled faster, his jaw tightening. His fingers dug into the phone's edge. Something ugly and possessive clawed at him, jealousy, sharp and irrational.

Then he stopped.

The most recent photo was from three days ago. Hayden Pike with his arm around a woman, blonde, pretty, smiling up at him with obvious affection. Her hand rested on her very pregnant belly. The caption read: "Can't wait to meet you, little one. 4 more months. @jackie889 you're gonna be the best mom"

Ilya stared at the photo.

He scrolled down. More couple photos. A pregnancy announcement from five months ago. Pictures of Hayden kissing the woman, Jackie, her hand showing off an engagement ring.

Hayden had a girlfriend. A pregnant girlfriend. A fiancée.

Ilya closed his eyes. His face burned. Shame hit him, sharp and acidic. It settled in his stomach, making his breath come short. He'd acted like a fool.

Groceries and Hayden. Shane had bought groceries and taken his friend out to dinner. His friend who was about to become a father. Shane had probably been celebrating with him, or just being a good friend, and Ilya had stormed out like a jealous teenager.

"Blyad," Ilya muttered under his breath.

He'd acted like an ass. Shane had looked so confused, so hurt when Ilya had left without explanation. And for what? Because Ilya couldn't handle the thought of Shane spending time with someone else? Because Ilya had somehow convinced himself that the money he'd given Shane came with strings attached?

He opened his eyes, forcing himself to breathe slowly through his nose. He looked back at Shane's Instagram. He scrolled through more hockey photos, trying to think clearly instead of spiraling. Shane in his gear, skating drills, post-game celebrations.

Then he noticed something.

In every photo, Shane's skates looked the same. Beaten up. Worn down. The leather was cracked in places, and in one close-up shot, Ilya could see tape wrapped around the boot, holding something together. These weren't just used skates. They were falling apart.

Ilya zoomed in on another photo. The blades were dull, the holders were scratched to hell, and the tongue of one skate was visibly separating from the boot.

Shane was playing competitive college hockey in skates that should have been replaced years ago.

Ilya switched apps, pulling up Google. He typed in "best hockey skates" and started reading.

Bauer Vapor FlyLite. Top of the line. Professional grade. The reviews called them "the best skates money can buy." They cost \$1,200.

Ilya looked at the size charts, trying to estimate. Shane was tall, maybe six feet, lean but solid. Probably a size 9 or 9.5. He'd noticed Shane's feet before. He'd noticed everything about Shane, if he was being honest with himself.

He placed orders for multiple sizes, 8.5, 9, and 9.5. Better to have options and return what didn't fit than to guess wrong. Ilya didn't care about the cost.

The order confirmation appeared on his screen. Overnight shipping. They'd arrive tomorrow.

Ilya sat back against the leather seat, ice pack forgotten in his lap. This was insane. He was being insane. He should stay away from Shane. The boy was a college student with his whole life ahead of him, and Ilya was... Ilya was everything Shane should run from.

But he couldn't stay away.

He'd tried. After the first night, he'd told himself it was just curiosity. After the second visit, he'd told himself he was just checking on the store, making sure his territory was secure. After the third, he'd stopped lying to himself.

He wanted Shane. Wanted to take care of him, wanted to see him smile, wanted to hear him complain about his terrible coffee and his brutal coach. Wanted to watch Shane's eyes light up when he talked about hockey, wanted to be the reason Shane looked happy instead of exhausted.

Wanted things he had no right to want.

The car pulled up to his building. Ilya climbed out, nodding to Dimitri. "Tomorrow night. We're making a stop."

Dimitri raised an eyebrow. "The store?"

"The store."

"Of course." Dimitri's mouth twitched. "Should I wait in the car this time, or do you need backup to deliver a gift to a college student?"

Ilya shot him a flat look. "You're coming in."

"Wouldn't miss it," Dimitri said, and there was definitely amusement in his voice now.

Ilya ignored him and headed inside.

The skates arrived at noon the next day, three large shopping bags full of boxes. Ilya inspected them carefully, pulling out each pair. Pristine white and black, the Bauer logo gleaming, the blades sharp and perfect. Size eight-and-a-half, nine, nine-and-a-half. All with their documentation. Professional grade equipment for a player who deserved it.

He texted Dimitri: Pick me up at 2 AM.

The response came immediately: The store?

Yes.

This is getting ridiculous, boss.

2 AM, Dimitri.

Yes, sir. Should I bring flowers too?

Ilya didn't dignify that with a response.

At 2 AM, he was waiting outside his building when the Mercedes pulled up. Dimitri got out to open the door, and Ilya caught the smirk on his face before he could hide it.

"Not a word," Ilya said as he slid into the back seat, the three shopping bags settling beside him.

"I didn't say anything." Dimitri closed the door and got back in the driver's seat. "I'm just driving you to a convenience store in the middle of the night so you can give expensive gifts to a boy who's going to sell them."

"He didn't sell the wallet."

"Oh, well then. That changes everything." Dimitri pulled into traffic. "You know, when I signed on to work for you, I thought it would be more guns and intimidation, less... shopping for hockey equipment."

"You can always quit."

"And miss this? Never." Dimitri glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "For what it's worth, boss, the kid seems good. Better than the usual people in our world."

Ilya looked out the window. "That's the problem."

"Is it?" Dimitri was quiet for a moment. "Or is that why you can't stay away?"

Ilya didn't answer. They drove in silence through Manhattan, crossing into Brooklyn. The neighborhoods changed, got grittier, more real. This was Shane's world—cramped apartments and late-night shifts and struggling to make rent.

Ilya's world was blood and money and power. They shouldn't mix.

But here he was anyway, three shopping bags of \$1,200 skates beside him, about to walk into a 7-Eleven like some lovesick fool.

Dimitri parked across the street. "You want me to wait here?"

"No. Come in."

"Really?" Dimitri looked genuinely surprised.

"I want him to see that this is normal for me. That I have people, that I'm..." Ilya trailed off. That he was what? Dangerous? Powerful? Someone Shane should be wary of?

Someone Shane should take seriously?

"That you're serious about him," Dimitri finished quietly.

Ilya met his eyes in the mirror. "Yes."

Dimitri nodded slowly. "Alright then. Let's go give your boy some skates."

They got out of the car. Dimitri grabbed the three large shopping bags from the trunk, and Ilya fell into step beside him, close enough to be protective, far enough to not be threatening.

It was a practiced formation, one they'd perfected over years of working together.

The bell chimed as they entered the store.

Shane was behind the counter, head bent over a textbook. He looked up at the sound, and his expression went through several changes in rapid succession, surprise, wariness, then something that might have been relief.

"Ilya," Shane said, and his voice was careful. Guarded in a way it had never been before.

Ilya had done that. Had made Shane uncertain around him.

"Shane." Ilya approached the counter, very aware of Dimitri behind him with the bags. "I owe you an apology."

Shane blinked. "You... what?"

"Yesterday. I was rude. I left without explanation." Ilya held Shane's gaze. "I'm sorry."

Shane looked at him, then at Dimitri, who gave him a small nod of acknowledgment.

"I don't understand," Shane said slowly. "What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing." The word came out harder than Ilya intended. He forced himself to soften his tone. "You did nothing wrong. I was... I misunderstood. I thought Hayden was..." He couldn't say it. Couldn't admit to the jealousy that had burned through him.

Understanding dawned in Shane's eyes. "Oh. Oh." A flush crept up his neck. "Hayden's my best friend."

"I know. I saw on Instagram." Ilya saw Shane's eyes widen and added, "I looked you up."

Behind Ilya, Dimitri made a sound that might have been a stifled laugh. Ilya ignored him.

"What size skates do you wear?" Ilya asked.

Shane blinked at the non-sequitur. "Uh... nine. Why?"

Ilya turned to Dimitri, who was holding three large shopping bags. His second-in-command stepped forward, setting them on the counter with a smirk that Ilya also ignored. Ilya reached into one of the bags, sorting through boxes. Size eight-and-a-half, nine, nine-and-a-half, until he found the right one.

"Here." He pulled out the size nine box and set it in front of Shane.

Shane looked at the bags, then at the box, then at Ilya. "How many pairs did you buy?"

"Enough to ensure I had your size."

Dimitri coughed. It sounded suspiciously like "whipped."

"Open it," Ilya said.

Shane looked at him for a long moment, then carefully lifted the lid. His hands stilled. "Holy shit."

"Your skates are falling apart."

"They're fine,"

"They're held together with tape, Shane." Ilya leaned forward slightly. "You can't play in those. You'll hurt yourself."

Shane's fingers traced the edge of one skate, reverent. "These are Vapor FlyLites. These are like... these are what NHL players wear."

Ilya gestured to the three bags on the counter. "I bought multiple sizes. Eight-and-a-half through nine-and-a-half. Keep whichever fits best. The rest can go to your teammates."

"Ilya." Shane looked up, and his eyes were wide, almost overwhelmed. "I can't accept these."

"You can."

"They're too expensive,"

"I don't care."

"I'll just sell them,"

"No." The word came out sharp, commanding. Ilya saw Shane's breath catch. "Not these. These are for you to use. To play in. To keep." He held Shane's gaze. "Please."

The please seemed to surprise Shane. He looked down at the skates again, then back up at Ilya. "Why?"

Because I can't stop thinking about you. Because you treat me like a person instead of a monster. Because you sold a \$25,000 watch without hesitation but you kept the wallet I gave you. Because you're everything good in this world and I want to be the reason you smile.

"Because you need them," Ilya said instead. "And I want you to have them."

Shane was quiet for a long moment. Then, softly: "Okay."

"Okay?"

"I'll keep them." Shane's fingers curled around the edge of the box. "Thank you. Really. This is... this is really generous."

The tension that had knotted in his shoulders all day finally released. Ilya's breath came easier. "You're welcome."

They stood there, the counter between them, the skates in Shane's hands, and Ilya thought that maybe, maybe, this could work. Maybe he could find a way to be in Shane's life without destroying it.

Maybe Shane would let him.

Behind him, Dimitri cleared his throat softly. "Boss. We have that meeting at four."

Ilya didn't take his eyes off Shane. "I'll be there."

"I'll wait in the car." Dimitri headed for the door, and Ilya heard him mutter, "Definitely bringing flowers next time."

The door chimed as Dimitri left. Shane glanced after him, then back at Ilya. "Was that your...?"

"Dimitri. He works for me."

"He seems nice."

Ilya almost laughed. Dimitri had killed more men than Ilya could count, but sure. Nice. "He has his moments."

Shane carefully closed the box, but he didn't move it away. Didn't push it back toward Ilya. He was keeping it. Keeping them.

"I really am sorry," Ilya said quietly. "About yesterday."

"It's okay." Shane's expression softened. "I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to... I don't know what I did, but I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything." Ilya reached out slowly, giving Shane time to pull away, and let his fingers brush against Shane's hand where it rested on the counter. "I'm just not used to this."

"Used to what?"

Wanting someone. Caring about someone. Being jealous over someone who isn't even mine.

"Talking to people," Ilya said instead.

Shane's mouth quirked up in a small smile. "You talk to me fine."

"You're different."

"Yeah?" Shane turned his hand over, letting their palms touch. His skin was warm. "How?"

Ilya looked at their hands, at the way Shane didn't pull away, didn't flinch. "You're not afraid of me."

"Should I be?"

Yes. "No."

Shane's smile widened slightly. "Good. Because you're kind of my favorite customer."

Ilya's throat tightened. His pulse quickened. Heat spread down from his chest, warming his hands where they still almost-touched Shane's. Dangerous. Reckless. He should leave. Should walk out of this store and never come back, let Shane live his normal life with his hockey and his friends and his terrible coffee.

But he couldn't.

"I should go," Ilya made himself say. "Dimitri's waiting."

"Okay." Shane didn't let go of his hand. "Will you come back?"

"Yes."

"Good." Shane squeezed his fingers once, then released him. "Thanks for the skates. Really. I'll actually use them."

Ilya gestured to the other shopping bags still sitting on the counter. "Keep those too."

Shane's eyes widened. "What? No, that's way too much!"

"Keep them," Ilya said firmly.

"Ilya, that's two pairs of skates. I can't,"

"You can." Ilya held his gaze. "Keep them, Shane."

Shane looked at the bags, then back at Ilya, something conflicted crossing his face. Finally, he nodded slowly. "Okay. Yeah, okay. I'm sure one of my teammates will be able to use them. There's always someone on the team who needs new skates but can't afford them."

A genuine smile curved Ilya's mouth. Not the controlled half-smile he usually allowed himself, but something real and warm. Of course Shane's first thought was to help his teammates. Of course he'd take something expensive and immediately think about who else needed it.

"You have a good heart," Ilya said quietly.

Shane's cheeks flushed slightly. "I just... it's a team, you know? We look out for each other."

"I know." Ilya stepped back, already missing the warmth of Shane's touch. "I'll see you soon."

"Yeah. See you, Ilya."

Ilya walked to the door, made himself push it open. The bell chimed. He glanced back once and found Shane watching him, the box of skates held carefully in his hands, a soft

expression on his face. Ilya's breath caught. His pulse hammered in his throat. He wanted to walk back, wanted to stay, wanted things he couldn't name.

Then he stepped outside, into the cold night air, and headed for the car where Dimitri was waiting.

Dimitri didn't say anything as Ilya slid into the back seat. Just pulled into traffic and drove.

After a few blocks, Ilya said, "Not a word."

"Wasn't going to say anything, boss." But Dimitri was smiling. "Except maybe that he kept them."

"He kept them."

"And he held your hand."

"Dimitri."

"Just making observations." Dimitri's smile widened. "For what it's worth, I think he likes you too."

Ilya looked out the window, watching Brooklyn blur past. "He doesn't know what I am."

"Maybe that's not what matters."

"It will matter eventually."

"Maybe." Dimitri was quiet for a moment. "Or maybe he'll surprise you."

Ilya thought about Shane selling a \$22,000 watch without hesitation, about Shane treating him like a normal person, about Shane's hand warm against his.

Maybe.

Chapter 5: Punched

The night had that dead-zone quality to it, past midnight, before the pre-dawn construction workers started trickling in for coffee and energy drinks, Shane was restocking cigarettes behind the counter, the repetitive task leaving his mind free to wander. His thoughts kept circling back to the skates sitting in his closet at home, the way Ilya had looked at him when he'd laced up the new skates, the first pair he'd owned in years. That small smile, barely there, but Shane had caught it.

He was smiling to himself when the bell chimed.

The man who stumbled through the door was drunk. Not tipsy, not buzzed, *drunk* drunk. The kind Shane had learned to clock instantly after two years of graveyard shifts. The guy was maybe forty, wearing a stained jacket, and he moved with that loose-limbed, aggressive unpredictability that made Shane's shoulders tense automatically.

"Hey," the man slurred, making his way to the counter in a weaving line. "Gimme... gimme a pack of Marlboros. Reds."

Shane set down the carton he was holding and turned to face him, keeping his expression neutral. "Sure thing. ID?"

The man fumbled in his pockets, patting himself down with increasing agitation. "Don't need... I'm fucking forty years old, man."

"Store policy," Shane said, keeping his voice level and calm. He'd done this dance before. "No ID, no sale."

"That's bullshit." The drunk guy's face was flushing red, his eyes unfocused but angry. "Just give me the fucking cigarettes."

"Can't do that." Shane stayed where he was, not moving closer. "But there's a Bodega about six blocks down if you..."

"I don't wanna go six blocks down!" The man's voice rose to a shout. "I wanna buy cigarettes HERE!"

"I understand, but I need to see ID first."

"Fuck your ID!" The drunk guy suddenly lurched forward, slapping his palm down on the counter hard enough to make the scanner jump. "You think you're better than me? Huh? Some punk kid working at a fucking gas station?"

Shane felt his jaw tighten, but he kept his voice steady. "Sir, I'm going to need you to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere until I get my cigarettes!"

"Then I'm calling the cops." Shane reached for his phone in his pocket.

That was when the drunk guy snapped. He swept his arm across the counter, sending the card reader and a display of lighters clattering to the floor. "Fuck you! Fuck your store!"

"Okay, that's enough." Shane moved toward the end of the counter, intending to physically guide the guy toward the door if he had to. "You need to leave. Now."

The drunk guy turned on him, getting right in his face, Shane could smell the alcohol on his breath, sour and overwhelming. "You gonna make me, tough guy?"

"I don't want to make you do anything," Shane said, holding his ground but not advancing. "I just want you to leave before this gets worse."

"Gets worse?" The man laughed, a harsh, ugly sound. "Gets worse for who?"

Shane saw the man's shoulder shift, saw his weight transfer, but his brain didn't process it fast enough. Didn't translate the information into *move* quickly enough.

The fist came out of nowhere.

The impact was a white-hot explosion of pain that radiated from his cheekbone through his entire skull, Shane's head snapped to the side, his vision whiting out for a second, and then he was falling. His hip hit the edge of the counter on the way down, and then his shoulder hit the floor, and then he was *down*, sprawled on the grimy tile behind the counter.

Everything was swimming. The fluorescent lights above him were too bright, bleeding into each other. His face felt like it was on fire, a deep, throbbing agony that pulsed with his heartbeat. He could taste copper, blood in his mouth, probably from where his teeth had cut the inside of his cheek.

What the fuck just happened?

Shane pushed himself up, got his hands under him, but his arms were shaking and his head was spinning and he couldn't quite make his body cooperate. He could hear the drunk guy above him, saying something, but the words were muffled and distant like Shane was underwater.

He blinked hard, trying to clear his vision, trying to focus.

That was when he heard it.

The bell.

The door chime, bright and incongruous, cutting through the ringing in his ears.

Shane managed to lift his head, squinting through the pain and the haze. He saw shoes first, Ilya's expensive dress shoes, and then his legs, and then all of him as he stepped fully into the store.

Ilya's eyes found Shane immediately—on the floor, blood on his face, one hand pressed to his cheek. His whole body went rigid. For a single breath, he didn't move.

And then something happened to his face.

For a split second, Ilya went completely still.

Not anger, exactly. Something colder. Anger was hot, explosive, messy. This was something else. Something cold and precise and absolutely terrifying. Ilya's shoulders rolled back, his jaw locked tight, and the air around him seemed to compress into something lethal. Shane felt a chill run through him despite the pain.

He'd never seen Ilya look like that.

The drunk guy turned, swaying, a satisfied smirk on his face. "What're you looking at?"

Ilya didn't answer. He moved.

Shane had seen Ilya move before, always controlled, always deliberate, like every step was calculated. But this was different. This was faster, more direct, stripped of anything unnecessary. Predatory. Ilya crossed the distance between the door and the counter in three strides, and before the drunk guy could even process what was happening, Ilya's hand shot out and grabbed him by the front of his jacket.

The drunk guy's smirk vanished. "Hey, what the fuck?"

Ilya hauled him forward, then spun him toward the door. The drunk guy swung at him, a wild, uncoordinated punch that Ilya avoided without even seeming to try. Ilya's other hand came up, gripping the back of the man's neck, and then he was *moving* him, propelling him toward the exit with a force that made it look effortless.

"Get the fuck off me!" The drunk guy was struggling now, trying to plant his feet, trying to fight back, but it was like watching someone try to fight a riptide. Ilya was *stronger*, and his movement carried something controlled and deliberate and practiced, that made Shane's stomach drop.

This wasn't someone who'd gotten in a few scraps. This was someone who *knew* how to do this.

Ilya shoved the door open with his shoulder, never loosening his grip on the drunk guy, and then they were outside. Through the window, Shane could see Ilya throw. actually *throw*. the man away from the entrance. The drunk guy stumbled, nearly fell, caught himself against a car in the parking lot.

He started to turn back, started to say something, and Ilya took a single step toward him.

That single step was enough.

But whatever the drunk guy saw in Ilya's face made him stop. Made him back up, hands raised, and then turn and stumble away into the night, moving faster than Shane would have

thought possible for someone that drunk.

Ilya stood there for a moment, watching him go, his shoulders rigid and his hands curled into fists at his sides. Then he turned and came back inside.

The bell chimed again.

Shane was still on the floor. He'd managed to get himself into a sitting position, his back against the cabinet under the register, one hand pressed to his face. His cheekbone was already swelling, he could feel it, and his jaw ached when he tried to move it.

Ilya's eyes found him again. His shoulders came down slightly. not relaxed, but less ready to kill. Shane could still feel the danger underneath, coiled and waiting, but there was something else now: the Ilya who came to the store every few nights, who gave Shane gifts he couldn't possibly accept, who stood in a convenience store like it was the only place that mattered.

"Shane." Ilya's voice was rough, strained. He moved around the counter, dropping into a crouch beside Shane. "Let me see."

Shane lowered his hand slowly. He could feel blood on his lips, could taste it in his mouth. "I'm okay," he said.

"You are not." Ilya's jaw was still tight, his breathing deliberately controlled, his focus so absolute that Shane felt pinned by it. "He hit you."

"Yeah." Shane laughed, a short, painful sound. "I noticed."

Ilya didn't laugh. He reached out, his fingers hovering near Shane's face but not quite touching, like he was afraid he'd hurt him. "Your cheek is swelling. You need ice."

"There's... there's a freezer in the back." Shane pushed himself up, and Ilya immediately moved to help him, one hand on his arm, steadying him, Shane's head spun as he got to his feet, and he had to grip the edge of the counter to keep from swaying.

"Sit," Ilya said, guiding him toward the stool behind the register. "I will get it."

Shane sat, because his legs felt like water and his face was throbbing and he didn't trust himself to walk to the back without falling over. He watched Ilya disappear through the door to the storage area, heard him moving around, and then he was back with a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a paper towel.

"Here." Ilya pressed it gently against Shane's cheek, and Shane hissed at the contact, the cold a shock against the heat of the swelling. "Hold this."

Shane took the bag, held it to his face, and looked up at Ilya. Studied him.

Ilya was still tense, his shoulders rigid, his breathing deliberately controlled. The kind of controlled that meant he was holding back something massive. His hands were shaking slightly, knuckles scraping against his thighs, fingers clenching and unclenching like they wanted to hit something but couldn't.

"Ilya," Shane said quietly. "What the fuck was that?" Ilya's eyes snapped to his. For a second, Ilya's breath hitched. actual fear breaking through. Before he pulled himself back, jaw locking down, shoulders squaring. The walls went back up.

"He hit you," Ilya said, like that explained everything.

"Yeah, but you..." Shane trailed off, trying to find the words. "You moved like... I don't know. Like you've done that before."

Ilya looked away, his jaw working. "I have."

The admission hung in the air between them, Shane wanted to ask more. Wanted to know where, when, why. But his head was pounding and his face hurt and he was still trying to process what he'd witnessed.

Ilya, who was quiet and careful and patient, Ilya, who gave him expensive gifts without expecting anything in return and listened to Shane ramble about his classes and hockey like every word mattered, Ilya, who came to the store at the same time every week to see him.

Ilya, who had thrown a grown man out of the store like he weighed nothing. Who had moved with a cold, controlled violence that spoke of experience. Of practice.

"Are you..." Shane started, then stopped. "Are you okay?"

Ilya's eyes came back to him, and they were raw now, something vulnerable. "Am I okay?" he repeated, and his voice carried an edge. "Shane, you are the one who was hit."

"I know, but you look..." Shane gestured vaguely with his free hand. "You look kind of freaked out."

Ilya let out a breath, running a hand through his hair. "I am, I don't like..." He stopped, struggled with the words. "I don't like seeing you hurt."

Something in Shane's chest tightened at that. At the way Ilya said it, quiet and fierce and honest.

"I'm okay," Shane said again, and this time he meant it. Or at least, he meant that he would be. "It's a bruise. I've had worse."

Ilya didn't look convinced. He was still standing too close, still watching Shane like he was afraid he might fall over. "You should go to hospital. Make sure nothing is broken."

"It's not broken." Shane moved his jaw experimentally, wincing at the ache. "Hurts like hell."

"Shane."

"I'm fine, Ilya." Shane lowered the bag of peas, looking up at him. "Thank you. For... for getting rid of him."

Ilya's expression tightened. "I should have been here sooner. I should have..."

"You couldn't have known." Shane cut him off. "It's not your fault."

Ilya didn't respond. He stood frozen, his hands still clenched at his sides, his whole body radiating the kind of stillness that precedes violence. Shane had the sudden, unsettling thought that if the drunk guy came back right now, Ilya might actually kill him.

And the unsettling part was that Shane wasn't entirely sure Ilya would be wrong to.

"Hey," Shane said softly. Ilya's breath caught. The first break in his control. "I'm okay. You got here. You helped. It's over."

Ilya nodded slowly, but his shoulders didn't drop, his hands didn't stop shaking. Whatever had happened when Ilya had seen Shane on the floor, whatever that cold, terrifying thing had been, it hadn't fully left him yet.

Shane pressed the frozen peas back to his face, the cold numbing some of the pain, and tried not to think about how easily Ilya had moved that man. How practiced it had looked. How *dangerous* Ilya had seemed in that moment.

He tried not to think about what that might mean.

But sitting there, his face throbbing and his head still spinning, watching Ilya struggle to calm himself down, Shane understood that he'd seen behind a wall. Seen what Ilya was capable of. What Ilya *was*.

And the unsettling part was that it didn't frighten him as much as it should.

"I'm staying," Ilya said suddenly.

Shane blinked, lowering the frozen peas. "What?"

"For the rest of your shift. I'm staying." Ilya's tone left no room for argument. He wasn't asking permission. He was stating a fact.

"You don't have to do that," Shane said automatically. "I'm fine. One drunk asshole. I can handle..."

"No."

The word was flat, final, and Shane felt the protest die in his throat. Ilya wasn't moving. Wasn't softening. Wasn't giving Shane room to argue.

"Ilya..."

"I'm staying, Shane." Ilya set his jaw, his whole body rigid. "You're not working alone tonight. Not after that."

Shane wanted to argue. Wanted to point out that he'd been working alone for months, that this was literally his job, that Ilya probably had better things to do than babysit him in a convenience store at three in the morning.

But the look on Ilya's face stopped him.

Not protectiveness alone. Something deeper, something almost desperate. Ilya's hand was clenched in a fist against his thigh, his breathing ragged at the edges. Like if he left right now, something inside him might break.

"Okay," Shane said quietly. "Okay. You can stay."

Some of the tension bled out of Ilya's shoulders. He nodded once, sharp and decisive, then pulled out his phone.

Shane watched as Ilya typed something, his thumbs moving quickly across the screen. Then he lifted the phone to his ear.

"Dimitri," Ilya said, his voice switching to that clipped, authoritative tone Shane had heard him use with the bodyguards. "I'm staying here. Handle the Kozlov situation without me."

Silence stretched, Shane could hear the faint sound of Dimitri's voice on the other end, though he couldn't make out the words.

"I don't care," Ilya said. "You're more than capable. Take Viktor and Alexei. I'll deal with the fallout tomorrow." Another pause. "No. I'm not leaving."

Shane's stomach did something complicated. Ilya was blowing off work. mafia work, apparently, something involving people with Russian names and "situations" that needed handling, to stay here. With him. In a shitty convenience store in Brooklyn.

"Dimitri." Ilya's voice went softer, but no less firm. "I'm staying. That's final."

He ended the call and pocketed his phone, then turned back to Shane. For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"You didn't have to do that," Shane said finally. "Whatever you were supposed to be doing, it can wait."

"Can wait." Ilya stepped closer, shoulders forward, scanning each mark and bruise. "When did you last eat?"

Shane blinked at the subject change. "Uh... I don't know. Lunch?"

"What time was lunch?"

"Like... noon?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. "It's three in the morning, Shane."

"Yeah, well." Shane shrugged, immediately regretting it when the movement made his head throb. "I've been busy. And I had some chips earlier—"

"Chips are not food." Ilya pulled out his phone again, already scrolling through something. "There's a diner two blocks from here. They deliver?"

"I mean, yeah, but—"

"What do you want?"

Shane stared at him. "Ilya, you don't have to—"

"Shane." Ilya looked up from his phone, leaning forward, every line of his body saying this was non-negotiable. "Let me do this. Please."

That word again. *Please*. Coming from Ilya, it felt like something precious, something rare. Like Ilya didn't ask for things often, didn't say please to many people.

"Okay," Shane said softly. "Um. Eggs? And toast? And coffee. Real coffee, not the battery acid from our machine."

Ilya's mouth twitched. Not quite a smile, but close. "Anything else?"

"That's already too much—"

"Shane."

"Fine. Bacon. If they have it."

Ilya nodded and placed the order, speaking quietly into his phone, Shane watched him, still pressing the frozen peas to his face, trying to process everything that had just happened.

The attack, Ilya's violence. The way Ilya had looked at him after, like Shane was something precious and breakable. The way Ilya was now ordering him breakfast at three in the morning like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Twenty minutes," Ilya said, pocketing his phone. Then he moved around the counter. walked right into Shane's workspace like he had every right to be there. And hoisted himself up to sit on the counter itself.

"Uh," Shane said. "That's not—"

"I'm staying here." Ilya settled himself more comfortably, his long legs dangling, his expensive shoes probably worth more than everything in the store combined. "Where I can see the door. And you."

Shane opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. Because the thing was, having Ilya there, solid and present and clearly not going anywhere. made Shane feel safer than he had in months. Maybe safer than he'd felt since moving to New York.

"Okay," Shane said again.

Ilya reached out and gently pulled Shane's hand away from his face, fingers tracing the bruise. His touch was careful, deliberate. Shane's ribs relaxed; he didn't realize how much he'd been bracing until Ilya touched him.

"Does it hurt?" Ilya asked quietly.

"Yeah," Shane admitted. "But I've had worse. Hockey, you know. I've taken sticks to the face, elbows, pucks." He tried for a smile. "This is nothing."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "It's not nothing."

"I mean, comparatively—"

"Shane." Ilya's thumb brushed carefully along Shane's cheekbone, below the bruise. "Someone hurt you. That's not nothing."

Shane didn't know what to say to that. Didn't know how to explain that he'd been hurt before, that this was part of life, that he'd learned a long time ago to shake it off and keep going.

But looking at Ilya's face, at the way his jaw was locked and his breathing deliberate, at the careful way he was touching Shane. Shane thought maybe Ilya wouldn't accept that explanation.

The bell above the door chimed, making them both tense. But it was the delivery guy, a tired-looking kid in his twenties holding two large bags.

"Order for... Rozanov?" the kid said, squinting at his phone.

"Here." Ilya slid off the counter and pulled out his wallet, handing over what looked like several bills. "Keep the change."

Rozanov, Shane's tired brain caught on the name, turned it over. So that was Ilya's last name. He'd never asked, and Ilya had never offered. Rozanov. It sounded... fitting, somehow. Russian and solid and a little bit dangerous.

The kid's eyes widened. "Uh, thanks man. Feel better," he added to Shane, who was still holding frozen peas to his face.

"Thanks," Shane managed.

The kid left, and Ilya brought the bags to the counter, unpacking them with careful efficiency. Two large coffees. real coffee, from the diner, not the convenience store sludge. Eggs, scrambled and still steaming. Toast with butter and jam. Bacon, crispy and perfect. Hash browns. Orange juice.

"This is enough food for three people," Shane said.

"You need to eat." Ilya pushed one of the containers toward him. "And I'm hungry too."

Shane picked up a plastic fork, his stomach suddenly reminding him that yes, he was starving. He took a bite of eggs and nearly moaned. "Oh my god. Real food."

"Better than chips?" Ilya's voice carried the faintest hint of warmth.

"So much better." Shane took another bite, then another. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until the food was in front of him. "Thank you. You didn't have to do all this."

"I wanted to." Ilya picked up his own container, eating with the same controlled precision he applied to everything. "You take care of everyone else. Someone should take care of you."

Shane felt heat creep up his neck. He focused on his food, not sure how to respond to that.

They ate in comfortable silence. The store was quiet, the fluorescent lights humming their usual tune, the city outside dark and still. Sitting here with Ilya at three in the morning, eating eggs and bacon. It was the most normal-abnormal thing Shane had ever done, Ilya settled on the counter like he'd always belonged there.

The bell chimed again, Shane tensed automatically, but it was a regular customer. A woman in scrubs, probably coming off a night shift at the hospital. She grabbed a energy drink and some gum, paid without incident, and left.

"You get a lot of customers this late?" Ilya asked.

"Some. Mostly people coming off shifts, or insomniacs, or..." Shane gestured vaguely. "People like that guy. Drunk, looking for cigarettes or whatever."

Ilya's whole body stiffened. "Has that happened before? Someone getting aggressive?"

Shane hesitated. "Sometimes. Usually they're loud, not violent. Tonight was... that was worse than usual."

"You shouldn't be here alone."

"I don't have a choice. It's my shift."

"Then I'll be here." Ilya said it like it was simple, like it was already decided.

"Ilya, you can't—"

"Why not?"

Shane stared at him. "Because you have a life? A job? Things to do that are probably more important than sitting in a convenience store?"

"Nothing is more important than this." Ilya stepped closer, holding Shane's gaze so directly that breathing felt complicated. "Than making sure you're safe."

Shane's breath caught. He didn't know what to say to that. Didn't know how to process the intensity of Ilya's focus, the way he said it like it was a fact, like Shane's safety was the most

important thing in Ilya's world.

"I don't understand you," Shane said quietly.

"What don't you understand?"

"Why you care so much. About me. I'm..." Shane gestured at himself, at the store. "I'm nobody. I work at a 7-Eleven and play college hockey and I can barely afford rent. And you're... you're..."

He trailed off, not sure how to finish that sentence. *You're dangerous. You're powerful. You're part of something I don't understand.*

"I'm what?" Ilya asked softly.

"I don't know," Shane admitted. "But you're not... this." He gestured at the store again. "You don't belong here."

"Maybe I want to belong here." Ilya's voice was quiet, almost vulnerable. "Maybe this is the only place I feel like I can be myself."

Shane looked at him. Studied him. At the expensive clothes tailored to his frame, the way he held his shoulders like he was always braced for combat, the violence Shane had watched him move through with cold precision. And then Ilya's thumb brushed Shane's hand, gentle and uncertain, and the walls cracked. Just for a second.

"Who are you, Ilya?" Shane asked.

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then: "Someone who wants to keep you safe."

Not an answer. But looking at the way Ilya held himself, open but guarded, like this confession cost him something. Shane thought maybe it was the only answer Ilya could give right now.

"Okay," Shane said finally. "You can stay."

"I was going to anyway." But Ilya reached out to brush his fingers against Shane's hand. "Thank you."

The rest of the shift passed in a strange, comfortable rhythm.

Customers came and went. fewer than usual, but steady. A college student buying energy drinks and instant ramen. A construction worker grabbing coffee before an early shift. A group of drunk girls buying snacks and giggling over something on their phones.

Each time the bell chimed, Ilya's whole body snapped to attention, tracking every person who entered, tensing until they left. His hand would drift toward his jacket, jaw setting into something calculating and lethal.

Shane realized after the third customer that this didn't bother him. If anything, it calmed him.

Shane went through his usual tasks, restocking shelves, wiping down the coffee station, checking inventory. Ilya watched him work, occasionally asking questions about what Shane was doing, why things were organized a certain way. Oddly domestic, having Ilya there.

Around four-thirty, during a lull between customers, Shane found himself leaning against the counter next to where Ilya sat, both of them nursing fresh cups of coffee from the diner order.

"Can I ask you something?" Shane said.

Ilya looked at him. "Yes."

"What you did earlier. When that guy..." Shane touched his face gently. "You moved like you knew exactly how to handle him."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "I have."

"Done what? Thrown people out of buildings?"

"Protected what's mine." Ilya's eyes were steady on Shane's. "Dealt with threats."

Shane's heart did something complicated at the phrase *what's mine*, but he pushed past it. "Is that what you do? For work?"

"Among other things."

"That's not an answer."

"No," Ilya agreed. "It's not."

Shane studied him. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Not yet." Ilya's expression was serious. "But not because I don't trust you. Because I don't want to put that weight on you. Not until I have to."

"That sounds ominous."

"It is." Ilya reached out and took Shane's hand, threading their fingers together. "I'm not a good man, Shane. I do things that would probably scare you if you knew. But I'm trying to keep that world separate from this. From you."

Shane looked down at their joined hands, Ilya's knuckles were still scraped from whatever had happened before he'd come to the store. Evidence of violence, of a life Shane couldn't quite picture.

"I'm not as fragile as you think," Shane said quietly.

"I know." Ilya squeezed his hand. "You're stronger than most people I know. But that doesn't mean I want to drag you into my world."

"What if I'm already in it?" Shane looked up, meeting Ilya's eyes. "You're here. You keep coming back. You're sitting in my convenience store at four in the morning because you won't leave me alone after some drunk asshole hit me. That seems pretty dragged-in to me."

Something raw crossed Ilya's face before settling back into control. "You could tell me to leave. To stop coming here."

"Is that what you want?"

"No." The word was immediate, fierce. "But it might be safer for you."

Shane thought about that. About the danger that followed Ilya, about the violence he'd witnessed, about all the things he didn't know and probably should be afraid of.

Then he thought about how safe he felt right now, with Ilya's hand in his. How Ilya had stayed all night to make sure Shane was okay. How Ilya looked at him like Shane was something precious.

"I don't want you to leave," Shane said.

Ilya's breath caught. "Shane. Stay."

"I don't know what you do. I don't know who you are, not all of it. But I know you make me feel safe. I know you care about me. And I know that when I see you walk through that door, I feel..." Shane trailed off, not sure how to finish.

"Feel what?" Ilya's voice was soft, almost hopeful.

"Happy," Shane admitted. "I feel happy."

Joy bloomed across Ilya's face, raw, unguarded, a smile that broke through every careful wall.

"I feel happy too," Ilya said quietly. "When I'm here. With you."

They sat there in the quiet store, hands linked, the city slowly waking up outside. The sky was starting to lighten, not quite dawn yet, but getting close, Shane's shift would end in an hour, and then what? Would Ilya leave? Would this strange, intimate bubble they'd created disappear with the sunrise?

"What happens now?" Shane asked.

Ilya's thumb traced circles on the back of Shane's hand. "Now I make sure you get home safe. And then I come back tomorrow night."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to." Ilya's eyes were steady on his. "I'm not going anywhere, Shane. Not unless you tell me to."

The world narrowed. Everything else—school, work, money, exhaustion—fell away. Only this existed: Ilya's hand in his, Ilya's commitment to stay. His body knew before his brain did what that meant.

"Okay," he said. "Then stay."

Ilya smiled. A real smile, soft and genuine. "Okay."

The bell chimed as another customer entered, breaking the moment. But Ilya didn't let go of Shane's hand, not right away. He squeezed once, gentle and reassuring, before releasing him so Shane could help the customer.

And when Shane glanced back, Ilya was still there on the counter, still positioned, present, solid, refusing to leave.

By seven AM, Shane couldn't feel his legs. The adrenaline had burned away hours ago, leaving him hollow. Muscles aching, face throbbing, his skull wrapped in cotton. Six hours of graveyard shift after getting hit in the face did that. Everything hurt in a way that only moving made worse.

The morning shift guy. Marcus, a nursing student who always looked as tired as Shane felt. Pushed through the door right on time.

"Jesus Christ, what happened to your face?" Marcus stopped mid-step, staring.

"Long story." Shane was already moving toward the back to grab his stuff. "Some drunk asshole. It's handled."

"You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." Shane pulled his backpack from the employee closet, wincing as the movement pulled at his sore ribs. He hadn't realized he'd hit the floor that hard. "All yours."

He clocked out, said goodbye to Marcus, and headed back to the front of the store, Ilya was still there, leaning against the counter like he'd been there all night. Which, technically, he had.

"Ready?" Ilya asked.

"You don't have to walk me home," Shane said, even though part of him. A bigger part than he wanted to admit. was relieved Ilya was offering. "It's not far. Like fifteen minutes."

Ilya just looked at him.

"Okay, fine." Shane adjusted his backpack. "Let's go."

They stepped out into the early morning. The sun was just starting to break over the buildings, casting everything in that particular golden-gray light that made the city look almost beautiful. Almost. The air was cold and sharp, and Shane pulled his jacket tighter around himself.

They walked in silence for the first few blocks, Shane was used to this walk. Did it twice a day, sometimes more. Past the bodega that sold the cheapest beer, past the check-cashing place with the bulletproof glass, past the corner where the guys usually hung out selling loosies and other things Shane tried not to think about too hard.

His neighborhood. Nothing special, nothing terrible. Just... where he lived.

But he noticed things differently as they walked. Saw it through Ilya's eyes.

The way Ilya's gaze tracked the group of guys still out at seven in the morning, clearly not heading to any legitimate job. The way his jaw tightened when they passed a building with boards over half the windows. The way his hand moved fractionally closer to Shane when they walked past an alley where someone was sleeping under a pile of cardboard.

Shane glanced at Ilya. His shoulders remained squared, but something shifted in the space between them, a tightening that had nothing to do with posture. The disapproval radiated off him in waves, or maybe it was concern. Shane couldn't quite tell.

"It's not that bad," Shane found himself saying. "I mean, it's not great, but it's cheap. And it's close to campus and the store."

Ilya didn't respond. His stride never wavered, but his shoulders angled slightly toward each doorway, each alley, cataloging. The watchfulness was tangible, a weight in the air between them.

They turned onto Shane's street. The graffiti was thicker here. tags on every surface, some artistic, most just territorial markings. Trash piled up near the curb where someone had missed collection day. A car with no wheels sat on blocks halfway down the block.

Shane's building was squeezed between a laundromat that was always either broken or blasting hot air onto the sidewalk, and a bodega run by a Korean family who'd been there for thirty years. The building itself was old brick, the kind that had probably been nice once, maybe a hundred years ago. Now it just looked tired.

They stopped in front of the entrance. The front door was propped open with a brick. The lock had been broken for three months and the landlord kept saying he'd fix it. The small lobby visible through the door was dim, the overhead light burned out, Shane could smell the familiar mix of old cooking, mildew, and something he'd never quite identified.

Ilya stared at the building. Then at the broken lock. Then at the group of guys smoking on the stoop next door, watching them with casual interest.

Shane felt something defensive rise in his chest. "It's not—look, I know it's not fancy, but it's what I can afford. The rent's cheap and it's mine and—"

"Which floor?" Ilya's voice was quiet. Controlled.

"Third. Why?"

"Fire escape?"

"Yeah, there's one. It's, " Shane stopped. "Why are you asking about the fire escape?"

Ilya's jaw was tight. He was still staring at the building, and Shane could practically see him cataloging every security risk, every danger, every reason this was a terrible place for Shane to live.

"Ilya." Shane touched his arm. "I'm fine. I've lived here for two years. It's fine."

"It's not fine." The words came out harder than Ilya probably intended. He closed his eyes briefly, then looked at Shane. "The lock is broken. Anyone can walk in."

"Yeah, but nobody ever comes in."

"Shane." Ilya's hand came up, cupping Shane's jaw gently, careful of the bruise. "This is not safe."

"It's what I can afford," Shane said quietly. "I'm doing the best I can."

Something shifted, his shoulders rolled back, his jaw unclenched. The disapproval drained like water.

"I know," Ilya said. "I know you are."

They stood there on the sidewalk, Ilya's hand still on Shane's face, the morning getting brighter around them, Shane was suddenly very aware of how he must look to Ilya. Exhausted, bruised, living in a building with a broken lock in a neighborhood where people sold drugs on the corner.

But Ilya wasn't looking at him with pity.

"Go inside," Ilya said finally, dropping his hand. "Lock your door. All the locks, if you have them."

"I have two deadbolts."

"Good. Use them both." Ilya pulled out his phone. "What's your number?"

Shane rattled it off, and Ilya typed it in. A second later, Shane's phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Text me when you're inside," Ilya said. "When the door is locked."

"You're being paranoid."

"I'm being careful." Ilya's eyes were intense. "Text me, Shane."

"Okay, okay." Shane adjusted his backpack again. "I'll text you."

He started toward the door, then stopped. Turned back, Ilya was still standing there, watching him with that same intense focus.

"Thank you," Shane said. "For staying. For... everything."

Ilya's hand brushed Shane's shoulder. The gentlest touch. "Get some sleep."

"You too."

"I will."

Shane didn't quite believe him, but he nodded anyway. He pushed through the broken door. It scraped against the floor, the brick keeping it from closing all the way. And headed for the stairs. The elevator had been broken since before Shane moved in.

He climbed the three flights slowly, his legs protesting every step. His face throbbed. His ribs ached. He was pretty sure he was going to sleep for twelve hours straight.

At the second-floor landing, he glanced out the grimy window that overlooked the street.

Ilya was still there. Standing on the sidewalk, hands in his pockets, eyes tracking the building. Waiting.

Shane's exhaustion felt different now. not a weight but a tether. Pulling him toward the third floor, toward his locked door, toward the text he was about to send. He kept climbing.

His apartment was at the end of the third-floor hallway. Studio, barely three hundred square feet, with a window that looked out at the brick wall of the next building. The door had two deadbolts like he'd told Ilya, plus the regular lock. Shane had installed the deadbolts himself when he moved in.

He unlocked all three, stepped inside, and locked them again behind him. The apartment was exactly as he'd left it. unmade bed shoved against one wall, tiny kitchenette with a hot plate and a mini-fridge, bathroom barely big enough to turn around in. His hockey gear was piled in the corner, still drying from yesterday's practice.

Not much. But his.

Shane pulled out his phone and texted the number Ilya had called from: *Inside. Doors locked. All of them.*

The response came immediately: *Good. Sleep. I'll see you tonight.*

Shane stared at the message for a long moment. Then he looked around his tiny apartment, trying to see it the way Ilya must have seen the building. The peeling paint. The radiator that clanked and hissed. The water stain on the ceiling from when the upstairs neighbor's toilet had leaked.

He'd never been embarrassed about where he lived before. It was just where he lived. A place to sleep between shifts and classes and practice.

But standing here now, thinking about Ilya's expression when he'd seen the broken lock, the way his jaw had tightened...

Shane shook his head. He was too exhausted for this—too drained to unpack what it meant that Ilya cared where he lived, that Ilya had stayed all night, that Ilya was planning to come back tonight.

He dropped his backpack, kicked off his shoes, and collapsed face-first onto his bed without bothering to change. His phone was still clutched in his hand.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he sent one more text: *Thank you for staying.*

The response came as Shane's eyes were already sliding shut: *Always.*

Shane drifted off with his phone still in his hand, the word "always" echoing in his mind, and the memory of Ilya's hand gentle against his bruised face.

Outside, three floors down, Ilya stood on the sidewalk for another five minutes—watching the building, watching the broken door, watching the third-floor window where he knew Shane was.

Then he pulled out his phone and made a call.

"Dimitri," he said when his second answered. "I need you to look into something."

Chapter 6: A Penthouse from My Sugar Daddy

The bell above the door chimed, and Shane looked up from restocking the energy drinks, already knowing who it would be.

Ilya.

He moved through the fluorescent-lit aisles like he owned the place, which, knowing him, he probably could if he wanted to. Two nights since the attack. Two nights of Shane jumping at shadows and sleeping with his baseball bat next to the bed. The bruise on his face had faded from purple-black to a mottled yellow-green, and the split in his lip was mostly healed.

Ilya's eyes went straight to Shane's face, cataloging the damage with that intense focus he had. His entire frame locked, shoulders drawing back, chest expanding as his breath caught, then held. The stillness that followed was absolute, the kind of motionlessness that made the air feel pressurized, that came right before violence. Then his exhale came, slow and deliberate through his nose, and his shoulders dropped incrementally, tension bleeding out in controlled stages. Satisfied Shane was still in one piece.

"You look better," he said, his accent wrapping around the words.

"Yeah, well. I heal fast." Shane shoved another Red Bull onto the shelf, trying to act normal. Like having a stupidly hot Russian guy show up at his minimum-wage job was just a regular Tuesday night.

Ilya didn't buy anything. He just... stayed. Leaned against the counter near the register, scrolling through his phone occasionally but mostly just watching Shane work. It should have been creepy. Instead, it made Shane feel weirdly safe, like having a guard dog. A very expensive, very dangerous guard dog in a coat that probably cost more than Shane's rent.

Shane was ringing up a customer, some college kid buying cigarettes and lottery tickets, when he heard the soft clink of metal on metal. He glanced over. Ilya had picked up his keys from where he'd left them by the register and was casually threading something onto the ring.

"Uh, what are you doing?" Shane asked as the college kid shuffled out.

Ilya set Shane's keys back down. Two new keys gleamed on the ring, silver and obviously freshly cut.

"What are these?" Shane picked them up, frowning.

"Keys to your new apartment." He said it like he was telling Shane the weather. Casual. Matter-of-fact.

Shane laughed. Had to. Because what else do you do when someone says something that insane? "Right. Sure. And I'm the Queen of England."

"You should enjoy the finer things in life, Shane."

The way he said Shane's name made something warm curl in his chest. But Shane shook it off, grinning. "Okay, seriously, what are these actually for? Your place? Because I'm not..."

"I'm not joking."

The smile died on Shane's face. Ilya was looking at him with those steady gray eyes, completely serious. No hint of humor.

"You... what?"

"Your new apartment. The keys."

"Ilya, that's, that's not funny."

"I am not trying to be funny."

Shane stared at him. Then at the keys. Then back at him. "You didn't actually, you can't just, people don't just *give* other people apartments!"

He shrugged, one shoulder, elegant. "I do."

"That's insane!"

"Perhaps."

The rest of Shane's shift passed in a blur. Ilya stayed the whole time, like he had before, and Shane kept glancing at those keys sitting next to the register. They looked so normal. Just keys. But they felt like they were burning a hole in his peripheral vision.

Every time Shane looked at them, Ilya was watching him with this small, satisfied smile.

When Shane's replacement finally showed up at 6 AM, he grabbed his jacket and his keys, those two new ones clinking against his apartment key and his mailbox key, and headed for the door. Ilya fell into step beside him like it was choreographed.

"Let me show you," he said.

"Show me what?"

"Your apartment."

Shane stopped dead on the sidewalk. "Ilya. No. This is crazy. I can't, I can't accept an *apartment* from you. That's—do you know how insane that sounds?"

"It's already done."

"Then un-do it!"

"It will sit empty if you don't use it." He said it so reasonably, like they were discussing whether Shane wanted cream in his coffee. "Waste of space."

"That's not—you can't just—" Shane ran his hand through his hair, frustrated. "Ilya, *why*?"

Instead of answering, Ilya started walking. Not toward the subway. Across the street.

Toward the nice building.

The *really* nice building, the one Shane passed every day on his way to work and never thought twice about because it was so far out of his league it might as well have been on Mars. Modern glass and steel, with actual landscaping out front and a doorman visible through the lit lobby.

"Ilya, what the fuck?"

Ilya kept walking, right up to the entrance. The doorman nodded at him, *nodded at him*, like Ilya belonged there, and held the door open.

Shane planted his feet on the sidewalk. "No. Absolutely not. This is too much."

Ilya turned back, patient. "Shane, "

"I can't accept this! This is—do you know what a place in this building costs? This is insane! What do you even expect me to, I can't, " The words were tumbling out too fast, tripping over each other.

"It's already rented. For a year. The money is spent." Ilya stepped closer, his voice dropping lower, more intimate. "Would you rather it sit empty? Waste?"

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is the point?"

"The point is, " Shane gestured wildly at the building, at Ilya, at everything. "The point is this is *crazy*! People don't do this! You don't just give someone an apartment!"

"I do."

"Well, you shouldn't!"

A couple walked past them, giving them curious looks. Ilya waited until they were gone, then said, quietly, "The lock on your building doesn't work. There's no security. It's not safe."

"So I'll... I'll get better locks, or... "

"Shane." Just his name, but it shut him up. "Let me do this."

"I don't even have any of my stuff," Shane said, grasping at straws. "My clothes, my gear, my... everything's at my place. I can't just... "

"So let's go pack a bag."

Shane gaped at him. "You're serious."

"Yes."

"Like, right now serious."

"Yes."

"Ilya—"

But Ilya was already walking, heading back the way they'd come, toward Shane's apartment fifteen minutes away. Shane stood there for a moment, keys digging into his palm, before he jogged to catch up.

They walked in silence, the neighborhood gradually shifting around them. The clean sidewalks and well-lit storefronts gave way to cracked pavement and shuttered windows. By the time they reached Shane's block, the difference was stark.

"This is insane," Shane muttered.

"You've said that."

"Because it *is*!"

Ilya didn't answer, just waited while Shane unlocked the door to his building, the one that didn't lock properly anyway, and climbed the stairs to his third-floor apartment. His actual apartment, with its water-stained ceiling and the radiator that clanked all night and the bathroom he shared with three other people.

Ilya stood in Shane's doorway, looking around with that same expression he'd had before. Not quite disapproving, but... assessing. Taking in the cramped space, the futon that served as Shane's bed, the milk crates he used as furniture.

"I'll just... give me a minute." Shane grabbed his duffel bag from the closet and started throwing things in. Clothes, mostly. Toothbrush. Laptop. His good headphones. The whole time, he kept up a running commentary of protests. "This is crazy. You know this is crazy, right? I can't just move into some apartment you rented. What are people going to think? What am I supposed to tell people? 'Oh yeah, some guy I barely know just gave me a penthouse', "

"It's not a penthouse."

Shane stopped, a pair of jeans halfway into the bag. "What?"

"It's not a penthouse. It's just a nice apartment."

"In *that* building, 'just a nice apartment' is, " Shane shook his head, going back to packing. "Doesn't matter. Point is, this is insane."

Ilya leaned against the doorframe, watching him. "Are you finished?"

"With packing or with telling you this is insane?"

"Both."

Shane zipped the duffel bag, slinging it over his shoulder. "I guess."

They made the walk back, fifteen minutes through gradually improving neighborhoods. Shane kept the duffel bag clutched tight, still muttering protests under his breath. Ilya walked beside him, patient and unhurried, like he had all the time in the world. Like walking Shane home, to Shane's *new* home, was exactly where he wanted to be.

By the time they reached the building across from the convenience store, Shane had run out of arguments. Or maybe he'd just run out of energy to keep fighting this.

They walked back across the street in silence. The doorman greeted Ilya by name, "Good evening, Mr. Rozanov", which made Shane's stomach do a weird flip. The elevator was the nice kind, with mirrors and soft lighting, not the kind that smelled like piss and had graffiti scratched into the walls.

Ilya pressed the button for the top floor.

"Ilya," Shane said slowly. "How many floors does this building have?"

"Twelve."

The elevator climbed. And climbed. And didn't stop until it reached twelve.

The doors opened directly into an apartment.

Not a hallway with apartment doors. Into an *apartment*. A private elevator that opened into a fucking *penthouse*.

"You said it wasn't a penthouse," Shane said faintly.

"I lied."

Shane stepped out into the space and just... stopped. Floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over the city, lights glittering like stars. The floors were real hardwood, gleaming. The furniture was modern and clean and looked like it belonged in a magazine. The kitchen had granite countertops and stainless steel appliances. There was a hallway leading to what Shane assumed were bedrooms, plural, and he could see a bathroom through one open door that was bigger than his entire current apartment.

"This is..." Shane turned in a slow circle, duffel bag hanging from his numb fingers. "Ilya, this is a *penthouse*."

"Yes."

"A *penthouse* penthouse. Like, the whole top floor."

"Yes."

"I can't..." Shane's voice cracked. "I can't accept this. This is too much. Way, *way* too much. What do you even expect in return? Because I can't, I don't have anything that could possibly, this is *insane*,"

"Shane." Ilya set his keys on the kitchen counter, that beautiful granite counter, and leaned against it, looking completely comfortable in this space that probably cost more per month than Shane made in a year. "Breathe."

"I am breathing!"

"You're panicking."

"Because this is *panic-worthy*!" Shane gestured at everything, at the windows and the furniture and the fucking *chandelier* hanging over the dining area. "This is, people don't do this! You don't just give someone a penthouse! What are you? What do you want from me??"

Ilya smiled. Actually smiled, like Shane had said something amusing. "Do you understand yet that you have a sugar daddy?"

The words landed like a punch to his sternum. Shane's breath stopped, actually stopped, his lungs refusing to cooperate, and his stomach twisted hard enough to make him dizzy. His legs went soft, threatening to buckle, and he locked his knees to stay upright. He gripped the duffel bag tighter, his knuckles going white, because if he didn't hold onto something he might actually fall apart right here on this expensive fucking floor.

Ilya pushed off the counter and crossed to Shane in three long strides. He was suddenly right there, invading Shane's space, close enough that Shane caught the scent of his cologne, something expensive and sharp. Shane's breath stuttered out of him involuntarily.

"Shane," Ilya said softly.

"We haven't even... we're not..." Shane couldn't form a complete sentence. His brain had short-circuited somewhere around "sugar daddy" and hadn't recovered.

Ilya reached up and cupped Shane's face, his hands warm and careful, mindful of the fading bruise on his cheek. His thumb brushed over Shane's cheekbone, gentle.

"We are now," he said.

And then he kissed him.

It wasn't rough or demanding. It was tender, almost sweet, his lips soft against Shane's. But there was something claiming about it too, something possessive in the way his hand slid to the back of Shane's neck, holding him there. Like he was marking territory. Like he was saying *mine*.

Shane's duffel bag hit the floor. His hands found Ilya's coat and didn't let go, fingers locked in the fabric while his mouth opened against Ilya's, matching the pressure, the heat. When Ilya pulled back, Shane's knees buckled forward, a full step this time, his body chasing what had just been taken away.

Ilya looked at him with those steady gray eyes, a small, satisfied smile on his lips. Like he'd just won something.

"Welcome home, Shane," he said.

Shane was in way, *way* over his head.

Shane stood frozen in the middle of the living room, his brain still trying to catch up with the last sixty seconds of his life. Ilya had just kissed him. Ilya had given him a penthouse. Ilya had called this *home*.

What the actual fuck was happening?

"Come," Ilya said, picking up Shane's duffel bag like it weighed nothing. "Let me show you around."

Shane followed on autopilot, his lips still tingling, his pulse hammering against his ribs. The apartment stretched out before them, open concept, all clean lines and expensive furniture that looked like it belonged in a magazine. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined one entire wall, offering a view of the city that made Shane's knees weak. The lights of Manhattan glittered in the darkness, stretching out endlessly.

"Kitchen," Ilya said, gesturing to the left.

Shane looked. Marble countertops. Stainless steel appliances that gleamed under recessed lighting. A gas range with six burners. An island with bar seating. A fucking *wine fridge*.

He reached out and touched the counter, half-expecting it to disappear under his fingers like a mirage.

"This is real," he said, more to himself than to Ilya. "This is actually real marble."

"Yes."

Shane turned in a slow circle, taking it all in. The living room had a sectional couch that looked like it cost more than his car. There was art on the walls, actual art, not posters. A coffee table made of what looked like reclaimed wood and steel. Everything was clean and modern and *expensive* in a way that made Shane's secondhand furniture back in his studio look like garbage picked off the street.

"So you just..." Shane turned to look at Ilya, who was watching him with that same patient expression. "You just kissed me. Like, that happened. That was real."

Ilya's mouth curved slightly. "Yes, Shane. That was real."

"Okay. Okay." Shane ran both hands through his hair. "Just checking. Because this whole night has been kind of surreal and I wanted to make sure I didn't imagine that part."

"You didn't imagine it."

"Right. Good. That's... good." Shane was pretty sure he sounded like an idiot, but his brain was still rebooting. "So this is really happening. All of this."

"Yes."

"The apartment and the kiss and the, everything."

"Yes."

Shane laughed, a little hysterical. "Okay. Cool. Just a normal Tuesday."

Ilya's smile widened slightly, something warm and amused in his eyes. He set the duffel bag down and walked toward Shane, closing the distance between them with that same fluid grace he always had. When he was close enough, he reached out and tucked a strand of Shane's hair behind his ear, the gesture so casual and intimate that Shane's stomach tightened, his hands reaching out instinctively to grip Ilya's coat.

"Come," Ilya said again. "There's more."

He led Shane down a hallway, past what looked like a home office and a second bathroom, and pushed open a door at the end.

The bedroom.

Shane stopped in the doorway.

The bed was *huge*. King-sized, maybe bigger, with a dark gray comforter and what looked like about seventeen pillows arranged perfectly. More floor-to-ceiling windows lined the far wall, the city lights casting a soft glow across the hardwood floors. There was a dresser, a closet that was probably bigger than Shane's current bathroom, and bedside tables with actual lamps on them.

It looked like something out of a hotel. The kind of hotel Shane couldn't afford even if he saved for a year.

"This is the bedroom," Ilya said, unnecessarily.

"I can see that." Shane's voice came out higher than normal. He was very aware of the bed. Very aware of Ilya standing next to him. Very aware of the implications of being shown a bedroom by a man who had just kissed him.

His shoulders drew up slightly, his chest tightening as if the air had gotten thinner. He could feel every point of contact between his body and his clothes, the seam of his shirt against his ribs, the weight of his jeans at his hips. His hands opened and closed at his sides, searching

for something to do. He kept his eyes on the bed because looking at Ilya right now felt dangerous.

Ilya's hand settled on the small of Shane's back, warm through his shirt. "There are two bedrooms. This is the master. The other is smaller, if you prefer."

Shane's brain latched onto that. "Two bedrooms. Right. That's... that's good. Options. I like options."

He was babbling. He needed to stop babbling.

Ilya guided him toward another door off the bedroom. "And this," he said, pushing it open, "is the bathroom."

Shane stepped through the doorway and stopped dead.

"Holy shit."

The bathroom was enormous. Bigger than his entire studio apartment, easily. The floors were heated tile, he could feel the warmth through his shoes, and the walls were done in some kind of pale gray stone that looked expensive enough to make Shane nervous about touching it. There were double sinks set into a floating vanity, the mirrors above them backlit with soft LED lighting.

But that wasn't what made Shane's brain short-circuit.

On one side of the room was a walk-in shower. Not a shower-tub combo with a plastic curtain. Not a cramped stall with a door that didn't quite close. A *walk-in shower* with frameless glass doors and what looked like a rainfall showerhead the size of a dinner plate. There were jets on the walls too, multiple jets, and the whole thing was tiled in the same pale stone as the walls.

And on the other side,

"That's a bathtub," Shane said faintly.

It wasn't just a bathtub. It was a *soaking tub*, deep and wide and freestanding, positioned under a window that overlooked the city. The kind of tub you saw in luxury hotel ads, the kind that probably cost more than Shane's entire year of tuition.

Shane walked over to it like he was in a trance. He reached out and touched the edge, smooth and cool under his fingers.

"This has a tub," he said, his voice distant. "And a shower. Separate. Both of them."

He looked at the shower again, then back at the tub, like he was cataloging something impossible. Something that couldn't exist in his reality.

"I've never had a bathtub," Shane said, still staring at it. "Not since I moved out of my parents' house. Just showers. Shitty showers with low water pressure and mold in the grout."

He touched the tub again, running his hand along the smooth curve of it. "This is... this is insane."

He turned to look at Ilya, who was leaning against the doorframe, watching him with that same patient expression.

"You're really..." Shane started, then stopped. Tried again. "You're hitting on me, right? Like, this isn't just... you're actually..."

He couldn't finish the sentence. Couldn't quite make himself say it out loud, like speaking it would break whatever spell was keeping this moment intact.

Ilya laughed.

It wasn't his usual controlled half-smile or the quiet huff of amusement Shane had heard before. It was a real laugh, warm and genuine, and it transformed his entire face. Made him look younger, less dangerous, more human.

"Shane," Ilya said, still smiling. "I kissed you. I gave you a penthouse. And you're *still* asking?"

Shane's shoulders drew up toward his ears, his hands suddenly finding the edge of the marble counter to grip. His throat tightened, that specific constriction that came with being caught in something obvious he'd somehow missed. He couldn't quite meet Ilya's eyes, his gaze dropping to the floor tiles instead, and when he spoke his voice came out smaller than he intended. "I just, I wanted to make sure! You're very hard to read sometimes!"

"Am I." Ilya pushed off the doorframe and crossed the bathroom in three strides. He stopped in front of Shane, close enough that Shane had to tilt his head back slightly to meet his eyes. "What do I have to do to make it clear?"

"I don't know! Maybe use your words? Say it explicitly?" Shane was very aware of how close Ilya was, of the warmth radiating off him, of the way his gray eyes had gone soft and amused.

Ilya reached up and cupped Shane's face again, his thumb brushing over Shane's cheekbone. "I want you," he said, his voice low and deliberate. "I have wanted you since the first night I walked into that store and you told me my coffee tasted like battery acid. I want to take care of you. I want you to be mine. Is that explicit enough? I want to fuck you."

Shane's brain flatlined somewhere around "I want you" and hadn't recovered.

"Oh," he managed. "That's... yeah. That's pretty explicit."

"Good." Ilya's smile turned slightly wicked. "Though I have to say, your obliviousness is charming. I've been pursuing you for weeks and you kept selling my gifts."

"They were expensive! I needed the money!"

"I know. That's why I gave them to you." Ilya's hand slid to the back of Shane's neck, his fingers warm against Shane's skin. "But these," he gestured around the bathroom, the

apartment beyond, ", these you keep. Understood?"

Shane swallowed hard. "This is too much."

"It's not."

"Ilya, this bathroom probably costs more than I make in a year, "

"I don't care."

", and the rent on this place is probably insane, "

"Already paid."

", and I don't even know what you do for a living that you can afford all this, "

Ilya's expression shifted slightly, something guarded sliding into place. "Shane, "

"I don't care," Shane said quickly, surprising himself. "I mean, I'm curious, obviously, but I don't... I don't care. Whatever it is." He took a breath. "You've been nothing but good to me. You've been... you've been really good to me. So whatever you do, I trust you."

Something in Ilya's expression softened. "You shouldn't."

"Too bad. I do anyway." Shane reached up and covered Ilya's hand with his own, where it still rested against his neck. "So yeah. Okay. I'll keep the apartment. And the bathroom with the ridiculous tub. And... and whatever this is. Between us."

"Whatever this is," Ilya repeated, his mouth curving. "I believe the term is 'sugar daddy.'"

Shane's shoulders drew up toward his ears, his breath catching audibly. His free hand pressed flat against Ilya's chest, not pushing away but needing something solid to anchor to. "Fuck, don't, that's not, " He couldn't quite meet Ilya's eyes, his gaze dropping to the marble counter instead. "That makes it sound so transactional."

"Why not? It's accurate."

"It's embarrassing!"

"It's honest." Ilya pulled him closer, until they were nearly chest to chest. "I'm going to take care of you, Shane. I'm going to make sure you're safe and fed and that you never have to worry about rent or broken security doors or working yourself to exhaustion. And in return..." His thumb brushed over Shane's lower lip. "In return, I'm going to take you to bed. I'm going to touch you until you forget why you were ever embarrassed about this. And you're going to let me do that."

His pulse hammered against his ribs, fast and uneven. "That's it? That's all you want?"

"For now." Ilya's smile turned slightly predatory. "We can negotiate the rest later."

His breath came shallow through his teeth, his fingers curling tighter against Ilya's shirt.

"Okay," he said, his voice coming out rough. "Okay. Yeah. I can... I can do that."

"Good." Ilya leaned in and kissed him again, soft and claiming, and Shane's jaw loosened immediately, his hands fisting in Ilya's shirt as he pulled him closer, deepening the kiss with a low sound caught in his throat. His protests had evaporated somewhere around the bathtub reveal, and now he was standing in a bathroom that cost more than his yearly salary, being kissed by a man who had just declared himself Shane's sugar daddy, and somehow, impossibly, this was his life now.

When Ilya pulled back, Shane was dizzy.

"Welcome home," Ilya said again, softer this time.

Shane looked around the bathroom, at the tub, at the shower, at the heated floors and the expensive tile and the city lights visible through the window. Then he looked back at Ilya, at the warmth in his gray eyes and the small smile on his lips.

"Yeah," Shane said quietly. "Okay. Home."

Ilya's phone buzzed in his pocket.

Shane saw the shift immediately, the way Ilya's expression tightened, the way his jaw set. He pulled out his phone, glanced at the screen, and something dark flickered across his face.

"I have to go," Ilya said, and he sounded genuinely regretful.

"Oh." Shane tried not to feel disappointed. "Yeah, of course. You've been here all night, you probably have..."

"Work," Ilya said simply. He pocketed his phone and stepped closer, reaching up to cup Shane's face again. His thumb brushed across Shane's cheekbone, gentle and possessive. "Rest. You've had a long night."

"I'm okay, "

"Shane." Ilya's voice was firm. "Rest. Take a bath. Eat something. There's food in the kitchen, I had it stocked."

Of course he did. Because apparently Ilya thought of everything.

"Lock the door after I leave," Ilya continued. "All the locks. And text me when you wake up."

Shane nodded. "I will."

Ilya leaned in and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, lingering there for a moment. "This is your home now. You understand?"

Shane nodded, not trusting his voice.

"Good." Ilya's hand slid down to squeeze Shane's shoulder once, then he stepped back. "I'll see you soon."

"Okay," Shane managed.

Ilya held his gaze for another long moment, like he was memorizing Shane's face, then turned and walked out of the bathroom. Shane followed him to the front door on autopilot, watching as Ilya paused in the doorway.

"Lock the door," Ilya reminded him.

"I will."

"Text me."

"I will."

Ilya smiled, that real smile again, the one that made Shane's chest feel too tight, and then he was gone.

The door clicked shut.

Shane stood there, staring at it.

His own breathing was the only sound, shallow, uneven, too loud in the emptiness Ilya had left behind. The apartment hummed around him: the refrigerator's low electrical thrum, the distant hiss of traffic fifteen stories below, the faint whisper of the HVAC system. But underneath it all was the absence of Ilya's presence, the space where his voice had been, and Shane's body hadn't caught up yet, still braced for something, still waiting.

He turned slowly, looking at the apartment around him. The massive living room with its floor-to-ceiling windows. The kitchen with its marble counters and stainless steel appliances. The hallway leading to the bedroom with its king-sized bed and the bathroom with the separate tub and shower.

His duffel bag sat on the floor by the couch, looking pathetically small and out of place.

Shane walked over to the windows and looked out at the city. Lights stretched out in every direction, glittering in the darkness. He could see his old building from here, or at least, he could see the general direction of it, fifteen minutes away in a neighborhood that suddenly felt like a different world.

He'd been living in a shoebox with a broken security door and a bathroom he shared with three other people.

Now he was standing in a penthouse.

Because Ilya had given it to him.

Ilya, who bought \$1,200 skates like it was nothing. Who left \$5,000 in a wallet as casually as someone else might leave a twenty. Who had just kissed him and called himself Shane's sugar daddy and told Shane to let him take care of things.

"What the fuck," Shane said out loud to the empty apartment. "What the actual fuck."

He started pacing.

Ilya had kissed him. Multiple times. That had definitely happened. Shane touched his lips, like he could still feel the pressure of Ilya's mouth against his.

Ilya wanted him. Had said it out loud. *I want you to be mine.*

His breath caught. He stopped mid-stride, one foot forward, suspended in the memory of it.

And the apartment, Jesus Christ, the apartment. This wasn't just nice. This was *luxury*. This was the kind of place Shane had walked past a thousand times and never imagined being inside, let alone living in.

For a year.

Ilya had rented it for a year.

Shane sat down heavily on the couch. It was leather. Soft, expensive leather that probably cost more than Shane's car.

His car that was currently parked fifteen minutes away in front of his shitty apartment that he apparently didn't live in anymore.

"Okay," Shane said to himself. "Okay. Let's... let's think about this logically."

Except there was nothing logical about this situation.

Ilya had given him a penthouse. Ilya, who Shane still didn't know that much about, except that he had money, a lot of money, and people who worked for him, and he moved like someone who knew how to hurt people. Ilya, who had thrown a drunk guy out of the convenience store like he weighed nothing, who had scraped-up knuckles and expensive watches and a way of looking at Shane that made him feel like the only person in the world.

Ilya, who had just declared himself Shane's sugar daddy.

Shane's phone was in his hand before he consciously decided to pick it up. He pulled up his contacts, found Hayden's name, and hit call.

It rang twice before Hayden answered, his voice thick with sleep. "Shane? Dude, it's like eight in the morning. What, "

"I need to tell you something," Shane blurted out.

There was a pause. Then Hayden's voice came back, more alert now. "Are you okay? What happened? Where are you?"

"I'm..." Shane looked around the apartment again. "I'm freaking out."

"Okay." Rustling sounds, like Hayden was sitting up. "Talk to me. What's going on?"

Shane took a breath. Then another one. Then the words just came tumbling out, too fast, tripping over each other in his rush to get them all out.

"Remember that guy I told you about? From the store? Ilya? He just, he gave me an apartment. A penthouse. Like, a really nice penthouse with a bathtub and heated floors and a view of the entire city. And then he kissed me. Multiple times. And he said, he said he wants me to be his, and he called himself my sugar daddy, and I don't even know what he does for work but he has so much money, Hayden, and I'm standing in this apartment that probably costs more per month than I make in a year, and he just left, and I, " Shane ran his free hand through his hair. "Hayden, what the fuck is my life right now?"

Silence on the other end of the line.

Shane waited, his heart pounding.

"Okay," Hayden said finally, his voice very careful. "Okay. So. Let me make sure I'm understanding this correctly. The hot Russian guy from the convenience store, the one who gave you the watch and the wallet, just gave you an entire apartment?"

"Yes."

"A penthouse."

"Yes."

"And kissed you."

"Yes."

Another pause. Then: "Shane. Buddy. I need you to be very honest with me right now. Are you in danger? Do I need to call someone? Because this sounds, "

"No!" Shane said quickly. "No, I'm not, I don't think I'm in danger. He's not, he wouldn't hurt me."

"How do you know that?"

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. "I just—I know. He's been nothing but, he's been good to me. Really good. He just, "

"Gave you a penthouse," Hayden finished. "Shane. Normal people don't do that. That's not, that's a lot of money. Like, a *lot* of money. What does this guy do for a living?"

"I don't know," Shane admitted.

"You don't know."

"He's never said. He just... he has money. A lot of it. And people who work for him. And he," Shane thought about the way Ilya had moved when he threw that drunk guy out of the store. The scraped knuckles. The expensive clothes and the way other people looked at him with a mixture of respect and fear. "I think he might be involved in something... not exactly legal."

"Jesus Christ." Hayden sounded like he was having a minor crisis. "Shane. Shane, you can't, you need to be careful. If this guy is, "

"I know," Shane said. "I know. But Hayden, he's, " He stopped, trying to find the words. "He's not scary. Not to me. He's just... he looks at me like I matter. Like I'm important. And he wants to take care of me, and I know that sounds insane, but, "

"It sounds insane because it *is* insane," Hayden said, but his voice had softened. "But... you sound happy. Underneath the freaking out, you sound... I don't know. Giddy?"

Shane let out a breathless laugh. "I think I might be losing my mind."

"Yeah, probably." Hayden was quiet for a moment. "But for what it's worth? If this guy makes you happy, and he's not hurting you, then... maybe it's okay to be a little insane. Just, be careful, okay? And keep me updated. If anything feels wrong, you call me immediately."

"I will," Shane promised.

"And send me your address. The new one. Just in case."

"Hayden, "

"Just in case, Shane."

Shane sighed. "Okay. Yeah. I'll send it."

"Good." Another pause. "So. He kissed you, huh?"

Shane's breath caught. He looked away from the phone, suddenly very interested in the ceiling. "Yeah."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Was it good?"

Shane thought about Ilya's mouth on his, the way Ilya had cupped his face like Shane was something precious. The way he'd said *mine* like it was a promise.

"Yeah," Shane said quietly. "It was really good."

Hayden laughed. "Well, shit. Okay then. I guess you have a sugar daddy now."

"Jesus, don't say it like that."

"Why not? That's literally what he called himself, right?"

Shane groaned and flopped back against the couch. "I'm hanging up now."

"Send me the address!" Hayden called out before Shane could end the call.

"I will!"

"And Shane?"

"Yeah?"

"Congratulations on the penthouse. And the hot Russian boyfriend."

"He's not my, " But Hayden had already hung up.

Shane sat there for a long moment, phone still in his hand, staring at the ceiling.

He had a penthouse.

He had Ilya's number in his phone.

He had a sugar daddy.

"What the fuck," Shane said again, but this time he was smiling.

Chapter 7: John Wick

The warehouse reeked of salt water and rust, the kind of smell that clung to your clothes for days. Ilya stood with his arms crossed, watching his men work under the harsh glare of industrial lights that swung slightly in the draft from the bay doors. Twenty kilos of cocaine sat on the metal table between him and the Colombians—brick after brick wrapped in plastic so tight it squeaked when touched.

"Count it again," Ilya said in Russian to Mikhail, who nodded and began rechecking the product with a blade, testing each brick methodically. The Colombians shifted their weight, impatient, but they didn't speak. They knew better.

Across from him, Carlos—mid-forties, expensive watch, cheap attitude—drummed his fingers on the table. "We've been here two hours, *compadre*. The product is good. You know it's good."

Ilya's gaze didn't waver. "Then you won't mind us being thorough."

The tension in the room pulled taut like a wire. Ilya could feel his men positioned around the perimeter, hands near their weapons. The Colombians had brought four guys. Ilya had brought eight. Math that everyone in the room had already done.

"There's a problem," Mikhail said quietly in Russian, holding up a brick. "This one's light. Maybe half a kilo short."

Ilya's jaw tightened. He switched to English, his accent thick but his words precise. "You're short."

Carlos's expression flickered—surprise, then calculation. "That's impossible. We packed these ourselves—"

"Half a kilo." Ilya stepped closer to the table, his presence filling the space between them. He was tired. Bone-tired. They'd been running deals since midnight, and his knuckles were still scraped raw from the convenience store two nights ago when some punk had thought he could skim from one of Ilya's operations. "You think I won't notice? You think I'm stupid?"

"*Hermano*, it's a mistake—"

"Fix it." Ilya's voice dropped lower, colder. "Now. Or we're done, and you can explain to your boss why you lost the Russian pipeline."

The warehouse went silent except for the distant sound of water lapping against the docks. Carlos stared at him, weighing his options, then jerked his head at one of his men. "Get another brick from the truck."

"Smart," Ilya said, stepping back.

Twenty minutes later, the deal was done. Three million dollars in cash loaded into Ilya's SUVs, the product loaded into the Colombians' truck. Handshakes that meant nothing, promises that meant less. Carlos and his men drove away into the grey morning, and Ilya finally let himself exhale.

"Boss." Dimitri appeared at his elbow, lighting a cigarette. "That's the third deal tonight. We're done, yes? You look like shit."

Ilya ran a hand through his hair. His shirt was wrinkled, his jaw shadowed with stubble. There was a smear of something—blood, maybe, from earlier—on his cuff that he hadn't noticed until now. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten."

Ten in the morning. He'd been awake for twenty-eight hours. There had been the collection runs in Brighton Beach, the sit-down with the Italians about territory, the thing with the accountant who'd been skimming (resolved now, permanently), and then three back-to-back deals. His body ached. His head ached. Everything ached.

But instead of thinking about sleep, he thought about Shane.

Shane, who'd probably just woken up. Shane, who'd probably had coffee and breakfast like a normal person. Shane, who lived in a world where the worst thing that happened was a bad grade or a missed alarm, not negotiations over kilos of cocaine with men who'd kill you for looking at them wrong.

Ilya pulled out his phone. The screen was cracked—he needed to replace it—but it worked. He opened his messages, scrolled to Shane's name, and typed: *Can I take you to breakfast?*

The reply came fast: *I'm at school! Have class rn*

Ilya stared at the message, then at the time. 10:07 AM. Right. Normal people didn't eat breakfast at ten in the morning. Normal people had already eaten. Normal people had schedules and classes and lives that didn't involve warehouses and cocaine and blood on their cuffs.

He typed back: *What time does class end?*

11:30

I'll pick you up.

Three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again. Then: *Okay* ❤️

That heart. That fucking heart emoji did something to Ilya's chest that he didn't have words for.

"You're texting your boy." Dimitri's voice was amused. Ilya looked up to find his second-in-command grinning at him, cigarette dangling from his lips. "You have that look."

"What look?"

"Like someone hit you in the head and you liked it." Dimitri reached into the backseat of his car and pulled out a bouquet of flowers—real flowers, expensive ones, roses and something else Ilya didn't know the name of, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. "Here. For your man."

Ilya stared at the flowers. "Where did you get those?"

"Florist on Brighton Beach Avenue. Opens at six." Dimitri thrust them at him. "Take them. You can't show up empty-handed. You're courting him, yes? Court him properly."

"I'm not—" Ilya started, then stopped. He took the flowers. They smelled good, clean, like something from a different world. "Thank you."

"You're gone for him," Dimitri said, shaking his head. "Completely gone. It's embarrassing."

"Fuck off."

"I'm happy for you, boss. Really." Dimitri clapped him on the shoulder. "Go. Clean up. You smell like a dock and look like you lost a fight."

Ilya did smell like the docks. And he probably did look like he'd lost a fight. He glanced down at himself—wrinkled shirt, scraped knuckles, that blood stain on his cuff. He couldn't show up to Shane's campus looking like this.

"I'm going home first," he said.

"Good idea. Maybe sleep for twenty minutes."

"No time." Ilya checked his phone again. 10:15. He had an hour and fifteen minutes. "I'll shower and change."

He drove back to his apartment in Brighton Beach, the flowers sitting in the passenger seat. The morning traffic was thick, normal people going to normal jobs, and Ilya felt the disconnect like a physical thing. He'd just overseen the movement of millions of dollars in cocaine. He'd threatened a man's life. He'd been awake for more than a day. And now he was going to pick up his—what? Boyfriend? The word felt strange in his mouth, too soft for what he was, but Shane was his, and that was all that mattered.

At his apartment, Ilya stripped off his clothes and stood under the shower until the water ran clear. He scrubbed the smell of the docks from his skin, washed his hair, watched the grime circle the drain. When he got out, he felt almost human.

He dressed carefully—clean black jeans, a dark grey henley, his leather jacket. He checked his knuckles. The scrapes were healing but still visible. Nothing he could do about that. He ran product through his hair, checked his reflection. Better. Presentable. Like someone Shane wouldn't be embarrassed to be seen with.

The flowers were still fresh, sitting on his kitchen counter. Ilya picked them up, locked his apartment, and headed back down to his car.

The drive to Shane's campus took thirty minutes. He parked in a visitor spot near the humanities building where Shane had said his class was, cut the engine, and waited.

The campus was busy with students moving between buildings, backpacks slung over shoulders, coffee cups in hand, talking and laughing. They looked so young. They were young—Shane's age, early twenties, their whole lives ahead of them. Clean lives. Legal lives. Lives where the worst thing they'd face today was a pop quiz or a difficult reading assignment.

Ilya felt ancient watching them. He was only thirty-two, but he'd lived lifetimes compared to these kids. He'd killed his first man at nineteen. He'd been running operations for the Bratva since he was twenty-five. He'd seen things, done things, that would give these students nightmares for years.

And Shane was one of them. Sweet, innocent Shane.

What the fuck was he doing?

But then the door to the humanities building opened, and Shane came out, and Ilya forgot every doubt he'd ever had.

Shane was wearing jeans and an oversized sweater, his backpack slung over one shoulder, his hair slightly messy like he'd been running his hands through it during class. He was talking to another student—a girl with dark hair—and laughing at something she'd said. The sound of his laugh carried across the quad, and Ilya felt it in his chest.

Ilya got out of the car, the flowers in his hand.

Shane saw him immediately. His eyes went wide, and his whole face transformed—surprise melting into joy, that smile that Ilya would kill for, die for, burn the world down for. Shane said something to the girl, who glanced at Ilya with obvious curiosity, then jogged across the grass toward him.

"Ilya!" Shane's cheeks were flushed, from the cold or from happiness, Ilya couldn't tell. "What are you—I didn't think you'd actually—" He stopped, staring at the flowers. "Are those for me?"

"No, they're for Dimitri," Ilya said dryly. "Yes, they're for you."

Shane took them carefully, like they might break, and buried his face in the blooms. When he looked up, his eyes were bright. "They're beautiful. What are they for?"

"Because I wanted to give them to you." Ilya stepped closer, close enough to smell Shane's shampoo, something citrus and clean. "Dimitri insisted I couldn't show up empty-handed."

"You didn't have to show up at all," Shane said softly. "But I'm really glad you did."

Ilya cupped Shane's face with one hand, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. Shane leaned into the touch, and Ilya felt something in his chest ease, some tension he'd been carrying since the warehouse, since the deals, since forever.

"I wanted to see you," Ilya said.

"You look tired."

"I am tired."

"Have you slept?"

"No."

Shane's brow furrowed with concern. "Ilya—"

Ilya kissed him. Right there on the campus quad, in front of the humanities building, with students walking past and probably staring. He didn't care. He needed this, needed Shane, needed the reminder that there was something good in his life, something pure, something that wasn't blood and money and violence.

Shane made a small surprised sound against his mouth, then melted into the kiss, his free hand coming up to grip Ilya's jacket. He tasted like coffee and mint, and Ilya wanted to drown in it, wanted to forget everything else and just exist here, in this moment, with Shane warm and solid against him.

When they broke apart, Shane's face was red. "People are staring," he whispered.

"Let them stare."

"Ilya." But Shane was smiling, that shy smile that made Ilya want to kiss him again.

"Have lunch with me," Ilya said. It wasn't really a question.

"I should study. I have a paper due—"

"Shane."

Shane bit his lip, then nodded. "Okay. Yes. Lunch."

They walked to the car together, Shane clutching his flowers like they were precious. Ilya opened the passenger door for him, waited until he was settled, then rounded to the driver's side. When he slid behind the wheel, Shane was looking at him with an expression Ilya couldn't quite read.

"What?" Ilya asked.

"Nothing. Just..." Shane reached over and took his hand, lacing their fingers together. "I'm happy you're here."

Ilya looked down at their joined hands—Shane's smooth and unmarked, his own scarred and scraped. The contrast was stark. Everything about them was a contrast. But Shane's hand fit in his like it was made to be there, and when Ilya looked up, Shane was still smiling at him.

"Me too," Ilya said quietly.

He started the car and pulled out of the parking lot, Shane's hand still in his, the flowers resting in Shane's lap. The exhaustion was still there, the weight of the night's work, the violence and the deals and the constant vigilance. But it felt lighter now. Manageable.

Shane made everything better. Shane made everything worth it.

They drove away from campus, toward whatever restaurant Ilya would find, toward an hour or two of normalcy, of pretending he was just a man taking his boyfriend to lunch. And for now, with Shane beside him, that was enough.

The restaurant was tucked into a quiet street in Little Italy, the kind of place that didn't need a sign because everyone who mattered already knew it was there. Ilya pulled up to the curb and a valet appeared immediately, opening Shane's door before Shane could even reach for the handle.

"Mr. Rozanov," the valet said with a respectful nod. "Good to see you again."

"Marco." Ilya handed over his keys and came around to Shane's side, placing a hand on the small of his back as they walked toward the entrance.

Shane was still holding the flowers, looking slightly overwhelmed. "They know you here?"

"I come here sometimes." Ilya opened the door for him. "The food is good. You'll like it."

Inside, the restaurant was warm and intimate—white tablecloths, soft lighting, the smell of garlic and fresh bread. Not ostentatiously fancy, but definitely several steps above anywhere Shane would normally eat. A hostess approached immediately, her face lighting up when she saw Ilya.

"Mr. Rozanov! We weren't expecting you today." She grabbed two menus. "Your usual table?"

"Please."

She led them through the dining room to a corner booth, private and quiet. Shane slid in first, setting his flowers carefully on the seat beside him. Ilya sat across from him, and immediately felt the exhaustion settle heavier into his bones. The adrenaline from the deal was wearing off, leaving him hollow and tired.

"Can I get you something to drink?" the hostess asked.

"Water," Shane said. "And coffee, if you have it?"

"Of course. Mr. Rozanov?"

"Espresso. Double."

She nodded and disappeared. Shane was looking around the restaurant with wide eyes, taking in the oil paintings on the walls, the well-dressed clientele, the polished silverware.

"This place is really nice," Shane said.

"You sound surprised."

"I mean—I don't know. I guess I figured we'd go to like, a diner or something." Shane picked up his menu, then immediately set it down again. "Ilya, there are no prices on this menu."

"I know."

"That's—that's a bad sign, right? That means it's expensive."

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm worrying about it." But Shane picked up the menu again, scanning the options. "Okay, what's good here?"

Ilya rubbed his eyes, trying to focus. "Everything. The pasta is fresh. The osso buco is excellent. The carbonara."

"You look exhausted."

Ilya dropped his hand, meeting Shane's concerned gaze. "I'm fine."

"When's the last time you slept?"

"Yesterday. The day before." Ilya couldn't quite remember. Time had blurred together somewhere around the third deal of the night. "It's fine. I'm used to it."

"That's not fine. That's like—that's really bad for you." Shane was frowning now, that little crease appearing between his eyebrows. "You can't just not sleep."

"I sleep when I can."

"Ilya—"

"Shane." Ilya reached across the table, catching Shane's hand. "I'm here now. With you. That's what matters."

Shane looked like he wanted to argue, but the server arrived with their drinks—water for Shane, espresso for Ilya, and a basket of warm bread with olive oil. Shane reluctantly let go of Ilya's hand to make room.

"Are you ready to order, or do you need a few minutes?" the server asked.

"The carbonara," Ilya said. "And the Caesar salad to start."

"I'll have the same," Shane said, closing his menu. When the server left, he tore off a piece of bread and dipped it in the olive oil. "So. You gonna tell me what you were doing all night that kept you from sleeping?"

"Work."

"What kind of work?"

Ilya took a sip of his espresso, the bitter heat helping to clear some of the fog from his mind. "The kind that pays for penthouses and hockey skates."

Shane's expression shifted—not quite suspicious, but thoughtful. "Right. That kind of work."

"Does it bother you?"

"I don't know yet." Shane ate his bread, considering. "I mean, I'm not stupid. I know you're not like, a lawyer or whatever. But..." He trailed off, then shrugged. "You've been good to me. That's what I know."

Something warm unfurled in Ilya's chest. Shane should be running. Should be asking more questions, demanding answers, putting distance between himself and whatever Ilya represented. But instead he was sitting here, eating bread, looking at Ilya like he was just a man and not a monster.

"You're too trusting," Ilya said quietly.

"Maybe." Shane grinned. "Or maybe I'm an excellent judge of character."

Their salads arrived, and Shane immediately started talking about his morning class—something about organic chemistry and a professor who couldn't explain concepts to save his life. Ilya listened, watching Shane's hands gesture as he talked, the way his face lit up when he got animated about something.

"—and then Tyler knocked over the entire beaker, and the TA just about had a heart attack because apparently that stuff is like, super expensive—" Shane paused, fork halfway to his mouth. "Am I boring you?"

"No." Ilya realized he'd been rubbing his face again, trying to keep his eyes open. "Sorry. Keep talking. I like listening to you."

"You look like you're about to fall asleep in your salad."

"I'm fine."

"You keep saying that, but I don't think you know what 'fine' means." Shane pointed his fork at him. "When we're done here, you're going home and sleeping. Like, actually sleeping. For hours."

"Is that an order?"

"Yeah. It is." Shane's expression was firm, but there was concern underneath it. "I'm serious, Ilya. You can't keep doing this to yourself."

Ilya wanted to tell him that this was normal, that he'd gone longer without sleep, that his world didn't allow for weakness or rest. But looking at Shane's worried face, he found himself nodding instead.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay?"

"I'll sleep. After lunch."

Shane looked satisfied with that answer. Their pasta arrived—perfect carbonara, creamy and rich, with crispy pancetta and fresh cracked pepper. Shane took one bite and made a sound that was almost obscene.

"Oh my god," Shane said around his mouthful. "This is incredible."

Ilya smiled despite his exhaustion. "Told you."

They ate in comfortable silence for a while. Ilya found himself stealing bites from Shane's plate, and Shane retaliated by stealing his pancetta. It was easy. Domestic. The kind of thing Ilya had never imagined wanting, but now couldn't imagine giving up.

"So," Shane said eventually, twirling pasta on his fork. "Tell me something about you. Something real."

"What do you want to know?"

"I don't know. Anything. What's your favorite color? What did you want to be when you were a kid? Do you have siblings?" Shane paused, then grinned. "Actually, wait—I already know you're a sugar daddy, so maybe I should be asking different questions."

Ilya nearly choked on his pasta. Shane's face went bright red.

"I can't believe I just said that out loud," Shane muttered, covering his face with his hands.

"I can't believe it took you this long to say it." Ilya was smiling now, genuinely amused. "I've been very obvious."

"You have not!"

"Shane. I gave you a penthouse."

"Okay, yes, but—" Shane floundered. "I thought maybe you were just really generous? Or like, felt bad about my living situation?"

"I felt bad about your living situation because I want you safe. I want you comfortable. I want —" Ilya stopped himself, aware they were in public. "I want to take care of you."

Shane stared at him, his pasta forgotten. "Oh."

"Yes. Oh."

"So we're... what are we?"

"What do you want us to be?"

Shane bit his lip, considering. "I don't know. I've never done this before. The whole... sugar daddy thing. Or the dating thing, really. I've been too busy with hockey and school."

"We don't have to define it right now." Ilya reached across the table, running his thumb over Shane's knuckles. "We can just... be."

"Be," Shane repeated softly. "Yeah. Okay. I can do that."

The server appeared to clear their plates. "Can I interest you gentlemen in dessert? We have a wonderful tiramisu today."

Ilya looked at Shane, who nodded enthusiastically. "We'll share one," Ilya said.

When the tiramisu arrived—a perfect square of coffee-soaked ladyfingers and mascarpone—Shane immediately dug in with his spoon. Ilya took a bite, then another, but he could feel his body shutting down. The exhaustion was winning.

Shane watched him struggle through another bite, then set down his spoon. "Okay, that's it. You're done. You're literally falling asleep at the table."

"I'm fine—"

"Stop saying that." Shane's voice was gentle but firm. He hesitated, then said, "Come back to my apartment."

Ilya's eyes sharpened, some of the exhaustion clearing. "Your apartment?"

"Yeah. The one you—" Shane's face flushed. "You did pay for it, after all. Seems like you should get to use it too."

Something warm and possessive flickered across Ilya's face. He leaned forward slightly. "You're inviting me to your apartment."

"To sleep," Shane said quickly. "You need to sleep. That's all."

Ilya's mouth curved into a slow smile. "Just sleep?" He let the question hang between them, loaded with possibility.

Shane made a strangled sound, his grip tightening on his spoon. "Yes! Just sleep! You've been up for like thirty hours! You need actual rest, not—" He cut himself off, his face going completely red.

"Not what?" Ilya asked, his voice dropping lower.

"Not—you know what I mean." Shane couldn't quite meet his eyes. "Sleep. Real sleep. That's what you need."

"And that's all you want?" Ilya reached across the table, running his thumb over Shane's knuckles. "Just sleep?"

Shane swallowed hard. "For now," he said quietly. "Yes. Just sleep. For now."

The 'for now' made something hot curl in Ilya's stomach, but Shane was right—he was dead on his feet. Anything else would have to wait.

"Okay," Ilya said softly. "Just sleep. For now."

They walked out to the car together. The valet held Shane's door open, and Shane slid in carefully, still holding his flowers like a lifeline. Ilya tipped the valet and got behind the wheel, his body moving on autopilot now.

Shane was quiet as they pulled into traffic, but Ilya could feel him looking over, could sense the nervous energy radiating off him.

"You okay?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah. Just... processing." Shane fidgeted with the flowers.

Ilya reached over and took Shane's hand, lacing their fingers together. Shane squeezed back, and they drove through the city like that—hands linked, the flowers resting in Shane's lap, the afternoon sun streaming through the windows.

The penthouse was quiet when they arrived, sunlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows and casting everything in warm afternoon light. Shane fumbled with his keys—still not used to having them, still not quite believing this place was his—and pushed the door open.

Ilya followed him inside, and Shane watched as his eyes swept over the space. There was satisfaction in his expression, something possessive and pleased. Like seeing Shane here, in this safe and beautiful place, settled something in him.

"Do you have something I can sleep in?"

Shane's brain short-circuited for a second. Ilya. In his clothes. In his bed. "Uh. Yeah. I think—hold on."

He disappeared into the bedroom, rummaging through the dresser that had come furnished with the apartment. Most of his own clothes were still at his old place—he'd only packed one bag, just enough for a few days. But he found a pair of gray sweatpants and a plain black t-shirt that might work.

When he came back out, Ilya was standing by the windows, looking out at the city. He turned when Shane approached, taking the clothes with a small nod of thanks.

Ilya disappeared into the guest bathroom, and Shane stood there for a moment, alone in the living room, trying to process the fact that this was happening. Ilya Rozanov—dangerous, powerful, impossibly generous Ilya—was about to sleep in his apartment. In his bed, probably, if the way this day had been going was any indication.

Shane's heart was racing. He needed to get changed too, needed to do something with his hands before he vibrated out of his skin with nervous energy.

He went into his bedroom and closed the door, leaning against it for a moment. The flowers Ilya had given him were still on the kitchen counter. His sugar daddy had given him flowers. His sugar daddy was currently changing in the guest bathroom and would probably be climbing into bed with him in about five minutes.

"What is my life," Shane muttered to himself.

He changed quickly, pulling on a worn NYU Hockey t-shirt and a pair of soft pajama pants. Then he climbed into bed, sitting against the headboard, trying to look casual and failing miserably.

In the guest bathroom, Ilya changed into Shane's clothes. The sweatpants fit well enough—Shane was tall, even if he was leaner than Ilya—but the t-shirt was snug across his shoulders and chest. It smelled like Shane's detergent, something clean and simple, and Ilya found he didn't mind.

He pulled out his phone and opened his messages to Dimitri.

I need you to do something.

The response came immediately: *Of course. What do you need?*

Get a crew. Go to Shane's old apartment—I'll send you the address. Pack up everything—clothes, books, hockey gear. Whatever furniture there is. Deliver it here in 6 hours.

There was a pause. Then: *You're moving him in while he sleeps?*

Yes.

Boss, you're completely whipped.

6 hours, Dimitri.

Yes, sir. I'll handle it. For what it's worth, I think it's romantic. In a slightly unhinged way.

Ilya didn't dignify that with a response. He sent Shane's old address, then pocketed his phone. His body was screaming for sleep now, the adrenaline from the day finally wearing off completely. But there was one more thing he needed to do.

He left the bathroom and walked down the hall to Shane's bedroom. The door was closed. He knocked softly.

"Shane."

There was a pause, then Shane's voice, slightly muffled, "Yeah?"

"I'm not sleeping alone."

Another pause. Longer this time. Then, "Okay."

Ilya opened the door. Shane was sitting in bed, looking nervous and adorable in an old hockey shirt, his hair still slightly messy from the day. His eyes were wide, tracking Ilya's movement as he crossed the room.

"I didn't come all this way to sleep in a different room," Ilya said quietly.

Shane's face flushed. "I—yeah. Okay. That's... okay."

Ilya pulled back the covers on the other side of the bed and climbed in. The mattress dipped under his weight, and he could feel Shane's nervous energy from across the space between them.

"Come here," Ilya said, his voice rough with exhaustion.

Shane hesitated for only a second before sliding down from where he'd been sitting against the headboard. Ilya reached for him, pulling Shane against his chest, one arm wrapping around his waist. Shane went stiff for a moment, then slowly relaxed, his head coming to rest on Ilya's shoulder.

"This okay?" Ilya murmured.

"Yeah." Shane's voice was quiet, almost wondering. "Yeah, this is okay."

Ilya could feel Shane's heartbeat against his side, quick and fluttering. His own was steadier, already slowing as sleep pulled at him. Shane was warm and solid in his arms, real in a way that made something in Ilya's chest settle.

"Sleep," Ilya said softly, his hand moving in slow circles on Shane's back.

"You first," Shane whispered.

Ilya's breathing was already evening out, his body finally giving in to the exhaustion. Within minutes, he was asleep, his hold on Shane never loosening.

Shane lay there in the quiet, listening to Ilya's heartbeat, feeling the rise and fall of his chest. This was insane. All of it was insane. A few weeks ago, he'd been selling a watch for rent money. Now he was in a penthouse, in bed with a man who'd given him flowers and paid for his lunch and looked at him like Shane was something precious.

It should have been terrifying. Maybe it was, a little. But mostly it just felt... right.

Shane closed his eyes and let himself drift off, safe and warm in Ilya's arms.

Six hours later, Ilya's phone buzzed on the nightstand.

He woke instantly, years of training making him alert even through the fog of deep sleep. The room was darker now—evening, not afternoon. Shane was still pressed against him, breathing deep and even, completely dead to the world.

Ilya carefully extracted his arm from around Shane's waist, moving slowly so he wouldn't wake him. Shane made a small sound of protest but didn't wake, just rolled over and burrowed deeper into the pillows.

Ilya grabbed his phone. A text from Dimitri: *Outside. We have everything.*

Ilya pulled on his pants and padded quietly out of the bedroom, closing the door behind him. He made his way to the front door and opened it to find Dimitri standing in the hallway with four other men and a rolling cart stacked with boxes.

"Everything?" Ilya asked quietly.

"Everything," Dimitri confirmed. "Furniture's coming up next. We were... thorough."

"Good." Ilya stepped aside to let them in. "Set it up in the living room—quietly."

The men moved with practiced efficiency, carrying in Shane's few belongings. Ilya directed them, keeping his voice low. Shane's futon, a small bookshelf, a couple of milk crates. A few boxes labeled "clothes" and "hockey gear."

It took thirty minutes to get everything inside. When the last box was placed, Dimitri looked around the apartment, now holding Shane's few belongings, and shook his head.

"You know this is crazy, right?" he said quietly.

"Yes," Ilya said.

"And you're doing it anyway."

"Yes."

Dimitri smiled slightly. "He's good for you, boss. I hope he knows what he's getting into."

"He will," Ilya said. "Eventually."

Dimitri and his crew left, and Ilya stood in the living room, looking at Shane's few belongings. Shane's life, transplanted here. Where it belonged. Where Shane belonged.

He was about to head back to the bedroom when he heard movement behind him.

Shane woke up slowly, awareness returning in pieces. Warm bed. Soft pillows. The lingering scent of Ilya's cologne.

Ilya.

Shane's eyes flew open. The other side of the bed was empty, the sheets cool. He sat up, confused. Had Ilya left? But no—he could hear voices. Muffled, coming from somewhere else in the apartment.

Shane climbed out of bed and padded to the door, opening it quietly. The voices were clearer now—Ilya's low rumble and another man's voice, speaking in Russian.

Shane walked down the hallway toward the living room, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Then he stopped dead.

There were a few boxes stacked near the couch. His futon—the one with the broken spring. His bookshelf. A couple of milk crates.

"What the fuck," Shane said.

Ilya turned from where he'd been standing by the window. Dimitri was there too, along with several other large men who were clearly finishing up moving things. They all looked at Shane.

"You're awake," Ilya said calmly, like this was completely normal.

"What—" Shane looked around wildly, taking in the scope of it. Everything. All of his things. "What did you do?"

"I had your apartment packed up," Ilya said, walking over to him. "You don't need it anymore. This is your home now."

Shane's mouth opened and closed. No words came out. He looked at Dimitri, who gave him a small shrug that seemed to say *what did you expect?*

"You—while I was sleeping—you moved my entire life?" Shane finally managed.

"Yes."

"That's—" Shane ran a hand through his hair, overwhelmed. "That's insane. That's completely insane."

"You were going to have to do it eventually," Ilya said reasonably. "This way, it's done."

"I didn't—I didn't agree to this!"

"You agreed to live here."

"I agreed to try it out! Not to—" Shane gestured helplessly at all his belongings. "Not to move in completely while unconscious!"

Ilya stepped closer, his expression softening slightly. "Shane. The lock doesn't work at your old place. It's not safe. You're not going back there."

Shane wanted to argue. Wanted to protest that Ilya couldn't just make decisions like this, couldn't just uproot his entire life without asking. But looking around at his things—his life, carefully packed and moved and now sitting in this beautiful, safe apartment—he couldn't quite make the words come out.

Because Ilya was right. He wasn't going back there. He'd known it the moment he'd walked into this place.

"You could have asked," Shane said weakly.

"Would you have said yes?"

"I—" Shane stopped. "Maybe?"

Ilya's mouth curved slightly. "Maybe."

"Boss," Dimitri said, drawing their attention. "We're done here. Anything else you need?"

"No. Thank you." Ilya pulled out his wallet and handed Dimitri a thick stack of bills. "For the crew."

Dimitri pocketed the money and nodded to Shane. "Welcome home, Shane."

Then he and the other men filed out, leaving Shane and Ilya alone in the apartment with Shane's few boxes.

Shane stood there, looking around at everything. His entire life, transplanted. His books, his clothes, his hockey gear. The poster from his dorm room freshman year. The coffee maker that only worked if you hit it on the side first.

"I can't believe you did this," Shane said quietly.

"Are you angry?" Ilya asked.

Shane thought about it. He should be angry. This was controlling and presumptuous and completely over the top. But looking at Ilya—at the careful way he was watching Shane, like he was genuinely worried he'd overstepped—Shane couldn't quite manage anger.

"I don't know what I am," Shane admitted. "Overwhelmed. Definitely overwhelmed."

Ilya moved closer, reaching out to cup Shane's face gently. "You're safe here. That's all that matters to me."

Shane's breath caught. "You're intense, you know that?"

"Yes."

"Like, really intense."

"I know." Ilya's thumb brushed over Shane's cheekbone. "Is it too much?"

Shane looked around again at all his things, at this beautiful apartment, at Ilya standing in front of him in Shane's too-small t-shirt with his hair mussed from sleep. At this impossible, overwhelming, generous man who'd somehow decided Shane was worth all of this.

"I don't know yet," Shane said honestly. "Ask me again in a week."

Ilya smiled—a real smile, warm and genuine. "Fair enough."

Shane's stomach chose that moment to growl loudly. Ilya's smile widened.

"Hungry?" he asked.

"Starving," Shane admitted. "What time is it?"

"Almost eight. We slept for six hours."

"Six hours?" Shane blinked. "I haven't slept that long in a while."

"Neither have I." Ilya looked more rested than Shane had ever seen him, the exhaustion gone from his eyes. "Come on. Let's get food. We can deal with the boxes later."

Shane glanced at the boxes again, still processing. "It's still a lot to deal with."

"We have time," Ilya said simply. He took Shane's hand, lacing their fingers together. "We have all the time you need."

Shane looked down at their joined hands, then back up at Ilya. "Okay," he said softly. "Okay. Let's get food."

They ended up ordering pizza—something simple that didn't require either of them to think too hard. Shane reached for his phone to look up places nearby, but Ilya was already pulling out his own.

"There's a place in Little Italy," Ilya said. "They deliver. Best pizza in the city."

"Of course you know a place," Shane said, amused despite himself.

Ilya glanced up at him, one eyebrow raised. "You doubt my pizza expertise?"

"I doubt nothing about you at this point." Shane gestured around at the apartment full of his belongings. "You've proven you can make anything happen."

Something warm flickered in Ilya's eyes. He placed the order—two large pizzas, one margherita and one with pepperoni and mushrooms, plus garlic knots and cannoli for dessert.

When he gave the address and his name, Shane heard the person on the other end say something deferential, almost nervous.

Shane filed that away with all the other little details that were starting to paint a picture he wasn't quite ready to look at directly yet.

"Forty-five minutes," Ilya said, setting his phone down. "Come on. Let's sit."

They moved to the couch—a sleek, modern thing in charcoal gray that Shane was still getting used to. Everything in this apartment was so nice, so far removed from his old futon with the broken spring and the coffee table he'd found on the street.

Shane sank into the cushions with a sigh. Ilya settled beside him, close enough that their thighs touched, and reached for the remote.

"What do you want to watch?" Ilya asked.

"I don't care. Anything that doesn't require thinking."

Ilya flipped through channels, past news and reality shows and cooking competitions, until he landed on an action movie already in progress. On screen, Keanu Reeves was suiting up in what looked like a very expensive armory.

"John Wick," Shane said, recognizing it immediately. "I've seen this one."

"So have I." But Ilya didn't change the channel. He set the remote down and shifted, his arm coming to rest along the back of the couch behind Shane.

It was an invitation. Shane hesitated for only a second before leaning into Ilya's side, letting himself be pulled in until he was tucked against Ilya's chest. Ilya's arm came down around his shoulders, solid and warm, and Shane felt something in him relax that he hadn't even realized was tense.

This was insane. All of it was insane. He'd known Ilya for what, a few weeks? And now he was living in a penthouse Ilya paid for, wearing Ilya's too-big pajama pants, curled up against Ilya's side like they'd been doing this for years.

But it felt right. That was the terrifying part. It felt *right*.

On screen, John Wick was methodically taking out a room full of armed men with brutal efficiency. Shane had always appreciated the choreography of these movies—the way the fights were more like dances, precise and controlled.

He felt Ilya's breathing change slightly during the action sequences. Not tense, exactly, but... attentive. Like he was watching with a professional eye.

Shane's gaze drifted from the screen to the few boxes by the wall. His entire life, packed up and moved while he slept. By men Ilya had called. Men who worked for him.

What does Ilya do?

The question had been lurking in the back of Shane's mind since the beginning, but he'd been too overwhelmed, too grateful, too attracted to ask it directly. Ilya had money—a lot of money. Ilya had people who jumped when he called. Ilya moved like someone who knew violence intimately.

And Ilya was Russian.

On screen, someone called John Wick "Baba Yaga." The Boogeyman. A man so dangerous that even other killers feared him.

Shane's eyes tracked back to Ilya's face. In the flickering light from the TV, Ilya's profile was all sharp angles and shadows. Beautiful and dangerous in equal measure.

The pieces clicked together with sudden, startling clarity.

The expensive gifts. The deference from restaurant staff and doormen. The way those men at the convenience store had looked at Ilya with fear. The scraped knuckles. The exhaustion from being up for twenty-eight hours doing *something* Ilya had never specified.

The Russian mafia.

Shane's heart kicked up in his chest. He should be scared. He should be running. Instead, he found himself turning in Ilya's arms, pulling back just enough to look at him properly.

"Ilya," Shane said, his voice coming out more serious than he'd intended.

Ilya's attention shifted from the TV to Shane's face, his expression going carefully neutral. "Yes?"

Shane glanced at the screen, where John Wick was reloading with practiced ease, then back at Ilya. "Please tell me you're not a Baba Yaga."

For a moment, Ilya just looked at him. Then his mouth curved into a slow, dangerous smirk that made Shane's stomach flip.

"Would it matter if I was?" Ilya asked quietly.

"I—" Shane's breath caught. "That's not an answer."

"No," Ilya agreed. "It's not."

They stared at each other. Shane could feel his pulse in his throat. He should push. He should demand a real answer. He should—

Ilya's hand came up to cup Shane's jaw, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. Then Ilya leaned in and kissed him.

It was different from the other kisses—slower, deeper, with an edge of something dark and possessive that made Shane's toes curl. Ilya kissed him like he was claiming him, like he was saying *mine* without words, and Shane found himself kissing back just as desperately.

When they finally broke apart, Shane was breathing hard. Ilya's eyes were dark, pupils blown wide, his thumb still tracing patterns on Shane's jaw.

"That's not an answer either," Shane managed, but his voice came out breathless and wanting.

Ilya's smirk returned. "I'm not an assassin," he said, which was technically an answer but also somehow not an answer at all.

"But you're—" Shane started.

"Worse," Ilya finished, and there was something almost playful in his tone, except Shane could see the truth in his eyes. The acknowledgment of what he was, what he did.

Shane should be terrified. He should be running for the door.

Instead, he heard himself say, "Okay."

Ilya's expression shifted, surprise flickering across his features. "Okay?"

"I mean, it's not okay," Shane clarified quickly. "I'm not—I don't—" He took a breath. "I'm not saying I'm okay with whatever it is you do. I'm saying I'm okay with... this. Right now. With you."

Something fierce and tender crossed Ilya's face. He pulled Shane back against his chest, pressing a kiss to the top of his head. "You're too good for me," he murmured into Shane's hair.

"Probably," Shane agreed, but he was smiling despite himself.

The doorbell rang, making them both jump.

"Pizza," Ilya said, reluctantly releasing Shane.

Shane watched him get up and head for the door, moving with that same fluid grace that Shane now recognized as something learned, something practiced. Something dangerous.

Ilya returned a moment later with the pizza boxes and a bag of sides, and they settled back on the couch. Shane grabbed a slice of margherita, the cheese still bubbling hot, and tried to focus on the movie instead of the man beside him.

On screen, John Wick was walking away from an explosion, and Shane couldn't help but wonder what Ilya's version of that looked like. What Ilya had been doing for twenty-eight hours that left him so exhausted. What kind of world Shane was stepping into by accepting this apartment, these gifts, this relationship.

But Ilya's arm was warm around his shoulders, and the pizza was perfect, and for now—just for now—Shane let himself have this. Let himself be here, in this moment, with this dangerous, generous, impossible man who looked at him like he was something precious.

The question of what exactly Ilya was could wait.

For now, Shane chose to stay.

Chapter 8: Skating and Sex

Shane pushed open the door to the penthouse, his hockey bag slung over one shoulder, every muscle in his body screaming. Coach had run them through conditioning drills for two hours straight, and Shane was pretty sure he'd left part of his soul on the ice.

Ilya was sitting on the couch, laptop open on the coffee table, but he looked up as Shane entered. His gaze tracked over Shane—sweaty, exhausted, still in his practice gear—and something warm flickered in his expression.

"Rough practice?" Ilya asked.

"Brutal." Shane dropped his bag by the door with a heavy thud, the sound of his skates shifting inside. "Coach is trying to kill us before regionals."

Ilya's eyes lingered on the hockey bag, then returned to Shane's face. "I can skate too," he said, casual as breathing.

Shane blinked, still catching his breath. "What?"

"Ice skate." Ilya closed his laptop, giving Shane his full attention. One dark eyebrow raised. "You seem surprised."

"I just—" Shane shook his head. "I didn't picture you as the ice skating type."

"I grew up in Moscow, everyone skates." Ilya's mouth curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "The Wollman Rink opens this weekend. We should go."

Shane's heart did something complicated in his chest. Ice skating. Together. In public. In Central Park, where anyone could see them. It sounded like—it sounded like a date. A real date, not just expensive dinners in private restaurants or quiet evenings in the penthouse.

"Okay," Shane heard himself say. "Yeah. Let's do it."

Ilya's smile widened, genuine this time, and Shane felt that now-familiar warmth spread through his chest. Three months ago, he'd been working double shifts at a convenience store, eating ramen for dinner, wondering how he'd make rent. Now he was agreeing to go ice skating with a man who'd bought him a penthouse, who looked at him like he was something precious and dangerous all at once.

His life had become unrecognizable. He still wasn't sure if that terrified him or thrilled him.

Saturday afternoon found them at Wollman Rink, the Manhattan skyline rising behind the ice like a postcard come to life. The air was crisp and cold, that particular November chill that promised winter was coming. Shane shoved his hands in his jacket pockets—the expensive wool coat Ilya had bought him, because of course he had—and tried not to think about how many people were around.

The rental counter smelled like old leather and ice. Ilya handled everything, as he always did, speaking to the attendant with that easy confidence that seemed to come naturally to him. Shane found himself watching the way Ilya moved, economical and precise, like everything he did was calculated.

"Size nine?" Ilya asked, and Shane nodded.

They laced up on the benches, surrounded by families and couples and groups of teenagers. Shane's fingers worked the laces with practiced efficiency—he'd spent years in skates, countless hours on the ice—but his hands felt unsteady now. Nervous.

"You're quiet," Ilya observed, finishing his own skates with practiced efficiency.

"Just thinking." Shane pulled the laces tight, tied them off. "Nervous about skating with you, I guess."

It wasn't a lie. The truth was that his stomach was doing flips, that being here with Ilya felt significant in a way he couldn't quite name. They'd had dinner together dozens of times. They'd spent hours talking in the penthouse. But this—this was different. This was public. This was them, together, where anyone could see.

This was a date.

The ice was crowded but not packed, a steady stream of skaters moving counterclockwise around the rink. Shane stepped onto it and felt that familiar sensation, the slight give of the blades, the way his body remembered how to balance. He pushed off, gliding forward, and felt some of his tension ease.

He'd been good at hockey—really good. Good enough for scholarship offers from three different schools before he'd chosen NYU. Good enough to make first line his sophomore year of high school and never look back. The muscle memory was still there, his body falling into the rhythm of it, his strides powerful and controlled.

Ilya stepped onto the ice beside him, and Shane was surprised—genuinely surprised—by how smoothly he moved. Not the aggressive, powerful skating of a hockey player, but something more elegant. Controlled.

"You really can skate," Shane said.

"I told you." Ilya glided closer, matching Shane's pace. "Did you think I was lying?"

"No, I just—" Shane shook his head, unable to explain. He'd pictured Ilya doing a lot of things. Ice skating gracefully around Central Park hadn't been one of them.

They fell into step—into stride—side by side. The rink stretched out before them, the ice reflecting the pale afternoon sun. Around them, couples held hands, children wobbled on unsteady legs, teenagers showed off with spins and jumps. Shane was hyperaware of Ilya beside him, of the space between them, of how easy it would be to reach out and—

No. He couldn't. Not here. Not with all these people around.

He'd never been good at this, at being open about who he was. Growing up in a small town in Canada, playing hockey, working at a coffee shop in the summer—there hadn't been room for it. He'd learned to keep that part of himself quiet, hidden, safe.

Even now, even with Ilya, even after everything—the fear was still there.

"You're tense," Ilya said quietly. They'd completed one lap, starting on their second. "Relax, Shane. We're just skating."

"I know." Shane forced his shoulders down, tried to breathe. "I'm fine."

Ilya didn't push, just stayed beside him, their movements synchronized. Shane focused on the skating, on the cold air in his lungs, on the scrape of blades against ice. Tried not to think about what this looked like, what people might think, what it meant that he was here with Ilya at all.

They were halfway through their third lap when it happened.

A kid—maybe ten years old, wearing a Rangers jersey—came shooting across the ice, cutting directly into Ilya's path. Ilya tried to dodge, his blade caught an edge, and Shane watched him start to fall.

Instinct took over. Shane's hand shot out, grabbing Ilya's, steadying him. Their fingers locked together, and for a moment they were frozen there, hands clasped, staring at each other.

"Thanks," Ilya said softly.

Shane should have let go. Should have released Ilya's hand, stepped back, put distance between them. Instead, he held on.

"You okay?" His voice came out rougher than he intended.

"Yes." Ilya's fingers tightened around his. "Better now."

They started skating again, still holding hands. Shane's heart was pounding, but not from fear anymore. Or not just from fear. Something else, something bigger, something that felt like standing on the edge of a cliff and deciding to jump.

No one was staring. No one seemed to care. Around them, other couples skated hand in hand, and they were just two more people on the ice, just two more bodies moving in the cold November air.

Shane's grip relaxed, his fingers threading through Ilya's more naturally. The tension in his shoulders eased. They glided together, their strides matching, and it felt—

It felt right.

"Better?" Ilya asked, and there was something knowing in his voice, something gentle.

"Yeah." Shane squeezed his hand. "Better."

They did four more laps like that, hands linked, skating in comfortable silence. Shane found himself watching Ilya more than the ice, noticing the way he moved, the grace in it. Ilya had been a soldier once, Shane knew. Had done things Shane couldn't imagine, had lived a life of violence and danger. But here, now, he looked almost peaceful.

"You're good at this," Shane said as they rounded the curve near the south end of the rink.

"So are you." Ilya glanced at him. "You never told me what position you play in Hockey, or where?"

"NYU. I play center."

"You move like you've been playing a long time."

Shane felt heat rise in his cheeks despite the cold. "Since I was five. Made first line sophomore year." He shrugged, trying for modesty. "I'm decent, I guess."

"I think you're being modest."

They skated in silence for another lap. The sun was starting to sink lower, the light turning golden, and Shane realized he didn't want this to end. Didn't want to leave the ice, didn't want to let go of Ilya's hand, didn't want to step back into the real world where things were complicated and scary.

Here, on the ice, it was simple. It was just them.

"One more lap?" Ilya suggested, as if reading his mind.

"Yeah," Shane said. "One more."

They took it slow, savoring it, and when they finally glided to the exit, Shane felt something settle in his chest. Something that felt like acceptance. Like maybe this could be okay. Maybe he could be okay.

The skate rental return was quick, their fingers cold as they unlaced the boots and handed them back. Shane's feet felt strange in his regular shoes, too stable, too grounded. Ilya's hand found his again as they walked away from the rink, and this time Shane didn't hesitate, didn't pull away.

"Hungry?" Ilya asked.

"Starving."

"Good. I made reservations."

Of course he had. Ilya always had a plan, always thought three steps ahead. It should have been annoying, that constant control, but instead Shane found it comforting. Someone else making decisions, taking care of things, taking care of him.

The restaurant was in Midtown, a steakhouse with dark wood paneling and leather booths, the kind of place Shane would never have gone on his own. The kind of place where the cheapest entree cost more than he used to make in a day. The host greeted Ilya by name, led them to a corner booth that offered privacy without isolation.

Shane slid into the booth, accepted the menu, and tried not to look at the prices. He'd gotten better at that over the past few weeks, at letting Ilya pay for things without feeling guilty about it. Better, but not perfect.

"The ribeye is excellent here," Ilya said, not even opening his menu. "And the lobster mac and cheese."

"You've been here before?"

"A few times. For business." Ilya's eyes met his across the table. "Never for pleasure."

The waiter appeared, took their drink orders—whiskey for Ilya, beer for Shane—and disappeared. The restaurant hummed with quiet conversation, the clink of silverware, the low jazz playing from hidden speakers. It was elegant and expensive and exactly the kind of place Ilya belonged.

Shane still wasn't sure he belonged here. Wasn't sure he belonged in any of this—the penthouse, the expensive dinners, the life Ilya was offering him. But he was here anyway, and that had to mean something.

Their drinks arrived. Ilya raised his glass. "To skating."

Shane clinked his beer against Ilya's whiskey. "To not falling on my ass."

Ilya's laugh was low and genuine. "You were never in danger of that. You're a good skater."

"So are you. Where'd you learn?"

"Moscow. There was a rink near where I grew up. My mother used to take me." Something flickered across Ilya's face, there and gone too quickly to read. "A long time ago."

Shane wanted to ask more, wanted to know about Ilya's mother, his childhood, the life he'd lived before all of this. But Ilya's expression had closed off slightly, and Shane had learned to recognize when a door was being shut.

They ordered—ribeye for Shane, filet mignon for Ilya, sides to share—and fell into easier conversation. Ilya asked about Shane's classes, listened with genuine interest as Shane talked about his economics midterm, his statistics homework. It still felt surreal sometimes, that Ilya cared about these mundane details of his life.

The food arrived, perfectly cooked, and they ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Shane was halfway through his steak when Ilya set down his fork and looked at him with that particular intensity that meant he had something to say.

"I want to talk about your job," Ilya said.

Shane's stomach tightened. "Okay."

"I'm not going to ask you to quit working at the convenience store." Ilya's voice was calm, measured. "I know what you'll say."

"No," Shane confirmed. "I won't quit."

"I understand why." Ilya picked up his whiskey, swirled it. "You need your independence. You need to feel like you're earning your own way. I respect that."

"But?" Shane could hear the unspoken word hanging between them.

"But I will keep spoiling you anyway." Ilya's smile was slight, almost apologetic. "I can't help it, I want to give you things. I want to take care of you. That's not going to change."

Shane set down his fork, his appetite suddenly gone. "Ilya—"

"I'm not asking for permission." Ilya's voice was gentle but firm. "I'm telling you how it is. You can keep your job, keep your independence. But I'm going to keep buying you things, taking you to dinner, making sure you have everything you need. Both things can be true."

Shane stared at him, trying to process. It should have felt suffocating, that level of care, that insistence on providing. But instead it felt—safe. Like Ilya was building a net underneath him, making sure he wouldn't fall.

"I don't know how to do this," Shane admitted quietly. "I don't know how to let someone take care of me."

"I know." Ilya reached across the table, his hand covering Shane's. "But you're learning. And I'm patient."

The weight of Ilya's hand on his was grounding. Shane turned his palm up, let their fingers intertwine. Around them, the restaurant continued its quiet hum, oblivious to the moment happening in their corner booth.

"Okay," Shane said finally. "Okay."

They finished dinner slowly, the conversation drifting to lighter topics. Ilya told him about a business deal that had gone sideways, about his associate Viktor's latest complaint about New York winters. Shane talked about his coworker Marcus, about the regular customers at the store, about the small dramas of his ordinary life.

It was normal. It was easy. It was everything Shane had never thought he could have.

When the check came, Ilya didn't even let Shane see it, just handed over a black credit card and signed the receipt with a flourish. They walked out into the November night, the city bright and alive around them, and Ilya's hand found Shane's again.

"Your place?" Ilya asked.

Shane's heart kicked up. "Yeah. My place."

The penthouse. His penthouse. He still couldn't quite believe it, even after weeks of living there. Couldn't believe any of this—the fancy dinners, the expensive gifts, the gorgeous, dangerous man walking beside him who looked at him like he was something worth keeping.

Three months ago, Shane had been nobody. Just another broke college student working a dead-end job, trying to survive. Now he was—what? Ilya's boyfriend? His lover? His kept boy? Shane didn't know what to call it, didn't know what label fit.

All he knew was that when Ilya looked at him, he felt seen. When Ilya touched him, he felt wanted. When Ilya spoke to him, he felt valued.

It was more than he'd ever had before. More than he'd ever thought he deserved.

The car was waiting—Ilya always had a car waiting—and they slid into the back seat. The driver knew better than to make conversation, just pulled smoothly into traffic and headed uptown. Ilya's hand stayed in Shane's, their fingers linked, and Shane found himself staring out the window at the city lights, his mind racing.

He wanted this. Wanted Ilya. Wanted everything Ilya was offering, even though it scared him, even though he didn't understand it, even though some part of him kept waiting for it all to disappear.

But tonight, watching the city lights blur past, Shane realized something. He was tired. Tired of being in control all the time, of making every decision, of carrying the weight of his own survival on his shoulders. School, work, rent, food, hockey—every day was a constant calculation of what he could afford, what he had time for, what he could manage. He'd been doing it for so long he'd forgotten what it felt like to just... let go.

Ilya never asked him to make decisions. Ilya just handled things. The restaurant reservations, the car, the penthouse, everything. At first it had made Shane uncomfortable, that level of control. But now? Now Shane was starting to understand the appeal. There was something freeing about it. Something that made the constant tension in his shoulders ease just a little.

He'd been thinking about it more lately. About sex. About what it would be like to give himself to Ilya completely, to stop fighting, to just surrender. The thought should have terrified him—and part of it did—but mostly it felt like relief. Like finally setting down a burden he'd been carrying too long. Ilya made him feel safe in a way no one ever had. Safe enough to be vulnerable. Safe enough to let someone else take control, just for a little while. Safe enough to stop pretending he had to be strong all the time.

Maybe tonight was the night he stopped fighting it. Stopped fighting himself.

The penthouse was warm when they entered, the lights of Manhattan spreading out beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. Shane shrugged off his coat, hung it in the closet, and turned to find Ilya watching him.

"What?" Shane asked.

"Nothing." But Ilya's eyes were dark, intense. "Just looking at you."

Shane's breath caught. The air between them felt charged, electric. They'd kissed before—plenty of times—but always Ilya had been the one to initiate it, to pull Shane close, to take control. Shane had responded, had kissed back, but he'd never been the one to start it.

Now, standing in the living room with the city glittering behind them, Shane made a decision.

He crossed the space between them and kissed Ilya.

It was clumsy at first, his angle slightly off, but then Ilya's hands came up to cup his face and it became something else. Something deeper. Shane's hands fisted in Ilya's shirt, pulling him closer, and Ilya made a low sound in his throat that sent heat shooting through Shane's body.

When they broke apart, both breathing hard, Ilya's eyes were almost black.

"Shane," he said, and his voice was rough.

Shane's heart was hammering so hard he could feel it in his throat. Heat pooled low in his belly, spreading through his limbs, making him feel loose and tight all at once. This was it. This was the moment. He could pull back, could laugh it off, could suggest they watch a movie or order dessert or do any of the hundred safe things they'd done before.

But he didn't want safe. Not anymore.

He'd been waiting for this without even realizing it—waiting through every dinner, every casual touch, every night he'd lain alone in the massive bed wondering what it would feel like to have Ilya beside him. Wondering what it would feel like to stop holding back, to stop being afraid, to just let himself want something. Want someone.

He was nervous. Terrified, actually. But underneath the fear was something stronger: trust. He trusted Ilya. Trusted him to be careful, to be patient, to take care of him the way he'd been taking care of him all along. And more than that—he wanted this. Wanted Ilya. Wanted to finally let himself have something good, something real, something that was just for him.

The decision crystallized, sharp and clear.

Shane's heart was pounding. "Bedroom. Now."

They made it to the bedroom in a tangle of limbs and kisses, Shane walking backward, Ilya guiding him. The bed was huge—king-sized, expensive sheets, everything in this place was expensive—and Shane sat on the edge of it, looking up at Ilya.

"I need to tell you something," Shane said, and his voice shook slightly.

Ilya knelt in front of him, hands on Shane's knees. "Tell me."

"I've never—" Shane swallowed hard. "I've never done this before."

The words hung in the air between them. Shane didn't specify what "this" meant—never with a man, never with anyone, never gone all the way—but from the way Ilya's eyes widened, the way his grip tightened on Shane's knees, he understood.

Ilya went very still. "You're a virgin."

Shane's face burned. "Yeah."

For a heartbeat, Ilya just stared at him. Then he surged up and kissed Shane so hard it stole his breath. His hands came up to frame Shane's face, holding him in place as he devoured his mouth. Shane made a startled sound that turned into a moan, and Ilya growled—actually growled—low in his throat.

He pushed Shane back onto the bed, following him down, his body covering Shane's. His kisses were consuming, desperate, moving from Shane's mouth to his jaw to his throat. Shane's hands scrabbled at Ilya's back, trying to pull him closer, and Ilya bit down gently on the junction of Shane's neck and shoulder.

"*Bozhe moy*," Ilya breathed against Shane's skin, and his hands were already working Shane's shirt buttons open with shaking fingers. He stripped the shirt away, then the undershirt, and immediately his mouth was on Shane's chest, kissing, tasting, claiming every inch of exposed skin.

Shane shivered, goosebumps rising everywhere Ilya touched. Ilya's hands mapped his body—his chest, his sides, his stomach—while his mouth followed the same path, hot and demanding.

"Lie back," Ilya instructed, and Shane obeyed.

The mattress was soft beneath him. Ilya stood, and Shane watched as he stripped off his own shirt, revealing the lean muscle beneath, the scars that marked his skin. Shane had seen Ilya shirtless before, but this felt different. This felt like a prelude to something more.

Ilya's hands went to Shane's belt, and Shane lifted his hips to help. His jeans slid down, then his boxer briefs, and suddenly he was naked, exposed, vulnerable in a way he'd never been before.

"Beautiful," Ilya breathed, and Shane felt his face heat.

"I'm not—"

Ilya's hand wrapped around Shane's throat—not squeezing, just holding, possessive. "You are." His thumb pressed against Shane's pulse point. "And you're mine. Say it."

"I'm yours," Shane whispered.

"Good." Ilya released his throat, his hands tracing down Shane's body with deliberate slowness. "Now lie still and let me take what's mine."

Ilya disappeared into the bathroom, returned with a bottle of lube. Shane's heart was racing, his cock already half-hard just from anticipation. Ilya stripped off the rest of his clothes with efficient movements, and Shane couldn't help but stare. Ilya was beautiful—lean and dangerous and scarred—and the look in his eyes was predatory.

"Spread your legs," Ilya commanded, settling between Shane's thighs.

Shane obeyed, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Ilya's hands pushed his thighs wider, holding them open.

"Keep them like this," Ilya said. "Don't move unless I tell you to."

The first touch of Ilya's lubed finger against his hole made Shane jump.

"I said don't move." Ilya's voice was firm, and Shane forced himself to stay still. "Good boy."

The praise sent heat through Shane's body. Ilya circled his entrance with one finger, maddeningly slow, not pushing in, just teasing. Shane's cock twitched, and he bit his lip to keep from begging.

"So eager," Ilya murmured, and there was amusement in his voice. "We have all night, *solnyshko*. I'm going to take my time with you."

Finally—finally—Ilya pressed the tip of his finger inside. The sensation was strange, intrusive, and Shane's breath hitched. Ilya pushed in slowly, so slowly Shane wanted to scream, until his finger was fully seated.

"Okay?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah. Keep—keep going."

But Ilya didn't keep going. He held still, his finger buried inside Shane, and just waited. Shane squirmed, trying to get more friction, more movement, anything.

"I told you not to move." Ilya's free hand pressed down on Shane's hip, pinning him. "You'll take what I give you, when I give it to you. Understand?"

Shane nodded, frustrated and aroused in equal measure.

Only then did Ilya begin to move, sliding his finger in and out in a torturously slow rhythm. The strangeness gradually faded into something else. Something that felt good. Shane's cock hardened fully, and he needed more.

"More," Shane gasped. "Please, I need—"

"You need what I decide you need." Ilya's voice was calm, controlled, and he didn't change his pace at all. "And right now, you need to learn patience."

He continued that same slow rhythm, in and out, in and out, until Shane was trembling with need. His cock was leaking against his stomach, his body begging for more, but Ilya was

relentless in his control.

When Ilya finally added a second finger, Shane nearly sobbed with relief. The stretch burned, but it was something, it was more, and Shane arched into it.

"Stay still," Ilya reminded him, and Shane forced himself to obey.

And something in Shane's chest loosened at the command. He didn't have to think. Didn't have to decide. Didn't have to be in control. For once—for the first time in so long—he could just *let go*. Let Ilya take over, let Ilya decide what he needed, when he needed it. It should have been terrifying, giving up that much control. But instead it felt like relief. Like finally setting down a weight he'd been carrying for too long.

Every day, Shane had to make decisions. Had to budget every dollar, plan every meal, schedule every shift around classes. Had to be responsible, had to be strong, had to keep it together. But here, now, with Ilya's hands on him and Ilya's voice telling him what to do—he didn't have to be any of that. He could just be. Could just feel. Could trust that Ilya would take care of him, would give him what he needed even when Shane didn't know what that was.

It was freeing. Intoxicating. Exactly what he'd been craving without knowing how to ask for it.

Ilya worked the second finger in with the same maddening patience, taking his time, ignoring Shane's whimpers and gasps. When he crooked his fingers and found Shane's prostate, Shane cried out, his hips jerking involuntarily.

"There it is," Ilya said with satisfaction, and then he did it again. And again. Rubbing that spot inside Shane until Shane was gasping, his cock achingly hard, his body trembling.

"Ilya, please—" Shane begged. "Please, I need—I need you to—"

"Not yet." Ilya's fingers kept moving, kept hitting that spot, kept driving Shane higher and higher without letting him fall. "You're not ready yet."

"I am, I'm ready, please—"

Ilya pulled his fingers out completely, and Shane whimpered at the loss. "You're ready when I say you're ready."

He added more lube, then pushed three fingers in at once. The stretch was intense, bordering on too much, and Shane gasped. Ilya didn't give him time to adjust, just started moving, working him open with ruthless efficiency.

"Look at you," Ilya murmured, and there was dark pleasure in his voice. "So desperate. So needy. You'd let me do anything to you right now, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Shane gasped. "Yes, anything, please—"

"Anything?" Ilya's fingers stilled, buried deep inside Shane. "Then be patient. Let me enjoy this."

And he did. For what felt like hours, Ilya worked Shane with his fingers, alternating between hitting his prostate and avoiding it entirely, between moving fast and slowing to a crawl. Every time Shane got close to the edge, Ilya would change his rhythm, keeping him hovering in that desperate space between pleasure and release.

Shane was sobbing now, actual tears leaking from the corners of his eyes, his body shaking with need. His cock was so hard it hurt, leaking steadily, and he needed—he needed—

"Please," Shane begged, his voice breaking. "Please, Ilya, I can't—I need you inside me. Please. I'll do anything. Please fuck me. Please."

Ilya's fingers stilled. He looked down at Shane—wrecked and desperate and beautiful—and smiled. It was a predator's smile, satisfied and possessive.

"Now you're ready," Ilya said, withdrawing his fingers.

Ilya withdrew his fingers, and Shane felt empty, bereft. He watched through half-lidded eyes as Ilya rolled on a condom, slicked himself with lube. Ilya's cock was thick and long, and Shane felt a flutter of nervousness—how was that supposed to fit?—but then Ilya was positioning himself, the head of his cock pressing against Shane's entrance, and Shane stopped thinking.

"Look at me," Ilya commanded, and Shane's eyes snapped to his. "I want to see you. Want to watch you take me."

Ilya pushed in, and Shane's world narrowed to the sensation of being breached, opened, filled. The stretch was intense, bordering on painful, and Shane's hands fisted in the sheets.

"Breathe," Ilya said, his voice strained. "Relax. Let me in."

Shane tried. Tried to relax, tried to breathe, tried to accept the thick intrusion. Ilya moved slowly, so slowly, giving Shane time to adjust. Inch by inch, he sank deeper, until finally—finally—he was fully seated, his hips flush against Shane's ass.

"Fuck," Ilya breathed. "You feel—Shane, you feel incredible."

Shane couldn't speak. Could barely breathe. He felt impossibly full, stretched beyond what he thought possible, and it hurt but it also felt—right. Complete. Like this was what his body had been made for.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, and Shane could hear the strain in his voice, could see the tension in his shoulders as he held himself still.

"Yeah." Shane's voice was wrecked. "You can—you can move."

Ilya pulled out slowly, then pushed back in, and Shane gasped at the sensation. It was different from the fingers—thicker, deeper, more intense. Ilya set a slow, steady rhythm, each thrust deliberate and controlled, and Shane felt like he was being taken apart and put back together with each movement.

"So tight," Ilya murmured, his eyes locked on Shane's face. "So perfect. Taking me so well."

Shane whimpered, his hands coming up to grip Ilya's shoulders. The pain had faded into a deep, aching pleasure that built with each thrust. Ilya angled his hips, and suddenly he was hitting that spot inside Shane again, and Shane cried out.

"There," Ilya said with satisfaction. "That's it. Let me hear you."

He kept that angle, each thrust rubbing against Shane's prostate, and Shane lost the ability to form coherent words. He could only moan, could only hold on as Ilya fucked him with that same maddening control, slow and deep and perfect.

"Touch yourself," Ilya ordered. "Want to see you come on my cock."

Shane's hand wrapped around his own cock, and he was so hard it almost hurt. He stroked himself in time with Ilya's thrusts, and the dual sensation—Ilya inside him, his own hand on his cock—was overwhelming.

"Ilya," he gasped. "I'm—I'm close—"

"Come for me." Ilya's thrusts grew harder, faster. "Let me see you. Let me feel you."

Shane's orgasm hit him like a freight train. He came with a cry, his body clenching around Ilya's cock, his release spilling over his hand and onto his stomach. The intensity of it was almost frightening, pleasure so sharp it bordered on pain, and he felt like he was flying apart.

Ilya groaned, his rhythm faltering, and then he was coming too, his hips jerking as he spilled into the condom. He collapsed forward, catching himself on his forearms, and buried his face in Shane's neck.

They lay there, breathing hard, bodies still joined. Shane felt wrung out, exhausted, more satisfied than he'd ever been in his life. Ilya's weight on top of him was grounding, comforting.

"Okay?" Ilya asked eventually, his voice muffled against Shane's skin.

"Yeah." Shane's hand came up to stroke Ilya's hair. "More than okay."

Ilya pulled out carefully, and Shane winced at the sensation. He felt empty now, used, and he was definitely going to be sore tomorrow. But he didn't care. It had been worth it. All of it. Shane's breath hitched, and he realized with surprise that his eyes were stinging. Not from pain—from something else entirely. Something bigger than he had words for. He'd just given himself to someone completely, let Ilya see him at his most vulnerable, let him take control in a way Shane had never allowed anyone before.

It should have been terrifying. Maybe it was, a little. But mostly it felt like relief. Like he'd been carrying something heavy for years and had finally set it down. His chest felt tight, full of something that might have been emotion or might have been the aftermath of the most intense experience of his life. A tear slipped down his cheek, and Shane didn't bother wiping it away. Ilya had seen everything else—what was one more piece of vulnerability?

He felt raw, exposed, like every defense he'd ever built had been stripped away. But he also felt safe. Held. Like Ilya would guard this fragile thing Shane had given him, would keep it precious. Would keep him precious.

Ilya disposed of the condom, then returned with a warm washcloth. He paused when he saw Shane's face, his thumb gently catching the tear track on Shane's cheek.

"Did I hurt you?" His voice was urgent, concerned.

Shane shook his head quickly. "No. No, I'm—I'm okay. Just—" He couldn't find the words. How could he explain that he was crying because he felt safe? Because for the first time in his life, he'd let someone see all of him and hadn't been rejected?

Ilya seemed to understand anyway, his expression softening. He leaned down and pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead, then another to his cheek where the tear had fallen.

"Okay," Ilya murmured. "I've got you."

He cleaned Shane gently, carefully, his touch tender in a way that made Shane's chest ache. When he was done, he climbed back into bed and pulled Shane against his chest.

"Thank you," Ilya said quietly. "For trusting me with this. With you."

Shane pressed his face against Ilya's shoulder. "Thank you for—for making it good. For taking care of me."

"Always." Ilya's arms tightened around him. "I'll always take care of you, *solnyshko*. Always."

Shane believed him. Lying there in Ilya's arms, his body sated and sore, his heart full, he believed him. This dangerous, beautiful man had claimed him, had taken him, had made him his. And Shane had let him. Had wanted him to.

He still didn't know what his life had become. Still didn't know if he deserved any of this. But lying there, safe in Ilya's embrace, he thought maybe—just maybe—he could learn to accept it.

Chapter 9: Tell Me Everything

The text came through during lunch, and Shane felt his phone buzz for what had to be the fifteenth time that day.

Ilya: What time does practice end?

Shane stared at the screen, his turkey sandwich suddenly tasteless in his mouth. He'd already answered this. Twice. Once last night when Ilya had asked about his schedule for today, and again this morning when Ilya had tried to convince him to skip practice entirely and spend the day at his apartment.

Shane: 6. Same as always.

The reply was instant.

Ilya: I'll pick you up.

Shane's jaw tightened. He set his phone face-down on the cafeteria table and tried to focus on what Marcus was saying about their upcoming game against St. Augustine, but his mind was elsewhere.

It wasn't that Shane didn't appreciate it. Part of him—the part that had spent years feeling invisible, feeling like he had to handle everything alone—loved that someone cared enough to check in, to want to see him, to make sure he was safe. Ilya's attention was intoxicating, overwhelming in the best way when they were alone together. The way Ilya looked at him like he was something precious, something worth protecting, made Shane feel seen in a way he'd never experienced before.

But it was also suffocating.

Yesterday, Ilya had shown up at school during Shane's free period, leaning against his car in the parking lot like he belonged there, drawing stares from everyone who passed. He'd brought Shane coffee—the expensive kind from that place downtown—and had stayed for twenty minutes, his hand possessive on Shane's lower back, his eyes scanning the parking lot like he was expecting an attack at any moment.

The day before that, Ilya had texted him thirty-seven times. Shane had counted.

This morning, Ilya had tried to convince Shane to let him drive him to school. When Shane had refused, Ilya had looked at him like he'd been slapped, his expression darkening in that way that made Shane's stomach twist with guilt and frustration in equal measure.

Shane picked up his phone again.

Shane: I'm taking the subway today. I need some space.

He hit send before he could second-guess himself, then immediately regretted it. The three dots appeared, disappeared, appeared again. Shane could practically feel Ilya's displeasure radiating through the screen.

Ilya: Why?

Shane: Because I need to be able to do normal things without you hovering over me 24/7.

Shane: I'm not made of glass.

The dots appeared and stayed there for a long time. Shane's heart hammered in his chest. He knew Ilya wouldn't like this, but he also knew he couldn't keep going like this. He felt like he couldn't breathe, like every moment of his day was being monitored and managed. He loved being with Ilya, loved the way Ilya made him feel when they were together, but he also needed to be able to exist on his own.

Finally, Ilya's response came through.

Ilya: Fine.

That was it. Just "fine." Shane knew that tone even through text—clipped, cold, barely restrained anger. He could picture Ilya's face, the way his jaw would be tight, his eyes hard.

Shane: Don't be like that.

Ilya: Like what? You want space. I'm giving you space.

Shane sighed and shoved his phone into his pocket. Marcus was looking at him with raised eyebrows.

"Trouble in paradise?" Marcus asked, stealing a chip from Shane's tray.

"Fuck off," Shane muttered, but there was no heat in it.

"Seriously though, man. You've been weird all week. Everything okay?"

Shane wanted to laugh. Everything was the opposite of okay. He was sleeping with a man who was involved in God-knew-what kind of illegal activities, someone had slashed his tires as a warning, and now that same man was tracking his every movement like Shane was a flight risk. But he couldn't say any of that to Marcus, couldn't explain any of it without revealing things that would put Marcus in danger too.

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

Marcus didn't look convinced, but he let it drop, launching back into his analysis of St. Augustine's defensive weaknesses. Shane tried to focus, tried to care about hockey strategy and game plans, but his mind kept drifting back to Ilya, to the weight of his attention, to the feeling of being simultaneously cherished and caged.

The rest of the day passed in a blur. Shane's American Literature lecture felt endless, the professor droning on about Transcendentalism and Emerson while Shane's mind was elsewhere. He kept his phone on silent, but he could feel it buzzing periodically in his pocket. He didn't check it. He knew it would be Ilya, and he didn't have the energy to navigate that minefield right now.

After class, Shane cut through Washington Square Park on his way to the subway. The December cold had driven most people indoors, leaving the park quieter than usual. He was thinking about practice, about whether he should text Ilya back, about how to balance independence with safety, when something made him look up.

A man was leaning against a dark sedan parked on the street, smoking a cigarette. There was nothing overtly threatening about him—just another guy taking a smoke break—but something about the way he was standing there, the way his eyes tracked Shane's movement across the park, made the hair on the back of Shane's neck stand up.

Their eyes met for just a second before the man looked away, taking a long drag from his cigarette.

Shane told himself he was being paranoid. It was just some guy. Maybe he was waiting for someone. There were a million innocent explanations. But Shane couldn't shake the feeling that the man was watching him specifically.

He pulled out his phone as he walked, partly to check the time, partly to look busy and less like a target.

Ilya: Are you ignoring me?

Ilya: Shane.

Ilya: Answer me.

Shane felt a flash of irritation. This was exactly what he was talking about. He couldn't go a few hours without Ilya demanding his attention, demanding to know where he was and what he was doing.

Shane: I'm on campus. Where else would I be?

Ilya: I don't like this.

Shane: I know. But I need you to trust me.

Ilya: It's not you I don't trust.

Shane didn't respond to that. He shoved his phone back in his pocket and glanced back toward where the man had been standing. The sedan was gone. Shane told himself he'd imagined the whole thing, that he was just on edge because of everything that had happened lately.

But as he descended into the subway station, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was being watched.

Practice was brutal.

Coach Morrison was in one of his moods, the kind where nothing anyone did was good enough, where every drill was run until someone puked or collapsed. Shane's legs were burning, his lungs screaming for air, and his body was already sore from the previous night with Ilya—a soreness that had nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with the way Ilya had pressed him into the mattress, had taken him apart with a possessive intensity that had left Shane marked and aching in the best way.

But now, as Shane pushed through another suicide drill, that soreness just made everything harder. His muscles protested with every stride, every sharp turn. He could feel his teammates' eyes on him, could hear Marcus muttering something about Shane being off his game.

"Hollander! You skating or sleepwalking?" Coach Morrison's voice boomed across the ice. "Move your ass!"

Shane gritted his teeth and pushed harder, ignoring the burn, ignoring the way his body wanted to give up. He wasn't weak. He wasn't going to be the guy who couldn't keep up, who couldn't handle the pressure.

By the time Coach finally blew the whistle to end practice, Shane was ready to collapse. He skated off the ice on shaky legs, his jersey soaked with sweat, his hair plastered to his forehead. The locker room was filled with the usual post-practice banter—guys chirping each other, making plans for the weekend, complaining about Coach's sadistic drills—but Shane just wanted to shower, change, and get the hell out of there.

He stood under the hot spray longer than usual, letting the water pound against his sore muscles, trying to wash away the tension that had been building all day. He thought about texting Ilya, about apologizing for being short with him earlier, but he also knew that if he did, Ilya would immediately offer to come get him, and Shane would be right back where he started—smothered, suffocated, unable to breathe.

He needed this. He needed to prove to himself—and to Ilya—that he could handle his own life, that he didn't need constant protection and supervision.

When Shane finally emerged from the shower, most of his teammates had already cleared out. Marcus was still there, pulling on his jacket.

"You good, man?" Marcus asked, genuine concern in his eyes.

"Yeah," Shane lied. "Just tired."

"You sure? You've been weird lately. Like, weirder than usual."

Shane managed a weak smile. "I'm fine. Just got a lot on my mind."

Marcus looked like he wanted to press, but he just nodded. "Alright. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah. See you."

Shane finished getting dressed, moving slowly, his body protesting every movement. He pulled on his jeans, his hoodie, his jacket. Slung his hockey bag over his shoulder and grabbed his backpack. His knuckles were bruised from blocking shots during practice, and there was a fresh bruise blooming on his ribs where he'd taken an elbow during a drill.

He was a mess, inside and out.

The rink was mostly empty when Shane finally left, just a few stragglers from the figure skating class that practiced after the hockey team. The parking lot was dark, lit only by a few scattered streetlights that cast long shadows across the pavement. Shane's breath fogged in the cold air as he headed toward the bus stop, his hockey bag heavy on his shoulder.

He was thinking about Ilya, about whether he should call him, about whether he was being unfair by demanding space when Ilya was clearly just trying to keep him safe. He was thinking about the man he'd seen outside school, about whether he should mention it to Ilya or if that would just make things worse.

He was distracted, lost in his own head, which was probably why he didn't notice the car until it was too late.

"Hey."

The voice came from behind him, casual, friendly. Shane turned, his hand instinctively tightening on the strap of his hockey bag.

There were two of them. The first was the man Shane had seen outside school—tall, lean, with a cigarette dangling from his lips. The second was shorter, stockier, with a shaved head and a scar running down his left cheek.

"You got the time?" the tall one asked, taking a step closer.

Every instinct Shane had was screaming at him that something was wrong. These guys weren't just asking for the time. The way they were positioned, the way they were looking at him—it was predatory, calculated.

"Sorry, no," Shane said, taking a step back. His heart was hammering in his chest, adrenaline already starting to flood his system. "I gotta go."

He turned to walk away, but the stocky one moved fast, cutting off his path. Shane's stomach dropped.

"Don't be like that," the tall one said, his friendly tone dropping away to reveal something cold and hard underneath. "We just want to talk."

"I don't know you," Shane said, his voice steady despite the fear coursing through him. "Get out of my way."

The stocky one smiled, and it was not a nice smile. "See, that's the problem. You don't know us, but we know you. We know you've been spending a lot of time with Ilya Rozanov. That's not very smart, kid."

Shane's blood ran cold. This wasn't random. This was because of Ilya.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Shane said, but his voice came out weaker than he intended.

"Sure you don't," the tall one said. He flicked his cigarette away and took another step closer. "Here's what's gonna happen. You're gonna come with us, nice and quiet. We're gonna have a conversation with Rozanov, and if he's smart, everyone walks away happy."

"And if I don't?" Shane asked, even though he already knew the answer.

The stocky one cracked his knuckles. "Then this gets messy."

For a split second, Shane considered his options. He could scream, but there was no one around to hear. He could run, but he was exhausted from practice and they'd catch him before he made it ten feet. He could try to fight, but there were two of them and they were both bigger than him.

But then he thought about Ilya, about the way Ilya looked at him like he was something precious, something worth protecting. He thought about all the times Ilya had told him he needed to be careful, that there were people who would try to hurt him to get to Ilya. He thought about how Ilya would feel if something happened to him, if these men took him and used him as leverage.

And he thought about how fucking tired he was of being treated like he was weak, like he couldn't take care of himself.

The tall one reached for Shane's arm, and Shane moved.

The hockey bag came around in a wide arc, forty pounds of equipment and momentum, and it caught the tall one square in the face. There was a satisfying crunch—nose breaking, Shane thought distantly—and the man staggered back, blood already streaming down his face.

"Fuck!" the tall one shouted, his hands flying to his nose.

The stocky one lunged at Shane, but Shane was already moving, dropping the hockey bag and bringing his fist up in a sharp uppercut that connected with the man's jaw. Pain exploded through Shane's knuckles, but he didn't stop. He couldn't stop. Adrenaline was singing through his veins, drowning out the exhaustion, the soreness, everything except the need to fight, to survive.

The stocky one recovered faster than Shane expected, his fist slamming into Shane's ribs right where the bruise from practice was already blooming. Shane gasped, the air driven from

his lungs, but he used the momentum to drive his elbow into the man's face, feeling cartilage give way under the impact.

He'd been in plenty of fights on the ice—hockey wasn't exactly a gentle sport—and he knew how to take a hit, how to give one back twice as hard. He knew how to use his weight, his strength, his anger.

And right now, Shane was very, very angry.

The tall one was back, blood still pouring from his broken nose, and he grabbed Shane from behind, his arm wrapping around Shane's throat. The man's other hand clamped around Shane's left wrist, yanking it back hard. Shane felt something snap—the plastic band of his Hello Kitty watch giving way—and then the watch was dangling loose, the face cracked, barely hanging on by a thread of broken plastic.

Shane drove his head back, felt it connect with the man's face, heard another satisfying crunch. The arm around his throat loosened, and Shane twisted free, spinning to face his attacker.

"You little shit," the tall one snarled, but his voice was thick, distorted by his broken nose.

Shane didn't give him a chance to recover. He drove his fist into the man's solar plexus, then followed up with a punch to the jaw that sent the man stumbling backward. The stocky one grabbed Shane's jacket, trying to pull him off balance, but Shane used the momentum to drive his knee into the man's stomach, then brought his elbow down on the back of his head when he doubled over.

The stocky one went down hard, his head bouncing off the pavement with a sickening thud.

Shane spun back to face the tall one, his chest heaving, his knuckles bleeding, his entire body screaming in protest. The tall one was on his knees, blood covering the lower half of his face, his eyes unfocused.

"Stay down," Shane growled, his voice rough.

The tall one looked up at him, and for a moment, Shane thought he was going to get back up, was going to keep fighting. But then something in the man's eyes changed—fear, maybe, or just the realization that this wasn't worth it—and he slumped forward, his hands braced on the pavement.

Shane stood there, breathing hard, his whole body shaking with adrenaline and rage and fear. His knuckles were bleeding, his ribs were screaming, and he was pretty sure he'd reopened whatever damage Ilya had done to his back the night before. But he was standing, and they weren't.

He'd won.

The realization hit him like a freight train, and suddenly his legs felt weak, his hands shaking so badly he had to clench them into fists to make it stop. He'd just fought off two grown men

who'd tried to kidnap him. He'd just—

Then he looked down at his wrist.

The Hello Kitty watch—the stupid, fifteen-dollar watch he'd bought as a joke to replace the \$25,000 Audemars Piguet he'd sold—was hanging by a thread of broken plastic, the face cracked straight through Hello Kitty's cheerful face. The little light-up feature that had made him grin every time he checked the time was dead, the screen dark.

Something hot and furious surged through Shane's chest.

"Motherfuckers broke my watch," he said, his voice flat and cold.

He'd been jumped. Nearly kidnapped. Beaten. And somehow, the thing that made him actually, viscerally angry was the broken watch. It was stupid. It was a cheap piece of plastic. But it was *his* cheap piece of plastic, and he'd liked it, and now it was ruined because these assholes had decided to use him as leverage against Ilya.

Shane ripped the broken watch off his wrist and shoved it into his pocket. His hands were still shaking, but now it was less from fear and more from pure, cold rage.

Oh God.

This was because of Ilya. This was because Shane had been stupid enough to get involved with someone dangerous, someone whose enemies would see Shane as a weakness to exploit. This wasn't random violence, wasn't just bad luck. This was targeted, calculated.

This was his life now.

Shane pulled out his phone with shaking hands, his fingers leaving smears of blood on the screen. He should call the police, he thought distantly. He should call 911, report an attempted kidnapping, let the authorities handle this.

But he knew he couldn't. Because if he called the police, they'd ask questions. They'd want to know why these men had targeted him, who they were working for, what Shane's connection to Ilya Rozanov was. And Shane didn't have good answers to any of those questions, didn't have answers that wouldn't put Ilya in danger.

Instead, Shane opened his camera and took a photo of the tall one's face, making sure to get a clear shot despite the blood. Evidence. Proof that this had happened, that Shane wasn't making it up or being paranoid.

Then he grabbed his hockey bag and walked.

He didn't know where he was going at first, just knew he needed to get away from the parking lot, away from the two unconscious men. His legs felt steady—surprisingly steady, actually. The adrenaline was draining away, leaving behind something cold and clear instead of the shaking mess he'd expected.

Shane found himself on the sidewalk outside a closed bodega two blocks from campus. He dropped his bag and sank down onto the curb, his back against the brick wall. His knuckles hurt where he'd split them open on that guy's face, and his ribs ached where the stocky one had landed that punch, but it was distant. Manageable.

He looked down at his hands. Blood was drying on his knuckles, dark and sticky. He should probably feel more freaked out about that. About all of this. He'd just fought off two grown men who'd tried to kidnap him. He'd knocked them both unconscious and walked away.

And he felt... fine.

Not fine, exactly. But not falling apart either. There was a strange, dark satisfaction sitting in his chest—he'd handled himself. He'd won. They'd underestimated him, thought he'd be an easy target, and he'd proven them wrong.

Shane recognized this feeling. This flatness, this clinical detachment. It was the same way he'd felt when his dad had his mild heart attack sophomore year—everyone else crying in the hospital waiting room while Shane sat there cataloging exit routes and counting ceiling tiles. His mom had squeezed his hand and said, "It's okay, baby. I know you process things differently. You'll feel it later."

She'd been right. He'd cried for three days straight once they got home, once it was safe, once he had all the information and knew his dad would be okay. But in the moment, his brain had shut down everything except the need to gather facts, to understand, to control what he could control.

His therapist in high school had explained it. Autistic nervous system, she'd said. When things get overwhelming, your brain protects you by going into information-gathering mode. Emotions get filed away for later processing. It's not that you don't feel them—you just feel them on a delay, when it's safe.

Right now, Shane's brain needed facts. Needed to understand what had just happened, who those men were, what the threat level was. The fear would come later—probably tonight, probably in the form of a panic attack or nightmares or both. But right now, he needed answers more than he needed to fall apart.

This was how he survived. This was how his brain kept him functional when everything went to shit.

Not fine, exactly. But not falling apart either. There was a strange, dark satisfaction sitting in his chest—he'd handled himself. He'd won. They'd underestimated him, thought he'd be an easy target, and he'd proven them wrong.

Shane pulled out his phone again, staring at Ilya's name in his contacts. He needed answers. He needed the truth. And he was done waiting for it.

He hit the call button.

Ilya answered on the first ring. "Shane." His voice was tight, controlled, but Shane could hear the worry underneath. "Are you—"

"Someone just tried to grab me." Shane's voice came out flat, matter-of-fact. "After practice. Two guys. They knew your name."

The silence on the other end was deafening. Then: "Where are you?" Ilya's voice had gone cold, deadly. "Shane, where are you right now?"

"I'm on Amsterdam, couple blocks from campus. Outside a bodega." Shane looked around, noting the cross street with clinical precision. "Corner of Amsterdam and 116th."

"Stay there. Don't move. I'm coming to you." Shane could hear movement in the background, Ilya already moving. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine. I fought them off." Shane's tone was calm, almost detached. "They're both unconscious in the parking lot. I took a photo of one of them."

"You—" Ilya's voice cracked. "Shane, are you—"

"Ten minutes," Shane said, cutting him off. "I'll be here."

He hung up before Ilya could respond. He couldn't do this over the phone, couldn't have this conversation while sitting on a curb. He shoved his phone back in his pocket and leaned his head back against the brick wall, breathing slowly, evenly.

The minutes crawled by. Shane watched cars pass, watched a few people walk by and give him wary looks—probably because he had blood on his knuckles and his shirt was torn. He didn't care. He just sat there, waiting, his mind replaying the fight with cold clarity.

He'd won. He'd actually won. And the scary part was how not-scary that felt.

The sound of tires screeching to a stop jolted Shane out of his thoughts. He looked up to see a black Mercedes pull up to the curb, and then Ilya was getting out of the back seat, Dimitri visible in the driver's seat.

Ilya looked wrecked. His face was pale, his eyes wild, his usual careful control completely shattered. He crossed the sidewalk in three long strides, dropping to his knees in front of Shane, his hands coming up to cup Shane's face.

"Let me see," Ilya demanded, his voice rough. His eyes scanned Shane's face, then dropped to his torn shirt, his bloody knuckles. "Shane, let me see—"

"I'm fine." Shane's voice was flat, steady. He pulled back from Ilya's touch, reaching into his pocket for his phone. "Couple bruised ribs, split knuckles. Nothing serious."

Ilya stared at him, and Shane watched something like confusion flicker across his face. Like Ilya had expected to find Shane falling apart, traumatized, and instead found him cold and composed. Ilya had seen men respond to violence in a hundred different ways—shock, tears, rage, the shaking aftermath of adrenaline crash. He knew what trauma looked like. But this—

Shane's clear eyes, his clinical tone, the way he was processing this like a checklist instead of a catastrophe—this was something else. Something Ilya didn't understand. It made his chest ache with confusion and an overwhelming need to protect Shane even from this strange, unsettling calm.

Shane pulled up the photo and held out his phone. "Two guys. They said they knew I'd been spending time with you. They wanted to take me, use me to get to you." His voice was hard, controlled. "Who the fuck was that?"

Ilya's face went from pale to ashen, his eyes fixed on the photo. Shane watched as a dozen emotions flickered across his face—fear, rage, guilt, something that looked almost like grief.

"Shane," Ilya breathed, reaching for him again.

Shane didn't pull away this time, but he didn't lean into the touch either. He just looked at Ilya, waiting. "Don't lie to me," he said quietly. "Don't tell me it's nothing. I just fought off two men who tried to kidnap me because of you. I deserve the truth."

Ilya's jaw clenched, his hands curling into fists at his sides. For a moment, Shane thought he was going to refuse, was going to try to deflect or minimize or protect Shane from the truth the way he'd been doing since they met.

But then Ilya's shoulders sagged, and he looked at Shane with an expression so raw, so devastated, that Shane almost felt something crack in his chest.

Almost.

"Get in the car," Ilya said quietly, his voice rough. "I'll tell you everything."

Shane stared at him for a long moment, then grabbed his hockey bag and stood. His legs were steady, his body calm despite everything. He climbed into the back seat, and Ilya followed, closing the door behind them. Dimitri pulled away from the curb without a word, merging smoothly into traffic.

The interior was quiet, insulated from the street noise. Shane sat there, waiting. His knuckles throbbed where the skin had split, and he could feel the beginnings of bruises forming along his ribs, but the pain was distant, manageable. He kept his eyes on Ilya.

Ilya stared out the window, his jaw tight, his hands clenched on his thighs. The silence stretched between them—ten seconds, twenty, thirty. The city lights blurred past, and still Ilya said nothing.

Shane's patience, already worn thin, snapped.

"Well?" Shane said, his voice hard. "You said you'd tell me everything. So start talking."

Ilya's jaw worked, but no words came out. He looked like he was wrestling with something, like every instinct in his body was screaming at him to keep his mouth shut, to protect Shane from the truth.

Shane felt anger flare hot in his chest. He'd just been attacked. He'd fought off two men who'd tried to kidnap him because of whatever the fuck Ilya was involved in. And Ilya was still trying to keep secrets?

Fuck that.

Shane leaned forward, bracing his forearm on the back of the front passenger seat. "Dimitri."

Dimitri's eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror, meeting Shane's gaze. There was surprise there, quickly masked.

"You better tell this fucker," Shane said, his voice low and dangerous, "that he needs to tell me everything. Right now. Or I'm getting out of this car and he can deal with his shit alone."

Dimitri's eyebrows rose fractionally. For a moment, no one spoke. Then Dimitri's gaze shifted slightly, looking at Ilya in the mirror.

"Boss," Dimitri said quietly. "He's right."

Ilya's head snapped toward Shane, his eyes wide. Shane held his gaze, unflinching. He wasn't backing down. Not this time.

Something shifted in Ilya's expression—surprise, maybe, or something that looked almost like respect. His mouth opened, closed, then opened again.

"You want the truth?" Ilya said finally, his voice rough. "Fine. I'll give you the truth."

He took a breath, and Shane saw his hands tremble slightly before he clenched them into fists.

"I'm Bratva," Ilya said. "Russian organized crime. I run operations in Brooklyn and parts of Manhattan—drugs, protection, smuggling. I've been doing this since I was sixteen." His voice was flat, emotionless, like he was reciting facts.

"What kind of drugs?" Shane interrupted, his voice hard. "Where from? How much?"

Ilya's eyes snapped to his, something like pain flickering across his face. "Shane—"

"Details, Ilya. Not generalizations. I want to know exactly what you do."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then he exhaled slowly, and when he spoke again, his voice was quieter. Heavier.

"Heroin. Cocaine. Primarily." He looked out the window, unable to meet Shane's eyes. "We import from South America—I have connections with Colombian suppliers. The cocaine comes through them. Heroin comes from Afghanistan, routed through Eastern Europe. Former Soviet states where I still have contacts."

Shane's stomach twisted, but he kept his face neutral. "How much?"

"Monthly shipments worth three to five million dollars." Ilya's jaw clenched. "We distribute through Brooklyn, Queens, parts of Manhattan. I have street dealers, protected territories. Anyone who tries to sell in our areas without permission..." He trailed off.

"Gets what?" Shane pressed.

"Gets dealt with." Ilya's voice was flat. "Violently."

The car was silent except for the hum of the engine and the sound of traffic outside. Shane felt like he was watching this happen to someone else, like he was floating above his own body.

"What about the smuggling?" Shane asked.

Ilya closed his eyes briefly. "Weapons. Illegal firearms from Eastern Europe—former Soviet states, same supply chain as the heroin. Automatic weapons, untraceable guns. We bring them through Red Hook port in shipping containers. False manifests, bribed customs officials."

"Who do you sell them to?"

"Other criminal organizations. Sometimes street gangs." Ilya finally looked at him, and there was something broken in his expression. "People who use them to kill other people."

Shane felt cold. He thought about the watch Ilya had given him—the one he'd sold for twenty-five thousand dollars. How many people had died to earn that money? How much blood was on those bills?

"What else?" Shane heard himself ask.

"Protection rackets. Businesses pay us for 'security'—pay us not to destroy their property, not to hurt them." Ilya's voice was getting rougher, like each word was being dragged out of him. "Loan sharking. We lend money at impossible interest rates. When people can't pay, we take everything they have. Sometimes we take more than that."

"More?"

"Their businesses. Their homes. Their bodies, if they have nothing else to give." Ilya's hands were shaking now. "We run girls—prostitution. Not directly, but we take a cut from the operations in our territory. We launder money through legitimate businesses. Restaurants, construction companies, real estate."

"Stop," Shane said quietly.

Ilya stopped, his chest heaving, his eyes wild.

Shane took a breath. His hands were steady. His voice was steady. He felt like he was made of ice. "Tell me about this war. Who's coming after me?"

Ilya stared at him like he couldn't believe Shane was still here, still asking questions, still sitting in this car instead of running as far and as fast as he could.

"Viktor Kozlov runs operations in south Brooklyn and parts of Queens," Ilya said finally. "We've been fighting over territory for six months. He wants what I have. He's been pushing into my areas, undercutting my prices, trying to turn my people against me." His jaw clenched. "Three weeks ago, he killed one of my men. Shot him in the head and left him in the street as a message."

"And you retaliated."

"Yes." Ilya's voice was flat. "I sent a message back. Two of his men. Made sure he knew it was me."

Shane felt something twist in his chest. "And now he knows about me."

"Yes." Ilya's voice broke on the word. "He must have been watching me. Saw us together. Realized you were—" He stopped, swallowed hard. "Realized you mattered to me. So he sent those men to take you. To use you as leverage. To hurt me through you."

Shane looked at him—really looked at him. At this man who'd given him a penthouse, who'd bought him skates, who'd held him so gently last night. This man who was also a drug dealer, a weapons smuggler, a killer.

"What else do I need to know?" Shane asked.

Ilya turned to face him fully, and there was something desperate in his eyes now. Something raw. "You understand what this means? You can't just walk around like nothing happened. They'll come for you again. Kozlov won't stop—he'll send more men, better men. Professionals, not just street thugs." His voice was urgent, almost pleading. "You got lucky today, Shane. You caught them off guard. Next time—"

"I handled it today, didn't I?" Shane interrupted, his voice calm. Almost dismissive.

Ilya stared at him. "That's not the point—"

"I knocked two guys unconscious and walked away without a scratch." Shane shrugged, ignoring the ache in his ribs. "I'm not saying I want it to happen again, but I'm not exactly helpless."

"Shane—"

"The only thing I'm worried about," Shane continued, "is getting jumped at work." He met Ilya's eyes. "The convenience store. Too many civilians around. Can't fight back properly without putting people at risk. Some kid could walk in, or an old lady, and if I'm throwing punches..." He trailed off. "That's the problem. Not me handling myself."

Ilya's expression shifted immediately—from desperate to determined. "Then quit."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Quit the job. You don't need it." Ilya leaned forward, his voice firm. "You live in the penthouse. I pay for everything. There's no reason for you to keep working at that store. Just quit."

"No."

The word came out flat, final. Ilya's eyes narrowed.

"Shane—"

"No," Shane repeated. "I'm not quitting my job."

"This is not about pride—"

"It's not about pride." Shane's voice was hard now. "It's about having something that's mine. Something that's not part of your world. I need that, Ilya. I need something normal, something I do because I want to, not because you're paying for it."

Ilya's jaw clenched. "Your safety is more important than your independence."

"My safety is my problem."

"Like hell it is." Ilya's voice rose, frustration bleeding through. "You're in danger because of me. Because Kozlov wants to hurt me through you. That makes it my responsibility—"

"I'm not giving up everything just because your enemies are assholes," Shane cut him off. "I'm not going to hide in that penthouse and let you control every aspect of my life. I won't do it."

"This is not negotiable, Shane. Your safety—"

"Is mine to manage." Shane's voice was steel. "I'm not quitting."

They stared at each other, the tension in the car thick enough to cut. Dimitri's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror, watching them both.

Finally, Ilya exhaled sharply through his nose. "Fine." The word came out clipped, angry. "Then one of my men will be there. Every second of your shift."

Shane opened his mouth to argue, but Ilya kept going.

"Inside the store or outside, I don't care. But you will have protection. Someone who knows what they're doing, who can handle Kozlov's men if they come back." His eyes were hard. "That's the compromise, Shane. You keep the job, but you don't work alone. Not anymore."

Shane considered this. It wasn't ideal—having one of Ilya's guys hovering around while he worked. But it was better than quitting. Better than giving up the one piece of his life that was still his own.

"Okay," Shane said finally. "I can live with that."

Ilya's shoulders relaxed fractionally, though his jaw was still tight. He looked relieved and frustrated in equal measure—like he'd won something but not nearly enough.

From the front seat, Dimitri made a sound that might have been a cough. Or a laugh. "Kid's got balls," he muttered, just loud enough to be heard.

Ilya shot him a look, but didn't argue. Because it was true.

Shane had just stood his ground against a man who ran half of Brooklyn's criminal underworld. And won. And called him a fucker.

Chapter 10: His Brother Wanted His Attention?

The last question on Shane's Physical Chemistry final stared back at him—something about quantum mechanical operators and partition functions that made his brain feel like it was melting out of his ears. He'd spent the last three hours working through thermodynamic calculations and reaction kinetics problems that required every bit of calculus he'd ever learned, and he was pretty sure he'd gotten at least half of them wrong.

He filled in what he hoped was the right answer, set down his pencil, and let out a long, slow breath.

Done.

He was done.

Shane gathered his exam booklet and walked it up to the front of the lecture hall, where Professor Tremblay took it with a nod. Physical Chemistry was notorious—the class that separated biochemistry majors who were serious from those who weren't. Shane had watched three people drop it after the first midterm. The winter sunlight streaming through the tall windows felt different now. Lighter. Like the weight of the entire semester had just lifted off his shoulders.

Well. Mostly lifted. He still had Biochemistry II lab to finish next week—six hours of protein purification that would probably end with him pipetting until his hands cramped and praying his yield was high enough to pass. But that was future Shane's problem. Right now, finals were done.

Outside, the NYU campus was transformed. December had settled over New York City with that particular kind of cold that made everything feel sharper, cleaner. String lights were wrapped around bare tree branches, and someone had hung a massive wreath on the library entrance. Students hurried past in puffy coats and scarves, their breath fogging in the air, everyone wearing that same expression of exhausted relief.

Winter break. Three whole weeks of no classes, no exams, no 3 AM cram sessions fueled by bad coffee and desperation.

Shane pulled out his phone as he walked, checking the date. December 18th. One week until Christmas.

Christmas with Ilya.

The thought made something warm unfurl in Shane's chest, cutting through the cold. Their first Christmas together. He'd been so buried in finals he hadn't had time to think about it properly, but now—now he could actually plan something. Get Ilya a gift. Maybe they could get a tree for the penthouse. Did Ilya even celebrate Christmas? He was Russian Orthodox, wasn't he? Shane made a mental note to ask.

But first: what the hell did you get for a man who could buy literally anything he wanted?

Shane had been turning this question over in his mind for days. A watch? Ilya already had a collection that probably cost more than Shane's entire education. Clothes? Ilya's closet looked like something out of GQ. Something personal, then. Something that meant something.

He was still thinking about it when he pushed through the door of the 7-Eleven four hours later, the bell chiming overhead. The familiar smell of burnt coffee and cleaning solution hit him, oddly comforting after weeks of having Dimitri stationed nearby during every shift.

"Evening," Shane called out to Tyler who was finishing up the day shift.

"Hey, man. How'd the final go?"

"Survived it. That's all I'm claiming." Shane shrugged out of his coat and grabbed his work vest from the back. "Anything exciting happen?"

"Old lady tried to return a lottery ticket because it didn't win. Explained to her three times that's not how it works." Tyler grabbed his jacket. "Your shadow's already outside."

Shane glanced through the window and spotted Dimitri leaning against the black Mercedes, scrolling through his phone. Right on time, like always.

It had been three weeks since the attack. Three weeks since Shane had fought off two of Kozlov's men in the parking lot and Ilya had laid down the law: Shane could keep his job, but he didn't work alone. Ever.

At first, it had been awkward. Dimitri sitting in the car outside, or sometimes coming in to buy coffee he didn't drink, both of them pretending this was normal. But somewhere along the way, it had stopped feeling like surveillance and started feeling like... friendship.

Dimitri was funny, in a dry, deadpan way that caught Shane off guard. He told stories about Ilya's younger days that made Shane laugh until his ribs hurt. He taught Shane a few words of Russian—mostly curse words, admittedly. And he never made Shane feel like a burden, even though babysitting a college kid working a convenience store job was probably the least exciting thing Dimitri had ever been assigned to do.

Shane finished the shift handoff with Hayden and settled in behind the counter. Tuesday nights were always slow, and tonight was no exception. By eight o'clock, he'd had maybe five customers, and the store felt almost peaceful in its emptiness.

He grabbed two cups of coffee—one black for Dimitri, one with too much cream and sugar for himself—and a package of those chocolate chip cookies Dimitri pretended not to like but always ate anyway. Then he pushed through the door into the cold December night.

Dimitri looked up from his phone, one eyebrow raised. "You're supposed to stay inside."

"It's dead in there. I'm bored." Shane handed him the coffee and cookies. "Besides, you look cold."

"I'm Russian. This is nothing." But Dimitri took the coffee anyway, wrapping his hands around the cup. "Thanks."

They stood there for a moment, watching cars pass on the street, the city humming with its usual nighttime energy. The string lights from a bodega across the street cast everything in a warm glow.

"So," Shane said, leaning against the car next to Dimitri. "I need your help with something."

"If this is about your Econ homework again—"

"It's not homework. Finals are over, thank God." Shane took a sip of his coffee. "It's about Ilya."

Dimitri's expression shifted slightly, became more alert. "What about him?"

"Christmas is in a week. I need to get him something." Shane ran a hand through his hair, frustrated. "But what do you get a guy who literally has everything? I can't exactly buy him a watch or a car or whatever. He'd probably just sell it back to me."

Dimitri snorted. "He wouldn't sell a gift from you."

"You didn't see what I did with the first watch he gave me."

"Oh, I heard about that. Boss was very impressed. And very annoyed." Dimitri's mouth twitched. "Twenty-five thousand dollars and you bought a Hello Kitty watch instead."

"It told time just as good," Shane said defensively, though he was smiling. "Plus it lit up."

"And then it got broken when you fought off Kozlov's men." Dimitri shook his head. "You're something else, kid."

"So what do I get him?" Shane pressed. "Seriously. You've known him longer than I have. What does he actually want?"

Dimitri was quiet for a moment, considering. He took a sip of his coffee, his breath fogging in the cold air. "Ilya doesn't want things," he said finally. "He has things. More things than he knows what to do with."

"That's not helpful."

"I'm not finished." Dimitri looked at him. "He doesn't want things. He wants you. Happy. Safe. With him." He paused. "Get him something that shows you're staying. That you're in this. That's what he wants."

Shane felt something tighten in his chest. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Something personal. Something that says 'I'm not going anywhere.'" Dimitri shrugged. "You're the one dating him. You figure it out."

"You're terrible at giving advice."

"I'm excellent at giving advice. You're just bad at taking it." Dimitri bit into one of the cookies, chewing thoughtfully. "Although if you want my opinion—"

"I literally just asked for your opinion."

Shane thought about that. It was simple. Almost too simple. But maybe that was the point. Ilya's world was complicated, dangerous, full of violence and money and power. Maybe what he wanted was something uncomplicated. Something real.

"That's actually a good idea," Shane admitted.

"I know. I'm full of good ideas." Dimitri finished his cookie and reached for another. "You should listen to me more often."

"You told me to bet on the Knicks last week and they lost by twenty points."

"Nobody's perfect."

Shane laughed, the sound carrying in the cold night air. This was nice. Easy. Standing outside a convenience store in December, drinking bad coffee and talking about Christmas presents with a man who was technically his bodyguard but felt more like family.

"I'm happy," Shane said suddenly, surprising himself. "Like, actually happy. Things are good. Stable. For the first time in... I don't know. A long time."

Dimitri looked at him, something unreadable in his expression. "Good," he said quietly. "You deserve that."

"So does Ilya."

"Yeah. He does." Dimitri's jaw tightened slightly. "He's been through a lot. More than you know. It's good that he has you. That he has something good in his life that isn't—" He gestured vaguely. "All the rest of it."

Shane wanted to ask what he meant by that, what Ilya had been through, but before he could, Dimitri straightened suddenly, his entire body going tense.

"Get inside," Dimitri said, his voice sharp and low.

"What—"

"Now, Shane. Get inside the store."

But it was already too late.

Dimitri's hand went to his hip, drawing his gun with practiced speed. The first attacker lunged, but Dimitri was faster—he fired once, the crack of the gunshot splitting the night air.

One of the men cried out, stumbling back with his hand clutching his shoulder, blood already seeping between his fingers.

But the shot gave the others their opening. Two men rushed Dimitri from opposite sides while he was still tracking the wounded man. One grabbed his gun arm, wrenching it upward, while the other drove a fist into Dimitri's jaw, snapping his head back. The gun clattered to the pavement.

The punch came hard and fast, catching Dimitri in the jaw and snapping his head back. He stumbled, tried to recover, but there were too many of them. Two men grabbed his arms while a third drove a fist into his stomach, then his face, then his ribs.

"No!" Shane wrenched free from the hands holding him and threw himself forward, putting his body between Dimitri and the attackers. "Don't! Stop! Don't hurt him!"

One of the men kicked Dimitri in the ribs, hard. Dimitri grunted, tried to stay upright, but another kick sent him to his knees. They didn't stop. One of them stomped down on Dimitri's arm, and Shane heard the crack, heard Dimitri's cry of pain that he tried to bite back.

Dimitri collapsed forward onto the pavement, blood running from his nose and mouth, cradling his broken arm. But his eyes were still focused, still sharp. He looked up at the big man—the leader—and recognition flashed across his face.

"Pavel," Dimitri said through gritted teeth, his voice tight with pain. Blood flecked his lips. "You're not one of Viktor's men." He let out a harsh, bitter laugh that turned into a cough. "Ilya's going to be so pissed when he finds out his own brother Alexei is meddling in things."

Pavel's expression darkened. He stepped forward and drove his boot into Dimitri's ribs, hard. Dimitri gasped, curling in on himself.

"Shut up," Pavel said coldly.

Shane felt something break inside his chest watching Dimitri on the ground, bleeding and broken. That familiar detachment was settling over him—his brain shifting into the mode where everything became a problem to solve rather than a crisis to panic about. Save Dimitri. Comply with the attackers. Those were the only things that mattered right now.

"I'll go with you," Shane said, his voice shaking but steady. "I won't fight. I won't run. Just stop hurting him. Please."

Pavel studied him for a long moment. Behind Shane, Dimitri was trying to speak, wheezing. "No—Shane—don't—"

Pavel's gaze flicked to Dimitri, then back to Shane. Something shifted in his expression. He nodded once.

"Get him in the van," Pavel said.

Hands grabbed Shane's arms, started pulling him backward. He didn't resist. Dimitri was still on the ground, blood pooling beneath him, his broken arm at an odd angle. "No—Shane—"

But then he was being shoved into the back of a van, the doors slamming shut behind him, cutting off whatever else he might have said.

The interior was dark, smelling of cigarettes and something chemical. Shane's hands were yanked behind his back, zip ties cutting into his wrists. He was shoved onto a bench seat, and then the leader climbed in across from him, settling into the seat with an ease that suggested he'd done this many times before.

Shane looked up at the man across from him, trying to read his expression in the dim light filtering through the tinted windows. "Is he going to be okay? Dimitri?"

The leader's expression didn't change. "You should worry about yourself."

Shane swallowed hard. "You broke his arm. He needs a hospital."

"He'll live," the man said finally.

Shane nodded, trying to ignore the way his hands were shaking, the way his heart was hammering against his ribs. The van turned a corner, heading deeper into Brooklyn, away from the lights and the people and everything familiar.

Away from Ilya.

Shane closed his eyes and thought about Dimitri's blood on the pavement, about the sound of his arm breaking, about the way he'd tried to protect Shane even while he was being beaten.

And he thought about Ilya, who was about to get a phone call that would destroy him.

The van drove on into the night, and Shane sat in the darkness, zip ties cutting into his wrists, and wondered if he'd just made the biggest mistake of his life.

Or if he'd saved Dimitri's.

Maybe both.

Ilya was in the middle of a meeting when his phone rang.

The warehouse in Red Hook was cold, the kind of bone-deep December cold that seeped through concrete and steel. Five of his men stood around a table covered in ledgers and manifests—shipments coming in from Gdańsk, payments owed from three different protection rackets in Sunset Park, the usual business of keeping an empire running.

Ilya's phone buzzed against the metal table. He glanced down.

Dimitri.

His hand stilled over the ledger. Dimitri never called during Shane's shifts. Never. That was the arrangement—Dimitri watched, Dimitri protected, and unless something went catastrophically wrong, Dimitri didn't interrupt.

Ilya's blood turned to ice.

He snatched up the phone, already moving away from the table. "What happened?"

The sound that came through the line made Ilya's heart stop.

Breathing. Labored, wet, painful. The kind of breathing that came with broken ribs, with blood in the lungs.

"Boss..." Dimitri's voice was barely a whisper, thick with pain. "They took him. They... they took Shane."

The world tilted.

Ilya couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The warehouse around him—the men, the table, the business—all of it disappeared into white noise. There was only Dimitri's voice, ragged and broken, and those four words echoing in Ilya's skull.

They took Shane.

"Where?" The word came out like gravel, like violence. "Where are you? Who took him?"

"The store... convenience store..." Dimitri coughed, a horrible wet sound. "Boss, I'm sorry, I tried—"

"Who?" Ilya demanded. "Kozlov? Was it Viktor's men?"

"No." Dimitri's breathing was getting worse, more labored. "Pavel. I recognized him. Boss, it was—" Another cough, wet and painful. "It was Alexei's men. Your brother—"

The world stopped.

Everything—the cold warehouse, the distant sound of traffic, his own heartbeat—all of it ceased to exist. There was only Dimitri's words, hanging in the sudden, terrible silence.

Your brother.

Alexei.

"Dimitri—" Ilya's voice cracked. "Dimitri, stay with me—"

"Phone's dying... boss, hurry—"

The line went dead.

Ilya stared at his phone, his hand trembling. His brother had Shane. Alexei—his older brother, the one who'd taught him how to fight, how to kill, how to survive in the Bratva—had taken the one person Ilya cared about more than anything in this world.

This wasn't about territory. Wasn't about money or power or respect.

This was personal.

Half a second of pure, crystalline terror, and then his body took over. He grabbed his keys from his pocket, his gun from the holster under his jacket, and ran.

He didn't tell his men where he was going. Didn't explain. Just ran out into the freezing December night and threw himself into his car.

The Mercedes roared to life. Ilya slammed his foot on the gas and tore out of the parking lot, tires screaming against asphalt.

Brooklyn blurred past. Red lights meant nothing. Stop signs didn't exist. He took corners too fast, swerved around slower cars, laid on the horn when someone didn't move fast enough. His hands were white-knuckled on the steering wheel, his jaw clenched so tight his teeth ached.

Alexei has Shane.

The thought repeated in his mind like a drumbeat, like a death knell. Not Kozlov. Not some random enemy. His own blood. His brother had reached into Ilya's life and taken the only thing that mattered.

Ilya's mind raced through possibilities, through reasons, through every unfinished piece of business between them. Alexei didn't do anything without purpose. He was patient, methodical, and he never made a move unless he wanted something.

And now he had Shane.

Ilya had let him keep working at that fucking store. Had compromised, had let Shane have his independence, had convinced himself that Dimitri's presence would be enough.

He'd been wrong.

The convenience store came into view. Ilya saw the lights first, the familiar glow of the 7-Eleven sign. Then he saw the blood.

A dark stain on the pavement, spreading slowly. And Dimitri, crumpled beside it, one arm bent at an unnatural angle, his face pale and slick with sweat.

Ilya slammed on the brakes. The car hadn't even fully stopped before he was out, running, dropping to his knees beside Dimitri.

"Dimitri." His hands hovered over his second-in-command, over his friend, not sure where to touch without causing more pain. "Dimitri, look at me."

Dimitri's eyes fluttered open. Unfocused, glassy with pain. "Boss..."

"Where?" Ilya's voice was sharp, urgent. "Where did they take him?"

"I don't know. Van. Black van, no plates." Dimitri coughed, blood flecking his lips. "Four of them... coordinated. They went for me first. Shane—" His voice broke. "Shane tried to protect me. Threw himself between us. Pavel was going to shoot me, and Shane just... he traded himself. Saved my life."

Ilya's jaw clenched. His hands were shaking as they hovered over Dimitri's broken body.

"Boss, I'm sorry," Dimitri gasped out. "I should've—I tried to stop them, but there were too many, and Shane—"

"You did everything you could," Ilya said, but his voice was hollow.

Dimitri's good hand grabbed Ilya's jacket, fingers twisting in the fabric. His eyes were desperate, pleading. "Boss... what does Alexei want? Why now? Shane saved me. They could've killed him right there, but they just... took him. That means something, right? They won't hurt him. Right?"

Ilya looked down at Dimitri. At his broken arm, his bruised face, the blood soaking through his shirt. Dimitri, who'd tried to protect Shane. Who'd failed, but only because Shane had refused to let him die.

"He'll be okay," Dimitri said, and it sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as Ilya. "Alexei won't hurt him. He's your brother. He just wants... I don't know, attention? To talk to you? He won't actually hurt Shane. Right?"

Ilya's face was blank. Emotionless. The mask he wore when he was about to do something terrible, something necessary.

But his hands were shaking.

"There are worse things than death," Ilya said quietly.

Dimitri's eyes widened. "Boss—"

Sirens cut through the night. Red and blue lights painted the street, the ambulance pulling up to the curb. Paramedics jumped out, rushing over with a stretcher and medical bags.

Ilya stood, stepping back to give them room. He watched them work on Dimitri—checking vitals, stabilizing the broken arm, asking questions Dimitri could barely answer. His second-in-command was loaded onto the stretcher, still trying to talk, still trying to apologize.

"Boss, I'm sorry, I should've—"

"You did everything you could," Ilya said. His voice was flat, empty. "Get to the hospital. I'll handle this."

The ambulance doors closed. The sirens wailed back to life, and then Dimitri was gone, leaving Ilya alone on the sidewalk outside the convenience store.

Ilya pulled out his phone. He needed to make calls. Needed to mobilize his men, needed to find out where Alexei was keeping Shane, needed to plan, to strategize, to *move*.

But his hands were shaking too badly to dial.

He stared at the blood on the pavement. Shane's blood, maybe. Or just Dimitri's. It didn't matter. What mattered was that Shane had been here, and now he was gone.

Taken by Alexei.

Ilya knew his brother. Knew what he was capable of. Alexei didn't just kill people—he broke them. Took them apart piece by piece until there was nothing left but obedience and fear. He was patient, methodical, and he never did anything without a reason.

If Alexei had taken Shane, it was because he wanted something from Ilya. Wanted to hurt him, or control him, or force him into something he'd been avoiding.

And Shane—sweet, stubborn, fearless Shane—was caught in the middle.

Ilya closed his eyes. Took a breath. Then another.

When he opened them again, the shaking had stopped. His hands were steady. His mind was clear.

He dialed a number.

"Gather everyone," Ilya said when the line connected. "I don't care where they are or what they're doing. I want every man we have at the warehouse in Red Hook in one hour."

"Boss, what's—"

"My brother has Shane." The words came out cold, final. "We're getting him back."

He ended the call. Made another. And another. Mobilizing his entire organization, calling in every favor, activating every contact.

Alexei thought he could take Shane and use him as leverage. Thought he could force Ilya's hand, make him come crawling back to deal with their unfinished business.

He was right.

But Alexei had made one critical mistake.

He'd taken the only thing in this world that could make Ilya Rozanov burn everything to the ground.

Ilya looked at the convenience store one last time. At the blood on the pavement, at the door Shane had walked through every night for months, at the place where Ilya had fallen in love with a college student who sold his gifts and treated him like a normal person.

Then he got in his car and drove into the night, already planning the war he was about to start.

His brother wanted his attention?

He had it.

Something rough and dark was pulled over Shane's head—a hood, thick fabric that smelled like oil and dust. His world went black.

"Don't move," someone said. Not the leader. One of the others.

Shane didn't move. His hands were still zip-tied behind his back, the plastic cutting into his wrists. His shoulders ached from the position. But he stayed still, stayed calm, forcing his breathing to slow even as his heart hammered against his ribs.

The van lurched forward, and Shane had to brace himself against the seat to keep from falling. He tried to track the turns—left, then right, then another right—but after the fifth or sixth turn, he lost count. The city sounds faded, replaced by the hum of the engine and the occasional murmur of voices he couldn't quite make out.

He didn't know how long they drove. Twenty minutes? An hour? Time felt strange under the hood, stretched and compressed at the same time. Shane focused on breathing, on staying present, on not letting the fear take over.

Dimitri's alive. You saved him. That's what matters.

Ilya will find you. He'll come.

The van finally stopped. Shane heard the front doors open, felt the vehicle shift as people got out. Then the side door slid open, and hands grabbed his arms, hauling him to his feet.

Cold air hit him as he was pulled out of the van. December wind, sharp and biting. His feet hit pavement, then he was being pushed forward, stumbling slightly. Someone steadied him—not rough, just firm—and guided him up what felt like steps.

A door opened. Warmer air, but not by much. The smell changed—damp concrete, old wood, something musty.

Then down. Stairs, steep and narrow. Shane counted them without meaning to. Thirteen steps down into what had to be a basement.

Another door. The scrape of a key in a lock.

He was shoved forward, not hard enough to make him fall but enough to send him stumbling. He heard the door slam behind him, the lock clicking into place.

Footsteps retreated up the stairs.

Then silence.

Shane stood there for a moment, breathing hard, listening. Nothing. No voices, no movement. Just the faint hum of what might have been a furnace somewhere in the building.

He needed to see.

With his hands still zip-tied behind his back, Shane bent forward and rubbed the side of his head against his shoulder, trying to work the hood up. It took several tries, the fabric catching on his ear, but finally it slipped up and over his head. He straightened, blinking in the dim light.

A basement. Concrete walls, unpainted and bare. A single high window near the ceiling, small and rectangular, showing a sliver of darkness outside—ground level, probably. A twin bed against one wall, thin blanket folded at the foot. Nothing else. No chair, no table, no bathroom that he could see.

The door was solid wood, no window, no way to see out. He could see the deadbolt on this side, but it was locked from the outside.

Not dirty. Not disgusting. Just... empty. Prison-like.

Shane walked over to the bed and sat down, the springs creaking under his weight. His hands were still bound behind him, and the zip ties were starting to really hurt now, cutting off circulation. His fingers were tingling, going numb.

Shane's mind spun through possibilities, through scenarios, but he kept coming back to the same thought: *Ilya will come. He'll find me. He has to.*

The hours crawled by. Shane had no way to tell time—no phone, no watch (his Hello Kitty watch was broken anyway, still in his pocket in pieces). The window showed only darkness, no hint of dawn.

His wrists ached. His shoulders burned. The adrenaline that had kept him sharp during the kidnapping was wearing off, leaving him exhausted and shaky.

Eventually, Shane lay down on the bed, curling on his side to take some pressure off his arms. The blanket was thin and scratchy, but he pulled it over himself anyway. The basement was cold.

He didn't mean to fall asleep. Didn't want to. But his body had other ideas, dragging him down into unconsciousness despite the zip ties, despite the fear, despite everything.

Shane jerked awake to the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

His heart slammed into his throat. He sat up too fast, his vision swimming, his bound hands screaming in protest. The footsteps got closer. A key scraped in the lock.

The door opened.

It was one of them—one of the men from the kidnapping. Stocky build, dark hair, maybe mid-thirties. He was carrying a McDonald's bag, the golden arches visible even in the dim basement light.

Shane's brain, still foggy from sleep, immediately labeled him: *Henchman Number 1*.

The man walked in, set the bag down on the floor a few feet from the bed, then straightened and looked at Shane.

Shane looked at the bag. Then at the man. Then back at the bag.

"Please, no," Shane said. His voice came out hoarse. "I'm on a strict diet. Can you please get me something clean to eat? Like grilled chicken and vegetables? Brown rice? Anything with actual protein that isn't deep-fried?"

Henchman Number 1 just stared at him.

The man reached into his pocket.

Shane's entire body went rigid. This was it. He'd pushed too far, been too mouthy, and now—

The knife came out, and Shane's breath caught in his throat. His heart hammered so hard he could hear it in his ears. He was going to die in a basement because he'd complained about McDonald's.

But the man just walked over to the bed, leaned down, and with one quick motion, sliced through the zip ties binding Shane's wrists.

Shane's hands fell free. Pain exploded through them immediately—pins and needles, sharp and vicious, as blood rushed back into his fingers. He brought his hands around to his front, flexing them carefully, wincing at the deep red marks the zip ties had left.

The man straightened, pocketing the knife. Then he laughed. Not a cruel laugh, not mocking—genuine, surprised laughter that echoed off the concrete walls.

"You're serious?" He had an accent, Russian thicker than Ilya's. "You're kidnapped and you're worried about your *diet*?"

"I have practice—" Shane started, then stopped.

Did he have practice? What day was it? Was it still Tuesday? Wednesday? How long had he been here?

And even if he knew, would it matter? He was locked in a basement. He wasn't making it to practice.

The man was still grinning, shaking his head like Shane was the most absurd thing he'd ever seen. "Call me Pavel," he said. Then, still chuckling, he turned and walked out. "Eat what you are given."

The door closed. The lock clicked.

Shane sat there, staring at the McDonald's bag.

His stomach growled. He hadn't eaten since... when? Before his shift. Before the kidnapping. Hours ago. Maybe longer.

The smell of fries and burgers wafted from the bag, greasy and tempting.

Shane didn't touch it. He lay back down on the bed, hands free but wrists aching, and stared at the ceiling. Somewhere above him, he could hear muffled voices. Footsteps. The creak of floorboards.

He thought about Ilya. About whether he knew yet. About what he was doing, what he was planning.

About whether Shane would ever see him again.

The McDonald's bag sat on the floor, untouched, as Shane closed his eyes and tried not to think about how much his wrists hurt.

Time moved strangely in the basement.

Shane lay on the twin bed, hands finally free but his wrists throbbing with deep red marks where the zip ties had cut into his skin. The circulation had returned in painful pins and needles, and now his wrists just ached—a dull, persistent reminder of the last few hours.

Or had it been longer than hours? Shane had no idea.

He stared at the ceiling and started counting tiles.

One. Two. Three. The acoustic panels were water-stained in places, yellowed with age. Four. Five. Six. Some had small holes, like someone had thrown something at them. Seven. Eight. Nine.

It was something to do. Something to focus on besides the fact that he was locked in a basement, kidnapped by people who worked for Ilya's brother—whoever the hell that was—and had no idea when or if he was getting out.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

The McDonald's bag sat on the floor where Pavel had left it. Shane could smell it—that distinctive fast-food smell of grease and salt and processed meat. His stomach growled again, louder this time, but Shane ignored it.

He wasn't eating that shit. He'd worked too hard on his diet, spent too many hours meal-prepping chicken and rice and vegetables, suffered through too many protein shakes, to throw it all away on a Big Mac.

Even if he was kidnapped.

Especially if he was kidnapped.

Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen.

Shane's mind wandered as he counted. Was Ilya looking for him? Of course he was. Dimitri would have called him—assuming Dimitri was okay, assuming he'd made it to the hospital, assuming—

Shane forced the thought away. Dimitri was tough. He'd be fine.

Twenty-three. Twenty-four. Twenty-five.

The voices upstairs had quieted. Shane could hear the occasional creak of floorboards, the distant sound of what might have been a TV. Normal house sounds. Like this was just a regular place where regular people lived, not a location where someone was being held against their will.

Thirty-one. Thirty-two. Thirty-three.

His wrists hurt. His shoulders hurt from being yanked around. His ribs were sore where he'd been shoved into the van. But nothing was broken. Nothing was bleeding. They hadn't actually hurt him.

That should probably be comforting. It wasn't.

Forty-two. Forty-three. Forty-four.

Shane lost count somewhere around forty-seven and had to start over.

One. Two. Three.

The lock clicked.

Shane's head snapped toward the door. His body tensed automatically, muscles coiling even though there was nowhere to go, nothing to do. He was locked in a basement. Fighting would be stupid.

The door opened.

Different guy.

Younger than Pavel—mid-twenties, maybe. Dark hair, sharp features, and wearing the most stereotypical outfit Shane had ever seen: black Adidas tracksuit with the white stripes down the sides, white sneakers that looked brand new. He looked like he'd walked straight out of a movie about Russian gangsters.

Shane's tired brain immediately labeled him: *Henchman Number 2*.

The guy didn't say anything. Didn't bring food or water or explanations. He just walked in, looked around the small basement room, and then slid down to sit on the floor with his back

against the wall opposite the bed.

And stared at Shane.

Shane stared back.

The silence stretched out, awkward and heavy. The guy—Henchman Number 2—didn't move. Just sat there, arms resting on his knees, watching Shane like he was some kind of science experiment.

Shane sat up slowly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. His wrists protested the movement, but he ignored them.

"You want it?" Shane gestured to the McDonald's bag on the floor between them. "I'm not eating it."

Henchman Number 2's eyes flicked to the bag, then back to Shane. Suspicious. Wary.

Shane shrugged. "Seriously. It's just going to sit there and get cold. Might as well not waste it."

For a long moment, the guy didn't move. Then his stomach growled—loud enough that Shane heard it across the room.

Something shifted in the guy's expression. He reached out, grabbed the bag, and pulled it toward him. Opened it carefully, like he was checking for a trap. Then he pulled out a Big Mac, unwrapped it, and took a bite.

Still watching Shane.

Shane leaned back against the wall, letting his head rest against the cold concrete. Now that he was sitting up, he could see more of the room. It was small, maybe ten by twelve feet. The bed. The concrete walls. The single high window.

And a TV.

Shane blinked. He hadn't noticed it before—a small flat-screen mounted on the wall near the ceiling, angled down toward the bed. Old, maybe a decade out of date, but functional. There was even a remote sitting on a small shelf bolted to the wall.

"Huh," Shane said out loud.

Henchman Number 2 paused mid-bite, looking at him.

"This is almost like a panic room," Shane continued, more to himself than to his silent companion. "Or a safe house. Somewhere someone could hide out for a while." He looked around again—the bed with actual sheets, the TV, the fact that the concrete walls were solid and windowless except for that one high opening. "Why would you guys have this set up?"

The guy didn't answer. Just kept eating, his eyes never leaving Shane.

Shane sighed. "Okay. Strong silent type. Got it."

More silence. The guy finished the Big Mac and started on the fries.

"So what's your name?" Shane asked. "Or should I keep calling you Henchman Number 2?"

The guy stopped chewing. Stared at Shane like he'd just said something in a foreign language.

"I mean, the other guy told me to call him Pavel," Shane continued. "Figured you might have a name too. Unless you prefer Henchman Number 2. I can work with that."

"...Artem," the guy said finally. His voice was younger than Shane expected, with a thicker accent than Pavel's.

"Artem," Shane repeated. "Cool. I'm Shane. But you probably already know that."

Artem nodded slowly, still watching him with that wary expression. He was younger than Pavel—definitely mid-twenties, maybe even younger. There was something almost uncertain about him, like he wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to be doing here.

Shane reached into his pocket and pulled out his Hello Kitty watch.

The band was snapped clean through, dangling uselessly. The plastic face was cracked straight through Hello Kitty's cheerful smile, spiderwebbing out from the center. The little ears were chipped. It was completely, thoroughly broken.

Shane turned it over in his hands, examining the damage. The back panel was loose—he could probably pop it off if he had something small enough to pry with. Maybe the battery had just come loose. Maybe it was fixable.

"Do you have any small tools?" Shane asked, looking up at Artem. "Like a tiny screwdriver or something?"

Artem stared at the Hello Kitty watch. Then at Shane. Then back at the watch.

"...No," he said finally.

"Damn." Shane sighed, disappointed. He turned the watch over one more time, then slipped it back into his pocket. "Worth a shot."

He lay back down on the bed, one arm behind his head, staring at the ceiling again. Started counting tiles.

One. Two. Three.

Artem was still there, sitting against the wall. Shane heard the crumple of the McDonald's bag as Artem finished the fries and wadded up the wrapper. But he didn't leave. Just sat there, watching.

Four. Five. Six.

Shane closed his eyes. His wrists ached. His stomach was empty. He was locked in a basement, kidnapped by his boyfriend's brother's men, and he had no idea what was going to happen next.

But at least Henchman Number 2—Artem—had eaten the McDonald's.

Small victories.

Seven. Eight. Nine.

The sound of Artem shifting against the wall. The distant creak of floorboards overhead. The hum of the furnace kicking on somewhere in the house.

Shane kept counting.

Chapter 11: Proof

Chapter Notes

It's my birthday! So I'll be giving you the gift of many updates. Hopefully there aren't any errors but I wanted to get these out quickly. <3

Pavel stood in the doorway, his gaze immediately going to the McDonald's bag sitting crumpled on the floor by Artem. Pavel's jaw tightened. He rolled his eyes—a gesture so perfectly exasperated it would've been funny under different circumstances.

Shane sat up straighter. "Hey, do you have any tiny tools? Like a small screwdriver?"

From his spot against the wall, Artem snickered. "He's probably got one in his pants."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Real mature."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the broken Hello Kitty watch, holding it up toward Pavel. The cracked face caught the dim basement light, the cheerful pink cat staring out from behind the damaged plastic. "I need to fix this."

Pavel's eyes locked onto the watch.

Before Shane could say anything else, Pavel stepped forward and snatched it from his hand—fast, no warning, his fingers closing around the cheap plastic.

"What the fuck!" Shane jumped to his feet. "Give it back!"

Pavel was already turning toward the door, the watch clutched in his fist.

"Hey! I'm talking to you!" Shane moved toward the door, but Pavel was already through it. The lock clicked into place with a solid, final sound.

Shane stood there, staring at the closed door, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. His heart was pounding—not from fear, but from pure, undiluted fury.

Behind him, Artem made a sound of surprise.

Shane spun around. "What?"

Artem was staring at him, eyebrows raised, looking genuinely shocked. "Now he gets mad."

"Yeah!" Shane's voice was sharp with anger. "I bought that! Give it back!"

But Pavel was already gone, his footsteps echoing up the stairs overhead.

Shane glared at the closed door for another moment, then threw himself back onto the bed with more force than necessary. He crossed his arms over his chest, staring at the ceiling with the kind of sullen fury that would've been more at home on a teenager than a college junior.

But he didn't care.

That was his watch. He'd bought it with his own money after selling Ilya's ridiculously expensive Audemars Piguet. It was stupid and cheap and the face lit up when you pressed a button, and it was his.

Artem shifted uncomfortably against the wall, clearly not sure what to do with Shane's anger. The silence stretched out, thick and awkward.

Shane just kept glaring at the ceiling, ignoring Artem, ignoring the situation, ignoring everything except the fact that Pavel had stolen his watch.

Upstairs, Pavel walked straight to what had once been the house's dining room but now served as a makeshift command center. Alexei was there, leaning over a table covered in maps and phones.

Pavel set the watch down on the table without a word.

Alexei picked it up, turning it over in his hands. The cracked Hello Kitty face stared up at him, cheerful despite the damage. The pink plastic band hung loose, snapped clean through.

"This is what he was worried about?" Alexei asked, his accent thicker than Ilya's, his voice carrying a note of genuine amusement. "Not his safety. Not his freedom. His watch."

Pavel nodded. "He refused the McDonald's because he's on a diet. Then got angry when I took this."

Alexei laughed—a real laugh, surprised and oddly delighted. He examined the watch more closely, noting the \$15 price sticker still faintly visible on the back.

"My brother's lover," Alexei said, shaking his head. "Interesting." He set the watch down carefully. "Send it to Ilya. Let him know we have his boy."

The watch would arrive in a plain box with no note, no return address. But Ilya would know. Ilya would understand exactly what it meant.

Shane lay on the bed, arms still crossed, still pouting. Time crawled by. Minutes felt like hours.

Artem was still there, sitting against the wall. The empty McDonald's bag sat crumpled beside him, grease stains visible on the paper. He looked distinctly uncomfortable, shifting his weight every few minutes, clearly not sure what to do with an angry hostage.

Shane ignored him. Kept counting ceiling tiles in his head, his jaw tight.

More time passed. Shane had no idea how much. Could've been an hour. Could've been three.

Finally, the door opened again.

Pavel stood there, this time carrying a plastic container instead of a McDonald's bag. He walked in and set it down on the floor near the bed, along with a fork.

Shane leaned forward slightly, looking at the contents. Grilled chicken breast, steamed broccoli, brown rice. Exactly what he'd asked for. Clean food. Actual protein.

His stomach growled—a loud, embarrassing sound after hours of nothing but adrenaline and stress.

"Thanks," Shane said, his voice still a little sullen but genuine.

He paused, then looked up at Pavel. "Can I have my watch back?"

Pavel's mouth twitched. He let out a short, dismissive scoff—almost a snort—and turned toward the door without answering.

"Seriously?" Shane called after him.

The door closed. The lock clicked.

Shane stared at it for a moment, then sighed and reached for the food container.

Fine. Whatever. At least he had real food now.

He opened the container. The smell hit him immediately—simple, clean, exactly what his body needed. He picked up the fork and started eating, still pouting slightly, still annoyed about the watch.

But he ate. Because he was starving, and because refusing food out of spite was stupid, and because he needed to keep his strength up if he was going to figure out how to get out of this mess.

The chicken was plain but well-cooked. The rice was perfectly done. The broccoli was maybe a little oversteamed, but he wasn't going to complain.

Shane ate methodically, his mind already moving past his anger and back to the bigger picture. Where was he? How long had he been here? What did these people want? And most importantly—was Ilya looking for him?

Of course Ilya was looking for him. That wasn't even a question.

Shane finished the food, set the empty container aside, and lay back down on the bed. The ceiling tiles stared back at him. Sixty-seven. Sixty-eight. Sixty-nine.

Artem was still there, sitting against the wall.

Four days.

Four days since Shane had been taken, and Ilya had nothing.

He stood in the middle of Shane's penthouse—and felt the walls closing in. The space was unrecognizable now. His men came and went at all hours, reporting dead ends and empty leads, their voices a constant background hum that Ilya barely registered anymore.

But underneath all of it—the organized chaos of a manhunt, the clinical efficiency of his operation—Shane's presence remained. His biochemistry textbook still sat open on the coffee table, a highlighter marking his place. His NYU hoodie was draped over the back of the couch. His coffee mug sat in the sink, still stained with the too-sweet coffee he preferred. The bathroom smelled like his shampoo, his toothbrush still in the holder next to Ilya's.

Ilya couldn't escape him. Didn't want to escape him.

He'd moved in here the night Shane was taken, unable to bear his own penthouse with its cold emptiness, its lack of Shane's chaos and warmth. Here, surrounded by Shane's things, Ilya could almost pretend he was just at class, or at work, or at hockey practice. That he'd walk through the door any minute with that tired smile, complaining about Physical Chemistry or his coach's conditioning drills.

But Shane wasn't coming through that door.

Alexei had him.

Ilya hadn't slept more than an hour at a time since the kidnapping. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Shane's face—heard Dimitri's broken voice on the phone, saw the blood on the pavement outside the convenience store. His mind conjured a thousand different horrors, each one worse than the last.

What was Alexei doing to him? Was Shane hurt? Scared? Was he even still—

No. Ilya couldn't think like that. Shane was alive. He had to be alive.

The door to the penthouse opened. One of Ilya's men—Sergei, young and nervous—stepped inside, holding a plain cardboard box.

"Boss," Sergei said carefully. "This was left at the front desk. No return address. The doorman said a courier dropped it off twenty minutes ago."

Ilya's blood turned to ice. He crossed the room in three strides and took the box from Sergei's hands. It was light, almost weightless. No markings. No labels.

His hands were steady as he opened it—years of training, of control, keeping his movements calm and precise even as his heart hammered against his ribs.

Inside, nestled in plain brown packing paper, was a watch.

A Hello Kitty watch.

Pink plastic band snapped clean through. The face cracked straight across Hello Kitty's cheerful smile. The cheap digital display dark and lifeless.

Shane's watch.

Ilya stared at it. His brain registered the details with clinical precision: the break in the band, the spiderweb crack across the face, the way the light caught on the broken plastic. This was the watch Shane had bought to replace the \$25,000 Audemars Piguet Ilya had given him. The watch Shane had worn every single day, the watch that lit up when you pressed a button, the watch Shane had been furious about when those men broke it during the first attack.

Proof.

Proof that Alexei had Shane. Proof that Shane had been alive when this was taken. Proof that his brother wanted Ilya to know exactly who had him.

Ilya's hands started to shake.

The box slipped from his fingers, hitting the floor with a soft thud. The watch tumbled out, landing face-up on the hardwood, Hello Kitty's broken smile staring up at him.

And something inside Ilya snapped.

He grabbed the nearest thing—a chair—and hurled it across the room. It hit the wall with a crash, splintering on impact. His men scattered, backing toward the door, eyes wide.

Ilya didn't care.

He swept his arm across the dining table, sending maps and photographs flying. Flipped the coffee table, Shane's textbook tumbling to the floor. His fist connected with the wall, plaster cracking under the impact, pain exploding across his knuckles.

He didn't feel it.

"FIND HIM!" The words tore out of him, raw and ragged. "Search every property! Every safe house! Every place Alexei has ever fucking been! I want every man we have on the street! I want every contact, every informant, every person who's ever done business with my brother brought in for questioning!"

His men were already moving, pulling out phones, barking orders. But it wasn't enough. Nothing was enough.

Ilya grabbed another chair, threw it. Kicked over a lamp. His chest was heaving, his vision blurring at the edges. He was usually so controlled, so cold, so precise. That was how he'd survived this long—by never letting emotion cloud his judgment, by staying three steps ahead of everyone else.

But Shane was gone, and Ilya was falling apart.

"Boss—" Sergei started, his voice shaking.

"GET OUT!" Ilya roared. "All of you! Get out and don't come back until you have something!"

They fled. The door slammed shut behind them, and Ilya was alone.

He stood in the wreckage of Shane's living room, breathing hard, his hands shaking so badly he had to clench them into fists. The watch lay on the floor a few feet away, pink plastic bright against the dark wood.

Ilya sank to his knees and picked it up.

The band was broken. The face was cracked. But it was Shane's. The stupid, cheap, ridiculous watch that Shane had loved more than anything Ilya had ever given him.

Ilya closed his fist around it, the broken plastic digging into his palm.

Three days of searching.

Brighton Beach first—the house Alexei had used when he'd visited New York two years ago. Ilya's men kicked in the door at 3 AM, guns drawn, ready for a fight.

Empty. Dust on the furniture. No sign anyone had been there in months.

The warehouse in Red Hook next. One of Alexei's old smuggling operations, abandoned after a customs raid five years back. Ilya went himself for that one, unable to sit still, unable to wait for reports.

Nothing. Just rusted shipping containers and rats.

Three apartments in Brooklyn. Two in Queens. A storage unit in the Bronx. A restaurant in Little Italy that Alexei's men used to frequent.

Dead ends. All of them.

Alexei was too smart. Too careful. He'd known Ilya would come looking, had planned for it. Every location Ilya knew about, every property tied to his brother's name—Alexei had anticipated all of it.

And Shane was somewhere Ilya couldn't find him.

Ilya stood at the windows of Shane's penthouse, staring out at the city. It was late—past midnight, maybe later. He'd lost track of time. The apartment was quiet now, his men gone to follow up on leads that would probably go nowhere.

He'd taken over Shane's space completely. Maps covered the walls, red string connecting locations like a spider's web. Photographs of Alexei, of his known associates, of every property Ilya could tie to his brother. The dining table was buried under files and reports. The kitchen counter was covered in empty coffee cups and takeout containers Ilya hadn't touched.

But Shane's things were still there, underneath it all. His textbooks stacked on the bookshelf. His hockey gear in the corner by the door—skates, stick, the Bauer Vapor FlyLites Ilya had given him. His jacket hanging on the coat rack. His presence everywhere, inescapable, a constant reminder of what Ilya had lost.

Ilya hadn't showered in days. Hadn't changed his clothes. Hadn't done anything except pace and plan and search and come up empty every single time.

He opened his hand, looked down at the watch he'd been clutching since it arrived. The pink plastic was warm from his body heat, the broken edges digging grooves into his palm.

Shane had chosen this over a \$25,000 watch. Had bought it as a joke, maybe, or because it was practical, or because it made him smile. Ilya didn't know. He'd never asked.

And now it was broken, and Shane was gone, and Ilya had no idea if he'd ever get the chance to ask.

The door opened behind him.

Ilya didn't turn. Didn't need to. He knew that footstep—the slight drag of the left foot, the careful, measured pace of someone moving through pain.

Dimitri.

"Boss," Dimitri said quietly.

Ilya's jaw tightened. He kept staring out the window, at the lights of the city, at the thousands of buildings where Shane could be hidden.

"I'm sorry." Dimitri's voice was rough, thick with guilt. "I should have—"

"Don't." The word came out flat, emotionless.

"If I had been faster, if I had seen them coming—"

"I don't want to hear it."

Silence. Ilya could feel Dimitri standing there, could sense the weight of his guilt, his need to apologize, to explain, to somehow make this right.

But there was nothing to make right. Shane was gone. Apologies wouldn't bring him back.

"You did what you could," Ilya said, his voice cold and controlled. The mask was back in place, the careful neutrality he wore when he needed to function. "Shane made his choice. It's done."

But his hands were shaking. Still clutching the watch. Still unable to let go.

Dimitri didn't say anything. Ilya heard him shift his weight, heard the quiet hiss of pain as his broken ribs protested the movement. He'd been released from the hospital today—arm in a

cast, face still bruised, moving like every step hurt.

And he'd come straight here.

Ilya should send him home. Should tell him to rest, to recover. But he couldn't form the words. Couldn't do anything except stand here and stare at the city and feel the watch digging into his palm.

"We'll find him," Dimitri said finally. "Boss, we'll find him."

Ilya didn't answer.

After a long moment, Dimitri turned and limped back toward the door. It closed softly behind him, and Ilya was alone again.

He looked down at the watch in his hand. Pink plastic. Cracked face. Hello Kitty's broken smile.

Shane had loved this watch. Had been more upset about it breaking than about being attacked. Had yelled at Pavel—though Ilya didn't know that part yet—demanding it back like it was the most important thing in the world.

Stupid. Stubborn. Perfect.

Ilya closed his fist around the watch again, the broken plastic cutting into his skin.

He wasn't letting go.

Somewhere out there, Alexei had Shane. And Ilya would burn the entire city to the ground if that's what it took to get him back.

But first, he had to find him.

And so far, he had nothing.

Day Five. Maybe Six.

Shane had lost track.

The basement had no windows, no natural light to mark the passage of time. Just the fluorescent bulbs overhead that stayed on constantly, the TV mounted on the wall, and the rotation of his guards. Pavel and Artem, switching every eight hours or so. Sometimes Pavel stayed longer. Sometimes Artem came back early.

Right now, it was Artem's shift, and they were watching hockey.

"Okay, see that?" Shane pointed at the screen where a player was skating backward, stick positioned perfectly. "That's defensive positioning. He's reading the play, staying between his man and the net."

Artem leaned forward from where he sat on the floor next to Shane's bed, elbows on his knees. "But why he not just hit him?"

"Because if he commits to the hit and misses, the guy's got a clear lane to the goal. It's about patience. You wait for the right moment." Shane watched the play develop. "There—see? Now he steps up, takes the body, clean hit."

"Ah." Artem nodded, genuinely interested. "Is like chess. You think ahead."

"Exactly like chess."

They'd been doing this for days now. Artem would come in for his shift, and instead of sitting in silence like Pavel did, he'd ask questions. About hockey, about New York, about college. Shane answered, kept things light, kept things human.

It was working.

Artem had started bringing Shane food without being asked—clean food, the kind Shane had requested that first night. Grilled chicken, vegetables, rice. Sometimes fruit. Yesterday he'd brought Shane a protein bar, the good kind, the expensive ones Shane usually couldn't afford.

"My sister, she play hockey," Artem said suddenly. "In Moscow. Not professional, just... for fun. She very good."

"Yeah?" Shane looked at him. "How old is she?"

"Sixteen. She want to come to America, play for university team." Artem's expression softened slightly. "I tell her maybe someday."

"She should. If she's good enough, there are scholarships. I got one for NYU."

"You play for university?"

"Yeah. Center. First line." Shane felt a pang in his chest. His team. His life. Everything that felt impossibly far away right now. "We were supposed to have a game this week. I'm probably benched now."

Artem looked uncomfortable. "I am sorry. For this."

Shane shrugged, trying to keep his voice casual. "Not your fault. You're just doing your job."

"Still." Artem was quiet for a moment. "You are... not what I expect."

"What did you expect?"

"Crying. Begging. Fear." Artem gestured vaguely. "You just... watch hockey. Ask for better food. Get angry about watch."

Shane almost smiled. "The watch was important."

"Is Hello Kitty watch."

"It was *my* Hello Kitty watch."

Artem laughed—a real laugh, surprised and genuine. On the TV, the game continued, the announcers calling plays in rapid-fire commentary.

They watched in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Shane was aware, distantly, that this was strange. That he was sitting in a basement, kidnapped, watching hockey with one of his captors like they were friends. But it didn't feel strange. It felt like survival.

If he could make them see him as a person—as Shane, not just a hostage—maybe they'd be less likely to hurt him. Maybe they'd let something slip about why he was here, or how long this would last, or who was in charge.

So far, he'd learned almost nothing. Artem and Pavel were careful. They didn't talk about their boss, didn't mention Ilya, didn't give Shane any information he could use.

But they were warming up to him. Slowly.

The door opened.

Pavel stepped in, his expression neutral, his posture military-straight. He looked at Artem, then at Shane, then back at Artem.

"Go," Pavel said in Russian, then switched to English. "Your turn to sleep."

Artem glanced at the TV, where the third period was just starting. "But the game—"

"Now, Artem."

Artem sighed, pushing himself to his feet. He looked at Shane, something apologetic in his expression, then headed for the door. "Later," he said quietly.

"Yeah. Later."

The door closed behind him, and Pavel took his place—but not on the floor next to the bed. Pavel sat in the chair against the far wall, a good ten feet away, his arms crossed over his chest.

The temperature in the room seemed to drop.

Shane turned his attention back to the TV, trying not to let the shift in atmosphere get to him. Pavel was harder than Artem. Older, maybe late thirties, with the kind of face that didn't give anything away. He watched Shane the way a guard was supposed to watch a prisoner—alert, suspicious, ready for trouble.

They sat in silence.

On the screen, the hockey game continued. A player took a shot, missed. The goalie made a save. The crowd roared.

Shane could feel Pavel's eyes on him.

He needed to try. Needed to build the same bridge with Pavel that he'd built with Artem. It was harder—Pavel didn't ask questions, didn't engage, didn't seem interested in anything Shane had to say. But Shane had to try anyway.

"How long have you worked for..." Shane trailed off, realizing he didn't know how to finish that sentence. Whoever kidnapped me? The guy who's holding me hostage? "For your boss?"

Pavel didn't answer immediately. Shane thought maybe he wouldn't answer at all. Then: "Long time."

"Yeah?" Shane kept his voice casual, non-threatening. "You from Moscow?"

"St. Petersburg."

Two words. It was something.

"I've never been to Russia," Shane said. "Do you miss it? St. Petersburg?"

"Sometimes."

Shane waited, hoping Pavel would elaborate. He didn't.

They lapsed back into silence. On the TV, the period ended. Commercials played—car ads, beer ads, something about insurance. Shane watched without really seeing.

He wanted to ask the questions that actually mattered. How long is this going to last? When can I go home? What do you want from me? Is Ilya looking for me?

But he knew Pavel wouldn't answer. Might even get angry if Shane pushed too hard. So he stayed quiet, stayed harmless, and waited.

The game came back on. Shane watched the players line up for the face-off, the tension building as the puck dropped.

"Do you want to change the channel?" Shane asked suddenly. "I don't mind. You're stuck here watching me, might as well watch something you like."

Pavel looked at him, surprise flickering across his face. It was the first real expression Shane had seen from him.

"You don't care?" Pavel asked.

"Not really. I've been watching hockey for days. A change would be nice."

Pavel considered this for a long moment. Then he reached for the remote on the small table beside him and started flipping through channels.

He stopped on a football match—soccer, Shane's brain corrected automatically. The announcers were speaking rapid Russian, and the jerseys on the screen were red and white.

Russia. Playing against Germany, from the looks of it.

Pavel sat forward slightly, his attention immediately locked on the screen. His entire posture changed—less guarded, more focused. He muttered something in Russian under his breath as a German player made a run toward the goal.

Shane watched Pavel instead of the game. Watched the way his jaw tightened during tense moments, the way his hands gripped the armrests of his chair. This mattered to him. This was something real, something human.

On the screen, Russia intercepted the ball. A quick pass, then another. The Russian striker broke free, one-on-one with the German goalkeeper.

He shot.

Goal.

"Yes!" Shane jumped slightly, his fist pumping in the air. "Nice goal! Come on, Russia!"

Pavel's head snapped toward him, eyes wide with surprise.

Shane kept watching the screen, watching the replay of the goal, the Russian players celebrating. "That was a great shot. Top corner, no chance for the keeper."

Pavel stared at him for another moment, then slowly turned back to the TV. Something in his expression had shifted—less suspicious, more... curious.

They watched the game continue. Germany pushed forward, trying to equalize. Russia defended, compact and organized. Pavel muttered commentary in Russian, his accent thickening when he got invested in a play.

Russia made a counterattack. Fast, clinical. Another goal.

"Yes!" Shane cheered again, grinning. "Two-nil! Germany's falling apart!"

This time, Pavel smiled. Just a slight curve of his mouth, but it was there.

"You don't have favorite team?" Pavel asked, his English careful but clear.

"Not really," Shane admitted. "I don't follow soccer much. But Russia's playing well. I like watching good football."

Pavel's smile widened slightly. "Is not football. Is futbol."

"Right. Sorry. Futbol."

They turned back to the screen. Germany was getting frustrated now, making sloppy passes, taking desperate shots. Russia absorbed the pressure, stayed disciplined.

Pavel leaned back in his chair, some of the tension leaving his shoulders. "You understand game?"

"A little. I mean, I know the basics. Offside, fouls, that kind of thing." Shane shrugged. "Hockey's more my sport, but I can appreciate good defense when I see it."

"Russia has best defense," Pavel said, and there was pride in his voice. "Germany think they can attack, attack, attack. But we wait. We are patient. Then we strike."

"Like that first goal."

"Da. Exactly."

They watched together as the game moved into the second half. Pavel explained a play when Russia made a tactical substitution, his voice less guarded now, more animated. Shane asked questions—genuine questions, not just trying to manipulate—and Pavel answered.

When Russia scored a third goal, they both cheered.

Pavel glanced at Shane, something almost like approval in his expression. "You are strange hostage."

Shane laughed, the sound surprising him. "Yeah, I've been told I'm strange."

"Most people, they cry. They beg. They try to escape." Pavel gestured at Shane. "You watch sports. You make friends with Artem. You cheer for Russia."

"What else am I supposed to do?" Shane asked honestly. "I can't escape. I don't know where I am, and even if I got out of this room, I wouldn't know where to go. So I might as well..." He trailed off, searching for the right words. "I might as well be human about it."

Pavel studied him for a long moment. "He is looking for you."

Shane's heart jumped. "Ilya?"

"Da. Ilya Rozanov." Pavel's expression was unreadable. "He tear city apart looking for you. Very angry. Very dangerous."

"Is he okay?" The question came out before Shane could stop it. "Is he—did anyone hurt him?"

"No one hurt him. But he hurt many people looking for you." Pavel paused. "You care about him."

"Of course I care about him." Shane's voice came out sharper than he intended. "He's—" Everything. He's everything. "Yeah. I care about him."

Pavel nodded slowly, like Shane had confirmed something he'd suspected. On the TV, the game was winding down. Russia was going to win, three-nil, a dominant performance.

They watched the final minutes in silence. When the whistle blew, Pavel allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction.

"Good game," Shane said.

"Da. Very good game."

Pavel stood, stretching slightly. He looked at Shane, and for the first time, there wasn't suspicion in his gaze. Just... assessment. Like he was seeing Shane differently now.

"You want water?" Pavel asked. "Food?"

"Water would be great. Thanks."

Pavel nodded and headed for the door. He paused with his hand on the handle, looking back. "You are not what I expect either."

Then he was gone, the lock clicking behind him.

Shane sat on the bed, his heart still racing from hearing Ilya's name. He's looking for me. He's tearing the city apart.

Of course he was. Shane had never doubted that. But hearing it confirmed—hearing that Ilya was out there, searching, refusing to give up—made something tight and painful loosen in Shane's chest.

He looked around the basement. At the TV still showing the post-game analysis. At the empty chair where Pavel had been sitting. At the door that stayed locked no matter how friendly his captors became.

One down, Shane thought. Artem liked him. Pavel was warming up to him.

He still didn't know who was in charge. Didn't know why he'd been taken, or what they wanted, or how long this would last.

But he was surviving. By being himself. By making them see him as Shane—a person, not just a hostage.

It was all he could do.

So he'd keep doing it.

Shane lay back on the bed, staring at the ceiling tiles he'd counted a hundred times already, and waited for whatever came next.

The next day—or maybe it was the same day, time had lost all meaning down here—the lock clicked and Artem pushed through the door.

He had something behind his back.

Shane sat up from where he'd been lying on the bed, immediately alert. Artem looked... awkward. Uncomfortable in a way Shane hadn't seen before. His usual easy confidence was gone, replaced by something almost sheepish.

"I have something for you," Artem said.

Shane's eyebrows rose. "Okay?"

Artem shifted his weight, still keeping whatever it was hidden behind his back. He looked like a kid about to give a Valentine's Day card to his crush—embarrassed and uncertain.

Then he pulled his hand forward.

A Hello Kitty watch.

Shane stared.

It was new. The plastic packaging was still on it, the price sticker from some bodega or drugstore visible on the back. The band was bright pink—almost aggressively pink—and Hello Kitty's cheerful face smiled up from the digital display, one paw raised in a permanent wave.

"I don't know why you like this so much," Artem said, his accent thicker than usual, like embarrassment was making him forget his English. "Is... children's watch. But here." He held it out, arm extended, like he wanted to get rid of it as quickly as possible. "Pavel shouldn't have taken yours. That was... not right."

Shane just stared at the watch. At Artem's outstretched hand. At the bright pink band and Hello Kitty's smiling face.

"You..." Shane's voice came out rough. He cleared his throat. "You bought this for me?"

Artem shrugged, looking away. "Is only fifteen dollars. Maybe twenty. Not expensive."

Shane reached out slowly and took the watch. The plastic was cool against his palm, the packaging crinkling slightly. He turned it over, examining it. It was perfect. Exactly like his old one—the same model, the same ridiculous pink band, the same cheerful Hello Kitty face.

Artem had gone out of his way to find this. Had left wherever they were keeping Shane, had gone to a store, had searched for this specific stupid watch, and had bought it with his own money.

For Shane.

"Thank you," Shane said quietly. "Really. Thank you."

He peeled off the plastic packaging, his fingers working carefully. Then he fastened the watch around his wrist. The bright pink band stood out against his skin, garish and childish and perfect.

Shane pressed the button on the side.

The display lit up—a soft blue glow illuminating Hello Kitty's face. The time blinked: 3:47 PM.

Shane smiled. A real smile, genuine and warm, the first one he'd felt since being thrown in that van.

Artem was watching him, still looking awkward but also... pleased. Like he'd done something right and wasn't quite sure how to handle it.

"You really like it," Artem said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah," Shane said, still looking at the watch. "I really do."

He touched the face gently, tracing Hello Kitty's outline with his thumb. "It reminds me that not everything has to be expensive to matter, you know? Sometimes the cheap stuff is better because it's real. It's honest."

Artem nodded slowly, like he understood. He moved to his usual spot against the wall and sat down, settling in for his shift.

Shane kept looking at the watch. Pressed the button again just to see it light up. The soft blue glow felt like a small victory, a tiny piece of normalcy in this concrete basement.

"Thanks, Artem," Shane said again. "Seriously."

Shane pressed the button one more time, and this time he noticed the date displayed in small numbers beneath the time: 12/24.

He stared at it for a moment, his brain processing. December 24th. Christmas Eve.

"Wait," Shane said, looking up at Artem. "What day is it?"

"Is twenty-fourth. December." Artem glanced at his own phone to confirm. "Why?"

Christmas Eve. Shane had been here for almost a week. He was missing Christmas. Missing Christmas with Ilya—their first Christmas together. He'd been planning to get Ilya a gift, maybe a photo of them together, something meaningful. They were supposed to get a tree for the penthouse. Make it special.

Instead, Shane was in a basement, and Ilya was out there somewhere tearing the city apart looking for him.

Shane swallowed hard, pushing down the sudden tightness in his chest. He forced a grin, keeping his voice light. "Well, thanks for the Christmas gift, mate. Sorry I can't reciprocate."

Maybe I'll get you a new Adidas tracksuit when I get out of here."

Artem laughed—a real laugh, surprised and genuine. "You notice my tracksuit?"

"Hard not to. Very Russian." Shane's grin widened despite everything. "Three stripes and everything."

"Is classic," Artem said, still smiling. "And yes, I hold you to that. New tracksuit. Black, not blue."

"Deal."

Shane looked down at his wrist. Hello Kitty smiled up at him, cheerful and bright. He pressed the button one more time, watching the display light up in the dim basement.

Chapter 12: Family Business

Shane had been in the basement for about a week now. Maybe longer. Time had a way of blurring down here, where the only light came from a single bulb that never turned off and the only sounds were the occasional creak of floorboards overhead and Artem's quiet breathing from the other cot.

He'd fallen into a routine of sorts. Wake up when Pavel brought breakfast—usually something simple, bread and cheese, sometimes eggs. Spend the day reading the battered paperbacks Artem had scrounged up from somewhere, or playing cards, or just staring at the water-stained ceiling and trying not to think about Ilya. Trying not to wonder if Ilya was looking for him.

Artem was decent company, at least. Quiet, but not unfriendly. He'd explained the basics: they were somewhere outside the city, in a house that belonged to Alexei Rosanov—Ilya's older brother. Shane was leverage. Bait. A way to get Ilya's attention, to bring him back into the fold.

"What fold?" Shane had asked.

Artem had just shaken his head. "Family business. Not my place to say."

So Shane waited. And tried not to think about what would happen when Ilya finally showed up.

The door at the top of the stairs opened with its usual creak, and Shane looked up from his book—some thriller he'd read three times already—expecting to see Pavel with lunch.

But Pavel's energy was different today. Tense. His jaw was tight, his movements sharp as he descended the stairs.

"Boss wants to see you," Pavel said, his accent thicker than usual. "Upstairs."

Shane's stomach dropped.

He'd been wondering when this would happen. When he'd finally meet whoever was in charge of this operation. He'd imagined it a dozen different ways—some violent, some merely terrifying—but now that the moment was here, his mind went blank.

Artem, sitting on his cot across the room, looked worried. His eyes met Shane's, and there was something in them that made Shane's pulse quicken. A warning, maybe. Or sympathy.

Shane stood slowly, setting the book aside. His legs felt unsteady, but he forced himself to stay calm. To breathe.

"Let's go," Pavel said, already turning back toward the stairs.

Shane followed.

It was the first time he'd been out of the basement since arriving. The stairs creaked under his feet, and when he reached the top, the sudden brightness made him squint. Natural light, streaming through windows. He'd almost forgotten what it looked like.

Pavel led him through a house that was nicer than Shane had expected but not ostentatious. Suburban, almost. Hardwood floors, neutral paint, furniture that looked like it came from a mid-range catalog. The kind of place that wouldn't draw attention from the neighbors.

They passed through a kitchen—clean, unused—and down a hallway lined with family photos that Shane didn't have time to examine. Then Pavel stopped at a doorway and gestured for Shane to enter.

Shane stepped into what looked like a living room that had been converted into an office. A desk in one corner, papers scattered across it. A bookshelf with more decorative items than books. And in the center of the room, sitting in a leather armchair like it was a throne, was a man.

He was older than Ilya. Late thirties, maybe early forties. But the resemblance was unmistakable—the same sharp jawline, the same high cheekbones, the same grey eyes that seemed to see right through you.

But where Ilya's gaze was calculating, controlled, this man's eyes were wild. His pupils were dilated, blown wide despite the bright afternoon light. His leg bounced restlessly, and his fingers drummed against the arm of the chair in a rapid, erratic rhythm.

He sniffed, wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

Shane realized, with a cold clarity that settled in his gut like a stone: this man was high. Cocaine, probably. And he had the jittery, mean energy of someone looking for a fight. Or entertainment.

This was Alexei. Ilya's brother.

Alexei looked Shane up and down, his gaze slow and assessing. A predator sizing up prey.

"So this is my brother's little pet," Alexei said, his voice rough, words coming fast. "The college boy."

He stood, and Shane had to resist the urge to step back. Alexei was taller than Ilya, broader in the shoulders. He circled Shane slowly, and Shane forced himself to stand still, to keep his breathing even.

"I don't see what's so special," Alexei continued, his tone mocking. "You're nothing. Skinny. Weak." He stopped in front of Shane, tilting his head. "Ilya could have anyone. Why you?"

Shane stayed quiet. Every instinct screamed at him that this was dangerous, that one wrong word could set this man off. He could feel Pavel's presence behind him, tense and ready.

Alexei stepped closer, invading Shane's space. Shane could smell the sharp, chemical scent of sweat and something else—vodka, maybe, underneath the cocaine.

"What, no smart mouth?" Alexei's lips curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "I heard you had a smart mouth."

Before Shane could respond, Alexei's hand shot out and grabbed a fistful of Shane's hair. He yanked Shane's head back roughly, forcing him to look up, to meet those wild grey eyes.

Pain lanced across Shane's scalp. He winced but didn't cry out, biting down on the inside of his cheek hard enough to taste blood.

"I asked you a question," Alexei said, his face inches from Shane's. "What makes you so special?"

Shane's heart was hammering so hard he could hear it in his ears. His scalp burned where Alexei's fingers twisted in his hair. But somewhere beneath the fear, beneath the adrenaline flooding his system, a familiar defense mechanism kicked in.

When in doubt, make a joke.

"Honestly?" Shane managed, his voice strained but steady. "It's my sparkling personality. That and I'm great at Hockey."

The silence that followed was deafening.

Pavel made a small sound behind him—a sharp intake of breath. Shane could feel everyone in the room holding their breath, waiting.

Then Alexei laughed.

It was genuine, surprised laughter that seemed to catch even Alexei off guard. He released Shane's hair and stepped back, shaking his head.

"There it is," Alexei said, still laughing. "The smart mouth."

He wiped his nose again, sniffed. "You got balls, kid. I'll give you that."

Shane's scalp throbbed. He resisted the urge to touch it, to check if Alexei had pulled any hair out. Instead, he just stood there, trying to read the situation, trying to figure out if he'd just saved himself or signed his own death warrant.

Alexei's laughter faded, and his expression shifted—mercurial, like a switch had been flipped. The humor drained from his face, replaced by something cold and hard.

"You know why you're here?" Alexei asked.

Shane swallowed. "Not really. You haven't exactly been forthcoming."

Alexei's jaw tightened. "You're here because my brother forgot where he came from. Forgot his family." His voice dropped, getting colder with each word. "I'm reminding him."

And there it was. The truth Shane had suspected but hadn't wanted to acknowledge.

This wasn't about him. It had never been about him.

He was leverage. A tool. A way for Alexei to get to Ilya.

"My brother thinks he can just walk away," Alexei continued, pacing now, that restless energy making it impossible for him to stand still. "Thinks he can go legit, play businessman, forget where the money came from. Forget who built this empire." He stopped, turned to face Shane. "But family is family. Blood is blood. And Ilya needs to remember that."

Shane's mouth was dry. He wanted to ask what Alexei wanted from Ilya, what "family business" meant, but he had a feeling he didn't want to know the answer.

Alexei waved a hand dismissively. "Take him back downstairs."

Pavel moved forward, grabbing Shane's arm.

"Enjoy your stay," Alexei called after them as Pavel started leading Shane toward the door. "You'll be here a while."

Shane let himself be guided out, but at the doorway, Alexei's voice stopped them.

"And kid?"

Shane looked back over his shoulder.

Alexei was smiling again, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Next time I ask a question, you better have a funny answer. I don't like boring."

Shane's heart was still racing, but he heard himself say, "I'll work on my material."

Alexei's laughter followed them down the hallway.

Pavel didn't speak as they walked back through the house, back down the stairs into the basement. But once they were at the bottom, once the door had closed behind them, he turned to Shane.

"You are either very brave or very stupid," Pavel said.

Shane's hands were shaking now that the adrenaline was wearing off. He shoved them in his pockets. "Probably both."

Artem was standing by his cot, his face pale. "Boss could have killed you."

"But he didn't," Shane said.

He walked to his cot and sat down heavily, his legs suddenly weak. He touched his scalp gingerly where Alexei had grabbed him. It was sore, tender. He'd probably have a bruise.

Pavel lingered by the stairs for a moment, watching Shane with an expression that might have been respect. Or pity. Then he turned and left, the door closing with a heavy thud.

Artem sat down on his own cot, still staring at Shane. "You made him laugh."

"Yeah." Shane leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes. "Lucky me."

But as the adrenaline continued to drain from his system, leaving him shaky and exhausted, Shane's mind was working.

Alexei was dangerous. Unpredictable. High on cocaine and probably other things, with the kind of volatile energy that could turn violent in a heartbeat.

But he was also lonely. Angry. Desperate for his brother's attention.

This was personal. A family drama playing out with Shane as an unwilling prop.

Ilya had walked away from something—from the family business, from Alexei, from whatever life they'd built together. And Alexei couldn't accept it. Couldn't let him go.

So he'd taken Shane. Not because Shane mattered, but because Shane mattered to Ilya.

Or at least, Alexei thought he did.

Shane opened his eyes, staring at the water-stained ceiling.

He was caught in the middle of something he didn't understand, between two brothers with a history he couldn't begin to unravel. And the worst part was, he didn't even know if Ilya would come for him.

They'd left things badly. Shane had pushed too hard, said too much. And Ilya had shut down, the way he always did when things got too real.

Maybe Ilya would decide Shane wasn't worth the trouble. Wasn't worth confronting his brother, his past, whatever demons he'd been running from.

Maybe Shane would just rot in this basement until Alexei got bored or Ilya called his bluff.

"You should rest," Artem said quietly. "Boss will probably want to see you again. He likes... entertainment."

Shane nodded, but he didn't move. He just sat there, touching his sore scalp, and tried not to think about Ilya's grey eyes—so similar to Alexei's, but so different.

Controlled danger versus chaotic danger.

And Shane, somehow, had fallen for the controlled kind.

He almost laughed at the absurdity of it. Almost.

Instead, he lay down on the bed, pulled the thin blanket over himself, and closed his eyes.

And tried not to hope that Ilya would come.

The next day—or maybe it was the day after, Shane had lost track—Artem came down the stairs with his phone in hand and an actual smile on his face.

"I got it working," he announced, holding up the phone like a trophy. "Russian league. Live game. Spartak Moscow versus CSKA."

Shane sat up from where he'd been lying on the bed, staring at the ceiling tiles he'd counted approximately four hundred times. "Seriously?"

"Seriously." Artem was already connecting his phone to the TV, fumbling with cables. "My cousin, he has subscription. I use his login. Is not exactly legal, but..." He shrugged. "Who cares?"

The TV flickered to life, and suddenly the basement was filled with the sounds of a hockey arena—the roar of the crowd, the scrape of skates on ice, the sharp crack of stick against puck. Shane felt something loosen in his chest, something he hadn't realized was wound so tight.

Hockey. Normal, familiar hockey.

"Come, sit." Artem gestured to the spot next to him on the floor, his back against the wall. "Game just started."

Shane slid off the bed and settled beside him, close enough that their shoulders almost touched. The screen showed players warming up, the camera panning across the crowd waving flags and banners.

"Spartak is my team," Artem said, pointing at the screen. "Red and white. See? Number seventeen, that's Sergeyev. Best defenseman in the league. And number nine, Volkov—he's fast, like lightning."

"What about CSKA?"

"Army team. Very good. Very disciplined." Artem made a face. "Boring. But they win a lot."

The puck dropped, and they both leaned forward, watching the play develop. Shane found himself getting pulled in despite everything—despite the basement, despite the zip tie marks still visible on his wrists, despite the fact that he was a hostage watching hockey with one of his captors.

"Yes! Go, go, go!" Artem shouted as Spartak pushed into the offensive zone. "Pass it! *Blyad*, pass it!"

Shane laughed. "What does that mean?"

"Is... how you say... fuck. But Russian fuck." Artem grinned. "You want to learn Russian curse words? Is very useful for hockey."

"Absolutely. Ilya's taught me some... but I want to impress him."

For the next twenty minutes, Artem taught him. *Blyad* for fuck. *Suka* for bitch. *Yob tvoyu mat* for something that apparently translated to "fuck your mother" but was used more like "goddammit." Shane practiced them, stumbling over the pronunciation, while Artem corrected him between plays.

"No, no—*blyad*, not *bleed*. You sound like you're dying."

"I feel like I'm dying. Russian is hard."

"English is harder. You have silent letters. Why? What is the point?"

They argued about linguistics while Spartak scored, both of them jumping up and yelling at the screen. Shane found himself grinning, actually grinning, for the first time in days. This was normal. This was human. Two guys watching hockey and yelling at refs who couldn't hear them.

"That was offsides!" Shane protested when CSKA scored on what looked like a questionable play.

"*Suka!*" Artem threw his hands up. "Ref is blind! *Yob tvoyu mat!*"

Shane tried it: "*Yob... tvoy... mat?*"

"Close enough." Artem clapped him on the shoulder. "You're learning."

They settled back against the wall, shoulders touching now, comfortable in a way that should have been impossible given the circumstances. But hockey did that—created a shared language, a common ground. It didn't matter that Artem was Russian and Shane was American, that one of them was a guard and the other was a prisoner. Right now, they were just two guys watching a game.

"Your, uh, Ilya." Artem said during a commercial break, his voice quieter. "You two play hockey together?"

"No. I play on a College team." Shane touched his new Hello Kitty watch, the one Artem had bought him.

Shane thought about Ilya's hands in his hair, Ilya's mouth on his, Ilya's voice saying *welcome home* in that penthouse that still smelled like new paint and possibility. "Yeah. He's good to me."

Artem nodded slowly. "Boss—Alexei—he talks about his brother like he is enemy. But I think... I think he misses him. Is complicated."

"Family usually is."

The game came back on, and they fell silent again, watching Spartak fight to tie it up. Shane learned more names—Kuznetsov, Petrov, Mikhailov—and Artem told him stories about each player, about their stats and their rivalries and that time Volkov got into a fight so bad he broke his hand on another player's helmet.

It was almost peaceful.

And then the door at the top of the stairs opened.

Both of them looked up. Pavel descended slowly, his expression unreadable.

"Boss wants to see you again," Pavel said, looking at Shane.

Shane's stomach dropped. He remembered Alexei's fingers in his hair, the manic energy, the cocaine-bright eyes. The way he'd looked at Shane like he was a toy, something to play with and break.

"Now?" Shane's voice came out steadier than he felt.

"Now."

Artem stood up quickly. "I'll come with you."

Pavel looked at him, then nodded. "Da. Both of you."

They climbed the stairs in silence—Pavel in front, Shane in the middle, Artem behind. Shane's heart was hammering against his ribs, his mouth dry. The hockey game continued without them, the crowd's roar fading as they moved through the house.

The same living room. The same expensive furniture and the same smell of cigarettes and something chemical. But this time, Alexei was worse.

He was pacing when they entered, talking to himself in rapid Russian, his movements jerky and agitated. His pupils were blown wide, his jaw working constantly. He'd been up for days, Shane realized. Days of cocaine and paranoia and whatever demons lived in his head.

Alexei's gaze snapped to them as they entered. His eyes locked on Artem immediately.

"What are you doing here?" His voice was sharp, accusatory. "I called for the boy, not you."

Artem straightened. "I just thought—"

"You *thought*?" Alexei crossed the room in three strides, getting in Artem's face. "Since when do you think? You're paid to watch, not to think. You're paid to keep him locked up, not to become his fucking friend."

Artem's face went red. "Boss, I—"

"Useless." Alexei's voice dripped with contempt. "You let him get comfortable. You're too soft. Too weak. You sit down there watching hockey with him like you're *friends*." He spat the word like it was poison. "You think I don't know? You think I don't see everything that happens in my own house?"

"I'm sorry, Boss, I—"

The slap came fast and hard, Alexei's hand cracking across Artem's face with enough force to snap his head to the side. The sound echoed in the room.

Artem stood there, his cheek already reddening, his eyes on the floor.

"Get out of my sight," Alexei said coldly.

Shane moved before he could think about it, stepping between them, his body blocking Alexei's path to Artem.

"Hey," Shane said, his voice loud in the sudden silence. "He was just doing his job. Which, I gotta say, seems pretty boring. Watching me count ceiling tiles for eight hours? You should give him a raise for not dying of boredom."

Alexei's attention shifted to Shane like a predator spotting new prey. His eyes narrowed, dangerous and bright.

Behind Shane, Artem made a small sound—shock or fear or both.

Pavel tensed, his hand moving toward his hip.

"What did you say?" Alexei's voice was soft now, which was somehow worse than the shouting.

Shane held his ground, even though every instinct screamed at him to back down, to apologize, to shut up. "I said he deserves a raise. Or at least better TV channels. Russian hockey is great and all, but we've watched the same game three times."

Alexei stared at him. Then, slowly, his mouth curved into something that might have been a smile if it wasn't so cold.

"I said get out," he repeated, but he was looking at Artem now, not Shane. "Now."

Artem hesitated, his eyes on Shane.

Shane gave him a small nod. *It's okay. Go.*

Artem left, shooting Shane one last look—apologetic, worried, guilty—before the door closed behind him.

Now it was just Shane, Alexei, and Pavel.

The room felt smaller suddenly. More dangerous.

Alexei started pacing again, his movements sharp and erratic. He ran a hand through his hair, sniffed hard, wiped at his nose. "You want to know something?" he said, not looking at Shane. "About my brother?"

Shane stayed quiet, watching him.

"We used to be close. Brothers. *Real* brothers." Alexei's voice was bitter. "Before he left. Before he forgot about family. We were supposed to do this together—take over from our father, run the organization together. That's what father wanted. That's what he *planned*."

He spun around, his eyes wild. "But no. Ilya had to go off on his own. Build his own empire. Thought he was better than us. Better than the family that raised him, that taught him everything."

Shane watched him pace, watched the manic energy, the way Alexei's hands wouldn't stay still. The cocaine was making him talk, making him confess things he probably wouldn't say sober.

"Have you tried less coke?" Shane asked.

The words came out before he could stop them. Deadpan. Genuinely asking.

The silence that followed was absolute.

Alexei stopped pacing. Turned slowly to look at Shane.

Then he crossed the room in two strides and backhanded Shane across the face.

The impact sent Shane's head snapping to the side, his ears ringing, the taste of copper flooding his mouth. He stumbled but stayed on his feet somehow, his hand going to his lip where it had split open.

"Boss—" Pavel started forward.

Alexei held up a hand, stopping him.

Shane touched his split lip, felt the blood, then looked back at Alexei.

"I guess that's a no," he said.

For a moment, nothing. Alexei just stared at him, his chest heaving, his fist still clenched.

Then he laughed.

Loud, genuine laughter that filled the room. He shook his head, still laughing, and some of the manic energy seemed to drain out of him.

"Fuck," Alexei said, wiping at his eyes. "You really do have balls. I'll give you that."

He moved to the couch and dropped onto it, suddenly looking exhausted. He sniffed, wiped his nose again, leaned back against the cushions.

"You want to know when I thought Ilya and I were done?" he asked, his voice quieter now but still wired. "When I thought he'd betrayed the family?"

Shane stayed where he was, blood dripping from his lip onto his shirt. Listening. Learning.

"When I found out he was a faggot." Alexei said it casually, like he was commenting on the weather. "When I learned my little brother liked to fuck men. That's when I thought it was over. That he'd chosen... that lifestyle over us. Over family."

He paused, his jaw working. "But it wasn't. We worked through it. Father didn't like it—father *hated* it—but Ilya was still family. Still blood. So we dealt with it."

His voice got harder. "But when father died? When father left everything to both of us, to share, to run together?" He leaned forward, his eyes burning. "That's when Ilya walked away. Took half the organization and left. Didn't even come to the funeral. Just... left."

Alexei's hands clenched into fists. "That's when he betrayed us. Not when he started fucking men. When he abandoned his family. When he decided he was too good for us."

Shane stood there, his face throbbing, blood on his lip, absorbing every word. Learning about Ilya's past, about the split, about why Alexei was so angry. This wasn't about Shane at all. This was about brothers. About inheritance. About a father's death and the family that fractured in its wake.

"So now I remind him," Alexei said, his voice cold. "Family doesn't abandon family. You don't get to walk away and pretend we don't exist."

He looked at Shane, really looked at him. "Even if I have to hurt what he loves to make him remember."

The words hung in the air, a threat and a promise.

Then Alexei waved a hand dismissively. "Go. Get out. I'm tired of looking at you."

Pavel moved forward, his hand on Shane's shoulder, guiding him toward the door. Shane went, his legs shaky, his face on fire.

They descended the stairs in silence. Shane's mind was racing, processing everything Alexei had said. About Ilya leaving. About their father's death. About the organization split in two. About Alexei's rage and loneliness and cocaine-fueled desperation to get his brother back.

The basement door closed behind them, and Artem jumped up from where he'd been sitting on the bed.

"Fuck," he said, seeing Shane's face, the blood. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"Not your fault," Shane cut him off. He moved to the bed and sat down carefully, his head spinning. "He was looking for an excuse."

Artem disappeared for a moment, came back with a cloth soaked in cold water. Shane took it, pressed it to his split lip, winced at the sting.

On the TV, the hockey game was still playing. Spartak was losing now, down by two.

Shane sat there, holding ice to his face, and thought about everything Alexei had said. About Ilya walking away from his family. About their father's death. About Alexei's rage that had nowhere to go except into cocaine and violence and this—kidnapping his brother's boyfriend to force a confrontation.

Alexei didn't want to kill him, Shane realized. Alexei wanted his brother back. And Shane was the ransom. The bait. The thing Ilya loved enough to come back for.

If Ilya came back at all.

Shane closed his eyes, the cold cloth pressed to his throbbing face, and tried not to think about grey eyes and careful hands and a voice saying *welcome home*.

Ilya sat in Shane's penthouse, surrounded by maps and dead ends.

The dining table—Shane's dining table, the one they'd eaten breakfast at just two weeks ago—was covered in papers. Surveillance photos of Alexei's known associates. Lists of properties his brother might use. Reports from his men who'd been searching every warehouse, every safe house, every fucking basement in Brooklyn and Queens for ten days straight.

Nothing.

Alexei had vanished like smoke, and he'd taken Shane with him.

Ilya's phone sat on the table in front of him, silent. Mocking. He stared at it, willing it to ring, to buzz, to give him *something*. His hands were shaking—he couldn't remember the last time he'd slept. Couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten anything that wasn't coffee or vodka.

The penthouse smelled like Shane. His shampoo in the bathroom. His textbooks still stacked on the coffee table. His hoodie draped over the back of the couch. Everywhere Ilya looked, there was evidence of Shane's life, Shane's presence.

Shane's absence.

The phone buzzed.

Ilya's hand shot out, grabbing it before the vibration even finished. Unknown number. His heart stopped.

The text was simple: *Warehouse on Kent Ave. Midnight. Come alone if you want to talk about the boy.*

No signature. No threats. Just an address and a time.

But Ilya knew.

Alexei.

Finally. After ten days of searching, of tearing the city apart, of threatening and bribing and breaking every rule he'd ever set for himself—finally, his brother was reaching out.

Ilya checked the time. 11:17 PM. He had forty-three minutes.

He stood, grabbed his gun from where it sat on the kitchen counter, checked the magazine. Fully loaded. He tucked it into the holster at his back, pulled on his jacket, and headed for the door.

Dimitri was waiting in the hallway, leaning against the wall. He straightened when he saw Ilya. "Boss?"

"Kent Avenue. Warehouse district. Midnight." Ilya's voice was flat, emotionless. The voice he used when he was about to do something terrible. "It's Alexei."

Dimitri's jaw tightened. "It's a trap."

"I know."

"You're going anyway."

"Yes."

"Then I'm coming with you."

Ilya looked at him—at his second-in-command, his friend, the man who'd taken a beating trying to protect Shane. Dimitri's arm was still in a cast, his face still bruised. But his eyes were hard, determined.

"Stay back," Ilya said. "But stay ready."

Dimitri nodded once. "Always."

The warehouse on Kent Avenue sat in the industrial wasteland between Williamsburg and Greenpoint, surrounded by empty lots and shuttered factories. At midnight, the area was deserted—no witnesses, no cameras, no one to hear anything that might happen inside.

Perfect for a meeting between two men who dealt in violence.

Ilya pulled up in his Mercedes, killed the engine. Two more cars pulled in behind him—Dimitri and six of his best men. Armed, ready, waiting for his signal.

The warehouse had lights on inside. Ilya could see them through the grimy windows, casting long shadows across the cracked pavement.

He got out of the car. The December cold bit at his face, his breath fogging in the air. He checked his gun one more time, then started walking toward the entrance.

"Boss." Dimitri's voice, low and urgent. "Let us come with you."

Ilya didn't turn around. "Stay here. If I'm not out in thirty minutes, come in shooting."

He pushed through the warehouse door.

The space inside was massive—concrete floors, steel beams, pallets stacked against the walls. Empty, abandoned, perfect for a confrontation. Industrial lights hung from the ceiling, casting everything in harsh white light.

And in the center of it all stood Alexei.

Ilya's brother looked exactly the same as he had three years ago. Tall, broad-shouldered, dark hair slicked back. Same sharp cheekbones, same grey eyes—their father's eyes. He wore an expensive suit that was slightly rumpled, his tie loosened. And he was smiling.

Flanking him were four men. Ilya recognized two of them—Pavel and Artem, Alexei's most trusted enforcers. The other two were unfamiliar, but they had the same hard look, the same readiness for violence.

Alexei's men inside. Ilya's men outside.

Standoff.

"Little brother." Alexei's voice echoed in the empty space, warm and familiar and wrong. "It's been too long."

Ilya stopped ten feet away. His hands were loose at his sides, ready to draw his gun if needed. His face was blank, emotionless—the mask he wore when he was barely holding himself together.

"Where is he?" Ilya's voice was cold. Controlled. Each word carefully measured.

Alexei's smile widened. "Who? Oh, you mean the college boy. Your little pet."

Ilya's jaw clenched. "Where. Is. Shane."

"Safe. For now." Alexei started circling, hands in his pockets, casual. Like they were having a conversation at a bar instead of a standoff in an abandoned warehouse. "He's comfortable. Fed. Unharmed. Mostly."

"Mostly?"

"He has a smart mouth on him. Had to remind him to be respectful." Alexei shrugged. "Nothing permanent."

Ilya's hands curled into fists. He forced them to relax. Forced himself to breathe. "What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Alexei stopped circling, turned to face him fully. "I want my brother back. I want my family back. I want what father wanted—the two of us, running this organization together. Like it was always supposed to be."

"Father's dead."

"Because you weren't there!" Alexei's voice cracked, the casual facade slipping. "He was dying, Ilya. Dying. And where were you? In New York, playing gangster, pretending you didn't have a family back home."

"I had my reasons."

"Your reasons." Alexei laughed, bitter and sharp. "Your reasons got father buried without his youngest son at the funeral. Your reasons left me alone to handle everything. Your reasons—" He stopped, took a breath, smoothed his expression back into that dangerous smile. "But we're not here to talk about the past. We're here to talk about your future. And the boy's future."

Ilya went very still. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Alexei's smile turned cruel. "Don't talk about him? But he's all you care about now, isn't he? This American college student with his hockey and his textbooks and his—" He paused, his gaze raking over Ilya with something ugly in it. "I have to say, little brother, I understand now. Why you picked him."

Every muscle in Ilya's body tensed. "Alexei—"

"He's pretty, in that American way. Clean. Innocent-looking." Alexei's voice dropped lower, more intimate. More deliberately cruel. "Young, too. What is he, twenty-two? Twenty-three? You always did like them young."

"Stop talking."

"Why? Does it bother you?" Alexei took a step closer. "Hearing me talk about your little boyfriend? About what he looks like? What he feels like?"

Ilya's vision was starting to narrow, red creeping in at the edges. "I'm warning you—"

"I bet he's tight," Alexei continued, his voice a purr now, designed to cut. "Bet he makes those sweet sounds when you fuck him. Does he beg, Ilya? I bet he begs. That mouth on him—probably does more than just talk back, doesn't it?"

Ilya's control was fracturing. He could feel it, like ice cracking under pressure. "Shut your fucking mouth."

"Or what?" Alexei spread his hands, still smiling. "You'll hit me? Go ahead. Won't change the fact that I have him and you don't. Won't change the fact that he's in my house, sleeping in my bed— Won't change the fact that every time he closes his eyes, he's wondering if you're even coming for him."

"Where is he?" Ilya's voice was shaking now, barely controlled.

"Safe," Alexei repeated. Then, softer, more vicious: "For now. But you know, little brother, he really is very pretty. And I've been so lonely since you left. Maybe I should find out for myself what's so special about him. See what made you choose a college boy over your own blood. Maybe I should—"

Ilya moved.

He didn't think. Didn't plan. Just moved.

He crossed the ten feet between them in two strides and slammed into Alexei with all his weight, tackling him to the concrete floor. They hit hard, the impact driving the air from both their lungs, and then Ilya was on top of him, fists flying.

No technique. No control. Just violence.

He punched Alexei in the face, felt his brother's nose break under his knuckles. Punched him again, splitting his lip. Again, catching his cheekbone. Blood sprayed across the concrete, hot and red, and Ilya didn't stop.

Alexei fought back—he was bigger, stronger, had always been the better fighter when they were kids. He bucked, throwing Ilya off balance, and got a punch in that caught Ilya's ribs, then his jaw. Pain exploded through Ilya's face, but he barely felt it. He grabbed Alexei's collar, slammed his head back against the concrete, and kept hitting him.

They rolled, grappling, trading blows. Crashed into a stack of pallets that toppled with a deafening clatter. Alexei got on top, drove his fist into Ilya's stomach, his ribs, his face. Ilya tasted blood, felt his eye swelling, and didn't care.

He grabbed Alexei's throat, squeezed, and used the leverage to flip them again.

Around them, the henchmen watched.

Pavel and Artem stood tense, hands on their weapons, but they didn't move. Didn't intervene. This was between brothers. Personal. Sacred in its violence.

Outside, Dimitri had heard the commotion and pushed through the door, his own men behind him, guns drawn. But he stopped when he saw the fight, held up a hand to keep his men back.

This had to happen.

Ilya got on top of Alexei again, straddling him, and rained punches down. His knuckles were split and bleeding, his hands screaming in pain, but he didn't stop. Couldn't stop.

Alexei's face was a mess—nose broken, blood pouring from his mouth and nose, one eye already swelling shut. But he was laughing. Laughing through the blood, through the pain, his teeth red.

"There he is," Alexei gasped, spitting blood. "There's my brother. There's the Rozanov I remember."

"Where is he?" Ilya grabbed Alexei's collar, shook him. "Where's Shane?"

"You think—" Alexei coughed, more blood. "You think beating me gets him back?"

Ilya pulled back his fist for another punch.

"You're not getting him back acting like this," Alexei said, still smiling that bloody smile. "You want him? You come home. You come back to the family. You take your place at my side, like father wanted. Like it was always supposed to be."

Ilya's fist hovered in the air. "Give him back."

"Come home first."

"Give him back!"

"Kill me," Alexei said softly, "and you never find him. Never. I'm the only one who knows where he is. You kill me, he dies in that basement. Alone. Wondering why you never came."

Ilya's hand shook. He wanted to do it. Wanted to beat his brother's face in until there was nothing left. Wanted to make him hurt the way Ilya was hurting, the way Shane was hurting.

But Alexei was right.

Kill him, and Shane was lost forever.

Ilya hesitated.

That was all the opening Alexei's men needed.

Pavel and another man moved in fast, grabbing Ilya's arms, hauling him off Alexei. Ilya struggled, feral, trying to break free. "I'll kill you! I'll fucking kill you!"

Pavel helped Alexei up. Ilya's brother swayed on his feet, one hand pressed to his broken nose, blood streaming down his face and onto his expensive suit. But he was still smiling.

"There's your answer, little brother," Alexei said, his voice thick with blood. "You want him back? You know what you have to do."

Dimitri and Ilya's men rushed forward, guns drawn, surrounding them. Alexei's men drew their own weapons. The warehouse filled with the sound of safeties clicking off, of hammers being cocked.

Mexican standoff.

"Easy," Alexei said, holding up one bloody hand. "We're leaving. No one needs to die tonight."

His men started backing toward the exit, weapons still trained on Ilya's crew. Alexei moved with them, supported by Pavel, leaving a trail of blood drops on the concrete.

At the door, he stopped. Turned back.

"Family, Ilya," he said. "That's all I ever wanted. That's all father wanted. You and me, together, running this empire the way it was meant to be run."

Ilya stood there, held back by Dimitri now, breathing hard. His face was a mess of blood and bruises, his knuckles split open, his ribs screaming. But his eyes were locked on his brother.

"Come home," Alexei said. "Take your place. Then you get the boy back. Not before."

They left.

The door swung shut behind them, and the warehouse fell silent except for Ilya's ragged breathing.

Dimitri's hand was on his shoulder, steadying him. "Boss?"

Ilya didn't answer. He stared at the blood on his hands—his blood, Alexei's blood, mixed together. Stared at the drops on the concrete floor, the evidence of violence that had solved nothing.

Alexei had all the control here.

Alexei had Shane, and Ilya had no choice.

He could kill his brother—hunt him down, put a bullet in his head, end this. But then Shane would die too. Alone in some basement, waiting for a rescue that would never come.

Or he could do what Alexei wanted. Go back to Russia. Take his place in the family business. Become the man his father had wanted him to be, the man he'd spent three years running from.

Become his brother's second again.

The rage that had been burning in Ilya's chest—hot and wild and uncontrolled—started to cool. Started to crystallize into something else.

Calculation.

If Alexei wanted to play games, Ilya would play. He'd go back. He'd pretend to fall in line. He'd do whatever it took.

And then, when Alexei's guard was down, when Shane was safe—

Then Ilya would destroy him.

"Get the car," Ilya said quietly.

Dimitri hesitated. "Boss, you need a hospital—"

"Get the car."

Dimitri nodded and moved away, barking orders to the other men.

Ilya stood alone in the warehouse, surrounded by blood and broken pallets and the ghost of his brother's laughter.

He touched his split lip, his swollen eye. Felt the pain in his ribs where Alexei had landed solid hits.

None of it mattered.

The only thing that mattered was Shane.

And Ilya was going to get him back.

No matter what it cost.

Chapter 13: Back Home

The basement was silent.

Shane sat on the edge of the mattress, listening. Really listening, the way he'd learned to do over the past ten days—cataloging every creak of the floorboards above, every muffled voice, every footstep that might tell him who was upstairs and what kind of mood they were in.

Right now? Nothing. No one.

That was unusual. Normally Artem or Pavel was always there, stationed somewhere upstairs like the world's most apologetic prison guards. Even when they weren't actively watching him, Shane could hear them—the low murmur of Russian conversation, the sound of the TV, Pavel's occasional laughter at something on his phone.

But for the past hour, maybe longer, there had been nothing but silence.

Well, not quite nothing.

Earlier—Shane wasn't sure exactly how long ago, time had a way of blurring down here—there had been noise. A lot of it. Raised voices upstairs, angry and sharp even through the ceiling. Something crashing, glass breaking maybe. The unmistakable sounds of a fight.

Shane had pressed himself against the wall, heart hammering, trying to make out words. But it had all been in Russian, too fast and too muffled for him to catch more than fragments. He'd heard Alexei's voice, he was pretty sure. And maybe Artem's? Someone else's he didn't recognize.

Then doors slamming. Car engines starting. The screech of tires on pavement.

And then... silence.

Complete, absolute silence.

Shane had waited, counting his breaths, listening for any sign of movement upstairs. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty.

Nothing.

He was alone.

Actually, properly alone which was rare since Alexei's men had grabbed him outside his apartment building ten days ago.

This was his chance.

Shane's hand moved almost automatically, sliding under the thin mattress to the spot near the wall where he'd been hiding his secret for the past three days. His fingers found it

immediately—the piece of plastic he'd been working on, shaping, preparing for exactly this moment.

It was part of a soda bottle. Sprite, specifically. Pavel had brought him one four days ago, along with a sandwich and an apology for Alexei being "difficult." Shane had drunk the soda slowly, thinking. And when Pavel had taken the empty bottle away, Shane had asked if he could keep it.

"Keep the bottle?" Pavel had looked confused.

"Yeah, I just... I like having something to fidget with. Helps with the anxiety." Shane had shrugged, going for casual. "You know how it is."

Pavel had hesitated, then nodded. "Sure, okay. Is just plastic."

Just plastic.

Shane pulled it out now, examining it in the dim light from the single bulb overhead. He'd been working on it little by little whenever he was alone—which wasn't often, but Artem and Pavel did occasionally both go upstairs at the same time, usually when Alexei called them for something.

Shane had used those precious minutes to bite and tear at the plastic, shaping it with his teeth and fingernails. He'd filed the edges against the rough concrete wall, over and over, until they were sharp enough to cut. He'd bent it, tested its flexibility, shaped it into something that was roughly—hopefully—the right size and shape to work as a shim.

He'd watched enough YouTube videos about lock picking back when he was procrastinating on a work project. He'd never actually tried it, never had a reason to. But the basic principle was simple enough: slide something thin and flexible into the gap between the door and the frame, manipulate the latch mechanism, and if you were very lucky and the lock was cheap enough...

Well. He was about to find out.

Shane stood up, his legs shaky from a combination of adrenaline and too many days of limited movement. He crossed to the door—just a few steps in the small basement room—and pressed his ear against it.

Still nothing upstairs.

Okay. Okay.

He could do this.

Shane knelt down, examining the door more closely. It was old, the kind of cheap interior door you'd find in a rental property. The lock was a simple push-button thing on the outside, the kind that locked automatically when you closed it. Not a deadbolt, thank god. Just a spring latch.

He could work with that.

Shane slid the piece of plastic into the gap between the door and the frame, right at the level of the lock. The plastic was thin enough to fit, flexible enough to bend. He angled it, trying to feel for the latch mechanism, trying to remember the videos he'd watched.

Push in, angle up, apply pressure...

Nothing happened.

Shane adjusted his grip, tried again. The plastic slipped, nearly fell out of the gap entirely. He caught it, repositioned, tried once more.

Still nothing.

His hands were shaking. He could feel sweat forming on his palms despite the cold of the basement. This had to work. It had to. He didn't know when Artem or Pavel would be back, didn't know how long this window of opportunity would last.

Focus. Breathe. Try again.

Shane worked the plastic deeper into the gap, feeling for resistance. There—something. The latch, maybe? He angled the plastic up, applying steady pressure, trying to push the latch back into the door.

The sharp edge of the plastic bit into his palm. Shane hissed in pain but didn't stop. He could feel something warm and wet—blood, probably—making the plastic slippery in his grip.

Ignore it. Keep going.

He adjusted his angle, pushed harder. The plastic bent, flexed, threatened to snap. Shane eased off slightly, tried a different approach. Slide it in, angle it, push up and in at the same time...

Minutes passed. Five, ten, fifteen. Shane's hand was cramping, his palm definitely bleeding now. The plastic was slick with blood and sweat. His knees ached from kneeling on the concrete floor.

But he kept working. Methodically, patiently, trying every angle he could think of. Pushing, pulling, angling, adjusting.

Twenty minutes. Twenty-five.

Come on. Come on, you piece of shit lock, just—

Click.

The sound was so quiet Shane almost missed it. But he felt it—the latch giving way, sliding back into the door mechanism.

Shane froze, not daring to breathe. Had that really just happened? Or was he imagining it?

Slowly, carefully, he reached up and turned the door handle.

It moved.

The door opened.

Holy shit. Holy shit, it actually worked.

Shane stayed frozen for a long moment, half-expecting alarms to go off or footsteps to come thundering down the stairs. But there was nothing. Just silence, and the door standing open in front of him, and the dark stairway leading up.

He was out.

Now he just had to get out of the house.

Shane crept up the stairs one step at a time, testing each one before putting his full weight on it. The old wood creaked occasionally, making him freeze and listen, but there was no response from above. No voices, no footsteps, no sign of anyone at all.

The house felt empty. Not just quiet—empty. Like everyone had left in a hurry and hadn't come back.

What the hell had happened up here?

Shane reached the top of the stairs and found himself in a narrow hallway. Dark, with just a little light filtering in from somewhere deeper in the house. He could make out doorways, the edge of what looked like a kitchen to his left.

He should wait. Should hide somewhere and wait until he was absolutely sure the house was empty, until he had a better plan than just "run."

But he couldn't wait. Every second he stayed here was another second closer to someone coming back, to his chance evaporating. He had to go now, while he could.

Shane looked down at himself. Jeans and a t-shirt, both dirty from ten days in a basement. No shoes—they'd taken those the first day. No jacket, no phone, no wallet. Nothing but the clothes on his back and a piece of bloody plastic still clutched in his hand.

Fuck it. He'd run barefoot if he had to.

Shane moved through the hallway, staying close to the wall, trying to make as little noise as possible. He passed what looked like a living room—furniture overturned, a lamp broken on the floor, clear signs of the fight he'd heard earlier. A kitchen, empty. A bathroom.

And then he saw it: a window. Small, the kind of basement-level window that was half above ground and half below. But it was big enough for a person to fit through, and more importantly, it wasn't barred or boarded up.

Shane approached it carefully, listening for any sound that might indicate someone was nearby. Nothing. Just his own breathing, harsh and too loud in the silence.

He reached for the window latch, old and stiff with paint. It took both hands and all his strength to turn it, the metal protesting with a squeal that made Shane's heart stop.

He froze, listening.

Nothing. No response.

Okay. Okay, keep going.

Shane pushed the window open slowly, trying to minimize the noise. The hinges creaked—old, rusty, loud as hell in the quiet house. He stopped, waited, listened.

Still nothing.

He pushed it open wider. Cold air rushed in immediately, December in New York, probably below freezing. Shane could see snow on the ground outside, piled up against the foundation of the house.

This was going to suck.

But it was better than staying here.

Shane grabbed the window frame, preparing to pull himself up and through. He was just getting his knee up onto the sill when he saw movement in his peripheral vision.

Someone was there.

Shane's head whipped around, his heart jumping into his throat.

Artem stood in a doorway about ten feet away, half-hidden in shadow. Just standing there, watching. Their eyes met across the dark hallway.

Shane's mind raced. Artem could stop him. Could call out, could grab him, could lock him back in the basement. Could do any number of things that would end with Shane not getting out of this house.

But Artem didn't move. Didn't speak. Just stood there, looking at Shane with an expression that was hard to read in the dim light.

Shane raised a finger to his lips. Shh.

Please. Please don't stop me.

He tried to put everything into that look—all the desperation, all the fear, all the hope that maybe, just maybe, Artem would let him go. Artem, who had bought him a Hello Kitty watch. Artem, who had played cards with him and taught him more curse words.

Please.

The moment stretched out, long and terrible. Artem's face was unreadable. He could end this with a single word.

But he didn't say anything. Didn't move. Just watched as Shane turned back to the window and pulled himself up.

Shane climbed through, awkward and ungraceful, scraping his arms on the window frame. He dropped down on the other side, landing in the snow with a shock of cold that stole his breath.

Fuck. Fuck, that was cold.

The snow burned against his bare feet, so cold it felt like fire. Shane bit back a gasp and forced himself to move, to get away from the window, away from the house.

He was in a backyard, small and enclosed by a chain-link fence. Beyond that, he could see other houses, a residential street, streetlights casting orange pools of light on the snow.

Suburban. Somewhere in Queens, maybe? Or Brooklyn? Shane had no idea exactly where Alexei's safe house was, just that it had taken about forty minutes to drive here from Manhattan when they'd first brought him.

Didn't matter. He'd figure it out. Right now, he just needed to run.

Shane stumbled through the snow to the fence, grabbed it with his bloody hands, and hauled himself over. His feet screamed in protest as he landed on the other side, the frozen ground like knives against his bare skin.

Ignore it. Keep moving.

He ran.

The first few minutes were the worst. Shane's feet burned with cold, every step on the frozen sidewalk sending jolts of pain up his legs. His lungs burned too, the cold air like razors in his chest. He was already exhausted from ten days of limited movement and stress, and his body protested every step.

But he didn't stop. Couldn't stop. He ran down the residential street, past houses with Christmas lights and cars in driveways, past a corner store that was closed for the night, past a bus stop where a woman waiting looked at him with wide eyes.

Shane didn't stop to explain. Just kept running.

People stared. Of course they did—a guy running barefoot through the snow in December, bleeding, wild-eyed. But no one tried to stop him, and Shane was grateful for that New York quality of minding your own business even when something weird was happening.

He found a main street, wider, with more traffic. The street signs were familiar—he knew this area. Not well, but enough to orient himself. He was in Queens, not too far from the bridge.

Okay. Okay, he could work with that. He knew how to get home from here.

Shane kept moving, alternating between running and fast walking when his body absolutely refused to run anymore. His feet left bloody prints on the sidewalk. His hands were numb, his face numb, everything numb except the burning pain in his feet and lungs.

Twenty minutes. Thirty. The streets became more familiar. He crossed into Manhattan, the skyline rising up around him like a promise of safety.

Almost there. Almost home.

By the time Shane reached his apartment building, he was barely conscious of what he was doing. His body was on autopilot, muscle memory carrying him through the familiar streets, up the familiar block, to the familiar glass doors of his building.

The doorman—A man named Mr. Smith, who'd been working the night shift for as long as Shane had lived here—looked up as Shane stumbled through the doors. His eyes went wide.

"Mr. Hollander?!" Mr. Smith was out from behind his desk in an instant. "Where have you been?! Everyone's been looking for you! Are you—Jesus, are you okay? Should I call an ambulance?"

Shane shook his head, still moving toward the elevators. "No. No, I'm fine. I just need to get upstairs."

"But your feet—"

"I'm fine."

He wasn't fine. He was very much not fine. But he was home, and that was all that mattered.

Shane made it into the elevator, jabbed the button for his floor with a bloody finger. Mr. Smith was still talking, asking questions, but the elevator doors closed and cut him off.

The ride up felt like it took forever. Shane leaned against the wall, trying to catch his breath, trying to process the fact that he'd actually made it. He was home. He was safe.

Ilya.

The thought hit him with sudden, overwhelming force. Ilya was up there, in the apartment. Ilya, who had probably been going out of his mind for the past ten days. Ilya, who had probably torn the city apart looking for him.

Ilya, who was probably planning to murder his brother.

The elevator dinged. The doors opened.

Shane stumbled out into the hallway, down to his apartment door. No key—they'd taken that too, along with everything else in his pockets. He raised his fist and started pounding on the door.

"Ilya! Open up!"

He pounded again, harder. "Ilya!"

Footsteps inside, fast and heavy. The sound of the deadbolt being thrown.

The door flew open.

Ilya stood there, and for a moment he just stared. Like he was seeing a ghost. Like his brain couldn't process what his eyes were showing him.

"Shane?"

His voice was barely a whisper.

"Hey," Shane said, and tried for a smile.

Then Ilya was grabbing him, pulling him inside, crushing him in an embrace so tight Shane couldn't breathe. Strong hands running over his back, his shoulders, his face, like Ilya needed to physically confirm he was real.

"Are you hurt? Did they hurt you? Where were you? What happened?" The questions came rapid-fire, Ilya's voice rough and desperate. He pulled back just enough to look at Shane properly, his hands framing Shane's face. "Tell me you're okay. Tell me—"

"I'm okay," Shane managed. "I'm okay, I'm—"

"Holy shit."

Shane looked past Ilya to see Dimitri standing in the living room, one arm still in a cast, limping slightly as he moved closer. He looked like he'd been through a war—bruised, battered, exhausted.

But it was Ilya who made Shane's heart stop.

Now that he was actually looking, now that the initial shock was wearing off, Shane could see the damage. Ilya's face was a mess of bruises, dark purple and yellow spreading across his cheekbone. His lip was split, still slightly swollen. His knuckles were torn up, bloody and raw.

"Oh my god." Shane reached up, touching Ilya's face gently. "What happened to you?"

Ilya laughed, the sound slightly unhinged. "What happened to me? Shane, you were missing for ten days—"

"But your face—"

"I'm fine." Ilya was still touching him, hands moving over Shane's shoulders, his arms, like he couldn't stop. "You're safe. That's all that matters. You're safe and you're here and—" He turned to Dimitri, his expression hardening. "Go. Kill my brother. Kill all of them."

"Wait." Shane grabbed Ilya's arm. "No. We need to talk."

Ilya stared at him. "What?"

"We need to talk. All of us. You, me, your brother."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Ilya looked at Shane like he'd lost his mind. "Shane, they kidnapped you—"

"I know." Shane tightened his grip on Ilya's arm. "I know. But we need to talk. Before you go kill anyone."

Dimitri was looking between them, clearly confused. "Boss?"

"Look," Shane said, his exhaustion making him sway slightly on his feet. "Alexei is a complete cunt. He's on way too much coke and he needs therapy. Like, serious therapy. Maybe inpatient."

Ilya's expression was somewhere between disbelief and concern. "Shane—"

"But killing him isn't going to fix whatever happened between you." Shane pushed on, needing to get this out before his legs gave out entirely. "And his guys? Pavel and Artem? They're good people. Well, good gangsters. Whatever. They kept me company. Fed me. Artem bought me a new watch."

He held up his wrist, showing the Hello Kitty watch. The pink plastic was smudged with blood and dirt, but the little cat face still smiled up at them.

"I don't want them hurt because your brother is an asshole."

"Shane." Ilya's voice was strained. "He took you. He kept you for ten days. He—"

"Smacked me around a bit, yeah." Shane shrugged. But he had spent ten days thinking about this, about what would happen when he got out, about the war that would inevitably follow.

He'd had a lot of time to think.

"This is between you and Alexei," Shane continued. "Something about your father, about the family business. So let's talk about it. Surely you can talk this out."

"Talk this out?" Ilya repeated, incredulous.

"Yes! Like adults! Instead of beating the shit out of each other and kidnapping people!"

Ilya looked at Dimitri with an expression that clearly said 'is he serious right now?'

Dimitri shrugged, his good arm spreading in a gesture of helplessness. 'I don't know, boss.'

Shane swayed again, and Ilya immediately steadied him. "You're brothers," Shane said, looking up at Ilya. "You used to be close, right? Before everything went to shit?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. "That was a long time ago."

"But it was real. Whatever happened, whatever he wants, maybe there's a middle ground." Shane could feel his energy draining, his body finally catching up with everything he'd been through. "Because if you kill him, this never ends. His men come after you, your men retaliate, it's just war forever. And I really, really don't want to get kidnapped again."

Practical, logical Shane. Even now, even after everything, trying to find the rational solution.

"Shane..." Ilya's voice was softer now, conflicted.

"Just think about it. Okay? Before you go murder people." Shane's legs were definitely giving out now. "Can I sit down? My feet are killing me."

Ilya looked down, and Shane watched his expression change from conflicted to horrified. Shane's feet were a mess—cut up and bloody, leaving him in a small puddle.

"Dimitri, get the first aid kit." Ilya's voice was sharp, commanding. "And call off the men."

"Boss?"

"We're not killing anyone, yet."

Dimitri nodded and disappeared down the hallway. Ilya turned back to Shane, his hands hovering uncertainly before settling on Shane's waist.

"Come on," Ilya said quietly. "Let's get you to the couch."

Shane tried to take a step and immediately hissed in pain. His feet were screaming now that the adrenaline was wearing off, every cut and scrape making itself known. Ilya's arm tightened around him, taking most of his weight.

"I've got you," Ilya murmured, and they moved slowly across the living room—Shane limping badly, leaving small bloody footprints on the hardwood floor that made Ilya's jaw clench tighter with each step.

When they reached the couch, Ilya lowered Shane down carefully, like he was made of glass. Shane sank into the cushions with a groan of relief, his whole body suddenly feeling like it weighed a thousand pounds.

Ilya knelt in front of him, his hands gentle as he lifted Shane's right foot to examine it. The damage was worse up close—deep cuts across the sole and heel, smaller scrapes along the sides, what looked like pieces of gravel or glass embedded in the skin. Blood was still seeping from several of the wounds.

"*Bozhe moy*," Ilya breathed, his thumb hovering over a particularly nasty gash. "Shane..."

"It's not that bad," Shane said, though his voice lacked conviction.

Ilya looked up at him, and Shane saw something raw and terrible in his eyes. Guilt. Pain. The kind of anguish that came from seeing someone you loved hurt because of you.

Dimitri returned with the first aid kit, setting it on the coffee table. He glanced between them, then quietly retreated toward the door. "I'll make those calls, boss. Give you two some privacy."

The door clicked shut, and they were alone.

Ilya opened the kit and pulled out antiseptic, gauze, tweezers. His hands were steady as he started cleaning Shane's right foot, but Shane could see the tension in his shoulders, the careful control in every movement.

Shane winced as the antiseptic hit the cuts, but he didn't complain. Just watched Ilya work, taking in the damage to his face up close. The split lip, the bruising along his jaw and cheekbone, the swelling around his left eye. His knuckles were torn up and bloody, raw from whatever fight he'd been in.

With Alexei, Shane realized. Those were knuckles that had been used to beat someone's face in.

Ilya's split, bloody knuckles were now carefully, gently cleaning Shane's feet.

"They literally tried to feed me McDonald's," Shane said suddenly, trying to lighten the oppressive quiet.

Ilya's hands paused. He looked up.

Shane made a face, grimacing. "Can you believe that? After everything I've been working on? I'm not fucking up my macros."

For a moment, Ilya just stared at him. Then he rolled his eyes and went back to cleaning Shane's foot. "Of course that's what bothers you. Not the kidnapping. The McDonald's."

There was the ghost of a smile on his lips despite everything—despite the blood, despite the fear, despite the ten days of hell they'd both been through.

"I have standards," Shane said defensively.

"You have issues," Ilya corrected, but his voice was fond. He went back to work, using the tweezers to carefully extract a piece of gravel from Shane's heel.

They fell into silence again, but it was less heavy now. Just the quiet sounds of Ilya working—the clink of tweezers against the coffee table, the rustle of gauze, Shane's occasional sharp intake of breath when Ilya hit a particularly tender spot.

Ilya was quiet for a long moment, focused on removing another piece of debris. Then, carefully, without looking up: "How were you really treated?"

His voice was controlled, but Shane could hear the tension underneath. The fear. The need to know if Shane had been hurt in ways that didn't show on his feet.

Shane considered the question, thinking back over the past ten days. The basement. The waiting. The fear that had slowly given way to something else.

"Honestly?" Shane said. "Well. By Artem and Pavel, at least."

Ilya's hands stilled for just a moment before continuing their work.

"They brought me clean food after the McDonald's thing," Shane continued. "Let me watch TV. Talked to me. Artem told me about his sister who plays hockey in Moscow. Pavel and I watched Russian football together—Russia beat Germany 3-0, and he was so happy he almost smiled."

Shane paused, remembering. "It was... weird. But they weren't cruel. They treated me like a person, not a hostage."

"And Alexei?" Ilya's voice was very quiet.

Shane's hand went to his lip, touching the spot where Alexei had backhanded him. "Alexei was different. He's the one who..."

Ilya's hands stopped moving entirely. His jaw clenched so hard Shane could see the muscle jumping. When he looked up, his eyes were dark and dangerous.

"He hit you."

"Once. Maybe twice." Shane shrugged, trying to downplay it. "He was high. On a lot of coke, I think. He's... he's not well, Ilya. He's angry and hurt and using way too many drugs to deal with it."

Ilya looked like he wanted to say something—probably something violent—but Shane kept talking.

"But Artem and Pavel... they were good to me. Artem especially." Shane's voice softened. "He let me go tonight. He saw me at the window. Could have stopped me, called for help, raised the alarm. He just... watched me leave."

Ilya's expression was complicated—something between jealousy and gratitude warring on his face.

"He bought me the watch, you know," Shane added, holding up his wrist to show the Hello Kitty watch with its bright pink band. "After Pavel took my old one to send to you. Artem went out and spent his own money on a fifteen-dollar Hello Kitty watch because he knew it mattered to me."

Ilya stared at the watch for a long moment. Then he looked up at Shane, and something in his expression shifted. The jealousy was still there—someone else had taken care of Shane, had kept him company, had made him smile during the worst days of his life. But there was gratitude too. And something else. Respect, maybe.

"I'll remember that," Ilya said quietly.

But there was weight in those words. A promise. *I won't hurt them. I owe them.*

Ilya went back to bandaging Shane's feet, wrapping them carefully in clean white gauze. His touch was gentle, reverent almost, like Shane was something precious that might break.

"You're jealous," Shane said softly.

Ilya's hands paused. "You spent ten days with them."

"I spent ten days missing you."

Ilya looked up, and their eyes met. Something passed between them—all the fear, all the longing, all the desperate relief of being together again.

"I tore this city apart looking for you," Ilya said, his voice rough. "Every warehouse, every safe house, every place I thought he might be. I couldn't find you. I couldn't—" His voice broke slightly. "I couldn't protect you."

"I know," Shane said gently. "Alexei told me. He seemed... pleased about it, actually. Like that was the whole point. Making you feel what he felt."

Ilya's jaw tightened, but he didn't respond. Just finished wrapping Shane's left foot and sat back on his heels, surveying his work.

"Can you walk?" he asked.

Shane flexed his feet experimentally and winced. "Probably not well. But I just ran like three miles barefoot from Queens to Manhattan, so..."

Ilya almost smiled. "You're insane."

"You've mentioned that."

Ilya stood and moved to sit next to Shane on the couch. He pulled Shane against him carefully, mindful of his injuries, and Shane went willingly, leaning into Ilya's warmth. He was so tired. The adrenaline that had carried him through the escape was completely gone now, leaving him hollow and exhausted.

"I'm sorry," Shane said quietly, his face pressed against Ilya's shoulder.

"For what?"

"For getting kidnapped. For saving Dimitri. For—"

"Don't." Ilya's voice was firm. "You saved his life. You did the right thing. The only thing you could have done." He paused. "I would have done the same."

They sat together in the quiet, the apartment settling around them. Shane could hear the distant sounds of the city outside—traffic, sirens, the endless hum of New York at night. Normal sounds. Safe sounds.

His eyes were getting heavy, his body finally giving in to the exhaustion.

"Will you really talk to him?" Shane asked, his voice barely above a whisper. "To Alexei?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Shane could feel the tension in his body, the war between what he wanted to do and what Shane was asking him to do.

"If that's what you want," Ilya said finally.

"I want this to be over," Shane murmured, already half-asleep. "I want to go back to worrying about finals and hockey and whether you're going to let me redecorate this place. The couch is really ugly, by the way. I've been meaning to say something."

A small laugh rumbled through Ilya's chest. "We'll talk to him."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Shane's breathing was evening out, sleep pulling him under. Ilya held him carefully, one hand stroking through his hair, the other resting protectively on his back.

He looked down at Shane—at his split lip, his bandaged feet, the exhaustion written in every line of his body. Shane had been taken, held for ten days, and had somehow managed to befriend his captors and convince them to let him go. Had run three miles barefoot through the freezing cold to get home. Had immediately tried to stop Ilya from starting a war.

Shane, who sold expensive gifts without hesitation. Shane, who was asking Ilya to talk to the brother who'd kidnapped him. To find a middle ground. To choose peace over violence.

Ilya looked at Shane's sleeping face and thought about Alexei. About their father. About all the years of anger and hurt and unfinished business between them.

He thought about what Shane had said: *You're brothers. You used to be close.*

It was true. Once, a long time ago, before the Bratva consumed everything, before their father's death drove a wedge between them that seemed impossible to remove—once, Alexei had been his best friend. His protector. His brother in every sense of the word.

Maybe there was a way back from this. Maybe Shane was right.

Or maybe Ilya would sit down with his brother, try to talk, and end up putting a bullet in his head anyway.

But he'd try. For Shane, he'd try.

Ilya's hands were gentle as he helped Shane stand. "Come on. Let's get you to bed."

Shane winced, his bandaged feet tender against the floor. Ilya supported most of his weight, walking him slowly to the bedroom. Shane looked around - his room, his things - everything feeling surreal after ten days in a basement.

At the bed, Ilya carefully helped Shane out of his dirty clothes. A soft NYU t-shirt, clean sweatpants. Shane was too exhausted to feel self-conscious, sighing as clean fabric touched his skin.

"What about security?" Shane mumbled, already half-asleep.

"Dimitri's handling it," Ilya whispered. "No one gets in."

Shane nodded, immediately trusting. He curled into Ilya's side, their bodies fitting together like they'd never been apart. Ilya wrapped an arm around him, pressing a soft kiss to Shane's forehead.

"You're safe," Ilya murmured.

Within moments, they were both asleep - Shane's steady breathing, Ilya's protective grip, finally, finally home.

Chapter 14: Fired

Shane woke to an empty bed.

For a moment—just a split second—panic seized his chest. The basement. The zip ties. The sound of footsteps on stairs.

Then he heard water running in the bathroom, heard Ilya's voice speaking low Russian into his phone, and the panic dissolved into relief so sharp it hurt.

He was home. He was safe.

Shane sat up slowly, his feet still tender but healing. Morning light filtered through the curtains, painting everything in soft gold. The clock on the nightstand read 9:47 AM.

His phone.

Shane's stomach dropped. He hadn't thought about his phone in ten days. Hadn't thought about work, about his shifts, about—

Fuck.

He scrambled out of bed, ignoring the protest from his feet, and found his phone on the dresser. Dimitri must have brought it back from... wherever it had been. The screen was dark. Dead battery.

Shane plugged it in with shaking hands and waited for it to power on.

The bathroom door opened. Ilya emerged in sweatpants and nothing else, hair damp, phone still pressed to his ear. He saw Shane standing there and his expression shifted—concern flickering across his face.

"I'll call you back," Ilya said into the phone, then ended the call. "What's wrong?"

"My job," Shane said, staring at his phone as it finally lit up. "I just— I haven't been to work in ten days. I didn't call. I didn't—"

The notifications started flooding in.

Texts from his boss. Increasingly angry texts. Then a final one from three days ago: Don't bother coming back.

"Shit," Shane breathed.

But maybe if he called, if he explained—

He dialed before he could talk himself out of it.

The phone rang twice before his boss picked up.

"Shane." The voice was cold, clipped. "Didn't expect to hear from you."

"I'm so sorry," Shane said quickly, the words tumbling out. "I had a family emergency—"

"A family emergency that lasted ten days? Without a single call?"

"I couldn't— it was complicated—"

"Save it." His boss's voice was flat, final. "I already told you in my text three days ago—you're done. Don't bother coming in."

"Wait, please, if you just let me explain—"

The line went dead.

Shane stared at his phone, the screen still showing the ended call. His stomach felt like it had dropped through the floor.

He'd just lost his job.

The job that paid for his MetroCard. His groceries. His textbooks. The job that let him feel like he was taking care of himself, like he wasn't completely dependent on—

"Shane."

Ilya was there, close, his hand warm on Shane's shoulder. "What happened?"

"I just got fired." Shane's voice came out flat. Hollow.

"I'll take care of it."

Shane's head snapped up. "What?"

"Your job. The money. I'll take care of it." Ilya said it like it was simple, like it was already decided. "You don't need to work anyway. You should focus on school, on hockey—"

"That's not—" Shane pulled away, frustration flaring hot in his chest. "I don't want you to just fix everything with money."

Ilya's expression shuttered. "I'm trying to help."

"I know. But I—" Shane ran a hand through his hair, trying to find the words. "I need to be able to take care of myself. I need something that's mine, that I earned, that isn't just... you giving me things."

"You were kidnapped," Ilya said, his voice tight. "By my brother. Because of me. And now you've lost your job because of it. Let me fix this."

"You can't fix everything!"

The words hung between them, sharp and raw.

Shane closed his eyes, took a breath. "I'm sorry. I just— I need a minute."

He grabbed his phone and walked out of the bedroom, leaving Ilya standing there.

Shane sat on the couch in the living room, staring at his phone. Dimitri was at the dining table with his laptop, pretending not to notice the tension radiating from Shane.

He scrolled through his messages. Dozens from his boss. A few from coworkers asking where he was. And then—

Hayden.

Seventeen texts from Hayden, spread across the past ten days.

Yo where are you?

Shane? You good?

Dude your boss called me asking where you were

Starting to get worried man

SHANE ANSWER YOUR PHONE

If you don't text me back in 24 hours I'm filing a missing persons report

The last one was from yesterday: Please just let me know you're alive

Guilt crashed over Shane like a wave.

His best friend. The guy who'd covered his shifts, who'd helped him study, who'd been there through everything. And Shane had just... disappeared.

He typed: Hey man, you around? Need to talk.

The response came in less than ten seconds.

SHANE??? WTF BRO. CALLING YOU NOW.

Shane's phone rang immediately.

He answered. "Hey—"

"WHERE THE FUCK HAVE YOU BEEN?"

Shane winced, pulling the phone slightly away from his ear. "I know, I'm sorry—"

"You're SORRY? Shane, I've been texting you for DAYS! I almost filed a missing persons report! Your boss called ME asking where you were and I had no idea what to tell him!"

"I know. I'm really sorry—"

"Are you okay?" Hayden's voice shifted, anger giving way to concern. "What happened? Where were you?"

Shane hesitated.

He couldn't tell the truth. Couldn't say I was kidnapped by the Russian mob because my boyfriend is a crime lord and his brother wanted to use me as leverage.

"I just..." Shane swallowed hard. "I needed some time. After finals."

"You needed time?"

"Everything was overwhelming and I just... shut down for a bit. I turned off my phone and stayed with Ilya and I just— I needed to decompress."

The lie tasted wrong in his mouth. Bitter.

"You shut down for TEN DAYS?" Hayden's voice was incredulous. "Shane, that's not—that's not normal. That's not healthy."

"I know. I fucked up. I should have at least texted you." Shane pressed his free hand against his eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry."

Hayden was quiet for a long moment.

"Shane," he said finally, his voice careful. "If something's wrong... if you're in trouble, or if Ilya is— I don't know, controlling you or something—"

"No!" Shane said quickly. "God, no. It's not like that at all."

"Because you can tell me. You know that, right? If something's going on—"

"I promise I'm okay." The lie came easier this time, smooth and practiced. "I just fucked up and didn't communicate. That's on me."

"You scared the shit out of me, man."

"I know. I'm so sorry."

Another pause. Then: "Okay. But seriously, don't go MIA like that again, bro. I thought you were dead in a ditch somewhere."

"I won't. I promise."

"You better not. And you're buying me so many drinks when I see you next."

Shane laughed, the sound coming out shaky but genuine. "Deal."

They talked for a few more minutes—normal stuff. Hayden's classes, the hockey team's practice schedule, Jackie's pregnancy cravings. It felt good. Normal. Like Shane's life hadn't just been turned completely upside down.

Even if it was all built on a lie.

"Alright, man," Hayden said finally. "I gotta get to work. But text me later, okay? Like, actually text me. Don't make me hunt you down."

"I will. Promise."

"Good. Love you, bro."

"Love you too."

Shane ended the call and sat there, phone in his hand, staring at nothing.

"You lied to him."

Shane looked up. Ilya was standing in the doorway, dressed now, watching him with an unreadable expression.

"What was I supposed to say?" Shane's voice came out sharper than he intended. "Your brother kidnapped me and held me in a basement for ten days?"

Ilya didn't answer.

Shane set his phone down on the couch beside him. "This is my life now, isn't it? Lying to everyone who isn't..." He gestured vaguely between them, at the apartment, at the world they existed in. "This."

"You can still walk away," Ilya said quietly.

Shane looked at him—really looked at him. At the bruises still fading on his face from the fight with Alexei. At the careful way he held himself, like he was braced for Shane to say yes, to choose the normal life over this complicated, dangerous thing between them.

"I don't want to walk away," Shane said.

"But?"

"But I don't know how to live in both worlds either." Shane's voice cracked slightly. "I just lost my job. I lied to my best friend. I almost died."

Ilya crossed the room and sat beside him on the couch. Close, but not touching.

"I'm sorry," Ilya said. "For all of it."

"It's not your fault."

"It is." Ilya's jaw tightened. "You're in this because of me. Everything that's happened—"

"I chose this," Shane interrupted. "I chose you. I'm still choosing you." He turned to look at Ilya. "But I don't know what that means yet. I don't know how to do this."

Ilya reached out slowly, giving Shane time to pull away. When he didn't, Ilya pulled him close, tucking Shane against his side.

"We'll figure it out," Ilya said quietly.

Shane wanted to believe him. Wanted to believe there was a way to have both—his normal life and this thing with Ilya. His friends and his classes and hockey, and also this man who'd turned his entire world upside down.

"Will we?" Shane asked.

Ilya didn't answer.

Because he didn't know either.

They sat there in the quiet morning light, holding onto each other, while Dimitri worked at the dining table and pretended not to notice. Outside, the city hummed with its usual chaos. Inside, Shane felt the weight of everything settling over him—the lies, the danger, the impossible choice between two worlds that couldn't coexist.

At the end of the week they'd have to face Alexei.

But right now, there was just this. Ilya's arms around him. The steady beat of his heart. The promise that they'd try to figure it out, even if neither of them knew how.

It would have to be enough.

Two days later, on Wednesday evening, Shane was sitting on the couch with Dimitri, half-watching some Russian news channel that Dimitri had put on. His feet were propped up on the coffee table, still bandaged but healing. The cuts were scabbing over, the swelling going down. He could put weight on them now without wanting to cry.

Progress.

Ilya stood from the armchair where he'd been reading through messages on his phone. "I'll be right back," he said, heading toward the bathroom.

Shane waited until he heard the door close, the lock click. Then he turned to Dimitri.

"I need a favor."

Dimitri looked up from his phone, one eyebrow raised. His arm was still in a cast, but he'd gotten pretty good at texting one-handed. "What kind of favor?"

Shane kept his voice low. "I need you to get me an Adidas tracksuit. Medium. Black, not blue."

Very specific. Very deliberate.

Dimitri stared at him for a long moment. Then a grin spread across his face. "What, you trying to be an OG Russian mobster now?"

He laughed at his own joke, the sound warm and genuine.

Shane didn't laugh.

He just looked at Dimitri seriously, his expression steady. "No. Just... please get it for me."

The laughter died. Dimitri's smile faded as he studied Shane's face, seeing something there that made him go quiet.

"This for the meeting?" Dimitri asked.

Shane nodded.

He didn't explain further. Didn't elaborate. Just held Dimitri's gaze.

Dimitri was quiet for a moment, considering. Then he pulled out his phone with his good hand and typed out a quick message. The reply came back almost immediately.

"Done," Dimitri said. "Sergei will drop it off tomorrow."

"Thank you."

"Kid, I don't know what you're planning, but—"

The bathroom door opened. Ilya's footsteps in the hallway.

Dimitri and Shane exchanged a look—brief, understanding, conspiratorial. Then Dimitri went back to his phone, and Shane went back to staring at the Russian news like nothing had happened.

Ilya settled back into his chair, none the wiser.

That night, Shane's feet were finally healing enough that he could walk without limping quite so badly. The bandages were lighter now, just gauze and tape instead of the heavy wrapping from before. He could flex his toes without wanting to scream.

He stood from the couch, testing his weight. Better. Not perfect, but better.

"I need to actually wash," Shane said, hobbling toward the bathroom. "I feel disgusting."

He'd been doing sponge baths for days, careful not to get the bandages wet, but now he wanted—needed—to feel clean. To wash away the last ten days, the basement, the fear, all of it.

"Let me help," Ilya said, already standing.

In the bathroom, Ilya ran the water, testing the temperature with his hand until it was just right. Warm, not too hot. He helped Shane sit on the edge of the tub, then carefully unwrapped the bandages from his feet.

The cuts looked better. Still red, still healing, but no longer angry and raw.

Ilya helped Shane into the tub, steadying him as he lowered himself into the water. Shane sighed, the sound pure relief, as the warmth enveloped him.

"Okay?" Ilya asked.

"Yeah. God, yeah."

Ilya sat on the edge of the tub, reaching for the shampoo. He squeezed some into his palm, then worked it gently through Shane's hair. His fingers were careful, methodical, massaging Shane's scalp in slow circles.

Shane leaned into the touch, eyes closing. This was... nice. Domestic. The kind of intimacy that had nothing to do with sex and everything to do with trust.

They were quiet for a while. Just the sound of water, of breathing, of Ilya's hands moving through Shane's hair.

Then, soft: "I'm worried about the meeting."

Shane opened his eyes. "I know."

"I'm worried about bringing you. About what could happen." Ilya's hands kept working, rinsing the shampoo away, water running through Shane's curls. "Alexei is unpredictable. Dangerous. If something goes wrong—"

His voice caught slightly.

"I just got you back."

Shane reached up, catching Ilya's hand. Their fingers tangled together, wet and warm.

"I know why you're worried," Shane said quietly. "I understand."

"Then why do you need to be there?" Ilya's voice was raw. "You don't owe him anything. You don't owe me this."

"It's not about owing." Shane squeezed Ilya's hand. "It's about... being part of this. Part of your life. Even the complicated parts. Especially the complicated parts."

Ilya was quiet, his thumb brushing over Shane's knuckles. Then he reached for the conditioner, working it through Shane's hair with the same careful attention.

"You're too good for this world," Ilya said quietly. "Too good for me."

Shane turned in the tub, water sloshing slightly, so he could look at Ilya properly. "That's not your decision to make."

Their eyes met.

"I choose you," Shane said. "All of you. Even the parts that come with warehouses and brothers and danger. I'm not going anywhere."

Ilya leaned down, pressing a kiss to Shane's forehead. His lips lingered there, warm and gentle.

"I understand why you want to come," Ilya murmured against Shane's skin. "I don't like it. But I understand."

"That's all I'm asking."

They stayed like that for a moment—Ilya bent over the tub, Shane looking up at him, water cooling around them, steam slowly dissipating into the air.

Then Shane said, softly: "Will you tell me about him? About Alexei? Before all this?"

Ilya went still. His hand paused in Shane's hair.

Shane waited. Didn't push. Just gave Ilya the space to decide.

Finally, Ilya exhaled and sat back on the edge of the tub. He reached for a washcloth, dipping it in the water, and began washing Shane's shoulders with slow, careful movements.

"We were close once," Ilya said quietly. "When we were kids. Alexei was... he was my hero. Five years older, and he knew everything. How to fight, how to talk to girls, how to survive our father."

Shane listened, watching Ilya's face as he spoke.

"Our father was Bratva. Old school. Brutal. He expected us to follow in his footsteps, and Alexei—Alexei was perfect at it. He was everything our father wanted. Strong, ruthless, smart." Ilya's jaw tightened. "I was the disappointment."

"I don't believe that."

"It's true." Ilya rinsed the washcloth, wrung it out. "I was too soft. Too hesitant. I didn't want to hurt people just because our father said to. Alexei tried to toughen me up, tried to teach me, but..." He shook his head. "We fought about it. A lot."

"What changed?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. "Our father got sick. Cancer. It was slow, painful. He was dying for months, and neither of us noticed. We were too busy with the business, with territory wars, with proving ourselves." His voice went flat. "By the time we realized, it was

too late. He died alone in a hospital while Alexei and I were in different cities, handling different deals."

Shane's chest tightened. "Ilya..."

"Alexei blamed me. Said I should have been there, should have checked on him. And he was right." Ilya's hands stilled in the water. "I came to New York, started my own operation. I told myself it was about building something new, something better. But really, I was just running away."

"From Alexei?"

"From the guilt." Ilya looked at Shane, his eyes dark and haunted. "From the fact that I let our father die alone because I was too much of a coward to face him."

Shane reached up, cupping Ilya's face with his wet hand. "You're not a coward."

"I abandoned my brother."

"He kidnapped me."

"Because I ignored him for two years." Ilya's voice cracked slightly. "He called. He texted. He tried to reach out, and I just... I couldn't. Every time I thought about talking to him, all I could see was our father's face. All I could feel was that guilt."

Shane pulled Ilya closer, until their foreheads touched. "So that's what the meeting is about. Not just getting him to leave us alone. It's about facing him. Facing all of it."

"Yes."

"Then I'm definitely coming."

Ilya almost smiled. "You're impossible."

"You've mentioned that."

They stayed like that—foreheads pressed together, water cooling around Shane, steam fogging the mirror—while Ilya told him more. About growing up in Moscow, about the first time Alexei taught him to fight, about their father's iron grip on both their lives. About the business, the violence, the slow erosion of everything good between them.

Shane listened to all of it. Absorbed it. Understood, finally, the weight Ilya had been carrying.

And when the water went cold and Shane's fingers were pruned, Ilya helped him out of the tub. Dried him carefully, rebandaged his feet with gentle hands, helped him into clean clothes.

"Thank you," Shane said as they headed back to the bedroom. "For telling me."

Ilya pulled him close, pressing a kiss to his temple. "Thank you for listening."

They climbed into bed together, Shane curling into Ilya's side.

The next morning, Thursday, Shane woke to darkness.

Not the complete darkness of the basement—that thought still made his chest tight—but the soft pre-dawn darkness of early morning, when the city was quiet and the world felt suspended between night and day.

Ilya was asleep beside him.

Shane turned his head on the pillow, watching him in the dim light filtering through the curtains. Ilya's face was peaceful in sleep, all the sharp edges and careful control smoothed away into something softer. Younger, almost. The bruises from his fight with Alexei were still visible—a fading yellow-green along his jaw, a darker purple near his temple—but even those couldn't diminish how beautiful he was.

Shane's chest ached with it. With affection and desire and something deeper he wasn't quite ready to name.

He shifted closer, careful not to wake him. Not yet.

Ilya's breathing was slow and even, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. One arm was thrown across the pillow above his head, the other resting on his stomach. Relaxed. Unguarded in a way he never was when he was awake.

Shane reached out, fingers hovering just above Ilya's skin, then made contact. Traced the line of his collarbone through his t-shirt, felt the warmth of him.

Then he leaned in and pressed his lips to Ilya's neck.

Soft. Deliberate. A kiss just below his ear, where Shane had learned he was sensitive.

Ilya stirred slightly but didn't wake. Made a soft sound in the back of his throat, something between a hum and a sigh.

Shane smiled against his skin and kissed him again. Lower this time, along the column of his throat. Then again, trailing down to where his pulse beat steady and strong.

Ilya's breathing changed. Still slow, but deeper now. His hand moved, fingers flexing against the sheets.

Shane's hand slid over Ilya's chest, feeling the solid warmth of him through the thin fabric of his shirt. He kissed the hollow of Ilya's throat, then the edge of his jaw, working his way back up.

"Shane..." Ilya's voice was rough with sleep, barely more than a whisper. His eyes were still closed. "What are you doing?"

"What does it feel like?" Shane murmured against his skin.

Ilya's hand came up, cupping Shane's jaw with surprising gentleness. His thumb brushed over Shane's cheekbone, and then he was pulling Shane up, guiding him into a real kiss.

Deep. Heated. Ilya's mouth opening under his, tongue sliding against Shane's in a way that made heat pool low in Shane's stomach.

Shane responded immediately, rolling closer until their bodies were pressed together. His hands found their way under Ilya's shirt, palms flat against warm skin, feeling the muscles shift as Ilya moved.

Ilya's fingers tangled in Shane's hair, holding him close as they kissed. His other hand slid down Shane's back, pulling him even closer.

They took their time.

There was no rush, no urgency beyond the slow build of want between them. Morning light was hours away from filtering through the curtains. Shane could see Ilya's face even in the dim light now—eyes dark and intent, lips kiss-swollen, that careful control slipping away into something raw and real.

Shane shifted, moving to straddle Ilya's hips. Ilya's hands came to rest on Shane's waist, thumbs stroking over the bare skin where his shirt had ridden up.

"Come here," Ilya said, his voice low and rough, and pulled Shane down into another kiss.

Shane's hands explored the planes of Ilya's chest through his shirt, the hard muscle of his shoulders, the sharp line of his jaw. Ilya's hands were everywhere—in Shane's hair, on his back, sliding under his shirt to map the curve of his spine.

Ilya rolled them over, pressing Shane into the mattress, and Shane went willingly. Wrapped his legs around Ilya's waist and pulled him closer, closer, until there was no space left between them.

Ilya whispered something in Russian—low and heated—and Shane shivered at the sound of it.

"What does that mean?" Shane asked, breathless.

Ilya smiled against his throat. "You don't want to know."

"I really do."

"Later." Ilya kissed him again, swallowing whatever Shane had been about to say. "I'll teach you later."

Shane's head rested on Ilya's chest, rising and falling with each breath. Ilya's arm was wrapped around him, holding him close even now, protective in a way that made Shane's chest ache.

The room was still dark, pre-dawn light just beginning to creep through the curtains. Shane could hear the distant sounds of the city waking up—cars on the street below, someone's alarm going off in another apartment, the hum of the radiator kicking on.

Normal sounds. Safe sounds.

"You know what the worst part was?" Shane said quietly.

Ilya's hand stilled where it had been tracing idle patterns on Shane's shoulder. "Of what?"

"Being taken. Being in that basement."

Ilya's arm tightened around him, his entire body going tense. "Shane—"

"It wasn't Alexei," Shane continued, his voice soft but steady. "It wasn't the fear or the uncertainty. It wasn't even not knowing if I'd get out."

He paused, gathering his thoughts. Ilya waited, silent.

"It was being separated from you," Shane said finally. "Especially after we'd just... after that first night."

Ilya's chest rose and fell beneath Shane's cheek. He didn't say anything, but his hand moved to Shane's hair, fingers threading through it gently.

"We'd finally had sex," Shane said, the words coming easier now. "Finally crossed that line. And then I was just... gone. For ten days." He swallowed hard. "I kept thinking about how we'd barely had any time together like that. How I didn't know if I'd ever get back to you."

"Shane..."

"I kept thinking about your hands," Shane continued, his voice dropping lower. "Your mouth. The way you—" He broke off, heat rising in his cheeks despite everything they'd just done. "I just really missed you. This."

Ilya made a sound—half scoff, half laugh. Not mocking, but affectionate, almost disbelieving. "You were kidnapped by my psychotic brother and you were thinking about sex?"

"I was thinking about you," Shane corrected, lifting his head to look at Ilya. "There's a difference."

Ilya went quiet. His hand came up to cup Shane's face, thumb brushing over his cheekbone. Then he pulled Shane up into a kiss—deep and thorough and aching tender.

When they broke apart, Ilya's forehead rested against Shane's. "You're here now," he said quietly.

"I'm here now," Shane agreed.

"And we have time." Ilya's hand slid to the back of Shane's neck, holding him close. "All the time you want."

They kissed again—slower this time, softer. Shane settled back against Ilya's chest, and Ilya's hand returned to his hair, stroking through it in a soothing rhythm.

"After we deal with Alexei," Shane said after a moment. "I want normal. I want lazy mornings and sex and arguing about your ugly furniture."

He felt Ilya smile against his hair. "My furniture is not ugly."

"It's so ugly," Shane said, grinning. "But I'll help you pick new stuff. If we survive this."

"We'll survive," Ilya said, and it sounded like a promise. Like a certainty.

"Then you're letting me redecorate."

"Fine." Ilya's hand tightened in Shane's hair, just slightly. "But the bed stays."

Shane looked at the bed—at the expensive sheets and the solid frame and the way the pre-dawn light made everything look soft and intimate. At the place where they'd first been together, where they'd just been together again.

"The bed can stay," he agreed.

They stayed like that—wrapped together in the early morning darkness, Shane's head on Ilya's chest, Ilya's arms around him. Soon they'd have to face Alexei and whatever came after.

But right now, there was only this.

Ilya shifted, rolling them over with careful hands until Shane was on his back, Ilya above him. His hands framed Shane's face, thumbs brushing over his cheekbones as he looked down at him with an expression that made Shane's breath catch.

Then Ilya kissed him—deeply, thoroughly, like he was trying to memorize the taste of Shane's mouth. Shane melted into it, his hands coming up to grip Ilya's shoulders.

When Ilya finally pulled back, his hands moved to Shane's shirt, fingers sliding under the hem. He worked it up slowly, his knuckles brushing against Shane's ribs, his stomach. Shane lifted his arms without being asked, letting Ilya pull the shirt over his head and toss it aside.

Ilya's hands returned immediately, sliding over Shane's bare chest. The touches were gentle, reverent—fingertips tracing the lines of muscle, palms warm against his skin. Ilya was careful, mindful of Shane's still-healing feet, of the fading bruises from his captivity.

"Krasivyy," Ilya murmured, his voice low and rough.

Shane didn't know what it meant, but the way Ilya said it—soft and wondering—made him shiver.

Ilya's fingers hooked into the waistband of Shane's sweatpants. He paused, looking at Shane with a silent question in his dark eyes.

Shane nodded, breathless. "Yes."

Ilya pulled them down slowly, carefully, watching Shane's face the whole time. Shane kicked them off the rest of the way, and then he was bare beneath Ilya, vulnerable but trusting.

Ilya just looked at him for a long moment, his gaze traveling over Shane's body with an intensity that made Shane's skin heat.

"Krasivyy," Ilya said again, softer this time. Beautiful.

Shane reached up, tugging at Ilya's shirt. "Your turn."

Ilya helped, pulling it over his head in one smooth motion. Shane's hands were on him immediately, exploring the planes of his chest, the solid strength of his shoulders. He traced the lines of muscle, feeling the warmth of Ilya's skin under his palms.

His fingers found the bruises still fading from the fight with Alexei—purple-yellow marks across Ilya's ribs, a darker one on his shoulder. Shane touched them gently, his expression tightening.

"I'm fine," Ilya said quietly.

"I know." Shane's hands continued their exploration, moving lower to Ilya's waistband. He fumbled a little with the drawstring, and Ilya helped, pushing the pants down and kicking them off.

Now they were both bare, skin to skin, and Shane made a soft sound at the contact. He pulled Ilya back down into a kiss, deeper this time, more urgent.

But then Shane's mouth moved—to Ilya's jaw, to the line of his throat. He couldn't help it. Couldn't stop himself from returning to that spot, from pressing his lips to Ilya's pulse point and feeling it beat strong and steady beneath his mouth.

He kissed his way up Ilya's neck, tasting salt and warmth, finding that spot behind his ear that made Ilya's breath hitch. Ilya tilted his head, giving Shane access, one hand tangling in Shane's hair while the other gripped his hip.

"You have a thing for my neck," Ilya observed, his voice rough with amusement and desire.

Shane smiled against his throat, pressing another kiss there. "You have a great neck."

Ilya laughed—a genuine, surprised sound that made Shane's chest warm. "You're serious."

"I'm very serious." Shane continued his exploration, lips and tongue mapping every inch of Ilya's throat. "It's a really good neck."

Ilya groaned softly, his fingers tightening in Shane's hair. "Shane..."

"Hmm?" Shane didn't stop, didn't pull away.

"You're going to drive me insane."

Shane smiled against Ilya's skin. "Good."

Their bodies moved together, slow and unhurried despite the heat building between them. Shane's hands were everywhere—Ilya's back, his shoulders, the curve of his ass. Ilya's mouth found Shane's chest, his collarbone, learning what made Shane gasp and arch into his touch.

Words fell between them—Russian and English, whispered and breathless. Shane didn't understand half of what Ilya said, but the tone was enough. The way Ilya said his name like a prayer, like something precious.

Ilya lifted his head, looking down at Shane. Shane knew what he must look like—flushed, pupils blown, lips swollen from kissing. He didn't care.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, his voice soft.

"More than okay." Shane pulled him back down, their mouths meeting again. His leg hooked over Ilya's hip, pulling him closer. "Please."

Shane kept his mouth on Ilya's neck throughout, kissing and tasting and feeling Ilya's pulse race under his lips. Soft sounds escaped him, Ilya's name whispered between kisses.

"Good," Shane breathed, and Ilya kissed him again, harder this time.

"More," Shane breathed immediately, his hips moving to meet Ilya's hand. "Don't go slow. I can take it—I need more."

"More," Shane demanded again, his voice breaking. "I can take it. I need more."

Ilya added a third finger, and Shane arched off the bed, a curse falling from his lips. His mouth found Ilya's neck again—he couldn't help it, couldn't stop himself—kissing and tasting even as pleasure rolled through him.

"Please, Ilya, please—" Shane was begging now, shameless, desperate. His body moved with Ilya's fingers, chasing the sensation. "I need you inside me. Now."

"Yes. God, yes." Shane pulled him down into a kiss, messy and desperate, all tongue and teeth and need.

Ilya withdrew his fingers, and Shane made a frustrated sound at the loss. But then Ilya was rolling on the condom, slicking himself, and Shane watched with his mouth open, breathing hard, his entire body thrumming with anticipation.

"Breathe," Ilya said softly.

Shane's breath caught, his hands flying to Ilya's shoulders, gripping hard. "Fuck, yes—"

"Don't stop." Shane's nails dug into Ilya's skin. "Don't you dare stop."

Then Shane's hips bucked. "Move."

Ilya set a hard pace immediately, and Shane met him thrust for thrust. The bed creaked beneath them, the headboard hitting the wall with a rhythmic thud that neither of them cared about. Shane's legs wrapped around Ilya's waist, pulling him deeper.

"Harder," Shane gasped against Ilya's throat, his mouth still finding that spot on Ilya's neck between words. "Don't hold back."

Shane's nails raked down Ilya's back, leaving red lines in their wake. His entire world had narrowed to this—to Ilya inside him, Ilya's skin under his mouth, Ilya's name falling from his lips like a prayer.

"Yes, like that—" Shane's back arched as Ilya hit that perfect spot. "Right there, don't stop—"

Even now—even lost in pleasure—Shane's mouth found Ilya's neck. Kissing, biting, marking. Claiming. Ilya groaned at the sensation, his control fraying with every thrust.

Ilya reached between them, wrapping a hand around Shane, stroking in time with his thrusts. Shane's back arched, his mouth falling open against Ilya's neck.

"Come for me," Ilya said, his voice rough and commanding. "Let me see you."

A few more thrusts—hard and deep and perfect—and Shane shattered. He came with a cry, Ilya's name on his lips, his body clenching around Ilya, his mouth still pressed to Ilya's neck.

Ilya followed moments later, burying himself deep, groaning Shane's name in Russian—"Bozhe moy, Shane"—as he came.

They stayed like that for a moment, both trembling, both breathing hard. Then Ilya carefully pulled out, and Shane made a soft sound at the loss. Ilya dealt with the condom quickly, then collapsed next to Shane on the bed.

Shane immediately curled into Ilya's side, and Ilya's arm came around him automatically. They lay there, catching their breath, hearts still racing.

Shane's fingers traced lazy patterns on Ilya's chest. His body felt loose, satisfied, completely wrung out in the best way.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's forehead. "Okay?"

"More than okay." Shane tilted his head up, meeting Ilya's eyes. "We should do that again."

Ilya laughed, the sound warm and genuine. "Give me ten minutes."

"Or five."

"You're insatiable."

Shane smiled, pressing a kiss to Ilya's jaw. "Only with you."

Shane shifts slightly, raising his wrist. The Hello Kitty watch's digital face glows softly between them, casting a pale pink light across his serious expression.

"Okay," Shane says, completely deadpan. "You've got twenty minutes."

Ilya stares. First at Shane. Then at the ridiculous watch. Then back at Shane.

Shane doesn't break. "I'm serious. The watch says twenty minutes."

Ilya starts laughing—real, uncontrolled laughter that shakes the bed. Shane tries to maintain his serious face but can't help the smile spreading across his mouth.

"Nineteen minutes now," Shane adds.

Ilya pulls him closer, still laughing. "You're ridiculous."

The watch continues glowing between them, a tiny pink beacon of absurdity.

Outside, the sun was rising over Brooklyn. Thursday morning. One more day until they'd face Alexei.

But right now, wrapped in each other, they had this.

Later that day, Shane's feet were healing.

The cuts weren't as angry, the bandages smaller. He could walk without wincing every step, though Ilya still hovered like Shane might shatter if he moved too fast. They'd spent the past few days in a strange limbo—Shane catching up on sleep, Ilya refusing to leave his side, Dimitri coordinating security from the living room like he'd set up a command center.

Now, late afternoon sun slanted through the windows of Shane's apartment. Ilya sat at the dining table, phone in hand, staring at the screen like it might bite him.

Shane was on the couch, textbook open but ignored, watching Ilya instead.

"You're going to have to do it eventually," Shane said quietly.

Ilya's jaw tightened. He typed something, deleted it, typed again. Finally, he stood and crossed to Shane, holding out the phone.

The message read: We need to talk. When and where?

Shane read it twice, then looked up at Ilya. "Send it."

Ilya hesitated for just a moment—his thumb hovering over the screen—then pressed send.

The response came within two minutes.

Ilya's phone buzzed. He read the message, his expression going carefully blank, then read it aloud: "End of the week. Friday. Warehouse on Kent Ave again. Noon. Bring whoever you want. I'll do the same."

Dimitri, who'd been working on his laptop at the kitchen counter, looked up sharply. "It could be a trap."

"Of course it's a trap." Ilya set his phone down with deliberate care. "But we're going anyway."

Shane closed his textbook. "Friday at noon." He met Ilya's eyes. "We already decided I'm coming with you."

Ilya's expression tightened, but he didn't argue. They'd had this fight already—Shane insisting, Ilya resisting, both of them knowing how it would end. Shane was stubborn when he'd made up his mind, and Ilya had learned there was no changing it.

"I know," Ilya said quietly, the resignation clear in his voice. He hated it—hated the idea of bringing Shane anywhere near Alexei again—but Shane had been right. This was about him. About them. And keeping Shane locked away wouldn't change that.

Dimitri looked between them, then stood and walked to a drawer near the kitchen. He pulled out a handgun—compact, black, deadly—and held it out to Shane. "Then you need a gun."

Shane stared at the weapon.

He didn't take it.

"I..." Shane's voice was smaller now. "I don't know how to shoot a gun."

Silence.

Dimitri blinked. "What?"

"I've never fired a gun. I don't know how."

Ilya closed his eyes. Pinched the bridge of his nose. Actively resisted the urge to put his face in his hands and scream.

Dimitri looked between them, incredulous. "Your boyfriend doesn't know how to shoot?"

Ilya took a very deep, very controlled breath. "Of course you don't know how to shoot."

He opened his eyes, looking at Shane with a mixture of exasperation and something that might have been affection. "Because you're a college student who plays hockey and worries about Physical Chemistry. Not someone who should be walking into a warehouse full of armed mobsters."

"But I am walking into that warehouse," Shane said, his voice steady.

Ilya stepped closer, his voice dropping into something commanding. "You're staying next to me the entire time. You don't speak unless I tell you to. And if shooting starts, you hit the ground immediately. Understood?"

"Deal."

Dimitri was still holding the gun awkwardly. "Should we... teach him? Before Friday?"

Ilya looked at Shane—at his determined expression, his bandaged feet, his split lip that was still healing. Soft. Concerned. Frustrated beyond measure.

"No," Ilya said finally. "If he has a gun and doesn't know how to use it, he's more likely to shoot himself."

A pause.

"Or me."

"I would not shoot you," Shane protested.

"You wouldn't mean to."

Dimitri put the gun away, muttering under his breath. "This is a terrible idea."

"I know," Ilya said.

"I'll be fine," Shane insisted. "We'll all be fine."

Ilya crossed the room and pulled Shane close, careful of his injuries. "You're going to give me a heart attack."

Shane leaned into him. "Not until after I graduate, I hope. I need you to quiz me on functional groups."

Despite everything—despite the danger, despite his brother, despite the meeting on Friday that could end in bloodshed—Ilya almost smiled.

Friday. They'd meet with Alexei on Friday.

And somehow, Ilya had to keep Shane safe while trying to make peace with a brother who might just shoot them all.

Chapter 15: The Warehouse Meeting

The morning of the meeting, Shane stood in Ilya's bedroom trying to figure out what the hell you were supposed to wear to a potential shootout. Jeans seemed too casual. His one button-down seemed too flimsy. He was staring at his limited wardrobe options when Ilya appeared in the doorway holding a garment bag.

"For you," Ilya said, laying it carefully on the bed.

Shane eyed it warily. "Ilya, you can't keep buying me things."

"I can. And I will." Ilya unzipped the bag, revealing a suit that made Shane's breath catch. All black—jacket, pants, shirt—the kind of elegant simplicity that screamed money.

Shane stared.

"I want you to look nice. Presentable." Ilya's voice was soft but firm. "If you're going to insist on coming with me, you should look like you belong there."

Shane wanted to argue. Wanted to say he didn't need expensive suits, didn't need Ilya dressing him up like some kind of doll. But then the absurdity of the situation hit him, and he almost laughed. What do you wear to a possible shootout anyway? Might as well look good if he was going to get shot.

"Okay," Shane said, taking the suit. "But only because I literally have nothing else appropriate for 'meeting your psychotic brother in an abandoned warehouse.'"

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Very practical."

Shane changed in the bathroom, the fabric sliding over his skin like water. The suit fit perfectly—shoulders, waist, inseam—like it had been made for him. He looked at himself in the mirror and barely recognized the person staring back. He looked older. Sophisticated. Like someone who could walk into a room full of dangerous men and hold his own.

Like someone who belonged in Ilya's world.

When he stepped out, Ilya went very still. His dark eyes traveled over Shane slowly, taking in every detail, and something heated flickered in his expression before being replaced by something more complicated. Pride, maybe. And fear.

"You look..." Ilya's voice was rough. He crossed the room and adjusted Shane's collar with careful fingers, even though it didn't need adjusting. "Beautiful. And I hate that you're walking into danger looking like this."

Shane caught Ilya's hands, holding them against his chest. "Then let's make sure we both walk out again."

The black SUV pulled up to the Kent Avenue warehouse just before noon on Friday, tires crunching over broken asphalt and scattered gravel. Shane sat in the passenger seat, a plain shopping bag clutched in his lap, the Adidas tracksuit folded carefully inside. Black, not blue. He'd checked three times that morning to make sure.

Ilya killed the engine but didn't move to get out. His hands stayed on the steering wheel, knuckles white with tension. In the back seat, Dimitri and Sergei were equally silent, the kind of quiet that came before violence. Shane could feel it pressing against his skin—the weight of what they were walking into.

"You stay next to me," Ilya said finally, his voice low and hard. He turned to look at Shane, his dark eyes intense. "No matter what happens. You stay next to me."

Shane nodded, his throat too tight to speak. He understood what Ilya wasn't saying: *This could go bad. This could go very bad.*

They got out.

The warehouse looked abandoned—crumbling brick facade, rusted metal door, the kind of place that had been forgotten by the city years ago. It was exactly the sort of location Shane had expected for a meeting like this. Dimitri moved ahead of them, one hand inside his jacket where Shane knew his gun was holstered. Sergei brought up the rear, his massive frame blocking any retreat.

Ilya's hand found the small of Shane's back, a brief touch that was both protective and possessive. Then they were moving forward, through the door, into the vast empty space beyond.

The warehouse was mostly bare—concrete floors, exposed beams overhead, windows so grimy they barely let in light. But it wasn't empty. Three men stood in the center of the space, and Shane's breath caught when he saw them.

Alexei. Shane recognized him immediately—the man who'd orchestrated his kidnapping, who'd held him for ten days. He stood with his arms crossed over his chest, stance wide and confident in his expensive Italian suit, every inch the bratva boss. But his face was a mess. The fight with Ilya had left its mark: his nose was clearly broken, swollen and bruised a deep purple-black, with white medical tape across the bridge holding it in place. Dark bruising spread across his left cheekbone and jaw, yellowing at the edges where it was starting to heal. A split in his lip had scabbed over. Despite the damage, his expression was hard as granite, his dark eyes cold and assessing as they locked onto Shane.

Shane's stomach twisted. Seeing Alexei again—outside the context of captivity, in this tense standoff—made everything feel surreal and dangerous.

Artem stood slightly behind Alexei and to the left. When his eyes met Shane's, something flickered across his face—recognition, maybe guilt, maybe relief. The big man who'd been kind during those ten days, who'd brought food and apologized, who'd wanted a black tracksuit. Shane's fingers tightened on the shopping bag, suddenly hyperaware of its weight.

Pavel was there too, positioned on Alexei's right. The compact, muscular enforcer looked ready for a fight, eager for it even, his eyes tracking their approach with predatory focus. Shane remembered that coiled energy from the warehouse where he'd been held, the way Pavel had always seemed like he was one word away from violence.

The two groups faced each other across the empty warehouse, maybe twenty feet of concrete and tension between them. Shane's heart hammered against his ribs. These were the men who'd taken him, held him, used him as leverage. And now he was walking toward them voluntarily, standing beside Ilya in what could easily become a bloodbath. Shane could hear his own heartbeat, loud in his ears. Could feel Ilya's presence beside him, solid and immovable. Could sense Dimitri and Sergei flanking them, hands ready to draw weapons.

This was a powder keg. One wrong word and it would explode.

Ilya looked nearly as bad as his brother. His jaw was mottled with bruising, dark purple spreading from his chin up toward his ear. A cut near his left eyebrow had been butterfly-banded but was still angry and red. His knuckles were split and scabbed, the skin across them torn from connecting with Alexei's face—or the concrete floor. There was a faint bruise blooming along his cheekbone, and Shane could see the careful way he held himself, like his ribs were still tender.

Both brothers bore the marks of their violence, a mirror of shared brutality and pain.

"So," Alexei said, his voice carrying easily in the empty space. Russian accent thick, words clipped. "You finally decided to talk to me."

"I asked for this meeting," Ilya replied, his tone carefully neutral.

"After two years of silence." Alexei's eyes narrowed. "How generous of you."

Shane saw Ilya's jaw clench, the muscle jumping beneath his skin. "Still as arrogant as ever."

"Still running away from your responsibilities." Alexei's voice was sharp as a blade, cutting deep.

The hostility was immediate and visceral, years of hurt and anger rising to the surface like poison. Shane could see it in the way both brothers stood—rigid, defensive, ready to attack. Old wounds reopening, bleeding fresh.

Artem and Pavel exchanged worried looks. Dimitri's hand drifted toward his gun, a subtle movement that Pavel mirrored. The air itself felt dangerous, crackling with the promise of violence.

Shane could feel it going bad. Could feel the situation spiraling toward something terrible and inevitable. His heart hammered against his ribs, adrenaline flooding his system, but beneath the fear was something else—a clarity, a certainty about what needed to happen.

He stepped forward.

"Shane—" Ilya's voice was sharp with warning, his hand reaching out to stop him.

Shane ignored him. He walked across the empty space between the two groups, his footsteps echoing off the concrete, the shopping bag swinging at his side. He could feel everyone's eyes on him—Ilya's shocked and worried, Alexei's cold and calculating, Artem's confused.

He stopped in front of Artem and held out the bag.

"Here," he said simply.

Artem stared at him, then at the bag, his expression unreadable. Slowly, carefully, he took it. Opened it. Looked inside.

Shane watched his face change—surprise flickering across his features, then confusion, then something softer. Something almost vulnerable.

"It's black," Shane said quietly. "Not blue."

Artem pulled the tracksuit out slightly, just enough to see the three white stripes against black fabric. His fingers traced over the Adidas logo, and for a moment he looked like he might say something. Then he just nodded, his throat working as he swallowed hard.

"What the fuck is this?"

Alexei's voice cut through the moment like a knife. He was staring at Shane now, really looking at him for the first time, his eyes sharp and dangerous. Looking between Shane and Artem, trying to understand what he was seeing.

"Boss, I—" Artem started.

"You bought my man a gift?" Alexei's voice was mocking, dangerous. He took a step closer to Shane, studying him like he was something strange and potentially threatening. "What, you got Stockholm Syndrome? Think we're friends now?"

Shane met his eyes steadily. "He was nice to me. I wanted to thank him."

Alexei laughed—a harsh, cruel sound that echoed off the warehouse walls. "Nice to you? That's cute." He looked Shane up and down, his lip curling. "This stupid little college kid thinks—"

"Watch your fucking mouth."

Ilya's voice was deadly quiet, but it cut through everything else. He stepped forward, his whole body radiating fury, and Shane had never seen him look so dangerous. This was the bratva enforcer, the man who'd done terrible things to protect what was his.

Alexei turned to face his brother, and the temperature in the room dropped ten degrees. "Or what?"

They were glaring at each other now, both brothers rigid with rage, hands moving toward weapons. Dimitri and Sergei shifted, ready to back Ilya. Pavel moved to Alexei's side, ready

to fight. Artem stood frozen, the tracksuit still in his hands, looking between the brothers with growing alarm.

It was about to explode. Shane could feel it—the violence coiled and ready to spring, the years of hurt and anger about to erupt into bloodshed.

"Everyone out."

Shane's voice was loud and firm, cutting through the tension. Every eye in the warehouse turned to him.

"This is a family talk," he continued, his voice steady despite his racing heart. "All the henchmen can wait outside."

"Kid, that's not—" Dimitri started.

"I said OUT." Shane put every ounce of authority he could muster into the word, channeling every professor who'd ever commanded a lecture hall, every coach who'd ever controlled a team. More authority than anyone expected from a twenty-two-year-old college student.

Dimitri scoffed, looking at Ilya. "Boss?"

Ilya was staring at Shane, his expression unreadable. Shane met his eyes, held them, and said quietly, "Please."

The silence stretched. Then Dimitri sighed, a long-suffering sound, and gestured to Artem and Pavel. "You heard him. Let's go."

Artem was still holding the tracksuit bag, clutching it like a lifeline. Pavel looked at Alexei, uncertain. "Boss?"

Alexei studied Shane for a long moment, his eyes calculating. Shane could see him reassessing, trying to figure out what game was being played. Then, slowly, he nodded once.

"Da. Outside."

The four men filed toward the door, their footsteps echoing. Artem glanced back once, catching Shane's eye, something grateful in his expression. Then the heavy metal door clanged shut behind them, and Shane was alone in the vast warehouse with Ilya and Alexei.

The silence was deafening.

Shane walked to an old table pushed against the far wall—scarred wood, probably left behind by whatever business had occupied this space before. He grabbed the edge and started dragging it toward the center of the warehouse, the legs scraping loudly against concrete.

"Shane, what are you—" Ilya started.

"Help me with this," Shane said, not looking up.

Both brothers just stared at him. Shane got the table positioned where he wanted it, then went back for chairs. Found three that looked relatively stable, carried them over one by one, arranged them around the table. He pointed at one chair.

"Alexei. Sit."

Pointed at another.

"Ilya. Sit."

Then he sat in the third chair himself, at the head of the table, and looked at both brothers expectantly. They were still standing, both of them looking stunned, like they couldn't quite believe what was happening.

"I said sit," Shane repeated, his voice firm.

Ilya moved first, almost automatically, taking the chair Shane had indicated. He sat down slowly, his eyes never leaving Shane's face, something like wonder in his expression.

Alexei followed after a moment, sitting across from his brother. The two of them faced each other across the scarred wooden table, years of hurt and anger between them, with Shane at the head like some kind of mediator.

"What is this?" Alexei asked, his voice dangerous.

"This is a conversation," Shane said simply. "You want to talk to your brother? Fine. We talk. But we do it like adults, not like two kids about to throw punches."

He turned to Alexei, meeting those cold dark eyes directly. "Kidnapping me was a terrible way to get your brother to talk to you. You need to apologize."

The silence that followed was absolute. Alexei stared at Shane like he'd grown a second head. Then he laughed—a harsh, disbelieving sound that held no humor.

"Apologize? To you?"

"To me," Shane said steadily. "And to Ilya."

"No." Alexei was still laughing, shaking his head. "I don't apologize to—"

"Don't you have someone you love?"

Shane's question cut through the laughter like a knife. Alexei stopped, his expression shifting, the humor draining away.

Shane leaned forward, his voice serious, intense. "Someone who matters to you more than anything? How would you feel if they were used the way you used me? Taken. Held. Used as leverage against you."

Alexei's face went dark, something dangerous flickering in his eyes. But beneath the anger, Shane saw something else—recognition. Understanding. Pain.

"You have a woman?" Ilya asked, surprised. He was studying his brother with new eyes, seeing something he hadn't expected.

Alexei was quiet for a long moment. Then he huffed, a sound that might have been resignation or defeat, and reached for his wallet. Pulled out a photograph, worn at the edges like it had been handled many times. Slid it across the table.

Shane and Ilya both leaned in to look.

The photo showed a young woman, maybe mid-twenties, with long dark hair and a warm smile. She was holding a little girl—maybe three years old, with dark curls and eyes that were unmistakably Alexei's. The same shape, the same intensity, even in a child's face.

Ilya picked up the photo with careful fingers, staring at it like it held the secrets of the universe. His hand was shaking slightly.

"This is Katerina," Alexei said quietly. "My daughter. She's three."

"I have a niece." Ilya's voice was barely above a whisper, thick with emotion. He couldn't look away from the photo, his thumb tracing over the little girl's face. "I have a niece."

"You would have known that if you ever answered my calls." Alexei's voice wasn't angry now, just tired. Bone-deep tired, the exhaustion of years of trying and failing. "If you ever talked to me."

"I didn't know." Ilya looked up, his eyes bright with unshed tears. "You never said—"

"I tried to tell you. For two years I tried." Alexei's jaw was tight, his hands flat on the table. "Every call, every message. I wanted you to know. I wanted you to meet her."

Shane watched the ice crack between them, watched years of silence and hurt begin to thaw. This was what Alexei had really wanted—not to drag Ilya back to Moscow, not to assert dominance or control. He'd wanted his brother to know his daughter. To be part of his life.

"Okay," Shane said softly, drawing both brothers' attention. "Now that we're actually talking..." He looked at Alexei. "What do you want? Really want, not just what you tell yourself you want."

Alexei looked at his brother, and for the first time since they'd entered the warehouse, his expression was completely open. Vulnerable.

"I want my brother back," he said simply. Honestly.

Ilya's jaw tightened, emotion flickering across his face. His hand was still holding the photo of Katerina, clutching it like something precious.

"Why don't you visit New York?" Shane suggested, his voice gentle but firm. "You and your daughter. And her mother. Come see where Ilya lives. See what he's built."

Alexei considered for a moment, then shook his head. "I want my brother in Moscow. Where he belongs. Where family is."

The old argument, resurfacing. Shane could see Ilya's expression closing off, the walls going back up.

"It's not safe," Shane said firmly, clearly. "You should want your brother safe."

"He'd be safe with me—" Alexei started.

"Would he?" Shane interrupted. "Would he really be safe in Moscow? With your father's old enemies? With all the people who want power?"

Alexei stood up abruptly, his chair scraping back. "You don't know anything about our world! About what we owe, what we—"

"He's right though!" Ilya stood too, his voice raised, years of frustration pouring out. "Do you want me arrested? Do you want me murdered? Because that's what would happen if I came back!"

"Father's death left a vacuum," Ilya continued, his voice raw. "Andrei took over and you know what he's like. Half the bratva wants him gone and they'd use me to do it. Or kill me to keep me from doing it. Either way, I'm dead."

Alexei was still angry, his chest heaving, but he was listening. Really listening.

"It's not safe, Alexei," Ilya said, quieter now. "It's not."

The silence that followed was heavy with truth. Alexei stood there, his hands clenched into fists, his jaw working. Then, slowly, he sat back down. Ran a hand through his hair, the gesture so similar to Ilya's that Shane's heart ached.

"Yeah," Alexei said finally, the word dragged out of him. "Okay. Maybe... it's not safe."

It was a grudging admission, painful, but it was real. Ilya sat back down too, looking surprised that his brother had actually heard him. Actually acknowledged the truth.

"But I want to see you," Alexei said, and now his voice was almost pleading. The hard bratva boss facade cracking to show the brother underneath. "I don't want another two years of silence."

"I don't either," Ilya said immediately, leaning forward.

It was the first real agreement they'd reached, the first moment of genuine connection. Shane felt something loosen in his chest.

"So visit New York," he said again, looking between them. "Bring Katerina. Show her America. You can see Ilya. Meet his... his people." He stumbled slightly over the word, not quite sure how to describe Ilya's organization. "It's not Moscow, but it's something."

Alexei was quiet, thinking. Shane could see him turning it over in his mind, weighing options, considering possibilities.

"Maybe we could visit," he said finally, grudgingly. "For a week. See what you've built."

"I'd like that." Ilya's voice was thick with emotion. He was still holding the photo of Katerina, looking down at it. "I want to know my niece."

"She should know her uncle," Alexei said, looking at the photo too. Something in his expression softened, the hard edges smoothing out. "She should know she has family."

Something was shifting between them—not fixed, not healed, but beginning to mend. Like a bone that had been broken and set wrong, finally being reset properly. It would take time to heal, but at least now it had a chance.

"See?" Shane said, allowing himself a small smile. "That wasn't so hard."

Both brothers looked at him. Alexei's expression was complicated—irritation and grudging respect and something that might have been amusement.

"You're very annoying, you know that?" he said, but there was almost a smile tugging at his lips.

"I've been told," Shane replied.

Under the table, Ilya's hand found Shane's, their fingers intertwining. He squeezed, and Shane squeezed back, a silent conversation passing between them. *Thank you. You're incredible. I love you.*

"I'm still angry with you," Alexei said, looking at Ilya. "About leaving. About the silence."

"I know," Ilya said quietly.

"But..." Alexei's voice softened. "I miss you. I miss my brother."

"I miss you too." Ilya's voice was barely audible, but the words carried the weight of years. The first honest thing they'd said to each other in so long.

Shane stood up, giving them space. "I'll get the others."

He walked to the door, leaving the two brothers alone at the table. Years of hurt between them, yes, but maybe—finally—a path forward.

When Shane opened the door, all four men were standing right there, clearly having been listening. Dimitri had the grace to look slightly sheepish. Artem was still holding the tracksuit bag like a treasure.

"We're done," Shane said. "Everything's... okay."

They filed back in, the atmosphere completely different from before. Alexei and Ilya were standing now, the table between them, but the hostility was gone. They looked awkward, uncertain, but not hostile. Not ready to kill each other.

"We're leaving," Alexei said to Artem and Pavel. Then, to Ilya, "I'll call you. About New York."

"Okay," Ilya said, nodding. "I'll answer."

It was a promise, simple but profound.

Alexei looked at Shane, studying him with those sharp dark eyes. "You're brave," he said finally. "And stupid." A pause. "But... thank you."

It was the closest thing to an apology Shane was going to get, and he'd take it.

"Don't kidnap me again," Shane said.

"No promises," Alexei replied, but he was almost smiling. Almost.

Artem caught Shane's eye as they turned to leave. He nodded once—a gesture of gratitude, of respect—the tracksuit bag tucked carefully under his arm. Then he followed Alexei and Pavel out of the warehouse.

They heard the sound of a car starting, driving away. The tension that had filled the space drained away with it, leaving behind something that felt almost like peace.

"What the fuck just happened?" Dimitri asked, looking between Ilya and Shane with bewilderment.

"Peace for now," Ilya said, and there was awe in his voice. He was looking at Shane like he'd just witnessed a miracle.

"Can we go home now?" Shane asked, suddenly exhausted. The adrenaline was wearing off, leaving him shaky and tired. "I'm starving."

The tension broke. Dimitri laughed, shaking his head. Sergei clapped Shane on the shoulder hard enough to make him stumble. Ilya pulled him close, pressing a kiss to his temple.

They left the warehouse together, piling back into the SUV. As Ilya started the engine, his hand found Shane's again, their fingers intertwining on the center console.

Crisis averted. Family beginning to mend. And Shane, somehow, had been the one to make it happen.

As they drove away from the warehouse, back toward Manhattan and home, Shane looked out the window at the Brooklyn streets passing by. He thought about Katerina, the little girl

with Alexei's eyes who would get to know her uncle. About Artem and his black tracksuit. About two brothers who'd been silent for two years finally talking again.

He'd been kidnapped, held hostage, used as leverage. It had been terrifying and wrong and Alexei absolutely owed him an apology he'd never fully give.

But maybe—just maybe—something good had come from it after all.

Ilya squeezed his hand, and Shane squeezed back, and they drove home together through the Friday afternoon traffic, the worst behind them and something better ahead.

The SUV pulled up outside Shane's building fifteen minutes later. The adrenaline from the warehouse meeting had worn off, leaving Shane feeling hollowed out and exhausted. His body ached—his feet still tender from the escape, his wrists sore from the zip ties, bruises blooming across his ribs and arms from being manhandled into the van ten days ago.

He just wanted to sleep for about twelve hours.

"I'll walk you up," Ilya said, already unbuckling his seatbelt.

Shane nodded, too tired to argue. Dimitri and Sergei stayed in the car, Dimitri scrolling through his phone while Sergei lit a cigarette and cracked the window.

They headed toward the building entrance, Ilya's hand warm and steady on the small of Shane's back. The elevator ride up was quiet, comfortable. Shane leaned against Ilya's shoulder, letting himself be held up.

"You did good today," Ilya murmured. "With Alexei. With everything."

"I just didn't want anyone to get shot."

"Still. You were brave." Ilya pressed a kiss to the top of his head. "Stupid, but brave."

Shane smiled despite his exhaustion. "Your favorite combination."

The elevator dinged and opened directly onto Shane's private landing—one of the perks of a penthouse. Shane stepped out and froze.

Hayden was sitting on the floor outside his apartment door, back against the wall, phone in hand. When he saw Shane, he jumped to his feet.

"SHANE!"

Shane barely had time to register what was happening before Hayden practically tackled him with a hug, arms wrapping around him so tight Shane's ribs protested.

"Jesus, Hayden—"

"Don't 'Jesus Hayden' me!" Hayden pulled back just enough to grip Shane's shoulders, his face a mixture of relief and fury. "Where the fuck have you been? I've been calling you all

day! You promised you'd be—"

Then Hayden's eyes landed on Ilya standing behind Shane.

Then on the bruises covering Shane's face—the fading yellow-green ones from the kidnapping, the fresher ones from being shoved around.

Then on the spectacular damage to Ilya's face—the mottled purple bruising along his jaw, the cut near his eyebrow, the split knuckles.

Hayden's expression shifted from relief to alarm. "What the hell happened to you guys?"

Shane's brain scrambled for an explanation. Any explanation. "Hayden, this is Ilya. My... boyfriend."

The word felt strange in his mouth. They hadn't really labeled it, hadn't had that conversation. But what else was he supposed to call him? *The Russian mobster I'm sleeping with who bought me a penthouse and whose brother kidnapped me?*

Ilya nodded, his expression carefully neutral. "Hello."

Hayden stared. Just stared. Taking in Ilya's size—easily six-two, broad-shouldered, built like he could break someone in half. The expensive clothes that screamed money. The bruises that screamed violence.

"You look like you got hit by a truck," Hayden said finally.

"It's a long story," Shane said quickly.

"I've got time."

Shane opened his mouth to respond when he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. Shit. Shit shit shit.

Dimitri appeared at the top of the stairwell, massive and intimidating in his black coat, his broken arm still in a cast. He took one look at the scene—Shane, Hayden, Ilya—and raised an eyebrow.

Hayden's eyes went wide. "Who the fuck is that?"

"This is Dimitri," Shane said, the lie coming easier this time. "Ilya's... uncle."

Dimitri's other eyebrow joined the first, but he played along without missing a beat. "Da. Uncle. Nice to meet friend of Shane." His Russian accent was thick, deliberate.

Hayden looked between all of them—Shane, Ilya, Dimitri—like he was trying to solve an equation that didn't add up. "Your uncle is huge."

"Six foot two," Dimitri said.

"Close enough," Hayden muttered.

An awkward silence settled over the hallway. Shane could feel Hayden's suspicion radiating off him in waves, could see the questions forming behind his eyes.

Hayden grabbed Shane's arm and pulled him aside slightly, lowering his voice to a harsh whisper. "Dude. What the fuck is going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play dumb with me." Hayden's grip tightened. "These guys look like they're in the mob or something."

Shane's heart skipped. "They're not— it's not like that."

"Shane, look at them. Look at you." Hayden gestured at Shane's face, his bruised wrists visible where his sleeves had ridden up. "You have bruises everywhere and you've been MIA for days."

"I told you, I just needed time—"

"Bullshit." Hayden's voice was flat, final. "That's complete bullshit and you know it."

"We should talk inside," Ilya said from behind them, his voice calm but firm. Not a suggestion.

Hayden's jaw clenched. "Yeah. We should."

They all filed into Shane's apartment—the penthouse Ilya had bought him, with its floor-to-ceiling windows and expensive furniture. It felt even smaller with three large men crowding into it. Dimitri stationed himself by the door like a sentinel. Ilya sat on the couch, his posture relaxed but his eyes sharp. Hayden and Shane sat across from him, and Shane felt like he was about to be interrogated.

"So," Hayden said, his voice tight. "Explanation. Now."

Shane glanced at Ilya, uncertain. How much could he say? How much should he say?

Ilya met his eyes, then turned to Hayden. "There was... family trouble. My brother came to New York. We had disagreement." He gestured to his battered face. "As you can see."

"And Shane was there for this 'disagreement'?" Hayden's tone made it clear he didn't believe a word of it.

"I wanted to support him," Shane said quickly. "Things got heated. I got caught in the middle."

It wasn't entirely a lie. He had been caught in the middle. Just not in the way Hayden was imagining.

Hayden didn't look convinced. His eyes narrowed as he studied Ilya. "Your brother did this to you?"

"We both gave as good as we got," Ilya said evenly.

Hayden turned back to Shane. "And you couldn't call me because...?"

"My phone died. And everything happened so fast." Another lie. They were piling up now, one on top of the other, and Shane hated it. Hated lying to his best friend.

"For ten days?" Hayden's voice rose. "Your phone was dead for ten days?"

"I'm sorry, okay?" Shane ran a hand through his hair, frustration and exhaustion making his voice crack. "I fucked up. I should have called. I should have let you know I was safe."

That part, at least, was true. He should have found a way to contact Hayden. Should have known his friend would be worried sick.

Hayden sighed, some of the anger draining out of him. "Shane, you're my best friend."

"I know."

"And I don't know what's going on here, but—" Hayden looked at Ilya, at Dimitri standing by the door like a bodyguard. "Just... be careful, okay?"

"I am."

"Are you?" Hayden's gaze dropped to Shane's wrists, to the deep red marks still visible where the zip ties had cut into his skin.

Shane quickly pulled his sleeves down, but it was too late. Hayden had seen. His frown deepened.

"Boss," Dimitri said from the door, his voice cutting through the tension. "We should go. Let the boys talk."

Ilya stood immediately. "Da. You're right." He looked at Shane. "I'll call you later?"

Shane nodded. "Yeah."

Ilya hesitated, clearly wanting to kiss Shane but aware of Hayden watching them. He settled for touching Shane's shoulder, his hand warm and grounding. "Be safe."

Then he and Dimitri left, the door closing behind them with a soft click.

Silence.

Hayden stared at Shane.

Shane stared back.

"What the actual fuck, Shane?"

"I know how it looks—"

"Do you?" Hayden stood up, pacing. "Because it looks like you're dating some Russian mobster who got into a fight with his brother and dragged you into it. It looks like you disappeared for ten days and came back covered in bruises. It looks like you're lying to me."

"He's not—" Shane started, then stopped. Because he couldn't deny it. Couldn't say *Ilya's not a mobster* when Ilya absolutely was. Couldn't say *I wasn't kidnapped* when he absolutely had been.

Hayden's eyes widened. "Oh my god. He IS."

Shane sat down heavily on the couch, suddenly too tired to keep up the pretense. "It's complicated."

"Un-complicate it."

"I can't." Shane looked up at his best friend, at the worry and fear written all over his face. "I can't tell you everything because it's not just my story to tell. But I promise you, I'm okay."

"Shane—"

"Ilya isn't— he's not dangerous. Not to me." Shane believed that, down to his bones. Ilya would never hurt him. Would burn the world down before he let anyone else hurt him.

"Shane..." Hayden's voice was softer now, almost pleading.

Silence stretched between them. Shane didn't have an answer for that. Did he know what he was doing? Did anyone ever really know when they were falling in love with someone dangerous?

Finally, Hayden sighed and sat back down. "Fine. I can't stop you."

"Hayden—"

"But I'm not going to sit here and watch you get hurt." Hayden's voice was firm, final. "If shit gets bad, if he hurts you, if ANY of this gets dangerous—you call me. Immediately."

"I will."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"And no more disappearing acts." Hayden pointed at him. "I don't care if your Russian mobster boyfriend's brother shows up. You text me. You let me know you're alive."

"Okay. I will." Shane meant it. He'd put Hayden through enough.

Hayden ran a hand through his hair, some of the tension finally leaving his shoulders. "He's hot, at least."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Your boyfriend. He's hot. In a scary, might-murder-someone way." Hayden's mouth twitched. "And the uncle? Jesus. Is everyone in his family like six feet of solid muscle?"

"Pretty much," Shane said, and despite everything—the lies, the fear, the exhaustion—he found himself smiling.

Hayden shook his head. "You have the weirdest taste in men."

"Yeah. I really do."

Hayden stood up, grabbing his jacket from where he'd thrown it over a chair. "I should go. But I'm serious, Shane. Be careful."

"I will."

Hayden pulled him into another hug, this one gentler than the first. "I'm glad you're okay. Even if you're dating the Russian mob."

"He's not— okay, yeah." There was no point denying it anymore.

Hayden left, and Shane was alone in his apartment. The silence felt heavy, oppressive. He collapsed onto the couch, staring at the ceiling, trying to process everything that had happened in the last few hours. The warehouse. Alexei. Katerina. Hayden.

His phone buzzed.

Ilya: Your friend cares about you.

Shane smiled despite his exhaustion.

Shane: Yeah. He does.

Ilya: That's good. Everyone should have someone who cares like that.

Shane set his phone down and closed his eyes. His body ached, his mind was spinning, and he had no idea what came next. But for now, he was safe. Ilya's brother wasn't trying to kill him. Hayden knew—sort of—and hadn't completely abandoned him.

Chapter 16: The Game and Samovar Soiree

Wednesday night, and the NYU ice rink hummed with pre-game energy.

Shane sat on the bench in the locker room, lacing up his skates with practiced efficiency. The familiar ritual—tape on the stick, pads adjusted just right, jersey pulled over his head—settled something in his chest that had been restless since the kidnapping. This was his. Hockey was his.

Around him, his teammates were going through their own routines. Music played from someone's speaker, a mix of pump-up songs and trash talk filling the space. The smell of sweat and ice and equipment was as familiar as breathing.

Hayden dropped onto the bench next to him, already suited up, his jersey stretched across his shoulders. "You ready?"

Shane looked up, grinning. "Always."

"Good." Hayden bumped his shoulder. "Because I'm passing to you all night. You're scoring tonight, Hollander. I can feel it."

"No pressure or anything."

"You're our center. Pressure's kind of your thing." Hayden stood, grabbed his helmet. "Let's fucking go."

Shane finished with his skates and stood, rolling his shoulders. His body felt good—strong, ready. The bruises from the kidnapping had faded to yellow-green shadows on his ribs and arms, barely visible under his gear. He'd been cleared to play three days ago, and he'd been itching to get back on the ice ever since.

Coach Morrison walked through, clipboard in hand, doing his final check. He stopped when he reached Shane, eyes scanning his face. "Hollander. You good?"

"I'm good, Coach."

"You sure? You missed two weeks. If you need more time—"

"I'm ready." Shane met his eyes, steady. "I promise."

Coach studied him for another moment, then nodded. "All right. But you feel anything off, you tell me. Got it?"

"Got it."

Coach moved on, and Shane grabbed his helmet and gloves. Around him, the team was gathering, energy building. Captain—a senior named Jake—stood in the center.

"All right, boys. This is our house. Let's show them what NYU hockey looks like."

The team roared, sticks banging against the floor.

Shane felt it in his chest, that familiar surge of adrenaline and purpose. This was what he'd been missing. This sense of belonging, of being part of something.

They filed out toward the ice, and Shane could hear the crowd already—not huge, but loud. College hockey didn't pack arenas, but the people who came were die-hard fans.

He stepped onto the ice, and everything else fell away.

Ilya and Dimitri arrived at the rink fifteen minutes before the game started.

"I've never been to a hockey game," Ilya admitted as they walked through the entrance. The cold air from the rink hit them immediately, sharp and clean.

Dimitri looked at him like he'd just confessed to a crime. "You've never—Boss, in Russia, we take hockey very seriously. This is a tragedy."

"I was busy."

"Too busy for hockey. *Bozhe moy*." Dimitri shook his head, muttering in Russian about priorities and shame.

They found seats about halfway up the stands, with a good view of the ice. The rink was smaller than Ilya had expected—intimate, the kind of place where you could see players' faces, hear the scrape of skates and the crack of sticks against the puck.

Ilya scanned the ice, looking for Shane. The teams were warming up, skating in circles, taking practice shots. Then he saw him—number 24, navy and white NYU jersey, moving across the ice with that same fluid grace Ilya had seen at Wollman Rink.

But this was different. This was Shane in his element, focused and fast, stick handling the puck like it was an extension of his body. He took a shot—top corner, past the goalie—and skated back around, easy and confident.

Something in Ilya's chest tightened. Watching Shane like this—strong, capable, completely in control—did things to him he didn't have words for.

"That's him?" Dimitri asked, following Ilya's gaze.

"Da. Number 24."

"He's good."

"I know."

They settled into their seats, and Ilya tried to relax. Tried to be a normal person watching his boyfriend play hockey. Not a man who ran half of Brooklyn's criminal underworld. Not someone who'd spent the last two weeks tearing the city apart looking for this same person.

Just... someone who cared.

The seats next to them were empty. Ilya was grateful for the space—he didn't want to make small talk with strangers.

Then someone sat down next to him.

Ilya's hand moved instinctively toward his gun, his body tensing. He turned, ready to—

It was Artem.

Wearing the black Adidas tracksuit Shane had given him, looking younger than usual, almost nervous. Pavel was right behind him, settling into the seat next to Artem.

Ilya stared. "What are you doing here?"

Artem met his eyes, steady. "Watching the game."

"Does Alexei know you're here?" Ilya's voice was low, dangerous.

Pavel answered, calm. "We came alone. Just wanted to watch."

"Shane invited us," Artem added. "Texted us the game info last week. Said we should come if we wanted."

Ilya hadn't known Shane had done that. Hadn't known Shane was in contact with the men who'd kidnapped him.

Dimitri, on Ilya's other side, looked amused. "The more the merrier."

Ilya wanted to argue. Wanted to tell them to leave, that this was *his* thing with Shane, not theirs. But Artem was wearing the tracksuit Shane had bought him, and Pavel looked genuinely interested in the game, and—

And Shane had invited them.

"Fine," Ilya said. "But if this is some kind of—"

"It's not," Pavel interrupted. "We just want to watch hockey."

The whistle blew. The game was starting.

Ilya turned his attention back to the ice, but he was hyperaware of Artem and Pavel beside him. This was strange. Surreal. Sitting with two of his brother's men, watching his boyfriend play college hockey.

His life had gotten very weird.

The referee dropped the puck at center ice.

Shane was there, crouched and ready, facing off against the opposing center. The puck hit the ice, and Shane's stick was faster—he won the face-off, flicking the puck back to his defenseman before the other guy could react.

The game exploded into motion.

Shane skated hard, cutting across the ice, calling for the puck. His teammate passed it, and Shane controlled it easily, stick handling around a defender. He saw Hayden breaking toward the net and passed—perfect tape-to-tape—and Hayden took the shot.

The goalie saved it, but barely.

"He's good," Artem said, leaning forward in his seat.

"Da," Ilya agreed, eyes never leaving Shane.

"Number 23 is also good," Pavel observed, nodding toward Hayden.

Dimitri, who actually understood hockey, started explaining the rules to Ilya in low Russian. Positions, penalties, strategy. Ilya absorbed it, but mostly he just watched Shane.

Watched him skate, fast and agile, reading the ice like he could see three plays ahead.
Watched him communicate with his teammates—pointing, calling out, directing traffic.
Watched him take a hit and bounce right back up, unfazed.

This was Shane at his best. Confident, skilled, completely in his element.

Ilya had seen him nervous at school, sarcastic at the convenience store, vulnerable in bed. But this—this was something else entirely.

The first period ended with NYU up 1-0. Not Shane's goal, but his assist—a beautiful pass that set up the play perfectly.

"This is good," Artem said during the intermission, grinning. "Exciting."

Pavel stood. "I'm getting snacks. Anyone want anything?"

Dimitri: "Beer."

Artem: "Nachos."

Ilya just shook his head, still processing the fact that he was sitting here with these people.

Pavel returned a few minutes later with an armful of concessions—nachos, beers, a hot dog for himself. He offered the nachos around, and they passed the tray between them like this was normal. Like they were friends.

It was the weirdest moment of Ilya's life, and he'd had a lot of weird moments.

The second period was more intense.

The other team came out aggressive, hungry to tie it up. The play was faster, harder, more physical.

Shane took a brutal check into the boards—shoulder-first, the impact loud enough that Ilya heard it from the stands. He was halfway out of his seat before he even realized he'd moved, heart in his throat.

Dimitri's hand on his arm pulled him back down. "He's fine, boss. Look."

Shane was already back on his feet, shaking it off, skating back into position like nothing had happened.

"He's tough," Artem said, impressed.

"Tougher than he looks," Ilya agreed, his voice rough.

The game stayed close. By the end of the second period, it was tied 2-2, and the tension in the arena was thick enough to cut.

Third period. Five minutes left.

The game was still tied, both teams exhausted but pushing hard. Shane was on the ice, sweat-soaked and breathing hard, but his eyes were sharp, focused.

He got the puck at center ice.

Ilya leaned forward, every muscle in his body tense.

Shane skated fast, dodging one defender, then another. He saw Hayden breaking toward the net and passed—a quick, clean feed. Hayden controlled it, drew the goalie out, then passed it back.

Shane didn't hesitate. He wound up and shot.

Top shelf. Bar down.

Goal.

The crowd *erupted*.

Shane's teammates mobbed him, piling on in celebration. The goal horn blared, and the announcer's voice boomed over the speakers: "GOAL! Number 24, Shane Hollander!"

Artem and Pavel were on their feet, cheering. Dimitri was clapping, grinning. And Ilya—

Ilya was standing, heart pounding, unable to take his eyes off Shane.

Shane skated past the bench, and for just a second, he looked up into the stands. His eyes found Ilya's through the glass.

He grinned.

Ilya had never seen him look so alive.

NYU held the lead.

The final buzzer sounded: 3-2, NYU wins.

The team celebrated on the ice, hugging and shouting and banging their sticks. Shane and Hayden found each other, pulling into a tight hug, both of them laughing.

The crowd was still cheering as the teams shook hands and skated off.

Twenty minutes later, Shane emerged from the locker room, hair still damp from the shower, gym bag slung over his shoulder. He was wearing joggers and a hoodie, his face flushed and happy.

He stopped when he saw them.

Ilya, Dimitri, Artem, and Pavel, all standing there waiting.

"You all came?" Shane's voice was surprised, pleased.

Ilya stepped forward. "You were incredible."

Shane's face went red. "It was a team effort."

"You scored the winning goal," Dimitri pointed out.

"Yeah, but Hayden set it up, and—"

Hayden emerged from the locker room behind Shane, saw the group of Russian men, and did a visible double-take. His eyes went from Ilya and Dimitri—who he recognized—to Artem and Pavel, who he definitely didn't.

"These are... friends," Shane said quickly. "From out of town."

Hayden's expression said he didn't believe that for a second, but he didn't push. "Right. Well. Good game, man. I'm heading out. See you Friday?"

"Yeah. See you."

Hayden left, throwing one last suspicious look over his shoulder.

Shane turned back to the group, and his eyes landed on Artem. On what he was wearing.

"The tracksuit!" Shane's face lit up. "You're wearing it!"

Artem looked down at himself, almost shy. "Da. It fits perfect."

"It looks good! Black is definitely your color."

Artem smiled—genuine, warm. "Thank you. For this."

Shane pulled up his sleeve, showing off the bright pink Hello Kitty watch on his wrist. "And look, I wear this all the time!"

Artem laughed. Pavel shook his head. "Is very... pink."

Ilya rolled his eyes. "Don't encourage him."

"You love it," Shane said, grinning.

"I tolerate it."

"Same thing."

Artem cleared his throat. "We should celebrate. The win."

"There's a good Russian place not far from here," Pavel added. "Samovar Soiree. In Brighton Beach."

Ilya knew it. He'd been there a few times over the years—the place was a well know Russian stomping ground.

"Best pelmeni in New York," Artem said.

Shane looked confused. "What's pelmeni?"

All four Russian men turned to stare at him.

Dimitri looked genuinely horrified. "You have never had pelmeni?"

"I've never had... a lot of Russian food," Shane admitted.

"This is crime," Pavel said flatly.

"We must fix this immediately," Artem agreed.

Ilya looked at Shane. "Do you want to go?"

Shane's stomach chose that moment to growl audibly. He laughed. "I'm starving. Let's do it."

Samovar Soiree was tucked into a corner of Brighton Beach, the kind of place you'd miss if you weren't looking for it. Dark wood, red accents, warm lighting that made everything feel intimate and old-world. The smell hit them as soon as they walked in—garlic, butter, herbs, something rich and savory that made Shane's mouth water.

An older Russian woman stood behind the host stand. She looked up when they entered, and her face broke into a smile when she saw Ilya.

"Ilya Rozanov! We haven't seen you in months!"

"Vera." Ilya stepped forward, kissing her cheek in the traditional way. "Good to see you."

Vera's sharp eyes moved to Shane, curious and assessing. "And who is this?"

"This is Shane."

Something in Ilya's tone—something soft, possessive—made Vera's smile widen. "Ah. Welcome, Shane."

"Thank you," Shane said, a little overwhelmed.

Vera led them to a large table near the back, away from the few other customers.

They settled in—Ilya and Shane on one side, Dimitri, Artem, and Pavel across from them. Vera brought menus, but Artem waved them away and started ordering in rapid Russian.

Shane leaned toward Ilya. "What did he order?"

"Everything," Ilya said, amused.

"Everything?"

"You said you've never had Russian food. He's fixing that."

The food started arriving almost immediately.

First: a large plate of **pelmeni**—small meat dumplings, steaming hot, served with a generous dollop of sour cream. They looked simple, almost plain, but the smell was incredible.

"Try," Artem urged, pushing the plate toward Shane.

Shane picked one up with his fork, dipped it in the sour cream, and took a bite.

His eyes went wide.

"Oh my god."

He immediately ate three more in quick succession, barely pausing to breathe.

Artem grinned. "Good, yes?"

"These are *amazing*," Shane said around a mouthful. "What's in them?"

"Beef and pork, usually," Dimitri explained. "Onions, spices. Very simple, but done right, they're perfect."

Ilya watched Shane devour the dumplings, something warm and fond settling in his chest. Shane's enthusiasm was infectious—he wasn't pretending to like it, wasn't being polite. He genuinely loved it.

More food arrived.

Blini—thin, delicate pancakes served with caviar and sour cream. Shane was less sure about the caviar, but he tried it anyway, his face going through a series of expressions before he nodded. "Okay. That's... interesting. Not bad."

Beef Stroganoff, rich and creamy, served over egg noodles. Shane took one bite and made a sound that was borderline obscene. "This is incredible."

Pickled vegetables—cucumbers, tomatoes, cabbage. Shane tried them and, to everyone's surprise, loved them. "These are so good! Why don't we have these everywhere?"

Olivier salad, which looked like potato salad but tasted completely different. Shane tried it, considered, then went back for more.

Black bread with butter, dense and slightly sweet.

The Russians explained each dish as it arrived, and Shane asked questions—about ingredients, preparation, regional variations. He was genuinely interested, and the men responded to that, opening up, telling stories about their grandmothers' cooking, about meals in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Then Artem ordered a round of kvass.

The drinks arrived in tall glasses, dark and fizzy. Shane picked his up, sniffed it, looked suspicious.

"What is this?"

"Kvass," Pavel said. "Very Russian. Traditional."

"It's fermented rye bread," Dimitri added. "Non-alcoholic."

Shane took a cautious sip.

His face did something complicated.

"It tastes like... carbonated bread?"

All four Russians burst out laughing.

"Da!" Dimitri said, delighted. "Exactly!"

Shane took another sip, considering. Then another.

"Okay, it's growing on me."

Third sip: "Actually, I kind of like it?"

"One of us," Artem said solemnly. "One of us."

The conversation flowed more easily after that.

Artem and Pavel talked about the hockey game, analyzing plays with surprising insight. Dimitri told stories about Russian hockey—the legendary Soviet teams, the brutal training, the pride of the sport. Shane asked about Moscow, and Pavel pulled out his phone to show photos of Red Square, the Kremlin, the metro stations with their ornate decorations.

Ilya stayed quieter, just watching.

Watching Shane fit into this world. His world. Watching him laugh at Dimitri's stories, ask Artem about his sister, listen to Pavel describe his hometown. Watching him be *himself*—curious, kind, genuinely interested in people.

This strange, impossible group. A Bratva boss, his second-in-command, two of his brother's men, and a college student who played hockey and wore a Hello Kitty watch.

It shouldn't work. But somehow, it did.

Vera brought dessert—**medovik**, a layered honey cake that looked almost too beautiful to eat.

Shane's eyes lit up. He took a bite, and his expression went blissful.

"This might be the best thing I've ever eaten."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Better than those bagels you like?"

"Different category. Both can be the best."

Ilya smiled. Under the table, Shane's foot touched his. Ilya caught his eye, and Shane looked happy. Relaxed. Like he belonged here.

This is good, Ilya thought. This could be really good.

They finished eating, and Ilya insisted on paying—waving off everyone's protests. Outside, the January night was cold and clear, the street quiet.

Artem and Pavel were heading back to their hotel. Artem turned to Shane, his expression serious.

"Thank you. For the tracksuit. For inviting us."

"Thanks for coming! I wasn't sure you'd find the number I left in the tracksuit pocket." Shane said. "It meant a lot."

Pavel nodded. "You play good hockey. "

"Thanks. Come to another game sometime."

They left, walking down the street together, and Dimitri went to get the car, leaving Ilya and Shane alone for a moment.

"That was nice," Shane said, his breath fogging in the cold.

"Da. It was."

"Your world isn't so scary when it's just eating dumplings and watching hockey."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "It's not always like this."

"I know." Shane stepped closer. "But it was nice. Tonight."

Ilya pulled him in, wrapping an arm around his waist. "You scored."

Shane grinned. "I did."

"You looked—" Ilya couldn't find the words. Beautiful. Alive. Perfect.

"Alive?" Shane offered.

"Beautiful."

Shane kissed him, quick and cold and sweet. Dimitri honked from where he'd pulled up with the car, and they broke apart, laughing.

They got in the car, Shane full of pelmeni and kvass and happiness, Ilya's hand in his.

As they drove back into the city, Shane leaned his head on Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya thought about how strange his life had become. How good. How much he had to lose.

But for now, in this moment, it was just them. And that was enough.

A week later, Shane was losing his mind.

He sat on his couch—Ilya's couch, technically, in the penthouse Ilya had bought for him—staring at his laptop screen. His Physical Chemistry problem set was open, half-finished. He'd been staring at the same thermodynamics equation for twenty minutes without actually seeing it.

Classes had started back up three days ago. Spring semester, junior year. His schedule was manageable—Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, four hours of lectures and labs spread across the day. Tuesdays and Thursdays were completely free.

Which meant he had a lot of time to sit around and do nothing.

Shane closed his laptop and pulled out his phone, opening his banking app more out of habit than necessity. His checking account showed a comfortable balance— He wasn't hurting for money, thanks to selling Ilya's gifts . That wasn't the problem.

The problem was that he was bored out of his fucking mind.

He'd spent two years working at that coffee shop near campus, pulling shifts between classes, staying busy, having a routine. Then the convenience store, which had been less about the money and more about having something to do, somewhere to be. He was used to working. Used to being needed, being useful, having a purpose beyond just existing.

Now he just... sat here.

He did his homework. Watched TV. Scrolled through his phone. Waited for Ilya to text. Made dinner he barely ate. Went to bed. Woke up. Repeated.

It had been a week since the warehouse, since Alexei, since everything had exploded and then somehow resolved itself. A week since Hayden had shown up and forced Shane to confront how deep he'd gotten into Ilya's world. A week of Ilya being extra protective, extra careful, checking in constantly to make sure Shane was okay.

Shane was okay. Physically, at least. His feet had healed. The bruises from being grabbed and shoved around had faded to yellow-green. He was fine.

He was also going completely stir-crazy.

Shane grabbed his phone and texted Ilya.

Shane: I'm losing my mind. Can I see you?

The response came almost immediately.

Ilya: Are you okay? What's wrong?

Shane: Nothing's wrong. I'm just bored. Can I come over? Or you come here?

Ilya: I'll pick you up. 20 minutes.

Shane stood up, suddenly energized. He changed out of his sweatpants into jeans, pulled on a hoodie, ran his fingers through his hair. Checked his Hello Kitty watch—the new one Artem had given him, which he still wore every day. Ilya would be here soon.

Nineteen minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

Shane opened it to find Ilya standing there, looking unfairly good in a dark coat and scarf, his breath fogging in the cold January air. The bruises on his face had faded significantly, though there was still a faint yellow tinge along his jaw.

"Hi," Shane said, suddenly feeling stupid for texting. "Sorry, I just—"

"Don't apologize." Ilya stepped inside, pulling Shane into a brief kiss. "I wanted to see you anyway."

"Yeah?"

"I want to show you something."

Shane grabbed his coat. "Is it legal?"

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Define legal."

Shane laughed, and it felt good. He followed Ilya down to the street where the black Mercedes was waiting, Dimitri in the driver's seat as always. Shane slid into the back next to Ilya, and the car pulled away from the curb.

"Where are we going?" Shane asked.

"Brighton Beach."

Shane's face lit up. "Are we going back to Samovar Soiree?"

Ilya glanced at him, surprised. "You want to go back?"

"Are you kidding? Those pelmeni were incredible. I've been thinking about them all week." Shane leaned forward in his seat. "Plus Vera was so nice. And the whole place was just—I loved it."

Something softened in Ilya's expression. "Good. Because I want to talk to you about something."

They drove through Brooklyn, the neighborhoods changing as they went. Shane watched out the window, recognizing the route now. When they pulled up in front of the restaurant with its elegant gold lettering on the dark green awning—**Samovar Soiree / Самовар Вечер**—Shane felt a little thrill of excitement.

Inside, the warmth and smell of fresh bread and herbs welcomed them immediately. A few customers were scattered throughout the dining room, and Shane took in the details he'd noticed last week: the dark wood, the brass fixtures, the white tablecloths and fresh flowers.

Vera emerged from the back, and her face broke into a smile when she saw them.

"Ilya! And Shane!" She crossed the room quickly, greeting Ilya in Russian before switching to English for Shane's benefit. "You came back! I told Ilya you would. The pelmeni, yes?"

Shane grinned. "The pelmeni were amazing. Everything was amazing."

"Good, good." Vera patted his arm affectionately, then looked between him and Ilya with obvious curiosity. "You want your usual table?"

"Please," Ilya said.

They settled into the same corner table from last week, tucked away from the other customers. Vera brought tea without being asked—proper Russian tea in glasses with ornate metal holders—and disappeared back toward the kitchen.

Shane wrapped his hands around the warm glass, looking at Ilya expectantly. "So what did you want to talk about?"

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his fingers tracing the rim of his tea glass. "You said you're going crazy sitting in your apartment. That you need something to do."

"Yeah." Shane's stomach tightened slightly. He wasn't sure where this was going.

"And you said you're good at customer service. Management. That you worked at a coffee shop for two years before the 7/11."

"I did. I ran shifts, trained new people, handled inventory." Shane leaned forward. "Why?"

Ilya looked around the restaurant—at the beautiful space, the handful of customers, the potential being wasted. "Business isn't great here. We get regular customers, mostly Russian, mostly older. But not enough new business. Younger people don't come here. The Yelp reviews are mixed."

Shane had noticed that when he'd looked the place up after their visit last week. Three and a half stars. Complaints about the menu being confusing, the atmosphere being too formal, the staff not speaking enough English.

"You need better marketing," Shane said. "A social media presence. Maybe update the menu to make it more accessible. Better lighting in some areas. Events to draw in younger crowds."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Exactly."

"So... what are you saying?"

"I'm saying I need help. Someone who understands how to run a legitimate business. Someone who can make this place actually successful." Ilya met his eyes. "I'm offering you a job."

Shane's heart jumped. "Seriously?"

"Front of house only," Ilya said, his voice firm. "You don't go in the back room. You don't handle money. You don't ask questions about certain customers. And if I tell you to leave, you leave. No arguments."

Shane remembered what Ilya had told him last week—that this place was a front for money laundering, for meetings, for business that wasn't entirely legal. But it was also a real restaurant with real customers and incredible food. Both things could be true at once.

"I agree," Shane said immediately.

"Shane—"

"I agree to all of it." Shane reached across the table, covering Ilya's hand with his own. "I want to do this. I want to help."

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his thumb tracing circles on Shane's palm. "You need to understand what you're agreeing to. Really understand."

"I know it's a front. You told me last week—"

"It's more complicated than that." Ilya glanced around the dining room—at the older couple finishing their lunch, at the businessman at the bar. "When I bought this place three years ago, it was simple. A front for money laundering. Somewhere to hold meetings. The customers were mostly my men, old Russians who knew what this place really was. Everyone understood the arrangement."

"But?"

"But Vera is too good at her job. And Boris—the food is actually incredible." Ilya's expression was almost rueful. "Word spread. Real customers started coming. Yelp reviews. Food bloggers. Last month we were featured in some 'Hidden Gems of Brooklyn' article. Now we're too popular. Actually popular."

Shane looked around with new understanding. "So you need real help because you have real customers."

"Exactly. And I can't just... ignore them. Can't let the place fall apart because I'm too busy with other business." Ilya met his eyes. "And more and more, it's families. Young couples. People who just want good food."

Shane could see it—the potential, the opportunity. "I can change that. Bring in younger crowds, diverse customers. Make this place actually successful, not just as cover but as a real business."

"That's what I'm hoping."

"But I have a condition." Shane's voice was firm, surprising himself with how steady it sounded. "No violence in the dining hall. That's non-negotiable."

Ilya blinked, clearly not expecting that. "Shane—"

"I'm serious." Shane didn't look away. "If I'm going to work here, if you want real customers who feel safe enough to come back and bring their friends, they need to actually *be* safe. No guns drawn, no threats, no intimidation where people are eating. I don't care what happens in the back room, but out here?" He gestured to the dining room. "This has to be clean."

Ilya studied him for a long moment, something like respect flickering in his eyes. "Of course. Vera wouldn't have it any other way."

"Vera runs a tight ship?"

A smile tugged at Ilya's mouth. "You have no idea. She once threw Dimitri out for being rude to a customer. Physically threw him out. He's twice her size and she grabbed him by the ear and marched him to the door."

Shane laughed, the tension breaking. "I like her already."

"She likes you too. She's been saying for months that we need someone young, someone who understands modern business. Someone who can bring this place into the twenty-first century." Ilya's expression softened. "I think she'll be relieved I finally listened."

"What about the back room?" Shane asked, needing to know the boundaries clearly.

Ilya's face became more serious. "The back room is different. That's where the other business happens. Meetings, money, things you don't need to know about. But when you're working, you won't be involved with that. You'll be front of house—managing staff, dealing with customers, making this place run smoothly."

"Good." Shane nodded. "I can handle knowing it exists. I just don't want to be part of it."

"That's fair. That's more than fair." Ilya squeezed his hand.

"So we have a deal?" Shane asked. "I help make this place actually successful, and you keep the violence away from the customers?"

"Deal."

They shook hands formally, but then Ilya pulled Shane closer across the table and kissed him instead—soft and claiming and full of something that felt like pride.

A sharp voice called out from the kitchen in Russian—Vera's voice, scolding and amused at once.

They broke apart, both laughing. Shane didn't need to speak Russian to understand the gist: *Not in the dining room!*

"She's going to keep us in line, isn't she?" Shane said.

"Absolutely." Ilya was still smiling, his thumb brushing Shane's cheek. "Welcome to Samovar Soiree, Shane Hollander. When do you want to start?"

"Monday?"

Ilya closed his eyes briefly, then opened them and met Shane's eager gaze. "Fine. Monday."

Vera returned with a plate of pelmeni—the same ones Shane had loved last week—and set them down with a knowing smile. She said something in Russian to Ilya, her tone teasing.

Ilya responded in Russian, sounding resigned.

Vera switched to English, addressing Shane directly. "Good. We need young blood. Someone who understands Instagram." She winked at him before heading back to the kitchen.

Shane looked around the restaurant with new eyes. Now it wasn't just a beautiful place he'd visited once—it was his project. His purpose. Something to do besides wait and worry and count the hours until Ilya texted. He could see it already: updated menus, better lighting, a proper social media strategy, maybe some events to draw in younger crowds.

Ilya was watching him, a mixture of pride and fear in his expression.

"I'm going to make this place amazing," Shane said, popping a pelmeni into his mouth.

"I know." Ilya reached across the table and took Shane's hand, threading their fingers together. "Just... be careful. Please."

"I will." Shane squeezed his hand. "I promise."

Outside, the January afternoon was fading into evening. Inside Samovar Soiree, warm light glowed against the gathering dark. Shane sat with Ilya, eating pelmeni and drinking tea, and felt something settle in his chest.

Purpose. Direction. A place to belong.

He was going to make this restaurant the best front in all of Brooklyn.

Chapter 17: Shooting Range

Dimitri picked Shane up on Friday afternoon in a black SUV that smelled like leather and gun oil.

"Where are we going?" Shane asked, climbing into the passenger seat. He'd gotten a text an hour ago: *Be ready at 2. Dress warm.* No explanation.

"Shooting range." Dimitri pulled into traffic without checking his mirrors. Somehow no one honked.

Shane's stomach did a small flip. "Oh."

"You will be working for us. You should know how to protect yourself." Dimitri's voice was matter-of-fact, like he was discussing the weather. "Ilya does not like this idea. But Ilya is not always practical."

"Does he know we're doing this?"

"Yes. He is..." Dimitri made a gesture with one massive hand, something between resignation and frustration. "Conflicted. But he did not say no."

They drove in silence for a while, heading toward an industrial area in Queens that Shane didn't recognize. The buildings got more spread out, more run-down. Finally, Dimitri pulled into what looked like an abandoned warehouse complex.

"This doesn't look like a shooting range," Shane said carefully.

"It is not public range." Dimitri parked and killed the engine. "We own it. More private. No questions."

Right. Of course the Russian mob had their own private shooting range.

Inside, the warehouse had been converted into something surprisingly professional. Proper shooting lanes with targets at various distances, soundproofing on the walls, a small office area with a gun safe. It was cold—the heating was minimal—but well-maintained.

"First, safety." Dimitri pulled out a handgun from the safe, keeping it pointed down and away. "Gun is always loaded. Even when it is not loaded, it is loaded. You understand?"

"Always treat it like it's loaded," Shane repeated.

"Da." Dimitri showed him the weapon—a Glock 19, he said, standard, reliable. "Finger off trigger until you are ready to shoot. Never point at anything you do not want to destroy. Know your target and what is behind it."

He went through the basics methodically: how to hold it, how to stand, how to aim. His hands were enormous, making the gun look almost small, but his movements were precise and

careful.

"Your turn." He handed Shane the unloaded weapon.

It was heavier than Shane expected. The weight of it felt significant in his hands, like holding something that demanded respect. He mimicked Dimitri's stance, feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent.

"Good. You have balance already. Hockey helps." Dimitri adjusted Shane's grip slightly. "Both hands. Support hand pushes forward, shooting hand pulls back. Creates tension, keeps steady."

They practiced the stance and grip for a while before Dimitri loaded a magazine with five rounds.

"We start close. Seven yards. Aim for center mass—the chest. Biggest target." He stepped back. "When you are ready."

Shane lined up the shot, his heart hammering. The target was a simple paper silhouette, but his hands were sweating inside his gloves despite the cold.

"Breathe," Dimitri said quietly. "Exhale slowly. Squeeze trigger, do not pull."

Shane squeezed.

The gun kicked harder than he expected, the sound enormous even through the ear protection. His shot went wide, hitting the target's shoulder area.

"Not bad for first time." Dimitri sounded almost approving. "Again. Remember to anticipate recoil."

The second shot was better. Third better still. By the fifth round, Shane had three shots in the center mass area.

"You have good hand-eye coordination," Dimitri observed, taking the gun back to reload. "This is not surprise. But shooting is different from hockey. In hockey, you have time to think. With gun..." He shook his head. "Everything happens fast. And you cannot miss."

They practiced for another hour. Dimitri was patient but demanding, correcting Shane's stance, his grip, his breathing. Between rounds, he talked.

"I have been with Ilya since he was sixteen," Dimitri said, watching Shane reload under his supervision. "I watched him break from his father. Watched him build something here, something different. Better." He paused. "I have also watched people get hurt. People who were not ready for this life."

Shane's hands stilled on the magazine. "I'm not trying to get in over my head."

"No one ever tries." Dimitri's voice was gentle, which somehow made it worse. "But this world, it pulls you down. Like riptide. You think you are swimming parallel to shore, but

current takes you out to sea."

"So why teach me to shoot?"

"Because you are already in the water." Dimitri met his eyes. "I see how Ilya looks at you. I see how you look at him. This is not casual thing. You are not walking away." He gestured to the gun. "So if you stay, you should know how to survive."

Shane thought about the warehouse, about Alexei's men, about the casual way Ilya's world operated on the edge of violence. "Has anyone ever... come after Ilya? Here, I mean. In New York."

"Yes." Dimitri's face was grim. "Three times in two years. Once was his father's men. Once was rival organization. Once was..." He shook his head. "Does not matter. What matters is that Ilya has enemies. And now you are person he cares about. This makes you target."

The weight of that settled over Shane like a heavy coat. "I don't want to kill anyone."

"Good. You should not want this." Dimitri took the gun, checked it, handed it back. "But you should know how, if you must. If it is your life or theirs." He pointed to the target. "Again. This time, faster. Do not think so much."

Shane raised the gun and fired. The shot hit center mass.

"Better." Dimitri almost smiled. "Again."

By the time they finished, Shane's hands were sore and his ears were ringing despite the protection. He'd gone through nearly a hundred rounds, and while he wasn't going to win any competitions, he could hit a target at seven yards with reasonable consistency.

Dimitri cleaned and stored the weapons with the same methodical care he'd shown throughout. "You will practice more. Once a week, we come here. By summer, you will be decent shot."

"Does Ilya know how to shoot?" Shane asked, pulling off his ear protection.

"Ilya is excellent shot." Dimitri's voice held a note of pride. "His father made sure of this. But Ilya does not like guns. He uses them when he must, but he does not like them."

They walked back to the SUV in the fading afternoon light. Shane's arms ached, and he smelled like gunpowder.

"Thank you," Shane said as they pulled onto the street. "For teaching me. For... caring, I guess."

Dimitri grunted, which Shane was learning meant he was uncomfortable with emotion. "You make Ilya happy. I have not seen him happy in long time. This is worth something." He glanced over. "But happiness is not armor. So you learn to shoot."

"I'll practice. I promise."

"Good." Dimitri nodded. "And Shane? Do not tell Ilya you are good at this. Let him think you are terrible. He will sleep better."

Shane laughed despite himself. "I'm not that good."

"You will be." Dimitri's voice was certain. "You have steady hands and good focus. This is most important thing." He was quiet for a moment. "I have trained many men. Some are natural, some are not. You are natural. This is good thing and bad thing."

"Why bad?"

"Because it means when time comes, you will not hesitate." Dimitri's eyes were on the road, but his voice was heavy. "And once you cross that line, you cannot go back."

Shane looked out the window at the city passing by, thinking about targets and center mass and the weight of a gun in his hands. Thinking about Ilya, about the restaurant, about the life he was building in the spaces between legal and illegal.

"I hope it never comes to that," he said quietly.

"*Da.*" Dimitri's agreement was soft. "I hope this too."

They drove back to Manhattan in silence, and Shane tried not to think about how natural the gun had felt in his hands by the end, how his body had learned the rhythm of aim and fire and breathe. Tried not to think about what that meant.

When Dimitri dropped him off at his apartment, he gripped Shane's shoulder briefly. "You are good boy, Shane Hollander. Try to stay that way."

Then he was gone, the SUV disappearing into traffic, and Shane was left standing on the sidewalk with sore hands and the smell of gunpowder in his clothes and the knowledge that he'd crossed another line he couldn't uncross.

He went upstairs, showered, and texted Ilya: *Dimitri took me shooting. I didn't die. Want to get dinner?*

The response came quickly: *Thank god. Yes. I'll pick you up at 7.*

Shane looked at his hands—steady, capable, the same hands that scored goals and made coffee and now knew how to hold a gun.

He was in the water, just like Dimitri said. The current was pulling him out to sea.

But he wasn't drowning yet.

Shane woke up Monday morning to find Ilya already awake, propped on one elbow, watching him with that intense focus that still made Shane's stomach flip.

"Good morning," Shane mumbled, reaching up to touch Ilya's jaw where the bruising had faded to yellow-green, matching his own.

Ilya caught his hand, pressed a kiss to his palm. "You are nervous."

"Is it that obvious?"

"You have been awake for thirty seconds and already you are thinking too much." Ilya's thumb traced over Shane's knuckles, still slightly tender from Friday's shooting practice. "It is just restaurant work, *solnyshko*. You will be fine."

But when Shane got up to shower, Ilya followed him into the walk-in closet afterward, watching critically as Shane reached for his usual jeans and a sweater.

"No," Ilya said.

Shane paused. "No?"

"You are working at *my* establishment. You will dress appropriately." Ilya pulled out a pair of dark jeans—nicer than Shane's usual ones, probably expensive—and a crisp button-down shirt in deep blue. "These."

"Ilya, I'm just hosting—"

"You are representing Samovar Soiree. You are representing *me*." Ilya's voice was firm, but his hands were gentle as he helped Shane into the shirt, fingers deft on the buttons. "You will look professional."

Shane stood still, letting Ilya fuss over him. It should have felt ridiculous—he was twenty-one years old, he could dress himself—but there was something almost tender in the way Ilya adjusted his collar, smoothed the fabric over his shoulders.

"There," Ilya said, stepping back to assess. Then he frowned, reached out to fix the collar again. "Better."

"You know I'm going to spill something on this within an hour, right?"

"Then you will be beautiful and messy." Ilya's mouth curved slightly. "Come. I drive you."

They stopped for coffee on the way—Ilya's driver knew a place that opened early—and Shane watched the city wake up through the tinted windows of the town car. His hands were wrapped around a paper cup, still a little sore from gripping the Glock, and he could feel Ilya's gaze on him.

"You do not have to do this," Ilya said quietly. "If you want different job—"

"I want this one." Shane met his eyes. "I want to help."

Something shifted in Ilya's expression—possessive and pleased and worried all at once. "You are too good, Shane Hollander."

"You keep saying that like it's a bad thing."

"In my world, is a dangerous thing."

They pulled up to Samovar Soiree at ten-thirty, half an hour before Vera had told Shane to arrive. The restaurant looked different in daylight—less atmospheric, more practical. The windows let in weak January sun that showed every smudge on the brass fixtures, every scuff on the dark wood floors.

Shane reached for the door handle, but Ilya caught his wrist.

"Shane."

He turned back, and Ilya pulled him close, one hand cupping the back of his neck. The kiss was slow, thorough, possessive—a claiming and a promise and a warning all at once.

When Ilya finally pulled back, his thumb traced Shane's jaw. "You call me if there is any problem. Any problem at all."

"It's a restaurant, not a war zone."

"With my people, sometimes is same thing." But Ilya's mouth quirked. "Go. Vera will be impressed you are early."

Shane climbed out of the car, adjusting the shirt Ilya had chosen, and watched the town car pull away. His hands were still a little sore from Friday's shooting practice, but the bruises on his face had faded to yellow-green shadows that he could almost cover with the right lighting.

The front door was unlocked. Inside, he could hear the clatter of kitchen prep, smell onions and butter and something baking.

"Hello?" he called.

Vera emerged from the kitchen, wearing black slacks and a crisp white blouse, her steel-gray hair pulled back in its usual severe bun. She looked him up and down with those sharp dark eyes that missed nothing.

"You are early," she said.

"I wanted to make a good impression."

Her mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but close. "Come. I show you everything."

She led him through the dining room, pointing out the host stand, the reservation book, the seating chart. "Monday through Thursday, we are not so busy. Weekends, we are full. You greet guests, you check reservations, you seat them. You make sure they feel welcome but not crowded. You watch the flow—who has been waiting too long, which tables are turning over, which servers are overwhelmed."

Shane nodded, taking mental notes. It wasn't so different from managing the coffee shop rush, just more formal.

"You smile, you are polite, but you are also gatekeeper," Vera continued. "If someone is rude, if someone is drunk, if someone makes trouble—you tell me or Anton. We handle it. You do not handle it yourself. Understood?"

"Understood."

She showed him the small office behind the host stand where they kept the reservation system—an actual physical book, not a computer program. "Ilya does not trust technology for this," she said dryly. "Too easy to hack."

That made sense, given what the restaurant really was.

They walked through the dining room again, and Shane picked up one of the menus from a table setting. Heavy cardstock, elegant Cyrillic script, no prices listed. He flipped through it, recognizing maybe one word in ten.

"Vera," he said carefully. "Can I ask—do you get many non-Russian customers?"

"Some. More now than before. Word spreads about good food."

"And do they... know what they're ordering?"

Vera's expression didn't change, but something flickered in her eyes. "Servers explain."

Shane nodded slowly, turning the menu over in his hands. "What if I made an English version? With photos of the dishes? It might help people order, and it would be easier for the servers too."

Vera was quiet for a long moment, studying him. Then she said, "You think you can do this?"

"I can try. I'd need to photograph the dishes—maybe during prep, or when they come out of the kitchen? And I'd need help with translations to make sure I get them right. But yeah, I think I can do it."

"Why?"

The question caught him off guard. "Why?"

"Why do you want to do this? You are host. This is not your job."

Shane thought about it. "Because if someone comes here and has a good experience, they'll come back. They'll tell their friends. And right now, if you don't speak Russian, it's kind of intimidating. The food is amazing—I know that from last week. More people should get to experience it."

Vera's expression softened almost imperceptibly. "You sound like businessman."

"I sound like someone who worked at a convenience store for two years. But I do have family that own a restaurant."

This time she did smile, just a little. "Okay. You can do this. But first, you learn your actual job. Come."

She introduced him to the rest of the staff as they arrived. Anton, the floor manager, was in his forties with thinning hair and a precisely trimmed beard. He shook Shane's hand with professional courtesy, but his eyes were assessing, territorial. This was his domain, and Shane was an unknown variable.

"You have restaurant experience?" Anton asked.

"Coffee shop. Two years."

"Hmm." Non-committal. "Is different here. More formal. You watch, you learn."

Boris, one of the older waiters, was friendlier. He had a broad, weathered face and hands that moved expressively when he talked. "Ah, you are Ilya's boy! Welcome, welcome. You need anything, you ask Boris."

Katya, a server who looked maybe twenty-two, studied Shane with open curiosity. "You're the hockey player," she said. "Artem won't shut up about you."

Shane felt his face heat. "Artem talks about me?"

"He says you are very kind. That you gave him tracksuit." She said it matter-of-factly, but there was a question in her eyes: *Why would you be kind to someone like Artem?*

"He was nice to me," Shane said simply. "When he didn't have to be."

Katya nodded slowly, like he'd passed some kind of test.

The restaurant opened at eleven-thirty for lunch service. Vera stationed Shane at the host stand with the reservation book and a seating chart and told him to watch how she greeted the first few customers.

She was perfect—warm but not effusive, professional but not cold. She remembered names, asked after families, made people feel seen without being intrusive. Shane watched the way she managed the room, the subtle signals she gave to servers, the way she could tell at a glance which tables needed attention.

By the third group of customers, she stepped back and let Shane take over.

"Good afternoon," he said to an older couple. "Welcome to Samovar Soiree. Do you have a reservation?"

They did. He checked the book, found their names, grabbed two menus. "Right this way."

He seated them at a quiet corner table, made sure they were comfortable, and signaled to Boris that they were ready for water. When he returned to the host stand, Vera gave him an approving nod.

The lunch rush was steady but manageable. Shane fell into the rhythm of it—greeting, seating, watching the flow of the room. He noticed things: Table six had been waiting fifteen minutes for their check. Table three's water glasses were empty. Anton was hovering near the kitchen, which meant he was stressed about something.

During a lull, Shane grabbed his phone and started photographing the menus. He made a list of dishes he'd need photos of, organized by category. Appetizers, soups, main courses, desserts. He'd need to figure out the best way to get good photos without disrupting service.

"You are serious about this menu project," Vera said, appearing beside him.

"If I'm going to do it, I want to do it right."

She studied him for a moment. "You are not what I expected."

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. College boy playing at gangster, maybe. Someone who would get bored after one week." She paused. "But you actually care about the work."

"Is that surprising?"

"Little bit, yes." She gestured at the dining room. "This is front. Is not real business. Most people, they understand this. They do minimum, they collect money, they don't ask questions."

Shane met her eyes. "I'm not most people."

"*Da*." Vera's smile was small but genuine. "I am beginning to see this."

Around two o'clock, when the lunch crowd had thinned, Ilya appeared. He was dressed for business—dark suit, no tie, his hair slightly disheveled like he'd been running his hands through it. He caught Shane's eye and gave him a small smile, but he didn't approach the host stand. Instead, he headed straight for the back room, the one with the heavy lock.

Dimitri was with him, and two men Shane didn't recognize. Business, then. Real business.

Shane turned his attention back to the dining room, to the elderly woman who needed help reading the menu, to the young couple celebrating an anniversary. This was his world right now—the front of house, the legitimate face of Samovar Soiree.

The back room was something else entirely.

By three-thirty, the lunch service was over. The kitchen staff was cleaning up, and the servers were rolling silverware for dinner service. Vera told Shane to take a break, but instead he asked if he could go into the kitchen to photograph some dishes.

"Chef Yuri is very particular about his kitchen," Vera warned.

"I'll be respectful."

She led him back, and Shane met Chef Yuri—a compact man in his fifties with burn scars on his forearms and the intense focus of someone who took his craft seriously. Vera explained Shane's project in rapid Russian, and Yuri's expression shifted from suspicion to interest.

"You want to show my food?" he asked in heavily accented English.

"Yes. It's beautiful. People should see it."

Yuri considered this. Then he nodded. "Okay. But you do not get in way during service. You come during prep, I make dishes for photos. Good lighting, good angles. We do this right."

"Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"You are Ilya's boy," Yuri said, like that explained everything. "Ilya has good taste. In food, in men." He shrugged. "We help you."

Shane spent the next hour working with Yuri, photographing dishes the chef plated specifically for the camera. Beef stroganoff with a perfect swirl of sour cream. Pelmeni arranged artfully on a white plate. Blini with caviar and crème fraîche. The medovik cake, its layers visible in cross-section, honey-gold and beautiful.

Shane took dozens of photos, adjusting angles and lighting, making sure each dish looked as good in the picture as it did in person. Yuri watched with approval, occasionally repositioning a garnish or adjusting a sauce drizzle.

"You have good eye," Yuri said finally. "You understand presentation."

"I just want to do the food justice."

When Shane emerged from the kitchen, Ilya was waiting at the host stand, leaning against it with his arms crossed. The business meeting was apparently over.

"How was your first day?" Ilya asked.

"Good. Really good, actually." Shane showed him the photos on his phone. "Vera said I could make an English menu with pictures. Yuri helped me photograph the dishes."

Ilya scrolled through the images, his expression softening. "These are excellent."

"I'm going to work on translations tonight. Get everything organized. Maybe have a draft by the end of the week?"

"You don't have to do this, you know. You're just hosting."

Shane shook his head. "I want to. It's—I don't know. It feels good to build something. To make something better."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, something complicated in his eyes. Then he reached out and tucked a strand of Shane's hair behind his ear, a gesture so casual and intimate that Shane's breath caught.

"You're going to be dangerous," Ilya said quietly.

"What?"

"Nothing. Come on. I'll drive you home."

As they left, Shane glanced back at the dining room—the tables being reset for dinner service, Vera directing the staff with quiet authority, Anton checking the reservation book. It felt right, being here. Like he was good at this.

He didn't let himself think about what that meant, about how easily he was sliding into this world. About how the current was pulling him deeper and he wasn't even trying to swim back to shore anymore.

The drive back to Ilya's apartment was quiet, comfortable in a way that felt new. Shane watched the city slide past the window, streetlights beginning to flicker on as dusk settled over Brooklyn. His feet ached—he'd been standing for hours—but it was a good ache. The kind that came from actually doing something.

Shane glanced over at Ilya's profile, illuminated by passing streetlights. "You're staying tonight?"

Ilya's mouth curved into a smile, small but genuine. "As long as you'll let me."

Something warm unfurled in Shane's chest. He turned back to the window, fighting his own smile, feeling the weight of Ilya's words settle between them like a promise.

Ilya's apartment was in a newer building in Brighton Beach, all clean lines and security cameras. The kind of place that screamed money but not ostentation. Shane had been here enough times now that he knew which floorboard creaked near the kitchen, where Ilya kept the good vodka, how the shower took exactly thirty seconds to get hot.

Inside, Shane dropped his bag by the door and collapsed onto the leather couch with a groan. "My feet are killing me."

Ilya's expression shifted immediately, concern replacing the softness from the car. "Still hurting from the escape?"

"Yeah." Shane pulled off his shoes carefully, wincing. He'd worked plenty of shifts at the coffee shop standing all day—that wasn't the problem. It was the cuts and bruises on the soles of his feet, still healing from running barefoot through Brooklyn in January. "I thought they'd be better by now."

"Let me see." Ilya disappeared into the bathroom before Shane could protest. He returned with a small plastic basin and a towel, filling the basin with warm water in the kitchen sink.

"You don't have to—"

"I know." Ilya set the basin on the floor in front of the couch, then knelt beside it. "Put your feet in."

The water was perfectly warm, and Shane couldn't suppress a sigh of relief as he lowered his feet into it. Ilya added something that made the water cloud slightly—Epsom salts, maybe.

After a few minutes, Ilya lifted Shane's right foot out of the water, setting it carefully on the towel across his knee. His fingers were gentle as he examined the sole, tracing the edges of the healing cuts. Some of the deeper ones were still pink and tender, a few spots inflamed from the day's work.

"This one's angry," Ilya murmured, thumb ghosting over a particularly red patch near Shane's heel.

"It's fine. Doesn't hurt that bad."

Ilya's eyes flicked up to meet his, skeptical. Then he returned his attention to Shane's foot, checking each cut, each bruise. "They're healing well, though. Better than I expected."

"Told you I'm tough."

"Mm." Ilya switched to the other foot, repeating the careful examination. His touch was clinical but tender, and Shane found himself relaxing into the couch, watching Ilya's bent head, the concentration on his face. "You should have said something. I would have gotten you a stool at the restaurant."

"I'm fine. Really." Shane wiggled his toes, and Ilya's mouth twitched. "See? Good as new."

"Not quite." But Ilya lowered Shane's foot back into the water, letting both soak a bit longer. "Better?"

"Yeah." Shane's voice came out softer than he intended. "Thank you."

"You do." Ilya stood, drying his hands. "Are you hungry?"

Shane thought about it. He'd eaten lunch at the restaurant—Yuri had insisted he try the pelmeni before they photographed it—but that had been hours ago. "Yeah, actually. Starving."

"I'll order something."

"What, no home-cooked meal?" Shane was joking, but then he realized he'd never actually seen Ilya cook. Not once. "Wait. Do you cook?"

Ilya paused, his hand on the fridge door. Then he closed it and turned around, something almost sheepish in his expression. "No."

"No?"

"I can't cook. At all."

Shane sat up, genuinely surprised. "Really? Nothing?"

"I can make tea. Toast, if I'm careful." Ilya leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "My mother tried to teach me when I was young, but I was... not interested. And then later, there was always someone else to do it."

"Huh." Shane processed this. It was strange, learning these small things about Ilya. The man ran a criminal organization, commanded absolute loyalty from dangerous men, but couldn't make himself dinner. "So you just order out? Every night?"

"Usually. Or I eat at the restaurant."

"Wait." Shane's brain caught up. "Is that why you bought Samovar Soiree? So you'd have somewhere to eat?"

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Not entirely. But it was a factor."

"Oh my god." Shane started laughing. "You bought a whole restaurant because you can't cook."

"I bought a restaurant because it's an excellent front for moving money," Ilya corrected, but there was warmth in his voice. "The food was a bonus."

"A bonus."

"A significant bonus." Ilya moved to sit beside Shane on the couch, close enough that their thighs touched. "When I first came to New York, after I left Moscow, I ate nothing but American food for months. Pizza, burgers, Chinese takeout. It was fine, but it wasn't..." He paused, searching for words. "It wasn't home."

Shane watched him, seeing something vulnerable in Ilya's profile. "And then you found Samovar Soiree."

"And then I found Samovar Soiree." Ilya's voice softened. "The first time I ate there, Yuri made shchi—cabbage soup, the way my grandmother used to make it. With the sour cream stirred in, black bread on the side. I sat in that dining room and it was like being eight years old again, at her table in Moscow."

Shane's chest tightened. He'd never heard Ilya talk about his childhood, about anything before New York. "So you bought it."

"So I bought it." Ilya turned to look at him finally. "The owner was retiring, his children had no interest in running it. It was perfect. A legitimate business that needed cash flow, serving the kind of food I grew up with. I could eat there whenever I wanted and no one would question it."

"And launder money through it."

"And launder money through it," Ilya agreed. "But mostly, I wanted to preserve it. To make sure it stayed exactly as it was."

Shane understood then, why Ilya had been so particular about the restaurant, why he cared that it was done right. It wasn't just a front. It was a piece of home, carefully maintained in a foreign city.

"That's why you were worried," Shane said slowly. "About me working there. About me changing things."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "I don't want it to become something else. Something American and sanitized."

"I'm not going to change it." Shane shifted closer, their shoulders pressing together. "I'm just going to make it so more people can experience it. The English menu, the photos—that's not changing the food. That's just... opening the door a little wider."

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then he reached out and took Shane's hand, threading their fingers together. His palm was warm, callused. "You're good at this. At seeing what something could be."

"I just want to help."

"I know." Ilya lifted Shane's hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles, so gentle it made Shane's breath catch. "That's what worries me."

"Why?"

"Because you make things better, *solnyshko*. You walk into a room and people want to please you, want to be part of what you're building. It's a gift." Ilya's thumb traced circles on the back of Shane's hand. "But in my world, that kind of gift gets noticed. And once you're noticed..."

He didn't finish, but he didn't have to. Shane understood. Once you were valuable to the *bratva*, you belonged to them.

"Hey." Shane squeezed Ilya's hand. "I'm not going anywhere."

Ilya looked at him, something raw and unguarded in his eyes. Then he leaned in and kissed Shane, slow and deep, tasting like the mint tea he'd had at the restaurant. Shane melted into it, his free hand coming up to cup Ilya's jaw, feeling the slight scratch of stubble.

When they pulled apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's. "I should feed you."

"Probably."

"There's a Thai place that delivers. Or Italian."

Shane smiled. "Anything but Russian food. I've been staring at it all day."

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh.

He pulled out his phone to order, and Shane settled back against the couch, watching him.

Shane's gaze drifted around the living room—the sleek lines, the expensive minimalism. Then he frowned. "Hey, what happened to your chairs?"

Ilya's thumb stilled on his phone screen. He didn't look up. "What?"

"The chairs. The ones that were at your dining table." Shane gestured toward the table near the kitchen, which now sat empty except for a single chair. "There were four of them before. Now there's just one."

For a long moment, Ilya said nothing. His jaw worked, and Shane could see the muscle ticking there. Finally, he set his phone down on the coffee table with careful precision.

"I broke them."

Shane blinked. "You... broke them?"

"Yes." Ilya's voice was flat, controlled. "While you were gone."

The words hung in the air between them. Shane's chest tightened as understanding dawned. "Ilya—"

"I couldn't—" Ilya cut himself off, his hands curling into fists on his thighs. "Ten days. Ten days of not knowing if Alexei would—" He stopped again, his breathing harsh. "I broke the chairs. I put my fist through the wall in my bedroom. Dimitri had to replace the drywall."

Shane stared at him, something hot and painful lodging in his throat. He'd known, intellectually, that Ilya had been worried. But this—this was different. This was Ilya losing control, Ilya breaking things with his bare hands because Shane had been taken from him.

"I didn't know," Shane said quietly.

"I didn't want you to know." Ilya finally looked at him, and his eyes were dark, haunted. "You were dealing with enough. You didn't need to know that I was—" He made a sharp gesture, frustrated. "That I couldn't keep it together."

Shane reached out, taking one of Ilya's clenched fists in both his hands. He worked his fingers between Ilya's, coaxing them open, smoothing his thumbs over Ilya's knuckles. There were faint scars there, barely visible, probably from the chairs.

"You kept it together where it mattered," Shane said. "You got me back."

"Not fast enough."

"Fast enough." Shane squeezed his hand. "I'm here. I'm okay."

Ilya's throat worked. He turned his hand over, lacing their fingers together, and pulled Shane closer until Shane was practically in his lap. Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck, his breath warm against Shane's skin.

"I thought I was going to lose you," Ilya said, so quiet Shane almost didn't hear it. "I thought he would—that you would—"

"I'm here," Shane repeated, wrapping his arms around Ilya's shoulders. "I'm right here."

They stayed like that for a long time, Ilya holding onto him like Shane might disappear if he let go. Shane ran his fingers through Ilya's hair, feeling the tension slowly drain from his body.

When Ilya finally pulled back, his eyes were red-rimmed but dry. He cupped Shane's face in both hands, studying him like he was memorizing every detail.

"I'll buy new chairs," Ilya said, his voice rough.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh, leaning into Ilya's touch. "Yeah. You should probably do that."

"So Pad Thai?"

"Sounds perfect." This—sitting in Ilya's apartment, deciding on dinner, the casual intimacy of it—felt more dangerous than anything else he'd done. More dangerous than the shooting range, than working at the restaurant, than any of it.

Because this felt like building a life. And Shane was terrified of how much he wanted it.

Chapter 18: Goodbyes and Exhaustion

Chapter Notes

Anyone else besides andromourir and I who are shipping Dimitri/Artem? 🧐🧐

The text came Tuesday morning while Shane was getting ready for his second day at Samovar Soiree.

We fly out today. 4pm. Want to come say goodbye? - A

Shane stared at his phone, surprised. He hadn't expected Artem to reach out, hadn't really thought about what it would be like when Alexei and his men went back to Moscow. Part of him—the rational part—knew he should be relieved. They were leaving. Going back to Russia. He wouldn't have to see the man who'd kidnapped him anymore.

But another part of him, the part that remembered Artem's kindness during those ten days, the part that had watched Alexei's face when he talked about his daughter, felt something else entirely.

"What is it?" Ilya asked from the doorway, buttoning his cuffs.

Shane held up his phone. "Artem. They're flying out this afternoon. He asked if I want to come to the airport."

Ilya went very still. "Do you?"

"I don't know." Shane set the phone down, reaching for his shoes. "Is that weird? That I'm even considering it?"

"You're too good," Ilya said quietly. "That's not weird. That's just who you are."

Shane looked up at him. "Would you come with me? If I went?"

Something shifted in Ilya's expression—surprise, maybe, or something softer. "If you want me there."

"I do."

Ilya pulled out his own phone. "I'll text Dimitri. He'll want to come too."

JFK was chaos as always—crowds of travelers dragging luggage, announcements echoing overhead, the smell of coffee and jet fuel. Dimitri drove them in the SUV, parking in the

short-term lot, and they made their way to the international terminal.

Shane spotted them near the check-in counters: Alexei with his duffel bag, the medical tape still across his nose, bruises fading to yellow-green on his face. Artem in his black Adidas tracksuit, the one Shane had given him. Pavel standing slightly behind them, hands in his pockets.

Artem saw Shane first. His face lit up, and he raised a hand in greeting.

Alexei turned, and his expression went from neutral to genuinely surprised. He said something in Russian to Pavel, who smiled.

"You came," Artem said as they approached, his English careful but warm. "I wasn't sure you would."

"Yeah, well." Shane shrugged, suddenly feeling awkward. "Figured I should say goodbye properly."

Alexei stepped forward, and Shane tensed instinctively. But Alexei just extended his hand, his expression serious.

"Thank you," he said in accented English. "For coming. You didn't have to."

Shane took his hand, shaking it firmly. "You're welcome."

Alexei glanced at Ilya, something passing between them—an understanding, maybe, or the beginning of one. The bruises on Ilya's face matched his brother's, a mirror of their fight in the warehouse.

"I'll send you pictures," Alexei said to Ilya, switching to English for Shane's benefit. "Of Katerina. And Anya says she wants to visit New York. Bring Katerina to see her uncle."

Ilya's expression softened almost imperceptibly. "She's welcome anytime."

"Maybe this summer," Alexei continued. "When it's warm. Katerina would like the parks here."

"You should give Anya a ring," Ilya said, his tone casual but pointed. "Make it official."

Alexei laughed, a genuine sound that transformed his face. "Not yet, *brat*. We're taking our time."

"You have a three-year-old."

"And? We're happy as we are." Alexei's smile turned sly. "Besides, you're one to talk. When are you going to—"

"We're not talking about me," Ilya cut him off, but there was no real heat in it.

Shane felt his face warm, and he looked away, catching Artem's amused expression.

"I'm glad you kept the tracksuit," Shane said, nodding at Artem's outfit.

Artem grinned, running a hand down the front of the jacket. "It's very comfortable. And it reminds me that not everyone in this business is..." He paused, searching for the word. "Hard. Cold. You were kind even when you didn't have to be."

"You were kind to me first," Shane said quietly. "You didn't have to be either."

Artem's expression turned serious. He stepped forward and pulled Shane into a brief, tight hug. "You're a good person, Shane Hollander. Don't let this world change that."

When he pulled back, Pavel stepped forward too, offering his hand. "Take care of yourself," he said in heavily accented English. "And keep playing hockey. You're good."

Shane shook his hand, smiling. "Thanks. I will."

Dimitri had been standing slightly apart, watching the exchange with his usual stoic expression. But when Alexei approached him, he inclined his head respectfully.

"Keep him safe," Alexei said in Russian, nodding toward Ilya.

"Always," Dimitri replied in the same language.

Alexei turned back to Ilya, and for a moment, the two brothers just looked at each other. Then Alexei stepped forward and pulled Ilya into a rough embrace, clapping him on the back.

"Don't be a stranger," Alexei said. "Call more. Katerina should know her uncle's voice."

"I will," Ilya said, his voice tight.

When they separated, Alexei's eyes were bright. He cleared his throat, picking up his duffel bag. "We should go. Security will take forever."

Artem and Pavel gathered their things, and the three of them started toward the security checkpoint. But Artem turned back one last time, raising his hand in a wave.

Shane waved back, watching until they disappeared into the crowd.

"That was good of you," Dimitri said quietly. "Coming here."

Shane shrugged, suddenly feeling the weight of the past two weeks—the kidnapping, the fear, the strange new reality he'd found himself in. "He's your brother," he said to Ilya. "And they weren't... they weren't all bad to me."

Ilya reached for Shane's hand, lacing their fingers together. "You're too good for this world, *solnyshko*."

"Maybe," Shane said. "But I'm in it now, aren't I?"

Ilya's grip tightened. "Yes. You are."

They stood there for a moment longer, watching the crowds flow around them, before Dimitri cleared his throat.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you to work. Vera will have my head if you're late on your second day."

Shane laughed, and the tension broke. They headed back toward the parking lot, Ilya's hand still warm in his.

By the time they reached Samovar Soiree, the dinner rush was already building. Cars lined the street, and through the windows Shane could see nearly every table occupied. His stomach did a small flip—not nervousness exactly, but anticipation.

"I'll see you later," he said, leaning over to kiss Ilya quickly before climbing out of the car.

Ilya caught his wrist. "We're coming in."

Shane blinked. "You're eating here?"

"Dimitri wants some pelmeni." Ilya's expression was neutral, but something in his eyes suggested he had no intention of being anywhere else tonight.

"Okay." Shane smiled despite himself. "I'll get you a table."

Inside, the restaurant hummed with life. The warm lighting caught on polished brass fixtures, and the scent of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the air. Vera stood near the host stand, directing a server toward the kitchen with brisk efficiency.

She glanced up as Shane entered, Ilya and Dimitri behind him. Her eyebrow lifted fractionally, but she said nothing.

"Good evening," Shane said, slipping behind the host stand and grabbing two menus—the old ones, still in Cyrillic. "Table for two?"

"By the window," Ilya said.

Shane led them to a corner table with a clear view of the dining room—and the host stand. Of course. He set down the menus and pulled out Dimitri's chair with a slight flourish that made the big man snort.

"I'll have Katya come take your order," Shane said.

Ilya's hand brushed his hip as he turned to leave, a brief touch that sent warmth through him. "Don't work too hard, *solnyshko*."

Shane rolled his eyes and headed back to the host stand, where a family of four had just walked in.

The next hour passed in a blur of greeting customers, managing the waitlist, and coordinating with Vera and Anton to keep the flow smooth. Shane found his rhythm quickly—the same awareness he had on the ice, tracking players and anticipating plays, translated easily to tracking tables and reading the room.

He noticed when an elderly couple near the window finished their appetizers and signaled Katya to check on their mains. He saw when a businessman at the bar looked ready to leave and made sure Boris brought the check promptly. He greeted a group of six with a warm smile and managed to seat them at a large table that had just cleared, even though they didn't have a reservation.

"You're a natural," Vera murmured as she passed him, carrying a stack of dessert menus.

Shane grinned, feeling the truth of it in his bones.

From his corner table, Ilya watched.

Shane could feel his gaze like a physical thing—steady, intent, possessive. Every time Shane laughed at something a customer said, every time he leaned in to hear an older woman's question, every time he touched someone's arm to guide them to their table, he was aware of Ilya tracking the movement.

It should have been unnerving. Instead, it made something warm and tight coil in Shane's chest.

Dimitri said something, and Ilya's attention shifted back to his plate, but not for long. Within moments, his eyes found Shane again.

Around eight-thirty, the rush finally eased. The waitlist cleared, and most of the tables were settled into their meals. Shane exhaled, rolling his shoulders, and glanced toward Ilya's table.

Dimitri was working through a plate of pelmeni with single-minded focus, but Ilya had pushed his plate aside, nursing a glass of vodka and watching Shane with that same unreadable expression.

Shane grabbed his phone from beneath the host stand and crossed the dining room.

"How's the food?" he asked, sliding into the empty chair beside Ilya.

"Excellent," Dimitri said without looking up. "You should try these."

"I will." Shane hesitated, then unlocked his phone and pulled up the photos he and Vera had taken earlier. "Actually, I wanted to ask you something."

Ilya's attention sharpened. "What do you need?"

"Vera and I finished the English menu," Shane said, angling the phone so Ilya could see. "We took photos of all the dishes, added descriptions, organized it by category. But we need to get copies printed—like, professional ones. Do you know any good printing companies?"

Ilya took the phone, scrolling through the images with a critical eye. Shane had spent hours on the layout, making sure the photos were well-lit and appetizing, the descriptions clear but not overly wordy. He'd even added small notes about which dishes were spicy or contained common allergens.

"This is good," Ilya said finally. "Very good."

Shane felt a flush of pride. "Thanks. I just need to figure out where to get them printed. Vera said there's a place in Manhattan that does restaurant menus, but—"

Ilya was already pulling out his own phone. "How many do you need?"

"Uh... fifty? Maybe? That should be enough to start."

Ilya tapped the screen, then held the phone to his ear. The call connected almost immediately.

"Sergei," Ilya said in Russian. "I need menus printed. Fifty copies, full color, laminated, professional quality." He paused, listening. "Tonight. I'll send the files now." Another pause. "Good."

He ended the call and handed Shane's phone back. "Send me the photos. He'll have them ready in two hours."

Shane blinked. "Two hours? Ilya, that's—"

"He owes me a favor." Ilya's tone suggested the matter was settled. "Send the files."

Shane hesitated, then did as he was told, forwarding the images to Ilya's number. Within seconds, Ilya had sent them onward.

"How much do I—"

"No."

"Ilya—"

"No," Ilya repeated, his voice firm. "You're improving my business. I pay for it."

Dimitri made a sound that might have been agreement, scooping up another dumpling.

Shane wanted to argue, but the logic was there. "Okay," Shane said quietly. "Thank you."

Ilya's hand found his under the table, squeezing once. "You're welcome."

They finished their meal slowly, Dimitri ordering a second plate and Ilya nursing his vodka while Shane returned to the host stand. By nine-thirty, the dining room had thinned out, and Vera sent Shane a pointed look.

"Go," she said. "We can handle the rest of the evening."

Shane didn't argue. He grabbed his coat and met Ilya and Dimitri near the door.

The printing shop was in Brooklyn, tucked between a laundromat and a convenience store. The sign was in Russian, and the windows were covered with bars. Ilya led them inside without knocking.

A man in his fifties looked up from behind the counter, his expression shifting from neutral to wary to carefully respectful in the span of a heartbeat.

"Mr. Rozanov," he said. "They're ready."

He disappeared into the back and returned with a large box, setting it on the counter. Ilya opened it, pulling out one of the menus.

Shane's breath caught.

The menu was beautiful. The photos were crisp and vibrant, the text clean and easy to read. The lamination gave it a professional weight, and the layout looked like something from an upscale restaurant in Manhattan.

"This is perfect," Shane said, running his fingers over the smooth surface. "This is exactly what I wanted."

Sergei looked pleased despite himself. "Good quality paper. Double-sided lamination. Should last a long time."

Ilya handed him an envelope—cash, Shane assumed—and picked up the box. "Thank you."

"Anytime, Mr. Rozanov."

They drove back to Samovar Soiree in comfortable silence, the box of menus resting on Shane's lap. He kept pulling one out to look at it, unable to stop smiling.

When they arrived, the restaurant was nearly empty. Vera was counting the register, and Anton was overseeing the last few tables. Shane carried the box inside, setting it on the host stand with a sense of ceremony.

Vera looked up, her sharp eyes taking in the box, the menus, Shane's expression.

"Let me see," she said.

Shane handed her one, watching as she examined it with the same critical eye she used on everything. She turned it over, read through the descriptions, tested the lamination.

Finally, she nodded. "This will do."

Coming from Vera, it was high praise.

"We can start using them tomorrow," Shane said. "I'll keep the old ones as backups, but—"

"No," Vera interrupted. "We use these now. The old ones go in storage."

Shane grinned. "Okay."

Ilya was leaning against the doorway, watching them with an expression Shane couldn't quite read. When their eyes met, something warm and possessive flickered across Ilya's face.

"Good work, *solnyshko*," he said quietly.

Shane's chest tightened. "Thanks for making it happen."

Ilya shrugged, as if printing fifty professional menus in two hours was nothing. And maybe, in his world, it wasn't.

Shane was starting to understand just how much power Ilya had—and how easily that power could be turned toward making Shane's ideas a reality.

The days blurred together in a rhythm Shane hadn't expected to find comfortable.

Monday, Wednesday, Friday: morning classes, afternoon study sessions at the library, hockey practice at four. Tuesday, Thursday: sleep in until nine, work the lunch shift at Samovar Soiree, evening classes. Weekends: double shifts at the restaurant, the dining room packed with families and couples and the occasional group of men who disappeared into the back room with Ilya.

Shane learned to read the flow of the restaurant like he read the ice during a game—when to seat parties near the window for ambiance, when to hold tables for regulars, when to intercept Anton before he could get territorial about Shane's suggestions. The staff warmed to him. Katya started asking his opinion on difficult customers. Boris taught him a few phrases in Russian. Even Chef Yuri stopped glaring when Shane poked his head into the kitchen.

The new menus were a hit. Customers stopped squinting at Cyrillic, started ordering adventurously. Revenue ticked up. Vera never said so directly, but Shane caught her watching him with something that might have been approval.

At home—and it was becoming home, plural, both his own penthouse and Ilya's sleek penthouse—Shane fell into a different kind of rhythm.

Some nights Ilya stayed at Shane's place, the two of them tangled together on Shane's bed, Ilya's arm heavy across Shane's chest. Other nights Shane stayed at Ilya's, waking up to the smell of coffee Ilya had ordered from the café downstairs because he still couldn't figure out the French press.

"You're a crime boss," Shane said one morning, laughing as Ilya scowled at the contraption. "You run an entire organization. How can you not make coffee?"

"I have people for this," Ilya muttered.

"You have *me* for this." Shane took over, pressing the plunger down slowly. "But you're going to learn."

Ilya pulled him close instead, kissing the side of his neck. "I have better things to do with my hands."

A month in, the exhaustion caught up with him.

It was a Friday night, the restaurant packed, and Shane had been running on five hours of sleep and adrenaline. His shift at the restaurant had run late the night before, then he'd gone to Ilya's, and then he'd had an early morning class. The details blurred together. He was seating tables on autopilot, his notepad a mess of scribbled abbreviations that made sense at the time but looked like chicken scratch now. Table seven wanted the pelmeni. Or was it table nine? He'd written it down, he was *sure* he'd written it down, but when he glanced at his notes his vision swam slightly and he couldn't quite make out his own handwriting.

He grabbed what he thought was the right order from the kitchen—stroganoff, blini, a side of sour cream—and delivered it to table nine with his best smile. The couple looked at the plate, then at each other, then back at the plate. Shane's stomach dropped. Wrong table. He'd definitely brought them the wrong order. He was already reaching for the plate, already opening his mouth to apologize, when the woman's face lit up.

"Oh my God," she said to her husband. "This is exactly what I was just saying I wanted to try. How did you know?"

Shane froze. "I—"

"This is perfect," the man agreed, already cutting into the stroganoff. "We were going to ask for recommendations anyway."

Relief flooded through Shane so intensely his knees nearly buckled. He laughed—a slightly delirious sound—and excused himself, heading back to the kitchen where he found the actual order for table nine sitting under the heat lamp, getting cold. He delivered it to the correct table with an apology, and they were gracious about it. By the end of the night, both tables had left generous tips and asked for him by name.

But Vera had seen. She'd watched the whole thing unfold from her post by the host stand, and when Shane clocked out, she pulled him aside. "You're making mistakes," she said flatly. "Good ones, apparently, but mistakes. You need to sleep."

Hayden noticed, of course.

"You're never around anymore," he said after practice one Wednesday, watching Shane check his phone. "We used to grab food after. Now you're always rushing off."

"I have work," Shane said, shouldering his bag. "I told you."

"Yeah, the restaurant." Hayden's tone was careful. "And Ilya."

Shane looked up. "What about him?"

"Nothing. Just—" Hayden shrugged. "You're different. I don't know if that's good or bad yet."

Before Shane could answer, a sleek black car pulled up to the curb. Dimitri in the driver's seat, Ilya in the back.

Hayden's jaw tightened.

Ilya stepped out, impeccably dressed as always, and Shane felt the shift in the air—his two worlds colliding on the sidewalk outside the rink.

"Hey," Shane said, walking over. "You didn't have to pick me up."

"I wanted to." Ilya's gaze shifted past Shane. "Hayden."

"Ilya." Hayden's response was clipped, polite in the way that meant the opposite.

Shane stood between them, feeling the weight of their mutual assessment. They'd done this dance before—brief exchanges when Ilya picked him up, careful acknowledgments that never quite became conversations.

"Good practice?" Ilya asked, though his eyes hadn't left Hayden's.

"Fine," Hayden said. Then, to Shane: "You coming to the team thing Friday?"

Shane had forgotten. "I—I have to check my schedule at work."

Something flickered across Hayden's face. Disappointment, maybe. Or confirmation of whatever he'd been thinking.

Ilya's hand found the small of Shane's back, possessive but gentle. The gesture wasn't lost on Hayden.

Finally, Hayden nodded once. "Take care of him."

"Always," Ilya said.

It wasn't much. But it was something.

It happened twice more over the next few weeks—Ilya appearing after practice, Hayden watching with guarded eyes as Shane climbed into the car. They exchanged nods, brief words, the kind of careful civility that felt like a ceasefire.

Shane caught Hayden studying him during drills, during games, in the locker room. He knew what Hayden was looking for: signs that Shane was in over his head, that Ilya was dangerous, that Shane needed saving.

Shane didn't know how to explain that he'd already drowned. That he was breathing underwater now, and it felt like living.

A month into his new schedule, Shane was seating a family of four near the window when he saw Hayden walk through the door.

He froze, menu in hand, before recovering with a smile. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

Hayden looked around, taking in the warm lighting, the elegant tables, the hum of conversation in Russian and English. "You kept talking about this place. Figured I'd check it out."

"Oh." Shane's mind raced. "Okay. Yeah. Let me—let me get you a table."

He led Hayden to a two-top near the back, away from the main flow of traffic. Handed him one of the new menus.

"This is nice," Hayden said, and he sounded genuine. "Really nice."

"Thanks." Shane shifted his weight. "I, uh—I can't really sit with you. I'm working."

"I know. That's fine." Hayden opened the menu. "I'll just eat and head out."

Shane nodded, relieved, and turned to go—

And nearly collided with Ilya.

"*Solnyshko*," Ilya said quietly, steadying him with a hand on his elbow. His gaze moved past Shane to the table. "Your friend is here."

"Yeah," Shane said. "Hayden wanted to try the food."

Ilya studied him for a moment, then looked back at Hayden. Something shifted in his expression—a decision being made.

"I'll join him," Ilya said.

Shane blinked. "What?"

"You're working. He's alone. It would be rude to let him eat by himself." Ilya's tone was perfectly reasonable, but Shane knew him well enough to catch the undercurrent: *I want to know who your friend is. I want him to know who I am.*

"Ilya—"

"It's fine, *solnyshko*." Ilya pressed a brief kiss to Shane's temple, possessive and deliberate, before walking over to Hayden's table.

Shane watched, heart in his throat, as Ilya pulled out the chair across from Hayden and sat down.

From the host stand, Shane couldn't hear their conversation. But he could see it.

Hayden's posture was stiff, defensive. Ilya sat with perfect composure, hands folded on the table. They spoke in low tones. Vera brought them water, then menus, her sharp eyes missing nothing.

Shane tried to focus on his job—greeting customers, managing the seating chart, coordinating with Anton—but his attention kept drifting back to that table.

Hayden said something, his expression hard. Ilya responded, calm and controlled. Hayden leaned forward. Ilya didn't move.

Shane's stomach twisted.

When he finally had a break in the flow of arrivals, he walked over. "Everything okay?"

Both of them looked up. Hayden's jaw was tight. Ilya's expression was unreadable.

"Fine," Hayden said.

"We're just getting to know each other," Ilya added smoothly.

Shane didn't believe either of them. "Okay. Well. Can I get you anything?"

"Recommendations?" Hayden asked, and there was something pointed in his tone.

Shane rattled off a few dishes—pelmeni, beef stroganoff, the honey cake for dessert. Hayden ordered. Ilya ordered the same, even though Shane knew he'd already eaten lunch here earlier.

When Shane left, he caught Vera's eye. She raised an eyebrow. He shook his head slightly: *I don't know either.*

The dinner rush picked up. Shane moved through the dining room, seating parties, answering questions, checking on tables. Every time he glanced toward the back, Hayden and Ilya were still talking.

Hayden's posture had loosened slightly. Ilya was leaning back in his chair now, more relaxed. They weren't smiling, but they weren't glaring either.

Shane didn't know if that was progress or a ceasefire.

When their food arrived, Shane made another pass by the table. "How is everything?"

"Good," Hayden said, and he sounded surprised. "Really good."

Ilya's gaze was on Shane, warm and possessive. "You should eat something, *solnyshko*. You've been on your feet all evening."

"I'm fine," Shane said automatically.

Hayden frowned. "When's the last time you ate?"

"Lunch."

"Shane—"

"I'm *fine*," Shane repeated, more firmly. "I'll eat after my shift."

He left before either of them could argue, but he felt their eyes on him as he walked away.

By the time the dinner rush slowed, Shane's feet were aching and his head was starting to pound. He'd been up since six for an early class, had hockey practice at four, and had been at the restaurant since five-thirty. It was nearly nine now.

He checked on Hayden and Ilya's table one more time. Their plates were empty. They were nursing drinks—whiskey for Ilya, beer for Hayden—and the conversation had shifted into something that looked almost... normal.

Hayden saw him first. "Hey. Come sit for a minute."

"I can't, I'm still—"

"Sit," Ilya said, and it wasn't a request.

Shane hesitated, then pulled over a chair from an empty table nearby. He sat, grateful to be off his feet.

"Your friend was just telling me about your game last week," Ilya said. "The one I missed."

Shane looked at Hayden, surprised.

Hayden shrugged. "Hat trick. You were on fire."

"Team effort," Shane said.

"Bullshit," Hayden said. "You carried us." He took a sip of his beer, then looked at Ilya. "He's good. Really good. Scouts have been watching."

Ilya's expression sharpened with interest. "Scouts?"

"It's nothing," Shane said quickly. "Just—some guys from a few teams. It doesn't mean anything."

"It means you're talented," Ilya said. His hand found Shane's under the table, squeezed briefly. "You should be proud."

Shane's chest tightened. "Yeah. Maybe."

Hayden was watching them, his expression unreadable. Then he said, "He works too hard."

Shane's head snapped up. "Hayden—"

"You do," Hayden said. "Classes, practice, this place. When do you sleep?"

"I sleep fine."

"You fell asleep in the locker room last week."

Shane flushed. "I was tired. It's not a big deal."

Ilya's hand tightened on his. "You didn't tell me that."

"Because it's *not a big deal*," Shane insisted. He pulled his hand away, stood up. "I need to get back to work."

He left before either of them could stop him.

The rest of the shift passed in a blur. Shane focused on the work, on the rhythm of the dining room, on anything except the weight of Hayden's concern and Ilya's quiet intensity.

When he finally locked the front door at ten-thirty, Vera was waiting by the host stand.

"Your friend and your boyfriend had an interesting conversation," she said.

Shane slumped against the stand. "Yeah?"

"Your friend is protective. He asked if you were safe here." Vera's sharp eyes studied him. "I told him you were the best thing to happen to this restaurant in years."

Shane managed a tired smile. "Thanks, Vera."

"But he's not wrong," she continued. "You're working too much. You look exhausted."

"I'm fine."

"You keep saying that." Vera handed him his coat. "Go home. Sleep. Come back Monday."

Shane nodded, too tired to argue.

Outside, Ilya was waiting by the car. Hayden was gone.

"He left twenty minutes ago," Ilya said, opening the door for Shane. "We talked."

Shane climbed in, sinking into the leather seat. "About what?"

"You." Ilya slid in beside him, nodded to Dimitri. The car pulled away from the curb. "He wanted to know if I was good for you."

Shane's stomach twisted. "And what did you say?"

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. "I told him I was trying to be."

Shane looked at him—at the sharp lines of his face, the careful control, the hint of vulnerability underneath.

"He doesn't trust me," Ilya continued. "But he loves you. So we came to an understanding."

"What kind of understanding?"

"That we both want you safe. Happy." Ilya's hand found Shane's again, laced their fingers together. "Even if we disagree on what that looks like."

Shane leaned his head against Ilya's shoulder, exhaustion pulling at him. "He thinks I'm working too hard."

"You are."

"You sound like him."

"Maybe he's right." Ilya's voice was soft. "Maybe I'm asking too much of you."

Shane closed his eyes. "You're not asking. I'm choosing."

"Are you?" Ilya's thumb traced circles on the back of Shane's hand. "Or are you just trying to keep up?"

Shane didn't answer. He didn't know how to.

The car hummed through the streets of Brooklyn, carrying them home—wherever that was now. Shane felt the pull of sleep, the ache in his feet, the weight of everything he was trying to balance.

They didn't talk much on the drive back to Shane's apartment. The city blurred past the windows—streetlights and storefronts and the occasional late-night pedestrian. Ilya kept one hand on Shane's thigh, a steady presence, while Shane stared out at nothing in particular.

By the time they got upstairs, Shane was moving on autopilot. He changed into sweats and a t-shirt, brushed his teeth, and collapsed onto the bed. Ilya emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, already stripped down to sleep pants, and slid in beside him.

For a while, they just lay there in the dark. Shane could hear the ambient noise of the city—distant sirens, the hum of traffic, the building settling around them. Ilya's arm was draped across his chest, his breathing already evening out toward sleep.

"What's your favorite?" Ilya asked quietly, his voice rough with exhaustion.

Shane turned his head slightly. "What?"

"Of all the things you do. Hockey, school, the restaurant." Ilya's fingers traced lazy patterns on Shane's ribs. "Which one do you love most?"

Shane didn't have to think about it. The answer came immediately, without hesitation. "Hockey."

"And then?"

"The restaurant."

"School?"

"Yeah." Shane exhaled. "School's last."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then: "Then organize your life like that. Hockey first. Restaurant second. School third."

Shane turned to look at him, even though he could barely make out Ilya's features in the darkness. "That's not how reality works."

"Why not?"

"Because—" Shane shifted onto his side, facing Ilya fully. "Because I have to keep my grades up. NCAA eligibility requirements. If I don't maintain a certain GPA, I lose my spot on the team. And I can't afford NYU without the scholarship."

Ilya's hand stilled on his chest. "How much do you need?"

"It's not about money, Ilya. It's about—" Shane paused, searching for the words. "It's about the structure. The rules. I can't just decide to prioritize hockey and hope the school part works itself out."

"Why not?"

"Because that's not how it works." Shane's voice was tired, frustrated. "The real world doesn't let you just pick what you want and ignore the rest."

"It could." Ilya's voice was calm, practical. "If you wanted it to."

Shane felt something twist in his chest. "You make it sound simple."

"It is simple." Ilya's hand resumed its gentle movement. "You want hockey. You want the restaurant. You don't want school. So stop doing school."

"I can't—"

"You can." Ilya shifted closer, his voice low and certain. "I can pay for your education. You wouldn't need the scholarship."

Shane's breath caught. He'd known, intellectually, that Ilya had money—serious money. But hearing it said so plainly, so casually, made it real in a way it hadn't been before. "Ilya—"

"I'm serious." Ilya's hand moved to cup Shane's face, his thumb brushing across Shane's cheekbone. "You love the restaurant. You're brilliant at it. You love hockey. You're brilliant at that too. Why waste your energy on something you don't love?"

"Because I do love it," Shane said quietly. "I love the restaurant. I really do. But I also—" He stopped, trying to articulate something he barely understood himself. "I love hockey more. And I love the restaurant. But I can't just abandon school. It's not just about the money. It's about... I don't know. Having something that's just mine. Something that's not connected to your world."

The words hung in the darkness between them.

Ilya didn't respond immediately. His hand dropped away from Shane's face, and for a moment, Shane thought he'd hurt him. But then Ilya pulled him closer, tucking Shane's head under his chin, holding him against his chest.

"I understand," Ilya said finally, his voice barely above a whisper. "But you're struggling, *solnyshko*. I can see it."

Shane closed his eyes, breathing in the familiar scent of Ilya's cologne and soap. "I know."

"And I don't know how to fix it if you won't let me."

Shane didn't have an answer for that either. He just lay there, pressed against Ilya's chest, listening to his heartbeat, feeling the weight of impossible choices pressing down on him from all sides.

Neither of them spoke again. Eventually, Ilya's breathing deepened, his grip on Shane loosening as sleep claimed him. But Shane stayed awake a while longer, staring into the darkness, caught between the life he wanted and the life he was actually living. The next morning, Shane woke to the smell of coffee and butter. Ilya was already up, moving quietly through Shane's kitchen in a pair of gray sweatpants and one of Shane's hoodies—the NYU one that was slightly too small in the shoulders. He looked domestic in a way that still caught Shane off guard sometimes.

Shane padded out in bare feet, his Hello Kitty watch catching the pale winter light from the window. Ilya glanced up from the stove where he was making eggs, and something in his expression softened.

"Good morning," Ilya said, and it was such a simple thing, but the tenderness in it made Shane's chest tight.

"Morning." Shane settled at the kitchen table, watching Ilya move with practiced efficiency. He'd been staying over enough now that he knew where everything was. Shane's apartment had started to feel like theirs.

Ilya set a plate in front of him—scrambled eggs, toast with butter, fresh fruit. He poured coffee into Shane's favorite mug, the one with the chipped handle. Then he sat across from him with his own plate, and they ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes.

Shane took a breath. He'd been thinking about this all night, turning it over in his mind while Ilya slept beside him.

"Okay," Shane said quietly. "You can pay for my schooling."

Ilya looked up from his eggs, his dark eyes steady on Shane's face.

"Next semester, I'm going to take fewer classes," Shane continued. "This semester has too many lab-heavy courses. They're eating up all my time. If I drop down to twelve credits

instead of sixteen, I can manage the restaurant better. I can actually sleep." He paused. "And I can keep something that's just mine."

Ilya set down his fork. He didn't say anything, just got up and walked to the living room where his jacket hung by the door. Shane heard the rustle of fabric, the sound of a pen being uncapped. When Ilya came back, he was holding his checkbook.

He sat back down at the table and wrote without hesitation, his handwriting precise and controlled. The scratch of the pen was the only sound in the apartment. When he finished, he tore the check free and slid it across the table to Shane.

One hundred thousand dollars.

Shane stared at it. The number seemed to swim in front of his eyes. One hundred thousand dollars. That was—that was nearly two years of tuition. That was breathing room. That was freedom.

"Ilya—"

"It's done," Ilya said simply, picking his fork back up as if he hadn't just casually written a check for more money than Shane had ever held in his life. "You can focus on school. On hockey. On the restaurant. You don't need to kill yourself."

Shane's hands were shaking slightly as he picked up the check. The paper felt impossibly thin for something so significant.

"Even Hayden can see you're struggling," Ilya continued, his tone matter-of-fact. "Your best friend notices. That tells me it's serious."

Shane thought about Hayden's worried face at the restaurant, the way he'd been watching Shane with increasing concern. The way Ilya had picked him up after practice and Hayden had seen the exhaustion written all over Shane's features.

"This is a lot," Shane said quietly.

"It's practical," Ilya replied. He reached across the table and covered Shane's hand with his own, the check trapped between their palms. "You're valuable to me, *solnyshko*. Not just at the restaurant. In every way. So I'm investing in you. In your future. In keeping you from burning out."

Shane looked at the check again. One hundred thousand dollars. It was so easy for Ilya. Just a pen, a signature, and a problem was solved. That was the difference between their worlds, wasn't it? The casual way Ilya could move money around, could make things happen.

But it was also love. Shane understood that now. This wasn't control or manipulation. This was Ilya seeing Shane drowning and throwing him a rope.

"Thank you," Shane whispered.

Ilya squeezed his hand. "You're welcome. Now eat your eggs before they get cold."

Shane looked down at his plate, then back at Ilya, and something in his chest loosened just slightly. He folded the check carefully and set it on the table beside his plate, like he needed to make sure it was real.

"Next semester," he said. "Twelve credits. I can do this."

"You can," Ilya agreed. He released Shane's hand and returned to his breakfast, but his eyes kept drifting back to Shane's face, watching him with that particular intensity that made Shane feel seen in a way that was both terrifying and comforting.

Shane picked up his fork and ate, the check sitting there on the table like a promise—or maybe a line being crossed. He wasn't entirely sure which.

Chapter 19: Normal

Chapter Notes

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

The check cleared on a Tuesday.

Shane sat in his car in the bank parking lot, staring at his phone screen, refreshing his account balance three times just to make sure it was real. The numbers didn't change. Sixty-seven thousand dollars. After taxes, after Ilya had insisted on handling everything properly—still more money than Shane had ever imagined having at once.

He'd already paid off his debts months ago with the money from the scarf and gloves. This was different. This was *savings*. Real, actual savings.

Shane opened a new account that afternoon. A savings account, separate from his checking, where he transferred forty thousand dollars and just... left it there. Untouched. For the future. For after graduation. For whatever came next.

Then he paid his tuition for the entire next academic year. Both semesters, upfront. No payment plans, no deferred charges, no waiting for financial aid to process. Just paid. Done.

He set aside five thousand for graduation expenses—cap and gown, whatever fees came with finishing, maybe a decent suit for job interviews if he ever needed one. Another five thousand went into a general emergency fund.

By the time he was done, he still had over twelve thousand dollars in his checking account. For living expenses. For groceries and gas and the occasional dinner out with Hayden.

Shane had sat in that parking lot for twenty minutes, just staring at the numbers on his phone screen.

That night, he'd slept for nine hours straight. Not because the anxiety was finally gone—that had happened months ago, when the debts cleared. But because for the first time in his life, he could think about the future as something other than survival. He could think about what he wanted, not just what he needed.

By the end of February, Shane had essentially taken over the front of house at Samovar Soiree.

It hadn't been a formal promotion—nothing with Ilya ever was—but the shift had been gradual and undeniable. Ilya still handled the major decisions, the vendor relationships, the financial oversight, but the day-to-day operations? That was Shane now.

He managed the reservations, trained new servers, handled difficult customers with a diplomatic charm that surprised even himself. He'd reorganized the seating chart to maximize

turnover without making guests feel rushed. He'd implemented a new system for tracking dietary restrictions and preferences that had already prevented two potential disasters.

The restaurant was thriving. They were booked solid most nights, with a waiting list that stretched weeks for weekend reservations. The reviews were glowing. The staff respected him. Even the head chef who'd initially been skeptical of the young American, now sought Shane's input on menu changes.

"You have good instincts," Ilya had told him one night after closing, his hand warm on the back of Shane's neck. "Better than you know."

Shane had been put on salary in mid-February. Eighty thousand a year, plus bonuses tied to the restaurant's performance. It was more than he'd ever imagined making, especially while still in school.

"This is too much," Shane had protested when Ilya told him.

"It's what you're worth," Ilya had replied, in that tone that brooked no argument. "You're not just serving tables anymore, *solnyshko*. You're managing my business. You should be compensated accordingly."

The money meant Shane could finally stop living in survival mode. He could buy groceries without checking his account balance first. He could get his car's check engine light looked at. He could replace his worn-out work shoes without feeling guilty.

But more than that—he could focus on school without the constant background noise of financial panic.

The gifts started appearing again in early March.

Shane noticed the laptop first—a sleek MacBook Pro sitting on the kitchen counter one morning, still in its box.

"Ilya—"

"Your old one was dying," Ilya said, not looking up from his coffee and newspaper. "You complained about it freezing during your online lectures."

"I mentioned that once—"

"So I listened." Ilya turned a page. "There's also software for graphic design classes already installed. The IT person at the Apple store was very helpful."

Shane had stared at the box, something warm and complicated twisting in his chest. "Thank you."

"Is practical," Ilya said, but there was the faintest smile at the corner of his mouth.

The hockey gear came next. Shane had been using borrowed equipment for the pickup games he'd started playing again on Sunday mornings—his old gear from high school had been sold years ago when he needed rent money.

He came home one afternoon to find new equipment laid out on the bed. A top-of-the-line stick, proper pads, a helmet that actually fit. Even a gear bag with his initials embossed on the side.

"Ilya, this is—this is too much—"

"You were using equipment that was a safety hazard," Ilya said. He was sitting in the armchair by the window, watching Shane's reaction with quiet satisfaction. "And you play better than you think. You should have gear that reflects that."

The clothes were more subtle. A good winter coat that appeared in the closet. Jeans that actually fit properly. A few nice button-downs for the restaurant. Quality basics that replaced the threadbare t-shirts and worn-out hoodies Shane had been cycling through for years.

"I've seen you play," Ilya added. "You were happy. I liked watching you happy."

Nothing flashy. Nothing that screamed *sugar daddy* or *kept boy*. Just... nice things. Things that made Shane's life easier, more comfortable.

"You don't have to keep doing this," Shane said one night, curled against Ilya's side on the couch.

"I know I don't have to." Ilya's fingers traced idle patterns on Shane's shoulder. "I want to. Let me want to."

Shane had learned to stop arguing. Learned to just say thank you, to accept that this was how Ilya showed care—through action, through providing, through making sure Shane had what he needed before Shane even realized he needed it.

It should have felt transactional. Somehow, it didn't.

Their domestic life had settled into something that felt startlingly normal.

Ilya kept clothes at Shane's apartment now—a drawer in the dresser, space in the closet. His toothbrush lived in Shane's bathroom. His briefcase was usually by the door. His reading glasses had a permanent spot on the nightstand.

Most nights, Ilya stayed over. They'd fall into an easy rhythm: they'd order takeout or Shane would bring food home from the restaurant, and Shane would work on assignments at the kitchen table while Ilya handled whatever business needed handling—phone calls in Russian, paperwork spread across the coffee table.

After dinner, they'd migrate to the couch. Sometimes they'd watch something on TV, Ilya's commentary on American crime dramas both hilarious and oddly insightful. Sometimes Shane would study while Ilya read, the comfortable silence broken only by the turning of pages or Shane's occasional frustrated sigh over a difficult concept.

"You're thinking too loud," Ilya murmured one night. They were in bed, Shane's head on Ilya's chest, listening to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Just... thinking about how different things are now."

"Different good or different bad?"

"Different good." Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya's collarbone. "Really good."

Ilya's hand tightened in Shane's hair, just slightly. "Good."

There were moments when Shane would catch himself—moments when he'd remember that this wasn't supposed to be his life, that he'd stumbled into this by accident, that the man holding him had a past Shane couldn't fully comprehend and connections Shane didn't want to examine too closely.

But those moments were becoming rarer. Easier to push aside.

Because this—this warmth, this stability, this feeling of being *wanted*—this was real. Whatever else was true, this was real.

Alexei called every few days.

Shane had gotten used to the pattern: Ilya's phone would ring at odd hours, he'd glance at the screen, then step into the bedroom or out onto the balcony for privacy. The conversations were always in Russian, always brief, always left Ilya looking thoughtful afterward.

"Everything okay?" Shane would ask.

"Fine," Ilya would say. "Alexei sends his regards."

In early March, Ilya had put the call on speaker—a first. They'd been having dinner—takeout from the Thai place down the street—and when the phone rang, Ilya had simply answered it without leaving the room.

The conversation was still in Russian, but Shane caught a few words he'd learned: *khoroшо* (good), *sem'ya* (family), *biznes* (business).

When Ilya hung up, he'd looked almost relaxed.

"Alexei says things are stable in Moscow," Ilya translated, unprompted. "Anya and Katerina are well."

"That's good," Shane said.

"Is good." Ilya had pulled Shane close, kissing his temple. "It means the old agreements are holding. No disruptions."

Shane didn't ask what that meant. He'd learned that some questions were better left unasked.

But Ilya seemed lighter after those calls, less tense. And if Ilya was relaxed, Shane could be too.

School was actually manageable now.

Without the constant stress of financial crisis as well as the less hours, Shane found he could actually focus on his classes. He participated in class discussions. He even enjoyed some of it.

His graphic design professor, this semester's elective, had pulled him aside after class one day. "Whatever you're doing differently these few weeks, keep doing it. Your work has improved dramatically."

Shane had just smiled and nodded.

The new laptop helped too. His old one had been so slow that working on design projects had been an exercise in frustration. Now he could actually execute the ideas in his head without the software crashing every ten minutes.

He'd even started thinking about the future—actually planning beyond just surviving the next month. Maybe he'd graduate on time after all. Maybe he'd actually be able to use his degree for something. Maybe he'd—

Well. He didn't know what came after graduation. But for the first time in years, he felt like there might actually *be* an after.

Hayden noticed the change immediately.

"Okay, what the hell happened to you?" they demanded one afternoon in the library, where they'd met up to work on a group project.

"What do you mean?"

"You look... I don't know. Less like you're about to collapse at any moment?" Hayden studied him with narrowed eyes. "You're sleeping. You're not surviving on energy drinks and spite. You actually seem *happy*."

Shane felt his cheeks warm. "Things are just... better. I got a promotion at the restaurant. Better pay, better hours."

"Uh-huh." Hayden's expression was skeptical. "And the new laptop? The new clothes? The fact that you're not having a breakdown every time someone mentions tuition?"

"I'm managing my money better."

"Shane." Hayden leaned forward. "I'm happy for you. Really. But if you need anything—if anything goes wrong—you know I'm here, right?"

"Thank you," Shane said, and meant it. "Things are finally working out."

Hayden had looked at him for a long moment, then nodded slowly. "Okay. But if you need anything—if anything goes wrong—you know I'm here, right?"

And he did know. But nothing was going to go wrong. Everything was finally, *finally* stable.

By mid-March, Shane had settled into a routine that felt almost surreal in its normalcy.

Monday through Wednesday: classes in the morning, studying in the afternoon, work at the restaurant in the evening. He'd close up with Ilya, they'd go back to the apartment, they'd fall into bed together.

Thursday: his long day, classes until 4 PM, then a shift at the restaurant. Ilya would save him dinner, would wait up even when Shane didn't get home until after midnight.

Friday and Saturday: the restaurant's busiest nights. Shane would work the floor, managing the controlled chaos with increasing confidence. Ilya would watch him sometimes, Shane could feel it—that steady gaze tracking him across the dining room, something like pride in those pale eyes.

Sunday: his day off. Pickup hockey in the morning, homework in the afternoon, quiet evenings with Ilya. Sometimes they'd go out—a movie, a walk along the waterfront, dinner at one of the other Russian restaurants where Ilya seemed to know everyone. Sometimes they'd stay in, and those nights were Shane's favorite. Just the two of them, no performance, no roles to play.

It was a good life. A stable life.

Shane had stopped waiting for the other shoe to drop.

One night in late March, Shane woke up.

Ilya stirred beside him, one arm reaching out to pull Shane closer even in sleep. Shane went willingly, tucking himself against Ilya's warmth.

"Can't sleep?" Ilya's voice was rough with drowsiness.

"No, I'm good. Just thinking."

"About?"

"About how different everything is now." Shane pressed a kiss to Ilya's shoulder. "How good everything is."

Ilya's arm tightened around him. "You deserve good things, *solnyshko*."

"So do you."

A soft huff of laughter. "Perhaps."

They lay there in the darkness, wrapped around each other, and Shane felt something settle deep in his chest. Something that felt dangerously close to contentment.

He'd spent so long just surviving, just getting through each day, that he'd forgotten what it felt like to actually *live*. To have space to breathe, to plan, to hope.

He had that now. He had Ilya, and the restaurant, and school, and a future that felt possible instead of terrifying.

He'd figured it out. He'd found a way to balance both his worlds—the legitimate one and the one that existed in the shadows of Ilya's life. He could handle both. He could make this work.

Everything was going to be fine.

Shane's phone rang on a Thursday afternoon while he was reviewing his notes for his biochemistry final. Ilya was on the couch beside him, laptop open, responding to emails in rapid-fire Russian.

The caller ID made Shane's stomach do a small flip. *Dad*.

"Hey," Shane answered, sitting up straighter. "What's up?"

"Shane! Hey, bud." His dad's voice was warm, familiar, with that slight Canadian lilt that always made Shane feel like a kid again. "Sorry I haven't called in a while. Your mom and I have been absolutely slammed with the restaurant. You know how it is."

"Yeah, no worries." Shane glanced at Ilya, who'd looked up from his laptop. "How's everything going?"

"Good, good. Busy season, you know. We're thinking about expanding the patio for summer." His dad paused. "Actually, that's kind of why I'm calling. We were hoping you'd come up for the summer. Help out at the restaurant, spend some time with us. It's been too long, Shane."

Shane's chest tightened. "Oh. Uh..."

"I know you've got school, but you'd be done by then, right? And we'd pay you, obviously. Better than whatever you're making down there, I bet." His dad laughed. "Plus your mom misses you. She's been on me for weeks to call."

"I..." Shane looked at Ilya again, who was watching him now with quiet attention. "I can't. I've got hockey."

"Hockey?"

"Yeah, my rec league. We've got games all summer, and I'm... I'm really committed to it. The team's counting on me." The lie tasted bitter, but Shane pushed through. "And I've been working on my game a lot. I don't want to lose momentum."

There was a pause on the other end. "Shane, it's just rec league. Surely you could miss a few games."

"It's not just that. I've got practice, and... and I'm helping coach some of the newer guys." Shane closed his eyes, hating himself a little. "I really can't, Dad. I'm sorry."

Another pause, longer this time. Then his dad sighed. "Alright. If it's that important to you. Your mom's not going to be happy, but... I get it. You've got your own life down there."

"Thanks for understanding."

"Yeah." His dad's voice softened. "We're proud of you, you know. Everything you're doing. School, work, all of it."

Shane's throat felt tight. "Thanks, Dad."

"Love you, bud."

"Love you too."

The call ended, and Shane sat there staring at his phone, feeling like shit.

"You didn't mention me," Ilya said quietly.

Shane looked up. Ilya's expression was neutral, but there was something careful in his eyes.

"I..." Shane set his phone down. "I'm not out to my parents."

Ilya's eyebrows rose slightly. "You're not?"

"No." Shane rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not... they wouldn't care. They're not like that. My mom's got gay friends, my dad doesn't give a shit about that stuff. It's just..." He trailed off, trying to find the words. "I've never really had a boyfriend before. So I never felt like I needed to tell them. It never came up."

"And now?"

"And now how the fuck am I supposed to explain this?" Shane gestured between them. "Hey Mom, hey Dad, I have a boyfriend. He's a Russian mafia boss who's my sugar daddy. Want to come meet him?"

Ilya laughed—a real laugh, warm and surprised. "You don't have to tell them that part, *solnyshko*."

"Which part? The mafia part or the sugar daddy part?"

"Either." Ilya reached over, brushing his thumb along Shane's jaw. "You can just tell them you have a boyfriend. That's all they need to know."

Shane looked at him—at this man who'd somehow become the center of his world, who made him feel safe and wanted and *seen* in a way no one else ever had. Who'd given him stability and security and asked for nothing but Shane's time in return.

"Fuck it," Shane muttered, and hit redial before he could talk himself out of it.

His dad picked up on the second ring. "Shane? Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I just..." Shane took a breath. "I lied. About why I can't come up this summer."

"What?"

"It's not hockey. I mean, I do have hockey, but that's not why." Shane felt Ilya's hand settle on his knee, grounding. "I have a boyfriend. And I want to spend the summer with him. Here."

Silence on the other end. Shane's heart hammered.

Then: "Oh." His dad cleared his throat. "Okay. That's... that's good, Shane. I'm glad you're happy."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Of course." His dad's voice warmed. "How long have you been seeing each other?"

"A few months now."

"That's great, bud. Really." Another pause. "Maybe your mom and I can come up to New York sometime. Meet him."

Shane blinked. "You want to meet him?"

"Well, yeah. He's your boyfriend. We'd love to meet him."

"I..." Shane looked at Ilya, who was clearly trying not to smile. "Yeah. I'd like that."

"Good. We'll figure out a time. Your mom's going to be thrilled." His dad chuckled. "She's been worried you were spending too much time alone down there."

"I'm not alone."

"I can hear that. Alright, I'll let you go. Love you, Shane."

"Love you too, Dad."

Shane ended the call and dropped his phone on the couch.

"You took a big step today." Ilya cupped Shane's face, tilting it up.

Shane leaned into the touch, feeling something loosen in his chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." Ilya kissed him, soft and lingering.

Shane kissed him back, wrapping his arms around Ilya's neck and pulling him closer. When they broke apart, Shane was smiling despite himself.

"My parents are going to meet you and have no idea what to do with you."

"I can be charming."

"You're a six-foot-four Russian guy who looks like you could break someone in half."

"I can be *very* charming."

Shane laughed, and Ilya kissed him again, and for a moment everything felt perfect and possible and *right*.

He'd told his parents. Sort of. It was a start.

The following Sunday, Shane met Hayden at the rink for their usual pickup session. The ice was nearly empty this early—just a handful of guys running drills at the far end, the sound of skates cutting and pucks hitting boards echoing in the cold air.

"There he is!" Hayden called out as Shane stepped onto the ice. "Looking good in the new gear, man. That's some serious equipment."

Shane glanced down at his skates—top of the line Bauers that Ilya had insisted on ordering after seeing Shane's old pair held together with tape. "Yeah, well. Figured it was time for an upgrade."

"Time for an upgrade," Hayden repeated, shaking his head with a grin. "Listen to you. Mr. Financially Stable over here."

They started with easy laps, warming up, falling into the familiar rhythm. Shane had missed this—just skating, no pressure, no performance. The ice under his blades, the cold air in his lungs, Hayden beside him talking shit about their biochem professor.

"So seriously though," Hayden said as they transitioned into passing drills, "you do look better. Less stressed. Happier, even."

Shane caught the puck, sent it back. "I told you. Things are good."

"The restaurant's working out?"

"Yeah. Really well, actually." Shane felt a small surge of pride saying it. "I'm basically running the front of house now. Managing reservations, training new servers, handling the difficult customers."

"Damn." Hayden whistled low. "That's impressive. And you never even worked at your parents' place, right? So you basically taught yourself everything?"

Shane caught the puck, sent it back. "I mean, my boss has been really patient. Teaching me a lot."

"Still though. Most people would be drowning, but you just... figured it out." Hayden shook his head with a grin. "That's actually insane."

Something warm unfurled in Shane's chest. "Thanks."

"Your dad's probably proud too. You're doing great."

Shane thought about his dad, about the phone call he'd made a few days ago. *I have a boyfriend. I want to spend the summer with him.* His dad had been... okay with it. More than okay.

"Yeah," Shane said quietly. "I think he is."

They ran through more drills—one-timers, breakaways, defensive positioning. Shane felt loose, confident, the stress that had been his constant companion for months finally, blessedly absent. Hayden was right. He *was* happier.

"You know what?" Hayden said as they took a water break, both of them breathing hard. "Whatever you're doing, Ilya seems good for you."

Shane felt his face heat.

"Shane. Come on." Hayden's expression was knowing but kind. "You've got that look. That stupid happy look people get when they're falling for someone. It's fine. I'm not gonna interrogate you about it. I'm just saying... it's good to see you like this."

"Thanks," Shane managed.

"Now come on." Hayden pushed off toward center ice. "Let's see if that fancy new equipment actually makes you faster, or if you're still gonna eat my dust."

Shane laughed and chased after him, and for a little while, everything was simple. Just hockey, just friendship, just the ice under his skates and the cold air in his lungs.

Just normal.

Chapter End Notes

Were ramping up into act 2. I considered making this a series but I wanted it all together.

<3

Chapter 20: A Fortress

The biochemistry final sat on Shane's desk, face-down, waiting. Three hours to complete. He'd been the first one in the lecture hall that morning, watching as other students filtered in with their coffee cups and nervous energy, whispering last-minute mnemonics to each other.

Shane didn't need to whisper anything. He knew this material. He'd actually *learned* it this time, not just crammed it into his skull the night before and prayed it would stick long enough to regurgitate onto a Scantron.

"You may begin," Professor Jones announced.

Shane flipped the exam over.

The questions looked... manageable. More than manageable. He recognized the metabolic pathways, could visualize the enzyme mechanisms, understood the thermodynamics. His pencil moved steadily across the page, filling in answers with a confidence that felt almost foreign. No panic. No blank spaces where knowledge should be. Just the quiet satisfaction of knowing he'd put in the work, and the work had paid off.

He finished with forty minutes to spare, used the extra time to check his answers twice, then turned in his exam and walked out into the late April sunshine.

The quad was alive with the particular energy of impending freedom. Students sprawled on the grass, some still studying for finals, others already celebrating. The trees had that fresh, almost luminous green that only happened in spring. Shane stood there for a moment, just breathing it in.

One semester down. Actually, truly down. Not scraped through by the skin of his teeth, not passed by some miracle of generous curve grading. He'd done the work.

The relief was so profound it almost made him dizzy. He was officially on to senior year.

His other finals came and went over the next week. Physical chemistry—challenging but fair. Cell biology—he'd actually enjoyed studying for it, working through problems with Ilya at the library, their heads bent together over diagrams of cellular signaling pathways and membrane transport mechanisms. Statistics—tedious but straightforward.

When grades posted the following Tuesday, Shane checked them on his phone while sitting in his apartment, Ilya beside him on the couch reading something in Russian on his tablet.

Biochemistry II: A-

Physical Chemistry: B+

Cell Biology: A-

Statistics: B+

Shane stared at the screen. His GPA had gone up. Actually gone up. He was going to laugh, or cry, or possibly both.

"What is it?" Ilya asked, glancing over.

"I passed everything," Shane said. The words felt strange in his mouth, too simple for what they meant. "I actually... I did well."

Ilya's face softened into one of those rare, unguarded smiles that still made Shane's chest tight. "Of course you did."

"No, you don't get it." Shane set his phone down, running both hands through his hair. "This is the first semester since I started college where I wasn't drowning. Where I didn't spend every day feeling like I was one bad grade away from losing everything. I actually... I learned things. I retained them. I didn't just survive—I actually did *well*."

Ilya reached over and pulled Shane against him, pressing a kiss to his temple. "I'm proud of you."

Shane closed his eyes and let himself sink into the embrace. A year ago, he'd been barely holding it together, working himself to exhaustion, convinced that if he just pushed hard enough, sacrificed enough, he could force his life into the shape it was supposed to be. He'd been so tired. So lonely. So convinced that this was just what life was—an endless grind of obligation and diminishing returns.

Now he was here, in his apartment that actually felt like home, with a man who looked at him like he was something precious, having just finished a semester where he'd actually thrived instead of merely survived.

The contrast was almost too much to process.

"Thank you," Shane said quietly. "For... everything. For helping me study. For making me take breaks. For just... being here."

Ilya's arms tightened around him. "Always."

They stayed like that for a while, the afternoon light slanting through the windows, warm and golden. Eventually Ilya shifted, reaching for his tablet again, and Shane grabbed his laptop to mindlessly scroll through social media, content just to exist in the same space.

But Ilya didn't go back to reading. Shane could feel him thinking, that particular quality of attention that meant he was working up to saying something.

"What?" Shane asked, glancing over.

Ilya was looking at his tablet, but his expression was thoughtful, almost hesitant. "I was thinking," he said slowly. "About summer."

"Yeah?"

"We should go somewhere." Ilya turned the tablet toward Shane. On the screen was a travel website, images of white-washed buildings against impossibly blue water, narrow streets lined with bougainvillea, sun-drenched beaches. "Greece, maybe. Or Italy. Somewhere warm."

Shane blinked at the screen, then at Ilya. "You want to... go on vacation? Together?"

"Yes." Ilya was watching him carefully, like he was trying to gauge Shane's reaction. "If you want to. I know you'll probably need to work some, but we could go for a week or two. I have money saved. We could—"

"You want to go to *Greece* with me," Shane interrupted, still trying to wrap his head around it.

A small smile tugged at Ilya's mouth. "Is that so surprising?"

"Kind of, yeah." Shane looked back at the images on the screen—ancient ruins, crystal-clear water, couples walking hand-in-hand down cobblestone streets. It looked like something from a movie, not something that happened to people like him. "I've never... I mean, I've barely left the state. And you want to go to Europe. With me."

"Who else would I go with?" Ilya asked, and there was something in his voice—something warm and certain and utterly matter-of-fact—that made Shane's throat tight.

"I don't know, I just..." Shane trailed off, not sure how to articulate the surprise of it. That Ilya wanted to plan a future with him, even if that future was just two weeks in the Mediterranean. That Ilya was thinking in terms of "we" and "us" and "together." That this was real enough, solid enough, to build plans around.

"We don't have to decide now," Ilya said, misreading Shane's silence as reluctance. "It was just an idea. If you'd rather stay here, or go somewhere else—"

"No," Shane said quickly. "No, I want to. I really want to. I'm just... surprised. Happy surprised," he added, seeing Ilya's expression. "Really happy surprised."

Ilya's smile widened, and he pulled Shane closer, pressing a kiss to his hair. "Good. We can look at flights later. Figure out where exactly we want to go."

Shane nodded, still staring at the images on the screen. Greece. Italy. Somewhere warm and beautiful and far away from everything familiar. With Ilya.

"I'll need to pick up extra shifts," he said, already doing the mental math. "Save up some money. I can probably—"

"Shane." Ilya's voice was gentle but firm. "I can afford it. This is my idea. Let me do this."

Shane opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. They'd had this conversation before, in various forms. Ilya had money— enough that he could write a six-figure check without blinking. Shane was still getting used to it, still fighting the instinct to refuse anything that felt like charity.

But this wasn't charity. This was Ilya wanting to share something with him. Wanting to create memories together. Wanting to plan a future, even if that future was just a few weeks away.

"Okay," Shane said finally. "But I'm paying for some of it. Meals, at least. Or activities. Something."

Ilya huffed a quiet laugh. "If you insist."

"I do."

"Then we have a deal."

Shane leaned back against Ilya's chest, letting himself imagine it. The two of them on a beach somewhere, sun-warm and salt-sticky. Exploring ancient ruins, getting lost in winding streets, eating food they couldn't pronounce. Ilya's hand in his, solid and real and present.

A year ago, he couldn't have imagined this. Couldn't have imagined being with someone who wanted to build a life with him, even in small ways. Couldn't have imagined feeling this settled, this content, this *hopeful* about the future.

"What are you thinking?" Ilya asked, his voice rumbling against Shane's back.

Shane smiled. "Just... how different everything is now. How different I am."

"Different how?"

"Happier," Shane said simply. "I'm happier."

Ilya's arms tightened around him, and Shane felt the press of lips against his hair again. They sat like that as the afternoon stretched into evening, talking idly about potential destinations, looking at photos of places they might go, making plans that felt both impossibly distant and thrillingly close.

Later, after they'd ordered takeout and eaten it sprawled on the couch, after Ilya had pulled up a map and they'd traced possible routes through the Greek islands or along the Italian coast, after they'd laughed about Shane's complete lack of knowledge about European geography and Ilya's insistence that they needed at least three days in Rome, Shane found himself just watching Ilya.

The way he gestured when he got excited about something, hands moving in quick, emphatic arcs. The way his accent got thicker when he was tired, consonants sharpening, vowels shifting. The way he looked at Shane like he was the only person in the world worth looking at.

They kissed, slow and sweet, and Shane thought about summer stretching ahead of them. Thought about warm nights and lazy mornings and the luxury of time—time to just be together, without the pressure of deadlines and exams and obligations. Time to explore a new place, to create memories that would be entirely theirs.

Time to build something that felt like a future.

When they finally pulled apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's, both of them smiling like idiots.

"Greece," Shane said. "Let's do Greece."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I want to see the ocean with you. I want to eat weird food and get sunburned and take a million photos. I want..." He trailed off, trying to find the words. "I want to have this. With you."

Ilya kissed him again, deeper this time, and Shane felt the familiar heat building between them. But underneath it was something else—something steadier and more enduring. The knowledge that this wasn't just about right now. This was about tomorrow, and next week, and next month. This was about building something together, one day at a time.

"We'll have it," Ilya murmured against his lips. "I promise."

And Shane believed him.

That night, lying in bed with Ilya's arm draped across his waist, Shane stared at the ceiling and let himself feel it—the full weight of his contentment. The relief of having finished the semester strong. The anticipation of summer, of travel, of long days with nothing to do but be with Ilya. The quiet joy of domesticity, of shared space and shared plans and shared life.

A year ago, he'd been so lost. So convinced that he had to do everything alone, that asking for help was weakness, that love was something that happened to other people. He'd been drowning and didn't even know it, too busy treading water to realize he could just... stop. Could reach out. Could let someone help him.

Now he was here. Safe. Loved. Happy.

It wouldn't always be this easy, he knew. Life didn't work that way. There would be hard days ahead, challenges and setbacks and moments of doubt. But right now, in this moment, everything felt possible. Everything felt right.

Ilya shifted beside him, pulling him closer even in sleep, and Shane smiled into the darkness.

Summer was coming. And for the first time in longer than he could remember, he was actually looking forward to it.

The Tuesday dinner rush at Samovar Soiree was in full swing—not packed, but steady. Shane moved through the dining room with practiced ease, balancing plates, refilling water glasses, making small talk with regulars. Two weeks since finals ended, and he'd settled into the rhythm of full-time summer hours. Morning shifts prepping, afternoons off, evenings on the floor.

It was good. Easy, even. He'd gotten comfortable here, learned the menu inside and out, figured out which customers wanted conversation and which just wanted their food. Yuri had

stopped hovering over him months ago. The other servers treated him like he belonged.

Shane was clearing table six when the front door slammed open hard enough to rattle the frame.

Artem stumbled through it, and Shane's entire world tilted sideways.

He knew that face—had spent ten days with it in a basement, Artem standing guard while Shane sat on that cot, always alert, always professional. The man who'd brought him meals and let him use the bathroom, who'd eventually started talking to him, became something like a friend. But this wasn't that man. This was someone running on pure terror and adrenaline, black tracksuit stiff with dried blood, face gray beneath the stubble, eyes wild and unfocused.

In his arms, he carried a child.

Shane's hands went numb. The water pitcher he'd been holding hit the floor and shattered.

The little girl couldn't have been more than three. Blonde hair matted and tangled. Wearing pink pajamas that were smeared with the same dark stains as Artem's tracksuit. Her face was buried against his chest, small body rigid with fear, and she wasn't making a sound. Not crying, not whimpering—just silent in a way that made Shane's stomach turn over.

Something catastrophic has happened.

The dining room went quiet. Forks stopped halfway to mouths. Conversations died mid-sentence.

Artem's gaze swept the room with desperate intensity. When he spoke, his accent was thick, words tumbling over each other. "Ilya. I need—where is Ilya."

Shane was already moving. "Artem." He kept his voice low, steady, even though his heart was trying to punch through his ribs. "Come with me. Right now."

His body was running on pure instinct—the same autopilot that had gotten him through every crisis before Ilya, before stability, before he'd let himself believe things could be normal. *Move. Don't think. Get them out of sight.* But underneath that mechanical competence, his brain was fracturing into a thousand panicked pieces: *This is real. This is happening. This is your apartment. This is your life now.* He could feel the exact moment the door to his old existence swung shut behind him, but there was no time to process it, no space to fall apart. Later. He could fall apart later. Right now, a child needed help.

Artem's eyes locked on him, recognition flaring through the panic. "Shane—*bozhe moy*—"

"Not here." Shane stepped between Artem and the dining room, blocking the customers' view. He glanced at Katya, who was already moving toward them, face carefully blank. "I've got this."

Katya nodded once. Her hand disappeared beneath the host stand—probably hitting whatever silent alarm connected to Ilya's security people. "Take them to the office."

Shane led them through the kitchen, moving fast. Dmitri looked up from the grill, took one look at the blood-soaked man and the silent child, and went very still. Shane shook his head slightly—*not now*—and kept moving.

The office was small and windowless, just a desk and a couple of chairs and filing cabinets that Shane suspected held more than just restaurant paperwork. He shut the door behind them and Artem sagged against the wall, still clutching the little girl like she was the only thing keeping him upright.

Shane already had his phone out, hitting Ilya's contact. "Sit," he said to Artem, pulling out the desk chair. "Are you hurt? Is she hurt?"

"Not my blood." Artem sank into the chair. The girl whimpered—the first sound she'd made—and burrowed deeper against him. "Not mine. Not hers. We weren't—we got out before—" He cut himself off, jaw clenching.

Ilya picked up on the first ring.

"*Solnyshko*. Miss me already?"

"You need to come to the restaurant." Shane turned away from Artem, lowering his voice. "Right now. Artem's here. He has a little girl with him and he's covered in blood and he needs to talk to you."

Silence. Then: "I'm five minutes away. Keep them in the office. Don't let anyone else see them."

The line went dead.

Shane pocketed his phone and turned back to Artem. The man had his eyes closed, one hand cradling the back of the girl's head. She still hadn't looked up. Shane could see her small fingers twisted in Artem's tracksuit, knuckles white with the force of her grip.

"Ilya's coming," Shane said quietly. "He'll be here in a few minutes."

Artem nodded without opening his eyes.

Shane looked at the little girl—at her tangled hair and her pink pajamas and the way she was holding herself so, so still—and felt something crack open in his chest. He'd seen scared before. He'd *been* scared before. But this was different. This was a child who'd learned that making noise was dangerous, that the only safety was in silence and stillness and making yourself as small as possible.

He crouched down slowly, making himself less threatening. "Hey, sweetheart. My name's Shane. You're safe here, okay? Nobody's going to hurt you."

She didn't respond. Didn't even acknowledge that he'd spoken.

"This is Katerina," Artem said hoarsely. "She hasn't talked since—" He stopped. Swallowed hard. "She hasn't talked."

Shane's throat tightened. "Okay. That's okay." He looked around the office, searching for something, anything that might help. His eyes landed on the small fridge in the corner—Yuri kept it stocked with bottled water and the occasional beer. "Katerina, are you thirsty? Would you like some water?"

Nothing.

Shane got a bottle anyway, twisted it open, set it on the desk within reach. Then he grabbed the spare jacket hanging on the back of the door—one of Yuri's, probably—and held it out to Artem. "You should cover up. The blood."

Artem took it with his free hand, managed to drape it over his shoulders without dislodging Katerina. "Thank you."

They waited.

Shane couldn't stop looking at the little girl. At the way her shoulders were hunched up around her ears. At the smear of something dark on her cheek that he really, really hoped was just dirt. At her bare feet, pale and small against Artem's black tracksuit.

She was three years old. Maybe younger. And someone had done something terrible enough to send a grown man fleeing across an ocean with her, covered in blood that wasn't his.

The door opened.

Ilya stepped through, and Shane had never seen him look like this. His face was carved from ice, eyes flat and cold in a way that made him look like a stranger. He took in the scene in one sweep—Artem, Katerina, the blood, Shane standing uselessly to the side—and something flickered across his expression too fast to name.

"Artem." His voice was carefully neutral. "Report."

Artem stood, still holding Katerina. The little girl made a small sound of distress and Artem immediately sat back down, murmuring something in Russian that Shane didn't catch.

"Aleksandr attacked the Moscow house three days ago," Artem said. His voice was flat now, shock settling in. "Alexei was shot. Anya—" He stopped. Started again. "Anya is dead. Pavel got Alexei out, took him to a hospital in Tver. I grabbed Katerina and ran. Aleksandr's men were right behind us. I got us on a cargo flight to New York yesterday. I didn't know where else to go."

The office was very, very quiet.

Shane felt the words land like physical blows. Alexei shot. Anya dead. A three-year-old child fleeing for her life.

Ilya's expression didn't change. "Alexei's condition?"

"Critical when Pavel called me. That was eighteen hours ago. I don't know if—" Artem's voice cracked. "I don't know."

"And Aleksandr?"

"Coming here. He has to be. He knows about you, about New York. He'll come to finish it."

Ilya nodded once, like Artem had just confirmed something he'd already suspected. Then his gaze shifted to Katerina, and for just a moment, the ice cracked. Shane saw grief there, and rage, and something that looked almost like fear.

"She's Alexei's daughter," Ilya said quietly. It wasn't a question.

"Yes."

Ilya closed his eyes. Opened them. The ice was back, but Shane could see the effort it took. "You did the right thing bringing her here. You're both safe now."

Artem let out a shaking breath. "I'm sorry. I didn't know what else—"

"You did the right thing," Ilya repeated, firmer this time. He looked at Shane. "*Solnyshko*, I need you to go back out front. Tell Katya to close early, send everyone home. Then come back here."

Shane nodded. He wanted to ask questions—about Alexei, about what happened, about what they were going to do—but Ilya's expression said *not now*. So he just squeezed Ilya's arm as he passed, felt the tension thrumming through him like a live wire, and left.

The dining room was still quiet when he emerged. Katya met his eyes and Shane nodded toward the door. "Boss says close early. Send everyone home."

Katya didn't argue. Within ten minutes, the last customers were ushered out with apologies and complimentary desserts promised for next time. The servers and kitchen staff filtered out in small groups, shooting curious glances toward the back but smart enough not to ask questions.

When Shane returned to the office, Ilya was on his phone speaking rapid Russian. Artem was still in the chair, Katerina still pressed against him. The water bottle sat untouched on the desk.

Ilya ended the call. "Pavel says Alexei is stable. Still critical, but stable. He'll live."

Artem's shoulders sagged with relief.

"Any's family?"

"Her mother is dead." Artem looked down at Katerina.

Ilya was quiet for a long moment. Then he crouched down in front of the chair, bringing himself to Katerina's eye level. He said something in Russian, voice soft and gentle in a way Shane had only ever heard directed at himself.

Katerina didn't respond. Didn't even look at him.

Ilya tried again, still gentle, still patient. Nothing.

He straightened, and Shane saw the muscle jump in his jaw. "We need to get them cleaned up. Somewhere safe. Not my apartment—if Aleksandr is coming, he'll know about that."

"My place," Shane said immediately. "He doesn't know about me, right? About us?"

Ilya looked at him. "No. He doesn't."

"Then take them there. I'll meet you after I help Katya lock up."

"Shane—"

"I'm not arguing about this." Shane kept his voice level. "That little girl needs a bath and clean clothes and somewhere she can feel safe. My apartment is the best option and you know it."

For a moment, he thought Ilya might argue anyway. But then he just nodded, something that looked almost like pride flickering across his face. "Okay. Thank you."

Shane watched them leave—Ilya leading the way, Artem following with Katerina still clutched against his chest, the little girl's face still hidden, still silent. The door closed behind them and Shane stood alone in the office, surrounded by the faint smell of blood and fear.

His hands were shaking.

He looked down at them, at the fine tremor running through his fingers, and felt the full weight of what had just happened crash over him. A child. A traumatized, terrified child who'd watched her mother die and her father get shot and been dragged across an ocean by a man covered in blood.

And somewhere out there, the person who'd done it was coming to New York.

Shane took a breath. Then another. Then he went to help Katya close up the restaurant, because that was what needed to be done next, and he'd learned a long time ago that sometimes you just had to keep moving forward even when the ground was crumbling beneath your feet.

But as he wiped down tables and counted out the register and locked the front door behind him, all he could see was Katerina's small, pale face. Her white-knuckled grip on Artem's tracksuit. Her terrible, terrible silence.

Summer was coming.

And everything had just changed.

The night air was cool against Shane's skin as he stepped out onto the street. The restaurant was dark behind him now, closed early, the dinner rush abandoned the moment Artem had walked through the door. Somewhere across the city, Ilya was taking them to Shane's

apartment—his apartment, which was now a safe house for a traumatized child and a man covered in his brother's blood.

Katerina had nothing. Just the clothes on her back, stained and ruined. No toys, no comfort items, no pajamas that didn't smell like fear and violence. Shane thought about her small hands, the way she'd gripped Artem like he was the only solid thing left in the world, and made a decision.

He pulled out his phone and searched for the nearest Target. Eight minutes away. Still open until midnight. Shane started walking, his mind already spinning through a list of things a three-year-old might need—things that had nothing to do with blood or airports or men with guns. Simple things. Normal things. The kind of things that might help a little girl remember that the world wasn't entirely made of terror.

The Target was too bright, fluorescent lights buzzing overhead like angry insects. Shane stood just inside the entrance, staring at the rows of aisles stretching out before him, and had absolutely no idea where to start.

What did a three-year-old need?

He pulled out his phone, typed "essentials for 3 year old" into Google, then put it away again. The search results were overwhelming—developmental milestones and nutritional guidelines and potty training advice—and none of it felt relevant to a little girl who'd just watched her mother die.

The fluorescent lights pressed down on him, making everything too sharp, too bright. His chest felt tight in a way that had nothing to do with the temperature and everything to do with the sheer *vastness* of the store—the endless aisles, the thousands of choices, each one potentially wrong. He didn't know how to do this. He'd never done this. A week ago he was planning Greece, thinking about summer classes and maybe finally getting ahead on his design portfolio, and now he was supposed to know what a traumatized three-year-old needed at midnight on a Tuesday.

The absurdity of it—the wrongness of it—made his hands clench into fists. But Katerina was waiting. Artem was waiting. Ilya was waiting. And Shane had learned, over the past months, that sometimes you just had to move forward even when you had no idea what you were doing. You picked a direction and you walked. You figured it out as you went. So he grabbed a cart, took a breath that didn't quite steady him, and headed toward the back of the store.

Shane grabbed a cart and started walking.

The children's section was in the back corner, past home goods and electronics. He found himself in an aisle of sippy cups and plastic plates, cartoon characters grinning up at him from every package. He picked up a cup with a soft silicone spout—purple, with stars on it—and put it in the cart. Then added another one, just in case.

Pajamas. She'd need pajamas.

The clothing section was organized by size, and Shane stood there staring at the tags until the numbers stopped making sense. 3T? 4T? He had no idea how big Katerina was, couldn't remember anything except her face pressed against Artem's chest and her small hands gripping his tracksuit. He grabbed a set in 3T—soft cotton with little moons and clouds—and then a 4T too, because what if he got it wrong?

A package of underwear. Socks with grips on the bottom. A hoodie that looked warm and soft.

He was moving on autopilot now, adding things to the cart without really thinking. Toothbrush. Kid's toothpaste that tasted like bubblegum. A hairbrush with soft bristles.

The toy aisle stopped him cold.

It stretched out in both directions, an explosion of primary colors and plastic packaging. Dolls and action figures and building blocks and stuffed animals, everything designed to catch a child's eye, to make them laugh and play and be *normal*. Shane stood there with his hands on the cart handle and felt something crack open in his chest.

She wasn't going to play. Not yet. Maybe not for a long time.

But maybe—maybe if there was something soft, something safe—

He picked up a stuffed rabbit, gray and floppy-eared, with a gentle expression embroidered on its face. Put it in the cart. Then a set of crayons and a coloring book with simple pictures—flowers and butterflies and smiling suns. Things that were gentle. Things that weren't scary.

A puzzle with big wooden pieces. A book about a bear who couldn't sleep. Another stuffed animal, this one a dog with a red collar.

He was buying too much. He knew he was buying too much. But he couldn't stop, because what if she needed something and he didn't have it? What if there was one thing that could make her feel even a little bit safer and he'd left it on the shelf?

The blankets were in the bedding section, and Shane almost walked past them. But then he saw it—soft pink fleece with Hello Kitty's face repeated in neat rows, the cartoon cat's expression sweet and uncomplicated. Shane reached out and touched it, felt the softness under his fingers.

His mom had given him a blanket when he was little. Blue, with trucks on it. He'd dragged it everywhere until it fell apart, until the binding came loose and the fabric went thin and holey. He'd loved that blanket more than anything.

Shane put the Hello Kitty blanket in the cart.

Maybe it was stupid. Maybe she wouldn't even like Hello Kitty. Maybe she was too traumatized to care about cartoon cats and soft fleece. But it felt right, somehow—something

gentle and childish and normal, something that said *you're safe now, you're allowed to be a kid*.

He hoped she'd like it.

By the time he made it to the checkout, the cart was overflowing. The cashier—a tired-looking woman in her fifties—gave him a knowing smile as she started scanning items.

"Somebody's birthday?" she asked.

"Something like that," Shane said.

The total made him wince, but he handed over his card without hesitating. Money wasn't the problem anymore. Money was the one thing he actually had.

The problem was the six bags now sitting in the cart, and the fact that he was standing outside Target at nearly midnight with a Russian crime lord hunting someone connected to his boyfriend, and he had no idea if anyone was watching him right now.

Shane stood just outside the entrance, the automatic doors sliding shut behind him with a pneumatic hiss. The parking lot stretched out in front of him, pools of yellow light from the streetlamps creating islands in the darkness. A few scattered cars. A shopping cart someone had abandoned near the curb. The distant sound of traffic on Atlantic Avenue.

He scanned the lot carefully, the way Dimitri had taught him without ever explicitly teaching him—looking for cars with people sitting in them, for movement in the shadows, for anything that felt wrong. His heart was beating too fast. Everything looked normal, but normal didn't mean safe. Normal didn't mean he wasn't being watched.

The subway station was two blocks away. He could walk there, take the train back to his apartment. It would be easy. Simple.

Except it wouldn't be simple at all.

The subway meant crowds, meant being trapped underground with too many people and no way out if something went wrong. It meant standing on a platform with his back exposed, sitting in a car where anyone could get on at any stop. It meant being visible, trackable, vulnerable. And he'd be carrying six bags of children's supplies like a fucking beacon, announcing to anyone paying attention that he was connected to a child, that there was a child somewhere who mattered to him.

Shane's hands tightened on the cart handle. His chest felt tight again, but this time it had nothing to do with the fluorescent lights or the overwhelming choices. This was different. This was the feeling he got sometimes when his brain started cataloging threats faster than he could process them, when the world narrowed down to a series of potential dangers and his body went very still and very quiet in response.

He didn't know if anyone was watching him. That was the worst part. He could scan the parking lot all he wanted, could look for suspicious cars and lurking figures, but he had no

idea what Aleksandr's people looked like. No idea if they were already here, already tracking him, already connecting him to Ilya and Artem and Katerina.

The not-knowing made his skin crawl.

He needed to get back to the apartment. Needed to get these supplies to Katerina. Needed to do it without leading anyone straight to the one place that was supposed to be safe.

Shane pulled out his phone, scrolled through his contacts until he found Dimitri's number. His thumb hovered over the call button.

He could frame it as needing help with the bags. That would be reasonable. Six bags was a lot to carry, and Dimitri was already at the apartment anyway, already part of this situation. It would make sense to ask for a ride.

But that wasn't really why he was calling.

He was calling because he was scared. Because he didn't know if he was being followed and didn't trust himself to get back safely on his own. Because somewhere out there, a man who'd already killed at least one person was coming to New York, and Shane had just made himself visible by walking into a brightly-lit store and buying supplies for the child that man was hunting.

Shane hit call.

Dimitri answered on the second ring. "Shane?"

"Hey. Are you—I'm at the Target on Atlantic. I bought some stuff for Katerina and I can't carry it all. Can you—"

"Five minutes," Dimitri said, and hung up.

Shane stood there with his phone in his hand, six bags of children's supplies at his feet, and felt the absurdity of it wash over him. Six months ago he'd been drowning in debt and working three jobs and barely keeping his head above water. Now he was calling a Bratva enforcer for a ride home from Target because he'd bought too many toys for a traumatized three-year-old who was hiding in his apartment from a Russian crime lord.

His life had gotten so fucking weird.

A black Mercedes pulled up to the curb exactly four and a half minutes later. Dimitri got out, took one look at the bags, and raised an eyebrow.

"She's three," he said. "Not moving in permanently."

"I know," Shane said, defensive. "I just—I didn't know what she'd need."

Dimitri's expression softened slightly. He picked up four of the bags like they weighed nothing. "Come on. Ilya's waiting."

Shane grabbed the remaining two bags and followed him to the car, the Hello Kitty blanket visible through the plastic, pink and soft and hopeful.

Maybe it was too much. Maybe he'd bought all the wrong things.

But at least he'd tried.

The drive back was quiet. Dimitri didn't ask questions, didn't offer commentary. He just drove with the same efficient competence he brought to everything, navigating the late-night streets like he'd done this a thousand times before.

Shane stared out the window at the passing lights and tried to process what his life had become in the span of a few hours. This morning he'd been planning a summer trip to Greece. Now he was bringing home children's pajamas and trying to figure out how to keep a three-year-old safe from a man who'd already killed her mother.

"Ilya's got people on the building," Dimitri said, breaking the silence. "Two on the street, one in the lobby. No one gets up to your floor without clearance."

Shane nodded. He should probably feel something about that—about armed men watching his apartment building, about his home becoming a fortress. But mostly he just felt tired.

"How long can we stay there?" he asked.

Dimitri's jaw tightened. "Depends on what Aleksandr knows. If he tracked Artem to the restaurant..." He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to.

They pulled up outside Shane's building fifteen minutes later. Shane could see them now that he knew to look—the man leaning against the building across the street, the car parked with a clear view of the entrance. Watching. Waiting.

Dimitri grabbed the bags again and followed Shane inside. The lobby was empty except for another man Shane didn't recognize, sitting in one of the chairs near the elevator with a newspaper he wasn't reading.

Another guard. Another piece of Ilya's world bleeding into his.

The elevator ride up felt longer than usual. Shane watched the numbers climb—3, 4, 5—and felt each floor like a step further from the life he'd had this morning. The one where his apartment was just his apartment. Where the biggest decision was whether to take Italian or keep his schedule light. Where "summer plans" meant sun and ancient ruins, not blood-stained children and armed guards in his lobby.

He was going up to the twelfth floor, but he was really crossing a border he couldn't uncross. Accepting something he couldn't unaccept.

Am I equipped for this? The question sat in his chest like a stone. He didn't know how to care for a traumatized child. Didn't know how to live in a safe house. Didn't know how to be the person who said "yes" to this kind of danger, this kind of responsibility.

But Katerina was up there. Artem was up there. Ilya was up there.

And Shane had learned something over the past months, something that had kept him alive when he had nothing: you didn't need to know how. You just needed to keep moving. One foot in front of the other. One decision at a time. Survival wasn't about being ready—it was about refusing to stop.

The elevator dinged. Twelfth floor.

This is what survival looks like now, Shane thought, and stepped out into the hallway.

The Hello Kitty blanket stared at him through the plastic bag, soft and pink and absurdly hopeful.

His apartment door was unlocked. Shane pushed it open and stepped inside, Dimitri behind him with the bags.

The first thing he saw was Ilya.

The second thing he saw was Katerina wrapped around him like a small, desperate animal.

She'd transferred from Artem completely. Her arms were locked around Ilya's neck, her legs around his waist, her face buried against his shoulder. Her small hands were fisted in his shirt—the same shirt he'd been wearing when he left for his meeting hours ago, now wrinkled from her grip.

Ilya was standing in the middle of Shane's living room, one hand supporting her weight, the other rubbing slow circles on her back. He was murmuring something in Russian, too quiet for Shane to hear, his voice low and steady.

Artem was slumped on the couch, his head in his hands. The blood on his clothes had dried to a dark rust color. He looked up when Shane entered, and the relief in his eyes was devastating.

"She recognized him," Artem said, his voice hoarse. "As soon as he spoke. She just—she reached for him."

Shane set his bags down carefully, trying not to make sudden movements. Katerina didn't look up, didn't acknowledge his presence. She just held onto Ilya like he was the only solid thing in a world that had shattered around her.

"From the phone calls," Shane said quietly, understanding. "She knows your voice."

Ilya met his eyes over Katerina's head. His expression was complicated—protective and gentle, but also calculating. Shane could see him assessing, planning, thinking three steps ahead even as he comforted a traumatized child.

Shane moved closer, keeping his movements slow and deliberate. Katerina's eyes were open, he could see now. Wide and dark and empty. Staring at nothing.

"I brought supplies," he said, gesturing to the bags. "Clothes, pajamas, a blanket. A cup. Some toys."

Dimitri had already started unpacking, efficient and methodical. He pulled out the Hello Kitty blanket first, shaking it out. It was soft and pink and absurdly cheerful against the tension in the room.

Katerina's eyes tracked the movement. Just barely. Just enough to show she was still in there somewhere.

"Good," Ilya said. He was still rubbing circles on her back, still murmuring in Russian. "She needs to be bathed. Changed. The blood—" His jaw tightened. "She shouldn't be wearing that."

Shane pulled out the pajamas next. Purple with little stars. Size 3T. He'd guessed on the size, had stood in the Target aisle trying to remember what three-year-olds looked like.

"I can run a bath," he said. "Get the water warm. But I don't—" He looked at Katerina's death grip on Ilya's shirt. "I don't think she'll let go."

"She won't," Artem said from the couch. He sounded destroyed. "I tried. She just—she holds on tighter."

Ilya's expression shifted, something cold and strategic sliding into place beneath the gentleness. "Then I'll do it. Shane, get the bathroom ready. Warm water, not too hot. Bring the pajamas and the blanket."

He was giving orders now, smooth and automatic. This was the Ilya who ran operations, who made decisions that kept people alive. Shane had seen glimpses of it before, but never like this. Never in his own apartment with a traumatized child clinging to him.

"Dimitri," Ilya continued, "get Artem cleaned up. There's a shower in the second bathroom. Find him something to wear—Shane's clothes should fit."

Dimitri nodded and moved toward Artem, who stood slowly, like his body hurt.

"I should—" Artem started.

"You should get the blood off," Ilya said, not unkindly. "You did your job. You got her here. Now let us help."

Shane was already moving toward the bathroom, grabbing the pajamas and blanket, turning on the tap. The water ran cold at first, then gradually warmed. He tested it with his hand, adjusted the temperature, tried to remember anything he knew about bathing small children.

He didn't know anything about bathing small children.

Behind him, he could hear Ilya's voice, still low and steady, still speaking Russian. Footsteps. The bathroom door opening.

Ilya appeared with Katerina still wrapped around him. She hadn't loosened her grip at all. Her small face was still buried against his shoulder, her hands still fisted in his shirt.

"I'm going to need to put you down," Ilya said gently, switching to English. "Just for a moment. Just to get you clean."

Katerina's grip tightened.

Ilya looked at Shane, and something passed between them—a question, an acknowledgment. This was going to be hard. This was going to take time.

"The blanket," Ilya said. "Let her see it."

Shane held up the Hello Kitty blanket, soft and pink and new. "Look," he said quietly. "This is for you. For after. It's warm."

Katerina's eyes tracked to the blanket. She didn't reach for it, didn't make a sound. But she looked.

"We're going to get you clean," Ilya said, still in that steady voice. "Get the blood off. Put on new pajamas. And then you can have the blanket. Okay?"

Silence. But her grip loosened. Just slightly.

It took another ten minutes of patient coaxing before Ilya could pry her hands off his shirt. She didn't cry, didn't fight. She just went rigid, her whole body locked with fear, as Ilya carefully undressed her.

The pajamas underneath were worse than Shane had imagined. Not just blood-stained. Soaked. Dried stiff in places.

Shane had to look away.

Ilya didn't. He just kept moving, kept talking in that low steady voice, kept his hands gentle as he lifted her into the warm water.

Katerina sat in the bath like a small statue. Didn't splash, didn't play. Just sat there while Ilya washed the blood from her hair, her skin, her small hands.

Shane knelt beside the tub and held out the cup he'd bought—the one with the handles, meant for toddlers. "For rinsing," he said.

Ilya took it, filled it with warm water, poured it carefully over Katerina's head. She didn't flinch. Didn't blink.

"She's in shock," Shane said quietly.

"Yes." Ilya's hands were steady, methodical. "But she's safe now. That's what matters."

When Katerina was clean, Ilya lifted her out and wrapped her in Shane's softest towel. She was so small. Shane hadn't realized how small until now, seeing her wrapped up like that, her dark hair plastered to her head.

The purple pajamas were too big. Shane had guessed wrong on the size. But Katerina didn't seem to notice or care. She just stood there, passive, while Ilya dressed her with the same careful gentleness he'd used for the bath.

Then the blanket. Shane held it out, and this time Katerina reached for it.

Her small hands closed on the soft pink fabric, and something in her face shifted. Not quite relief. Not quite comfort. But something.

She pulled the blanket against her chest and looked up at Ilya.

He picked her up again, and she went willingly, wrapping herself around him with the blanket clutched between them.

"Good," Ilya murmured. "That's good, *malyshka*."

They walked back out to the living room. Artem was there, cleaned up and wearing Shane's old NYU sweatshirt and sweatpants. He looked younger without the blood, more vulnerable. His eyes went to Katerina immediately.

"She okay?"

"She's clean," Ilya said. "That's a start."

Dimitri had unpacked the rest of the bags. The toys were lined up on Shane's coffee table—the stuffed bunny, the coloring books, the crayons. The sippy cup sat beside them, still in its packaging.

It looked surreal. Children's toys in Shane's apartment, arranged neatly beside his biochemistry textbooks and empty coffee mugs.

"We need to talk logistics," Ilya said. He'd sat down on the couch, Katerina still in his lap, still clutching her blanket. "Sleeping arrangements. Security. How long we can stay here before Aleksandr figures out where we are."

Shane sank into the chair across from him. His legs felt weak. "How much time do we have?"

"Unknown." Ilya's hand was still on Katerina's back, still rubbing those slow circles. "Artem was careful. Took precautions. But Aleksandr has resources. If he tracked him to the restaurant—"

"He'll track him here," Shane finished.

"Eventually. Yes."

The weight of it settled over the room. Shane looked around his apartment—his safe, quiet apartment that had been his refuge for the past six months. The place where he and Ilya had built something real, something good.

Now it was a safe house. Now there were armed men watching the building. Now there was a traumatized child who wouldn't speak, clinging to Ilya like he was the only thing keeping her tethered to the world.

"She won't sleep alone," Ilya said quietly. "Not tonight. Probably not for a while."

Shane nodded. He'd already figured that much. "Then we'll all sleep in my bed. You, me, her. It's big enough."

Ilya met his eyes, something unreadable passing between them. "You're sure?"

"She needs both of us," Shane said. "And I'm not leaving you to handle this alone."

Artem looked between them, exhausted relief washing over his face. "Thank you. Both of you." His voice cracked. "I just—I just need to know she's safe."

"She is," Ilya said. "For now."

Shane stood and walked to the window. He could see the man across the street, still watching. Still waiting.

"What happens next?" he asked.

"We keep her alive," Ilya said simply. "We keep her hidden. And we figure out how to end this before Aleksandr finds us." Ilya's expression went cold.

Katerina shifted in his lap, her small face turning toward his chest. She was still silent, still staring at nothing. But her grip on the blanket had loosened slightly, and her breathing had evened out.

Maybe she was falling asleep. Maybe she was just shutting down.

Shane didn't know. He didn't know anything about traumatized children or Russian crime lords or how to keep someone safe when the whole world was hunting them.

But he knew how to make a bed comfortable. How to keep the apartment warm. How to have food ready when someone was hungry.

He knew how to do the small things, the normal things.

And maybe that was enough. Maybe it had to be.

Because the alternative was walking away, and Shane had already made his choice the moment he'd led Artem through the restaurant kitchen. The moment he'd driven to Target at midnight. The moment he'd stepped into that elevator knowing what waited for him on the twelfth floor.

He was choosing this. Not just accepting it—*choosing* it.

The realization sat heavy in his chest. This morning he'd woken up in a world that made sense. Predictable. Safe. The kind of safe he'd fought for, clawed his way toward when he had nothing. He'd had routines. Patterns. A life he could map out and understand.

Now there were armed men in his lobby. A traumatized child in his living room. Blood on his bathroom floor that he'd have to scrub out later. His apartment—his *space*, the one place that was supposed to be just his—had become a safe house. A fortress. A place where people hid from men who killed mothers in front of their children.

Everything had changed in the span of a dinner shift.

And Shane didn't know if he could do this. Didn't know if he was equipped for a life where danger walked through the door without warning, where the rules shifted faster than he could process them, where the careful stability he'd built could shatter in an instant.

He needed predictability. Needed to know what was coming. Needed time to prepare, to adjust, to build the frameworks that let him function in a world that moved too fast and demanded too much.

But Katerina was here. Ilya was here. And they needed him.

I've survived before, Shane thought, staring at the bed he was about to share with a man he loved and a child who'd watched her mother die. *I survived being broke. Survived being alone. Survived ten days in a basement not knowing if I'd ever get out.*

He'd survived by doing exactly this—breaking impossible situations down into manageable pieces. One task at a time. One decision at a time. Don't think about tomorrow, don't think about next week. Just think about the next five minutes.

Make the bed comfortable. Get extra pillows. Make sure the air is on.

He could do that. He could do the small things.

And maybe if he did enough small things, one after another, he'd survive this too.

"I'll make up the bed," he said quietly, his voice steadier than he felt. "Get extra pillows. Make sure the air is on."

Ilya met his eyes, and something passed between them again. Gratitude. Trust. The acknowledgment that they were in this together now, whatever this was. That Shane wasn't running. That he was staying, even though staying meant danger, meant uncertainty, meant everything he'd built could come crashing down.

That he was choosing Ilya's world. Or maybe Ilya's world was choosing him. Or maybe—probably—it was both at once, and Shane was walking into it with his eyes open, terrified and determined in equal measure.

"Thank you," Ilya said, and the weight in those two words told Shane that Ilya understood. Understood what Shane was giving up. What he was risking. What it cost him to stay.

Shane nodded and headed toward the bedroom. Behind him, he could hear Ilya's voice again, low and steady, murmuring in Russian to the silent child in his arms.

His apartment didn't feel like his anymore.

It felt like a fortress. A hiding place. A last stand.

He pulled back the covers on his bed and fluffed the pillows, and tried not to think about how everything had changed in the span of a few hours.

Tried not to think about the blood on Artem's clothes, or the emptiness in Katerina's eyes, or the men with guns watching his building.

Tried not to think about the fact that his life—his quiet, normal, hard-won life—had just become something else entirely.

Something dangerous.

Something he couldn't walk away from.

Not now. Not with a three-year-old girl clutching a Hello Kitty blanket and trusting Ilya to keep her safe.

Chapter 21: Artem and Dimitri

The apartment was dark when Artem finally gave up on sleep.

He'd been lying in the guest room for over an hour, staring at the ceiling, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of Shane's building. Every creak made his heart race. Every distant siren sent adrenaline flooding through his system. His mind wouldn't stop replaying it—the gunfire, Anya's scream cutting off too suddenly, Alexei's blood spreading across the floor, Katerina's terrible silence.

He sat up slowly, careful not to make noise. Shane's old clothes hung loose on his frame—gray sweatpants and a faded NYU t-shirt that smelled like laundry detergent. Clean. Normal. Nothing like the blood-soaked clothes Ilya had taken from him to be washed.

His throat was dry. Painfully dry. He hadn't had anything to drink since—when? The plane? Before that?

Artem pushed himself to his feet and padded quietly down the hallway. The apartment was silent except for the hum of the air conditioning. Through Shane's bedroom door, he could hear nothing. Good. Katerina needed sleep. God knew she needed something good after what she'd seen.

The kitchen was dark, just the faint glow of the microwave clock casting green shadows across the counter. Artem felt his way to the cabinets, opened one carefully, found glasses. His hands were shaking as he filled one from the tap.

The water was cold. Clean. He drank half of it in one long swallow, then refilled the glass.

Behind him, the apartment door opened.

Artem spun, the glass slipping from his fingers.

It shattered on the tile floor with a sound like a gunshot, and Artem's back hit the counter, his heart hammering so hard he thought it might break through his ribs. His hands came up instinctively—defensive, useless—and for one terrible second he was back in Moscow, back in the house with Aleksandr's men pouring through the doors.

"*Blyad*," Dimitri said quietly, freezing in the doorway. "Artem. It's me. Just me."

Artem couldn't speak. Couldn't move. His chest was too tight, his breath coming in short, sharp gasps that didn't seem to bring any air.

Dimitri closed the door carefully behind him and crossed the kitchen, his boots crunching on broken glass. "Don't move," he said, his voice low and steady. "You're barefoot. Just—stay there."

He flipped on the light above the stove—dim, not the overhead—and Artem could finally see him properly. Dimitri looked tired, his jacket gone, his shirt sleeves rolled up. He'd been outside. Doing rounds. Checking the perimeter.

Keeping them safe.

"I'm sorry," Artem managed, his voice hoarse. "I didn't—I thought—"

"I know." Dimitri grabbed the dish towel from the counter and knelt, carefully sweeping the larger pieces of glass into his palm. "My fault. Should've knocked."

Artem watched him work, his heart still racing, his hands still shaking. Dimitri moved efficiently, methodically, clearing a path through the broken glass. When he was satisfied, he stood and dumped the shards into the trash, then grabbed another glass from the cabinet.

He filled it from the tap and held it out to Artem.

"Here."

Artem took it with both hands, gripping it tight so he wouldn't drop this one too. He drank, and the water helped. A little.

"You should sleep," Dimitri said, leaning against the counter. Not crowding him. Just... there. Solid. Real.

"I tried." Artem set the glass down carefully. "I can't."

Dimitri nodded slowly, like he'd expected that answer. "Adrenaline?"

"Everything." Artem's voice cracked. "Every time I close my eyes, I see—" He stopped, swallowed hard. "I keep thinking about what would've happened if we'd been five minutes slower. If Katerina had been in the room when—"

"But she wasn't," Dimitri said quietly. "You got her out. You kept her alive."

"Anya didn't—" Artem couldn't finish the sentence.

Dimitri's expression didn't change, but something shifted in his eyes. Understanding. Grief. The weight of too many losses.

"No," he said. "She didn't."

They stood in silence for a moment, the dim light casting long shadows across the kitchen floor.

"Go back to bed," Dimitri said finally. "Try again."

Artem nodded and headed back down the hallway, his feet silent on the hardwood. The guest room was exactly as he'd left it—bed rumpled, sheets tangled, pillows askew from his restless attempts at sleep.

He lay down and stared at the ceiling.

Fifteen minutes later, he gave up.

When he came back out into the living room, Dimitri was sitting in the armchair by the window, his phone in his hand, his posture alert despite the late hour. He looked up as Artem appeared in the doorway.

"Still can't sleep?" Dimitri asked, though it wasn't really a question.

Artem shook his head. "I keep—" He stopped, tried again. "I can't be alone with it. With my thoughts. I just—"

"Couch," Dimitri said, nodding toward it. "Sit."

Artem hesitated, then crossed the room and sank onto the couch. It was soft, worn in, the kind of couch that had seen a lot of use. Shane's couch. Shane's apartment. Shane's life that they'd dragged into this nightmare.

Dimitri stood and grabbed the throw blanket from the back of the couch—soft fleece, dark blue—and tossed it to Artem. Then he reached over and dimmed the lamp on the side table until the room was bathed in warm, low light. Not dark. Not bright. Just... safe.

"Lie down," Dimitri said, settling back into the armchair. "I'm not going anywhere."

Artem pulled the blanket over himself and stretched out on the couch, his head on the armrest, his body finally starting to relax. The cushions were comfortable. The apartment was quiet. And Dimitri was there, solid and watchful in the chair beside him.

"You don't have to stay," Artem said quietly.

"I'm on watch anyway," Dimitri replied. "Might as well be in here."

Artem closed his eyes. The adrenaline was finally starting to drain away, leaving exhaustion in its wake. His muscles ached. His head throbbed. His chest felt hollow.

But Dimitri was there.

Someone was watching. Someone was keeping guard.

He didn't have to be alert. Didn't have to listen for footsteps or gunfire or Katerina's silent terror.

He could just... rest.

"Thank you," Artem whispered.

Dimitri didn't answer, but Artem heard the quiet shift of fabric as he settled deeper into the chair.

Sleep came slowly, then all at once—pulling Artem under like a tide.

And Dimitri sat in the dim light, his phone dark in his lap, his eyes on the door, on the windows, on the man finally resting on the couch.

Keeping watch.

Morning light filtered through the windows, pale and soft, when Artem woke.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was. The couch beneath him was unfamiliar, the blanket over him not his own. His body ached, his mouth was dry, and his mind felt sluggish, like he was swimming up through deep water.

Then it came back.

The flight. The blood. Katerina's silence. Shane's apartment.

New York.

He was in New York.

The smell of coffee reached him—rich and dark—and he opened his eyes fully, blinking against the light.

The apartment was quiet. Peaceful, even. The city hummed distantly outside, muffled by the windows, but inside there was only the soft clink of dishes and the low hiss of something cooking.

Artem sat up slowly, the blanket sliding off his shoulders. His neck was stiff, his back protesting the night on the couch, but he'd slept. Actually slept. For the first time in days.

He looked toward the kitchen.

Dimitri was there, standing at the stove, his back to the living room. He'd changed his shirt—still black, still tactical—but his movements were easy, unhurried. He cracked eggs into a pan, flipped toast in a toaster, poured coffee into two mugs.

Like this was normal. Like he did this every day.

Artem pushed the blanket aside and stood, his bare feet silent on the hardwood floor. He padded toward the kitchen, drawn by the warmth and the smell and the quiet competence of the man cooking breakfast.

Dimitri glanced over his shoulder as Artem approached. "Morning."

"Morning," Artem said, his voice rough with sleep. He cleared his throat. "You didn't have to —"

"Coffee's ready," Dimitri interrupted, nodding toward the counter. "Eggs'll be done in a minute."

Artem hesitated, then reached for one of the mugs. The ceramic was warm in his hands, the steam rising in lazy curls. He took a sip—black, strong, exactly what he needed—and felt something in his chest loosen just a little.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

Dimitri shrugged, sliding scrambled eggs onto two plates. "You need to eat."

He set one plate on the small kitchen table, then gestured for Artem to sit. Artem obeyed, sinking into the chair, cradling the coffee mug like it was something precious.

Dimitri set the second plate across from him, then leaned against the counter, his own mug in hand. He didn't sit. Didn't relax. Even now, even making breakfast, he was on guard.

"Did you sleep at all?" Artem asked.

"Enough."

"That's not an answer."

Dimitri's mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but close. "I'm fine."

Artem looked at him—really looked. The faint shadows under his eyes, the way he held himself, alert even in the quiet morning light. He'd been up all night. Or most of it.

"You've been watching," Artem said.

"That's the job."

Artem took another sip of coffee, his eyes steady on Dimitri's face.

Dimitri looked down into his mug, his jaw tight, then back up at Artem. "Eat, before it gets cold."

Artem picked up his fork. The eggs were good—simple, but cooked perfectly. The toast was buttered, still warm. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until the first bite, and then he was eating steadily, mechanically, his body demanding fuel.

Dimitri watched him, silent, his expression unreadable.

"How are you feeling?" Dimitri asked after a moment.

Artem paused, fork halfway to his mouth. "I don't know," he admitted. "Tired. Scared. Relieved." He set the fork down. "Guilty."

"For what?"

"For leaving Alexei. For bringing Katerina here. For—" He stopped, his throat tight. "For not being able to protect Anya."

"You got Katerina out," Dimitri said, his voice firm. "That's what matters."

"Is it?"

"Yes." Dimitri set his mug down on the counter. "You did what you had to do. You kept her alive. That's not nothing."

Artem looked down at his plate, his vision blurring. He blinked hard, swallowed, forced himself to breathe.

"I don't know what happens next," he said quietly.

"We figure it out," Dimitri replied. "When Ilya wakes up, we'll make a plan. Until then, you eat. You rest. You let us handle the rest."

"I'm not good at that."

"I know." Dimitri's voice softened, just a fraction. "But you don't have a choice right now. So let us."

Artem looked up at him, and something passed between them—something unspoken, something fragile and new.

"Why are you doing this?" Artem asked.

Dimitri was quiet for a long moment. Then he picked up his mug again, took a slow sip, and met Artem's eyes.

"Because you need it," he said simply.

Artem's chest tightened. He didn't know what to say to that. Didn't know how to respond to the quiet care in Dimitri's voice, the way he'd stayed up all night, the way he'd made breakfast like it was the most natural thing in the world.

So he just nodded, and went back to eating.

The apartment was still quiet. Shane, Ilya, and Katerina were still asleep in the bedroom, the door closed, the world beyond it held at bay for just a little longer.

Outside, the city was waking up—cars honking, voices rising, the rhythm of New York beginning again.

But inside, in the warm kitchen with the morning light spilling across the table, there was only this: coffee and eggs and two men sitting together in the quiet.

Dimitri leaned against the counter, his mug in his hands, his eyes on Artem.

Artem ate slowly, savoring the warmth, the safety, the strange and unexpected kindness of this man who'd stayed up all night to keep watch.

When the plate was empty, Artem set his fork down and wrapped both hands around his coffee mug.

"Thank you," he said again.

Dimitri nodded.

They sat together in the quiet morning, the apartment still and peaceful around them, both aware that when the others woke the planning would begin, the action would start again, the danger would press back in.

But for now, there was this.

A moment of peace. A moment of rest.

A moment where Artem didn't have to carry everything alone.

And Dimitri, watching him from across the kitchen, felt something shift in his chest—something he didn't have a name for yet, but something real.

Something that mattered.

A knock at the door broke the quiet—three sharp raps, a pattern.

Dimitri set his mug down and moved to the door, checking the peephole before opening it. One of the guards stood there with several grocery bags in his arms.

"Thought you might need supplies," the man said in Russian.

Dimitri took the bags with a nod. "Good thinking."

The door closed and locked again, and Dimitri carried the bags to the kitchen counter. He started unpacking—eggs, milk, butter, bacon, sausage, pancake mix, syrup, bread, fruit.

"You don't have to—" Artem started.

"Three more people to feed," Dimitri said simply, already pulling out a large skillet. "And one of them is a kid who needs a real breakfast."

Artem watched as Dimitri moved through the kitchen with easy competence—bacon going into one pan, sausage into another, a bowl appearing for pancake batter. The man's hands were steady, his movements efficient. Like he'd done this a thousand times before.

The smell of cooking meat filled the apartment, rich and savory. Dimitri whisked the pancake batter, then poured the first circles onto the griddle. They sizzled and bubbled, golden at the edges.

Artem sipped his coffee and watched. There was something almost hypnotic about it—the rhythm of Dimitri's work, the way he flipped the bacon with a fork, checked the sausages, poured more pancake batter.

A sound from the bedroom made them both look up.

The door opened slowly, and Ilya emerged first, his hair mussed, his shirt wrinkled. He had Katerina in his arms, her small body pressed against his chest, her face buried in his shoulder. Behind them came Shane, looking exhausted but alert, his eyes scanning the apartment before settling on the kitchen.

"Morning," Shane said quietly.

"Morning," Dimitri replied, flipping a pancake. "Breakfast in five."

Ilya carried Katerina to the couch and sat down with her still in his arms. She didn't make a sound, but her eyes were open now, watching the room with that same wary stillness.

Shane moved to the kitchen, his hand finding Artem's shoulder briefly as he passed. "You sleep at all?"

"Some," Artem said. It wasn't a lie.

Shane poured himself coffee, then brought the pot to the table and refilled Artem's mug without asking. He leaned against the counter beside Dimitri, watching him work.

"You didn't have to do all this," Shane said.

"Kid needs to eat," Dimitri said, the same thing he'd told Artem. He plated three pancakes, added bacon and sausage, then cut everything into small, manageable pieces. He drizzled syrup over the pancakes and brought the plate to the coffee table.

"Katerina," he said gently, crouching down so he was at her eye level. "I made you breakfast."

She looked at him, then at the plate, then back at Ilya.

Ilya shifted her slightly on his lap. "It's okay, *malyshka*. You should eat."

She didn't speak, but after a moment she reached for the fork. Ilya helped her hold it, and she speared a piece of pancake, brought it to her mouth, chewed slowly.

Dimitri stood and returned to the kitchen, already plating more food.

Shane glanced at the table—at the single chair that remained. "I really need to replace those," he said quietly.

"Later," Artem said. He took his plate from Dimitri and slid down to sit on the floor, his back against the cabinet, his legs stretched out in front of him.

Shane took the chair, pulling it out with a scrape of wood on tile. Dimitri stayed at the counter, leaning against it with his own plate, eating standing up like it was the most natural thing in the world.

The apartment was quiet except for the sounds of eating—forks on plates, the soft scrape of a knife through pancake, the occasional clink of a coffee mug being set down.

Artem watched Katerina from his spot on the floor. She was still silent, still pressed close to Ilya, but she was eating. That was something. That was good.

Shane and Ilya moved around each other with the kind of coordination that came from knowing someone well—Shane refilling Ilya's coffee without being asked, Ilya catching Shane's eye and nodding toward the syrup, Shane passing it before Ilya had to speak.

And Katerina, small and fragile on Ilya's lap, ate her breakfast one careful bite at a time.

Artem felt something tighten in his chest. This was what he'd brought them into. This child, this danger, this disruption of their lives.

But looking at them now—Shane moving between the kitchen and the couch with a glass of juice for Katerina, Ilya murmuring something soft in Russian as she ate, Dimitri quietly making sure everyone had enough food—Artem saw something else too.

He saw people taking care of each other.

He saw family being formed in real time, in the middle of a crisis, because that's what you did. You fed people. You kept them safe. You sat together and ate breakfast even when the world outside was dangerous and uncertain—even when you had to eat on the floor or standing at the counter because there weren't enough chairs.

Katerina finished her pancakes and set her fork down carefully. Ilya wiped her mouth with a napkin, gentle and practiced, like he'd done this before.

"Good?" he asked softly.

She nodded. Just once. But it was something.

Shane caught Artem's eye from across the room and gave him a small, tired smile. *We've got this*, the look said. *We'll figure it out*.

Artem nodded back, his throat tight.

Dimitri stood and started clearing plates, moving through the kitchen with the same quiet efficiency he'd shown all morning.

Shane waited until Katerina was settled back on the couch with Ilya, her small body curled against his side, before he asked the question that had been sitting heavy in his chest all morning.

"So what are we going to do?"

Ilya looked up from where he was stroking Katerina's hair, his expression calm but tired. "You're going to act normal," he said quietly. "Go to work. Maybe hang out with Hayden. Keep your routine."

Shane frowned. "What about you?"

Ilya's hand stilled for a moment on Katerina's head. She'd closed her eyes, her breathing evening out like she might fall asleep again. "I'm going to try to get ahold of Pavel," he said. "See how Alexei is. Make some calls."

Shane nodded slowly. It made sense—Ilya couldn't exactly go skating or show up at the restaurant. Not with Katerina clinging to him, not with everything that needed to be coordinated. But the thought of leaving him here, of going about his day like everything was fine, felt wrong.

Still. If that's what Ilya needed him to do.

He looked over at Artem, who was still sitting on the floor with his back against the cabinet, staring into his empty coffee mug like he was trying to read the future in the dregs.

"Artem," Shane said. "You want to come with me? Just... get out of the house for a bit?"

Artem's head came up, his eyes a little unfocused. Then he blinked and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, okay."

Dimitri glanced at them from the kitchen but didn't say anything. He just kept washing dishes, his movements steady and methodical.

Shane grabbed his board from by the door and his backpack from the bedroom, moving quietly so he wouldn't disturb Katerina. When he came back out, Artem was already standing, looking a little lost but willing.

"We'll be back this afternoon," Shane said to Ilya.

Ilya met his eyes and nodded. "Be careful."

"Always am."

It wasn't true, but it was what Ilya needed to hear.

The rink was busy for a weekday morning—summer brought out all the kids who didn't have jobs or responsibilities, the ones who could spend all day working on their edges and showing off. Shane spotted Hayden almost immediately, lacing up his skates on one of the benches near the boards.

"Yo!" Hayden called when he saw Shane approaching. "Thought you were gonna bail on me."

"Nah, just had a weird morning." Shane sat down to swap his shoes for skates, the familiar ritual grounding. "This is Artem. He's... staying with me and Ilya for a bit."

Hayden gave Artem a quick once-over—taking in the exhaustion, the rumpled clothes, the way he held himself like he was bracing for impact—but he didn't ask questions. "Cool. You skate?"

"No," Artem said quietly. "I'll just watch."

"Suit yourself." Hayden finished tying his laces and stepped onto the ice without preamble, pushing off smoothly and carving a wide arc across the rink.

Shane followed, the cold air and the glide of the blades clearing his head for the first time since last night. This was familiar. This was normal. Push, crossover, turn. The rhythm of it, the focus required, pushed everything else to the edges for a little while.

He was halfway through a lap when he noticed Dimitri.

The man was standing near the boards, maybe twenty feet from where Artem sat on a bench, and they were talking. Not intensely—just... talking. Dimitri's posture was relaxed, his hands in his pockets, but Shane could see the way his eyes kept moving, scanning the rink, the entrance, the people coming and going.

Bodyguard, Shane thought. That made sense. Ilya wouldn't have let them leave without someone watching.

He carved a tight turn and glided to a stop near Hayden, who was leaning against the boards catching his breath.

"Your friend's got a shadow," Hayden said, nodding toward Dimitri. "Isn't that Ilya's uncle?"

"Yeah." Shane didn't elaborate. Hayden didn't push.

They skated for another hour, until Shane's legs were burning and Hayden had to leave for a shift at the pizza place where he worked part-time. By then, Shane was ready for food and to get off his feet.

"You guys want to grab lunch?" Shane asked as they unlaced their skates.

"Hell yeah," Hayden said. "I'm starving."

Artem fell into step beside them as they left the rink, and Dimitri followed at a distance, close enough to intervene if needed but far enough to give the illusion of space.

The restaurant was quiet in the lull between breakfast and dinner service. Shane led them to a booth near the back, and they ordered without looking at the menus—Shane knew everything by heart, and Artem seemed too tired to care what he ate.

When the food came, Artem stared down at his beef stroganoff like he wasn't sure what to do with it. Then he picked up his fork and started eating, slow and mechanical, like he was forcing himself through the motions.

Hayden talked through most of the meal—something about a video he'd seen, a new trick he wanted to learn, some drama with the team. Shane listened with half his attention, the other half on Artem, who was pushing noodles around his plate and not really engaging.

When Hayden finally finished eating, he checked his phone and swore. "Shit, I gotta go. I'm gonna be late for work."

"Thanks for skating," Shane said.

"Anytime, man." Hayden clapped him on the shoulder and headed for the door, leaving Shane and Artem alone in the booth.

Shane expected Artem to leave too—to head back to the apartment, maybe try to sleep—but instead he just sat there, staring at his empty plate.

"You don't have to stay," Shane said quietly. "I'm just working the rest of the afternoon."

Artem shook his head. "I'll stay. Keep an eye on you."

Shane raised an eyebrow. "You think I need a babysitter?"

"I think..." Artem hesitated, then sighed. "I'm not much help back at the apartment. I don't know any of Ilya's men. I don't know what to do. At least here I can... I don't know. Be useful."

Shane studied him for a moment, then nodded. "Alright. But you know Dimitri now."

Artem's face went red so fast it was almost comical. He looked down at his hands, his jaw working like he was trying to figure out what to say.

"I—yeah. I guess."

Shane bit back a smile. Interesting.

"Come on," he said, standing. "I've got a shift to start."

The afternoon was steady but not overwhelming—a few tables, some takeout orders, the usual rhythm of a weekday lunch service winding down into the quiet hours before dinner prep started. Shane moved through it on autopilot, his hands busy while his mind drifted back to the apartment, to Ilya and Katerina, to the weight of everything that had landed on them in the span of a single night.

He was refilling water glasses when the man at table six flagged him down.

"Excuse me," the man said, his tone already sharp. "I need to talk to you about my food."

Shane set the water pitcher down and pulled out his notepad. "What's the problem?"

"This." The man gestured at his plate—pelmeni in a rich sour cream sauce, exactly what he'd ordered. "This isn't what I wanted."

Shane frowned. "You ordered the pelmeni, right? That's what you got."

"I ordered *Russian dumplings*," the man said, his voice rising slightly. "This is... I don't know what this is, but it's not what I expected."

Shane took a slow breath, keeping his expression neutral. "Pelmeni are Russian dumplings. That's what they are."

"Well, they're not what I thought they'd be. I want something else."

"You've already eaten half of them."

The man's face flushed. "Because I was *trying* to give them a chance. But they're not good. I want something different."

Shane could feel the exhaustion creeping in at the edges, the thinness of his patience worn down by too little sleep and too much stress. But he kept his voice even, professional.

"I can get you something else," he said. "But you'll be charged for both dishes."

"That's ridiculous. I shouldn't have to pay for something I didn't like."

"You ordered it. You ate half of it. That's how it works."

The man leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "I want to speak to a manager."

Shane bit the inside of his cheek. "I'll get her."

He walked back to the kitchen, where Vera was prepping vegetables for the dinner service, and explained the situation in as few words as possible.

Vera sighed, wiped her hands on her apron, and headed out to the dining room.

Shane didn't follow. He just stood there for a moment, his hands braced on the counter, and let himself breathe.

Normal, he thought. Ilya wanted him to act normal.

This was normal.

By the time his shift ended, Shane's feet ached and his shoulders were tight with tension he'd been holding all day. He changed out of his work shirt in the back room, pulled on his jacket, and grabbed the takeout containers he'd packed earlier—pelmeni, blini with sour cream, and enough kasha to feed everyone twice over.

Vera had waved him off when he'd tried to pay. "Take it," she'd said. "You look like you need it."

Shane hadn't argued.

He pushed through the front door into the cool evening air and spotted Dimitri's car idling at the curb. Artem was in the passenger seat, his head tipped back against the headrest, eyes

half-closed.

Dimitri got out when he saw Shane, moving around to open the back door.

"You don't have to do that," Shane said.

"I know." Dimitri's expression didn't change, but there was something almost amused in his eyes.

Shane slid into the back seat, balancing the takeout bags on his lap. The car smelled faintly of coffee and leather, and the heat was on just enough to take the edge off the January chill.

Artem turned in his seat as Dimitri got back behind the wheel. "Long day?"

"Long enough." Shane met his eyes. "You?"

Artem let out a slow breath, rolling his shoulders like they'd been locked in place for hours. "I've been watching people all day. At the rink, at the restaurant, during your shift." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Dimitri says I need to stop looking at everyone like they're a threat, but—"

"But you don't know who is," Shane finished quietly.

"Yeah."

Dimitri pulled into traffic, his hands steady on the wheel. "He did good," he said, his tone matter-of-fact. "Stayed alert. Didn't draw attention. Caught two people who were watching too long."

Artem's jaw tightened. "They were probably just customers."

"Probably," Dimitri agreed. "But you noticed them."

Artem didn't argue.

Shane leaned back against the seat, watching the city slide past the window—storefronts and streetlights and people heading home. It felt surreal, the normalcy of it. Like the world didn't know that his apartment was a safe house, that a little girl who'd watched her mother die was sleeping in his bed, that somewhere in Russia a man was lying in a hospital bed with Pavel standing guard.

"Ilya hear anything?" Shane asked.

Dimitri's eyes flicked to the rearview mirror. "He'll tell you when we get back."

That wasn't a no.

Shane nodded and didn't push.

The rest of the drive passed in silence, the kind that wasn't uncomfortable—just three people too tired to fill the space with words.

The apartment was quieter than Shane expected when they walked in.

Ilya was sitting on the couch with Katerina curled up beside him, her head resting against his arm. She was awake, her dark eyes tracking their movement as they came through the door, but she didn't move.

Ilya looked up, and something in his expression eased when he saw Shane.

"You're back."

"Yeah." Shane held up the takeout bags. "Brought dinner."

Katerina's gaze shifted to the bags, and for the first time since she'd arrived, Shane saw something that looked like interest.

Artem moved past him, heading straight for the couch. He crouched down in front of Katerina, his voice soft. "Hey, *malyshka*. You hungry?"

She didn't answer, but she sat up a little straighter.

Shane carried the food into the kitchen and started unpacking it onto plates—there was only one chair at the table, so he set everything up on the counter instead, spreading it out so people could grab what they wanted.

Dimitri leaned against the doorway, watching. "You need help?"

"I've got it."

But Dimitri stayed anyway, and when Shane handed him a plate, he took it without comment.

Artem coaxed Katerina off the couch, and she followed him into the kitchen, her small hand wrapped around two of his fingers. Ilya came behind them, his hand resting briefly on Shane's lower back as he passed—just a touch, but it was enough.

Shane handed Katerina a plate with a little bit of everything, and she stared down at it for a long moment before picking up a blini and taking a small, cautious bite.

Then another.

Artem let out a breath Shane hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Good?" Artem asked.

Katerina didn't answer, but she kept eating.

They stood around the kitchen, plates balanced on the counter or held in their hands, and for a few minutes, it almost felt normal. Dimitri said something low to Artem that made him huff a

quiet laugh. Katerina ate three more blini and half a bowl of kasha. Ilya stayed close to Shane, his presence solid and grounding.

When Katerina finally set her plate down, her eyelids were drooping.

Ilya glanced at Shane, then at Artem. "I'll put her down."

Artem nodded, and Ilya scooped Katerina up easily, carrying her toward the bedroom. She didn't protest, just tucked her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Shane started cleaning up, scraping plates and packing away leftovers, and Dimitri moved to help without being asked. Artem hovered near the counter, his arms crossed, staring at nothing.

"She ate," Shane said quietly.

Artem's throat worked. "Yeah."

"That's good."

"Yeah."

Dimitri's hand brushed Artem's shoulder as he passed, just briefly, and Artem's eyes tracked him across the room.

Ilya came back a few minutes later, closing the bedroom door softly behind him. He looked tired—more tired than Shane had seen him in weeks—but there was something settled in his expression now, something that hadn't been there this morning.

"She's asleep," Ilya said.

Shane nodded. He finished wiping down the counter, then turned to face him. "You talked to Alexei?"

Ilya's gaze flicked to Artem, then back to Shane. "Yeah. About an hour ago."

Artem straightened. "He's—"

"Alive," Ilya said. "Pavel got him stable. He's not moving much for a few weeks, but he'll recover."

The relief that washed over Artem's face was so stark it was almost painful to watch. He braced his hands on the counter, his head dropping forward, and for a moment he just breathed.

Dimitri stepped closer, his presence quiet but deliberate.

Shane met Ilya's eyes. "He asked us to take care of her."

It wasn't a question.

Ilya nodded. "He did."

Shane didn't hesitate. "Of course we will."

Ilya's expression softened, and he reached out, his hand curling around the back of Shane's neck. "I know."

There was no question in it. No doubt.

Just certainty.

Shane leaned into the touch for a moment, letting himself feel the weight of it—the trust, the partnership, the quiet understanding that they were in this together.

Behind them, Artem straightened, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Thank you," he said, his voice rough. "Both of you. I don't—" He stopped, shook his head. "Thank you."

"You don't have to thank us," Shane said.

Artem looked at him, then at Ilya, and something in his expression cracked just a little. "Yeah," he said quietly. "I do."

Dimitri's hand settled on Artem's shoulder, steady and sure, and this time Artem didn't pull away.

Chapter 22: K-I-S-S-I-N-G

The apartment had settled into an uneasy quiet after dinner. Artem lay on the guest bed, staring at the ceiling, his mind refusing to shut down. Every creak of the building, every distant sound from the street below sent his pulse spiking. He'd been running on adrenaline for so long that his body didn't know how to stop.

After twenty minutes of futile attempts at sleep, he gave up and padded into the living room in his borrowed sweatpants and t-shirt.

Dimitri was standing by the window, one hand holding the curtain aside just enough to scan the street below. He turned at the sound of Artem's footsteps, his dark eyes assessing.

"Can't sleep," Artem said, unnecessarily.

Dimitri let the curtain fall back into place. "Couch," he said, gesturing. It wasn't a suggestion.

"I'm fine—"

"Couch." Dimitri's tone left no room for argument. He moved to the reclining chair positioned at an angle that gave him a clear view of both the front door and the window. "I'll be here."

Artem wanted to protest, but exhaustion was catching up with him now that he was out of the bedroom's oppressive silence. He settled onto the couch, pulling the throw blanket over himself. The couch was cool against his cheek as he turned on his side.

Dimitri had already reclined the chair, his long legs stretched out, but his posture was still alert. Even relaxed, he looked ready to move at a moment's notice.

Artem watched him in the dim light filtering through the curtains. Dimitri's face was all hard angles and shadows—the scar cutting through his left eyebrow caught the light, a pale line against darker skin. His lips were fuller than Artem expected on a man built like that, softening features that would otherwise be too severe.

He was older. Forty-something, maybe. Old enough that the lines around his eyes and mouth spoke of experience, of things seen and done that Artem could only guess at.

Artem was twenty-six. Blonde and blue-eyed and too obviously Slavic, the kind of features that made people back home call him *krasavchik*—pretty boy. He'd always been shorter than he wanted to be, five-nine in boots, and next to Dimitri's solid six feet he felt almost delicate.

Artem's eyes were getting heavy now, the weight of the day finally catching up with him. He watched Dimitri's chest rise and fall in steady rhythm, watched the way his hand rested loose on the arm of the chair, ready but not tense.

Outside, he could hear the low murmur of voices—Ilya's other men, positioned around the building. The knowledge that they were there, that Dimitri was here, was more comforting than it should have been.

He fell back asleep listening to it.

Dimitri waited until Artem's breathing evened out completely before he let himself look.

The kid—no, not a kid, twenty-six wasn't a kid—was sprawled on the couch now, one arm thrown over his head, the other tucked against his chest. His blonde hair caught what little light came through the curtains, making it look almost white in places. In sleep, the tension that had been carved into his face all day finally smoothed out, making him look younger than he was.

Dimitri had been doing this work for twenty years. Guarding people, watching doors, reading rooms for threats. He knew how to position himself to see everything that mattered—the window, the door, the hallway beyond. He knew how to stay alert through long nights, how to keep his mind sharp when his body wanted to shut down.

He'd guarded plenty of people. Politicians. Businessmen. Ilya's associates when they needed extra security. Women, men, families. It was a job. You kept them safe, you got paid, you moved on to the next assignment.

This didn't feel like that.

Artem shifted slightly, turning his face toward the back of the couch, and Dimitri's eyes tracked the movement automatically. The line of his neck was pale and exposed, vulnerable in a way that made something tighten in Dimitri's chest. His features were fine—delicate, almost. The kind of face that made people underestimate him, probably. Pretty boy. *Krasavchik*. Dimitri had heard someone call him that earlier, one of the other men, and Artem had rolled his eyes but hadn't argued.

Because it was true.

Dimitri had noticed it the first time he'd seen him, back when this whole mess started. Noticed the way Artem moved, quick and careful. Noticed the blue eyes that looked too tired for someone his age. Noticed the way he held himself like he was ready to run or fight, whichever came first.

He'd noticed, and he'd filed it away as irrelevant. You didn't get distracted on a job. You didn't let yourself think about the person you were guarding as anything other than the assignment.

But watching Artem sleep now, seeing the way his chest rose and fell in steady rhythm, the way his mouth was slightly parted, the way he looked almost peaceful for the first time since Dimitri had met him—

Dimitri liked it.

Liked the way Artem looked. Liked the sharp intelligence behind those blue eyes when he was awake, the way he didn't waste words, the way he'd spent an entire day watching Shane for threats without complaint. Liked that he was tougher than he looked, that he didn't fold under pressure.

Liked that he was pretty, and didn't apologize for it.

Dimitri shifted in the reclining chair, adjusting his position so he could see the door more clearly. Professional. He was here to do a job. Artem was under his protection, which meant keeping him safe, not—

Artem made a small sound in his sleep, something between a sigh and a murmur, and Dimitri's attention snapped back to him immediately. But the kid didn't wake. Just settled deeper into the couch, his body finally relaxing after the tension of the day.

Outside, Dimitri could hear the low voices of Ilya's men making their rounds. The building was secure. The hallway was clear. Everything was as it should be.

He let himself look at Artem for another moment—at the blonde hair falling across his forehead, at the way sleep made him look softer, younger, less guarded.

Then Dimitri turned his attention back to the door, to the window, to the job.

But he remained aware of every breath Artem took, every small shift of his body on the couch. Aware in a way that had nothing to do with professional vigilance and everything to do with the fact that he wanted to keep watching him, wanted to make sure nothing touched him, wanted—

Dimitri cut the thought off and settled into the familiar rhythm of a long watch. Alert. Ready. Professional.

The fact that he could still see Artem in his peripheral vision, could still hear the quiet sound of his breathing, was just a detail. Just part of the job.

He told himself that, and almost believed it.

In the bedroom, Shane stood in the doorway watching Katerina sleep. She was curled on her side in the middle of the bed, one small fist tucked under her chin, her dark hair spread across the pillow. She'd fallen asleep almost immediately after Ilya carried her in here, exhausted from the long day.

Ilya stood beside Shane, close enough that their shoulders touched.

Shane looked at Katerina's face—peaceful now in sleep, her dark lashes resting against pale cheeks. She looked so small. So breakable. Three years old and she'd already seen more horror than most people experienced in a lifetime.

She shifted slightly, making a small sound, and Shane held still until she settled again.

"She trusts you," Ilya said quietly.

Shane glanced up at him. "She trusts you too."

"She knows me from the phone calls. You're new."

"Maybe that's easier," Shane said. "I don't remind her of before."

Ilya's expression softened, and he reached up to touch Shane's face, his thumb brushing Shane's cheekbone. Then he tilted his head toward the bathroom, a question in his eyes.

Shane looked down at Katerina again. She was deeply asleep now, her breathing even and slow.

Carefully, slowly, Shane scooted toward the edge of the bed. Ilya moved at the same time, both of them practiced at this kind of quiet movement. Katerina stirred but didn't wake, just rolled slightly into the warm spot Shane had left behind.

They made it to the bathroom and Ilya closed the door softly behind them, turning the lock.

For a moment they just stood there, looking at each other in the harsh fluorescent light. Then Ilya reached for Shane, pulling him close, and Shane went willingly, wrapping his arms around Ilya's waist and pressing his face against his shoulder.

"You did good today," Ilya murmured against his hair.

"So did you. You're so good with her."

Ilya's hands moved down Shane's back, solid and grounding. "Shower?"

"Yeah."

They stripped efficiently, dropping clothes on the floor, and Ilya turned on the water, adjusting the temperature before pulling Shane in with him. The shower was big enough for two, with plenty of room but they pressed close together, the hot water immediately fogging the glass.

For a moment they just stood there, letting the water run over them, washing away the tension of the day. Then Ilya's hands were in Shane's hair, tilting his head back, and he kissed him—slow and deep and thorough.

Shane made a soft sound against his mouth, his hands sliding over Ilya's wet skin, mapping familiar territory. They'd done this plenty of times, but it never got old. The weight of Ilya's body against his, the way Ilya kissed like he had all the time in the world even when they both knew they didn't.

Ilya's mouth moved to Shane's jaw, his throat, working his way down. Shane's breath hitched as Ilya dropped to his knees, water streaming over both of them.

"Ilya—"

"Quiet," Ilya said, looking up at him with dark eyes. "Don't wake her."

Then his mouth was on Shane's cock and Shane had to brace one hand against the tile wall to stay upright.

Ilya knew exactly what he was doing—had learned Shane's body the way he learned everything, with focus and attention to detail. He took his time, using his tongue and lips and the perfect amount of pressure, and Shane had to bite down on his other fist to keep from making noise.

The water kept running, providing cover, and Shane looked down at Ilya kneeling in front of him—this man who ran an empire, who commanded respect and fear in equal measure, who was currently sucking Shane's dick in a cramped shower while a traumatized child slept in the next room.

It shouldn't have been hot, but it was. The intimacy of it, the trust, the way Ilya gave this to him even in the middle of everything else.

Shane came with a bitten-off gasp, his hand tightening in Ilya's hair, and Ilya took it all, swallowing and then pulling back to press a kiss to Shane's hip.

"Your turn," Shane said roughly, already reaching for him.

Ilya stood, and Shane switched their positions, pressing Ilya back against the tile. Ilya's cock was hard and flushed, and Shane didn't waste time, just took him in his mouth and got to work.

Ilya's hand came to rest on the back of Shane's head, not pushing, just holding. Shane could feel the tension in Ilya's thighs, the way he was holding himself still, trying to stay quiet. Shane took him deeper, hollowing his cheeks, using everything he'd learned about what Ilya liked.

It didn't take long. Ilya was wound tight from the stress of the day, from watching Shane leave that morning not knowing what might happen, from coordinating security and talking to Pavel and keeping Katerina calm.

When he came, his hand tightened in Shane's hair and he made a low sound in his chest that Shane felt more than heard.

Shane pulled back slowly, wiping his mouth, and Ilya hauled him up for a kiss that tasted like both of them.

They finished washing quickly after that, practical again, and dried off with the same efficiency. Shane pulled on clean boxers and a t-shirt. Ilya did the same.

When they slipped back into the bedroom, Katerina was exactly where they'd left her, still deeply asleep, her small face peaceful in the dim light from the hallway.

Shane climbed back into bed carefully, and she immediately rolled toward him, seeking his warmth. He settled her against his side again, and Ilya got in on her other side, creating a

protective barrier around her.

Ilya's hand found Shane's across Katerina's sleeping form, their fingers linking together.

They didn't say anything. They didn't need to.

Artem woke to gray morning light filtering through the curtains and the immediate awareness that he wasn't alone.

He opened his eyes slowly, still half-tangled in the blanket Dimitri had given him last night, and found Dimitri already awake in the reclining chair. Not just awake—alert. His dark eyes were on the door, his posture relaxed but ready, and when Artem shifted on the couch, those eyes moved to him immediately.

"Morning," Dimitri said quietly.

Artem pushed himself up on one elbow, his blonde hair sticking up on one side. "How long have you been awake?"

"A while."

"Did you sleep at all?"

Dimitri's mouth curved slightly. "Enough."

Artem doubted that. He sat up fully, the blanket pooling around his waist, and rubbed his face with both hands. His body ached from yesterday—from the tension of watching Shane all day, from the hypervigilance that never quite turned off, from sleeping on a couch that was too short for him.

But he'd slept. Deeply. Because Dimitri had been right there.

"You slept well," Dimitri said. It wasn't a question.

Artem looked at him. "Yeah."

Something passed between them in the quiet—an acknowledgment of what that meant. That Artem had felt safe enough to sleep. That Dimitri had stayed awake to make sure he could.

Dimitri stood, stretching slightly, and winced when his left arm protested—the one Pavel had broken. Artem watched the way his shoulders moved under his shirt, the way his spine straightened despite the pain. He was a big man. Solid. The kind of presence that took up space without trying.

"Come on," Dimitri said. "I'll make coffee."

The apartment came alive slowly.

Shane emerged first, moving quietly so he wouldn't wake Katerina. He looked tired but steady, his hair damp from the shower, and he nodded at Artem and Dimitri as he headed for the kitchen.

Ilya followed a few minutes later, already dressed, his phone in his hand. He was texting someone—probably Pavel, Artem thought—and he barely looked up as he poured himself coffee.

Katerina was the last to wake. Artem heard her small voice from the bedroom, calling for Shane, and Shane went to her immediately.

When he brought her out, she was rubbing her eyes with one fist, her dark hair messy from sleep. She looked so small in Shane's arms, her legs dangling, her face pressed against his shoulder.

Shane set her down at the table, and she climbed into the chair next to Ilya without a word.

Dimitri was already making breakfast—eggs, bread, butter. He worked mostly with his right hand, his left arm moving carefully, stiffly, when he had to use it. Simple food, but there was something comforting about the routine of it. The smell of coffee and toast filled the small kitchen, and Artem found himself relaxing slightly despite everything.

He sat at the table across from Katerina, and Dimitri set a plate in front of him without asking. Eggs, two slices of bread, butter melting into the warm surface.

"Eat," Dimitri said.

Artem picked up his fork.

Dimitri didn't sit. He leaned against the counter with his own coffee, close enough that Artem could feel his presence like a weight in the room. When Artem glanced up, Dimitri was watching him—not obviously, not intrusively, but watching.

Making sure he ate.

Making sure he was okay.

Artem looked back down at his plate and took another bite.

Shane was coaxing Katerina to eat, his voice low and patient, and Ilya was still on his phone, his expression unreadable. The apartment felt crowded and small, all of them crammed into this space together, but there was something grounding about it too.

Artem finished his eggs and reached for his coffee. When he lifted the cup, he caught Dimitri's eyes again.

Dimitri's gaze didn't waver.

Artem's stomach tightened—not from fear, not from stress, but from something else entirely. Something he'd been trying not to think about.

He looked away first, focusing on his coffee, but he could still feel Dimitri watching him.

When breakfast was over, Shane started clearing plates, and Ilya finally put his phone down. Katerina climbed into Ilya's lap, and he wrapped his arms around her automatically, his chin resting on top of her head.

Artem stood, carrying his plate to the sink.

"I'm going to shower," he said to no one in particular.

Dimitri's eyes followed him as he left the room.

The bathroom was small and steamy from Shane's earlier shower, the mirror still fogged at the edges. Artem closed the door behind him and locked it, then leaned against it for a moment, letting out a slow breath.

He could still feel Dimitri's gaze on him.

He stripped quickly, leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor, and turned on the shower. The water took a moment to heat up, and when it did, he stepped under the spray and let it hit his shoulders, his neck, his face.

For a few minutes, he just stood there, letting the heat work into his muscles, trying to relax.

But his mind wouldn't settle.

He kept thinking about Dimitri. About the way Dimitri had looked at him this morning. About the way Dimitri had stayed close during breakfast, hovering, protective, like Artem was something that needed guarding.

About Dimitri's hands.

Artem braced one hand against the tile wall and closed his eyes, water streaming down his back.

Dimitri's hands were big. He'd noticed that yesterday—noticed the way they dwarfed the coffee cup he'd been holding, the way they'd looked when he'd handed Artem the blanket. Broad palms, thick fingers, scarred knuckles.

Artem wondered what they would feel like on his skin.

His cock was already half-hard, and he wrapped his hand around it slowly, testing, his breath catching slightly at the contact.

He thought about Dimitri's mouth. Those big lips. The way they'd curved when Dimitri had smiled at him this morning—just barely, just a hint of warmth breaking through that

professional exterior.

Artem stroked himself slowly, his other hand still braced against the wall, and let himself imagine it.

Dimitri's hands on him. Those big hands gripping his hips, his thighs, holding him in place. Dimitri's mouth on his neck, his collarbone, moving lower.

Artem bit his lip to keep quiet, his hand moving faster now, the water making everything slick and easy.

He imagined Dimitri's weight pressing him down, that solid body covering his, those hands pinning his wrists above his head. He imagined Dimitri's voice in his ear—low, rough, telling him to be quiet, telling him to take it.

His breath hitched, and he had to press his forehead against the tile to steady himself.

He imagined Dimitri's mouth on his cock, those lips stretched around him, and that was what did it.

He came hard, biting down on his own hand to muffle the sound, his whole body tensing as pleasure rolled through him in waves.

For a moment, he just stood there, shaking slightly, his hand still braced against the wall, water streaming over him.

Then he straightened slowly, catching his breath, and reached for the soap.

His heart was still pounding, and there was a faint flush of guilt creeping up his neck—not because of what he'd done, but because Dimitri was right outside that door. Because Dimitri had been watching him all morning with those dark, unreadable eyes, and Artem had just gotten himself off thinking about him.

But the guilt didn't last long.

He finished washing quickly, rinsed off, and turned off the water.

When he stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel, he caught his own reflection in the fogged mirror—flushed, wet, his blonde hair plastered to his head.

He looked like exactly what he was.

Someone who wanted something he probably shouldn't.

The bathroom door opened, and Artem stepped out, a towel slung over his shoulder, his hair still damp and sticking up in places.

He was wearing only sweatpants, his chest bare, water still beading on his skin.

He froze when he saw everyone at the table.

Shane glanced up, then back at Katerina, unbothered.

Ilya raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

Artem's face flushed, and he quickly crossed to the couch, grabbing one of Shane's old shirts from the pile of clothes they'd been sharing. He pulled it on fast, tugging it down over his stomach.

When he turned back around, Dimitri was standing in the hallway, one hand braced against the doorframe of the guest room.

Their eyes met.

Artem's breath caught, and for a second, neither of them moved.

Dimitri's gaze flicked down—just briefly—to the shirt Artem was wearing, then back up to his face.

Artem swallowed and looked away first, his heart hammering.

"I can take watch," Artem said quickly, looking at Ilya. "If you need someone—"

"No," Ilya said, not looking up from his coffee. "Stick around. Make sure Dimitri actually sleeps."

Artem blinked. "What?"

"You heard me."

Dimitri made a sound that might have been a scoff, but he didn't argue. He just turned and disappeared into the guest room.

Artem stood there for a moment, staring at the empty hallway.

Then he followed.

The guest room was large— but just had a bed, a nightstand, and a large window with blackout curtains pulled halfway open. Dimitri was lying on top of the covers, still fully dressed, his phone in his hand.

Artem stopped in the doorway. "You're supposed to be sleeping."

Dimitri didn't look up. "I'm fine."

"You look like shit."

That got Dimitri's attention. He glanced up, one eyebrow raised, and Artem felt his face heat again.

"I mean—" Artem started.

"I know what you mean," Dimitri said, his voice dry.

Artem stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He crossed to the window and yanked the blackout curtains shut, plunging the room into near-darkness.

"Hey—"

Artem turned and plucked the phone out of Dimitri's hand.

"*Artem—*"

"Sleep," Artem said firmly, setting the phone on the nightstand, out of reach.

Dimitri stared at him, his expression caught somewhere between annoyed and amused.

Then Artem walked around to the other side of the bed and sat down on the edge, toeing off his shoes.

"What are you doing?" Dimitri asked.

"Making sure you sleep," Artem said. He swung his legs up onto the bed and lay down on top of the covers, his back to Dimitri, his heart pounding so hard he was sure Dimitri could hear it.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then Dimitri made a low sound—half scoff, half laugh—and Artem felt the mattress shift as Dimitri moved.

"Get under the covers," Dimitri said.

Artem went still. "What?"

"You heard me." Dimitri tugged at the blanket trapped under Artem's body. "We both could use the extra sleep. Get under."

Artem's mouth went dry.

He didn't move.

"*Artem,*" Dimitri said, his voice lower now, rougher. "Get under the fucking covers."

Artem's hands were shaking as he lifted himself up just enough for Dimitri to pull the blanket free. Then he slid beneath it, the fabric settling over his shoulders, warm and heavy.

He could feel Dimitri next to him—close, so close. The heat of his body, the weight of him on the mattress, the sound of his breathing.

Artem closed his eyes and tried to steady his own breath.

His heart was pounding.

He could feel every inch of space between them—and it wasn't enough.

Dimitri shifted slightly, and Artem felt the brush of his arm against his own.

Neither of them said anything.

Artem kept his eyes closed and tried to sleep.

But all he could think about was Dimitri's hands.

And his mouth.

And the fact that they were in a bed together.

Shane's hands were shaking when he buttoned his work shirt.

He'd done this a thousand times. Button, button, button. Tuck it in. Belt. The motions were automatic, muscle memory, but his fingers felt clumsy and disconnected.

He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror.

His face looked wrong. Pale. Tight around the eyes.

He needed to leave for his shift in ten minutes.

The restaurant needed him. Vera had texted yesterday—they were short-staffed, could Shane please come in if he felt up to it? And Shane had said yes because what else was he supposed to do? Sit here and stare at the walls while armed men stood outside his door?

He could work. He was fine.

He splashed cold water on his face and dried it with a towel that smelled like Ilya's detergent.

His hands were still shaking.

In the living room, Katerina was curled up on the couch with her Hello Kitty blanket, watching cartoons. Something bright and loud with talking animals. She looked small and safe, her legs tucked under her, her thumb near her mouth but not quite in it.

Ilya was in the kitchen, talking quietly on his phone in Russian. Business.

Shane picked up his keys from the counter.

His chest felt tight.

He looked at the door.

Just walk out. Go to work. Do your job. Come home.

Simple.

He took a step toward the door.

His legs felt heavy.

He took another step.

The tightness in his chest got worse—like someone had wrapped a band around his ribs and was pulling it tighter, tighter, until he couldn't expand his lungs all the way.

He stopped in front of the door, keys in his hand.

Just open it.

His hand wouldn't move.

Behind him, Ilya's voice had gone quiet. The phone call must have ended.

Shane stared at the door handle.

His vision was starting to blur at the edges, and his breathing had gone shallow and fast, and his hands were shaking so badly the keys were jingling.

He couldn't do this.

He turned away from the door and walked—too fast, too stiff—toward the bedroom.

"Shane?"

Ilya's voice, concerned, but Shane didn't stop. He made it into the bedroom and closed the door behind him, leaning back against it, his whole body trembling now.

The door opened a second later.

Of course it did.

Ilya stepped inside, his expression shifting immediately from concern to alarm. "Shane—"

"Don't." Shane's voice came out shaky and too high. He held up a hand, palm out, even though it was shaking. "Don't—just—"

Ilya moved toward him anyway, reaching for him, and Shane flinched back.

"Go sit with Katerina," Shane said. His voice cracked. "I need—I need a minute. Alone."

Ilya stopped, his hand still half-extended. "Shane—"

"*Please*." Shane squeezed his eyes shut. His chest was so tight he could barely breathe. "I just—I need—go sit with her. Please."

For a long moment, Ilya didn't move.

Shane could feel him there, could feel the weight of his presence, the way he wanted to reach out and hold Shane together because that's what Ilya did—he fixed things, he protected people, he held them when they broke.

But Shane couldn't do that right now.

He couldn't be touched right now.

He needed space. He needed quiet. He needed to fall apart alone because if Ilya touched him, if Ilya held him, Shane would shatter completely and he didn't know if he'd be able to put himself back together.

"Okay," Ilya said finally, his voice rough. "Okay. I'll be on the couch."

Shane heard him leave. Heard the door click shut.

And then he was alone.

He slid down the door until he was sitting on the floor, his knees pulled up to his chest, and he buried his face in his arms and started to cry.

It came out in shaky, gasping sobs—ugly and raw and too loud. His whole body was shaking, trembling so hard his teeth chattered, and he couldn't stop it. Couldn't control it.

Everything he'd been holding together for the past three days came crashing down all at once.

Alexei's blood on Artem's track suit. Katerina's small hand in his. The weight of the gun Ilya had given him. The armed men outside his door. The way Artem looked at Dimitri. The way Katerina flinched at loud noises. The way Ilya's jaw tightened every time his phone rang.

The fact that Shane had said *yes* to all of this.

The fact that he'd chosen this life.

The fact that he loved Ilya so much it terrified him.

He pressed his forehead against his knees and sobbed, his breath coming in short, painful gasps, his chest aching with the effort of it.

He didn't know how long he sat there.

Eventually, the sobs slowed. His breathing evened out. His hands stopped shaking quite so badly.

He lifted his head and wiped his face with his sleeve.

His eyes felt swollen. His throat hurt.

But the tightness in his chest had eased.

He could breathe again.

He sat there for another minute, staring at nothing, letting his body settle.

Then he stood up, his legs unsteady, and went to the bathroom to wash his face.

He wasn't going to work today.

He'd text Vera. Tell her he couldn't make it.

He looked at himself in the mirror—red-eyed, blotchy, exhausted—and took a slow, deep breath.

Then he opened the bedroom door.

Ilya was sitting on the couch with Katerina in his lap, her head resting against his chest, the cartoon still playing on the TV. He looked up immediately when Shane appeared, his dark eyes searching Shane's face.

Shane walked over and sat down next to him.

Ilya didn't say anything. He just shifted slightly, making room, and Shane leaned into him—carefully, slowly, letting himself settle against Ilya's side.

Ilya's arm came around him, solid and warm.

Katerina looked up at Shane with her big, solemn eyes.

"Hey," Shane said quietly.

She reached out and patted his knee with her small hand.

Shane closed his eyes and let himself breathe.

Dimitri woke to warmth.

Not the alert snap of consciousness he was used to—the instant assessment of threat, location, status. This was slower. Heavier. His body dragging itself up from somewhere deep and dark where he hadn't been in years.

He blinked at the blackout curtains, disoriented.

Then he realized: he'd actually slept.

Hours. Real sleep. The kind that left him groggy and thick-headed instead of wired.

His stomach twisted with hunger, sharp and immediate.

And then he realized something else.

He was wrapped around Artem.

His left arm was slung over Artem's waist, his chest pressed against Artem's back, his face close enough to smell the faint scent of Shane's borrowed shampoo in Artem's hair. Their legs were tangled under the blanket, Artem's body fitting against his like they'd done this a hundred times before.

Dimitri went still.

He should move. Pull back. Put distance between them.

But he didn't.

He was comfortable. More comfortable than he'd been in months. Maybe years. Artem was warm and solid against him, breathing slow and even, and Dimitri's body didn't want to let go. Even the ache in his arm felt distant, secondary to the warmth pressed against him.

Then Artem shifted.

Just slightly—a small adjustment of his shoulders, his hips pressing back a fraction of an inch.

Dimitri's breath caught.

Artem was awake.

He didn't know how he knew, but he did. Something about the quality of Artem's stillness, the way his breathing had changed.

Dimitri's arm tightened reflexively around Artem's waist.

Artem turned his head.

Their eyes met.

They were close. Too close. Dimitri could see the exact shade of blue in Artem's eyes, the faint shadows beneath them, the way his pupils dilated as they stared at each other.

Artem's lips parted.

And then he kissed him.

It wasn't hesitant. Wasn't a question.

Artem twisted in Dimitri's arms and pressed their mouths together, his hand coming up to grip the front of Dimitri's shirt, pulling him closer.

Dimitri responded before his brain could catch up.

He kissed back hard, hungry, his right hand sliding up to cup the back of Artem's neck. Artem made a sound—low and desperate—and opened his mouth, and Dimitri was lost.

He'd been thinking about this. Trying not to think about this. Watching Artem's mouth and his hands and the way he moved, and now Artem was kissing him like he'd been thinking about it too.

Dimitri's other hand found Artem's hip, gripping tight, and Artem pressed closer, their bodies flush together under the blanket.

The kiss was messy. Urgent. All the tension of the past days breaking open between them.

Dimitri could feel Artem's heart pounding against his chest. Could feel his own pulse hammering in his throat.

He wanted more. Wanted to roll Artem onto his back, wanted to taste every inch of him, wanted—

They broke apart, panting.

Staring at each other.

Artem's lips were red and swollen. His eyes were dark, pupils blown wide.

Dimitri's mind was racing.

This was a bad idea. This was the worst possible idea. Artem was under his protection, in the middle of a crisis, vulnerable and—

"Late," Dimitri said.

His voice came out rough. Wrecked.

Artem blinked at him.

"It's late," Dimitri said again. He pulled back, untangling himself from Artem's body, from the blanket, from the heat between them. "I need to check in."

He got up.

His legs felt unsteady. His whole body felt unsteady.

He didn't look back at Artem as he left the room.

Ilya was in the hallway outside Shane's apartment door, holding plastic bags that smelled like Chinese food.

He looked up when Dimitri emerged from the guest room, and his expression didn't change, but Dimitri saw the flicker of assessment in his eyes.

"You slept," Ilya said.

"Yeah."

"Good." Ilya handed him one of the bags. "You look less like death. Help me with this."

Dimitri took the bag and followed Ilya inside.

The apartment was quiet. Shane was sitting on the couch with Katerina curled against his side, her Hello Kitty blanket draped over both of them. She was watching cartoons, and Shane had his arm around her, but his eyes tracked to Ilya immediately when they walked in.

"Food," Ilya announced.

Shane's expression softened slightly. "You didn't have to—"

"I did." Ilya set the bags on the coffee table and started unpacking containers. "Everyone needs to eat."

Dimitri heard the guest room door open behind him.

He didn't turn around, but he felt Artem's presence like a physical thing.

Artem came into the living room, his hair still messed up from sleep, wearing Shane's old shirt and sweatpants. His eyes found Dimitri's for just a second—a flash of heat and uncertainty—before he looked away.

"Sit," Ilya said, gesturing at the couch. "All of you."

Shane shifted to make room, and Katerina climbed into his lap without being asked. Artem sat on the other end of the couch, careful not to take up too much space.

Dimitri lowered himself to the floor near Artem's feet.

It was a familiar position—bodyguard stance, close enough to respond to threats, low enough not to block sightlines. But it also put him right next to Artem, close enough that he could feel the heat radiating from Artem's leg just inches away.

Ilya handed out containers—fried rice, lo mein, orange chicken, dumplings. Katerina perked up at the dumplings, and Shane helped her with chopsticks, patient and gentle.

"Eat," Ilya said again, settling onto the couch next to Shane.

They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Dimitri was starving—he couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten a real meal—and the food was good, hot and greasy and exactly what his body needed.

Artem shifted slightly above him, and Dimitri felt the brush of Artem's knee against his shoulder.

Neither of them moved away.

Katerina giggled at something on the TV, and Shane smiled down at her, his hand gentle on her back.

Ilya glanced at Dimitri, then at Artem, and something flickered across his face—understanding, maybe, or calculation—but he didn't say anything.

He just ate his noodles and watched his people.

And for a moment, despite everything, it felt almost normal.

Chapter 23: The Ambush

Chapter Notes

Shorter chapter before Ao3 updates. <3

The apartment was silent at two in the morning.

Dimitri lay in the guest room bed, staring at the ceiling. He'd slept earlier—actually slept, deep and dreamless with Artem warm against him—but now he was awake again, his body clock still fucked from days of constant vigilance.

He should sleep. He knew he should sleep.

But all he could think about was the kiss.

The way Artem had tasted. The soft sound he'd made when Dimitri had pulled him closer. The heat of his mouth, the press of his body—

The door opened.

Dimitri's hand went to the gun on the nightstand before his brain caught up, before he registered the silhouette in the doorway.

Artem.

"You're awake," Artem said quietly.

"Yeah."

Artem stepped inside. Closed the door behind him. The lock clicked—deliberate, unmistakable.

Dimitri sat up slowly, his heart suddenly pounding.

Artem crossed the room. He was wearing the borrowed sweatpants and t-shirt, his hair mussed from sleep, but his eyes were clear and focused.

"Mitya," he said softly.

The diminutive hit Dimitri like a punch to the chest. Intimate. Affectionate. The kind of name you only used with someone close.

"Tyoma," Dimitri said, his voice rough.

Artem smiled—just a little, just enough—and then he was there, climbing onto the bed, straddling Dimitri's lap before Dimitri could think, could breathe, could do anything but reach for him.

Their mouths crashed together.

It wasn't gentle this time. Wasn't tentative. Artem kissed him like he'd been starving for it, like he'd been thinking about it all day, and Dimitri groaned into his mouth, his hands finding Artem's hips, gripping hard.

Artem ground down against him, and Dimitri felt the hard line of Artem's cock through the thin fabric of the sweatpants.

"Fuck," Dimitri breathed.

"Quiet," Artem whispered against his mouth. "Everyone's sleeping."

He kissed Dimitri again, deep and hungry, and his hands slid under Dimitri's shirt, pushing it up. Dimitri helped him pull it off, and then Artem's hands were on his chest, his shoulders, mapping the scars and muscle with careful fingers.

"Tyoma," Dimitri said again, and Artem shivered.

"I want you," Artem said simply. "I want this."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Dimitri's hands slid up under Artem's shirt, feeling the smooth skin, the lean muscle. Artem pulled the shirt off himself, tossed it aside, and then he was pushing Dimitri back against the pillows, kissing him again, his hips rolling in a slow, deliberate rhythm that made Dimitri's breath catch.

"You have—" Dimitri started.

"In my pocket," Artem said, pulling back just enough to fish a small bottle of lube and a condom out of his sweatpants pocket.

Dimitri stared at him. "You came prepared."

Artem's smile was wicked. "I came *hoping*."

He kissed Dimitri again, softer this time, and then he was sliding off the bed, stripping off the sweatpants. No underwear. Just pale skin and lean muscle and his cock hard and flushed.

Dimitri's mouth went dry.

Artem climbed back onto the bed with careful, deliberate movements, helped Dimitri out of his own pants with steady hands, and then he was straddling him again, skin to skin, nothing

between them anymore, and Dimitri groaned at the contact, at the heat of Artem's body pressed against his own.

"Mitya," Artem whispered, his voice low and rough with desire, and he kissed him again, slow and deep and thorough, while his hand wrapped around both their cocks, stroking them together with a firm, steady rhythm that made Dimitri's vision blur at the edges.

Dimitri's hips jerked up involuntarily, seeking more friction, more contact, more of everything, and Artem made a soft, pleased sound against his mouth, like he was savoring every reaction.

"Quiet," he reminded, his lips brushing the shell of Dimitri's ear, his breath hot against sensitive skin. "Remember where we are."

"You're killing me," Dimitri muttered, his hands gripping Artem's hips hard enough to leave marks.

Artem laughed softly, breathlessly. He reached for the lube on the nightstand, slicked his fingers with practiced efficiency, and then he was shifting up, reaching behind himself with purpose.

Dimitri watched, completely transfixed, unable to look away as Artem worked himself open with careful, measured movements. His face was flushed, a deep red spreading across his cheeks and down his neck, his breathing uneven and catching in his throat, and his free hand braced on Dimitri's chest for balance, fingers splayed wide against his sternum.

"Tyoma," Dimitri said, his voice completely wrecked, barely recognizable even to his own ears. "Let me help—let me do it—"

"No," Artem said firmly, shaking his head, his eyes dark and determined. "I want to do it myself. I want you to watch."

He took his time, thorough and careful, and Dimitri's hands gripped his thighs, trying to stay still, trying not to rush him.

Finally, Artem pulled his fingers free, reached for the condom. He rolled it onto Dimitri with steady hands, slicked him up, and then he was positioning himself, the head of Dimitri's cock pressing against him.

Their eyes met.

"Okay?" Artem asked.

"Yeah," Dimitri managed. "Yeah, Tyoma, please—"

Artem sank down slowly.

The heat was overwhelming. The tight, perfect pressure. Dimitri's hands flew to Artem's hips, gripping hard, and Artem gasped, his head falling back.

"Fuck," Artem breathed. "Mitya—"

He took him all the way, seated fully, and they both froze for a moment, adjusting, breathing. Then Artem started to move.

Slow at first, rolling his hips, finding the angle. Then faster, more confident, riding him with a steady rhythm that made Dimitri's vision blur.

"God," Dimitri groaned, trying to keep his voice down. "Tyoma, you feel—"

"Good?" Artem asked breathlessly.

"Perfect. You're perfect."

Artem smiled, and he leaned down to kiss him, still moving, still taking what he wanted. His hand wrapped around his own cock, stroking in time with his movements, and Dimitri could feel him tightening, getting close.

"Mitya," Artem whispered against his mouth. "Touch me—"

Dimitri's hand replaced Artem's, stroking him firmly, and Artem's rhythm faltered, his breath hitching.

"Close," he gasped. "I'm—"

"Yeah," Dimitri said. "Come on, Tyoma, let me see—"

Artem came with a choked sound, biting down on Dimitri's shoulder to muffle it, his body clenching tight around Dimitri's cock.

It was too much. Dimitri thrust up once, twice, and then he was coming too, groaning into Artem's hair, his hands gripping Artem's hips hard enough to bruise.

They stayed like that for a long moment, breathing hard, trembling.

Finally, Artem lifted his head. His face was flushed, his hair damp with sweat, and he was smiling.

"Hi," he said softly.

Dimitri laughed—couldn't help it. "Hi."

Artem kissed him again, gentle this time, and then he carefully lifted himself off, wincing slightly. Dimitri dealt with the condom, and then Artem was curling up against his side, his head on Dimitri's chest.

They lay there in the dark, catching their breath.

"Mitya?" Artem said after a while.

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry Pavel broke your arm."

Dimitri blinked. Then he started laughing—really laughing, his chest shaking with it.

"What?" Artem asked, lifting his head.

"That's what you're thinking about right now?" Dimitri managed. "After that?"

Artem's smile was sheepish. "I just—I never apologized. And he's my cousin, so—"

"Tyoma," Dimitri said, still grinning. "It's fine. It healed. And honestly?" He pulled Artem closer. "He could have done much worse."

Artem laughed softly and settled back against him.

"Yeah," he agreed. "He usually would have."

They fell asleep like that, tangled together, the apartment quiet around them.

Shane woke to pale morning light filtering through the bedroom curtains. Six-fifteen, according to his phone. He lay still for a moment, listening to Ilya's breathing beside him—slow and even, still asleep.

Except when Shane turned his head, Ilya's side of the bed was empty.

He got up, pulled on sweatpants and a t-shirt, and padded out to the living room.

Ilya was on the couch, laptop open on his thighs, his face lit by the screen. He was wearing reading glasses—the ones he only used when he'd been staring at something too long—and his expression was tight.

"Hey," Shane said quietly.

Ilya looked up, and his face softened slightly. "Dobroye utro."

"Everything okay?"

Ilya's hesitation was brief but noticeable. "Da. Just... keeping up with things."

Shane crossed to the couch and sat down beside him. He could see the laptop screen—messages in Russian, names he didn't recognize, except one.

Viktor.

His stomach tightened. "Viktor?"

Ilya glanced at him, then back at the screen. "There's movement. Nothing concrete yet, but..." He trailed off, his jaw working.

Shane knew enough about Viktor to be worried. Ilya's New York rival, the one who'd been circling for years, looking for weaknesses. The one who knew about Shane.

"What kind of movement?"

"The kind that makes me pay attention," Ilya said. He closed the laptop and set it aside, then pulled Shane closer, kissing his temple. "But we're prepared. Don't worry."

Shane leaned into him, but the knot in his stomach didn't ease.

They sat like that for a few minutes, quiet, until Shane heard the soft pad of small feet on the hallway floor.

Katerina appeared in the doorway, clutching her Hello Kitty blanket, her hair sticking up on one side.

"Hi, sweet girl," Shane said, smiling.

She came over and climbed onto the couch between them, settling against Shane's side. "Golodnaya," she said—hungry.

"Yeah? What do you want for breakfast?"

"Kasha—cereal," she said immediately, using both the Russian and English word.

Shane's smile faded slightly. He got up and went to the kitchen, Katerina trailing after him.

He opened the fridge. A carton of eggs, some leftover Chinese takeout, a half-empty container of yogurt that was probably past its date. He checked the door—no milk. He opened the cabinets. The cereal box was nearly empty, and it wasn't even the kind Katerina liked. No fruit snacks, no juice boxes, barely any bread.

"Sorry." Shane closed the cabinet and looked down at her. "How about... eggs?"

Her face scrunched up. "Nyet. Kasha."

Shane sighed and went back to the living room. "We need groceries."

Ilya looked up from his phone. His expression shifted immediately—calculating, weighing options.

"How bad?"

"No milk. Cereal's almost gone. Nothing she'll actually eat." Shane crossed his arms. "We've been so focused on everything else, we didn't—"

"I know." Ilya set his phone down. "Delivery?"

"Strangers coming to the door?" Shane shook his head. "You really want that right now?"

Ilya's mouth tightened. "No."

"I can go," Shane said. "Quick trip. In and out."

"Not alone."

"Then send Dimitri with me."

"I need Dimitri here."

They looked at each other. Shane could see Ilya working through it—risk versus necessity, personnel versus security. They genuinely needed food. Katerina needed food.

The guest room door opened, and Artem emerged, barefoot, wearing one of Shane's old shirts and a pair of borrowed sweatpants. His hair was mussed, and he looked more relaxed than Shane had seen him since he'd arrived. Like he'd actually slept.

"What's going on?" Artem asked, his voice still rough with sleep.

"We need groceries," Shane said. "For Katerina."

Artem glanced toward the kitchen, then back at them. "I'll go with you."

Ilya's eyes narrowed slightly. "Artem—"

"Two people, quick trip," Artem said, practical. "In and out. I've been cooped up in here for days anyway. I need to move."

The door to Dimitri's room opened, and Dimitri stepped out, fully dressed, his hair damp like he'd just showered. His eyes went immediately to Artem, tracked him as he moved across the room, and something in his expression shifted—something Shane couldn't quite name.

Artem glanced at Dimitri, just for a second, and Shane saw it—the brief flicker of eye contact, the way Artem's mouth curved slightly before he looked away.

Ilya saw it too. Shane watched his gaze move between them, sharp and assessing.

"Mitya," Ilya said slowly. "You slept."

"Da." Dimitri's voice was even, but his eyes were still on Artem.

Ilya leaned back on the couch, his fingers drumming once against his thigh. Then he looked at Shane. "You take the car. You stay together. Phones on. You're fast."

"I should go instead," Dimitri said immediately.

"No." Ilya's tone was firm. "I need you here. With me and Katerina. This is the safest option."

Dimitri's jaw tightened, but he didn't argue. He looked at Artem again, and this time the concern was obvious.

"We'll be fine," Artem said quietly.

Dimitri didn't look convinced.

Shane went to grab his keys from the bowl by the door, and Artem followed, sitting down on the floor to pull on a pair of Shane's sneakers.

Katerina appeared beside Shane, tugging on his shirt. "Horoshaya kasha," she said seriously in Russian.

Shane crouched down and smiled at her. "I promise."

She patted his cheek, satisfied, and went back to Ilya.

Shane straightened and looked at Artem, who was tying his laces. "Ready?"

"Da."

They headed for the door. Shane could feel Dimitri's eyes on them the whole way.

Dimitri moved before they reached the door. He caught Shane's arm—not rough, but firm—and pulled him aside. His other hand went into his jacket.

He withdrew a compact Makarov, the metal catching the light. He held it out to Shane without preamble.

"You know how to use this, so use it." His accent thickened when he was serious.

Shane took it, felt the familiar weight settle in his palm. "Yeah."

"Strelyal khorosho, yesli ponadobitsya," Dimitri said. Shoot well if you need to. Not a question. Not hope. A statement of fact about what might happen.

Shane checked the magazine—full—and tucked the gun into his jacket.

Dimitri's eyes held his for a moment longer. There was something in that look—recognition, maybe. An acknowledgment that Shane wasn't just the civilian anymore. That he could do what needed doing.

Dimitri reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. He pressed them into Shane's hand. "Take my car."

Shane's fingers closed around them. The keys were warm from Dimitri's body heat.

Artem watched the exchange but said nothing. He just stood and moved toward the door.

The door closed behind them with a soft click. Ilya stood there for a moment, listening to their footsteps fade down the hall. From the living room came the sound of cartoons—something with bright music and animal characters. Katerina was settled on the couch with her hello kitty blanket.

Ilya turned to find Dimitri still standing by the door, his expression unreadable.

"So," Ilya said. "You and Artem."

Dimitri's shoulder lifted in a shrug. Nothing more.

Ilya laughed—quiet, but genuine. "That's more affection than I've seen you give anyone in a while."

Dimitri's jaw tightened slightly. He moved past Ilya toward the kitchen, but stopped halfway. "Vory v Zakone," he said quietly. The thieves code. "You remember what it says about family. About attachments."

The laughter died in Ilya's throat.

He did remember. No wife, no children, no ties that could be used against you. The brotherhood was supposed to be everything. Loyalty to the code above all else.

"I can't live by that anymore," Ilya said. His voice was steady, certain. "I have Katerina now. She matters more than tradition."

Dimitri turned to look at him. Something passed between them—an understanding that didn't need words. They'd both grown up in that world, both knew what it meant to break from it.

"Da," Dimitri said finally. Yes. Not agreement, exactly. Just acknowledgment.

Ilya held his gaze. "The old ways don't work when you have someone who needs you to come home."

Dimitri's expression shifted—just slightly, but enough. He nodded once, then moved into the kitchen to make coffee.

The conversation was over. But something had been said that mattered.

Dimitri's car handled like a dream—smooth, responsive, the kind of vehicle that cost more than Shane made in six months. He kept both hands on the wheel, eyes moving between the road and the mirrors. The weight of the Makarov pressed against his ribs under his jacket.

Artem sat in the passenger seat, relaxed in a way Shane couldn't quite manage. He had his window cracked, one arm resting on the door, watching the city slide past.

"You drive like old woman," Artem said after a few blocks.

Shane glanced at him. "I drive like someone who doesn't want to get pulled over with an illegal gun."

Artem's mouth twitched. "Fair."

The grocery store was a twenty-four-hour place in Brooklyn, the kind with fluorescent lights that made everything look slightly unreal. Shane parked toward the back of the lot—habit, maybe, or instinct. Easier to leave quickly if you weren't boxed in.

Inside, they moved fast. Shane grabbed a cart and went straight for what mattered: milk, bananas, apples, the cereal with the bear on the box that Katerina liked. Artem added things without asking—bread, eggs, cheese, a package of cookies that definitely weren't on any list.

"She's three," Shane said.

"I was eating cookies at three."

"You turned out great."

Artem grinned, but didn't put them back.

Shane was aware of the gun the entire time. The way it shifted when he reached for something on a high shelf. The weight of it reminding him that this wasn't just a grocery run. That Dimitri had armed him for a reason.

He scanned the store without meaning to. Exits. People. Anyone paying too much attention.

No one was.

They checked out fast, paid cash. Artem carried most of the bags—four in total, plastic handles cutting into his palms. Shane took two, kept his right hand free.

The parking lot was darker than it should've been. One of the overhead lights was out.

Shane noticed that first.

Then he noticed the car—black sedan, engine running, parked three spaces from Dimitri's. Two men leaning against it, not talking, just waiting.

"Artem—"

"I see them."

They kept walking, but Shane's heart was already kicking up. The men pushed off the car as they approached. Two more came from the left, between parked vehicles. One more from behind, cutting off the route back to the store.

Five total.

Professional spacing. Coordinated.

Fuck.

"Groceries down," Artem said quietly. He set his bags on the asphalt, slow and deliberate. Shane did the same, but his hand was already moving toward his jacket.

The closest man smiled. He was broad-shouldered, maybe forty, with a scar through his eyebrow. "We just want to talk."

"Then talk," Artem said.

"Viktor sends his regards." The man's eyes flicked to Shane. "And Aleksandr is very interested in where Ilya Rozanov is."

Shane's blood went cold.

"Don't know what you're talking about," Artem said.

The man's smile widened. "We can do this easy, or we can do it hard."

Artem moved.

He was fast—faster than Shane expected. His fist caught the scarred man in the throat, a brutal, efficient strike that sent him staggering back. Artem spun, elbow driving into the second man's face with a crack that echoed across the parking lot.

But there were three more.

They swarmed in. One grabbed Artem from behind, arms locking around his chest. Another drove a fist into his ribs—once, twice, three times. Shane heard the impact, heard Artem's sharp exhale of pain.

Shane lunged forward, but someone caught him—thick arm around his neck, yanking him back. He struggled, but the grip was iron.

"Hold still, *suka*," the man hissed in his ear.

Artem got one arm free, drove his elbow back into the man holding him. But the one in front hit him again—hard punch to the mouth that split his lip open. Blood sprayed. Another punch, this one to the eye, and Artem's head snapped to the side.

"Where is Rozanov?" the scarred man rasped, holding his throat. "Where's the girl?"

Artem spat blood. "Fuck you."

The man nodded to one of the others.

The punch came from behind—a brutal strike to the back of Artem's head, right at the base of his skull. A donkey punch. Artem's knees buckled, and he went down hard, collapsing onto the asphalt.

"Artem!" Shane thrashed against the hold, but the arm around his neck tightened, cutting off air.

The scarred man crouched next to Artem, grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanked his head up. Artem's face was a mess—lip split, eye already swelling shut, blood running from his nose.

"Last chance," the man said.

Artem's good eye focused on him. "Poshel na khuy."

Go fuck yourself.

The man sighed, pulled a gun from his jacket—a Glock, black and ugly in the fluorescent light from the store. He pressed it against Artem's temple.

Shane stopped thinking.

His hand went to his jacket, fingers closing around the Makarov's grip. The man holding him didn't notice until Shane twisted, drove his elbow back into the man's gut. The grip loosened just enough.

Shane pulled the gun, turned, and fired.

The sound was deafening.

The man holding him jerked back, eyes wide with shock. The bullet had punched through his chest—center mass, the way Dimitri taught him.

The man fell.

Shane's ears were ringing. His hands were shaking, but he kept the gun up, swinging it toward the scarred man.

The man froze, Glock still pressed to Artem's head. For a second, no one moved.

Then the scarred man pulled his gun away, raised both hands slowly. "Easy," he said. "Easy."

The other two men were already backing up, hands visible, eyes on the body bleeding out on the asphalt.

"We're done here," the scarred man said. He let go of Artem's hair, stood slowly. "Viktor will hear about this."

"Good," Shane said. His voice didn't sound like his own. "Tell him to fuck off."

The men retreated to their car, engines starting, tires squealing as they peeled out of the lot.

Shane stood there, gun still raised, until the taillights disappeared.

Then his knees almost gave out.

"Shane." Artem's voice, rough and pained. "Shane, help me up."

Shane shoved the gun back into his jacket, stumbled over to where Artem was trying to push himself up. He got an arm under Artem's shoulder, hauled him to his feet. Artem swayed, one hand pressed to his ribs, blood still dripping from his mouth.

"We need to go," Artem said. "Now."

"Hospital—"

"*Nyet*." Artem grabbed Shane's jacket, pulled him close. His good eye was fierce despite the damage. "Not the penthouse. They'll follow. They'll track us."

Shane's mind was racing, adrenaline and shock making everything too bright, too loud. The dead man on the ground. The blood. The gun in his jacket that he'd just used to kill someone.

"My apartment," Shane said. "The old one. I still have it."

Artem nodded, winced. "Da. Go."

They grabbed the groceries. Left the body. Shane got Artem into the passenger seat, slammed the door, ran around to the driver's side. His hands were shaking so hard he could barely get the key in the ignition.

The engine roared to life.

Shane pulled out of the lot, tires screeching, and drove.

His hands were locked on the wheel, knuckles white. Artem was breathing hard beside him, one hand pressed to his ribs, the other braced against the dashboard. Blood dripped onto the leather seat.

Shane had killed someone.

He'd pulled the trigger, watched the man fall, and he'd meant it.

The weight of it sat in his chest like a stone, but his hands didn't leave the wheel. He drove through red lights, took corners too fast, didn't stop until they were ten blocks away and he was sure no one was following.

Only then did he let himself breathe.

"You did good," Artem said quietly. His voice was thick with pain, but steady. "You saved my life."

Shane didn't answer. He just drove, the city blurring past, the gun heavy against his ribs, and the knowledge that everything had just changed sitting cold and certain in his gut.

Shane's old apartment was not fancy, but he was thankful he had kept paying rent even after moving in with Ilya—some part of him needing a fallback, a place that was just his.

He pulled into the narrow alley behind the building, killed the engine. The groceries sat in the backseat. Neither of them moved to get them.

"Can you walk?" Shane asked.

Artem nodded, then winced. "Da."

Shane came around, opened the passenger door. Artem got out slowly, one arm wrapped around his ribs. His lip was split, blood dried at the corner of his mouth. His left eye was

already swelling shut, the bruise spreading dark across his cheekbone.

Shane got under his shoulder, took some of his weight. They made it to the back entrance, up three flights of stairs. Artem's breathing was labored by the second floor, but he didn't complain.

Shane unlocked the apartment with shaking hands.

Inside, it smelled faintly of dust and the lavender soap he kept under the sink. The furniture was gone.

Artem sank onto the floor, leaned back carefully. He touched his ribs, his jaw, assessing. "Nothing broken," he said after a moment. "Just bruised."

Shane stood in the middle of the room, the gun still tucked against his ribs, and pulled out his phone.

His hands were still shaking.

Ilya picked up on the second ring. "Shane?"

"We're okay," Shane said, and his voice cracked. He cleared his throat, tried again. "We're okay. But—there was an ambush. At the grocery store. Five men. Viktor's."

Silence on the other end. Then: "Are you hurt?"

"No. Artem—he's beat up. Ribs, face. But he's okay." Shane closed his eyes. "They asked about Katerina and you."

He heard Ilya's sharp inhale. Then his voice went cold, controlled. "Where are you?"

"My old apartment."

"Good. Stay there." A pause. "What happened, Shane?"

Shane's throat tightened. "They had Artem on the ground. Gun to his head. I—" He stopped. Swallowed. "I shot one of them. Center mass. He's dead."

Another pause. Longer this time.

"You left the body?" Ilya asked.

"In the parking lot. We had to go. The others ran."

"Dimitri and I will handle it." Ilya's voice was steady, certain. "We'll clean it up. You stay with Artem. Don't move. Don't open the door for anyone."

Shane nodded even though Ilya couldn't see him. "Okay."

"Shane." Ilya's voice softened, just slightly. "Are you all right?"

Shane looked at Artem on the couch, at the blood on his face, at the way he was watching Shane with something that might have been respect or gratitude or both.

"No," Shane said quietly. "But I'm functional."

"That's enough," Ilya said. "I'm coming as soon as we handle this."

"Okay, hurry."

Shane hung up.

The apartment was quiet. The gun pressed cold and heavy against his ribs. His hands had finally stopped shaking, but the weight in his chest hadn't moved.

Artem was still watching him.

"You crossed a line today," Artem said softly. "For me."

Shane sat down on the edge of the coffee table, elbows on his knees. "Yeah."

"Thank you."

Shane didn't answer. He just sat there, the reality of it settling into his bones, and wondered if Ilya would look at him differently now.

If he'd look at himself differently.

He already knew the answer.

Chapter 24: Safe Distance

The grocery store parking lot was lit up like a stage—patrol cars angled across the asphalt, their lights painting everything in alternating washes of red and blue. Dimitri pulled up half a block away, killing the engine. Through the windshield, he could see the cluster of uniforms, the yellow tape, the dark shape on the ground covered with what looked like a tarp weighted at the corners.

"Wait here," he told Ilya, though he was already reaching for the door handle.

"I'm coming."

Dimitri didn't argue. He grabbed the envelope from under his seat—thick with hundreds, rubber-banded in the middle—and stepped out into the cold night air.

They walked toward the scene with purpose but no urgency. A young patrol officer moved to intercept them, but Dimitri's eyes had already found who he needed: Detective Kowalski, mid-fifties, twenty-five years on the job, standing near an unmarked sedan with his hands in his coat pockets. Their eyes met. Kowalski's expression didn't change, but he tilted his head slightly and moved away from the cluster of cops, drifting toward the edge of the lot where the shadows were thicker.

Dimitri followed. Ilya stayed three steps behind, watching their backs.

"Evening," Kowalski said quietly. His breath fogged in the air between them.

"Detective." Dimitri held out the envelope. No preamble, no small talk. This wasn't a negotiation—the price had been set years ago, adjusted for inflation and risk. Kowalski took it without looking inside, slipping it into his coat with the practiced ease of a man who'd done this a hundred times.

From his other pocket, he produced a plastic evidence bag. Inside, Dimitri could see the brass glint of shell casings. Kowalski handed it over, then pulled out a USB drive from his shirt pocket.

"Security footage," Kowalski said. "Only copy. Camera angles weren't great anyway—mostly caught the aftermath. Self-defense is the working theory. Victim had priors, weapon on scene. No cooperative witnesses." He paused. "Your people left before we arrived. Smart."

Dimitri pocketed both items. "Appreciated."

They stood there for another moment, two men conducting business in the shadow of a death neither of them would lose sleep over. Then Kowalski nodded once and walked back toward the lights and the uniforms and the paperwork that would tell whatever story needed to be told.

Dimitri and Ilya returned to the car.

Shane's old apartment building was a squat brick structure that had seen better decades, tucked away in a neighborhood far enough from the grocery store parking lot to feel like safety. Dimitri took the stairs at a measured pace, his left arm held close to his body, Ilya behind him. The door to 3B was locked, Ilya knocked three times and the door flung open.

Inside, Shane sat on the couch, elbows on his knees, staring at nothing. Artem was in the kitchen, leaning against the counter with a bag of frozen peas pressed to his face. When he lowered it, Dimitri saw the damage: split lip still seeping blood, left eye swollen nearly shut, the bruising already spreading across his cheekbone in shades of purple and red.

"Ribs?" Dimitri asked.

"Bruised. Maybe cracked." Artem's voice was rough. "I'll live."

Dimitri looked at Shane, who finally raised his eyes. There was something different there now—not fear, not shock, but a kind of settled understanding. Shane had crossed a line tonight, and there was no going back across it.

"You did good," Dimitri said simply.

Shane nodded once. No words needed.

"Can you move?" Dimitri asked Artem.

"Yeah." Artem pushed off the counter with a wince. "Let's go."

Outside, Dimitri's car sat at the curb with a bright orange parking ticket tucked under the windshield wiper. Dimitri pulled it free without comment, crumpled it, and shoved it in his pocket with the shell casings. The groceries were still in the trunk from the original run—milk probably warm by now, cereal boxes dented.

Ilya took the driver's seat. Dimitri helped Artem into the back with his right hand, his left arm hanging stiff at his side. He watched Artem ease down with careful breaths. Shane climbed into the passenger seat, still silent.

The drive back to Manhattan was quiet. The city slid past the windows giving way to Brooklyn, then the bridge, then the towers of the Financial District rising against the night sky. Dimitri kept checking the rearview mirror, watching Artem's face, the careful way he breathed.

In his pocket, the shell casings and crumpled ticket clicked together softly. Evidence that no longer existed. A problem solved with cash and connections, the way problems had always been solved in their world.

When they pulled into the underground garage of the penthouse building, Dimitri finally spoke.

"Katerina doesn't need to know details."

"Understood," Shane said.

They took the elevator up in silence, the grocery bags in Ilya's hands a surreal touch of domesticity. Milk, cereal, eggs. The ordinary necessities of life, carried home after a man had died in a parking lot.

The elevator doors opened onto the penthouse floor.

They were home. They were safe.

But the world had shifted tonight, and everyone in that elevator knew it.

The penthouse was quiet. Katerina was in the living room with Vera, both of them on the floor with a puzzle spread across the coffee table. She looked up when they came in, her face brightening.

"Uncle Ilya! Ty poluchil khlop'ya!"

Ilya set the grocery bags down on the kitchen counter. Shane started unpacking, moving with mechanical efficiency—milk into the fridge, fruit into the bowl, eggs into the door. His hands were steady. His mind was somewhere else.

"Guess there's no way to family therapy out of this situation," Shane said quietly, setting the cereal box down.

Ilya looked at him like he'd suggested they all take up skydiving.

Shane laughed—a short, sharp sound that bordered on hysteria. "Yeah, I'm gonna freak out later. Probably tomorrow. Right now I'm still in crisis mode. Still functional." He glanced at Ilya. "Ask me again in a few hours."

Ilya didn't respond. He just moved to the cabinet, pulled out a bowl, and poured cereal for Katerina. It was 1 PM. She'd already eaten lunch. It didn't matter. He set the bowl on the counter with milk and a spoon, and she came running, climbing onto the stool without question.

In the main room, Dimitri was checking the locks when Vera appeared from the hallway.

"We're clear here," Dimitri said. "But you need to go. Be careful with the restaurant."

Vera's expression didn't change. "Viktor's people?"

"Probably. They're moving fast."

She nodded, reaching down to adjust the holster at her hip. The gun was visible—a Sig Sauer, well-maintained. She flashed it like someone checking their keys before leaving the house.

"Don't worry," she said. "Anyone tries to move on the place, I'll light them up."

It wasn't bravado. It was just fact.

"Go," Dimitri said. "Stay sharp."

She was already heading for the door, her phone already in her hand, probably calling ahead to the restaurant to make sure the staff was ready. The threat was expanding now—not just the penthouse, but everything connected to them. Every operation, every location, every person on the payroll.

Viktor was escalating.

Which meant Aleksandr wouldn't be far behind.

After Vera left, Ilya found Shane in the kitchen, still in the clothes from the parking lot. Ilya looked at him once—really looked—and saw the dried blood on his sleeve, a small spray across his collar.

"Shower," Ilya said quietly. "Now."

Shane didn't argue. He just nodded and started moving toward the hallway.

"Wait." Ilya caught his arm. "Your clothes. Everything you wore today. Hand them out from the shower. Don't leave them on the floor."

Shane understood immediately. The weight of it settled on his face—not just the shower, but what came after. What had to be erased.

"I'll take care of it," Ilya said. It wasn't a promise. It was a statement of fact, the same tone he'd use to say the door was locked or the coffee was ready.

Shane nodded again and disappeared into the bathroom.

Ilya waited by the door, listening to the water start. A few minutes later, the bathroom door cracked open just enough, and Shane's arm extended out, holding the bundled clothes. Blood-stained. Evidence.

Ilya took them without hesitation, without comment. He held the bundle at arm's length and walked to the kitchen, where he found a heavy-duty garbage bag under the sink. He stuffed the clothes inside, sealed it, and set it aside. Later—tonight, after Katerina was asleep—he'd take it down to the incinerator in the basement. The kind of detail that separated people who got caught from people who didn't.

Under the spray of hot water, Shane's mind caught on something small. Stupid. He was grateful—genuinely grateful—that he'd left his Hello Kitty watch on the nightstand this morning. If he'd been wearing it, it would be in that bag now, burned to nothing along with everything else. The thought anchored him for a moment, gave his spiraling mind something manageable to hold onto. A small thing. A thing he could save. When everything else was being erased, at least that was safe.

He returned to the bathroom door and pressed his ear against it, listening. Just the sound of water. Shane was still in there.

Ilya went back to Katerina, who was still working through her cereal, milk on her chin.

The shower was hot—too hot. Shane had turned it up until his skin protested, needing the sharp sensation to anchor him. The water pressure was good here, better than his old apartment. Steady. Consistent. He focused on the sound of it: a white noise that filled the space, that drowned out everything else. The hiss and patter against tile. The way it changed pitch when it hit his shoulders versus the floor.

He stood under it and let the water run over his face, over his hands—the ones that had pulled the trigger. He'd been trained for this.

He'd wanted to help people. That was the whole reason he'd gone into medicine. That was the entire architecture of who he thought he was.

Now he'd killed someone.

The water ran pink at his feet for a moment—not much blood on him, but enough. He watched it swirl toward the drain, the dilution ratio changing as more water mixed in. He scrubbed his hands raw, between the fingers, under the nails. The soap was slick, almost too slick. The texture made his skin feel wrong. His hands still felt like they belonged to someone else.

He tried to focus on the sound again. The water. Just the water. The steady rhythm of it. He counted the beats—one-two-three-four—trying to match his breathing to it. Four in, hold, six out. The pattern his therapist had taught him years ago.

It wasn't working.

He pressed his palms against the shower wall—cold tile, smooth, the grout lines rough under his fingertips—and let himself break. The sound of it was swallowed by the water, and he was grateful for that, for the way the noise covered him. The kind of crying that came from somewhere deep and animal, the kind that bent him forward at the waist. His shoulders shook. His breath came in gasps that he couldn't control, couldn't count, couldn't regulate.

He'd taken a life. That was the fact. That was the thing that wouldn't change no matter how long he stood here.

The water kept running. Constant. Reliable. He focused on it again—the only thing in the world that made sense right now. The temperature starting to cool slightly as the hot water tank struggled to keep up. The pressure still steady against the back of his neck.

It didn't matter that the man had been about to kill Artem. It didn't matter that there'd been no other choice. Shane had still done it. He'd crossed a line he'd never thought he'd cross, and there was no going back.

Ilya was helping Katerina with her milk cup when he heard it—not loud, but present. A shift in the sound of the shower. The water was still running, but something underneath it had changed.

He glanced at Katerina, who was focused on her cereal, oblivious.

Ilya set down the cup and moved to the bathroom door. He stood there for a moment, listening. He knew Shane needed space during these things—had learned that early on. Shane didn't want comfort while he was falling apart. He wanted to fall apart alone and then be okay again.

But Ilya needed to know.

He knocked softly. "Shane?"

There was a pause. Then Shane's voice, rough and wet: "I'm okay. Just... crying."

Ilya pressed his forehead against the door. He could feel the warmth of the shower through the wood. He wanted to go in. He wanted to do something. Instead, he stood there with his forehead against the door and let Shane have what he needed.

"I'm here," Ilya said quietly. "When you're ready."

He heard Shane's breath hitch. Then nothing but water.

Ilya turned back to Katerina, who was swinging her legs under the table, humming something in Russian. He sat down across from her and she immediately climbed into his lap, cereal forgotten, her small weight settling against his chest.

He held her there and waited. She had other plans her small hands twisted the door knob and barging in.

Shane stood in the doorway with a towel around his waist, still dripping, his skin flushed from the heat. His eyes were red and swollen. His face was blotchy.

Katerina didn't hesitate. She scrambled and ran to him, wrapping her small arms around his wet torso.

"Uncle Shane," she said into his chest.

Something broke in Shane's face. His arms came around her automatically, and then he was crying again—not the controlled breakdown of the shower, but something rawer. His shoulders shook. Tears streamed down his face and he pressed his cheek against the top of her head.

Ilya stood and moved to them both. He wrapped his arms around Shane from behind, his chin resting on Shane's shoulder, holding both of them. Shane leaned back into him, still holding Katerina, and for a long moment they just stood there in the hallway—wet and broken and together.

"I've got you," Ilya said quietly. "Both of you. I've got you."

Shane's breath steadied slowly. Katerina stayed pressed against him, her small hand patting his back the way she'd seen adults do it.

Ilya didn't let go.

Katerina patted Shane's shoulder with one small hand. "*Bcë xopouo*," she murmured, the way Ilya said it to her when she was upset. "It's okay."

Shane let out a shaky laugh, tears still streaming. "Thanks, kiddo."

They stayed like that for a long time—on the bathroom floor, tangled together, the three of them holding each other in the quiet.

In the spare bedroom, Artem peeled off his shirt. The fabric stuck to his ribs where blood had dried—not his own, mostly. He was halfway through unbuttoning his jeans when Dimitri appeared in the doorway.

"Tyoma." Dimitri's voice was steady, matter-of-fact. "Glad you're okay."

Artem didn't answer. He just kept moving, stepping out of his jeans. Dimitri crossed the room without waiting for a response and took the clothes from Artem's hands—shirt, jeans, everything. Artem stood there in his boxers, and Dimitri didn't hesitate. He hooked his fingers into the waistband and pulled them down.

Artem huffed. "Subtle."

"Evidence," Dimitri said, already turning away with the bundle of fabric. "Everything goes."

He disappeared for a minute. Artem heard water running somewhere—the kitchen sink, probably. Dimitri was washing his hands. When he came back, he had an ice pack wrapped in a thin towel and a bottle of Tylenol.

Artem sat on the edge of the bed. Dimitri crouched in front of him, his right hand already moving—careful fingers along Artem's ribs, pressing gently to assess. His left arm hung stiff at his side, still healing. Artem's breath hitched but he didn't pull away.

Dimitri shifted the ice pack to his right hand—his left arm still healing, useless for this. "Ice," he said. He pressed the pack against Artem's ribs, held it there with his palm. "Twenty minutes. Then Tylenol."

He left Artem there with the ice pack, half-naked and bruised, but taken care of. The kind of care that didn't require words.

Dimitri returned less than a minute later with a folded t-shirt and shorts. He set them on the bed next to Artem.

Artem looked at the shirt. Sailor Moon stared back at him in all her crystalline glory, tiara gleaming against a pale pink background.

"Really?" Artem said.

Dimitri laughed. Actually laughed—a short, genuine sound that caught Artem off guard. It transformed his face for just a moment, made him look almost young.

Dimitri was already heading back out, but Artem caught the faint curve of his mouth as he went.

Hunger pulled Artem out of the guest room twenty minutes later. The ice pack had done its work—his ribs still ached, but the sharp edge was dulled. He pulled on the Sailor Moon shirt, which hung loose on his frame, and padded barefoot toward the kitchen.

The penthouse was quiet. He could hear Ilya's voice from somewhere in their bedroom—low, measured.

Dimitri was at the kitchen counter, pouring milk into a bowl of cereal. Just cereal. Nothing else. He glanced up when Artem appeared, took in the pink shirt without comment, and gestured to the cabinet.

"Hungry?"

"Yeah."

Artem grabbed a bowl, found the cereal—some generic brand, nothing fancy. They ate in silence for a few minutes, the clink of spoons against ceramic the only sound. It was almost surreal, the two of them sitting at the counter like this. Like they weren't in the middle of a war.

"We're bringing in Sergei and Anton," Dimitri said eventually, not looking up from his bowl. "They'll be outside. Rotating shifts."

Artem nodded slowly. He understood what that meant. The penthouse wasn't just a safe house anymore—it was a fortress.

"And inside?" Artem asked.

"Me," Dimitri said. He finally looked at Artem, and his eyes were steady, certain. "I'm inside."

There was something in the way he said it. Not a promise exactly, but close. Artem felt the weight of it settle over him—the knowledge that Dimitri had already decided where he'd be when things got worse. And they would get worse.

"Okay," Artem said quietly.

They finished their cereal. Dimitri rinsed both bowls, set them in the sink. The domestic simplicity of it felt like a small rebellion against everything else—the blood, the running, the men outside who would soon be guarding them.

"How are the ribs?" Dimitri asked.

"Better," Artem said. It wasn't entirely a lie.

Dimitri nodded, satisfied. He was already thinking ahead again, already planning the next thing. But for a moment, he'd sat with Artem in the kitchen and eaten cereal like it was just

another morning.

Artem set his spoon down. "Can I shower? I still have—" He gestured vaguely at himself. Blood under his nails. The smell of sweat and adrenaline.

"Guest bathroom," Dimitri said. "Down the hall, second door. Towels are in the cabinet."

Artem stood, then paused. "Why here?" He looked around the penthouse—expensive, clean, too visible. "What about the other places? The ones on Nevsky, the apartment near—"

"Burned." Ilya's voice came from the doorway. He stepped into the kitchen, phone still in his hand. His face was drawn, tired in a way that went deeper than lack of sleep. "Alexie had a list. The best ones."

Artem understood immediately.

Ilya set his phone on the counter. "So we assume he has the list. Or someone does. Either way, those locations are compromised."

"And this one?" Artem asked.

"Vera's name," Ilya said simply. "The deed, the utilities, everything. It doesn't trace back to me. Not easily."

Dimitri leaned against the counter, arms crossed. "It's the cleanest option we have left."

The words hung there. *The cleanest option we have left*. Not the best. Not the safest. Just what remained after everything else had been stripped away.

Artem nodded slowly. He didn't ask what they'd do if this location burned too. He didn't need to. They were all thinking it.

"Shower," Dimitri said, his voice gentler now. "You'll feel better."

Artem left without another word. The guest bathroom was small, functional. He closed the door behind him and finally let himself breathe.

Viktor stood when Aleksandr entered the room. He didn't sit back down until Aleksandr gestured—a small, dismissive flick of the wrist.

Viktor's hand trembled slightly as he reached for the vodka bottle. He poured, knocked it back, set the glass down. "Ilya's boyfriend shot him. We didn't—"

"Stop." Aleksandr didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. Viktor's mouth snapped shut. "Tell me why five of my men couldn't handle a grocery store pickup."

"We didn't know the other one would be there." Viktor's words came faster now, defensive. "Artem wasn't supposed to—"

"You didn't know." Aleksandr moved to the window, hands clasped behind his back. He looked out at the city lights, his reflection ghostly in the glass. "You didn't plan. You didn't prepare. And now Denis is dead, the police are involved, and Ilya knows exactly what's coming."

Viktor swallowed. "We have leverage. I can—"

"You didn't know because you didn't plan." Aleksandr crossed to the table, picked up his own glass. He didn't drink. "Now we have a body. Police involvement. And Ilya knows we're coming."

It wasn't a request. Viktor fumbled for his phone, nearly dropped it, swiped to the photo with fingers that weren't quite steady. He slid it across the table and waited, standing, while Aleksandr took his time crossing back to look at it.

Aleksandr picked up the phone. Studied it. His expression didn't change.

"Shane Hollander," Viktor said, the words tumbling out. "Biochemistry student at NYU. Hockey practice most days. Worked the graveyard shift at a 7-Eleven before moving to work at Samovar Soiree when he's not at Ilya's penthouse. He's—"

"Soft," Aleksandr said. He set the phone down with deliberate care. "Civilian. No training." His eyes lifted to Viktor's face. "And yet he killed Denis."

Viktor's jaw clenched. He looked like he wanted to argue, to explain, but under Aleksandr's flat stare the words died in his throat.

"Sit down," Aleksandr said.

Viktor sat.

Aleksandr remained standing. He picked up his own glass, turned it in his hand, watching the light catch in the vodka. He didn't drink. "Denis was with us for six years. Loyal. Competent." He paused. "You sent him after a civilian and he's dead. What does that tell me about your planning, Viktor?"

"It won't happen again." Viktor's voice was tight. "I'll—"

"You'll do exactly what I tell you to do." Aleksandr's voice was still quiet, still controlled, but something in it made Viktor shrink back in his chair. "Nothing more. Nothing less. Do you understand?"

Viktor's throat worked. "Yes, Aleksandr."

Aleksandr finally drank. Let the silence stretch. Viktor didn't move, didn't reach for his cigarettes, didn't pour another drink. He just sat there, waiting.

"The boyfriend is useful," Aleksandr said eventually. "It means Ilya cares about him. Enough to arm him. Enough to let him kill." He set the glass down. "That makes him leverage."

Viktor nodded quickly. "We can grab him. Make Ilya—"

"No." The word cut through the air like a blade. "You'll do nothing until I tell you to. The restaurant is too public. Ilya's already scrambling to secure what's his. If you move now, he goes to ground and we lose everything." Aleksandr leaned forward, palms flat on the table. "I want him here. I want him watching while I take it all apart. Piece by piece. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Aleksandr."

"Ilya thinks he's built something. Territory. Security. Family." The last word came out like an insult. "We're going to show him how fragile it all is. But we do this smart. We do this my way." He straightened. "The girl is bait. The boyfriend is a message. But not yet."

Viktor's face went pale. "Understood."

Sergei and Anton arrived forty minutes later.

Shane heard them before he saw them—the low murmur of Russian in the entryway, Dimitri's voice responding. He looked up from where he sat on the couch next to Katerina, who was half-watching some cartoon with a princess and a talking horse.

Two men stepped into the living room. Both were broad-shouldered, late thirties maybe, wearing dark jackets and the kind of neutral expressions that came from years of not reacting to anything. The taller one had a scar through his left eyebrow. The shorter one had knuckles that looked like they'd been broken more than once.

"Sergei, Anton," Ilya said, gesturing toward them without ceremony. "They'll be outside. Rotating shifts."

Sergei nodded once at Shane. Anton's gaze swept the room—windows, doors, sightlines—before he looked back at Ilya.

"Dimitri briefed you?" Ilya asked in English.

"Yes," Sergei said. His accent was thicker than Dimitri's. "We're clear."

"Good." Ilya's tone was flat, businesslike. "No one in or out without my approval. If you see anything, you call me first."

Both men nodded. Dimitri led them back toward the door, speaking quietly in Russian. Shane caught something about schedules and perimeter checks, then the door closed and it was just the four of them again—Ilya, Dimitri, Katerina, and Shane.

Ilya looked at Shane. "We need to talk."

Shane's stomach dropped. He glanced at Katerina, who was still absorbed in her show, then stood and followed Ilya into the kitchen.

Ilya leaned against the counter, arms crossed. Dimitri stayed in the doorway, watching both of them.

"Viktor's people had a photo of you," Ilya said.

Shane blinked. "What?"

"A surveillance photo. " Ilya's voice was calm, but there was an edge underneath it. "Probably from when Viktor's men ambushed you the first time."

The words didn't land right at first. Shane stared at him, trying to process.

"Your schedule. Your routine." Ilya's gaze didn't waver. "They know where you go to school. They know about the 7-Eleven, about the restaurant. They probably know about hockey practice."

Shane's chest tightened.

Someone had been watching.

"They—" His voice came out hoarse. He cleared his throat. "You think they have my photo."

"Yes."

The room felt smaller suddenly. Shane's skin crawled, his mind racing back through every time he'd walked alone, every time he'd taken the subway, every time he'd stood under a streetlight waiting for the walk signal. Had they been there? In a car? On the sidewalk? How close had they been?

"How long?" Shane asked.

"We don't know," Dimitri said quietly from the doorway. "At least three days. Maybe more."

Shane's hands curled into fists. He felt violated in a way he couldn't articulate—like someone had been inside his head, cataloging his life without him knowing. Every step he'd taken, every place he'd gone, they'd been there. Watching.

"Why didn't you tell me?" His voice came out sharper than he meant it to.

"We just found out," Ilya said. "Dimitri saw the photo when he was cleaning up the scene."

Shane exhaled hard, pressing his palms against the counter. His heart was pounding. "Jesus Christ."

"You and Katerina stay here," Ilya said. "In the apartment. No leaving. Not until this is over."

Shane looked up sharply. "What?"

"It's not safe." Ilya's tone left no room for argument. "They know too much. Your schedule, your locations—they've been planning something. You don't go back to school. You don't go

to work. You stay here where Sergei and Anton can keep you secure."

"For how long?"

"Until Aleksandr is dealt with."

Shane's jaw tightened. He wanted to argue, to say he wasn't going to hide, but the truth was he didn't know what else to do. The idea of going back to his apartment, to campus, to the store—knowing someone might be watching, waiting—made his skin crawl.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

He pulled it out, glanced at the screen. **Dad.**

For a second, he just stared at it. Then he swiped to answer, lifting it to his ear. "Hey, Dad."

"Shane! Hey, kiddo. How's it going?"

His father's voice was warm, easy, completely oblivious. Shane closed his eyes. "It's—yeah, it's good. Busy."

"I bet. Listen, your mom and I were talking, and we're thinking about coming down to visit. Maybe this weekend, or next if that works better for you. We could take you to dinner, catch one of your hockey games. What do you think?"

Shane's throat closed up. He looked at Ilya, who was watching him carefully.

"Uh—" Shane's voice cracked. He cleared his throat again. "Can you—hold on a second, Dad?"

"Sure, no problem."

Shane pulled the phone away from his ear and set it on the counter, his hand shaking. He stared at it like it was a live grenade.

"They can't come here," he said, his voice tight. "They can't—Jesus, Ilya, they can't come to New York right now."

Ilya's expression didn't change, but something shifted in his eyes.

"They want to visit," Shane continued, his words coming faster now. "They want to take me to dinner, come to a game—what if Viktor's people see them? What if they follow them? What if they—" He broke off, his chest heaving. "I can't let them walk into this. I can't."

Dimitri straightened slightly in the doorway, glancing at Ilya.

Ilya was quiet for a moment, his gaze steady on Shane. Then he said, "Maybe you should go to them."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"You and Katerina," Ilya said. "Go visit your parents. Get out of New York. Away from Aleksandr."

Shane stared at him. "You're serious."

"Yes."

"No." The word came out immediately, reflexive. "No, I'm not leaving."

"Shane—"

"I'm not leaving you," Shane said, his voice rising. "Not now. Not when—" He gestured vaguely toward the door, toward the city beyond it. "Not when this is happening."

"This is exactly why you should go," Ilya said, his tone measured. "You're exposed. Katerina's exposed. If you're here, you're a target. If you're in—where do your parents live?"

"Ottawa."

"If you're in Canada, you're out of reach. Safe."

"And you're here," Shane shot back. "Dealing with Aleksandr. Alone."

"I have Dimitri. I have Sergei and Anton. I have resources." Ilya's voice was calm, but there was something underneath it—something that almost sounded like concern. "What I don't need is to worry about you and Katerina while I'm handling this."

Shane's hands clenched into fists again. He wanted to argue, to say he could help, but the truth was he didn't know how. He wasn't Dimitri. He wasn't Sergei or Anton. He was a biochemistry student who'd just killed a man and was still trying not to think about it.

But leaving felt wrong. It felt like running.

"I don't want to leave you," Shane said quietly.

Ilya's expression softened, just slightly. "I know."

Shane picked up the phone. His hand was steady. Everything felt steady in a distant, disconnected way—like he was watching himself from somewhere outside his body.

"Hey, Dad. Sorry about that."

"No problem! So what do you think? This weekend, or would next week be better?"

Shane's mouth moved before his brain caught up. "Actually, I was thinking—what if Ilya and I came up there instead? To Ottawa."

There was a pause. Then his father's voice came back, brighter, surprised. "Really? You want to come home?"

"Yeah." Shane's voice was flat, automatic. "And maybe bring Ilya's niece. Katerina. She's three, and Russian. I think you and Mom would like her."

"Oh, Shane, that would be wonderful!" His dad sounded genuinely thrilled. "Your mother's going to be over the moon. When were you thinking?"

"Maybe this weekend. Or early next week." Shane stared at the counter, at the grain of the marble. He traced a vein of white with his eyes, following it across the surface. "Depends on when we can get flights."

"That's perfect. We can show Ilya around the city—does he ski? The hills aren't great this time of year, but we could take him to Gatineau Park. And his niece too—oh, your mom's going to spoil her rotten. How long can you stay?"

"I don't know yet. A week, maybe."

"That's fine, that's great. However long you can manage." His father was already planning, Shane could hear it in his voice. "We'll set up the guest room for you and Ilya, and Katerina can have your old room. Does she speak English?"

"Some. She's learning."

"That's okay, kids pick things up fast. Your mom took French in school, maybe she remembers enough to—well, I guess Russian's different, isn't it?" His dad laughed. "We'll figure it out. This is really great, Shane. I'm so glad you're coming."

Shane's throat felt tight. "Yeah. Me too."

"Let me know as soon as you book the flights, okay? I'll pick you up from the airport. And if you need help with tickets or anything—"

"We're fine, Dad. I'll text you when I know more."

"Okay. Okay, good. Your mom's going to be so excited. I'm going to go tell her right now."

"Sounds good."

"Love you, kiddo."

"Love you too."

Shane ended the call and set the phone down on the counter. He stared at it for a moment, at the black screen reflecting the kitchen lights. His father's voice was still echoing in his head—excited, happy, completely unaware.

"You're not coming," Shane said. He didn't look up.

Ilya was quiet for a moment. "No."

Shane's jaw tightened.

"So what's the story?" Shane's voice was flat. "What do I tell them when you don't show up?"

"Family emergency," Ilya said. "My brother Alexei was shot. He's in the hospital. You'll apologize for me, say I couldn't leave."

Shane finally looked up. Ilya's expression was calm, steady—the same expression he'd had when he told Shane to shower, when he'd taken the bloody clothes, when he'd poured cereal for Katerina like it was just another day.

"You're sending me away," Shane said.

"I'm keeping you safe."

"Same thing."

"No," Ilya said quietly. "It's not."

Shane wanted to argue. He wanted to say he could stay, that he could help, that he wasn't some civilian who needed to be protected. But the words stuck in his throat because they weren't true. He *was* a civilian. He'd killed someone today and he was still shaking from it. He wasn't Dimitri. He wasn't built for this.

"How long?" Shane asked.

"A week. Maybe two."

"And if it takes longer?"

Ilya didn't answer immediately. When he did, his voice was careful. "Then you stay longer."

Shane's hands curled into fists on the counter. He felt the anger rising—not hot, not explosive, just a cold, quiet fury that settled in his chest. He was being moved. Positioned. Taken off the board like a piece that was too valuable to risk.

"I don't like this," Shane said.

"I know."

"I'm not running."

"You're not," Ilya said. "You're taking care of Katerina. She needs you."

It was a low blow and they both knew it. Shane's jaw worked. He looked away, toward the living room where Katerina was still watching her cartoon, oblivious to everything.

"Fine," Shane said finally. The word came out hard, clipped. "We'll go."

Ilya stepped closer, his hand reaching for Shane's arm, but Shane pulled back.

"Don't," Shane said quietly. "Just—don't."

Ilya's hand dropped. He didn't argue. He just stood there, watching Shane with that same steady expression, and Shane hated him for it. Hated how calm he was, how certain. Hated that he was right.

Shane picked up his phone and walked out of the kitchen.

"I don't know," Shane said finally, his voice barely above a whisper.

Ilya didn't push. He just waited.

Shane stood there for a long moment, phone still in his hand, staring at nothing. His chest felt tight. His throat ached. He was so tired of being angry, so tired of fighting against the current when he knew—he *knew*—that Ilya was right.

He turned back.

Ilya hadn't moved. He was still standing in the kitchen doorway, hands loose at his sides, watching Shane with that patient, unreadable expression. Waiting.

Shane crossed the distance between them in three steps.

He didn't say anything. He just pressed himself against Ilya's chest, arms wrapping around his waist, face buried against his shoulder. Ilya's arms came up immediately, solid and warm, pulling Shane closer.

In the living room, Dimitri glanced over from where he sat in the armchair. Katerina had dozed off on the couch, her small body curled under a blanket, her breathing soft and even. Dimitri's gaze lingered on Shane and Ilya for a moment—then he looked away, giving them privacy.

Shane held on tighter. He could feel Ilya's heartbeat against his cheek—steady, strong, grounding. His warmth seeped through Shane's shirt. His solidity. Shane's medical brain cataloged it automatically: heart rate calm, respiration even, body temperature normal. Alive. Safe. Here.

For now.

Ilya's hand came up to cradle the back of Shane's head, fingers threading through his hair. His other arm stayed wrapped around Shane's waist, holding him close.

"Ya lyublyu tebya," Ilya whispered against Shane's temple. His voice was low, rough. "Ya khochu, chtoby ty byl v bezopasnosti."

Shane didn't understand all the words. His Russian was still limited, still clumsy. But he understood the tone. The weight. The meaning.

Shane's fingers curled into the fabric of Ilya's shirt. His throat tightened. He wanted to say something—wanted to tell Ilya that he loved him too, that he was terrified, that he didn't want to leave, that he didn't know how to do this without him.

But the words wouldn't come.

So he just held on.

Ilya pressed a kiss to Shane's hair. His hand moved in slow, soothing strokes down Shane's back. He didn't ask for anything. Didn't push. He just held Shane like he was something precious, something worth protecting.

Shane's chest ached.

He pulled back just enough to look up at Ilya. Their faces were close—close enough that Shane could see the faint lines at the corners of Ilya's eyes, the shadow of exhaustion beneath them. Close enough to see the way Ilya was looking at him—like he was memorizing him.

Shane's hand came up to cup Ilya's jaw. His thumb brushed over Ilya's cheekbone.

"I don't want to go," Shane whispered.

"I know."

"I don't want to leave you."

Ilya's eyes closed briefly. When they opened again, there was something raw in them—something unguarded.

"I don't want you to go either," Ilya said quietly. "But I need you alive more than I need you here."

Shane's breath hitched. He leaned in, pressing his forehead against Ilya's.

They stood like that for a long moment, breathing each other in, holding on to something that felt fragile and finite. The penthouse was quiet around them. Katerina's soft breathing. The distant hum of the city outside. Dimitri's careful silence.

Shane didn't know when he'd see Ilya again. Didn't know if Aleksandr would make his move while Shane was gone. Didn't know if this was the last time he'd hold Ilya like this.

He didn't let himself think about it.

He just held on.

Chapter 25: The Shoe

Two days later, Shane was folding a sweater into his duffel bag when he smelled it.

Smoke.

He stopped, hands still on the fabric, and inhaled deeply. Faint, but there. Acrid. Wrong. The kind of smell that made the hair on the back of your neck stand up, that sent primitive warning signals racing through your nervous system.

"Dimitri?"

Dimitri was at the dining table, four passports laid out in front of him—Shane's, Katerina's, Ilya's, Artem's. He'd been organizing them methodically, checking expiration dates, verifying that the photos were still current, making sure everything was in order for whatever came next. His head came up immediately, eyes sharp and alert.

"You smell that?"

Dimitri's nostrils flared. He took a slow, deliberate breath, processing what his senses were telling him. His expression went flat, all emotion wiped clean in the way it did when danger was close. "Yes."

The fire alarm shrieked to life, piercing and insistent, echoing off the walls.

Shane's heart kicked into overdrive, adrenaline flooding his system. Katerina appeared in the hallway, small hands pressed over her ears, eyes wide with fear and confusion. Ilya came out of his office, already moving with purpose, already assessing the situation with the tactical precision of someone who'd survived worse. Artem was right behind him, still favoring his injured ribs, moving more carefully than usual, the bruising on his face faded to a sickly greenish-yellow.

"Aleksandr," Ilya said. Not a question. A certainty.

Dimitri was already at the window, pulling the curtain aside and looking down at the street below, scanning for threats, for patterns, for anything that didn't belong. "Smoke's coming from below. Multiple floors. This isn't accidental."

Ilya's jaw tightened, a muscle ticking near his temple. He looked at Shane, then at Katerina, his gaze softening for just a fraction of a second before hardening again. "We go now. Farthest stairwell from the apartment. Stay together."

"Ilya—"

"Now." Ilya's voice cut through the alarm like a blade, brooking no argument, no hesitation. He looked at Dimitri, their unspoken communication honed by years of working together. "You stay with Shane and Katerina. Don't let them out of your sight. Artem's with me."

Artem didn't argue, didn't question. He just moved to Ilya's side, positioning himself slightly behind and to the left, covering Ilya's blind spot despite his injuries.

Shane grabbed Katerina, lifting her small body into his arms. She wrapped her legs around his waist, arms around his neck, and buried her face against his shoulder, her breath hot and quick against his skin. She didn't make a sound—she'd learned too young that silence could mean survival.

Dimitri scooped the passports off the table in one fluid motion, shoving them into the inside pocket of his jacket where they'd be secure. "Let's move."

The hallway was filling with smoke. Ilya could hear doors opening, voices shouting, footsteps pounding. The building was waking up, panicking. Good. Chaos would cover their exit.

He led them to the east stairwell—the one farthest from the penthouse, the one that opened onto the side street instead of the main entrance. If Viktor was smart, he'd have men at every exit. But maybe, maybe this one—

Ilya shoved the door open.

Four men. Waiting.

He didn't hesitate.

The first one was closest, already reaching for a gun. Ilya grabbed his wrist, twisted, and drove his elbow into the man's face. Bone crunched. The man staggered back, hit the railing, and Ilya kicked him. Hard. The man went over, tumbling down the stairs in a tangle of limbs and momentum.

"Go!" Ilya shouted.

Shane didn't stop. He jumped over the man's body—still moving, groaning—and kept running, Katerina clutched tight against him. Dimitri was right behind him.

The other three men moved in.

Artem took the one on the left, slamming him into the wall. Ilya went for the two on the right. One of them got a hand on his jacket, yanking him back. Ilya twisted, drove his fist into the man's throat. The man choked, let go. The other one swung a baton. Ilya ducked, felt it whistle past his ear, and came up inside the man's guard. Headbutt. The man's nose exploded.

Behind him, Artem grunted—pain, not effort. His ribs. He was still hurt.

"Dimitri!" Ilya's voice echoed down the stairwell. "Follow him!"

Dimitri was three steps down, looking back. His face was torn—duty, loyalty, the impossible choice.

"GO."

Dimitri's expression hardened. He turned and ran.

Shane's lungs burned. Katerina was small, but dead weight in his arms, and he was taking the stairs two at a time, trying not to trip, trying not to think about the man he'd jumped over or the sounds of fighting above him.

The smoke was thicker here. His eyes watered. Katerina coughed once, a small sound against his neck, but she didn't cry. She didn't say anything.

He hit the ground floor, shoved through the door, and stumbled out onto the street.

Cold air. Night. People were pouring out of the building, some in pajamas, some in coats thrown over nothing. Sirens wailed in the distance. Smoke billowed from the upper floors, dark and ugly against the sky.

Shane turned, looking for Ilya, for Artem—

Dimitri burst through the door behind him.

His face was a mask of fury. He crossed the distance in three strides, pulled two passports from his jacket, and shoved them into Shane's hands.

"Airport. Now."

"What—Dimitri, where's—"

"Go." Dimitri's voice was flat, final. He was already turning, already moving back toward the building.

"Dimitri!"

Dimitri didn't stop. He disappeared through the door.

Shane stood there, Katerina in his arms, passports clutched in one hand, and watched him go.

The stairwell was empty.

Dimitri took the stairs fast, gun drawn, eyes scanning. Smoke. Silence. No bodies. No Ilya. No Artem.

He reached the landing where they'd fought.

One of Artem's shoes. Just one. Lying on its side near the wall.

Dimitri crouched, picked it up. The laces were still tied.

Blood on the wall. Not a spray—a smear. Someone had been shoved against it, hard. A struggle.

He stood, turned in a slow circle. The stairwell was empty. The men were gone. Ilya and Artem were gone.

Taken.

Dimitri's hand tightened around the shoe. His jaw clenched so hard his teeth ached.

He pulled out his phone and dialed.

The airport was a blur. Shane moved on autopilot—check-in, security, gate. Katerina stayed silent the entire time, her hand in his, her eyes distant. She didn't ask where Uncle Ilya was. She didn't ask about Artem. She just followed.

On the plane, she curled up against him, her head on his shoulder. Shane wrapped his arm around her and stared out the window at the darkness.

His phone buzzed. A text from Dimitri.

They're gone. Taken. Get her safe. I'll find them.

Shane closed his eyes.

Ottawa was cold. His dad was waiting at arrivals, grinning, arms open. "There's my boy!"

Shane hugged him, felt his dad's solid warmth, and wanted to scream.

"And this must be Katerina!" His dad crouched down, smiling. "Hi, sweetheart. I'm Shane's dad. You can call me David."

Katerina looked at him. She didn't smile. She didn't say anything.

David's smile faltered. He looked up at Shane. "She okay?"

"She's tired," Shane said. "Long flight."

They drove to the house. Shane's mom was waiting on the porch, arms crossed against the cold. She hugged Shane tight, then looked past him toward the car.

"Where's Ilya?" Yuna asked. "I thought he was coming with you."

Shane met her eyes. "Work thing came up. He got delayed. He'll catch a later flight."

The lie came out smooth. Easy. Like he hadn't just left Ilya bleeding in a burning penthouse. Like he didn't know Ilya was zip-tied in some warehouse right now, maybe dying.

Yuna frowned. "He works too much."

"Yeah," Shane said. "He does."

Inside, Yuna fussed—making hot chocolate, pulling out blankets, showing Katerina the guest room with its pale blue walls and stuffed animals on the shelf. Katerina sat on the bed and stared at the wall.

Shane's mom came back to the living room, her voice soft. "Shane, honey—what's going on? Where's her mother?"

Shane looked at his hands. "She's dead."

His mom's face crumpled. "Oh, sweetheart. That poor baby. When did—"

"Recently," Shane said. "It's been hard. Katerina is Ilya's brother's daughter—Alexei. He flew in from Russia when her mother died. Ilya's been helping him take care of her."

"His brother?" His dad leaned forward. "I didn't know Ilya had a brother."

"Yeah. They're not super close, but—" Shane shook his head. "Alexei needed help. His daughter just lost her mother. Ilya couldn't say no to that."

Yuna reached over and squeezed Shane's hand. "You're a good man, helping him through this. Both of you must be exhausted."

Shane nodded. He felt nothing. Just the smooth surface of the lie, holding.

His phone rang.

He stepped into the hallway, looked at the screen. Dimitri.

"Yeah?"

"They have them." Dimitri's voice was rough. "Viktor's men. Aleksandr's orders. I'm working on a location."

"I'm coming back."

"No. Stay with—"

"I'm coming back."

Silence. Then: "Okay."

Shane hung up. He walked back into the living room, where his parents were sitting on the couch, waiting.

"That was Dimitri," Shane said. His voice was steady. Calm. "Ilya's brother's been shot."

His mom gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "Alexei? Oh my God—"

"What happened?" His dad stood up. "Is he—is he going to be okay?"

"I don't know." Shane looked at his dad. "I have to go back. I don't know how long I'll be gone. Can you—can you keep Katerina here? Just for a little while?"

"Of course," his dad said immediately. "Of course. Whatever you need."

Shane went to the guest room. Katerina was still sitting on the bed, staring at nothing.

His mom was already on her feet. "Shane, is Ilya okay? Is he safe?"

"I don't know," Shane said again. It was the first true thing he'd said since he walked through the door. "I just—I have to go back."

Yuna pulled him into a hug. "Be careful. Please."

"I will."

"Call us when you know more," his dad said. "About Alexei. About everything."

Shane nodded. He didn't trust himself to say anything else.

He crouched in front of her. "Hey."

She looked at him.

Shane pulled out his phone. Opened Google Translate. Typed: *I have to go back to New York. But you're safe here, okay? My mom and dad are going to take care of you.*

He hit the speaker button. Let the robotic voice say it in Russian. Then he tried it himself, reading off the screen. "Ya dolzhen vernut'sya v N'yu-York. No ty zdes' v bezopasnosti, khorosho? Moi mama i papa budut zabotit'sya o tebe."

Katerina's eyes filled with tears. She didn't blink. They just sat there, pooling.

Shane typed again. *I'll come back. I promise.*

He read it aloud. "Ya vernus'. Obeshchayu."

She nodded. Once.

Shane hugged her. She didn't hug back. She just sat there, small and still and silent.

Artem's wrists burned where the zip ties cut into his skin. His hands were going numb. He'd stopped trying to shift his weight twenty minutes ago—every movement made his ribs scream, and the guards noticed.

The warehouse was cold. Industrial. Concrete floors, metal beams overhead, the smell of rust and old oil. A single bulb hung from a wire somewhere behind him, casting long shadows across the floor. He couldn't see much. His left eye was swollen shut, and the right wasn't much better.

Ilya was next to him. Close enough that their shoulders touched. Both of them zip-tied to metal chairs bolted to the floor, wrists behind their backs, ankles bound to the chair legs.

Artem could hear Ilya breathing. Slow. Controlled. The kind of breathing that meant he was in pain but refusing to show it.

Artem didn't look at him. Couldn't risk it. Not yet.

There were three guards. Two by the door, one pacing near the far wall, smoking. They spoke in Russian, low voices, bored. Waiting for orders. Waiting for Aleksandr.

Artem's mouth tasted like blood. His back tooth was gone—he'd felt it crack during the fight in the stairwell, swallowed it before he hit the ground. His jaw ached. His ribs ached. Everything ached.

But he was alive.

And Ilya was alive.

That was the only thing that mattered.

It had happened fast.

The stairwell. The ambush. Ilya had shoved Shane and Katerina ahead, and then the men were on them—four, maybe five, Artem couldn't be sure. He'd fought. Ilya had fought. Dimitri had been somewhere behind them, and then there was smoke, and shouting, and someone's fist in Artem's face.

He'd gone down hard. Tasted blood. Heard Ilya's voice, sharp and commanding, and then another impact—something heavy against the side of his head.

When he came to, he was on the floor. Hands dragging him upright. Ilya was a few feet away, on his knees, blood streaming down his face. One of the men had a gun to the back of his head.

Artem's vision swam. His ears rang. But his brain kicked into gear.

They don't know which one is Ilya.

The thought came fast and cold. Aleksandr's men—they were muscle, not inner circle. They'd been told to grab Ilya Rozanov and anyone with him. But they didn't know what Ilya looked

like. Not up close. Not with his face beaten to hell.

Artem made a choice.

"Pavel!" he shouted. His voice cracked. "Pavel, don't—"

Ilya's eyes snapped to him. For half a second, there was confusion. Then understanding.

"Shut up," one of the men barked, hitting Artem across the face.

Artem spat blood. "Don't hurt him—please, he didn't do anything—"

"I said shut up."

Another hit. Artem's head snapped back. He tasted copper. But he kept his eyes on Ilya.

"Pavel," he said again, quieter. Desperate. "Just do what they say."

The man with the gun looked between them. Then at Ilya. Ilya's face was a mess—nose broken, blood everywhere, one eye swollen shut. His hair was dark with it, matted and wet.

"This one?" the man said, nudging Ilya with his boot.

"No," another guard said. "The other one called him Pavel. Rozanov's the one we want. Check him."

They hauled Artem up. Patted him down. Found his wallet.

"Artem Kozlov," one of them read off his ID. He looked at Ilya. "Who the fuck are you?"

Ilya said nothing. His jaw was clenched. Blood dripped from his chin onto the concrete.

"Pavel," Artem said again, his voice shaking. "Just tell them—"

"Shut him up," the first guard snapped.

Someone hit Artem again. He went down. His vision blurred. He heard them talking, fast and tense.

"—supposed to grab Rozanov—"

"—this one's Kozlov, the ID says—"

"—where the fuck is Rozanov—"

"—must've gotten away in the smoke—"

"Aleksandr's going to kill us."

"Then we bring him what we have. Kozlov's his boyfriend, right? He'll want him."

A pause. Then: "Fine. Grab them both. Move."

Artem blinked. His vision cleared slightly. The warehouse came back into focus.

They thought Ilya was someone else. Some guy named Pavel who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. A witness. Collateral.

They thought Ilya had escaped.

Which meant they wouldn't kill him. Not yet. Not until they were sure.

Artem's chest tightened. His hands were numb, his face was on fire, but he'd done it. He'd bought them time.

He turned his head slightly. Just enough to see Ilya out of the corner of his good eye.

Ilya was looking at him.

His face was unrecognizable. Swollen, bruised, caked with dried blood. His hair hung in dark, matted clumps. But his eyes—his eyes were clear.

And they were saying *thank you*.

Artem didn't nod. Didn't move. Just held his gaze for a second, then looked away.

The guards were still talking by the door. One of them was on the phone. Artem caught fragments: "—Kozlov secured—" "—other one, some guy named Pavel—" "—Rozanov got away, we think—"

Artem's ribs ached. His wrists burned. His mouth tasted like blood.

But Ilya was alive.

And as long as Aleksandr's men thought Ilya Rozanov was still out there, they wouldn't put a bullet in the back of "Pavel's" head, not yet at least.

Artem closed his good eye. Let his head hang forward.

They just had to stay alive long enough for Dimitri to find them.

But he knew one thing: he wasn't going to let Ilya die in this warehouse.

Not today.

The flight back to New York left in two hours. Shane sat in the airport terminal, elbows on his knees, head in his hands.

His thoughts were a loop he couldn't break. The man tumbling down the stairs. Katerina's face pressed against his shoulder. The sounds of fighting behind them—grunts, impacts, the wet crack of bone. Ilya's voice: *Go*. Dimitri's face when he came out alone.

Artem's shoe.

Dimitri had sent him a photo. Just the shoe, lying on the stairwell landing. No explanation needed.

Shane stared at the departures board without seeing it. His mind kept circling back, replaying, dissecting. Ilya had known. He'd known the stairwell was a trap and he'd gone anyway because there was no other choice. He'd sent Shane and Katerina ahead because that was the play—save them first, deal with the consequences after.

The consequences were Ilya and Artem in Aleksandr's hands.

Shane's stomach twisted. He thought about what Aleksandr wanted. Not money. Not territory, not really. He wanted Ilya broken. He wanted to take everything Ilya had built and burn it down, and he wanted Ilya to watch.

Which meant Ilya was alive. For now. Because dead, he couldn't suffer.

Shane's hands curled into fists. His nails bit into his palms.

He thought about Artem. Artem, who was already hurt. Ribs still healing, face still bruised. Artem, who'd fought anyway, who'd taken the man on the left and slammed him into the wall because that's what you did—you fought even when you were broken because the alternative was worse.

Artem, who'd lost a shoe.

Shane didn't know why that detail gutted him. Maybe because it was so small. So human. Artem had been dragged away and he'd lost a shoe and Dimitri had found it and picked it up like it mattered, like it was evidence, like it was a promise.

I'll find them.

Shane pulled out his phone. Looked at the photo again. The shoe. The blood smear on the wall.

He thought about Katerina. Her silence. The way she'd sat on the bed in his parents' guest room and stared at nothing, tears pooling in her eyes but not falling. She'd seen the man go down the stairs. She'd heard the fighting. She was three years old and she'd learned that the world was violent and the people you loved disappeared and sometimes they didn't come back.

Shane had promised her he'd come back.

He didn't know if he'd be able to keep that promise.

He thought about his parents. His dad's easy smile. His mom fussing over hot chocolate. They thought Ilya's brother had been shot. They thought Shane was going back to support his boyfriend through a family tragedy. They had no idea their son was flying into a gang war. They had no idea Shane had killed a man in a grocery store parking lot.

Shane wondered if they'd still recognize him if they knew.

He wondered if he recognized himself.

Three months ago, he'd been a biochem student working graveyard shifts at 7-Eleven and playing hockey on weekends. He'd been normal. Boring. Safe.

Now he was sitting in an airport terminal, flying back to New York to help execute a rescue mission—or a revenge killing, depending on how it played out—and he wasn't scared.

He was furious.

The fear had burned away somewhere over the last few days. Maybe in the stairwell. Maybe when Dimitri had shoved the passports into his hands and told him to run. Maybe on the plane to Ottawa, holding Katerina while she shook silently against him.

The fear was gone. What was left was cold and sharp and focused.

Shane thought about the gun. The one Dimitri had given him before the grocery run. He'd left it in New York—couldn't take it on a plane—but it would be waiting for him when he got back. He thought about the weight of it. The way it had felt in his hand when he'd shot Denis. The recoil. The sound.

He thought about pulling the trigger again.

He should feel something about that. Guilt, maybe. Horror. The knowledge that killing someone changed you, that you couldn't uncross that line.

But he didn't.

He just felt ready.

Shane's phone buzzed. A text from Dimitri.

Vera's putting out feelers. Someone will slip. They always do.

Shane typed back: *How long?*

Don't know. Hours. Maybe a day.

I land at 11.

I'll be there.

Shane put his phone away. Stared at the departures board again.

He thought about Ilya. About the way Ilya had looked at him in the bathroom after the grocery store, when Shane had been shaking and trying not to fall apart. Ilya had been calm. Steady. He'd told Shane it was okay to break.

Ilya had held him while he cried.

Now Ilya was gone and Shane wasn't crying. He was past that. He was past breaking down, past needing someone to hold him together.

He was going to get Ilya back, and he was going to kill anyone who got in the way.

The thought should have scared him. It didn't.

Shane wondered what that said about him. Wondered if he'd already crossed some invisible line, if he'd become someone his parents wouldn't recognize, someone his professors wouldn't believe existed.

He decided he didn't care.

Ilya was gone. Artem was gone. Katerina was traumatized, again, and silent and safe in Ottawa because Shane had gotten her out, but the cost was two people he—

Shane stopped that thought. Didn't finish it.

He stood up. Grabbed his bag. Walked to the gate.

The flight was boarding.

The plane was half-empty. Shane got a window seat, shoved his bag in the overhead compartment, and sat down. He didn't pull out his phone. Didn't try to distract himself. He just sat there, staring out at the tarmac, and let his mind go where it wanted.

He thought about violence.

He'd been sheltered from it his whole life. Good parents, good neighborhood, good schools. The worst thing that had ever happened to him was a concussion from a bad hit during a hockey game. He'd never been in a real fight. Never seen someone get hurt—really hurt, not just a bloody nose or a black eye.

Then he'd met Ilya.

And now he'd seen a man beaten in a parking lot. He'd shot someone. He'd jumped over a body in a stairwell while carrying a three-year-old. He'd watched Katerina shut down, watched her go silent and still because her brain couldn't process what she'd seen.

He'd learned that violence wasn't abstract. It was immediate and visceral and it left marks—on bodies, on minds, on the people who witnessed it.

And he'd learned that he could do it.

That was the thing that sat heavy in his chest. Not guilt. Not horror. Just the knowledge that he was capable. That when Dimitri had handed him a gun and told him to shoot if he had to, Shane had done it. No hesitation. No freezing up.

He'd pulled the trigger and Denis had gone down and Shane had felt—

Nothing. Relief, maybe. That it was over. That Artem was safe.

But not regret.

Shane didn't know what that made him. Didn't know if he was broken or just adapting, if this was who he'd always been under the surface or if Ilya's world had changed him into something new.

He thought it was probably both.

The plane took off. Shane watched the lights of Ottawa fall away below him, and he thought about his parents. About the lie he'd told. About how easy it had been to look his dad in the eye and say *Ilya's brother's been shot* like it was true, like he wasn't flying back to New York to help stage a rescue mission that would probably end in more people dying.

His parents would keep Katerina safe. They'd feed her, give her a bed, probably try to get her to talk. His mom would fuss. His dad would try to make her smile.

And Shane would be in New York, doing things they couldn't imagine.

He thought about the distance between those two realities. The life his parents thought he was living—college, part-time job, hockey on weekends—and the life he was actually living. The gap was so wide he didn't know how to bridge it. Didn't know if he ever could.

Maybe he wouldn't try.

Maybe this was just who he was now. Someone who existed in two worlds, who could smile at his parents over dinner and then fly back to New York and pick up a gun.

The thought should have bothered him more than it did.

Shane closed his eyes. Tried to sleep. Couldn't.

His mind kept circling back to Ilya and Artem. To what they might be going through. Aleksandr wasn't stupid—he wouldn't kill them right away. He'd want something first. Information, maybe. Leverage. Or maybe he'd just want to make them suffer because that was the point, because breaking Ilya was the goal and you couldn't break someone who was already dead.

Shane thought about Ilya being hurt. Thought about someone hitting him, cutting him, making him bleed. His hands curled into fists again.

He thought about Artem. Artem, who was already injured. Who'd fought anyway. Who'd probably fought when they took him, too, because that's what Artem did—he fought until he

couldn't anymore.

Shane wondered if they were together. If Aleksandr was keeping them in the same place or if he'd separated them, if he was using one to break the other.

He wondered if they were scared.

Ilya didn't scare easy. Shane had seen him calm in situations that should have sent anyone else into a panic. But everyone had a breaking point. Everyone had something they couldn't lose.

For Ilya, it was Katerina.

And Shane had gotten her out. Had put her on a plane and taken her somewhere Aleksandr couldn't reach. That was something. That was one thing Aleksandr couldn't use.

Shane's jaw tightened.

The plane droned on. Shane stared out the window at the darkness and thought about what he was going to do when he landed.

Dimitri would pick him up. They'd go back to the penthouse—or somewhere else, maybe, if the penthouse wasn't safe anymore. They'd wait for intelligence. For someone to slip, like Dimitri had said. Someone always did.

And then they'd move.

Shane thought about that moment. The moment when they had a location, when they knew where Ilya and Artem were being held. He thought about the decision that would come next—go in fast, go in quiet, go in ready to kill anyone who got in the way.

He thought about pulling the trigger again.

He was ready.

That was the thing that sat clearest in his mind. Not doubt. Not fear. Just cold, focused readiness.

Shane had crossed a line when he shot Denis. He'd become someone who could kill if he had to. And now he was flying back to New York to do it again, and he wasn't conflicted about it.

He was just waiting for the opportunity.

The plane started its descent. Shane opened his eyes, looked out at the lights of New York spreading below him like a circuit board.

Somewhere down there, Ilya and Artem were being held. Somewhere down there, Aleksandr was waiting.

Shane was coming.

Dimitri was waiting at arrivals. He looked like he hadn't slept—eyes shadowed, jaw tight, shoulders tense. He saw Shane and nodded once. No words. No explanations.

They walked to the parking garage in silence.

Dimitri's car was on the third level. He unlocked it, got in. Shane threw his bag in the back and slid into the passenger seat.

Dimitri started the engine. Pulled out of the parking space. Drove.

"Anything?" Shane asked.

"Not yet." Dimitri's voice was flat. "Vera's got people watching. Listening. Someone will make a move."

"How long?"

"Don't know."

Shane looked out the window. The city slid past—lights, traffic, people going about their lives like the world wasn't on fire.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"There's a place. Outside the city. Upstate. Aleksandr won't find it. Not yet."

Shane nodded. He thought about the penthouse. About smoke and Ilya and Artem being dragged away. About everything that burned down. About what was waiting for them at the end of this drive.
About what they would find.

"You okay?" Dimitri asked.

Shane looked at him. Dimitri's eyes were on the road, but his jaw was tight, his hands gripping the steering wheel like he was holding himself together by force of will.

"Yeah," Shane said. "You?"

"No."

They didn't talk after that.

The house was outside the city limits, hidden off a rural road surrounded by trees. Dimitri unlocked the door, stepped inside, flipped on the lights. Shane followed.
The space was sparse. Functional. The kind of place that existed for exactly this purpose—safe house, off the books. No personal touches. No signs of life. Just furniture and walls and the heavy weight of waiting.

Shane dropped his bag by the door. Walked into the living room. Sat down on the couch.

Dimitri went to the kitchen. Came back with two glasses and a bottle of vodka. He poured, handed one to Shane, and sat down in the chair across from him.

They drank in silence.

This place wasn't home. It wasn't the penthouse. It was a box with furniture, designed for waiting and planning. Dimitri had brought him here to do exactly that. Wait. Plan. Get ready for what came next.

Shane understood. They weren't going to hide or grieve. They were going to prepare for war.

It felt like a waiting room. Like the space between one thing and the next. Like they were suspended in time.

"They're alive," Dimitri said. His voice was rough. "Aleksandr won't kill them. Not yet."

"I know."

"He'll want something first. Information. Leverage."

"I know."

Dimitri drank. Poured another glass. "When we find them—"

"We go in fast," Shane said. "We don't negotiate. We don't wait. We go in and we get them out."

Dimitri looked at him. Really looked at him. His eyes were hard, assessing. "You ready for that?"

"Yeah."

"It's going to be bad, Shane. When we find them—what we find—it's going to be bad."

Shane met his gaze. "I know."

Dimitri nodded slowly. He drank. "Okay."

They sat there, drinking vodka in the safe house, waiting for the phone to ring.

It rang six hours later.

Shane had dozed off on the couch, his body finally giving in to exhaustion. Dimitri was at the dining table, laptop open, going through contacts and surveillance reports and anything that might give them a lead.

The phone rang. Dimitri grabbed it.

"Yeah?"

He listened. His expression didn't change, but his hand tightened around the phone.

"Where?" A pause. "You're sure?" Another pause. "Okay. Good. Thank you."

He hung up. Looked at Shane.

"Vera," he said. "Two of Aleksandr's men went to Samovar Soiree. Ate dinner. Looked around. Vera clocked them immediately."

Shane sat up. "And?"

"She had Katya follow them. They drove to Staten Island. Warehouse district near the waterfront. Katya got an address."

Shane stood. "Let's go."

"Shane—"

"Let's go."

Dimitri looked at him. Saw whatever he needed to see. He nodded.

He stood and walked to the closet near the kitchen. Opened it. Inside was an arsenal—rifles mounted on the wall, handguns on shelves, boxes of ammunition stacked neatly below.

Dimitri pulled a Glock from one of the shelves. Checked it. Handed it to Shane.

"Here."

Shane took it. The weight was familiar. Solid. He ejected the magazine, checked it—full—then slid it back in. Chambered a round. Engaged the safety. Tucked it into the back of his waistband.

Dimitri pulled another weapon for himself. Loaded it with the same practiced efficiency.

He looked up, met Shane's eyes.

"You ready?"

Shane thought about Ilya. About Artem. About Katerina's silence and the shoe on the stairwell and the blood smear on the wall.

He thought about pulling the trigger.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm ready."

They walked out of the house together, and Shane didn't look back.

The second safe house was in Red Hook—a converted warehouse with blacked-out windows and reinforced doors. Dimitri pulled into the loading bay and killed the engine.

Inside, the team was already assembled.

Sergei stood near a table covered in weapons and tactical gear, checking the magazine on an AR-15. Anton was beside him, strapping a vest across his chest. Katya was at the far end, loading rounds into spare magazines with quick, efficient movements.

Seven other men Shane didn't recognize filled the space—all armed, all focused. They moved with the kind of quiet competence that came from years of this work. No one spoke unless necessary.

Sergei looked up when Shane and Dimitri entered. He nodded once. Anton did the same. Katya didn't look up from her work.

Dimitri walked to the table and picked up a tactical vest—black, heavy, professional. He held it out to Shane.

"Put this on," he said.

Shane took it. Pulled his shirt over his head and strapped the vest across his chest, secured the sides. It was snug. Restrictive. Good.

Dimitri was already wearing his own.

From the table, Dimitri picked up a second pistol—a Sig Sauer, compact and clean. He checked the magazine, chambered a round, and handed it to Shane grip-first.

"Ankle holster," Dimitri said. "Backup."

Shane took it. Crouched down and strapped it to his right ankle, the holster sitting just above his boot. He stood, tested the draw. Smooth. Fast.

Around them, the team finished their preparations. Rifles slung across backs. Spare magazines tucked into vests. Radios clipped to shoulders. Twelve people total, moving with synchronized purpose.

Dimitri looked at Sergei. "We ready?"

"Ready."

"Three vehicles," Dimitri said. "Sergei, you take four in the van. Anton, three with you in the SUV. Shane's with me."

No one questioned it. They just moved.

Shane followed Dimitri back to the car. Behind them, engines started. Doors slammed. The convoy pulled out of the loading bay in formation—Dimitri's car in front, the van and SUV close behind.

Shane watched the city pass. Warehouses and chain-link fences and the dark water beyond.

His heart was steady. His hands were steady.

Chapter 26: The Confrontation

The three black SUVs cut their headlights two blocks out, rolling through the industrial wasteland of Staten Island's forgotten waterfront like sharks through dark water. Shane sat in the passenger seat of the lead vehicle, checking his Glock 19 for the third time—magazine seated, round chambered, safety off. The familiar weight of the weapon in his hand steadied his breathing.

"Two minutes," Sergei said from behind the wheel, his voice flat and professional.

He'd strapped up with three guns tonight. The Glock 26 sat in his ankle holster, and the Sig Sauer P365 pressed against his lower back. He knew he'd be giving one to Ilya the moment they found him—assuming Ilya was in any condition to hold it.

Shane glanced in the side mirror. The other two vehicles maintained their spacing, thirty yards back, moving in perfect formation. Dimitri was driving the second SUV. Katya rode shotgun in the third. Between the three vehicles, they had eleven operators—enough firepower to level a small compound, let alone one warehouse.

The target building materialized out of the darkness ahead: a squat, two-story structure with corrugated metal siding and narrow windows set high in the walls. A single security light illuminated the front entrance. Two cars sat in the gravel lot—a black Mercedes and a gray Lexus. Aleksandr's people were home.

Sergei pulled the lead SUV past the warehouse, continuing another hundred yards before cutting the engine. The other two vehicles peeled off, circling around to approach from different angles. Shane's door was open before they'd fully stopped.

"Radio check," Sergei whispered into his throat mic.

"Two, good," Dimitri's voice crackled back.

"Three, good," came Katya's response.

Shane pulled his tactical vest tight, feeling the spare magazines press against his ribs. Dimitri emerged from the darkness, moving low and fast, his Sig Sauer P226 already drawn. The big Russian's face was unreadable, but Shane caught the tension in his shoulders. They'd worked together long enough to read each other without words.

"Rear entrance is around back, past the loading dock," Dimitri said quietly. "One door, steel frame. We kick it and go."

Shane nodded. "Sergei's team hits the front in ninety seconds. We move on the first shot."

They separated from the main group, circling wide around the warehouse's eastern wall. The ground was littered with broken pallets and rusted metal drums. Shane's boots crunched on gravel, each step measured and deliberate. His heart rate was elevated but controlled—the

familiar pre-combat cocktail of adrenaline and focus that sharpened everything to crystal clarity.

The rear of the warehouse was darker, the security light from the front barely reaching this far. The loading dock was a concrete platform four feet high, its rolling door pulled down and locked. To the right, set into the wall, was a single steel door with a deadbolt.

Dimitri moved to one side of the door, Shane to the other. They waited, weapons raised, breathing synchronized. Shane counted down in his head. Sixty seconds. Forty-five. Thirty.

From the front of the building came the sudden explosive crack of a door being kicked in, followed immediately by the staccato bark of automatic weapons fire.

Dimitri didn't hesitate. He pivoted and drove his boot into the door just beside the lock. The frame splintered with a sharp crack. The door flew inward, and they were moving.

Shane went in low and left, Glock up, scanning for targets. The rear section of the warehouse was a maze of metal shelving units stacked with cardboard boxes. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting harsh shadows. The gunfire from the front was deafening now—the deep boom of shotguns mixing with the rapid chatter of AR-15s.

A figure appeared between two shelving units, twenty feet ahead. Male, mid-thirties, leather jacket, raising a pistol. Shane fired twice—center mass, textbook double-tap. The man went down hard, his weapon clattering across the concrete floor.

"Clear right," Dimitri called out, moving past Shane toward a corridor that led deeper into the warehouse.

They advanced through the storage area, weapons tracking every shadow, every corner. The main firefight was raging somewhere ahead—Shane could hear Sergei's voice shouting commands in Russian, punctuated by sustained bursts of automatic fire. Glass shattered. Someone screamed.

The corridor opened into a wider space—what looked like a former office area, now stripped down to bare walls and exposed wiring. Three doors led off the main room. Two were open, revealing empty spaces. The third was closed.

Shane moved to the closed door, Dimitri covering him. He tested the handle—locked. Without hesitation, he stepped back and fired three rounds into the lock mechanism. The door sagged inward.

He kicked it open and swept inside, Glock leading.

The room was small, maybe fifteen by twenty feet. A single bare bulb hung from the ceiling. And there, in the center of the space, were Ilya and Artem.

Both men were zip-tied to heavy metal chairs, the kind used in industrial settings. Ilya's face was a mask of blood and bruising, his features so swollen and distorted that Shane barely recognized him. His left eye was completely shut, the surrounding tissue purple and black.

Blood had dried in thick streams from his nose and mouth. His shirt was torn, revealing more bruising across his ribs.

Artem was in slightly better shape, but not by much. His right eye was swollen shut, and a deep gash across his forehead had bled down his chin. His breathing was labored, each inhale producing a wet, rattling sound that suggested broken ribs.

Both men's heads lifted as Shane entered. Ilya's one good eye focused on him, and something like relief flickered across his battered face.

"What the fuck are you doing here," Ilya rasped, his voice barely audible over the gunfire outside.

"Saving your ass." Shane said while holstered his Glock and pulled his tactical knife from his belt. He moved behind Ilya first, sawing through the thick plastic zip-ties binding his wrists to the chair. The ties fell away, and Ilya immediately brought his hands forward, flexing his fingers to restore circulation.

Dimitri was already working on Artem's bindings, his knife making quick work of the plastic.

Shane moved around to face Ilya, pulling his backup piece—a compact Glock 26—from his ankle holster. He pressed it into Ilya's hands. "Can you shoot?"

Ilya's fingers closed around the weapon. He checked the magazine with practiced efficiency, despite his injuries. "I can shoot."

Dimitri handed Artem his own backup weapon, a snub-nosed .38 revolver. Artem took it with his left hand—his right arm hung at an awkward angle, possibly dislocated or broken.

For a moment, the four men stood in the small room, the sounds of combat raging just beyond the walls. Shane met Ilya's gaze, then Artem's. No words were exchanged. None were needed. They'd come for their people. Now they'd finish this.

Shane moved to the door first, checking the corridor. "We move to the front. Stay tight, watch your sectors."

They emerged from the office area into the main warehouse floor, and the full scope of the firefight became apparent.

The front section of the warehouse was a war zone. Sergei's team had pushed through the main entrance and taken cover behind a row of industrial equipment—old machinery, metal drums, concrete pillars. Aleksandr's men were dug in deeper in the warehouse, using stacked pallets and shipping containers as cover.

Muzzle flashes lit up the darkness like strobe lights. The air was thick with gun smoke and the acrid smell of cordite. Brass casings littered the concrete floor, tinkling like wind chimes as they rolled.

Shane counted at least six hostiles still in the fight, maybe more. One was positioned behind a forklift, firing controlled bursts from an AR-15. Another was up on a catwalk, raining down

fire from above. The rest were scattered throughout the space, using whatever cover they could find.

Katya was pinned down behind a concrete pillar, returning fire with her Beretta. Anton had taken a position near the entrance, his shotgun booming at regular intervals. Sergei was in the center, coordinating the assault, his own AR-15 spitting fire in short, disciplined bursts.

Shane moved left, using the shadows along the wall for concealment. Dimitri went right, Ilya and Artem following close behind. They needed to flank the hostiles, catch them in a crossfire.

A figure emerged from behind a shipping container, swinging an AK-47 toward Sergei's position. Shane fired three times, fast and accurate. The man stumbled backward, his weapon discharging into the ceiling before he collapsed.

The hostile on the catwalk spotted Shane's muzzle flash and pivoted, bringing his rifle to bear. Shane dove behind a metal drum as rounds sparked off the concrete where he'd been standing. He came up firing, his shots punching through the catwalk's metal railing. The hostile jerked and fell, tumbling over the edge to crash onto the warehouse floor below.

Dimitri had engaged two hostiles near the back wall, his Sig Sauer barking steadily. One went down immediately. The other scrambled for better cover, but Ilya—moving with surprising speed despite his injuries—caught him with two rounds from the Glock 26. The man dropped without a sound.

The firefight was collapsing inward now, Aleksandr's men being systematically eliminated. The hostile behind the forklift made a break for a side exit, but Katya tracked him smoothly and put him down with three shots. Another tried to surrender, hands raised, but Anton's shotgun spoke first—this wasn't the kind of operation that took prisoners.

Shane advanced toward the center of the warehouse, stepping over bodies and spent brass. His Glock was hot in his hand, the slide locked back on an empty magazine. He dropped it, slammed in a fresh one, released the slide. The weapon was ready again in under two seconds.

Movement to his right—a hostile rising from behind a pallet stack, pistol extended. Shane pivoted and fired twice. The man's head snapped back, and he crumpled.

Then, suddenly, it was quiet.

Two of Aleksandr's men who hadn't surrendered opened up from behind a shipping container, their rifles on full auto. Mikhail went down hard, three rounds stitching across his chest. Igor took fire from the second shooter and dropped without a sound, blood spreading across the concrete. Katya and Sergei returned fire simultaneously, their weapons barking in unison until both hostiles collapsed behind the container.

The gunfire stopped. The only sounds were the ringing in Shane's ears, the ragged breathing of the survivors, and the soft patter of something dripping—blood or hydraulic fluid, Shane couldn't tell.

Sergei emerged from cover, his AR-15 still at the ready, sweeping for targets. "Clear!" he called out.

"Clear!" came the responses from around the warehouse.

Shane did a quick head count. Nine of their people were still standing. Mikhail and Igor were down—dead before they hit the ground. Some of the others had taken hits—Anton was bleeding from his shoulder, and one of the other operatives was limping—but everyone still mobile was getting out.

Aleksandr's men weren't so lucky. Shane counted nine bodies scattered across the warehouse floor. Maybe more in the shadows.

Ilya limped forward, the Glock 26 still gripped in his hand. He looked around at the carnage, then at Shane. "Aleksandr?"

Shane shook his head. "Not here. But he'll know we're coming."

Dimitri appeared at Shane's shoulder, his face grim. "We need to move. Police will be here soon."

Shane nodded. They'd been in the warehouse maybe five minutes, but it felt like hours. "Everybody out. Now."

The team moved with practiced efficiency, gathering weapons, checking bodies, erasing evidence of their presence as much as possible. Katya helped Artem toward the exit. Sergei supported Anton.

Shane took one last look around the warehouse—at the bodies, the blood, the spent brass glinting under the fluorescent lights. This was just the beginning. Aleksandr had started this war when he'd taken Ilya and Artem. Now it would end only one way.

He followed his team out into the night, the Glock heavy and warm in his hand, already thinking about the next move.

Shane was three steps from the back exit, Ilya moving beside him with the fluid efficiency of a man who'd done this a thousand times, when the cold press of metal touched his temple.

"Don't move."

The voice came from behind, smooth and confident. Aleksandr. Shane's muscles locked, his Glock still raised but useless at this angle.

"Drop it," Aleksandr said, pressing the gun harder against Shane's skull. "Slowly."

Shane's fingers loosened. The Glock clattered to the concrete.

Aleksandr's breath was warm against Shane's ear. "You know, I heard you killed Denis. I didn't believe it at first—some American boy playing at being dangerous." His grip tightened on Shane's shoulder. "But you got lucky. That's all. One lucky shot doesn't make you—"

Shane moved.

Pure instinct—the same reflexes that had kept him alive on the ice when someone came at him from his blind side. Left hand snapping up to grab Aleksandr's wrist, twisting it away from his head as he spun inside the man's reach. Aleksandr's gun discharged, the shot going wide, the muzzle flash blinding in the darkness. Shane's right hand was already moving, reaching back to his waistband, fingers closing around the Sig Sauer P365.

Aleksandr's eyes widened. Recognition. Fear.

Shane fired.

The shot was point-blank, the barrel pressed against Aleksandr's forehead. The sound was deafening in the enclosed space. Aleksandr's head snapped back, a neat hole appearing between his eyes, and he dropped like a puppet with cut strings. Blood pooled beneath him, spreading across the concrete in a dark halo.

Shane stood over the body, breathing hard, the Sig Sauer still raised.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" The voices came from across the warehouse—three men emerging from behind cover, hands raised high. A fourth appeared from behind a stack of crates, his rifle dangling from one hand, the other palm-up in surrender.

Shane's eyes found Ilya across the warehouse floor.

Ilya stood twenty feet away, his face a mask of bruises and dried blood, one eye swollen nearly shut. But the other eye was clear. Sharp. It met Shane's gaze and held it.

Something passed between them. An understanding. A recognition of what needed to happen next.

Ilya turned toward the surrendering men.

"Wait—" one of them started.

Ilya fired. The first man went down with a hole in his chest. The second tried to run. Ilya shot him in the back. The third man screamed, hands still raised, and Ilya put two rounds in his center mass. The fourth man was fumbling for his rifle when Dimitri's AR-15 barked twice, dropping him where he stood.

The rest of the team opened fire. Anton took down a man trying to crawl behind a crate. Katya's pistol cracked three times, methodical and precise. Sergei fired from the doorway, his rifle bucking against his shoulder.

It was over in seconds.

Shane stood in the sudden silence, his gun still in his hand, Aleksandr's body at his feet. Smoke hung in the air, acrid and thick. His ears rang from the gunfire.

Ilya walked toward him, stepping over bodies without looking down. His movements were stiff, painful, but his gaze never left Shane's face.

"You good?" Ilya's voice was rough, barely more than a rasp.

Shane nodded. He couldn't find words.

Ilya's hand came up, gripping the back of Shane's neck. His fingers were cold. "You did good."

Shane looked down at Aleksandr's corpse. The man's eyes were still open, staring at nothing. Blood had stopped spreading across the floor.

"Check for survivors," Dimitri called out, his voice cutting through the ringing in Shane's ears. "Sweep the building. Make sure we didn't miss anyone."

The team moved, boots crunching on spent brass casings. Shane stayed where he was, Ilya's hand still on his neck, grounding him.

No survivors. That had been the plan all along.

Shane's ears were still ringing from the gunfire when Dimitri's voice cut through the silence.

"Clear the building. Check our people."

The team moved with practiced efficiency, sweeping through the warehouse in pairs. Shane holstered his Glock and turned back toward where they'd found Ilya and Artem. His hands were still shaking—adrenaline, not fear. He flexed his fingers, forcing them steady.

"Sergei's hit," Anton called from near the front entrance.

Shane crossed the warehouse in seconds. Sergei was sitting against a support beam, his left leg stretched out in front of him, blood soaking through his tactical pants just above the knee. His face was pale but composed, jaw tight.

"How bad?" Shane dropped to a crouch beside him.

"Through and through," Sergei said through gritted teeth. "Missed the bone."

Shane pulled his belt free, the leather sliding through the loops with a hiss. "This is going to hurt."

"Just do it."

Shane wrapped the belt around Sergei's thigh, several inches above the wound, and threaded it through the buckle. He pulled it tight—Sergei's breath hitched but he didn't make a sound—and Shane kept pulling until the leather bit deep into the muscle. He twisted the loose end, creating a makeshift windlass, and secured it.

The bleeding slowed to a trickle.

"Good?" Shane asked.

Sergei nodded, his knuckles white where they gripped his rifle. "Good."

"Two down," Katya said quietly, appearing beside them. Her face was expressionless, but Shane saw the tightness around her eyes. "Mikhail and Igor. Headshots. They didn't suffer."

Shane looked past her to where two bodies lay covered with tactical jackets. He hadn't known their names until now. Hadn't known them at all. They'd come anyway, fought anyway, died anyway.

"Anton?" Dimitri's voice carried across the warehouse.

"Shoulder," Anton called back. He was standing near the loading dock, one hand pressed to his left shoulder, blood seeping between his fingers. "Clean through. I can move."

Dimitri appeared from the back of the warehouse, Artem beside him. For just a moment—maybe two seconds—Dimitri's hand gripped Artem's arm, his forehead nearly touching Artem's temple. Relief, raw and unguarded. Then Dimitri stepped back, his expression smoothing into something professional.

Artem's face was a mess of bruises and swelling, his left eye completely shut, but he was standing on his own. Alive.

"We need to move," Ilya said. His voice was rough, damaged. He was leaning against a concrete pillar, the gun Shane had given him still in his hand. "Police will have heard the shots."

"Katya," Dimitri said, already moving toward the exit. "Take Sergei and Anton to the hospital. Use the cover story—bar fight in Red Hook, multiple attackers. They'll ask questions but they won't push."

Katya nodded. "What about Mikhail and Igor?"

"We'll handle them," Artem said quietly. "And the rest."

Dimitri looked at Shane. "Take Ilya to the safe house. Stay there until I call."

Shane glanced at Ilya, seeing for the first time how badly he was hurt. The swelling around his eyes, the dark bruises covering his jaw and cheekbones, the way he held his ribs when he breathed. He looked like he'd been beaten with a pipe.

"I can manage," Ilya said, reading Shane's expression.

"Artem and I will take care of the bodies," Dimitri continued. "Staten Island. We know a place."

"How many?" Anton asked.

"Twelve," Sergei said from the floor. "Thirteen if you count Aleksandr."

"We'll need the van," Artem said.

The team moved quickly after that—Katya helping Sergei to his feet, Anton walking under his own power despite the blood soaking his sleeve. Two of the operatives Shane didn't know carried Mikhail and Igor to the van, their faces grim. Dimitri and Artem began dragging Aleksandr's body toward the loading dock.

Shane crossed to Ilya, who was still leaning against the pillar.

"Can you walk?"

"I can walk."

But when Ilya pushed off the pillar, he swayed. Shane caught his arm, steadying him, and felt how much weight Ilya was putting on him to stay upright.

"Come on," Shane said quietly.

They made it to the car slowly, Ilya's breathing labored. Shane opened the passenger door and helped him inside, watching as Ilya lowered himself into the seat with a barely suppressed grimace.

Shane closed the door and walked around to the driver's side. Behind them, the warehouse was already emptying—vehicles pulling away, headlights cutting through the darkness.

He started the engine and pulled onto the street, leaving the bodies and the blood behind.

The safe house was a nondescript brownstone in Sunset Park, three blocks from the water. Shane pulled the car to the curb and killed the engine. His hands were still steady on the wheel, but his pulse was hammering in his throat.

Ilya hadn't said a word the entire drive.

Shane glanced over. Ilya's face was a mess—left eye swollen nearly shut, nose crooked, dried blood crusted in his hair and across his cheekbone. Fresh blood too, splattered across his jaw and neck. Aleksandr's blood. The man's brains had painted Ilya's shirt when Shane pulled the trigger.

Ilya's good eye was fixed on him. Dark. Hungry.

"Inside," Ilya said. His voice was rough, damaged.

Shane got out of the car. His tactical vest felt too tight, the Kevlar constricting his ribs. He could feel his heartbeat everywhere—chest, throat, cock. He was hard. Had been since the warehouse, since Aleksandr dropped and Ilya turned those surrendering men into corpses without hesitation.

They crossed the sidewalk. Shane unlocked the door with the key Dimitri had given him weeks ago. The safe house smelled like dust and old wood. He barely got the door closed before Ilya was on him.

Ilya's mouth crashed against his, brutal and graceless. His split lip reopened immediately, blood smearing between them. Shane tasted copper and gunpowder residue and something darker. Ilya's hands fisted in Shane's tactical vest, yanking him closer, and Shane went, his back hitting the door hard enough to rattle the frame.

"Fuck," Shane breathed against Ilya's mouth.

Ilya didn't answer. He kissed like he was trying to consume Shane, like he'd been starved for weeks and Shane was the first meal he'd seen. His teeth caught Shane's lower lip, biting down until Shane gasped. One of Ilya's hands slid up to grip Shane's jaw, holding him in place while Ilya's tongue pushed into his mouth, claiming every inch.

Shane's cock throbbed against his zipper. He could feel Ilya hard against his hip, could feel the tremor in Ilya's hands that had nothing to do with weakness. This was need. Raw and desperate and uncontrolled.

Ilya broke the kiss and shoved Shane toward the hallway. "Bedroom."

Shane went. His legs felt unsteady, adrenaline still singing through his veins. The bedroom was at the end of the hall—bare mattress on a metal frame, single window with blackout curtains. Ilya followed him inside and kicked the door shut, twisting the lock with a decisive click.

Then Ilya's hands were on him again, yanking at the velcro straps of Shane's tactical vest. The sound was loud in the quiet room—rip, rip, rip. The vest hit the floor with a heavy thud. Ilya's fingers found the hem of Shane's black t-shirt and dragged it up. Shane raised his arms and Ilya stripped it off, tossing it aside.

Shane's skin was sticky with sweat and blood—some his, some not. Ilya's gaze raked over him, possessive and feral, and Shane felt it like a physical touch.

"You killed him," Ilya said. His voice was wrecked, barely more than a rasp.

"Yeah."

Ilya's hands went to Shane's belt, fingers working the buckle with single-minded focus. "You didn't hesitate."

"No."

The belt came free. Ilya popped the button on Shane's tactical pants, dragged the zipper down. Shane's cock strained against his boxer briefs, the fabric damp at the tip. Ilya's palm pressed against it, rough and deliberate, and Shane's hips jerked forward involuntarily.

"Fuck," Shane hissed.

Ilya shoved the pants down Shane's thighs. Shane kicked off his boots, stepped out of the pants and his boxers in one motion. His cock jutted out, hard and flushed, precome beading at the slit. Ilya stared at it for a long moment, then looked up at Shane's face.

"On the bed."

Shane obeyed. The mattress was bare, the sheets stripped away. He sat on the edge, then lay back when Ilya gestured impatiently. His cock lay heavy against his stomach, twitching with every heartbeat.

Ilya stripped with economical movements—shirt over his head, revealing a torso mottled with bruises, ribs shadowed purple and yellow. His pants and boxers followed. His cock was thick and hard, curving up toward his belly. He didn't bother with preparation, didn't ask if Shane was ready.

He climbed onto the bed, straddling Shane's hips, and reached down to grip Shane's cock. His hand was rough, callused, and Shane groaned at the contact. Ilya stroked him once, twice, spreading the precome down his length.

Ilya pushed Shane's thighs apart, settling between them. He spat into his palm, then reached down between Shane's legs. His fingers found Shane's hole, circling it once before pressing inside.

"Fuck, yes," Shane gasped. "Do it. Don't wait."

Ilya worked one finger in, then two, rough and efficient. No gentleness, just enough to open him up. Shane's hips rolled forward, trying to take more.

"More," Shane said. "Come on, I can take it."

Ilya pulled his fingers out and spat into his hand again, slicking his cock with spit and precome. He lined himself up, the blunt head of his cock pressing against Shane's hole, and Shane's breath caught.

"Do it," Shane said. His voice was rough, desperate. "Fuck me."

Ilya pushed in. Not slow, not careful—one brutal thrust that buried him halfway. Shane's back arched off the mattress, a choked sound punching out of him. It burned, the stretch too much and not enough, and he wanted more.

"Don't stop," Shane gasped. "Keep going."

Ilya drove in the rest of the way, bottoming out with a grunt. Shane's vision whited out for a second. Ilya was thick and hard and perfect, filling him completely, and the burn was already fading into something better.

Ilya didn't give him time to adjust. He pulled back and slammed in again, setting a brutal pace. No finesse, no rhythm—just raw, desperate need. His hips snapped forward with every thrust, driving deeper, and Shane met him thrust for thrust.

"Fuck, yes," Shane groaned. His hands flew to Ilya's shoulders, gripping hard enough to bruise. "Harder."

Ilya fucked him like he was trying to break them both. The sound of skin slapping against skin filled the room, obscene and perfect. Shane's cock bobbed between them, leaking steadily, untouched.

Ilya shifted his angle, nailing Shane's prostate, and Shane's whole body went rigid. "There, fuck, right there—"

Ilya drove into that spot again and again, relentless. His breathing was ragged, his good eye locked on Shane's face. Shane could see the tension in his shoulders, the way his jaw clenched with every thrust.

"Come on," Shane growled. He wrapped his hand around his own cock, stroking in time with Ilya's thrusts. "Want to feel you come."

Ilya's rhythm faltered. His hips stuttered, then slammed forward one last time, burying himself as deep as he could go. He came with a choked sound, his cock pulsing inside Shane, and Shane followed him over the edge. His orgasm punched through him, white-hot and all-consuming, come striping across his chest and stomach.

For a long moment, neither of them moved. Ilya was still buried inside Shane, his chest heaving, sweat and blood mixing on his skin. Shane's hands were still locked on Ilya's hips, his fingers digging into bruised flesh.

Ilya opened his good eye and looked down at Shane. His face was a ruin, but his gaze was clear. Satisfied.

"You're alive," Shane said. His voice came out rough, barely recognizable.

Ilya's mouth twitched. "So are you."

He pulled out slowly, and Shane felt the loss of him immediately—the emptiness, the cooling slick of spit and come between his legs. Ilya collapsed onto the mattress beside him, his breathing harsh and uneven. Shane didn't move. Couldn't move. Right now, he couldn't do anything but lie there.

They lay there in silence, both of them breathing hard, covered in blood and come and sweat. Outside, the city hummed. Inside, for the first time in days, Shane felt like he could breathe.

Ilya's hand found his, their fingers tangling together on the bare mattress.

Neither of them let go.

The industrial waterfront in Staten Island was dead at three in the morning. Artem sat in the passenger seat of Dimitri's car, watching the dark water through the windshield. Behind them, the van and SUV idled with their lights off. The warehouse district stretched out in every direction—rusted chain-link fences, abandoned shipping containers, cracked asphalt sprouting weeds.

No cameras. No witnesses. Just the sound of water lapping against concrete pilings.

Dimitri killed the engine. "Ready?"

Artem nodded. His ribs screamed when he opened the door.

The others were already moving. Anton and two men Artem didn't know opened the back of the van. Bodies inside, wrapped in plastic sheeting and duct tape. Seven of them. Aleksandr's men. The ones who'd surrendered and the ones who'd fought to the end—it didn't matter now.

Artem forced himself out of the car. Every breath was a knife between his ribs. His left eye was still swollen half-shut, and the gap where his molar used to be throbbed with his heartbeat. He could taste blood every time he swallowed.

Dimitri appeared at his side. "You don't have to—"

"I'm fine."

Dimitri looked at him for a long moment, then nodded.

They worked methodically. Anton and his crew dragged the first body out of the van, carried it toward the water's edge where a concrete boat ramp sloped into the harbor. Sergei would've been here too, but he was in a hospital bed getting his leg stitched back together. The tourniquet Shane applied had saved his life.

Artem grabbed the ankles of the second body. One of the men he didn't know took the shoulders. The plastic crinkled as they lifted. The body was heavy, dead weight in every sense. Artem's ribs protested with each step, but he kept his face blank.

They carried it down the ramp. The water was black and still, reflecting nothing. Oil slicks shimmered on the surface.

"On three," the man said.

They swung the body once, twice, then released. It hit the water with a dull splash and sank immediately. Cinder blocks tied to the ankles with rope. Simple. Effective.

Artem straightened, breathing carefully through his nose. The gap in his teeth made his mouth feel wrong, unbalanced. He ran his tongue over the empty socket and tasted copper.

Dimitri was watching him from the top of the ramp.

Artem turned and walked back up. His legs felt steadier than they had any right to. Adrenaline, maybe. Or just the knowledge that this was the work. This was what came after the bullets stopped flying.

They repeated the process. Body after body. Plastic-wrapped bundles that had been men an hour ago. Artem didn't think about their faces. Didn't think about whether they'd had families, whether anyone would miss them. They'd chosen this life the same way he had. The same way Dimitri had.

The fourth body was heavier. Artem's grip slipped on the plastic and he had to adjust, his fingers digging into the slick material. Pain flared white-hot across his ribs and he bit down on a gasp. The empty socket in his mouth throbbed.

"Careful," Dimitri said from behind him.

Artem didn't answer. He tightened his grip and kept walking.

By the time they reached the seventh body, Artem's hands were shaking. Not from fear. Just exhaustion. His body had been through too much in the past forty-eight hours—the grocery store beating, the warehouse, the zip ties cutting off his circulation for hours, the firefight. He was running on fumes.

This one was Aleksandr.

Artem recognized the shape of him even through the plastic. Taller than the others. Broader shoulders. The hole in his forehead where Shane's bullet had punched through was a dark shadow against the translucent sheeting.

Dimitri took the shoulders without a word. Artem grabbed the ankles.

They carried him down the ramp together. The water was still black, still waiting. Artem wondered if Aleksandr had ever imagined ending up here. Probably not. Men like him always thought they were untouchable.

"Three," Dimitri said quietly.

They swung him into the water. He sank fast, pulled down by the cinder blocks tied to his legs. Bubbles rose to the surface for a moment, then stopped.

Artem stood there, staring at the spot where Aleksandr had disappeared. The man who'd ordered the fire. Who'd had him and Ilya beaten and bound. Who'd put a gun to Shane's head.

Gone.

"It's done," Dimitri said.

Artem nodded. His ribs were on fire, his face ached, and his mouth tasted like blood, but it was done.

They walked back to the cars. Anton and his crew were already loading into the van, their faces blank and professional. This wasn't their first time. Wouldn't be their last.

Dimitri opened the passenger door for Artem. "Get in."

Artem slid into the seat, biting back a groan as his ribs protested. Dimitri closed the door gently and walked around to the driver's side.

The engine started with a low rumble. Dimitri pulled away from the waterfront, the van and SUV following behind. The industrial district gave way to empty streets, then residential

neighborhoods with dark windows and sleeping families who had no idea what had just happened three miles away.

Artem leaned his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. His body hurt everywhere. Ribs, face, hands, the empty socket in his mouth. But he was alive. Ilya was alive. Shane was alive.

Aleksandr wasn't.

The math worked.

They drove in silence for ten minutes. Artem felt himself starting to drift, exhaustion pulling him down. Then Dimitri's hand was on his face, warm and careful, turning him.

Artem opened his eyes.

Dimitri leaned across the center console and kissed him.

It was soft. Tender. Nothing like the desperate, hungry kisses they'd shared before. This was something else—relief, maybe. Gratitude. The kind of kiss that said *I'm glad you're alive*.

Artem kissed him back for a moment, then grimaced and pulled away.

Dimitri's eyes went sharp with concern. "What's wrong? Your ribs?"

"No." Artem touched his mouth, his fingers finding the gap where his molar used to be. "Lost a tooth."

Dimitri stared at him. Then, impossibly, he smiled. "Good thing I know a good dentist who can fix that."

Artem raised an eyebrow. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Because right now you look like a country bumpkin."

Artem laughed. It hurt his ribs, but he couldn't help it. "Well," he said, "I did come from the country."

Dimitri blinked. His smile faltered. "What?"

"The country. Rural Russia. Small village, dirt roads, the whole thing."

Dimitri was staring at him like he'd just spoken a different language. "You weren't from Moscow?"

"No."

"But your accent—"

"Took me a long time to perfect it." Artem shrugged, then regretted it when his ribs flared.

"When I moved to the city, I sounded like every other farm kid. Got laughed at. So I worked

on it. Listened to how people talked, practiced until I got it right."

Dimitri was quiet for a long moment. The car rolled through an intersection, the traffic light turning green above them.

"It doesn't show at all," Dimitri said finally. "I never would've guessed."

"That was the point."

Dimitri reached over and took his hand. His thumb brushed over Artem's knuckles, careful of the bruises. "What was it like? The country?"

Artem thought about it. He hadn't talked about this in years. Hadn't wanted to. The village felt like another life, something that had happened to someone else.

"Quiet," he said. "Cold in the winter. My family had a small farm—chickens, a couple of goats. My father worked in the factory in the next town over. My mother stayed home." He paused. "They wanted me to stay. Take over the farm. Marry a local girl."

"But you didn't."

"No." Artem looked out the window. "I wanted more. Wanted to see the city, make something of myself. So I left when I was seventeen. Took a train to Moscow with two hundred rubles in my pocket and no plan."

Dimitri's hand tightened on his. "Do you ever go back?"

"No." Artem's voice was flat. "They disowned me when I told them I wasn't coming home. Said I was abandoning the family. My father told me not to bother calling."

"I'm sorry."

Artem shrugged again, more carefully this time. "It was a long time ago."

They drove in silence for another few minutes. The safe house was close now—Artem recognized the neighborhood. His body was screaming for rest, for a bed, for something to dull the pain in his ribs.

But Dimitri's hand was still holding his, warm and solid, and that helped more than he wanted to admit.

"For what it's worth," Dimitri said quietly, "I'm glad you left."

Artem looked at him. Dimitri's eyes were on the road, his profile sharp in the dim light from the dashboard.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Dimitri glanced at him, just for a second. "Otherwise I never would've met you."

Artem felt something shift in his chest. Not pain this time. Something else. Something that made his throat tight.

"Country bumpkin and all?" he said, trying to keep his voice light.

Dimitri smiled. "Country bumpkin and all."

They pulled up to the safe house. The lights were off except for one window on the second floor. Shane and Ilya, probably. Artem didn't want to think about what they were doing up there.

Dimitri killed the engine but didn't move to get out. He turned in his seat, his hand still holding Artem's.

"You did good tonight," he said. "In the warehouse. The way you kept your head, kept Ilya alive with that Pavel thing—" He shook his head. "You're smart. Smarter than most of the men I've worked with."

Artem didn't know what to say to that. Compliments always felt like traps.

"I just did what I had to," he said finally.

"No." Dimitri's voice was firm. "You did more than that. You saved his life. Probably saved your own too."

Artem looked down at their joined hands. Dimitri's knuckles were bruised, his nails rimmed with dirt and blood. His own hands looked worse—swollen, cut, the skin around his wrists raw from the zip ties.

"We should go inside," Artem said. "Get cleaned up."

Dimitri nodded but didn't let go of his hand. "Yeah. And then you're going to let me look at those ribs."

"I'm fine."

"Artem."

Artem met his eyes. Dimitri's expression was serious, no room for argument.

"Fine," Artem said. "But after I shower. I smell like a corpse."

"You smell like you've been through hell."

"Same thing."

Dimitri smiled, small and sad. Then he leaned over and kissed him again, just as soft as before. This time Artem didn't pull away. He let himself have it—the warmth, the tenderness, the feeling of being cared for.

When they finally broke apart, Dimitri rested his forehead against Artem's.

"I'm glad you're alive," he whispered.

Artem closed his eyes. "Me too."

They sat there for another moment, breathing together in the quiet car. Then Dimitri pulled back and opened his door.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you inside."

Eventually, Ilya forced himself to move. His ribs protested, his face throbbed, but he pushed up on his elbows and looked at Shane. "Shower."

Shane nodded. They both needed it—needed to wash off Aleksandr's blood, the sweat, the evidence of what they'd just done.

The bathroom was small and utilitarian. Ilya turned on the water, waited for it to heat. Steam rose. He caught his reflection in the mirror and looked away immediately. His face was barely recognizable—swollen, bruised, one eye nearly sealed shut. He didn't need to see it.

Shane stepped into the shower first. Ilya followed, and they stood under the spray without speaking. The water ran red at their feet, swirling down the drain. Ilya watched it, watched the blood wash away from Shane's skin, from his own hands. He grabbed the soap and worked methodically—his chest, his arms, between his legs where Shane had been. Shane did the same, efficient and practical.

No tenderness. Just necessity.

When they were clean, they dried off and found clothes in a bedroom closet. Everything was too big or too small—nothing fit right. Ilya pulled on jeans that hung loose at the waist and a gray t-shirt that was too large. Shane ended up in black cargo pants that were too tight in the thighs and a navy sweater that swallowed him whole. They looked ridiculous, but it didn't matter. They were clean. They weren't covered in blood.

Ilya was buttoning the jeans when he heard it—the sound of a car pulling up outside. He moved to the window, careful of his ribs. Dimitri's car. The engine cut off.

"They're here," Shane said from behind him.

Ilya nodded. He could hear the car doors opening, footsteps on the pavement. Artem and Dimitri, back from Staten Island. Back from disposing of bodies in the dark water.

The front door opened downstairs.

Ilya turned from the window. Shane was watching him, waiting. Ilya's face hurt. His ribs hurt. Everything hurt. But he was alive. Shane was alive. Artem was alive.

That was enough.

"Come on," Ilya said, and headed for the stairs.

Chapter 27: Close to the Chest

The safe house was two hours north of the city, tucked into woods where the trees stood bare against a gray sky. Winter had stripped them down to black branches, skeletal and stark. Ilya could see them from the bedroom window. His face still looked like hell in the bathroom mirror that morning. The swelling had gone down some, but the bruises were deeper now, purple-black across his cheekbone and jaw.

Shane was in the kitchen making coffee. Ilya could hear him moving around downstairs, the quiet domestic sounds strange after everything. They'd driven up before dawn, Dimitri and Artem in the back seat. Keeping everyone together made sense. Safer. Two of their men were stationed at the end of the long driveway—the only way in or out of the property.

Ilya came downstairs slowly, his ribs protesting. Shane looked up from the coffee maker and handed him a mug without a word. They sat at the small kitchen table. The house was sparse—functional furniture, nothing personal. Another property that existed only on paper, another place to disappear.

Shane's phone buzzed on the table between them.

He glanced at the screen, then picked it up. "It's Hayden."

Ilya nodded. Shane answered.

"Hey, what's up?" Shane's voice was easy, relaxed. Nothing in it suggested he'd killed a man two days ago.

Ilya couldn't hear Hayden's words, but he could hear the excitement in the tone coming through the speaker.

"Wait, what?" Shane said. "Now?"

More excited talking.

"I'm in Canada," Shane said. The lie came out smooth, natural. "With my parents. I flew up yesterday."

Ilya watched Shane's face. Nothing changed. No tell.

"That's amazing, man. Congratulations." Shane was smiling now, genuine. "Yeah, send me photos. I want to see." A pause. "Tell Jackie I said congrats too. I'll come meet her when I'm back in town."

Another pause, then Shane laughed. "Yeah, I know. Uncle Shane. Weird." He listened for another moment. "Alright, man. Give them both my love. Talk soon."

He ended the call and set the phone down.

"Jackie's in labor," he said.

"I gathered."

"Hayden's excited."

"He should be."

They sat in silence. Shane picked up his coffee, took a sip. Outside, wind moved through the trees. Ilya could hear bare branches scraping against the windows.

"You're good at that," Ilya said.

"At what?"

"Lying."

Shane shrugged. "It's easy when it doesn't matter."

"It matters to him."

"He'll get photos. He'll be happy. Me being there wouldn't change anything." Shane looked at him. "And I can't be there."

"No."

"So it doesn't matter."

Ilya supposed that was one way to look at it. Shane's logic was always clean, uncluttered by guilt or second-guessing. It was one of the things Ilya loved about him.

Loved.

The word sat in his chest, heavy and certain.

They finished their coffee in silence. Shane took both mugs to the sink, rinsed them. When he came back, Ilya caught his wrist.

"Come here."

Shane let himself be pulled down onto the couch. Ilya shifted carefully, his ribs complaining, until Shane was tucked against his side. It hurt, but he didn't care. Shane's weight was warm and solid. Real.

"Your ribs," Shane said.

"Are fine."

"They're not."

"I don't care."

Shane settled against him, careful anyway. His head rested on Ilya's shoulder. Outside, the wind picked up. Bare branches scraped against the glass.

Ilya's hand found Shane's, their fingers tangling together.

"I love you," Ilya said.

Shane didn't move. Didn't tense. After a moment, he said, "I figured."

It surprised a laugh out of Ilya—sharp and painful, his ribs protesting. But he couldn't help it. Of course Shane had figured it out. Of course he'd known.

"You aren't going to say it?" Ilya asked.

Shane was quiet for a long moment. Then: "Yes. I love you."

Simple. Matter-of-fact. Like he was confirming a tactical assessment.

Ilya tightened his grip on Shane's hand. Outside, the trees stood bare and skeletal. Inside, they sat together in the quiet, and it was enough.

The dentist's office was in Brighton Beach, tucked between a Russian grocery and a tailor shop. Dimitri had made the appointment that morning—his dentist, a guy named Boris who'd left Moscow in the nineties and didn't ask questions.

Artem sat in the chair, his ribs screaming every time he breathed. The local anesthetic helped with his mouth, at least. Boris was examining the gap where Aleksandr's men had knocked out his tooth.

"We can do implant," Boris said in accented English. "Take a few months. Or we do bridge, faster."

"What about gold?" Artem asked.

Boris raised an eyebrow. "Gold crown?"

"Yeah."

Dimitri made a sound from where he stood by the door. When Artem looked over, Dimitri was trying not to smile.

"Gold crown, yes, we can do," Boris said. "I make mold today, you come back in two weeks when gum is healed. Then we fit crown."

"Do it," Artem said.

Boris nodded and got to work. The mold tasted like chemicals and made Artem gag, his ribs protesting with every cough. But he sat through it. When it was done, Boris gave him care instructions and a prescription for antibiotics.

In the car, Dimitri finally let himself laugh.

"What?" Artem said.

"A gold tooth."

"It'll look good."

"You'll look like a gangster."

"I am a gangster."

Dimitri shook his head, still grinning. But there was something else in his eyes too—heat, interest. "It's going to look ridiculous."

"You like it."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Dimitri pulled out into traffic, heading back toward the safe house. Artem watched the streets slide past, his mouth still numb, his ribs a constant ache. He'd taken painkillers that morning but they were wearing off.

Back at the safe house, Dimitri helped him up the stairs. Every step hurt. By the time they reached the bathroom, Artem was sweating.

"Bath," Dimitri said.

"I can do it myself."

"Shut up."

Dimitri ran the water, testing the temperature with his hand. When the tub was full, he helped Artem undress. Artem hissed when Dimitri's fingers brushed the bruises along his ribs—deep purple, almost black in places.

"Easy," Dimitri murmured.

Artem lowered himself into the water slowly. The heat helped, loosening muscles that had been clenched for days. Dimitri knelt beside the tub, sleeves rolled up, and picked up a washcloth.

"I can—"

"Let me."

So Artem let him. Dimitri washed him carefully, the cloth moving over his shoulders, down his arms. When he reached Artem's ribs, his touch was feather-light. Artem closed his eyes and focused on breathing—shallow breaths that didn't pull at the damaged tissue.

Dimitri's hand cupped the back of his neck, thumb stroking the skin there. "You're okay," he said quietly.

Artem opened his eyes. Dimitri was watching him, dark eyes serious.

"Yeah," Artem said. "I'm okay."

Dimitri leaned in and kissed him—gentle, careful of his swollen mouth. When he pulled back, his hand was still on Artem's neck.

"Gold tooth," Dimitri said.

"You're never going to let that go."

"Never."

But he was smiling, and so was Artem, even though it hurt.

Alexei walked into the restaurant just after noon, Pavel trailing behind him. The flight from Miami had been hell—every bump and jostle sending pain through Alexei's healing shoulder. But they were here now, and he needed to see Ilya.

Vera was behind the bar, polishing glasses. She looked up when they entered, her expression unreadable.

"Alexei," she said. "You look like shit."

"I feel like shit." He crossed to the bar, moving carefully. "Where's Ilya?"

"Safe house. Recovering."

"From what?"

Vera set down the glass she'd been polishing. "He killed Aleksandr."

The words hung in the air. Alexei felt something loosen in his chest—tension he'd been carrying since the moment Aleksandr's men had grabbed him in Miami.

"Good," he said.

Vera nodded. "It's done."

Pavel stepped forward. "My cousin," he said. "Artem. Is he—"

"He's alive," Vera said. "He's at the safe house with Ilya. Dimitri's looking after him."

Pavel went pale. "Looking after him? What happened?"

"Aleksandr's men broke three of his ribs. Knocked out a tooth."

"Jesus." Pavel's hands flexed at his sides. "And Dimitri—why Dimitri?"

Vera's expression didn't change. "Someone needed to stay with him. Make sure he doesn't do something stupid while he heals."

Pavel looked at Alexei, then back at Vera. "Dimitri. Ilya's big Russian guard."

"That's the one."

"Fuck," Pavel said quietly.

Alexei watched the information settle over Pavel—his cousin beaten badly enough to need a babysitter, Dimitri of all people playing nursemaid. He looked at Vera. "Ilya's okay?"

"He will be. They beat him pretty bad, but he'll heal."

"And Shane?"

"Also fine. He's with Ilya."

Alexei nodded. That made sense. Those two had been circling each other for months. About time they figured it out.

"You want a drink?" Vera asked.

"Yeah," Pavel said. "I really do."

Vera poured three glasses of vodka. They drank in silence for a moment. Then Vera pulled out her phone and typed a quick message. Alexei caught a glimpse of it before she sent it: *Alexei's here. Shoulder's healing.*

She set the phone down and picked up her glass again.

"Where's Katerina?" Alexei asked.

"Safe in Canada."

"Canada? What the fuck?"

"Yup, she's safe."

Alexei wanted to ask more, but Vera's phone buzzed. She glanced at the screen, then answered.

"Yeah, he just walked in," she said. A pause. "No, he looks like hell, but he's mobile." Another pause, longer this time. "Understood."

She ended the call and looked at Alexei. "He wants to see you. Tomorrow morning. Bring Pavel."

"Anything else?"

"Just that."

Vera pulled a napkin from the dispenser and wrote down an address in neat, precise handwriting. She slid it across the table to Alexei.

"That's where they are," she said.

Alexei looked at the address, then back at her. "Tell me more about Katerina. Why Canada?"

"She's with Shane's parents. They have a place up there. Safer than here right now."

"She's okay?"

"She's fine. Worried, but fine."

Alexei set the napkin down carefully. "I want to see her."

Vera shrugged. "That's not my problem. Take it up with Shane."

Alexei rolled his eyes and looked away, jaw tight. He picked up the napkin and folded it into his pocket.

Pavel finished his vodka and stood. "We should go."

Alexei nodded and pushed back from the table. He and Pavel left cash on the table—more than enough—and headed for the door without another word.

The hotel was in Midtown, generic and forgettable. They rode the elevator up in silence, Pavel's exhaustion evident in the way he leaned against the wall. Alexei's shoulder throbbed with a dull, persistent ache from the flight.

In the room, Pavel collapsed onto one of the beds fully clothed. Alexei sat on the edge of the other, the napkin still in his pocket, and stared at nothing in particular.

Tomorrow morning. He'd see Ilya then. Find out what the hell had happened. And after that—after that, he'd figure out how to get to Canada.

Shane moved through the kitchen with practiced efficiency, pulling out the blender and gathering fruit from the fridge. Banana, berries, yogurt, protein powder. The routine was grounding—something to do with his hands that wasn't thinking about the warehouse, the blood, the way Aleksandr's body had gone slack.

He blended, poured, handed a smoothie to Dimitri first. Then Artem, who took it carefully, favoring his ribs. Ilya was at the kitchen table, and Shane set the last one down in front of him.

His hands were shaking.

Not badly. Just a tremor that made the smoothie glass clink softly against the table. Shane stared at his palms, watching them vibrate like they belonged to someone else.

Ilya was up immediately. He didn't say anything—just took Shane's wrist and pulled him toward the bedroom, closing the door behind them.

The room was quiet. Gray light filtered through the window, bare branches scratching against the glass outside.

Ilya took Shane's hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing his fingers. One at a time. Slow. His lips were warm.

"You're okay," Ilya said against Shane's skin. Not a question.

Shane's throat felt tight. "I don't think I'm going to freak out as bad as last time. Just a little shaky."

Ilya kissed his fingers again. His other hand came up to cup Shane's jaw, thumb brushing his cheekbone. He was still bruised—the marks from the interrogation visible along his temple, his neck. But his eyes were steady on Shane's.

"You're okay," Ilya said again, and kissed his fingers once more.

Shane smiled. He couldn't help it. The shaking was already easing, his body responding to Ilya's presence the way it always did—like Ilya was the thing that made him solid again. Like Ilya's hands on him were the only proof Shane needed that they'd both survived.

Ilya kept kissing his fingers, patient and deliberate, and Shane stood there in the quiet bedroom and let himself believe it.

Ilya pulled him closer, wrapping an arm around Shane's waist. His ribs were still sore—Shane could feel him wince slightly—but he didn't let go.

"I'm so glad you went into that 7-Eleven months ago," Ilya said quietly. "So glad you were there, being stubborn and selling my gifts."

Shane laughed despite himself. "That's what you're thinking about right now?"

"That's what I'm always thinking about." Ilya's forehead touched his. "You."

Shane's hands settled on Ilya's shoulders, careful of the bruises. "What's your point?"

"My point is—" Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him. "All this. The murder. The blood. I need you to know it's not going to scare you away, right? Tell me it won't."

Shane shook his head. "It won't scare me away."

"Good." Ilya exhaled, relief visible in the set of his shoulders. "Because I don't know what I'd do if—"

"But," Shane interrupted, and Ilya's eyes widened slightly. "I would like some rest before the next turf war."

Ilya stared at him for a second, then burst out laughing—real, genuine laughter that made him wince and grab his ribs, but he didn't stop. Shane watched him, feeling something settle in his chest.

"Yeah," Ilya managed between laughs, shaking his head. "Yeah, me too. I'm going to ensure no more turf wars. That's my new priority."

"Good," Shane said. "Because I'm serious."

"I know you are." Ilya was still smiling, still holding his ribs. He pulled Shane back against him, careful but deliberate. "No more turf wars. I promise."

Shane let himself sink into it—the warmth of Ilya against him, the promise hanging between them, the lightness that came after the weight.

"There's one thing I want," Shane said quietly.

"Anything."

"My Hello Kitty watch. Left it in the penthouse."

Ilya didn't hesitate. He pulled out his phone one-handed, keeping his other arm around Shane's waist, and texted Alexei: *Get Shane's Hello Kitty watch from the penthouse. Bring it tomorrow.*

He looked back at Shane. "I'll get your watch."

Shane reached up carefully, mindful of Ilya's bruised face, and kissed him—soft and deliberate against his split lip. It wasn't about passion. It was about gratitude, about the simple fact that Ilya would move heaven and earth for a Hello Kitty watch because Shane wanted it.

Ilya made a small sound against his mouth, something between pain and contentment, and Shane pulled back just enough to see his face.

"Thank you," Shane said.

"Always," Ilya replied, and meant it.

Artem sat at the kitchen counter with his smoothie, careful with the straw on the left side of his mouth where the gold tooth wasn't yet installed. Two more weeks. He could wait.

Dimitri leaned against the counter beside him, nursing his own drink. They both watched the bedroom door close behind Ilya and Shane.

Dimitri caught Artem's eye and smiled—that small, knowing thing that didn't need words.

Artem took another sip and shook his head slightly. "When I first met Shane, I never expected he'd be such a badass."

Dimitri laughed, quiet and genuine. "Yeah. The boss is whipped. And rightfully so."

Artem nodded. It was true. He'd seen Ilya with plenty of people over the years, but never like this. Never with someone who could ground him like that, who could walk into a room and make Ilya's whole body settle.

They drank their smoothies in comfortable silence, the kind that only came from understanding exactly what was happening behind that closed door—and why it mattered.

Dimitri set his glass down and pulled a small bottle from his pocket. Codeine. He shook two tablets into his palm and handed them to Artem without ceremony.

Artem took them, swallowed them dry with the last of his smoothie. His ribs were aching—had been all morning, that dull throb that came from breathing too deep or moving wrong.

"You need to sleep," Dimitri said. It wasn't a question.

Artem nodded. He was exhausted in a way that went deeper than just tired. His body was still healing, still burning through energy just to keep itself functional. The codeine would help. The sleep would help more.

He slid off the stool carefully, favoring his left side, and Dimitri steadied him with a hand on his elbow—not hovering, just there.

"Go on," Dimitri said. "I'll clean up."

Artem made his way to the bedroom they'd claimed, the one with the view of the bare trees and the long driveway. He stripped down to his boxers and slid under the blankets, his ribs settling into the mattress with a small sound of relief.

The codeine was already starting to work, that soft blur at the edges of everything. He closed his eyes and let it take him under.

Shane woke to Ilya's hand on his shoulder, gentle but insistent. The light through the window had shifted—afternoon now, the gray sky a little darker.

"They're here," Ilya said quietly.

Shane blinked, orienting himself. Right. Alexei and Pavel. He sat up, rubbed his face, and reached for his boots.

They made their way to the front of the house together, Ilya moving a little stiffly but steady. Dimitri was already in the living room, standing near the window with his arms crossed. He nodded toward the driveway.

Shane opened the door as Alexei and Pavel came up the steps. Alexei looked tired—his shoulder clearly bothering him from the way he held himself—but his eyes were sharp. Pavel was quieter, taking everything in.

Pavel reached into his jacket and pulled out Shane's Hello Kitty watch. "Found this in the penthouse," he said, handing it over.

Shane took it, turned it over in his hands. It was undamaged. He strapped it on immediately, the familiar weight settling against his wrist.

"Thanks," he said.

Alexei stepped past Pavel and looked at Ilya, his expression shifting. "They really fucked your face up, brother."

Ilya's mouth twitched. He reached out and tapped Alexei's shoulder—right where the bullet wound was.

Alexei groaned, his face twisting, and without hesitation he smacked Ilya across the face. Not hard, but enough to make Ilya's head turn.

Shane stepped between them, one hand on each of their chests. "Fucking quit."

Alexei laughed, the sound rough but genuine. He raised his hands in surrender. "Alright, alright."

Pavel cleared his throat. "Where's my cousin?"

Dimitri, who'd been silent the whole time, straightened. "Let me get him. He's resting."

He disappeared down the hallway, his footsteps quiet on the wood floor.

Alexei turned to Shane, his expression sobering. "Where's Katerina?"

Shane met his eyes. "I had to go to Canada with her. To keep her safe."

Alexei nodded slowly. "Thank you." He paused. "I want to see her."

Shane pulled out his phone, scrolled to his parents' contact, and hit FaceTime. It rang twice before his mom's face filled the screen.

"Shane," she said, her voice warm but cautious.

"Hey, Mom. Alexei's doing okay. He wants to talk to his daughter."

Yuna's expression softened. She nodded and turned the phone. "Katerina, sweetheart, it's your papa."

The camera shifted, and Katerina's face appeared—her eyes wide, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. She said something in Russian, fast and relieved, and Alexei answered in the same language. His voice was softer than Shane had ever heard it.

They spoke for a minute, maybe two. Then Katerina's expression changed—worried, searching. She asked something, and Alexei sighed.

He handed the phone to Ilya.

Ilya took it, his face carefully neutral. "Привет, солнышко."

Katerina's voice came through, rapid and insistent. Ilya answered her quietly, his tone steady and reassuring. Shane couldn't understand the words, but he could hear the weight of them—the promise underneath.

The call lasted another minute before Ilya said something final and handed the phone back to Shane. Shane thanked his mom and ended the call.

Alexei was quiet for a moment. Then he looked at Ilya. "I'll be staying in New York."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "No, you won't. We didn't just kill Aleksandr for you to move to New York."

Alexei shrugged, wincing slightly. "Katerina obviously wants to stay with you more."

"That's not—"

"She asked about you first," Alexei said, his voice flat. "Asked if you were okay. If Shane was okay." He paused. "Took her a full minute to ask about me."

Ilya's expression shifted—something between guilt and understanding. "She knows you can handle yourself."

"Yeah." Alexei's mouth twisted. "She also knows who she wants to live with."

"She's worried about everyone," Ilya said carefully. "She saw what happened to me. Of course she's—"

"She was more worried about you and your boyfriend than her own father." Alexei's tone wasn't bitter, just factual. "I'm not blind, Ilya."

Ilya was quiet for a moment. Then he nodded slowly. "Maybe we can do split custody."

Alexei's expression softened. "I'd like that." He paused. "You've always been better with kids anyway."

Ilya's mouth twitched—not quite a smile, but close. "Yeah."

Shane watched them, the way they stood there in the quiet house, two men who'd survived too much and were trying to figure out what came next.

Dimitri returned with Artem, who looked half-asleep but steady enough. Pavel's eyes widened when he saw his cousin—the bruises, the missing tooth, the careful way he moved.

"Jesus, Artem," Pavel said.

Artem shrugged. "Could be worse."

Dimitri's hand hovered near Artem's elbow, not touching but ready. Shane caught the look between them and said nothing.

Shane cleared his throat. "You know what? We all need a vacation after this." He looked at Alexei. "You should come to Greece with us."

Ilya's head turned sharply, his eyes meeting Shane's with a look that clearly said *please no*.

Alexei caught it and laughed. "How about Canada instead? Let's take a trip to Canada."

Shane hesitated. "How am I supposed to explain all these Russian men to my parents?"

Ilya's expression smoothed into something calm and reasonable. "Alexei's my brother. When he was shot in New York"—he gestured at Alexei's shoulder—"his family came immediately. Uncle Dimitri and cousins Pavel and Artem." He paused. "Of course they did."

Shane considered this, then nodded slowly. "Okay. But we need to wait at least a few days for your face to look better."

Ilya touched his bruised jaw carefully. "Fair."

Before anyone could say more, the front door opened and Katya appeared, arms full of takeout bags.

"Eat," she said simply, setting the bags on the kitchen counter. "All of you."

They gathered around the table—Shane and Ilya on one side, Artem and Dimitri on the other, Alexei and Pavel at the ends. Katya unpacked containers of pelmeni, blini, roasted vegetables, pickled everything. She left without ceremony.

Pavel dug in immediately, talking around a mouthful of food. "So you got your ribs broken *and* lost a tooth?"

Artem nodded slowly, chewing carefully on one side of his mouth, his jaw moving with deliberate caution. "Yeah."

"Idiot," Pavel said affectionately, shaking his head with a mixture of exasperation and fondness. His accent was thicker than the others', more rural, the vowels rounder and softer in a way that spoke of small villages and open fields. "You always were too stubborn for your own good."

Dimitri's eyes flicked to Pavel sharply, then back to his plate, his fork scraping against the ceramic. "I can hear the accent now."

Pavel's jaw tightened immediately, and a vein appeared at his temple, pulsing visibly beneath the skin. The room went quiet for a beat. Then Artem laughed—a real laugh, genuine and rough, that made him wince and press a hand protectively to his bruised ribs.

Shane's phone buzzed against the table, breaking the tension. He glanced down at the screen, then his expression shifted, softening into something surprised and tender. "Hayden just

texted. Jackie had the baby."

"Boy or girl?" Ilya asked, leaning forward slightly with interest.

"Girl. Seven pounds, four ounces." Shane set his phone down gently, something wistful and distant crossing his face as he stared at the table. "I wish I could send them a gift or something. Flowers, maybe. A card."

Ilya pulled out his own phone without hesitation, already scrolling through screens. "What's Hayden's address?"

Shane blinked, confused. "Why?"

"Just tell me."

Shane recited it slowly, watching Ilya's thumbs move across the screen. Ilya typed for a moment, his expression focused and businesslike, then set his phone down with finality. "Done. Gifts will be waiting for them by tomorrow afternoon."

Shane stared at him, mouth slightly open. "You didn't have to—"

"I know."

They finished eating in comfortable silence, the kind that came from exhaustion and relief. When the containers were empty, Alexei stood, Pavel following.

"We'll come back tomorrow," Alexei said.

Pavel stretched. "Can you bring actual food? I'm tired of Russian food. McDonald's or something."

Artem laughed again, softer this time. "Shane won't eat any of that."

Shane shook his head. "No, I won't."

Pavel grinned. "More for me, then."

Alexei clapped Ilya on the shoulder—the good one—and they left, the sound of their car fading down the long driveway.

Shane was already heading toward the bedroom when Ilya caught up with him, his hand finding the small of Shane's back. They moved through the hallway in silence, the kind of quiet that felt earned after a day like this one.

Inside, Shane changed into sleep clothes with methodical precision—the same efficiency he brought to everything. Ilya watched from the doorway, then moved to the bed, already stripped down to his boxers. His ribs were still wrapped, the bruising visible across his shoulders and collarbone. He moved carefully, but without the sharp intake of breath from earlier.

Shane slid under the covers, and Ilya followed, settling on his back. For a moment, neither of them spoke. Then Ilya turned his head slightly.

"You don't have to let them all come to Canada," he said quietly. "You can tell Alexei to fuck off. We can get her."

Shane was still for a long moment. He stared at the ceiling, his fingers picking at the edge of the blanket. "No," he said finally. "I'm okay with it. My parents—they'll want to meet at least Alexei. And Katerina needs stability right now."

"Your parents will ask questions."

"Yeah. Probably."

Ilya shifted, wincing slightly as his ribs protested. "I'll help you lie."

Shane turned his head to look at him. There was something in his expression—gratitude, maybe, or just the simple recognition of being understood. He leaned over and kissed Ilya, slow and careful, mindful of the bruising on his face. It was tender in a way that didn't require words.

When he pulled back, he settled against Ilya's chest, his head fitting into the hollow of his shoulder. Ilya's arm came around him, his hand splayed across Shane's back, holding him close. They lay like that in the darkness, the weight of the day finally lifting.

"Thank you," Shane said softly.

"For what?"

"For being here."

Ilya didn't answer. He just held him tighter, and they drifted toward sleep like that.

Dimitri found Artem on the back porch, smoking a cigarette with his free hand—the other arm still carefully positioned against his ribs. The evening had cooled, and the woods around the safe house were dark and quiet. Dimitri stepped outside, letting the door close softly behind him.

"You should be resting," Dimitri said, but he wasn't really scolding. He just wanted an excuse to be near him.

Artem glanced over, a slight smile tugging at his mouth. "I am resting. I'm just doing it outside."

Dimitri moved to lean against the railing beside him, close enough that their shoulders almost touched. "Pavel seems solid."

"He is." Artem took a drag, exhaled slowly. "Better than solid, actually."

"How long have you known him?"

Artem was quiet for a moment, watching the smoke curl into the darkness. "My whole life, technically. He's my cousin. But I didn't know he was in the life until Alexei recruited me." He paused, and Dimitri could see the memory working across his face. "When they brought us together for the first time, I didn't even recognize him. It had been years. But he recognized me immediately."

"How many years?"

"Since we were kids. Maybe fifteen, sixteen years." Artem took another drag. "Pavel's older. He was already deep in it by the time I was even thinking about this kind of work. I had no idea. My family didn't talk about it."

Dimitri processed that. "So he's been protecting you this whole time without you knowing."

"Not protecting, exactly." Artem shifted his weight, careful with his ribs. "But yeah. When Alexei brought me in, Pavel made sure I didn't get in over my head too fast. He vouched for me. Taught me things." He looked at Dimitri then. "I wouldn't have gotten this far without him. I know that sounds like a cliché, but it's true."

"Are you close?"

Artem considered the question seriously. "We used to be. As kids, before everything got complicated. Now..." He shrugged, then winced at the movement. "Now we're more like colleagues. We work well together. We trust each other. But it's not the same as it was."

"Do you want it to be?"

"No." Artem said it simply, without hesitation. "That version of us doesn't exist anymore. We're different people. But I respect him. And I owe him." He turned to face Dimitri more fully.

Dimitri reached out and carefully took the cigarette from Artem's hand, brought it to his own lips, and took a drag. It was an intimate gesture, one that made Artem's breath catch slightly. When Dimitri handed it back, their fingers brushed.

"I trust your judgment," Dimitri said quietly. "About Pavel. About all of it."

Artem looked at him for a long moment, and Dimitri could see the vulnerability there—the part of Artem that was still figuring out how to let someone care about him without it being transactional. "Thank you," Artem said finally.

They stood together in the darkness, passing the cigarette back and forth until it was gone, not needing to say anything else.

When Artem reached for another cigarette from the pack on the railing, Dimitri's eyes tracked the movement.

"Where did you get those?" His tone was casual, but there was something underneath it—curiosity, maybe concern.

Artem hesitated for just a moment. "I asked Katya. When she was here earlier." He lit the fresh cigarette, exhaled slowly. "She left them on the table. Discreetly."

Dimitri made a small sound—not quite a laugh, but close. "Smart girl."

"Don't let Ilya see them," Dimitri said, and now there was definite amusement in his voice. "He quit this year. He'll take them for himself, and then we'll have a problem."

Artem glanced at him, then back at the cigarette. "I'll hide them."

"Good." Dimitri reached over and squeezed Artem's shoulder—careful, mindful of the ribs.

Artem nodded, tucking the pack into his jacket pocket where it wouldn't be visible. Another small conspiracy between them, another reason to keep this—whatever this was—close to his chest.

Chapter 28: O Canada

Chapter Notes

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

The week passed slowly at the safe house. Everyone rested—Dimitri, Artem, Shane, and Ilya staying there, with Alexei and Pavel visiting for dinner each evening. Shane's parents called every night so Katerina could talk to Ilya and Shane.

The routine was simple. Mornings were quiet—coffee, low conversation, the sound of bare branches scraping against windows when the wind picked up. Afternoons stretched long. Artem slept more than he wanted to admit, the codeine keeping the worst of the pain at bay. Shane read on the couch, his legs tucked under him, occasionally glancing at Ilya when he thought no one was looking. Ilya worked from his phone, handling what he could remotely, his face still a mess of bruises that shifted from purple to green to yellow as the days passed.

Evenings were louder. Alexei and Pavel arrived with food—sometimes Katya's cooking, sometimes takeout from Brighton Beach. They ate together at the long kitchen table, the conversation a mix of Russian and English, business and bullshit. Pavel told stories about Miami that made Artem laugh until his ribs hurt. Alexei ribbed Ilya about his face, and Ilya responded by tapping Alexei's injured shoulder until Shane told them both to knock it off.

And every night, without fail, Shane's phone rang at eight o'clock.

On the fifth night, Shane answered the FaceTime call and immediately turned the screen toward Ilya.

Katerina's face filled the frame, her dark hair pulled into pigtails, her eyes lighting up. "Ilya!"

"Привет, солнышко," Ilya said, his voice softening in a way it never did for anyone else.

She launched into a story about the snow in Canada, about how Shane's mom let her help make cookies, about the big dog next door that barked every morning. Ilya listened, nodding, asking questions, his bruised face relaxing into something almost peaceful.

When Katerina finally ran out of steam, Shane took the phone back. "Hey, Mom."

Yuna's face appeared, smiling. "Hi, sweetheart. How are you?"

"Good." Shane glanced at Ilya, then back at the screen. "Actually, we're thinking of coming up there. Stay for a week or two."

Yuna's smile widened. "Really? Oh, that's wonderful. David will be so happy."

"Yeah." Shane hesitated. "Ilya's uncle and two cousins are coming too. They rushed over from—well, they came to America when Alexei got shot. Family emergency. They'll need a place to stay."

"The more the merrier," David's voice called from somewhere off-screen.

Yuna nodded. "Absolutely. We have plenty of room. When are you thinking?"

"Few more days," Shane said. "Alexei needs another couple days before he can travel."

Yuna laughed. "Fair enough. Just let us know."

After the call ended, Ilya pulled out his phone and sent a quick text. Within an hour, one of his men was on the road. By the next afternoon, he returned with four suitcases filled with clothing—winter coats, sweaters, jeans, everything they'd need for a trip north.

On the sixth day, Dimitri drove Artem to the dentist.

The appointment was in Brighton Beach, at the same office where they'd gone before. Dimitri didn't say much on the drive, just kept one hand on the wheel and occasionally glanced over to check on Artem.

Artem sat in the passenger seat, his jaw still tender, his ribs aching every time the car hit a bump. He wasn't nervous exactly, but he wasn't looking forward to it either.

"You good?" Dimitri asked as they pulled into the parking lot.

"Yeah."

Inside, the waiting room was small and sterile, the fluorescent lights too bright. Artem sat in one of the plastic chairs, flipping through a magazine he wasn't reading. Dimitri stood near the window, his phone in his hand, but his attention never fully left Artem.

When they called Artem back, Dimitri stayed in the waiting room. He made a few calls, his voice low and clipped, handling things that couldn't wait.

An hour later, Artem emerged, his mouth numb and his head swimming from whatever they'd given him. He moved slowly, unsteady on his feet, and Dimitri was there immediately, one hand on his elbow.

"Easy," Dimitri said.

Artem blinked at him, his eyes glassy. "Got the tooth."

"Good." Dimitri guided him toward the door, his grip firm but careful. "Let's get you home."

In the car, Artem leaned his head against the window, the world outside blurring into soft shapes and colors. Dimitri drove carefully, avoiding the worst of the potholes, his eyes flicking over to check on Artem every few minutes.

"Feels weird," Artem mumbled.

"Yeah?"

"The tooth. Feels... heavy."

Dimitri's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "You'll get used to it."

By the time they pulled up to the safe house, Artem was more alert but still soft around the edges, the drugs making everything feel distant and manageable.

Dimitri helped him out of the car, one hand on his back as they walked inside.

Pavel was sitting at the kitchen table, scrolling through his phone. He looked up when they walked in.

"How'd it go?" Pavel asked.

Artem touched his jaw gingerly. "Got the tooth. Feels weird."

"Let me see."

Artem opened his mouth, and Pavel leaned forward, squinting. The gold tooth gleamed in the gap where the old one had been.

"Damn," Pavel said, grinning. "You look like a pirate."

"Fuck you," Artem said, but he was smiling too, the drugs making everything feel soft around the edges.

Dimitri moved to the other room, pulling out his phone. His voice drifted back, low and controlled, as he made another call.

"So," Pavel said, leaning back in his chair. "You and Dimitri."

Artem blinked. "What?"

"Come on." Pavel's grin faded slightly. "I'm not blind. The way he looks at you. The way you look at him."

Artem's chest tightened. He glanced toward the doorway, but Dimitri was still on the phone, his back turned.

"Yeah," Artem said finally. "We're... together."

Pavel stared at him. "Together. Like—"

"Like lovers," Artem said, the word feeling strange in his mouth. "Yeah."

Pavel sat back, his expression shifting through several emotions at once—surprise, confusion, something that might have been fear. "Dimitri. Stone-cold-killer Dimitri."

"That's the one."

"Jesus, Artem." Pavel rubbed his face. "I broke his fucking arm."

"I know."

"And he's—he's okay with that?"

Artem nodded slowly, the drugs making his thoughts move like molasses. "It was business. You had every right. Could've done worse, honestly."

Pavel looked at him like he'd grown a second head. "He doesn't hold a grudge?"

"No." Artem's voice was quiet but certain. "He doesn't."

Pavel was silent for a long moment, processing. Then he shook his head, half-laughing. "You're braver than I thought."

"Or stupider," Artem said.

"Maybe both."

Dimitri's voice stopped. A moment later, he appeared in the doorway, his phone in his hand, his eyes moving between them.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

Pavel looked at him, then at Artem, then back at Dimitri. "Yeah. We're good."

Dimitri's gaze lingered on Artem, something unreadable in his expression. Then he nodded and disappeared back into the other room.

Pavel leaned forward, lowering his voice. "Does he know you told me?"

"He will," Artem said. "I don't keep secrets from him."

Pavel shook his head again, but this time he was smiling. "You're fucking crazy."

"Probably."

On the seventh day, Shane texted Katya.

Need a favor. Can you bring makeup when you come tonight?

She didn't ask questions. When she arrived with dinner—pasta, chicken, breadsticks, and salad—she handed Shane a small bag along with the food.

"Thank you," Shane said.

Katya just smiled and set the dishes on the counter.

They ate together, the six of them crowded around the table. The conversation was easy now, familiar. Alexei told a story about a job in Miami that went sideways, and Pavel added details

that made it funnier. Artem's gold tooth caught the light when he laughed, and Dimitri's hand rested on the back of his chair, close but not quite touching.

Halfway through the meal, Ilya's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen, frowned, and stood. "I need to take this."

He disappeared into the bedroom, leaving Shane and Alexei alone at the table. Pavel and Artem had moved to the couch, and Dimitri was clearing dishes.

Shane looked at Alexei. "You know, I like you a lot better now that you're sober."

Alexei laughed—a real laugh, not the bitter thing it used to be. Then he winced, his hand going to his shoulder.

"Still hurts?" Shane asked.

"Yeah." Alexei's jaw tightened. "It's getting better, but—yeah."

Shane stood, grabbed the bottle of Tylenol from the counter, and tossed it to him. Alexei caught it one-handed, shook out two pills, and swallowed them dry.

"Thanks," he said.

Shane sat back down. They were quiet for a moment, the sound of Pavel's laughter drifting in from the other room.

"I don't know how to be a father," Alexei said suddenly.

Shane looked at him.

"I relied on her mother," Alexei continued, his voice low. "For everything. I didn't—I wasn't there. Not really. And now that she's gone..." He trailed off, staring at the table. "I don't think I can do it. Take care of her. That's why I think she'll be better in New York. With Ilya. With you."

Shane was quiet for a long moment. Then he nodded. "You're right."

Alexei's face fell.

"But," Shane said, and Alexei's eyes snapped up. "That doesn't mean you can't be in her life."

Alexei opened his mouth, but Shane kept going.

"She loves you. We saw her face light up when she saw you on that call. Even if she was asking for Ilya, she was happy to see you. And if you're not in her life—if you just disappear—she'll miss out on having you as her father."

Alexei's throat worked. He looked away, blinking hard.

"You don't have to be perfect," Shane said quietly. "You just have to show up."

Alexei nodded, his jaw tight, his eyes wet. He didn't say anything, but he didn't need to.

When Ilya came back a few minutes later, Alexei had pulled himself together. But Shane saw the way Ilya's eyes lingered on his brother, the way he squeezed Alexei's uninjured shoulder as he passed.

They finished dinner. Alexei and Pavel left an hour later, promising to come back the next day.

And the next morning, they packed for Canada.

David spotted Shane first.

He was coming through the arrivals gate with a group of men—tall, broad-shouldered, moving like they took up more space than they actually did. David's chest tightened with relief. It had been almost a year since he'd seen his son in person, and even though they'd talked on the phone, it wasn't the same.

"There," Yuna said, already moving forward.

Katerina was in David's arms, her head on his shoulder, but she perked up when she saw them. "Ilya!" she said, pointing.

David saw him then—the man Shane had told them about. Ilya. Tall, dark-haired, with a face that looked like it had been through hell.

Shane saw them and his face broke into a grin. He picked up his pace, and David set Katerina down just in time for Yuna to pull Shane into a hug.

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, her voice thick. "Look at you."

Shane hugged her back, tight, and then David was there, wrapping his arms around his son. Shane was solid, warm, alive. David's throat closed up.

"Hey, Dad," Shane said, his voice muffled against David's shoulder.

"Hey, kiddo."

When they pulled back, Katerina was already running. Not to Shane—to Ilya.

"Ilya!" she shrieked, and Ilya crouched down, his face splitting into a smile despite the obvious pain it caused. She crashed into him, her little arms wrapping around his neck, and he held her carefully, his hand cradling the back of her head.

"Printsessa," he murmured, his voice rough. "I missed you."

She pulled back, her hands on his cheeks, and frowned. "You have a bruise."

Ilya laughed, low and quiet. "Yeah. I do."

She seemed to accept this and turned, running to Shane next. Shane scooped her up, spinning her once before setting her down. "Hey, Kat."

"Hi, Shane." She grinned up at him, then turned and ran to one of the other men—older, with a bandage visible under his jacket collar. He crouched down stiffly, wincing, and she hugged him.

"Alexei," she said, like she was testing the name.

"Hey, malyshka," he said, his voice soft.

Yuna was already moving toward him, her face full of concern. "Oh my God, are you okay? Shane told us you got shot."

Alexei straightened, his hand going to his shoulder. He smiled, easy and practiced. "Yeah, I'm fine. Just—wrong place, wrong time. I didn't know New York that well, went down the wrong road, got caught in the middle of a gang fight." He shrugged with his good shoulder. "Stupid mistake."

Yuna's hand went to her chest. "That's terrifying."

"I'm okay," Alexei said. "Really. Just sore."

David stepped forward, extending his hand. "David. Good to meet you."

Alexei shook it, his grip firm despite the injury. "Alexei. Thanks for having us."

David turned to the others. There were three more men—one with a gold tooth that caught the light when he smiled, another with a face that looked like it had taken a few hits, and a younger guy who looked less beaten up but just as solid.

"This is Artem," Ilya said, gesturing to the man with the gold tooth. "Dimitri." The one with the hard face. "And Pavel." The younger one.

David shook their hands, and Yuna smiled warmly at all of them. But David's eyes caught on Artem's face—the gold tooth, yeah, but also the bruising around his jaw, the way he moved carefully, like his ribs hurt. And Ilya's face, up close now, was worse than he'd thought. The makeup was heavy, but it didn't quite cover the mottled purple-yellow underneath.

"What happened to you two?" David asked, nodding at Artem and Ilya.

Artem grinned, wincing slightly. "Hockey."

"Hockey," Ilya agreed.

David raised his eyebrows. "Rough game."

"You have no idea," Dimitri said, his voice flat.

David laughed. "Yeah, that sounds about right." He'd played hockey in his twenties. He knew how it went.

Yuna was already ushering them toward the exit. "Come on, we've got the van outside. Let's get you all home."

David grabbed a couple of their bags, and they headed out into the cold. The minivan was parked at the curb, and David unlocked it, sliding the door open.

"Pile in," he said.

Katerina climbed into her car seat, and Ilya buckled her in, his hands gentle and sure. Shane got in next to her, and the others filled in the remaining seats. It was a tight fit, but they made it work.

David started the engine, glancing in the rearview mirror. Shane was smiling, his hand on Katerina's knee, and Ilya was watching them both with an expression David couldn't quite read.

Yuna turned in her seat, looking back at them. "We're so glad you're here," she said. "All of you."

"Thanks for having us," Ilya said.

David pulled out of the parking lot, heading toward home. The heater kicked on, and the van filled with the low hum of conversation—Katerina chattering to Shane, Artem and Dimitri murmuring to each other in Russian, Alexei and Pavel quiet in the back.

It felt full. Warm.

David glanced at Yuna, and she smiled at him.

Yeah. This was going to be good.

The house was a two-story brick colonial on a quiet street lined with snow-covered maples. The driveway had been shoveled recently, and warm light glowed from the windows. Shane felt something loosen in his chest as David pulled in.

Home.

They piled out of the van, grabbing bags, and David unlocked the front door. Inside, it smelled like cinnamon and wood polish. The entryway opened into a living room with a worn couch, a fireplace, and family photos on the mantel. The kitchen was visible beyond, bright and clean.

Katerina ran ahead, her boots squeaking on the hardwood.

"Careful," Ilya called after her.

Yuna hung up her coat, already moving toward the kitchen. "I'll put on tea. You all must be exhausted."

Shane set down his bag, looking around. It was smaller than he remembered. Cozier.

Artem and Dimitri stood near the doorway, taking it in. Pavel wandered toward the living room, hands in his pockets. Alexei stayed close to Katerina, watching her explore.

Yuna turned back, her hands on her hips. "Okay, so—Shane, Ilya, you two can stay here. We'll make up your old room. The rest of you, we can figure something out. Maybe the couch, or—"

"No," Shane said quickly. "No way."

Yuna raised an eyebrow. "No way what?"

Shane's face heated. "I'm not staying in my childhood bed with Ilya."

Yuna's expression shifted—knowing, amused. She didn't say anything, just looked at him.

Shane's blush deepened. "Mom."

Dimitri laughed, low and rough, and Shane shot him a look.

Ilya's mouth twitched, but he kept his face neutral.

"We'll get a hotel," Shane said firmly. "All of us. Somewhere nearby."

David came in from the van with the last of the bags. "Hotel's probably a good idea anyway," he said. "This place isn't big enough for seven people."

Yuna sighed, but she was smiling. "Fine. But you're all eating here. Every meal."

"Deal," Shane said.

David clapped his hands together, grinning. "Good. Because while you're here, you're trying all the best Canadian food. Poutine, tourtière, butter tarts—the works."

"You don't have to—" Ilya started.

"I'm a chef," David said. "This is what I do. And you're guests." He was already heading toward the kitchen, rolling up his sleeves. "I'll start with dinner. You all settle in."

Yuna shook her head, fond. "He's been planning this since Shane called."

Shane smiled. "Yeah, I figured."

While David worked in the kitchen—pots clanging, the smell of onions and butter filling the air—the others spread out. Dimitri and Artem sat at the dining table, murmuring quietly. Pavel wandered over to the couch, and Yuna followed, grabbing the remote.

Katerina climbed onto the couch next to Alexei, her legs swinging. She looked up at him, her face serious.

"Papa Alexei?"

Alexei's chest tightened. "Yeah, *kotyonok*?"

"Are you going to take me away?"

Alexei's throat closed. He glanced toward the kitchen, where Ilya was leaning against the counter, talking to Shane. Then he looked back at Katerina.

"No," he said quietly. "I'm not going to take you away."

Her eyes searched his face. "Promise?"

"Promise." He shifted, wincing slightly as his shoulder pulled. "You're staying with Ilya and Shane. In New York. That's your home."

"But—" Her voice wavered. "I won't see you?"

"You will," Alexei said. "I'll visit. I'll come to New York to see you. As much as I can."

Katerina's face brightened. "Really?"

"Really."

She threw her arms around his neck, and Alexei hugged her back, careful of his shoulder. His eyes stung, but he blinked it away.

"Okay," she whispered.

"Okay," he said.

Yuna turned on the TV, flipping through channels until she found a hockey game. The Canadiens were playing the Maple Leafs, and she settled back with a satisfied sound.

Pavel perked up immediately. "Oh, this is a good one."

Yuna glanced at him, surprised. "You follow hockey?"

"Are you kidding?" Pavel leaned forward, his eyes on the screen. "I grew up on it. KHL, NHL—doesn't matter. I'll watch anything."

Yuna grinned. "Who's your team?"

"SKA Saint Petersburg," Pavel said. "But over here? I don't know. I like the Bruins."

Yuna made a face. "The *Bruins*?"

"What's wrong with the Bruins?"

"Everything," Yuna said. "They're dirty players."

Pavel laughed. "That's what makes them good."

"That's what makes them *cheap*," Yuna shot back, but she was smiling. "Now I see why everyone is bruised up if that's how you like to play."

On the screen, a player checked another into the boards, and they both leaned forward, shouting at the same time.

Shane glanced over from the kitchen, shaking his head. Ilya's hand brushed his lower back, warm and steady.

"Your mom's intense," Ilya murmured.

"Yeah," Shane said. "She is."

David looked up from the stove, grinning. "Dinner in thirty. Hope you're all hungry."

The house smelled like butter and herbs and something sweet baking in the oven. Katerina was curled up next to Alexei, her head on his arm. Yuna and Pavel were arguing about a penalty call. Artem and Dimitri were talking quietly, Dimitri's hand resting on Artem's knee.

Shane leaned into Ilya, just a little.

"This is good," he said quietly.

Ilya's fingers pressed against his spine. "Yeah. It is."

Thirty minutes later, David called everyone to the table. He'd made tourtière—a spiced meat pie with pork and beef, the crust golden and flaking. There was poutine with hand-cut fries, cheese curds, and rich gravy. Maple-glazed salmon, the glaze dark and glossy. Fresh bannock still warm from the oven. Butter tarts cooling on the counter next to a tray of Nanaimo bars.

"Real Canadian food," David said, setting down platters. "Everything's better hot."

They did. Katerina sat between Shane and Ilya, her small hands working the bannock apart. Alexei watched her from across the table, something soft in his expression. Yuna kept refilling glasses. Pavel asked David about every dish. Dimitri ate methodically, one hand occasionally touching Artem's shoulder when he shifted in his seat—the ribs still bothering him.

Shane caught his father's eye across the table. David winked.

By the time they finished, snow had started falling outside the windows, thick and steady.

"Hotel's about fifteen minutes from here," David said, standing to clear plates. "I'll drive you."

The minivan was warm. Katerina dozed against Shane's shoulder, her Hello Kitty blanket bundled in her lap. The hotel was small, clean, the kind of place that catered to families and business travelers. David pulled up to the entrance and helped them unload.

"I'll wait while you get sorted," he said.

The concierge was efficient. Three rooms—two queens in one, a king in another, a suite for the third. Ilya stepped forward before anyone else could speak.

"I need a car," he said. "Sports car. Something fast."

The concierge didn't blink. "We have a Dodge Challenger in the lot. Red. Recently detailed."

"That works," Ilya said.

They arranged two more vehicles—a practical sedan for Pavel and Alexei, a mid-size SUV for Dimitri and Artem. Keys were distributed. David hugged Shane at the elevator, kissed his forehead.

"Call if you need anything," he said. "Your mother will worry."

"I will," Shane promised.

The elevator doors closed. Katerina was still half-asleep, her blanket trailing behind her as they walked down the hallway. Ilya unlocked their room—the suite, spacious, with a view of the parking lot and the snow falling beyond it.

Shane set Katerina on one of the beds. She stirred, clutching her blanket tighter, and curled onto her side. Ilya stood in the doorway, watching her settle.

"She's out," Shane said quietly.

Ilya nodded. He moved to the window, looking down at the red Challenger in the lot below, then back at Shane.

"This is strange," he said. It wasn't a complaint.

"Good strange?" Shane asked.

Ilya considered it. "Yeah. Good strange."

Shane sat on the edge of the bed, careful not to jostle Katerina. Outside, the snow kept falling. In the parking lot, three rental cars sat waiting—one red and gleaming, the others practical and dark.

Tomorrow they could drive. Tonight, they could rest.

I have started a new fic with similar vibes, but both the boys are hardened criminals.

It's called Tea and Gunpowder and the summary is:

Ilya traffics opium for the Bratva.

Shane secures weapons for the Yakuza.

When they meet in a Shanghai club, neither knows what the other really is—and that's the only thing keeping them safe. As their connection deepens, two criminals from rival organizations discover that the person they trust most could destroy them.

Chapter 29: To Greece

The next morning, Shane woke to Katerina sitting cross-legged on the other bed, watching cartoons with the volume low. Ilya was already up, showered, dressed in dark jeans and a sweater. He stood by the window with his phone, speaking quietly in Russian.

Shane sat up. Katerina glanced over, smiled.

"Morning," she whispered.

"Morning." Shane rubbed his face, reached for his phone on the nightstand. A text from his mother: *Breakfast at 9 if you want. No pressure.*

He showed it to Ilya when he hung up. Ilya read it, nodded.

They dressed Katerina in shorts and a t-shirt. She complained about the boots.

"Hurt," she said.

"They're winter boots," Ilya told her. "They're supposed to be tight."

She made a face but didn't argue further.

Shane's childhood house smelled like coffee and bacon when they arrived. Yuna opened the door, already dressed for the day in slacks and a cardigan, her hair pulled back.

"Come in, come in," she said, ushering them inside.

Katerina went straight upstairs. Shane heard her footsteps on the landing, then the creak of his old bedroom door.

"There are toys up there," Yuna called after her. "Help yourself, sweetheart."

David appeared from the kitchen, spatula in hand. "Pancakes or French toast?"

"Pancakes," Shane said.

"French toast," Ilya said at the same time.

David grinned. "Both it is."

They ate in the dining room—Shane, Ilya, Katerina, David, and Yuna. The table was too big for five people, but it felt right. Katerina sat between Shane and Ilya, syrup on her chin, her legs swinging under the chair.

"What's the plan today?" David asked.

Shane glanced at Ilya. "Thought I'd show him around. Dimitri and Artem want to come."

"Where?" Yuna asked.

"Downtown." Shane paused. "Skating, if everyone's up for it."

Yuna's face lit up. "Oh that sound so fun!"

When breakfast was nearly done, Yuna started packing containers—bacon, eggs, toast, a thermos of coffee.

"What are you doing?" Shane asked.

"Your friends haven't eaten yet." She wrapped the toast in foil, kept it warm. "Take this to the hotel."

"Mom, they're fine—"

"Shane." She gave him that look. The one that meant there was no argument. "They're staying here because of you. They eat."

Ilya hid a smile behind his coffee cup.

Shane grabbed the containers. "Okay, okay."

"And take the butter," Yuna called after him. "And jam. And tell them there's more if they want it."

The hotel was ten minutes away. Shane carried everything up in two trips—knocked on Dimitri and Artem's door first, then Pavel and Alexei's. Both times, the men looked genuinely surprised, then grateful. Dimitri actually smiled. Really smile.

When Shane got back to the house, Yuna was already clearing plates, moving with the kind of efficiency that came from decades of taking care of people.

"They said thank you," Shane told her.

Yuna patted his shoulder. "Good. Now go get ready."

Ilya caught Shane's eye across the table, something warm in his expression.

"Your mother," he said quietly, "is very kind."

Katerina looked up, interested. "Skating?"

"You've skated before?" Shane asked.

She shook her head.

"We'll teach you," Ilya said.

They picked up Dimitri and Artem from their room an hour later. Dimitri looked rested, dressed in black jeans and a heavy coat. Artem moved carefully, his shoulder still bothering

him, but he was smiling.

"Where are we going?" Dimitri asked as they piled into the Challenger.

"Tour of Ottawa," Shane said. "Then skating."

Artem raised his eyebrows. "I don't skate."

"You'll learn," Dimitri said.

They drove through downtown first—Shane pointing out landmarks, places he'd been as a kid. The Parliament buildings, snow-covered and imposing. The Rideau Centre, where he'd bought his first pair of hockey skates with money saved from mowing lawns.

"That's where I got in a fight in tenth grade," Shane said, nodding toward a Tim Hortons on the corner.

Ilya glanced at him. "Over what?"

"Some guy said the Senators were better than the Leafs."

Dimitri laughed from the backseat. "Worth it."

They parked near the canal. The Rideau Canal stretched out before them, frozen solid, dotted with skaters and families. Vendors sold hot chocolate and beavertails from small stands along the edge. The sky was pale blue, the sun weak but present.

Katerina pressed her face to the window. "So big!"

"Eight kilometers," Shane said. "Longest skating rink in the world."

They rented skates from a stand near the entrance—Katerina's were pink, too big even at the smallest size, but Ilya tied them tight. Shane laced his own, muscle memory taking over. Dimitri's fit perfectly. Artem struggled with his, wincing when he bent forward.

"Let me," Dimitri said, kneeling in front of him.

Artem let him, his hand resting on Dimitri's shoulder for balance.

On the ice, Shane and Ilya moved easily, instinctively. Shane took Katerina's hand, skating backward while she wobbled forward, her ankles rolling inward.

"Straighten your legs," he told her. "Don't lean back."

She tried, overcorrected, nearly fell. Ilya caught her other hand.

"We've got you," he said.

Katerina's face was serious, focused. She pushed forward, one foot then the other, her movements jerky but determined.

Dimitri skated past them, smooth and controlled. He circled back, hands in his pockets, grinning at Artem, who was clinging to the edge of the rink.

"Come on," Dimitri called.

"I'm fine here," Artem said.

Dimitri skated over, offered his hand. Artem took it, reluctant, and let Dimitri pull him away from the wall. They moved slowly, Dimitri skating backward, guiding him.

"You're doing it," Dimitri said.

"Then I'll catch you."

"Then I'll catch you. Just watch your teeth, no more golden teeth."

Shane watched them for a moment, then looked at Ilya. Ilya was watching Katerina, his expression soft.

"She's getting it," Shane said.

Ilya nodded. "She's stubborn."

"Wonder where she gets that."

Ilya's mouth twitched.

They skated for an hour. Katerina fell twice, both times laughing, her cheeks red from the cold. Artem fell once, hard, and Dimitri hauled him up, checked his ribs.

"I'm fine," Artem said, but he was limping slightly when they left the ice.

They bought hot chocolate from a vendor—thick, sweet, too hot to drink right away. Katerina held hers with both hands, blowing on it.

"Fun!" she said.

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya's eyes were on the canal, the skaters, the families passing by. His expression was unreadable.

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

That evening, they gathered at David and Yuna's house for dinner. Alexei and Pavel arrived first, Alexei moving stiffly but without help. His color was better, his eyes clearer.

"How's the shoulder?" Shane asked.

"Healing," Alexei said. He sat in the armchair by the fire, Pavel beside him on the couch.

David was in the kitchen, the sound of pots clanging, the smell of garlic and butter filling the house. Yuna set the table, Katerina helping by folding napkins—badly, but earnestly.

"What's he making?" Dimitri asked, appearing in the doorway.

"Tourtière," Yuna said. "Meat pie. It's Québécois."

Dimitri nodded, watching David work. "Can I help?"

David glanced over, surprised. "You cook?"

"Yes."

"Then sure. Grab a knife."

Dimitri moved into the kitchen, washed his hands, and started chopping onions without being told what to do. David watched him for a moment, then went back to the stove.

They worked in silence for a while, the rhythm easy. Dimitri's knife work was precise, efficient. David noticed.

"You've done this before," David said.

"I'm not a terrible cook, I've cooked my whole life."

David nodded. He didn't ask more.

Dinner was loud—eight people around the table, plates passed, wine poured. Katerina sat between Yuna and Shane, her plate piled high with mashed potatoes and pie. Alexei ate slowly, carefully, but he ate.

"This is good," Pavel said, gesturing with his fork.

"Thank you," David said. He looked at Dimitri. "He helped."

Dimitri shrugged. "I chopped onions."

"Good onions," David said.

After dinner, they moved to the living room. Katerina fell asleep on the couch, her head on Ilya's lap. Shane sat on the floor by the fire, Artem beside him. Dimitri and Pavel were talking quietly in Russian near the window. Alexei was in the armchair, eyes half-closed.

Yuna brought out tea, set the tray on the coffee table.

"Stay as long as you want," she said.

Shane looked at his mother. She smiled at him, touched his shoulder as she passed.

The next day, Shane took Ilya to the rink where he'd played as a kid—a small community center on the east side of the city. The boards were scuffed, the ice mediocre, but it was empty.

"This is it," Shane said, lacing his skates on the bench.

Ilya looked around. "You played here?"

"Every weekend. Sometimes after school." Shane stood, stepped onto the ice. "House league, then rep, then juniors."

Ilya followed him, skating a slow lap. "It's small."

"Yeah." Shane picked up a puck someone had left behind, stick-handled it across the blue line. "I loved it, though."

They played one-on-one, no rules, just movement. Shane was faster, but Ilya was stronger, harder to move off the puck. They didn't keep score. Katerina watched from the bench, her legs swinging.

"Uncle Ilya winning!" she called.

"No he's not," Shane called back.

Ilya grinned, stole the puck, skated away.

That night, Shane woke to a small sound—a whimper, barely audible.

Katerina was between them, her body curled toward Ilya. She made the sound again, her face scrunched, her small hands gripping the blanket.

"Katarina." Ilya's voice was soft, immediate. He shifted closer, his arm coming around her. "I'm here."

Her eyes opened, wet and unfocused. "Mama," she whispered, her voice breaking.

Ilya pulled her against his chest. She turned into him, her fingers clutching his shirt, her face pressed to his collarbone.

Shane lay still beside them, close enough to feel the warmth of Katerina's back against his arm. He watched Ilya hold her, watched the way his hand moved in slow, steady strokes through her hair.

"Ty ne odna," Ilya murmured. "You're not alone."

Katerina's breathing gradually evened out. Her grip on Ilya's shirt loosened, her body going soft with sleep.

Ilya didn't move. Just held her, his chin resting on the top of her head.

Shane reached across, his hand finding Ilya's shoulder. Squeezed once.

Ilya's eyes met his in the dark. No words needed.

They lay like that—Katerina safe between them—until morning.

On the third night, Dimitri finally spoke up.

They were in the kitchen again—David pulling a roast from the oven, Dimitri peeling potatoes at the counter.

"Let me cook tomorrow," Dimitri said.

David looked at him. "You don't have to."

"I want to." Dimitri set down the peeler. "Russian food. Real Russian food."

David considered it, then nodded. "Okay."

The next evening, Dimitri took over the kitchen. He sent David to the store with a list—sour cream, dill, beets, buckwheat, beef. David came back with everything, plus a bottle of vodka.

"Just in case," David said.

Dimitri smiled.

He made borscht first—beets and cabbage simmering in a heavy pot, the smell rich and earthy. Then pelmeni, the dumplings rolled by hand, filled with seasoned meat. David watched, fascinated, as Dimitri's hands moved quickly, folding each dumpling with practiced precision.

David picked up one of the finished dumplings, examined it. "I want to learn this."

Dimitri glanced at him. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." David set it down carefully. "Show me."

"I'll teach you," Dimitri said.

They worked side by side, David's dumplings lopsided at first, then better. Yuna came in, saw them, smiled.

"Smells amazing," she said.

Dinner that night was different—quieter, more reverent. The borscht was served with a dollop of sour cream, dark bread on the side. The pelmeni were perfectly cooked, tender, rich.

Alexei ate three bowls. Pavel looked close to tears.

"This is—" Pavel stopped, shook his head. "This is great."

Dimitri didn't say anything. He just nodded.

Katerina tried the borscht, made a face, then tried it again.

"S weird," she said.

"It's Russian," Ilya told her.

"I Russian," she said.

"Then eat."

She ate.

The days blurred together after that. Morning coffee at the hotel, breakfast at David and Yuna's, afternoons exploring the city or staying in by the fire. Evenings were always dinner—sometimes David cooked, sometimes Dimitri, once Yuna made a roast chicken that Katerina declared the best thing she'd ever eaten.

Shane showed Ilya the house he grew up in—a small two-story on a quiet street, the yard buried in snow. They didn't go inside, just stood on the sidewalk, looking.

"I had a treehouse in the back," Shane said. "Fell out of it when I was nine. Broke my arm."

Ilya looked at him. "Idiot."

"Yeah."

They walked back to the car, Ilya's hand finding Shane's in his pocket.

One afternoon, Yuna took Katerina to a craft store. Shane stayed behind, sitting at the kitchen table with his mother while Katerina picked out supplies for a project Yuna had suggested—something with felt and glitter.

"She's sweet," Yuna said, watching Katerina deliberate between two shades of pink felt.

"She is," Shane said.

Yuna looked at him. "You're good with her."

Shane didn't know what to say to that.

"I mean it," Yuna continued. "You're patient. Kind. She trusts you."

Shane's chest tightened. "I'm trying."

"I can see that." Yuna reached across the table, squeezed his hand. "I'm proud of you."

Shane looked down at their hands. His mother's fingers were smaller than his, her skin soft.

"Thanks, Mom," he said quietly.

When they got home, Katerina showed Ilya everything she'd bought—felt, glue, googly eyes, pipe cleaners. She spread it all out on the living room floor and got to work, Yuna sitting beside her, guiding her hands.

Shane watched from the couch. Ilya sat next to him, close enough that their shoulders touched.

"Your mother's good with her," Ilya said.

"Yeah," Shane said. "She is."

They watched Katerina hold up a piece of pink felt, Yuna nodding encouragement.

"She wasn't part of the plan," Shane said quietly.

Ilya glanced at him.

"When we started this," Shane continued. "I didn't think—" He stopped. "I didn't know what it would be like."

"No," Ilya agreed. "Neither did I."

Shane looked at Katerina. She was concentrating hard, her tongue between her teeth as she tried to glue a googly eye onto the felt.

"I love her," Shane said.

"I know." Ilya's voice was soft. "She loves you too."

Shane's throat tightened.

"I'm grateful," Ilya said after a moment. "For both of you."

Shane turned to look at him. Ilya's expression was open, unguarded.

"I didn't think I'd have this," Ilya said. "Her. You. Both of you."

Shane reached for his hand, laced their fingers together.

"You do," Shane said.

Ilya squeezed his hand. On the floor, Katerina held up her creation—a lopsided pink creature with too many eyes.

"Uncle Ilya, look!"

"I see it," Ilya said, his voice warm. "It's perfect."

Later, while Ilya was helping Katerina wash the glue off her hands and David was in the living room with the others, Yuna caught Shane's arm gently and pulled him into the kitchen.

"Help me with dessert," she said, though it wasn't really a question.

Shane followed her, already knowing something was coming. His mother had that look—the one she got when she was thinking hard about something.

Yuna pulled out a container of berries from the fridge, set it on the counter. She didn't look at him directly, which somehow made it worse.

"So," she said, arranging berries on a plate. "What does Ilya do?"

Shane's chest tightened slightly. He kept his voice steady.

"Commercial properties, mostly. Eastern Europe, some in the States."

Yuna nodded, accepting this easily. She'd always been good at taking people at face value when they gave her a straightforward answer. But then she glanced at him.

"And Dimitri?"

There it was.

"What about him?" Shane asked, keeping his tone casual.

"He seems..." Yuna paused, choosing her words carefully. "Protective. Aware. Like he's always watching."

Shane leaned against the counter. "He used to be a bodyguard. Private security work."

"Used to be?"

"Now he works with Artem. They run a gym together in New York."

Yuna looked at Dimitri through the kitchen doorway—his broad shoulders, the way he sat with his back to the wall, the efficiency of his movements.

"He has the build for it," she said finally, and Shane felt some of the tension ease from his shoulders.

But then Yuna turned back to him, and her eyes were sharper.

"What about Alexei? What does he do?"

Shane's jaw tightened slightly. He forced himself to relax it.

"Government work," he said.

Yuna's hands stilled on the berries.

"Government work," she repeated. "Shane, was he—was that attack targeted?"

"I don't know, the police are looking into it."

Yuna set down the berry she was holding. She looked at her son for a long moment, and Shane could see her mind working, fitting pieces together. But then she seemed to decide something. She reached over and squeezed his shoulder.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Okay."

She turned back to the berries, and Shane exhaled slowly.

"Your father and I," Yuna said, not looking at him, "we know you're not going to tell us everything. We know there are things you can't tell us. But we trust you. And we trust Ilya."

Shane's throat felt tight.

"Thank you," he said.

Yuna glanced at him, smiled—sad and knowing and full of love.

"Just be careful," she said. "All of you."

Shane nodded.

They finished the dessert in silence, but it was a different kind of silence. The kind that meant his mother knew he was lying, and she was choosing to let him, because she loved him more than she needed the truth.

On the fifth night, Alexei looked stronger. He sat at the table without wincing, ate without hesitation. His color was back, his eyes sharp.

"You're healing," Ilya said.

Alexei nodded. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," Ilya said. "But you're better."

Alexei didn't argue.

After dinner, they sat in the living room—all of them, the fire crackling, the snow falling outside. Katerina was asleep again, this time on the floor, her head on a pillow, her craft project abandoned beside her.

David poured vodka into small glasses, passed them around. Even Artem took one, though he sipped it carefully.

"To family," David said, raising his glass.

They drank.

Shane looked around the room—his parents, Ilya, Katerina, Alexei, Pavel, Dimitri, Artem. His two worlds, overlapping, merging.

It felt right.

On the sixth day, they started talking about Greece.

"When do we leave?" Artem asked.

"Two days," Ilya said. "We fly out of Montreal."

"All of us?" Pavel asked.

Ilya nodded. "All of us."

Katerina perked up. "Greece?"

"Greece," Ilya confirmed. "Warm. Beach. Ocean."

Her eyes went wide. "Never see beach."

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya's expression softened.

"You will," Ilya said.

The last dinner at David and Yuna's house was bittersweet. David made steak, Dimitri made blini, Yuna made a salad. They ate slowly, no one in a hurry to leave.

"You'll call when you land?" Yuna asked.

"I will," Shane promised.

David hugged him at the door, held on longer than usual.

"Take care of them," David said quietly.

Shane nodded. "I will."

Yuna hugged Ilya, then Katerina, then everyone else. She cried a little, wiped her eyes quickly.

"Come back soon," she said.

"We will," Ilya said.

They drove back to the hotel in silence. Katerina was asleep in the backseat, her head against the window. Shane's hands were steady on the wheel.

"Your parents are good people," Ilya said.

"Yeah," Shane said. "They are."

Ilya looked out the window at the snow, the dark streets, the quiet city.

"I'm glad we came," he said.

Shane glanced at him. "Me too."

They left for Montreal early, the sun not yet up. Three cars in a convoy—Shane and Ilya and Katerina in the Challenger, Dimitri and Artem in the SUV, Alexei and Pavel in the sedan.

The drive was smooth, the roads clear. Katerina woke up halfway, asked where they were.

"Almost there," Ilya said.

She went back to sleep.

At the airport, they returned the rentals, checked their bags, moved through security. Katerina held Ilya's hand the entire time, her eyes wide, taking everything in.

They boarded—business class, three rows, enough space for all of them. Katerina sat between Shane and Ilya, her seatbelt fastened, her hands gripping the armrests.

"It's okay," Ilya said.

The plane took off. Katerina squeezed her eyes shut, her knuckles white.

Then they were in the air, and she opened her eyes, looked out the window.

"Oh," she said softly.

Below them, the world stretched out—white and endless, the sky above them blue and infinite.

"So pretty," she whispered.

Shane looked at Ilya. Ilya was watching Katerina, his expression unreadable.

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

The flight to Athens was long. Katerina slept most of it, curled against Ilya's side, her head on his shoulder. Shane watched them, felt something settle in his chest—something warm and permanent.

When they landed, the air was different. Warmer. The sun bright and clean.

Ilya had rented a house on the coast—white stone, blue shutters, a terrace that overlooked the sea. Big enough for all of them. Three bedrooms upstairs, a kitchen that opened onto the terrace, stairs that led down to a private stretch of beach.

They arrived in the early afternoon, the light golden, the air smelling like salt and wild herbs.

Katerina ran through the house, her footsteps echoing on the tile floors, her voice high and excited.

"Big! So big!"

Dimitri carried the bags in. Artem opened the windows, let the breeze through. Alexei sat on the couch, his arm still in the sling, his face tired but better than it had been.

"This is nice," Pavel said, looking out at the water.

Shane stood on the terrace, felt the sun on his face. Ilya came up beside him, close enough that their shoulders touched.

"Thank you," Shane said quietly.

Ilya glanced at him. "For what?"

"This. All of it."

Ilya's hand found his, their fingers lacing together.

"You don't have to thank me," Ilya said.

They stood there for a moment, the sound of the sea below them, Katerina's laughter drifting from inside the house.

Then Dimitri called from the kitchen. "We should eat. There's a place in town."

They went into town—a small village, narrow streets, white buildings with blue doors. The restaurant was open-air, tables on a patio overlooking the harbor, the smell of grilled fish and lemon and olive oil thick in the air.

Katerina sat on Ilya's lap, her eyes wide, watching the boats in the water.

They ordered—too much food, plates of grilled octopus and lamb and fresh bread, bowls of tzatziki and olives, wine for the adults, lemonade for Katerina.

She tried everything, made faces at some things, loved others. She ate three pieces of bread, dipped them in olive oil, got it all over her hands.

"Messy," she said, holding up her fingers.

Ilya wiped them with a napkin, kissed the top of her head.

The sun set while they ate, the sky turning pink and orange, the water glowing. Shane took a picture of Katerina with her lemonade, sent it to his parents.

His phone buzzed a moment later. Hearts. *Have fun, sweetheart.*

When they got back to the house, Katerina was half-asleep, her head on Ilya's shoulder. But when they walked through the door, she lifted her head, looked at Shane with wide, determined eyes.

"Beach," she said.

Shane smiled. "Tomorrow, kiddo. It's dark now."

"Beach," she said again, more insistent.

Ilya kissed her temple. "Tomorrow. I promise."

She frowned, but she was too tired to argue. Ilya carried her upstairs, put her to bed in the room they'd share. Shane followed, watched as Ilya tucked her in, smoothed her hair back from her face.

"Love you," Ilya murmured in Russian.

"Love you," she whispered back, already half-asleep.

The next morning, Katerina woke them before the sun was fully up.

"Beach," she said, standing beside the bed, her hair a mess, her eyes bright. "Beach now."

Shane groaned, pulled the pillow over his face. Ilya laughed, sat up, pulled Katerina onto the bed between them.

"Okay," he said. "Beach."

They had breakfast on the terrace—fruit and yogurt and coffee, Katerina eating quickly, bouncing in her seat.

Dimitri stood near the railing, his coffee cup in hand, but he hadn't sat down. Shane watched him shift his weight, glance toward the kitchen, then back at the water.

"I'm going into town," Dimitri said after a moment. "We need supplies. Groceries, water, things for the house."

Ilya looked up at him. "We have enough for today."

"I know," Dimitri said. "But we'll need more tomorrow. I'll stock up now."

Artem glanced at him, something knowing in his expression, but he didn't say anything.

Dimitri couldn't sit still. Shane could see it—the restlessness in his shoulders, the way his fingers tapped against the side of his cup. He needed to move, to do something, to be useful. It was how he was built.

"Take the car," Ilya said quietly.

Dimitri nodded, set his cup down, grabbed the keys from the counter inside.

Shane watched him go, heard the car start a moment later, the sound fading as he drove down the road.

Katerina looked up from her yogurt, her spoon halfway to her mouth.

"Need swim," she said, looking at Ilya. "No have swim."

"Then we'll get you one," Shane said.

They drove into town, found a shop near the harbor that sold beachwear. Katerina ran ahead, her hand in Ilya's, pulling him toward the racks of swimsuits.

She found it immediately—a pink one-piece with Hello Kitty on the front, a little ruffle around the waist.

"This," she said, holding it up. "Want this."

"It's perfect," Shane said.

Ilya took it from her, checked the size, nodded. "We'll get it."

Shane wandered over to the men's section, found a pair of plain black trunks, held them up. Then he saw the rack next to it—bright colors, patterns, ridiculous prints.

He grinned, picked up a pair of pink trunks covered in flamingos.

"I wish they had matching ones," he said, holding them up for Ilya to see.

Ilya looked at them, then at Shane, then back at the trunks. His mouth twitched.

"They do," he said.

He reached past Shane, pulled out another pair—same pink, same flamingos.

Shane laughed. "You're not serious."

"I am," Ilya said, his eyes bright with amusement. "We're getting them."

Dimitri and Artem came over, both holding blue trunks—plain, practical.

"You two are ridiculous," Dimitri said, looking at the pink flamingos.

"You're just jealous," Shane said.

Dimitri snorted, but he was smiling.

Alexei stayed near the door, his arm still in the sling. Shane caught his eye, raised an eyebrow.

"Not buying anything?"

Alexei shook his head. "Can't swim. Shoulder."

"You can still sit on the beach," Shane said.

"I will," Alexei said. "I'll watch."

Shane grabbed sunscreen, a couple of towels, a big canvas beach bag. They paid, headed back to the house.

Katerina changed in the bathroom, came out wearing her new swimsuit, her arms spread wide.

"Look!" she said. "Pretty!"

"Very pretty," Ilya said, crouching down to her level. "You look beautiful."

Shane and Ilya changed into their matching pink trunks. Shane looked at himself in the mirror, shook his head, grinned.

"We look insane," he said.

"We look good," Ilya said, coming up behind him, wrapping his arms around Shane's waist.

Shane leaned back into him, felt Ilya's chin on his shoulder.

"Yeah," he said. "We do."

Downstairs, Dimitri was packing a cooler—bottles of water, cans of soda, some beer, ice. Artem grabbed the towels, the beach bag. Alexei stood by the door, already wearing a t-shirt and shorts, his sunglasses on.

They walked down the stairs to the beach, Katerina running ahead, her feet kicking up sand.

The water was clear, impossibly blue, the sand white and warm. Katerina stopped at the edge, looked back at Ilya.

"Come," she said. "Come in."

Ilya walked over, took her hand. They waded in together, the water up to Katerina's waist, her laughter bright and high.

Shane stood at the edge, watched them. Dimitri came up beside him, handed him a beer.

"This is good," Dimitri said.

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

He pulled out his phone, took a picture—Katerina in the water, her arms up, Ilya holding her hands, both of them smiling.

He sent it to his parents.

The reply came a moment later. Three hearts. *Have fun, sweetheart.*

Shane put his phone away, walked into the water.

The sun was hot on his shoulders. He waded out to where Ilya stood with Katerina, the water cool against his skin.

"Sunscreen," Shane said. He'd grabbed the bottle from the beach bag before coming down. "Everyone needs it."

Ilya turned to him, amused. "You're very thorough."

"Someone has to be," Shane said. He squeezed a generous amount into his palm and started with Ilya's shoulders, working the lotion across his back in careful strokes. Ilya stood still, letting him, the muscles under Shane's hands warm and solid. Shane moved to his arms, his chest, making sure every exposed inch was covered.

"Done," Shane said finally, stepping back.

Katerina was already wading toward him, impatient.

"My turn," she announced.

Shane crouched down, and she squirmed immediately as he smoothed sunscreen across her small shoulders, her arms, her face. She giggled and tried to dodge, but he was patient, thorough, making sure her nose and cheeks were protected.

"Hold still," he said gently. "Don't want you to burn."

"Tickles," Katerina said, but she held still enough for him to finish.

On the beach, Pavel was helping Alexei with his back. Alexei's injured shoulder made it impossible for him to reach, and he stood shirtless while Pavel worked the sunscreen across his shoulder blades, careful around the bandaging. They moved with the ease of brothers, Pavel's hands steady and practiced.

"Don't miss anything," Alexei said.

"I know what I'm doing," Pavel replied.

Once everyone was covered, they swam. Katerina stayed close to Ilya, but she was braver now, letting the water come up to her chest, splashing and laughing. Shane swam out a little further, felt the pull of the current, the salt on his skin. Artem dove under, came up shaking water from his hair. Even Alexei waded in, careful with his shoulder, but smiling.

The sun climbed higher. After an hour, they came out, exhausted and happy, and collapsed on their towels.

Artem spotted him first—Dimitri coming down the stone steps from the house, the cooler in his hands. He'd been gone for over an hour, and now he was making his way across the sand toward them.

"Supplies," he said, setting it down in the middle of their little camp. He opened it to reveal bottles of water, cans of soda, beer, and a container of Greek pastries and cheese and olives. "And food."

"You're a good man," Artem said, reaching for a water bottle.

They settled into an easy rhythm—eating, drinking, the sun warm on their skin. Katerina sat between Shane and Ilya, munching on a piece of cheese, her hair drying in the heat.

Alexei's nose was bright red.

Ilya laughed, a real laugh that came from deep in his chest. "You look like a tomato."

"Shut up," Alexei said, but he was smiling.

Shane grabbed the sunscreen stick from the beach bag and tossed it to him. Alexei caught it one-handed, twisted the top, and applied it carefully to his nose.

"Better?" he asked.

"Marginally," Ilya said.

Artem was already on his feet, reaching down to haul Dimitri up. "Come on. You're not sitting here all day."

"I'm eating," Dimitri protested, but Artem was already dragging him toward the water, laughing.

"You can eat later. You need to relax."

Dimitri didn't fight it. He let himself be pulled into the waves, and within moments he was swimming, his movements loose and easy.

Shane watched them go, then looked at Alexei. His cousin was watching too, his expression soft.

"I've never seen him like this," Pavel said quietly. "Artem. So... happy."

Shane smiled. "Yeah."

Pavel turned to look at him. "Thank you for your kindness to him. And to me too."

"You're welcome," Shane said. "You and Artem are my two favorite kidnappers. Leagues above Aleksandr."

Pavel laughed, the sound bright and genuine.

By the time they packed up the beach, Katerina was barely awake. She'd crashed hard after lunch, her small body limp against Shane's chest as he carried her back to the house. Her hair was stiff with salt, her skin warm from the sun despite the sunscreen, and she was out—completely, utterly exhausted.

They got her inside, and Ilya carried her to the couch, settling her gently against the cushions with a throw blanket tucked around her. She didn't even stir.

Alexei was already stretched out in an armchair with a book, looking content. He glanced up as Ilya and Shane exchanged a look—the kind of look that said *we need a moment alone*.

"We're going to shower," Ilya said, his voice casual. "Get the salt off."

Alexei's mouth curved into a knowing smile. He set his book down and gestured toward Katerina. "I've got her. Go on."

"You sure?" Shane asked.

"She's asleep," Alexei said, and then added with a wink, "You kids have fun."

Shane felt heat creep up his neck. Ilya's hand found the small of his back, a gentle pressure guiding him toward the hallway.

The shower was small, barely big enough for two, but that was fine. That was better than fine.

Ilya turned on the water, let it run warm, and Shane stepped in first. The salt rinsed away in rivulets, the sand that had worked its way into everything finally loosening. He was reaching for the soap when Ilya stepped in behind him, and suddenly the small space felt even smaller.

"Here," Ilya said, his voice low. He took the soap from Shane's hands and worked it across his shoulders, his palms firm and warm. Water cascaded down between them. Shane closed his eyes, feeling the tension of the day—the sun, the noise, the constant awareness of being around people—start to melt away.

Ilya's hands moved down Shane's back, careful and deliberate. His thumbs traced the line of Shane's spine. Shane turned, and Ilya's hands found his chest, soap and water and the solid warmth of him. Shane reached up, his fingers threading through Ilya's wet hair, and Ilya's breath hitched.

"Missed you," Shane murmured.

"We've been together all day," Ilya said, but his hands were already moving—down Shane's ribs, across his hips—like he couldn't help it.

"Not like this."

Ilya's eyes were dark when Shane looked at him. He leaned in, and Shane met him halfway, their kiss tasting of salt and want. Ilya's hands gripped Shane's waist, pulling him closer until there was no space between them, just heat and water and the press of skin against skin.

They didn't rush. There was no need to. They washed each other slowly, deliberately, every touch lingering longer than necessary. Shane's hands mapped the familiar landscape of Ilya's shoulders, his arms, the scar tissue that mapped his history. Ilya's hands were gentle on Shane's face, his neck, like he was memorizing him.

By the time they stepped out of the shower, Shane was trembling—not from cold, but from the ache of wanting him.

They didn't bother with much. Ilya wrapped a towel around his waist, and Shane did the same, and they moved through the quiet house to the bedroom they'd claimed as theirs. The

door closed softly behind them.

The bed was cool against Shane's damp skin as Ilya pressed him down into it, his mouth finding Shane's again. His hands were still damp, still warm, and Shane arched into him, needing closer, needing more. Ilya's weight settled over him, solid and real, and Shane's hands found skin—Ilya's back, his shoulders, pulling him down.

"I love you," Shane breathed against Ilya's neck.

Ilya's response was wordless, a sound caught between a groan and a sigh, his mouth finding the sensitive spot where Shane's neck met his shoulder. His hands moved with purpose now, and Shane let himself fall into it—into Ilya, into the feeling of being wanted like this, completely and without reservation.

Ilya pulled back slightly, reaching for his wallet on the nightstand. He fished out a small packet of lube, and Shane laughed—a surprised, breathless sound.

"You carry that in your wallet?" Shane asked.

"Always prepared," Ilya said, and there was something almost smug in his tone. He tossed the wallet aside and turned to the TV, finding a music channel and turning the volume low—just enough to cover any sounds that might carry through the house. Then he locked the bedroom door with a soft click.

When he returned to the bed, he moved deliberately, settling beside Shane. His eyes were dark, focused entirely on him.

"I want to watch you," Ilya said quietly. It wasn't a question. "Want to see you open yourself up for me."

Shane's breath caught. There was something about the way Ilya said it—not demanding, but certain. Like he knew Shane would do this, would give him this.

Ilya squeezed the lube onto Shane's fingers, and Shane watched the clear liquid pool in his palm, warm from Ilya's hands. His heart was hammering in his chest.

"Go on," Ilya murmured, settling back slightly to give Shane space. "Let me see."

Shane shifted, spreading his legs, and Ilya's gaze followed every movement. There was nothing hurried about it. Shane brought his hand down, circling first, feeling the tension in his own body, the anticipation. He was acutely aware of Ilya watching him—not just looking, but *seeing* him. Every vulnerability, every moment of exposure.

He pressed a finger inside, slow and careful, and heard Ilya's sharp intake of breath. Shane's eyes fluttered closed for a moment before opening again, meeting Ilya's gaze. There was something intensely intimate about this—about being watched so completely, so intently. About trusting Ilya enough to be this open, this exposed.

"That's it," Ilya said softly, his voice rough. His hand came to rest on Shane's thigh, not moving, just present. A reminder that he was there. "Take your time."

Shane worked another finger in, his breath coming faster. The lube made everything easier, smoother, and he could feel himself relaxing into it, into the sensation and into Ilya's unwavering attention. Ilya's thumb traced small circles on his thigh, grounding him.

"You're beautiful like this," Ilya said, and Shane felt heat flood through him at the words. "So open for me. So trusting."

Shane's movements became more deliberate, more confident. He could feel the tension building in his core, the anticipation of what was coming. He added a third finger, stretching himself, and Ilya's breathing had become audible now—heavy, controlled, but audible.

"Enough," Ilya said finally, his voice strained. "Come here."

Shane withdrew his hand and moved without hesitation, straddling Ilya's hips. His thighs bracketed Ilya's body, and he could feel the heat of him beneath him, the solid strength of his chest rising and falling with each breath. Ilya's hands came to Shane's waist, steadying him, his thumbs brushing across Shane's hipbones.

"Look at me," Ilya said, and Shane did. Their eyes locked, and there was nothing between them now—no walls, no pretense. Just this. Just them.

Shane reached down, guiding Ilya inside him, and sank down slowly. The sensation was exquisite—the stretch, the fullness, the rightness of it. He moved inch by inch, taking his time, feeling every moment of connection. Ilya's jaw clenched, his hands tightening on Shane's waist, but he didn't rush him. He let Shane set the pace, let him control this moment.

When Shane was fully seated, he paused, breathing heavily. Ilya's eyes were dark, almost black with desire, but there was something else there too—tenderness, reverence, love.

"Okay?" Ilya asked, his voice rough.

Shane nodded, unable to speak. He began to move, lifting himself slowly before sinking back down. The rhythm was deliberate, unhurried. This wasn't about chasing release—it was about connection, about feeling every sensation, every moment of intimacy.

Ilya's hands guided him, moving from his waist to his thighs, his chest, his back. His touch was everywhere and nowhere, constant and grounding. Shane braced his hands on Ilya's shoulders, leaning forward slightly, and Ilya met him halfway, their lips meeting in a kiss that was slow and deep and all-consuming.

They moved together like this—Shane rising and falling in that steady, passionate rhythm while Ilya thrust up to meet him, their bodies finding a perfect synchronization. The kiss broke only for breath, and even then their foreheads stayed pressed together, their breathing mingled.

"You feel so good," Ilya murmured against Shane's mouth. "So perfect."

Shane's movements became more confident, more assured. He could feel the pleasure building in waves, could feel Ilya responding to every shift of his hips, every subtle change in

angle. Ilya's hands slid down to grip Shane's ass, helping him move, and Shane gasped at the sensation.

"That's it," Ilya said, his voice strained. "Take what you need."

Shane did. He rode him with increasing intensity, but it was still slow, still passionate—not frantic, but deliberate. Each movement was a conversation, a question and answer between their bodies. Ilya watched him with an intensity that made Shane feel seen in a way he'd never experienced before. Like Ilya was memorizing every expression on his face, every sound he made.

They kissed again, deeper this time, and Shane felt Ilya's hands tighten on him. Ilya's breathing was ragged now, his control slipping, but he held back—waiting for Shane, letting Shane lead them both toward the edge.

"I love you," Shane whispered against Ilya's lips, the words tumbling out without thought.

Ilya's entire body went still for a moment, and then he was kissing Shane again, harder, more desperately. "I love you," he said back, the words fierce and absolute. "God, Shane, I love you so much."

Shane felt something break open inside his chest. He moved faster now, chasing the sensation, chasing the feeling of Ilya inside him, around him, consuming him. Ilya met every thrust, his hands never leaving Shane's body, his eyes never leaving Shane's face.

The pleasure crested, and Shane came with a gasp, his body tensing around Ilya. Ilya followed moments later, his hands gripping Shane tightly as he thrust up one final time, burying himself deep as he found his release.

They stayed like that for a long moment, Shane still straddling him, Ilya still inside him, their bodies pressed together, their breathing slowly evening out. Ilya's arms wrapped around Shane's waist, pulling him down so they were chest to chest, and Shane rested his head on Ilya's shoulder.

They lay like that in the quiet of the room, the low murmur of the TV the only sound, completely wrapped up in each other.

Chapter 30: Family dinner

Artem stared at the ceiling. The room was dark, the curtains drawn against the moonlight, but sleep wouldn't come. His mind kept circling back to the same question: what happens when this ends?

Greece had been good. Better than good. The beach, the sun, Katerina's laughter. Dimitri's hand finding his under the table at dinner. Small moments that felt enormous.

But it couldn't last forever.

He slipped out of bed as quietly as he could, pulling on shorts and a t-shirt. Artem padded through the house barefoot, past Alexei's room, past the room where Shane and Ilya slept with Katerina between them. Everyone was asleep.

The kitchen light was on.

Dimitri stood at the counter, a glass of water in his hand. He looked up when Artem appeared in the doorway, his expression unreadable.

"Can't sleep?" Dimitri asked quietly.

Artem shook his head. "Going for a walk."

Dimitri nodded, said nothing. Artem hesitated, then turned and headed for the door.

The beach was empty at this hour. The moon hung low over the water, casting a silver path across the waves. Artem walked down to the shore, his feet sinking into the cool sand. When he reached the water's edge, he kicked off his shoes and let the waves rush over his feet.

The water was cold. It felt good.

He stood there for a long time, watching the horizon, listening to the rhythmic crash of the waves. The sound was soothing in a way that the silence of the bedroom hadn't been. Out here, he could breathe.

He didn't know how long he'd been standing there when he heard footsteps behind him.

Dimitri appeared at his side, barefoot as well, his hand reaching out to take Artem's. Their fingers laced together naturally, like they'd done it a thousand times before.

They stood in silence for a moment, the water rushing over their feet, retreating, returning.

"Are you going to return to New York with us?" Dimitri asked finally, his voice soft.

Artem's chest tightened. There it was. The question he'd been avoiding.

"I'd like to," he said quietly.

Dimitri nodded, his thumb brushing over Artem's knuckles. "Then do it, Tyoma."

Artem let out a breath that was almost a laugh. "It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"Pavel—"

"Pavel will have something to say about it," Artem finished. He looked down at their joined hands. "He always does."

Dimitri rolled his eyes. "Leave it to Ilya. He'll handle him."

Artem turned to look at him. "You think so?"

"I know so." Dimitri's voice was firm. "Ilya wants you there. Shane likes you. Katerina adores you. Pavel can complain all he wants, but he's outvoted."

Artem smiled despite himself. "Outvoted."

"Democracy," Dimitri said dryly.

Artem laughed, a real laugh this time, and pulled Dimitri toward him. The kiss was meant to be brief—a thank you, a moment of affection—but Dimitri's hand came up to cup the back of his head, deepening it, and suddenly Artem was drowning in a different way.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing harder, Dimitri tugged him toward the dry sand. They sat down side by side, their shoulders touching, and looked up at the stars.

The sky was impossibly clear. Artem had forgotten how many stars there were when you got away from the city lights.

"Tell me about your childhood," Dimitri said after a while.

Artem glanced at him. "Why?"

"Because I want to know."

It was such a simple answer. Such an honest one. Artem looked back up at the stars.

"You already know most of it," Artem said quietly. "The farm. My parents. Leaving."

Dimitri's hand found his in the sand. "Then tell me about Moscow. What it was like when you first got there."

Artem was quiet for a moment, remembering. "Terrifying," he said finally. "I'd never seen so many people in one place. The noise, the crowds, the way everyone moved so fast—like they all knew exactly where they were going and I was just... in the way."

"You were seventeen."

"I was seventeen," Artem agreed. "With a village accent and clothes that marked me as a country boy the second I opened my mouth or walked into a room. People laughed. Not always to my face, but I could hear it. See it in their eyes."

Dimitri's thumb traced circles on the back of his hand.

"I slept in a hostel for the first month," Artem continued. "Shared a room with eight other men. Some of them were kind. Most weren't. I worked construction during the day—anything that would pay cash. At night I'd listen to the radio, trying to learn how Muscovites talked. Trying to erase where I came from."

"That must have been lonely."

"It was." Artem looked down at their joined hands. "I'd never felt more alone in my life. Back on the farm, at least I knew who I was. In Moscow, I was nobody. Just another kid from nowhere, trying to become someone."

They sat in silence for a moment, the waves providing a steady rhythm.

"And now," Dimitri said softly, "you're about to do it again."

Artem looked at him. "What?"

"Move to a new city. Start over." Dimitri's expression was thoughtful. "New York is bigger than Moscow. Busier. More people, more noise, more everything."

Artem felt something tighten in his chest. He hadn't thought about it that way.

"But this time," Dimitri continued, his voice firm, "you won't be alone. You'll have me. Ilya. Shane. Katerina. You won't be sleeping in a hostel or working construction or trying to hide who you are." He squeezed Artem's hand. "This time, you're coming home. Not running away from one."

Artem stared at him, something warm and overwhelming rising in his throat.

"Home," he repeated quietly.

"Home," Dimitri confirmed. He leaned in and kissed him, soft and sure. "With me."

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the waves. Artem felt Dimitri's thumb tracing circles on the back of his hand.

"Tyoma," Dimitri said quietly.

Artem's heart did something complicated in his chest. The diminutive sounded different in Dimitri's voice. Intimate.

"Yeah, Mitya?"

Dimitri turned to look at him, his expression serious. "Come back to New York, Tyoma. Stay."

"I want to," Artem said. "I really do."

"Then that's settled."

Artem smiled. "Just like that?"

"Just like that." Dimitri leaned in and kissed him again, slower this time, sweeter. When he pulled back, his hand came up to brush Artem's hair out of his eyes. "You think too much."

"Someone has to."

"Not tonight." Dimitri settled back against him, his head on Artem's shoulder. "Tonight we just sit here."

So they did.

Artem watched the stars wheel slowly overhead, felt the cool night air on his skin, heard the endless rhythm of the waves. Dimitri's weight against him was solid, real, grounding.

For the first time in weeks, the knot in his chest loosened.

"Mitya?" he said after a while.

"Mm?"

"Thank you."

Dimitri's hand squeezed his. "For what?"

"For coming out here. For asking."

"I wasn't going to let you stand in the water alone all night," Dimitri said. "You'd have turned into a prune."

Artem laughed quietly. "Romantic."

"I try."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few more minutes before Artem spoke again.

"Tell me about your childhood," he said. "Fair's fair."

Dimitri was quiet for a long moment. His thumb continued its slow circle on the back of Artem's hand.

"Moscow," he said finally. "Affluent neighborhood. My father was successful in business." He paused. "That's what we called it. Business."

Artem waited. He'd learned that Dimitri didn't rush through things.

"I was in my twenties when I figured out what that business actually was," Dimitri continued. "Drugs, mostly. Some other things. My father wanted me to help him. Said it was family legacy." His voice was flat, matter-of-fact. "So I did. For a few years."

"What changed?"

"I met Ilya." Dimitri shifted slightly, his shoulder brushing Artem's. "He was eighteen. Needed a bodyguard. Someone who knew how to handle themselves. I was good at that part—the violence, the protection. Still am." He glanced at Artem. "Been with him almost twelve years now."

Artem did the math. Dimitri had been in his late twenties when he'd left his father's operation. Young enough to get out. Old enough to know what he was leaving behind.

"Do you regret it?" Artem asked.

"No." Dimitri's answer was immediate. "My father was a hard man. Ilya..." He trailed off, searching for words. "Ilya is different. He's loyal. He takes care of people. That matters to me."

Artem thought about that. About loyalty and care mattering more than money or family obligation.

"Has he ever been like this with anyone?" Artem asked carefully. "Besides Shane?"

Dimitri laughed, a short, genuine sound. "No. Never. But Shane—Shane is the only one who sells the gifts he gives. Ilya's not used to that."

Artem turned to look at him. "What do you mean?"

"Ilya gives gifts," Dimitri said. "Good ones. Expensive ones. Most people keep them because it's rude not to. They display them, wear them, show their appreciation." He shook his head. "Shane doesn't care. He sells them."

"And Ilya...?"

"Ilya wasn't used to it," Dimitri said. "Everyone else keeps what he gives them out of respect. Or fear. Or because they want to stay in his good graces." His voice was soft with something like wonder. "Shane just... doesn't care about any of that. He sees an expensive scarf and thinks 'I could get three months of rent for this.' That's when Ilya started to change. When he realized Shane wasn't trying to impress him or use him. Shane just wanted to play hockey, and live."

Artem thought about that too. About what it meant to keep something just because someone you loved gave it to you.

"I have a pair of gloves," Dimitri said quietly. "Ilya gave them to me seven years ago. They're falling apart now. The leather's cracked, the lining's coming out." He held up his hand,

turning it slightly. "I should throw them away. But I can't. Because throwing them away feels like..." He paused. "Like insulting him. Like saying what he gave me doesn't matter."

Artem felt something shift in his chest. He reached over and took Dimitri's hand, bringing it to his lips and pressing a kiss to his palm.

"He knows," Artem said. "About the gloves. He has to know."

"Maybe." Dimitri's voice was rough. "But I'm not taking the chance."

They sat with that for a while. The waves kept their rhythm. The stars kept their vigil.

"So you're telling me," Artem said eventually, "that you've been loyal to Ilya for twelve years, and you're still worried about insulting him over a pair of gloves."

"Yes."

"That's..." Artem searched for the word. "That's actually really beautiful, Mitya."

Dimitri made a dismissive sound, but his hand tightened around Artem's. "Don't tell anyone. I have a reputation."

"Your secret's safe with me."

. Dimitri's head remained on Artem's shoulder, his hand never leaving Artem's. And Artem understood, in that moment, why Dimitri had followed him out into the night. Why he'd asked the hard questions. Why he'd told him to stay.

Because Dimitri knew what it meant to belong to someone. To choose it. To keep choosing it, even when it was hard.

And he was offering Artem the same choice.

By the time they made it back to the house, they were both covered in sand—in their hair, on their skin, ground into their clothes. Everyone else was still asleep.

Artem caught Dimitri's hand as they slipped inside, then pulled him toward their room with a deliberate wink. "We should probably shower."

Dimitri's mouth curved into a slow smile. "Probably."

Their bathroom was small but private, all pale tile and a generous shower. Artem turned on the water and stepped under the spray, letting the warmth chase away the chill of the early morning. Dimitri followed, and for a moment they just stood there, letting the water rinse the sand away.

Then Dimitri's hands found Artem's shoulders, turning him gently. "Come here."

Artem tilted his head back, and Dimitri's fingers worked through his hair with careful attention, massaging his scalp, working out the sand grain by grain. It was such a simple thing—just washing his hair—but the intimacy of it made Artem's chest tight. Dimitri's touch

was methodical, thorough, almost reverent. He tilted Artem's head back to rinse, his hand cradling the back of his neck, and Artem felt something in him settle.

This was what it meant. This quiet care. This attention.

When Dimitri finished, Artem didn't step back. Instead, he sank to his knees on the shower floor, the tile cool against his skin. Water cascaded over both of them. Dimitri's breath caught as Artem looked up at him, and then Artem leaned forward and took him into his mouth.

Dimitri's hand came to rest on the back of Artem's head, not pushing, just holding. A grounding point. Artem worked slowly, deliberately, tasting him, feeling the weight of him on his tongue. Dimitri's breathing grew ragged, his thighs tensing. Artem hollowed his cheeks and took him deeper, and Dimitri's fingers tightened in his hair.

"Tyoma," Dimitri breathed, and the diminutive—his diminutive, the one Dimitri used only for him—made Artem's own body respond. He continued, steady and sure, until Dimitri's hips began to move, shallow thrusts that Artem welcomed. The water ran over them both, warm and endless.

When Dimitri came, it was with a low groan, his hand gentle even as his body shook. Artem swallowed, then pulled back, resting his forehead against Dimitri's hip for a moment before standing.

Dimitri pulled him close immediately, kissing him hard, tasting himself on Artem's mouth. His hands roamed over Artem's wet skin, possessive and tender all at once.

They dried off in silence, wrapped in towels, and Dimitri led him back to their bedroom. The house was still quiet. The world felt very far away.

Dimitri pressed Artem onto his back on the bed, still damp, still warm from the shower. He kissed his way down Artem's body—his chest, his ribs, the sharp line of his hip. Artem's breath came faster as Dimitri settled between his legs, his mouth finding Artem's cock with purpose.

Artem's hands fisted in the sheets. Dimitri was thorough, attentive, taking his time. He used his tongue with precision, his mouth warm and wet, and Artem felt himself unraveling. There was no rush here, no urgency—just Dimitri's steady attention, his clear intention to draw this out, to make Artem feel every second of it.

"Mitya," Artem gasped, and Dimitri hummed around him, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure through his entire body.

Dimitri's hand wrapped around the base, stroking in rhythm with his mouth, and Artem felt the tension building, coiling tight in his belly. He tried to warn Dimitri, but Dimitri just pressed deeper, taking him further, and Artem came with a muffled sound, his hips jerking up as Dimitri swallowed around him.

When it was over, Dimitri pulled back and crawled up Artem's body, settling against him. Artem's arms came around him immediately, holding him close. They lay tangled together,

still damp.

Shane woke to sunlight streaming through the curtains and Ilya's arm draped across his waist. For a moment, he just lay there, listening to the sound of the ocean through the open window and Ilya's steady breathing against his shoulder. It was peaceful. Quiet. The kind of morning that made him forget, just for a second, that their lives were usually a lot more complicated than this.

Then his stomach growled, and the moment was over.

He slipped out of bed carefully, pulling on a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. Ilya stirred but didn't wake, and Shane left him there, padding barefoot out into the hallway. The house was still mostly quiet—Katerina had slept in Alexei's room last night, since it had two beds, one for Alexei and one for Pavel. That had given Shane and Ilya the privacy they'd needed. He could hear the faint sound of running water from somewhere, probably Artem and Dimitri's room.

The kitchen was empty and bright, sunlight pouring in through the windows that overlooked the terrace. Shane set to work, pulling out eggs and bread and whatever else looked useful. Cooking wasn't exactly his specialty, but he could manage breakfast. Scrambled eggs, toast, some fruit cut up in a bowl. Simple. Functional.

He was halfway through cracking eggs into a bowl when Katerina appeared in the doorway, her hair still messy from sleep, clutching a stuffed rabbit under one arm.

"Morning, kid," Shane said.

She climbed up onto one of the stools at the counter and watched him with sleepy eyes. "You're making breakfast?"

"Looks like it."

"Papa usually makes breakfast."

"Papa's still asleep." Shane whisked the eggs with more force than strictly necessary. "You want toast?"

"Yes, please."

He popped bread into the toaster and poured the eggs into a pan. Katerina swung her legs, watching him work, and Shane found himself relaxing into the rhythm of it. This was fine. This was normal. Just a guy making breakfast for a kid. Nothing complicated about it.

By the time the eggs were done, Alexei had wandered in, followed by Pavel, who looked like he'd been awake for hours already. Dimitri and Artem appeared a few minutes later, both looking suspiciously relaxed and sandy despite the early hour. Shane didn't ask.

"Where's Ilya?" Dimitri asked, stealing a piece of toast off the plate Shane had just set down.

"Still asleep."

"Shocking."

Shane snorted and turned back to the stove. He was plating up the last of the eggs when Ilya finally appeared, hair damp from a shower, wearing a linen shirt that probably cost more than Shane's entire wardrobe. He looked annoyingly good for someone who'd just woken up.

"You cooked," Ilya said, sounding pleased.

"Don't get used to it."

Ilya kissed the side of his head and reached for a plate. "I brought your phone. You left it in the bedroom."

Shane glanced over. Ilya had set his phone on the counter, screen-down. "Thanks."

They ate on the terrace, the morning sun warm on Shane's skin, the sound of the ocean a constant backdrop. Katerina chattered about wanting to go back to the beach, and Dimitri promised they'd go later. Pavel was quiet, nursing a cup of coffee and looking vaguely disapproving of everything, which seemed to be his default state. Alexei made a joke about Artem's hair still being full of sand, and Artem turned red while Dimitri smirked into his coffee.

It was nice. Normal, even. Shane let himself sink into it, into the easy rhythm of breakfast and conversation and Ilya's hand resting on his thigh under the table.

Then his phone buzzed.

Shane ignored it at first, but it buzzed again. And again. He frowned and reached for it, flipping it over.

Three missed calls. Two voicemails.

"Popular this morning," Dimitri observed.

Shane unlocked the phone and pulled up the voicemails. The first one was spam—something about his car's extended warranty, which was hilarious considering he didn't own a car. He deleted it and moved to the second one.

The voice that came through was professional, clipped, American. "Hi, this message is for Shane Hollander. My name is Marcus Friedman, and I'm a sports agent based out of New York. I've been reviewing footage of your games over the past two seasons, and I have to say, I'm impressed. You've got the skill set to go professional, and I've been fielding inquiries from several schools looking to recruit you. I'd love to discuss representation and next steps. Please have your agent reach out to me at your earliest convenience. My number is—"

Shane stopped the voicemail.

He stared at his phone.

"What?" Ilya asked, his voice sharp with concern.

Shane replayed the message, just to make sure he'd heard it right. Then he set the phone down on the table and looked at Ilya. "Some guy says I'm qualified to go pro. Says schools are trying to recruit me."

Ilya's eyebrows went up. "Professional hockey?"

"Yeah." Shane laughed, but it came out weird, disbelieving. "He wants to talk to my agent."

"You have an agent?" Dimitri asked.

"No." Shane shook his head. "I don't—I mean, I love hockey, but I never—" He stopped, trying to organize his thoughts. "I play for fun. I'm not—this doesn't make sense."

Katerina was watching him with wide eyes.

Ilya picked up Shane's phone, his expression thoughtful. "What's his name?"

"Marcus Friedman."

Ilya scrolled through the voicemail, then stood. "I'll call him back."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"I'll call him back," Ilya repeated, already walking back into the house. "As your agent."

"I don't have an agent!"

"You do now," Ilya called over his shoulder.

Shane stared after him, then looked at Dimitri. "Is he serious?"

Dimitri grinned. "Completely."

"I don't—" Shane stood, following Ilya into the house. "Ilya, you can't just—"

But Ilya was already on the phone, his voice smooth and professional in a way that made Shane stop in his tracks. "Yes, hello, this is Ilya Rozanov. I'm calling on behalf of Shane Hollander. You left a message regarding recruitment opportunities?"

Shane leaned against the doorway and listened as Ilya proceeded to have an entire conversation with Marcus Friedman, sounding for all the world like he'd been a sports agent his entire life. He asked about the schools, the timeline, the terms. He took notes on a pad of paper he'd pulled from somewhere. He was calm, authoritative, and completely in control.

Shane felt something strange twist in his chest. Not quite disbelief. Not quite hope. Something in between.

When Ilya finally hung up, he turned to Shane with a satisfied expression. "You have three schools interested. Two in New York, one in Boston. They want to meet with you next

month."

Shane opened his mouth. Closed it. Tried again. "I don't understand."

Ilya crossed the room and cupped Shane's face in his hands. "You're good. You've always been good. Someone finally noticed."

"But I'm not—" Shane shook his head. "I'm just some guy who plays hockey for fun."

"You're more than that." Ilya's voice was firm. "And now you have a chance to prove it."

Shane stared at him, his mind racing. Professional hockey. Schools recruiting him. An actual future doing something he loved.

It didn't feel real.

"What if I'm not good enough?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya smiled. "Then we'll figure it out. But you are."

Shane kissed him, hard and desperate, and Ilya kissed him back just as fiercely. When they broke apart, Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's and tried to catch his breath.

"You're really going to be my agent?"

"Unless you'd prefer someone else."

"No." Shane laughed, shaky and disbelieving. "No, you're—yeah. Okay."

"Good." Ilya kissed him again, softer this time.

Shane grabbed his phone from the counter and stepped out onto the terrace, the morning sun warm on his shoulders. He scrolled through his contacts and found Hayden's number. His best friend answered on the second ring, and Shane could hear a baby crying in the background.

"Dude, hey," Hayden said, slightly breathless. "Give me one second—"

There was a muffled conversation, then Hayden came back. "Sorry, man. Emma's teething. What's up?"

"You got a call from Marcus Friedman?" Shane asked.

"Yeah, like an hour ago. Dude, I'm freaking out. Did you—"

"I got one too," Shane said, and he could hear Hayden's whoop of excitement through the phone.

"No shit! Shane, this is insane. Are we gonna go pro?"

Shane laughed, leaning against the terrace railing. "I don't know if I'm ready for this."

"You're more than ready," Hayden said firmly. "You've been the best player on every team we've ever been on. I'm just riding your coattails, man."

"That's not true," Shane said, but he was smiling. "So what team are you thinking?"

"Jacki's already on it. She got me an agent—some guy she knows from work. He's supposed to call me back today with options. What about you? You got someone?"

"Yeah, actually. Ilya's taking it on."

There was a beat of silence, then Hayden laughed. "Of course he is. Sounds right. That guy doesn't do anything halfway."

"No, he really doesn't," Shane agreed, glancing back through the glass doors where Ilya was still in the kitchen, probably already making calls or taking notes.

"So what team do you want?" Hayden asked.

"The Admirals," Shane said immediately. "I want to stay in New York. Be close to home."

"That's perfect, man. That's actually perfect because I was thinking the same thing. We could actually play together."

Shane felt something warm settle in his chest. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. Jacki would love that too. She's been saying how much she misses having you around." Hayden paused. "Speaking of which—how's everything going with Ilya and the family?"

"Good. Really good, actually." Shane watched Katerina through the window, curled up on the couch with a book. "That's actually what I wanted to tell you. Me and Ilya, we're going to have custody of Katerina. His niece. She's been living with us, and it's just... it's happening."

"That's awesome, man," Hayden said warmly. "Seriously. You're going to be great at that."

"I hope so," Shane said. "But hey, that means your kid can come over and play with her. She'd love that."

"Emma would lose her mind," Hayden laughed. "She's obsessed with older kids. This is going to be so cool, Shane. We're actually doing this."

"Yeah," Shane said, and he could hear the smile in his own voice. "We actually are."

They talked for a few more minutes about logistics and timelines, about Hayden's new baby and how exhausted he was, about the Admirals' roster and what their chances actually looked like. By the time Shane hung up, his hands were shaking slightly—not from fear, but from the sheer reality of it all.

He turned to find Ilya watching him from inside, leaning against the kitchen counter with a knowing smile.

"Hayden's excited?" Ilya asked as Shane came back in.

"Extremely," Shane said. "He got a call too and he wants to play for the Admirals too. Stay in New York."

"Then we'll make sure that happens," Ilya said simply, like it was already decided. Like it was just a matter of logistics.

Shane crossed the kitchen and kissed him, quick and grateful. "Thank you. For all of this."

"You don't have to thank me," Ilya said. "This is what I do. I take care of people I love."

Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's shoulder, letting himself believe it for just a moment. That this was real. That he was going to play professional hockey. That Hayden would be there with him. That Ilya had his back.

That he actually had a future.

By mid-morning, the decision had been made: they were going fishing.

Katerina had complained about the beach being "boring" which was her way of saying she wanted something new. Ilya had simply nodded and made a phone call. Within an hour, plans were set.

Now, in the master bathroom, Shane stood shirtless while Ilya smoothed sunscreen across his shoulders. The lotion was cool against his sun-warmed skin, and Ilya's hands were methodical, thorough—covering every inch of his back, his shoulders, the tops of his arms.

"You're going to burn otherwise," Ilya murmured, his fingers working along Shane's spine.

"I burn anyway," Shane said, but he wasn't complaining. He turned around and Ilya started on his chest, his touch lingering just a moment longer than necessary over Shane's ribs.

In the hallway, Katerina was terrorizing Alexei with a bottle of sunscreen, trying to get him to let her apply it to his face.

"I don't need—" Alexei was saying, but he was already leaning down, letting her squeeze a generous dollop onto her hands.

"You do!"

Pavel emerged from his room already slathered in lotion, his pale skin gleaming. He caught Shane's eye and shrugged—a silent acknowledgment that Katerina had probably bullied him into it too.

Artem was in the kitchen, methodically packing a cooler with water bottles and snacks. He'd changed into swim trunks already, and there was something different about him this morning—a quiet confidence that hadn't been there before. He moved with purpose, checking items off a mental list.

Dimitri appeared in the doorway, already dressed in board shorts and a linen shirt left unbuttoned. He caught sight of Artem and smiled, that soft, private smile he reserved for him.

"Ready?" Ilya asked Shane, stepping back to admire his handiwork.

"As I'll ever be," Shane said, pulling on a t-shirt.

The boat was beautiful—a sleek fishing vessel with a cabin, twin engines, and enough deck space for all of them. Dimitri had arranged it with the kind of efficiency that suggested he'd done this before, probably many times. He moved around the boat with easy familiarity, checking lines, testing the engines, making sure everything was secure.

Ilya stood at the helm with him for a moment, discussing something in low Russian. Then Ilya nodded and stepped back, letting Dimitri take the wheel.

"He's good at this," Shane observed to Artem, who was securing the cooler to the deck.

"He's good at everything," Artem said simply, and there was no jealousy in it—just fact. He glanced back at Dimitri, who was running through a pre-departure checklist with the kind of focus he usually reserved for threat assessment.

The engine rumbled to life, and they pulled away from the dock. Alexei had already claimed a spot in one of the deck chairs with a cold beer, his massive frame relaxed in a way Shane rarely saw. He looked almost peaceful, watching the coastline recede.

Katerina stood at the railing with Pavel, pointing out dolphins in the distance. Pavel was indulging her, nodding along, though his attention kept drifting to the horizon.

Ilya was below deck, checking the fishing equipment. He emerged with an armful of rods and tackle boxes, setting them out with the precision of someone who'd done this before.

"Artem," he called. "Come help me set these up."

Artem moved immediately, and Shane watched as he took one of the rods from Ilya. There was a moment—just a flash—where something shifted in Artem's posture. His shoulders straightened. His hands moved with certainty as he examined the rod, testing the reel, checking the line.

"You've fished before," Ilya said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes, on my family's farm." Artem said quietly. "There was a pond. I used to go there."

Ilya handed him another rod. "Show me what you know."

The boat cut through the water smoothly, Dimitri handling the wheel with the kind of casual competence that came from years of experience. The salt air was sharp and clean, and the sun beat down on the deck with Mediterranean intensity. Shane could feel it on his shoulders, despite the sunscreen, could taste the salt on his lips.

They reached the fishing grounds—a spot Dimitri seemed to know instinctively—and he cut the engines. The boat rocked gently on the swells, and for a moment, there was just the sound of water lapping against the hull.

Ilya handed out the rods. Shane took one, feeling the weight of it, the smooth grip of the handle. Katerina wanted to try, so Shane stood behind her, guiding her hands, showing her how to hold it properly.

But it was Artem who moved to the edge of the boat with a kind of quiet purpose. He cast his line with a smooth, practiced motion—the rod bending, the line singing out, the lure hitting the water with barely a ripple.

"Nice cast," Ilya said, settling into a chair with his own rod.

Artem didn't respond, just began to work the reel with steady, rhythmic movements. There was something meditative about it, something that seemed to center him. His eyes were focused on the water, reading it in a way that suggested he understood something about it that the rest of them didn't.

The first bite came within minutes.

Artem's rod bent sharply, and he set the hook with a quick, practiced jerk of his wrist. The reel screamed as the fish ran, and Artem's entire body went taut with concentration.

"Easy," Dimitri called from the helm, though he was grinning. "Don't horse it."

Artem worked the rod with surprising skill, letting the fish run when it needed to, reeling in when he could. His jaw was set, his breathing steady. This was a different Artem—not the uncertain, careful one who worried about belonging. This was someone who knew exactly what he was doing.

The fish broke the surface—a large sea bass, silver and thrashing—and Artem brought it in with a final, controlled reel. It landed on the deck with a wet slap, and Katerina squealed with delight.

"That's huge!" she said, bouncing on her toes.

Artem was already moving to the next rod, casting again with that same fluid motion. Within the hour, he'd caught three more fish—each one substantial, each one brought in with the same quiet competence.

Shane watched him work, fascinated. There was a version of Artem that existed here, on this boat, with a fishing rod in his hands and the sun on his face. A version that was confident and capable and completely at ease.

Dimitri kept glancing back at him from the helm, and every time he did, there was this soft expression on his face—pride, maybe, or just the simple pleasure of watching someone he loved do something they were good at.

Alexei had moved from his chair to stand beside Artem, beer in hand, offering occasional commentary.

"That's a good one," he said as Artem brought in another fish. "You're a natural."

"I used to fish a lot," Artem said, and there was something almost wistful in his voice. "I forgot how much I liked it."

"Well, you're doing it now," Alexei said simply. "And you're damn good at it."

The boat rocked gently on the swells, and the sun climbed higher in the sky. Shane cast his own line and caught a few smaller fish, nothing compared to Artem's haul. Ilya caught one decent-sized grouper and seemed satisfied with that. Katerina managed to land a small snapper with Pavel's help, and she was so proud of it that they decided to keep it for dinner.

By early afternoon, they had enough fish for a feast. Dimitri turned the boat back toward shore, and the engines rumbled to life. The wind picked up as they moved, salt spray misting across the deck, and Katerina laughed as it caught her face.

Artem stood at the railing, watching the coastline approach. Dimitri had one hand on the wheel, the other reaching out to briefly touch Artem's shoulder as he passed—a small gesture, but it said everything.

Shane caught Ilya's eye across the deck. Ilya was watching the same thing, and there was a small, satisfied smile on his face.

This was what they'd come here for, Shane realized. Not just the beach or the sun or the escape from New York. But this—moments where people could be themselves. Where Artem could be confident and capable. Where Dimitri could relax into competence. Where Alexei could sit with a beer and just exist. Where Katerina could laugh without worry.

Where Shane could believe in his future.

The boat cut through the water, carrying them all back to shore.

Dimitri brought the boat in with practiced ease, cutting the engines as they approached the shallows. The water was clear enough to see the sandy bottom, and he maneuvered the vessel with the kind of precision that made it look effortless. He dropped anchor in waist-deep water, then turned to help everyone off.

"Careful," he said to Katerina, steadying her as she climbed down the ladder. "Don't slip."

She was covered in salt spray and sunscreen, her hair matted to her head, grinning like she'd conquered the world. Pavel helped her the rest of the way, and she waded toward shore with the determination of someone who'd just caught her first fish.

Shane jumped in after her, the water cool against his salt-crusted skin. Artem was already swimming, moving with that same quiet competence he'd shown with the fishing rod. Alexei followed, his massive frame creating a small wake as he moved through the water.

Ilya waited for Dimitri to secure the boat, then they both swam in together, side by side.

By the time they reached the house, everyone was dripping and sandy, leaving trails of salt water across the terrace. Katerina was shivering despite the heat, her lips tinged slightly blue from the cold water and the adrenaline crash.

"Bath," Ilya said simply, already moving toward the stairs. "Come on, Katya."

She followed him without argument, which told Shane everything about how tired she was. The day on the water had worn her out in the best way.

Shane stood in the kitchen with Pavel and Alexei, watching as they began to clean the fish. It was methodical work—scaling, gutting, filleting—and Pavel moved through it with the efficiency of someone who'd done it a thousand times. Alexei worked beside him, his massive hands surprisingly deft with the knife.

Upstairs, he could hear water running. Then Ilya's voice, low and patient, talking Katerina through getting into the tub.

"The water's warm, see? Not too hot. Just right."

There was a splash, and then Katerina's voice, lighter now, less tired. "Can you wash my hair?"

"Of course."

Shane found himself smiling. There was something about watching Ilya with Katerina that made his chest feel tight in a good way. The man who'd stepped into his life like a force of nature, who managed bratva business and hockey agents and entire households—that same man was upstairs gently washing salt out of his niece's hair.

"He's good with her," Alexei observed, not looking up from the fish he was filleting.

"Yeah," Shane said. "He is."

Twenty minutes later, Katerina emerged from upstairs in clean clothes, her hair damp and combed, wrapped in a towel like a burrito. She was yawning, her eyes already half-closed.

Ilya came down behind her, his own hair wet, his shirt clinging to his chest. He caught Shane's eye and jerked his head toward the stairs—a clear signal.

"Alexei," Ilya said, "cartoons?"

Alexei was already moving toward the living room, gesturing for Katerina to follow. "Come on, princess. Let's see what's on."

She padded after him, still wrapped in her towel, and within seconds they could hear the opening theme of some animated show blaring from the television. Alexei settled into the couch with her tucked against his side, his massive frame making her look impossibly small.

Ilya didn't waste time. He grabbed Shane's hand and pulled him toward the stairs.

The familiar small shower was barely big enough for two people, but they'd learned its rhythm over the past week. The water came out hot and fast, and Shane stepped under it with a groan of relief. Salt crusted his skin, his hair, even his eyelashes. The warm water dissolved it all, turning the runoff cloudy.

Ilya stepped in behind him, and the space became impossibly intimate—their bodies nearly touching in the confined space, steam rising around them.

"Here," Ilya said, and his hands were already in Shane's hair, working shampoo through it with efficient, practiced movements. His fingers massaged Shane's scalp, and Shane let his head fall back, trusting Ilya to keep him steady under the spray.

The water rinsed the soap away, and Ilya's hands moved to Shane's shoulders, his back, washing away the salt and sand with quick, purposeful strokes. There was no time for lingering—they both knew that—but there was tenderness in it anyway. Care in the way Ilya's hands moved, in the way he made sure every inch of Shane was clean.

Shane turned around, and Ilya was already reaching for the soap. Shane took it from him, returning the favor, his hands moving over Ilya's chest, his shoulders, the defined lines of his abdomen. Ilya's breath hitched slightly as Shane's hands moved lower, but he caught Shane's wrist gently.

"Not enough time," he said, and there was regret in his voice.

"I know," Shane said, but he leaned in anyway, kissing Ilya under the spray. The water was warm between them, and Ilya's hands came up to cup Shane's face, the kiss deep and thorough despite the time constraint.

When they broke apart, both breathing harder, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's.

"Later," he promised. "When she's asleep."

"Yeah," Shane said. "Later."

They finished rinsing quickly, efficiently, but Ilya's hand stayed on the small of Shane's back as they moved, a constant point of contact. When they stepped out of the shower, Ilya wrapped a towel around Shane's waist, then grabbed one for himself.

Downstairs, they could still hear the cartoon theme song playing, and Alexei's low voice saying something to Katerina that made her giggle.

This was their life now. Stolen moments under the shower spray. Quick kisses between responsibilities. The knowledge that later, when Katerina was asleep, they'd have time to be thorough.

Shane dried off and pulled on clean clothes, and Ilya did the same. By the time they made it back downstairs, they looked like they'd simply showered off the salt and sand—which, technically, they had.

Alexei glanced up from the couch, where Katerina sat beside him in her pajamas, wide awake and focused on the television. The sun was going down outside, casting long shadows through the windows. He gave Ilya a small nod—everything's fine, she's handled—and turned back to the cartoon.

Ilya caught Shane's hand as they passed, squeezing it once. A promise. A reminder.

The front door burst open with enough force that Katerina jumped.

"I have returned," Dimitri announced, "with enough pasta to feed a small army. Possibly a large army. I'm not entirely sure anymore."

He was carrying three massive bags, and behind him came Pavel with two more. The smell hit them first—garlic, tomato sauce, fresh bread, something rich and savory that made Shane's stomach growl audibly.

"Jesus," Shane muttered.

"I went to this place," Dimitri continued, setting bags down on the kitchen counter with the reverence of a man delivering treasure, "and I asked the owner what was good. She looked at me like I'd asked her to choose between her children. So I said, 'Give me everything.' And she did. Look at this."

He pulled out container after container. Lasagna in a deep pan, still steaming. Rigatoni in a massive bowl, the sauce coating every piece. Alfredo so creamy it looked like it might be illegal. Pans of bread—garlic bread, rosemary bread, plain bread for soaking up sauce. And meatballs. So many meatballs, in their own sauce, in a pan that could have doubled as a weapon.

"There's more," Pavel said, pulling out salad, wine, dessert. "He kept adding things."

"She kept adding things," Dimitri corrected, already pulling plates from the cabinet.

Ilya was already moving, grabbing plates and utensils. "Everyone. Eat. Now."

They didn't need to be told twice.

Within minutes, they'd arranged themselves around the living room—Katerina still on the couch with Alexei, but now with a plate balanced on her lap. Shane sat on the arm of the couch, Ilya beside him on a chair they'd pulled over. Dimitri and Pavel took the floor, backs against the coffee table, completely unbothered by the informality.

The pasta was incredible. The kind of food that made you stop talking for a moment just to appreciate it. Shane loaded his plate with lasagna and rigatoni, added meatballs, grabbed bread. Around him, everyone else was doing the same.

"This is insane," Shane said through a mouthful of lasagna. "Where did you find this place?"

"Down by the harbor," Dimitri said. "I asked a fisherman. He knew."

Katerina was eating methodically, her small fork working through the rigatoni with concentration. She'd abandoned her cartoon focus in favor of food, which seemed like a reasonable trade-off.

They ate in comfortable silence for a few minutes, the only sounds the clink of forks, the occasional satisfied grunt, the low murmur of the television still playing in the background.

Then Katerina looked up. "Can we watch hockey?" she asked, her eyes moving between Ilya and Shane. "Please?"

Ilya glanced at Shane, who shrugged. Why not?

"Sure, love," Ilya said, reaching for the remote. He scrolled through, found a game from yesterday—some match between teams Shane didn't immediately recognize. He pulled it up, and the screen filled with the rink, players warming up.

They settled back into eating and watching. The game started slow, methodical. Players moving across the ice with practiced precision. Shane found himself narrating a bit, pointing out positioning, explaining plays to Katerina, who watched with the intense focus of someone trying to understand a new world.

And then, about halfway through the second period, it happened.

Two players collided hard near the boards. Words were exchanged. Then suddenly they were dropping their gloves, and the fight erupted—fists flying, bodies slamming, the crowd roaring through the television speakers.

It was brutal. Fast. The kind of violence that looked worse on screen than it probably was in person.

Katerina's fork stopped moving.

She turned to look at Shane, her small face creased with worry. "Oh no," she said quietly. "Will that happen to Shane too when he plays?"

"No," Ilya said immediately, his voice calm and certain. "Shane can take care of himself."

But Katerina didn't look convinced. She set her plate down on the coffee table and crawled across the couch toward Shane, her small body fitting against his chest as she wrapped her arms around him.

"Play safe, please," she said into his shirt, her voice small and serious. "Okay? Promise?"

Shane's chest tightened. He wrapped his arms around her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head.

"Of course I will," he said softly. "I promise, Katerina. I'll be careful."

She held on for a moment longer, then pulled back just enough to look at his face, searching it like she could verify the truth of his words by looking hard enough.

"Okay," she said finally, and settled back against him, her small body relaxed now.

On the screen, the fight had ended. The players were being led to the penalty box. The game continued.

But Shane kept his arm around Katerina, and she stayed pressed against his side.

Ilya caught Shane's eye across the room, and there was something soft in his expression.

Shane squeezed Katerina gently and turned his attention back to the game, but his focus was really on the small girl in his arms, finally relaxed, finally believing he'd be okay.

Chapter 31: Yellow Dress

The next morning, Shane found Artem and Ilya on the terrace, coffee cups in hand, speaking in low Russian. He was about to turn away when Artem switched to English.

"I want to come to New York," Artem said, his voice steady but careful. "To work for you. If you'll have me."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, then smiled—something genuine and warm. "Of course. I'll take care of everything. Visa, apartment, whatever you need."

"I can—"

"I'll take care of it," Ilya repeated, firm but not unkind.

Artem nodded, something like relief crossing his face. "Thank you."

Shane backed away quietly, leaving them to it. But he felt something settle in his chest—something good. The idea of Artem in New York, close by, part of their strange little constellation of people. It felt right.

The Greece trip was winding down.

They had three days left, and everyone seemed to feel it—the way time was slipping through their fingers like sand. Katerina had grown more clingy, as if she sensed the change coming. Alexei had stopped complaining about the heat. Even Dimitri seemed quieter, more thoughtful.

But tonight, Ilya had made plans.

"Just us," he'd said that morning, his hand on Shane's hip as they stood in the kitchen. "Dinner. Somewhere nice."

Shane had raised an eyebrow. "A date?"

"A date," Ilya confirmed, kissing him briefly. "Wear something that makes you look even more unfairly attractive than usual."

So Shane did.

He pulled on dark slacks, a white button-down that fit well across his shoulders, left the top button undone. Ran a hand through his hair and decided it was good enough. When he came downstairs, Ilya was waiting—dressed in a charcoal suit that should have been illegal, his hair swept back, looking like he'd stepped out of some European fashion magazine.

"Fuck," Shane said eloquently.

Ilya's mouth curved. "Likewise."

They took one of the cars, drove into town as the sun set over the water, painting everything gold and pink. The restaurant Ilya had chosen was tucked into a narrow street, all white stone and ivy, with tables set on a terrace overlooking the harbor. Candles flickered in glass holders. The air smelled like salt and jasmine.

They were seated at a corner table, private and intimate. A waiter brought wine, menus, disappeared with practiced discretion.

Shane looked across the table at Ilya, who was watching him with that particular intensity he sometimes got—like Shane was the only thing in the world worth paying attention to.

"This is nice," Shane said.

"It is," Ilya agreed. He reached across the table, his fingers brushing Shane's. "You deserve nice things."

Shane felt his face heat. "You're ridiculous."

"Accurate."

They ordered—something with seafood, something with lamb, more wine. The food was incredible, but Shane barely tasted it. He was too focused on Ilya, on the way the candlelight caught in his eyes, the way his voice dropped lower when they were alone like this.

Halfway through the meal, Shane set down his fork.

"Can I ask you something?"

Ilya's expression shifted slightly, attentive. "Always."

"Victor," Shane said. "What happened to him?"

Ilya didn't flinch. He took a sip of wine, set the glass down carefully. "He's alive," he said evenly. "Missing a few fingers. Won't be causing any more trouble."

Shane absorbed that. "Oh," he said. "Okay."

Ilya watched him, waiting.

Shane picked up his fork again, then set it back down. "When I get back," he said, "I want to take a class on guns. Get a permit to carry."

Ilya's expression didn't change, but something flickered in his eyes—approval, maybe. Relief. "Good," he said simply. "I'll help you find the best instructor. Someone who'll teach you properly."

"You're not going to tell me I don't need to?"

"Why would I?" Ilya leaned forward slightly. "You should know how to protect yourself. I'd feel better knowing you could."

Shane nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Okay," Ilya echoed, and his hand found Shane's again across the table, squeezing gently.

They finished dinner in comfortable quiet, the kind that didn't need filling. When they finally left, the night had settled in fully—warm and dark, the streets lit by old-fashioned lamps that cast everything in soft gold.

They walked without direction, just moving through the narrow streets, past shops and cafes, the occasional burst of laughter from open doorways. Ilya's hand found the small of Shane's back, a casual touch that felt like an anchor.

They turned a corner and found themselves in front of a high-end boutique—the kind of place with a single mannequin in the window wearing something that probably cost more than Shane's first car.

Ilya stopped. "Let's go in."

Shane looked at him. "Why?"

"Because I want to."

Before Shane could protest, Ilya was already pushing open the door. A small bell chimed. Inside, the store was all clean lines and soft lighting, racks of clothes that looked more like art than something you'd actually wear.

A woman approached, smiling. "Good evening. Can I help you find something?"

"Just browsing," Ilya said smoothly, already moving toward a display.

Shane followed, hands in his pockets, feeling vaguely out of place. He watched Ilya move through the racks with the ease of someone who'd done this a thousand times, fingers brushing over fabric, assessing.

Then Ilya stopped. Pulled out a shirt—soft cotton, baby blue, simple but clearly expensive.

He held it up, looked at Shane, then back at the shirt. "This," he said. "I'm getting you this."

Shane blinked. "What? No."

"Yes."

"Ilya, I don't need—"

"I'm not asking," Ilya said, already heading toward the counter. "It's baby blue. It'll look good on you. I'm buying it."

Shane followed, exasperated. "You can't just—"

"I can," Ilya said, handing the shirt to the woman behind the counter. "And I am."

Shane rolled his eyes but didn't argue further. There was no point. When Ilya decided something, that was it.

While Ilya handled the transaction, Shane wandered toward another section of the store—smaller clothes, children's section. His eyes caught on a dress, pale yellow with small white flowers embroidered along the hem. It was delicate, sweet. The kind of thing Katerina would love.

He picked it up, checked the size, then carried it to the counter.

Ilya glanced over, saw the dress, and something in his expression shifted—went soft in a way that made Shane's chest tighten.

"For Katerina?" Ilya asked quietly.

"Yeah," Shane said, pulling out his wallet. "She'd like it."

The woman rang it up. Shane paid, took the bag, and when he looked up, Ilya was staring at him with an expression Shane couldn't quite name. Something warm and devastating.

"What?" Shane asked.

Ilya shook his head slightly, still looking at him like that. "Nothing."

"That's not nothing. You're giving me a look."

"You bought her a dress," Ilya said simply.

Shane shrugged, feeling his face heat. "So? We've basically adopted her."

Ilya's smile was slow, genuine, the kind that reached his eyes. "We have," he agreed softly.

They left the store together, bags in hand, and walked back toward the car. Ilya's hand found Shane's, their fingers lacing together in the warm night air.

The villa was quiet when they returned, the kind of peaceful quiet that meant everyone had settled in for the evening. They stepped inside, and Shane immediately heard it—the soft murmur of a children's movie, animated voices and gentle music drifting from the living room.

They found Alexei and Katerina on the couch, the older man's arm around the girl's shoulders as she leaned against him, completely absorbed in the screen. Katerina's feet were tucked up beneath her, and she had a blanket pulled over her lap. Alexei glanced over as they entered, gave them a small nod of acknowledgment before turning his attention back to the movie.

Ilya caught Shane's eye, then quietly slipped away toward the hallway, the bag with the yellow dress in hand. Shane watched as he disappeared into one of the back rooms, presumably to hide it somewhere safe for tomorrow.

Shane moved toward the couch. Katerina noticed him first, her face brightening.

"Shane!" she said, wiggling slightly. "Come watch with us. It's about a princess who has to save her kingdom."

"Sounds important," Shane said, settling onto the couch beside her. She immediately shifted, tucking herself against his side the way she had with Alexei, creating a warm sandwich of bodies.

Alexei gave Shane an approving look, then returned to the movie without comment. There was something comfortable about it—the way Alexei had simply made room, the way Katerina had accepted Shane's presence without question, as if this was exactly how things should be.

On screen, the animated princess was rallying her friends for battle. Katerina watched with rapt attention, occasionally glancing up at Shane or Alexei as if to make sure they were still there, still watching with her.

Ilya returned a few minutes later, the bag gone. He paused in the doorway, taking in the scene—the three of them on the couch, Katerina nestled between two men who'd become her family, the soft glow of the television illuminating their faces.

He smiled, quiet and private, and moved to join them. He settled on the arm of the couch behind Shane, his hand dropping to rest on Shane's shoulder. A casual touch, but it felt like everything.

"What did I miss?" Ilya asked softly.

"The princess is gathering her army," Katerina informed him seriously. "She's very brave."

"I can see that," Ilya said, and his fingers squeezed gently at Shane's shoulder.

They sat like that as the movie played on—four people who'd found each other in the most unlikely of ways, now bound together in this quiet, domestic moment. The kind of moment that didn't need words, that didn't need anything but presence.

Shane felt Katerina's weight against him, warm and trusting. Felt Ilya's hand on his shoulder, steady and sure. Felt Alexei's quiet acceptance of it all.

The ocean at night was different. Artem had never been able to quite explain it to anyone, but standing here with Dimitri, a blanket spread across the sand and the stars scattered above them like someone had carelessly spilled diamonds across black velvet, he thought maybe he didn't need to explain it. Maybe Dimitri already understood.

They'd set up their picnic away from the villa, far enough that the lights didn't reach them, close enough that the sound of the waves was a constant, soothing rhythm beneath everything else. Dimitri had insisted on making the pizza himself—something with fresh spinach and ricotta and herbs.

Artem reached for another slice, the cheese still warm, and brought it to his mouth. He closed his eyes as he bit into it, savoring the combination of flavors. It was perfect. Everything Dimitri made was perfect.

"Why do you like the ocean so much at night?" Dimitri asked, his voice soft in the darkness. He was lying back on the blanket, propped up on his elbows, looking at Artem with that expression that made Artem's chest feel too tight.

Artem shrugged, still chewing. He swallowed before answering. "It's relaxing," he said simply. "Being out here with no one but us. Just... quiet. Just this."

He gestured vaguely at the ocean, the stars, the space between them that felt both infinite and impossibly small.

Dimitri smiled, that soft, private smile that Artem had learned meant he was thinking something tender. "I worried you wouldn't like the spinach," Dimitri admitted, reaching for his own slice. "I wasn't sure if it was too much."

Artem laughed, a genuine sound that surprised even himself. "Of course I like it. I like anything you make, Mitya."

It was true. Artem couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten something Dimitri prepared that he didn't love. It wasn't just about the food—though Dimitri was genuinely talented in the kitchen. It was about the care that went into it, the attention, the way Dimitri thought about what Artem might enjoy and then made it happen.

He reached over and squeezed Dimitri's arm, just needing to touch him, to ground himself in this moment. The night air was cool against his skin, carrying the salt of the sea. Above them, the stars seemed to pulse with their own light, indifferent and eternal.

"Thank you," Artem said quietly. "For this. For all of it."

Dimitri's hand found his in the darkness, their fingers intertwining naturally, as if they'd been doing this forever. Maybe they had, in some way that didn't require time to measure.

"Of course," Dimitri said. "For you, always."

They finished eating in comfortable silence, the remnants of pizza scattered across the box between them. Artem was still holding Dimitri's hand when Dimitri leaned over and kissed him—soft at first, tentative, as if asking permission even though they both knew the answer.

Artem answered by deepening the kiss, his free hand coming up to cup Dimitri's jaw. The taste of him was familiar now, pizza and wine and something uniquely Dimitri that Artem had become addicted to. He pulled Dimitri closer, and Dimitri came willingly, shifting on the blanket until he was nearly straddling Artem's lap.

The kiss grew more urgent, more desperate. Artem's hands roamed across Dimitri's back, feeling the warmth of him through the thin fabric of his shirt. Dimitri's fingers tangled in Artem's hair, tugging gently, and Artem groaned into his mouth.

They rolled across the blanket, a tangle of limbs and seeking hands. Artem ended up on his back with Dimitri above him, and he could feel the weight of him, solid and real and exactly where Artem needed him to be. The stars wheeled overhead, indifferent witnesses to what was happening between them.

Dimitri's hand slid down Artem's chest, fingers splaying across his ribs, and then lower still. Artem's breath caught as Dimitri's palm pressed against the growing hardness in his pants. He thrust up into the touch, needing more, needing everything.

"Mitya," he breathed against Dimitri's neck, tasting salt and skin.

Dimitri's hand worked at the button of Artem's pants, freeing him with practiced efficiency. Artem's cock sprang free, already hard and aching, and Dimitri wrapped his hand around it, stroking slowly. Artem's hips bucked up into the touch, a low sound escaping his throat.

Dimitri pulled back just enough to reach for the candle they'd lit earlier, the one that had been casting dancing shadows across their faces all evening. He blew it out gently, and they were plunged into darkness—nothing but starlight and the sound of the ocean and their own ragged breathing.

In the darkness, Artem felt Dimitri shift, felt him move down his body. He understood what was about to happen a moment before it did, and anticipation coiled tight in his belly.

Then Dimitri's mouth was on him, warm and wet and perfect. Artem's back arched off the blanket, his hands finding Dimitri's shoulders, needing something to hold onto as sensation overwhelmed him. Dimitri took him deeper, his throat relaxing to accommodate Artem's length, and Artem had to bite down on his own lip to keep from crying out.

"God, Mitya," he gasped, his fingers threading through Dimitri's hair. "You're—fuck, you're perfect."

Dimitri hummed around him, the vibration sending a jolt of pleasure up Artem's spine. He began to move, his head bobbing with a rhythm that was both deliberate and passionate, his hand working the base of Artem's cock in tandem with his mouth. His other hand rested on Artem's hip, holding him steady even as Artem's hips thrust upward, chasing the friction.

The ocean crashed against the shore in the distance, a steady percussion beneath the sound of Dimitri's breathing through his nose, the wet sounds of his mouth working Artem's cock. It was obscene and beautiful and intimate in a way that made Artem's chest ache even as his body burned with pleasure.

Dimitri pulled back slightly, his tongue tracing the sensitive underside of Artem's cock, and Artem felt the tension building at the base of his spine, coiling tighter and tighter. He was close, so close, and he wanted to warn Dimitri but he couldn't seem to form words, couldn't do anything but feel.

"I'm going to—" he managed, his voice rough and broken.

Dimitri didn't pull away. Instead, he took Artem deeper, his throat working around him, and that was all it took. Artem came with a strangled sound, his hips thrusting up as pleasure crashed through him in waves. Dimitri swallowed around him, his hand still stroking, drawing out every last bit of sensation until Artem was trembling and oversensitive and completely undone.

When Dimitri finally pulled back, he moved up Artem's body and kissed him again, slow and tender. Artem could taste himself on Dimitri's lips, and instead of being strange, it felt intimate, felt like a promise.

But Artem wasn't done. He pushed gently at Dimitri's shoulder, reversing their positions until Dimitri was on his back and Artem was hovering over him, eyes dark with want. Dimitri's breath came faster, anticipation written across his face.

"Your turn," Artem murmured, and then he was kissing his way down Dimitri's chest, his stomach, leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses across warm skin. He made quick work of Dimitri's pants, freeing his cock with the same efficiency Dimitri had shown him.

Dimitri was already hard, already trembling, and Artem took a moment to appreciate the sight of him—flushed and wanting and completely his in this moment. Then Artem lowered his head and took Dimitri into his mouth.

Dimitri's hips jerked up involuntarily, a gasp torn from his throat. His hand found Artem's hair, fingers threading through it, not pulling but holding on like Artem was an anchor in a storm. Artem worked him with his mouth and hand, finding a rhythm that made Dimitri's breathing ragged and broken.

"Tyoma," Dimitri gasped, the diminutive falling from his lips like a prayer. "God, Tyoma, you're—"

Artem hummed around him, the vibration making Dimitri's entire body go rigid. He was already close, Artem realized with a surge of satisfaction. The intimacy of it, the fact that Artem could undo him so quickly, made something fierce and possessive bloom in Artem's chest.

"I'm going to—Tyoma, I can't—" Dimitri's words dissolved into incoherence as his hips thrust upward, chasing the friction. His hand tightened in Artem's hair, and then he was coming, his cock pulsing in Artem's mouth as he spilled with a broken cry of Artem's name.

Artem swallowed, drawing out every last sensation, until Dimitri was shaking and gasping and completely undone. Only then did Artem pull back, moving up to kiss Dimitri again, slow and deep and full of everything he felt but couldn't quite put into words.

They lay tangled together for a long moment, breathing hard, hearts still racing. The ocean continued its eternal song beside them, and the stars wheeled overhead, indifferent to the magnitude of what had just passed between them.

Then Artem's stomach growled—loud and unmistakable in the quiet night.

Dimitri froze for a second, and then he laughed, a real, genuine laugh that echoed across the beach. "Half a pizza isn't enough?" he asked, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Artem felt heat rise to his cheeks. "I guess not," he admitted sheepishly.

They got dressed slowly, reluctantly, as if leaving this moment meant breaking some kind of spell. But eventually they were presentable again, and they made their way back toward the villa, hands intertwined.

When they stepped inside, they found Katerina curled up between Shane and Alexei on the couch, all three of them absorbed in an animated princess movie. Pavel sat in an armchair nearby, equally engrossed. The scene was so perfectly domestic, so perfectly *them*, that Artem felt something warm settle in his chest.

"Ah, perfect timing," Dimitri said, already heading toward the kitchen. "I'm making more pizza."

Pavel's head snapped up immediately, and he gave an enthusiastic fist pump. "Yes! The one you made earlier was so good, Dimitri. I'm in."

Dimitri smiled, that soft, affectionate smile he reserved for moments like this—when his family was gathered, when he could take care of them in the ways that mattered. He caught Artem's eye across the room, and in that glance was everything: the passion of moments before, the tenderness of now, the promise of all the moments yet to come.

Artem squeezed Dimitri's hand before letting go, watching as he disappeared into the kitchen. On the couch, Katerina was pointing at the screen, explaining something to Shane with the seriousness only a child could muster. Alexei was listening intently, and Shane was smiling that soft smile he got when he was with people he loved.

Shane watched the princess on screen defeat the villain with the help of her friends, the triumphant music swelling as the credits began to roll. Katerina yawned beside him, rubbing her eyes with small fists.

"Tired, *malyshka*?" Alexei asked softly, brushing a strand of hair from her face.

Katerina nodded, then looked up at him with those big, trusting eyes. "Can I sleep with Papa tonight?"

"Of course," Alexei said without hesitation, his voice warm. He stood, scooping her up easily. She wrapped her arms around his neck, already half-asleep against his shoulder.

Shane caught Ilya's eye across the room. There was a flicker of heat there, a silent question, and Shane felt his pulse quicken in response. They'd been surrounded by family all evening—warm and perfect and exactly what Shane wanted—but now...

Now they could have a moment just for them.

Ilya stood, stretching casually. "We're heading to bed too," he announced to no one in particular. Pavel waved absently from the kitchen where he was already devouring a slice of Dimitri's fresh pizza.

They made it to their room, and Ilya locked the door behind them with a soft *click* that sent anticipation racing down Shane's spine. Ilya turned on the TV—some late-night talk show providing a low hum of background noise—and then his hands were on Shane, pulling him close.

"Shower first," Ilya murmured against Shane's ear, and Shane nodded, already breathless.

The shower was quick—too quick, really, with Ilya's hands sliding over wet skin, making Shane's knees weak. But Ilya didn't let him linger, didn't let him chase the pleasure building low in his belly. Just cleaned them both efficiently and then turned off the water, leaving Shane aching and wanting.

Back in the bedroom, Ilya guided Shane to the bed, laying him out on his back. The sheets were cool against Shane's heated skin, and he shivered—not from cold, but from the way Ilya was looking at him. Like Shane was something precious. Something to be savored.

"Ilya," Shane breathed, reaching for him.

But Ilya caught his wrists, pinning them gently above Shane's head. "Not yet," he said, his voice a low rumble. "I want to take my time with you."

And he did.

Ilya's mouth traced a path down Shane's throat, teeth grazing sensitive skin. His free hand explored—fingers ghosting over Shane's chest, circling a nipple until Shane arched into the touch with a gasp. Then lower, skimming over his stomach, his hip, everywhere except where Shane needed him most.

"Please," Shane whispered, his cock already hard and leaking against his stomach.

Ilya hummed, the sound vibrating against Shane's collarbone. "Not yet."

It went on like that—Ilya's hands and mouth driving Shane to the edge again and again, only to pull back just before he could fall over. Shane's breath came in ragged gasps, his body trembling with need. Ilya would wrap his hand around Shane's cock, stroking slowly, deliberately, until Shane was whimpering and thrusting into his grip—and then he'd stop, letting Shane's orgasm recede like a tide pulling back from shore.

Shane bit his lip hard, trying to muffle the desperate sounds threatening to escape. The TV provided a steady stream of white noise, but he was still acutely aware of the others just down the hall.

"Ilya, *please*," Shane begged, his voice breaking into a whisper. "I need—I can't—"

"You can," Ilya said, his thumb brushing over the head of Shane's cock, smearing precome. Then, softer: "Shh. You're doing so well for me."

Tears pricked at the corners of Shane's eyes, frustration and desperation mixing into something overwhelming. His entire body felt like a live wire, every nerve ending screaming for release. He was so hard it hurt, his cock flushed and throbbing, and still Ilya wouldn't let him come.

"Please," Shane sobbed quietly, the word barely coherent. He turned his face into the pillow, muffling the sound. "Please, Ilya, I need you—I need—"

Ilya's expression softened, and he leaned down to kiss Shane deeply, swallowing his desperate sounds. "I've got you," he murmured against Shane's lips. "I've got you."

Finally—*finally*—Ilya reached for the lube on the nightstand, slicking his fingers with deliberate slowness. Shane watched through tear-blurred eyes, his hips shifting restlessly against the sheets.

"Please," he whispered again, barely audible.

Ilya's slick fingers traced down, circling Shane's hole without pressing inside. Just circling, teasing, the touch feather-light and maddening. Shane tried to push back against them, desperate for more, but Ilya's other hand pressed firm against his hip, holding him still.

"Beg me properly, *solnyshko*," Ilya said, his voice dark velvet. "Quietly."

"Please," Shane gasped, keeping his voice low. "Please, Ilya, I need—need your fingers inside me, please—"

Ilya pressed one finger inside, slow and careful, and Shane's entire body shuddered. But instead of working him open, Ilya crooked his finger, finding Shane's prostate with unerring accuracy. He rubbed against it, firm and relentless, and Shane's mouth opened in a silent cry, his cock jerking against his stomach. He bit down on his knuckles to keep from making noise.

"That's it," Ilya murmured. "So beautiful like this."

The pleasure built fast—too fast—Shane's orgasm rushing toward him like a freight train. His thighs trembled, his breath coming in desperate pants, and just as he was about to tip over the edge—

Ilya stopped. Pulled his finger out completely.

"No," Shane sobbed into the pillow, his body clenching around nothing. "Please, please don't stop—"

"Not yet," Ilya said, maddeningly calm. "Quiet, *solnyshko*." He added more lube, then pressed two fingers inside this time, stretching Shane slowly. The burn was perfect, but Ilya didn't move—just held his fingers still, buried deep, while Shane writhed beneath him.

"Ilya, *please*—" Shane's voice broke, and he buried his face in the pillow again, muffling his whimpers.

Finally, Ilya began to move, fucking Shane slowly with his fingers, curling them to hit his prostate with every thrust. Shane's vision whited out, pleasure so intense it was almost painful after so much denial. He was making sounds he didn't recognize—broken, desperate noises that would have embarrassed him if he had any coherent thought left. His teeth sank into the pillow, trying desperately to stay quiet.

"Look at you," Ilya said, his voice rough with arousal. "So desperate. So perfect."

Shane was close again, his cock leaking steadily, his body tightening around Ilya's fingers. "Please," he begged, the word muffled. "Please let me come, I need—"

Ilya stopped again.

Shane actually sobbed this time, tears spilling down his temples. His entire body was shaking, oversensitive and aching, and he couldn't take anymore. He couldn't—

"One more," Ilya said, adding a third finger. The stretch was intense, but Shane was so desperate he barely felt it. Ilya worked him open with maddening thoroughness, his fingers moving faster now, hitting Shane's prostate over and over until Shane was incoherent, babbling pleas and Ilya's name into the pillow.

A particularly loud whimper escaped, and Ilya's free hand came up to cover Shane's mouth gently. "Shh," he murmured. "I know. I know, *solnyshko*. But you need to be quiet for me."

Shane nodded frantically against Ilya's palm, his sounds muffled now as Ilya continued to finger-fuck him relentlessly.

"That's it," Ilya murmured. "Let me hear you—but quietly."

Shane was right there, balanced on the knife's edge of orgasm, his body pulled taut as a bowstring—

And Ilya stopped one more time.

"*Please*," Shane sobbed against Ilya's hand, his voice wrecked and muffled. "Please, I need you inside me—need your cock—I can't—please, Ilya, *please*—"

Ilya positioned himself, the head of his cock pressing against Shane's entrance, and then he pushed inside in one smooth thrust. Shane's back arched off the bed, and Ilya's hand pressed firmer over his mouth, swallowing the cry that tried to escape. The sensation was so intense after an hour of denial that it bordered on too much.

But it wasn't too much. It was perfect.

Ilya set a steady rhythm, deep and relentless, and Shane could only hold on, his hands fisting in the sheets. Every thrust hit that spot inside him that made stars burst behind his eyelids, and Shane felt his orgasm building again—faster this time, inevitable. Muffled whimpers and gasps escaped against Ilya's palm with each thrust.

"Ilya," he gasped when Ilya moved his hand, his voice wrecked and barely a whisper. "I'm going to—"

"Come for me," Ilya commanded, his voice rough with his own need. He leaned down, covering Shane's mouth with his own. "Let go, *solnyshko*."

And Shane did.

His orgasm tore through him like a wildfire, his cock pulsing untouched as he came hard, spilling across his stomach. He cried out into Ilya's mouth, the sound swallowed by the kiss, his body clenching around Ilya's cock. Distantly he felt Ilya follow him over the edge, burying himself deep as he came with a low groan muffled against Shane's lips.

They stayed like that for a long moment, both of them trembling and spent. Then Ilya pulled out carefully and collapsed beside Shane, pulling him close. Shane buried his face in Ilya's chest, his breath still coming in shaky gasps.

They lay tangled together for a while, the TV still playing softly in the background, their breathing gradually evening out. Shane's muscles felt like liquid, his mind pleasantly fuzzy and content. He traced lazy patterns across Ilya's chest, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat beneath his fingertips.

"We should get something for Hayden's baby," Shane said softly, his voice still a little rough.

Ilya was quiet for a moment, and then he laughed—a genuine, surprised laugh that rumbled through his chest. "That's what you're thinking about right now?"

Shane felt heat creep up his neck, but he was grinning. "What? It's a nice gift idea."

"*Solnyshko*," Ilya said, amusement coloring his voice, "we just—and you're thinking about baby gifts? That's the strangest pillow talk I've ever heard."

"It's not pillow talk, it's just—" Shane lifted his head to look at Ilya, catching the playful glint in his eyes. He couldn't help but grin wider. "Okay, fine. It's weird. But I was thinking about it earlier and then I forgot, and now it just popped back into my head."

Ilya shook his head, still smiling, and Shane leaned up to kiss him—soft and sweet, tasting the lingering warmth between them. When he pulled back, Ilya was watching him with that soft expression he got sometimes, the one that made Shane's chest feel too full.

"We can look tomorrow," Ilya said, running his fingers through Shane's hair. "But right now, you're staying right here."

Shane settled back against his chest, perfectly content with that arrangement.

Chapter 32: Preschool

The last morning in Greece arrived too quickly.

Shane woke to find Katerina already up, sitting cross-legged on the living room floor with her small suitcase open in front of her. She carefully arranged her clothes, her little face scrunched in concentration. Ilya was in the kitchen making coffee, and the smell filled the villa, rich and dark and comforting.

"Morning, *malyshka*," Shane said, settling beside her on the floor.

She looked up at him with a complicated expression, excitement mixed with something sadder. "I'm packing," she announced unnecessarily.

"I can see that." Shane reached over and straightened one of her shirts that had gotten folded crooked. "You doing okay?"

Katerina nodded, but her hands stilled on a small stuffed bear Alexei had given her a few days ago. "Papa's going away," she said quietly. "I stay with you and Ilya?"

Shane's chest tightened. He pulled her into his lap, and she came willingly, tucking herself against him. "Papa loves you very much," he said. "And we're going to visit him. Ilya promised, remember?"

"Six months?" Katerina repeated, her voice small. "When Papa comes home?"

"It is," Shane agreed, because there was no point in lying to her. "But we'll call him. And FaceTime. And before you know it, we'll be on a plane to see him."

She nodded against his chest, and they sat like that for a while, the morning light streaming through the windows, the sound of the ocean a distant murmur.

By mid-morning, everyone had gathered in the main living area. Suitcases lined the hallway. Passports and tickets were checked and rechecked. Pavel was unusually quiet, his typical energy subdued. Alexei stood near the window, looking out at the water one last time, his expression unreadable.

Katerina had been clinging to Alexei all morning, and now she stood in front of him, her small hand wrapped around his much larger one. Alexei crouched down to her level, his weathered face softening in a way Shane had rarely seen.

"You be good for Ilya and Shane," Alexei said in Russian, his voice rough. "Listen to them. Work hard in school."

Katerina nodded solemnly. "I will, Papa."

"And remember," Alexei continued, switching to English so everyone could understand, "you are strong. You are smart. You are loved." He tapped her chest gently, right over her heart. "Always remember that."

Tears welled in Katerina's eyes, but she blinked them back fiercely. "I love you, Papa."

"I love you too," Alexei said, pulling her into a tight hug. He held her for a long moment, eyes closed, and Shane had to look away. The intimacy of it felt too private, too raw.

When Alexei finally released her, Katerina turned and threw herself at Pavel, who caught her with a surprised laugh. "Hey, little one," he said, ruffling her hair. "You take care of these guys, okay? Make sure Ilya doesn't work too much."

"I will," Katerina promised, her voice muffled against his shirt.

Pavel hugged her tightly, then set her down and met Ilya's gaze. Something unspoken passed between them, years of history, of loyalty, of brotherhood. Pavel stepped forward and pulled Ilya into a brief, fierce embrace.

"Take care of them," Pavel said quietly.

"Always," Ilya replied.

Then Pavel turned to Shane, his expression warming into something more playful. "You keep him in line," he said, jerking his thumb at Ilya. "Don't let him turn into a complete workaholic."

Shane laughed despite the tightness in his throat. "I'll do my best."

Pavel clapped him on the shoulder, squeezed once, then stepped back. He turned to Artem, and his expression softened into something more vulnerable. Without a word, he pulled his cousin into a tight hug, holding him for a long moment. "Call me if you need anything," Pavel said quietly, his hand gripping the back of Artem's neck. "Anything at all. You understand?"

Artem nodded against Pavel's shoulder, his own eyes bright. "I will."

Pavel released him, squeezed his shoulder once more, then turned toward the door.

Alexei approached Ilya next. The two men stood facing each other for a moment, then Alexei extended his hand. Ilya took it, shaking firmly. But Alexei didn't let go. Instead, he pulled Ilya into a brief hug, his hand coming up to clasp the back of Ilya's neck.

"Six months," Alexei said.

"Six months," Ilya confirmed.

Alexei nodded and released him, then turned to Shane. He studied Shane for a long moment, his dark eyes assessing, before offering his hand. Shane took it. Alexei's grip was strong, steady.

"You're good for him," Alexei said simply. "And for her."

Shane didn't know what to say to that, so he just nodded. "Thank you. For everything."

Alexei's mouth twitched into something that might have been a smile. Then he released Shane's hand and moved toward the door, Pavel following behind him.

Katerina ran after them, throwing her arms around Alexei's legs one more time. He bent down, kissed the top of her head, and gently disentangled himself. "Be good," he said again. Then he was gone, the door closing behind him with a soft click.

The villa fell suddenly quiet.

Katerina stood in the middle of the room, her small shoulders trembling. Shane moved toward her, but Ilya got there first, scooping her up and holding her close. She buried her face in his neck and cried, not loud, wailing sobs, but quiet, heartbroken tears that were somehow worse.

"I've got you," Ilya murmured, his hand rubbing soothing circles on her back. "I've got you, *malyshka*. It's okay to be sad."

Shane stood nearby, feeling helpless, until Ilya reached out with his free hand and pulled him into the embrace. The three of them stood like that, holding each other, while Katerina cried herself out.

The flight back to New York was long but uneventful. Katerina sat between Shane and Ilya, her head resting on Ilya's shoulder as she dozed. Across the aisle, Artem and Dimitri talked quietly, Dimitri's hand resting on Artem's knee in a casual, comfortable gesture.

Shane stared out the window at the clouds below, thinking about everything that had changed in such a short time. A few weeks ago, he'd been just a college student trying to figure out his life. Now he was flying back to New York with a man he loved, a little girl who'd become family, and friends who felt more like brothers.

It was terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure.

Ilya's hand found his, their fingers intertwining. Shane glanced over to find Ilya watching him with that soft expression that made his chest ache.

"What are you thinking about?" Ilya asked quietly.

Shane smiled. "Everything. All of this. How fast things changed."

"Good changes?" Ilya's tone held no real doubt.

"The best changes," Shane confirmed, squeezing his hand.

New York greeted them with humidity and noise and the particular smell of the city in summer, hot asphalt and exhaust and a million different lives crammed into too-small spaces. Shane had never been so happy to be back.

They took two cars from the airport. Ilya, Shane, and Katerina rode in one; Artem and Dimitri followed in the other. Ilya had arranged for Artem to stay in a hotel temporarily while they sorted out something more permanent, but Dimitri had insisted on staying with him, at least for now.

"We'll find you an apartment this week," Ilya said as they pulled up to the hotel. "Something close by."

Artem nodded, looking slightly overwhelmed but grateful. "Thank you. For all of this."

"You're family," Ilya said simply, and Artem's expression softened.

They said their goodbyes, temporary ones, because they'd see each other tomorrow, and then Ilya drove Shane and Katerina to a safe house in Brooklyn. It was a nondescript brownstone on a quiet street, the kind of place that blended perfectly with its neighbors. Ilya had keys. He let them in through a reinforced door that looked ordinary but clearly wasn't.

"This is temporary," Ilya said as Shane carried a sleeping Katerina inside. "Just until we find the right place."

The safe house was furnished but impersonal, functional furniture, bare walls, nothing that suggested anyone actually lived there. Shane tucked Katerina into one of the bedrooms, and she barely stirred, exhausted from travel and emotion. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching her sleep, feeling that now-familiar tightness in his chest.

Ilya appeared beside him, his hand coming to rest on the small of Shane's back. "She'll be okay," he said quietly.

"I know," Shane said. "I just, I want to make sure we do this right. That we give her everything she needs."

"We will," Ilya said with absolute certainty. "Together."

The next few days were a blur of activity.

First priority: finding apartments. Plural. Ilya had a specific vision, and he laid it out for their real estate agent, a sharp-eyed woman named Monica who didn't even blink at his requirements.

"I need a building with two adjacent units available," Ilya said. "Three bedrooms minimum for both. Good school district. Safe neighborhood. Upper West Side preferred."

Monica's eyebrows rose slightly. "That's... specific. And potentially difficult. Most buildings don't have two larger units available at the same time, especially side by side."

"Find it," Ilya said, and something in his tone made it clear this wasn't a request.

They toured four buildings over two days. The first had adjacent units, but one was a studio, too small. The second was in the right neighborhood but only had one available. The third had the space but sat near a school Ilya had already researched and rejected.

Katerina came with them to the viewings, her small hand gripping Shane's as they walked through empty rooms. She stayed quiet, still processing everything, but when Ilya explained that Artem and Dimitri would live right next door, her eyes lit up.

"Really?" she asked. "Like, right next to us?"

"Right next to us," Ilya confirmed. "You could knock on the wall and they'd hear you."

That made her smile, the first real smile Shane had seen since they'd left Greece.

The fourth building was perfect. A pre-war walk-up on West 86th Street, minutes from an excellent elementary school. Two three-bedroom units on the same floor, right next to each other, both recently renovated. Hardwood floors, large windows, the kind of space that felt like a home rather than just an apartment.

"This one," Ilya said, standing in the middle of what would be their living room. It wasn't a question.

Shane looked around, imagining Katerina doing homework at the kitchen table, imagining weekend mornings with pancakes and cartoons. Imagining Artem and Dimitri just next door, close enough to be part of their daily lives. "Yeah," he agreed. "This one."

Monica looked between them. "Both units?"

"Both units," Ilya confirmed. "I'll take them both."

She blinked. "I'll need to check with the landlord about,"

"I'll buy the building if necessary," Ilya said calmly. "But I'd prefer to lease. Draw up paperwork for both apartments. I'll sign today."

Monica's expression shifted into something between impressed and slightly intimidated. "I'll... make some calls."

By that evening, Ilya had signed leases for both apartments, paid a year upfront without blinking, and arranged for movers to deliver furniture within the week. It was efficient and overwhelming and exactly what Shane had come to expect from Ilya, when he decided something, it happened.

Katerina was thrilled. She ran between the two empty apartments, her footsteps echoing, already planning which bedroom would be hers and asking if she could visit Artem and Dimitri whenever she wanted.

"Whenever they say it's okay," Shane corrected gently, smiling.

Ilya pulled him aside while Katerina explored, his hand finding Shane's. "This is right," he said quietly. "All of us together. Close."

Shane squeezed his hand. "Yeah. It is."

That evening, Ilya took Shane back to the restaurant from their first real date, the one with the private booth and the incredible food and the sense that the world outside didn't exist.

The drive through Manhattan felt intentional. Ilya navigated the streets with the ease of someone who knew exactly where he was going, who had planned this carefully. He pulled up to the curb on a quiet street in Little Italy, the kind of place that didn't advertise itself because everyone who mattered already knew it was there.

A valet appeared immediately, opening Shane's door before he could reach for the handle.

"Mr. Rozanov," the man said, Marco, Shane remembered from their first visit, with a respectful nod. "Good to see you again, sir."

"Marco." Ilya handed over his keys and came around to Shane's side, placing a hand on the small of his back as they walked toward the entrance. "Thank you."

The restaurant looked exactly as Shane remembered. Soft lighting, intimate booths, the kind of elegant simplicity that spoke of confidence rather than pretension. The hostess glanced up from her stand, her face brightening with recognition.

"Mr. Rozanov," she said warmly. Her eyes found Shane and her smile widened. "And you brought him back. How wonderful."

Heat crept up Shane's neck. They remembered. Of course they remembered.

"Your usual booth?" she asked, already moving to lead them.

"Please," Ilya said, his hand never leaving Shane's back.

She led them through the restaurant to the same private booth in the corner, the one where Shane had sat nervously on their first date, where Ilya had looked at him with such intensity that Shane had felt truly seen for the first time. The booth where everything had shifted.

Shane slid into the seat, and Ilya settled across from him. For a moment, they just looked at each other.

"I wanted to come back here," Ilya said quietly. "To this place. To remind you, to remind us both, of where this started."

Nostalgia washed over Shane, but it felt different now. He'd been nervous then, unsure of what he was getting into, terrified of wanting something so badly. Now he sat across from Ilya and felt nothing but certainty. Everything that had happened since that night, Greece, Katerina, the apartments, the future stretching out before them, it all felt inevitable, like they'd been moving toward this moment all along.

"So much has changed," Shane said softly.

"Everything has changed," Ilya corrected. "But this," he gestured between them, "this was always going to happen. I knew it that first night."

Shane reached across the table, and Ilya met him halfway, their fingers intertwining. The server appeared with menus, but neither of them looked away.

"I'm glad we came back," Shane said.

"Me too." Ilya's thumb traced small circles on Shane's hand. "Full circle."

They ordered, Shane let Ilya choose for both of them, trusting his taste, and fell into easy conversation about Katerina's school enrollment, about Artem's upcoming work visa, about the logistics of their new life. But underneath it all ran something deeper, something unspoken but understood.

This was their life now. Together.

Halfway through the meal, Shane set down his fork and met Ilya's eyes. "I want to go back to the restaurant. Samovar Soiree."

Ilya didn't look surprised. "Okay," he said simply.

"Just like that?" Shane asked. "You're not going to tell me I don't need to work?"

"Why would I?" Ilya leaned back, studying him. "You love working. You're good at it. Why would I take that away from you?"

Shane felt something loosen in his chest. "I just, I thought maybe you'd want me to focus on hockey. Or, I don't know. Something else."

"Shane," Ilya said, his voice gentle but firm. "I want you to do what makes you happy. If it's hockey, play hockey. If it's both, do both. I'm not here to control your life. I'm here to support it."

Shane swallowed hard, emotion threatening to overwhelm him. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Ilya reached across the table, covering Shane's hand with his own. "Always."

Two days later, Shane walked into the gun range with Ilya beside him, more nervous than he'd expected.

He'd studied for the permit test, read through all the materials, practiced the written portion until he could recite the answers in his sleep. But standing here now, about to take the actual test, his palms were sweating.

"You'll be fine," Ilya said, his hand resting briefly on Shane's shoulder. "You know this."

Shane nodded, took a deep breath, and walked into the testing room.

The written portion was straightforward, questions about gun safety, storage, legal responsibilities. Shane moved through it methodically, double-checking his answers before submitting. Then came the practical portion: demonstrating proper handling, loading, unloading, basic safety protocols.

The instructor was a middle-aged woman with sharp eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor. She watched Shane carefully, correcting his grip once, then nodding approvingly when he followed her instructions precisely.

When it was over, she handed him a piece of paper. "You passed. Congratulations."

Relief and pride surged through him. Shane walked back out to the waiting area where Ilya was sitting, and Ilya stood immediately, reading the answer on Shane's face.

"I passed," Shane said, grinning.

Ilya pulled him into a brief, tight hug. "I knew you would."

The next stop was a gun store that Ilya had clearly been to before, based on the way the owner greeted him by name. They spent an hour looking at different options, the owner explaining the pros and cons of various models while Ilya listened with the careful focus of someone who took this very seriously.

Finally, they settled on a Glock 19, compact, reliable, easy to handle. Shane held it, getting a feel for the weight, and something about it felt right. Solid. Real.

"We'll need a holster," Ilya said, already moving toward another display. He selected one, leather, high-quality, designed for concealed carry. "You'll keep it on you at all times."

Shane raised an eyebrow. "At all times?"

"Yes." Ilya's tone left no room for argument. "I'm serious about this, Shane. You need to be able to protect yourself."

Shane thought about Victor, about the fear he'd felt in that moment, and nodded slowly. "Okay. But I can't exactly take a Glock onto the ice."

Ilya's expression flickered with frustration, then resignation. "Fine. Keep it in your locker during practice and games. But don't be surprised when Dimitri shows up every day to stand guard."

Shane laughed despite himself. "You're serious."

"Completely." There was no humor in Ilya's voice. "Your safety isn't negotiable."

That familiar warmth spread through Shane's chest, the knowledge that Ilya cared this much, that he'd go to these lengths to keep him safe. "Okay," he said softly. "I'll keep it on me. Except on the ice."

Ilya nodded, satisfied, and they completed the purchase.

The next day, Ilya took Shane shopping.

"You can't meet the team looking sloppy," Ilya said as they walked into a high-end menswear store in Midtown.

Shane looked down at his jeans and t-shirt. "I don't look sloppy."

"You look like a college student." Not quite an insult, but not a compliment either. "You're about to meet some very important people. You need to look the part."

Shane wanted to argue, but he knew Ilya was right. If he was serious about going pro, about making hockey his career, he needed to present himself professionally.

So he let Ilya guide him through the store, selecting dress shirts and slacks and a blazer that fit perfectly across Shane's shoulders. Ilya had an eye for this, he knew exactly what would look good, what would make Shane look older, more polished, more serious.

"Try this," Ilya said, handing him a charcoal gray suit.

Shane disappeared into the dressing room and emerged a few minutes later. The suit fit like it had been made for him, tailored and sharp and completely different from anything he usually wore.

Ilya's expression shifted when he saw him, something heated flickering in his eyes. "That's the one," he said, his voice rougher than before.

Shane looked at himself in the mirror and barely recognized the person staring back. He looked older. More confident. Like someone who actually belonged in Ilya's world.

"Okay," Shane said. "This one."

They bought three suits, a dozen shirts, new shoes, and a watch that cost more than Shane's entire wardrobe combined. Shane tried not to think about the price tags, tried not to feel guilty about how much Ilya was spending on him. But every time he started to protest, Ilya would give him a look that said *let me do this*, and Shane would fall silent.

The first practice with the New York City Admirals was scheduled for Thursday morning.

Shane woke early, nerves and excitement churning in his stomach. He dressed carefully, athletic gear for practice, but he'd bring one of his new suits to change into afterward. The Glock sat heavy in its holster at his hip, a constant reminder of his new reality.

Ilya drove him to the rink, Katerina in the backseat chattering about her upcoming first day of school. She'd been enrolled in the elementary school near their new apartment, with orientation scheduled for next week. She seemed excited, though Shane could see the nervousness underneath.

"You're going to do great," Ilya said as they pulled into the parking lot. He was talking to Shane, but his eyes flicked to Katerina in the rearview mirror. "Both of you."

Shane leaned over and kissed her briefly. "Thanks."

Inside the rink, a staff member greeted Shane and directed him to the locker room. It was bigger than his college locker room, newer, with state-of-the-art equipment and a level of polish that made Shane's heart race.

He found his assigned locker, his name already printed on a placard above it, and started changing. Around him, other players did the same, and Shane recognized a few faces.

"Shane!" Hayden's voice cut through the noise. Shane turned to see his friend grinning at him. Hayden looked good, bigger than Shane remembered, more muscular, like he'd been training hard. "Holy shit, man, it's good to see you."

They hugged briefly, clapping each other on the back. "You too," Shane said. "How's the baby?"

"Exhausting." Hayden's smile widened. "And perfect. You'll have to come meet her."

"I'd like that."

Another player approached, tall, broad-shouldered, with dark hair and an easy smile. "You must be Shane," he said, extending his hand. "I'm JJ. Heard good things."

Shane shook it, feeling the strength in JJ's grip. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise. Hayden's been talking you up. Says you're fast."

"Fast enough," Shane said, and JJ laughed.

They finished gearing up and headed out to the ice. The rink was pristine, freshly resurfaced and gleaming. Shane felt that familiar rush of adrenaline as his skates hit the surface. This was where he belonged. This was home.

Coach Brennan, a stern-looking man in his fifties, gathered them at center ice. He gave a brief speech about expectations, about the commitment required, about the opportunity they'd been given. Then he blew his whistle, and they were off.

The practice was brutal. Drills focused on speed, agility, teamwork. Shane pushed himself hard, skating faster than he ever had, playing more aggressively than he'd allowed himself to in college. No more holding back. He was done being careful, done playing it safe.

He wanted this. And he was going to prove he deserved it.

Coach Brennan noticed. Shane could feel the man's eyes on him, assessing, evaluating. During a scrimmage, Shane stole the puck from JJ, who was easily fifty pounds heavier, and drove toward the goal with single-minded focus. He faked left, cut right, and buried it in the net.

"Nice work, Hollander!" Coach Brennan called out, and Shane felt a surge of pride.

After practice, as they skated off the ice, Hayden caught up to him. "Damn, Shane," he said, slightly breathless. "You never used to play like that. What changed?"

Shane glanced toward the stands, where Ilya sat with Katerina on his lap. He was talking to a woman in a business suit, someone official-looking, probably from the team's management. But even from this distance, Shane could feel Ilya's attention on him.

"I'm serious about this," Shane said, gesturing toward Ilya. "About going pro. I'm done with school. I want to do what I love."

Hayden followed his gaze, then looked back at Shane with understanding. "That's Ilya over there, right? Your—"

"Yeah," Shane said, not bothering to hide it. "My boyfriend."

Hayden's eyebrows rose slightly, but he just grinned and clapped Shane on the back.

They headed back to the locker room, and Shane caught Ilya's eye across the rink. Ilya gave him a thumbs up, and Shane felt his heart swell with something too big to name.

He was ready for this. Ready for his future. Ready to spend it with Ilya.

Over the next few weeks, life settled into a new rhythm.

Shane practiced with the Admirals every morning, pushing himself harder than he ever had. Coach Brennan continued to watch him closely, and Shane could tell he was making an impression. Hayden and JJ became fast friends, the three of them falling into an easy camaraderie both on and off the ice.

In the afternoons, Shane would head back to the restaurant where he'd worked before. Vera had been thrilled to have him back, and he fell into the rhythm of the kitchen like he'd never left. The heat, the noise, the controlled chaos, it grounded him in a way hockey didn't. Both were things he loved, but they fed different parts of him.

Evenings belonged to Katerina. They'd pick her up from her after-school program, and she'd chatter about her day, about her new friends, what she'd learned, the art project she was working on. She was thriving, and watching her bloom made Shane's chest ache with pride.

Artem had started working for Ilya officially and moved into an apartment two blocks from theirs. Dimitri had found work as a private security consultant, a job Ilya had helped arrange, and the two of them were building a life together in New York. They had dinner together at least twice a week, the four of them plus Katerina, and it felt like family.

Shane's gun stayed in its holster most days, a weight he'd grown accustomed to. He practiced at the range twice a week with an instructor Ilya had hired, a former Marine who didn't tolerate sloppy technique. Shane was getting good, and that knowledge made him feel safer, more capable.

True to his word, Dimitri showed up at the rink on practice days, standing near Shane's locker with his arms crossed and an expression that discouraged conversation. After the first week, the other players stopped asking questions.

And through it all, there was Ilya.

Ilya, who watched Shane's practices from the stands whenever his schedule allowed. Ilya, who helped Katerina with her homework in Russian and English. Ilya, who pulled Shane into bed every night.

Six weeks after returning to New York, Shane got the call.

He was in the restaurant kitchen, prepping vegetables for dinner service, when his phone buzzed. He almost ignored it, he was in the middle of work, but something made him check.

Coach Brennan.

Shane's heart jumped into his throat. He stepped away from his station, ignoring the curious looks from his coworkers, and answered.

"Shane Hollander," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

"Shane, it's Coach Brennan. You got a minute?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. I wanted to let you know, we're offering you a contract. You've impressed the hell out of me these past few weeks, and management agrees. We want you on the team. Official roster."

Shane's knees buckled. He caught himself against the wall, struggling to process what he'd just heard. "I, thank you, sir. Thank you so much."

"You've earned it. We'll send the paperwork tomorrow. Welcome to the Admirals, Shane."

The call ended. Shane stood frozen, phone still pressed to his ear, trying to convince himself this was real.

Then he moved. He yanked off his apron and told his boss he had to leave early, family emergency, he'd make it up tomorrow. He practically sprinted to his car and drove too fast back to the penthouse, heart pounding the entire way.

Ilya was in his office when Shane burst through the door. He glanced up, startled, and his expression shifted to concern. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Shane was breathless, grinning. "I got the contract. I'm on the team. Official roster."

Ilya stood slowly. He crossed the room and pulled Shane into a fierce hug. "I'm so proud of you," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "So fucking proud."

Shane buried his face in Ilya's neck, tears pricking at his eyes. "I did it," he whispered. "I actually did it."

"You did." Ilya pulled back to look at him. His eyes were bright, his smile genuine and warm. "You worked your ass off, and you earned this."

They held each other for a long moment, and Shane felt like his chest might burst from happiness.

This was his life now. This was his future.

And he was ready for all of it.

A Few Months Later

Shane woke early, before his alarm, and lay in bed listening to Ilya's steady breathing beside him. The apartment was quiet, their apartment, the one they'd chosen together a few months ago, the one that had become home in every sense of the word. Katerina had insisted on sleeping in their bed last night, "for good luck," she'd said seriously, wedging herself between them with her stuffed bear clutched to her chest. She'd only recently graduated to sleeping in her own room most nights, but special occasions called for exceptions.

Now Shane could hear her moving around in her bedroom, the soft pad of her feet on the hardwood floor. He slipped out of bed carefully, not wanting to wake Ilya yet, and padded down the hall.

Katerina was standing in front of her mirror, the full-length one they'd hung at her height so she could see herself properly, wearing the new dress they'd bought for today. It was yellow, like the one from Greece all those years ago, though she'd long since outgrown that first one. Her dark hair had grown longer, falling past her shoulders now, and she was trying to pull it back with a ribbon, her small face scrunched in concentration.

"Morning, *malyshka*," Shane said softly from the doorway.

She turned, and her face was a mixture of excitement and nerves.

"Do I look okay?" she asked. "I can't get ribbon right."

"You look beautiful," Shane said honestly, crossing the room to help her. His fingers were more practiced now, two years of braiding hair and tying ribbons had taught him skills he'd never imagined needing. He smoothed down a stray lock of her hair. "The other kids are going to love you."

She bit her lip, a gesture she'd picked up from Shane years ago and never lost. "What if they don't?"

Shane finished with the ribbon and turned her to face him, kneeling down so they were eye level. "Then they're missing out," he said firmly. "But I think they will. You're smart and kind and funny. Anyone would be lucky to be your friend."

She tugged at Shane's sleeve and pointed to the embroidered letters on her new dress, a gift from Artem and Dimitri. "Look! K-A-T. That's me!" She traced each letter carefully with her small finger, her voice filled with pride. "Ilya taught me. Those are my letters."

Shane felt his heart squeeze. "That's exactly right, *malyshka*. Those are your letters." He tapped her nose gently. "You're so smart. See? It's going to be great."

Katerina's eyes welled with tears, but she blinked them back fiercely, another thing she'd learned from watching Ilya. "I scared," she whispered.

"I know," Shane said, pulling her into a hug. She fit differently in his arms now, longer-limbed and more solid, but still his little girl. "But you're also brave. Remember when you were scared to start preschool? And then you loved it?"

She nodded against his shoulder.

"This will be like that. And Ilya and I will be right there with you. We're not going anywhere."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

They stayed like that until Ilya appeared in the doorway, already dressed in one of his perfectly tailored suits, his hair still damp from the shower. He'd been up late the night before, working on some deal in Moscow, but he'd promised to be there for Katerina's first day. And Ilya never broke promises to her.

"Ready?" Ilya asked, his voice gentle.

Katerina pulled back from Shane and nodded, squaring her small shoulders. "Ready."

They took their time getting to the school. Ilya drove, the same car he'd had a few months ago, though he'd added a booster seat in the back for Katerina, while Shane sat beside her, holding her hand. She was quieter than usual, staring out the window at the familiar streets of the Upper West Side. Shane could feel the tension radiating off her small body.

The preschool was the same one they'd researched so carefully when they'd first moved to the neighborhood. A charming converted brownstone with a small playground out front and colorful murals painted on the walls. Shane had walked past it hundreds of times over the past few months, on his way to the subway, coming back from the restaurant, during evening walks with Ilya and Katerina. But today it felt different. More significant.

Parents and children were streaming through the front doors, the air filled with excited chatter and the occasional tearful goodbye. Shane recognized a few faces, neighbors, parents from the building whose kids were starting preschool too.

Ilya parked, and they all got out. Katerina immediately reached for both their hands, one on each side, and they walked toward the entrance like that, a family unit that had been forged in Greece and tempered by these few months of daily life together. Shane caught sight of their reflection in the school's glass doors and felt a surge of pride. They looked like they belonged together.

Inside, they were directed to Katerina's classroom. The teacher, a young woman with a warm smile and kind eyes, greeted them at the door.

"You must be Katerina," she said, crouching down to the girl's level. "I'm Ms. Rodriguez. I'm so excited to have you in my class."

Katerina looked up at Ilya, then at Shane, seeking reassurance. It was an old habit, one she'd carried since Greece, and Shane squeezed her hand gently. "It's okay," he said. "We'll be right here."

Ms. Rodriguez showed them around the classroom, the reading corner with its colorful cushions, the art station with neatly organized supplies, the cubbies where the children kept their belongings. Katerina's cubby had her name written on it in colorful letters, and she touched them reverently, tracing each one with her finger.

"Can you read it?" Ms. Rodriguez asked gently.

Katerina nodded. "K-A-T," she spelled out carefully.

"Very good!" Ms. Rodriguez said, and Katerina beamed.

Other children began arriving, and soon the classroom filled with noise and energy. Katerina watched them warily, still clinging to Shane and Ilya's hands, but Shane could see her curiosity winning out over her nervousness.

"It's time for parents to say goodbye," Ms. Rodriguez said gently. "We're going to start our morning circle soon."

Shane felt his throat tighten. This was it—the first goodbye, the first real step into her independence, and even knowing it was right and necessary, it still felt monumental. He knelt in front of Katerina, and Ilya did the same, their movements synchronized after months of co-parenting.

"You're going to have a great day," Shane said, trying to keep his voice steady. "And we'll be right here to pick you up when school's over. Just like always."

"Promise?" Katerina asked, her voice small. It was the same question she'd asked that first morning in Greece, when Alexei had left.

"Promise," Ilya said firmly. He pulled her into a hug, holding her tight. "We love you, *malyshka*. So much."

"Love you too," Katerina whispered. "Both of you."

Shane hugged her next, breathing in the scent of her shampoo, the same brand they'd used since she was very little, the one she always wanted. He tried to memorize this moment, knowing this was another milestone, another step toward her growing up.

When he pulled back, Katerina's eyes were bright with unshed tears, but she was smiling. "Okay," she said, taking a deep breath. "I'm ready."

They watched as she walked over to Ms. Rodriguez, who took her hand and led her to the circle of children gathering on the carpet. Katerina glanced back once, and Shane and Ilya

both waved. Then she turned back to the other children, and Shane saw her say something to the girl sitting next to her. The girl smiled, and just like that, Katerina was part of the group.

"We should go," Ilya said quietly, his hand finding Shane's.

They walked out of the classroom, down the hallway, and out to the car in silence. Shane felt like his chest was too tight, like he couldn't quite catch his breath. It was ridiculous, Katerina was fine, she was happy, she was exactly where she should be. But the weight of it all, the responsibility, the love, the fear of failing her, felt overwhelming even after a few months.

Ilya started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. They drove in silence for a few blocks, and Shane was so lost in his own thoughts that he almost didn't notice.

Then he glanced over at Ilya and saw the tears.

They were silent tears, running down Ilya's face unchecked, his jaw clenched like he was trying to hold something back. His hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, knuckles white.

"Ilya," Shane said softly.

Ilya didn't respond, just kept driving, his eyes fixed on the road ahead.

"Ilya, pull over," Shane said, more firmly this time.

Ilya's jaw worked, and for a moment Shane thought he might refuse. But then he signaled and pulled into a parking lot, the same grocery store parking lot where they'd stopped a few months ago when Katerina had her first preschool meltdown. Some things, Shane thought, came full circle.

Ilya put the car in park but didn't look at Shane. He just stared straight ahead, tears still streaming down his face.

Shane unbuckled his seatbelt and reached over, his hand cupping Ilya's jaw, gently turning his face toward him. "Hey," he said softly. "Talk to me."

Ilya's eyes were red-rimmed, his expression raw in a way Shane had seen more often over the years but which still made his heart ache. "I just," His voice broke, and he had to stop, take a breath. "She looked so small walking into that classroom. And I kept thinking about everything she's been through, everything she's lost, and," He paused, his breath hitching. "And how much she's grown. How far we've all come."

He couldn't finish. The words dissolved into a choked sound, and Shane unbuckled Ilya's seatbelt too, pulling him across the center console into an awkward but fierce hug.

Ilya buried his face in Shane's shoulder and cried, really cried, his whole body shaking with it. Shane held him, one hand in his hair, the other rubbing soothing circles on his back, and let him fall apart. This was new, this vulnerability. In the past months, Ilya had never let Shane see him like this, had never allowed himself to break down, to let the walls crack so completely. But here, in the car, with Katerina safe in preschool and the world held at bay, something shifted. Ilya let himself be held, let himself be seen.

"She's okay," Shane murmured. "She's safe. She's loved. We're giving her everything she needs. Look at her, she's thriving."

"I know," Ilya said, his voice muffled against Shane's shoulder. "I know that. But I'm still so fucking scared of failing her. Of not being enough."

"She's thriving here Ilya."

They stayed like that for a long time, holding each other in the parking lot, until Ilya's breathing evened out and the tears stopped. When Ilya finally pulled back, his eyes were still red but clearer, and there was something softer in his expression.

"Sorry," he said, his voice rough.

"Don't apologize," Shane said. "Ever. Not for this."

Ilya nodded, then leaned forward and kissed Shane, soft and sweet and full of everything they couldn't put into words.

When they pulled apart, Ilya rested his forehead against Shane's. "Thank you," he whispered.

"For what?"

"For being here. For loving her. For loving me. For building this life with us."

Shane's throat tightened. "I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with me."

Ilya huffed a laugh, and Shane felt him relax slightly. They sat like that for another moment, just breathing together, and then Ilya pulled back and wiped his eyes. "I have a meeting in an hour," he said. "And you have practice this afternoon."

"Yeah," Shane said. "And a game tonight, home game. You and Katerina will be there?"

"Always," Ilya said. It had become their routine, their family tradition. Every home game, Ilya and Katerina in the stands.

"Okay," Shane said. He kept his hand on Ilya's knee as they drove, a silent reminder that he was there, that they were in this together.

That afternoon, they picked Katerina up from preschool together. Shane had a few hours before he needed to be at the arena, and Ilya had rearranged his schedule, another thing that had become routine over the years. Katerina always came first.

She came running out of the building, her face flushed and happy, and threw herself at them. She was getting bigger, but she still loved to be picked up, and Ilya still managed it, swinging her up into his arms.

"I made a friend!" she announced breathlessly. "Her name is Emma! She has a dog!"

Shane and Ilya exchanged a look over her head, relief and pride and overwhelming love.

"That's wonderful, *malyshka*," Ilya said, setting her down. "Tell us everything."

As they walked back to the car, Katerina chattering excitedly about her day, Shane pulled out his phone and texted Artem: *First day success. Early dinner at yours before the game?*

The response came immediately: *Dimitri's already cooking. 4:30pm. We'll all go to the game together.*

Shane smiled. A few months in, and Artem and Dimitri were still right next door, still woven into their daily lives. Katerina spent almost as much time in their apartment as her own, and both men had become family in every way that mattered.

"Uncle Artem says early dinner at their place, then we're all going to Papa's game," Shane said, and Katerina's face lit up even more.

"Can I show Uncle Dimitri my classroom picture?" she asked.

"Of course," Ilya said, his hand finding Shane's as they walked.

They gathered in Artem and Dimitri's apartment at 4:30, the one right next door, the one they'd all chosen together a few months ago. Dimitri had whipped up a quick but delicious meal, and Katerina sat between Artem and Shane at the table, talking non-stop about her day while the adults listened with fond smiles.

"Emma sounds like a good friend," Dimitri said warmly.

"She is! And she said my name is pretty. She asked if I could teach her some Russian words."

Ilya's expression softened. "That's very sweet, *malyshka*."

Shane checked his watch. "I need to head out in twenty minutes," he said apologetically.

"We'll be right behind you," Ilya promised. "Front row, like always."

The arena was electric that night. The Admirals were playing the Boston Bruins, and the crowd was already roaring when Shane stepped onto the ice for warm-ups. He spotted Ilya and Katerina immediately, front row, center ice, exactly where they always sat. Katerina wore her tiny Admirals jersey with "HOLLANDER" across the back, bouncing in her seat with excitement. Ilya had one arm around her, keeping her steady, his eyes locked on Shane.

Shane skated over during warm-ups and tapped the glass in front of them. Katerina pressed her hands against it, grinning wildly, and Ilya's expression was soft and proud.

For them, Shane thought. *Everything for them.*

He skated back to center ice, feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline mixed with something deeper, purpose. A few months ago, hockey had been everything to him. It still was, but the definition had expanded. It wasn't just about the game anymore. It was about the little girl in the stands who'd conquered her first day of preschool, about the man beside her who'd finally let himself be vulnerable just hours ago.

The game started fast and physical. Boston came out aggressive, but Shane was ready. After just a few months playing professionally, he'd learned to read the ice like a second language.

Eight minutes into the first period, Shane saw the play developing before it happened, his winger breaking toward the net, the Boston defenseman a half-step too slow. Shane threaded a pass through traffic, tape-to-tape, and watched it get buried top shelf. The goal horn blared, and Shane's eyes flicked to the stands. Katerina was on her feet, jumping, and Ilya was clapping, his face bright even from this distance.

She had a good day, Shane thought as he skated back for the faceoff. *She made a friend. She's happy.*

The knowledge settled in his chest like warmth, fueling him. He won the next faceoff cleanly, cycled the puck, and kept Boston hemmed in their own zone. Every shift, he could feel their presence, not as a distraction, but as an anchor. A reminder of what mattered.

Midway through the period, he set up another goal. This time he caught Katerina's reaction more clearly, her small hands pressed against the glass, her mouth forming his name. *Papa*. She'd started calling him that six months ago, tentatively at first, then with growing confidence. Every time she said it, his heart felt like it might burst.

Between periods, in the locker room, Coach Brennan talked strategy, but Shane's mind was partly elsewhere. He kept thinking about Ilya's tears in the car, about the trust it had taken for him to show that vulnerability. About Katerina's nervous grip on his hand that morning, and her triumphant smile when they'd picked her up.

Play for them, he told himself. *Show them what they've given you.*

The second period started with Boston pressing hard, but Shane was everywhere, backchecking, breaking up plays, reading the ice like he could see three moves ahead. Then, twelve minutes in, he saw his chance.

He stole the puck at center ice, and suddenly there was nothing between him and the Boston net but open ice and two defenders. Shane's legs burned as he accelerated, his edges biting into the ice. The first defender lunged, Shane cut inside, leaving him grasping at air. The second defender tried to angle him off, but Shane had too much speed.

Just him and the goalie now. The crowd roared. The moment crystallized. He thought of Ilya's hand in his that morning, steady and sure. He thought of Katerina's small voice: *Will you be there when I come out?*

Always, he'd promised.

Shane went five-hole. The puck slipped through. The red light flashed, the horn blared, and the arena erupted.

His teammates mobbed him, but Shane's eyes went straight to the stands. Ilya was on his feet, clapping, his face bright with pride, the same expression he'd worn when Katerina walked

into her classroom that morning. Katerina was jumping up and down, screaming "Papa! Papa!" at the top of her lungs. Beside them, Artem and Dimitri were on their feet, cheering.

Shane's chest tightened. A few months ago, he couldn't have imagined this, this life, this family, this overwhelming sense of *home*. He'd been a college kid falling for a dangerous man, with no idea where it would lead. Now he was here, playing professional hockey with his daughter and partner watching from the stands, his found family beside them.

This is what I'm playing for, he thought. *This is why every shift matters*.

The third period was a grind. Boston threw everything at them, desperate, but Shane felt untouchable. Every time he glanced at the stands and saw them there, Ilya's steady presence, Katerina's excited bouncing, Artem and Dimitri's supportive smiles, something surged inside him.

With two minutes left and the Admirals up 4-2, Shane saw his winger breaking toward the net. The pass was risky, cross-ice, through traffic, but he didn't hesitate. He'd learned to trust his instincts, on the ice and off. The puck found its target, and his winger one-timed it home.

The crowd erupted. Shane raised his stick, acknowledging the assist, but his eyes were already finding his family in the stands. Katerina was practically vibrating with excitement, and Ilya's expression held so much love and pride that Shane felt it in his chest.

I did this, Shane thought. *We built this life together*.

When the final buzzer sounded, the Admirals had won 5-2, and Shane had recorded four points. The crowd rose to its feet, chanting his name: "HOL-LAN-DER! HOL-LAN-DER!"

But Shane barely heard them. He was already skating toward the glass where Ilya and Katerina waited. Katerina bounced on her toes, and Ilya's eyes shone, not with tears this time, but with pure joy and pride.

Shane pressed his glove against the glass. Katerina pressed her small hand against it from the other side. Ilya's hand covered hers, and for a moment, the three of them connected, separated by glass but bound by something far stronger.

This, Shane thought. *This is everything*.

After the game, Shane showered and changed quickly. Ilya, Katerina, Artem, and Dimitri were waiting for him outside the locker room, another routine they'd fallen into over the past few months.

"You were amazing!" Katerina launched herself at him, and Shane caught her easily, swinging her up.

"You think so?" he asked, grinning.

"The best!" she declared. "Everyone was cheering for you!"

"She's not wrong," Artem said, clapping Shane on the shoulder. "Four points. Impressive."

"Dominant," Dimitri added with a smile.

Ilya didn't say anything, but he didn't need to. The look in his eyes said everything, pride, love, gratitude, wonder. He stepped close and kissed Shane softly, right there in the hallway, not caring who saw.

"I'm so proud of you," Ilya murmured against his lips.

Shane's throat tightened. "I love you," he whispered back.

They walked out of the arena together, Shane carrying Katerina, Ilya's hand in his, Artem and Dimitri flanking them like the family they'd become. The city lights glittered around them, and that familiar sense of contentment settled over Shane like a warm blanket.

This was his life. This was his family. This was everything he'd ever wanted and more than he'd dared to dream possible.

"What are you thinking about?" Ilya asked as they reached the car.

Shane looked at him, at the man who'd changed his entire world, and smiled. "Everything. How lucky I am. How much I love our life. How far we've come."

Ilya's hand tightened in his. "Our life," he repeated softly. "I like the sound of that."

"Me too," Shane said.

Katerina had fallen asleep against his shoulder, worn out from the day's excitement, her first day of preschool, her first friend, her first hockey game as a big kid. Shane shifted his hold on her carefully, and Ilya opened the car door for them.

As they drove home through the city, their city, their home, Shane let that peace wash over him completely.

Two Weeks Later

The apartment was quiet in the late evening. Artem stood at the kitchen sink, sleeves rolled up, methodically washing the dinner dishes. The warm water ran over his hands as he scrubbed each plate clean, stacking them carefully in the drying rack. It was such an ordinary task, something he'd never imagined doing in his old life. Back then, there had been staff for this. Or more often, there had been no home at all, just hotel rooms and safe houses and the constant movement of men who couldn't afford to stay still.

Now he had a home. *Their* home. And he washed dishes in it.

The front door opened and closed softly. Artem didn't turn around, but his shoulders relaxed at the familiar sound of Dimitri's footsteps, the quiet rustle as he hung up his coat.

"You're back," Artem said, glancing over his shoulder.

Dimitri stood in the doorway between the entryway and kitchen, loosening his tie with one hand. He looked exhausted, the kind of bone-deep tiredness that came from navigating two worlds simultaneously. His shirt was slightly rumpled, his hair disheveled from running his hands through it too many times. There was something else in his expression tonight, something darker, the weight of decisions that couldn't be undone and problems that couldn't be solved with paperwork.

Artem knew that look. He'd worn it himself often enough. The look of a man who'd spent his day managing shipments that would never appear on any manifest, coordinating enforcement operations that left no paper trail, laundering money through a dozen shell companies while keeping the legitimate businesses running smoothly enough to avoid scrutiny. The exhaustion of maintaining the careful balance between the criminal empire they'd built and the respectable facade they showed the world.

But Dimitri's eyes softened when they landed on Artem.

"I'm back," Dimitri confirmed, his voice rough with fatigue. He moved into the kitchen, coming to stand beside Artem at the sink. Not touching, just... present. Close enough that Artem could feel his warmth.

"Long day?" Artem asked, rinsing the last plate.

"Very long." Dimitri leaned against the counter, watching Artem's hands move through the soapy water. "Three calls with our contacts in Moscow, two meetings about the new distribution routes, and one of our operations in Brooklyn had complications that took most of the afternoon to resolve."

Artem heard what wasn't being said. *Distribution routes* meant trafficking logistics. *Complications* meant someone had gotten greedy or sloppy, and Dimitri had spent hours making sure it didn't blow back on them. The legitimate shipping contracts were just the surface, the respectable veneer over operations that would put them all in prison if anyone looked too closely.

He thought briefly of Shane—probably at home right now with Ilya and Katerina, building something clean and whole, something that didn't require this constant vigilance and moral compromise. Shane had chosen a different path, one where his victories at work didn't come with the weight of secrets that could destroy everything. Artem didn't regret his choices, but in moments like this, he felt the distance between their lives like a physical thing.

Artem dried his hands on a towel and turned to face him fully. Dimitri's tie hung loose around his neck, his collar unbuttoned, and there were shadows under his eyes that hadn't been there this morning. More than that, there was tension in his jaw, the set of his shoulders, the careful control he maintained even here.

"You need to eat," Artem said.

"I ate at the office."

"You need to eat *real* food." Artem moved past him to the refrigerator, pulling out the container of leftovers he'd set aside. "Sit."

Dimitri obeyed without argument, sinking into one of the kitchen chairs with a quiet exhale. Artem heated the food, plated it, and set it in front of him along with a glass of water. Then he sat down across from him, chin resting on his hand, and simply watched.

Dimitri ate slowly, methodically, and Artem could see the tension gradually leaving his shoulders with each bite. When he was finished, he pushed the plate aside and met Artem's gaze.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"Always."

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Outside, the city hummed with its usual nighttime energy, but here—in this small kitchen, in this apartment they'd chosen together—everything was still. Safe.

"Come on," Artem said eventually, standing and offering his hand. "Bedroom."

Dimitri took it without hesitation, letting Artem pull him to his feet. They moved through the apartment together, a synchronized dance they'd perfected over the past few months. Dimitri went to change while Artem turned down the bed, drawing the curtains closed against the city lights.

When Dimitri emerged in sleep pants and a t-shirt, Artem was already sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting.

"Lie down," Artem said. "On your stomach."

Dimitri's expression flickered with understanding and something softer—gratitude, maybe, or relief. He did as instructed, stretching out across the bed with a quiet groan. Artem straddled his hips carefully, settling his weight, and placed both hands on Dimitri's shoulders.

"Tell me if it's too much," Artem murmured, and began to work his thumbs into the knotted muscles of Dimitri's upper back.

Dimitri made a low sound—half pain, half pleasure—and let his forehead drop against his folded arms. "Right there," he breathed. "God, right there."

Artem worked methodically, the way he did everything. He found each knot, each point of tension, and coaxed it loose with patient pressure. His hands moved down Dimitri's spine, across his shoulder blades, into the tight muscles along his sides. Dimitri's breathing gradually deepened, his body going pliant beneath Artem's touch.

"You carry too much," Artem said quietly, his thumbs working circles at the base of Dimitri's neck.

"Someone has to."

"Not alone. Not anymore."

Dimitri turned his head to the side, and Artem could see his profile in the dim light—the strong line of his jaw, the softness in his expression that he only ever showed here, in this room, with Artem.

"I know," Dimitri said. "I have you."

Artem's hands stilled for a moment. Even after months, those words still hit him somewhere deep. *I have you*. Such a simple statement, but it meant everything. It meant safety. It meant home. It meant that two men who'd spent their lives in violence and shadows could build something gentle together.

He leaned down and pressed a kiss to the back of Dimitri's neck, just below his hairline. Dimitri shivered.

He finished the massage slowly, thoroughly, until Dimitri was boneless and half-asleep beneath him. Then Artem shifted off him, lying down beside him instead. Dimitri immediately rolled over and pulled Artem close, tucking him against his chest with one arm wrapped securely around his waist.

They lay like that in the darkness, breathing in sync, Dimitri's face buried in Artem's hair.

"I never thought I'd have this," Dimitri murmured, his voice thick with exhaustion and emotion. "A home. Someone to come back to. Dishes in the sink and leftovers in the fridge and... you."

Artem threaded their fingers together, holding tight. "We have it now."

"Yeah." Dimitri's breath was warm against his temple.

Artem pressed one more kiss to Dimitri's shoulder, then carefully extracted himself from the bed. Dimitri made a small sound of protest, but Artem smoothed a hand over his chest.

"Stay here," Artem said softly. "I'm going to run you a bath."

Dimitri's eyes were already half-closed, but he nodded, settling back into the pillows. Artem pulled on a pair of loose pants and padded to the bathroom, turning on the water and adjusting the temperature until it was warm but not scalding. He added bath salts, watching the water cloud with minerals and the faint scent of lavender, then lit a few candles on the edge of the tub. Small things. Ordinary things. The kind of care that had seemed impossible in his old life.

He was checking the water level when he heard Dimitri's footsteps. His partner appeared in the doorway, still shirtless, wearing only the pants he'd pulled on earlier. He looked at the bath, at the candles, at Artem, and something in his expression softened further.

"Come here," Dimitri said, his voice still rough.

Artem crossed the small space between them, and Dimitri's hands came up to frame his face. The kiss was slow, deep, unhurried. It tasted like gratitude and exhaustion and the kind of tenderness that only came from truly knowing someone. When Dimitri pulled back, his forehead rested against Artem's.

"Join me?" Dimitri asked. It wasn't really a question.

"Of course," Artem said.

They undressed without self-consciousness, the ease of long familiarity. Dimitri stepped into the tub first, sinking into the hot water with a low groan of relief. Artem followed, settling between Dimitri's legs, his back against Dimitri's chest. Dimitri's arms came around him immediately, holding him close, and they simply sat like that for a long moment, letting the heat and the quiet work on the tension that had accumulated through the day.

The water lapped gently against the sides of the tub. After a while, Artem reached for the washcloth and soap. He turned slightly, enough to reach Dimitri's shoulders, and began washing him with slow, deliberate strokes. Across his shoulders, down his arms, careful around the old scars that mapped his history. Dimitri's head tipped back, resting against the edge of the tub, his eyes closed. Artem worked methodically, washing his chest, his sides, taking his time. This wasn't about efficiency. This was about care. About showing Dimitri that his body, marked as it was by violence and survival, was worthy of gentleness.

When Artem finished, Dimitri stirred slightly and took the washcloth from him without a word. He turned Artem around, and now it was Dimitri's hands that moved across his skin, washing him with the same unhurried attention. His touch was tender but thorough, and Artem felt the last of the day's tension drain from him. Dimitri's hands knew every line of his body, every scar, every place where he'd been broken and healed. He washed Artem like he was something precious, something worth protecting.

They rinsed in silence, and then Artem pulled the drain plug. They stepped out of the tub, and neither of them bothered with towels. Instead, they simply wrapped themselves in the warmth of the bathroom, letting the air dry their skin as they moved toward the bedroom.

The bed was still warm from where they'd been lying. They fell into it without ceremony, Dimitri pulling Artem against him immediately, one arm around his waist, the other tucked under his head. Artem's back was pressed to Dimitri's chest, and he could feel his partner's heartbeat gradually slowing, the tension in his body finally releasing.

"Thank you," Dimitri murmured against the back of Artem's neck.

Artem didn't answer with words. Instead, he reached back and found Dimitri's hand, threading their fingers together once more. They lay like that in the darkness, skin against skin, too tired for anything but this. Too tired for anything but the simple, profound comfort of being held by someone who understood exactly what it meant to need sanctuary.

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