

Here, After

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Here, After

by [BlckOnyx](#)

Summary

Ilya opened one of his messages.

Have you seen the news?

Ilya, call me. Now.

Please tell me you already fucking know.

Jesus Christ, man.

That was it. No context. No explanation. Just panic wrapped in vague bullshit.

His jaw locked. “Are you fucking serious right now,” he muttered, thumb scrolling harder than necessary. Say it or don’t, you assholes. The half-answers made his skin crawl. It felt like they were all circling something awful, whispering around it, waiting for him to step close enough to get hit.

His chest felt tight now, pressure building, so he did the one thing that made sense. He opened social media.

Shane Hollander’s name was everywhere.

Or

Shane was hurt in ways everyone could see, and in ways only Ilya would carry.

Notes

So. I have watched the show more times than I am willing to admit. I followed Connor and Hudson’s appearances like it was my second job. I reread the book. I reread scenes. I reread fanfic. And at some point, instead of screaming into the void about feelings, I decided to write my own.

I love the show. I love the book. I love the characters. I even love the actors. What I do not love is how weirdly toxic parts of fandom can get sometimes. So this fic is me opting out. This is my quiet little escape where I get to feel things without discourse breathing down my neck.

Yes, this is angst. Deeply. Aggressively. Emotionally irresponsible levels of angst. Why? Because apparently I enjoy suffering and making fictional hockey players suffer with me.

Important note: no one dies in this fic. I promise. I recently read a fic where Ilya did die and I was fully sobbing, staring at my phone like I had personally been betrayed by the universe, so I am not doing that to you. Or to myself.

If you're here, thank you for reading. If you feel something, I'd love to hear about it—comments genuinely mean the world. And if you liked it even a little, kudos are very appreciated and lovingly hoarded in my heart.

Be kind. Drink water. Enjoy the pain.

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

Chapter 1: Here

Ilya Rozanov had always been good at lying to himself. It was a skill, really. You didn't survive this long without learning how to compartmentalize the things that could ruin you.

This was supposed to be easy.

He sat alone with a glass of vodka sweating into the table, the apartment quiet in a way that felt aggressive. The kind of silence that demanded honesty. He hated it. He knocked the glass back, felt the burn drag its way down his throat, and waited for the familiar numbness. It didn't come. It never fucking did anymore.

He told himself it had only ever been sex. Convenient. Low-stakes. Two schedules colliding in stolen hotel rooms and borrowed time. A body he knew well enough to move with his eyes closed. That was the agreement, unspoken but solid. No feelings. No future. No mess.

Except somewhere along the line, it had stopped being just that.

He couldn't pinpoint when it happened. There was no dramatic shift, no moment he could circle and blame. It was gradual. Insidious. The way Shane laughed when he was exhausted. The way he got quiet after losses. The way his freckles showed up more when he'd been out in the sun too long, like his skin couldn't keep secrets any better than Ilya could.

That was the problem. Ilya didn't just want Shane's body anymore. He wanted the small things. The unguarded ones. The parts that weren't offered so freely.

He clenched his jaw and poured another drink.

This, whatever the hell this had turned into, was dangerous. It had weight. It pulled at him when he tried to step back. It made him think in ways he absolutely could not afford. He'd crossed a line without noticing, and now he was standing on the wrong side of it, staring at something that could ruin everything if he reached for it.

So he had to end it.

The thought made his chest tighten in a way that pissed him off. He swallowed hard, annoyed at himself for reacting like this. Ending it didn't mean erasing Shane from existence. He could still see him on the ice. On screens. In interviews where he smiled like he had no idea how badly he could fuck someone up just by existing.

Ilya could live with that.

He could admire Shane from a distance. He could track his career through headlines and box scores. He could pretend that was enough. People did that shit all the time. Wanting something and surviving without it. Fine. He could manage.

He had to.

Because wanting Shane like this, wanting more than what they had, meant vulnerability. It meant risk. It meant standing too close to something sharp and trusting it not to cut him. And Ilya didn't trust anything that much. Not people. Not love. Not himself.

He laughed under his breath, sharp and humorless, and poured another glass. Vodka sloshed against the rim. He didn't bother wiping it up.

This was him being smart. This was him choosing control. Ending it before it got worse. Before he wanted something Shane couldn't give him. Before he let himself believe in something that would eventually be taken away anyway.

Still, the idea of nothing, no texts, no rooms that smelled like Shane's shampoo, no familiar weight beside him in the dark made his stomach twist.

He drank anyway.

If he stayed drunk enough, maybe the lie would hold.

He eventually decided to sleep, mostly because staying awake felt like inviting thoughts he didn't want. He stretched out on the bed fully clothed, phone in his hand, thumb moving out of habit more than intention. He wasn't even looking at anything specific, just scrolling, letting time pass.

Then a text came in.

Jane: Out with the guys. Dinner turned into them dragging me to a club. Pray for me.

Ilya snorted despite himself. His first instinct was something sarcastic, and something bitchy. A comment about Shane hating clubs. About him pretending he wasn't having fun. About how he was absolutely going to have fun and would deny it later.

His thumb hovered.

Then he stopped.

This was it. Or at least the beginning of it. The slow fade. The gradual quiet. He told himself it didn't have to be dramatic. He didn't need to announce anything. He could just... stop responding right away. Stretch the silences. Miss a few conversations. Make himself less available.

Ghosting felt shitty, but so did everything else.

He locked the phone and set it face-down on the nightstand, like that somehow made the decision firmer. He told himself he'd text Shane when he woke up. That he just needed sleep. That things would feel more manageable in the morning.

He didn't remember falling asleep.

When he woke, it was abrupt and violent, like he'd been shoved out of something. His heart was racing, breath shallow, the sheets tangled around his legs. For a few seconds, he didn't

know where he was. He just knew something was wrong. Not in a vague way. In a deep, instinctive way that made his chest hurt.

He grabbed his phone.

The time glared back at him. Still dark. Hours before sunrise.

And then he saw the notifications.

Too many. Way too many.

Missed calls. Messages. Group chats blowing up his screen like a goddamn fire alarm. His teammates' names smeared together as he unlocked the phone, irritation cutting straight through the anxiety. What the fuck was this? It was the middle of the fucking night. Why was everyone acting like the world had ended?

He opened one of the messages.

Have you seen the news?

Ilya, call me. Now.

Please tell me you already fucking know.

Jesus Christ, man.

That was it. No context. No explanation. Just panic wrapped in vague bullshit.

His jaw locked. "Are you fucking serious right now," he muttered, thumb scrolling harder than necessary. Say it or don't, you assholes. The half-answers made his skin crawl. It felt like they were all circling something awful, whispering around it, waiting for him to step close enough to get hit.

His chest felt tight now, pressure building, so he did the one thing that made sense. He opened social media.

Shane Hollander's name was everywhere.

Headlines. Alerts. Half-formed speculation. Photos taken from too far away, too grainy, like distance made it more acceptable. His vision tunneled as he read, words slipping out of order before snapping back into place.

**Bruising altercation outside nightclub in New York City.
Professional hockey player hospitalized after violent assault.
Condition currently unknown.**

New York. A few hours' drive from Boston. Close enough to feel real. Close enough to hurt.

In any other circumstance, seeing Shane's name like this would've made him smug. Proud. Defensive. Shane being talked about meant Shane mattered. Shane was important. Shane was...

Beaten. Brutally. Left bleeding on a sidewalk.

Ilya's hands started shaking so badly he nearly dropped the phone. He refreshed without meaning to, desperate and furious, needing more information and hating himself for it. Articles contradicted each other. No motive. No suspects. Words like *severe* and *critical* slipped in and out of the text like they didn't carry weight.

Then he saw the video.

Someone had reposted it. Blurry. Shaky. Taken by some asshole who thought pulling out a phone was better than stepping in. Ilya clicked it before he could stop himself.

He didn't make it far.

The moment Shane's face filled the screen, blood streaked across skin that Ilya knew too well. Something in him broke loose. His breath hitched hard, panic slamming into him so fast it made him dizzy. He shut the video off, bile rising, pulse roaring in his ears.

"No. No, no, no," he said out loud, voice rough, like saying it enough times might undo what he'd just seen.

But his brain had already gone somewhere else.

His mother lying still, skin wrong-colored, eyes closed in a way that meant they would never open again. Twelve years old and understanding, all at once, what it meant when something was already gone by the time you reached it.

He doubled over, elbows on his knees, phone clutched uselessly in his hand.

This wasn't supposed to happen. Not like this. Not now. He was supposed to end things cleanly. Slowly. Carefully. He was supposed to make himself okay with distance.

Instead, the world had reached out and fucking shattered Shane, and Ilya hadn't even texted him back.

Hayden Pike hadn't slept. Not really. He'd closed his eyes a few times in the chair shoved against the hallway wall, but every time his body started to give in, his brain yanked him back up again. Too loud. Too alert. Like something bad would happen the second he wasn't watching.

The hospital smelled like disinfectant and burnt coffee. The lights were brutal. No windows anywhere near where he'd parked himself, just white walls and the low, constant hum of machines behind closed doors.

The doctors hadn't said a fucking thing that mattered.

They'd talked around it. Used careful language. Stable but serious. Under observation. Waiting to see. Nothing concrete. Nothing that made the tight knot in Hayden's chest loosen even a little. Every time footsteps came down the hallway, he looked up, half-expecting someone to finally say something useful.

No one did.

He dragged a hand down his face and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He could still see it if he let himself, the moment everything went sideways. Shane going down. Blood where there shouldn't have been blood. The sound his own voice had made when he yelled for help, ugly and panicked and useless.

And Hayden had dragged him out.

That was the part that wouldn't shut the fuck up.

Shane never liked clubs. Everyone knew that. He went because it was a team thing, because one of the guys had something big to celebrate, because when you're the captain you don't get to opt out. You show up. You make appearances. You keep morale high.

And Hayden had been the one pushing it. *Come on, man. Just for a bit. It'll be fine.*

Fucking liar.

He pressed his head back against the wall and closed his eyes, jaw tight. He should've been closer. Should've seen it coming. Should've been faster. What good was being built like a tank if he couldn't protect the one person who actually mattered?

He checked his phone. No new updates. Shane's parents are arriving soon. Minutes now. He typed out a message, erased it, typed it again. How the hell were you supposed to update someone when you had nothing to give them but uncertainty and dread?

He's still unconscious. Doctors are monitoring him. I'm here.

It felt like shit, but it was honest. He hit send before he could overthink it.

Hayden swore quietly and scrubbed at his eyes, forcing himself to breathe like a normal human being instead of someone on the edge of losing it. He couldn't spiral. Not yet. Shane needed someone functional when he woke up. When he *woke up*. Hayden clung to that word like it was a promise.

His phone buzzed again. This time, he didn't hesitate.

"Hey," he said when the call connected, voice rough.

"Hey," Jackie answered immediately, worry bleeding through the single word. "Jesus, Hayden. You sound like hell."

He let out a dry huff. "Yeah, well. Hospital chic isn't doing me any favors."

“That’s not funny,” she said gently.

“I know,” he admitted. “Sorry. Swing and a miss.”

There was a pause, not uncomfortable, just heavy. Jackie didn’t rush him. She never did.

“How’s he doing?” she asked.

Hayden stared at the floor. “Same. No big changes. Doctors are being... doctors. Careful as shit.”

“Which means bad?”

“Which means they don’t want to say the wrong thing,” he said. Then, quieter, “I fucked up, Jacks.”

She didn’t argue. She didn’t rush to fix it either. “You didn’t do this to him.”

“I dragged him there.”

“You didn’t put hands on him.”

Hayden swallowed. “I should’ve been there.”

“You *were* there,” she said firmly. “You got him help. You didn’t leave.”

It wasn’t comfort exactly, but it steadied him. Kept him upright.

“Are you eating?” she asked.

He scoffed. “Absolutely not.”

“Hydrated?”

“Debatable.”

“God, you’re impossible,” she said, exasperated but soft. “I wish I was there.”

“I know.” He meant it. The idea of seeing her right now almost hurt. “I’ll be okay.”

Jackie didn’t call him on the bullshit. “I love you,” she said instead.

“Love you too.”

He hung up and exhaled slowly, phone still in his hand. For the first time in hours, he felt like he could maybe stand without collapsing.

That was when he looked up and saw them—Yuna and David, walking down the hallway toward him, faces tight and pale and already knowing too much.

Yuna didn't waste time. She hugged him, quick but firm, like she was holding herself together through muscle memory alone. David stood close, hands jammed in his pockets, eyes glassy but focused. They didn't ask stupid questions. They didn't demand answers Hayden didn't have.

Yuna was the one who finally said it. "You need rest. Even a little. You're no good to anyone like this."

Hayden wanted to argue. Wanted to say *fuck that* and plant himself right there until his legs gave out. But the truth was sitting heavy in his bones. He nodded once.

"I'll be back," he said. "Soon."

"Go," Yuna replied. Not unkind. Just firm. Like she was holding the line for him.

The hotel room felt wrong. Too quiet. Hayden showered fast, water beating down on his shoulders like punishment, like maybe he could scrub the night off his skin. He didn't linger. Didn't sit. Didn't even dry his hair properly. Twenty minutes later he was back in the hospital, coffee burning his tongue, heart already picking up speed as he walked the familiar hallway.

He expected more waiting. More silence. More doctors saying *we'll see*.

He did not expect chaos.

The sound hit first. A crash. Then another. Voices raised but not shouting exactly. Controlled panic. Hayden broke into a jog.

The room looked like something had exploded inside it.

A tray lay overturned near the door. Plastic cups scattered and crushed. A chair tipped onto its side. A monitor beeped erratically, its rhythm off, wrong. The air felt tight, charged.

Shane was at the center of it.

He was half-upright in the bed, hospital gown twisted around his torso, IV line pulled taut as he thrashed. His breathing was wild, short, and fast, like he couldn't get enough air no matter how hard he tried. His eyes were wide and unfocused, darting to every movement, every sound. There was blood dried at his hairline, stark against his skin.

"Don't...don't fucking touch me!" Shane yelled, voice hoarse and raw. He swung his arm blindly, knocking something else to the floor. "Get away...get the fuck away!"

Yuna stood closest, hands raised, voice soft and steady. "Shane. Hey. It's okay. You're safe. You're in the hospital."

He didn't hear her. Or maybe he did, but it didn't matter. His body was locked somewhere else entirely. Every muscle rigid. Every instinct screaming.

Someone stepped closer, too fast, and Shane reacted instantly, kicking out, gasping, eyes flashing with pure terror. Not anger. Fear. Deep and uncontrollable.

Hayden's chest caved in.

"Hey," he said, carefully, staying near the doorway. "Hey, buddy. It's me."

Shane's head snapped toward him.

For half a second, Hayden thought he'd broken through.

Then Shane recoiled.

"No," he said, voice cracking. "No—no, no—don't—"

The look on his face almost dropped Hayden to his knees. Shane stared at him like he was a threat. Like he was a stranger. Like he was about to be hurt again.

"Fuck," Hayden whispered.

He took one careful step back. "Okay. Okay. I'm not coming closer. I swear."

Nurses were already moving in, practiced and calm, voices low and firm. One of them caught Hayden's eye and shook her head just slightly. Not now.

Shane was still shaking, breaths coming in sharp bursts, fingers clawing at the sheets like he needed something solid to hold onto and couldn't find it.

"I can't..." Shane gasped. "I can't—please—"

Hayden felt his throat close. He wanted to help. Wanted to do something. Anything. But all he could do was make it worse by being there.

"I'm gonna step out," he said quietly, more to Shane than anyone else. "You're okay. They've got you."

Shane didn't respond. He'd curled inward now, arms tight around himself, eyes squeezed shut like he could block the world out if he tried hard enough.

Hayden backed away as the nurses took over, heart pounding, vision blurring. He turned before anyone could see his face and stepped into the hallway, the door closing behind him with a soft, final click.

He leaned against the wall, chest heaving, hands shaking.

Whatever had happened to Shane hadn't stayed on the street. It was still happening. And there was nothing Hayden could do to stop it.

He pushed off the wall and started pacing, short laps up and down the hallway because standing still felt like inviting a breakdown. His head was still full of Shane's voice, raw and

terrified, and the sound of something hitting the floor. He rubbed at his face, hard, like he could reset himself if he tried hard enough.

That was when he saw the figure at the far end of the hallway.

At first, Hayden thought he was hallucinating. Exhaustion did weird shit to your brain. He stopped mid-step and stared.

The guy wasn't moving. Just standing there like he didn't know whether to come closer or turn around and bolt.

Hayden's stomach dropped.

Ilya Rozanov.

Hayden actually looked away and then back again, just to be sure. Same broad shoulders. Same stupidly familiar posture. Same face but wrong somehow. Tense. Tight. Hesitant in a way Hayden had never seen on him.

"What the fuck," Hayden muttered.

Ilya took a few careful steps forward and then stopped, like he'd hit an invisible line. The two of them stood there, a few feet apart, the air between them thick and hostile. Hayden's body reacted on instinct with his shoulders squaring, weight shifting forward. If Ilya thought he was getting anywhere near Shane, he was dead fucking wrong.

As far as Hayden was concerned, Ilya Rozanov was an asshole. A rival. The guy who played Shane like a personal vendetta and seemed to enjoy every second of it. Whatever history they had on the ice didn't belong in this hallway.

Hayden didn't bother being polite.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he snapped, voice low but sharp. "You lost, or you just here to stir shit?"

Hayden braced himself for the grin, the mouthy comeback, the usual Rozanov bullshit.

It didn't happen.

Ilya stayed where he was, jaw set hard, eyes cutting past Hayden toward the door to Shane's room like his body wanted to move and his brain wouldn't let it. His hands were curled tight at his sides, knuckles white, shoulders tense like he was bracing for a hit. There was something off about him, something stripped-down and wrong, and it unsettled Hayden more than any smug attitude ever had.

He didn't look cocky.

He looked wrecked.

Like he'd run himself empty and was still forcing his feet to hold him up.

“Don’t fucking look at me like that,” Hayden said. “Why do you even care?”

He didn’t soften it. Didn’t bother. “You two hate each other. That’s what everyone knows. So what is this? Some fucked-up victory lap? You wanna see how bad he got it?”

Something flashed across Ilya’s face that looked like anger, grief, something ugly and uncontrolled. Then it vanished, buried under effort. The familiar Ilya slid back into place, but it didn’t fit right. Like armor thrown on too fast.

He scoffed, a short sound, trying for dismissive and not quite landing it. “Please. If I want to be asshole, I don’t need hospital for that.”

His accent was heavier now, words catching, consonants rougher. He dragged a hand over the back of his neck, eyes anywhere but Hayden’s.

“I don’t care about your little stories,” he said, tone flat, forced. “Just...” He stopped, jaw tightening, like the English was fighting him. “Just tell me how he is, yes?”

Hayden opened his mouth to shut him down.

Another crash cut through the hallway.

Something hit the floor inside Shane’s room hard. A sharp sound, followed by a strangled shout that punched straight into Hayden’s chest. Shane’s voice, broken and panicked, yelling words that didn’t quite land as sentences.

“Fuck,” Hayden breathed.

That was it. That was the sound of things going past manageable. He could already picture the nurses trying to talk Shane down, voices calm and firm, hands hovering because touching him made it worse. Last resort territory.

Hayden turned just in time to see Ilya’s face change.

Whatever mask he’d been holding together shattered completely. His head snapped toward the door, eyes wide, breath hitching. “That’s him,” he said, like Hayden didn’t already know.

“Rozanov—” Hayden started.

Too late.

Ilya moved.

He didn’t shove past Hayden; he just went, fast and reckless, like his body had decided before his brain caught up. Hayden lunged, fingers brushing fabric, missing him by inches.

“Fuck!” Hayden swore, chasing him down the last few steps.

Ilya shoved the door open.

The room froze.

A nurse had one foot braced against the bed, hands raised. Another stood near the IV pole, clearly ready to call for backup. Yuna was pressed back against the wall, eyes wide, David half in front of her like he could shield her from what was happening.

And Shane...

Shane was curled in on himself, spine bowed like he was trying to fold inward, breathing fast and shallow enough that his chest barely rose. His hands were knotted in the sheets, fists locked so tight his knuckles had gone pale, fabric twisted between his fingers like it was the only thing anchoring him to the bed. Sweat clung to his skin, darkening the collar of the hospital gown, hair plastered messily to his forehead. His face was flushed in a way that didn't look like heat or exertion, just panic. His eyes were open too wide, glassy and unfocused, tracking movement that wasn't there. There was fear in him that went past shock or confusion. The kind that lived deep, that hijacked your body and didn't ask permission.

Everyone in the room turned toward Ilya like he didn't belong there. Like he'd walked into the wrong reality.

Ilya didn't look at them. Didn't even register them.

His focus narrowed until there was only Shane.

"Shane," Ilya said.

He tried to say it like a normal person would. Like this was just another room, another day. But the name cracked anyway, soft and frayed, his voice dropping too low, too careful. It barely carried past the bed, like he was afraid even sound might set Shane off again.

Nothing happened.

Shane's breathing hitched, stuttering, but he didn't move. His eyes stayed unfocused, his body still locked tight like a trapped animal waiting for the next hit.

Ilya swallowed hard. His jaw worked like he was bracing himself. He took a step closer before he realized he was moving, then stopped short, hands curling uselessly at his sides.

"Shane," he said again.

This time, the control was gone. The name came out rougher, heavier, the accent thickening around it, emotion bleeding through no matter how hard he tried to contain it. There was a break in his voice he didn't bother hiding, a shake he didn't have the energy to fight.

That did it.

Shane stilled. His shoulders were tense, breath coming too fast, but something shifted. His head turned slowly, like it took effort, like moving hurt. His eyes dragged across the room and then locked onto Ilya.

And they stayed there.

Recognition flickered. The wild edge dulled just enough, the panic no longer scattering in every direction. Shane's gaze fixed on Ilya's face like it was something solid in a room that wouldn't stop spinning, like a thread he could grab onto before everything else slipped away.

"Ilya," Shane said. The name came out broken, almost a question.

Hayden stopped just inside the doorway.

Ilya took one slow step forward. Then another. He kept his hands visible, palms open, shoulders rounded inward like he was trying to make himself smaller.

"It's okay," Ilya said quietly, the words rough, accented, barely holding together. "I'm here. You're okay."

Shane's hands loosened in the sheets, fingers trembling. He didn't reach out, not yet, but his body leaned, just a fraction, toward Ilya.

Ilya froze.

For a second, it looked like he might bolt. Like the wrong move would shatter everything. His chest rose and fell hard, eyes glossy, terrified of doing this wrong.

"Can I?" he asked, voice barely there.

Shane nodded. Small. Jerky.

That was all it took.

Ilya moved closer, slow as hell, stopping short of the bed. He didn't touch Shane at first. Just stood there, close enough for Shane to see him clearly, to hear him breathe.

"I got you," Ilya said. "I swear. I won't—I won't hurt you."

Shane's hand lifted on its own, shaking violently, reaching without looking. Ilya swallowed and met it halfway, fingers closing gently, like Shane might break if he squeezed too hard.

The room exhaled.

Shane's breathing started to slow, uneven but easing, his forehead tipping forward until it rested against Ilya's arm. His grip tightened, desperate, like letting go wasn't an option.

Hayden felt something in his chest crack.

He looked over at Yuna. She had one hand clamped over her mouth, the other gripping David's arm so hard her knuckles were white. David just stared, stunned, like the rules of the world had quietly rewritten themselves.

The asshole rival. The villain in every story.
And somehow, the only one Shane could see right now.

Hayden stayed by the door, silent, watching Ilya hover like a man terrified of waking a bomb, scared shitless, shaking, but still there. Still choosing to stay.

Ilya had driven to New York like he was being chased.

What should have taken a few hours took nearly twice that. He kept pulling over. Once because his hands wouldn't stop shaking. Once because his vision went blurry and he scared himself enough to slow down. Once because he started crying so hard he had to put his forehead against the steering wheel and wait it out, breath stuttering like something inside him had come loose and didn't know how to lock back in.

He told himself to get it together. Over and over. You are not helping like this. You need to drive. You need to get there.

By the time he reached the hospital parking lot, he just sat in the car.

Minutes passed. Maybe more. His phone buzzed in his pocket and he ignored it. The building loomed in front of him, too big, too bright. Going inside meant confirming it was real. Meant walking toward something that might break him clean in half.

When he finally forced himself out of the car, his legs felt wrong, like they didn't fully belong to him. Inside, the words stopped working. He stood at the desk, mouth opening and closing like an idiot while the nurse waited.

"Name," she prompted.

"Sh—" He stopped. Swallowed. "Hollander. Shane Hollander." The English felt thick and clumsy on his tongue. "Please."

She gave him directions, spoke kindly, and he nodded like he understood all of it. He didn't. He followed signs and people and the sound of his own pulse until he saw Hayden.

Then he heard Shane.

The sound cut straight through him. Panic. It wasn't just fear, it was terror without edges, and the feeling that hijacked your body and didn't let go.

Something inside Ilya shattered.

He didn't remember deciding to move. One second he was standing there, the next he was walking fast, heart slamming, lungs burning. His body took over like it knew something his brain hadn't caught up to yet.

The door opened and—

Fuck.

That wasn't Shane. Not the Shane Ilya knew.

The man in the bed looked smaller somehow. Folded in on himself. Eyes too wide. Hands clenched like he was bracing for impact that never stopped coming. Ilya felt ice crawl up his spine. He almost stopped. Almost turned around because he didn't trust himself not to make it worse.

But Shane said his name.

And Ilya was done thinking.

Now he was here, standing too close and not close enough at the same time, Shane's hand in his. The contact was light, careful, like one wrong move would send everything spiraling again. Ilya was painfully aware of every second, every breath.

Or fuck...maybe he wasn't breathing at all.

He realized it only when his chest started to ache. He forced air in, slow and quiet, terrified Shane would feel the change and panic. Shane's grip tightened just a fraction, then loosened again, like his body was arguing with itself about whether this was safe.

Shane stared at their hands.

Not at Ilya's face. Just their hands. Like he was trying to figure out if this was real, if it would disappear the second he trusted it.

Ilya could feel the fight in him. The tension. The urge to pull away and lash out and run. Trauma vibrating under Shane's skin.

"You're safe," Ilya said softly. His voice barely worked. "Okay? You're safe."

Shane's breathing hitched.

"Your parents are here," Ilya added, words slow, deliberate. "They came fast. Hayden's here too." He glanced over his shoulder briefly. "Unfortunately."

It was stupid. Small. Barely even a joke.

But Shane's mouth twitched. Just barely. Like his body remembered something human.

Ilya swallowed hard.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said automatically and then bit down on his lip, hard.

Because just yesterday, he'd been planning how to leave. How to end it cleanly. How to survive without this.

And now...now that he'd almost lost Shane, now that he'd seen him like this, broken open and terrified, Ilya knew with brutal clarity that there was no version of his life where walking away didn't destroy him.

He tightened his grip just enough for Shane to feel it. Not trapping. Not forcing. Just there.

"I got you," Ilya said again, quieter this time. "I swear. I'm here."

Shane finally looked up at him.

His eyes were wet, red-rimmed, like he'd been crying without realizing it. His mouth opened, closed, like he was trying to figure out how to ask something that mattered too much.

"You're... you're really here?" Shane asked. His voice shook, thin and uncertain.

Ilya nodded immediately. "Yes. I'm here."

Shane swallowed hard, fingers tightening around Ilya's again. "You're not—" He stopped, breath hitching. "You're not gonna leave me?"

The question landed like a punch to the chest.

"No," Ilya said. He didn't hesitate. "I won't."

Shane's face crumpled just a little at that. "I'm scared," he said, like it was a confession he'd been holding in too long.

"I know," Ilya said softly. "I know."

They stayed like that. No rush. No one pushing. Shane's breathing slowly evened out, still shaky but no longer spiraling. Ilya stood there, anchored in place, counting breaths with him without meaning to.

After a while, Ilya leaned in just enough for Shane to hear him. "You should rest," he said. "I'll stay. Right here. I won't go anywhere." His throat tightened. "I'll protect you. I promise. Whatever it takes."

Shane nodded, slow and tired. "Okay," he murmured, more to himself than to Ilya. The word sounded small. Young. Like he was trying to convince his body it was allowed to let go.

It didn't take long after that. Shane's grip loosened as sleep pulled him under, lashes fluttering before settling. His breathing evened out fully, deep and steady.

Ilya didn't move.

He stayed standing there, afraid that if he shifted even an inch, Shane would wake up and panic all over again. His fingers had gone numb by the time a nurse quietly approached and slid a chair next to the bed.

"You can sit," she whispered.

Ilya nodded. "Thank you," he said, the words clumsy and thick.

Only then did he realize the weight of the room.

Three pairs of eyes on him.

He didn't look up. Couldn't. His brain felt fried, English slipping through his fingers like water. He sat down carefully, slow as hell, making sure Shane didn't stir. Once he was settled, he let his gaze lock onto Shane's face.

Bruised. Cut. Peaceful in sleep in a way that felt unfair.

The door opened. Closed. Footsteps moved softly. Ilya registered it all distantly. He knew he wasn't alone. He knew Shane's mom was probably still there, sitting on the couch against the wall, watching her son breathe.

Ilya couldn't look.

If he did, he was afraid something in him would split wide open and never come back together. He kept his eyes fixed on the rise and fall of Shane's chest, counting it like a lifeline, like proof. Every breath felt fragile, temporary, like it might stop if Ilya trusted it too much.

He wanted to touch Shane's face so badly it fucking hurt. The need was physical, sharp. He wanted to trace the bruises with his thumb, gentle and careful, to feel warm skin under his fingers and convince himself this wasn't a mistake, that Shane was real and not something his brain had made up to punish him. He wanted to check every cut, every scrape, catalog the damage like he could undo it by knowing it.

The urge crawled up his spine and settled heavy in his chest, squeezing, suffocating. His hands twitched uselessly in his lap. He felt exposed, raw, like everyone in the room could see exactly how much he was unraveling.

Then it hit him.

His vision blurred, edges smearing, the room tilting just enough to make him dizzy. Tears spilled over before he could stop them, hot and humiliating, sliding down his face without permission. He bowed his head, shoulders drawing in tight, breath stuttering in short, ugly pulls. He tried to keep it quiet. He failed.

This wasn't how he did things. Ilya Rozanov didn't fucking fall apart in front of people. He didn't let himself be seen like this. Not scared. Not desperate. Not wrecked.

But he was all of it.

A hand landed gently on his shoulder.

He flinched hard before he could stop himself, every muscle locking up. His heart jumped, panic flashing hot and fast. Then another hand appeared in his field of vision, holding out a tissue.

Ilya froze.

Slowly, he looked up, eyes burning, chest tight, feeling stripped bare and caught in something he hadn't agreed to.

It was Shane's mom.

He wasn't sure how it happened after that. His body moved before he fully decided to let it. Carefully but regretfully, he eased his fingers out of Shane's hand, doing it slow enough that Shane didn't stir. The second the contact broke, panic flared hot in his chest, like he'd made a mistake he couldn't take back.

He stood up, took the tissue with a muttered "thanks," and wiped at his face, rough and ineffective. His hands shook. He hated that. Hated being seen like this. Fucking hated it.

"I'm... Ilya," he said suddenly, because silence felt worse. Like it would swallow him whole. "I'm... Ilya Rozanov."

The words sounded stupid the second they left his mouth. As if his name meant anything in this room.

Shane's mom smiled at him, soft and tired. "Yuna," she said. Simple.

Ilya hesitated, unsure if he should offer his hand. The moment stretched awkwardly then Yuna stepped forward and hugged him.

He stiffened, caught completely off guard. His arms hovered uselessly at his sides for a second before he awkwardly returned it, careful and unsure, like he might break something. Or be told to stop.

When she pulled back, Ilya's first instinct was to apologize. The word came out fast, tangled. "I'm sorry. I... I don't—"

Yuna's smile didn't fade, but her eyes were observant. Full of questions she wasn't asking yet. "I know," she said quietly.

She glanced toward the door. "Would you like to take a short walk with me?"

"No," Ilya said immediately. Too fast. Too harsh.

He winced. "Sorry. I didn't... I just can't. I promised him I wouldn't leave." The words came out rough, defensive, like he was bracing for someone to challenge that promise.

Yuna studied him for a long second. Then she nodded.

"That's okay," she said. "Please take care of our son."

The weight of that sentence hit him square in the chest.

"I will," Ilya said, nodding hard.

Yuna turned back to Shane, her face tightening as she looked at him, really looked. She lingered for a moment, memorizing him, then walked quietly toward the door.

When it closed behind her, the room fell still again.

Ilya sat back down immediately, reclaiming his place at Shane's side like he was afraid the bed might disappear if he didn't. He took Shane's hand again, gentle and sure this time, and stayed there, eyes locked on his face, breathing only when Shane did.

Alone now. And terrified of every second that followed.

Shane is back on the sidewalk before he understands that he's left it.

One second he's pushing through the club door, lungs desperate for air, head buzzing from noise and bodies pressed too close. The next, the ground is rushing up at him. Cold concrete slams into his back hard enough to knock the breath clean out of his chest. It burns when he tries to inhale, like his lungs forgot how to work.

He'd just wanted out. That's all. A minute of quiet. A few steps away from the lights and the bass and the constant brushing of strangers' hands. He remembers thinking he should text Hayden, let him know he was outside, that he'd be right back.

He never gets the chance.

There's a body on him, too fast to track, too heavy to fight off. The weight pins him down before he can even twist away. Shane catches a flash of a face, nothing clear, just the sense of someone who knows exactly who he is. The man says his name, and it sounds wrong in his mouth.

The first hit rattles his skull. The second scrambles everything.

His head snaps back against the pavement and the world fractures in white light, then red, then a sickening blur that won't settle. Pain flares everywhere at once. His ears ring so loud it drowns everything else out. He thinks he's yelling, but he can't tell. The sound might just be inside his head, bouncing around with the panic.

Something connects again. And again.

His vision goes watery, eyes burning, the shapes above him melting together. He tries to bring his arms up, to push, to swing, to do anything, but they feel like they belong to someone else. Heavy. Slow. Useless. His legs don't answer him at all.

The weight stays.

It doesn't stop when he expects it to. Doesn't let up. Doesn't give him space to breathe or think or recover. Time stretches into something unbearable, each second dragging and piling on top of the last until he can't tell where one ends and the next begins.

That's what stays with him. Not the first hit. Not the fall.

How long it lasts.

How helpless he is inside it.

Then...

Hands.

Shane wakes up gasping, like he's been dragged up from deep water. Air scrapes into his lungs in painful pulls, his heart slamming so hard it feels like it might crack his ribs from the inside. His body jerks on instinct, muscles locking, adrenaline flooding him before he has a single coherent thought.

He's back there. He's sure of it.

The ground. The weight. The not-stopping.

Panic hits all at once. He tries to pull away, tries to fold in on himself, tries to get his arms up over his head even though everything hurts. His movements are jerky and uncoordinated, like his body is lagging behind his brain. He twists, breath hitching, searching for space that isn't there.

Something is holding his hand.

The realization lands wrong. Too fast. Too close.

He loses it.

"No...no...fuck—" The words tear out of him, broken and raw, not even fully formed. His throat burns. His ears are still ringing, a high, relentless whine that makes everything else feel far away. His chest refuses to slow down, breath stuttering in shallow bursts that don't feel like enough.

He hears his name.

Again. And again.

But it's distorted, stretched thin, like it's coming from somewhere underwater. He can't place it. Can't trust it. Voices had been wrong before.

"Shane."

The sound cuts through just enough to stop him mid-movement. Not calm him—just interrupt the spiral. Confuse it.

“Shane, hey...”

That voice.

His head snaps toward the sound too fast, pain flaring at the base of his skull, but he barely registers it. His eyes burn, vision swimming as he fights to focus. The light is harsh and unforgiving. Everything is white. Walls. Ceiling. Machines. Shapes that don't make sense and don't feel safe yet.

Then he sees it.

Curls.

Dark curls, familiar in a way that hits him like a punch to the chest. They hover at the edge of his vision, solid where everything else feels unreal.

“Ilya?” he croaks. His voice barely works, dry and shaky, like it might fall apart if he pushes it any harder.

“I'm here,” the voice says immediately. Too fast. Too close. Like it's afraid of being missed. “I'm here.”

The room comes back in pieces.

Not all at once but just enough at first for Shane to realize he's not on the ground anymore. His back is supported. Something soft is under him. The angle is wrong for a sidewalk. The cold is gone. There's a steady beeping nearby, slow and relentless, a sound that doesn't belong to the street. His chest tightens as he takes another breath and catches the clean, sterile smell of the air that is unmistakable in a way that concrete and garbage and night never are.

A bed.

He's in a bed.

That thought lands, shaky but real.

Ilya is right there.

Not looming. Not crowding. Just close enough to matter. Close enough that Shane notices how carefully he's positioned, feet planted like he's ready to move in any direction at a second's notice. Like he's braced to catch Shane if he bolts, or curls in, or completely loses it again. His hands are visible, open, not touching more than Shane already allows. His shoulders are tight, coiled with tension.

His face...

Fuck.

Ilya looks terrified.

Not angry. Not annoyed. Not guarded. Terrified.

The sight of it hits Shane harder than the memory of fists, harder than the fear still buzzing under his skin. His throat tightens painfully. “I...” The word gets stuck. His voice wobbles. “I’m sorry.”

Ilya stiffens immediately. “What? No—”

“I didn’t...” Shane swallows, eyes burning, his chest aching with the effort of staying upright. “I don’t wanna be like this. I don’t wanna be so fucking scared.”

The words spill out rough and uncontrolled. He hates how small they make him sound. Hates that he feels stripped down to something younger and weaker, trapped inside a body that won’t listen to him no matter how hard he tries to command it to calm the fuck down.

His hand tightens without permission, fingers curling hard around Ilya’s like it’s the only solid thing left in the room. He can feel himself shaking now with full-body tremors that won’t stop, teeth threatening to chatter, muscles buzzing with leftover panic.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, voice breaking completely. “I’m really sorry.”

Ilya doesn’t pull away.

He doesn’t flinch or correct him or tell him to stop apologizing. He stays exactly where he is that feels steady, grounded, and solid. Close enough that Shane can feel the warmth of him, can match his breathing to something other than his own spiraling panic, even if it takes a few tries.

And for the first time since the street, since the weight and the hands and the fear that wouldn’t fucking end, Shane lets himself believe, just a little, that this moment might not hurt him.

He shifts without really deciding to, tugging Ilya closer until there’s no space left between them. The movement is clumsy, half-panicked, half-desperate, but Ilya goes with it immediately, careful not to jostle him. Shane ends up pressed against him, their bodies awkwardly fitted together on the narrow hospital bed. It’s not comfortable. It doesn’t matter.

He can feel Ilya’s heartbeat through his chest. Fast. Uneven. Real.

That steadies something in him.

Ilya’s tense. Shane can tell even without looking. His body is coiled tight, like he’s bracing for the moment Shane freaks out again. But wrapped up like this, with Ilya’s arms firm around him, Shane feels... contained. Protected, in a way that doesn’t feel suffocating. The edge of the fear dulls. Not gone. Just quieter. Manageable.

Shane wants to say something. Anything. There’s so much crowding his head. Apologies, questions, shit he’s scared to think too hard about but none of it lines up right. His throat tightens every time he tries.

So he settles for something small.

“Are you okay?” he asks quietly.

The words surprise both of them.

Ilya goes still for half a second. Shane expects deflection. A joke. A brush-off. That’s what Ilya does.

Instead, Ilya exhales shakily. “No,” he says. Honest. Bare. “I’m fucking angry. And I’m scared shitless.”

Shane swallows. The admission lands heavy. He tightens his grip on Ilya without thinking, forehead pressing into his shoulder. His brain flashes warning signs. Don’t cling, don’t trap, don’t...but his body ignores all of it. It just wants this. Needs it.

“I’m angry too,” Shane admits. His voice shakes, but he keeps going. “I feel... weak. Like my body betrayed me. I can’t make it stop reacting.”

Ilya’s hand shifts, rubbing slow circles into Shane’s back. “That’s not weakness,” he says quietly. “That’s your brain trying to keep you alive. It just doesn’t know when to shut up.”

Shane huffs out something that might be a laugh. It hurts a little. “It’s loud.”

“I know.” Ilya’s voice drops. “I’m here. If it gets bad again, you tell me. Or don’t. I’ll still be here.”

Shane nods against him. His eyelids feel heavy now, exhaustion finally catching up. “Everything hurts,” he murmurs. “And I’m tired. Like... deep tired.”

Ilya tightens his arms just slightly. “Sleep,” he says. “I won’t move.”

Shane hesitates. Old instincts flare. Don’t trust, don’t let your guard down but they’re weak now, drowned out by how safe this feels. “Promise?” he asks, small and quiet.

“I swear,” Ilya says immediately. “I’m not going anywhere.”

That’s enough.

Shane’s breathing evens out slowly, each inhale less strained than the last. His grip loosens but doesn’t let go. Somewhere between holding on and letting himself rest, he drifts.

Ilya stays awake longer, Shane knows that much. He can feel it in the careful way Ilya keeps still, like he’s afraid sleep might steal this moment away.

Eventually, though, even that tension fades. Ilya’s heartbeat slows. His breathing syncs with Shane’s.

They fall asleep tangled together in a hospital bed that’s too small, surrounded by machines and quiet and the aftermath of something terrible while holding on to each other like it’s the

only thing keeping the night from starting all over again.

Shane wakes to pain first.

It's dull and insistent, blooming through his ribs and skull like his body is reminding him it hasn't forgotten what happened. He shifts carefully, breath catching, eyes still heavy with sleep. Morning light leaks through the blinds in thin strips, softer than the glare from last night. He must've slept for hours. Real hours. That realization alone feels unreal.

He'd woken once or twice in the dark, pain spiking, panic threatening but every time he'd felt Ilya there. Solid. Warm. Breathing. Enough to pull him back down.

This time, his hand closes on empty sheets.

The panic hits fast, like a wire snapping tight in his chest. His heart stutters. His breath shortens. His head turns too quickly, scanning the bed, the room, the door.

Gone.

"No..." he mutters, barely audible, fingers digging into the mattress.

"Good morning, sweetheart."

His mom's voice cuts through the spiral like a hand on his shoulder.

Shane freezes, then exhales shakily. He looks toward the couch and sees her there, standing now, worry written plainly across her face. He forces himself to breathe slower, deeper, grounding himself in the familiar sound of her voice.

"Morning," he says, hoarse. He swallows and shifts, trying to sit up a little straighter, like that might make him feel less fragile. "Uh...hey."

She steps closer, gentle, careful, like she's approaching something that might spook. "How are you feeling?"

"Sore," Shane admits. "But... okay." The word feels flimsy, but he says it anyway. "Where's Ilya?"

The question tumbles out before he can stop it. Too fast. Too obvious.

His mom opens her mouth to answer—

...and the door opens.

Ilya steps in, phone in hand, voice low and clipped as he finishes a call. His shoulders are tense, posture tight, the easy confidence nowhere to be found. He looks exhausted. Awake, but barely holding it together.

"Yes," he says into the phone. "I know. I hear you. Just...give me a minute."

He ends the call and looks up.

Shane sees it all at once.

The phone.

The look on Ilya's face.

The way his mom glances between them.

Boston.

The word slams into Shane's head without anyone saying it.

Of course. Of fucking course. Games. Obligations. Team bullshit that doesn't stop just because Shane got beaten half to death. Ilya would have to leave. Go back. Get on a plane. Put distance between them.

Shane feels it in his chest, the familiar tightening, the beginnings of panic clawing back in. He doesn't realize how obvious it is until his mom turns fully toward him.

"Shane?" she asks softly. "Are you okay?"

He forces a nod. "Yeah. I'm good. Just...tired."

It's a lie. A thin one.

There's a look that passes between his mom and Ilya. Not hostile. Not kind either. Something careful. Something that scares the shit out of Shane because it feels like decisions are being made somewhere he can't reach.

And that, more than the pain, more than the empty side of the bed, scares the shit out of him.

Ilya had wanted this closeness for longer than he was willing to admit.

Not just the hospital bed. Not just the excuse of injury and fear and exhaustion. He'd wanted the quiet weight of Shane against him, the unguarded trust, the way Shane slept like he believed, really believed, that Ilya would still be there when he woke up.

That was the part that fucked him up the most.

Because his feelings for Shane weren't new. They hadn't appeared overnight, hadn't been born out of blood and panic. They'd been there for years, buried under habit and denial and the lie that this was just sex, just convenience. But this...this felt dangerously close to real. Too real.

And Ilya had reacted to it in a way that scared him.

Shane trusted him. More than his parents. More than his teammates. More than anyone else in the room. And Ilya didn't feel worthy of that kind of faith. It sat heavy in his chest, ugly and undeserved, like something he hadn't earned and would inevitably ruin.

He sat there watching Shane sleep, really sleep, mouth slightly open, lashes resting against bruised skin. The machines hummed softly. Shane's breathing was deep and steady. Alive.

Ilya lifted his hand without thinking and ran his fingers gently through Shane's hair, slow and careful. He leaned down, forehead almost brushing Shane's temple, and started talking under his breath.

Not in English.

In Russian, because English didn't have the right weight for this kind of confession.

"I'm scared," he whispered, voice rough. *"I'm fucking angry all the time, and I don't know where to put it. I don't know how to be soft the way you deserve."*

He swallowed, thumb still moving through Shane's curls like it was the only thing keeping him anchored.

"I don't feel like a good man," he went on quietly. *"I feel like a knife. Like I cut everything I touch sooner or later. You shouldn't lean on someone like me. I don't know why you do. You could have someone easier. Someone who doesn't flinch at the idea of staying."*

His breath hitched. He pressed his forehead down for a second, eyes squeezed shut.

"I don't trust that people stay," he said. *"I never have. And every time you look at me like I'm safe, like I'm enough, I keep waiting for the moment you wake up and realize I was just... a bad decision you made while you were hurt."*

He laughed under his breath, broken and humorless. *"I'm selfish. I'm a coward. I run the second things get real because it's easier than watching someone leave me."*

His fingers trembled in Shane's hair.

"But I love you," he said, barely above a breath. *"I love you in a way that scares the shit out of me. And I don't know how to deserve you, but I know I don't want a life where I walk away from you ever again."*

The door opening snapped him back to reality.

Ilya stiffened like he'd been caught doing something illegal.

Yuna stood in the doorway.

For one horrible second, Ilya considered pretending he wasn't there. Or sliding out of the bed and letting the floor swallow him whole. Instead, he froze, hand still tangled in Shane's hair, guilt crashing into him all at once.

Yuna didn't react the way he expected.

She didn't look angry. Or shocked. Or confused.

She just smiled faintly. "It's okay," she said softly.

It didn't feel okay.

Ilya nodded too fast, already pulling his hand back like it burned. He stood up slowly, like sudden movement might wake Shane or make this worse somehow. His skin felt too tight, nerves buzzing.

"This—uh," he started, then stopped. Fucking useless.

He gestured vaguely toward the couch. "Maybe we... talk?"

Yuna nodded and moved first, sitting at one end of the couch. Ilya sat at the other, leaning forward immediately, elbows on his knees, rubbing his hands together like he was trying to sand the anxiety off them. Yuna leaned back, calm in a way that made him feel even more exposed.

She waited.

Didn't rush him. Didn't fill the silence.

The quiet stretched.

Ilya stared at the floor, jaw tight, mind blank and loud at the same time. There were a thousand things he could say and none of them felt survivable.

Finally, after what felt like forever, he exhaled hard and muttered, "I don't know where to start."

Ilya swallowed and lifted one hand, gesturing vaguely between them, then toward the door, then back to himself, like he was mapping out a problem only he could see. "People think... me and Shane... we are rivals. Hate each other. On ice, off ice. That is probably what you think too." He made a helpless little motion with his fingers. "It's easier story."

He let out a breath through his nose. "I am not what people think I am," he said. "Or maybe I am, but only because it's easier to be that. Cocky asshole. Loud. Arrogant. That's what people expect from me, so I give it to them. No one gets close that way."

His shoulders lifted, then dropped. "That's how I grew up. You show teeth first. You don't let people see the rest."

He glanced up at Yuna briefly, then back to the floor. "Shane... he didn't buy it. Ever. He saw through it like it was nothing. And somehow" his hand curled, uncertain "he made me want to be better than that. Not perfect. Just... decent."

Ilya shook his head slightly. "I don't know if I am explaining this right."

“You’re doing fine,” Yuna said softly.

That almost undid him.

Ilya took a breath, deeper this time. “What I have with your son...it’s not joke. Not messing around. It’s not something I do because I am bored.” He hesitated, jaw tightening, hands flexing as he searched for words that wouldn’t betray him. “He matters to me. A lot. More than I am comfortable admitting. This is... serious. It’s not something I treat lightly.”

His voice dropped. “Very real.”

He laughed weakly and wiped at his face, only then realizing his eyes were wet. “When I heard what happened to him, I...” His voice broke hard this time. He stopped, pressed his lips together, tried again. “I thought I was going to lose him. And all the shit I was scared of before suddenly didn’t matter. I just needed to know he was alive.”

A tear slipped free. Then another. He didn’t bother stopping them.

“I am here because I want to be,” he said hoarsely. “Because he matters. Because he chose me, and I don’t understand why, but I’m trying to be worthy of it.”

He waited for the verdict. For her to say it out loud that he wasn’t good enough, that Shane deserved better, that this was a mistake.

Yuna spoke gently. “Ilya,” she said, “his father and I are confident we raised a good son. A strong one. And I trust his judgment about people.”

Ilya’s breath hitched.

“I saw how you were with him,” Yuna continued. “I saw how careful you were. How afraid you were to hurt him. Whatever I thought of you as a hockey player doesn’t matter anymore.”

Something loosened in Ilya’s chest, sudden and dizzying.

He huffed out a shaky breath. “Good,” he said quietly. “Because I am the best hockey player than everyone thinks.”

Yuna laughed, soft and real.

The sound felt like permission.

Before he could say anything else, his phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen and winced. “Shit,” he muttered. “That’s my manager.”

He stood up, rubbing at his face. “I...uh...sorry. I need to take this.”

Yuna nodded. “Go.”

Ilya stepped out into the hallway and answered the call before it could ring again. He moved a few feet away from the door, back to the wall, eyes fixed on nothing. The conversation was short and brutal. His manager talked. A lot. About obligations. About timing. About consequences. About how this would look. Ilya didn't explain himself. Didn't justify. He said, flat and final, that he wouldn't be playing for a while. That was it.

He barely had time to process it before he heard Shane's voice from inside the room.

Ilya turned back immediately. The call ended.

Shane was awake, sitting up a little, eyes down, hands twisted together in the blanket. After a while, for some reason, Shane is now not looking at Ilya, and the sight hit harder than any yelling would have. Ilya's first thought was that he'd fucked up. Left him alone. Broken the promise already.

He stayed where he was, watching, unsure how to step back in without making it worse.

A doctor came in then, mercifully neutral, checking vitals, asking routine questions. Shane answered quietly, clipped. Everything looked good enough. Pain manageable. No immediate complications. He could go home.

Home.

The word landed heavy.

Ilya already knew the answer and hated himself for it. Shane would go with his parents. Of course he would. Ilya had no right to ask for anything else. No claim. No ground to stand on.

When Yuna stepped out with the doctor to deal with paperwork, the room went quiet again. Too quiet.

Shane still wouldn't look at him.

Before Ilya could figure out what to say, Shane spoke, voice flat and controlled. "You should go back to Boston. Be with your team."

Ilya frowned. He searched Shane's face, tried to catch his eye. "Is that... a joke?"

Shane shrugged, still not looking up. "No."

Ilya waited a beat. Then another. He knew that tone. Knew what it sounded like when Shane lied to protect himself.

"Is that what you want?" Ilya asked carefully.

Shane didn't answer fast enough.

Ilya stepped closer. "Shane." He waited until Shane finally looked up. His eyes were glassy, blinking too hard. "Is that what you want?" he asked again. "Because I said I would stay. And I would."

Shane's mouth trembled. "Why would you do that?" he asked, quiet and raw. "Why would you stay?"

The question hurt more than anything else that day.

Ilya swallowed, heart pounding, words crowding his throat that he wasn't ready to say out loud. "Because you're important to me," he said instead. Simple. Honest. "And I'm not leaving you when you're like this. Not unless you tell me to my face that you want me gone."

Chapter 2: After

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the love on Chapter 1. seriously. I didn't expect that kind of response in one day, and it honestly meant a lot. The comments, the kudos, the shared pain? I felt all of it.

So, as promised, here's Chapter 2.

This one is quieter in some places, heavier in others, and very much about staying after the worst has already happened. I hope it lands the way it's meant to.

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

Ilya wasn't sure why he was this fucking nervous.

He stood just outside the airport, bag at his feet, jacket zipped up against the cold, heart beating too fast for someone who wasn't late and wasn't running. He kept checking his phone even though there was nothing to check. No missed calls. No messages. Nothing new that would explain the tight, restless energy crawling under his skin.

The last forty-eight hours blurred together in a way that didn't feel real. Boston. A rushed trip back to his apartment to grab clothes he barely remembered packing. Conversations that felt clipped and distant, like he was answering questions from underwater. Faces that expected explanations he didn't give. Then the plane. Then Ottawa.

He'd stayed off social media as much as he could, but news still found a way in. Shane's name everywhere. Updates. Speculation. And then, just a few hours ago, the confirmation that the man who attacked Shane had been identified and arrested.

The relief had hit first.

Then rage followed, ugly and burning, the second Ilya saw the guy's face. Some ordinary-looking asshole. Nothing about him that justified what he'd done. Ilya had shut his phone off after that, jaw clenched so hard it hurt.

He tried not to think about it now.

What he couldn't figure out was whether this feeling in his chest was excitement or dread. Whether he was nervous because he wanted to be here so badly or because everything about this felt like it was moving too fast for him to catch his footing.

He could still turn around. That thought surfaced uninvited. He could get back on a plane. He could put distance between himself and this before it became something he couldn't undo.

The idea made his stomach twist.

Shane had asked him to stay. And Shane was still healing. Still raw. Still waking up in the night scared and sore and too quiet.

Ilya had wanted to be the one there. Wanted it enough that the fear didn't outweigh it.

He exhaled slowly, grounding himself, just as a car pulled up in front of him.

Ilya straightened automatically, reaching for his bag.

Then the driver's door opened.

And instead of some hired car guy or assistant, an older man stepped out—tall, broad-shouldered, posture familiar in a way that made Ilya's chest tighten. His hair was streaked with gray, his expression calm but guarded, eyes sharp and assessing as they landed on Ilya.

Oh. Fuck.

Shane's dad.

The man looked at him for a long second, like he was measuring something that mattered. Then he nodded once, not unfriendly, not warm either.

"Rozanov?" he asked.

Ilya swallowed and nodded back, suddenly very aware of his accent, his hands, the fact that he was about to be alone in a car with the father of the man he loved and almost lost.

He bent to grab his bag and tossed it into the trunk, just something to do with his body while his brain scrambled. Halfway through closing it, he realized he'd never actually introduced himself.

"I...uh," he said, straightening. "You can call me Ilya."

The man gave a short nod. "David," he said, and held out his hand.

They shook. David's grip was steady, practiced. The handshake felt like a quiet assessment. Nothing hostile, nothing warm either.

"Well," David said, clearing his throat, already turning toward the driver's door, "we should get going. If traffic behaves, we'll make it in time for lunch at the cottage."

The cottage.

He'd seen it before, sunlit and quiet, tucked near the water, in a summer documentary Shane had been in. Ilya had watched the whole thing start to finish even though it bored the shit out of him, just to catch glimpses of Shane laughing on-camera, hair a mess, doing yoga poses, relaxed in a way he never was during the season.

Now he was actually going there. That felt unreal.

Inside the car, Ilya sat stiffly in the passenger seat, knees angled forward, hands folded together like he was trying not to touch anything he didn't belong to. He had no fucking clue how to start a conversation that didn't sound sarcastic or defensive or like he was trying too hard.

David pulled out smoothly, eyes on the road. "If you need to stop for anything," he said, casual, "let me know. It's about a two-hour drive."

"I'm good," Ilya replied. "But...thanks. For asking."

The silence settled again, thick and uncomfortable. The radio came on low, and unobtrusive but it didn't help much. The space between them felt loaded with everything they weren't saying.

After a few miles, Ilya couldn't stand it anymore.

"How is he?" he asked quietly. "I mean...how's Shane been the past couple days?"

He knew the answer, mostly. They'd texted. They'd talked. But it wasn't the same as hearing it from someone who was actually there, watching him sleep, watching him wake up.

David exhaled slowly. "We're all relieved," he said. "Knowing the guy's been arrested helped. A lot."

Ilya nodded, jaw tightening.

"But," David continued, after a beat, "he's been quiet. Mostly resting. Keeps to himself more than usual."

Ilya swallowed. "Has he been... panicking?"

David shook his head. "Not like that. He's been good." Then, more carefully, "But sudden movements still get him sometimes. Loud noises. Doors. Stuff like that. He flinches before he realizes it."

Ilya stared out the window, watching trees blur past, trying to picture Shane guarded, braced, body reacting before his mind could catch up. His chest ached with it.

"I see," he said softly.

The silence returned, settling between them again, less awkward now. Full of concern and restraint and things neither of them knew how to say yet.

"So," he said, eyes still on the road, voice careful in a way that immediately put Ilya on edge. "You and Shane...you've been friends."

It didn't sound like a question. It sounded like confirmation. Or maybe a test.

Ilya's shoulders tightened. He nodded once. "Yes."

He didn't trust himself to add anything else yet. Every word felt like it could land wrong, echo back later, hurt Shane in some way he couldn't undo.

David hummed quietly, like he was turning the idea over. "Huh. I never would've guessed." He glanced briefly at Ilya, then back to the road. "All this time, I thought Shane actually hated Ilya Rozanov."

Ilya snorted despite himself. "Sometimes," he said dryly, "that might still be true."

David huffed a small laugh, the sound surprising in the closed space of the car. Then, after a moment, "When did that happen? The *friendship*."

The question hit harder.

Ilya stared straight ahead, pulse ticking up. He had no clean answer. No safe one. He went with the truth that revealed the least. "Years," he said. "It's been... years."

David's eyebrows lifted. "Years," he repeated, clearly caught off guard.

The road stretched on. Another mile passed. Then another.

"Why keep it quiet?" David asked finally. Not accusing. Not curious in a prying way either. Just honest. "Why not let people know?"

There it was.

Ilya's chest tightened. He couldn't tell if David meant *friends* or something else. He couldn't tell if he was reading between lines that weren't supposed to be visible yet or if he was just being a father trying not to overstep.

Ilya took a breath. He reminded himself who was sitting next to him. Not a coach. Not a reporter. Not someone looking for leverage. Not his own father. Not his awful brother. Just Shane's dad. A man who loved his son and wanted to understand him.

"It's..." Ilya began, then stopped, fingers curling in his lap. "It's what people expect from us. What media wants. Rivalry. Drama. Noise." He shrugged. "Being friends didn't really fit that story. So we didn't feel need to correct it."

David nodded slowly. "Makes sense," he said.

The car signaled and pulled off the highway into a gas station a minute later. As David stepped out to fill the tank, Ilya stayed in his seat, exhaling hard through his nose, forehead tipping forward just slightly.

Fuck.

He hadn't realized how tightly he'd been holding himself together until the door closed and he could breathe again. There was still an hour left in the drive.

An hour closer to Shane.

The rest of the drive passed faster than Ilya expected. He let himself zone out, eyes following the trees as they blurred past the window, the steady motion grounding him in a way nothing else had lately. David asked a few more questions, harmless ones, about travel, about hockey schedules but mostly they sat in silence, the kind that didn't feel like pressure anymore. Just... shared space.

When they finally pulled up, Ilya was out of the car before the engine fully stopped. He grabbed his bag and followed David inside, the front door opening to warmth and smell that hit him square in the chest. Home-cooked food.

Yuna appeared from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She hugged David, kissed his cheek, murmured something low and domestic. Then she turned to Ilya.

"How was the trip?" she asked gently.

"Good," Ilya said. "Long. But good."

She smiled and pointed him toward a hallway. "Guest room's down there. You can put your things away."

He did it quickly, barely registering the space, and followed her back toward the living room. That was when he saw him.

Shane was sitting outside, on the couch by the window overlooking the lake. Curled slightly inward. Still. Watching the water like it might move first if he stayed quiet enough.

Ilya stopped without meaning to.

Yuna noticed. Of course she did. She smiled softly. "He's been asking for you."

Ilya stepped outside, the door sliding open with a soft sound that felt too loud in the quiet. "Shane," he said, keeping his voice low, careful.

Shane flinched anyway.

The movement was small but sharp, like his body reacted before his brain could stop it. He turned, eyes widening just a fraction.

"Shit...sorry," Ilya said immediately, guilt flaring hot. "I didn't mean to..."

"No," Shane cut in, shaking his head. "It's... sorry. I'm sorry."

They both fell quiet, standing there with the lake stretching out in front of them, blue and indifferent.

Shane turned back toward the water, shoulders tight. Ilya walked closer, steps slow, measured. "Can I..." He gestured to the couch. "Can I sit?"

Shane nodded.

Ilya sat carefully, leaving space he didn't really want to leave. Shane hesitated, then leaned back, shifting until his side pressed against Ilya's arm.

He looked up at Ilya, eyes tired and honest. "Thank you," he said quietly.

Ilya swallowed, throat tight. He stayed there, close enough to matter, staring out at the lake with Shane and letting the quiet do the talking.

After a moment, Ilya found the nerve to move. He shifted carefully and slid an arm around Shane's back, slow enough to give him time to pull away if he wanted to. Shane didn't. He leaned into it, weight settling like he'd been waiting for permission.

"How's the pain?" Ilya asked softly.

Shane huffed. "You asking about physical pain or the other one?" His mouth curved, but it didn't reach his eyes.

Ilya winced. "Sorry. Dumb question."

Shane looked back out at the lake, jaw tight. "Everything still hurts," he said after a beat. Not dramatic. Just honest.

The words hit Ilya square in the chest. He didn't mean to say it out loud but it just slipped, raw and unfiltered. "I wish I could take it. All of it."

Shane snorted quietly. "You can't say shit like that," he said, but there was no heat in it. Just fatigue.

"I know," Ilya said. "I know."

Shane was quiet for a second too long. His fingers flexed against his knee. "I was gonna say..." He stopped. Swallowed. "Never mind."

Ilya's heart kicked hard. For half a second, he thought, *fuck, is this it?* He thought maybe Shane was about to say it. And Ilya knew, with terrifying clarity, that he'd say it right back without hesitation.

Instead, Shane stood up abruptly. "Lunch," he said, too quick. "We should go inside."

Ilya followed him to his feet, the moment dissolving between them like it hadn't almost mattered too much.

Yuna and David were already there, stepping out with plates and dishes, moving around each other with the quiet ease of people who'd done this together a thousand times. Ilya didn't think and he just moved, reaching out.

"I can take that," he said, grabbing a stack from Yuna before she could argue.

She smiled at him like she'd expected it.

They sat around the outside table, food spread out between them. Pasta, warm and simple. Something stir-fried that smelled like home in a way Ilya hadn't let himself think about in years. He ate slowly, realizing halfway through that this was the first real, home-cooked meal he'd had in a long time that hadn't come from his mother's kitchen.

No one said anything big. They didn't need to. Shane stayed close enough that Ilya could feel him there.

For now, that was enough.

After lunch, Ilya hung back, watching as Shane's parents talked to him quietly near the kitchen. Yuna's voice was low and steady. David's hand rested on Shane's shoulder. It was obvious they knew their son well. They knew when to stay close and when to step back. They checked in, asked the necessary questions, made sure Shane understood they were only a call away.

Ilya stayed out of it. He didn't need to insert himself. He also didn't need to prove anything out loud. He could feel it anyway, the way Yuna glanced at him once, then nodded like something had been decided. Whatever doubts they'd had, they were quieter now. Ilya would take care of Shane. They trusted that.

When the conversation ended, Shane drifted back to Ilya's side without thinking about it. They walked Yuna and David to the door together, stood on the porch as they said their goodbyes. Yuna hugged Shane carefully, then surprised Ilya by pulling him into one too. David nodded once at Ilya.

The car rolled down the drive and disappeared.

The quiet that followed felt different.

This time, it wasn't shared. It was just them.

The thought hit Ilya out of nowhere. That this was it. That this was the stretch of time where it would just be Shane and him, until the day Shane said he didn't need him anymore. The idea lodged in his chest sharp and unwelcome. He shut it down immediately. Not now. Not like this.

"So," Ilya said instead, forcing lightness into his voice. "What do you want to do?"

Shane shrugged and wandered into the living room, lowering himself onto the long couch. "We could play video games."

Ilya raised a brow. "You just get your ass kicked half to death and now you want screen time?"

Shane snorted. "Yeah, okay, never mind. Concussion. Bad idea." He leaned back, staring at the ceiling for a second. "We could just... talk."

Ilya almost rolled his eyes. “Of course you’d pick the boring option.”

“Fuck you,” Shane said, but there was a small smile there, quick and real.

Ilya caught it and felt something in him loosen.

He sat down next to Shane, close enough that their knees brushed. “Alright,” he said. “What do you want to talk about?”

Shane had been watching Ilya the whole time.

Ilya stood near the front door while Shane’s parents talked to him, hands in his pockets, posture carefully neutral like he was trying not to take up space. He looked fine if you didn’t know him. Too fine. Shane knew that look. The one where Ilya went still when he didn’t want to be read.

“Are you okay with this?” Shane’s mom asked softly, eyes flicking between Shane and Ilya. “Being here. Just the two of you.”

Shane nodded without hesitation. “Yeah. I’m okay.”

Shane’s dad stepped in before his mom could worry it to death. “He’s an adult,” he said gently, one hand resting on Shane’s shoulder. “And we’re a phone call away. You know that.”

Yuna sighed, the tension easing just a little. “You really trust him,” she said.

Shane did. That was the terrifying part. He trusted Ilya in a way that felt instinctive now, like his body had already decided before his brain caught up.

“Yeah,” Shane said quietly.

Yuna’s face softened, something careful and bittersweet crossing her expression. Like she was finally letting go of a role she’d held too tightly for too long. “Okay,” she said. “Then we’ll let you rest.”

Shane hugged them both, careful and brief. When he pulled back, his chest felt tight but steady. He walked toward Ilya without thinking, and they went to the door together, stood side by side as they watched the car pull away down the drive.

When it disappeared, the house felt bigger. Quieter.

Ilya sat down next to him on the couch, waiting.

What do you want to talk about?

Shane had been circling this for a while now. Avoiding it, maybe. He'd been so focused on keeping himself together. Focusing on breathing, on pain, on not freaking out that he hadn't checked in the other direction.

"How are you?" Shane asked finally.

Ilya blinked, clearly not expecting it. Then he scoffed softly. "That's not important," he said. "You're the one who got hurt."

He looked away, jaw tightening.

Shane frowned. "That doesn't mean you're fine."

Ilya didn't answer.

The silence stretched. Shane's stomach knotted. He hated this part when he could feel something sitting between them and didn't know how to step around it without breaking something.

"Did you..." Shane stopped himself, then pushed through anyway. "Did you see the video?"

The regret hit immediately.

Ilya's face changed. His shoulders stiffened, and for a split second his eyes went somewhere else entirely. Somewhere ugly.

Shane knew the answer.

"Fuck," Shane muttered. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Ilya stayed quiet, jaw clenched, breath shallow.

"We don't have to talk about that," Shane said quickly. "We can talk about literally anything else. Hockey. Stupid shit. Weather. I don't care."

He shifted closer, not touching, just present. "I just... I wanted to know how you're doing too."

Ilya didn't look at him yet.

But he didn't pull away either.

Ilya took a deep breath. Then another. Like he had to physically brace himself before speaking.

"I was scared," he said finally, voice low. He kept his eyes fixed somewhere past the window, anywhere but Shane. "I still am."

He paused, then turned his head just enough to look at Shane's face. That was when Shane saw his eyes were wet, red-rimmed, the fear right there and unguarded. Not the cocky version

of Ilya everyone knew. This was stripped-down. Bare.

Shane reached out without thinking and took Ilya's hand, holding it firmly.

Ilya swallowed and kept going, words coming slower now, careful like he was stepping around broken glass. "When I saw the video... I was so fucking angry. I wanted to break something. Someone." His grip tightened. "And then I started thinking. Over and over. That I didn't text you back. That stupid fucking text."

Shane's chest tightened.

"I kept thinking," Ilya continued, voice rough, "what if that was last thing you sent me. What if that was last message I ever get from you, and I didn't answer." He shook his head, breath hitching. "I couldn't stop it. My brain just kept going."

He dragged his free hand down his face. "When I got to hospital... seeing you like that..." He stopped, words failing him for a second. "I'm still scared. I don't even know why. You're here. You're breathing. But my body doesn't understand that yet."

Shane felt his heart fracture open.

"I keep thinking," Ilya said quietly, English slipping just a little under the weight of it, "that something bad already happened once, so maybe it can happen again. And I don't know how to stop feeling like that."

Shane couldn't sit still anymore. He moved slowly, carefully, climbing onto Ilya's lap, mindful of his own injuries. He ignored the ache in his ribs and wrapped his arms around Ilya, pulling him in close but gentle, keeping the pressure off his chest.

Shane wiped at Ilya's tears with his thumb, soft and steady, then hugged him tighter, burying his face into Ilya's shoulder. "I'm sorry," he whispered, over and over. "I'm so fucking sorry."

His hand slid up into Ilya's curls, rubbing slow, grounding circles. "I'm here. I'm okay. I'm not going anywhere."

When Shane pulled back, Ilya's face was wrecked, eyes red, lashes clumped with tears he hadn't wiped away, jaw tight like he was holding himself together by force. His breathing was uneven, shallow, like he didn't trust his lungs to do their job. The sight of it made something in Shane's chest stutter and drop.

He leaned in and kissed him.

Shane moved slowly, giving Ilya time to pull away if he needed to. Their noses brushed first, breath mingling, the space between them closing inch by inch. Shane pressed his mouth to Ilya's with barely any pressure at all, lips soft, tentative.

Ilya answered right away.

His hands came up, shaking just a little, fingers curling into the fabric of Shane's shirt like he needed the proof of him, warm, solid, here. The kiss deepened, still careful, still restrained, but fuller now. Ilya's lips moved with quiet urgency, like he was grounding himself through the contact, like if he stopped touching Shane even for a second everything would come crashing back in.

Shane adjusted, slow and mindful of his ribs, tilting his head just enough to make it easier. The kiss stayed gentle. Their mouths moving together in a way that felt familiar and fragile all at once.

It didn't fix anything. It didn't undo the night or the fear or the shit that still sat heavy between them. But for a moment, the noise in Shane's head softened. The tight coil of anxiety loosened. There was just this. Breathing, warmth, the steady reassurance of Ilya's hands holding him like he mattered.

When they finally parted, neither of them moved far. Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's, eyes closed, catching his breath. "I missed you so much," he said, voice low and honest.

Ilya exhaled shakily, his lips brushing Shane's again, not quite another kiss, just close enough. "Me too," he said softly, like admitting it out loud still scared him a little.

Shane woke up on the couch sometime later, the room dark except for the faint glow from the kitchen. For a few seconds he didn't know where he was. Then the ache settled in and memory came back in pieces. Ilya's arms. The way they'd held each other like neither of them knew how to let go yet. The quiet.

Panic flickered anyway. It always did.

His eyes snapped open fully and he scanned the room, heart picking up speed. He told himself to breathe. Told himself Ilya wouldn't leave. Not like that. Not now.

The reassurance worked. Mostly.

He pushed himself upright, head throbbing just enough to be annoying, and listened. There was movement in the kitchen. Soft clinks.

Of course.

Shane stood slowly and padded toward the sound, already sure of what he'd find. Ilya was at the stove, back half-turned, clearly just out of the shower—pants slung low on his hips, a loose tank top clinging in places it probably shouldn't, hair still damp and curling at the ends. He looked... comfortable. Like he belonged there.

"What are you cooking?" Shane asked, voice rough from sleep.

Ilya glanced over his shoulder. "Dinner."

"That's not an answer."

"Canadian dinner," Ilya said, like that explained everything.

Shane squinted at the pan. “Are you... cooking?”

Ilya smirked. “You sound shocked.”

“I am shocked,” Shane said. “I didn’t know you could do anything in a kitchen besides open beer.”

“I am good at many things you are not,” Ilya said easily, stirring. Then, without thinking too hard about it, “I could be perfect husband.”

They both froze.

Ilya went still, clearly realizing what he’d said a second too late. “I mean...” he added quickly, turning back to the stove, ears faintly red. “For anyone. Hypothetically.”

Shane let out a short, surprised laugh that hurt his ribs a little. “Right. Hypothetically.”

He slid into one of the chairs, resting his elbows on the table like he was somewhere normal. Somewhere safe. “Excuse me,” he said mildly, “could I get a cold ginger ale?”

Ilya shot him a look but smiled anyway. He opened the fridge, grabbed one, and set it down in front of Shane. “I hope it is acceptable,” he said. “Dinner will be served soon.”

Shane wrapped his fingers around the cold can and looked at him. Really looked. At how at ease Ilya seemed standing there, domestic and solid and very much *here*.

He smiled.

Dinner didn’t take long. Shane hadn’t expected much. He wasn’t exactly in the mood to be impressed but the first bite stopped him cold. It was one of his favorite meals. And it was actually good. Like, annoyingly good. Cooked by Ilya fucking Rozanov of all people.

Ilya watched him chew, waiting. “Well?” he asked.

Shane swallowed deliberately. “It could be better,” he said, deadpan.

Ilya’s brow furrowed, just slightly. He looked genuinely displeased, like he was already cataloging what he’d fucked up.

Shane cracked. “I’m kidding,” he said quickly. “It’s really good. Like... really good.”

Ilya studied his face for a second, then nodded once, satisfied. “Good,” he said, and went back to eating.

They ate in relative quiet for a bit, the clink of utensils filling the space. Shane felt full in a way that wasn’t just about food. Too full, maybe.

“So,” Shane said, out of nowhere, “how’s your team in Boston?”

Ilya didn't answer right away. He stared down at his plate, jaw working. "Probably pissed at me," he admitted. "I left in middle of season. We might not even make playoffs."

The words landed heavy between them.

"When do you go back?" Shane asked, voice neutral, like he hadn't been turning that question over in his head for hours.

Ilya's spoon slipped from his hand and clattered against the plate. He froze, then looked up sharply. "Why are you asking that?" he said. "Do you want me to leave?"

Shane thought about saying it. About saying everything. That this, whatever this was, felt fragile and temporary. That once he was healed, once he was cleared to play again, they'd probably slide back into old habits. Pretending. Avoiding. Fucking and not talking about it. Like this moment was just a detour, not a turning point.

Instead, he shrugged. "You can't just... not go back," he said lightly. "You've got a team."

Ilya held his gaze for a beat longer than necessary, then nodded. "Yeah," he said quietly.

They went back to eating.

Shane stared at his plate, appetite gone despite the food still being good, and thought about how fucked it all was. How close they were to something real. How easy it would be to lose it by pretending nothing had changed.

He hated how much he wanted more.

The silence stretched until Shane remembered something, the thought surfacing like it had been waiting its turn. "Oh," he said, glancing up. "Hayden called earlier. This morning."

Ilya raised a brow. "Why?"

Shane ignored the tone. "He and Jackie want to visit tomorrow. They're insisting, actually."

Ilya snorted. "Absolutely not."

"They're my best friends," Shane said. "And I want you to know them. Both of them."

Ilya leaned back in his chair, arms crossing. "I already know Hayden. He's annoying."

"You could at least try to be nice."

Ilya's mouth twitched. "I am always nice."

Shane laughed quietly. "You're a menace."

Ilya tilted his head, eyes flicking over Shane in a way that made heat curl low in his stomach. "I could make you feel better tonight," he said lightly. "And tomorrow. Very nice of me."

Shane's pulse jumped, traitorous. He swallowed it down. "Don't," he said. "You're not distracting me with that."

Ilya made a face, clearly trying anyway. "I would be careful."

"I know," Shane said, rolling his eyes. "But my body still feels like shit. I'm bruised everywhere."

"I am always careful," Ilya repeated, softer this time.

Shane knew that. He also knew exactly what Ilya was doing, and fuck if it wasn't working. The look on Ilya's face, intent, patient, wanting made something hot and dangerous coil in his chest.

He stood up abruptly, grabbing his plate. "I'm putting this in the sink."

Ilya frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning up," Shane said.

"No," Ilya said, voice dropping just enough to matter. "Sit."

Shane hesitated, then scoffed. "I can..."

"I said sit," Ilya repeated, firmer now.

Shane sat.

He watched as Ilya gathered both plates, moved to the sink, and started washing them like this was normal. Like this was his place. Like Shane wasn't watching him with something dangerously close to awe.

He blinked hard and looked away, because if he didn't, he was pretty sure he'd admit something he wasn't ready to say out loud yet.

Fuck.

A while later, Shane was stretched out on the couch, half-reclined, pretending he was relaxed when he really wasn't. Through the glass walls, he could see Ilya outside, phone pressed to his ear, pacing back and forth. His shoulders were tense. His free hand kept running through his hair. Whatever the call was, it wasn't good.

When Ilya finally hung up and came back inside, Shane didn't ask who it was. Instead, he said, casually, "You smoked."

Ilya stopped short. "What?"

"You smell like it," Shane added.

Ilya scowled. “I had one. One. Don’t look at me like that.” He stepped closer. “What’s your point?”

“My point,” Shane said evenly, “is you shouldn’t be smoking.”

Ilya let out a deep breath and kept moving until Shane had nowhere left to retreat into the couch cushions. He stopped just short, leaning down slightly, close enough that Shane could see the edge of defiance in his eyes. “Since when do you get to lecture me?”

Shane leaned back just enough to keep space, then pushed at Ilya’s chest lightly. “I’m not kissing you if you smell like cigarettes.”

Ilya opened his mouth to protest.

“Go brush your teeth,” Shane said, already standing up. He shot Ilya a look over his shoulder as he headed toward the bedroom as an invitation wrapped in challenge. “Then I’ll probably do more than kiss you.”

Ilya stared at him for a second, then muttered something under his breath and turned toward the bathroom.

Shane made it to the bed and eased himself down carefully, sinking into the sheets with a quiet exhale. His body ached, but the bed felt solid, grounding. Safe. He stared at the ceiling and waited.

It didn’t take long.

Ilya appeared in the doorway, mouth tilted in a lazy smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. The light behind him threw his shape into shadow, tall and dark against the hall.

Shane’s heart kicked hard.

Then something in him twisted.

The room felt different. Too dark. His vision blurred at the edges, the shadow in the doorway stretching into something wrong. His chest tightened. The smell of his sheets turned into something harsher in his nose, his skin buzzing like it had before.

His brain betrayed him.

For half a second, the shape wasn’t Ilya anymore.

It was too big. Too close. Blocking the exit. His body locked up, breath stalling as panic surged hot and fast. His hands curled into the sheets, knuckles white, heart slamming so hard it hurt. He tried to tell himself where he was. *Bedroom, cottage, safe.* But the words slipped through him like water.

The shadow moved.

Shane flinched violently, a broken sound tearing out of his throat before he could stop it. His chest burned, lungs refusing to slow, the memory crashing in over everything else.

He couldn't see past it.

He couldn't tell the difference yet.

All he knew was that someone was there and his body was screaming at him to get away.

"Shane."

The voice cut through the noise, rough and urgent and unmistakably Ilya.

"Shane...hey. It's me. I've got you."

It didn't fix it instantly. Nothing ever did. But Shane latched onto the sound, dragging air into his lungs in uneven pulls. The room started to come back in pieces. The doorway. The bed. The shape in front of him resolving into something familiar instead of threatening.

Ilya was right there, crouched low, hands out in front of him like he was ready to catch Shane if he tipped over. His face was tight with concern, eyes wide and focused only on Shane.

Shane realized he was on the floor.

At some point he must have slid off the bed, knees pulled in, back against the mattress. The realization landed hard, and with it came the crash. The adrenaline drained out of him all at once, leaving him shaking and hollow.

"Oh...fuck," Shane choked, and then he was crying. "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

Ilya moved immediately. "No," he said firmly. "No, Shane. Don't do that. This is not something you apologize for."

Shane didn't pull away when Ilya's hand touched his arm. Didn't flinch when Ilya shifted closer. He let himself be gathered up, careful and solid, Ilya's body warm and real against his. Ilya wrapped him up fully then, arms secure but not tight, holding Shane like he was something worth protecting.

Shane buried his face in Ilya's chest and cried, shoulders hitching, breath coming apart. "I fucking hate this," he sobbed. "I hate it. I hate how it feels."

"I know," Ilya murmured, over and over. "I know. I'm here."

"I hate that I can't stop it," Shane said, words tumbling out between gasps. "I hate that my body just...does this. I hate it."

Shane clutched at his shirt, fingers twisting into the fabric. "When does it end?" he asked, voice breaking. "When do I get my life back?"

Ilya didn't answer.

“I wanna play again,” Shane said. “I wanna be normal. I’m so tired, Ilya. I’m tired of being careful. I’m tired of pretending shit doesn’t hurt. I’m tired of sneaking around and not saying what I want.”

His voice went raw with it. “I did everything right. I’m a good person. I’m a good son. I didn’t...fuck, I didn’t deserve this.”

The words kept spilling, messy and unfair and exhausted. He blamed the universe. He blamed fate. He blamed anything that might be listening for taking something simple and making it hurt like this.

What he didn’t say was what stayed locked behind his teeth and ribs. It was that he was tired of pretending he didn’t love Ilya. That he wanted a real life. A shared one. That it felt cruel to finally let himself want that and then get punished for it.

Ilya just held Shane, one hand steady at his back, the other cradling the back of his head, letting the storm burn itself out. He stayed exactly what Shane needed. Someone solid, present, and not going anywhere.

Eventually the sobs slowed. Shane’s grip loosened. His breathing evened out, shallow but steady. His body sagged with exhaustion, eyes fluttering despite his best effort to stay awake.

“I’m here,” Ilya whispered as Shane went heavy against him. “I’ve got you.”

And this time, when Shane slipped into sleep, the fear didn’t follow him all the way down.

Shane woke the next morning tangled up in warmth.

For a split second he didn’t move, just catalogued what he could feel. Steady breathing against his chest, an arm solid around his back, the faint ache in his body dulled instead of screaming. Then memory caught up. The floor. The panic. Ilya holding him while everything fell apart.

He was in bed now.

His arms were wrapped around Ilya, legs hooked in close, like he’d climbed there sometime in the night and refused to let go. He could tell immediately that Ilya was awake. There was a tension to him Shane recognized, that quiet alertness like he’d been lying there thinking for a while.

“Morning,” Shane said softly.

“Morning,” Ilya answered, voice rough with sleep. “How did you... sleep?”

Shane thought about it. The waking up. The absence of terror. The way his chest didn’t feel like it was going to cave in. “Better,” he said honestly.

Ilya nodded, relief flickering across his face before he could hide it. “Good.” He paused. “You hungry?”

Shane tightened his hold instead of answering. "Can we just... stay like this for a bit?"

What he didn't say was that he felt safe right now. Wrapped around Ilya, breathing him in, pretending the rest of the world didn't exist.

Ilya didn't argue. He just shifted slightly, making room, pressing a kiss into Shane's hair. They lay there in the quiet, morning light filtering in through the window.

"I've been thinking," Ilya said eventually, like he'd been holding the words back for hours. "What if I leave Boston?"

Shane stiffened. He pulled back just enough to look at him. "What?"

Ilya's expression was serious, guarded. "Playoffs chances are shit," he said. "And I could... transfer. Stay in Canada. Be closer."

Shane studied his face, trying to read past the words. "Is that what you want?" he asked carefully.

Ilya shrugged, noncommittal, then leaned in to kiss Shane's forehead. "I don't know," he admitted. "Not yet."

Something twisted in Shane's chest, like guilt digging its way in where it didn't belong. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, the words slipping out before he could stop them.

Ilya frowned immediately, like the idea itself offended him. "Why?"

Shane looked down at the space between them, at the sheets bunched under his fingers. He hated how familiar this felt like taking responsibility for things that weren't his to carry. "Boston's pissed at you because of me," he said. "You left in the middle of the season. This whole thing..."

"No." Ilya cut him off without hesitation, voice firm enough to stop the thought mid-spiral. "They're pissed because *I* made a choice. My choice." He shifted, forcing Shane to look at him. "You don't apologize for that."

Shane shook his head, stubborn even as his chest tightened. "I wanted you here," he said. "I asked you to stay. That makes it my fault too."

It felt logical in his head. Cause and effect. Wanting something and breaking things in the process. Shane had spent his whole life learning how to take blame cleanly, how to make it sit right.

Ilya didn't let him.

His hand slid up Shane's back, slow and deliberate, grounding him. "I chose you," he said, quiet but absolute. "No one forced me. No one pressured me. I chose you." His thumb pressed gently into Shane's spine. "And I'd do it again. Every time."

The words hit Shane like a punch to the chest.

Not painful, just overwhelming. Sudden. Like the floor dropped out from under him. His throat tightened, breath catching as his heart started racing, that familiar surge of intensity rising fast. But this time it wasn't fear clawing its way up his ribs.

It was want.

It was love, loud and unmanageable and terrifying in how clear it suddenly felt. It pressed against his chest, demanding space, demanding to be said, like holding it in might actually hurt.

"I..." Shane started, the word barely formed.

The doorbell rang.

The sound sliced straight through the moment. Shane flinched despite himself, muscles tensing on instinct. He let out a low, frustrated sound and dropped his forehead against Ilya's chest.

"Fuck," he muttered.

Ilya exhaled slowly, steady and warm beneath him. His hand came up to cradle the back of Shane's head, fingers gentle in his hair.

Hayden had been pissed off for days.

Ever since the hospital. Ever since he watched Shane half out of his mind, shaking, terrified lock onto Ilya Rozanov like he was a fucking lifeline. Hayden couldn't shake the image no matter how hard he tried. It didn't matter how many drills he ran, how many games they lost, how many hours he spent pretending to focus on hockey.

Of all people.
Ilya fucking Rozanov.

It sat wrong in his chest, ugly and jealous and meaner than he liked to admit. Shane was his best friend. His captain. His responsibility, even when Shane didn't ask for it. And somehow this asshole rival, this guy Shane was supposed to hate had slipped past all of that.

Montreal hadn't won a single game since Shane went down. The team felt off-balance without him, like they were all pretending not to notice the hole in the middle of everything. Hayden tried to tell himself that was why he was so on edge. That it wasn't personal.

It was personal.

When they finally got a few days off, Jackie didn't even bother pretending it was optional. She begged. Flat-out told him they were going, that Shane needed familiar faces, that *Hayden*

needed to stop sulking like a pissed-off teenager.

So now they were standing at Shane's cottage door, arms full of food and drinks, cold air biting at Hayden's face, his jaw already tight.

The door opened.

And there he was.

Rozanov.

Hayden didn't even think before it came out of his mouth. "Yeah, this was a fucking bad idea."

Jackie shot him a look sharp enough to cut glass and squeezed his hand hard. "Be nice," she hissed under her breath.

She stepped forward anyway, all calm and polite like she always was, extending her hand. "Hi. I'm Jackie."

"Ilya," Rozanov said, accent thick, voice measured as he took her hand.

Hayden watched it happen with open irritation. The handshake. The civility. Like this guy hadn't crawled under his skin and stayed there.

"That's enough," Hayden snapped.

He stepped forward and physically cut between them, shoulder nudging Rozanov aside just enough to break the contact. He didn't apologize. Didn't care.

Then he walked straight inside.

"Shane," Hayden said, relief hitting him hard when he saw him standing, moving, bruised but upright. His face was still marked, shadows under his eyes deeper than before, but he was there.

Shane smiled when he saw him, small but real.

Hayden swallowed the rest of whatever shit he was about to say. Whatever he felt about Rozanov could wait.

For now, Shane was still here.

He dropped the bags on the counter and took a step toward Shane without thinking, arms already lifting from pure instinct, muscle memory from years of celebrating wins and surviving losses together.

Shane flinched.

It was subtle. Barely there. But Hayden saw it anyway, the way Shane's shoulders tightened for a split second before he caught himself.

Hayden froze. "Hey...shit. Sorry," he said quickly. "Is it... is it still okay if I hug you?"

Shane smiled at him, soft and tired and familiar. "Yeah," he said. "Just...careful. I'm still pretty fucked up."

Hayden nodded, moving slower this time, telegraphing every step like Shane needed the warning. He wrapped his arms around him gently, careful where he put his hands, like Shane was something breakable.

Then, of course...

"Wow," Rozanov said from somewhere behind them. "Very tender moment. Should I leave room or what?"

Hayden pulled back immediately, jaw tightening. He turned to Shane instead of looking at Ilya, like the guy didn't even exist. "I'm gonna punch him," Hayden said flatly. "Just so you know."

Shane snorted. "Please don't. I don't really want us to have matching bruised faces."

Jackie stepped in before Hayden could respond, arms already opening. "Come here," she said gently.

Shane went into the hug without hesitation this time, leaning into her, eyes closing for a second like he needed it. Jackie held him carefully, one hand firm between his shoulder blades, grounding.

Hayden glanced past them and caught Ilya watching.

Not watching *them*. Watching Shane.

Every move. Every breath. Like nothing else in the room existed.

Hayden grimaced to himself. "Gross," he muttered under his breath.

But even as the word left him, something in his chest shifted. Uncomfortable and reluctant and real.

Whatever the fuck this was... it wasn't going anywhere.

After the quick hugs and awkward hellos, they ended up gathered around the kitchen table with drinks in hand. Shane had ginger ale, same as always. Hayden grabbed one too out of habit. Jackie poured herself some orange juice. Hayden didn't bother clocking whatever Rozanov was drinking as it wasn't relevant to his life.

Shane and Jackie fell into easy conversation, the kind that didn't need warming up. "How are the kids?" Shane asked, leaning back slightly, careful with his ribs.

“They’re good,” Jackie said, smiling. “Everyone’s good. Well...mostly.”

Rozanov perked up at that, brows lifting. “Mostly?”

Jackie laughed softly. “The twins are worried about you. They keep asking when Uncle Shane is coming home.”

Hayden watched it happen without meaning to.

The way Rozanov turned toward Shane at the word *uncle*. The way his mouth curved, not smug, not cocky, just fond. Teasing. Like it was an inside thing. Shane glanced back at him with the same look, something small and shared passing between them like a quiet joke.

It made Hayden’s skin itch.

He couldn’t hold it in. “Okay,” he said, setting his bottle down harder than necessary. “When did *this* start?”

Everyone looked at him.

He didn’t bother pretending to soften his tone. He turned directly to Shane. “And why?”

Jackie nudged his side immediately. “Hayden.”

“It’s fine,” Shane said, quick but calm. He glanced at Jackie, then back at Hayden. “Really.”

There was a pause.

Then Shane and Rozanov looked at each other.

It wasn’t long. It didn’t need to be. Just a look that said *you want to say it or should I?* Hayden caught it, and something cold slid down his spine.

Rozanov shrugged. “It is long story.”

Shane cut in before he could keep going. “Rookie season.”

The words landed like a punch.

Hayden stared at him. “You’re fucking kidding me.”

Rookie season. Before half the shit they’d survived together. Before the inside jokes. Before Shane had become *his* person.

His best friend.

Rozanov shifted like he was about to speak. “No, it was...”

Shane cut him off without looking. Just a small shake of his head, firm. Then he turned back to Hayden, eyes steady, like he knew exactly where Hayden’s head was going and wanted to stop him from spiraling too far.

“It’s not what you think,” Shane said.

Hayden frowned. “Okay,” he said slowly. “Then what the hell is it?”

Shane didn’t answer right away. Neither did Rozanov. They glanced at each other again, that same quiet, wordless exchange. Not smug. Not secretive. Just... checking in.

Like partners.

Shane exhaled. “It’s complicated,” he said finally.

The pause after it was long. Uncomfortable.

Hayden watched his face closely, waiting for deflection, for humor, for Shane to dodge it the way he dodged everything else. But it didn’t come. Shane wasn’t joking. He wasn’t minimizing. He was just... telling the truth in the only way he could.

Hayden leaned back in his chair, chest tight. He didn’t like Rozanov. He still didn’t. But he could see it now. The connection. The way Shane’s body angled toward him without thinking. The way Rozanov’s hand hovered near Shane like it belonged there. It was the same look Hayden had seen on his own face when he looked at Jackie.

He caught Jackie’s eye for half a second. She gave a small, knowing nod.

There was one more thing. The thing Hayden had been circling since the hospital and never quite dared to say out loud.

“Did I...” He stopped, jaw tightening. “Did I do something? Anything. That made you not tell me?” He rubbed a hand over his face. “About... you. About being gay.”

The word felt heavy in his mouth.

Shane took his time answering. He looked down at the table, then back up. “It wasn’t just you,” he said. “It was the sport. The league. The locker room. You hear that shit every day... slurs thrown around like jokes. Like it doesn’t mean anything.”

Hayden swallowed.

“And honestly,” Shane continued, quieter now, “I didn’t really accept it myself. Not until... recently.”

Rozanov’s hand slid onto Shane’s knee. Hayden watched it happen and felt something ugly and painful loosen in his chest.

“Oh,” he said softly. “Fuck.”

It wasn’t about him. Not really. It was about the kind of world they worked in. The one they helped keep going. The one that made people hide parts of themselves just to survive it.

Hayden leaned back, exhaled hard. “That’s fucked,” he said.

And for the first time since he walked through the door, he meant it in a way that didn't include blaming Shane or himself or even Rozanov.

Just the world.

Hours slipped by without anyone really noticing. The drinks got refilled. The edge wore down. Conversation drifted from hockey to travel to stupid stories Hayden had already told a dozen times but told again anyway. At some point, everyone just got... tired. Not bored. Not done. Just worn in that quiet way that comes after too much honesty.

Shane and Hayden ended up on the couch, shoulders angled toward the glass wall that looked out onto the deck. Outside, Rozanov and Jackie stood near the railing, talking low, heads bent together. Jackie laughed at something Rozanov said, her hand briefly touching his arm.

Hayden watched them for a long second.

Hayden tilted his head. "You love him," he said, like he was commenting on the weather.

Shane startled, shooting him a look. "What?"

"You love Rozanov," Hayden repeated, casual but certain.

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it again. "That's not..." He stopped, sighed. "Shut up."

Hayden smirked. "I can't believe Shane Hollander is in love with Ilya *fucking* Rozanov," he said, shaking his head. "And I *really* can't believe that asshole has a heart that actually works."

"Jesus Christ," Shane muttered, rubbing his face. "You're being dramatic."

"You're in love to my childhood nemesis," Hayden shot back. "I think I'm allowed."

Shane hesitated, then muttered, "I don't even know if he loves me."

That wiped the smile right off Hayden's face.

He turned fully toward Shane now, studying him. The bruises. The exhaustion. The way his hands twisted together like he didn't know where to put them. "For what it's worth," Hayden said slowly, "as much as I hate that guy... he doesn't look at you like it's casual."

Shane didn't answer.

"Seriously," Hayden continued. "I've never seen Rozanov look like that. Not once. And I've watched him be a dick for years. Only an idiot wouldn't see it."

He paused, then smirked. "And you, my friend, have always been a fucking idiot about relationships."

Shane laughed despite himself. "Fuck you."

Outside, Rozanov laughed at something Jackie said, head tipping back, eyes bright. Shane's gaze followed the sound automatically.

Hayden snorted. "He's still a menace."

Shane glanced at him.

"And your taste in men?" Hayden continued. "Absolutely questionable."

Shane smiled.

Jackie asked if they could step outside, and Ilya understood immediately. He nodded, glad for the excuse, glad to give Shane and Hayden space without making a thing of it.

The air outside was colder than he expected. Quiet. The lake stretched out in front of them, dark and still, like it was holding its breath. For a moment they didn't say anything.

Then Jackie spoke. "How is Shane," she said, not casually. Carefully. "Really."

Ilya almost smiled, a reflex. "He is stubborn," he said. "So, same Shane."

It didn't land.

He sighed and rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, fingers catching in his curls. "I'm worried," he admitted. The word felt small compared to what he meant, but it was the best he had.

Jackie waited. Didn't interrupt.

Ilya went on slowly, searching as he spoke. "It feels like... he is always ready for something bad to happen. Like his body doesn't believe he is safe. Ever." He swallowed. "Sometimes it just...comes. No warning. He is here one second and gone next."

Jackie nodded, jaw tightening. "Yeah," she said softly. "That tracks. Fuck."

"It's hard," Ilya said. "To watch him be scared of nothing. Or everything." He exhaled sharply. "It makes me angry. And helpless."

Jackie shook her head. "It's brutal," she said. "Seeing someone you love get hit with something like that and not being able to fix it."

Ilya hesitated, then added, "His mom talked about therapy yesterday. He will start soon."

"That's good," Jackie said immediately. "That's really good. For him. For all of you."

They stood there for a bit, the sound of water lapping faint against the shore. Ilya watched it, trying to let his shoulders unclench.

Jackie sighed, like she'd been debating something. Then she turned to him. "How are *you* doing?"

The question caught him off guard.

Ilya blinked. "I'm fine."

Jackie didn't look convinced. "Watching someone go through that, especially someone you care about, it's scary as hell."

He nodded slowly. "It is scary," he said. "But I can't be scared. Shane needs me to be..."

Jackie's expression softened. "You're allowed to have feelings too," she said gently. "You know that, right?"

The words settled into him.

Ilya didn't answer right away. He stared out at the lake, at the dark water that didn't give anything back. Jackie's words echoed in his head, quiet but persistent.

Allowed.

He wasn't sure what to do with that yet.

Instead, he focused on something easier. Safer.

He thought, not for the first time, that he actually liked Jackie. Which was... inconvenient. Because that probably meant Hayden wasn't a total disaster either, and Ilya hated that realization on principle.

"You are... surprisingly normal," Ilya said finally, dry. "Considering you married to Pike."

Jackie laughed, real and unoffended. "Yeah," she said. "I get that a lot."

"How," Ilya asked, squinting at her like the answer might physically hurt him, "did you end up married to someone like him?"

She smiled to herself. "That's not a story you want to hear."

Ilya hummed. "Probably not."

"But," Jackie added, softer, "he's a good dad. A really good one."

Ilya opened his mouth to say something sarcastic. Nothing came out. He frowned, mildly annoyed at himself. "He is... decent," he conceded. "Very annoying. But decent."

Jackie grinned like she'd just won something.

“Don’t tell him I said that,” Ilya added immediately. “I have reputation of being an asshole.”

She lifted two fingers. “I swear. Your secret’s safe.”

Then she tilted her head. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re an asshole. I think you’re just... misunderstood.”

Ilya scoffed quietly, but something about it stuck. He looked back out at the water, thinking that Jackie Pike was apparently a dangerously perceptive person.

She didn’t let him sit in that too long.

“Can I ask you something?” she said.

Ilya glanced at her. “You already are.”

She smiled thinly. “Have you ever been in a relationship with a woman?”

He laughed once. “Depends what you call relationship. I have had many s...”

Jackie’s look stopped him cold.

He sighed. “No,” he said. “It was just sex.”

“And Shane?” she asked, not pushing, just asking.

Ilya opened his mouth to deflect, instinct kicking in. Something about how good Shane was with his mouth.

He stopped himself.

“No,” he said instead, quieter. “Shane is not just... fun sex.”

Jackie nodded, like that was all she needed.

She didn’t rush the next question. Let the silence stretch just long enough to matter. “Who else knows?”

Ilya frowned. “Why so many questions?”

Jackie laughed under her breath. “Because I don’t want Shane hurt,” she said plainly. “And because if I’m going to watch this unfold, I want to know the person standing next to him isn’t full of shit.”

“I won’t hurt him,” he said immediately, the words sharp with urgency. “I couldn’t. I...” He stopped, breath catching, chest tightening before he could redirect it. “I love him too much to even think about hurting him.”

Ilya froze.

He stared at the lake like it might rewind time for him, like he could shove the sentence back into his mouth. His heart started hammering, loud and uncontained, the realization crashing in all at once.

He'd said it.

Out loud.

To someone who wasn't Shane.

Jackie's eyes widened, just a little, then softened. She smiled, slow and knowing.

"Wow," she said quietly.

"Fuck," Ilya muttered. He dragged a hand down his face. "I didn't... I mean, I wasn't..."

He tried to explain it away, but the truth was already there, sitting heavy in his chest. He felt it now, the way his mouth wouldn't stop pulling into a grin no matter how much he tried to rein it in. Like saying it had cracked something open.

"You haven't told him yet," Jackie said gently.

Ilya shook his head. "I'm scared," he admitted. "What if I say it and he realizes he deserves someone... better? Easier. Someone not his rival. Someone who doesn't come with this much baggage and bullshit."

Jackie stepped closer and placed a hand on his shoulder, firm and grounding. "Shane almost died," she said softly. "And he still wants you. That doesn't sound like someone looking for an easy way out."

Ilya swallowed hard.

"He's smart," she continued. "He'll figure out how to make it work. Or he'll fight for it. He always does."

Ilya huffed, the tension easing just a fraction. "You say very wise things for someone married to Hayden Pike."

Jackie smiled, unapologetic. "And you're in love with your biggest rival," she shot back. "Love makes idiots of all of us."

Ilya snorted, shaking his head.

Yeah, he thought.

Blind, terrifying, and already too late to walk away from.

Jackie glanced toward the house and clapped her hands once, like she was closing a mental tab. "We should head back," she said. "We promised the kids a play date."

Ilya nodded. "Yeah. Probably smart." He smirked. "Leaving Shane unsupervised with Hayden too long feels like bad judgment."

Jackie laughed. "That's fair."

Inside, the goodbyes were slow and soft in that way that came from knowing Shane wasn't fully okay yet. Jackie hugged him carefully, hands warm and steady at his back. Hayden followed, muttering something about "don't be stupid" that sounded suspiciously like *I care*.

Then Jackie turned to Ilya. "It was nice finally meeting you," she said. "For real this time."

Ilya surprised himself by stepping forward and pulling her into a hug. It was brief, respectful, but sincere. "You are... good people," he said. "Even if you married idiot."

"Hey," Hayden protested.

Ilya grinned and opened his arms. "You want hug too?"

Hayden took half a step forward, caught the smug look on Ilya's face, and stopped. "Never mind," he said immediately, heading for the door. "Absolutely not."

The door closed behind them.

Ilya turned slowly to Shane.

It was daylight, clean and honest, no shadows to hide behind. Ilya let himself look at him fully, at the bruises fading into yellow and green, at the tiredness still clinging to him, at the way Shane stood there like he belonged to this place.

Ilya took a step closer, the look on his face unmistakable.

Shane caught it immediately. He smiled, shaking his head. "No."

He said it even as he stepped backward.

Toward the bedroom.

Ilya followed, unhurried. "You're walking the wrong direction for no," he said lightly.

Shane rolled his eyes but didn't stop. "You're unbearable."

"And yet," Ilya said, softer now.

When Shane hit the doorframe, Ilya stopped. Close, but not touching. He searched Shane's face, really looked. Checked his eyes. Checked that Shane was here, present. Not pulled away somewhere else.

Shane met his gaze, breath a little shallow. Wanting.

Ilya leaned in slowly, giving Shane time to change his mind.

He didn't.

The kiss was unhurried and deliberate. Just lips fitting together like they'd been missing this exact thing all day. Ilya kept it gentle, one hand braced against the door instead of on Shane, grounding himself as much as Shane.

When they parted, barely an inch between them, Ilya murmured, "Tell me if you want me to stop."

Shane swallowed. Then he pulled Ilya back in by the front of his shirt.

"Don't," he said.

And Ilya didn't.

For the first time in a long while, Ilya could actually hold him.

Not in fragments. Not in rushed touches or borrowed hours or nights that ended too soon. Hold him like there was nowhere else to go, like time wasn't something sharp pressing at his back. Ilya had slept with plenty of people before... too many, really. Mostly women. Mostly faces that blurred together afterward. None of it touched this quiet, steady weight of Shane against him, warm and breathing and unmistakably choosing him in return.

When it was over, they stayed where they were.

They ended up tangled together on the bed, sheets kicked aside, skin bare and overheated in that slow, drowsy way that came after something real. It hadn't been about urgency or release or proving anything. It had been unhurried. Intentional. The kind of closeness that left Ilya oddly calm, like something inside him had finally clicked into place instead of rattling loose.

He'd never been sentimental about sex. Never believed it meant more than what it was.

Except with Shane.

His mind drifted without asking permission, back before their rookie season, that stupid sponsorship photoshoot. The first time he'd seen Shane naked. The way it had stolen the air from his lungs then, the same way it still did now. Their first time. The awkward honesty of it. The way everything that mattered somehow traced back to this one person.

Ilya lay there listening to Shane breathe, realizing that every version of *this*, every beginning that counted, had always been him.

"What are you thinking about?" Shane asked quietly.

Ilya shifted, pressing his mouth to Shane's shoulder, breathing him in like it helped organize his thoughts. "Just... memories," he said. "You. Us. All the dumb, messy ways we kept circling each other until this."

Shane hummed, fingers tracing slow, absent lines along Ilya's arm. He was quiet for a moment, like he was choosing his words carefully. "Do you want this to end?" he asked. Not

accusatory. Not afraid. Just honest.

Ilya lifted his head immediately. “No,” he said. The answer came too fast to question. “Fuck, no.”

Shane’s shoulders eased at that, a tension Ilya hadn’t even noticed draining out of him. “Good,” Shane said softly. He shifted closer, chest to chest now, like once the door was open he didn’t want to stand halfway through it anymore. “Because I don’t either.”

Ilya stayed still, listening.

“I don’t want to go back to pretending,” Shane went on. “I don’t want this to just be something we survive and then quietly put away.” He swallowed. “I want more than that. I want... a life. With you in it.”

Ilya’s breath caught, sharp and shallow.

“I want a kid someday,” Shane said, voice steadier now, like saying it out loud made it real in a way he’d been avoiding. “Or two. I want to be a dad. I want us old and annoying and retired, complaining about everything.” A small smile tugged at his mouth. “I want to live somewhere quiet. Maybe here. Somewhere we don’t have to hide.”

Ilya couldn’t move. Could barely breathe.

“And I want to be married,” Shane finished, eyes locked on his. “To you. Not as a fantasy. As a real thing.”

The words didn’t crash into Ilya, they settled. It was heavy but it felt right. The fear he’d been carrying for so long loosened its grip, piece by piece, like it finally understood it wasn’t needed anymore.

He blinked hard, only then realizing his vision had gone blurry.

“Is that...” Ilya cleared his throat. “Is that really what you want?” His voice came out rough, stripped of bravado. “Not just right now. Not because everything is fucked up.”

Shane leaned down and pressed a kiss to Ilya’s arm. Simple, steady, no hesitation in it at all. “Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

Ilya closed his eyes and pulled him closer, holding on like this was something fragile and precious and terrifying all at once. For the first time, the future didn’t feel like something waiting to hurt him.

The feeling built anyway. Too much. Too fast. It started as a tightness behind his eyes, then heat, then tears he couldn’t fucking stop no matter how hard he tried. His chest hitched, breath going uneven, everything inside him surging at once like it had been waiting years for permission.

Shane felt it immediately.

He lifted his head, concern flickering across his face, and Ilya couldn't look away anymore. He pressed kisses into Shane's forehead, one after another, his voice breaking as he muttered it in Russian. *Ya lyublyu tebya*. Again. Softer. Like saying it twice might make it real enough to survive.

Then he kissed Shane harder this time. Shane answered immediately, hands gripping Ilya's shoulders, pulling him closer like he was anchoring them both.

When they pulled apart, Ilya was shaking. His throat burned. His heart felt like it was trying to beat its way out of his ribs. He swallowed, forced the words through in English, bare and terrifying. "I love you."

Shane went still.

The second stretched too long.

Ilya's stomach dropped. His mind spiraled instantly, too much, too soon, he'd fucked it up, he'd ruined everything. His chest tightened like he was about to crack in half.

Then Shane moved.

He shifted, climbing over him so they were face to face, Shane's weight solid, his hands braced on either side of Ilya's head. Shane's face was inches away now, eyes wet, lashes clumped with tears he wasn't hiding.

"You don't get to say that and not let me answer," Shane said softly.

Then he leaned down and kissed him, slow, firm, unmistakable. When he pulled back, his forehead pressed to Ilya's.

"I love you too," Shane said.

The words hit Ilya like relief so sharp it hurt. He let out a broken laugh that turned into a shaky breath, hands gripping Shane like he was afraid he'd disappear.

"Fuck," Shane murmured, brushing his thumb under Ilya's eye. "You have any idea how long I've wanted to say that?"

Ilya let out a broken laugh that turned into another breathless confession. "I love you," he said. "I love you so much it hurts. I've been choking on it for years."

Shane smiled through his tears. "Yeah," he said softly. "I know."

Ilya kept saying it anyway in different versions of the same truth, words tumbling over each other, unpolished and raw. That he loved Shane. That he chose him. That it had always been him. Every time.

Shane listened to all of it, smiling through his own tears, kissing him quiet when the words got too messy.

When it finally settled. When the rush eased into something steadier, Ilya realized he could breathe again. The fear was still there, but it wasn't crushing anymore.

Ilya lay there with Shane curled against him. His heart still felt bruised from everything it had carried. Years of distance, of half-truths, of convincing himself that wanting this much was dangerous. But it wasn't running him anymore. It wasn't loud. It was just... there.

Ilya hadn't thought he'd ever get to this point. Hadn't thought he'd ever let himself imagine a future that wasn't built around exits and contingencies and the expectation that people left once they saw too much. But lying there with Shane asleep against his chest, breathing slow and even, the idea of *after* didn't feel like a threat.

He'd already lived through the worst version of fear he knew. Watching helpless while Shane was broken open by someone else's violence, watching the person he loved disappear behind panic and pain. That was the edge of it. The thing Ilya didn't think he'd survive.

He had.

So whatever came next, the media, league bullshit, the noise of the world, it felt smaller somehow. Manageable in a way it hadn't before. Russia wasn't home anymore. Hadn't been for a long time. The places he'd learned to survive didn't define him the way they once did.

What mattered was here.

Since his mother died, no one had ever really loved him for the parts he kept hidden. Not for what he could provide. Not for what he could do in bed. Not for the edges or the mask. Shane loved the son his mother had known. The one Ilya buried to keep going. The one he never thought he'd be allowed to show again.

And Shane was still here.

Ilya tightened his hold just a little, careful not to wake him, and pressed a kiss into Shane's hair. Then another.

For the first time, the future wasn't something to outrun.

It was something he could stay for.

Chapter End Notes

If you made it this far, thank you. Truly. Thank you to everyone who clicked, stayed, commented, left kudos, or just quietly read along. This was a harder fic to write than I expected, emotionally and time-wise, and knowing people were here for it made a huge difference.

Not gonna lie, this chapter got long. I fully sat down thinking “okay, just wrap it up nicely,” and then Hudson walked the catwalk today and my brain immediately went oh no, feelings, and suddenly here we are. So if this spiraled a bit. yeah. That’s on me.

I did briefly consider ending this with a wedding. I really did. But I realized I was already pulling a lot of emotional DNA from the books, and I didn’t want to overstep or do a disservice to the original story. If you want weddings and canon-earned happiness, *The Long Game* is genuinely such a good read and absolutely worth your time.

Mostly, I just want to say this: let’s try to keep this fandom kinder. These characters mean a lot to people. The show, the books, the actors, they’re comfort for a lot of us. Writing this fic was my way of stepping away from the noise and holding onto what I love about it all. I hope it felt like that for you too.

Take care of yourselves. Thank you for being here. 

End Notes

I stepped away for a little over a week to touch some grass (literally)... and I came back to 6k kudos and 75k hits.

Thank you. Truly.

I'm especially grateful for the kindness in this space (the thoughtful comments, mixed reactions, our love for ShiyLa)

P.S.: By the way I love Hollanov but ShiyLa is more fun.

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