The Shane Hollander Redemption Era

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The Shane Hollander Redemption Era

by embroiderama

Summary

After leaving Ilya to his own devices for too long, Shane finally gets back in the picture and tries to help fix what he broke.

Notes

This work is a follow-up to my story, Stick Season. It won't make that much sense on its own probably.

Shane pulled to a stop in front of Ilya's house in Ottawa and just sat there for a moment, processing the fact that his father's SUV was also there, parked in Ilya's driveway. The man was barely willing to miss work for a doctor's appointment, and here he was with Shane's ex-boyfriend on a Tuesday morning. It was very strange.

Shane realized that he had failed to bring the key that Ilya had given him after moving into this house, so he went and rang the doorbell. The door was answered a few minutes later by his father. "Oh, Shane," he said, smiling. "It's good you're here. Come on in." He opened the door, and Shane walked in, taking in how dark the house was and the stale smell that permeated it.

"What are you doing here, Dad?"

Shane's father sighed. "Ilya's not a man who should be alone right now. I needed to be here."

"Wow. Okay. Um, what about Mom?"

"She was here yesterday but she had some other things to take care of today. So it's my turn."

"So that's why I got so many texts from her yesterday."

"I imagine so. I don't know how all this happened but it might take all of us to fix it. Do you want to go upstairs and see Ilya?"

Shane wasn't so sure that he did but he felt like he didn't have much choice, so he nodded and walked to the foot of the stairs.

"Hold on a moment, son."

Dad went into the kitchen quickly and came back with a bottle of juice . "Give this to him. He needs it."

"Alright." Shane didn't think he'd ever seen Ilya drink orange juice, but if his dad said it was necessary then it must be for some reason. The stale smell from the foyer was much more concentrated in the bedroom, and Shane paused in the doorway, letting the light from the hallway illuminate a patch of Ilya's bed. He couldn't see more than a lump and tangle of covers but he trusted that the man was in there too.

"Lyubimaya?" Shane called softly, using the pet name he had learned from Svetlana back when they were all still close. To Shane's understanding, it meant Beloved. It felt unfamiliar in Shane's mouth, but it felt right to his heart.

"Stop." The word from inside the bedroom was rough , deep. "Stop, Shane."

"You don't want me to come in?"

"Please come in." Shane stepped into the darkness of the room. "Just please don't lie with your words."

“What do you mean?”

Ilya scoffed. “If I were your ‘lyubimaya,’ you could not leave me like this. Alone, abandoned. This you would not do.”

“Oh no, I’m so sorry, Ilya. I’m here now, though, okay?”

“Is good, yes. Better late than never. Now come closer please.”

“Is it okay if I turn on a light?” Shane felt uncomfortable in the stifling darkness of the room.

“If you must.”

Shane stepped forward and turned on the bedside light then sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. Ilya looked terrible lying there buried in blankets. Terribly ill. “Oh Ilya.” Shane reached out to touch his cheek and was surprised to feel no fever. Ilya turned his head to push into Shane’s touch like a cat seeking more petting. “Oh,” Shane said again. He traced Ilya’s cheekbone with his thumb and sighed. “You’ve lost weight.”

“I was supposed to eat? All alone here?”

“Well, yes. I thought you would take care of yourself.”

“Well we’re supposed to take care of each other. No?”

“Yes. You’re right. I’m so sorry that I failed you. I have some good news though. I think.”

“Yes? Tell me this, please.”

“This morning, I signed papers to trade myself to Ottawa for next season. I’ll be moving here as soon as Montreal is out of the playoffs.”

“Oh! That will be very soon I think.”

“Yes. I think you are right. No cup run for us this year.”

“I am sorry, Shane. But next year, me and you? We will be, what do they call it? Juggernaut?”

“Right. Yes. That is the plan.”

“And who will be centering whom?” Ilya had a wry smile on his drawn face, and Shane kept his hand cupped around that face.

“I think we leave that up to the coach. Yes?”

“Yes, perfect. You can center me all season if you want. I do not care. I care only that you are near.”

“I will be. I swear, I’m so sorry I failed you this year. It wasn’t because I forgot you or that I didn’t love you. I thought of you every day. Every morning, I woke and thought I should

drive here to be with my lyubimaya." Shane ducked his head down and pressed a light kiss to Ilya's forehead. It felt dry and cool under his lips.

"Come on, sit up. My dad had me bring you some juice."

Ilya moved to shift himself upwards, and Shane reached a hand behind Ilya's back to help him to sitting. He could feel that Ilya's back was somewhat bony now, not as broad and strong as it had always been. They would have to build him back up over the spring and summer. Shane determined to cook many, many burgers for him and to keep him resting on the deck between meals. No long trail runs for Ilya this summer. They would spend their time at the cottage being profligately lazy.

Shane might even hire someone to take care of chores around the place so that they would have no responsibilities beyond preparing themselves for next season. Surely somebody in the small town near the cottage would be looking for work. His mother used to easily find a summer babysitter for him when he was little so that she and Dad could relax too on vacation. A series of college or high school age girls, they had always been good at keeping Shane supplied with peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and glasses of milk and making sure he didn't drown in the lake or get lost in the woods.

Now all Shane cared about was taking care of Ilya to try to make up for his months of neglect. He hadn't thought he was responsible for the basic upkeep of a grown man, but apparently he was. He had he'd thought seen the blame and disappointment in his father's eyes when he answered Ilya's door earlier, and he'd heard it in his mother's voice when she called the day before. He couldn't blame them. Before Mom called, she was probably in this bedroom trying to get some sustenance into a man who clearly didn't care for himself. Shane felt the blame on his shoulders now, and it was a heavy load.

Shane held Ilya up while he drank the orange juice, and he was glad to see Ilya getting some hydration and nutrients into his depleted body. Before Ilya could lay back down, Shane wrapped his arms around him and held Ilya's head to his chest. "I'm sorry. I really am. I love you so much. Please try to take care of yourself and get stronger for me. Okay?"

"Mmm," Ilya mumbled as he nuzzled his head against Shane's collar bone. "You will take care of me and help me get stronger. Yes?"

Shane pet the curls on the back of Ilya's head. "Yes. Yes, I will. I need you here and strong with me."

"Mmm," Ilya hummed again. "Stay with me? Now? In the bed?"

"Yes, I would love to. Just a moment." Shane stood up, toed out of his shoes, and pulled off his jeans and flannel shirt. He walked around to the other side of the bed and climbed in wearing just his boxers and t-shirt but he ended up squirming out of his t-shirt so that he could be skin to skin with Ilya where they spooned together. He spoke quietly into Ilya's ear. "I'm going to call later and get myself out of playing and practices for the rest of the season. I'm not leaving you when you're like this. I can't."

"Your parents would help. And I promise I would not die."

“I need to be here myself.” Shane wrapped his arms around Ilya and pulled him impossibly closer. The stale smell of the room emanated from the bedding specifically, and Shane made a plan to set Ilya up to rest on the living room sofa while Shane washed the bedding and aired out the bedroom. It would do both of them good to have a nicer environment. While he did laundry, Shane could assess the state of the kitchen and order groceries for delivery so that he could cook later. Other than that, he planned to spend as much time as possible being close to Ilya to try to heal what had broken between them. He imagined laying in the summer sunshine with Ilya in his arms just like this, and he determined to order a double chaise lounge for the deck at the cottage. An expensive, solid one that could take the weight of two men and that had lots of cushioning to comfortably cradle them for hours. Shane would get out of the lounge only to get food and drinks, and Ilya would get up only to eat and drink and stretch his legs as necessary. Otherwise, they would rest together, and Ilya would recuperate his strength. As he was now, Ilya was in no condition to play. A hard hit to the boards would break him. If Ottawa was planning to let him play like this. Shane would have some words for them. In fact, he thought he would ask his mother to handle that. In his contract negotiations, Shane had made it very clear that he was now close friends with Ilya Rozanov and that they would be living together in Ottawa. It shouldn’t be a huge surprise if the Hollander family was getting involved on Ilya’s behalf. They had to know he wasn’t doing well. There was no way the man in Shane’s arms was performing well on the ice week to week. In fact, Shane needed to talk to his mother about this now.

Shane rubbed his thumb in an arc over Ilya’s ribs, and when Ilya shifted in his arms he whispered in his ear. “I just have to get up for a few minutes. I’m not really going anywhere. I promise. Okay? I’ll be in the house with you.”

Once Ilya mumbled his assent, Shane extracted himself from the bed. He stood and looked down at Ilya for a moment before dressing and leaving the room. The fresher scent of the hallway instantly made Shane feel a little better, and when he was standing in the kitchen in his father’s arms he was much better than that. “Oh my god, I really screwed up, Dad,” he said into his father strong chest.

“Yeah, kid, this isn’t great, but we’ll all fix it together. Your mom and I are here for you two.”

“I really appreciate that. Thank you so much for being here for him when I wasn’t. If you hadn’t been here, if Ilya didn’t answer the door, I would have had to drive back to Montreal for my keys, and he’d be in an even worse state having been on his own the last couple of days.”

“Your mom and I weren’t going to let that happen. He showed up at our house the other day looking half dead, and it was clear we needed to step in. I’m glad you’re here now though. You’re what he needs, not us.

“Yeah. I’m going to call Mom though. I’m going to need her to intervene with the team.”

“Yes, I know she’ll be happy to do that. Give her a call? I’ll put together some lunch for you and Ilya.”

“Okay. Thanks, Dad.”

“It's what I’m here for. Now go call.”

Shane nodded and went into the living room to make the call. After a brief conversation, Shane’s mom easily agreed to call the Centaurs and get Ilya put on IR for the rest of the post-season. The trade-off was that both Shane and Ilya would come back early in the late summer to start working with the new guys for next season. That was something they could worry about in August if Ilya didn’t seem ready yet then. But Shane was sure he would be better by then. The spring and summer would be able to heal the wounds of the winter.

Until he heard back from his mother, Shane went upstairs to get Ilya and bring him down to eat lunch and then rest on the couch. Thankfully, the sofa was deep enough that Shane would be able to stretch out there with him between chores. He didn’t want Ilya to be alone any more than he had to be. Being alone was what had hurt Ilya so badly. Shane would never forgive himself, could never let himself forget the consequences of his own inaction. He’d been pretending he was on his own, pretending he was free, living in Montreal while Ilya was suffering alone in Ottawa. The shame of it sat heavy in Shane’s chest. He thought it would dissipate as Ilya regained his strength. He hoped that would be the case.

Upstairs, Ilya was slow to wake up. “Come on, baby. Let’s get you downstairs. This room is no good for you right now.”

“Hmm, I like it here. Like my pillow. Like my blanket”

“We'll take all that down to the sofa. I promise, you’ll like them there too. And it’ll smell nicer.” Shane texted his dad, asking him to come help, and he was relieved when he heard footsteps behind him in the bedroom doorway.

“What do you need,boys?”

“Can you take the pillow and blanket to make a nest on the couch?”

“Sure thing.” Shane guided Ilya up to sit then balled up the blanket and handed it back to his father. The pillow followed.

“Dad, would you come back after and help me get him safely down the stairs?”

“No problem.”

Shane nodded, relieved. He had been worried about getting a weakened Ilya down the stairs without either them getting hurt. His father’s height and bulk would make that task much easier.

“I have to tell you something, Ilya.”

Ilya’s head straightened up quickly. “Yes? What?”

“While we were apart , I realized how much I love you. How much I need you. I’m sure f I had come back here to find you gone, I don’t think I ever would have been okay again.”

“Oh. Well, you could have come back here anytime.”

“I know. I know, and I’m so sorry. I hope that you can forgive me one day.”

“You are here now. I already forgive.”

"Oh, wow, thank you. Thank you Ilya for still being here.”

“Where else would I go? I am signed to Centaurs.”

“Yes, of course. You remember I told you I am too now?”

“I remember this. In the fall we will figure out how to be on a line together so we can destroy other teams.”

“Yes. We will. Imagine what we will do to Boston?”

Ilya let out a low, dark chuckle. “Yes, it will be terrible for them. They go home crying on plane.”

“Pooor Boston,” Shane agreed.”Hey, do you need to go to the bathroom before we go downstairs?”

“Yes. Good idea. You help me up?”

“Of course. That’s all I really want to do right now.” Shane slowly stood and drew Ilya up with him. Ilya leaned into Shane for a moment until he felt steadier then they walked together to the small en suite bathroom. Shane was afraid Ilya would fall over if left to his own devices, so he stayed and kept a hand on Ilya’s back while he stood to pee. At least there was some evidence of him being hydrated now. Ilya washed his hands and took the time to brush his teeth before he turned back into Shane’s waiting arms.

“Downstairs, you said?”

“Yes. I think that’s what we should do.”

“You will help me?”

“My dad’s coming back to help, too.”

“Last time I went down the stairs, when I was leaving to go to your parents’ house, I had to go down sitting. I got dizzy at top of stairs and was afraid I could fall.”

“Oh no, I’m sorry. “ Shane wrapped Ilya in a tight hug. “I’m so glad you called my parents and went over there. Can I ask what made you call after all that time?”

“I was sick from too much vodka, and it felt terrible to be alone right then.”

‘I’m sorry,” Shane repeated, and he gave Ilya another gentle squeeze. “I’m glad you let them help you.”

“i think part of me realized I really needed help. I hate to be so weak but I didn’t want to stay there on the bathroom floor. It was too cold.”

“Yes, of course. That’s not weak though. You had to be strong to risk reaching out for help. Like when you first started with Galina.”

“Hmm, yes, I should call her. Get an appointment.”

“I will take care of that for you. Maybe we could go see her together?”

“If you want. We can do that.”

“I want to do whatever will help you. I love you so much.”

“Love you too.” Ilya breathed against Shane’s neck for a moment then repeated the words in Russian. Shane rubbed his back as he listened to his father climb the stairs toward them.

“You all set, boys?”

“I think so. You ready to go downstairs with help, Ilya?”

“I will try,” Ilya agreed, sounding somewhat uncertain.

“We’ll have you,” Shane promised, though he doubted his promises held any weight for Ilya at this point. He guided Ilya over to near the top of the stairs next to his father. “Maybe put him on the wall side? I’ll go down backwards in front.”

“Okay, but you be careful. We don’t need you getting hurt either.”

“I’ll be very careful. We’ll be moving slowly anyway.” Shane watched anxiously as his father manhandled Ilya around to be between him and the wall.

“Lean against the wall if you need to. Okay, baby? I’m going to take your hands and stay in front of you.”

Ilya nodded slowly then let Shane grasp both of his hands between them. With Shane’s father’s long arm wrapped around Ilya’s shoulders , they began the slow trip down the stairs, one step at a time. Shane felt himself tense up when Ilya’s eyes went vague, and his face paled as he swayed over toward the wall and then back against Shane’s father. Shane steadied his own body to help stabilize Ilya in case he fully passed out but after a shaky breath he opened his eyes and looked much better.

“You okay, baby?”

“I will be better on sofa. With you. Fuck stairs.”

“Yes, completely fuck them.” Shane squeezed Ilya’s hands, and after a few more halting steps Shane was standing on the foyer floor, and Ilya stepped down into his arms. “Good job, baby. You deserve a rest now.” He guided Ilya over to the sofa, where the bed pillow was positioned at one end, and Ilya’s favorite blanket was draped over the back.

Shane sat down and drew Ilya down with him then stretched out so that Ilya had plenty of room in front of him and let their legs tangle together. He tugged on the blanket, and it fell on them in a soft, warm pile before Shane's father picked it up and spread it out over them better.

"Thanks, Dad."

"No problem. Now, both of you rest for a while. I'll be heading home in about an hour, but I'll check in with you before I go."

Shane nodded then let his eyes close. Here in the living room, Shane couldn't smell the stale reek of the bedroom. He could smell that Ilya himself probably needed a shower, but they could take care of that together when Ilya was feeling a little bit steadier. For now, it was time to rest. Shane regretted that he was dressed, putting another layer of cloth between them. He pulled the front of his t-shirt up then tugged up the back of Ilya's pajama top so that they could have a few inches of skin to skin contact. He suspected that Ilya was somewhat touch-starved on top of everything else, and he was set to do what he could to make Ilya feel better. He felt Ilya press back against him for more, and he was sure he was right. He slipped a hand inside the front of Ilya's shirt to press a hand to his belly and felt the muscles there relax under his touch.

"I'm here, baby," Shane whispered in his ear. "I'm here all for you, and I'm not going anywhere without you."

Ilya released a sighing breath and settled back against Shane's body. The weight of him was reassuring and perfect. Shane thought about the things he wanted to take care of in the next couple of days, and then he thought about packing for the trip to the cottage and how good it would be to spend the summer there together rebuilding their relationship. Shane cursed himself for almost letting Ilya slip through his fingers and unconsciously petted the warm skin under his hands. He wouldn't let this go ever again. He didn't know if either of them would survive that.

A few days later, Shane's mom put him in touch with a woman who could be hired to get the cottage ready for their arrival. She would clean the place and stock the fridge, and her husband would assemble the new chaise lounge and make sure they had what they needed for grilling. Shane was more than willing to pay for their services, and the woman agreed to come clean weekly during the summer and to grocery shop for them. She said that her husband would be available if any minor repairs to the cabin were needed during the summer, and Shane felt like they were all set for a few recuperative months on the lake.

He also had a conference with the Centaurs coach and management. They agreed to release Ilya for the rest of the post-season with the concessions that Yuna had promised. Shane asked for the team doctor to be sent to Ilya's house to check on him, and management easily agreed. He thought they might realize the team had been negligent in letting Ilya keep playing when he was clearly not doing well. They were getting off easy, as far as Shane was concerned. They all were, himself included.

When his body was cramping up, and he couldn't stand to stay on the couch any longer, Shane rubbed Ilya's arm to try to get his attention. "Hey, baby? Baby? I've got to get up,

okay? But I'll be close by. You just call out if you need me. I'll be listening."

Ilya nodded sleepily, and Shane took that as permission to begin to extract himself from behind Ilya. He should have had Ilya get on the couch first so that this would have been easier but that was dead last among Shane's many regrets. Eventually, Shane managed to climb out of the warm cocoon formed between the back of the couch and Ilya's body. He stood looking down at Ilya and felt overwhelmed with love and worry and determination to do better this time.

Shane found his dad unloading the dishwasher in the kitchen and went over to help.

"Hey kid, you doing okay?

"I just feel so shitty about letting this happen. If he wasn't going to be okay, I don't know what I would do with myself. Probably quit hockey and move into my old room at your house."

"And we would be glad to have you, but not glad for the reason. Do you think we should get him to a doctor? Make sure something's not seriously physically wrong?"

"The team doc is coming out tomorrow."

"Okay, that's better than nothing at least."

"Yeah. He should be able to run some blood tests and like take a blood pressure or whatever."

"Definitely."

"Please call your mother or me if anything comes up, if you need us. We want to take care of both of you. You're both our sons now. "

"Oh wow, thanks dad."

"It's what I'm here for. And don't worry about calling me if I'm at work. I'm perfectly willing to use my PTO. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Got it. Hopefully we'll be fine."

"Now that you're here, I'll bet on it."

Shane nodded and walked to the doorway where he could peek through to the living room and see that Ilya was still safely sacked out on the couch. Ilya was his responsibility now, and he didn't plan on messing that up. Not again.

By the time it was dark outside, Shane had aired out the bedroom for a few hours and washed and replaced the bedding. He even took Ilya's favorite blanket and pillow from the couch so that he could wash them, and Ilya had grudgingly accepted the replacements Shane brought.

Shane turned up the heat in the house to counteract the chill that had come in through the open windows. He didn't want Ilya to have to be cold in his weakened state, especially

considering that they were going to take a shower before bed.

Still, it had been worth cooling down the house to get rid of the fetid, stale smell that had inhabited the bedroom. Living in that couldn't be good for Ilya's mental state.

Shane found some of his mothers squash stew in the fridge and heated it up for dinner. He thought it would be warming and comfortable in Ilya's stomach with good carbs to help build him back up and some protein from the beans. The ginger scent of it began to spread through the kitchen as Shane set the table for dinner.

When he sat on the edge of the sofa to wake up Ilya, he found Ilya difficult to rouse. "Come on, baby. Wake up for me just for a little while." He jostled Ilya's shoulder until Ilya swatted at him to stop.

"Nope, no falling back asleep." When Ilya started to close his eyes again, Shane pinched his earlobe and dug his thumbnail in just to make a point.

"Ow! Fuck! What?"

"I'm sorry, I just need you to be awake for a little while. Then we can go back to bed, I promise."

"Right. Yeah. You promise. So I will wake up tomorrow morning alone again, yes?"

"No, absolutely not. I'm staying. In a month or so, we'll both go to the cottage together. Until then, it's you and me in this house. If I do have to go somewhere, one of my parents can come hang out with you."

"Do not need babysitter."

Shane gently ran his fingers through Ilya's hair. "I think maybe you do right now. You were on your own too long, and I know that's all my fault, but you're not well, okay? We are going to take care of you and get you well again soon."

"Hmm. Something smells good."

"That's my mom's stew. Can you let me help you to the kitchen so we can eat it for dinner?"

"Not that hungry," Ilya grumbled.

Shane placed a hand on ya's too-flat stomach and shook his head. "I think maybe you are, and you just forgot."

"Maybe. Okay, I will try dinner."

"Thank you, baby. You feel okay to stand up?"

"Sure. You'll help me?

“Of course.” Shane wrapped both arms around Ilya and pulled him up to standing. He felt far too light as he leaned against Shane, and Shane wondered if he could even carry Ilya now. He wouldn’t try it because Ilya would hate that, but he thought that in a pinch maybe he could.

Wrapped up in each other, they walked together to the kitchen, and Shane guided Ilya into a chair before sitting down across from him.

He had set a bowl of stew along with a glass of water and silverware at Ilya’s place at the table, and he was pleased when Ilya immediately picked up the glass of water and took a drink. He knew Ilya had to be dehydrated, and he wanted to take care of that before it turned into an IV situation.

After drinking the water, Ilya dipped his spoon into the stew and took a taste of it. “Mmm, very nice. Your mother is very good cook.”

“I’ll tell her you said that. This is one of my favorite dishes she makes “

Ilya nodded. “I can see that. The ginger is strong in it. I know you love that.”

“You’re right. I do. Always have, as far as I can remember.”

“I am surprised you didn’t end up with red-haired man.”

“You’re the one for me, Ilya. Just you.”

“Hmm. Didn’t feel that way, last months.”

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I wasn’t with anyone else though. I really fucked this all up. I’m going to show you how much I love you until you really believe me again. Okay?”

“Is okay. Maybe later you help me understand why things went this way.”

“I’d have to understand myself first, but I’ll try. I’m going to get my own therapist. Try to get myself straightened out because I don’t want to hurt you ever again.”

“Sounds like good plan. This was not very good.”

“Yes, I can see that. I’m so sorry. All I can say is that I’m here now, and I’m not leaving.”

“That is very good to hear. Thank you.”

Shane reached across the table to take Ilya’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“When you’re all done eating, we’re going to relax on the sofa for a little while longer. After that, we’ll take our time going up the stairs then take a shower. Together.

“Oooh.” llya gave Shane a filthy wink then shifted his shoulders under his shirt. “A shower would be nice. To feel clean would be good. With you, even better.”

“Yeah? When we’re both clean and dry, we’ll get into a clean, warm bed together and stay there until morning.

“All very good news. Thank you.

“Tomorrow, we’ll have a visitor that I know you won’t be so happy about, but it’s necessary.”

“What visitor?”

“The team doctor. He’s coming here to give you a quick check-up. I need to make sure you’re going to be okay. I don’t feel sure of that right now.”

“Will be okay. Just tired. Maybe too much vodka for a little while.”

“Yeah. And maybe not enough food and water and sleep?”

“Maybe you are right. Terry will tell you I will be fine.”

“I sure hope so. I also hope he apologizes to you for putting you in danger, letting you on the ice when you were not fit to play.”

“Not fit! Look at games I won while you say I was not fit.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s just how amazing you are. Playing like that when you weren’t at full strength. Nobody else in the league could do it.”

Ilya looked somewhat appeased by Shane’s words, and Shane hoped that Ilya could see some bit of how amazing he truly was.

When they were back in the living room sitting on the couch, Shane put his arm around Ilya and pointed across the room. “A Christmas tree would look really good over there.”

“I don’t think I have one.”

“It’s okay. When you’re feeling better, we’ll get one and decorate it. My parents can lend us some other decorations too. They have tons. Literally.”

“Oh, speaking of Christmas, I do have guests coming.

“Really? Who? When?

“Svetlana and Sasha are flying in from Russia on the 15th.

”Oh,that’s great. I’m glad they’re coming for you.”

“I would have asked you if I’d thought you would be here. I’m sorry.”

“No. You have nothing to be sorry for. I just worry that if Svetlana knows what I did she will kill me in my sleep.”

“No, I will talk to her. And I will protect you with my body at night if it comes to that.”

Shane leaned his head against Ilya's. "Oh god. I love you so much."

"Me too. Of course, I love Sveta too, but much less than I do you. So much smaller love."

"Thank you, baby. I'm glad you have her in your life. I am. I'm glad they were coming to spend time with you."

"I think they were worried about me being alone."

"Yes. They clearly know you better than I did. I didn't know enough to be worried. Now I know, and I will not leave you alone like that ever again."

"That sounds very good.."

"I love you too much to risk you hurting yourself again."

Ilya looked confused. "But I did not hurt to myself. Doesn't that mean doing to myself harmful things?"

"Yes, but not taking good care of yourself is also a kind of hurting yourself. You do know that you need food and water and sleep to be healthy, yes?"

"Yes. I see what you are saying. That is why I called your mom. Because I knew I was not good anymore."

"And I'm so glad you did. So glad. You could have called me, too, and I could have driven here overnight."

"You would not have answered."

"Fair. That's fair. Well, I wish my parents had called me while you were at their place. I could have come and gone home with you."

"Hmm. Perhaps they should have, but I didn't want them to."

"Right. Because I was being an asshole. I'm going to get them to announce it at the start of the first game next season. "Everybody, welcome Shane Hollander, who is an asshole!"

Ilya laughed quietly against Shane's side, and it made Shane feel warm and relieved all the way through. Ilya's capacity for happiness was still alive inside him somewhere. Shane hadn't managed to entirely kill it with his negligence. The two of them would nurture it back to full strength together by the end of the summer.

In the morning, Shane brought Ilya breakfast in bed, oatmeal with blueberries and walnuts and honey along with hot tea with cream and sugar. Shortly after Ilya finished eating, the team doctor arrived. Shane saw his car pull up and went to meet him outside.

"Doctor?"

"That's me. You can call me Terry."

“Terry. Nice to meet you but I have a question for you. How could you have let him play?”

“I’m not sure what you mean. I know Rozanov wasn’t having a great time this season, but I was keeping an eye on him. Regular bloodwork. Weigh-ins. The usual.”

“And those things told you he was healthy enough to play? The way he was when I got here yesterday, a hard hit would have almost killed him.”

“No, he’s strong.”

“Right. He’s still alive because of that strength but it’s no thanks to you.”

“Wow. Tell me how you really feel.”

“I’m trying to keep this as civil as I can because I know we need to be able to work together next season.”

“Oh right, I did hear that. Big news.”

“Yeah. For now, can you come in and examine Ilya to see if he should really be in the hospital right now? I don’t want to risk not getting him the support he needs. If you have any doubt, I want you to tell me to take him in.”

“Got it.” The doctor nodded and walked toward the front door, so Shane hurried to let him in and lead the way up the stairs to the bedroom. He turned on the lights so that the doctor could see what we was doing and then woke up Ilya. “Hey, the doc’s here. Is it okay if I stay while he checks you out?”

Ilya nodded, so Shane sat down on the other side of the bed, ready to help if needed.

“Hey, Ilya, just stay where you are right now. I’m going to get your vitals, and then I’ll take a few tubes of blood.”

Ilya groaned at that, and the doctor nodded at him. “It’s okay, I remember you have a hard time with blood draws. Good news is you’re already lying down, so I don’t see you passing out.

“Passing out?” Shane hissed.

They looked up at him. “Yeah, some guys have a really hard time with having blood drawn and get woozy or even pass out. It’s not that uncommon even with big, strong hockey men. Ilya gave me a heads up that that has happened to him before.

Shane patted Ilya‘s arm. “You’ll be okay. I’m not going anywhere.” Shane was going to say that last part as many times as he had to until Ilya knew it without him saying it.

“Good. Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure. Okay?”

Ilya nodded, and Shane saw a small smirk on his lips as well.

“Okay, Ilya. Vitals are all good. Can you take your arm out from under the covers?” Terry patted the arm closest to himself, and Ilya extracted it from under the blankets and comforter. Shane hoped he wouldn’t get too cold.

Within a couple of minutes, Terry had blood flowing from Ilya’s arm into a series of plastic tubes, which he tucked away into his bag. When he was done, he put a bandage on Ilya’s arm and tucked it back under the covers. Shane forgave him a little bit for that.

“Okay,Ilya, can you sit up for a minute? I want to listen to your heart and breathing .”

Shane helped Ilya sit up and pulled him forward to rest against Shane’s chest. He did t seem strong enough to hold himself up long enough for the doctor’s testing. Shane held his hand flat against the bare skin of Ilya’s lower back while the doctor coached him through deep inhales and exhales. As soon as the doctor said they were done, Shane helped Ilya back down and covered him up “you doing okay?”

“If I say no. You get rid of him?”

“Nope, sorry.”

“It’s okay, we’re almost done. Ilya, I think you’re going to need some time to build your strength back up. When you come back in the fall, I want to see you weighing as much as you did this past fall. Last time we checked, you were down about 15 pounds. That’s not great on a guy your size.”

Shane seethed that the doctor hadn’t done anything at that point, not even benching Ilya to keep him safe and to make a point to him that what was going on was serious.

“Otherwise, you seem stable right now. Do you think you could give me a urine sample?”

Ilya nodded, so Shane stood up and walked around the bed to help Ilya to the bathroom. He took the sample cup and the bag to put it in from the doctor then kept a hand on Ilya as they walked to the en suite. Ilya struggled to lean over to hold the cup without toppling over, so Shane did it for him then carried the cup in its bag to the doctor. “Thanks for being so thorough,” he murmured to the man, who somberly nodded in response.

Once Ilya was back under the covers again, Shane followed the doctor out of the room and down the stairs. “What do you think?” Shane asked, once they were standing by the front door.

“Honestly, I was afraid he would be much worse. Unless the lab work tells me something pretty bad, I think he’s safe to recover here at home.”

“Okay. You’ll let us know about the lab results?”

“I will. It might take a couple of days.”

“I get it. I’m just worried about him.”

“I can see why. He’s not in great shape, but I do think he’s stable. You’re welcome to call me directly anytime if he seems to get worse. I live pretty close by." The doctor handed Shane his business card, and Shane tucked it in his shirt pocket, grateful for the offer.

“Okay. Thanks for coming out. I really appreciate your time.”

“Not a problem. Take care of him, right?”

“Absolutely. I’ll see you in the fall if not before.”

“Great. Take care of yourself, too. I don’t want to have to bench either of you.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Shane watched as the doctor got in his car, and then he went back inside to check on Ilya. First, he stuck the business card on the fridge using a magnet. Then, he walked upstairs to the bedroom.

Ilya looked vulnerable and pale in the bed, so Shane stripped down and climbed in with him right away. “You feeling okay? Dizzy or anything?”

“No, I’m okay. Glad you are here.”

“Me too.” Shane rolled closer and pulled Ilya as close as he could get him, almost merging their bodies together. In the warmth under the covers. Ilya hummed with contentment and fell back to sleep, his head heavy on Shane’s arm.

That evening,Ilya’s phone rang, and Shane listened as he answered. “Hello?”

“Oh yes, thank you. Yes, you have my permission to talk to Shane. Should I get him for you?”

Shane tapped Ilya on the shoulder to let him know he was there, and Ilya handed over his phone. “Hello?”

“Shane. This is Terry. I have Ilya’s lab results, and he told me I could share that information with you.”

“Okay, great. What did you find?”

“I think that if we’d run these tests a few days ago. I would have been putting him in the hospital. But just, I think it’s all improving where it needs to.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, his blood sugar is a little low but I’m guessing it was lower before you and your parents started feeding him. Same with hydration. Nothing at all was dire. It’s all going to resolve itself with a few weeks or months of healthy living. It’s all good news, Shane.”

“Wonderful. Thank you. Seriously. Any recommendations?”

“Get a supply of Gatorade and give him a lot of that to drink. Not too much caffeine. His heart doesn’t need that.”

“His heart? So no Cokes then?”

“One or two sodas a day is fine. His heart isn’t bad I think he just overworked it and leaned a little too heavily on caffeine to make it through the days for a while.”

“Okay. Thanks for the advice.”

“That’s my job, yeah?. Just to reiterate, you are welcome to call me if you have a specific concern. I’m also going to send a report to Ilya’s primary care doc of record, so you can also get him an appointment there if you want to keep an eye on his progress.”

“That’s not a bad idea. Thanks, man.”

“Just take care of him and yourself, and I’ll see you in August. Right?”

“Right. Will do. Have a good summer.”

“You guys, too!”

Shane hung up and took Ilya’s phone back to him.

“What’d the doc say?” Ilya asked before Shane could leave him to sleep some more.

“You’re doing okay. He said if he’d done the tests a few days ago he thinks we might have been sending you to the hospital.”

“Ouch. But not now?”

“Nope. You get to stay here and let me take care of you.”

“Hm.” Ilya shrugged one shoulder. “I can deal with that.”

“I sure hope so. How do you feel about dinner?”

“Eh, I don’t really care either way.”

“Well, you can either come down and eat a decent dinner or I can bring up a protein shake for you to have here. Up to you, but you’re getting one or the other.”

“I’ll come down. You think we can do it without your dad?”

“I do. No problem.”

“Okay. Then let’s do it so we can have some couch time after dinner.”

Shane helped Ilya up, and they walked together to the top of the stairs. Ilya looked down and shivered a little, “maybe I should sit down. Go down that way.”

“I think we can keep you on your feet. Do you want me next to you steadying you? Or do you want me to go down backwards again so you can lean forward on me?

“Um. As long as you feel safe, maybe you can go down backwards ?”

“Sure thing but listen, if you feel dizzy or woozy at any point, you’ve got to stop and sit down right where you are. I don’t know if I can catch us both if you fall and tip us both over.

“Oh, that sounds terrible. No, I’ll sit down if I feel bad. I promise.”

“Good.” Shane took a step down and got in position facing Ilya, who leaned forward and looped his arms around Shane’s shoulders. Shane put one hand on the railing to help stabilize them and put his other hand in Ilya’s waist. “You ready?”

“Uh-huh.” Shane took a careful step back and down and felt Ilya follow him. When he was sure they were both steady, he took another step. It took them a few minutes, but they made it safely to the bottom of the steps, where they both sighed in relief and hugged each other tightly.

“Okay,” Shane said. “Dinner.”

“Yes, something smells really good.”

“It’s chicken and dumplings in the crock pot. One of my American friends gave me the recipe.”

“Sounds very good.”

“I hope it is. You want a Coke or water to drink?

“A Coke would be great.”

“Sure thing.”Shane got a cold bottle from the fridge, cracked it open, and set it in front of Ilya’s place at the table.

“Hey, by the way, who is your regular primary care doctor?”

“I go to a practice that’s really close to here. I’ll text you the information. Why?”

“Terry suggested you might want to follow up with them to check your progress. Maybe we can go soon and then make an appointment for part way through the summer just to check on things so we know we’re getting you healthy in time for next season?”

“That makes sense. Sure. Yes, I’ve got to be ready to play.”

“Just so you know, if you’re not able to be ready, it’ll be okay. I’ll take care of things.”

“Um, I don’t think I’d really be okay with that. I need to play.”

“Well, we’ll do our best. You know what your job is?”

“Rest, I guess. Eat healthy?”

“Yep. Stay hydrated. Get light exercise. Light! Like walking and playing in the lake. No running. No weight room right away.”

“Damn, seriously? You gonna let me go so far as to fuck you?”

“Oh definitely. Definitely that.”

“So at least I’ll be good for something,” Ilya said bitterly.

Shane looked steadily at Ilya and made sure Ilya was looking back at him. “I need you to understand that you are valued for things other than your skills at hockey and at sex. You’re really good at both, and I get that they’ve been a big part of your self image for a long, long time. But there’s more to you, and I know it. You’re a good person, and I love you for who you are inside, not just the hockey phenom or the sex god. Okay?”

“Sex god? I like this phrase.”

“You would. But do you hear what I’m trying to say?”

Ilya hesitated for a moment then nodded slowly. “I hear. I understand, Shane. And I thank you for kind words.”

“I should have told you this before. I want you to know that if you decided to retire or didn’t have a choice about it, nothing else would change. We would still be us. We would keep living the same. Our plans would stay the same. We don’t need hockey nearly as much as we need each other.

“Yes, I understand this. Very good to hear. Thank you. I don’t expect to retire for long time.”

“Me either. I want some solid years playing on a team with you before we both retire together.”

“And we walk off rink hand in hand and finally everyone knows.”

“That’s one way to do it. Certainly would be satisfying!”

“Yes. But I can satisfy you long before that time.”

“I’m sure you can and will. Let’s go sit on the couch?”

Shane sat down first in the middle of the couch, then Ilya came and draped himself over Shane’s lap like a dog that thought it was smaller than it actually was. Shane put his hands on Ilya, one in his hair and one on the upturned curve of his hip, and began to pet him soothingly. This new ritual was relaxing to both of them, affirming their love, affirming each other’s presence. As they continued, Shane felt his heart rate slow and his breathing deepen. He hoped it was having similarly healthy effects for Ilya. This was the reason he wanted to spend all summer with his hands on his boyfriend, whether it was in bed or on the new chaise lounge or by the fire pit or in the water The contact was healing for them both, and they both

had a lot of healing to do. That thought reminded Shane that he needed to do some research to find his own therapist so he could get to work on himself. He didn't like the prospect of explaining to a stranger the choices he had made and what they had done to the man he loved, but he knew it needed to be done. He owed it to Ilya to make sure it never happened again.

The next week, they went together to see Ilya's therapist, Galina. Shane was pleased that Ilya asked him to join in the appointment It seemed very intimate, and Shane was honored to be included.

Galina nodded politely at both of them as they walked into her office. Ilya sat down across from her and almost immediately folded in on himself, looking down at his hands.

."Ilya, I'm so glad to see that you're looking better than you were that last time we met."

That set off an alarm bell in Shane's mind, and he couldn't resist speaking up . "Excuse me, does that mean that you had an appointment with Ilya recently while he was not doing well?"

"Yes. We had a productive discussion, and I felt that Ilya would be able to care for himself after the session."

"So, you didn't consider getting help for him? Possibly hospitalization?"

"I didn't expect that Ilya would consent to that, and I didn't want to harm our therapeutic relationship."

"Oh,I see. Your relationship was more important than Ilya's well-being. His life, even."

"Not at all. If I had felt it at all likely that my patient's life was at risk I would not have accepted him leaving here to go home on his own."

Ilya lifted his head then. "You would have what? Called the police on me?"

"Only as an absolute last resort. First, I would have called your emergency contact. Who is here now." She gestured at Shane. "If I had called you, Mr. Hollander, what would you have done.?"

"I would have driven in to be with Ilya right away. That night."

"Did Ilya himself try to contact you at any point."

Shane found himself wishing he hadn't gotten himself into this conversation. "Yes, he called me. I don't know about that day. But he called me quite a few times."

"And you didn't answer."

"I did not. I made so many mistakes. I should gave been here. I'm just frustrated that there are people who were here and who saw that Ilya needed help. Professionals who should have known. And nobody made him get the help he needed."

"Who are you talking about other than myself?"

“The team doctor. He came out to do a quick check up last week, and he admitted to me that he’s been very concerned about Ilya’s health but he didn’t step in.”

“Yes. And neither did I. I’m sorry that the physicians in Ilya’s life failed him when he needed our help. Can I ask what the results were of that check-up last week?

“Oh,” Ilya said, looking up again, “I’m going to be fine. I need to eat and sleep and drink things that are not vodka or coffee, but I will regain my strength.”

“That’s good news. How much alcohol had you been drinking?”

“Um, too much.”

“About how many shots per day or per week?”

“”Per day, I guess at least two or three. Some days a lot more than that.”

“But you were still functioning?”

“Sort of. I called Shane’s mom from the bathroom floor because I’d had too much to drink.”

“Okay. What happened then?”

“She invited me over to her house, and Shane’s parents took care of me. They stayed with me until they got Shane to come back.”

“I’m so glad to hear that they helped you,” Galina replied. “But the drinking is not a good idea, Ilya. First off, alcohol is a depressant, and you don’t need that. Also, it can mess with your sleep and make it harder for you to take care of yourself adequately.”

Ilya nodded glumly in response.

“Also, I need to ask you, other than the drinking and the lack of self-care, did you do anything to hurt yourself or think seriously about doing that?”

“No. No, I did not do or consider anything like that. I did—I did have some thoughts that I didn’t like though.”

“What kind of thoughts? And Ilya it’s okay if you want to ask Shane to step out of the room for this.”

Ilya shook his head and glanced over at Shane before looking back at Galina. “I had thoughts like, what if I were to crash my car in the snow? And what if the cold were to just take me? Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.”

Shane felt a sick jolt of panic and reached out to make contact with Ilya. He worked his fingers in between Ilya’s to hold his hand and felt that even here in this heated office his hand felt colder than Shane would have expected. “That would be terrible,” he whispered urgently to Ilya.

“I’m sure those were very troubling thoughts, Ilya, but I’m glad to hear you weren’t actually wanting to purposely hurt yourself.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that to Shane or his parents. Or to the fans. The children!

“Yes, quite a lot of people would be impacted if you were to hurt yourself. It’s always good to keep that in mind if you experience troubling thoughts. Will you tell me what you’re thinking about the children?”

“Well, I understand that some of them look up to me and want to be like me, which is very strange to me. If I were to do something awful, maybe they would want to do it as well to be like me? That is not something I can allow to happen. People would say long afterwards, ‘Oh, Rozanov! That sad Russian bastard who convinced those little boys to hurt themselves!,’ No, I don’t want that for a legacy.

Shane squeezed Ilya’s hand. “Hey, how about instead of thinking about your legacy, you think about your life ? Which is going to be with me.

“I hear you Shane. It’s just that when I was feeling like I had nothing in my life, at least it was good to imagine leaving a positive legacy.”

“You have a lot more than nothing. You always did.”

“Sure. I am sure that seems true from the outside. From inside my mind, is not so true.”

“I’m sorry. Hey, Ilya, if you want to speak Russian with Galina, I can go take a walk and won’t be offended. I know it’s easier for you to communicate that way.”

“I think that’s a good idea,” Galina replied, ”Thank you, Shane.”

“Will one of you call me if you want me back here before the end of the session? Otherwise I’ll be in the waiting room by two. Yeah?” Shane stood, waiting for one of them to say they would call. He didn’t feel good about leaving Ilya without that reassurance.

“We will call if we need you,” Galina said finally. “Yes, Ilya ?”

“Yes,” Ilya responded, looking over at Shane with a nod and a tiny smile.”

“Okay. I’ll be nearby. I promise. I love you.”

“I love you too, Ilya replied, and Shane didn’t in any way want to leave, but he had made the offer in the first place. He let himself out of the office into the empty waiting room then hesitated there for a few minutes before exiting to the hallway. Outside, Shane zipped his jacket against the chill and started walking. He compulsively checked his phone every couple of minutes to make sure he hadn’t missed a call, but no call came through. Shane hoped that was a good thing. When he got back to the warm waiting room, Shane could hear only very low voices through the office door. He thought about knocking then decided to just sit and wait for the session to be finished. Ilya looked red around the eyes when he walked out into the waiting room, and Shane immediately pulled him into a hug. “Hey,” he asked Ilya quietly, “do you mind if I ask her a question? Not about you. Just a general question?” Ilya shook his

head against Shane's shoulder, and as they stepped apart from each other, Shane kept a hand on Ilya's arm while he leaned back into the office.

"Excuse me, would you be able to refer me to a therapist for myself? I obviously need somebody who would be completely discreet and trustworthy."

"Yes, ah, let me think a moment. I do think that's an excellent idea. Do you prefer to talk to a man or a woman? "A man , I think, as long as he's not homophobic."

"Yes, of course. Here is someone for you to call." Galina walked over and handed Shane a business card.

"Thank you so much. And thank you for helping Ilya. I didn't mean to be coming for you so much at the beginning of the session. I'm sure you did what was correct in your professional experience. I just worry."

"Yes, thank you. I understand." She looked at Ilya then. "Please be well and make sure you call me if you need me. I can do a phone or Zoom appointment if you can't get to the office." Ilya replied to her briefly in Russian then turned to leave, tugging Shane with him where they were connected.

They were halfway home from the appointment when Ilya spoke up from the passenger seat. "So why do you prefer a man?

"Um. Huh?"

" For therapist. You said you would prefer a man."

"Oh, right, I guess I'm just more comfortable dealing with men in general. I've mostly been around men since forever, and I feel like they're more straightforward."

"Except when they are not straight, of course."

"Of course. But I only want to talk to the therapist. It doesn't matter to me if he's gay or straight or whatever. Just as long as he doesn't hate me for loving you. Because I do. So much. With all I am."

"Yes, me too. I am the same for you." Ilya sounded like he was on the verge of tears, and Shane couldn't take it, so he pulled into the first parking lot he came across and parked in the back away from other cars. When he turned toward Ilya and opened his arms, he quickly found himself with arms full of a sniffling Ilya who was clinging to him tightly. "Hey, hey," Shane said as soothingly as he could manage, "we're okay here. Everything is okay. We're just going home together. Unless you don't want to go there. We could go see my mom if that would be better. Do you want her instead of me? We could get my dad there, too, if that's what you need."

"No," Ilya said in a rough, quiet voice. "But I need you. I only need you. I will be okay."

Shane hugged him tight. "And that's all I want. For you to be okay. Physically and mentally. All the way okay.

“I will be. Can I ask why you want to see a therapist anyway?”

“Well,there’s clearly something wrong with me. I made plans for you and me together, and then I fucked it all up. I did this to you, and I need to make sure I fix things so it never happens again. It might kill both of us, and I’m not okay with that .

“No, of course not. You are stronger man than me. You would never fall asleep wishing you could just never wake up, dead in the snow on the side of the road.”

Shane gave Ilya another squeeze. “You’re right, I would never. But not because I’m better than you. You inherited a mental illness. I did not, as far as I know. That is simply my luck, not anything negative about your character.”

“I try to believe that, but it is very American and Canadian, so different from what I was raised to believe. I see it as a terrible fault and weakness in myself.

“If I were sad and struggling because I had inherited an illness from my mom or dad, would you think I was weak and terrible?

“No. I would think you were so strong for getting through the days anyway.”

“And that’s how I feel about you. You are so strong to have survived this far. And I’m so glad you have because you are so important to me. I love you so much.”

“I love you too. Perhaps too much. Perhaps I don’t know how to keep going without you.”

“That’s why it’s my job to make sure you never have to be without me again.

“You’ll die someday.”

“Right. But we’re the same damn age, Ilya. Neither of us should be left behind for very long. And if something happens to me while I am young, my parents will be there for you, and if that happened they would need you too, so much. “

Shane continued, “Sometimes I think back to the conversation we had years ago about adoption. Maybe you need somebody other than me to love and who will love you too and need you, too.”

Ilya sighed. “Yes, maybe. I will think about it when my head is better.”

“Good. Okay. I liked that plan, you know?”

“I know. Your heart is so generous, Shane.”

“That’s very kind of you to say. Okay, you ready to go home now?

“Yes. I am sorry for delaying us with my soft emotions.”

“No need for apologies. I am here to love you and all of your soft emotions.”

“I am very lucky,” Ilya said as he turned to reattach his seatbelt.

Shane knew he was the lucky one, that he hadn’t finally come back to Ilya only to find him dead in the house, his mind and body pushed too far finally. He wouldn’t have even had to take a razor to himself or anything else purposeful. He could have fainted and fallen down the stairs or choked on this own vomit, many ways his weakened body could have succumbed. Shane imagined that happening, imagined calling his parents to come help him, and he knew that he never would have been okay again.

Before putting the car in reverse, Shane turned to look at Ilya and took his hand. “Thank you,” he said. When Ilya looked confused, he explained. “Thank you for being so strong. Thank you for staying alive. Thank you for waiting long enough for me to get here. I know it wasn’t easy for you.”

“Thank you for coming back. I don’t understand yet what the struggle was for you, but thank you for being strong enough to come to me anyway. I know things were hard for you when you were young, so thank you for surviving that so we could meet all those years ago. “

“Oh, well, you’re very, very welcome. You survived so much, too. To make it to that rink in Saskatchewan and all the rinks after that.”

Ilya nodded. “We are good, strong men. Perhaps you are right that we should make more of a family.”

“We can talk about it whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you,” Ilya said as Shane pulled out of the parking space toward home.

“The only thanks i ever want is you warm in my arms at night.”

“i am very agreeable to that. Maybe we lay on the sofa for a while since it’s too early for bed?”

“No such thing. We can go to bed whenever we want. Who do you think is making rules for us?”

“True, true,” Ilya agreed readily.

Inside the foyer, they both turned to look into the living room at the deep sofa. Then, they took each other’s hands and walked up the stairs together. They got undressed across from each other, and if Ilya still looked too thin to Shane he was already better than he had been. Ilya didn’t seem like a man built to be especially slender, so Shane was sure the flesh would find its way onto his beautiful body again. He’d make sure of it this summer.

“Hey,” Ilya said, holding up a hand after Shane pulled off his shirt.

“What?

“Is that a scar on your side? A new scar I didn’t know about?”

Shane unconsciously moved his hand to cover it. “Um. I guess. Yeah.”

“You will please tell me now what happened.”

.” It wasn’t a really big deal. I just got appendicitis in the middle of the season and had to have it taken out.”

“Shane? But that can be serious.”

“Sure, but I got it taken care of right away. I was having trouble in practice, and then they figured out I had a fever. After the doc pressed on my belly to make me scream, he had an idea what was wrong and took me to the ER. Hayden went with me and stayed until they released me.”

“And your parents?”

“They came to see me, but I didn’t need them to stay. I had Hayden and JJ. I mean, it sucked, but I was fine.”

“Huh. I still feel like you should have called me. Gave me the opportunity to be there for you too. You’d rather have Pike than me?”

“Nope. Not in any circumstance. But the thing is that I didn’t deserve to have you there for me. I wasn’t going to see you, wasn’t taking your calls, how could I tell you I needed you to come to me? I didn’t have the right.”

“”Fucking Hayden should have called me or come to get me. He owes us. “

“I made him promise not to reach out to you, and I also told him he owed me. He was ready to go snag you off the ice during a game.”

“I wish he had.”

“In retrospect? I kind of wish he had too. I might have been able to see you needed help and avoided some of this recent drama.”

“So, the moral of the story is that we always have to tell each other things, especially when we need medical help.”

“Yes. Definitely. But we’re both going to be fine. I have a little scar, and I’m down a useless organ. You just need some time to get back to your usual self, and I’m so happy that didn’t come with any new scars for you.”

“I wouldn’t,” Ilya insisted.”

“I know, baby. And I’m grateful for that. In any case, next year it’s not going to matter at all that I had my appendix out or that you—“

“Had a major depressive episode?”

“Had a really tough late fall. We’ll both be right here and just fine and playing our hearts out together trying to win the cup.”

“Yes yes to all of that. But I still never again want to hear that you had surgery without me knowing or being able to be there.”

“understood. And I would want you there, too. It wasn’t a lot of fun.”

“No, I bet not. One of my housemates got appendicitis when I was a rookie , and when he wasn’t puking he was crying. And he was a tough guy. Latvian. They’re not allowed to cry any more than Russian men are.”

“Yeah, Hayden had to mop me up off the floor a couple of times. But listen, I don’t care where you were born or how much of a man you are, if you need to cry I want you to know you can always bring that to me. I will never shame you for your feelings.”

“Oh no, you would never. I know that.”

“Good. Ready to get in bed?”

“I’m just going to brush my teeth. I’ll be right back. You go ahead and get under the covers.”

Shane did just that, enjoying the slide of the expensive sheets on his skin. Then the bed dipped, and Shane opened his eyes to see Ilya slipping under the covers with him. Shane moved himself closer to the middle of the bed and was ready when Ilya rolled back toward him. Ilya was warm and solid in his arms, and breathing in the scent of his shampoo and his skin at the back of his neck was better than any sleeping pill Shane could imagine. He tangled their legs together, enjoying the slight masculine tug of leg hair against leg hair.

He wrapped his arms around Ilya’s torso to pull him impossibly closer. “Is this okay?” He asked into Ilya’s hair

“This is exactly what I need. This is everything. This is perfect.”

“Good. Stay in my arms all night then.”

Ilya wiggled hip hips slightly against Shane. “Gladly,” he said. “All night sounds good.”

Shane knew they’d wake up separated. They always did, but it didn’t have to be permanent. They had each new night to come back together again. Shane had just forgotten that for a while. And maybe Ilya had too.

The next day, Shane called the therapist Galina had recommended. The first thing he asked was, “Can you assure me of your absolute discretion?”

“Well, yes, of course. That’s my job.”

“I know it’s your job. What I’m asking is if you as a person can promise me as a person that what I share with you will never get shared by you. Not with your partner at home, not with your family, your best friend, whatever.”

“What are we talking about about here? State secrets? I don’t have a security clearance for that.”

“No, just personal business, but for me and for someone I care about they might as well be state secrets. Real damage could be done if information gets out when it shouldn’t.”

“Wow. Okay, I can absolutely promise you my discretion. I have never betrayed a client’s privacy.”

“Good. Okay. Would we be able to have a first appointment pretty soon?”

“Yes. If you are available, i have an opening at 2 pm tomorrow and for Tuesdays into the foreseeable future.”

“Great. That works for me.”

“I’ll put you down for it. Can you give me your name and also a general idea of what we’ll be working on?

“Does that promise of discretion start now?”

“Yes, certainly.”

“Okay, my name is Shane Hollander. Do you need me to spell it?”

“No, I can spell it. But oh, I’m starting to understand now.”

“Good okay. What we need to work on is that recently I made some bad decisions that made no sense at all, and they really hurt my, ah, boyfriend. Fiancé, really,”

“Oh! Okay, I get it now.”

“I imagine you do. “Does any of this make you not want to work with me?”

“What? No, of course not. It sounds very normal to me. Can I expect you on Tuesday at two?”

.”Yes. Yes, please. I’ll be there. I have your business card. Are you still at this address on 15th?

“That’s me. I look forward to meeting you.”

“Same here. Thank you!”

Shane hung up, pleased that he’d been able to take this step toward making sure that nothing like this whole mess ever happened again.

When the day and time of his appointment arrived, Shane walked into the small, older office building, feeling ridiculously nervous considering that he’d only be talking. He had a brief

wait in an empty waiting room, then shortly after a woman exited the inner office and left, a slim man around Shane's age stepped from the office into the waiting area. "Shane?"

"That's me. My turn, doctor?"

"Yes. Come on in, and please call me Theo."

"Cool okay." Shane stood and followed Theo into a small but pleasantly airy office with a view of the parking lot and also of a faraway park. Seeing the trees was nice.

"So, I have to tell you I've never done this."

"This?"

"You know, going to a therapist. A psychologist, whatever. At least for personal reasons. The teams usually have a sports psychologist we meet with but it's not the same."

"No. Do you mind telling me how you found me?"

"Oh, I was referred by my partner's therapist. I actually don't know her last name, but her first name is Galina, and she's Russian.

"Right. Thank you. Can you tell me about your partner?

"Sure. Though that gets to be kind of a lot really quickly. I don't know how much you know about me, but are you aware of the longtime rivalry I'm supposed to have with Ilya Rozanov?

Theo chuckled quietly. "I am the most casual of hockey fans, and even I know about that. Is that causing problems for your relationship?"

"No. The thing is that back when we were both still teenagers, Ilya and I began a sexual relationship that continued sporadically for many years."

"Oh wow. You're right. That's a lot. Can I ask. Was it consensual?

"Oh yes. Very much so. Eventually, we developed serious feelings for each other. Publicly we are friends now, but we're also in a real relationship and plan to marry one day. I came up with a plan for him to move from Boston to Ottawa so that we'd be able to see each other more, and we could work on our charity and our hockey camps."

"I know people who have worked for organizations that benefited from your charity."

"Really? That's great to hear. I don't know if you paid any attention when we announced the formation of the charity, but it was inspired by Ilya's mother who died by suicide when he was a child, after years of dealing with untreated depression."

"Oh, how sad. and he is seeing Galina so perhaps he has inherited something from his mother."

“It’s extremely important that this stay between us, but yes. He deals with serious depression. When I basically abandoned him this fall, he fell into a major episode that impacted his physical health as well. I’m serious, I’d rather you tell someone I’m gay rather than anything about Ilya’s health situation. It’s that private.

“Understood. None of it is going to go beyond this room. Tell me more about what happened this fall?”

Shane paused then sighed. “I’m just so upset with myself. I hate what I did or failed to do, and I’m sure you’re going to think I’m a total piece of crap once you have the details.”

“If I did, that would be my problem to deal with. You came here to work on this, so we should probably get to work.

“Yeah, okay.” Shane nodded. “So, I came up with the whole plan last summer while we were spending some time at my lake house. I love it there so much. I call it my cottage. Ilya wasn’t going to make the trip there, but then Scott hunter did what he did, and Ilya changed his mind. Theo nodded that he knew what Shane was talking about, so Shane continued. Um, anyway, I was supposed to be driving in from Montreal regularly to stay with Ilya. But then, once my season got going. I just didn’t feel like making the drive. So I didn’t. And I didn’t feel like answering the phone when he called, so I didn’t. I wasn’t aware that there was a major problem until my parents called me. They live in this area, too, and Ilya had reached out to them. I’m so grateful that he did. It might have saved his life, seriously. They took care of him for a couple of days until I could get here. He’d lost a lot of weight, dehydrated, ,drinking too much vodka and not enough anything else. And he was still actively playing a dangerous sport. It could have gone really badly. “

“Wow,that sounds really hard.”

“Yeah, for him it was. He left his team and everyone he knew in Boston. He did it for me. For me! And what did I do? Leave him to die.”

“Shane, I don’t think it helps to frame the situation quite that dramatically. Try to dial it back a little and see if it helps you be able to think about this without hating yourself so much. If we go from hurting your partner to hurting you, that’s not really progress.”

“Yeah, okay. What did I do? I left him to fend for himself emotionally in a new city in a new country. I didn’t even check on him or ask my parents to do so.”

“It sounds like you’re very close with your parents?”

“Yes. I am, I guess. They’re really good people. They did everything for me, and now they love Ilya too.”

“I’m glad to hear that. No family problems with your sexuality?”

“No, not at all. We had a big discussion about it this past summer, and we’re all good.”

“That’s great. So what happened with your parents and Ilya recently?”

“Well, he called my mom because he was feeling so bad that I think he was scared. They had him over for dinner, and they could clearly tell he was barely hanging on. They had him stay overnight. And once he went home one of them was always staying with him. Making sure he ate and whatnot.”

“Im glad they were able to do that.”

“Oh yeah, me too. Otherwise, by the time I got here and got inside the house I probably would’ve found the desiccated husk that was formerly Ilya Rozanov.

“Oh no. Well, that didn’t happen, right?”

“No, he’s improved a lot in the last couple of weeks. I think he’s feeling a lot better, and we still have through the end of summer to get him back up to full strength.”

“Okay, that sounds reasonable. Do you think he needs any kind of inpatient care?”

“No, not now. I really did right after I got here, but a couple of different kinds of doctors have told me he’s safe and on the mend.”

“Good. That’s good. So maybe you can give yourself a little bit of a break? Nobody died. Things really sucked for a while, but now they’re better.”

“Yeah, true, but that feels like a technicality. Maybe I don’t deserve a break on this. I know my parents are disappointed that I treated Ilya the way I did. I just don’t know why I would do that. Not taking or returning his calls. That was especially low, I think. If I had just stayed in touch, I could have known he needed help before things got so bad.”

“Yes, maybe.

“Definitely.”

“I know I don’t know you well yet, Shane, and I don’t know everything about this situation, but here’s what I’m thinking. I think that you pulled back from Ilya to protect yourself. I think you weren’t engaging with him because on some level it didn’t feel safe to do so. I think you did your best in a tough situation. I think our job here in this room is to figure out what felt so unsafe to your brain.”

“Ilya would never be unsafe for me. He is my safety. And my comfort.

“That sounds good. We need some time, but we can figure this out. You said that your choices didn’t make any sense to you, but it’s very likely that there was a solid logic behind them. We just need to work out what that was.”

Shane shook his head, feeling stubborn and contrary. Theo would have to go a pretty long way to convince Shane his theory was correct. “Okay,” he said. “I’m going to do my best for now to trust that you know what you’re talking about.”

“Thanks a lot for that. Are you going to be able to make it to appointments weekly? If so, I’d be happy to give you this time slot every week .”

“For the next couple of months, I’ll be in town, and I’ll take the time slot. In maybe June, we’ll head to my cottage, so I won’t be able to make it here”

“We could continue with virtual sessions over the phone or laptop as long as you have a mic and camera. I think that would be an excellent idea as long as you can have some privacy there. We can keep the time slot the same if that works for you.”

“Sure. Sure. Thanks for being flexible and understanding of my situation. “

“I want to help you, Shane. You seem like a good guy, and you and Ilya both deserve to be happy without all this drama.”

“Thanks, man. That means a lot. The only drama I want to cause is the kind that stays on the ice.”

They both laughed at that, then Shane paid for his session and left.

At home, Shane found Ilya sitting at the kitchen table with a bowl of the leftover chicken and dumplings. The dish had turned out well, if a little peppery for Shane’s preference. The dumplings had been soft and wonderful, the chicken tender. Overall, the dish was both hearty and easy to eat, which felt like a big win for getting calories and nutrients into Ilya, and Shane thought he’d make it again just with less black pepper. Shane was glad to see Ilya eating more of it without prompting.

“There’s a lot more of this if you want it.”

“Thanks. I’ll heat some up and eat with you if that’s okay.”

“Of course it is. Please do. How was your appointment?

“Pretty good, I think. We have a lot to figure out together but I liked him well enough.”

“Good! Is he a hockey fan?”

“Only a real, real casual one. When I mentioned Scott Hunter and what he did, Theo knew what I was talking about. Beyond that? I don’t think he’s up on the trades and all that.”

“Okay. Just as well. Anyway. I think that anyone who wasn’t living under a rock knows what Scott Hunter did. It was kind of a big deal, even to people who aren’t queer hockey players.”

“Yeah, kind of the biggest thing to happen in hockey during our careers.”

“We’re going to have to top him before we get out.”

“Topping Scott Hunter!” Shane laughed at the idea. He could certainly imagine being folded in half and topped BY Scott Hunter, but he didn’t need that when he had Ilya in his life. He couldn’t really imagine either of them actually topping the big man. Though Shane guessed that if Scott asked very nicely he’d be able to think about Ilya for long enough to get the job done. Well, that was never going to happen.”

“Do I want to know the whole horny thought process that just went through your mind?” Ilya asked, smirking.

“No, definitely not. I don’t even want to know, and they were my thoughts unfortunately.”

“Uh-huh . I’ll tell Hunter the next time I see him that you’re up for giving him a good ramrod session.”

“I am not! You know what I prefer.”

“I sure do, and what I prefer is giving it to you.”

“Yes, please. “ Shane grinned and slid his foot out to bump against Ilya’s. It had been kind of a long time, which was completely Shane’s fault, and he could really use feeling that close and connected to Ilya for a while.”

“I’ll see what I can do. Maybe I should make some strong coffee so I can stay, um, up. Ilya popped the P at the end, and Shane wanted to lick the sound from his lips.

“Hey, you’re supposed to go kind of easy of the caffeine while you’re recovering.”

“Really? I don’t think anybody told me that.”

“I’m so sorry. Terry told me, and I totally forgot to pass it along. He said that one or two cokes a day is fine but no strong coffee or energy drinks for right now. I guess you pushed your heart pretty hard while it was trying to keep you alive. Too much caffeine might push it too hard, and if you feel bad in that way, I’m 100% calling an ambulance on you, and I know you’d hate that.”

“Yes, I would. I will have to ask the primary care to keep an eye on that too or refer me to someone. Obviously, as an athlete, you know I need my heart to be pumping in peak condition.”

“I do know that. I also know, as the man who loves you, that I need your heart to keep beating just normally for as long as possible. I definitely support asking them for help with that. And we’ll make sure Terry is keeping an eye on it too next season since he’s the one who sees you all the time.

“Right. Sure. Maybe I should get one of those watches that tracks heart rate and all?”

“Yes. Don’t buy one though. It’s almost Christmas after all.”

“Okay, Shane. Will we go to your parents’ house for Christmas?”

“We will. We’ll have a nice meal and then open presents. Mom usually makes the squash stew.”

“Oh yes. Very much yum! Do you think I could bring my friends also to the house?”

“Yes, of course. The more the merrier and all that. Mom said that Tony should be there this year, too. It’s been a while. Do you remember him?”

“Rude little pipsqueak. Shane 2.0.

“Hmm, something like that. He’s been playing in Europe while he works on his masters degree.”

“He didn’t get drafted to MLH?”

“No, despite me and my mom both trying to pull strings behind the scenes.”

“That is shocking. But he’s still playing?”

“Yes, I sent him to school at McGill, and he played on the team there. Now he’s working on some kind of Swedish literature project and playing there, keeping a skate on the ice at least. We might still get him in the league.

“Let me know if there is anything I can do to help.”

“Thanks! I’ll let you know. But let’s figure out something to get him as a present, okay?”

“Sure. I will think about it. What does a young, undrafted hockey player need?”

They looked back and forth at each other then said at the same time, “Money!”

“How about airline gift cards?”

“Excellent idea. I’ll get them and a nice card we can both sign.”

Ilya nodded. “I must go shopping, unfortunately. I need cards too and something for all of my beloved Hollanders.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do any of that if you don’t have the energy.”

“I want to, and I will find the energy. Without too much caffeine, I promise!”

“Good plan. Okay, I’m going up to get ready for bed.”

“Okay. Like, what kind of getting ready?” Ilya lifted his eyebrows suggestively”

“Yes, that. I’ll be waiting for you to, uh, come.” Shane stumbled to a stop, knowing he’d just given Ilya the setup to a joke.

“You better wait!” Ilya said, cracking himself up. Shane could watch him laugh all evening, even if it was at his own expense.

“See you soon,” Shane said before turning and walking out of the room with a little extra switch in his step. He was very pleased to hear Ilya whistle at him as he turned onto the staircase.

In the bathroom, Shane took the time to get himself extra clean He and Ilya usually didn't worry about all that, liking things a little more rough around the edges, but this time Shane wanted things to be as nice as possible with no unwelcome surprises. By the time Ilya came up to the room, Shane was entirely clean and mostly dry, lounging naked on top of the comforter and examining his toes. He was wondering if Svetlana would want to go out for pedicures. Shane thought she would come as long as he treated, which of course he would. He also planned on trying to reimburse both her and Sasha for their plane tickets. After all, it was Shane's fault they needed to come. He planned on getting cash out of the bank so he could at least tuck the money in their suitcases if they didn't want to accept it outright.

Shane tried to be mindful of the fact that most people didn't make the kind of money that male professional athletes in North America take in. Even more, he was in a household with another man making that kind of money, so between them they could easily help out friends.

Shane watched as Ilya walked to the bathroom, and while the shower ran he lay back and began to very, very lightly stroke himself. Without his permission, his thoughts slipped back to when he and Ilya had showered together shortly after Shane had come back. It hadn't been sexy, with Ilya leaning against Shane and the wall because his legs were shaky. He had given in and sat down on the built-in bench seat, but that hadn't lasted long because the tile was too hard under his bony ass. Now, he was confident that Ilya was standing strong and that he'd be able to grab some flesh on that ass in a few moments, even if it wouldn't be as generously curvy as it used to be.

When Ilya came striding out of the bathroom door and straight toward the bed, Shane could see that his hair was still damp, water still beading on his strong shoulders. Ilya knelt at the end of the bed and climbed up to kneel by Shane's hips. When he gently guided Shane's knees up toward his shoulders, Shane sighed in relief at the familiar stretch in his hip flexors. The stretch burned a little as he settled in, but then it mellowed to a warmth that started to spread throughout his body as Ilya stroked broad hands up the backs of Shane's thighs from the bottom of his ass to the backs of his knees. "Come 'ere," Shane moaned. "Closer." He felt the bed move as Ilya walked his knees further up the bed. He felt the head of Ilya's cock glance across the back of his thigh and heard Ilya's breath catch. "Yes, baby. That's what I need. Bring it closer." Shane reached out and was able to put his hands on Ilya's damp shoulders. He traced his fingers over the curve of muscle and down to the armpits then tugged, saying again, "Closer!" In a deep voice that was unfamiliar to his own ears.

Ilya obliged and soon was bent over Shane, pressing a kiss to his lips while he groped to put some lube where it needed to go. "Yesss," Shane sighed, overwhelmingly relieved that his wait was almost over. He reached both his hands to the part of Ilya's back that he could reach, and then he felt the hard press of Ilya's cock right outside his opening. He pushed his hips toward Ilya and bore down, bringing Ilya inside his body in a tight slide of flesh against flesh. "Yes. Yes, baby, you know this is what I need."

"I know. I know just what you need after all this time," Ilya groaned. He leaned his hips against Shane's, resting for just a moment, then pulled back and started thrusting Shane reached down, squeezed both of his hands around the flesh of Ilya's ass, and pulled him in closer. It wasn't quite the large hockey ass that he remembered, but it was getting there. It felt healthy and full, and Shane was so grateful for it.

When Shane let him go, Ilya went back to pounding him, and Shane simply closed his eyes in pleasure and took it, letting Ilya's strength buffet his body into the mattress, rhythmically forcing the air out of his lungs. Shane didn't feel like he needed air if he had this joy and connection with his partner.

With a groan, Ilya paused and let his head hang down between them for a moment. Shane cupped his hand around the back of Ilya's sweaty neck and rubbed gently with his thumb, hoping that they hadn't depleted too much energy that Ilya couldn't afford to burn.

After a short break, Ilya planted his hands next to Shane's shoulders and went back to pounding him, rocking the two of them together with the smack of skin against skin. After he tensed and trembled with his orgasm, Ilya tipped himself to the side and flopped down on the bed next to Shane. When Shane was finished too, he rolled to the side and rested his head on Ilya's chest, feeling the rise and fall of Ilya's breaths under his cheek. When he quieted his own breathing, he could even hear Ilya's strong, precious heart beating inside his chest. He put his hand flat on Ilya's belly and petted lightly through the sweat gathered there. "Thank you, baby."

"Mmmhmm," Ilya hummed in what Shane took to be agreement, and they fell asleep together under the sticky sheets.

The next day, Shane drove to the fancier mall way out in the suburbs. His most important stop was at the Apple Store to get one of those watches for Ilya. They seriously did push their hearts to the edge of endurance during games, and they'd need a way to keep an eye on Ilya's. He got the sales clerk to tell him all about the heart rate functionality. He explained that the watch couldn't check for a heart attack, but it could alert the user to unusual heart rates or unhealthy heartbeat patterns. They sounded useful to Shane.

Even as a very young man with absolutely no health problems of any kind, Shane had found himself dizzy a few times from his heart racing so hard, pounding in his chest. He wasn't sure Ilya was up to that yet, and he might not be there in the fall, but Shane would do his best to support him. While in the Apple Store, Shane also picked up a hefty gift card for Tony, who had always liked gadgets.

Shane knew Ilya usually took his friends to this same mall when they visited, so he went to the high-end department store that anchored the mall and bought gift cards for both Svetlana and Sasha. They both loved fashion so he knew they'd enjoy the gift cards. In the Hallmark store, he picked out greeting cards for the people close to him as well as boxed cards that he could send to his often far-flung hockey friends. He also picked up a Sephora gift card for Hayden to give to Jackie because he did that every year and a build-a-bear gift card for Harden to use for the kids because he'd been doing that every year, too, since the kids had started coming along. He seriously loved the Pike children, even if they were chaos demons sometimes. Like, usually when he had agreed to babysit them. He had learned his lesson on that one and now left the childcare to professionals who were prepared for that kind of insanity.

Shane was happy that he already had presents wrapped for his parents. He'd gotten his dad a nice leather laptop bag for when the took his work computer home for work from home days, which were fairly rare. For his mom, he always bought Christmas decorations. She loved

anything with angels or stars, especially the big, many-pointed stars. She had told Shane one time that they were called Moravian stars. Bored on the plane one day, Shane had googled that and learned that Moravians were one of the various kind of kooky religious sects that had come over in the early days of the American colonies. They had founded some towns that still had some elements of Moravian culture in them. Shane found that gift shops in those towns advertised beautiful stained glass star ornaments that he knew his mom would go crazy over. One week, after playing a game in Philly, Shane had rented a car to go to one of those towns. He bought a huge, heavy clear glass star that was meant to be installed over a front porch lightbulb. He thought his mother would love coming home to that during the holiday season. He also found a stained glass angel ornament for her, and at that point he knew he was done. While he was shopping, he heard people talking about how nice it was to stay in the stately, old hotel that was located in the town's little Main Street shopping district. He expected that it wouldn't be cheap but he made a plan to send his parents on a trip there one holiday season in the future. His mother would flip over the Christmas-themed everything in the town, and his dad enjoyed history, so he thought they would both have fun there.

On his way home from the mall, Shane stopped at the chain drug store to get the airline gift cards for Tony. He put enough money on them that the cashier looked concerned and asked Shane some questions about why he was buying the gift cards.

"They're Christmas presents, that's all. I promise you I'm not being scammed. Do I look like some kind of old person who would fall for that?"

Their cashier shook her head. "No sir, uh, Mr. Hollander. Not at all."

Shane examined her name tag. "I do appreciate your diligence, Kristy." She blushed at him saying her name, and Shane was charmed. "So you like hockey, yeah?"

"Of course! I mean, who doesn't around here? I play too, though I'm not actually very good, and it's just girls and all."

"Don't say just girls like that. I know some women who play professionally. They are serious seriously badass, and they deserve a lot more money and respect than they get. How old are you, by the way ? I swear I'm not asking to be creepy."

"I didn't think you were. Anyway, I'm 16."

If she had been 15 or under, Shane was going to invite her to the summer camp so he decided he'd offer her something else. "Cool. Hey, are you going to the game tomorrow night?"

"Uh no, I've never been to a real MLH game."

"Well, let's change that. Do you have a little piece of paper and a pen?"

She ripped off a piece of receipt paper and handed that to Shane along with a battered-looking pen. Shane wrote down the access code for his personal reserved seats along with the date and time of the next game. "Give this to the box office, and they'll get you seated. It's good for up to four tickets, so take some friends or family, okay?"

“Okay! Wow! Thank you so much! We’ll cheer super loud for you.”

“I appreciate that, but I’m not playing right now. I’m out dealing with a family medical issue.”

“Oh no, I hope they’re okay! Anyway, I can’t thank you enough for the tickets. This is the best Christmas present ever.”

Shane was returning his card to his wallet and decided to pull out one of the fifties he’d gotten from the bank. “Hey Kristy, take this and get everyone in your group a beer or a snack on me. If you can, take a rideshare so that nobody drives drunk.”

She accepted the cash and gave Shane another bright smile. “Oh, my mom says that’s too expensive, but I swear we won’t drink and drive.”

“Okay,fair enough. Have a great time and cheer for all the other players who might not have anybody in the stands.”

"Aw, that’s sad. Is there anybody specific we should support?

“Not that I can think of right now, but look in the program for the younger guys from other countries. Their families and friends usually can’t afford to come to their games, and the boys aren’t making enough yet to bring them over very often.

“Okay, thanks, that makes sense. I know we’ll have an amazing time. Thank you so much!”

“You’re very welcome. It’s my pleasure.”

Shane went back to the gift card area and picked up an Uber card then went back to the checkout. “Hi Kristy, please put $30 on this one.”

“Sure, no problem." She handled the transaction then handed the card and receipts to Shane, who put the card down on the counter and slid it back to her. “This is for you. I don’t want to worry about anyone drinking on my dime then getting in an accident. I can’t have that on my conscience right now. Okay?”

“Sure! Thanks! That’s super extra nice of you.”

Shane smiled at her. “Well, you’re welcome. I hope you have a great time at the game.”

“We so will. I already know we will.”

“Good. Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas, Shane!” She called after him as he left the store with a smile on his face. He thought that he should do things like this more often. It was good for the soul and good for his love of the game.

As he parked in front of the house, Shane suddenly realized that if he was going to be gone for most of the day as he had been, he should have asked his mom to come stay with Ilya.

Guilt and fear flooded him, and he hurried inside to see if Ilya was okay. Upstairs, Shane found Ilya puttering around the guest rooms, preparing for his friends' imminent arrival. They would be driving to the airport early the next morning, and Shane was already planning to swing through the nearby Starbucks drive through. He wanted a peppermint mocha for himself and probably some kind of tea drink for Ilya. No way was he putting anything with espresso in Ilya's hands. "Hey, can you take a minute to come sit down with me?" You should be relaxing anyway."

"I'm fine. But sure, okay." Ilya followed Shane to the living room, where they sat next to each other on the sofa. Shane handed Ilya the boxes from the Apple Store—the one with the watch itself and the one with the designer band Shane had picked out that he hoped Ilya would like enough to wear. Ilya looked confused for a moment then put the boxes down.

"It's too soon for presents! Shouldn't we wait?"

"Nope. I need you to get this one now. For me, please?"

"Okay. This seems silly but I will do it for you. Anything for you." Ilya opened the boxes and looked admiringly at the watch for a moment before looking to Shane for an explanation.

"Remember, we talked about this the other day? A watch that will keep an eye on your heart. It can alert you to unusual heart beats or unhealthy rhythms. I seriously need you to tell me if you get any of those alerts. It's not going to mean an immediate trip to the ER, baby. I know you would hate that. But we'll have to run it by Terry or another doctor to see what they think. Please promise me you'll let me know so I can help. If you're just going to get the alarm and keep it to yourself so that you're worried and scared on your own, that's no good. I don't want that at all."

"Me either. That doesn't sound nice. I will share with you. Okay?"

"Okay! Thank you. Thank you so much. I want you to understand how precious your heart is to me. It keeps you here with me, so it's pretty much the most important thing to me."

"I understand, I think. I felt that way about your brain after you got hurt in the game. I thought about how you need your brain to live and also to be yourself, and I just wanted to cradle and protect your brain like it was a tiny baby."

"Yes, that's how I feel about your heart and your health in general. I just want to protect it because you mean everything to me."

Ilya attached the band to the watch and put it around his wrist. Shane walked him through checking his heart rate, just to make sure the watch was working. The watch displayed a good, steady rhythm, and Shane was so grateful for that gift even if he didn't deserve it

Shane tugged Ilya down to lay in his lap and spread a throw blanket over him before beginning to pet his hair as if his head were a small shaggy dog. Shane had no problem with manipulating Ilya into getting the rest he needed. He'd gladly do it for the rest of their lives but he did hope that someday, when they were still young enough to enjoy it, they be able to retire together, and then without so much stress on his shoulders Shane hoped Ilya could relax

whenever he needed it without being nudged or tricked into doing so. But maybe that was just a fantasy. Shane would keep his fantasy for now. It was easy to hold onto when Ilya was warm and cozy in his lap.

Shane hadn't begun to decorate for the holidays yet and hadn't taken his mother up on her offer to come over and do it for them because he and Ilya had decided to try to give his friends the most traditional Canadian Christmas they could manage. So, the day after they arrived, all of them would go out to choose a tree then bring it home and decorate it, complete with Christmas music playing and mugs of hot cocoa at hand. On Friday, they would go to a children's choral recital, and Christmas itself would mostly be spent with Shane's parents in the Hollander winter wonderland. Somewhere in there, they would all go to a Centaurs game and hang out in the team box away from the crowd and with better food and drinks than what the concession stand offered.

When they were all at a roadside tree lot, Shane managed to button-hole Sasha away from the main flow of foot traffic. "Hey, can I ask you kind of a personal question?"

"Yes, sure." Sasha looked uncertain but he nodded.

"Okay, what I'm wondering is are you safe? At home in Russia, are you okay? Are you safe?" Shane worried because Sasha wasn't a big man, and he tended more toward the femme side of things, which Shane was afraid would make him a target for harassment or worse."

"Oh, I see. Yes, as much as I can be there, I am safe. I am careful. Circumspect."

"Good. It would really hurt Ilya if something bad happened to you."

"I'm honestly surprised that you care to ask."

"I care because you are Ilya's family, and he's my family, so in a way we're all family. I want you to know that if you're ever concerned that you're not safe, you can come to us. You always have a place in our home, and Canada would give you asylum for immigration purposes so you'd be able to work legally."

"Asylum?"

"Per the government, Russia is officially not safe for members of the 2SLGBTQIA community. They would not send you back there. It would be unlawful."

"Oh,wow. But what kind of work could I get?'

"What do you do now?"

"I work the cash register in a shop."

"Well, we need people with that skill here, too. We would help you find something. You would be fine, and you'd be safe here. Please come here if it comes to that. Text me. I will buy you a plane ticket and send it any day. Any day."

"Wow, thank you. You are very kind. I'm glad Ilya has you."

“I’m not always as kind as I want to be, unfortunately. But I am trying. I’m especially trying to do right by Ilya.”

“I’m glad he found you, even if it means he will never come back to Russia.”

“Oh, we might come visit sometime. I would love to see his home.” Shane didn’t want to say anything about the potential adoption plan, since Ilya hadn’t agreed to it yet.

“That would be very good. I would offer you to stay with me but I only have small flat.”

“It’s okay. We will be fine in a hotel room. We will try to be near you though.”

“I would like that very much.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do if the trip ever comes together.”

A few days later, when the Russians all headed to the mall for a day of shopping, Shane was surprised to get a call from Ilya, much too soon for them to be done with shopping and ready for a ride home.

“Hi,” he answered. “What’s up?”

“I think I made a mistake, Shane. Will you come? We are on patio of Starbucks on outside of mall.”

“Uh-oh. Starbucks? What has happened?”

“I know I should not have, but I got a PSL with two extra shots of espresso. I needed energy for walking mall.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“Eh, my heart is pounding very hard, and the watch gave me one of those alerts..”

“Oh no," Shane said, “You should be able to pull it up on your phone in the health app. Will you send me a screenshot? And send me Svetlana’s phone number too. Just in case.”

“I will do this, but please don’t worry too much. I am fine. I am strong enough for girly coffee drink.”

“Of course. Thank you for calling me though. Will you send that screenshot?”

“Yes. Let me just hang up the call.” The line went silent then, and Shane felt like his own heart wasn’t going to be able to take the wait for more information. Finally the texts came through. The screenshot showed that the watch had identified possible atrial fibrillation, which sounded serious. Shane immediately called Terry and briefly explained the situation.

“Oh boy, I wish he hadn’t done that. I’m sure he’ll be fine but it wouldn’t hurt to take him in to the ER. Have them call me, and I’ll give them the background on his condition .”

“Okay. Thanks, man.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you called.”

Shane replied to Ilya’s text, “I’m coming to get you. Stay right where you are.” Once he was in the car and connected to Bluetooth, he called Svetlana.”

“Yes, Shane,” she answered sweetly.

“How is he really doing?”

“Just a moment.” Shane heard the squeal of a chair and then footsteps, as she presumably stepped away from Ilya to talk about him. “I think he is scared. He is very pale, eyes wide, hand on his chest after he was staring at his ugly watch. I got him some water, tried to help him feel better but it did not help.”

“Thank you for trying anyway. Can you stay with him until I get there? Not leave him at all?”

“Of course. I will get Sasha to come meet us here as well so we are all ready to go.”

“Excellent idea. Thank you.”

Shane set his GPS to take him to the mall Starbucks directly. He didn’t want to be driving loops around the various mall parking lots when Ilya needed him.

As he approached the Starbucks, he could see Ilya, Svetlana and Sasha all sitting outside together in a little cluster. Svetlana was sitting next to him with one of his hands held in both of hers, and from her facial expression, she was ready to go into battle for him. Sasha was on his other side with an arm around his back. Shane was so grateful Ilya had had that support while he waited.

Shane pulled to a stop at the curb, as close to the group as he could get. A moment later, he was kneeling at Ilya’s feet, holding the hand that Svetlana didn’t have. “Baby, I know you don’t want to hear this, but I’m taking you to the hospital. This could be serious.”

“Fuck,” Ilya bit out. “Fuck me. Fuck. PSLs.”

“Yep. Now,will you let me carry you to the car? It’s not far.”

“No. No, I don’t like that. I can walk. We will go slowly.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to stress your heart any more. You need to take it easy.”

“Right, right. Walking is very easy.” llya stood up, and Shane felt ill as he watched his face lose color. He instantly reached out to grip Ilya’s arm. Sasha stood and held onto Ilya as well.

Shane nodded at Sasha. “Hey thanks, but do you think I can scoot in where you are?”

Sasha slowly stepped away, transferring Ilya’s weight from himself to Shane as he did. Shane pulled Ilya’s arm around his neck and shoulder and contemplated just scooping him up.”

“No, Shane. No carrying. I am not damsel.”

“I’m well aware of that. But you are ill right now. I certainly know you’re a man. MY man. And I will take care of you.”

Ilya sighed and leaned little more heavily against Shane’s side. Shane took that as the best consent he was going to get and bent to pull Ilya up against his chest.

“Oof,” he said involuntarily. Ilya’s arms wound more tightly around him, and Shane squeezed him closer. “I won’t drop you. Don’t worry. You’re pretty light these days.”

“I must eat whole recipe of your burgers and get too heavy for you to do this again.

“Please do." Shane had left the front passenger door unlocked, and Sasha jogged ahead to pull it open, allowing Shane to deposit Ilya right into the seat and connect his seatbelt. He then unlocked the back to let Sveta and Sasha in before getting in himself to drive them all to the hospital.

There was a very good hospital near the mall, so Shane went straight there. The ER had a valet service, which took care of some logistics that Shane had been worried about. He handed over his keys, transferred Ilya to a wheelchair, and then they all headed inside. At the front desk, Shane briefly described Ilya’s recent medical history and his symptoms that day, which was enough to get them a fast track to the triage station. Shane filled out forms and gave them Terry’s contact information but otherwise focused on trying to keep Ilya calm. Being upset wouldn’t help his heart.”

"Okay," the nurse said, "we’re going to get you situated and page somebody from cardiology to come see you as soon as they can.”

"Wait! Ah, I need to know the nationality of the cardiologist before he or she comes."

"Excuse me, what?" The nurse looked confused and offended, and Ilya knew he had messed up his English again.

"No, No, I'm sorry, I do not mean ethnicity, color, any of that. I mean actual national origin."

"I promise, any of our doctors will provide excellent care, no matter where they were born."

"I understand that. I am immigrant myself, as I'm sure you can tell. Here is the thing. I have secrets that could be sold for money or favors in Russia. If a doctor from Russia has family or friends back home still, they would easily figure this out, and it could be very dangerous to my family and friends or to myself if I ever go home again."

"Oh. Oh, goodness," the nurse said, not looking so offended now.

"You see, Russia is not friendly to men like me." Ilya reached out and took Shane's hand. "Like us."

"Yes, of course. I will see what I can find out."

"Thank you very much." Ilya was glad he had remembered to ask about that, even if he had bungled it at first.

“Yes, thank you" Shane said, "I want to stay with him, wherever he goes.”

“Noted. You’re welcome to come along with us for now.” The nurse was small enough that she somewhat struggled to push the gurney with Ilya on it into the hallway. Shane wanted to offer to help, but he knew it wasn’t his job. His job was to be here and to show Ilya how much he was loved. Once they were situated in a curtained off cubicle area, Shane took out his phone to text his parents, and he held Ilya’s hand with the one that wasn’t busy texting.

“Hey, my parents are probably going to be here pretty soon. Is there anything you want them to pick up for you?”

“No. Maybe phone charger you and I can share.”

“Sure, no big deal. Shane texted his dad about that then sent a quick text to Terry to update him. Once his phone was back in his pocket, he turned his full attention to Ilya.

“How are you feeling now, baby?”

“Tired. Just a little tired. Heart has calmed down.”

“Good. I’m so glad. That had to be scary for a while there.”

“Yes, a little. I was happy to have friends there with me, to not be alone, wondering if I would pass out and strangers step on me.”

“Canadians would never! But yes, it’s good you weren’t alone. Even if you had been, I would have stayed on the phone with you while I drove to get you.”

“That would have been good.”

“Hey, if you wanted to talk to me earlier, all you had to do was ask Sveta for the phone.”

“Oh. I was concentrating on breathing. Where is she? And Sasha?”

“They’re out in the waiting room. They’re fine.. I’ll get my parents to find them and take them to the cafeteria or whatever once they get here.”

“They were scared I think. At the Starbucks. I feel bad about that.”

“We were all scared, baby. It was scary. But it’s only because we love you. It’s okay.”

The nurse poked her head in and told Ilya," I believe the cardiologist who is working now is Korean. Will that work for you?"

"Oh yes, Korean is wonderful. Perfect. Thank you."

Eventually, a doctor came into Ilya's curtain area, introduced himself as a cardiologist, and with the help of a younger woman set to work attaching sticky pads all over Ilya's torso. Ilya seemed to be checked out of the proceedings, so Shane made a point of telling the doctor about the earlier alert from Ilya's watch. He seemed concerned but also confident that the test he was running would give him all the information he needed.

Ilya looked cold, where so much of his body was exposed through the open gown. Shane ached to cover him with a blanket but he didn't want to mess up the important test.

As soon as the doctor shook both their hands and left, Shane buzzed the nurse to ask for a warm blanket, which he carefully tucked around Ilya's upper body. Ilya made a contented sound and snuggled into the warmth , and Shane found his hand under the blanket and held it tight. He needed Ilya to know he wasn't alone, no matter how aware or not aware he might be of his surroundings in general. He needed Ilya to know he was safe and loved. After a while, Shane's parents walked into the room, followed by Svetlana and Sasha

"How did you know to find them?" Shane asked his mother.

"She came up to me and asked if I was your mom!"

Shane laughed and looked wide-eyed at Svetlana, who just shrugged. "You two practically have the same face. She just had to be your mother."

"Wow. Okay, I'm glad you found each other."

Everybody turned concerned eyes on Ilya where he lay on the gurney.

"So, a cardiologist came to examine him, which I think is really great. He did some tests, and I guess he'll come back once he has the results."

Everyone nodded or made sounds of approval. Shane's dad handed him the phone charger and asked if he was hungry.

"No, I'm totally fine. Maybe you could take these two to the cafeteria or the gift shop if they need anything?"

Shane's parents readily agreed, and soon after that everyone other than Shane and Ilya left the room. Soon, Shane got a text from Terry, letting Shane know he was in the waiting room and could Shane come and get him. Shane stepped out into the hallway and made a mental note of where Ilya's room was located then went out to find Terry."

"Hey, thanks Shane. They were never going to let me come back."

"It's cool. I'm glad you came. He was in pretty bad shape when I picked him up from Starbucks at the mall.

"Ouch. What did he have?"

"Enough to make his heart go off the rails."

“I bet he won’t do that again.”

“Safe bet.”

Shane led the way in to Ilya’s room. Bedside, Terry briefly greeted the sleeping patient then held a business card out to Shane. “Give this to the cardiologist please. And get Ilya to sign whatever he needs to so we can share information. I'm going to have to work closely with the cardiologist to keep Ilya safe next season.”

“Uh, yeah you are,” Shane agreed sarcastically. “sorry, it was just hard seeing him like that. I actually carried him to my car,”

“Damn. Isn’t he bigger than you?”

“Not right now he isn’t, unfortunately.”

“Right. Right. I bet he didn’t love that.”

“Nope but it was the right way to go.”

“I can see that. Just don’t go making a habit out of it and throw your back out. Yeah?”

“Yeah, I hear you. Carrying is for when necessary only. Ilya barely tolerated it this time, when he was scared and felt really bad.

“Damn. Well, please make sure the cardio guy understands I need to talk to him.”

“Will do, no problem.” Shane nodded.

“Cool. Okay, I’m gonna head out.”

“Thanks for coming out here.”

“Yup. See you soon, Shane.”

“Sure. We’re coming to sit in the box for the next game. With some guests.”

“Nice! I’ll see you then. Buy you a drink.”

“It's open bar.”

“Ah, right you are. All the better for me.”

“Have a safe drive back.”

“Yep. Thanks.”

When Terry was gone, Shane slipped the card into his shirt pocket and found Ilya’s hand again. It felt good to be connected that way, and he hoped it helped Ilya too.

Shane looked up with anticipation every time somebody walked into the room, but after a few hours it was finally the cardiologist returning."

"Hi, doctor. Do you have news for us?"

"I sure do. The patient should probably be awake for this." He nodded down at the sleeping man in the bed.

Shane jostled Ilya's shoulder then bent to speak in his ear. "Hey, Ilya, can you wake up for a minute?" He thought about pinching his ear again but really didn't want to. Finally, Ilya shifted his head then opened his eyes and smiled at Shane. "Hey, the heart doc's here to see you. You want me to tilt your bed up?

"Yeah. Please." Shane pressed the button to tilt up Ilya's bed to a sitting position then looked back at the doctor, realizing something he should have thought about earlier. "Doctor, just to confirm, you will not share anything from inside of this room with anyone else?"

"No, under no circumstances would I do that."

"Okay, it's just super important for us."

"I understand, I think, but Mr. Rozanov's health is certainly nobody else's business."

"Right, but here's the thing." Shane made a point of reaching under the covers and taking Ilya's hand. "You feeling okay sitting up, baby?"

"Yeah. I'm fine."

"Good. I need you to be okay."

"Oh, I see," the doctor said quietly. "This is also not anybody else's business."

"That's good to hear, doctor. What news do you have for us?"

"Mr. Rozanov, you'll be glad to hear that your heart is very strong. Of course, it should be considering what you do for a living. I don't think I've ever treated a professional athlete before."

"He's a world class elite athlete. Went to the Olympics and everything."

"Oh goodness," the doctor said, while Ilya pointed at Shane and said, "so did he."

"Wow. Okay. So, unfortunately I did see some issues. There was indeed some atrial fibrillation, as your watch alerted you to, which means the heart is not beating in the correct rhythm. As you experienced, it doesn't feel very nice. I wouldn't want you to go into again while you're skating flat-out across the ice. That could go badly."

Shane shuddered at the thought. "Speaking of that, our team doctor really wants to speak with you and coordinate with you on Ilya's care next season. Ilya will sign whatever releases

are needed for that to happen. Shane handed over Terry's card and watched the cardiologist tuck it into his own shirt pocket.

"That's a really good plan. Your team may need to purchase an EKG machine and get somebody trained to use it. That would be ideal."

"Then I'll talk to them about that. They really dropped the ball on watching out for Ilya this season but that's not going to happen next year."

"Oh, I see. They let him play when he was having heart problems?"

"I don't think anybody, including Ilya, was aware there were heart problems going on, but he wasn't well."

"Okay, that's not great. I'll work with your team doctor to make sure everyone is much more mindful of his well-being next season."

"Good, then we'll be on the same side, you and me. Thanks. So what do we need to do to improve things?"

"There's a procedure I'd like to do that should reduce or eliminate the incidences of atrial fibrillation."

"Heart surgery?" Ilya asked, gesturing to his chest like tracing an incision.

"Not like that, no. We would do a catheterization procedure where we go in through an artery, most likely in your groin or your neck, and run a very thin catheter all the way to your heart. We would make repairs that way. It's an easy recovery and a very short hospital stay. Nothing like open heart surgery.

"That's doesn't sound terrible," Shane said.

Ilya made an uncertain, unhappy sound, and Shane squeezed his hand. "Well have to do some research and talk to Terry but we really don't want that happening when you're moving on the ice. Think of how bad you felt just sitting in a chair at Starbucks then imagine you're going 20 miles an hour with the world flying by you and nothing to hold onto."

Ilya shook his head. "No," he murmured, "Bad. Very bad."

"Yes. Very much bad. You want me to stand on the other side of the ice watching you clutch your chest and go down?"

"No. Definitely not. I would be very sorry for that."

"Then we'll make sure that doesn't happen. Okay?"

"Yes. Is good plan."

"Doctor, can you get us some information on the procedure you recommended?"

“Sure I can. We’re going to admit Ilya just for tonight. I’ll be around to see him again in the morning, and I’ll bring you some information then. Will you be there?”

“Oh yeah. I’m not leaving until he does.”

“Okay I’m glad he has you then. I’m always glad to see when my patients have good support at home.”

“That’s my job, and I’m not going to fail at it again.”

“Hmm. Okay. Well, it was fascinating to meet you both. I’ll try to bring the information release paperwork tomorrow as well so I can work with your team doc.

“Great, thanks. And you’re not going to say anything to anybody about any of this?”

“I would not do that.”

“I appreciate that a lot.” Shane reached out to shake the man’s hand, and then he was gone, walking briskly out of the room. Soon after, a woman came in wheeling a laptop on a cart and said she was there to get Ilya checked in for his overnight stay. She took their contact information and the insurance details and asked what medications Ilya was taking regularly, which was none so far though Shane suspected that might change.

After a short wait, a nurse from the floor where Ilya would be staying came to transport him up there. Shane followed closely as they moved down the hall then into an elevator then down another hall. Not surprisingly, they ended up in a room in the cardiac specialty unit. Shane watched, cringing, as a few very small women worked to slide Ilya from the gurney to the room’s bed. He didn’t trust them to be able to catch him if he rolled too far, so Shane positioned himself at the open side of the bed and refused to budge until Ilya was safely situated in bed. He texted his parents to let them know the room number then sat down in the room’s recliner to wait.

After about 20 minutes, a soft knock came at the door, and then everyone else entered the room. They all seemed to notice at the same time that Ilya was sleeping, and Shane’s parents gestured for him to join them in the hallway. As he passed Svetlana, Shane looked her in the eye. “You’ll come get me if he wakes up. Yes?”

“Yes, of course,” she agreed, and Shane had to trust her.

In the hallway, his parents both hugged him and then quietly asked what they could do to help.

“Is there any way you could go to our house and get a few things?”

“Sure,” Shane’s dad agreed “no problem.”

Shane asked them to get the throw blanket that was on the couch, as it would do more than the thin hospital blankets to keep Ilya warm and comfortable. He also asked them to find Ilya’s overnight bag that was kept in the coat closet and bring the toiletries bag that lived inside of it, as well as a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt and light jacket for Ilya to wear home.

They promised to be back that evening with what Shane asked for along with something for Shane to eat for dinner. They would also drop Svetlana and Sasha off at the house, which was a huge relief to Shane, who hadn't been sure what to do with them. They couldn't all spend the night in the hospital room together. There just wasn't enough space. He knew they might not be happy about leaving Ilya, but Shane was the partner. He had priority.

After a short visit, Shane saw everyone off then went back to sit with Ilya again. "I'm here," he whispered in Ilya's ear. "I didn't go anywhere. I'm not going anywhere until we can both go home." He pet his hand over Ilya's hair just to reinforce his words.

After not too much time, a woman came in and dropped off a dinner tray for Ilya. It looked like some kind of Sheppard's Pie along with a sad-looking piece of cake and a cup of grape juice. Ilya, awoken by the clatter of the tray, pushed up to lean back on his elbows, looking around with wide eyes before focusing in on Shane.

"Oh, Shane! You are here!"

"Yes. I told you I wasn't going without you."

"I am not remembering that. I am sorry."

"Hey." Shane walked over to the side of the bed. "Nothing for you to be sorry for. Eventually I'll make sure you know that I'm sticking around."

"All night? Am I staying the night?"

"Yes to both. You are admitted for an overnight stay, and I'm not leaving you. My parents are taking Svetlana and Sasha home right now, and they're going to bring back some stuff for us.
"Sveta and Sasha? They are okay?"

"Sure, they're fine. You're the one who was sick."

"Yes, but I think I remember them being scared."

"They'll get over it. I'm just glad they were there with you. They took good care of you until I got there."

"Of course they did. And right, until you got there and made me sack of potatoes."

"So that you remember clearly? Typical."

"It was strange experience. Last time I was carried I'm sure was many years ago, before we got serious, when I slept with an American hockey player who had to be about 6'5" and 250. You are not quite such a beast.

"Wasn't Hunter was it?"

"No. Too bad for me, huh?"

"Good for me though. "

“Though now you’re stuck sleeping in too- small recliner in hospital because we’re together.”

“No, anywhere I am with you, I’m not stuck. Being with you anywhere is a privilege I’m so happy that you will still grant to me.”

Ilya shook his head. “Sweet talker,”

“You deserve sweetness. All of the sweetness. That’s what we’re going to have at the cottage this summer. Long, sweet summer days, lazy as honey coming out of a jar.”

"so, uh, evocative? This word. Is it correct?”

“Yes. Very correct, my brilliant bi-lingual.”

“No, that is you. I just stumble along with my English and learn a new word now and then.”

“I don’t think you give yourself enough credit. Just so you know, I had a little talk with Sasha and told him he could always come stay with us if he’s not safe in Russia. He could claim asylum for legal immigration status. “

“That was very kind of you to be so welcoming to first boy I slept with.”

“I know that was a long ass time ago.”

“Yes. I have no such feelings for him anymore. All for you.”

“Me too. I’m all for you too. But I hate to think of a gay man, somebody that I know, that I’m connected to, being hurt when I could do something about it. I would love to help him get established here in Canada.”

“Yes. When we are home, when we have house to ourselves again. I think it will be time to talk about family plans. Otherwise, I think I will find you adopting adults and bringing them home to stay.”

“Well, I would never do that without talking to you first. It’s your home, after all. “

Ilya shook his head. “My name on house, but it is your home too. I hope.”

“Yes. That’s the address I gave to the Centaurs as where I’ll be living next season. They know we’re living together, so we don’t have to hide that part of it.”

“Oh, well, that’s good news.”

“I’m glad you think so. I think so too. I don’t want to hide everything forever.”

“We won’t. They’re going to retire our jerseys together. And then we’re going to show up Scott Hunter with a much better, sexier kiss on the ice. Then we skate off into the sunset to live happy until we die.”

“Yes, I could go for that plan.”

“Good. It is what I live for some days.”

“Then by all means hang onto the dream. When you want to make it real, just give me a heads up.”

“Of course. Hopefully we play for several years first.”

“Yes. You will get well, I will stay healthy, and we could play for ten more years.”

“That would be a triumph, to go from a literally lovesick 30 year-old gay man with a literally weak heart to retiring at the top of the hockey world at 40 years old. I want that very much. “

“I want it for you, too. For us.”

“I do that, and the haters can kiss my ass for the rest of my life. If I go home to Moscow, they throw ticker tape parade in my honor.”

“Yes. I would throw the most ticker tape, whatever that is.”

“I think it was little strips of paper that used to be in offices. For, like, fax machine before fax machines were invented.”

“Huh. Sounds like it would make a big mess in the streets Canadians would not do that, I think.”

Ilya shrugged. “Then all of the ticker tape parades are for me. Too bad for you.” He put a hand over his mouth then and yawned widely.”

“You should get some sleep, baby. I know you must be tired from what you went through earlier.

Ilya pulled up the edge of the thin, white covers. “If you get in the bed with me, huh?”

“I don’t think so. One of us would wake up on the floor, and the floor looks too hard for that. Just a moment.” Shane moved the rolling bedside table out of the way and pushed his recliner into its place closer to the bed. By the time he had it positioned just right and sat down, he was able to reach up and hold Ilya’s hand while they both rested.

“Better,” Ilya sighed.

“Yes. Let’s see if we can manage to get any sleep.”

“”I think we were both able sleep in those little cardboard beds in Sochi.”

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” Shane groaned.

“Like you ever forgot. “

“Yeah true. I guess going to the Olympics is pretty memorable.”

“Yes. Even if no ticker tape parade.”

“Even if.” Shane wished that a nurse would come to check on Ilya so that Shane could ask them to turn off the overhead light that was burning through his eyelids into his eyes. After what felt like hours of sitting in the stiff recliner with Ilya’s beloved hand in his, Shane heard a soft knock on the door followed by his name “Shane? Honey?”

He painfully peeled himself out of the recliner and went to the door, where we found his parents in the hallway with an overstuffed overnight bag and a plastic grocery bag.
“I think we got everything,” Shane’s mom said. “And we got the Russian kids situated at the house. Picked up some dinner for them on the way there, too.

“Oh wow, thank you so much. I don’t know what we would’ve done without you guys.”

“ Hush, that’s what we’re here for. We love you and Ilya, and his friends seem nice too.”

“They are. When Ilya was sick today, when I got there to pick him up, they were both sitting there holding onto him between them. It was very sweet.”

“Aw, I’m glad he had that. He’s been on his own too much.”

“I know, mom. And I know it’s my fault. It’s not going to happen again, and we’re working on it.”

“Okay, honey. I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad, I swear.”

“I know, mom. It’s just that nobody has to try these days. I already feel bad. Like, so much of the time.”

Shane’s dad shook his head. “Oh Shane, I hate to hear that. You’re taking such good care of Ilya. Try to feel good about that instead.”

“I can try. Thanks, Dad.”

Each of Shane’s parents hugged him in turn. “Let us know what’s going on tomorrow, okay, we want to be kept in the loop.”

“Sure thing. I’ll let know once I know anything.”

Once they had gone down the hall and out through the main doors to the unit, Shane went back into Ilya’s room where he checked out what his parents had brought. The grocery bag held a large tuna sub that Shane would be really glad to eat as a late dinner. In the overnight bag, he found the throw blanket stuffed in tight along with a full set of clothes for going home, including the slip-on sneakers that Ilya called his “old man shoes.” It was all perfect, as he should have expected it to be. He set the overnight bag on the floor, put his sub on the rolling table,
then shook out the blanket and carefully spread it out over Ilya in the bed. He moved a little, his body seeming to sense and unfurl into the familiar warmth and comfort. Shane wanted keenly to climb into the bed with him, but he also really didn’t want to wake up on the floor with a broken ass or worse, another concussion. That could take Shane out of the game long-term as easily as Ilya’s heart issue could for him.

It was overall safer to sleep on the recliner, so he sat back down and found Ilya's hand again so they could stay connected. That would have to be good enough."

In the morning, Ilya was greeted by a nurse who needed to do vitals and take some blood from him. Shane spoke with her and got her to put the head of the bed down flat before she stuck Ilya so that he shouldn't pass out."

"Hey, you, let us know if you feel bad, okay?"

"Yup," Ilya agreed. "Feel fine though."

"Of course you do. You feel so fine that you're flat on your back in the hospital waiting for a heart doctor to come see you."

"Yesterday, not so fine for a while. Today, fine but stuck here because you panicked yesterday."

"Yeah. You looked like death, and you were clutching your chest like you were on your way there, but I panicked because I got you help. If I hadn't, that would have been terribly negligent on my part. Also, I suspect your friends would have beaten me with their shopping bags until I agreed to get you help. And they would've been right to do so."

"They are small and weak; you could've taken them. After all, you manhandled me like caveman."

"What did he do to you?" The nurse asked, clearly drawn in by their conversation."

"He picked me up. Me! And carried me to his car."

"Ooh, wow." She turned her head to eye Shane up and down then pulled away from Ilya just long enough to duck her head to look behind Shane. "Well, you do have nice, strong arms. Not to mention the rest of you."

Shane felt himself blush, and he knew that Ilya was just waiting for the right time to laugh his ass off. It had been a long, long time since he'd been so blatantly appraised to his face, especially by a woman. It was disconcerting. Plus, wasn't she supposed to be a professional?

She must have picked upon Shane's reaction because she sighed and busied herself with quickly finishing the blood draw. "I'm sorry, that wasn't appropriate for me to say. It wasn't professional. I hope you can forgive me.

"Sure. It's not that big of a deal." She nodded then dropped a couple of tubes on the bed and scrambled to pick them up before they rolled away.

"It's just, I have a little girl at home. So I hope you understand I can't lose this job."

"Hey," Shane said, "relax. It's okay. I'm letting it go. It's over. We all make mistakes. I certainly have."

She turned to look at Shane, her eyes wide and bright. “Oh thank you, sir! Thank you so much. Is there anything I can get to help you be more comfortable while you wait for the doctor?”

Ilya lifted his head from the pillow then. “Can of ginger ale? Cold?”

“Oh,are you feeling sick to your stomach?”

“No, not at all. Shane here just loves ginger ale. I suspect his parents forgot to bring him a bottle when they brought him the stinky tuna sub last night.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know the tuna would bother you.”

“It didn’t, silly. I went to sleep thinking that if we were at home, I would have covered it in cheese and toasted it for you.

The nurse glanced back at Shane. “Wow, all that and you have a man who will cook for you? Nice.”

“I’ve been very fortunate, it’s true.”

“But he really worked for and earned those muscles. You better believe that.”

“Oh, no doubt. Okay, let me go scrounge up a can of ginger ale.”

“You don’t have to go to any trouble!” Shane called out as she left the room. First he made her worry for her job, and then he caused her extra work. Shane felt so low he wanted to ooze down the hallway and then slip through a crack into an elevator shaft to get away from the scene of his most recent crimes.”

“Hey,” he said to Ilya, patting him on the arm. “I feel like talking to Hayden. Is it okay if I give him a real vague idea of what’s been going on?”

“Um, yeah. Yeah, he’s your best friend, and you should be able to talk to him. I don’t want to take that away from you.”

“Thank you, baby. I love you so much.” He rubbed his hand over Ilya’s arm, feeling it warm up under his touch. I’m going to go take a little walk. You want anything from the gift shop or cafeteria? Or elsewhere? I mean, I have my car so I can go wherever.”

“No thanks. Go talk to Pike then come back to me.”

“Of course. Being with you is all I want to do anymore anyway. It’s like I got into the pure, uncut stuff now that we’ve got back together, and I am hardcore addicted with no thought of getting clean. You’re singing through my veins, and it’s permanent.”

“I like that.” Ilya shoved gently at Shane’s leg. “Okay, go walk so you come back soon.”

“Yes. I will be back very soon. You need me sooner, just text me. I’ll see the text come through, and I’ll come right back. Okay?”

Ilya sighed. “Yes, Shane. Okay.”

Shane grabbed his jacket and left then. Once he got outside, he found a bench with nobody nearby and sat down to call Hayden.

“Shane!” Hayden said enthusiastically in greeting, followed by “Hollander!”

“Yes, Hayden. That is my full name. Good to hear your voice too.”

“Shit, how are you? You’ve been missed here, Captain.”

“Ugh, I’m sorry. I just really need to be here right now.”

“Damn, is it one of your parents? They were really nice to me. I hope they’re okay!”

“Yeah, they’re totally fine, thanks. It’s Ilya.”

“Rozanov? What does he need you for?”

“Well, you know what we are to each other. And I pretty seriously fucked up.”

“It’s hard to imagine that, Mr. Perfect.”

“Yeah, well, think back to when Jackie was having a hard time after, um, which baby was it? Sorry!”

“Arthur. Right. But I don’t want to think about that. It sucked.”

“I know man, but what if you had just fucked right off and left her to deal on her own?”

“Oh no, that would’ve been bad. I’m not sure how many kids I would’ve had left by the time I got back.”

“Wow, that’s dark man. Luckily we don’t have any kids to worry about yet, but Ilya was in a bad place, and I left him to deal with it on his own.”

“YET?!? Okay, but what was wrong with Rozanov?”

“You do know a person doesn’t have to have a baby to get depressed, right?”

“Sure. But I can’t really see that for Rozanov.”

“You would have seen it if you’d been here a couple weeks ago when I first came back. It wasn’t pretty, man. It’s better now, but I’m not leaving him.”

“But I know he was still playing pretty recently.”

“Yeah, and I’ve had it out with the Centaurs about that. He shouldn’t have been near the ice for a while.”

“Dude, I still can’t believe a guy at his level is playing for the Centaurs.”

“Well, get used to it. I’ll be playing for them too next season.”

“Oh, you are NOT.”

“I’m sorry, Hayden, but I am. I’m sure the official news will come out soon. Please help the rest of the team understand.”

“Hey, I’m not the captain.”

“Not yet you aren’t.”

“Heeey yo! Back to the yet thing, what was that about kids? You gonna get a bun in that oven Shane?”

“Fuck you,” Shane spit out. “We’re talking about options. Like adoption or whatever.”

“Aw, that’s great. You need to have kids to help entertain mine.”

“That’s what I live for, you know.”

“As you should. So, how is Rozanov doing now?”

“A lot better. Thanks.

"Yeah, so, am I thinking right that Boston Lilly was actually Ilya?”

“Yeah. You’re a regular genius, Hayden.”

“Wooow, all that time. Really, all that time?”

“Yep.”

“So what was your name on his phone?”

“I don’t think I should tell you because you’re just going to make fun of me.”

“Aw, hell, I’ll do that either way."

“Yeah you will. Okay, I was Jane. With a J.”

“Awww, Janie! I might never call you by your boy name again.”

“You suck.”

“Pretty sure that’s you, Janie. Listen, you need me for anything, just let me know, and I’ll be there. You need any food, I get Jackie’s cook for you.”

“Thanks, man, but I think we’re okay now. You gonna have your usual Memorial Day cookout?”

“Fuck, man, yeah. You want to come? Before you head to the cottage?”

“Of course.” Shane had gotten used to celebrating American summer holidays over the years. “Along as we’re both welcome.”

“Yeah, man. Of course. You know I’m not like that.”

“I do. Thanks, Hayden. And thanks for being there for me when I had the appendicitis.”

“Oh hey, no problem. Why is that on your mind?”

“Ilya saw the scar and gave me kind of a hard time about not telling him when it was happening.”

“I don’t blame him. I would flip the fuck out if Jackie was getting cut on and didn’t tell me. You should’ve let me go grab him.”

“Yeah, I should’ve. We could’ve gotten him help sooner, too. Fuck. I fucked up the whole season.”

“Hey, don’t get too spun up, man. Everyone’s going to be okay. Right?”

“Right. No thanks to me, but yes.”

“Aw, I bet you're taking real good care of your man now that you’re there.”

“I’m trying anyway.”

“You sure you don’t need another pair of hands there? Somebody to back you up?”

“No. I would let you know if I did, and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate the offer. I do have my parents here, too.”

“Yeah, that’s cool. Still, the offer stands. It’s not that far a drive. I’ll make JJ do the driving, and you know how he speeds.”

“Yeah, no, I can’t have that kind of driving on my behalf.”

“Fine. I’ll drive all nice and slow. It’s just a pain the the ass because my car has all the car seats in it.”

“Good thing I don’t need you guys to come then, huh?”

“You sure, buddy?”

“I’m sure. But thank you, seriously.”

“You’re welcome seriously. I can be serious when it’s called for, and it sounds like this was a big deal.”

“Yeah. When I got to his house he was pretty much half dead. It wasn’t good, and it was all my fault.”

“Fuck, man, i feel like i need to come there just to give you a big Daddy Pike hug. You want me to do that?”

“Luckily, I have my actual father here for that.”

“I'm so glad, man. You’re lucky your parents are still around.”

“Don’t I know it. “

“Damn, I bet your dad ran around on the ice with you when you were a kid.”

“He sure did. Hell, he would now if I got us some ice time.”

“Man, that’s lucky. My dad was old as fuck when I was a kid. You should get that ice time. I bet it would be awesome.”

“You’re right; I should. And I’m sorry. Ilya’s dad was older, too.”

“Ah, right. Right.”

“Okay, text me the time for the cookout and what you want us to bring?”

“If you want a stinky fish burger, bring that. Otherwise, we’re all good.”

“Great. Thanks, man. I’m looking forward to seeing everyone but especially you.”

“Aw, I feel special now. See you then!”

“See you.” Shane hung up then called the scheduler at the Centaurs’ rink to ask about scheduling ice time on a weekend. It would be really good to skate with his dad again, and he wanted to get Ilya back on the ice too. See how he was doing in skates. He got a date for a week out and put it in his calendar along with Hayden’s cookout then got up and headed back into the building.

He stopped by the cafeteria to pick up bottles of soda for himself and Ilya. One ginger ale and one caffeine free Coke. As expected, Ilya pouted slightly when he noticed the caffeine free note on the label. “Aw, I thought I might get a little something to help me wake up. I get that I can’t have espresso or a Monster or whatever but just a regular Coke?”

“Sorry, baby, I didn’t want to risk it. The doctor should be here in a little while, and we can ask him. Okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome. Hey, how do you feel about some super casual ice time the weekend after Christmas? Just you and me and probably my dad.”

“That would be amazing. I might feel like a man with some skates on my feet.”

“Okay. We’ll take it super easy, just skate a little and knock a puck around. They only gave me an hour on Saturday morning.”

“Sounds good.”

“You just have to promise me you’ll grab me and go sit down right away if your watch says anything about your heart. Anything!”

“Yeah. Got it. I kind of got a hard lesson at the mall the other day.”

“Yesterday. And yeah, you did. I know that was scary.”

Ilya sighed. “Yes. Was not fun time.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” Shane rubbed his back for a moment until he felt Ilya relax a little.

“Anyway, I will drink fake Coke that you were nice enough to bring for me.”

Ilya was still sipping on the soda when his cardiologist walked into the room. Doctor looked at the bottle then raised one eyebrow at Ilya. “You know, you don’t have to 100% avoid caffeine unless you really want to.”

“Yes? Tell him, please.” Ilya elbowed Shane in the side, and the doctor turned to look at Shane.

“I appreciate your caution but I’d say he can have one to three mildly caffeinated beverages per day. What I mean by that is regular cola, black tea, green tea. Hot or iced for the teas. At least an hour between servings. I don’t recommend pounding an extra large tea in a half an hour given that’s several servings.”

“Got it. Okay. We just want to avoid what happened yesterday.”

“That is completely understandable and commendable.”

“Doc, can I go home today?” Ilya asked, drawing the doctor’s attention back to him.

“Theoretically yes, but I want to talk about how we’re going to proceed. ” he waved a bundle of papers he had in his hand. “I brought information about the procedure I want to do. Today, please do whatever research you need to do, talk to whoever you’ve got to talk to, then call my office and let them know the verdict. What I’d like to do is keep you in here tonight then do the procedure first thing tomorrow then send you home once you’re out of recovery. How does that sound?”

“I don’t love the idea of another night here, but we will do research and call your office.”

“Okay. Great. What do you think, Shane?”

“I think I like the idea of him being monitored here until he has the procedure. Ilya’s right. Well research it and let your office know as soon as we find an answer.”

“Very good. If you find you have questions that you specifically need me to answer, please call me. I don’t want to delay this if we don’t have to.” He handed his card over to Ilya. If I can’t answer because I’m with another patient, I’ll call back as soon as I’m available.”

“Thanks, doctor. I’m sure we’ll talk to you soon one way or another.”

“Great. You can ask the nurses too. They see patients have this kind of procedure all the time, and I imagine they have opinions.”

Shane and Ilya both nodded, and the doctor turned to leave the room.

“Hey, Shane?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Will you get me a real Coke for lunch? Or an iced tea or anything? I just know I’m going to end up with a caffeine withdrawal headache otherwise.”

“Yeah, of course. I can go get one now if you want.”

Ilya took Shane’s hand in his. “No, I just got you back. I don’t want you to leave again so soon.”

Shane felt like his heart could break from that, and he squeezed Ilya’s hand tightly. “No problem. I’m not going anywhere. I’m just going to text my parents really quick to let them know we’re not headed home this morning. I’m going to call Terry then too. Can I have the paperwork for a minute?”

Ilya handed it over, and Shane tied off his shoes so he could sit cross legged on the bed across from Ilya. Texting his parents was quick, and then he made the call to Terry. He was really curious to hear what the team doctor would have to say about the potential procedure from the perspective of considering Ilya’s playing going forward.

“Hey, Shane. What’s up? You guys home yet?”

Shane explained what the doctor had planned and asked Terrry what he thought.

“You know, it’s been a long time since I learned about this stuff. Let me look into it and call you back? Give me an hour maybe?”

“Sure, no problem. Thanks for taking the time for this.”

“That’s part of my job. I’m on it. Okay?”

“Perfect, thanks.” Shane hung up and let Ilya know that Terry would be working on it and getting back to them soon.

At that point, he got a text back from his mother, asking if there was anything they needed for the day. Shane asked her to get the pajamas he had folded on top of his dresser as well as a bottle of regular Coke for Ilya. He hadn’t enjoyed sleeping in his jeans the night before, so

pajamas would be a huge improvement. Before he sent the text, he checked in with Ilya. “Is there anything you want from the house? My mom is going to swing by there on the way here.”

“Great. I don't need any things, but maybe she could bring Sveta and Sasha? We could send them home in an Uber later. I feel bad they came all the way here, and I am not there.”

“I’m sure they’d be fine at the house, but if you want them here we’ll get them. I can also take them home later if you can do without me for a little while.”

“Sure. I will try to be strong.”

“You always are. Okay, I’ll let my mom know.”

Shane added on to his text, asking his mom to give the Russians a ride to the hospital, explaining that he would take care of getting them home. She agreed to all of it, and Shane suspected she’d be bringing him something for lunch as well.

“Okay,” he told Ilya. “All arranged.”

“Great. Thank you.”

“Thank my mom.”

“Oh, I will. Definitely. She was so kind to have me over to the house when I was feeling bad.”

“She said you told her you were on the bathroom floor. You think she was just going to leave you there and tell you to try someone else?”

“Well, no, but still. I could have called a teammate or coach, and they would have come, but they wouldn’t have put me to bed in Little Shane’s bedroom.”

Shane shook his head. “Seriously? That bed is way too small for a grown man.”

“I had good dreams there. Was nice.”

“Well, I’m glad. I told my dad that if anything had happened to you to make you…not still there when I got to the house, that I would’ve quit hockey and everything else and gone back to live in that bedroom.”

“Well, I’m glad that did not happen. As you said, the bed is much too small.”

“Yes, because the bed size is the biggest, most unsolvable problem with that scenario.”

“Yes, of course, me being dead would be much worse.”

“I’m glad you can see that. As far as I’m concerned, it’s the ultimate worst thing. The worst worst thing there could be.”

“And for me, that would be losing you, but let us not discuss too much because this will not happen for long time.”

“Right. I agree. I expect you to still be railing me in 40 years, so we have to keep that heart strong .”

“Yes. For that, absolutely. I think Shane at 70 will still be very handsome.”

“Yeah? Why?”

“You stay so healthy. And your parents! They must be nearly 60, and they both look great.”

“They are, and yeah they do.”

“When I went to their house when I was feeling bad, it was so nice for handsome man to hold me. I remember thinking that meant I needed to get laid.”

Shane chuckled softly. “Were you going to call an old, uh, friend?”

“I was thinking I would find a woman. They are easier in some ways. Many would be content to take home a wounded animal like I was.”

“Oh, baby, no. I could tell that you hadn’t had anybody to touch you in a while. I don’t think you’re really cut out for being celibate, and I certainly didn’t deserve your celibacy.”

“Eh, in the end I’m glad I did not sleep with other people. I would’ve had to use a condom when we had sex.”

Shane made a face at that. He had been so happy when they had decided to be exclusive and had ditched condoms. Everything was better just skin to skin.

“Hey, are you tired? Do you want to stretch out here with me for a little while? I’m think we can avoid major injury if we’re not trying to actually sleep the night together in this bed.

“Yes?” Ilya looked up, and Shane ached for the hope on his pale face. “Yes, please.”

Shane got down from the bed long enough to grab the throw blanket then climbed back into the bed and stretched himself out as straight as he could manage. He guided Ilya down next to him then pulled the blanket over their torsos. They once they had that privacy, he arranged their shirts so that they could have some skin contact and tucked his hand under Ilya’s shirt, against his belly, which he hoped would serve the dual purpose of also keeping them both in the bed rather than rolling apart, which could be disastrous with no bed space for rolling. Ilya sighed deeply, and Shane felt it in the motion under his hand. He was pleased that Ilya didn’t feel quite as thin as he had weeks ago when they had rested in a similar position. There was a wonderful hint of convex softness to his belly, and Shane didn’t feel ribs at all as he had before.

“Thank you, baby,” Shane murmured in Ilya’s ear.

“What for?”

“For getting better. You’re a lot better. I can tell.”

“Mmm, you’re welcome. You helped a lot.”

Shane thought to himself that he’d also put them in this situation in the first place, but he knew that wasn’t a very productive line of thought. Theo would not approve. He just pulled Ilya an inch closer and hoped he was enjoying the warmth under the blanket along with the shared body heat.

Shane didn’t think that he would fall asleep, but he did. He woke to the sound of a soft knock then footsteps in the room followed by his mother’s voice. “Oh, boys!”

Shane jostled Ilya’s shoulder then pushed himself up to sit, feeling very glad they hadn’t actually taken their shirts off for their nap.

“”Hey, honey. Is he okay?”

“Sure we were just catching a little nap because neither of us slept great last night.”

“Oh, okay. I was just worried he was worse or something.”

“Nope. We just need to do some more research to decide if he’s having the procedure tomorrow morning.”

“If he is, just let me know how early, and we’ll be here to sit with you. I don’t want you to wait by yourself.”

“Thanks, Mom. I really appreciate that.”

“It’s not a problem at all, and I know your dad feels the same.”

“You guys are really great. Just so you know.”

“That’s nice to hear. Thanks, honey.”

“Do you want to come with us the Saturday after Christmas when Dad, Ilya and I go mess around on the ice for a while? I have an hour booked at the rink.”

“Hmm, I might. I can bring a thermos of hot chocolate and some snacks and feel like a real hockey mom again. Watch all my boys on the ice.”

“Aw, that sounds nice. I know Ilya would love it.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do.”

“Great. Okay. Do you want to look at the information the doctor left with us?”

“I do, yes.”

Shane got out of bed and found it for her then sat down on the edge of the bed with his hand on Ilya’s shoulder to make sure he knew he wasn’t alone.

“Hey, mom? Can I tell you something kind of important?”

She looked up, concern in her features. “Sure, honey, what is it?” She got up and walked over next to where Shane sat on the bed.

“Is something else wrong?”

“No, I was just thinking. If, um, anything ever happens again that causes me not to be around to be with Ilya, try to remember that you need to give him a lot of hugs. Or snuggles. Or whatever. Okay?”

“Sure, okay, if that’s what he needs, but you’re going to be around to give those hugs and snuggles. Aren’t you? Son?”

“Yes. Yes, of course. I was just thinking what if it was something I couldn’t control? Anybody could get taken out on the highway or whatever. I wouldn’t mean to, but I want to be able to think that he’d be okay.”

“I wouldn’t be okay,” Yuna argued.

“Right, I’m sorry, I know. But maybe being there for Ilya could help you guys, too, in a way.”

“Yes, I can see that. Okay, noted. All the hugs for your snuggle bunny. We can do that.”

“Thank you so much, Mom. I love you, and I plan on always being here. Ilya and I have plans decades into the future.”

“That’s good to hear, baby. And I know you’ll never take off on him or dump him again after what happened this time.”

“Oh, no. No way. Never again. Right now, I can’t even imagine going on a vacation without him.”

“Good boy. Okay. Hayden can use JJ for his vacation wingman for now.”

“Oh, no, Hayden doesn’t do that. Jackie would murder him by stuffing his own balls in his mouth to smother him.”

“Oh, my, that’s very graphic!”

“Sorry, that’s what you get for raising me to spend my life in locker rooms with hockey players.”

“Hah, okay. Though I think you had free will on that count.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. It doesn’t matter because I’m really happy with my life, okay?”

“I’m glad, honey. You ought to be happy, especially now that you have your partner.”

“Yes. Especially now.” Shane rubbed his hand over Ilya’s shoulder, and after a moment Ilya woke and perked his head up.

“Hey. Nap time is over?”

“Yeah. We have a visitor.”

Ilya pushed himself up to sit on the side of the bed. “Hi. Thanks for coming to visit again.”

“Oh, you know I want to be here for you both.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Hollander.”

“Now, Ilya. I think we talked about this. You can call me Yuna. Or, if it feels okay, you can call me Mom. I would like that a lot.”

Ilya looked over at Shane. “Would that bother you?”

“Not at all. Whatever feels best to you.”

“Okay. Um. Thanks, Mom.”

Shane’s mother stood up and walked over to pull Ilya into a tight hug. Shane heard Ilya sigh happily and put his hand on Ilya’s back to rub gently. Some of Ilya’s weight slumped back into Shane’s hand so he scooted himself around to sit behind Ilya and hug him from that direction. He hoped this helped to fill up the well inside of Ilya that had gone dry from touch starvation. He didn’t understand why Ilya needed this so much. Shane himself thought that he could easily be a hermit with no human contact, and he’d be fine that way. In fact, human physical contact was often stressful for Shane if it wasn’t with somebody he was very close to, like his parents or Ilya. Shane often avoided touching, while Ilya withered without it. Human beings were such a mystery to Shane. He didn’t understand himself much less other people. If they did bring a child into their lives, Shane thought that he would have to be cognizant of providing sufficient hugs and whatnot for the child’s well-being. He imagined that Russian orphanages might not provide a lot by way of warm affection.

“Okay,” Ilya said quietly after a couple of minutes. “Okay, thank you, Hollanders. I am okay.”

Shane and his mother both drew their arms from around Ilya, but Shane stayed sitting right behind him, ready to be leaned against or cuddled into.

“Oh” Yuna said, walking over to the tote bag she’d brought in with her. “I have a Coke for you, Ilya, and I think it’s still a little bit cold.”she held out the bottle, and Ilya accepted it then opened it and took a long drink.

“Is it cold enough or do you want me to go get some ice in your fancy hospital cup over there?”

“Is fine. Thank you. Mom, did you also bring my friends from the house?”

“Oh,yes. Goodness! I think I left them in the hallway.”

Shane hopped off the bed, gestured for his mother to stay sitting, and went to look outside the door. He immediately saw the two Russians standing flat against the wall, probably from trying to stay out of the way of passing patient transport. “Hey you guys, come on in.”

They followed Shane into the room though he heard them hesitate a few feet in, probably taking in the the improbable sight of Ilya sitting on the side of a hospital bed, in a hospital gown, even. The man usually looked impervious, but at that moment he certainly did not.

“Hey,” Ilya said, followed by some words in Russian. Shane thought he might have caught and understood perhaps one word in ten, and he had been trying to learn the language for years now, though the effort was, he had to admit, somewhat sporadic. He thought he would make that a New Year’s resolution, to focus more on studying Russian. He could do it on plane and bus rides with the team, so there was no excuse. He was going to find a better program to follow and really take it seriously this year.

Shane liked to make New Year’s resolutions so that he could have something positive to focus on going into the new year. He knew that most people made fitness and diet-related goals, but Shane figured he had that locked in as part of his default lifestyle.

Shane climbed back up to sit on the bed with Ilya, leaving the Russians to share the recliner. They shared the narrow space so easily that Shane couldn’t help wondering if they’d ever had a physical relationship. Maybe Sasha wasn’t the gold star gay he had seemed to Shane. They were certainly good friends if nothing else, and Shane was glad for them. Maybe Svetlana was able to be somewhat of a beard for Sasha in Russia to help keep him safe. Not a full on beard, Shane thought, but like a soul patch or something. Shane would certainly be willing to be seen canoodling with Svetlana in public if it helped him avoid prison or worse.

Shane was haunted by the way Ilya had replied years ago when Shane asked him what would happen to him at home if he were out as queer. “I don’t want to find out,” he had said. That had been a punch in the gut to Shane at the time, reminding him how privileged he had been to grow up in liberal modern Canada with kind, liberal parents. That Ilya had grown up with a specter of potentially violent repression hanging over him, and that the specter being vague was better than knowing the details, made Shane feel truly ill. Nobody should have to live like that, definitely not in the 21st century. Shane had the passing thought that maybe when hockey was done he could do some kind of government work to help resettle queer immigrants in Canada. Depending on how things went south of the border, they might even need to open asylum to Americans. He’d seen a number of former players who had parlayed their face and name recognition into fruitful political careers. Shane had zero desire to run for office but he thought his years of popularity could still help him get a job. He thought he’d have to talk to his parents about the idea, especially since his father had worked for the government as long as Shane had been alive, and his mother was excellent at strategizing in general.

“Who has the paperwork from the doctor?” Shane called out to the room.

“I do, honey,” his mother answered. “And I’ve heard of this procedure before. My friend Marci’s husband had it done, and it worked out really well for him. Obviously, he’s not a

professional athlete, but he was able to return to running marathons, so that's something."

"Yeah, that sounds really promising. Can I borrow the papers so I can look this up on my phone?"

Yuna handed them over to Shane, and Shane set himself to researching. After an hour of poking at his phone, Shane leaned in closer to Ilya. "I think you should do this. The risks sound super low, with probably great benefits."

"That does sound positive," Ilya agreed. "Find me my phone so I can look it up myself? It's not that I don't trust you; I just want to be able to participate in making this decision about my life."

"Of course! Hold on." Shane found Ilya's phone and handed it to him. Ilya proceeded to curl up in bed, poking at his phone for about 45 minutes.

Shane covered Ilya with the throw blanket then went over to try to chat with the Russians. "I'm sorry we haven't been able to show you two a good time the way we had planned. Is there something that you think you'd like to do today? Somewhere you want to go that I can take you to and drop you off?

They both shrugged, and then they spoke quietly between themselves in Russian. "Maybe back to the mall? There's a movie theater there and other things."

"Sure, we can do that. Svetlana, may I borrow your phone for a couple of minutes?"

After she handed him her unlocked phone, Shane installed the Lyft app then added their home address along with his payment information. He explained to her the basics of how the app worked and assured her the rides would be paid for. Once she seemed straight on that, he took out his wallet and handed her ten twenty dollar bills plus a fifty. I'll help you get a Lyft to the mall. Use the money for the movies, and get yourselves dinner somewhere nice. Is all of this okay with you?"

"Thank you for the money, Shane. That is very kind of you. But I want to make sure I understand Lyft. So, I will get in the car with a stranger, but I will not wake up chained to a dirty bed somewhere?"

Yuna chimed in then, "Oh, honey, no. I have a friend who can't see to drive at night, so she takes Lyfts all the time. Just to be careful, though if the driver offers you bottles of water or something, don't accept them just in case they're drugged. But I really think you'll be safe. When you get a ride, send Shane or Ilya a screenshot with the driver's information. That way, if we lose track of you, we have a good way to start to find you. But that's not going to happen. Here, what's your phone number Svetlana?"

Svetlana recited her number, and Yuna sent her a text. "Now you have my number. If you ever don't feel safe about getting in a car, just call me instead. Between me and Shane we'll get you picked up and still be here for Ilya. We all want you to be safe, but we want you to have some fun, too."

Svetlana and Sasha both nodded. “Okay. Thank you very much,” Svetlana replied.

“Yes, thank you all for being so nice,” Sasha added.

“Of course,” Shane said.

“Can we get a few minutes to talk to Ilya before we go?”

Shane thought her request was entirely reasonable, so he stood up. “Okay, I guess that means Hollanders out. Mom,let me walk you to your car?”

“Oh, sure.” Yuna stood up and gathered her things, and Shane turned back to talk to Svetlana again. “Will you stay here with him until I get back?”

“We will.”

“Okay, great.” Shane went over to the bed and distracted Ilya from his phone for a moment. “I’m just going to walk Mom to her car, but you won’t be alone. Okay, baby?”

“Yes, is fine. Thank you for letting me know.

“I’m going to keep doing that for a while, okay?”

“Very okay. I love you , Shane.”

“I love you too. I’ll be right back.”

It was a nice day out, brisk but sunny, so Shane enjoyed getting fresh air while walking to his mother’s car. “Do you think I should have offered to chauffeur them around myself?”

“No, honey. I think you’re doing your best to juggle competing priorities. I respect that you want to stay with your partner.”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, mom.”

“You’re very welcome. Remember to text me once you have a time for tomorrow morning.”

“Will do.”

Shane trekked back to Ilya’s room, where he found Svetlana sitting against the back of the bed, Ilya all tangled up in her lap.”

“Is completely innocent,” Ilya announced before Shane could say anything.”

“Sure. I don’t even know if I believe you were innocent when you were born, baby, but I’m not worried about this. I’m glad you can get comfort from your friends. Now, do you two want to go outside, and I’ll see you into a Lyft to the mall?”

They agreed, so Shane led the way to the hospital’s main entrance. When they were near the doors, Shane borrowed Svetlana's phone again to plug in the locations. He made sure she knew where their home address was saved in the app and gave her his house key. When the

driver was there. He showed her how to confirm the license plate was correct then made a point of making eye contact with the driver before he left. He had to believe they would be safe, and he hoped they had a nice time.

Back upstairs, it was time to make a final decision about the procedure. “What do you think?” Shane asked Ilya. “Are you going to let them fix you up?”

“I am. I don’t love the thought of it, but I feel sure that it’s the right choice to make. I talked to Terry, too, and he agrees."

“Great. That’s really great.”

“Oh, Terry also told me that before the season starts they’re going to bring in a machine to test my heart, and they’re going to hire a tech who’s qualified to use it to work on home game days. Full NDA and everything. I’m not sure what we’ll do on the road, but they’re working on it. Anyway, they’re going to be testing me before games.”

“Good. They should. Bare minimum. I’m glad I don’t have to go gloves off with them to protect you.”

“I’m pretty sure that nobody at any level wants a stadium of fans to watch me die on the ice.”

“Oh god, no. No. I would be on that same ice. They’d probably have to cart me off too.”

“Yeah , I know that feeling. Believe me.”

“I know. I’m sorry you had to go through that, baby. Now, are you going to call the cardiologist’s office or do you want me to call?”

“I’ll call. Thanks.”

“Can you try to get them to tell you what time it will be?”

“Of course.”

Once it was all scheduled , Shane texted his mom to let her know. ”Can you scoot down the bed? I’ll climb in behind you like how you were with Svetlana. That looked cozy.”

“Yes, please.”

“Once Ilya had made room. Shane took off his shoes, picked up the blanket, and settled himself at the top of the bed. Ilya reclined back towards him, and Shane covered him with the blanket and pulled him closer.

Ilya sighed happily. “You make good furniture.”

“I think I like being your furniture. Only yours.”

“Uh-huh,” Ilya nodded , resting his head against Shane’s chest.

Shane petted Ilya's hair until he felt himself falling asleep. Then he closed his eyes and just drifted. He felt in that moment like he would rather die than lose the next few decades or so that he was supposed to spend with Ilya He knew that wasn't healthy but he was willing to acknowledge the feeling. He wanted to remember to bring it up with Theo but he wasn't sure it would stick with him once Ilya was home and safe, which he hoped would be by the afternoon or evening of the next day.

Times like this, Shane wished he were religious, but he just didn't have it in himself to believe in any kind of god. He imagined that it would be a comfort, but he knew he'd never find out how it really felt. He liked the concept of Buddhism, but he couldn't even really get into that. It was, like the craving for touch and a drive to make babies with the opposite sex, a part of the human experience that Shane was just entirely missing., as if it had been cut out of his head when he was born.

Shane put his hand over Ilya's pendant and contemplated the idea that Ilya did have some kind of faith. And yet it had not sustained him in a difficult time. Jesus had apparently not kept him warm at night, and Shane thought that was very unfortunate. He would love for Ilya to have been comforted, even if by something Shane thought was imaginary.

If it's just us humans, I guess we really do have to take care of each other, Shane thought to himself. And that's where I failed.

Ilya nuzzled his face against Shane's chest, leaving behind a tiny bit of moisture on Shane's t-shirt, but Shane didn't mind at all. He'd take decades of being slightly drooled on before he'd take any years without the man in his lap. He could always wash his clothes and himself, but he couldn't make a substitute for Ilya.

The nurse had explained that Ilya wouldn't get dinner that night, and that he couldn't have anything to eat or drink in the morning before the procedure. With that in mind, Shane saw very little reason for either of them to move. He would have loved to change out of his jeans, but it wasn't worth disrupting Ilya's rest. He would just have to deal with seams and hardware digging into his skin. After a while, he didn't even feel it anymore, and he fell asleep with his arms and his lap full of the man he loved.

In the morning, he felt so stiff that he wasn't sure he'd be able to walk but he found he was able to toddle far enough to get himself a cup of tea. Given that Ilya couldn't have anything, Shane hurried to finish it before he woke up. The hot tea scalded his throat but it warmed him from the inside and gave him a gentle boost of caffeine to start the day.

Later in the morning, he followed Ilya down to the area of the hospital where the procedure would be done then let the staff show him to a waiting room where they said the doctor would find him afterward. Shane texted his parents to let them know where he was then settled in for the wait.

Scrolling on his phone, Shane came across a heart health PSA and shared it to his Instagram. He didn't like vaguebooking, but in this case he thought it couldn't hurt.

Once his mother was sitting next to him, Shane leaned over to tell her, "The team is buying a machine and hiring someone, so they'll be testing his heart on game days.

“As well they should,” she hissed. “They need to keep an AED on hand too.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a device that can be used to shock him back to a normal rhythm if his heart really goes off the rails. The medics should have them already, but we’ll make sure.”

“Yes. I’m not taking any chances if they can be avoided.”

“Good plan. He’s too important.”

“Yes. Thank you for accepting him as part of our family.”

“Well, it wasn’t me or your dad who did that. As soon as you brought him to the house and told us you loved him, that was it. He was in our family. Same as if you had brought us a young woman and told us you were married.”

“Not everyone would see it that way.”

“I know, honey, but we had tried when you were small to make sure you knew we were accepting of different sexualities. You shouldn’t have been surprised.”

“Really? I know you guys were definitely never homophobic in front of me, but—“

“Don’t you remember Miss Stacy and Miss Jennifer?”

Shane thought for a moment, and then the light went off. “Oh right! I do! They had a house around the corner. You told me they loved each other just like you and dad did, and they were going to have a baby and be moms together.”

“Yes, honey. I thought it was important you saw that was a way families could be.”

“Yeah. I’m sorry I forgot.”

“It’s okay. Do you remember their baby?”

“Yes! Oh my god, it was the fattest baby ever."

“Yes. Her little rolls had little rolls. I’m friends with Stacy on n Facebook. You won’t believe what her daughter is doing these days.”

“Yeah? What?”

“Do you know or know of Rachel Unger?”

"Oh, she’s—“ Shane snapped his fingers. “She’s on the Canadian women’s team. She’s the goalie. She’s awesome at it even though she’s about half the size of the men’s team goalie.”

“Indeed. She’s impressive to watch.”

“Wow, I feel like I should reach out to her.”

“Then do that. Just don’t go on about how grotesquely fat a baby she was.”

“yeah, that’s a no. But it would be cool to talk to her. Can you get her number or email or something from her mom?”

“Sure. I’ll send Stacy a message and let you know once I hear back.”

"Cool, thanks. You know, I’m also suddenly remembering Kevin. You knew him from work, right?”

“Yes, I did. I recall you being rather smitten with him, so I’m surprised you didn’t remember him until now."

"Come on, I was like five or something? Right?”

“Yes, I believe so. You were so little and funny.”

“Kevin was so fancy. All fancy! He had a long, purple scarf around his neck. I wanted to borrow it and put it on and walk around all fancy like he did.”

Yuna laughed gently "Son, you should have told me that , and then we would have known about you long ago.”

“Haha right. But I remember you telling me that Kevin was a little different because he wanted to kiss other men instead of ladies.”

“Yes, it was all about kissing for you then. We let you watch The Princess Bride, and it was like you discovered that people kiss, and you were fascinated.”

“Wow. I remember Dad talking to me too he told me tha wthen boys in school or at hockey used the F slur they were being mean about men like Kevin. He even said there could be boys at school or hockey who were going to grow up to be like Kevin, but you just couldn’t tell yet, and it wouldn’t be nice to them to use the F slur.”

“Yes. Was it hard for you to hear that word, honey? Once you were figuring yourself out?”

“I didn’t love it. You know, we don’t let the camp kids use it, full stop?”

“That’s good.”

“It’s really hard for some of them. It's like they don’t know how to chirp without that word.”

“Hmm. That’s a lack of creativity right there.”

“Right. Maybe we should run a clinic each year on Creative Chirping? Who do you think are the best chippers in the league? Ones who aren’t hateful, of course.”

“I’ll have to think about that. I expect you would know better than me.”

“Yeah, maybe. It’s not something I pay much attention to.”

“For good reason. I like the idea of the clinic though. They should learn how to give a guy a hard time without going for his sexuality or ethnicity or any of that.”

“I completely agree. The other camp coaches are all in line on this too. Kids say those things, they go home.”

“And then the parents regret that their children are missing out on a great opportunity because of some bullshit they probably taught their kids in the first place.”

“Right. Thanks for trying to teach me different. I’m sorry it didn’t all stick.”

“Not your fault. We should have done some more of that when you were a little older.”

Shane shrugged. “Well, I look forward to talking to Rachel. That’s wild!”

“Yes. It’s too bad they moved away, but I guess I was Stacy’s long distance hockey mom mentor years ago.”

“I bet.” Shane looked at the time on his phone. “I wonder how much longer until the doctor comes out.”

“Who knows. Just try to relax a little, honey. He’s in good hands now.”

“Yeah. I just hate that they’re not my hands.”

“I’m sure. You were smart enough for medical school if that had been what you wanted.”

“I’m not sure about that but thanks for saying so. I couldn’t imagine myself going to school all those years and not playing hockey.”

“I know. But the downside to being a famous athlete is that you have to let somebody else do the medical procedures.”

“Feels like a big downside today. But it’ll be okay.”

Shane kept his phone out and looked up Rachel Unger. She was a petite, skinny thing now. Shane didn’t know how she managed to cover a crease the way a 6’4” guy with Gumby legs could. She had to be crazy fast. Good for her.

Shane was intently re-reading information on what Ilya’s recovery might be like when he looked up to see the doctor walking toward him. The man looked calmly neutral, so Shane suspected nothing unexpected had happened.

“Hi, doctor,” Shane smiled at him.

“Hi, Shane. Good to see you again. I’d like to talk for a few minutes, but first off everything went well.”

Shane felt his spine soften in relief. “Oh good. Thank you! These are my parents. I’d like to bring them in on the discussion as well.”

“Okay. We can all squeeze into a little room over here,” the doctor gestured to a door in the wall of the waiting room, and the Hollanders followed him there. Inside, Shane and his parents sat on a small, hard sofa, and the doctor took the only chair.

“As I said, the procedure went well. Ilya tolerated the anesthesia very well so I don’t anticipate any problems for him. You’re going to need to keep an eye on the surgical site in his groin to make sure it doesn’t become infected or bleed heavily. If there were to be heavy bleeding from there, you would need to get him lying down, put pressure on the site and call 911. Don’t drive him to the hospital yourself in that circumstance. He could pass out before you get here.”

“Ugh, scary. Okay, understood. How long is that going to be a concern?”

“Just until it heals, maybe a month or so. With his age and level of fitness, he should heal quickly. Speaking of fitness, his heart itself was noticeably larger than what I usually see. It’s a real machine!”

Shane smirked. “Don’t I know it. But seriously, he’s been playing hockey at a high level since he was about 16. We train obsessively.”

“Okay, that makes sense. For the next maybe six months, I want that dialed back, light exercise only for now. I want to see him in a month to make sure he’s recovering well, and then I’ll see him before your training and playing start up again to clear him for that. I understand you’ll be going away for part of the summer?”

“Yes, to my cottage. It’s a lake house about two hours away.”

“Very nice. Okay. I want you to make sure you have my contact information for in case he has an issue and needs to see a doctor in that area.”

“How would we know if he needs to be seen?”

“If I remember correctly, Ilya has a watch that monitors heart rate and checks for a-fib?”

“Yes, he does. It alerted him when he had his episode the other day.”

“Very good. That can be an excellent tool. How he feels is important, too. So if he’s on the watch testing his heart rhythm because it feels wrong, that’s just about as alarming as if the watch actually alerts him. So keep an eye out and try to keep him resting as much as you can.”

“That’s the plan. Definitely. Rest and relaxation and fresh air. Then we’ll come see you again before we’re back to work.”

“Perfect. Okay, if you want to come back to be with him in recovery, I can take you there.”

“Yes, please!" Shane stood up, ready to follow the doctor, then turned to his parents. “You guys can head out. We’ll be fine. Thank you for being here.”

“We wouldn’t be anywhere else,” Yuna replied, and David nodded in agreement.

“If you want to come see Ilya at home soon, I’m sure he’d love that.”

“Okay, we’ll let you know.”

“Great, thanks again.”

The doctor let himself out of the room, and Shane stayed right on his heels. Soon, they were walking through a labyrinth of curtained off areas, and the doctor motioned Shane into one of them. Inside, Ilya was in bed, his eyes closed and his face lax. Shane found his hand under the covers and held it tightly.

“Okay," the doctor said, “a nurse will come by to check on him, and she will get him discharged when he’s ready.”

“Great. Thanks.”

Shane turned all of his attention to the man in the bed. A few minutes later, he felt Ilya’s hand flex in his, and heard Ilya moan low in his throat. “Baby? You okay? I’m here now.” He used his free hand to rub some warmth into Ilya’s bare arm. “I’m here. We’re gonna go home soon. You just need to wake up, baby.”

“Mmmf!” Ilya’s eyes opened wide, and he lifted his head and shoulders from the bed. He didn’t get very far until Shane wrapped an arm around his back and pulled him up, just in time for Ilya to throw up a mouthful of bile into his own lap.

“Oh, baby,” Shane soothed as he rubbed Ilya’s back. He groped for the call button and pressed it to call for a nurse.

A minute later, the curtain swished open, and a young woman entered. “Hi,I’m Amy. Oh, goodness. I’ll be right back, okay?

“Thanks,” Shane said. “Sorry for having to buzz you.”

“This is what it’s for. You’re good.”

She hustled away then returned a few minutes later with her arms and hands full. “Okay, I’ve got a clean gown here and some fresh blankets. I also have something the doctor approved to help with the nausea and some water and a cup. You can spit into the cup. It’s totally fine.”

“Mmm, gross,” Ilya groused. Amy reached out, put a hand on his blanket-covered ankle and squeezed lightly. “You don’t need to worry about that. It’s my job to deal with that kind of thing. You are completely fine. Now, do you want me to have your friend leave while I help you with the new gown or do you want me to leave and let your friend help you?”

Ilya reached out and wrapped his hand around Shane’s forearm. “Shane will help.”

“Okay then, but first here’s your pill.” She handed Ilya a plastic cup with a tiny pill in it along with an opened bottle of water. Ilya swallowed the pill with a sip then put the water down. Amy smiled and left.

Shane carefully peeled off the dirty gown then balled it up and put it in the hamper. He pulled the clean one over Ilya's shoulders then replaced the blankets and pulled Ilya into a hug. "This is better than pill,"

"I'm sorry that you feel bad, baby."

"Is not your fault. Will feel better soon and go home."

"Right. We'll sleep in our own bed tonight."

"Good. Is all I want. Bed and you."

"You'll have both tonight. All night. You want some water to swish out your mouth?"

Ilya nodded, and Shane handed him the bottle and the empty cup then threw away the cup when Ilya was done with it. "You want some soda? You think that would help you feel better?"

"Yeah, maybe. Would be nice I think."

Shane glanced out into the hallway but didn't see anybody so he hesitantly pressed the call button again. Amy again appeared quickly.

"Everything okay in here?"

"We're okay, but could he get some Coke or something?"

"Yeah, sure. Just a minute."

She left the room then came back soon with a tiny can of regular Coke and a cup of ice. "Here you go. Let me know if he starts feeling any worse, okay. Um, Ilya?" She ducked down to be face to face with him. "Are you having any bleeding at your groin?"

Ilya quickly looked at himself under the covers then shook his head. "No, but I will say if I do."

"Perfect, thank you. It's just that we need to get right on it if you have any serious bleeding."

"Yes, I understand. Thank you, Amy."

"You're welcome. Buzz me if you need anything else.

"Will do," Shane agreed. "Thank you."

"It would be very disturbing," Ilya muttered, "heavy bleeding from groin. I would say something very much."

"Yes. Let's hope that doesn't happen."

"Definitely." Ilya nodded then took a small sip of his Coke.

“You tell me if that’s not sitting right, okay?”

“Oh, you will know.”

“I bet. Are you warm enough?”

“Eh, not really. But Is okay. Will not freeze.”

“Not okay with me.” Shane touched Ilya’s face, noting that he didn’t feel warm at all. Ilya’s arms were covered in goose bumps , and Shane desperately wanted to get him home where they could be warm in bed.” Feeling like a pest, he decided to buzz Amy again.

“What’s up?” She said with a smile when she came through the curtain.

“I’m so sorry, but he’s really cold. Can we get more blankets or something?”

“Sure thing, just a minute.”

Amy ducked out then returned a few minutes later with a bundle of white fabric in her arms. “These are just out of the dryer, so they’re really nice and warm. Let me know if this doesn’t do the trick.”

“Thank you so much!” Shane accepted the blankets, and they were indeed very warm from the dryer. He set them on the bed and then took them one by one to wrap around Ilya, who immediately relaxed into them. “That better, baby?”

“Yesss.”

When all of the warmed blankets were wrapped around Ilya, Shane pulled the whole lump into his arms, squeezing tight to try to push the warmth into Ilya, who hummed happily and leaned into Shane.

A few minutes later, Amy came back in, wielding a thermometer. “Sorry, guys, I just need to get a temp on him.

Shane drew back enough for her to work but kept one arm around Ilya, hugging him from the side.
“Okay, temp looks good. Are you feeling any warmer?”

Ilya nodded, and Amy patted his arm then left again.

“Here’s the thing,” Shane said quietly to Ilya, “I don’t want you feeling bad in any way, especially not if I can do anything about it. You’re cold, I want to warm you up. You’re hungry, I want to feed you. You’re tired, I want to put you in bed. You get it?”

“I get it. I love you too, Shane.”

Shane gave him another tight hug."yeah, that’s it. I love you so much that it makes me crazy to know that you’re hurting or don’t feel good.”

Ilya sighed. “You can’t protect me from everything.”

“Maybe not, but I can sure try. “

“Okay, thank you. Just, next season, when somebody knocks into me on the ice, you cannot tear them apart with bare hands. Yes? Okay?”

“Yes, okay. I will have to control my reactions for sure because I’m going to want to kill anybody who puts you into the boards or knocks you out. I am however going to make sure everyone knows we’re a package deal. If you get hurt, and they take you to get checked out, I’m going with you, and I won’t care how much time is left in the game.”

“Yes, good. Make sure they know it’s me to you, too. After Marleau hit you, they wouldn’t even tell me if you were conscious or let me near you.”

“I’m sorry, I know that was hard. I’ve seen the video.”

“Yes. Was no good. Next season, you so much as roll your ankle, and I’m going with you.”

“That’s probably not necessary but I totally get where you’re coming from Remember, we’ll have my parents, too. They’ll likely be at most of our games. You’ll have to put them down as alternate emergency contacts. If one of us really needs to stay on the ice, my parents will go with whoever’s down.”

“Yes, okay. They are very good, your parents.”

“They are. And they’re your family now, too. “

“I haven’t had family I actually wanted around since my mother died. My father and brother, no good for me.”

“I’m sorry. Can you tell me what went so wrong between your brother and you? He should have wanted to look out for you.”

“Yes. Well, first our father moved on from his mother to my mother, and then I came along and took too much attention. Then, when I was 15 , he came in on me and Sasha, and since then I was never Ilya or Brother, only slur words for gay you do not like.”

“I know I never met him, but I really kind of hate that guy. Sorry, baby.”

“No, I hate him too. I don’t think I’ll ever see him again.”

“Good. If you saw him, I’d probably meet him too, and that might not go so well. “

“You’re really determined to be my pitbull today. Must get you collar and leash.”

Shane brain immediately turned that into a sexy proposition. “Oh, yes. Yes, master.”

“No, there is no master here. I have always liked that we are equal.”

“Yeah, me too. Head to head, from day one. And all the way down the road.”

Shane was holding Ilya again, trying to warm him up some more, when Amy came into the room again.

“Sorry to interrupt! Ilya, I’m just checking in to see if you need to use the bathroom or anything.””I, well,I guess I could. Will that help me go home soon?”

“Sure, it’ll check off one box. Now, I want you to be very slow and careful as you get off the bed. Then get your bearings before you start walking.”

“I’ll help him,” Shane said.

“I’d really like to see how he can do on his own at this point so please kind of hang back if you can. I don't mean let him fall. Just give him a chance to be on his own two feet.”

“Yeah, okay.” Shane didn’t like it, but he’d play along for now.

Ilya slid down from sitting on the bed and stood still holding onto the bed for a long moment.

Shane reached his hands out to be ready just in case help was needed, and Amy asked, “Are you feeling dizzy?”

Ilya slowly shook his head. “No, just feel weak. Hate being weak like old man .”

“You’re not weak. You’ve just been through a lot. You’ll be strong again soon “

“Have to be.”

“Okay, when you’re feeling steady enough, come meet me in the hallway “ she looked at Shane then. “Why don’t you stay behind him just in case. I’ll be in front.”

Shane thought that he’d like to see her try to stop him from staying behind Ilya, but he didn’t want to be argumentative so he kept his mouth shut. Ilya started to shuffle forward, and as soon as there was room Shane fell in behind him. "If I see you wavering, I’m grabbing you so be prepared okay?”

“Yes, Mr. Caveman.” And Ilya sounded so exhausted that Shane wanted to pick him up to save him the work of supporting his own body weight, “Remember. Not damsel.”

“Now, how could I forget something like that?” He heard a slight, low chuckle come from Ilya and was pleased. As they went down the hallway, Amy walked slowly backward with her hands out toward Ilya. She didn’t look like she could safely catch him, but assuredly she had training for that. Shane was still glad he was there, too. When they reached a single stall, unisex restroom, Amy stopped and waved Ilya in.

“Now please don’t lock the door, just in case. I’m not coming in unless I hear a shout or a big boom. Okay? You’ll have your privacy.”

“Should I go in?” Shane asked. Ilya shook his head, and Amy held up one hand. “I think we should give him a chance to do this on his own. Being in the hospital can be tough on a person’s dignity, and doing basic tasks independently helps with that. Obviously, you two are very close, but that doesn’t mean he doesn’t feel the need to do this himself.” Ilya nodded in agreement.

“Okay, I’ll be right here. Same criteria as Amy said—a shout or a big boom, and I’m coming in. I don't even care if you locked it or not.”

Ilya rolled his eyes and muttered, “cave man,” darkly at Shane., who shrugged and watched Ilya shuffle into the bathroom alone.

When Ilya shuffled out again a couple of minutes later, he still looked exhausted but not any worse for wear. “Everything okay?” Amy asked. “Any blood or other problems?”

“No blood. Everything was normal.”

“Excellent. Then let’s make our way back to your bed, and I’ll reach out to your doctor to see when we can let you go.”

Shane shadowed Ilya back up the hallway then stood ready to help as Ilya got himself back on the bed. He looked cold again, so Shane wrapped the wad of blankets back around him.

“You know, let me get you some new warm ones,” Amy said, “Do you need more soda or water or anything else?”

“No,” Ilya replied quietly, “am okay. Thank you.”

“No problem! I’ll be right back.”

A few minutes later, Shane had another armful of dryer-warm blankets. He thought maybe he should do this for Ilya at home, but there he could turn up the furnace and climb in under the covers to add body heat. The hospital was cold with narrow beds, so warmed blankets were the best if not only option. Shane straightened out the warm blankets so he could put them around Ilya all at once then made quick work of peeling off the cool blankets and wrapping him in the warm ones. Ilya relaxing into the heat was a satisfying reaction, and Shane held the blankets closer around him for a moment, bracing Ilya’s weight against his own body.

He hoped they could go home soon, but at the same time he felt like he could stay right where he was forever.

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