

Before the Door Closes

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Before the Door Closes

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Summary

After their engagement, Ilya and Shane return to Russia under the cover of the Irina Foundation, knowing it may be the last time Ilya ever sets foot there. What waits for him is not closure, but grief, memory, and a past he learned to survive by becoming quiet and hard.

It isn't about going back to the life he escaped.

It's about one final goodbye—to the place that shaped him, and to the mother he never stopped missing.

With Shane beside him—steady, patient, and fiercely careful—Ilya faces grief he's spent years surviving, old fear that still lives in his bones, and the quiet truth he's been avoiding: some doors don't close cleanly... but you can still choose how to leave them.

This is a story about grief, survival, and choosing a future where home is no longer a place, but a person.

Chapter 1

The lake was almost too still this morning.

It had been that way since dusk, the water stretched smooth and dark beneath a sky that hadn't quite decided whether it was done with the day yet. The cottage sat back from the shoreline, lights low, warm and inviting. Crickets had started up somewhere in the trees, tentative at first, then braver, their sound weaving in and out of the quiet like a pulse. The loons could be heard in the distance. It was the kind of evening that could only be witnessed and felt in Canada. It was the kind of peace that many longed for, and would never find.

Ilya stood on the edge of the dock barefoot, toes curled against the cool planks, staring out at the lake like he had done every night since he first set foot in the cottage last year. He turned the ring on his finger absently, the metal catching what little light remained. It still felt strange there. Not wrong, just something he would need to get used to. If he was honest with himself, it was something that he wasn't sure would ever find a home. Not on his finger, and certainly not in his heart. Shane changed everything for him.

Behind him, Shane floated around the cottage. Ilya could tell that he was moving in the neurotic way he did when he wanted to appear busy. He knew that it pained Shane to not hover when he was out here alone with his thoughts. He knew that he would assume that every thought Ilya had was coming from the darkest parts of his mind. That was often true, but sometimes on nights like this, his thoughts were joy-filled reminders of how lucky he was to be here. To be here in Canada. With Shane. When Shane stepped out on to the deck he set two mugs on the small outdoor table, adjusted a chair that didn't need adjusting, then checked the screen door twice before finally taking a seat.

"Coffee" he announced, like Ilya hadn't watched him make it. "I couldn't remember if you wanted cream or not, so I put it on the side."

Ilya glanced back over his shoulder. "It is late for coffee, yes?."

"Yes," Shane said, a little defensively. "But I wanted to feel useful."

"I have other ways for you to be useful tonight" Ilya yelled back cheekily.

Shane snorted and stood, carrying his mug down the steps now, stopping a few feet behind Ilya. He didn't crowd him. He never did. Instead, he leaned against the railing, shoulder just close enough to brush Ilya's arm if either of them moved an inch.

They stood like that for a while, listening to the lake breathe.

"I forgot how quiet it gets out here," Shane said eventually. "In a good way. Not... the other kind."

Ilya hummed. "You mean the kind where your brain starts inventing problems to stay entertained?"

Shane shot him a look. “I don’t invent problems.”

“You absolutely do.”

“I identify potential future complications,” Shane corrected. “Proactively.”

Ilya smiled faintly, eyes still on the water. The cottage had become their home together. Ilya hadn’t realized how much he needed it until they arrived and his shoulders dropped an inch from the weight falling off of them.

“This place feels... safe,” Shane said, as if reading his mind. Then, quickly, “I mean, obviously not in a dramatic sense. Just. Quiet.”

“It is,” Ilya agreed. He took a sip of his coffee, then grimaced. “This is still too hot.”

“You say that every time.”

“And every time I am right.”

Shane smiled, but it didn’t quite settle. He watched Ilya’s reflection ripple faintly on the lake’s surface, watched the way his hand kept turning the ring, slower now, more deliberate.

“Can I ask you something?” Shane said.

Ilya didn’t turn. “It took you less than a minute to invent a problem, yes?”

“Yes,” Shane admitted. “But I still want to ask.”

Ilya laughed under his breath. “Go ahead.”

Shane hesitated. It was subtle—just a fraction too long—but Ilya caught it. He always did.

“When we get married,” Shane began, “you can’t go back to Russia, can you?”

Ilya blinked. The question landed softer than he expected, but deeper. He considered deflecting, offering something clever and vague. He didn’t.

“I don’t want to go back to Russia. There is nothing left there for me.” he said instead.

Shane nodded, unsurprised. “Okay. But, what if you change your mind. Once people know about us, you can never go back.”

Ilya shifted his weight, the dock creaking quietly beneath him. “Do we need to talk about this? Right now?” He looked at Shane and realized he wasn’t going to drop this. He turned his body fully now, taking Shane’s hands in his. He looked into his eyes, more seriously than he had been. “Shane, this is where I want to be. Here. With you. There are things in Russia I might like to see again, but if it means not marrying you I would never risk it.”

Shane absorbed that, brow furrowing slightly. “So there are things?... People?”

Ilya exhaled through his nose. He let go of Shane's hands and turned back to the lake. He was frustrated now at Shane's insistence. "You really do want to create a problem here don't you?"

"No," Shane said. "I just don't want our relationship to be the reason you can't say goodbye to your home."

Ilya finally turned to face him. Shane's expression was open, serious without being heavy, the way it got when he was genuinely trying to understand something instead of filing it away for later analysis.

"Russia was never home in the way you mean," Ilya said. "It was... structure. Rules. Expectations." He shrugged. "This is my home, Shane."

Shane winced faintly. "That sounds exhausting."

"It is" Ilya replied. "You are."

Shane laughed quietly. "I meant Russia, not me ass hole."

Ilya smiled thinly. "I know."

They fell quiet again, the crickets filling the space between them. Shane watched the way Ilya's shoulders stayed tense despite the calm, like his body didn't fully trust the stillness yet.

"When you left," Shane said carefully, "did it feel like escape, or like... exile?"

Ilya laughed, sharp but not unkind. "You don't ask easy questions."

"I know," Shane said. "I'm trying."

Ilya stared back out at the lake. The water looked endless in the low light, dark and reflective all at once. "Both," he said finally. "At first, it was escape. Every mile felt lighter. Later... it felt like I'd crossed a line I couldn't uncross."

"And now?"

Ilya glanced down at his hand, at the ring glinting softly. "Now it feels final."

Shane swallowed. "Does that scare you?"

"Yes," Ilya said immediately.

Shane blinked. "Oh."

Ilya looked at him then, really looked. "You thought I'd say no?"

"I thought you might say 'a little,'" Shane admitted. "Or make a joke."

"I'm tired of joking tonight."

That earned him a slow nod. Shane stepped closer, resting his forearms on the railing beside Ilya, close enough now that their shoulders touched.

“What scares you about it?” Shane asked.

Ilya considered the question. He could feel the honest answer pressing at his ribs, heavy and sharp. He didn’t give it voice—not all of it.

“It means I don’t get to pretend anymore,” he said instead. “That there’s a version of me who still fits there. Who could go back quietly. Blend in. Keep his head down.”

“And you don’t want to be that person,” Shane said.

“No,” Ilya said. “But he kept me alive.”

That landed. Shane didn’t rush to fill the silence this time. He let it stretch, let the truth of it settle.

“You don’t owe that version of you anything,” Shane said eventually.

Ilya tilted his head. “He’d disagree.”

Shane smiled sadly. “Of course he would.”

They stood there, the lake breathing steadily in front of them, the cottage warm and waiting behind them. Somewhere deep in the trees, a loon called out, the sound long and haunting.

“You said there are things you might want to see” Shane said quietly, “what are they?”

Ilya didn’t answer right away. He watched the ripples spread across the water, counting them, grounding himself.

“I don’t care about the people. About Alexei,” he said at last. “But I miss other things. I miss the language. It has been so long since I have spoken in my native language for real.”

Shane nodded. “You still use it when you’re tired.”

“I know.”

“I like it,” Shane added. “Even when I don’t understand it.”

Ilya smiled, genuine this time. “Careful. You’ll encourage me.”

“Maybe I want to,” Shane said.

Ilya’s smile faded, thoughtful. “I don’t miss the house,” he added, quickly, too quickly. “Or the city. Or the expectations.”

Shane noticed. He always noticed. “But?”

Ilya shrugged. “I could not introduce you to my mom.”

“Well you couldn't really do that anyway” Shane said, clueless as ever.

Ilya glanced at him. Shane’s face was calm, curious, not demanding. He knew Shane wasn't stupid, he just had a hard time reading between the lines sometimes. He chose his words with care.

“My mother is buried outside of Moscow” he said. “close to where she grew up. Once I could drive, I visited her often.”

Shane’s jaw tightened. “I would have love to have met her. Anyway I could.”

“I know,” Ilya said softly. “That’s why it’s hard to imagine not going back there. It is the only goodbye I cared about.”

Shane reached out, fingers brushing against Ilya’s hand, the ring cool between them. “If you wanted to” he said, “I would go back with you.”

Ilya looked at their joined hands. “I know.”

“And we wouldn’t stay if it was too much.”

“I know.”

“And you don’t have to show me everything,” Shane added. “You can keep parts of it for you. I’m not entitled to every wound.”

Ilya laughed quietly. “You say that now. You can't even let me look at a lake by myself.”

Shane didn't laugh. “I mean it,” he said back, looking Ilya in the eyes.

Ilya believed him. That, somehow, was the most terrifying part.

The night deepened around them, the lake darkening to near-black, the cottage lights glowing softly behind them like an invitation. Ilya leaned into Shane without thinking, resting his head briefly against his shoulder.

“We can talk about it tomorrow, I am tired.” he murmured, not quite a question. He grabbed the mug of coffee and poured it in the lake, signaling that the night was over.

Shane’s arm came around him, solid and warm. “Only if you want it,” he replied. When he let him go he told Ilya that he was going to go shower. Ilya knew he had showered already, but this was another way that Shane could think of to make himself seem busy long enough to give Ilya some space.

Ilya closed his eyes, breathing in the scent of pine and water. Shane had said he wasn't entitled to every wound, but what he didn't know was that he had already opened one.

Chapter 2

Ilya woke before the sun.

Not fully, just enough that he knew he would not fall back asleep. The cottage was still dark, the air cool against his bare arms, the lake outside a black, unbroken sheet just as he had left it the night before. Some mornings he struggled to come back to reality and remember where he was, that he was safe here at the cottage.

Then Shane shifted beside him. The best reminder.

The mattress dipped slightly, familiar weight, familiar warmth. Shane's arm was slung loosely over Ilya's waist, his hand resting open against Ilya's stomach like he'd put it there without thinking. His breathing was slow, even—deep sleep, the kind Ilya rarely managed anymore. It made Ilya smile for a brief moment, but the tension didn't ease.

Ilya lay still, staring up at the ceiling, counting the faint knots in the wood paneling. The ring felt colder in the early morning, the metal pressing against his finger every time his hand flexed. He curled his fingers into the sheet instead, grounding himself in texture, in proof that he was here. Safe. Wanted.

It didn't stop the thoughts from coming.

This is a mistake.

The thought arrived fully formed, without panic attached to it. That was what made it dangerous. It didn't feel dramatic or impulsive. It felt... reasonable.

He turned his head just enough to look at Shane. Even asleep, Shane looked earnest—brow faintly furrowed, mouth slack, glasses abandoned on the nightstand where Ilya had placed them the night before. There was something almost painfully open about him in sleep, like all the careful self-monitoring shut off when consciousness did.

Ilya loved him. That wasn't in question.

But love had never made Ilya braver. It had only made him more careful. It made him more scared of losing one more thing he felt he couldn't live without. He feared this was a horrifying difference between he and Shane. Shane grew up in a home where love was multiplied. It was never taken away. He didn't know the fear that came with knowing it could be. It was what allowed Shane to sleep so peacefully.

He slipped out from under Shane's arm slowly, deliberately, easing himself free without waking him. Shane murmured something incoherent, shifted, then settled again, his hand closing around nothing.

Ilya stood, pulling on a sweater from the back of the chair. The cottage floor was cool beneath his feet as he padded toward the window, then stopped. The dock beyond was barely

visible, a darker shape against darker water.

Russia pressed in on him again, uninvited.

He hadn't agreed to go, but while his body stood in the cottage, his mind was already in Moscow.

He rubbed his face with both hands, exhaling slowly. He should have slept. He should have stayed in bed. He should not be awake cataloguing every reason this was a bad idea.

Behind him, the mattress creaked softly.

"Ilya?"

The sound of his name—sleep-rough, uncertain—sent a jolt through him. He turned just as Shane pushed himself up onto one elbow, squinting, adjusting to the room.

"You're gone," Shane said, like he was stating a fact he didn't quite trust.

"I'm here," Ilya replied quickly. "I didn't go far."

Shane nodded, but his eyes stayed on him, alert now, already awake in the way he always was when something felt off. "What time is it?"

"Too early," Ilya said.

"Is something wrong?"

There it was. Direct, simple, earnest.

Ilya hesitated. The truth crowded his throat. He chose something adjacent to it instead.

"Couldn't sleep," he said. "My brain decided it was time to review my entire life."

Shane grimaced sympathetically. "Rude of it."

"Extremely."

Shane pushed himself upright, then patted the space beside him. "Come back to bed?"

Ilya considered it. He really did. Then he shook his head. "You go back to sleep."

Shane studied him for a long moment, then nodded. "Okay. I'll make coffee." Not accepting Ilyas orders.

Ilya smiled faintly. "You don't have to—"

"I want to," Shane said, already reaching for his glasses. "Also, I can tell when you're about to put up your walls."

Ilya laughed, sharp and reflexive. "You cannot."

“I can,” Shane said mildly. “You get very polite.”

“That’s called being in love.”

“That’s called lying,” Shane countered, standing.

They moved through the cottage together in that quiet, early-morning choreography they’d developed over time—Shane finding the coffee, Ilya opening a window, the lake air sliding in cool and clean. The first hint of dawn was just beginning to show its colors.

They sat at the small kitchen table, mugs warming their hands. The silence between them wasn’t uncomfortable, but it was loaded, humming with things not being said.

“You’re already pulling away,” Shane said eventually.

Ilya froze. Just for a fraction of a second.

“That’s not fair, I just woke up.” he said, carefully.

“I didn’t say it was,” Shane replied. “I just said it’s happening.”

Ilya leaned back in his chair, exhaling through his nose. “You’re imagining it.”

“I don’t think I am.”

Ilya tilted his head, studying him. “Is this the part where you tell me I’m being "emotionally unavailable"?”

“No,” Shane said. “This is the part where I ask what changed overnight.”

Ilya looked down at his mug. The coffee was too hot, steam curling up in lazy spirals. “Nothing changed.”

Shane waited.

“I just...” Ilya began, then stopped. He rolled his shoulders, loosening tension that hadn’t gone anywhere. “I thought I knew what I wanted.”

Shane nodded slowly. “And what was that.”

“To say fuck you to Russia.”

“Well,” Shane said. “Big decisions always feel different in daylight.”

Ilya glanced up at him, surprised. Shane’s expression was calm, thoughtful, not defensive.

“I didn’t say we were going” Ilya added quickly.

“I didn’t say you did.”

“But you’re thinking it.”

“I’m thinking you’re scared,” Shane said. “And trying to get ahead of it.”

Ilya laughed quietly. “You make it sound so... strategic.”

“You are strategic,” Shane replied. Gosh that word sounded hotter coming out of his accented mouth, Shane thought. “It’s one of the things I admire about you. You plan your words, you make decisions based on logic, you prepare in a million ways to protect yourself, and me. Your strategic mind is just a shield.”

That landed heavier than expected. Ilya looked away, jaw tightening.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, suddenly.

Shane blinked. “You’re not.”

“By doing this,” Ilya clarified. “By dragging you into something ugly and unfinished.”

Shane leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “You’re not dragging me. I walked in willingly.”

“You don’t even know what you’re walking into.”

“I don’t need a map,” Shane said. “I just need you. I need you to be honest with me. You spent so many years protecting yourself from that place when it was their job to protect you. Maybe I can help you feel safe there for once.”

Ilya met his gaze. Shane had passion in his eyes. It was ironic that Russia, a place that was not safe for men like them, suddenly did feel safer with him.

“I’m trying to be honest” Ilya said with a hint of defeat.

“You’re building the walls,” Shane replied gently. “Just in case.”

Ilya smiled faintly. “Old habits.”

“The walls kept you alive,” Shane said. “I get that.”

Ilya swallowed.

“But,” Shane continued, “they don’t always help when you’re not alone anymore.”

The words were careful, not accusatory. They still stung.

“So what,” Ilya said, tone sharpening, “you want me to lay everything out now? Give you a full list of every bad memory before breakfast?”

Shane flinched, just slightly. Then he shook his head. “No. I want you to stop pretending this doesn’t matter to you and that you have already closed the book on Russia.”

Ilya opened his mouth, then closed it again.

The truth sat between them.

Outside, the lake began to catch the light, thin silver spreading across its surface.

“I’m allowed to change my mind,” Ilya said quietly.

“Yes,” Shane said immediately. “You are.”

“And you won’t resent me.”

“No.”

“And you won’t think less of me.”

Shane stood, crossed the small space between them, and rested his hands on the back of Ilya’s chair. He leaned down, pressing his forehead briefly to Ilya’s.

“I proposed to you knowing you’re complicated,” he said softly. “This doesn’t scare me off.”

Ilya closed his eyes. The urge to pull back flared—and faded.

“I don’t know how to do this,” he admitted.

Shane stayed there, steady. “Then we figure it out. Just don’t lock me out.”

Ilya nodded, once.

The walls didn’t come down, but Shane could see over them.

By midmorning, the lake had changed moods.

Sunlight skimmed across the surface in thin, glittering lines. The dock creaked faintly underfoot as Shane stepped out with two towels slung over his shoulder, blinking in the sudden brightness.

Ilya was already there.

He sat at the edge of the dock, feet dangling in the water, shoulders squared, posture deceptively relaxed. He wore sunglasses now, reflective lenses hiding his eyes, his expression unreadable from a distance. One hand rested on his knee. The other was curled loosely, thumb rubbing at the ring without him seeming to notice he was doing it.

Shane paused.

This was the version of Ilya that made him tread carefully—not because he was cold, exactly, but because everything about him suggested composure. Deliberate stillness. Control reclaimed.

Shane approached anyway, setting the towels down beside him. “You didn’t wait.”

Ilya shrugged. “You were busy.”

“I was gone ten minutes.”

“I didn’t count,” Ilya said lightly.

Shane sat, careful not to crowd him. The dock was wide enough for space, and Ilya had positioned himself just far enough away that Shane noticed without being able to comment on it without making things worse.

The water lapped softly against the posts below them.

“Did you sleep at all last night?” Shane asked.

“A little,” Ilya said. “Enough.”

Shane nodded, unconvinced. “You went quiet again.”

Ilya smiled. “I never stopped talking.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Ilya turned his head slightly, sunglasses catching the sun. “You might need to be more specific.”

There it was. Not deflection—precision. The kind that made it impossible to argue without sounding petty.

Shane inhaled slowly. “You feel... farther away.”

Ilya laughed, soft and incredulous. “We’re sitting on the same dock.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

Ilya tipped his head back, letting the sun hit his face. “You’re reading into things.”

Shane watched him, frustration flickering before he tamped it down. “You asked me not to.”

“I did,” Ilya agreed. “And you agreed.”

“I agreed not to assume anything,” Shane corrected. “Not to ignore.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

“You’re looking for a problem,” he said. “Because you don’t like uncertainty.”

“That’s not—”

“And I don’t have one to give you,” Ilya continued smoothly. “Not today.”

Shane fell silent. He stared out at the lake, letting the moment settle, reminding himself not to chase. Not to push. Ilya always retreated faster when he felt cornered.

“I keep thinking about what you said yesterday,” Shane said after a while.

Ilya didn’t respond.

“About your mom” Shane added. “About saying goodbye.”

Ilya’s shoulders shifted. “I’m not doing this again Shane. All today has been has been this.”

Shane nodded. “That’s what worries me.”

Ilya turned toward him then, expression sharp despite the glasses. “You’re worried about the wrong thing.”

“Am I?”

“Yes,” Ilya said. “You’re worried I won’t say goodbye. I’m worried I’ll make the wrong choice.”

“That feels connected.”

Ilya huffed a laugh. “You always think everything is connected.”

“Usually is,” Shane said.

Ilya stood abruptly, the dock rocking slightly beneath them. Shane instinctively reached out, steadying himself, but Ilya was already moving—stretching, rolling his shoulders, pacing a few steps like he needed motion to keep his thoughts from closing in.

“I’m thinking about consequences,” Ilya said. “That’s all.”

“Of going,” Shane asked. “Or not going?”

Ilya stopped, back to him. “Yes.”

Shane leaned back on his hands, watching the line of tension in Ilya’s spine. “Talk to me.”

Ilya turned, exasperation flashing. “I am talking! You are not listening!”

“You’re giving me the executive summary,” Shane said. “I think there’s more to it.”

Ilya stared at him. For a moment, something raw flickered across his face—annoyance, fear, something dangerously close to anger. Then it smoothed out.

“There’s always more,” he said calmly. “That doesn’t mean it’s useful.”

Shane flinched. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know,” Ilya said quickly. Too quickly. “You want honesty. I’m being honest.”

It was true. Just not complete.

Shane stood, closing the distance between them again. "I don't need everything," he said. "I just need to know why you're bracing for impact when we haven't even said we are going."

Ilya scoffed. "You don't know what it is like to always be bracing for impact." He was angry now. "You heard me say I want a vacation. To say goodbye to my mother. To speak in my own language. Nothing about Russia is a fucking vacation Shane. It is a place where I was beaten down by a man who was supposed to love me, surrounded by people who used me for years."

Shane watched as Ilya's rage filled words turned from English to Russian. He no longer knew what he was saying, but he could see tears welling in Ilya's eyes as he continued. He went on and on and on. Arms flailing, tears falling, and Shane could do nothing but stand back and watch it unfold, trying to hide the shock in his face.

Finally, Ilya turned back to the lake, arms crossing tight over his chest. Silent. He took a deep breath and finally said, "If we go," he said, voice low, "we have to be careful."

Shane straightened. He didn't want to bring any attention to what he just witnessed. Whatever he said brought him to a place where he was clearly ready to speak more coherently about this. "Careful how?" he asked with blind confidence.

"I don't know." Ilya said. "We can't be... us. I can't be me. This version of me."

Shane frowned. "You can't tell me how to act."

"I'm not," Ilya snapped, then stopped. His jaw worked, like he was choosing words he trusted. "I'm saying I know how small mistakes get big there."

Shane knew he was talking about his mother.

Ilya continued, "It doesn't take much. One look. One touch. One second too long."

Shane looked at him. "So you think I'm the problem."

Ilya turned, eyes sharp, scared. "I think WE are the problem, Hollander" he said. "I have always been a problem there. You make it worse."

The silence stretched. Shane swallowed.

"I'm not trying to make anything worse." Shane said.

"I know, I know" Ilya said again. Softer now. "I'm just... afraid."

"Of what?"

Ilya's voice dropped. "Of how fast they decide who you are."

Shane's mouth tightened. "So, you're protecting me? I know this is complicated and hard for you, but I'll be fine."

Ilya's head snapped up. "No. You're—" He stopped himself, inhaled sharply. "You're the reason it's complicated."

Silence stretched.

"Okay. I get it. I'm sorry." Shane said softly.

"I know," Ilya replied. "I'm just trying to be realistic. And I don't want you to know the version of me that lived there."

Shane nodded slowly, hurt settling into something quieter. "I wish you'd let me decide what I can handle."

Ilya hesitated. The honest answer pressed at his throat.

"I don't trust myself to be someone you can handle. I want to protect you." he said instead.

That surprised Shane. "From what?"

Ilya looked away. "From things you don't deserve to be dragged into."

Shane stepped closer again, voice low. "You also don't get to decide what I deserve."

Ilya laughed, sharp-edged. "You're marrying me. That alone suggests questionable judgment."

Shane didn't smile.

"Ilya."

Something in his tone—gentle but firm—made Ilya still.

"You're not doing this alone," Shane said. "Even if you want to."

Ilya's chest tightened. He crossed his arms tighter, a reflexive barrier. "I've done worse alone."

"I know," Shane said. "That doesn't mean you have to keep doing it."

Ilya stared at him, something unreadable in his expression. For a moment, Shane thought he might actually push him away—verbally, emotionally, with precision sharp enough to cut clean.

Instead, Ilya sighed.

"I hate that you see through me," he muttered.

Shane exhaled, relieved. "I hate that you think that's a bad thing."

Ilya leaned back against the railing, tension still coiled but no longer sparking. "I'm not ready," he admitted quietly. "To decide. To go. To not go. I feel like the moment I say it out loud, something locks."

Shane nodded. "Then don't say it yet."

Ilya glanced at him. "You're okay with that?"

"I don't love it, clearly I opened an old wound here that could use healing," Shane said honestly. "But yes. I will be with you either way."

Ilya studied him, searching for resentment. He didn't find it. Just patience, strained but sincere.

"You're very good at this," Ilya said.

"At what?"

"At fighting without leaving."

Shane smiled faintly. "You're the only one who thinks this is a fight."

Ilya clocked what he meant. Shane was raised in a place where confrontation was just a means of finding a solution. He was grateful he was in moments like this. He was still getting used to the idea himself.

They stood together on the dock, the lake bright and indifferent in front of them. Ilya slipped his hand into Shane's, the ring cool between their palms. Shane squeezed gently, grounding, present.

"I'm not promising anything," Ilya said.

"I'm not asking for a promise," Shane replied. "Just honesty."

Ilya considered that. Then nodded, once. "I'll try." Ilya turned to look at the lake, and Shane grabbed his face in both hands, kissing him deeply, reminding Ilya that this is also a way to communicate how he feels.

Chapter 3

Shane was sure to wake up first the next morning. He'd gone to bed with a pit in his stomach, feeling like they'd wasted a full day of quality time together because of his incessant need to crack Ilya open, one bad memory at a time. He didn't mean to—not really. After so many years of secret rendezvous and missed opportunities, he just wanted to have every part of the man he was marrying.

Once his eyes were open, he didn't move a muscle. He knew sleep was rarely peaceful for Ilya, and he wanted him to soak up as much rest as he could. He was grateful he'd woken up facing him, too, because it meant he got the best view the cottage could offer.

As he watched Ilya sleep, Shane thought back to the first time they'd woken up together at the cottage. He remembered looking up at him and seeing a look of peaceful calm settle over Ilya's face before his eyes had even opened, and then hearing him murmur, almost startled by his own honesty—

“I like you.”

That had been the first time Shane had ever seen Ilya look like that. A pure, weightless state of rest. Untouched by fear. Untouched by the world.

As he looked at him now, Shane knew some of that weight had returned.

His lips weren't loosely parted. His breathing was uneven. There was the faintest scowl etched into his brow, like his body was fighting something even in sleep. Shane couldn't help wondering what he might be dreaming about.

Then he noticed him stirring—restless, not awake yet.

Shane and Ilya were walking down the street.

What street was this? Ilya had no idea.

Shane reached out for his hand, and when Ilya looked over at him, he had that smile plastered across his face. Too bright. Too easy. Like nothing could touch him.

Ilya felt uneasy. He swatted Shane's hand away as they walked, Shane's smile unmoving.

He looked around. They were surrounded by people, but nobody he could name. The pavement felt familiar under his feet, the air cold against his face. He looked at the buildings—close together, grey and boring. Like he'd seen them before, but couldn't place them. The weather felt threatening.

Actually... everything felt threatening.

They continued walking.

Beside him, Shane moved like a content child, with the kind of relaxed posture that made people want to approach you. His jacket was open, his white t-shirt brighter than anything else around them. He stood out in a sea of joyless faces.

Ilya felt nothing but tension in his body.

His jaw was clenched. His fists were balled. His eyes were taking everything in at a rapid speed. Fight or flight. Every muscle prepared to run, or swing, or shove Shane behind him.

Ilya didn't know why, but he felt the need to protect Shane here.

He reached out for him, making sure to grab his jacket sleeve—not his hand. He pulled him right up next to him and let go immediately, careful not to draw attention. Careful not to make it obvious they belonged together.

Shane glanced at him with that giant, stupid grin that didn't belong here. It was like a happy little robot.

“What?” Shane murmured, smiling.

“Nothing,” Ilya said automatically, his eyes darting back to his surroundings.

Even in his dream—even with the city roaring around them—his voice felt exposed. Like it had echoed. Like it had carried farther than it should have. Like someone could pick it up and trace it back to him.

Human robot Shane didn’t notice. Of course he didn’t. Oblivious.

They kept walking.

A group of men leaned against a railing near a storefront. They weren’t doing anything obvious. Just standing. Smoking. Laughing at something Ilya couldn’t hear.

But the laughter dipped as they passed, the conversation thinning like someone had pressed mute.

One of them looked up.

Held Ilya’s gaze for a beat too long.

Then looked at Shane.

Then looked back at Ilya again.

Ilya’s stomach tightened like he was going to be sick. He didn’t know these men—but he knew this feeling. The warning that lived in the back of his skull. The sense that something had been noticed.

He needed to steer them away from here.

His body turned before his mind even realized a decision had been made. He started to go back the way they came, keeping Shane close the way you kept something precious close when you couldn't hide it.

Shane was still smiling.

“Do you want to stop somewhere to eat?” Shane asked, turning his head slightly, eyes bright like he was excited. Like this was a normal trip. Like they were just two men in a city.

“No,” Ilya said quickly. “We keep moving.”

Shane's eyebrows rose, amused. “You're so intense.”

Ilya didn't answer.

Because behind them, he could feel it now—movement shifting, attention adjusting, the subtle click of people stepping into a new awareness.

He heard a voice.

“Ilya.”

The way his name was spoken turned his blood cold.

Not yelled. Not questioned. Not mistaken. Said like a statement.

More importantly, it was in a thick Russian accent.

Fuck.

They were in Russia.

His shoulders tightened. His fingers curled against Shane's sleeve harder than he meant to. Shane glanced back over his shoulder, curious, still relaxed.

"Ilya?" Shane repeated under his breath. He smiled, the idiot. "Hey Ilya, they know you!"

Ilya turned his head just enough to see the speaker. He expected it to be the group of men—ready to pounce, ready to prove he hadn't been imagining things.

Instead, he saw a figure.

A short figure dressed in a long trench coat, hood pulled low over most of their face. A scarf hung loose around their mouth, bundled enough that there was no way to know who it was.

But something about their presence made a strange calm wash over Ilya. Familiar. Impossible.

They stepped closer. Their eyes flicked to Shane—not with confusion, not with judgment. Just... taking him in.

"Back home," they said, smiling like they were being kind. "We didn't know you were coming."

Ilya's throat tightened.

He forced his face into neutrality. Forced his shoulders into calm. Forced his voice into polite.

“We’re just visiting,” he said in Russian, perfectly even—still unsure who this person was.

Their smile widened beneath the scarf. “And this is...?”

Shane offered his hand like a normal person.

Like someone who hadn’t grown up learning that hands could be weapons. Or leverage. Or proof of something you didn’t want recorded.

“Shane,” he said brightly. “Hi.”

The figure didn’t take his hand right away.

They looked at it.

Then at Ilya.

Then they took it—just long enough to be socially correct—before letting go like the touch burned.

“Nice to meet you,” they said, still smiling.

The smile didn’t reach their eyes.

“Are you staying long?” they asked.

Somehow, Ilya knew the question wasn’t about time.

It was about safety.

It was about risk.

Shane shifted beside him, still too open, still too warm. “Just a week,” he said, helpful. “We’re—”

Ilya cut in so fast it almost sounded like he stepped on his own words.

“Not long,” he said. “We have... work.”

The figure nodded, expression softening with pretend understanding. “Of course. Always busy.” Their gaze slid to Shane again, and their voice dropped slightly—intimate in a way that made Ilya’s skin crawl. “You must be important.”

Shane laughed politely. “I don’t know about that.”

Ilya felt his hands start to shake.

Not visibly. Not yet. But in that deep internal way—the tremor that warned him he was reaching the edge of his control. Heat built behind his eyes. That old instinct crawled up his spine.

Don’t react. Don’t show. Don’t give them anything.

He pulled Shane closer again, fingers tightening like a silent command. Did this person know about them? Did anyone?

He looked around, expecting to be swarmed at any moment.

Shane finally sensed it. His smile faltered. His eyes flicked to Ilya, searching.

“What’s wrong?” he murmured in English, low.

The figure’s head tilted—not sharply. Just enough to notice.

“Sorry,” they said lightly, like they were teasing. “What language is that?”

Shane blinked. “Oh—English.”

Shut up, Shane.

Ilya didn’t know why English would be a threat right now, but everything was a threat here. He needed Shane to just shut up and take that stupid smile off his face.

“English,” the figure repeated. “Interesting.”

Ilya felt the street narrow around them. The buildings leaned closer. The noise pressed in. He could feel eyes now—more than before. People who weren’t watching were suddenly watching. People who had been walking past slowed down.

Shane's body stiffened beside him, finally catching up to the shift in the air. The relaxed posture vanished. The smile disappeared. He looked at Ilya like he'd suddenly realized the rules were real.

"Ilya," Shane whispered, barely audible.

Ilya couldn't answer.

He felt entranced by the figure in front of him. Everything in his body screamed at him to leave—now, while he still could—but he couldn't make himself move.

And then the figure said the sentence that made his blood run cold.

"So," they said, glancing between them like it was nothing, like it was casual conversation. "Are you traveling *together*?"

Shane didn't speak.

Ilya felt the moment hang.

This was the pivot. This was the point where one word could decide your future.

He knew exactly what they were implying.

His mind raced through options—routes, exits, explanations. Every safe lie. Every believable deflection. Every strategy he'd ever used to survive in rooms like this.

He was about to turn and leave, to say nothing, to drag Shane with him—

But the figure loomed closer.

Ilya couldn't move.

It was like his feet had been glued to the uneven cement beneath him. His mouth was frozen. His legs were frozen. He looked at Shane, bracing for fear—

Instead, it was there again.

That stupid fucking smile.

Maybe Shane knew better than him. Maybe he could trust him.

He was going to have to, because the figure moved closer and closer. Ilya wanted to blurt out an answer—

Yes! We're traveling for work!

—but his mouth wouldn't cooperate. His tongue felt thick. His lungs felt too small.

The figure came closer.

Closer.

Ilya's eyes shifted wildly around them, trying to find a way out.

They were only feet away now. His heart pounded so hard it felt like it was trying to break his ribs from the inside.

Thump. Thump. Thump. Thump.

He could feel his pulse radiating through his whole body.

They were right in front of them now, reaching out for him and Shane.

This was it.

What would they do?

Haul them to jail?

Deport Shane and leave Ilya here to rot?

Kill them both?

Ilya felt the figure's hand on him—surely ready to cuff him.

They reached for Shane too.

And then—

They did something unexpected.

They took Shane's hand and placed it in Ilya's.

Not forcefully.

Gently.

Lovingly.

Then they placed their own hand over both of them.

And that's when Ilya saw it.

The simple gold bracelet, hanging from a delicate wrist.

His throat closed.

His head snapped up, and with his other hand he reached for the hood, pulling it back.

He was met with the most beautiful blue-green eyes—eyes he could find in his own reflection.

His mother's.

Ilya's breath caught. He wanted so badly to hold her. How had he not recognized her voice? Had it been that long?

He let go of Shane's hand and lifted his arms to hug her—

But he felt her palm press against his chest, stopping him.

There was desperation in her eyes now, all kindness washed away, urgency replacing it so fast it stole the air from his lungs.

“You need to run,” she said.

Ilya looked behind him.

The group of men were coming.

Weapons in hand.

He grabbed Shane, his feet suddenly unglued, and he ran.

“ILYA!”

Shane's voice slammed into him, shaking him awake.

“Wake up!”

Ilya snapped upright, heart pounding. His chest heaved. His skin was damp. He felt wetness on his cheeks and didn't know when it had started.

Shane was there, his hand rubbing slow circles on his back, steady and warm.

Ilya looked over at him, relieved that that stupid robotic smile was gone.

“Breathe,” Shane said softly.

Ilya dragged in a breath. Then another. His hands trembled in his lap, like his body hadn't figured out it was safe yet.

When he looked at Shane, he had only one thought in his mind.

"I think I need to say goodbye to my mom."

Chapter 4

Shane and Ilya found themselves in the airport before the end of that week. Shane was quick to book them flights, before Ilya could change his mind. He imagined that whatever he had dreamed about that day had to have been connected to his subconscious desire to return to Russia.

Their privilege really showed up at the airport. It was hard to go from private tarmacs and jets to a busy terminal filled with people and noise. It would be a long flight, so Shane was sure to purchase first class seats that would offer them the kind of privacy that they not only desired, but actually needed. People passed by, offering double takes, pretending to not know who they were— but they knew anonymity didn't exist here.

They had only existed in this capacity when they were doing foundation work and hockey camps. It had always been comfortable under the guise of being “business”, and when it came to camps they knew that the kids were always oblivious. Here, they felt more exposed in a way that they sensed more unwanted attention and uninvited questions. Shane was the first to distance himself. He was sure to walk at a slightly quicker pace, avoiding any kind of physical contact.

Ilya felt the absence immediately. He hated the space.

His hand drifted instinctively toward where his ring should have been. Fingers brushed the bare skin of his knuckle, found nothing, and his stomach tightened anyway. He corrected himself quickly, letting his hand fall back to his side like nothing had happened. Like he hadn't made the choice deliberately.

The ring was back at the cottage, safe in the small dish on the dresser. It was the safe choice, but he didn't like that it had to be this way.

His body felt heavy today. Nothing felt right about this. It all felt like a lie. It was important to be safe, but returning to Russia with the man that he loved, and having it be a secret, felt so unfair. It felt unfair here too, but here they had the cottage at least.

Shane clocked it, of course.

He didn't say anything at first. Just adjusted the strap of his bag, shifted a half-step closer so their elbows brushed. It looked accidental, but it wasn't. It was Shane's version of telling him he loved him without making a scene.

“You okay?” he murmured, low enough to disappear into the general hum.

Ilya didn't look at him. If he looked, he'd show something. He could feel his face already trying to settle into neutrality, trying to go smooth and unreadable the way it always did when he was nervous.

“Yes,” he answered automatically.

Shane waited.

“I’m fine,” Ilya corrected, like the difference mattered. Like he wanted the words to be true.

Shane nodded like he believed him, even if he didn’t.

They kept moving, weaving through families dragging suitcases, business travelers with stiff shoulders and earbuds in, teenagers laughing too loudly like airports were fun.

At one point they crossed paths with a hockey team, suited up, flying to an out of province tournament. This brought them some joy. It didn’t feel like a burden to stop for some photos and autographs. It was an opportunity to practice their cover story as well, mentioning that they were headed to Russia for some foundation work. Shane also enjoyed seeing Ilya in situations like this. He had been so under-appreciated in Russia, remembered for his shortfalls and not his successes. Here he was a full blown hockey legend, and it was nice to see him getting the attention he deserved.

They finally arrived at their terminal and sat down, being sure to leave a seat between them.

But the moment they sat down, Shane could feel something in Ilya change—subtle, almost invisible if you didn’t know him. He got... quieter.

He wasn’t completely withdrawn, but his thoughts had gone inward again. Like he was allocating energy and couldn’t afford to waste. Shane wondered if this is how he always had to prepare when he went back to Russia.

Shane could understand why. He just hated that his home could do that to him.

He began to dig through his bag, trying to keep his body and mind busy. He put his headphones in his pocket, and grabbed himself a snack, before digging around for his passport.

“Do you have your passport?” He asked Ilya.

“No I lost it between security and here...” Ilya replied sarcastically.

Shane stared at him nervously.

“Yes Shane, I have my passport.” He said patting the pocket of his thousand dollar sweatpants.

Ilya was the only person Shane knew that would pay that much to look comfortable.

“Okay,” Shane said softly as he held his own passport up, “we’re good.”

Ilya nodded and took it without comment.

Shane’s eyes shot daggers at Ilya.

“Relax Hollander. You will stress and look fifty more times before we board. I will keep them.”

Shane swallowed the urge to grab them back.

Because he knew Ilya would flinch at the wrong kind of touch right now. The public kind. The kind that could be witnessed and misinterpreted and stored away by strangers like evidence.

Ilya put in one of his headphones. He slipped his shoes off and tilted his head back against the wall. He was so beautiful, and Shane wondered how the whole world didn't just stop and stare at him. He swore he'd find Ilya in any room.

“How do you do that?” Shane asked quietly, because he couldn't help himself.

Ilya glanced over, expression unreadable. “Do what.”

“Look like you belong anywhere.”

Ilya's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. “Because I don't belong anywhere,” he said, like it was a simple fact.

Shane hated how normal it sounded coming out of his mouth, but he supposed it was kind of true. He had learned to blend in. The black sheep of his family, a man in the closet, often the only Russian in the room. The answer was sadder than he expected, but accurate nonetheless.

The gate area was full of people sitting in clusters—families leaning into each other, couples curled together over shared earbuds, strangers sprawled out with neck pillows and dead eyes. A TV played muted news above the seating, bright images flickering without sound. Someone's kid cried. Someone laughed.

Shane checked the boarding time like he hadn't checked it twenty minutes earlier. Then again. Then he refreshed the airline app like it might suddenly change into something more comforting if he stared hard enough.

Ilya shot him a glance.

“Chill out already... you can see the fucking plane. It can't leave without us.” He said gesturing to the plane that had arrived at the gate.

Shane watched him for a moment, then leaned back, careful to keep his voice low.

“Okay,” Shane said. “Can we talk about the plan?”

Ilya leaned his head back against the wall, eyes closed. “We already discussed the plan Hollander.”

It bothered Shane that he had already slipped back into using his last name exclusively.

Shane tried to smile. It felt thin. “I know. I just... want to make sure we’re on the same page.”

“We are,” Ilya said, eyes still closed.

Shane waited.

Ilya sighed, barely audible, as if conceding. He could sense Shane staring at him. “Do you need me to say it out loud?” he said as he sat up, removing his headphone.

“Yes,” Shane admitted sheepishly.

Ilya finally turned his head to look at him. His expression was calm, but there was something in his eyes that made Shane feel like he was annoying him. He usually found this part of Shane charming.

“Okay,” Ilya said quietly. “We are in Russia for foundation work.”

Shane nodded. “For the Irina Foundation.”

“Yes,” Ilya confirmed. “It’s public. It’s documented. We can say it anywhere.”

“And we can make a post,” Shane added quickly, because he’d been thinking about this for days, chewing on it like a strategy and a shield. “Like... a real post. Not vague. Something that makes sense from the outside. I’m sure those boys already have our pictures all over instagram.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed slightly. Confused.

“What kind of post,” he asked, voice careful.

Shane swallowed. “Something that explains why I’m there with you. Something people will accept without looking too hard.”

Ilya stared at him for a long second. “And you think a social media post will protect us.”

Shane shrugged. “Not protect. But...” He exhaled, frustrated with himself because he couldn’t find the right words. “It sets a narrative.”

Ilya blinked once. He remembered that word.

Shane continued before he could lose his nerve. “Like... you’re bringing me to Russia to show me where your mother came from. That it’s meaningful. That it’s... heritage, family, philanthropy. From an outsider perspective, it looks wholesome. It looks harmless.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched again, and this time it almost looked like a smile. Almost.

“Nothing about what we do is wholesome.” Ilya murmured.

Shane grinned. “Shut up. I’m being serious.”

“Okay,” Ilya said.

Shane leaned closer, voice dropping lower. “If people recognize you, if they recognize me, if they ask why we’re together... there’s a story ready. It’s simple. It’s respectable. It gives them an answer that doesn’t invite them to dig deeper.”

Ilya’s gaze stayed on him, sharp and quiet. He wasn’t going to ruin Shane’s plan, but what he wanted to tell him was that he didn’t want their first instagram photo together to be a lie. He’d always pictured the moment he could finally proudly and openly post a photo of him and Shane for the world to see.

Shane felt the urge to fill the silence with more words, more logic, more reassurance. But he’d learned over time that Ilya didn’t need more noise. He needed space.

After a long moment, Ilya nodded once.

“That could work,” he said.

Relief hit Shane so quickly he almost laughed. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Ilya confirmed. “People like that kind of story.”

Shane’s chest loosened. “Okay. Good.”

Ilya’s eyes flicked toward the window again. “But,” he added.

Shane stiffened. “But.”

Ilya turned back to him. “We keep it broad. No dates. No locations. No details about where we are staying.”

Shane nodded immediately. “Of course.”

“And we post after,” Ilya said firmly. “Not before.”

Shane hesitated. “Why after?”

Ilya’s expression hardened just enough to make the answer obvious.

Shane swallowed. “Okay. After.”

Ilya watched him for another second, then his gaze softened slightly.

“It’s a good plan. Thank you for figuring it out” Ilya said quietly.

Shane blinked, caught off guard by the softness. “Yeah.”

“Really,” Ilya repeated, like he needed to say it twice to make it real. “Thank you.

Ilya never wanted Shane to feel like a burden when he was in the depths of his own neurotic mind. He knew Shane’s need to plan was formed from the chronic overwhelm that took over

his thoughts.

Shane felt something warm and sharp catch in his chest. “Always,” he said.

They sat in silence for a moment after that, the kind of silence that felt like a truce rather than a wall.

Shane’s foot bounced slightly. Ilya’s didn’t.

Shane glanced at him again, then down at their bags, then back up at the gate screen.

“This is really happening,” Shane murmured.

Ilya didn’t answer right away. His jaw tightened.

“Yes,” he said finally. “It is.”

Shane opened his mouth to say something stupid—something like, “it’ll be fun”, but even Shane knew that that wasn’t the right move.

So instead, Shane shifted closer, just a fraction. Enough that their knees touched briefly. A contact that could be shrugged off as accidental. A small grounding point in a space that made everything feel exposed.

Ilya didn’t move away.

Shane let out a slow breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

He tried to keep his nervous excitement quiet, contained, respectful of the gravity in Ilya’s body, but it kept leaking out anyway in the form of curiosity.

“So,” Shane said after a minute, voice low, “what season is it there right now?”

The second the words left his mouth, he knew he’d made a mistake.

Ilya stared at him slowly, as if he’d misheard.

Shane blinked, then rushed to explain. “I mean—Russia is... big. And I don’t know if it’s like... different? Like maybe—”

“No,” Ilya cut in, voice flat.

Shane’s cheeks warmed. “Okay. Right. That makes sense.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed slightly, disbelief mixing with something dangerously close to amusement. “We packed summer clothes, Hollander. Or do you hide winter gear at the cottage?”

Shane’s mouth opened, then closed again.

Then he laughed quietly, a little helpless. “I don’t know why I asked that... but yes, I do. It’s been known to snow in May in Canada!”

Ilya smiled. “Ah, yes. I wouldn’t know. My team is always still playing in May.”

“Shut up, Rozanov” Shane said back, almost childishly.

“You asked because you panic,” Ilya said.

Shane scoffed. “I don’t panic.”

“You absolutely do,” Ilya replied.

Shane rubbed his face with one hand, exhaling. “Okay. Fine. I panic. But in my defense, I’m packing for Russia and you keep telling me things like ‘don’t be noticeable.’”

Ilya tilted his head. “That is good advice.”

Shane nodded quickly. “Right. And I’m trying.”

Ilya’s gaze flicked down to Shane’s clothes, then back up. “You are wearing a white t-shirt right now.”

Shane blinked. “So?”

“So,” Ilya repeated slowly, like Shane was giving him a migraine, “you are... very noticeable.”

Shane looked down at his shirt like it had personally betrayed him. “It’s just a shirt.”

“It is bright,” Ilya said.

Shane glanced around self-consciously, like suddenly everyone in the airport was staring only at his torso. “I should change.”

“No,” Ilya said quickly.

Shane looked up. “No?”

Ilya exhaled through his nose. “We are not changing clothes in the airport.”

Shane hesitated. “Okay.”

Ilya watched him for another second. “Also,” he added, voice a shade softer, “in Canada, it does not matter if you are noticeable.”

Shane nodded. He understood what Ilya wasn’t saying.

In Russia, it does.

The humor evaporated, leaving something heavier behind. Shane's excitement dimmed slightly—not gone, just tempered by the reminder that this wasn't a vacation. It was a complicated, delicate thing Ilya was doing.

Shane's fingers itched to reach for him again, but instead he stayed still.

The boarding announcement crackled over the speaker system, garbled at first, then clearer:

“Now boarding...”

Shane's entire body reacted. He sat up straighter. His hands moved automatically, checking their documents, checking their bags, checking the gate number like it might have changed in the last ten seconds. The panic set in when he couldn't find his passport. Before he got too frantic, Ilya handed it over to him.

“I told you you'd keep checking” he said.

Ilya didn't react as dramatically, but Shane saw it—the slight shift in his posture, the way his shoulders pulled in tighter, the way his face smoothed into something composed.

This is it. No turning back.

Shane stood, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “Ready?”

Ilya stared at the gate for a second longer than necessary, as if he could delay time by refusing to move.

Then he stood too.

“Yes,” he said quietly.

And then, because Shane couldn't help himself, because he needed something human in the middle of all this steel and glass and fear, he leaned in just slightly and murmured, “Hey. I'm excited.”

Ilya's eyes flicked to him.

“Why,” he asked bluntly.

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “Because I get to go somewhere with you. Because I get to see what made you. Because you're letting me in, even though it scares you.”

Ilya swallowed.

His expression didn't soften much, but something shifted behind it—something exposed and quickly controlled.

“You are strange,” he said.

Shane smiled. “You love it.”

“I tolerate it,” Ilya replied automatically.

Shane’s smile widened. “Well that’s progress I guess.”

Ilya didn’t answer. But he didn’t deny it either.

They joined the boarding line.

People glanced at them, subtle and curious. A couple whispered. Someone stared a beat too long. But for now it was harmless. For now it was just the normal attention that followed athletes and familiar faces.

Shane tried to keep his energy contained. He knew Ilya could feel it—could feel him vibrating with questions and anticipation. But Shane also knew something else.

Ilya’s nervousness wasn’t loud. It was quieter than that. It lived in every controlled movement, every measured breath, every choice not to touch, not to smile, not to invite questions.

Shane watched the way Ilya kept his gaze forward, face neutral. Not unfriendly. Just... guarded.

But when Shane shifted too close, accidentally brushing his elbow against Ilya’s sleeve, Ilya didn’t move away. That was how Shane knew he was still here. Still trying.

The line moved forward.

The gate agent scanned their passes. The beep of the scanner felt too final.

They stepped onto the jet bridge. The tunnel narrowed. The light dimmed. Their footsteps echoed.

Shane’s excitement softened into something quieter, too. Something peaceful. He was only a few minutes away from near complete privacy.

Ilya’s expression didn’t change, but his fingers flexed once at his side, like he was releasing tension he hadn’t meant to hold.

The plane door waited ahead.

Shane stepped on to the plane first, offering a quick smile to the flight attendant. He murmured a thank you that sounded automatic, then shifted aside to make room for Ilya behind him.

Ilya didn’t smile.

He didn’t frown either. His face stayed neutral, professional, unremarkable. The version of him that could move through crowded spaces like smoke.

“Welcome Mr. Hollander, Mr. Rozanov. Let us show you to your seats”

This always made them both feel uncomfortable. They were used to special treatment with their teams, but here with the public, it felt strange. Still, they followed the attendant, refusing to allow her to carry their bags.

The cabin smelled like every plane cabin Shane had ever been on. Recycled air and faint citrus cleaner trying and failing to mask the reality of too many bodies and too little space. They didn’t have to walk far to reach their first class seats.

First class was tucked right at the front of the plane, separated from the rest of the cabin. They were on a large international flight, and the seats they booked weren’t really seats so much as private little pods, walled off with high dividers so you could barely see anyone else once you were inside.

Shane led the way as they were guided to their seats. They handed off their bags now, as the attendant stowed them nearby.

Ilya stood just behind him, still and silent, his eyes flicking from face to face—not lingering long enough to look like staring, but long enough that Shane could tell he was tracking everything.

Not out of curiosity. Out of habit. He probably wondered if the people sitting in the surrounding pods were friendly, vacationing Canadians, or hard Russians. They both knew that Russia wasn’t a top vacation destination for any country.

“Window?” Shane said quietly once they were alone.

Ilya slid into it without argument. Of course he did. Window seats gave you control. A wall at your back. No one climbing over you. No surprise touch from strangers. No forced conversation with aisle seat neighbors who asked where you were headed like it was their right to know.

Shane took the only seat beside him. His favorite place to be. Shane was happy to be the buffer for Ilya. Shane was the one who would get bumped, interrupted, asked questions.

Ilya stared straight ahead as Shane buckled his seatbelt, adjusted the little pillow, checked the safety card like he’d never been on a plane in his life.

“I know,” Shane murmured under his breath when he noticed Ilya grinning at him. “I’m ridiculous.”

“Yes,” Ilya replied flatly. “But I love you.” He said quietly as he snuck in a quick kiss onto Shane’s hand.

Shane huffed a silent laugh and leaned back, trying to settle his energy into something smaller. Excitement and nerves had always been difficult for Shane to hide. It lived in his hands, his posture, the way he couldn’t stop his eyes from taking in every detail like he wanted to memorize it before it vanished.

He was excited because this was a trip.

A real trip.

Not a stolen weekend. Not a quiet hotel in a random city between games. Not a hurried night that ended with someone checking their watch and slipping out before morning like love was something shameful.

They were going together.

They were flying together.

And even though Ilya looked like he was made of tension and silence, even though the air around him felt heavier, Shane still felt that strange, tender thrill of being chosen by him.

The plane filled. They couldn't see them from their private pod, but they could hear the familiar sounds of hushed voices and overhead bins snapping closed.

A woman peered over the divider, looking up at the seat number, and then down to Shane and Ilya.

"Sorry," she said, half-laughing. "I always do this."

"No worries," Shane replied.

Ilya didn't look at her.

The woman hesitated, glancing at Ilya once as she slid into the row behind them. For a second, Shane thought she recognized him.

Then she didn't say anything, and the moment passed.

Shane exhaled slowly through his nose.

His heart had been doing that annoying thing since the airport—beating a little faster than it needed to. Not panic. Not exactly. Just awareness. Anticipation. The sense that he was stepping into something larger than himself.

He tried not to project it onto Ilya. Tried not to make Ilya responsible for his feelings on top of his own.

But Shane couldn't stop watching him.

Ilya sat with his hands folded loosely in his lap, fingers interlaced, posture straight. His leg bounced once, then stilled—like he'd caught himself and refused to allow it. His gaze drifted toward the window, out at the jet bridge, out at the airport beyond it, like he was looking at a place he wouldn't see again for a while.

Or like he was looking at a door and wondering if he could still turn around.

Shane turned his head slightly, lowering his voice. “Hey.”

Ilya blinked, as if he hadn’t realized Shane was going to speak.

Shane’s throat tightened briefly. “We can still... we can still not do this.”

Ilya didn’t answer right away.

He didn’t look angry. He didn’t look comforted either. His eyes stayed on Shane for a long second, searching.

“Stop,” Ilya said quietly.

Shane swallowed. “Stop what?”

“Stop worrying about me,” Ilya replied. His voice wasn’t harsh. It was controlled. “It’s not helping.”

So there is something to help, Shane thought.

“I’m sorry” Shane argued softly. “I don’t mean to make you feel... nervous? I don’t know.”

Ilya’s jaw flexed. “It makes me feel like you don’t trust me. I’m not going to run from this.” He looked up at Shane with a quiet sadness now.

Shane blinked. “I don’t think you’ll run.”

“You do,” Ilya said, simple and certain. “You always think I will run.”

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it again, because the worst part was—he understood why Ilya believed that. Shane wasn’t going to fight him on it, but it wasn’t true. He understood that in Ilya’s world, love had always been something temporary. Something you got punished for wanting too loudly. Shane trusted Ilya to stay, he wasn’t sure Ilya felt the same.

Shane softened his voice. “I don’t think you’ll run,” he repeated. “I think you’re brave.”

Ilya stared at him for a moment, then looked away, out the window again.

“I am not brave,” he muttered.

Shane felt that ache again—the one he always felt when Ilya said something like that so casually, like it was fact.

“You’re going back to a place that hurt you,” Shane said quietly. “With me. That’s brave.”

Ilya’s lips pressed together, tight.

Then, very softly, almost like he didn’t want to admit it, he said, “I am doing it because I want to be done with it. For good.”

Shane nodded. “Okay.”

That at least made sense. That at least felt honest.

They fell quiet again as the last passengers boarded.

The overhead bins slammed shut for the last time. The flight attendants moved down the aisle doing the practiced, cheerful announcements of people who had said the same words a thousand times and meant them none.

Shane watched the exit door close. Watched the jet bridge pull away, and felt the subtle shift in the air when the plane became its own sealed world.

The cabin lights dimmed slightly. The engines changed pitch. The whole plane trembled with the first surge of movement.

Ilya’s fingers tightened in his lap.

Shane noticed immediately. He didn’t comment. He didn’t reach for him either—not yet.

He knew Ilya’s boundaries. He knew what mattered. He knew that comfort could be a kind of danger if you offered it at the wrong moment, in the wrong way.

Still, his hand hovered on the armrest between them, close enough to touch without being obvious. Close enough to offer without demanding.

The plane began to taxi.

Out the window, the airport slid by in slow motion—runways, service vehicles, distant planes waiting their turn. Everything looked small and organized from here.

The plane turned sharply.

The runway stretched ahead, long and open and too final.

Shane felt his stomach drop with that familiar pre-takeoff moment where the world seems to pause for a second, waiting to see what you choose.

Ilya’s posture tightened.

Shane’s hand moved before he thought about it. He reached toward the armrest between them and let his knuckles brush Ilya’s.

Ilya didn’t flinch.

He didn’t grab him either.

But he let the contact exist, and that was something.

The engines roared.

The plane surged forward.

Shane pressed his head lightly back against the seat, letting the force push him into the cushion. He wasn't afraid of flying, not really, but takeoff always did something to him. Always made him hyper-aware of the fact that humans weren't meant to do this.

The ground fell away. The airport shrank. The world tilted into sky.

And just like that, they were no longer on the ground. No longer in the place they'd left. Suspended between where they'd been and where they were going, trapped in that strange in-between space where time felt both too fast and too slow.

Shane exhaled, long and quiet.

For a while after takeoff, neither of them spoke. It wasn't awkward. It was... careful. Like they were both listening to their own bodies adjust, recalibrate.

The cabin lights dimmed further. People settled. The normal noises began again: the rustle of snacks, the soft tap of screens, the low murmur of conversation.

As soon as it was dark in the cabin, Shane felt a hand in his, gripping it tightly, as if it had been waiting to do its job all day.

Shane shifted slightly, adjusting his seatbelt, then glanced toward Ilya. "You okay?"

Ilya blinked like the question had to travel farther to reach him. "Yes."

Shane waited, then asked anyway, softer, "Actually okay?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. His gaze stayed on the window.

"No," he admitted, barely audible, shaking his head.

Shane felt something in his chest soften. Not relief—he didn't want Ilya to be not okay—but gratitude. Because it was honest. Because it meant Ilya was trying.

"Okay," Shane said quietly. "Thank you for telling me."

Ilya's throat bobbed once. He didn't respond.

Shane leaned back again, forcing himself to keep his energy calm, steady. He wanted to ask a million questions. He wanted to narrate every tiny thing he was feeling so Ilya wouldn't feel alone in his. But he knew better.

So he did what he'd learned to do with Ilya.

He made himself quiet.

After a while, Shane reached into his bag and pulled out his phone. He didn't open social media. Didn't scroll. He just opened his notes app, staring at the blank screen for a second.

Ilya noticed anyway. Of course he did.

“What are you doing,” Ilya asked, voice low.

Shane blinked and looked at him. “Nothing.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed. “You’re a bad liar.”

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “I’m... drafting the foundation post.”

Ilya stared at him for a beat. “Now?”

Shane shrugged, suddenly sheepish. “Just in case. It helps me to have the words ready.”

Ilya looked away again, but Shane caught the smallest sign of amusement. A faint softening in the corner of his mouth.

“You and your words,” Ilya murmured.

Shane smiled. “You like my words.”

Ilya scoffed. “Only the naughty ones.”

Shane nodded solemnly. “Right. Of course.”

He typed anyway, slow and careful, as if choosing each word mattered.

He wanted the story to be simple: Ilya honoring his mother, Shane learning where she came from, the foundation doing work in her name. A reason that didn’t feel suspicious. A narrative that didn’t invite strangers to imagine anything else.

He wrote:

Honored to be in Russia with Ilya this week, learning more about where his mother came from and continuing the work of the Irina Foundation...

He paused.

Because “honored” felt true, but also felt like it could be interpreted as smug from the wrong angle. He erased it. Rewrote.

Grateful to be in Russia with Ilya this week...

He stared at it, then glanced at Ilya again.

Ilya was still staring out the window, but his eyes weren’t tracking clouds. They were unfocused, fixed on something inside himself.

Shane’s excitement shifted, instinctively, into something quieter.

He tried again:

This week, Ilya brought me to Russia to show me where his mom came from and share a piece of his life that's always felt sacred. We're here with the Irina Foundation, continuing work that matters deeply to him.

Shane paused again.

He didn't send it. He didn't even save it.

He just let it sit there as proof he could create a story that didn't expose them.

A story that protected Ilya's grief instead of exploiting it.

He locked his phone screen, slipping it back into his bag.

Ilya's gaze finally shifted toward him. "You do not need to post anything," he said quietly.

Shane looked at him. "I know. I just think it's a safety net...and I think I maybe want people to know that we got to share this. Even if it's not the full truth."

Ilya's eyes held his for a second longer than necessary. Something tense in his expression loosened. "Okay," he said, like it was an agreement. Like it was permission.

Ilya looked away again.

But before he could get lost in his own thoughts again, Shane reached over turning his chin towards him. He placed a gentle hand on his face and leaned in for a short, meaningful kiss on his lips.

Shane held perfectly still for a moment, not wanting to spook him. Not wanting to demand more. He held his face a moment longer, resting his forehead on Ilya's.

It was strange, how so much peace could exist inside of fear.

They pulled away slowly, settling back in their seats.

"You want water?" Shane asked quietly, because offering something practical was easier than offering emotion.

Ilya nodded. "Yes."

Shane flagged the flight attendant politely, took the cup, handed it over.

Ilya drank slowly, like he was trying to convince his body to cooperate.

Shane watched the way his throat moved, the way his eyes stayed fixed on the window. He couldn't tell if Ilya was thinking or trying not to.

Shane swallowed his own nerves and said, softly, "You want to talk anything? About the rest of the plan for when we get there?"

Ilya stilled.

Shane immediately regretted it.

But Ilya didn't snap. He didn't retreat into sarcasm.

He just sat there, silent, for a long moment.

Then he said, very quietly, "Not yet."

Shane nodded. "Okay."

Another long pause.

Then, as if the words had been waiting behind his teeth, Ilya added, "I don't want you to only know the sad parts."

Shane's chest tightened. "I don't either."

Ilya finally turned his head, looking at him properly. His eyes were tired.

"The sad parts about my mother," he corrected.

Shane swallowed. He nodded slowly. "Okay."

Ilya's mouth pressed into a thin line, like he was fighting himself. "She liked tea," he said suddenly, voice flat, like he was stating a fact from a file. "Always tea. Even when it was too hot outside. She would complain about heat and still drink it."

Shane blinked, caught off guard by the simplicity. "That sounds like you."

Ilya scoffed, but it wasn't sharp. "Maybe."

Shane smiled softly. "What kind?"

Ilya's gaze flicked down, then back up. "Black. Always. Sometimes she put jam in it."

Shane's eyebrows lifted. "Jam?"

Ilya nodded once. "Yes. It's—" He hesitated, like he hated explaining things. "It's normal there."

Shane nodded enthusiastically. "Okay. I'm trying that."

Ilya looked at him like he was insane. "You will hate it."

Shane shrugged. "Worth the risk."

That earned him the faintest flicker of a smile. A micro-expression so brief it almost didn't exist. But Shane saw it anyway. He always did.

Shane leaned back slightly, giving him room. "Tell me one more good thing about her," he said softly.

Ilya's throat bobbed again. His eyes drifted toward the window.

He was silent long enough that Shane thought he might not answer.

Then, quietly, Ilya said, "She used to sing when she cleaned."

Shane's face softened. "Really?"

Ilya nodded. "Not like... real singing. Just quiet." His mouth twisted slightly. "She was not very good."

Shane laughed under his breath. "That's perfect."

Ilya didn't laugh. But his shoulders loosened, just a fraction, like saying it out loud had shifted something.

"She would hum," Ilya continued, voice low. "And my brother would complain. She would tell him to stop being dramatic. And then she would sing louder."

Shane smiled, warmth blooming in his chest. "I love her."

Ilya stiffened slightly, like the words hit somewhere tender.

Shane softened immediately. "Not like—sorry. I just mean... she sounds—"

"I know what you mean," Ilya cut in quietly. His voice didn't sound angry. It sounded strained. Like he was holding himself together with careful, practiced hands.

"The best parts of me came from her" he said finally.

He looked back out the window again.

Shane didn't push.

He just stayed.

Minutes passed.

Then Ilya spoke again, barely above a whisper.

"I am scared I will go there and feel nothing," he admitted. "Or feel too much."

Shane's throat tightened. "I've cared about the wrong things too much for my whole life, while I was scared to care about the important one." He said nudging Ilya's side with his elbow.

Ilya glanced at him again, eyes sharp with something like disbelief. "How did you fix it?"

Shane shrugged. "Well, I realized I was about to lose the most important thing if I didn't find a way to show I cared... but I still care way too much about the wrong things."

Ilya's lips curved, barely. "That's true."

Shane's excitement—the quiet warmth of being here with him, of being chosen—swelled again in his chest.

The plane continued onward. The sky outside changed shades. The light shifted slowly, the way it did when you traveled far enough that time itself became unreliable.

At some point, Shane leaned a little closer, voice low, almost teasing—gentle in a way he hoped wouldn't startle him.

"You know," Shane murmured, "I still think of some of our other trips together. All-star weekends in hotel rooms."

Ilya's eyes snapped open. "Do not start Hollander."

Shane grinned. "We sure knew how to fuck up a hotel room."

"We did."

Shane nodded solemnly. "Hmm there was just something about the sneaking around."

"We still sneak around Hollander" Ilya replied. "All season long, we sneak around."

"Yeah, but we have the cottage now. It feels so much less desperate."

Ilya loved when Shane got like this. A little less guarded, careful. Ilya knew that the sound of the plane engines were doing their job to drown out their voices so he continued to play.

He moved his hand to Shane's thigh, moving it up slowly. He could feel Shane begin to squirm.

"Are you trying to join the mile high club, Hollander?" Ilya whispered just millimeters from Shane's ear.

Shane's eyes widened as he slapped the hand from his thigh. "No! You know we can't do that! We're not allowed..." He cut himself off as he saw the wide joking grin on Ilya's face.

Ilya's gaze stayed on him for a beat longer, and then he laughed. It was the first real laugh Shane had heard in days.

"You're an asshole!" He said crossing his arms.

Ilya couldn't help it. He whispered in his ear, "I would fuck you so loud the pilots could hear you scream."

Shane didn't answer right away.

Then, very softly, he said, "I wish."

Shane blinked, and shook his head, trying to get the steamy thoughts out of his mind.

Ilya was proud of how he could unravel Shane with a light touch and some dirty words. This was enough to clear his mind long enough to fall asleep.

Outside the window, the clouds slid past endlessly, bright and indifferent. Inside the cabin, two boys nodded off hand in hand.

And somewhere far ahead, Russia waited.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

Shane had been to Russia before, for the 2014 Olympics in Sochi. So when the tires touched down, he recognized his surroundings from when they had landed here then. It was morning here in Russia, and the plane full of well-slept passengers were awake and buzzing.

Ilya went into action as soon as the jet way was attached. He was quick to grab their bags and exit the aircraft. Shane was sure they hadn't exchanged a single word in the process. It was as if Ilya's mind had been waiting for him in Moscow and now his body needed to catch up.

The first thing Shane noticed was the air.

It wasn't a dramatic change, but the second they stepped off the plane and into the terminal, it felt like the oxygen got heavier. Like the world here demanded more from him just to exist in it.

The airport smelled and moved different here too. Like floor cleaner that was working overtime to cover up years of cigarette smoke embedded in the walls. People moved with purpose, faces set in that expressionless, efficient way Shane usually only saw on game days when everyone was heading toward a common goal.

It was quieter than he expected. Voices stayed low. Laughter didn't travel as far.

Ilya walked beside him, shoulders squared, face neutral. Not tense in the way he had been on the flight. Not visibly nervous. Almost worse than that.

He looked... practiced. Confident.

Like something inside him had slid into place and locked.

Shane kept his eyes forward and his hands to himself. It wasn't hard. It didn't even feel like restraint. It felt like instinct, now—mirroring Ilya without thinking about it. Matching his tempo. Matching his quiet.

They joined the line for customs.

The space funneled into narrow lanes, metal barriers guiding them forward like the airport didn't trust anyone to behave without being physically directed. Above them, signs hung in Russian. Shane stared at the letters longer than he should have, trying to force meaning out of shapes that refused to become words.

It wasn't that he felt stupid. It was that he felt mute.

In Canada, Shane talked his way through discomfort. He smiled his way out of tension. He filled silence with harmless words and friendly energy until the world softened around him.

Here, his words didn't matter. Here, his smile didn't feel like currency. It actually felt like something that could cost them.

The line moved in slow increments, giving Shane plenty of time to take in his new environment. He noticed quickly that they would not go unnoticed here. All around them people were staring, pointing, whispering. He got the impression it was not directed at him though, everyone was looking at his boyfriend.

Ilya already had their documents ready—passports in hand, boarding stubs tucked neatly inside, phone dark in his pocket. He held himself the way he always did when he was trying to disappear while still remaining in control of every variable. Shane would normally be bothered at his lack of control, but he felt more comfortable following Ilyas lead.

Shane watched him out of the corner of his eye and felt the strangest kind of grief.

Because this version of Ilya didn't need Shane.

Not for language. Not for navigation. Not for confidence.

He didn't even need Shane for comfort right now, because comfort wasn't the goal. Control was.

Shane swallowed around the small ache in his throat and reminded himself: this isn't about you, idiot.

The customs officer looked at Ilya first, then down at his passport. His gaze flicked up again, sharper this time, lingering on Ilya's face like he was comparing it to something in his memory. He obviously recognized him.

Ilya didn't react.

He offered the passport with a polite, flat expression and spoke in Russian, his voice calm and perfectly measured. The words came out of him like they belonged there—like he hadn't spent years translating himself into English until Russian only lived in his mind and in his temper.

The officer asked something back, quick.

Ilya answered just as quickly.

Shane caught one word—foundation. Maybe. It sounded like something he should recognize, but it slipped away before he could grab it.

The officer finally glanced at Shane.

Shane held his face neutral. Not too friendly. Not too blank. He tried to look like he knew what he was doing.

The officer said something to him in Russian.

Shane froze for half a second. His brain did that useless thing where it scrambled for a response even though there was no possible way he could have one.

Ilya stepped in immediately, voice smooth.

The officer narrowed his eyes slightly, then nodded, stamping the passport with a heavy, dull thud that sounded too final for something so routine.

A second stamp, then a hand motioning them through.

Shane didn't exhale until they were past the line and the barriers opened into the wider terminal. He didn't realize how much he'd been holding himself until his shoulders loosened in a slow, reluctant release.

Shane remembered being taught the concept of "put yourself in their shoes" as a child. And while he could grasp it as a concept, he was never good at the practice of it. He practiced empathy, and found that sometimes he had to ask the right questions to get there, to fully understand, but he was never able to imagine himself in someone else's life. That was true until right now.

It struck Shane that this uncomfortable feeling living in his gut is what Ilya would have experienced for years coming to America. Even when Shane had been here for the Olympics, he was surrounded by handlers and translators. They stayed at the Olympics village filled with hundreds of English speakers. The concept of being completely lost and out of control was very new to him, and it made him feel for the teenage boy he met all those years ago. He didn't realize then that he probably felt like he was drowning.

Shane wondered now if Ilyas request to do that commercial together all those years ago had nothing to do with wanting Shane physically, but maybe rather as an emotional support. Shane may have been the only person he had connected to there on any level.

Ilya kept walking like nothing had happened, so Shane matched him, quiet and obedient.

"You're okay," Ilya said without looking at him.

Shane blinked. "You didn't even ask that like a question."

"You are," Ilya replied simply.

Shane huffed a breath that wasn't quite a laugh. "I don't feel okay."

Ilya glanced at him then, briefly. His eyes were sharp, aware.

"You feel... uncomfortable," Ilya said.

Shane swallowed. "Yeah."

Ilya nodded once, like it confirmed something.

"Good," he said softly.

Shane frowned. “Good?”

“You will be careful,” Ilya answered. “Because you feel it now.”

Shane’s stomach tightened.

He wanted to argue. Wanted to say he would’ve been careful anyway. Wanted to say he wasn’t reckless, that he wasn’t stupid, that he didn’t need fear to behave.

But he didn’t.

Because the truth was, the fear did change him.

They moved through the terminal and toward the exit. There were so many eyes on them. On Ilya.

People flowed around them. Families reunited. Taxi drivers called out. Someone laughed loudly near the doors and it sounded almost inappropriate, like joy was an accident.

Ilya didn’t slow down.

He walked with purpose. Shane stayed close, his bag strap tight in his fist.

Outside, the air hit him like a weight. Cold enough to bit. He wanted to stop and put on a sweater, but there was no way he was stopping Ilya now. He might just leave him there if he stopped moving.

Cars idled at the curb. A line of people smoked near the doors despite the signs telling them not to. Russian words washed over Shane from every direction, loud and fast and impossible to separate into meaning.

He heard some of the men talking, and then one of them started to speak in their direction. The only word he caught was “Rozanov”. He glanced at Ilya to watch for a reaction, and he noticed a smile before Ilya responded, giving him a wave. A fan, Shane assumed.

Ilya spoke to a driver without hesitation. A quick exchange. A nod. Then another man appeared with keys and a clipboard.

Rental. Right. They were renting a car. This felt like a relief for Shane. He felt selfish, but he was happy to not have to sit in a vehicle while Ilya had a conversation with a man he didn’t know, in a language he didn’t understand.

Shane watched as Ilya signed papers and handed over documents with calm efficiency. He looked like he’d been doing this for years, like he could have done it in his sleep.

Shane stood beside him, useless... god he hated feeling useless.

For the first time in a long time, he didn’t know what to do with his hands.

He shoved them in his pockets. Pulled them out. Adjusted his jacket. Looked at his shoes like they might give him instructions.

Ilya didn't look at him once.

Then keys were placed into Ilya's hand. He nodded once and led them toward the parking structure.

The walk was long enough that the silence started to feel loud between them.

Shane kept wanting to speak, but every thought felt wrong. Too bright. Too casual. Too loud for the air around them. It felt like Ilya couldn't speak English anymore.

They reached the car—black, clean, too new. It smelled like leather and someone else's cologne.

Ilya opened the trunk and loaded their bags, not as carefully as Shane would have liked.

Then they got in. The doors shut.

For one second, the world went muted.

Just them. Just breath. Just the soft click of Ilya fastening his seatbelt.

Ilya stared forward, hands on the wheel. He didn't start the car right away.

Shane waited.

He didn't want to rush him.

Ilya inhaled slowly, then exhaled through his nose. His fingers tightened on the wheel. Loosened again.

Then the engine turned over. The car eased into traffic.

Shane watched everything through the window and felt disoriented by how familiar it looked and how unfamiliar it felt at the same time. Like he'd seen versions of this city in movies. Like he'd heard about it in stories. But none of that translated into any kind of familiarity.

He looked at Ilya.

Ilya didn't look back.

He drove with focus, scanning mirrors, watching the road, checking crosswalks, navigating like he'd never left.

Shane felt a quiet chill creep up his spine. He had not been this uncomfortable in a long time, but had no way to break the silence. He didn't know what to say, what the appropriate tone was. So he just played with his own hands, anxiously waiting for a sign from Ilya that it was okay to speak.

It was clear that Ilya knew where he was going. He didn't need a GPS here. Shane imagined they were staying in a place he knew well. Maybe a hotel he used to party at in the off season. It was also clear that his body knew this place, too.

His shoulders held different here. His jaw moved differently. He blinked less. He breathed shallower.

He looked like a man who had learned how to exist under immense pressure.

Ilya looked like he was made of stone, until he finally moved. Just enough to turn off the radio that had been playing some Russian music. Was it a bad song? Or did he just need the silence? He was impossible to read in a way that Shane had never had to navigate.

They drove in silence long enough that Shane felt the weight of it settle into his bones now.

He tried not to take it personally, but his own thoughts were making that hard too. He tried to stay grateful that Ilya was even allowing him to be here at all.

But the silence still hurt, just a little.

Because Shane's instinct was always to turn travel into connection. To make jokes. To point out weird signs. To ask questions. To reach across the console and put his hand on Ilya's thigh and squeeze when the world felt too big.

Here, he couldn't do any of that.

Finally the hotel came into view and Shane could breathe a little easier. It was tall and gleaming and expensive in a way that felt out of place against the heavy mood of the day. Glass and stone, bright lights behind a clean front entrance. The kind of place that screamed upper class.

Ilya pulled into the covered driveway and stopped. A doorman approached immediately, speaking in Russian.

Ilya answered smoothly.

Another man appeared to open the trunk, carrying a light banter with Ilya. It was once again clear that these men knew or recognized him.

Shane stepped out of the car and stood for a second under the overhang, staring up at the building.

Nice. Too nice.

It felt... wrong, in a way he couldn't explain.

When Shane traveled home, he stayed at his mom's. He stayed with family. He slept in his childhood bed or on a couch or in a guest room that smelled like laundry detergent and good memories.

Hotels were for road trips. For games. For obligations. Not for home.

Shane watched Ilya hand over the keys and speak with the staff like it was nothing. Like it was normal. He handed him cash as he began to move inside.

Shane's stomach twisted with the strange thought that Ilya didn't have anyone here to stay with. Not anymore. Not anyone safe.

He followed Ilya into the lobby.

The space was quiet, dimly lit in a way that felt intentional. Plush chairs. Soft music. Marble floors that muted footsteps instead of echoing them. Everything designed to make you feel like you were above everyone.

Shane had been in the NHL for a decade, and they didn't stay in places as nice as this. They preferred mediocre hotels that came with privacy and blue collar folks that would ignore their presence.

Ilya checked in quickly. Efficiently. His Russian smooth and formal. He didn't smile, but he didn't need to. People respected him anyway, like the stillness in his face made him important.

Shane stood beside him, watching the exchange like he was watching a foreign film without subtitles. It was humiliating in a way he didn't want to admit.

Ilya finished checking in and accepted a keycard. Then another.

Penthouse.

Shane's ears flicked up at that. It must have been a word that was known here in Russia.

He wasn't sure why Ilya would book a penthouse. Everything about this trip screamed "don't stand out", and "blend in". Something penthouse guests didn't usually want to do.

Then Ilya glanced at him, and something in his expression made Shane understand.

Privacy. Space. No neighbors. No one hearing things they shouldn't.

The elevator ride was silent.

The kind of silence that pressed against your eardrums.

Shane stared at the floor numbers rising. Ilya stared straight ahead. His face looked calm, but his shoulders were rigid.

Had Ilya forgotten how to speak English? Shane was fully convinced at this point that something about this place gave him amnesia. Like he forgot he could communicate with Shane.

When they reached the top, the hallway was empty. Ilya swiped the keycard and the door opened.

The penthouse was stunning in a way that didn't even register as beautiful to Shane at first, because he was so focused on Ilya.

Finally he took it in. It was huge. Too huge. Open space, dark wood, floor-to-ceiling windows looking out over the city like the world beneath them was small and harmless. Minimal furniture. Clean lines. A place designed for people who wanted to forget they were in Russia.

Shane stepped inside, his bag still on his shoulder, and felt the same discomfort tighten in his chest.

It was safe but it didn't feel like a home. It felt like a hideout.

Ilya closed the door behind them and grabbed the bag from Shane's shoulder.

Shane turned toward him, uncertain. "This is... nice," he said quietly.

Ilya nodded once. "Yes."

Oh thank god. He can still speak fucking English.

Shane hesitated. "You didn't have to—"

"I did," Ilya cut in.

The words weren't harsh, but they were final. Like he couldn't afford to explain himself without cracking something open.

Shane swallowed and nodded, accepting it.

Ilya walked past him into the living room, setting the bags down with care. Much more care than he had putting them in the trunk. It was as if he finally had a moment to just be a human.

He didn't wander. Didn't admire the space. Didn't go to the windows. He didn't want to be here. Shane could tell.

Ilya was standing in the middle of the penthouse, still, staring at nothing. His hands hung at his sides, fingers flexing in and out as if he couldn't decide what to do with them.

Shane took a cautious step closer. "Hey."

Ilya blinked, like he'd forgotten Shane was there.

Shane softened his voice. "You okay?"

Ilya stared at him.

Then he shook his head once.

“No,” he said quietly. Honest. Simple.

Shane’s throat tightened. “What do you need?”

Ilya didn’t answer.

He just crossed the space between them in three quick strides and grabbed Shane’s shirt with both hands, pulling him close.

Shane’s breath hitched.

Ilya’s face was inches from his, eyes sharp, desperate, almost angry. Shane wasn’t sure at what, but he knew he felt safe with Ilya.

“Don’t talk, okay?” Ilya said under his breath.

Shane nodded immediately. “Okay.”

Ilya’s mouth crashed into his.

It wasn’t gentle. Not at first.

It was a kiss that felt like drowning and relief at the same time. It was like Ilya needed to drag himself into the present by force. Like he needed Shane’s mouth because everything else in the room was too quiet and too scary.

Shane let him. He slid his hands up Ilya’s arms, grounding him with touch, with steady pressure, with warmth that didn’t ask for anything back.

Ilya kissed him again, harder, then pulled back just enough to speak against Shane’s lips.

“Shower,” he whispered.

Shane blinked, breathless. “What?”

Ilya’s eyes flashed. “Shower,” he repeated, sharper this time, like he couldn’t stand explaining.

Shane nodded quickly. “Okay.”

Ilya grabbed his wrist and tugged him down the hallway toward the bathroom. Shane was used to this. It wasn’t the first time they would use the sound of water to drown them out. But he certainly didn’t expect it here.

The penthouse bathroom was almost obscene. It had wide marble counters, a freestanding tub, mirror lights that made Shane look too pale. A glass shower large enough for a whole team if someone had wanted to try.

Ilya didn’t stop to look at any of it.

He turned the shower on full blast, hot water pounding against tile, steam rising fast and hot. The roar of it filled the space immediately, swallowing the silence.

Ilya pressed Shane back against the counter, kissing him again, hands shaking just slightly as he fumbled with the hem of Shane's shirt.

Shane helped, pulling it off quickly, tossing it somewhere behind him. He reached for Ilya's sweater next, peeling it away, fingers brushing skin.

Ilya sucked in a breath, like he hadn't felt the touch of another human in years.

Then he leaned forward and kissed Shane again.

Shane's hands moved over Ilya's shoulders, his back, the hard lines of muscle that were tight with more than just desire. He could feel the tension living in Ilya's body, coiled and stubborn, refusing to let go.

Ilya's forehead pressed briefly against Shane's as if he couldn't quite keep himself together.

"Hey," Shane murmured softly, unable to help it. "I'm here."

Ilya's eyes snapped to his. "Don't," he whispered.

Shane stilled. "Don't what?"

"Don't talk" Ilya said, voice tight.

Shane's heart clenched.

He understood what Ilya meant. He didn't want Shane in make this about what it was really about. He didn't want him to Shane this moment.

He wanted escape.

He wanted something loud enough inside his body that it drowned out everything in his head.

So Shane nodded, swallowing the ache, and let his hands stay firm and sure instead of tender. Let his mouth be hungry instead of gentle. Let his presence be solid, unquestionable, something Ilya could grab onto without falling.

They both stood now, wrestling the pants off of each other as they puddled in a pile on the floor.

Ilya guided him into the shower, the heat wrapping around them immediately, lips never leaving each other bodies. Water struck their skin in heavy sheets. Steam blurred the mirrors and the glass. The world outside the glass might as well have stopped existing.

Ilya pushed Shane against the tile, kissed along his jaw, his throat, his mouth again—impatient, desperate, like he couldn't get close enough. Like the only safe place in Russia was the space between Shane's hands and his skin.

Ilya lowered himself to the marble floor, taking Shane in his mouth, while his hands quickly went to work opening him up.

Shane braced himself, palms against the wall, letting the water run down his body, over Ilya's curls and face. He pulled Ilya up and closer before it was too late, their bodies pressed tight, skin sliding warm and slick.

Ilya made a sound—small, broken, almost angry—and bit lightly at Shane's shoulder like he needed proof this was real.

Shane swallowed hard, his fingers tightening in Ilya's hair. "Ilya..."

Ilya's mouth lifted, water dripping off his lashes. His eyes were too bright.

"I need this," he said, voice low, raw.

Shane's throat tightened. "Okay."

Ilya shook his head sharply, like the word wasn't enough. Like he needed Shane to understand the real meaning.

"I need to not think," Ilya whispered.

Shane's chest ached.

He cupped the back of Ilya's neck, pulling him close again, forehead to forehead under the pounding water.

"You don't have to," Shane murmured.

Ilya's eyes fluttered shut, his breath catching.

Then he kissed Shane again, urgent and consuming, and Shane let him take what he needed.

"Turn around" Ilya demanded. Shane obliged, and within seconds, Shane could feel Ilya inside of him.

The shower roared around them.

Steam thickened.

Ilya moved like a man starving, like he'd been holding himself rigid for hours and finally, finally had somewhere he could fall apart without consequence.

Shane stayed with him through every second of it, anchoring him without speaking, giving him structure when his body went frantic, giving him steadiness when his mind tried to run.

Because Shane understood something now, more clearly than he ever had.

This wasn't just sex.

This was Ilya's way of surviving the first day back. And it was also a "fuck you" to Russia.

This was his way of reminding himself his body was still his. His life was still his. Shane was still his. The past hadn't won yet.

When it was over, when Ilya's breathing finally slowed, when the urgency faded into something quieter, he stayed pressed against Shane under the water, eyes closed, forehead resting against Shane's shoulder like he'd run out of strength to hold himself upright.

Shane didn't move.

He just wrapped his arms around him, firm and steady, and let the water keep pounding down like a shield.

Minutes passed. Or seconds. Time didn't matter.

Eventually, Ilya's voice came out rough, muffled against Shane's skin.

"I hate it here," he whispered.

Shane's heart cracked open.

He swallowed hard, forcing his voice to stay calm. "I know."

Ilya's fingers tightened around Shane's waist. "But I needed to come."

Shane nodded, his throat too tight to answer right away.

"Well you came alright" he managed, trying to break the tension while knowing what Ilya had meant.

Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him. His eyes were tired, but he let out a laugh.

Shane held his gaze, steady. Ilya's face dropped again and his head rested on Shane's shoulder again, arms wrapped around his body.

"I'm not leaving," Shane said quietly.

Ilya stared at him for a long moment, something fragile flickering behind his expression.

Then he nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

"Thank you" he whispered.

And for the first time since they'd landed, Shane felt Ilya's body loosen—just a fraction—as if his nervous system had finally accepted its new location.

They were safe for now. And more importantly they were together.

And in this small, steaming pocket of privacy at the top of the city, Ilya let himself breathe like someone who believed it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to those who have enjoyed this story so far.

I have a day off today with no kids in the house, so I hope to continue to add chapters today.

Chapter 6

After the shower, everything should've felt better. The steam was clearing, skin warm and clean, and there was the kind of quiet that usually arrived after they'd found each other again. But Russia didn't loosen its grip just because they were clean and connected. The city still hummed beyond the glass, and both men could feel the strain of what was waiting for them. The tension picked right back up the moment the water stopped.

The penthouse had two bedrooms. Shane discovered it by accident. He wandered the suite aimlessly, trying to keep his mind and body busy while Ilya figured out a plan to eat. Shane felt useless, not even being able to help order room service. He opened the door to a large bedroom. It was immaculate, with a king bed in the center of the room where the light from the floor to ceiling windows was cast on the deep red duvet. It was beautiful, but nothing about it felt warm and inviting. It made Shane's stomach drop when he realized that they would be using two bedrooms this week. Somehow this felt worse than all of the years they spent running out of hotel rooms back to their own homes after hooking up, because here they had to sleep only feet apart in separate rooms. Close enough to hear each others thoughts through the wall, but not close enough to touch.

It made sense. Of course it did. A penthouse like this wasn't meant for two people who wanted to be close. It was meant for distance. For separation. Russia felt like that in general.

When he turned back, Ilya was standing in the hall with a towel still slung low around his hips, hair damp and falling into his eyes. His face was calm again, but it wasn't the calm of relief. It was the calm of someone who had shoved a lid back on something boiling.

"We should sleep for a bit," Ilya said.

Shane nodded, but it didn't feel like agreement. It felt like obedience.

Ilya's gaze flicked past him into the second bedroom. The untouched bed. The fresh pillows. The empty space that looked too clean to be lived in.

Shane cleared his throat, voice soft. "We don't have to—"

"Yes," Ilya cut in quickly, then stopped himself. His jaw worked, like he was rearranging words before they came out too sharp. "We do."

Shane held his breath, waiting.

Ilya exhaled. "It's safer," he added, quieter. "If someone assumes. If anyone asks. If anything... happens."

Shane nodded slowly. He hated how reasonable it was. Hated that the logic had to exist at all.

"Okay," Shane said.

Ilya didn't look relieved. He looked... tired. Sad.

Shane tried to smile anyway. "Which one is mine?"

Ilya's eyes flicked to him, softening just a fraction. "This one," he said, nodding toward the room Shane had been standing in. "It's farther from the elevator."

Shane swallowed, understanding the subtext. Less accessible. Less exposed. Less likely to be the room someone tried first.

"Okay," Shane repeated, quieter this time.

He knew Ilya was tired, and all Shane wanted for him was comfort. He couldn't offer him comfort in their usual way tonight in bed, so instead he walked to Ilya's bag and retrieved his clothes. He grabbed a clean pair of boxers and his most comfortable clothes. He returned to Ilya and slowly removed the wet towel he had been too tired to take care of himself. He let it drop to the ground as he bent over to help slide the boxers over Ilya's ankles, pulling them up slowly. He followed with the shirt and sweatpants with the same level of tenderness and care. Ilya didn't fight it. When he was dressed and comfortable, Shane kissed him on the cheek, offering a small smile, and returned to his room to give Ilya some space.

He walked in and set his bag down. The bed was too perfect, corners tucked tight. Even the afternoon light couldn't brighten this place. He started unzipping his suitcase with careful movements, trying not to make noise. His brain kept circling back to the same thought: When I visit home, I stay in someone's house. Someone's spare room. Someone's couch. This wasn't homecoming. This was hiding.

Behind him, the door creaked softly. Shane turned. Ilya stood in the doorway like he hadn't meant to. Like he'd walked there on instinct and only realized it once he'd arrived. Shane's heart tightened.

"You okay?" Ilya hesitated, then nodded once.

"Yes." Ilya stepped into the room, crossing the space with quiet purpose. He reached for Shane's suitcase, then stopped, as if remembering he wasn't supposed to act domestic here. Not even behind closed doors, apparently. Not even when they were alone. So he did the next best thing. He reached for Shane instead. Just the smallest touch at the back of his neck. Fingers warm. Gentle. A contact so careful it felt like an apology.

"I'm sorry," Ilya said quietly.

Shane blinked. "For what?"

Ilya's gaze dropped to the bed. To the room. To the distance that had already started to form between them like a barrier.

"For this," Ilya admitted. "For bringing us back here"

Shane realized that Ilya didn't mean Russia when he said "here". He meant this lifestyle. They were interrupting their summer together to go back into hiding. Back to pretending that their

love didn't exist. They had enough of that eleven months a year, this time was meant to be theirs. But Shane also wanted this, he wanted to be here in Russia to support Ilya.

Shane's throat tightened. He swallowed. "It's okay, Ilya. We are doing what we have to do. It isn't a big deal."

Ilya looked at him sharply, like he didn't believe that could be true.

Shane softened his voice. "I mean, I don't like it either. But it's just for a week. You've had to feel like this your whole life."

Ilya's expression flickered. Something like relief tried to show itself and got caught halfway. He nodded once. Then, without another word, he moved around Shane and pulled the covers back. Smoothed the pillow with hands that were suddenly precise again. Like he needed a task to keep himself from unraveling.

Shane watched him, chest aching.

Ilya turned back and looked at him, eyes dark and tired. "Get in."

Shane almost laughed at the bluntness. He just nodded and did it. The sheets were cool. Clean. Impersonal.

Ilya stood there for a second, looking down at him like he didn't know what to do with all the feelings he'd refused to name. Then he did something so quietly sweet it nearly knocked the breath out of Shane's chest. He tucked Shane in. Not theatrically. Not like a joke. Just the simple act of pulling the covers up, tucking them at Shane's shoulder like Shane was something worth taking care of. His fingertips lingered briefly on Shane's collarbone, then retreated.

Shane blinked hard. "You know it's the middle of the day right?"

"I know. Have a rest while we wait for food. I think we both need it." Ilya said, and the roughness in his voice gave him away.

Shane went still realizing he couldn't deny Ilya of this opportunity to show his love.

Ilya leaned down and pressed a brief kiss to Shane's forehead. It was so soft, and so warm. Then Ilya straightened like he'd done something dangerous.

"Sleep," he said quietly.

Shane swallowed. "You too."

Ilya nodded once, then paused in the doorway again, hand on the frame like he was anchoring himself.

"If you need me," he said, voice low, "you come."

Shane's chest tightened. "Okay."

Ilya left without another word, the door clicking shut behind him. Shane lay there in the afternoon light, listening to the faint sounds of the penthouse—air vent whispering, distant city noise behind glass, Ilya shuffling around the suite. He stared at the ceiling until sleep finally took him.

Morning came thin and grey. Shane woke slowly, disoriented for a few seconds as his brain tried to place him. His phone alarm was sounding. He didn't remember setting one. There was no familiar sound of Ilya's breathing beside him, no warmth against his ribs, no quiet presence to anchor him before he opened his eyes. Was it morning? Shane had lost all sense of time.

He sat up, rubbing a hand over his face, fingers dragging through his hair in a groggy attempt to wake himself up. He reached for his phone, silencing his alarm. He checked the time. It was 8:30am. Shit. Shane had fallen asleep midday and slept right until morning. He hadn't realized how exhausted he was. When he went to set his phone down he noticed a note written on a hotel notepad.

I set your alarm just in case. Breakfast at 9.

Shane snorted softly, how had he not heard Ilya come in during the night? He hoped Ilya got some sleep too. Shane figured Ilya must have had a plan for the day if he scheduled breakfast. Ilya wasn't the planner.

He left the room and searched the suite for Ilya, but he was nowhere to be found. His bed was already made and Shane wondered if he had made it, or if it hadn't even been used. He showered quickly and dressed in silence, moving carefully through the room. Even after he was clean, even after he'd pulled on layers and zipped his jacket, his discomfort didn't loosen. When he stepped into the hallway, the penthouse felt even larger than it did the day before. It was too bright, too open, too clean. The sleek lines and wide emptiness made it impossible to hide in the corners, and Shane found himself suddenly aware of his own body in a way he didn't like, as if he was too visible in a space that wasn't meant for softness or uncertainty.

Shane stood in the kitchen area trying to figure out what to do next. He was out of his routine and there was nothing he hated more. He heard the click of the door and the panic left him as quick as it arrived when he looked up to find Ilya entering the room.

He was already dressed and composed, coffee in hand. He looked like he'd been awake for hours, like he'd already lived out the whole day while Shane had still been trying to remember where he was. Ilya glanced up, closing the door behind him, and for a brief moment his expression softened—just a fraction, the smallest flicker of something almost gentle, like relief trying to surface before being shoved back down. Then it smoothed out again into that controlled calm he wore like armor.

“Morning,” Shane said quietly.

“Morning,” Ilya replied, voice even.

Shane moved a little closer, keeping his tone low, his body language careful, as if he wasn’t sure what kind of movement might fracture Ilya’s control. “Did you sleep?” he asked.

Ilya hesitated, only for a second, but Shane caught it anyway. “Enough,” Ilya said finally, and Shane nodded because that was as honest as it was going to get. Not good. Not rested. Just enough to keep moving.

They ate breakfast in the hotel restaurant because Ilya insisted. Not room service. Not hiding behind closed doors. Public, controlled normalcy, the kind of routine you could point to and say *see? nothing strange here*. They sat at a table tucked into a corner, where the view of the room was clear and the exits were visible without being obvious. Staff spoke to them quickly in Russian, words spilling out with the kind of efficiency that didn’t pause for anyone’s comprehension, and plates appeared in front of them without extra conversation or warmth. It wasn’t unkind; it was simply how things were done here. Efficient and transactional.

Shane ate because his body needed fuel, not because he wanted to. He watched Ilya drink coffee like it was medicine, measured and necessary, and he watched the way Ilya’s eyes tracked the room even while he chewed, never fully settling. Every few minutes, Ilya leaned in slightly and translated the basics under his breath—what the waiter was asking, what the menu said, which option would be easiest. Shane nodded, grateful and quiet, responding with small gestures and careful expressions because he didn’t know what else to do. It was strange—being reduced to guesses and polite nods, being unable to do something as simple as saying *thank you* in a language people actually understood. It made him feel incapable in a way he wasn’t used to, and he hated how familiar that must’ve been to Ilya in America.

When they finished, Ilya set money down on the table, rose without hesitation, and didn’t look around like someone enjoying a morning out. He moved like someone who was always ready to leave. Shane followed him out, and the second they stepped outside, the air bit at his cheeks, sharp enough to pull him fully awake. The cold snapped at him like a reminder: you’re not home. It was summer here, but it didn’t feel like the summer they had just left at the Cottage. The wind was cooler, the sun not as hot. Shane figured it was just bad luck, but it also felt like the weather was trying to match their mood.

In the car, Shane finally spoke again, the words coming out cautious like he wasn’t sure what kind of conversation was allowed in this space. “Where are we going?”

Ilya nodded once, eyes on the road. “The rink.”

Shane swallowed. “The one you grew up in?”

For a second, Ilya’s fingers tightened around the steering wheel hard enough that Shane saw the subtle shift in his knuckles. Then he forced his grip to loosen again, returning to that controlled calm. “Yes.”

Shane waited for more detail from Ilya, but they never came. He just drove, and the city slid by block by block, changing gradually as they moved away from the polished hotel district and into streets that felt more lived-in. The farther they went, the more the buildings showed

their age, the more the sidewalks looked worn down by winters that had refused to be gentle. People moved in dark coats with their heads down, faces set in that steady, purposeful expression that didn't invite strangers. There were old storefronts with chipped paint and a certain old charm.

Shane tried to take it all in, but it didn't feel like this city was something he needed to memorize. It was clear the Ilya had. He drove confidently, navigating the streets like he had done it a million times before.

After a few minutes, they pulled into a parking lot. Shane wasn't able to determine where they were, but as they exited the car in silence and approached the building he was relieved to find that it was a sporting goods store. When they entered they were greeted warmly, maybe for the first time since touching down. Plenty of people had greeted Ilya, but this felt more like home. The young man helping them couldn't hide his excitement. He was very aware of the status of the hockey players standing before him. He guided them to the hockey section of the store where Ilya started grabbing them skates and sticks. Shane was enjoying this very much, because this was a language he could speak. Skates were skates. Sticks were sticks. Shane was also surprised to see the regular American brands here. It made sense, guys like Ilya had endorsement deals that would translate back to Russia. Ilya had some back and forth with the young man, who whisked their new skates away to the back room.

"He is going to sharpen them" Ilya explained.

Shane was grateful that they were starting their first full day in this way. He knew that it was intentional on Ilya's part. His goal was always to put Shane at ease before moving on to harder things. They both felt safe on the ice.

Before they paid, someone approached—an older man in a heavy coat with rough hands and a bearded face, the kind of person who looked like he'd worked hard his entire life and didn't waste words on people he didn't respect. He spoke to Ilya with something like gratitude in his expression, his hand briefly touching his chest as he talked, then gesturing toward Ilya as if thanking him for something Shane couldn't understand. Ilya nodded again, polite and contained, but Shane saw something in his posture soften just slightly, like he didn't know what to do with kindness delivered so directly.

They bought skates and a stick. Ilya chose quickly and efficiently, as though he didn't want to linger, as though he didn't want the warmth of this place to fool him into thinking everything was safe. Shane carried the stick out under his arm, feeling strangely young, like a kid heading to the rink for the first time with brand new gear.

Back in the car, Shane finally said what had been building in him since they walked into the store. "They... really like you," he murmured, voice low.

Ilya stared straight ahead. "They like hockey."

Shane frowned. "I think it's more than that, Ilya"

Ilya glanced at him briefly, then returned his attention to the road. "They are proud of hockey in this country" he said flatly.

“That’s not what I meant,” Shane replied quietly.

Ilya didn’t answer, and Shane was once again bothered by the silence. He could feel the defensiveness in Ilya like a closed door. But Shane couldn’t let it sit there without saying the truth that had already taken root.

“Ilya,” he said gently, “I think... I think you believe everyone here sees you the way your father saw you.”

The silence stretched longer this time, tight and heavy. Ilya’s jaw flexed once, his expression flattening like a shield sliding into place. “My father saw me right,” he said, voice controlled.

Shane swallowed, and something firm settled into him—something steady and unshakable. “No,” Shane said quietly. “He didn’t.”

Ilya didn’t look at him, but his grip tightened on the wheel hard enough that Shane could see the tendons in his hand stand out. The veins in his arms stood out. He didn’t argue. He didn’t agree. He just drove, and Shane let the truth exist in the space between them without demanding anything else.

The rink appeared like a relic, sitting stubbornly in the middle of the city like it had no interest in being modernized. It wasn’t glamorous. It was worn and real, signage faded, the building looking like it had outlasted too many winters to care what anyone thought about it. It felt less like a destination and more like a landmark.

Inside, the air hit Shane like a memory he didn’t even own—cold and sharp, that unmistakable smell of ice and metal and old wood. The echo of blades carried from somewhere deeper inside, a rhythm that felt both familiar and haunting. Ilya walked ahead with skates slung over one shoulder and a stick in hand, moving through the space like he belonged to it. He wasn’t a tourist here. This was a place that was familiar to him.

And then it happened again.

People recognized him. Not one or two, but almost everyone. A man in the doorway lit up and called his name. A kid near the boards stared like he’d seen a ghost. A group of teenagers whispered, and then one of them cautiously approached to ask for a photo with hands that trembled from nerves. Ilya agreed, standing still and composed while they took it, and Shane watched with something like shock as the softness on people’s faces became undeniable.

This wasn’t suspicion. This wasn’t condemnation. This was pride.

Ilya signed a stick for a kid who looked like he might cry, and he patted the kid’s shoulder once—awkward, brief, not overly warm, but not cold either. Shane’s throat tightened unexpectedly because he understood, suddenly, how warped Ilya’s internal map of home had been. Not because Russia was perfect. But because one man had convinced Ilya that he was only ever as good as his worst moment, that he would always be remembered for his failures no matter what he achieved.

They moved slowly to a dressing room, stopping along the way. Ilya introduced Shane to some of the kids, who obviously recognized Shane but needed a translator to step up and bridge the gap. It was fun seeing Ilya take control. He couldn't show Shane off in a romantic way, but he could tell that this part was also bringing some joy to Ilya. He was proud to have Shane by his side. They took pictures together with more kids before finally reaching the dressing room.

They got dressed. Shane's hands moved on autopilot—laces, tape, familiar ritual—while his eyes kept drifting to Ilya, watching the way his body held itself. Ilya was quieter now, but it wasn't the shut-down quiet from the airport. It was contained anticipation, like the rink was both comfort and danger all at once. Like it could offer him joy and take it away in the same breath.

When they stepped onto the ice, Shane expected Ilya to be stiff at first, hesitant. He wasn't.

The second his blades touched the surface, something in him changed—shoulders loosening, spine aligning, movement turning fluent and effortless. His body knew exactly what to do here, as if skating was the one language he never had to translate. Shane followed him out, the cold air biting his lungs, and for the first time since they landed he saw a glimpse of joy cross Ilya's face. Not loud. Not performative. Just real, brief, and almost startling in its simplicity. He interacted with the other kids on the ice, passing pucks their way, chasing some of the younger ones around. Shane didn't actually know who this random group of people was, but he assumed they were here during some kind of public skating time. He enjoyed watching the interactions between these strangers and his boyfriend. Shane followed his lead and played with the kids, understanding that a language barrier didn't apply on the ice.

They skated together in easy circles at first, then longer strides, carving space into the ice as if it belonged to them. Shane laughed once when Ilya cut close and sprayed ice at him on purpose, and Ilya's mouth twitched like he was trying not to smile, then failed. Shane felt warmth bloom in his chest so suddenly it almost hurt.

There you are.

Then a voice called out from the boards. Russian, older, sharp with familiarity, and Ilya stopped short, turning as if the sound had grabbed him by the collar. A man stood near the bench with his hands in his coat pockets, hair grey, posture straight despite his age. His eyes were bright, and his expression wasn't stern like Shane expected. It was pleased. Almost proud. Ilya's face went still as he replied in Russian, quiet and respectful, and the coach stepped closer, speaking quickly while Ilya answered with short phrases, voice carefully neutral.

Shane's heart beat faster—not fear, but the sense that he was witnessing something important, something that existed long before Shane ever entered Ilya's life. When Ilya turned slightly toward him and said in English, “An old coach, his son is out here.” Shane felt the words land heavy in his chest. The coach looked at Shane, then smiled—actually smiled—and said something in Russian that sounded warm even without translation. Ilya hesitated, then translated roughly, like he didn't want to soften it too much.

“He says... thank you for taking care of me.”

Shane blinked hard, throat tight. “Tell him... I’m trying.”

Ilya relayed it, and the coach’s expression softened further as he said more, slower now, like he was choosing his words carefully. Ilya listened, face unreadable, then nodded once. Shane had expected harshness, demands, cold judgment. But the man’s eyes held something like genuine affection as he looked at Ilya—like he was seeing a kid he’d once believed in, not a man he needed to break.

Shane’s chest tightened again because maybe the cruelty had never been the whole country. Maybe it had always just been one house.

Ilay had drifted close enough that the coach patted Ilya’s shoulder—firm and brief—and walked away, leaving Ilya staring after him like he wasn’t sure what to do with kindness that didn’t come with a price.

Shane skated closer, careful. “You good?” he asked softly.

Ilya didn’t answer. His gaze drifted upward toward the stands, and Shane felt it before he even saw it—the way Ilya’s posture changed as if something invisible had yanked him backward in time. His eyes fixed on a spot halfway up the empty bleachers, and his face went younger in a way that had nothing to do with age and everything to do with memory. His breath hitched, sharp and sudden.

Shane’s stomach dropped.

“Ilya?” he tried again, softer.

Ilya didn’t hear him. Or he did, and couldn’t answer. His eyes stayed locked on the stands like the empty seats had reached into his chest and grabbed something raw. And then he was gone.

He was twelve again. The rink was the same, but louder, warmer, alive with the thuds of pucks hitting the boards and the scrape of blades and the wild noise of boys who still believed they still had a shot. His gloves felt too big, his helmet too tight, and his heart was too full in a way that made him feel invincible. They had come back and won. He had scored the game winning goal. The scoreboard glowed, and his teammates swarmed him, laughing and shouting, slamming their gloves into his chest until he stumbled and laughed breathlessly, cheeks burning. In this moment, hockey was fun.

He lifted his head immediately, instinctively, searching the stands the way he always did.

He always searched.

And he found her—his mother, sitting in the same spot she always sat, scarf wrapped around her neck, cheeks pink from the cold, eyes bright and fixed on him like he was the only person in the building. She smiled so wide it looked like it hurt, and Ilya’s chest filled with

something clean and bright. He lifted a hand, half-wave, half-plea—did you see? did you see, mom?—and she waved back, laughing silently, her hand fluttering like a little flag.

For one perfect second, everything felt simple. He did it. She saw him. He made her happy. He did his job today.

Then someone sat down beside her.

His father.

Even from the ice, Ilya recognized the shift instantly. It was in the way his mother's shoulders stiffened, the way her smile faded, not entirely but enough, like she was trying to keep it turned on and couldn't. His father leaned in and said something sharp into her ear, his mouth unsmiling, his eyes cold, and his mother's expression changed. She shook her head slightly, tried to answer, lips moving quickly like she was pleading. His father's jaw tightened, and he gestured toward the ice aggressively—toward Ilya—like he was pointing out a flaw.

Ilya's stomach sank hard.

He looked at the scoreboard again, desperate to remind himself they'd won. They'd won. He'd scored.

Only once.

His father's face tightened like that number mattered more than the win, and suddenly Ilya's legs felt heavy, like the ice had thickened beneath him. Hockey was no longer fun tonight.

The game ended in noise and celebration. The team lined up, shook hands, and the rink buzzed with congratulatory chatter, but all Ilya could feel was the weight of his father's eyes. In the parking lot, the cold hit like a slap, and his father didn't congratulate him. Didn't speak to him until they were in the car. This was the worst part. The silence before the bomb was dropped. The anticipation scared him more than anything that would come next. It was a weapon. His mother sat in the front passenger seat. His brother sat beside Ilya in the back, quiet, eyes forward, already bracing because he knew the signs too.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, and then his father spoke—not loud, but worse than loud. Controlled. Angry.

"You scored once," his father said, voice flat.

Ilya swallowed. "Yes."

"You had three chances," his father continued. "You wasted them."

Ilya's hands clenched in his lap so hard his nails cut into his skin. His mother turned slightly in her seat, careful and brave. "He played well," she said.

His father's head snapped toward her. "Do not," he warned—just one word, but it carried weight, finality, threat.

His mother went quiet.

Ilya stared at the back of her seat, wishing he could climb forward and hide inside her coat the way he had when he was smaller, when protection still felt possible. His father kept going, voice steady and merciless, filling the car with criticism until it felt like there wasn't enough air left for anyone else to breathe.

"You think winning is enough," his father said. "It's not enough. There is no effort. Your focus is weak. You are weak. You skate like you are afraid of speed."

Ilya didn't answer because answering made it worse. His brother stayed silent beside him, body rigid, pretending he didn't exist. Alexei hated him for this. Ilya's flaws turned into Alexei's reality. Ilya couldn't deny the impact that it had on him. Ilya was taking direct blows night after night, but his brother was there forced to catch the strays.

The car felt too small, too hot, too full of his father's voice. Ilya stared out the window, blinking hard, trying not to cry because crying would be noticed, and being noticed would be punished. He had become aware of the window as an enemy. There was a time when he was hiding his tears, and the window was a dead giveaway in the way it fogged up from his warm tears and breath. He wasn't going to let that happen again.

At a red light, his mother turned her head.

She looked over her shoulder at him, and despite everything, her face softened. Her eyes met his in the dim light—blue-green and warm—and she smiled. Not big, not bright, just small and steady. A smile that said *I saw you*. A smile that said *you did good*. A smile that said *you are loved, even if he refuses to show it*.

Ilya held her gaze like it he needed it to stay alive.

Then the light changed, and she turned forward again, and the car kept moving.

He didn't know it then, but it would be the last hockey season with her in the stands. He prayed for more red lights that night, and every night, just to get one more glimpse of her eyes and her smile.

Back on the ice in the present, Ilya's breath caught like he'd been punched. He blinked hard, staring at the empty stands as if he expected to see her there—scarf, pink cheeks, bright eyes—only to remember, violently, that she wouldn't be. Not now. Not ever again. The joy drained out of him in one brutal pull, leaving him pale beneath the rink lights. Shane skated up fast, worry flashing across his face as he called his name, but Ilya flinched at the sound like it was too loud inside his head. He shook his head once, sharp, trying to clear it. He pushed Shane away.

Ilya skated off the ice to the dressing room, and just like that the joy was gone.

Shane didn't want to follow him off, he didn't think Ilya was in the right headspace to deal with Shane's worry right now. He continued for a few more minutes until he watched Ilya

leave the building.

He said goodbye to some of the kids, waved at Ilyas coach, who now had a look of concern on his face, and he went to the dressing room. On the bench Shane found Ilyas skates and stick, all signed now, waiting for a recipient. Shane's first thought was that that was a nice touch and they would be cherished by the lucky finder, but his second was that this was a clear sign that they would not be back here. He undressed quickly, found the Sharpie next to Ilyas skates, and signed his as well before exiting the rink to find Ilya. He hoped he hadn't left him there, but it was something that definitely crossed his mind.

He was relieved to find the car running in the parking lot where they had left it. Shane took a deep breath as he approached. He was bracing for whatever was about to hit him in the car.

When he reached the car, he was caught off guard when he watched Ilya exit his side and walk over to open the door for Shane. He closed it silently behind him and returned to his seat.

Shane expected to feel more tension, but when he looked at Ilya his eyes were quickly met by his. He had tears welling in his eyes.

"Hey," Shane started. "Hey, talk to me. What happened in there?"

"I'm sorry" Ilya said, but he was quickly interrupted.

"No, you don't need to apologize for.."

"Let me finish. I need to say this to you." Ilya said.

Ilya's voice came out quieter than he meant it to. He reached out and placed a hand on Shane's.

Shane didn't answer right away. He just turned slightly in his seat, watching him.

"Okay," Shane said softly. "Go ahead." pushing him before he could lose his nerve.

Ilya swallowed. The words felt stuck behind his teeth, like they'd been sitting there all day, heavy and sharp.

"I didn't mean to do that to you," he said.

Shane's brow pulled together. "Do what?"

Ilya let out a slow breath through his nose, like he was trying to steady himself. "This," he said, gesturing vaguely between them. "The quiet."

Shane blinked once, careful. "Ilya, you don't have to—"

"No," Ilya cut in, then immediately softened, forcing himself to slow down. "Yes. I do."

His grip tightened around his hand, then eased again.

“I know I’ve been... silent,” he said. “Since we got here. In the airport. In the car. Even in the hotel. I’ve been... gone.”

Shane’s voice was low. Gentle. “You’re not gone.”

Ilya’s jaw clenched. “I am. A little,” he admitted. “And I don’t want to be. I said I didn’t want to be.”

The next words came harder, like pulling something right out of his heart.

“My father used silence like a weapon,” Ilya said.

Shane went very still.

Ilya kept his eyes on Shane. His voice stayed controlled, but Shane could hear the roughness under it, the strain.

“He wouldn’t yell right away,” Ilya continued. “He would wait. He would let it just sit. In the car. At dinner. In the rink.” His throat moved when he swallowed. “He would make you sit there and... wait for it. Like you could feel something bad coming, but you didn’t know when. Only that it would be bad.”

Shane’s hands curled loosely in his lap. “Jesus.”

Ilya nodded once, sharp. “It made you punish yourself before he even spoke,” he said. “I already thought the worst about myself before he had to tell me.”

Shane didn’t interrupt. He didn’t rush him. He just listened.

Ilya’s voice dropped even lower. “I tried to make it so anything he could say or do wouldn’t hurt because I already thought it too.”

Shane’s head tilted, a frown forming. “Ilya—”

“No,” Ilya said again, firmer. “Listen.”

Shane fell silent immediately.

Ilya’s chest tightened. “I watched you today,” he said. “You didn’t talk much. You didn’t try to fix. You didn’t... fill the space like you normally do. You were watching everything. Trying not to do anything wrong.”

Shane swallowed. His voice came out careful. “Well, I don’t speak the language. There is nothing I can do.”

“I know,” Ilya said quickly. “I know. That’s part of it. But it’s more than that.”

Shane’s eyes stayed on him, steady and searching.

Ilya exhaled, and when he spoke again his voice sounded almost angry. Probably at himself.

“I didn’t want you to feel like you were waiting for something bad to happen,” he said. “I didn’t want you to feel like my silence meant anger. Or disappointment. Or punishment.”

Shane’s throat moved. “I didn’t think you were punishing me.”

Ilya flicked a glance at him, fast. “But you were waiting for something bad.”

Shane didn’t deny it. He couldn’t.

Ilya looked away again, eyes back to the road. “I’m sorry,” he said, the words blunt and honest. “I’m sorry I made you feel like he made me feel.”

Shane’s voice softened. “Ilya… you’re allowed to be your thoughts. Especially now.”

“I know,” Ilya said immediately. “But you shouldn’t have to guess what they are.” His fingers flexed against the wheel. “You shouldn’t have to sit beside me in silence and try to solve something… like I’m something dangerous.”

Shane’s mouth tightened. “You’re not dangerous.”

Ilya let out a humorless laugh. “Sometimes my head is.”

Shane’s expression shifted. That sentence scared him. “Have you felt scared here?”

Ilya nodded once. “Yes.”

“And you thought if you stayed quiet, it would… keep it contained,” Shane said.

Ilya swallowed. “It’s what I learned to do.”

Shane breathed out slowly, staring out the windshield for a second like he needed to settle his own thoughts before speaking. When he looked back, his eyes were gentle but firm.

“I don’t want to feel shut out,” Shane said. “But I also don’t want you to feel like you have to pretend for me.”

Ilya’s jaw worked. “I don’t know how to do this here,” he admitted. He let go of Shane’s hand and turned, lying his head down on the steering wheel.

Shane’s voice came even softer. “Then we we learn.”

Ilya’s throat tightened. He blinked once, hard. He sat back up. “I want to speak openly,” he said quietly. “Even if I don’t have the right words.”

Shane nodded once. “Okay.”

Ilya hesitated, then added, almost like a confession: “If I go quiet, it’s not because of you.”

Shane’s chest rose with a slow breath. “I know.”

“No,” Ilya corrected gently, eyes still on the road. “I need you to actually know.” His voice tightened. “It’s not anger. It’s not regret. It’s not you doing something wrong. It’s just me.”

Shane watched him for a long moment.

Then he reached across the console, placing his hand on Ilya’s forearm. Not grabbing. Just there.

Warm. Present.

“I am here, In whatever way you need me.” Shane said quietly.

Ilya’s breath hitched like the touch punched through him.

He nodded once, small.

Shane squeezed gently. “So what do you need from me?”

Ilya swallowed, then finally looked at him again—really looked.

“If you feel me doing it,” he said, voice low, “Don’t be polite. Just tell me.”

Shane blinked. “You want me to tell you?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, almost stern. “You are allowed.”

Shane’s mouth twitched, the faintest hint of his normal self. “Bossy.”

Ilya huffed a short breath that might’ve been a laugh if it wasn’t edged with something fragile. “Yes.”

Shane held his gaze. “Okay,” he said again. “I can do that.”

Ilya stared at him for a long second, something raw moving behind his eyes.

“I brought you here because I trust you,” Ilya said quietly. “Russia is scary, but I don’t want you to be scared of me.”

Shane’s thumb rubbed once over Ilya’s sleeve. “I’m not scared of you.”

Ilya’s voice dropped. “But you’re scared here?”

Shane didn’t deny it.

He just nodded once. Honest. “Yeah. A little. Things just feel intense here, and I don’t know what people are saying. I just feel out of control.”

Ilya’s expression softened, and this time it stayed softened.

“I’m sorry,” he said again, slower. “Truly.”

Shane held his hand there a moment longer. "Thank you for saying it," he murmured.

Ilya exhaled like the words had been sitting in his chest like a stone and he'd finally set them down.

"I will try to say more," he said.

Shane's eyes stayed steady. "And I will too."

"If we are being honest," Ilya began tentatively, "I didn't sleep last night. I never even made it into bed."

He glanced at Shane, expecting judgement. He found none.

"Then let's go have a nap."

"My room has a lock on the door. Let's go do it together." Ilya replied softly, before driving them back to the hotel.

The nap seemed to put them both in a better place. They woke slowly. -Shane lay still for a moment, letting his eyes adjust, letting the comfort of the bed sink into him again. His body and mind already felt better than it had this morning. Not from the rest, but from the company of the man he was waking up next to.

Beside him, Ilya was on his side, facing him. Awake and calm.

And for the first time since they'd landed, Shane saw something in Ilya that looked almost like peace. Shane felt a hint of relief. He knew Ilya hadn't slept in days and he hoped that this would improve his mental state enough to get them through the rest of the week.

"Hey," Shane whispered.

Ilya blinked slowly, like the word had to travel through him before it landed. Then his mouth twitched, faint and tired. "Hey."

Shane smiled without meaning to. "You slept."

Ilya hesitated, then nodded once. "A little."

Shane watched him, careful not to scare off whatever softness had settled in. "Was it a good sleep?"

For a second, Ilya just looked at him. Then, quietly he said, "Yes."

Shane exhaled, relief sliding through him like warmth. "Good."

Ilya turned over and stared at the ceiling for a moment, then back at Shane. His voice was rough with sleep, but it was steady. “You slept too?”

“Yeah,” Shane murmured. “I did.”

A small silence settled between them, but it wasn’t the kind they had just discussed in the car. It didn’t feel like bad. It felt restful.

Shane’s hand shifted under the sheets until it found Ilya’s wrist on the mattress between them. He didn’t grab it, he just gently combed his fingers softly over his pulse point in an effort to continue his peaceful calmness.

Ilya didn’t flinch. He didn’t pull away. He simply let it happen, as if the nap had brought them back to the comfort of the cottage for a moment.

“You okay?” Shane asked softly.

Ilya’s gaze dropped to their hands. “Better,” he admitted.

Shane nodded once. “Me too.”

Ilya let out a quiet breath that sounded almost like a laugh, but not quite. “Good.”

They lay there for another minute, neither of them in a hurry to stand up and re-enter the world. The penthouse could wait. The city could wait. Russia could wait, at least for a moment.

Shane finally cleared his throat. “Can we do something normal tonight?”

Ilya blinked. “Normal?”

“Yes,” Shane said, voice gentle but hopeful. “Just... something that doesn’t feel like an emotional hostage situation.”

That earned him a real exhale from Ilya—an actual, quiet laugh that loosened Shane’s chest even more.

“You are very dramatic,” Ilya murmured.

“I’m just adapting to the culture,” Shane whispered back, dead serious. “I’m leaning into Russian despair.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, but the corner of his mouth lifted. “You would die.”

“Probably,” Shane agreed. “But can I at least die with pastry or something?”

Ilya stared at him for a second, that expression hovering between fond and exhausted. Then he nodded once.

“Okay,” he said quietly. “Pastry.”

Shane smiled, soft and relieved. "Okay."

They got up slowly, moving through the penthouse without rushing, letting the nap linger a little longer. They got dressed. Shane was hyper aware of his wardrobe choices after this conversation at the airport. He watched Ilya slide on yet another black outfit, blending into his surroundings. He looked at Ilya, lifting his arms up as if to say "is this fine?". Ilya answered with no words and a smile. He would take it.

Before they left, they shared a quick kiss inside the penthouse doors. When they stepped out of the penthouse and into the hallway, Ilya's posture tightened slightly again. It was automatic, but he didn't turn into a robot like he had before. He stayed near Shane, not touching him, but close enough that he could feel the effort.

The elevator ride down was silent, but it wasn't suffocating.

Shane kept his eyes forward. Ilya did too. This felt like business.

When they stepped out on to the street, Shane felt more comfortable there than he had since they landed. It wasn't that Russia or their circumstances had changed, he just knew that they'd found their way back to each other for a few hours and that gave him the confidence to carry on with the day.

The café Ilya chose was warm in the kind of way that made Shane breathe easier. It felt more like home.

The windows were fogged with heat, lights low and golden, the air thick with the smell of bread and sugar and strong tea. It wasn't flashy or modern. It felt authentic. Like people had been coming here for years, enjoying the ambiance with their families.

Shane followed Ilya to a small table near the back, half-hidden by a wall. It felt thoughtful. Protective.

The server approached, speaking quickly in Russian.

Shane froze automatically.

Then he remembered: Ilya was here. Ilya would handle it. Shane didn't have to pretend to be competent here.

Ilya ordered for them without looking at the menu, voice calm and polite.

When the server left, Shane exhaled slowly. "Okay," he murmured. "Teach me one sentence."

Ilya's eyes flicked up. "Why."

"Because," Shane said, leaning forward slightly, "I feel like a spy who got dropped in the wrong country and told to blend in."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "Ou, mysterious." Raising his eye brows.

“Exactly,” Shane said. “But I need one thing. One phrase. Something I can use.”

Ilya studied him, then asked, “What do you want to say?”

Shane didn’t hesitate this time. “Thank you.”

Something softened in Ilya’s expression—small, but unmistakable.

He said the word slowly, clearly. “Spasibo.”

Shane repeated it immediately, careful. “Spasibo.”

Ilya’s eyebrows lifted. “Better.”

Shane looked smug. “I’m fluent.”

“You are not,” Ilya said, deadpan.

Shane grinned anyway, because for the first time all day, it felt like he could.

Ilya watched him for a beat, eyes softer than his expression wanted to admit.

“You’re proud of yourself,” Ilya said flatly.

Shane didn’t bother denying it. “I am *thrilled*.”

“You will get overconfident,” Ilya warned.

“I’ve already started,” Shane said, settling back in his chair like he was a local now. “Next I’m ordering soup on my own. Watch me.”

Ilya made a sound that was suspiciously close to a laugh. “Absolutely not. I am in charge here.”

Shane’s mouth twitched. “You’re so controlling.”

“Yes,” Ilya agreed, unbothered.

Then the server returned, saving them both from what that moment might’ve turned into.

Two glasses of tea were placed down first—one darker, one lighter, both steaming and fragrant. The server said something quick to Ilya, and Ilya answered, equally quick, then nodded once as the woman moved away again.

Shane stared down at the tea like it was sacred. “Okay,” he murmured. “This smells… amazing.”

“It will fix you,” Ilya said, like it was a fact.

Shane blinked up at him. “Fix me?”

Ilya nodded. “Yes.”

“Like medicine.”

Ilya grabbed the jam that had just been dropped off at the table. He took a spoonful and stirred it in the darker of the two teas. Like his mother had loved. Shane took a sip of the now sweet tea. He closed his eyes, and just enjoyed the warmth of it. This meant something to Shane, it was Ilyas way of sharing a piece of himself and his mother.

Ilya’s mouth curved slightly. “Told you.”

They sat there for a few minutes without rushing, letting warmth spread through their bodies in slow, steady increments. Outside, the cool evening air pressed up against the windows like it wanted in. Inside, the café glowed.

Then dessert arrived.

A plate was set down between them—something layered and golden, honeyed and soft, with a delicate dusting of crumbs on top like snow. Another small dish followed, with pastries that looked too pretty to be handled. The scent hit Shane immediately—sweet, warm, rich.

Shane stared. “Okay. This is *not* fair.”

Ilya lifted an eyebrow. “What is not fair.”

“This,” Shane said, gesturing at the table like it was a personal offense. “How good this looks. How is everyone in Russia not just... endlessly happy from pastries alone?”

Ilya’s expression deadpanned. “We are not emotionally stable.”

Shane nodded slowly. “Fair. Okay. Point taken.”

Ilya picked up his fork and cut into the honey cake with careful precision, like he didn’t want to destroy it too quickly. He lifted a bite, then paused.

Shane waited, amused. “You’re thinking.”

“I’m deciding if you deserve it,” Ilya said.

Shane gasped. “Oh, I will earn it”

Ilya blinked. “Not here, Hollander.”

Shane waved a dismissive hand. “I don’t even want it. Doesn’t fit in the diet plan.”

Ilya rolled his eyes and slid the first bite across the plate toward Shane anyway.

Shane ate it.

And immediately froze.

His eyes widened. His whole face changed like something holy had happened in his mouth.

Ilya watched him with lazy satisfaction. “Yes?”

Shane swallowed slowly, blinking like he needed a second to recover. “Oh my god,” he whispered.

Ilya’s mouth twitched. “It’s good.”

“It’s not ‘good,’” Shane corrected, scandalized. “It’s *incredible*. This is... this is what you meant when you said the soup was medical. This is—this is a cure.”

Ilya’s eyes softened, the humor in them gentler now. “You are very dramatic. You only like because you don’t eat sugar in Canada.”

“Well, I guess my diet had borders” Shane insisted. “Spasibo to Russia for this.”

Ilya huffed out a quiet laugh, shaking his head.

And for a few minutes, it really did feel normal.

Not normal like home. Not normal like Montreal. But normal like... two people sharing something sweet in a warm room, letting the world exist without constantly bracing for it.

Shane caught himself watching Ilya more than the food.

The way he settled in. The way his eyes weren’t scanning the room every five seconds anymore. The way his hands had loosened, fingers resting against the cup instead of gripping it like it might be ripped from his hands.

Ilya was still guarded. Still careful. But the tightness wasn’t wrapped around his throat anymore.

Shane held onto that like a small victory.

He pulled his phone out slowly, keeping it low, and Ilya immediately noticed.

His gaze sharpened for a heartbeat. “What are you doing?”

Shane lifted the phone slightly, eyebrows raised in innocence. “Irina Foundation,” he said, like it explained everything.

Ilya stared at him, suspicious. “You’re recording me eat cake?”

Shane grinned. “I’m recording the *experience*. It’s cultural. Educational.”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed. “No.”

Shane leaned forward, lowering his voice like he was negotiating a hostage situation. “One photo,” he pleaded. “Not you. Just... the tea, the dessert, the vibe. Proof that we’re doing wholesome foundation outreach.”

Ilya hesitated.

Shane softened. “We can make it about your mom,” he added gently. “About where she came from. About... roots. The good parts.”

Something shifted behind Ilya’s eyes.

Not pain exactly. Not yet. Just... quiet thought.

“Okay,” Ilya said at last. “One.”

Shane’s smile softened instantly. “Okay.”

He took a photo of the table—tea steaming, honey cake half-eaten, the warm glow of the café lights in the background. No faces. No details that mattered. Just a moment frozen into something that could look innocent to anyone else.

Then he tucked his phone away again like a promise kept.

“Thank you,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya nodded once. “Eat. Your borders will be back in a few days.”

Shane obeyed.

When they left the café, the sharp wind hit their cheeks, the night was wrapping around the city like a curtain. The streetlights had flickered on. Cars moved steadily, tires hissing against pavement. He hadn't been outside here at night yet. It was far more beautiful than it was during the day. The warm glow of streetlights lit up the cold looking buildings. Somehow, the skyline looked more awake in the dark than it had in the daylight. Shane didn't really feel like going back to their hideout.

He kept his hands in his pockets, shoulders hunched slightly against the cold. Ilya walked beside him, close but not touching, his posture calm in that careful way that suggested he still had one foot in safety and one foot in flight mode.

They didn’t talk much at first.

The quiet was different now. It wasn’t a weapon like they had discussed. It felt like they were both just... listening and letting the city exist around them.

Shane breathed out slowly, watching his breath fog in front of him. “Okay,” he murmured, “this is... kind of beautiful.”

Ilya glanced at him. “Yes.”

Shane smiled faintly. “I might even like it here.”

“No you don't” Ilya said.

Shane bumped his shoulder gently into Ilya's. Not hard. Just enough to say *I'm here* without saying it out loud. "I know. But can we pretend for one night?"

Ilya's mouth curved slightly. "Maybe."

They walked a few blocks, letting the streets open up into something wider.

A river, maybe—dark water cutting through the city, reflecting light in broken pieces. Or a bridge that offered a view. Somewhere with space to breathe.

Ilya slowed without announcing it, stepping toward the railing.

Shane followed.

Shane leaned on the railing, staring out.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then Shane said quietly, "I thought it would feel worse."

Ilya's gaze stayed on the horizon. "Worse?"

"Yeah," Shane admitted. "I thought... everyone would be cold. Or angry. Or suspicious. And maybe some people are, I don't know. But today... they looked at you like you belong to them."

Ilya didn't answer.

Shane turned his head slightly, careful not to push too hard. "That must be... confusing."

Ilya's jaw tightened. Then eased.

"Yes," he admitted, voice low. "It is."

Shane waited.

Ilya's eyes stayed forward. "My father made it sound like I left in disgrace," he said quietly. "Like the whole country was disappointed in me."

Shane's chest tightened at the flatness in his tone. Like it was still half-believed.

"I don't think they see you that way," Shane said.

Ilya's mouth pulled into something thin, not quite a smile. "No?"

Shane exhaled. "I know you don't like when I say things like this..."

Ilya glanced at him. "Then don't."

Shane smiled faintly. "Too late. I'm committed."

Ilya rolled his eyes, but it wasn't sharp. It was fond.

Shane leaned closer, voice low enough that it felt like something private even out here in the open. "I think you spent your whole life listening to one voice," he said. "And it wasn't the right one. Maybe just the loudest."

The words hung between them, fragile and dangerous.

Ilya stared out at the city for a long moment.

Then, quietly, almost like it hurt to admit, he said, "Well I think the loudest one died and there was only one left."

Shane didn't push, but he wanted to leave Ilya with something to hold on to.

"I hope you can leave here understanding that you are loved by this country. Let his voice die with him."

He stayed there, shoulder close to Ilya's, the cold biting at his fingers, the city glowing in front of them like it was trying to offer something softer than memory.

After a while, Shane murmured, "We should go back before I freeze to death."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "I thought we learned that it is not winter here."

Shane squinted at him. "The summer can be cold too, asshole."

"Ok."

"Ok."

Ilya exhaled, and this time it really did sound like a laugh. "Come on."

Chapter 7

The next morning, Shane waited until they were both standing in the kitchen space. The poured their coffee and stood at the counter. It was like Ilya had remembered their conversation the day before and felt the need to bridge the gap between them. He glanced at the door, as if to check that it was still closed and locked like he had left it. Then moved over to Shane, not breaking eye contact along the way. He reached up and grabbed the coffee mug from Shane's hand, placing it out of the way on the counter beside them. Then he grabbed Shane's waist and drew him in until their faces rested against each other. His lips parted as he kissed Shane passionately, hands exploring Shane's back and hair. He lifted him up on to the counter and Shane wrapped his legs around him instinctually, bringing Ilya closer to him. Their kiss deepened to the point that they had to force themselves apart, catching their breath, and remembering where they were.

It was unlikely that someone could just barge in, but there would be no way to cover up what they were doing. Not like this, not in this position. So they stopped, both knowing the thoughts that entered each others minds. Shane released Ilya, lowering his legs back down, but he stayed sat on the counter while Ilya went back to drinking his coffee.

“What do you want to do today?” Shane said finally, having caught his breath.

Ilya didn't respond right away. His gaze stayed fixed on the coffee in his hands. He looked composed, but Shane had learned by now that composure and calm weren't always the same thing for Ilya. Sometimes composure was simply the most efficient way to keep moving while something inside you screamed.

After a long beat, Ilya said quietly, “My neighborhood, maybe?”

Shane blinked, caught off guard by the choice. He kind of assumed that Ilya would want to stay as far away from that part of his life as possible. He didn't know if he still had family there, but there must be people there who could recognize him in a way that could get back to the people he didn't want to see. Back to Alexei.

“Okay,” Shane replied anyway, keeping his voice even. He didn't ask why. He didn't ask if Ilya was sure. Those were the kinds of questions that sometimes made Ilya retreat. Instead, Shane let the word *okay* carry everything he meant: *I'm with you. I'm not afraid of where you come from. I'm not going to make you do this alone.*

Ilya nodded once, still looking out the window, and the movement was small but decisive. “We drive,” he added, like he was trying to reduce the weight of it. “We just look.”

Shane knew better than to believe it would be that simple. But he also knew that Ilya needed it to feel that way.

So Shane just nodded again. “We'll look.”

The neighborhood snuck up on them.

It was quiet, just a normal neighborhood that you would see in any Canadian city. It appeared to be a middle-class neighborhood. It had a variety of homes, some new, some old. Many had been renovated recently, while others stood almost looking abandoned. Shane never really knew where Ilyas family sat economically. He knew they had to have some kind of financial security, because even here in Russia, hockey was a privileged sport. It cost money to play hockey, more so than a lot of other competitive sports. He also knew that Ilya had been paying to support his family since signing his NHL contracts, so was it a change in lifestyle, or circumstances that would cause the shift? Or was it simply that they could ask and they knew he would pay?

Either way, Shane got the impression seeing the homes around him that Ilya came from a regular working class home. He was anxious to see the home that Ilya grew up in.

Ilya drove like someone following a route his body remembered better than his mind wanted to. He didn't check a map. He didn't hesitate at turns. He didn't need landmarks. Shane watched his hands on the wheel, the subtle changes he could read now—fingers tightening at certain intersections, a brief pause at a particular corner, the way his shoulders climbed higher as they turned onto a smaller street, then loosened again as if his lungs had finally found a rhythm that belonged here. It wasn't fear, exactly. It was recognition. The kind that slid under your skin and made you realize you'd never actually escaped a place—you'd only gotten better at being far away from it.

They parked without speaking much, and the moment the engine cut off, silence poured into the car like a tide. Shane didn't rush to open his door. He sat still for a second, letting the quiet settle. He waited for Ilya's next move. Then he opened the door and exited the vehicle. Shane didn't know where they were going.

The sun hit Shane immediately, it felt warmer today than the days before. He decided to leave his jacket and the car and followed Ilya down the sidewalk at that quicker pace that Ilya carried here in Russia.

Ilya didn't say where they were going. He just walked with quiet purpose, eyes forward, posture straight, moving past homes that looked eerily similar to each other, until Shane felt like he'd lose his sense of direction completely if Ilya stopped. It wasn't a place Shane could memorize by landmarks. It was a place you had to know by memory and instinct, by knowing which doors belonged to which families, which corners were safe to linger on and which were not.

"Ilya" Shane started. "You're doing it again. Can you just tell me where we are going?"

Ilya slowed his pace, allowing Shane to catch up.

"Sorry. I want to see my school."

The continued to walk. Shane thought it was silly to have parked so far away. He'd imagined there were parking spots closer to their destination, but he didn't say anything. Ilya must have had a reason.

They passed a small park, more patch than playground. A few bare trees. A narrow path worn into the grass. Two benches stood with paint chipped and wood weathered. It looked like the kind of place you sat when you needed air but didn't want to go home yet. Ilya slowed as they reached it, his gaze moving over the space like he was searching for something that had been erased. Without speaking, he walked toward one of the benches and sat down as if he was tired of walking.

Shane stopped a few feet away, watching him.

"Sit" Ilya said.

"You see that building there? That is where I went to school until the 8th grade." Ilya pointed to an old building across the field. There were kids playing outside of it. It was Monday, so maybe they had school. He didn't know what the school calendar looked like here in Russia. It was also possible that Russia was a place that existed with less screen time and less involved parents. Kids still knew how to play here.

Maybe this is why Ilya parked so far away. He probably knew there would be kids there would would recognize him. It might be something he was trying to avoid today.

Shane sat on the second bench, separate from Ilya.

He glanced over at him. Ilya was leaned forward slightly, elbows on his knees, hands loosely clasped. He stared off into the distance. Withdrawn. He looked like someone who had arrived somewhere important and didn't know what to do with the fact that it still existed.

Minutes passed.

"What was it like there?" Shane finally gathered the courage to ask.

And then Shane saw it.

The shift. It was just the smallest change in Ilya's eyes. His breathing stayed steady, but his gaze went distant, his expression tightening like his mind had moved backward and left his body behind to keep up the illusion that he was okay.

This time, though, he didn't flinch. He didn't bolt. He didn't snap back into coldness and control. He let himself go. He let himself remember.

He was twelve again.

The day after his mother died, his father made him go to school.

He remembered waking up. Not so much waking up, but coming back into the room. He hadn't slept. It was the first night he had to go to bed without the tender moments he shared with his mother on the couch, reading stories to quiet both of their minds before ending the day. He lied in his bed, looking up at the ceiling, hearing his father and brother having a conversation in the kitchen. A normal fucking conversation. It was as if Ilya's world was the only one that had stopped spinning the day before. He was just about to roll over, refusing to

leave his bed. He considered crying, for a brief moment, and then he remembered that grieving was not something that was allowed under this roof. He didn't need to lose his mother to know that. He had been surrounded by the idea that grief was weakness his entire life. That was the culture.

Before he could move, his father had opened the bedroom door without knocking. He hadn't asked how Ilya was. He hadn't sat on the edge of the bed. He hadn't touched him or said anything about his mother. He'd just looked at him with that cruel gaze, and said, "Get up."

Ilya had blinked slowly, throat closing. "Papa..." he'd started, because even then, even in that moment, some part of him still believed his father might have a heart.

"You will go to school," his father said.

The words had felt unreal. Like a mistake.

"I can't," Ilya whispered.

His father's expression didn't change. "You will not be lazy. You will go." Then, like an afterthought meant to sound like guidance rather than cruelty: "Life does not stop because there was an accident."

Ilya remembered dressing with shaking hands, buttons slipping through his fingers. He remembered the silence in the apartment, the way it swallowed every sound he made as if even the walls were ashamed to witness him. He remembered having to pass by her bedroom, where he had found her only hours before. He remembered walking down the stairwell alone, the air smelling like concrete and smoke. He remembered the cold outside hitting his face so hard it felt like being punished for what he had seen.

School had looked the same as always. That was the most disorienting part. Kids laughing. Teachers calling names. Boots crunching snow. The building standing there in stubborn normalcy while Ilya felt like his entire world had split open and bled out overnight.

His friends were kind. They had no idea what to do, but they were kind.

One boy had stared at him with wide, horrified eyes, and whispered, "We heard. I'm sorry," like the words tasted wrong in his mouth. Another friend offered him half of his lunch, when they sat down and realized he didn't have one. She had always packed it. He didn't even think to do that this morning. He wasn't hungry anyway. Their faces were soft with sympathy. Their voices were careful. They didn't say anything cruel. They didn't say anything sharp. They just... looked at him like they wished they could fix it.

His teachers were kind too. He didn't know how anyone had even found out, because he knew his father would not have called the school to tell them. The kindness of the teachers actually stung, because it was a reminder that there were more good adults that knew how to handle these things, but those weren't the kinds of people he went home to. He knew when he left school and went back to life that the sympathy and kindness would run out.

Ilya couldn't respond to the kindness. He nodded, because words wouldn't come. He kept his eyes down, because if he looked too directly at anyone, he thought he might shatter.

And then he walked out to recess and saw his brother. He hadn't seen him this morning, he imagined that his dad probably sent him to school before he had even come to tell Ilya he had to go.

Alexei was two years older. Bigger. Harder. Already shaped by their father, and not their mother—anger instead of quiet endurance. But Ilya felt relief the second he spotted him, because Alexei was the one person besides their mother who had ever felt like *his*. The one person who understood the house they lived in. The rules. The fear. The way you learned to anticipate pain. Both mental and physical.

Alexei would understand.

Alexei would—

Alexei turned his head, met Ilya's eyes, and the look on his face was nothing like relief.

It was rage. Pure and immediate rage.

Ilya froze.

Alexei approached him so quickly, it felt like there was no where for Ilya to go. Everything went quiet. Heads turned. A teacher supervising the park glanced up sharply. Ilya felt the blood drain from his face, confusion and dread colliding in his ribs so hard it hurt.

"You," Alexei said, voice shaking.

Ilya swallowed. "Alexei..."

"You killed her," Alexei spit.

The words didn't make sense. They couldn't make sense. Not out loud. Not from Alexei's mouth.

Ilya blinked, shocked. "Alexei... I.."

"You killed her!" Alexei repeated, louder, like volume could make it true. His face was flushed, eyes bright and wet, hands clenched so tight his knuckles went pale. "You made her sad. You made her worry. All the time. Your hockey—your stupid fucking hockey—you ruined her! She spent everything on you! Everything!"

The park was dead silent, but Ilya barely registered it. The only thing he could hear was his brother's voice, every word slamming into him with the force of a fist.

"Stop," Ilya managed, barely audible. "Stop it."

Alexei stepped closer, and his voice dropped suddenly into something lower, crueler, meant only for Ilya. "She loved you too much. She only loved you," he hissed. "And now she's

dead.”

Something broke cleanly inside Ilya’s chest. They were face to face now, and before Ilya could say anything else, he found himself on the ground. A shooting pain radiating down the side of his jaw. He could taste the blood pooling inside of his mouth, like his own teeth had broken the skin.

He didn’t cry. He didn’t move. He just lied there like his body had stopped working, like his brain couldn’t process that the one person who should’ve been safe—his brother—had taken their mother’s death and placed it in his hands like a sentence.

The teacher moved then, stepping between them, voice sharp with panic. Alexei shoved past her like he couldn’t stand to even share the same air as Ilya for another second. He left the park, walking in the opposite direction of the school. He was leaving. Everyone was leaving Ilya. Even with the taste of his own blood in his mouth, Ilya did not want him to leave.

And Ilya lie there while everyone watched him, while the world kept turning, while his mother was gone and his brother had decided it was his fault.

Ilya just wanted his mom.

On the bench in the present, Ilya’s face stayed turned forward, eyes unfocused on the park, but tears slid down his cheeks in slow, silent tracks. He didn’t make a sound and he didn’t wipe away the tears. He just let them fall as if his body was finally doing the grieving that had been postponed for years.

Shane’s chest ached so sharply he had to swallow hard just to breathe through it. He moved now to Ilya’s bench and sat down beside him carefully, leaving a fraction of space at first, but then he raised his arm and wrapped it around Ilya’s back pulling him towards him slightly.

Ilya’s tears kept falling, and his breathing stayed steady, even as his mind remained back there on the school yard, hearing his brother’s voice like it was happening again. Shane didn’t speak. He didn’t rush him back to the present. He let Ilya be twelve for as long as he needed, let him feel it without drowning in it.

Eventually, Ilya blinked and his focus shifted. He squirmed out of Shane’s arm and looked around quickly to make sure no one had seen.

His voice, when it finally came, was rough and thin.

“He said it like it was true,” Ilya whispered.

Shane’s throat tightened. He squeezed Ilya’s hand once, barely. “Said what? Who?” he said quietly.

Ilya nodded faintly but he didn’t answer, lips pressed tight as another tear slid down. He continued to speak, “I didn’t even get to grieve her,” he murmured. “I just...” His breath

shuddered once. “I got blamed.”

Shane turned slightly toward him, understanding now who he could have been talking about. He spoke, voice low and steady. “You were a kid, Ilya.” he said. “You were a kid who loved his mom, and they needed someone to put it on, so they put it on you.”

Ilya’s mouth trembled. He sat there with the truth in the open air between them, tears falling, shoulders squared, letting the memory exist without letting it destroy him.

After a moment, he whispered, almost to himself, “Sometimes my mind takes me back there.”

Shane’s chest tightened. “I know” he murmured. “Is it scary?”

Ilya’s fingers tightened slightly around Shane’s hand for a brief moment. “No. Because you’re here.”

Shane swallowed hard, eyes burning. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I’m here.”

Ilya’s gaze shifted a fraction toward him, red-rimmed and tragically sad, and then he looked forward again like he couldn’t hold eye contact for too long without falling apart.

When he spoke again, the words came out quiet and certain.

“I think I want to go to her grave.”

Shane nodded immediately, voice steady even as his heart cracked open. “Okay,” he said. “We can.”

Ilya inhaled slowly, trembling once. “Tomorrow,” he added.

Shane squeezed his hand a little tighter. “Tomorrow,” he promised.

And they stayed on that bench a while longer, in the middle of Ilya’s neighborhood, letting the grief move through him, while Shane sat beside him in silence that wasn’t a weapon at all, just the simple proof that he wasn’t alone anymore. Shane didn’t need to see his home, meet his friends, or ask anymore questions. This park bench, and whatever clarity it had brought Ilya felt like enough. This neighborhood didn’t owe them anything else.

Chapter 8

Ilya woke up alone in his giant penthouse bedroom. He had gone to bed depleted of any energy that had been clinging to his bones throughout the trip. When his head hit the pillow he was launched immediately into a deep and meaningful sleep. He was grateful for that, he knew he needed the energy today.

Today is not a practice run. It was the last time he would visit his mothers grave.

He got up and got dressed slowly, deliberately. He was thoughtful about what he was wearing. He packed mostly comfortable clothing, but he was sure to pack one outfit that he knew his mother would love. He put on his sleek light grey pants that cut at the ankles, something more stylish than the twelve year old boy she knew would have worn. He paired it with a nice fitting black shirt, and dressier black shoes. He wanted to look good for his final goodbye, but he didn't want this to feel like a funeral. He styled his hair, slicking it back. He thought he looked handsome. He moved through the penthouse with quiet carefulness. He didn't know what he expected to feel this morning: dread, emptiness, something sharp enough to cut him in half. But what he felt most was... peace.

He knew that his soul needed this.

He looked at himself in the mirror one last time, touching his mothers cross around his neck so tenderly, as if she could feel it wherever she was. He stepped into the kitchen area.

And stopped, right in the middle of the floor, his body freezing not from fear this time, but from surprise.

There were flowers on the table.

A bouquet wrapped in thick brown paper, stems still damp, the colors soft and pale in the dim light—white and blush and something violet tucked in behind. They looked expensive, but they were simple. Elegant. The kind of flowers you brought to someone you loved when you wanted them to know it.

Ilya stared at them. He just stood there, throat tight, chest squeezed hard enough it felt like a bruise.

Because flowers were... complicated, for him at least.

Flowers were supposed to mean something good. Celebration. Love. Care.

But in his life, they had also meant sad endings.

The sound of a door opening down the hall made him flinch.

Shane's footsteps followed, soft on the floor, and then he appeared in the doorway of the kitchen looking ready for the day and just as handsome as Ilya. He looked like he'd been

waiting for Ilya to come out. His hair was still damp from a rushed shower this morning, cheeks slightly pink from the heat, eyes gentler than the rest of the world deserved this early.

He stopped when he saw Ilya staring at the flowers.

Shane cleared his throat, suddenly unsure of himself in a way that Ilya was used to. “Uh...”

Ilya turned his head slowly. “What is this?”

Shane’s mouth twitched. “Flowers.”

Ilya stared at him. “I can see that.”

Shane nodded, then looked down like he didn’t want to make a big show of it. “I went downstairs early,” he said quietly. “There was a florist open.”

Ilya didn’t speak.

Shane lifted his shoulders in a small, helpless shrug. “I just...” He swallowed. “I wanted to bring something.”

Ilya’s voice came out lower than he meant it to. “For her?”

Shane met his eyes. “Yeah.”

Silence expanded, thick and soft.

Ilya looked back at the bouquet like it had altered the air in the penthouse.

“You didn’t have to,” Ilya said quietly. Ilya knew that this would have taken a lot of courage for Shane. He wouldn’t have known where to begin in English, never mind having to do it in Russia.

“I know,” Shane replied. “But I wanted to.”

Ilya’s jaw tightened. He nodded once, sharp and controlled, like it was the only way to keep himself from breaking in half right there in the kitchen.

Shane stepped closer, careful. “Is this okay?” he asked softly. “Or is it... too much.”

Ilya blinked hard.

Then, in a voice that didn’t sound like him at all, he said, “It’s good.”

Shane’s expression softened instantly. He reached for Ilya’s hand without thinking, then caught himself midway, recalibrating in the way he’d been forced to here. Instead, he let his fingers brush Ilya’s wrist. Light. A question.

Ilya answered by turning his palm up and taking Shane’s hand fully.

Shane’s breath hitched, just slightly.

“You’re sure you want to go today?” Shane asked.

Ilya nodded. “Yes.”

Shane’s thumb rubbed once over Ilya’s knuckles. “Okay.”

Ilya stared at him for a moment. Then, quieter, he added, “Thank you.”

Shane blinked. “For what.”

Ilya glanced toward the bouquet again. “For this,” he said softly motioning to the flowers. “For thinking about her today, and not just me.”

Shane’s mouth opened, then closed again. He looked like he wanted to say something perfect and couldn’t find it.

So he just said, “Of course.”

Ilya finally moved.

He stepped toward the table, picked up the bouquet carefully, and felt the damp stems press cool against his palms. He stared at the paper wrap, at the small ribbon tied around it like someone had tried to make it special.

Then his eyes caught on a detail that turned his stomach.

A small white card, intended for a loving message. In this case it was blank, but it reminded him of something.

The memory didn’t come like a flash. It came like a slow-opening door. A smell first. Stale air and her perfume. He could feel the heaviness in the room. On the nightstand, a vase with white flowers. And a white note that read "Moyey zhene"... "to my wife". How fucking meaningful. A bribe.

Shane noticed the blank stare immediately. “Ilya?”

Ilya didn’t answer.

His grip tightened on the bouquet, and his eyes went distant—not panicked, not frantic, just pulled backward.

Shane stepped closer, voice low. “Hey. Where are you?”

Ilya blinked once, slow.

And the world shifted once more.

After the flowers, he saw her hand first.

That was what his brain clung to, even years later, even after everything else had been torn up and rearranged inside him. He didn't think of her face, or the room. He thought of her hand. It was draping off the edge of the bed, resting on the blanket like she'd simply fallen asleep mid-sentence. Her fingers were slightly curled, the skin pale against the dark fabric. It was such a small detail, almost nothing at all, and yet it cracked his entire world open.

The door to their bedroom had been half-open. It always was. His mother liked light and air and movement, liked to remind herself that this wasn't really a prison. The hallway outside felt colder than it should have, but Ilya didn't notice that at first. What he noticed was the silence. The kind that didn't feel like peace. The kind that felt like a room holding its breath. It was a school day and Ilya had always counted on his mother to wake him up in the morning with a sweet smile and the promise of breakfast. That good morning hadn't come that morning.

"Mama?" he'd called, once, quietly.

No answer.

The air pressed heavier against his chest as he stepped closer, his socked feet barely making sound on the floor. He didn't know why his pulse was racing already. Nothing had happened yet but it felt like his body knew something was coming. There was no reason to panic. But his body had always been smarter than his mind in that house.

When he pushed the door open the rest of the way, the room looked wrong immediately.

Not obviously wrong. Not dramatic. The curtains were drawn, dimming the space into a muted grey-blue hush. The bed was made the way it always was. His father's side left a mess, waiting for his wife to make it for him. But it wasn't made, because somebody was still in it.

His mother. She was there, but she wasn't moving.

Ilya froze, hand still on the doorframe, and stared at that one detail: her hand. Hanging off the bed. It looked harmless. Like maybe she had gone to bed late and she had earned a little extra rest this morning. His mind latched onto the idea that she was simply sleeping late, that she was tired.

He took a step forward anyway. This was a room his father never let him enter, like it was sacred. But it wasn't sacred, he just felt the need for boundaries in unnecessary places, to avoid any kind of connection under his roof.

His throat had closed like he was swallowing glass. "Mama..." he tried again, a little louder this time, and his voice sounded strange in the dim. Too small.

Still nothing.

His stomach turned hard enough he thought he might be sick. He walked closer, slow, as if speed would allow her more time to wake up, as if he could delay the truth by moving

carefully. He could hear his own breathing, shallow and quick. He could hear the faint hum of the building outside the room. He could hear *nothing* from her.

The closer he got, the more his brain started doing what it always did when something was too big to accept.

It began bargaining.

She's asleep.

She's just tired.

She's just sick.

She'll open her eyes.

She slept in.

His gaze darted around the room, desperate for something ordinary to grab onto—something that could anchor him in the version of this moment where nothing irreversible had happened. The nightstand. The lamp. The small stack of books his mother loved.

And then the flowers.

A bouquet sitting on the nightstand.

They weren't fresh. Not dead either. Somewhere in the middle, petals curling at the edges, water in the vase gone low. Ilya stared at them with a strange, cold clarity, because he knew what they were without being told. He knew the pattern. He knew the rhythm.

Flowers came after fights. Flowers came after his father said something sharp enough to slice his mother open. Flowers came after the house got too tense and his father decided he should offer something that looked like love without actually having to be kind.

They were never an apology. They were leverage.

Ilya's eyes dropped again, back to the bed.

Back to his mother's hand.

The shape of her body beneath the blanket was still, too still, and something in his chest began to tear at the seams. He stepped closer until he was right at the edge of the mattress, close enough to smell her perfume faintly under the stale air, close enough to see the softness of her blonde curls against the pillow.

He whispered again, voice breaking. "Mama... wake up."

Nothing.

He reached out slowly, fingers trembling, and touched her hand.

At first it didn't register.

His skin met hers and his brain tried to interpret it as normal contact—like the warmth would be there, like her fingers would twitch, like she would curl her hand around his like she always did when she wanted to reassure him without making a big show of it.

But her skin was cold. Just cold enough that his body understood before his mind could form the sentence.

This is wrong.

His fingers recoiled instinctively and then because he couldn't accept it. He touched her again, harder this time, as if pressure might bring her back. As if love was a force strong enough to reverse the most final thing in the world.

“Mama,” he said again, louder now, voice cracking wide open. “Mama, please.”

He shook her hand gently, then more firmly, then grabbed her wrist like he could pull her back from wherever she'd gone. His heart thudded so violently he could feel it in his throat. His vision blurred. His ears rang. The room felt like it was shrinking around him, pressing in, making it hard to breathe.

She didn't move.

And that was when the real terror arrived.

Not fear of punishment. Not fear of his father. Not fear of being in trouble for waking her up.

Fear of being alone. Completely and utterly alone.

Because Ilya realized in a single brutal flash that if his mother didn't wake up, there was no softness left in his world. There was no buffer between him and his dad. Between him and his brother. No one who could look at him and see him as a child instead of a project, an obligation, a disappointment. His mother was the only one in that house who treated him like a person first.

Without her, he was just... something to be used. Something to be tolerated.

His hands went numb. He couldn't feel his fingers properly anymore. He stared at her face, willing her lashes to flutter, willing her lips to part, willing her chest to rise. He waited for any sign that she was about to be annoyed at him, about to sigh and say his name the way she did when he worried too much.

But there was nothing.

The silence swallowed him whole.

His gaze flicked back to the nightstand again, frantic now, searching for something that could explain it, because his mind couldn't live in a world where his mother simply didn't exist anymore. He saw the flowers again—soft petals drooping, pale and pretty and useless—and his stomach twisted with an anger so sharp it felt like it might make him violent.

How dare they sit there looking innocent. How dare the room hold onto beauty when she was gone.

Then he saw the bottle.

Small. Plain. Sitting near the base of the vase like someone had placed it there without drama, without ceremony. The cap was off. It wasn't spilled everywhere. It was just there, quiet evidence that something had been decided in this room while the rest of the house slept.

Ilya stared at it, and something in his head went blank.

He didn't have the words for overdose. He didn't have the words for suicide. But he understood the simplest truth a child could understand:

She did this on purpose.

That thought landed like a knife in his ribs.

For a split second, his brain rebelled so hard it almost saved him.

No.

No.

No, she wouldn't.

Not her.

Not my mother.

But the bottle didn't move. The flowers didn't move. Her hand didn't move.

And the truth was sitting in the room with him like a second body.

Ilya felt like his lungs stopped working.

He stumbled backward, hitting the dresser with his hip, pain flaring but meaningless compared to what his chest was doing. He stared at his mother's face—at how peaceful she looked, how still—and he felt something inside him split open in a way it never would again.

Because grief wasn't the first feeling.

The first feeling was betrayal. Because the world had already been hard enough with her alive. How could she leave him alone in it?

His mouth opened, but no scream came out. His throat was locked. He couldn't make sound. He couldn't call for help. He couldn't even cry properly. He just stood there shaking like an animal caught in a trap, staring at her as if his stare could pull her back into her body.

And then, like a cruel punchline to the universe, another thought arrived—automatic, trained into him by years of living under his father's rules:

This will be my fault. It wasn't logical. It didn't need to be. It was inevitability. Because in that house, responsibility always rolled downhill. And Ilya was always at the very bottom.

He stared at his mother and he understood something he wasn't supposed to understand at twelve. His mother had been trying to survive inside a place that didn't allow softness. And she had run out of ways to do it.

Ilya's knees went weak. He sank to the edge of the bed slowly, careful not to touch her again, like he was terrified he'd disturb her, like he was terrified she might suddenly wake and he'd have to explain why he was crying.

His hands curled into the blanket. His fingers shook.

He whispered, broken, "Mama..."

Nothing.

There was no one coming to save him. He was twelve years old, sitting beside his mother's body, and the world didn't stop. It didn't soften. It didn't even give him a moment to be a child. It just kept going. And so would he. Because he didn't have any other choice.

And then he realized he was also physically alone.

His brother had likely already gone to school. He wasn't lazy like Ilya, he would get up and out the door on his own. He would be fine without there mother.

His father had been gone to work. And then Ilya had a thought, a thought he had carried for the eighteen years since her death. Did he know? Did he wake up and see her there and carry on with his day? Filing her away as a problem that could be dealt with later? Would he do that to Ilya?

For eighteen years, Ilya knew the answer.

Yes. Yes he would.

Ilya didn't realize he'd stopped breathing until Shane spoke.

It wasn't loud. It wasn't urgent. It was just... there. A voice in the room that belonged to now, not then.

"Ilya," Shane said softly, like he was saying it through a door.

Ilya blinked—slow, heavy—and the penthouse came back into focus around him. Clean counters. Cold marble. Grey winter light through glass. The bouquet in his hands wrapped in brown paper that smelled faintly like water and stems and something sweet.

His cheeks were wet.

He didn't remember deciding to cry. He didn't remember the moment it started. He only knew that grief didn't ask permission anymore. It just moved.

Shane was close, but not crowding him. His posture was careful, open. Like he was offering Ilya space to stay upright without pretending nothing was happening.

“You’re here,” Shane murmured again, voice low.

Ilya nodded once, the movement sharp and automatic, like he couldn’t trust softness with his head still full of a bedroom that existed in his bones.

“Yes,” Ilya said, and his voice was rougher than he wanted. “I’m here.”

Shane hesitated, then asked, “Are you okay?”

Ilya almost laughed.

It wasn’t the right question, not technically. There was no version of *okay* that applied to a day like this. But he understood what Shane meant. He understood it the way you understood the hand someone offered you in the dark.

Ilya swallowed hard and said, “I will be.”

Shane’s eyes flickered, softening. “Okay.”

They stood there for another second, the quiet settling around them like snow. Then Shane glanced at the bouquet, like he was checking in with it too.

“Do you want me to carry those?” he asked.

Ilya tightened his grip instinctively. Possessive. Protective. As if letting go might mean losing the whole thing.

“No,” Ilya said quickly. Then, softer, because he heard how sharp it sounded: “No. I want to.”

Shane nodded like he understood exactly what that meant. *This is for her. This is yours. Let it be yours.*

Ilya exhaled slowly, forcing air into lungs that wanted to stay empty.

“You slept,” Shane said quietly, as if offering him a small truth to hold onto. “You did sleep.”

Ilya nodded. “Yes.”

“And you didn’t disappear,” Shane added, voice careful.

Ilya’s throat tightened. He looked down at the flowers again. “I’m trying not to.”

Shane stepped closer just enough that their shoulders almost touched. “You’re doing it,” he murmured. “You’re doing it right now.”

Ilya’s chest squeezed.

He turned his head slightly, meeting Shane's eyes, and for a moment he looked younger than he wanted to. Like the part of him that had been twelve—who had seen flowers on a nightstand and learned what they could mean—was sitting right behind his eyes.

"I hate those flowers," Ilya said quietly.

Shane blinked. "These ones?"

Ilya shook his head once, sharp. "No. Those ones." He swallowed. "The ones my father brought her. Like it made him kind."

Shane's jaw tightened.

"He didn't deserve her," Shane said simply.

The words landed like a clean cut.

Ilya didn't argue. He didn't defend. He didn't shrink away from the truth.

He just nodded once.

"No," he agreed, voice thin. "He didn't."

A long beat passed. Then Shane cleared his throat softly, shifting the air away from the edge.

"So," he said gently, "do we... go?"

Ilya inhaled through his nose, straightening his spine like he was stepping into something formal. A ritual. A goodbye.

"Yes," he said. "We go."

The car ride out of the city felt like leaving one world for another. Shane and Ilya had gone through the motions that morning, gathering up the flowers and making their way out to the car, ready to tackle the next goodbye together.

Moscow faded in the rearview mirror. The farther they went, the more the landscape softened. It was quiet and beautiful. The sun had decided to shine on them again today.

Ilya drove with both hands on the wheel, posture steady, eyes forward. Shane sat in the passenger seat enjoying the view of the empty fields. It felt a little like home.

The bouquet sat on Ilya's lap for the first ten minutes, cradled like something fragile. Then Ilya moved it gently onto the center console, adjusting it so it wouldn't bruise against the gearshift. He did it with surprising tenderness, like he was handling something alive.

Shane watched him do it and felt his throat tighten again.

Eventually, Shane said quietly, "This cemetery... it's in the country?"

Ilya nodded. "Small. Near where she grew up."

Shane paused. "So... not where your father is buried."

Ilya's jaw worked once.

"No," he said sternly.

Shane waited, careful. He could feel the shape of something bitter behind Ilya's silence.

Ilya spoke before Shane had to ask.

"My father chose to be buried with his parents," he said, voice flat, like he'd said it before and it had never stopped hurting. "In a tomb. With their family name."

Shane's chest tightened hard.

"And your mom?" he asked softly, already knowing the answer and still needing to hear it out loud.

Ilya's eyes stayed forward. "Not there."

Shane swallowed. "So he didn't want to be with her?"

Ilya's grip on the wheel tightened until his knuckles went pale. "I don't think he ever wanted her, really" he said, sharp and low. "Even in death."

Silence filled the car like smoke.

Shane stared out the window for a moment, blinking hard. He thought about his own parents, grateful for the life they had given him.

"That says a lot" Shane murmured.

Ilya didn't respond.

After another mile, Shane tried again—different this time. Softer.

"I don't want this drive to feel like... waiting," Shane said quietly.

Ilya's eyes flicked toward him for half a second. "Okay. Waiting how?"

Shane nodded. "Like waiting for the other shoe to drop."

Ilya's expression tightened, then softened. "You Canadians and your sayings. What the fuck does that mean?"

He swallowed. "You told me about that. How your dad used silence like a weapon."

Shane shifted in his seat, turning slightly toward him. "I don't want to do that today," he said. "Not with you."

Ilya stared at the road, face unreadable.

Shane took a careful breath.

“Tell me something good,” Shane said. “About her.”

Ilya’s throat moved. He swallowed once, hard. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything,” Shane insisted gently. “Anything you want me to know. I don’t want to go meet her only knowing she liked tea and singing. I want to go meet her... like she was a person. Like your mom.”

The air in the car changed. It felt warmer.

Ilya exhaled slowly, “My mother,” he said quietly, almost to himself.

Shane nodded, encouraging. “Yeah.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched, “She was... soft,” he said. “Not weak. Soft like...” He searched for words he trusted. “Like a warm hug. She liked to hug. She liked to hold hands, and cuddle on the couch.”

Shane’s eyes stung. She sounded just like Ilya.

“She loved the lake,” Ilya continued, voice steadier now. “She would have loved the cottage. She loved quiet places. She would light candles in the apartment even when my father hated it. She said it made it feel... warmer.” His mouth tightened. “He said it was stupid.”

Shane’s jaw clenched. “Of course he did.”

Ilya ignored it. “She sang,” he said suddenly. “When she was trying to pretend she wasn’t sad.” He paused, gaze fixed forward, voice softer. “I used to listen from the hallway. Because if I walked into the kitchen, she’d stop. Like she was embarrassed.”

Shane smiled faintly through the ache. “What did she sing?” Shane noticed he mentioned the singing twice now. It must have been something that felt important to him. Something he missed very much. Shane made a mental note to sing more, even if it made him feel stupid.

Ilya blinked. “Old songs. Folk things. Love songs.” He shrugged slightly, but the movement was tender. “I didn’t know what half of them meant. I just liked... that she made noise.”

Shane nodded slowly. “She sounds like she made your whole house feel different.”

“She did,” Ilya admitted.

He glanced out the windshield like he was watching the road and the past at the same time. “She had these hands,” he added, quieter. “Warm hands. Always warm. Even in winter.” His voice dipped. “She would touch my hair and tell me I was красивый.”

Shane’s brows lifted. “That means...?”

“Beautiful,” Ilya said simply.

Shane’s chest tightened painfully. “She told you that?”

“Yes,” Ilya replied, and this time the word was less flat. Almost proud. “Thank god she did. I always doubted myself, but she always made me feel like I was good at hockey, and very very beautiful” His mouth softened into a grin.

Shane’s voice came out hoarse. “Well she was right. She sounds like the only person who let you be a kid.”

Ilya nodded once. “Yes.”

Shane stared out the window again, eyes burning. “I’m glad she existed for your twelve years.” he whispered.

Ilya’s hands tightened on the wheel again.

“She would’ve liked you, Shane” Ilya said suddenly, voice quieter. “Very much.”

Shane blinked. “Yeah?” He loved that Ilya went back to his first name for a moment.

Ilya nodded, swallowing. “Yes. She would have loved how you... talk. Too much. Always too much.” A flicker of humor. A small softness. “She would have teased you.”

Shane smiled faintly. “I could take it.”

Ilya glanced at him, eyes bright with something raw. “She would’ve loved you,” he said, like it wasn’t even a question. Like it was obvious. “Because of how you love me.”

Shane’s chest cracked open.

He looked at Ilya for a long moment and said quietly, “Then I’m really grateful I get to meet her.”

Ilya didn’t respond with words, he just reached out and put his hand on Shane's thigh.

The cemetery was small. It was just a quiet patch of grass, surrounded by trees in the middle of nowhere. It was the kind of cemetery that Shane had seen dozens of times when he travelled west for hockey tournaments. He was always intrigued by these small prairie cemeteries in rural communities. They felt so personal. The same ten names repeated on hundreds of headstones. It was as if the idea of family didn't have boundaries here. They were all gathered together in life and in death. Shane couldn't help but think that this was the right place for Irina. It is the closest thing to a home that he had seen in Russia. How sad, that it took dying to find a home this peaceful.

Ilya parked the car and sat still for a moment, staring ahead through the windshield as if he needed to prepare himself for an important conversation.

Shane didn't move. He didn't rush. He waited until Ilya reached for the bouquet again, fingers tightening around the paper.

Ilya swallowed. "Come with me."

Shane nodded. "Okay."

They got out, the sun beaming. Shane soaked up its warmth for a moment before following Ilya.

Their shoes sunk into the thick grass. It felt nice to touch grass. Moscow had felt like a concrete jungle. Ilya moved with quiet purpose, clearly knowing where he was going. Shane followed, heart heavy in his chest, his breath fogging in front of him.

They passed a few graves, a few names Shane couldn't read. A few faded photos behind glass.

Then Ilya stopped.

He stood still like something had hit him.

Shane's eyes followed his.

A headstone—simple. Dark. Her name carved into it in Cyrillic, dates beneath. A small photo set into the stone, her face captured in a way that made Shane's breath catch: gentle eyes, a faint smile, softness in her expression like she'd been mid-laugh when the picture was taken. Shane realized he had never even seen a photo of her before. He stared at it, taking it in. He looked just like her. In the most beautiful way.

Ilya stared like he couldn't make his body move closer.

Shane's instinct was to stay back and give him space, but Ilya turned his head slightly and looked at Shane with eyes that were too bright.

"Come," he repeated, voice rough.

Shane blinked. "You want me... right away?"

Ilya nodded. "Yes."

Shane swallowed, heart pounding. "Okay."

They stepped forward together.

Ilya stood at the grave, bouquet in his hands, and for a moment he just stared down at her name like he didn't trust it. Like the letters were proof of something he still couldn't accept.

Then he spoke in Russian.

The sound of it in the still cemetery was intimate and devastating. Quiet words spilling out like he'd been holding them for years. His voice wasn't flat here. It wasn't controlled the way it was with strangers. It was full and human and shaking slightly at the edges. Shane didn't understand the words, yet he understood everything. He understood that Ilya was introducing himself again. He understood that some part of Ilya was still twelve, standing in a dim room with flowers on a nightstand, trying to figure out what to do next.

Ilya turned toward Shane after a moment, eyes wet.

"I told her..." Ilya swallowed hard. "...that I came back. That I brought someone important."

Shane's throat tightened so badly it hurt. "Yeah?"

Ilya nodded. "I told her you are a terrible hockey player, but an excellent boyfriend."

Shane stared at the headstone, then back at Ilya, smiling. "Tell her... I'm honored," Shane whispered.

Ilya blinked, like the word hit him. He looked back at Shane, remembering his dream that got them here. "I don't have to. I think she can understand you wherever she is."

Shane's voice shook. "Okay." He swallowed, then stepped closer to the grave, closer than he expected to be allowed. "Can I... say something?"

Ilya nodded. "Yes."

Shane stared down at the carved name, the small photo. He felt ridiculous standing here with no Russian, no proper prayer, nothing but his own honesty. He cleared his throat, breath fogging.

"Hi," Shane whispered, voice breaking slightly. "I'm Shane."

He exhaled a small laugh that wasn't funny. "I know you already know that. Ilya talks about you like you're..." He swallowed hard. "Like you're the only safe place he's ever had."

Ilya's throat moved sharply.

Shane continued anyway, voice low and sincere. "Thank you for making him soft, like you." he whispered. "Because he tries so hard to pretend he isn't. But he is, and it's my favorite thing about him."

He looked down at the bouquet still in Ilya's hands and reached out carefully, taking it from him like he was handling something sacred.

"I brought you flowers," Shane said. "I'm sorry it took me so long to meet you."

Then he knelt down, placed the bouquet gently against the base of the stone, adjusting it so it sat right, so it wouldn't fall. He tucked the paper under the grass slightly like he was tucking

her in.

When he stood, he didn't wipe his face, even though his eyes were wet.

He turned to Ilya.

For a heartbeat, they just looked at each other, alone in a cemetery where no one was watching, no one was listening, no one was there to punish them for tenderness. And then Shane did it. He stepped closer, cupped Ilya's face with both hands, and kissed him. Not a rushed kiss. A slow, steady kiss.

Ilya froze for a fraction of a second and then he melted into it.

His hands came up and gripped Shane's shirt, holding him like he needed the contact to stay upright. Like the kiss was the only thing tethering him to the present.

When they pulled apart, Ilya's eyes were wet.

Shane rested his forehead briefly against Ilya's. "I'm going to give you time alone," he whispered.

Ilya's lashes lowered. His voice was barely there. "Okay."

Shane kissed his forehead once—gentle—and then stepped back, slowly, respectfully, moving to sit on a bench out of earshot, but close enough to be there if Ilya needed him.

Ilya turned back to the grave and crouched down, looking directly at her headstone now.

Shane couldn't help but take out his phone and snap a photo. He would never have a photo of this version of Ilya and his mother, but this felt close to something precious.

Ilya stared at her name. It was different from his own. She never took his father's name, and he had always felt proud of that. It never bothered Ilya that they did not share a name, because they shared so much more than that.

He didn't know what to say first. So he just crouched there for awhile, allowing his tears to fall as his memories flooded him. He hadn't been here since he moved to America. He had always felt guilty about that. At some point it just got too hard to balance his new life and his old life, and when he came back to Russia in the summer, he just did what he had to do to get himself through to the next day.

There were too many years between them. But she was here. And he was here. And for the first time in his life, he wasn't being watched by anyone who wanted to hurt him.

So he let himself speak.

"Mama..." he whispered.

Just her title. Just the word alone was something he wasn't able to say without the emotions coming out. He had only said it a handful of times since her passing, and it never got easier.

His voice cracked immediately. He cleared his throat, swallowing hard, and tried again.

“Mama,” he said, louder this time, not afraid of the air. “Я пришёл.” I came.

His eyes burned. He blinked, but the tears didn't stop. They slid down his cheeks in steady tracks, quiet and endless.

“I'm sorry,” he said softly in Russian. “I'm sorry I didn't come sooner.”

The guilt had lived in him for so long it felt like part of his body by now. He stared at the stone like it might answer him.

“I was scared,” he admitted, voice trembling. “Not of you. Never of you. I was scared of... everything that came with you.”

His breath hitched.

“I was scared of that house,” he whispered. “I was scared of him. I was scared of how he made love feel like a burden.”

He wiped at his face with the back of his hand, the gesture abrupt—embarrassed by his own tears even here, even now when speaking of his father.

Then his shoulders sank slightly, and he let them fall again.

“You were the only part of life that was good” he said. “You were the only part that didn't hurt me.”

His throat tightened so hard it felt like he might choke on the truth.

“I miss you.” he whispered.

The words came out small. Barely audible. But they landed in the grass like a stone thrown into water.

“I found you mama. I found you in bed,” he said, voice shaking. “And I saw your hand first. I remember... your hand.”

He swallowed hard, eyes shutting briefly as if he could block out the memory by force.

“I touched you,” he whispered. “And you were cold. And I—” His voice broke open. “I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do, Mama. I didn't know how to live without you. I didn't know who to call.”

He inhaled sharply, breath trembling.

“And the worst part is...” His voice dropped, almost ashamed. “The worst part is I knew nobody was coming to help.”

He looked down at his feet, eyes blurred.

“I knew it was only me,” he said. “And I knew... it would always just be me.”

He lifted his gaze back to the stone, anger and grief twisting together.

“They made you mine,” he whispered. “They made you mine to carry. Like your death was something I did wrong.”

He laughed once—small and broken, no humor in it at all.

“Alexei,” he said softly, and his throat tightened on the name. “He told me it was my fault.”

His eyes squeezed shut, tears slipping free. “He said I killed you,” he whispered. “Because you loved me too much.”

His shoulders shook once, but he stayed standing.

“I believed him,” he admitted, voice raw. “I know now that it wasn't true” He swallowed. “But I don't think I have forgiven myself.”

He stared at the photo of her face.

“And I need you to know something,” he said quietly.

His voice steadied, just a fraction, as if speaking to her made him stronger.

“I loved you,” he said. “I loved you so much.”

He shook his head, tears falling.

“And I don't know how to forgive you,” he whispered. “For leaving me.”

The admission was sharp. Honest. Dangerous.

“But I'm trying,” he said, voice trembling. “I've been trying because I understand now. I understand what it must have been like to live in that house with him. To feel like you were dying and no one noticed.”

He inhaled slowly, forcing air into his lungs.

“I don't think you wanted to hurt me,” he whispered. “I know you just... couldn't stay.”

He looked down at the flowers again, the bouquet Shane had brought sitting carefully against the stone like an offering.

“And I brought him,” Ilya said softly, voice gentler now. “I brought Shane.”

A faint smile flickered through the tears.

“He’s... good,” Ilya whispered. “He’s so good, Mama. He’s kind in ways I didn’t know existed.”

He swallowed, breath catching on a sob that threatened to rise.

“He doesn’t punish me with silence,” he said. “He doesn’t make me guess what I did wrong. He doesn’t make love feel like something I have to earn.”

His voice cracked again.

“He holds me,” Ilya whispered. “Even when I’m awful. Even when I’m scared. Even when I shut down and try to disappear.”

He stared at her photo like she could see the man he was now.

“I think you would’ve loved him, mama” Ilya said. “I think you would’ve teased him. You would’ve laughed at him.” His mouth trembled. “He smiles too much. You would’ve said something about that.”

A small breath—almost a laugh—escaped him through tears.

Then his expression shifted again, heavier.

“Mama,” he whispered. “I need to forgive myself.”

The words felt like stepping off a cliff.

He shook his head slowly, eyes burning. “I was twelve,” he said, voice fierce with truth. “I was a boy.”

He swallowed hard.

“I didn’t fail you,” he whispered. “I didn’t fail you by wanting hockey. I didn’t fail you by needing you. I didn’t fail you by loving you.”

His voice rose slightly, still quiet, still contained, but stronger now, like he was speaking not just to her but to the part of himself that had been carrying blame all these years.

“I didn’t kill you,” he said.

The words hit the air and stayed there, solid and undeniable.

“I didn’t kill you,” he repeated, firmer. “I didn’t.”

His breath shook. Tears slid faster.

“I was just a boy,” he whispered. “I was just *your* boy.”

He lifted a trembling hand and pressed it to the stone, fingers splayed, like he could touch her through it.

"I'm so sorry you were alone," he whispered. "I'm sorry I wasn't enough to keep you here." His voice cracked hard. "But I'm done punishing myself for it."

He squeezed his eyes shut, a sob finally breaking free, quiet but deep.

"I'm done," he whispered again, voice shaking. "I'm done carrying everything they made me carry."

He inhaled slowly, trying to steady his lungs.

"I forgive you, mama" he said, voice barely holding together. "And I forgive me."

He stayed there, hand on the stone, forehead tipped down as tears fell on to it.

For a long time, he said nothing else.

He didn't need to. The goodbye wasn't one perfect speech.

When he finally lifted his head, his eyes were red and wet, his cheeks flushed from cold and emotion, but his posture looked... different.

He finally spoke again. "Mama, I won't be back here. Russia has changed since you have been gone. I am not allowed to love him here."

He took one last deep breath and let the tears fall once more. "I wish I could have both" he admitted. "But I know you would want me to have him, to love him. So I am going to go back to Canada, and I am going to marry him."

He got ready to say his last goodbye.

"I love you, mama." He whispered. "I will have a great life when I leave here. For me, but for you too. I won't hide you anymore... And I will make sure my kids know you."

Then he stepped back from the grave and turned his head slightly toward where Shane stood a few paces away, waiting like a lighthouse, steady, warm, and patient.

Shane didn't rush to him. He just looked at him, eyes soft.

And Ilya—still crying, still shaking slightly, but standing—gave him the smallest nod.

I'm ready.

Shane walked to him then, slow and careful, like he was approaching something sacred. He didn't speak. He didn't ask questions. He simply opened his arms and Ilya stepped into them.

Right there, in the warm cemetery outside Moscow, with his mother's name behind him and Shane's warmth in front of him, Ilya finally let himself be held without bracing for impact.

And for the first time in a long time, the weight in his chest didn't feel like it was crushing him.

It felt like something he could leave here with his mother.

"Goodbye, mama."

Chapter 9

The drive back to the hotel was quieter than the drive there. There was so much left to say, but it didn't feel like the right time. Ilya had just experienced more emotion in the last hour than he had in almost 30 years of life. It was like his skin had been peeled back and the air touched places it hadn't been allowed to touch in years. He was raw... but something inside Ilya had changed. He sat in the passenger seat now, Shane having not given him the choice, with his shoulders still, hands folded loosely in his lap, eyes fixed on nothing out the passenger window.

Shane drove like he was transporting glass. Slow, careful, respectful of the silence. He didn't fill it with questions this time. He didn't ask if Ilya was okay, because okay had never been the goal today. The goal had been a goodbye that he could live with. And Ilya had done it. He'd stood there, in front of her grave, and he'd let the pain exist without letting it swallow him whole.

Shane kept glancing over when he thought Ilya wouldn't notice, but he always noticed.

Shane's hand rested lightly on the center console, palm up, not forcing anything. An offer. Ilya stared at it for a long moment before he moved his own hand over, lacing their fingers together without a word. Shane squeezed gently, once, like he understood what that meant too.

By the time they hit the brighter streets near the hotel district, Ilya's eyes were red but clearer. They were tired in a way that made Shane's chest ache.

When they pulled into the underground parking, the building swallowed them in warm artificial light. Shane turned the car off. The silence settled again.

Ilya didn't move right away. His fingers were still tangled with Shane's, warm now from holding too long. Shane didn't let go first. He waited. He always waited.

Finally, Ilya's voice came out low and steady, "I don't want to stay here."

Shane turned his head fully toward Ilya. "Okay."

Ilya blinked, hard. "I mean it."

"Like this hotel? Or this country?" Shane said softly.

Ilya's jaw flexed once, like he didn't trust how easily it was being accepted. "I want to go home," he said, a little rougher now. "I want to book a flight right now."

Shane nodded without hesitation. "Then we book a flight."

Ilya stared at him, searching for resistance, resentment, disappointment, anything that would punish him for changing his mind now, for deciding the trip didn't deserve his time anymore.

He found none of it. Of course he didn't.

He only that soft, open expression that never demanded Ilya be braver than he was capable of being.

“You’re not mad?” Ilya said quietly.

Shane’s brows pinched. “Why would I be mad, Ilya?”

Ilya let out a small, humorless breath. “Because you came all this way. You were excited.”

Shane leaned closer, voice gentle but firm. “I didn’t come all this way for Russia,” he said. “I came for you.”

Ilya swallowed. He knew this, but needed Shane to remind him.

Shane squeezed his hand again, then added, “And you did it. You did the thing you came here to do.”

Ilya’s throat tightened so hard his voice barely worked. “I did.”

“Yeah,” Shane whispered. “You did.”

Ilya stared at him, blinking slowly, like he was trying to memorize this version of being loved, this version of being allowed to choose peace without being called weak.

“I really hate it here,” Ilya said suddenly, voice sharp with honesty. “I hate how it makes me feel.”

Shane nodded, understanding. “Then we leave.”

Ilya’s fingers tightened around Shane’s. “Soon.”

Shane nodded again. “Soon.”

And then—because Shane couldn’t help himself, because he was Shane and he was always looking for a way to turn pain into something survivable. He tilted his head slightly and said, quietly:

“Can I suggest something before we do?”

Ilya’s eyes narrowed faintly. “Don't say we should take a boat home.”

“Don't be an asshole” Shane said.

Ilya waited.

Shane’s mouth twitched, and his voice dropped into something more playful. “I think we should have one a last fuck you to Russia.”

Ilya froze. Not because he didn’t understand. Because he did. Immediately.

His eyes flicked to Shane's mouth like he'd felt the words there, like he'd tasted them. Something in Ilya's chest tightened and warmed at the same time.

Shane watched the shift happen, and his expression softened into something dangerously affectionate. "We're in a penthouse," Shane murmured. "No neighbors."

Ilya's breath caught.

Shane continued, voice low, almost reverent. "We lock the door. We shut the world out. We stop being careful. What are they going to do? Deport us?"

Ilya stared at him like he couldn't decide whether he wanted to laugh or drag Shane across the console and kiss him until neither of them remembered how to speak.

"Hollander" Ilya whispered, and it came out like a warning.

Shane's eyes held steady. "We can leave tomorrow." His thumb brushed over Ilya's knuckles. "But tonight... I want you to feel one last good thing in Russia."

Something in Ilya cracked open. Need.

"Okay," Ilya said, voice rough.

Shane's eyes darkened. "Okay?"

Ilya swallowed. "Okay."

Shane exhaled once, like the word had just detonated inside him. Then he leaned across the space between them, kissed Ilya's cheek—slow, warm—and whispered against his skin:

"Let's go upstairs."

The hotel felt different when they returned. Not because it had changed, but because *they* did. They moved through the lobby with their shoulders closer than usual, not touching, but threaded together by something invisible and intense. Ilya's eyes stayed forward, jaw tight with exhaustion and clarity, while Shane kept glancing at him like he was afraid the moment might evaporate.

The elevator ride was silent and slow. Too slow.

Shane stood beside him, hands in his pockets like he was trying not to touch too soon. Like he knew Ilya might need to reach first, might need to choose it, because today had been about choice more than anything else.

Ilya did. Halfway up, Ilya's hand slid over, fingers curling around Shane's wrist. Not gentle. Firm enough to communicate something Shane felt in his spine.

Mine.

Shane turned his head, eyes meeting Ilya's. His voice was barely audible. "Yeah?"

Ilya nodded once.

The elevator chimed. The doors opened. The hallway was empty and quiet. Shane pulled the keycard from his pocket and opened the door, then stepped aside to let Ilya walk in first. Ilya entered like a man who couldn't wait another second to be alone with Shane. He stood still in the entryway for a second, shoulders lifting on a breath.

Shane threw his jacket on the floor and grabbed the Do Not Disturb sign from inside the closet and hung it on the handle. He locked the door, then he locked the chain.

Ilya watched him like he was watching someone build a wall around them with his bare hands.

"There. No one comes in," Shane said quietly. "No one gets you but me tonight."

Ilya's throat tightened.

Shane stepped closer, voice dropping. "Come here."

Ilya stared at him for a long beat, then he said, almost hoarse:

"No you come here."

Shane didn't hesitate.

He crossed the space and Ilya grabbed him—hands fisting in Shane's shirt, pulling him in hard enough to knock the wind out of them both. The kiss that followed wasn't careful. It was hungry.

Ilya kissed him like he'd been holding his breath for days and Shane was oxygen. His mouth was warm and insistent, lips moving with urgency that made Shane's knees go weak. Shane's hands came up instinctively, sliding into Ilya's hair, fingers curling at the nape of his neck as if he needed something physical to keep him grounded in the fact that this was real. That Ilya was really here. That he hadn't disappeared again.

Ilya broke the kiss only to drag in air, forehead pressed to Shane's. His voice was ragged.

"I am never coming back here" he repeated, like he needed Shane to understand the depth of it. "This will be the last time this happens here."

Shane's thumb brushed over Ilya's cheekbone, wiping away dampness that wasn't fully dry yet. "Then let's make it count." he said.

Ilya's breath shuddered.

"Tonight," Shane added quietly, "I want to make you feel loved like you've never felt here."

That was what did it.

Ilya's eyes squeezed shut for a second, jaw trembling once. Then he nodded—one sharp movement that looked like surrender and permission at the same time.

“Tonight,” Ilya whispered back, “I don’t want to think.”

Shane's voice dropped. “Then don’t.”

Ilya's hands tightened again, dragging Shane back into his space. “I need you,” he said.

“Yeah,” Shane whispered, kissing him again, slower this time. “Yeah, baby. I’m right here.”

The kisses turned messy. Warm and desperate. Ilya's mouth moved over Shane's like he like he was trying to fill every hollow space Russia had scraped open with Shane's love. Shane followed him without hesitation, letting Ilya set the pace, letting him take what he needed and give what he could. Their bodies moved together down the hallway like gravity had shifted, like the only place that mattered was the bedroom door. They bumped there way down the walls, never letting their mouths separate. They were soaking in this kiss. Their clothes hadn't even come off yet and Shane had never felt closer to Ilya.

Inside, the room was dim and quiet and safe.

Ilya shoved Shane backward gently until he hit the edge of the bed. Shane sat down, breath already unsteady, eyes dark and shining.

Ilya stood over him for a moment, chest rising and falling, hands shaking just barely at his sides like his body was trying to decide what it needed right now.

Shane reached up, palms open, and rested his hands on Ilya's hips.

“You’re okay,” Shane murmured.

Ilya's laugh was broken and soft. “No.”

Shane's eyes held his. “You’re safe.”

Ilya's throat tightened hard.

“Say it,” Shane whispered. “Just for me.”

Ilya swallowed. His voice came out quiet and lethal with honesty.

“I’m safe.”

Shane exhaled.

Ilya leaned down, kissed him again—slower now, deeper, mouth open enough to make Shane's head spin. Shane's hands slid up Ilya's sides, feeling heat through his shirt,

memorizing the feeling. Ilya's fingers threaded through Shane's hair, tugging just enough to make Shane gasp against his mouth.

"God," Shane whispered, breathless, "you're—"

"Relax," Ilya cut in, and the word should've sounded harsh, but it didn't.

Shane's mouth twitched. "Yes, sir."

That earned him a sound from Ilya that was half laugh, half warning, and then Ilya kissed him again like punishment and affection were the same thing in his mouth.

Clothes started to disappear in quiet, hands tugging, fabric pushed aside, skin finally meeting skin. Shane's palms dragged over Ilya's back, down his spine, over the hard lines of muscle there, like he couldn't get enough of him. Ilya's breath turned rougher, his focus narrowing until all he could feel was Shane: Shane's mouth, Shane's hands, Shane's warmth in a room that belonged to no one else.

And then the night became something they built together.

Not just sex, though it was that too, hot and relentless and consuming—but something deeper: a private rebellion against a country that would not accept them. A refusal to conform.

Ilya moved like he was starving for sensation, like he was trying to replace every memory Russia had clawed into him with something living and real. He kissed Shane everywhere he could reach—jaw, throat, collarbone—like he needed to taste him, mark him, anchor himself in the fact that the man in his arms was not a dream, not temporary. Shane held him like he meant it, hands firm and worshipping, mouth murmuring praise into Ilya's skin.

"You're here," Shane whispered between kisses.

Ilya's eyes shut tightly. "Yes."

"I've got you."

"Yes."

"You're not alone."

Ilya's breath stuttered. He pressed his forehead to Shane's. "I love you"

Shane's voice broke. "I love you too."

The words landed like a vow.

Ilya kissed him again—slower now, deeper, mouth trembling with emotion he couldn't name. His hands gripped Shane like he was afraid the world might burst in through the locked doors and steal him back. Shane didn't let him float away. He kept pulling him into the present with touch, with voice, with warmth.

Ilya's control slipped in pieces, quiet gasps, sharp exhales, small helpless sounds he'd never allow himself to make anywhere else. And Shane took every one like it was sacred. Like it was proof that Ilya's body finally believed it didn't have to survive this alone.

At some point, Ilya went still—eyes squeezed shut, jaw tight—and Shane felt it: the grief trying to crawl back in. The memory. The cold.

Shane cupped his face gently, forcing him to look.

“Ilya,” Shane murmured.

Ilya's eyes opened, glassy.

Shane's voice went steady. “Stay with me.”

Ilya swallowed. “Okay.”

Shane kissed him, soft this time, not hungry, just anchoring.

Ilya's breath shuddered. “I love you so much” he whispered, like the words tore out of him.

Shane froze this time. Then his eyes filled and he smiled anyway, bright and raw. “I love you too,” he whispered back. “So much.”

Ilya's throat tightened. He kissed Shane like he wanted to crawl inside his chest and live there. And Shane let him.

Later, when the heat eased into softness, when the desperation melted into something slower, they stayed tangled together on the sheets, skin cooling, hearts still racing. The room smelled like them.

Ilya lay with his head on Shane's chest, listening to the steady thud of his heartbeat.

Shane's fingers traced lazy circles over Ilya's shoulder.

For a long time, neither of them spoke.

Then Ilya whispered, voice hoarse and exhausted:

“I want to go home.”

Shane kissed the top of his head. “We will.”

Ilya's hand tightened on Shane's side. “Tomorrow.”

Shane nodded, voice certain. “Tomorrow.”

Ilya exhaled. Shane held him tighter.

And in the locked penthouse above a city that had once taught Ilya how to disappear, Ilya stayed exactly where he was—warm, wanted, and finally, unmistakably loved.

Chapter 10

Ilya had changed. Shane could see it in the way he carried himself through the airport.

He walked beside Shane with both hands in his coat pockets, shoulders level, stride steady. No scanning and no quiet tension coiled beneath his skin. He didn't even look over his shoulder once. He moved through the space like a man leaving a room he'd already cleaned out, like someone who'd closed the door behind him and wasn't interested in hearing it creak back open.

It was almost unsettling how calm he looked.

They checked in under the Irina Foundation cover without needing to perform much. Ilya answered questions in crisp Russian, collected their documents, and guided Shane through the line with gentle pressure at his elbow when the flow of people shifted too quickly. Shane stayed close, quiet in the way he'd learned to be there, letting Ilya lead.

And when they finally reached security, when the last stamp and scan and indifferent glance was behind them, Shane exhaled hard enough to feel it in his ribs.

Ilya didn't. He just kept walking.

At the gate, they sat side by side near the window. There was no seat between them now. They knew that they were so close to safety that they were willing to risk some sideways glances. The plane waited outside, white and still, like it was already prepared to take them back to where they belonged. Shane handed his passport to Ilya. Maybe he had changed in the last few days too. He realized he didn't have to be responsible to Ilya's feelings, and that he could let Ilya lead sometimes too. He always had behind closed doors, in a physical way, but Shane had a tendency to micromanage all the small things that didn't matter.

Ilya's gaze was on the tarmac.

"How are you feeling?" Shane asked softly.

Ilya blinked, turning his head slightly. His expression was calm in a way Shane hadn't seen in Russia at all—not once.

"I'm fine," Ilya said.

Shane waited. "Fine like... fine, or fine like you're about to implode in three hours?"

Ilya's mouth twitched faintly. "I'm fine."

Shane didn't push. He let the moment breathe. Then he leaned back slightly, voice low enough it wouldn't carry.

"I didn't want to ask this there," Shane admitted. "But... do you have any mixed feelings?"

Ilya's brows lifted. "About leaving?"

"About all of it," Shane said gently. "About being there. About coming back. About..." He swallowed. "About her?"

Ilya was quiet for a few seconds, eyes still on the plane. Then he said something that was so simple Shane felt it land in his chest like a weight settling into place.

"No."

Shane blinked. "No?"

Ilya shook his head once, decisive. "No mixed feelings," he repeated. "I came here. I did what I had to do. I said goodbye." His voice stayed even. "That's it."

Shane's throat tightened.

It was so unlike how Ilya usually spoke about anything heavy. Usually there was a sharp edge. A deflection. A half-joke. A strategic distance. But this clear.

Shane nodded slowly. "Okay."

Ilya glanced at him then, something steady in his eyes. "You're worried I'll regret it?"

Shane didn't deny it. "A little," he admitted.

Ilya exhaled softly through his nose. "No," he said again. "I don't regret it."

Shane swallowed, then hesitated. "Do you... wish you'd seen Alexei?"

The name sat between them like something sharp.

Ilya turned his head fully this time, and the look on his face was so blunt Shane almost laughed, because it was unmistakable.

"Fuck no," Ilya said flatly.

Shane choked on a surprised breath. "Okay—"

"No," Ilya repeated, like he wanted it to be permanently recorded. "That goodbye was final at the funeral." His jaw tightened for a second, then eased. "I don't have anything to say to him. He doesn't deserve to know you."

Shane's chest warmed at that, protective and possessive in the way Ilya rarely admitted out loud. "He wouldn't have gotten near me," Shane said.

Ilya's eyes narrowed slightly. "You say this like you are intimidating."

Shane raised his eyebrows. "I am intimidating."

Ilya looked him up and down slowly. "You wear lotion that smells like fruit."

“It’s unscented,” Shane corrected.

“Liar,” Ilya said, deadpan.

Shane snorted, and the sound felt strange in his own body after the heaviness of the cemetery. It felt like proof of oxygen returning. Proof they’d survived.

Boarding was called not long after.

Shane stood first, slinging both carry-ons over his shoulders the way he always did, and held out a hand to Ilya—subtle, quiet, not performative. Ilya took it without hesitation. No pause, no scan of who was watching. Just fingers interlacing briefly before they separated in the crowd.

On the plane, Shane took the aisle again. Ilya slid into the window, and for the first time since they’d landed in Russia, Shane watched Ilya settle back into the seat like his body actually believed it could finally rest.

He closed his eyes for a second and exhaled.

Shane stared at him, chest aching with it—this stubborn, beautiful man who had carried so much for so long without ever letting it show until he couldn’t anymore.

When the plane lifted, when the city fell away beneath them, Ilya didn’t flinch.

He just watched the clouds swallow the ground and let it go.

They landed in the daylight. They were back to familiar announcements in English. Familiar rhythm of people moving with a softness in their bodies that wasn’t fear, just life.

The difference hit Shane instantly.

He hadn’t realized how much he’d been masking in Russia. Joy didn’t feel welcome there.

And then he looked at Ilya.

Ilya moved through the terminal like it belonged to him. Not because he was famous—though the looks were there, the quiet double-takes and whispered recognition—but because this was his life now. Shane knew that a large part of Ilya had been left behind in Russia for good.

As they passed through the airport, Shane had a new appreciation for Ilya. For when Ilya had first come here. When he’d had to learn English and deal with the constant awareness of being misunderstood. When he’d had to translate not just words, but tone, humor, culture, rules he’d never been taught. When he’d had to sit in rooms where everyone spoke fast and casually and expected him to keep up. Shane had had a glimpse of it when they had done their press conference together all those years ago, he never thought about it after that, but Ilya had to live like that for years.

Shane had spent a few days in Russia and had felt awful to not be understood.

Ilya had done it for years.

“You good?” Ilya asked, glancing at him.

Shane blinked. Taken aback. That was his line! “Yeah.” His throat tightened. “I’m just thinking.”

Ilya’s mouth curved faintly. “That is dangerous.”

Shane snorted. “I’m serious.”

Ilya studied him for a moment, then nodded. “Tell me what you're thinking.”

Shane hesitated, then said quietly, “I didn’t realize... how hard it must’ve been for you when you came here. Like... really. Not just the hockey part.”

Ilya’s gaze shifted away for a second, like he didn’t want to sit in praise. Like it made him itch.

“It was hard,” Ilya admitted.

Shane swallowed. “And you did it anyway.”

Ilya glanced at him again, eyes steady. “Yes.”

“And you did it alone.”

Something in Ilya’s jaw tightened.

“Not anymore,” Shane said quickly, softer. “Not now.”

Ilya held his gaze for a beat. Then, quietly, he said, “No. Not now.”

Baggage arrived. They collected their bags. It was routine—simple, normal—and it felt like relief moving through Shane’s bloodstream.

By the time they got the car loaded and started the drive back toward the cottage, Shane felt like he could breathe properly again. The highway stretched ahead. Trees lined the road. The sky looked impossibly open compared to the enclosed weight of the city.

Shane glanced at Ilya at a red light.

Ilya’s face looked... lighter. Not happy, exactly. Not smiling. But certainly unburdened.

As if the decision to leave had snapped the last thread Russia held around his ribs.

“Home,” Shane murmured.

Ilya’s eyes flicked to him. “Home,” he agreed simply.

The cottage was the way they had left it only days ago.

The moment Shane opened the door, the air hit Ilya like something physical. Safe in a way Russia had never been. The light spilled across the floorboards in wide stripes. The silence was soft here. It didn't demand anything of them.

They set the bags down. Shane kicked off his shoes. Ilya stood still in the entryway for a moment like he was letting his body recalibrate, letting his nervous system believe what his eyes already knew.

Shane watched him quietly, chest full.

Ilya didn't speak. He just moved.

Straight to the dresser in the bedroom.

Shane followed him, slower, careful not to interrupt whatever moment this was.

Ilya opened the small dish on the dresser where he'd left it. His ring. Waiting exactly where he'd placed it before they left. A piece of him put away for safety, for strategy, for survival. He picked it up between his fingers and held it for a second, closing his eyes while he squeezed it in his palm.

Shane's throat tightened so hard he couldn't speak. He walked over to Ilya.

"Let me." He said, opening his palm and placing the ring slowly on Ilya's finger. He grabbed his hand and raised it to his lips, kissing the ring.

Ilya looked down at it, blinked slowly, then turned his head toward Shane.

"I can't wait to marry you." he said simply.

Shane swallowed. "I can't wait to marry you." he repeated back.

Ilya's mouth twitched faintly, and he lifted his hand—ring catching the sunlight like it was proud to be seen.

Shane cupped Ilya's jaw, kissing him slow and warm.

When they pulled apart, Ilya's eyes were as clear as he had ever seen them. Stunningly beautiful in the sunlight of the cottage.

He exhaled and said, almost casually, "I want to go fishing."

Shane blinked. "You want to—"

"Go fishing," Ilya repeated.

Shane stared at him like he'd grown a second head. "You literally said fishing was for stupid Canadian lumberjacks."

Ilya's expression didn't change. "Yes."

Shane squinted. "And now you want to go?"

Ilya shrugged, completely unbothered. "It's a good thing I will be Canadian soon then."

Shane barked a laugh so sudden it startled him. "Oh my god. Okay... let's do it. You're not going to throw me off the boat again are you?"

Ilya stepped closer, eyes bright with something that felt like victory. "Maybe."

Shane shook his head, still smiling. "Alright, lumberjack. Let's go."

The boat cut across the lake, the air ripping past them waking their tired minds and bodies as they went.

The water glittered in the afternoon sun, rippling softly behind them. The wind off the water was cool but not enough to bother them. The fresh air felt necessary right now.

Ilya sat near the front, sunglasses on, hood pulled up against the breeze. He looked relaxed in a way that felt almost new—shoulders loose, posture easy, one hand resting on the side of the boat, leaned back, soaking in the light.

Shane watched him from behind the wheel, heart squeezing with it.

"So," Shane called over the wind, "you know how to fish?"

Ilya turned his head slightly. "No."

Shane laughed. "Perfect."

"You do?" Ilya said, like it wasn't a question.

"Of course I do," Shane confirmed. "Because I am Canadian."

Ilya nodded solemnly. "Yes. Stupid Canadian lumberjack."

Shane grinned. "Okay, you're never letting that go, are you?"

"No," Ilya replied.

They anchored near one of Shane's usual spots—quiet water, no boats too close, the kind of place that felt private even in broad daylight. Shane set up the rods, baited hooks, talked Ilya through it like he was teaching a kid, except the kid was a professional athlete who could

probably bench press Shane if he got annoyed enough. Shane laughed when he realized that Ilya was terrified of the leeches he had brought along for bait.

"What are these devil worms?" he exclaimed, pulling his hands away from the small container in front of them.

"Oh my god you big baby, I'll do it for you." Shane replied with a smile. "Are you going to make me take the fish off the hook too?"

Ilya thought about it. "I didn't think that far ahead." Of course he didn't.

They cast their lines and settled into the beautiful afternoon.

For a while, they just sat there. The water lapped against the boat. The sky stretched endlessly above them. Shane leaned back, letting himself actually enjoy the stillness for the first time since they'd left Canada.

Then Ilya spoke without looking at him.

"You are happier here, yes?" he said.

Shane blinked. "What? In Canada? Sure."

Ilya turned his head slightly. "No here, at the cottage."

Shane frowned, confused. "Of course I am. It is my favorite place on earth."

Ilya hummed. "Better than the rink?"

Shane stared at him. "I don't know. I love both. But I feel more like myself here. Where is this coming from?"

Ilya's mouth twitched. "I realized when we were in Russia that I don't really know you either."

Shane laughed. "We've known each other forever, Ilya."

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "And still. I do not know everything."

Shane's chest warmed at that. "What to you want to know?"

Ilya glanced at him, expression deceptively casual. "Tell me something I don't know."

Shane blinked. "About me?"

"Yes," Ilya said.

Shane hesitated, then smirked. "Okay. I can't sleep without some kind of sound. I have white noise on my phone every night."

Ilya turned fully toward him. "You're joking. We've never done that."

Shane shook his head. "I know."

Ilya's brows lifted. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

Shane laughed. "I didn't want to annoy you with my quirks." He looked at a reaction from Ilya and was met with a grin. "Your turn" Shane pushed.

Ilya hesitated, then looked at the fishing rod like it had betrayed him personally.

"I steal your clothes," he admitted.

Shane froze. "What do you mean? We live here together for the summer, I already knew that."

Ilya shrugged. "Not here."

"What? Like from my house? In Montreal?" Shane asked, stunned.

"No, like from everywhere." Ilya said flatly.

Shane stared. "Since when?"

Ilya finally looked at him, eyes bright with mischief even behind the sunglasses.

"I would sneak them out under my jacket leaving your weird sex house." he said.

Shane's mouth opened, then shut again. "What the hell have you all taken?!"

"Oh you know... hoodies. Shirts. Whatever you left lying around. I liked them, they smelled like you." Ilya was speaking seriously, but he was smiling.

Shane grinned. "Well that's actually adorable. Did you wear them?"

"No, but sometimes I slept with them. Or just held them if I missed you. Did you never notice they were missing?"

This man could still give Shane butterflies like no one else ever could. He thought about it and responded, "Well I usually buy the same shit in a bunch of colors so I don't have to think about what to wear. So I guess not."

Ilya paused. "Well I guess I can bring them back now anyway."

Then he said, very calmly, "I can smell you any time I want when we are here, and soon we will be together all the time."

Shane laughed, completely wrecked. "God I love you."

Ilya hummed. "Yes... I know."

Shane couldn't wait to know every part of Ilya.

Chapter 11

The boys had let themselves settle back into the cottage for a few days. They settled back into their home, into their little domestic dream world, and they soaked it in, more grateful now than ever that they had the opportunity to share this place.

Ilya walked around barefoot, warm and loose in a hoodie that belonged to Shane, his ring glinting every time his hands moved. It felt at home there on his hand. He kept catching his own reflection in the windows, catching the ring in the glass, and it made his mouth twitch like he was trying not to smile too much.

Shane was on the couch with his laptop open, phone beside him, hair still slightly damp from a rushed shower. He looked like he'd been trying to pretend to work, like he had his life together for at least twenty minutes and failing gracefully. His expression was focused in that familiar way—determined, earnest, a little too intense for someone sitting in sweatpants in front of a lake.

Ilya paused behind him, leaning down to press a slow kiss to the side of Shane's head.

"Your hair smells nice", Ilya whispered near his ear.

Shane didn't look up. "Oh are you going to steal my hair now too?"

"No" Ilya said. "Mine is prettier"

Shane snorted, then went back to his laptop. "Okay."

Ilya raised an eyebrow. "Okay what."

Shane gestured at the laptop like he was presenting a problem for them to solve together. "We should do the Irina Foundation post."

Ilya stared at him for a second like Shane had asked him to willingly re-enter an airport.

"We are home safe, do we still have to?" Ilya said plainly.

"I know," Shane replied. "But we took so many photos with people while we were there. I figure it might still be a good idea to get it out of the way."

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "So this is PR?"

Shane nodded. "Yes. But it doesn't have to be empty."

The trip had started as a cover story. A neat, clean explanation. A foundation post that would make sense to strangers and satisfy curiosity without giving anything real away, but what they'd actually done over there... wasn't neat. And it wasn't clean. And now they were back in the cottage with the sunlight on the floor and the ring on Ilya's finger and no reason to keep it shallow anymore.

Ilya sighed, long and dramatic. “Fine.”

Shane’s face lit up with relief. “Okay?”

Ilya pointed at him. “But you write it.”

Shane blinked. “Me?”

“Yes,” Ilya said, deadpan. “You are the word guy here.”

Shane laughed. “You’re literally the most poetic person I’ve ever met.”

Ilya’s mouth twitched. “That is because I am suffering. Suffering makes you poetic.”

“That’s—” Shane paused. “Well that’s true, actually.”

Ilya dropped onto the couch beside him, stretching his legs out, hip bumping Shane’s. He leaned back like he belonged there, because he did. Shane’s hand immediately found his knee like muscle memory.

Shane clicked into the folder of photos from the trip.

Ilya was feeling sassy. “What are you, 80? How do you even get pictures on to a computer?”

“Okay,” Shane said, ignoring him entirely. “First thing: photo.”

Ilya glanced at the screen, neutral. “Yes. Okay.”

Shane opened the camera roll. They appeared in a grid—dozens of little rectangles holding pieces of a week that somehow felt longer than time.

Food pictures first, because of course Shane started with food.

Borscht. Tea. Bread. Dumplings. Something fried that Shane had eaten like it could fix him emotionally. A picture of Ilya’s hand holding a glass, ring missing, wrist relaxed. A street scene out the car window. A skyline at night. A blurry shot of the rink boards. Shane grinning like a tourist.

Ilya watched silently while Shane scrolled, his thumb moving quick and casual like this was easy.

Shane paused on a photo from the cafe. “This one could be cute.”

Ilya’s brow lifted. “Cute?”

Shane nodded. “Like, wholesome.”

Ilya stared at him. “We are a mental health charity, not a food review page.”

Shane laughed. “Okay but the pastries were life-changing.”

“No” Ilya said.

Shane turned dramatically toward him. “You are a liar.”

Ilya smiled just slightly. “Okay. It was good.”

Shane pointed at the screen again. “Okay, what about the rink photo?”

Ilya’s eyes lingered on it. Something softened briefly in his expression—pride, maybe, or nostalgia without pain. “Maybe.”

Shane nodded. “Or a landscape.”

Ilya shrugged. “We didn’t see any nice landscapes.”

Shane sighed. “You’re so annoying.”

“I am Russian,” Ilya replied, as if that explained everything.

Shane scrolled again.

More photos flashed past—random shots Shane had taken without thinking. A quick selfie with the city behind them. A photo of Shane holding a hockey stick in a store, looking proud and ridiculous. A picture of Ilya at the rink with kids gathered around him, his expression calm but his eyes gentler than he ever let them be on camera.

Shane’s thumb slowed.

And then the cemetery photo appeared.

It wasn’t flashy. Just a distant shot of a headstone with the bouquet at the base, and a man crouched down to greet it. The quiet truth of it sitting there in the middle of a camera roll full of normal life.

Shane stopped scrolling. He forgot he had taken it.

The room stayed warm. The sun still poured in. The lake still glittered outside.

But Ilya’s attention locked to the screen like it had been magnetized.

Shane glanced at him. “I didn’t know if I should keep that one,” he said softly.

Ilya didn’t look away from the photo. “Keep it.”

Shane swallowed. “Are you sure?”

Ilya nodded once, slow and steady. “Yes.”

Shane’s voice was careful. “I thought you might want the post to be... lighter.”

Ilya finally turned his head slightly, meeting Shane’s eyes.

“It was not a light trip,” he said simply.

Shane’s throat tightened, but he nodded. “Okay.”

Ilya looked back at the photo. His voice softened just a fraction.

“This one,” he said, and then paused as if the admission required courage even now. “This is the only one that shows what I went through there.”

Shane stared at him, heart full and aching at the same time.

“You want to share it?” Shane asked, almost incredulous.

Ilya’s mouth twitched. “Yes.”

Shane huffed a quiet laugh. “Okay.”

Ilya’s gaze dropped briefly to his ring, then back to the photo.

“It is... the truth, yeah?” Ilya said. “And what we do is supposed to mean something.”

Shane’s voice went soft. “Yeah.”

Ilya sat back into the couch, exhaling slowly. “We don’t need to say goodbye forever. We don’t need to say anything dramatic.” His eyes flicked to Shane, firm. “But we can say what it was.”

Shane nodded, already opening the caption box. “Okay. We can do that.”

Ilya leaned in slightly, shoulder brushing Shane’s. “Show me what you write.”

Shane looked up. “You’re going to edit it.”

“Yes,” Ilya said immediately. “Aggressively.”

Shane smiled. “Of course you are.”

He typed a simple beginning first—the version that would’ve existed at the start of the story:

Grateful to bring Shane to Russia to see where my mother came from. Proud to represent the Irina Foundation abroad...

Ilya stared at it for three seconds.

Then he made a face. “No.”

Shane laughed. “Okay? Are you going to do it?”

Ilya pointed at the screen. “It reads like politician.”

Shane leaned back. “What do you want it to sound like?”

Ilya hesitated.

Because that was the thing, wasn't it?

He hadn't practiced writing like this. Not the way he practiced interviews.

He looked at Shane and said quietly, "Like we mean it."

Shane's expression softened instantly. "Okay," he promised. "We'll mean it."

Shane deleted the first version and started again, slower this time.

He typed:

Before the door closes, you have to decide what you're willing to carry with you.

Ilya went still.

Shane glanced up, almost self-conscious. "Too much?"

Ilya shook his head once. "No."

Shane swallowed and continued typing, letting the words come from the version of him that had watched Ilya stand at a grave and forgive himself.

This week, we traveled to Russia as part of the Irina Foundation's ongoing work supporting mental health organizations and community programs.

Ilya frowned slightly. "This is too... brochure."

Shane snorted. "Okay, fair."

He highlighted it and rewrote:

This week, the Irina Foundation brought us to Russia — not just for outreach, but for understanding.

Ilya's eyes stayed on the screen, something soft working behind them.

Shane kept going.

Sometimes the door closes on a place... but not on the past that shaped you. Not on the pieces of yourself that you still owe something to.

Ilya's throat tightened. He didn't speak. He just shifted closer until his thigh pressed against Shane's.

Shane typed more carefully now, like he was holding something fragile.

For Ilya, this trip was personal. It was full of memories, and full of lessons — the kind you don't always realize you've been carrying until you put your feet back on familiar ground.

Ilya inhaled slowly, then said quietly, “Don’t say my name like that. It feels... weird.”

Shane looked at him. “Okay. Then write it like you’re talking.”

Ilya blinked. “I am not talking to Instagram.”

Shane grinned. “You are today.”

Ilya stared at him. The tiniest smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

“Fine,” he murmured, and then, reluctantly, he said, “Give me the keyboard.”

Shane’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh my god, okay.”

He handed it over like it was a sacred object.

Ilya looked at the caption, swallowed once, then started to type—slow, deliberate, as if each word had to be chosen from a lifetime of careful restraint.

He wrote:

I went back to Russia because I needed to. Not for hockey. Not for closure in a perfect, movie way. Just because there are things you don’t understand until you stand in the place they started.

Shane’s throat tightened hard.

Ilya kept typing.

This trip reminded me that some doors close for a reason. But even when a door closes on a country, the things it gave you — discipline, resilience, stubbornness, drive — still belong to you.

He paused, fingers hovering.

Shane didn’t breathe. He honestly couldn’t believe how good Ilya’s English had gotten.

Then Ilya added, almost softer:

My past made me who I am. But it doesn’t get to own me anymore.

Shane’s eyes stung.

He swallowed and whispered, “Ilya...”

Ilya didn’t look at him yet. He kept writing, steadier now.

The Irina Foundation supports mental health charities because we believe nobody should have to carry the hardest parts of their life alone — not in silence, and not in shame.

Shane’s voice came out rough. “That’s perfect.”

Ilya finally looked at him, eyes glossy but calm. “It is true.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

Ilya stared at the screen again and added one last line—simple, quiet, the kind that didn’t beg for attention but still landed in the chest:

Thank you for letting us share a small part of this week with you. My mother would have been proud of the work we are doing.

He sat back, exhaling, like he’d just finished a game that mattered.

Shane stared at the caption for a long moment, then whispered, “I can’t believe you wrote that.”

Ilya glanced at him, expression dry. “Do not make it a big deal.”

Shane’s mouth twitched. “Too late.”

Ilya sighed. “Post it.”

Shane blinked. “Really?”

Ilya nodded once. “Yes.”

Shane hovered over the button like it might explode.

Then he looked at Ilya again. “You’re sure?”

Ilya’s hand slid over Shane’s, steadying it. “Yes.”

Shane swallowed hard, then pressed Share.

For a second nothing happened.

Then the post appeared on the Irina Foundation page: the quiet headstone, the flowers, Ilya, the truth sitting calmly in public view.

Shane leaned back slowly, heart pounding like he’d just done something risky.

Ilya stared at it without flinching.

Shane glanced at him. “How does it feel?”

Ilya thought for a moment, then said simply, “Like I meant it.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

They sat there together while the first likes and comments rolled in—people sending hearts, people thanking them, people sharing their own small pieces of grief and healing without being asked. It wasn’t invasive. It wasn’t ugly. It was human.

Shane stayed close, forehead brushing Ilya's temple now. "I'm proud of you."

Ilya's eyes shifted to him, warm and slightly irritated. "You are always proud of me."

"Yes," Shane said. "Because you keep giving me reasons to be."

Ilya stared at him for a long beat, then his voice dropped quiet and sincere.

"I'm proud of me too," he admitted.

Nothing could have made Shane happier. He pulled Ilya in closer until their bodies fit together. Ilya's hand rested on Shane's chest for a second, feeling his heartbeat. Shane kissed him again then whispered against his mouth, "I'm glad you got to say goodbye to your home."

Ilya's throat tightened, but his eyes stayed steady.

"I didn't," he said. "I got to come back home, here, with you."

And in the sunlight of their cottage, with the lake watching quietly and the ring shining like it belonged there, it felt true in every possible way.

Chapter 12: Epilogue

They were late.

Not terribly late, but late enough that it made Shane feel like Ilya was moving as slow as possible on purpose, just to piss him off. He looked around the cottage searching for his keys frantically. How had they let the cottage get like this? it was a lazy, lived-in mess. He noticed a mug left on the counter, Shane's keys abandoned in the wrong bowl, a folded blanket half-slid off the back of the couch, shoes all over the entryway.

Wait! Keys! In the wrong bowl. Ilya really knows how to minorly inconvenience Shane within an inch of his life.

"Ilya! Would you hurry up. There are mirrors at my parents." Shane yelled across the cottage.

"Okay, okay, okay" Ilya said, stepping out in suitable pants, but a shirt that looked like it had been run over a hundred times by a truck.

"Oh my god, could you find something with a few more wrinkles?" He asked sarcastically.

Ilya's grin was wide. "Oh I am sure I could", he said stripping it off slowly, moving in slow motion back to the bedroom.

"You're killing me Ilya. You know mom hates when I am late." He was moving out the door now, with or without Ilya.

Yuna and David had invited them for supper tonight. They had one last week at the cottage before they had to go back to real schedules, real responsibilities, the weight of the outside world. Shane hadn't wanted to go at first. He felt like it was taking up some of their valuable alone time. But then he put himself in Ilya's shoes, a skill he was trying to master, and he realized that to Ilya this was an opportunity to be surrounded by family, by laughter, by love. He didn't want to rob Ilya of that chance.

"Okay," he called back into the house as he stepped out. "I have the wine. The snacks. The ___"

"You have the anxiety," Ilya said from the kitchen.

Shane paused. "I do not have anxiety."

"You are losing your mind over some wrinkles and five minutes" Ilya replied, calm as ever.

Shane huffed. "I like being prepared."

Ilya appeared a moment later, redressed, hair still damp from a quick shower, his ring catching the light every time he moved. He looked... good. Not just physically—though he

did, because he always did—but in the deeper way. In the way his shoulders sat easier. In the way his eyes didn't look bright and optimistic.

Shane's gaze flicked to the ring automatically, like it still made his chest tighten every time he saw it there.

"I'm ready," Shane announced.

Ilya tilted his head. "Ready for what? An apocalypse?"

Shane pointed at him. "We're leaving now, or mom will call me and say something passive aggressive like, 'Oh, don't rush on our account.'"

Ilya's mouth curved faintly. "She will."

Shane grabbed his keys and headed for the door. "Come on. One last supper. I'm excited."

Ilya followed, slower. Not dragging his feet, not hesitant—just... taking in the moment in his own quiet way.

Shane stepped outside, already moving toward the car, calling back over his shoulder, "Hurry up and get in the car."

Ilya hummed in agreement and reached for the handle—

And then he stopped again.

His eye caught on the wall in the hallway, the one Shane had been slowly filling in over the last year. It had started as Shane's side—photos from childhood, a framed picture of him and Yuna and David laughing on a boat, one of David holding a fish like it was a trophy. Over time, it had become theirs. Proof that they were building a life together.

A team photo here. A candid from a dinner there. A picture of Shane and Ilya at the cottage, both of them smiling without thinking about who might see.

And now, tucked among them, like it had always belonged there, was a framed photo of Ilya's mother.

It wasn't a formal portrait. It wasn't harsh or posed. It was her smiling, peaceful and beautiful, the kind of photo that didn't feel like memory. It felt like presence.

Ilya stared at it. His throat tightened—not with grief the way it had in Russia, not with ache. With something brighter. Something like... quiet joy.

He stepped closer, fingertips brushing the edge of the frame like he was checking it was real.

Shane had done that. For him. For her.

He'd taken her out of the locked box of Ilya's past and given her a place in his present, among their people, among their family, among the life they were building. Not as a tragedy.

Not as a wound, just as family.

Ilya exhaled slowly, a soft sound he didn't even realize he made, and his mouth lifted into the smallest smile. He leaned in a fraction, voice so low it was barely sound—like he wasn't afraid of anyone hearing, but he still wanted it to be just between them.

“Look,” he murmured in Russian, eyes warm. “You’re here.”

He blinked once, steady.

Then he added, softer, almost amused with himself, “He put you with the loud ones.”

Outside, the car engine started.

Shane’s voice floated back through the open door, cheerful and impatient. “Ilya! Come on! You really are going to kill me!”

Ilya didn’t move right away.

He looked at her a second longer, letting the simple miracle of it settle into him—the fact that she wasn’t hidden anymore, and neither was he. Not from love. Not from softness. Not from the parts of himself that deserved to be seen.

He reached up, touched the frame again, and smiled a little wider.

“Okay,” he whispered, like he was promising her something easy. Something good. “We are going to go be happy now, mama.”

Then, under his breath, the kind of joy that sounded almost like teasing:

“And you would love them.”

He stepped back, turned toward the door, and headed outside.

Shane was leaning against the driver’s side, already impatient, already smiling when he saw him. “What were you doing?”

Ilya walked down the steps, hands in his pockets, face calm and unreadable except for the faint curve of his mouth.

“Nothing,” he said.

Shane narrowed his eyes. “That’s a lie.”

Ilya shrugged. “I was giving myself a pump up speech so I can deal with you tonight.”

Shane laughed, moving to open the passenger door for him. “You’re so dramatic.”

Ilya slid into the seat, kissing Shane on the way down.

“You like it,” he said.

Shane shut the door, walked around to the driver's side, and got in. "Yeah," he admitted, starting the car. "I do."

They pulled out of the driveway, tires crunching over gravel, the lake flashing bright behind them through the trees.

Ilya looked out the window, then down at his hand in Shane's, and he let himself smile without hiding it.

He didn't need to.

Not anymore.

Not with Shane beside him, and Yuna and David waiting for them up ahead, and his mother smiling on the wall from the cottage, like she'd always belonged there with them.

The cottage faded into the distance, but home stayed with him anyway. Here in this moment, with Shane.

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