

Baby, Bend Over

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Baby, Bend Over

by [TemporaryAltars](#)

Summary

Shane is convinced that Ilya Rozanov—captain of the Boston Bears and Shane’s newest student—hates him.

Ilya joined Shane's yoga class specifically to get closer to the hot instructor, but every attempt at flirting only seems to make things worse.

Neither of them has any idea the other is completely in love with them.

Notes

Disclaimer: I know nothing about hockey aside from the show and the very little I learned from my friend whose brother is in the NHL. Ilya's schedule in this story would absolutely not make sense if this fic was really happening.

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

Chapter 1: Boys Like You

Chapter Notes

Title from Yoga by Janelle Monet and Jidenna, which has been stuck in my head for like two full days now.

~~2/10 edit: Apparently someone reseed me on TT! Please comment the link if you have it, I'd love to watch 🥰🥰.~~

5/21/26 100k. I've dreamed of this since I was a teenager. 100k hits. Thank you so fucking much. I love all of you.

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



The Seaport Athletic Club was exactly the kind of ludicrously, unapologetically ostentatious place Ilya Rozanov loved, and he wasn't shy about it. The club was exclusive—made just for people like Ilya—and had been designed with their future clientele in mind. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Boston Harbor, equipment that cost more than most people's cars. A juice bar that served something called "adaptogenic wellness elixirs" that tasted like lawn clippings but came in

sleek glass bottles that looked good on the club's Instagram page. The kind of gym where people wore matching Loro Piana athleisure sets and the clientele were regularly featured on the Forbes top 100 list.

Ilya appreciated quality. He had a collection of luxury cars that would make most people weep and lived in a Beacon Hill brownstone with heated floors and a wine cellar. He wore custom suits and owned watches that cost more than some people's annual salaries. Why shouldn't he enjoy a gym that matched the rest of his lifestyle?

Sure, he had a state-of-the-art home gym, and access to a world-renowned training facility at Boston Landing. Not to mention, he had a personal trainer who made himself available whenever Ilya needed him—day or night, no questions asked. But there was something to be said about the energy of working out around other people. Ilya thrived on competition. Always had. Put him in a room with someone lifting heavier weights or running faster, and something in him kicked into gear—that need to measure himself, to push harder, to be better. It was the same instinct that made him a good hockey player, that drive to never be outworked, never be outdone.

And if he was being honest, being a bona fide celebrity was isolating as fuck. Lonely in ways that most people didn't understand and likely never would. You couldn't trust everyone you met—couldn't always be sure the story you told some stranger at a bar wouldn't end up on the front page of some shitty gossip magazine sold near the checkout lines at the grocery store.

The exclusivity of the athletic club meant he didn't have to worry about being mobbed by fans every time he wanted to step out of the house workout around someone besides his trainer or his teammates. The people here had their own money, their own lives. They didn't give a shit if he was Ilya Rozanov, captain of the Boston Bears, or just another guy on a treadmill.

Not to mention the view. The Seaport location meant floor-to-ceiling windows with a direct sightline to the harbor—icy blue water glittering in the morning sun, sailboats drifting past lazily like they had nowhere important to be. It was the kind of view that made the thirty grand a year membership fee feel justified.

This morning was no different from any other Tuesday. Eight o'clock, treadmill, then weights. Maybe some time in the sauna if his shoulders were still tight from practice yesterday. Routine. Discipline. The things that kept him sharp and ready whenever he stepped onto the ice.

The only disruption to his morning had been Svetlana.

His best friend had been relentless for weeks now, trying to drag him into the yoga classes the gym had recently started offering in the glass-walled studio on the second floor. Right next to the cardio equipment, which meant Ilya had a front-row view of people contorting themselves into positions that belonged in a circus act, not a fitness class.

"You're so *tense*, Ilya," she'd said this morning in the lobby as they'd arrived, poking him in the shoulder blade with the kind of aggressive affection only a Russian woman could manage. "You carry everything in your shoulders. It's like you're always bracing for impact."

"I play professional hockey," he'd replied. "I *am* always bracing for impact."

"Exactly. You need yoga. Come to class with me."

"I do not need yoga. I am professional hockey player, not ballerina. I do yoga, I become soft. I turn into granola man who drinks green juice and wears man bun."

Svetlana had laughed and insisted he was being ridiculous. "You're already soft, you idiot. You cried during a dog food commercial last month."

"It was very moving commercial," Ilya said, narrowing his eyes. "Puppy from beginning got old and all the fur around muzzle started turning gray."

Svetlana raised her brows, unimpressed, and smacked his arm lightly.

"Come to class with me, Ilya. Right now. Just try it once and if you don't like it I promise I won't ask again."

Svetlana was convincing. And terrifying. But Ilya was immune to her tactics by now. "Not today," he'd said. *Or ever*, his mind supplied.

Svetlana had rolled her eyes with fond exasperation and given up. "Fine. Stay tight. Stay miserable. I'll be in the studio if you change your mind."

She'd walked off toward the glass-walled room, Pinetti yoga mat tucked under her arm, and Ilya had headed for the treadmills.

His usual spot was open. Second one from the left, positioned perfectly so he could see both the harbor view and the rest of the gym floor. He set his water bottle in the cup holder, pulled his phone out to queue up his usual playlist, and stepped onto the belt.

The treadmill hummed beneath his feet. Ilya kept his pace steady—a warm-up, really, nothing serious—and stared out at the water. A few sailboats drifted across the harbor, their white sails bright against the gray-blue morning. He watched them for a moment, letting his mind go blank the way it did during warm-ups.

After a few minutes, curiosity got the better of him, and his eyes drifted toward the glass-walled yoga studio.

The class was in full swing. Svetlana was near the front, moving through poses with the kind of fluid grace that made Ilya's joints hurt just watching it. Even in workout clothes, she was striking—tall and lean with her full curls pulled back in a high ponytail, barely breaking a sweat, even as others struggled. She had the kind of presence that made people step aside in hallways—the sort of arresting beauty that was intensely striking and extremely intimidating to anyone who didn't know her. Ilya had watched men stumble over themselves around her for years, and it never stopped being funny.

The other students were scattered around the studio behind her, some of them actually keeping up, others looking vaguely confused and slightly resentful, like they'd been tricked into joining a cult.

And then there was the instructor. Ilya watched as he led the class into their next position—arms stretched forward on the mat, chest open and lowered, back curved down and forward in a deep fold. His hips stayed high, elevated, and his ass—Jesus Christ, his *ass*—was pointed directly at the glass wall. The black shorts he was wearing hugged every line, every enticing curve of muscle and flesh as he held the position.

The pronounced curve of his body from shoulders to hips was unavoidably visible through the glass, and Ilya was suddenly, acutely aware that he was staring at it like a man possessed. He couldn't look away. Didn't want to look away.

Ilya's breath caught and he tried to ignore it, but his heart had already done something complicated in his chest. Something that felt a lot like missing a step on the stairs, that sick lurch of gravity asserting itself.

The instructor was at the front of the class, demonstrating poses with the kind of easy confidence that came from years of practice. He was tall—not as tall as Ilya, but Ilya preferred being larger than his partners anyway—with the kind of lean, defined musculature that came from comprehensive bodywork and a genuine understanding of holistic wellness, rather than just lifting weights for the sake of brute strength. His skin was pale, dusted with freckles across his nose and cheeks, and his hair was thick and black, hanging in an S-shaped fringe, which somehow made his face look even more striking, accentuating his sharp cheekbones and full lips that were currently curved in an encouraging smile as he called out instructions to the class.

Ilya forced his attention back to the treadmill display. His heart rate was elevated. This was fine. This was normal. This was familiar territory. He was running at the gym, just like he did yesterday and every day before that since he was fourteen and decided he wanted to play hockey professionally.

He was absolutely not staring at the yoga instructor.

Staring was creepy and pathetic. Ilya did not *stare*. He was just glancing. Intently.

The instructor moved through the demonstration—downward dog, Ilya recognized that one. Warrior pose, sure. He was calling out cues, his voice carrying through the glass in a warm, steady cadence that Ilya couldn't quite make out over the hum of the treadmill. The class followed along, Svetlana moving with practiced ease while others struggled to keep up.

And then-

Oh, fuck.

The instructor moved into something else entirely. He was kneeling, his back arching so far backward that his head nearly touched his feet, chest thrust open to the ceiling, hips pushed forward and up. It was an insane degree of flexibility, the kind of thing that didn't seem physically possible. Everything about the pose was on display—the curve of his spine, the stretch of his abdomen, the prominence of his pelvis. Ilya forgot how to breathe.

The instructor's body was a study in controlled flexibility. The muscles in his back were defined but not bulky, the kind of strength that came from years of precise, controlled practice. His legs were long and lean, and the way he was positioned meant that Ilya could see the line of his spine, the curve of his lower back, the-

Ilya's foot slipped.

A full loss of coordination that sent his hands slapping against the treadmill's rails, grabbing for purchase as his body tried to remember how to stay upright. He caught himself—professional athlete reflexes and years of balance training doing their job—but his heart was hammering like he'd just taken a check into the boards.

He glanced around, pulse still racing.

No one had noticed. The guy next to him was staring at his phone propped on his own console. The woman two machines down had earbuds in and her eyes glued to the TV in front of her. Everyone was absorbed in their own workout, their own world, completely unaware of Ilya's momentary lapse in coordination.

Ilya's face was burning. This was not him. Ilya Rozanov was not the type of person who nearly ate shit every time he saw an attractive man. He was obviously just tired. Coach had been working them to the bone recently and clearly it was taking its toll on him.

He slowed the treadmill, then stopped it entirely, because apparently his body had decided that continuing to run while a beautiful man was stretching his glutes in Ilya's direct eye line was not a viable option. He grabbed a complimentary towel from the top of the pile—chalk white, and impossibly plush—and pressed it to his face.

When he lowered the towel, he made the mistake of looking back at the yoga studio.

The instructor had moved the class into a different pose now, something that involved lying on their backs with their legs up and out into a split. He was walking through the rows of students, offering corrections and adjustments, his hands gentle but firm as he helped someone deepen their stretch. Even from here, Ilya could see the easy warmth in his expression, the way he smiled at each student like they were the only person in the room.

And then, as if sensing Ilya's gaze, the instructor glanced up.

Their eyes met through the glass.

The instructor's expression shifted—surprise, maybe, or recognition. Or possibly just concern that the large, sweaty man on the treadmill was having some kind of medical event. He tilted his head slightly, one eyebrow raised in a question.

Ilya looked away so fast he nearly gave himself whiplash.

He grabbed his water bottle and took a long drink, trying to convince his body that he was fine, that this was fine, that he had not just been caught staring at a yoga instructor's ass like some kind of horny teenager.

Clearly, he would just have to avoid this section of the gym for the rest of his workout. That was fine. He needed to focus more on his strength training anyway. Ilya headed towards the weight benches—his back now resolutely turned away from the yoga classroom—and spent the rest of his workout taking out all of his pent up frustration on the barbells.

He was a professional. He was composed. He was-

"Ilya!"

Svetlana's voice cut through his spiral. He looked up to find her emerging from the yoga studio, flushed and happy, her hair still perfect despite the workout. She looked absolutely radiant. Powerful, confident, and radiant—the combination that had been making people nervous around her since they had first met as teenagers.

She threw her arms around him, and he hugged her back, grateful for the distraction. "How was your workout? Did you see the class? Wasn't it amazing?"

"I saw little bit. Looked okay," Ilya managed.

"Right? Shane is incredible. He just moved here from Ottawa. He's got this whole philosophy about yoga as a practice of presence and—Ilya, are you okay? You're very red."

"I am warm," Ilya said. "From the running."

"You were on the treadmill for like ten minutes, I saw you when we were in the seated twist."

"Intense ten minutes."

Svetlana gave him a look that suggested she knew exactly how full of shit he was, but before she could interrogate him further, the studio door opened and the instructor—Shane, apparently—stepped out.

He was even more striking up close. The freckles across his nose and cheeks were somehow prettier under the bright lights of the main floor. His gaze went straight to Ilya—just for a second, then quickly back to Svetlana with that same warm smile. "Great class today. You're really getting the hang of the binds."

"This is Ilya," Svetlana said, beaming at the compliment. "The one I've been telling you about. He thinks yoga is easy workout for bored housewives and influencers."

"Nice to meet you." Shane's voice was polite, professional—lacking all of the warm familiarity and casual ease he'd had with Svetlana. He didn't quite meet Ilya's eyes.

"I did not say that," Ilya insisted, which was technically true, even though he had absolutely thought it.

Shane smiled shyly, and it was the kind of smile that made Ilya understand, on a cellular level, why people wrote poetry. "Well, you should try a class sometime. Yoga is actually incredibly demanding. It's just a different kind of strength than what you might be used to."

Ilya considered this for exactly half a second before making what was either the best or worst decision of his week. "I will join next week," he said smoothly. "Tuesday class. I am curious to see what all the fuss is about."

Ilya ignored the look of surprise and amusement Svetlana was currently giving him out of the corner of his eye.

Shane's expression brightened. "That's great! We'd love to have you. Just make sure you get the front desk to add you to our roster before next class."

"I look forward to it," Ilya smiled.

Shane nodded and then retreated back into the studio to reset for the next class.

The moment he was out of earshot, Svetlana turned to Ilya with an expression of absolute delight, her mouth already opening with some kind of quip.

"Do not start," Ilya said, shooting her a look that could have stopped a charging bull.

She laughed in a way that meant she was absolutely going to give him shit about this later and slung her arm around his shoulders as they made their way back down the stairs.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to TulipBlossoms for the betaing!

Incase you're curious, the first move Shane was doing with his back arched and his ass in the air was extended puppy pose. The one that caused Ilya to nearly eat shit on the treadmill was kapotasana.

Chapter 2: Crave You



Shane arrived at the studio forty-five minutes before class started, the way he always did. It

allowed him to have some private time to himself, without the stress of socializing, before he'd have to start masking for the next nine hours until he could get back home.

The morning sun was pouring through the windows, washing the polished wood floors in a soft yellow light. He loved this time of day, before the students arrived, when the space was quiet and entirely his. He didn't have to worry about trying to read micro expressions or forcing himself to use more inflection in his voice so he'd sound less monotone. He'd had clients complain about that before, calling him rude and difficult and unfriendly. The only reason Shane had never gotten disciplined for it was because Hayden would always refuse to pass the messages on to their manager.

He moved through his setup routine with an easy efficiency that came from months of blissfully predictable, monotonous repetition: unlocking the prop closet, pulling out blocks and straps and bolsters, arranging them in neat stacks along the back wall. It was all second nature to him by now. Next, he checked the sound system, queuing up the playlist he'd put together last night—something mellow and grounding, but mainstream and generic enough that it would still appeal to most people's tastes. He'd learned early on that people got weird about yoga music. Play anything with chanting or wind chimes and half the class would spend the hour trying not to laugh.

He unrolled his own mat at the front of the room and ran through the sequence he'd planned, moving through each pose to make sure the flow made sense, that the transitions were smooth. Warrior two into extended side angle, then back to downward dog. A few breaths in child's pose before moving into the peak sequence. He'd been teaching long enough that he could plan a class in his sleep, but he still liked to walk through it physically, to feel it in his body before asking anyone else to do it.

By the time students started filtering in, Shane was in his element. Despite the fact that Shane still struggled with the burden of almost nonstop socialization at work, he always had a much easier time with the morning classes, when his social battery was high and he could actually enjoy seeing each of his regulars again.

It was always easier for Shane to make conversation with people he'd gotten the chance to know over a long period of time. The easy warmth in his voice when he was greeting them, asking about their week, remembering the small details they'd mentioned last time, came much more naturally to him this way, and stemmed from a genuine sense of care and camaraderie.

Carol, a sweet older woman who's moved to Boston from Texas last year to be closer to her daughter and grandchildren, had just gotten back from visiting her sister in Portland. James, an account manager at Fidelity with curly black hair and kind green eyes, was recovering from a shoulder injury and would need some modifications. Diane, a retired pediatrics nurse at Children's, always set up in the back corner by the window because she liked the view of the harbor.

"Morning, Svetlana," Shane said when she slinked in. She had her personal yoga mat tucked under her arm, and had looked at Shane with thinly veiled disgust the one time he'd offered her one of the communal ones.

She was another one of his regulars, had been coming to his Tuesday class since he'd started teaching here three months ago. She was strikingly beautiful and intrinsically sensual, slinking through the world like panther, and picked up each new pose with an ease that had taken Shane years to master.

"Good morning," she said, flashing him a smile. "I am thinking my friend will be joining us today. You met him last week. He was the one lied about not thinking yoga is stupid."

Shane laughed. "Well, if he shows up, I'll do my best to prove him wrong."

"Oh, he'll show up," Svetlana said, her smile turning knowing in a way Shane didn't quite understand. "Trust me."

She headed toward the back of the room to set up, and Shane turned to greet the next student coming through the door.

Except it wasn't just another one of his regulars.

It was Ilya Rozanov.

Shane's brain short-circuited, a full system stall that left him standing there with what he desperately hoped was a normal expression on his face. Because Ilya Rozanov—Boston's star center and captain, the guy Shane had watched score a hat trick against Montreal last month, the guy whose face was currently on a billboard in Kenmore Square advertising some luxury watch brand Shane couldn't pronounce, and star of all of Shane's wet dreams since he'd joined the league over five years ago—was walking into his yoga class.

Shane had been a hockey fan his entire life. He had grown up in Ottawa watching games with his dad, had played recreationally through high school before an ankle injury his senior year had redirected him toward yoga instead. He still watched every Bears game he could, still followed the league, still got unreasonably invested in playoff brackets. And Ilya Rozanov was—well. Shane would die before admitting this to anyone back home who hated the Bears on principle, but Ilya Rozanov was exactly the kind of player Shane had always been drawn to, both on and off the ice. Skilled, confident, gorgeous in a way that made Shane's mouth go dry whenever he saw him in that ridiculous Calvin Klein commercial that seemed to haunt him whenever he turned on the TV.

Shane couldn't even look at a pair of jeans anymore without hearing Rozanov's suggestive Russian drawl casually informing him that nothing came between him and his Calvin's. It would've made Shane roll his eyes he hadn't gotten hard the first three times he'd seen it.

So when he'd seen him in person for the first time last week, Shane would've sworn he'd been hallucinating, had it not been for Svetlana's presence at his side, grounding him back to reality. It had only been a short conversation, but Shane had thought about it every night since.

And now he was here. In Shane's studio. Wearing basketball shorts and a fitted black cotton t-shirt that did absolutely nothing to hide the fact that he was built like a hand-carved Greek statue.

Shane's heart was doing something erratic against his ribs. He took a breath—slow and controlled, the way he'd taught a thousand students to do over all his years as an instructor—and smiled in a way he hoped was casual and friendly.

"Welcome to class," he said, and his voice came out steady, warm, exactly the way it should. *Good*. He didn't sound nearly as flustered as he felt. "Grab a mat from the stack and feel free to set up wherever you're comfortable."

Ilya smiled back, and Shane felt it like a physical thing, a warmth that spread through his chest and made him acutely aware of his own pulse.

"Thank you," Ilya said, his accent curling around the words like smoke and turning them into something that sounded almost intimate.

Shane nodded and turned back toward the front of the room, focusing on the small tasks that needed doing before class started. Adjusting the volume on the sound system. Straightening the stack of blocks and reminding himself to breathe normally, which was suddenly requiring a conscious effort.

He could feel Ilya in the room the way you could feel a storm coming, that electric awareness prickling along his skin. He didn't look. He didn't need to. He knew exactly where Ilya was—back corner, next to Svetlana, unrolling a charcoal gray mat that still had the rental tag attached to it.

Shane had taught hundreds of classes. He knew how to maintain his composure, how to stay present and grounded even when his personal life was a mess or he was running on three hours of sleep or he'd just gotten dumped via text message. He could do this. He could teach a yoga class with Ilya Rozanov in the room and be completely professional about it.

He took another breath, rolled his shoulders back, and checked the time on his phone.

Eight o'clock.

"All right, everyone," Shane said, moving to the front of his mat. His voice was calm, steady, exactly what it needed to be. "Let's get started."

The class moved through sun salutations, then into standing poses. Shane walked the room with practiced ease, adjusting a student's alignment here, offering a modification there. His hands moved with the kind of confidence that came from years of teaching—firm enough to guide, gentle enough not to intrude.

He was halfway through demonstrating Warrior Two when he noticed Ilya's hips were rotated too far forward, his back foot turned in at an angle that would put unnecessary strain on his knee. Shane moved toward him without thinking, the correction automatic.

"Here, try this," Shane said quietly, crouching beside Ilya's mat. He placed one hand on Ilya's hip, the other on his knee, applying gentle pressure to guide the rotation. "Your back hip wants to open more toward the side wall. Just relax into it."

Ilya went rigid.

Not the normal resistance of tight muscles or unfamiliar positioning. This was different—a full-body tension that locked every muscle into place. Shane felt it immediately through his palms, that sudden shift from relaxed and loose to absolute stillness.

He pulled his hands back like he'd touched a hot stove.

"Sorry," Shane said automatically, stepping away. "You're good. Just—yeah, you've got it."

Ilya didn't look at him. His gaze stayed fixed on the front wall, jaw tight, and Shane felt something twist in his chest. He'd made Ilya uncomfortable. Crossed some boundary he hadn't seen.

Was Ilya uncomfortable being touched by other men? No, he was a hockey player. You couldn't play in the NHL if you were uncomfortable with unexpected physical contact. It must have been

Shane that made him uncomfortable then. Had Ilya been able to sense Shane's crush? Was he that obvious?

He kept teaching, kept moving through the room, but the feeling of Ilya going still under his hands never quite left him.

Ilya had arrived at the studio fifteen minutes early, plenty of time for his mind to wander, which was already a mistake. The space was smaller than he'd expected—intimate, really. It smelled clean, like eucalyptus and something faintly citrusy, and the air held just enough warmth that it felt like the temperature had deliberately been set to induce relaxation, to make you want to sink into the floors. He'd spent the last decade and a half training his body to respond to his commands with absolute precision—explosive power on demand, recovery protocols executed flawlessly, discipline so ingrained it was practically genetic.

He could not, apparently, control the fact that his eyes kept tracking toward the front of the room where Shane was bent forward, arranging props with the kind of focused attention most people reserved for defusing bombs.

"You're staring," Svetlana said mildly, not even looking up from her phone.

"I am not staring. I am observing studio layout. Is my first time here."

"Uh-huh." She finally glanced at him, one eyebrow arched in that infuriating way that meant she could see directly into his brain. "The studio layout. That's what we're calling him now?"

Ilya rolled out his mat with more force than necessary. "He is instructor. I am assessing whether I will actually learn anything here or if this is waste of my time."

"Right. And the fact that his ass looks incredible in those shorts is completely irrelevant to your assessment."

"Svetlana—"

"I'm just saying, if you're going to lie to me, at least make it entertaining." She settled onto her mat with the kind of theatrical grace that suggested she was preparing for a show. "Also, he's looking at you now. Try to be subtle."

Ilya didn't look. He was a professional athlete. He had discipline. He was a grown man with health insurance and a stock portfolio, for Christ's sake. He absolutely was not going to look.

His willpower lasted about two more seconds before Ilya cracked under the pressure. Shane was standing at the front of the room, and for just a moment, their eyes met.

Shane's expression shifted, like he hadn't been expecting Ilya to notice him looking, before he turned back to his sound system with what seemed like deliberate focus. His shoulders were broad, his posture effortlessly perfect in a way that made Ilya's chest feel tight. Even from across the room, Ilya could see the definition in his arms, the lean muscle that came from years of disciplined devotion to his craft rather than vanity-driven bulking.

"Oh my God," Svetlana whispered, switching to Russian so they could talk without being overheard. Ilya could hear the smile in her voice without looking at her. "You're in so much

trouble."

"I'm not in any trouble. I am here to stretch."

"You're here because I dragged you here, and now you're going to spend the next hour trying not to get a hard-on while pretending to be interested in your chakras or whatever."

"I don't have chakras."

"Everyone has chakras, Ilya. That's the whole point."

Shane's voice cut through their bickering—calm, warm, professional. "All right, everyone. Let's get started."

The class began with breathing exercises, which seemed designed specifically to torture Ilya. He was supposed to focus on his breath, on the present moment, on the flow of energy through his body. What he was actually doing was trying not to think about Shane's hands, which were now visible as he demonstrated each pose, soft and capable-looking.

They moved through sun salutations. Ilya had done yoga exactly once before, at Svetlana's insistence three years ago, and he'd hated it. Too slow, too introspective, too much quiet time for his traitorous mind to focus on all the things he didn't want to think about. But now, watching Shane move through the sequence with that liquid grace, Ilya found himself actually paying attention.

Shane's breathing stayed perfectly even as he flowed from pose to pose—inhalation as he swept his arms overhead, exhalation as he folded forward. When he moved into upward-facing dog, Ilya could see the muscles of his shoulders engage and release, the long line of his spine arching with precise control. His shirt rode up slightly, exposing a strip of lower back and the subtle flex of obliques as he transitioned into downward-facing dog.

The shift from one pose to the next was seamless, like watching water move, each muscle firing in exactly the right sequence. There was strength in it, but also flexibility, control, an understanding of how his body worked that went beyond simple athleticism. The way his core stayed engaged even in the transitions, the deliberate placement of each hand and foot, the economy of movement—nothing wasted, nothing rushed.

Ilya couldn't look away.

They moved into a series of standing poses. Ilya was actually doing okay—his flexibility was better than he'd expected, his balance solid. He could do this. He could get through an hour of yoga without embarrassing himself or developing an obvious erection, which seemed like a reasonable goal.

Then Shane said, "Let's move into Warrior Two," and started walking around the room to observe the students.

Ilya's entire body went on alert. He could hear Shane's footsteps, could sense him moving closer, could feel the air shift as Shane approached. This was fine. This was completely fine. Shane was just checking form. It was his job.

Shane stopped beside him, saying something about his knee.

Before Ilya could process what was happening, Shane's hands were on him.

One palm settled on his hip, fingers curving around the bone. The other wrapped around his knee, thumb pressing into the soft spot just above his kneecap. The heat of Shane's skin burned through the thin fabric of Ilya's shorts like a branding iron. Ilya could feel each individual finger, the exact points of pressure, the way Shane's grip was firm but careful, confident but not rough.

His brain simply *stopped*.

Every nerve ending in his body lit up at once. His pulse jumped so hard he was certain Shane could feel it through his hip. Heat spread from the points of contact outward, racing up his spine, pooling low in his belly. The touch was professional, clinical, completely appropriate, and Ilya's body responded like Shane had just gotten down on his knees for him.

He went rigid.

Every muscle locked down simultaneously. His breath caught. His heart rate spiked in a way that had nothing to do with physical exertion and everything to do with the fact that Shane was *touching* him—that those long, elegant fingers were on his body, that he could feel Shane's warmth, that for one perfect terrible moment he knew exactly what it felt like to have Shane's hands on him—and Ilya was about two seconds away from having a very obvious problem in a room full of people.

This was a nightmare. This was the worst possible scenario. Because it felt *good*, having Shane's hands on him, and that was information Ilya absolutely did not need.

"Just relax into it," Shane said, and Ilya nearly laughed at the cosmic joke of that instruction. Relax. Right. Sure.

Shane adjusted his knee, his hands warm through the fabric of Ilya's shorts, and then—mercifully—he moved away. Ilya exhaled slowly, trying to get his body back under control. His heart was still hammering. His skin felt too tight. He was absolutely, definitely going to kill Svetlana. If she hadn't introduced them, he could have just nursed a fantasy about some nameless beautiful stranger and moved on. But she'd marched Shane straight over to Ilya and then Shane had extended an invitation to join the class. Now he was trapped.

He risked a glance to her and found her watching him with an expression of barely contained glee. She was biting her lip, her shoulders shaking slightly with suppressed laughter. When their eyes met, she mouthed, "*Relax into it*," and Ilya had to look away before he actually murdered her in a yoga studio.

The rest of the class passed in a blur of controlled panic. Every time Shane came near, Ilya's body tensed in anticipation. Every time Shane moved, Ilya found himself tracking the movement. By the time they reached the final relaxation pose, Ilya was exhausted, and not because the workout.

Shane dimmed the lights and began guiding them through a body scan meditation, and his voice—low and soft and impossibly gentle—seemed to resonate in Ilya's chest. "Notice the weight of your body against the mat," Shane murmured, each word measured and unhurried, the timbre rich like dark honey. "Let your shoulders melt down. Release the tension in your jaw." The instructions were simple, clinical even, but delivered in that voice they became something else entirely—intimate, almost hypnotic. Ilya lay there in the darkness, eyes closed, trying desperately not to think about what that voice would sound like in other contexts, and failing spectacularly.

When class ended, Ilya rolled up his mat with mechanical precision and stood before he could do something stupid like volunteer to help Shane clean up.

"That was great," Svetlana said brightly, far too brightly, as they made their way toward the stairs. "You seemed really into it. Very focused."

"Don't," Ilya said.

"I'm just saying, you should definitely come back next week. For the stretching. And the chakras."

Ilya didn't answer. He was too busy calculating how long he had to seduce Shane before he completely embarrassed himself.

If the sequences got progressively harder, Shane would need to adjust him more frequently. And every adjustment was a ticking clock—either he'd get hard in front of the whole class or he'd panic and pull away too fast and injure himself before a game. He had limited time to figure this out before something had to give.

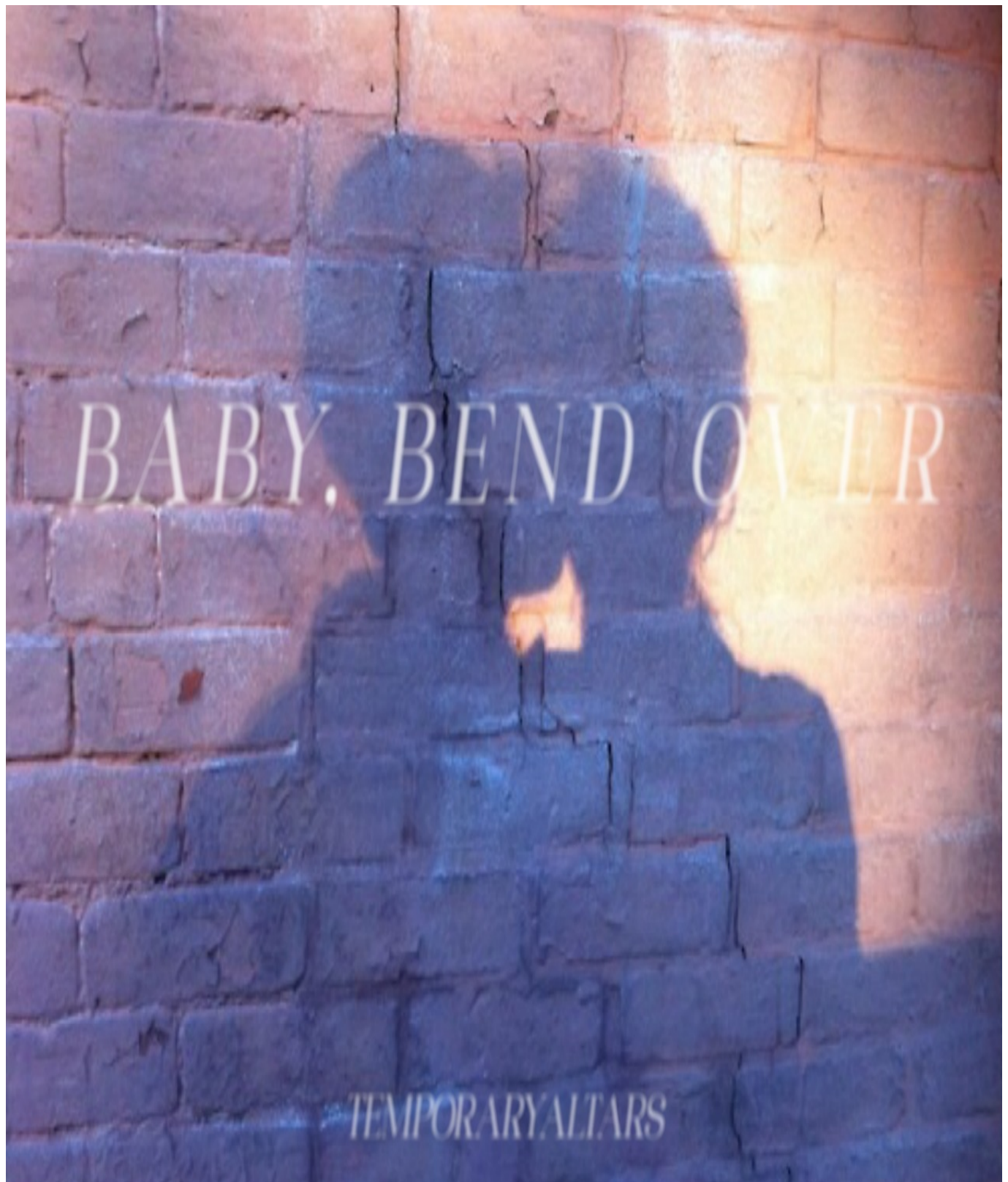
He'd won the Stanley Cup on bruised ribs. This couldn't be that much harder.

Chapter 3: Fineshrine

Chapter Notes

Happy Tuesday!

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



Shane had made a mistake.

Not the kind of small, forgivable mistake where you forgot to cue a transition or called someone in class by the wrong name.

The kind where you developed an embarrassingly obvious crush on a student who clearly wanted nothing to do with you, and then had to see that student every Tuesday for the foreseeable future.

Ilya had been coming to class for three weeks now. Three weeks of Shane trying to maintain professional distance while his heart did stupid things every time Ilya walked through the door. Three weeks of watching Ilya and Svetlana whisper to each other in rapid Russian, their eyes flicking toward him conspiratorially before they'd turn away as soon as they noticed he'd caught them.

Shane knew what that look meant. He'd been on the receiving end of it enough times in high school.

It was obvious now that Ilya and Svetlana were dating. Shane didn't know how he'd missed all the signs before.

The casual way they touched each other, the familiar shorthand of their conversations, how they always arrived and left together.

Shane had come home drunk and horny one night after Hayden's 25th birthday party, and immediately stumbled into bed scrolling his phone for shirtless post-game photos of Ilya, maybe an interview where his deep, drawling accent was on full display.

He'd only had to jerk himself off for a few minutes before he was coming over his fist. Once he was done, he told himself to close the tab out, clear his history, and pretend like it'd never happened. This was a student of his. It wasn't appropriate.

Instead, he'd let the burning curiosity that was nagging at his drunken mind win out over his rational brain, and kept scrolling through each link. He'd found dozens of articles with candid paparazzi photos of Ilya and Svetlana all over Boston—Leaving 311 Omakase arm-in-arm, standing outside Caveau waiting for the valet to pull Ilya's car around, walking out of The Grand with Ilya's hand firmly gripping Svetlana's waist, both of them looking like they belonged in one of those cologne ads where the gorgeous, tanned models had rough, primal sex against every surface of their modern, glittering penthouse.

The worst part was that first class, when he'd touched Ilya's hip to adjust his form and felt him go rigid. Shane had tried to convince himself it was just because it had been a surprise, but he'd seen the way Ilya's jaw had tightened. The way he'd pulled away the moment Shane's hand made contact with his waist.

Ilya clearly didn't like being touched by him. Especially not in front of his girlfriend.

And Shane had to keep doing it anyway, because that was his job, because he couldn't just *not* give adjustments if it meant one of his students was going to injure themselves. It made him feel cold and sick with guilt and humiliation each time he felt Ilya's muscles contract under his fingers, each time Ilya's breath caught in his throat when Shane gently guided him into proper form.

After the second time it happened, Shane had started keeping his touches as brief and light as possible, never lingering, never tipping his hand. Whatever he'd said or done to reveal his stupid crush would be nipped in the bud. He wouldn't give them any more material to laugh at, and he would do everything in his power to never make Ilya uncomfortable in his presence again.

It didn't matter. The damage was done.

They knew. Of course they knew. Shane wasn't exactly subtle with the way he'd stare when he thought Ilya wasn't looking, and blush when he did. And Ilya was keen and observant in that way athletes were—always aware of their surroundings, always tracking subtle movements and micro expressions, scanning for their opponents' weakness. He'd probably clocked Shane's interest within the first ten minutes of that first class, and now he and Svetlana had a running joke about the pathetic yoga instructor with the obvious crush.

Shane rolled up the last mat and shoved it into the storage rack harder than necessary.

He was being ridiculous. Ilya was polite. He showed up on time, he followed instructions, he didn't complain. If he was uncomfortable, he could just stop coming.

Except he kept coming back. Kept showing up early.

Which meant Ilya probably just wanted more time with his girlfriend before his training schedule pulled him away for the rest of the day. That made sense. Shane could respect that, even if it made his chest ache a little.

Shane grabbed his jacket from the hook by the door and headed downstairs. He needed to clear his head.

Chapter End Notes

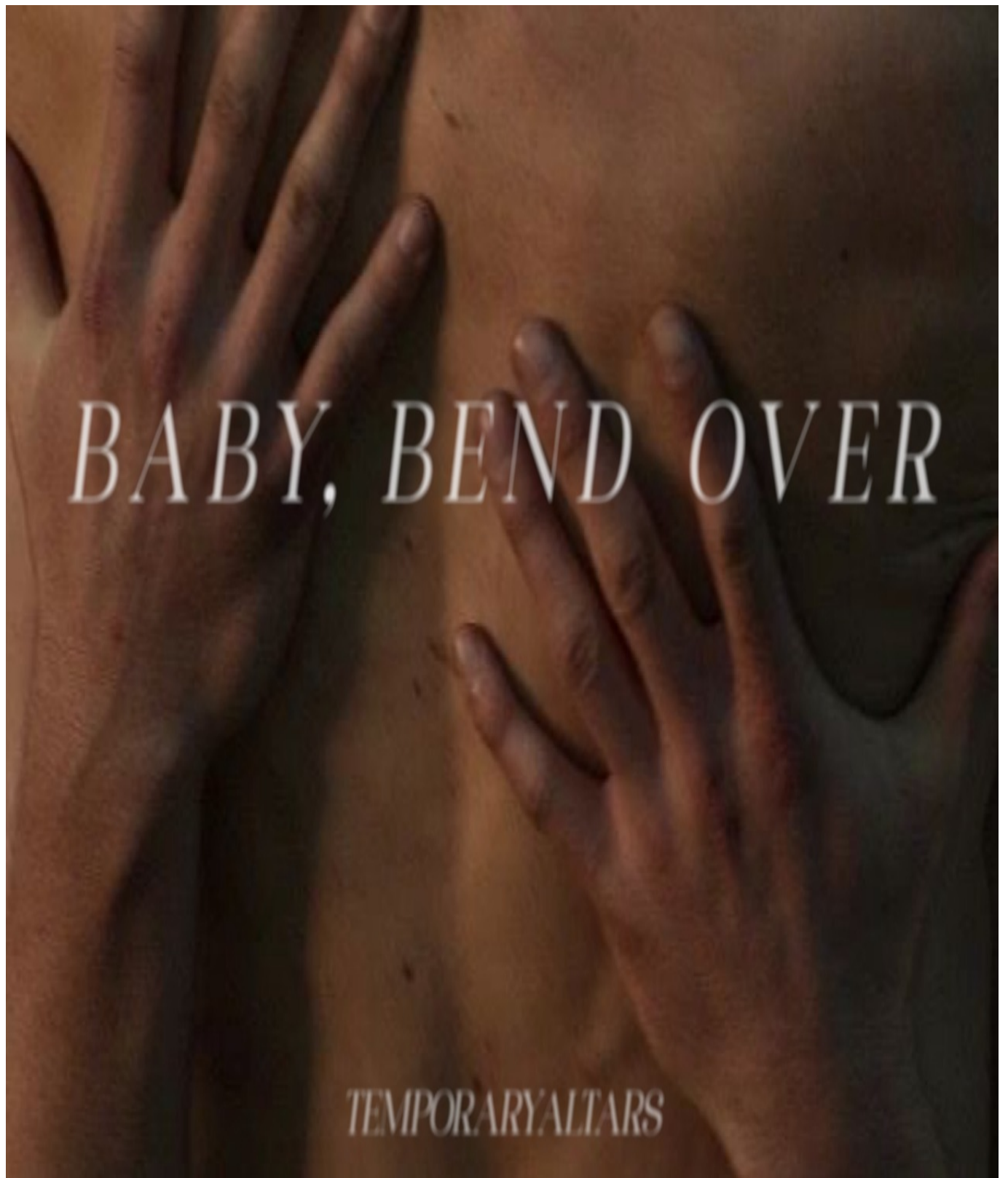
Sorry for the shorter chapter! I just needed the chance to show more of Shane's internal monologue and thought process before moving onto the meat of the story in chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Celestica

Chapter Notes

Halfway mark!

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



Ilya's phone rang at two-thirty in the morning.

He knew who it was before he looked at the screen. No one else called at this hour—not his teammates, not his agent, not even Svetlana when she was drunk and bored. Only one person had

the audacity—that particular combination of selfishness, entitlement, and desperation—to have absolutely no consideration for Ilya's wellbeing.

"Andrei," Ilya said, his voice rough with interrupted sleep.

His brother's voice came through tinny and distant, speaking rapid Russian. Ilya closed his eyes and listened to the familiar litany of complaints: the landlord was threatening eviction again, papa needed money for his medications, the car had broken down, there was never enough for anything.

"How much?" Ilya said, cutting straight to the chase.

The number Andrei gave him was higher than last time. It was always higher than last time.

Ilya sat up in bed, rubbing his face with his free hand. Through his bedroom window, Beacon Hill was quiet and dark, the gas lamps casting weak pools of light on the empty brick sidewalks below. He'd sent money three weeks ago. Before that, six weeks. Before that, two months. It didn't matter how much he sent or how often—there was always another crisis, always another reason his family needed more.

"I'll transfer it tomorrow," Ilya said. He didn't have the energy to fight with his brother anymore.

"Good." Andrei's voice was flat, already moving on. In the background, Ilya could hear the television—Кухня, from the sound of it. His brother hadn't even bothered to step outside or lower the volume.

"Andrei—"

"What?" The irritation was immediate, like Ilya had interrupted something important.

Ilya's jaw tightened. He didn't even know what he'd been about to say. *Be careful with it. Make it last. Try to find work.* All useless words he'd said before.

"Nothing," Ilya said.

Andrei grunted out a dismissive sound, barely human. Then, quieter but still audible—Andrei speaking to someone else in the room. "*Da, da*, he's sending it. I told you he would." A pause, followed by the sound of his brother's callous laughter. "Of course he will. What else is he good for?"

The words landed in Ilya's chest like stones, nearly knocking him over.

The line went dead.

After Andrei had hung up, sleep was impossible. He lay in bed staring at the ceiling, his mind churning through the same tired arguments. He made good money—excellent money. He could afford to help his family. But every time he sent money home, he felt the weight of it: the expectation that he would always be there, always have more to give, always be the solution to problems that had existed long before he'd left Russia and would continue long after.

He should have said no. He should have set boundaries years ago.

But he hadn't, and now here he was at four in the morning, wide awake and angry at himself for reasons he couldn't quite articulate.

By five, he'd given up on sleep entirely. He pulled on yesterday's clothes, grabbed his fullest pack of cigarettes, and drove to the gym. The building wouldn't open for another hour, but he couldn't stay in bed any longer. He could sit outside, smoke, and watch the sky lighten over the harbor until his head cleared enough to function.

He was halfway through the pack when he heard footsteps.

The pre-dawn air hit Shane's face as he pushed through the gym's front doors, cool and salt-tinged from the harbor. He was already mentally mapping his route—down to the Harborwalk, maybe as far as the Rose Kennedy Greenway if his legs really needed it—when he stopped short.

Ilya was standing just outside the entrance, leaning against the brick wall with a cigarette between his fingers. He looked like he hadn't slept. His hair was disheveled, his jaw dark with stubble, and there were shadows under his eyes that made him look almost gaunt. His clothing—black joggers and a gray hoodie—looked rumpled and slightly creased, like they'd already been worn. He was smoking with the kind of focused intensity that suggested he'd been out here for a while.

Shane's first instinct was to pretend he hadn't seen him. His second was to keep walking. His third, which apparently won out, was to stop and do his job.

"Hey," Shane said, keeping his voice level and professional. "Hey. I know it's early, but I can't have you smoking out here. It's in the membership agreement."

Ilya looked at him for a long moment, then down at the cigarette in his hand like he'd forgotten it was there. A thin smile crossed his face—the kind that didn't reach his eyes.

"Of course it is," he said, his accent thicker than usual. He took one last drag and flicked the cigarette into the street. "I am very sorry. I did not think anyone would be here yet."

"It's fine," Shane lied, stepping past Ilya to unlock the front doors. "Just for future reference."

Ilya nodded and pushed off from the wall, moving toward the door. Shane held it open for him, and they stepped into the quiet gym together. The fluorescent lights hummed awake overhead, casting everything in that particular shade of institutional brightness that made the early morning feel even earlier.

"I will help you set up," Ilya said, not as a question.

"You don't have to—"

But Ilya was already heading toward the studio, and Shane found himself following, too tired to argue.

The studio was still dark when they entered. Shane flipped on the lights and moved to the sound system, pulling up the playlist he'd prepared. Ilya started arranging the props—blocks, straps, bolsters—with the kind of methodical precision that suggested he'd watched Shane do it enough times to know the system.

"Your music is very boring," Ilya said after a moment, not looking up from the bolster he was positioning.

Shane glanced over at him, caught off guard. "Excuse me?"

"The playlist. It is very... safe." Ilya said the word like it was a mild insult. "Very yoga instructor. No personality."

Despite the early morning fog still clouding his brain, Shane felt his mouth twitch. "You have a better suggestion?"

"Anything would be better." Ilya finally looked at him, and there was something almost playful in his expression. "I am thinking maybe death metal. Very peaceful."

"I'll keep that in mind," Shane said, smiling fully now. He moved to help Ilya with the mats, unrolling them in neat rows.

Shane glanced over at him as they worked, and noticed the tightness around Ilya's mouth hadn't eased—that small, distracted frown still lingering at the edges. He knew it wasn't his business, but something about seeing Ilya looking down that morning was nagging at him in a way he couldn't shake. He knew it was a risk, but Shane decided to test the boundaries of their newfound rapport.

"You were incredibly stiff in downward dog yesterday. Worse than Mrs. Chen, and she's seventy-three with arthritis in both hips."

Ilya's head snapped up, and for a second Shane thought he'd gone too far. Then Ilya laughed—a real laugh, surprised and genuine, that lit up his whole face for the first time since Shane had seen him that morning—and Shane felt something in his chest loosen.

"Believe me, Hollander," Ilya said, his voice dropping into something cocky and teasing. "I am very flexible where it counts."

Shane's face went hot. He immediately turned toward the storage closet, fumbling with the stack of hand towels and focusing on them with an intensity they absolutely did not deserve. His cheeks were burning, and he knew that if Ilya could see his face right now, he'd see exactly how red Shane had gone.

"Right," Shane managed, his voice coming out slightly strangled. "Good to know."

He kept his back turned, arranging and rearranging the towels until his face cooled down enough that he could risk turning around again.

When he finally did turn back, Ilya was examining one of the hand towels with a look of revulsion.

"What is this?" Ilya held it up between two fingers like it might be contaminated. There was a faded streak of discoloration across the white terry cloth, unmistakable even after the thorough wash-cycle they got the night before. "Someone is using *very* bad self-tanner in your studio."

Shane bit back a grin, trying not to laugh at Ilya's disgusted expression. "There's a new spray tan place two doors down. Sometimes people come straight from there. Here, just give that one to me and I'll swap it out for another one."

"No, wait. I will give this one to the guy who wears too much cologne," Ilya said. "Maybe leftover chemicals from spray tan will absorb some of the smell."

A laugh burst out of Shane before he could stop it—sharp and genuine—and he immediately pressed his hand over his mouth, trying to smother it. His shoulders shook anyway. That cologne had been driving him insane for weeks, thick and cloying enough that he could taste it in the back of his throat during class, but he'd never said anything because it felt unprofessional to complain about a student. Hearing Ilya just say it out loud like that broke something loose in him.

He turned away, trying to compose himself, but he was still grinning behind his hand.

"I saw that," Ilya said, and Shane could hear the smile in his voice. "You are laughing at your students."

"I'm not," Shane protested, but he was still grinning when he turned back around. "I'm laughing at the situation."

"Mm-hmm." Ilya tossed the stained towel at him. Shane caught it reflexively. "Very professional, Hollander."

"Says the guy who just called out someone's spray tan."

"I did not call out anyone." Ilya's expression was perfectly innocent as he grabbed another towel from the stack. "I simply made observation about the *towel*."

Shane rolled his eyes and threw the orange-stained towel back at him. Ilya caught it easily, his reflexes sharp even at this ungodly hour, and his grin turned wicked.

"Oh, now we are playing this game?"

"We're not playing any—" Shane started, but Ilya had already snapped his towel in Shane's direction, the end of it cracking in the air between them with a sharp *pop* that made Shane jump back.

"Jesus, where did you learn that?"

"Hockey locker room," Ilya said, advancing with the towel twisted in his hands like a weapon. "I have *years* of experience."

Shane grabbed another towel from the stack, backing toward the far wall. "Don't you dare. I have to teach a class in twenty minutes."

"Then you should not have started towel fight with professional athlete." Ilya snapped the towel again, and this time it caught Shane on the hip—not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make him yelp.

"*You* started it!" Shane protested, laughing despite himself. He tried to snap his own towel back, but the technique was all wrong and it just sort of flopped uselessly in Ilya's direction.

Ilya stopped, lowering his towel, and looked at Shane with something close to pity. "That was very sad."

"Shut up." Shane was grinning so hard his face hurt. "Not all of us spent our formative years weaponizing laundry."

"Clearly." Ilya walked over and took the towel from Shane's hands. "Here. You twist like this—" He demonstrated, his hands quick and sure. "And then you—"

The studio door opened.

Svetlana walked in, wearing a matching chalk-white Ernest Leoty set, her dark hair pulled back in a high ponytail. She stopped just inside the doorway, taking in the scene—Shane and Ilya standing close enough that the tips of their shoes were touching, both of them still clutching Shane's towel, their fingers nearly brushing where their hands met on the fabric. They turned toward her at the same moment, startled and frozen in place, and her expression shifted into something knowing and amused.

"Good morning," she said, her eyes moving between them with obvious interest. "You two are here very early."

The spell broke.

Shane felt it snap like a rubber band pulled too tight. Suddenly he was acutely aware of how close he was standing to Ilya, of the way their fingers had been about to touch. Of how Shane would have let it happen without a second thought.

He stepped back abruptly, putting as much distance between them as possible, and schooled his voice into something polite and professional.

"Just getting the room ready," he said, moving toward the sound system. "The usual morning routine."

He didn't look at Ilya. He couldn't. The embarrassment was already crawling up his neck like centipedes—the realization he'd spent the better part of an hour flirting with one of his students. A student who, aside from practically hating Shane up until this morning, had a girlfriend. A girlfriend who was also in Shane's class, and who had just walked in to find them standing so close they were practically sharing the same breath. What had he been thinking? That Ilya was actually interested in him? That they were bonding?

He was an idiot.

Ilya didn't move for a moment. Shane could feel his eyes on him, the weight of his gaze pressing against Shane's back like a physical thing. The silence stretched between them, heavy and loaded.

"I'll go refill my water," Ilya said quietly, and headed out.

When Shane finally chanced a look at Svetlana, she was watching him with an expression of confusion and disappointment that made his stomach drop. Of course she was upset—she'd just walked in on her yoga instructor flirting with her boyfriend. Shane turned away quickly, already pulling up the next song on the playlist, already rebuilding the walls he'd stupidly let slip for just a moment.

He had a class to teach.

Raise your hand if you think Andrei needs his shit rocked.

Chapter 5: Do I Wanna Know?

Chapter Notes

Happy Sunday!

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



Ilya didn't understand what he'd done wrong.

One moment they'd been laughing together, standing close enough that he could see the individual freckles scattered across Shane's cheekbones, and the next Shane had gone cold. Professional. Like

someone had flipped a switch and turned off whatever warmth had been building between them all morning.

A week later, it was still the same. Shane greeted him with the same polite nod he gave everyone else, demonstrated poses with the same encouraging smile he used on the elderly woman in the back row, and moved through the studio like Ilya was just another body taking up space on a mat.

It was driving him insane.

"Shane?" Ilya raised his hand during the next Tuesday class, ignoring the way his chest tightened when Shane's eyes landed on him. "For warrior two, how wide should the stance be?"

Shane's expression flickered to Svetlana, who was smirking at the two of them, before landing back on Ilya—something Ilya couldn't quite read passing across his face before it smoothed into professional neutrality. "Hip-width distance," he said, demonstrating. "Your front knee should track over your ankle."

"Like this?" Ilya adjusted his stance, watching Shane's face.

"Yes, that's fine." Shane was already turning away, moving to help someone else.

Beside him, Svetlana made a quiet sound that might have been a laugh. Ilya shot her a look, but she was studiously examining her own alignment, her mouth twitching at the corners.

The following week, Ilya tried again. "The breathing—should I inhale or exhale when I fold forward?"

This time Shane's jaw tightened slightly before he answered. "Exhale on the fold, inhale as you rise." His voice was clipped, efficient. He didn't meet Ilya's eyes.

"And for downward dog—"

"The same principle applies to most forward folds." Shane moved past him to adjust someone's form on the other side of the room.

Svetlana wasn't even trying to hide her amusement now. When Ilya glanced at her, she raised an eyebrow, her expression clearly saying *Really? This is your strategy?*

Ilya gritted his teeth and focused on his breathing. Fine. The questions weren't working. Every time he asked something, Shane either frowned or—worse—blushed and looked away like Ilya had said something inappropriate instead of asking about basic alignment.

He needed a different approach.

After class, Ilya rolled up his mat slowly, watching Shane move around the studio, collecting props and straightening bolsters. Shane's shoulders were tense, his movements quick and purposeful, like he was trying to finish as fast as possible so he wouldn't have to be in the same room as Ilya any longer than necessary.

Something had shifted that morning when Svetlana walked in, and Ilya had no idea what it was. But he wasn't the kind of person who gave up just because something got difficult.

He'd just have to try harder.

The following Tuesday, Ilya was outside the Seaport Athletic Club at six in the morning, smoking a cigarette and watching the sky lighten over the harbor.

He'd thought about it all week. The questions hadn't worked—they'd only made Shane more uncomfortable, especially with Svetlana there to witness every awkward exchange. But that morning in the studio, before Svetlana arrived, things had been different. Easy. Shane had laughed at his joke about the cologne guy, had grinned so hard his face must have hurt. They'd set up the studio together, and for that hour, Shane had been *himself* again.

So Ilya would recreate that.

He took a drag from his cigarette and watched the door. At six-fifteen, Shane appeared, gym bag slung over his shoulder, looking tired but alert. He stopped when he saw Ilya, his expression flickering through surprise, wariness, and something else Ilya couldn't quite identify.

"You're here early," Shane said.

Ilya held up his cigarette. "Couldn't sleep again."

Shane's mouth twitched. "You know those will kill you."

"Is different for Russians. Nicotine and vodka are part of balanced diet," Ilya took another drag, studying Shane's face. "You are very serious all the time, you know this?"

"I'm an instructor. It's kind of the job description."

"No." Ilya shook his head. "You are serious even when you are not teaching. Always so..." He gestured vaguely with his free hand. "Tight. Wound up."

Shane's jaw tightened, but there was something almost amused in his eyes. "I'm not wound up."

"You are standing very straight right now."

"I always stand straight. It's called good posture."

"See?" Ilya grinned. "This is what I mean."

For a moment, Shane just looked at him. Then, to Ilya's surprise, he dropped his gym bag and sat down on the ground beside Ilya, his back against the brick wall of the building. "There. Happy?"

Ilya felt something warm unfurl in his chest. Shane was sitting on the cold pavement in his clean yoga clothes, looking rumpled and tired and almost relaxed. It was the most informal Ilya had ever seen him.

"Very," Ilya said, stubbing out his cigarette. He stood and offered Shane his hand. "Come. Let's go inside before you freeze your ass off."

Shane took his hand and let Ilya pull him to his feet. "You're the one who made me sit down."

"And now I am saving you. You should be grateful."

Shane was smiling as they walked inside together.

They set up the studio together in comfortable silence. Shane unlocked the door, flipped on the lights, and Ilya helped him pull out the mats and arrange the bolsters. It felt natural, easy, like they'd been doing this for years instead of just once before. Shane didn't flinch when Ilya handed him props, didn't avoid his gaze. By the time they finished, Shane was almost smiling.

"Thanks," Shane said, adjusting the last bolster. "You didn't have to help."

Ilya raised his brows teasingly, leaning against the wall. "You are rejecting my offer? You do not like my company?"

"No!" Shane said, too quickly, his eyes going wide. His cheeks flushed pink. "I just—I mean, of course you can help. Thank you."

Ilya grinned, watching the color spread across Shane's face. "Is no problem, Hollander." He pushed off the wall, moving closer. "I like spending time with you."

Shane's breath caught. He looked away, suddenly very interested in the bolster in his hands. "Yeah, well," he said, his voice rougher than before. "You're not...you're not so bad either."

Ilya laughed. "'Not so bad'?" He put a hand to his chest in mock offense. "Hollander, I am Ilya Rozanov. Best center in NHL. I am not 'not so bad.' I am the best."

Shane's eyes snapped back to his face, and he laughed—a real laugh, surprised and genuine. "Oh my god, your ego."

"Is not ego if is true."

"I don't know," Shane said, and there was something playful in his expression now, teasing. "Scott Hunter might give you a run for your money."

Ilya's jaw dropped. "Hunter? You are comparing me to *Hunter*?" He stepped closer, pointing at Shane accusingly. "This is betrayal, Hollander. I come to your class, I help you set up studio, and you say I am same as Scott Hunter?"

"I didn't say you were the *same*," Shane said, grinning now, his shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. "I just said he might—"

"No. No 'might.' There is no 'might.'" Ilya crossed his arms. "I have better stats. Better speed. Better —"

"Better humility?" Shane offered, his eyes bright with amusement.

Ilya huffed. "Hunter is ugly old man. NHL only keeps him around because they feel sorry for him. Is like... what do you call it? Make-A-Wish situation. They let him play because is making old man happy to get out of retirement home once a week." He gestured at himself. "I am young. Strong. Tough. I am hundred times better player than Scott Hunter ever will be. Hunter is—" He waved his hand dismissively. "Hunter is nothing."

"Sure," Shane said, still grinning. "Whatever you say."

"Yes. Is exactly what I say," Ilya said firmly, but he was smiling too, warmth spreading through his chest at the sight of Shane so relaxed, so *present*. This—this was what he'd been waiting for. Shane, laughing and teasing him back, the walls finally down.

The hour before class started felt like a small victory. Shane was relaxed, present, the tension in his shoulders finally easing. They didn't talk much, but the silence was comfortable, punctuated by Shane's quiet instructions as he walked Ilya through a few poses he'd been struggling with. Shane's hands were steady and sure when he adjusted Ilya's alignment, his touch professional but not cold.

Then the other students started arriving, and Shane's walls went back up.

During class, he was polite but distant, his answers to Ilya's questions brief and impersonal. He didn't meet Ilya's eyes. When Svetlana arrived and took her usual spot beside Ilya, Shane's expression shuttered completely.

But the next Tuesday, Ilya was outside at six again, smoking.

And Shane showed up.

It became a routine. Every Tuesday morning, Ilya arrived early, had a cigarette, and waited. Shane would appear at six-fifteen, they'd have their brief exchange—Ilya teasing him about being too serious, Shane sitting down beside him on the cold pavement with that same conflicted but genuine smile—and then they'd set up the studio together. For that hour, things were good. Shane laughed at Ilya's dry observations about the other gym members, asked about his training schedule, told stories about his most difficult students. He was warm and funny and *there* in a way he never was during class.

But the moment other people arrived, Shane retreated.

Ilya didn't understand it. He'd thought maybe Shane was just shy, uncomfortable with attention in front of others. But Shane was perfectly comfortable teaching, perfectly at ease giving corrections and demonstrations to the entire class. It was only with Ilya that he became stiff and formal, only when Ilya asked questions or tried to engage him in conversation.

Three weeks into their Tuesday routine, Shane mentioned he hadn't eaten breakfast.

"Again?" Ilya asked. They were arranging mats, the studio still empty and quiet. "You said that last week."

Shane shrugged, not meeting his eyes. "I don't usually have time in the mornings. I grab something later."

"Lunch?"

"Sometimes." Shane's tone was casual, dismissive. "I'm fine, Ilya. Don't worry about it."

But Ilya *did* worry about it. Shane worked long hours—teaching classes, training clients, covering shifts when other instructors called out. Ilya had seen the class schedule posted outside the yoga studio door: Shane's back-to-back sessions ran from eight in the morning until five in the evening some days. When did he eat? When did he rest?

It bothered Ilya more than it should have. The urge to take care of Shane, to make sure he was eating properly, felt instinctive and overwhelming. He thought about it through the entire class, watching Shane move through the poses with his usual grace, and all Ilya could think was: *someone should be looking after him.*

After class, Ilya went straight to the snack bar on the first floor and bought one of the large brownies they always had on display. It was wrapped in plastic, dense and chocolate-heavy, the kind of thing that would actually fill someone up. He brought it back upstairs and found Shane in the studio, rolling up mats.

"Here," Ilya said, holding out the brownie.

Shane looked at it, then at Ilya, his expression startled. "What's this?"

"Food. Has lots of carbs and fat, good for someone who is working out all day," Ilya pressed it into Shane's hand with the same level of care one would use to hand over a priceless jewel. "You said you don't eat breakfast."

For a moment, Shane just stared at the brownie, his fingers curling around the plastic wrapper. His throat worked, and when he looked up, his eyes were bright with something that might have been gratitude or might have been something else entirely.

"That's—" Shane's voice was rough. He cleared his throat. "That's really thoughtful, Ilya. Thank you."

Ilya felt a warm flush of satisfaction. Finally, he'd done something right.

Then Shane held the brownie back out to him. "But I can't eat this. I'm on a macrobiotic diet."

The satisfaction evaporated. "A what?"

"Macrobiotic. No processed sugar, no—" Shane gestured at the brownie. "It's very sweet of you, but I really can't. Maybe you could give it to Svetlana? I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

Ilya stared at Shane, trying to parse the comment. Why would Shane suggest giving it to Svetlana? Was he trying to be polite? Trying to make sure the brownie didn't go to waste?

Ilya took the brownie back, frustration coiling in his chest. "Right," he said. "Sure."

Shane's smile was strained. "Thanks for thinking of me, though. That was really nice."

Ilya left the studio, the brownie heavy in his hand. He walked past Svetlana in the hallway without stopping. She called after him, but he didn't turn around.

He'd tried questions. He'd tried showing up early. He'd tried bringing food. Nothing worked. Shane kept pulling away, kept maintaining that careful professional distance, and Ilya had no idea why.

But he wasn't giving up.

The answer came to him on Thursday morning, when he saw Hayden at the front desk. Ilya had noticed over the past few weeks that Shane and Hayden were always talking—before classes, after workouts, during Shane's breaks. They were clearly close, the kind of easy friendship that came from years of knowing each other outside of just work.

If anyone knew what Shane actually ate, what he actually *liked*, it would be Hayden.

Ilya approached the desk with his most charming smile. "Hayden. I need your help."

Hayden looked up from his computer, his expression immediately suspicious. "With what?"

"What does Shane eat?"

"Food, generally."

Ilya's hands shook with the effort it took not to curl them into fists.

"Hayden."

"Why do you want to know?" But Hayden was grinning now, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed. "Wait. Is this about the brownie?"

"He told you about that?"

"Shane tells me everything." Hayden's grin widened. "What are you up to?"

"He doesn't eat enough."

"And you've decided that's your problem because...?"

Ilya didn't answer. He just held Hayden's gaze, waiting.

Hayden laughed. "Okay. Fine. He likes the smoothies from Juice Press. They have one in the Equinox over on Northern Avenue. Large Clean Green with extra flaxseed. He's very specific about it."

"Juice Press," Ilya repeated. "Inside Equinox on Northern Ave."

"Yep." Hayden was still grinning. Ilya imagined what it would be like to wring his neck. "Good luck with that."

Tuesday morning, Ilya arrived at the studio with a smoothie from Juice Press. He'd repeated the order three times to make sure they got it right: Large Clean Green with extra flaxseed. The cup was cold in his hand, condensation already beading on the plastic.

Shane was in the studio, setting up alone. He looked up when Ilya walked in, surprise—maybe even relief—flickering across his face.

"Ilya, hi. You're here."

"Of course I am. I would not skip class."

"I didn't see you outside." Shane's voice was careful, but there was something underneath it—concern, maybe. "I thought maybe you were sick. Or busy."

Ilya felt something warm settle in his chest at the vulnerability in Shane's tone. He smiled, slow and teasing. "You cannot get rid of me so easily, Hollander."

Shane's cheeks flushed, and he looked away quickly.

Ilya held out the smoothie. "Here."

Shane stared at it. "What—"

"Your breakfast." Ilya pressed the cup into Shane's hand. "Clean Green with extra flaxseed. From Juice Press."

Shane's eyes went wide. "How did you—"

"Hayden told me."

For a long moment, Shane didn't move. He just stood there, holding the smoothie, his expression cycling through too many emotions for Ilya to read. His cheeks were flushed, his lips parted like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

"You asked Hayden what I eat," Shane said finally, his voice strange.

"Yes."

"And then you went to Juice Press."

"Yes."

Shane's grip tightened on the cup. "Ilya, I—" He stopped, swallowed hard. "Thank you. This is—" Another pause. "You didn't have to do this."

"I know." Ilya stepped closer, watching Shane's face carefully. "But I wanted to."

Shane's blush deepened. He looked down at the smoothie, then back up at Ilya, and for just a moment, his expression was completely unguarded—vulnerable and overwhelmed and something that looked almost like longing.

Then he blinked, and the walls came back up.

"Thank you," Shane said again, his voice carefully neutral. "This is really thoughtful."

He took a sip of the smoothie, and Ilya watched his throat work as he swallowed. Shane's eyes closed briefly, and when he opened them again, they were bright.

"It's perfect," Shane said quietly.

Ilya smiled. "Good."

Shane was losing his mind.

It had started with the questions. Ilya had begun asking things during class—simple things, basic things, things Shane was certain Ilya already knew the answers to. *How long should I hold this pose? Is my alignment correct here? Should I be feeling this in my hamstrings?*

At first, Shane had answered patiently, professionally. But then he'd noticed the way Svetlana would hide her smile, the quiet laugh she'd stifle when Ilya asked something particularly obvious. And Shane had realized: Ilya was mocking him. Making fun of the yoga instructor with his girlfriend right there to witness it.

The thought made Shane's chest tight with humiliation. He'd started keeping his answers brief, avoiding eye contact, moving away as quickly as possible after responding. His face would burn

every time Ilya raised his hand, every time that deep voice asked another question that felt like a joke Shane wasn't in on.

But the worst part—the part that made Shane want to scream—was that he *wanted* Ilya's attention anyway.

Even knowing Ilya had a girlfriend. Even with the possibility that he was being made fun of. Shane still felt his heart rate spike every time Ilya looked at him, still found himself watching Ilya's reflection in the mirror when he thought no one would notice, still felt that dangerous flutter of hope whenever Ilya smiled at him.

It was unprofessional. It was pathetic. It was *wrong*.

Shane lay awake at night trying to logic his way out of it. Ilya was straight. Ilya had a girlfriend. Ilya was probably just being friendly, or worse, amusing himself at Shane's expense. The crush would fade if Shane just maintained distance, kept things professional, stopped letting himself hope for something that would never happen.

He needed Ilya to leave him alone so he could get over this.

Except he didn't want Ilya to leave him alone at all.

Then Ilya had started showing up on Tuesday mornings.

The first time, Shane had arrived at dawn to find Ilya outside the building, smoking a cigarette in the cold morning air. Shane's heart had stuttered in his chest. For a moment, he'd just stood there, staring, trying to understand what was happening.

There were a million different things he wanted to say in that moment—*you look so tired. Are you okay? You can tell me anything. You can trust me.*—but instead all that came out was, “I appreciate you showing up early, but smoking isn’t allowed on gym property. It’s in the membership agreement.”

And Ilya had looked so fucking dejected. So exhausted. But he’d still given Shane a smile. It was weak—never reaching his eyes—but Shane could recognize masking and he could see Ilya’s attempt to slip back into his usual suit of sarcasm and bravado. It was devastating.

“Of course it is,” he said, his accent thicker than usual. “I am very sorry. I did not think anyone would be here yet.”

“It’s fine.” The lie came out easily, naturally. The Club was strict about their rules, always expected the staff to enforce each policy like it was of dire importance, but Shane couldn’t have cared less in that moment. He’d let Ilya do whatever he wanted, *anything*, if it even had a chance of bringing the light back into his eyes. Shane could handle the fallout another time. It would be worth it. “Just for future reference.”

Shane dug the teeth of his keys into the flesh of this thumb to stop himself from saying anything, like asking Ilya if he was okay, if he needed to talk about anything.

“Okay,” Ilya said, stubbing out his cigarette. “I will keep in mind.”

Shane nodded and turned to unlock the door to the lobby. He'd figured Ilya would just go back into his car and call Svetlana or just continue smoking as soon as Shane was out of sight, but he pushed off from the wall and started following Shane inside.

"Oh, the room isn't ready yet," Shane said, turning around to face him. "I still have to set everything up."

"I know." Ilya had smiled, that slow dangerous smile that made Shane's knees weak. "I thought maybe I could help."

Shane should have said no. Should have maintained boundaries, kept distance, protected himself from this thing that was only going to hurt him in the end.

Instead, he'd said, "Okay."

And just like that, Tuesday mornings became something else entirely.

Ilya would be waiting outside, always smoking, always stubbing out the cigarette when Shane arrived. They'd go through their little routine—Ilya teasing Shane about being too wound up, too serious, and Shane sitting down on the cold ground beside him despite himself, both of them pretending this was normal, that there was nothing significant about Ilya showing up an hour early just to spend time with Shane. Even if it was only because he seemed to have trouble sleeping.

Shane had thought about suggesting melatonin but, selfishly, he didn't want to give up his extra hour of one-on-one time with Ilya.

Inside, they'd set up the studio together. Ilya would carry the heavy equipment, arrange the bolsters and blocks exactly how Shane directed, move through the space with that unconscious grace that made Shane's mouth go dry. They'd talk—about nothing, about everything. Ilya would make him laugh with dry observations about the other gym members, and Shane would forget to be careful, forget to maintain distance, forget that this couldn't go anywhere.

For one hour every Tuesday, Shane let himself pretend.

Then class would start, and Shane would remember. He'd see Svetlana walk in, beautiful and confident, and the guilt would crash over him like a wave. He'd spend the entire class avoiding Ilya's eyes, keeping his adjustments brief and impersonal, hating himself for being greedy enough to take those Tuesday morning hours while knowing they meant nothing.

Because Ilya had a girlfriend. And Shane was encouraging this—whatever this was—by continuing to show up early, by laughing too loudly, too eagerly, at Ilya's jokes, by letting himself bask in Ilya's undivided attention. It was unprofessional. It was selfish. It was going to end badly.

But Shane couldn't stop.

The weeks blurred together. Every Tuesday, Ilya was there. Every Tuesday, Shane told himself it would be the last time. Every Tuesday, he gave in anyway.

Then one morning, Shane had made a mistake.

They'd been setting up the studio, and Ilya had mentioned something about his schedule, and Shane had responded without thinking: "Yeah, I never have time for breakfast either. I usually just grab

something quick between classes."

The moment the words left his mouth, Shane had wanted to take them back. It was too personal, too revealing. It invited further conversation, further connection, further hope.

Ilya had looked at him with those sharp dark eyes, and Shane had felt exposed.

The following week, Ilya had brought him a brownie.

Shane had stared at it, his throat tight. The gesture was so thoughtful, so *kind*, and it made everything worse. Because Ilya wasn't supposed to be kind. He was supposed to be distant and unavailable and easy to get over.

"I can't," Shane had said, and watched Ilya's face fall.

He'd forced an apology, explaining the macrobiotic diet he'd been on for the past two years, and tried to smile convincingly as he encouraged Ilya to offer it to Svetlana instead.

The suggestion had felt like swallowing glass. A reminder to himself as much as to Ilya: *You have a girlfriend. This can't happen. Stop being kind to me.*

Ilya had taken the brownie back, his expression carefully neutral, and Shane had felt like the worst person alive.

He'd spent the rest of that day replaying the moment, hating himself for rejecting Ilya's kindness, hating himself more for wishing he could have accepted it. The brownie had been a simple gesture, probably meaningless, and Shane had made it weird by refusing it.

But then, the next Tuesday, Ilya had brought the smoothie.

Shane had been setting up alone, trying not to watch the door, trying not to feel disappointed that Ilya hadn't shown up early. Then Ilya had walked in with that green smoothie—Shane's exact order, down to the extra flaxseed—and Shane's heart had stopped.

He'd barely managed to ask how Ilya knew, only to hear, "Hayden told me," in that disarming, matter-of-fact way that left Shane unmoored.

Ilya had asked about him. Had gone to Hayden specifically to find out what Shane liked. Had gone to Juice Press—which wasn't even close to the gym—to get Shane's exact favorite order.

Shane's hands had trembled as he took the smoothie. His face had burned. His chest had felt too tight, too full, like his heart was trying to break through his ribs.

"Thank you," he'd managed, and the words felt desperately inadequate.

When he'd taken that first sip, the taste had been perfect—exactly right, exactly what he needed. And Shane had felt something crack open inside him, something he'd been trying so hard to keep locked away.

Ilya had smiled at him, soft and pleased, and Shane had wanted to cry.

Because this meant something. It had to mean something. You didn't ask someone's best friend for their food order, didn't go out of your way to bring them exactly what they wanted, didn't show up

at dawn every Tuesday for weeks, unless it *meant something*.

But Ilya had a girlfriend. A funny, sexy, drop-dead-gorgeous girlfriend who was also another student in Shane's class.

Shane stood there holding the smoothie, feeling the cold plastic against his palms, watching Ilya watch him, and felt completely lost. He didn't know what this was. Didn't know what Ilya wanted. Didn't know if he was reading too much into simple kindness or if there was actually something here, something real, something possible.

Shane took another sip of the smoothie and tried not to think about what it meant that Ilya had memorized his order. Tried not to wonder why someone with a girlfriend would go to this much trouble to make sure their yoga instructor had something to eat. Tried not to care.

He failed at all three.

Chapter End Notes

I promise things are about to get juicy as hell in the next chapter. Let's just say they're gonna be in a car together for a lot of it and that close proximity makes it a lot harder for Shane to run away. Not to mention, some of Shane's friends might start to try and knock some sense into him lmfao.

Side note: My old gym literally did sell chocolate chip brownies in their snack bar and they were amazing. And poor Ilya who doesn't know what a macrobiotic diet is and lives off of McDonald's yet still has a six pack genuinely thinks the brownie is a great substitute for a meal (it literally reminded me of when Trixie said Katya is the only person who could emerge from the cloud of narcotics after a year with abs). Shane is truly God's strongest soldier cause I would've taken the delicious brownie from my hot celebrity crush in a heartbeat.

Btw someone please link me that Trixie and Katya clip I can't find it 😭😭!

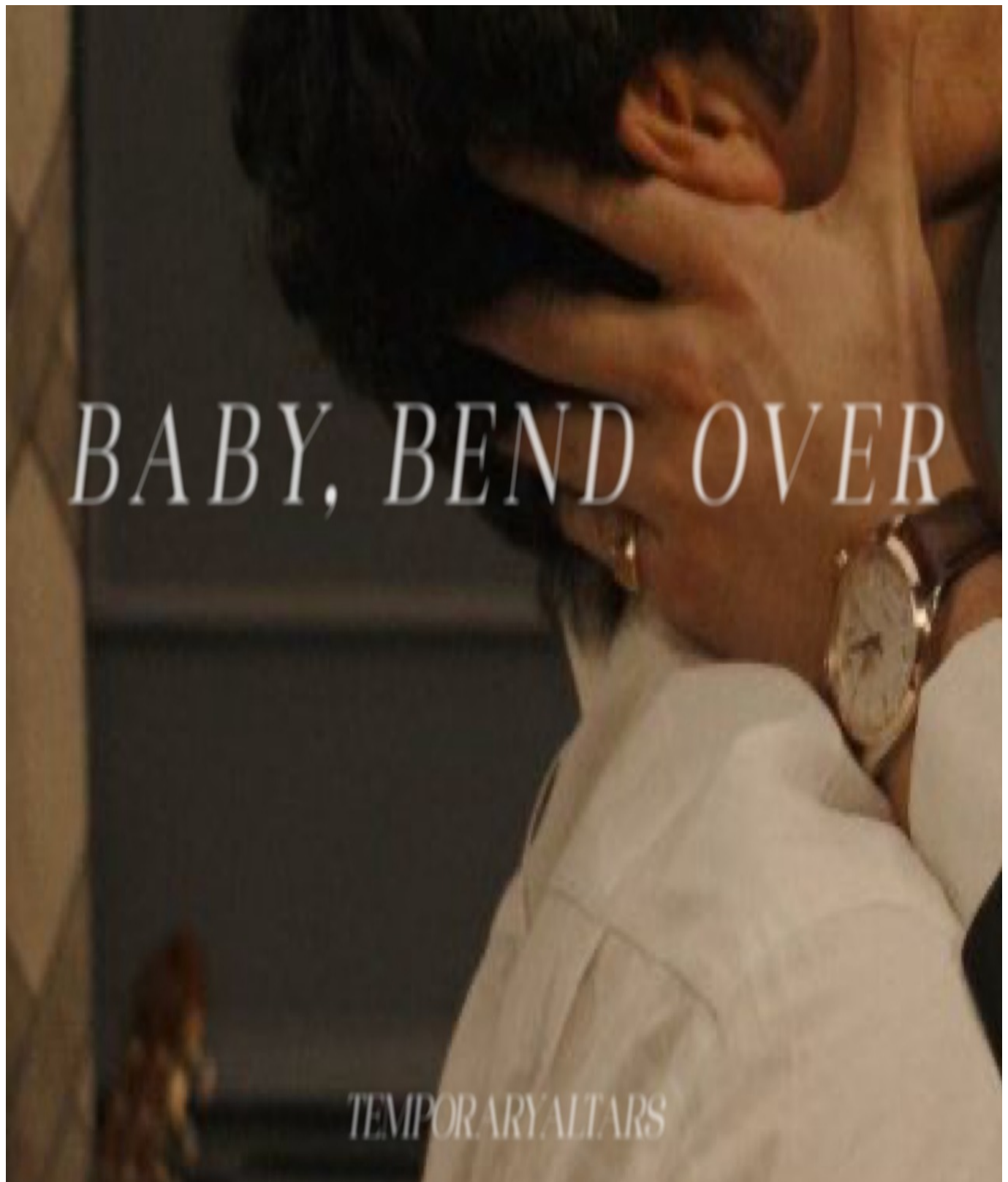
[UPDATE: SOMEONE FOUND IT FOR ME TYSM.](#)

Chapter 6: Everywhere

Chapter Notes

tw: racial & homophobic slurs. There is one paragraph wherein Shane is recalling the discrimination he faced growing up as a gay half-Japanese kid and all the shit that comes with being an outsider both racially and in terms of your sexual orientation. It is absolutely not necessary to read it in order to understand the plot of this chapter. If you'd like to skip it, it starts at "Some people were just born lucky" and ends with "before he ever really got started."

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



Shane's car coughed when he turned the key.

The engine sputtered and caught like it resented being woken up, but refused to actually start. He tried again. He sat there in the parking lot behind the athletic club, his gym bag in the passenger

seat, and turned the key again.

Nothing.

He sat back, jaw tight, then twisted the key again.

"Come on," he muttered. "Come on, please—"

Not even a creak this time.

It was just past eight-thirty on Wednesday evening. His six-thirty class had run long because someone had asked about hip flexor modifications, and then he'd stayed to clean up, and now the parking lot was nearly empty. The streetlights had come on, pooling amber light across the cracked asphalt. Shadows spilled out between the cars, stretching long and sharp, painting the otherwise empty lot in streaks of gold—beacons in the yawning night.

Shane pulled out his phone and stared at the black screen. He could call Hayden, but Hayden was probably getting the kids ready for bed right now.

The only other option would be to call a tow truck, but that would take forever and cost a fortune. He was already tight on cash from the last time he was babysitting for Hayden and Jackie when Ruby had decided to draw all over the walls of Shane's rental while he'd been cooking them both dinner.

He'd been trying to save up for a new car for years, but the money was never quite enough, and he'd been stuck driving his dented hunter-green '99 pre-owned Honda Civic for five years now. He'd bought it off Craigslist and he'd only been able to afford it back then because the owner gave him a discount once Shane pointed out the missing taillight and broken hubcap that hadn't been in any of the pictures.

Headlights swept across his windshield, and for a moment the beams didn't move on, flooding the car's interior with harsh white light. Shane looked up, squinting against the glare, expecting the car to pass through the intersection. Instead, it hovered at the entrance, headlights fixed on him, before finally turning in and rolling to a stop a few feet away.

For a second, Shane couldn't see who it was. Then the driver's side door opened, and Ilya Rozanov stepped out.

Of course. Of *course* it was Ilya.

Shane mentally flipped off whatever cosmic entity had decided to make Shane its plaything for the night, and rolled his window down so he'd be able to hear what Ilya was saying.

"Hollander?" Ilya called, walking over. He was wearing dark jeans, and a fitted black short-sleeve henley, his hair slightly mussed like he'd been running his hands through it. He looked at Shane, then at his beat-up shell of a car. "Your car is okay?"

"It won't start," Shane said, climbing out. The evening air was cool, carrying the salt smell of the harbor. "I don't know what's wrong with it."

Ilya came closer, frowning. "This has happened before?"

"No, I mean, it's a shitty car but the engine has never acted like this before." Shane gestured helplessly at the car. "I've tried three times already but it just won't catch."

"Pop the hood," Ilya said, already walking towards the front of the car. "I look."

Shane hesitated, then reached back in and pulled the hood release. Ilya lifted it, the metal creaking in protest, and peered at the engine while Shane stood there feeling useless and trying not to stare at the way Ilya's broad shoulders moved under his shirt.

After a minute, Ilya straightened up and shook his head, frowning at the tangle of old wires and grease residue. "This is... very different from my cars. I haven't seen an engine like this in a long time," he admitted. "But I think maybe your battery. Or fuel pump. You need mechanic."

"Great," Shane said, running a hand through his hair. "That's just—great."

Ilya closed the hood and looked at him. "Where you live, Hollander?"

"Coolidge Corner," he said, already pulling out his phone to check where the nearest T station was. "Why?"

"I drive you home," Ilya said, like it was obvious. "You can't stay here."

Shane's stomach dropped. "You don't have to do that. I can call someone—"

"Who you call? Is late." Ilya was already walking back toward his car, a candy apple red Lamborghini Aventador that screamed sex, money, and arrogance in equal measure. Shane would've rolled his eyes had it not been for the fact that he was definitely going to jerk off to the image of Ilya bending him over the hood later. "Come. I take you."

Shane hesitated, but he couldn't think of a better option that didn't require him freezing his ass off on the T for twenty minutes. He grabbed his gym bag and locked his car, his heart beating too fast. This was fine. This was just a ride home. People gave each other rides all the time. It didn't mean anything.

Except it was Ilya, and everything with Ilya meant something, even when Shane desperately wished it didn't.

He climbed into the passenger seat, and the car smelled like leather and something else—cologne, maybe. Something warm and expensive that made Shane want to lean closer and breathe it in, like gourmand cardamom and cooked saffron.

The interior was immaculate, all black leather—embossed with the Lamborghini bull—and chrome accents, and Shane suddenly felt hyper-aware of his Nike shorts and worn hoodie.

Ilya started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot, heading toward Seaport Boulevard.

"What you are doing here so late?" he asked, lowering the volume on the radio so they could hear each other properly.

"I had a six-thirty class," Shane said. "It ran over."

Ilya nodded, his hands easy on the wheel. He drove the way he moved—confident, controlled, like he knew exactly what he was doing. When he reached over to the gear shift, his large, tanned hand

swallowed the metal easily. It was horribly, inconveniently sexy.

"I was nearby," he said. "Lucky I see you."

"What were you doing here so late?" Shane asked, then immediately felt stupid for asking. It wasn't his business.

"Just dropped Svetlana off," Ilya said. He was driving with only one hand on the wheel, Shane noticed, and it was all Shane could do not to get hard in the passenger seat of his obnoxiously nice car. "She lives close by. We had drinks with some friends, and she had too much wine, so I drive her home."

The words hit Shane like a fist to the chest.

He could picture it perfectly: Ilya and Svetlana at some trendy Seaport bar, sitting with their thighs pressed together on the same side of the booth, laughing at a clever joke from one of their equally beautiful and absurdly wealthy friends. Ordering something ridiculous and ostentatious—food meant to signal wealth rather than satisfy hunger—like uni shooters or foie gras lollipops. Ilya watching her drink, keeping track, being careful but not overbearing. The easy intimacy of it—*I'll drive you home*. Ilya's hand on the small of her back as he guided her to the car, opening the door for her so she wouldn't have to lift a finger.

Maybe she'd been tipsy and giggly, leaning into him, resting her long manicured fingers on his thigh as he drove. Maybe she'd kissed him goodnight before going inside.

Shane stared out the window at the passing lights and tried to breathe normally.

"That was nice of you," he managed, hoping his voice didn't sound as tight and strained as it felt.

Ilya shrugged. "Is nothing."

Right. Of course it's nothing to drop your girlfriend off at her apartment and make sure she got home safely after your date. It wasn't a favor or a burden, it was expected. You call cabs for your friends, sure, but you only go out of your way to drive them home yourself if you need to see them home safely with your own eyes, because you wouldn't be able to sleep otherwise.

Shane's hands were clenched in his lap. He made himself relax them before Ilya could notice.

They drove in silence for a minute, heading up toward the Mass Pike. The city slid past outside—the glowing windows of office buildings, the red taillights of other cars, the dark stretch of the Charles River.

Inside the car, it was warm and quiet, just the low hum of the engine and the occasional swish of passing traffic.

"The smoothie yesterday," Ilya said suddenly. "You enjoyed? Was good?"

Shane's throat went tight. "Yeah. It was perfect. Thank you."

"I watch, make sure woman behind counter put extra flaxseed for you," Ilya said, nodding. There was something in his voice—pride, maybe, or satisfaction. "I wanted to get it right."

Why? Shane wanted to ask. *Why does it matter? Why do you care?*

But he didn't. Instead he said, "You did. It was exactly right."

Ilya glanced over at him, and even in the dim light from the dashboard, Shane could see him smile. "Good," he said softly.

The car suddenly felt very small.

Shane looked away, focusing on the road ahead. They were on Beacon Street now, heading west through Kenmore Square. The traffic was light, just a few other cars and the occasional pedestrian. A red light caught them near BU, and they sat there idling, the silence stretching out.

"You have a game on Friday, right?" Shane asked, just to say something.

"Yes. Against New York." Ilya's voice was casual, but there was an edge to it. An intensity. "Scott Hunter's team."

"You really don't like him, huh?" Shane laughed.

"He is old," Ilya said flatly. "And slow. And he thinks he is so good, but he is not. I am better."

There was no arrogance in it, just statement of fact. Shane felt his mouth curve despite himself.

"Confident," he said.

"Is true." Ilya glanced at him again, and this time there was a challenge in it. Something playful and sharp. "You should come watch. See how good I am."

Shane's heart kicked hard against his ribs. "To the game?"

"Yes. Saturday night. Home game." The light turned green, and Ilya accelerated smoothly. "I will leave tickets at will-call under your name. You just show up."

The casual confidence of it—the assumption that Shane would come, that it was already decided—should have annoyed him. Should have felt presumptuous. Instead, Shane felt heat crawl up the back of his neck, his pulse picking up.

He wanted to go. Wanted it so badly it scared him.

But—

"Will Svetlana be there?" The question came out too careful, contrived and artificially indifferent. Shane tried to make it sound casual, like he was just curious, but he could hear the edge in his own voice.

Ilya glanced at him, and there was something confused in his expression. A slight furrow between his brows.

"Svetlana? No. She doesn't come to games much anymore. Says she is bored of watching me win all the time," Ilya said, turning to wink at Shane, which earned him a huff of laughter and an eye-roll. "And she is busy Friday anyway."

Relief crashed into Shane's chest like a wave, immediate and shameful. If Svetlana wasn't there, then maybe—maybe it would be okay. Maybe he could go and watch Ilya play and it wouldn't feel

like he was doing something wrong. Wouldn't feel like he was inserting himself into something that wasn't his business.

The guilt came right after, hot and acidic. He was relieved that Ilya's girlfriend wouldn't be there. What kind of person did that make him?

"Okay," Shane heard himself say, swallowing down the ball of contrition that had lodged itself in his throat. "Yeah. I'll come."

Ilya's face lit up—there was no other word for it. His whole expression shifted, something warm and pleased and almost boyish breaking through.

"Yes? Good," he said, and his voice was softer now. Satisfied. "I score hat trick for you. You'll see."

The way he said it—*for you*—made Shane's chest feel too tight.

He'd watched Ilya play before. Had pulled up highlights on YouTube late at night when he couldn't sleep, had found himself checking scores, had maybe, possibly, watched a full game last week just to see Ilya move on the ice with that same controlled grace he brought to yoga. But watching from his couch, alone, was different from sitting in the arena. From being there in person while Ilya knew he was watching.

The car suddenly felt very small. They were pulling into Coolidge Corner now, the art deco marquee of the Theatre glowing ahead of them, the street lined with a mixture of brick and Tudor revival buildings and restaurants and shops that Shane had walked past a hundred times. He watched as a little boy pulled on his mother's hand, trying to pull her towards a pair of terrier mixes, prancing happily, tongues lolling out, on their nightly walk.

Shane's apartment was just a few blocks away, tucked into one of those era-agnostic buildings that defined the city, and the normalcy of it—the familiar streets, the life he'd built here—felt surreal with Ilya beside him, still looking at him like that.

"Turn left here," Shane said, his voice coming out rougher than he intended. "Then it's the third building on the right."

Ilya turned, then pulled up in front of Shane's building and put the car in park. The engine idled quietly. Through the windshield, Shane could see the warm yellow lights of his apartment building, the tree-lined street, a couple walking their dog—a liver roan German Shorthaired Pointer—on the sidewalk, swinging their interlocked hands together.

He should get out. Should thank Ilya and go inside and put distance between them before he did something stupid.

He didn't move.

"Thank you," he said instead, pulling at a loose thread in the seam of his hoodie. "For the ride. You didn't have to—"

"I wanted to, Hollander," Ilya said, and his voice was quiet now. Serious.

Shane made the mistake of looking at him.

Ilya was watching him with those dark eyes, his expression unreadable in the dim light of the street. One hand was still on the steering wheel, the other resting on his thigh. He looked relaxed, but there was something coiled about him too. Something anticipatory and taut.

"Shane," Ilya said, and the way he said it—the way his accent wrapped around the name—made Shane's breath catch.

The air in the car went thick. It felt solid and grabbable.

Shane couldn't look away. Couldn't move. His heart was pounding so hard he could feel it in his throat, in his fingertips, everywhere.

Ilya shifted slightly, leaning toward him across the console. Not much. Just enough that Shane could smell his cologne stronger now, could see the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw, could count his eyelashes if he wanted to.

Shane's lips parted. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The space between them felt electric, charged with something that made his skin feel too tight.

Ilya's gaze dropped to Shane's mouth, then back up. A question. An invitation. A dare.

"Delai so mnoy chto khoresh, rodnoy moy. Ya tvoy."

Shane didn't know what Ilya had just said, but it sounded as desperate as he felt.

He started to lean in—

And then he saw it.

A faint smudge of lipstick, dark and glossy, just visible on Ilya's cheek—the one that had been angled toward the driver's window until now. It looked like Ilya had tried to wipe it off at some point earlier in the night, but the stain lingered, shaped distinctly like a pair of pursed lips, unmistakable.

Svetlana. It had to be from her.

The realization landed in Shane's gut like a punch. Of course.

Of course Ilya wasn't his. He was someone else's—belonged to someone, cared for someone, went home with someone. Shane was just the other man. The one who didn't belong, who would ruin everything if he let this happen. The one who was going to be the reason someone got hurt.

Guilt reached out its hand and gripped him by the throat.

"I can't," Shane said, and his voice cracked on it. He grabbed for the door handle, his hands shaking. "I have to—thank you for the ride—"

"Shane—"

But Shane was already out of the car, grabbing his gym bag from the floor, stumbling back onto the sidewalk. The cool air hit his face and he sucked in a breath, his whole body trembling.

"Thank you," he said again, not looking at Ilya. Not letting himself look. "I'll—I'll see you Tuesday."

He turned and walked toward his building, his legs unsteady, his heart still racing. He didn't look back. Didn't let himself see Ilya's expression, didn't let himself wonder what might have happened if he'd just leaned in, if he'd just—

Behind him, he heard the Lamborghini's engine still idling. Heard it sit there for a long moment.

Then, finally, he heard it pull away.

Shane made it to his building's door before he had to stop and lean against the brick wall, his eyes closed, his breath coming in shaky gasps.

He'd almost kissed Ilya Rozanov.

He'd almost kissed someone else's boyfriend.

And the worst part—the part that made him want to sink to the ground right there on the sidewalk—was that he still wanted to.

Shane woke to the harsh buzz of his work phone rattling against the wood of his bedside table—too early, too bright, too demanding. He blinked at the screen, expecting a spam call or a staff group chat from their manager reminding them about the monthly staff meeting they had that night.

Instead, it was a message from the club's instructor line. Ilya's name blinked at the top. Shane nearly chucked the device across the room, but he didn't get paid enough to afford a replacement.

At the SAC, every instructor had a work phone so the VIP clients could access their trainers and instructors with any questions or scheduling matters at all hours. It was just another ridiculous perk the club included to justify their exorbitant membership fees.

Ilya:

Please do not worry about last night. We can forget it happened.

Does not have to be different between us.

Is okay, Hollander.

Tickets for Saturday still waiting at will-call for you. Two, in case you want to bring friend.

No pressure, honestly. If you don't want them, is okay.

Another message popped up a minute later:

Ilya:

I hope you have good day.

Shane stared at the screen, thumb hovering.

Of course wonderful, infuriatingly perfect Ilya would take the high road—polite, reassuring, making it easy for Shane to pretend none of it mattered, that Shane humiliating himself in Ilya’s car was nothing more than a minor slip-up.

He must have looked so desperate last night, practically throwing himself at a guy with a girlfriend whom he had just driven home after a date.

Now Ilya was just trying to smooth things over, keep everything professional, make sure Shane didn’t feel too embarrassed showing his face at work. It was generous, really, the kind of gentle letdown you gave someone you pitied. It didn’t even seem like he’d been shocked. More like he’d been waiting for the day Shane would try to act on his stupid, obvious, pathetic crush.

Fuck.

Shane tapped out a reply, then deleted it; tapped again, deleted again. He set the phone down and tried to breathe through the knot in his chest.

Hayden was stacking free weights in the corner when Shane found him during his break.

“Hey, when’s the shop say you’ll get your car back?” Hayden asked, grabbing his water bottle.

“Monday, with any luck.” Shane wiped his forehead with the edge of his shirt. “They said it’s the starter. Could’ve been worse, I guess.”

Hayden nodded. “So how’d you get home last night? The T?”

Shane shook his head, a little sheepish. “Ilya gave me a ride.”

Hayden paused, eyebrows up. “Wait, you just ran into him? At that hour?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, rubbing the back of his neck. “He was dropping his girlfriend off nearby. Saw me in the lot, offered me a lift.”

Hayden’s eyes went wide. “Girlfriend? I thought—”

Shane cut him off, too quickly. “Doesn’t matter. Point is, he offered me tickets to the game Saturday, but then things got kind of...awkward at the end.”

Hayden cocked his head. “Awkward how?”

Shane shrugged, not meeting his eyes. “Just...awkward. He texted this morning to apologize. Said the tickets are still at will-call if I want them, but honestly, I don’t know if I should go.”

Hayden rolled his eyes, grinning. “Shane. Come on. He’s a pro hockey player and he gave you tickets. You’d be nuts not to go. Besides, if you don’t already have plans for the second one, I’ll come. God knows I need a break—last night Ruby put glitter in the humidifier, and now the whole apartment sparkles like a Vegas strip club. I found some in my fucking ear this morning.”

Shane managed a laugh. “So you’re saying I’d basically be rescuing you.”

“Exactly. You get a free night out, I get a night without having to wear an Elsa wig and getting my toenails painted by a toddler. And if Ilya’s weird, we bail and get ice cream. Deal?”

Shane hesitated, then nodded. “Deal.”

Hayden clapped him on the shoulder. “Good. Now go hydrate and get a power bar from my desk drawer. Ilya’s right. You don’t eat enough. You’re pale as hell.”

Shane cracked a smile. “Says the guy who got sunburned in January. But fine. And thanks. I’ll see you Saturday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Shane had changed his outfit four times.

Four times.

He stood in front of his closet Saturday evening, staring at the pile of rejected clothes on his bed, and wondered when he'd become this person. The kind of person who cared what he wore to a hockey game. The kind of person who took mirror selfies in different shirts and sent them to his best friend for approval.

His phone buzzed.

Rose: okay that one's better but still too "i'm trying to look like i'm not trying"

Rose: you ARE trying. own it.

Shane groaned and pulled off the henley he'd been wearing. He tossed it onto the bed and grabbed a plain black t-shirt instead. Simple. Casual. Not like he'd spent an hour agonizing over it.

He took another photo and sent it.

Rose: BORING

Rose: Shane Hollander i know you own clothes with some shape

Rose: wear the dark grey one you wore to my birthday last year. the fitted one. it makes your arms look good.

Shane hesitated, then pulled the grey shirt from his closet. It was fitted—maybe a little too fitted compared to what he usually wore—but Rose was right. It looked good.

He pulled it on and checked the mirror. Then immediately felt ridiculous for checking the mirror for what felt like the millionth time that night.

Shane: This feels like too much

Rose: it's literally just a shirt

Rose: and it makes you look like Christian Grey (minus all the stalker stuff)

Rose: wear the grey one and stop overthinking

Shane: I'm not overthinking

Rose: you've sent me 6 outfit photos in the last hour

Rose: for a hockey game

Rose: that the hot russian hockey player invited you to

Rose: while giving you a ride home in his LAMBORGHINI

Rose: yeah you're definitely not overthinking

Shane felt his face heat. He sat down on the edge of his bed, phone in hand and rubbed his eyes tiredly.

Shane: It's not like that

Rose: uh huh

Rose: shane you bought TICKETS to see him play before he even invited you

Shane: That was before he was my student!

Rose: and now he's giving you FREE tickets

Rose: GOOD tickets probably

Rose: just admit you like him and go have fun

Shane stared at his phone. His chest felt tight.

Shane: He has a girlfriend

The three dots appeared, then disappeared. Then appeared again.

Rose: ...are you sure?

Shane: Yes

Shane: I've met her. She takes his yoga class.

Rose: okay but like

Rose: are you SURE sure?

Rose: because the way you describe him acting around you does not sound like a guy with a girlfriend

Shane closed his eyes. He'd been over this in his head a thousand times. The way Ilya looked at him. The way he smiled. The smoothie. The ride home. The tickets.

The almost-kiss in the car.

But then.

Svetlana's lipstick. The pictures of them arm-in-arm all over town. The way they were always together, always whispering, always laughing, always in each other's orbit. The fact that Shane had looked up Ilya's past dating history online and had only ever seen him with women. The unavoidable truth that Ilya was a professional hockey player in a homophobic league, from a homophobic country that would never allow him back if he so much as held hands with another man in public.

Even if he *was* single, Ilya wouldn't risk his career, his family, his reputation, his *country* for Shane Hollander, an unknown, gay, lower-middle-class yoga instructor at his thirty thousand dollar a year gym.

He looked down and saw that his knuckles had gone white around his phone.

Shane: I'm sure

Rose: okay well that sucks

Rose: but you can still go to the game and have fun

Rose: it's just hockey

Rose: wear the grey shirt. and your glasses. the ones I got you from that boutique on newbury street that make you look like a if a k-pop idol was a college professor. you'll look so hot he'll forget he even has a girlfriend.

Rose: jk cheating's bad

Rose: but seriously. go enjoy yourself.

Rose: and text me if anything interesting happens

Shane smiled despite himself.

Shane: Nothing's going to happen

Rose: we'll see

TD Garden was packed.

Shane had been to hockey games before—a few Bears games over the years, mostly with coworkers or friends—but he'd never felt this kind of energy. The crowd was loud, restless, excited. Almost feral. The air smelled like fresh ice and beer and popcorn, and something else entirely, something electric that Shane didn't have the words to describe.

He felt like one of those dogs that could sense the lightning before it even struck.

After squeezing through the crowd, he finally made his way to the will-call window, his stomach fluttering.

"Name?" the woman behind the counter asked when it was his turn.

"Hollander. Shane Hollander."

She typed something into her computer, then looked up with a slightly raised eyebrow. "You're picking up for Rozanov?"

Shane's face went hot. "Uh. Yes."

She printed the tickets and slid them across the counter. "Enjoy the game."

Shane took the tickets and glanced down at them.

Section 22. Row A.

His stomach dropped.

These weren't just good seats. These were *incredible* seats. Directly behind the player's bench, just slightly off from center ice, close enough that he could probably track each individual bead of sweat on the backs of the players' necks. The kind of seats that cost hundreds of dollars each, even before scalping prices.

Ilya had left him two of them.

Shane stood there for a moment, staring at the tickets in his hand, feeling like he was holding live ammunition, instead of paper.

He shook himself back into the moment, before his anxiety started to sabotage him, and headed toward the entrance.

He was halfway through the main concourse when he passed a merch stand. Jerseys hung on display racks, a sea of black and gold. He slowed, scanning them without really meaning to.

And then he saw it.

ROZANOV #81.

Shane stopped walking.

It was ridiculous. He knew it was ridiculous. He was a grown man, not some horny teenager with an unrequited crush on the quarterback. He didn't need to buy a jersey. He didn't need to broadcast to the entire arena that he wanted Ilya to notice him. That he wanted to be claimed, somehow, even if it was just for tonight.

He stepped closer to the stand.

"Can I help you?" the guy behind the counter asked.

Shane hesitated. "How much for the Rozanov jersey?"

"One-fifty for the replica. Three-fifteen for authentic."

Shane pulled out his wallet before he could talk himself out of it. He'd just have to pick up a few holiday shifts at the gym to pay it off, but it'd be worth it.

Five minutes later, he was pulling the jersey on over his grey shirt, the fabric settling across his shoulders like a brand.

The number 81 stretched across his back. ROZANOV, just above it, in bold letters, marking him.

He felt bold and ridiculous and a little bit giddy.

He felt like he was doing something reckless.

He felt better than he had in a long time.

Shane headed further inside, meeting up with Hayden, and leading them towards their section.

"Holy shit, are those our seats?" Hayden was staring at the tickets in Shane's hand, his eyes wide like Shane was holding a million dollar check with his name on it.

"Yeah," Shane said, trying to sound casual about it.

"Shane. These are *insane* seats." Hayden looked up at him, grinning. "Your Russian really went all out, huh?"

"He's not my Russian."

"Uh huh." Hayden's gaze dropped to Shane's chest. "Is that why you're wearing his jersey?"

Shane felt his face heat. "Shut up."

"Oh my god, it's *new*." Hayden laughed delightedly, pulling at the tag Shane hadn't bothered removing yet. "You bought this tonight! You actually bought a fucking *authentic* Rozanov jersey."

"I thought it would be—I don't know—supportive."

"Supportive," Hayden repeated, still grinning. "Right. Totally normal friend behavior. I'd definitely do the same for you, man."

"Can we just find our seats?"

They made their way down to Section 22, and Shane's breath caught when he saw the view. They were so close to the ice he could see the scrapes in the plexiglass, could hear the muffled sounds of the refs talking to each other before the players came out.

"This is unreal," Hayden said, dropping into his seat. "I can't believe you were going to skip this."

Shane sat down beside him, his heart racing.

The arena was filling up around them, the noise building. The lights dimmed slightly, and the crowd roared as the players started coming out onto the ice for warm-ups.

Shane scanned the players, looking for Ilya's number.

There.

Ilya skated out with the rest of the team, his movements smooth and powerful. He looked different in his uniform—bigger, somehow. More solid. The pads added bulk to his already wider-than-average shoulders and chest, and the shield hid most of his face, but Shane would have recognized him anywhere.

He moved across the ice like he owned it, like it answered to him and him alone. Fast, controlled, confident in a way that made Shane's chest tighten.

This was Ilya's world. This was where he belonged.

Shane watched him skate, mesmerized.

And then Ilya slowed. He turned, scanning the crowd, his gaze moving across the sections near the ice, right by the bench.

Shane's breath caught.

Ilya's gaze landed on him.

Even from this distance, even with the helmet partially obscuring his face, Shane could see the moment Ilya registered what he was seeing. The jersey. The number 81, clearly visible on Shane's loosely-crossed arms.

Ilya's whole face lit up.

He grinned—huge and unmistakable—before skating into position for the face-off.

The ref dropped the puck.

Ilya won the draw cleanly against Scott Hunter, snapping the puck back to his defenseman before Hunter could even react. Then he was moving, cutting across the ice with explosive speed.

His teammate sent the puck back to him, and Ilya caught it on his stick, deking left so smoothly that the opposing defenseman bit hard on the fake. Ilya shifted right, maintaining perfect control, and fired a pass across the ice that landed exactly on his winger's tape. The winger one-timed it, and the puck rocketed into the top corner before the goalie could move.

The goal horn blared and the crowd erupted like a volcano of raw, uncontrollable energy.

Ilya glanced back over his shoulder directly at Shane's section to make sure he'd seen it, winking at him when they made eye contact.

Shane felt his face go nuclear.

"Oh my god," Hayden said beside him, grabbing onto Shane's shoulder with a death grip. "Oh my *god*."

"Shut up," Shane muttered, but he was smiling so hard his face hurt.

"He just—did you see that?" Hayden was laughing. "He literally just showed off for you."

"He did not—"

"Shane. He winked at you. In front of the entire arena. With at least twelve different HD cameras pointed at his face." Hayden leaned closer, his grin wicked. "That's your boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend."

"Does he know that? Because I'm pretty sure he thinks you're dating."

Shane buried his face in his hands. "Oh my god."

"You two have the most obvious heart eyes I've ever seen," Hayden continued, clearly enjoying himself. "It's actually disgusting. I feel like I'm intruding."

"I hate you."

"No you don't." Hayden nudged him. "You're too busy being in love with a professional hockey player."

Shane's stomach flipped. He wasn't in love. He wasn't. He was just—

He was just completely fucked.

The next play started, and Shane forgot how to think.

He'd watched hockey before, but he'd never *watched* hockey. Not like this. Not with his entire focus locked on one player, tracking his every movement across the ice.

Ilya was incredible.

Fast and aggressive and precise in a way that made Shane's breath catch. He moved like the ice was an extension of his body, like he knew exactly where everyone else was without looking. He stole the puck, passed it, skated backward to defend, then turned and flew down the ice so fast Shane lost track of him.

And when he had the puck—

Shane leaned forward in his seat, his hands gripping the armrests.

Ilya deked around a defender, his body low and controlled, then snapped a shot toward the goal. The goalie barely got a glove on it.

The crowd in the Admirals section groaned loudly, booing. Ilya flashed them a bright smile and tapped his stick at them in acknowledgement.

"Holy shit," Hayden said. "He's good."

Shane couldn't respond. His heart was pounding too hard.

This was a different side of Ilya entirely. Not the playful, teasing man who showed up to yoga in soft, plush sweaters and lazily smoked cigarettes outside the gym. This was someone else. Someone powerful and commanding and a little bit dangerous.

Shane couldn't look away.

By the end of the second period, Ilya had scored twice. Both times, the arena exploded. Both times, Shane found himself on his feet, shouting with the rest of the crowd.

Both times, Ilya's eyes immediately found Shane's.

Both times, Hayden leaned over and said, "He's so whipped for you."

"Shut *up*," Shane said, laughing despite himself.

The third period was brutal.

The Admirals were pushing hard, trying to close the gap. The game got faster, more physical. Shane watched Ilya take a hit against the boards and felt his stomach drop, but Ilya just shook it off and kept skating.

At one point, Hunter attempted to chuck Ilya against the boards, right in front of the Bears bench. His lips moved around a string of words that were inaudible to Shane, but caused Ilya to snarl and lunge towards him, shouting a string of expletives. Shane leaned forward, straining his ears to catch what they were saying.

"You want to get 'em off?" Ilya goaded, tugging at his gloves as the ref skated between them, trying to corral Ilya back. "You can pick the hand I beat the fuck out of you with!"

Hunter clenched his fists, clearly trying not to let the chirp affect him.

"Is what I thought! Tupoye nichtozhestvo," Ilya spat. "Pereday svoey materi, chtoby ona perestala mne pisat' — ona ne v moyóm vkúse!"

And then, with four minutes left in the game, Ilya stole the puck at center ice.

Shane sat forward, hanging off the edge of his seat.

Ilya flew down the ice, an Admirals defender on his heels. He deked left, then right, his body moving so fast Shane could barely track it. Another defender closed in, but Ilya slipped between them, the puck still on his stick.

He was alone in front of the goal.

The goalie crouched, ready.

Ilya shot.

The puck hit the back of the net.

The arena *exploded*.

Hats flew onto the ice—dozens of them, hundreds of them, a rain of black and gold. The crowd was on its feet, screaming in unadulterated joy, and Shane was screaming with them, his heart pounding so hard he thought it might burst.

Hat trick.

Ilya had scored a hat trick.

And then Ilya turned.

He skated toward Shane's section, his teammates hopping the boards and chasing after him, and he looked right at Shane. Pointed directly at him.

And winked.

Shane's face went so hot he thought he might combust.

Beside him, Hayden leaned in close, his voice barely audible over the roar of the crowd.

"Told you."

They left the arena in a sea of people, the crowd still buzzing with energy. Shane felt like he was floating. His face hurt from smiling. His hands were shaking like they had an electric current running through them.

"That was insane," Hayden said, grinning. "I can't believe we just watched that."

"I know," Shane said, and his voice came out breathless.

"And I can't believe your boyfriend just dedicated a hat trick to you in front of twenty thousand people."

"He's not—" Shane started, but he was laughing too hard to finish.

"Shane. He pointed at you. And winked. After scoring the game-winning goal." Hayden shook his head, still grinning. "That man is *gone* for you."

Shane's chest felt too full. He didn't know what to say. Didn't know how to explain the guilt that was still there, lurking under the giddiness. Didn't know how to reconcile the way Ilya had looked at him tonight with the fact that Ilya had a girlfriend.

But for right now—just for tonight—he let himself feel happy.

He let himself feel wanted.

They made their way toward the North Station, and Shane pulled out his phone as they waited for the Green Line.

There was already a text from Rose.

Rose: WELL???

Shane: He scored a hat trick

Rose: AND???

Shane: And he pointed at me after

Rose: SHANE HOLLANDER

Rose: I TOLD YOU

Rose: THAT MAN IS IN LOVE WITH YOU

Shane stared at the message and tried to swallow down the ball of hope that was rising in his chest. He wanted to believe her. He wanted to close his eyes and imagine a world where he could actually have everything he's ever wanted. But that wasn't how Shane's life had gone so far, and it definitely wasn't going to start now.

Some people were just born lucky. They walked in the sun. And in order for the universe to maintain its balance, it had to create people like Shane. People who were so spectacularly broken and unlucky that it reset the scales. He'd spent the better part of twenty years being called a faggot and a chink, and having his lifelong dreams of playing professional hockey stripped away from him when he was still just a teenager, before he ever really got started.

So no, Shane couldn't let himself believe.

Shane: He has a girlfriend

Rose: ...

Rose: Shane. Guys don't just dedicate hat tricks to their friends. He was putting on a show for you because he wanted to impress you.

Shane didn't respond. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and followed Hayden onto the C.

He didn't want to think about this anymore, not while he was still feeling the high from watching Ilya play so beautifully on the ice, totally in his element.

He'd deal with reality tomorrow.

Tonight, he was just going to let himself feel this.

Sunday morning, Shane woke up still buzzing.

He'd barely slept. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Ilya on the ice—fast and powerful and completely in control. Saw him point and wink. Saw that grin, just for Shane.

Shane rolled over and grabbed his work phone. No new messages.

He hadn't expected any. It was barely seven in the morning, and Ilya had played a full game last night. He was probably still asleep.

Shane got up, made coffee, and tried not to think about the way his stomach flipped every time he remembered the jersey. The way Ilya had looked at him when he'd spotted it.

He had a private client session at nine. Then his usual Sunday classes. He needed to get moving.

He slipped on his On Cloudnova 2's, a steel blue crewneck, and a pair of shorts, and grabbed his gym bag before he headed out.

The Club was quiet when Shane arrived. Sundays were always slower in the mornings—most people slept in after Saturday nights out. Shane liked the calm. Liked having the space to himself before the chaos of the day started and he had to plaster his customer service smile on his face for the next nine hours.

He parked in the lot behind the building and grabbed his bag from the passenger seat.

And then he saw them.

Svetlana was standing near the entrance, her profile facing Shane. She was wearing yoga pants and a loose jacket, her hair pulled back in a long French braid.

She was kissing someone.

Shane froze.

The man was tall—at least 6'4, broad-shouldered, strong-jawed, and wearing a Bears hoodie. He had his hands on Svetlana's waist, and she was laughing against his mouth, her arms wrapped around his neck.

Shane's brain went blank.

That wasn't Ilya.

Svetlana pulled back, still smiling, and said something Shane couldn't hear. The man grinned and kissed her again, quick and easy, like they'd done this a thousand times.

Shane's stomach dropped so fast he thought he might be sick right there in the parking lot

She was cheating on him.

Svetlana was cheating on Ilya.

Shane couldn't move. Couldn't breathe.

Just last night, Ilya had scored a hat trick, had played one of the best games of his life, had been carried off the ice by his teammates on home ice, after beating his biggest rival in the entire league.

And now, less than twenty-four-hours later, Shane was standing in a parking lot watching Ilya's girlfriend kiss someone else.

Svetlana turned, still smiling, and her gaze landed on Shane across the lot.

Her wide smile faltered and Shane felt his jaw clench in response. She clearly hadn't expected to be caught cheating on her boyfriend by their yoga instructor.

Shane's hands were shaking. His chest felt too tight, like someone had wrapped a band around his ribs and pulled.

Svetlana raised a hand in a hesitant wave.

Shane turned and walked into the building.

He made it to the locker room before he had to sit down.

His mind was racing, spinning in circles he couldn't control.

He had to tell Ilya.

Didn't he?

Ilya deserved to know. Deserved the truth. Deserved to hear that the person he trusted, the person he brought to all his favorite restaurants, and talked about with that soft fondness in his voice—was lying to his face. The thought of letting Ilya walk around completely oblivious, unknowingly making a fool of himself as his girlfriend snuck around with another man behind his back was unthinkably cruel.

But what if Shane was wrong? What if Ilya didn't believe him? Worse, what if Ilya hated him after this?

What if Shane only wanted to tell him because some selfish, ugly part of himself hoped they'd break up?

His mind spun, panic tightening his chest. He'd spent weeks—months—trying not to want more, trying to do the right thing, trying to do everything possible to stay in Ilya's good graces, and now this.

Now he had to choose what to do with the life-altering secret burning in his hands.

Shane didn't know how long he sat in that empty locker room, hands still shaking, trying to regulate his breathing, before Hayden ultimately found him and quietly rubbed his back until he felt like he could breathe normally again.

He had no idea what to do.

Chapter End Notes

Tbh I'm really, really proud of this chapter and I'm really happy with how it turned out. I think it's my favorite chapter of the whole entire fic so far. I'd love to know if you guys feel the same way! Lmk if you had any favorite parts.

Thank you to TulipBlossoms for the beta and for talking me off the edge of a cliff.

S/O to Thorty of the Bruins for the (English) chirping. That "You can pick the hand I beat the fuck outta you with" is a real thing he said to another player on a hot mic and I was like "that's Ilya." The Russian phrases Ilya uses are basically just "pathetic moron" and "tell your mom to stop calling me, she's not my type." If Scott Hunter was Russian Ilya could've easily gotten his shit rocked (if Hunter wasn't a million year old reanimated dinosaur).

Also, I didn't get the chance to include it, but in my mind I imagine Rose briefly worked out at Seaport Athletic Club while she was in Boston filming a movie and that's how she met Shane

and now she buys him expensive gifts and peer pressures him into thinking he has a chance with the very hot Russian man in his yoga class. We all need a friend like Rose.

Btw, yes Shane wore his glasses to the game, and yes, of course Ilya was fighting off a boner the entire game.

Before you yell at me about how oblivious Shane is, please remember he's autistic and that also contributes to him frequently misinterpreting social cues that may seem obvious to the rest of us. Unlike us, he doesn't have the benefit of reading Ilya's mind.

Shane's [grey shirt](#), [Shane's glasses](#), and Shane's [steel blue shirt](#).

Chapter 7: Blue

Chapter Notes

<https://youtu.be/WeygnRnsRiU?si=Bv1www0-zTsJ81Eo>

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



Shane didn't sleep for two days.

He tried. He tossed and turned, lay in bed staring at the ceiling for hours, his mind cycling through the same impossible loop. Tell Ilya. Don't tell Ilya. Tell him. Don't. Over and over, until the

semantic satiation set in and even the question lost its shape.

Sunday blurred into Monday. Everything felt off-kilter, wrong, filled with a disquieted tension that permeated the air. His skin felt too tight for his body—like it was shrink-wrap instead of flesh.

The sleep deprivation had peeled the insulation off his nerves, and he had the sudden certainty that he was wearing himself wrong, like he'd put his shirt on backwards or missed a button.

Hayden kept shooting him worried looks—asking if he was okay, if he needed to talk, if he wanted to get out of the city for a few hours. He'd even offered to let Shane stay over and sleep on the pullout couch at his and Jackie's apartment for a night.

Shane just shook his head, managing a weak smile, and Hayden left it alone, though he lingered nearby more than usual.

He made it through his classes, but his focus kept slipping. He missed cues, stumbled over words, caught himself staring blankly at the wall when he should have been demonstrating a pose or adjusting a student.

He overcorrected, became almost too attentive, hyper-aware of every word he said. He barely ate, barely heard the conversations around him. Every time his phone buzzed or someone called his name, his nerves jumped.

He kept running through scenarios in his head: If he told Ilya, how would he say it? Would Ilya believe him, or accuse him of lying? What if he ruined everything? What if he kept it to himself and Svetlana really was cheating, and he said nothing, and Ilya found out later? What if it was none of his business? What if, deep down, he just wanted to be the hero—just wanted Ilya to need him?

By Monday night, Shane felt wrung out, his thoughts stretched paper-thin. He'd written and deleted a dozen texts to Ilya, each one worse than the last, and finally just turned his phone off and hid it under the pillow.

If he was going to ruin someone's life, he couldn't do it through text.

Around three a.m. on Tuesday morning, he'd given up on getting any sleep and gone for a run instead.

It didn't help.

Usually, running cleared his head. The rhythm of his feet on pavement, the burn in his lungs, the way his thoughts would eventually settle into something manageable. But this morning, he'd done his usual route along the Harbor and felt nothing but the same sick anxiety churning in his stomach.

He still had no idea what he was going to do.

By the time he got to the gym, he was exhausted and wired at the same time, his body running on adrenaline and dread. He parked in his usual spot and sat there for a moment, clenching the steering wheel until his fingertips went numb.

Maybe Ilya wouldn't be outside this morning. Maybe Shane would have more time to figure out what to say.

But when he rounded the corner of the building, there he was.

Ilya was leaning against the brick wall in his usual spot, cigarette in hand, and the moment he saw Shane, his entire face lit up.

"Hollander!" He pushed off the wall, grinning wide. "There you are. I was waiting for you."

The warmth in his voice hit Shane like a physical blow. It made his chest ache.

"Yeah, I went on a longer run this morning. I've been up for a while," Shane managed. "Couldn't sleep."

"Because you are still thinking about game?" Ilya's grin turned smug and teasing. "I told you, I play well when you are watching."

Shane tried to smile, but it felt watery and tight.

"And you wore my jersey," Ilya continued, taking a drag from his cigarette. His eyes were bright with something that looked like genuine delight. "I see you in stands and I think, *there he is*. My good luck charm."

Shane's throat went tight.

"Ilya—"

Ilya's expression shifted when he noticed Shane's discomfort, the teasing warmth fading. He stepped closer, studying Shane's face with a frown.

"Something is wrong," he said quietly. "What is it?"

"Nothing," Shane said, running a hand over his face, trying to clear the fog in his brain. "I'm fine."

"You are not fine." Ilya reached out and cupped Shane's face with one hand, his palm warm against Shane's jaw. His thumb brushed just under Shane's eye, where the skin probably looked bruised from lack of sleep. "Hollander, what is wrong? You are okay?"

Shane's eyes stung.

He was so tired. So confused. And Ilya was looking at him like he actually cared, like Shane's wellbeing mattered to him, and Shane had no idea how to do this.

"Can I um—" Shane nodded at the cigarette between Ilya's fingers, letting out a shaky laugh and trying to buy himself a few more moments. "Can I have a drag of that first?"

Ilya's frown deepened immediately. He pulled his hand back, his expression going serious in a way Shane had never seen aimed at him before.

"No," Ilya said flatly.

"I was joking."

"Yes. Was not funny." Ilya dropped his cigarette and crushed it under his shoe, then crossed his arms. Shane tried not to focus on the veins in his biceps. "Cigarettes are only for me. You have to

stay healthy." His voice softened. "Now tell me, Hollander, what is wrong? Whatever it is, I will help."

Shane's chest felt like it was caving in.

He couldn't do this. Couldn't stand here and break Ilya's heart before seven in the morning on a cracked sidewalk outside their gym. But he also couldn't *not* tell him. Ilya deserved to know.

"I—" Shane's voice cracked. He cleared his throat and tried again. "I saw something. On Sunday morning. When I came in for my shift."

Ilya's brow furrowed, and he dipped his head, trying to catch Shane's downcast gaze. "What did you see?"

"I was parking my car. And I saw—" Shane forced himself to meet Ilya's eyes. "I saw Svetlana. In the parking lot. Here."

"Okay?" Ilya looked genuinely confused. "She comes to gym on Sundays sometimes."

Shane's hands were shaking and he eyed the cigarette on the ground, thought about the stress ball in his bag, wishing he had something to do with them. He shoved them in his pockets and pinched the skin of his thighs through the fabric. "She was with someone. A guy. Tall, dark hair, wearing a Bears hoodie. And they were kissing. Not like friends, Ilya. Like—"

"Like what?" Ilya asked when Shane didn't elaborate any further.

He took a breath. "I think she's cheating on you."

The confusion on Ilya's face didn't clear. If anything, it deepened.

"Wait." Ilya held up a hand. "Wait, wait. Hollander. You think Svetlana is cheating on me?"

The way he said it—like the idea was absurd—made Shane's stomach drop.

Ilya didn't believe him.

This was exactly what he'd been afraid of.

"I know it's hard to hear," Shane said quietly. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to tell you, but I thought you should know—"

"Shane." Ilya's mouth was twitching. "Svetlana is not my girlfriend."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"She is my friend. Just friend. We have known each other since we are kids." Ilya's expression was caught somewhere between amusement and disbelief. "She is like—like sister to me."

"But—" Shane's brain was struggling to catch up. "You arrive together, you leave together, you constantly talk and laugh together in class, you're always touching each other..."

"Because she is my friend," Ilya said, his voice patient. He must have realized Shane required things to be spelled out for him much more than the average person. "I talk about her and spend

time with her because she is important to me. But not like that. Not like—" He paused, then added, "The man you saw—that is Dmitri. Her boyfriend. They have been together for three years. He is planning on proposing. I go shopping with him yesterday to help pick out ring."

Shane stared at him. His mouth opened to argue, but nothing came out. A dozen protests rose up and died in his throat, one after another, and he was left gaping at Ilya like a fish.

"Oh," he said faintly.

"Yes. Oh." Ilya was definitely smiling now. "You thought I have girlfriend this whole time?"

"I—yeah. I did." Shane could feel himself blush, suddenly feeling very bashful and silly.

"And you still—" Ilya's smile turned into something softer. Something that made Shane's pulse kick up. "You still come to my game. You still wear my jersey."

Shane's face was burning. "I thought I was being supportive. As a friend."

"Mm." Ilya looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh. "That is very noble of you, Hollander. Such a gentleman."

"Shut up."

"So." Ilya took a step closer. "Now you know I am single. What do you think about that?"

Shane's heart was beating wildly in his chest. Relief came first—fast enough to make him dizzy—and the embarrassment followed a second later. He cleared his throat, trying not to linger on the cautious optimism that lurked underneath.

"I think—" Shane swallowed. "That's good. For you. I'm sure you'll—I mean, you probably have a lot of options."

Ilya's eyebrows rose. "Options."

"Yeah. You know. You're—" Shane gestured vaguely at all of him. "You."

"I am," Ilya grinned.

"Yeah, so," Shane huffed, rubbing the back of his neck. "I mean, I'm sure you have, like, thousands of women lined up who'd love to date you."

"Da. Is true. I am very popular," Ilya said thoughtfully. "And I do already have someone I like very much."

The hope in Shane's chest died immediately.

"Oh," Shane said. His voice came out flat. "Okay. That's—that's good."

"Yes. He is very pretty."

Shane's brain snagged on the pronoun. *He*.

"Um—"

"He is yoga instructor," Ilya continued, his eyes locked on Shane's face. "Very bendy. Very serious about health. Makes me want to eat vegetables just to impress him."

Shane's breath caught.

"He has very nice ass," Ilya added, his mouth curving into a smile. "I notice very first day I saw him. Cannot stop noticing."

"Ilya—"

"And he wore my jersey to my game." Ilya's voice dropped, going softer. "He sat in seats I give him and he cheered for me and I score hat trick because I want to impress him so badly I think I am going crazy."

Shane couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. His entire body felt like it was vibrating.

The momentary vertigo of realization.

"You—" His voice cracked. "You like me?"

"Of course I like you." Ilya said it like it was obvious. Like Shane was an idiot for not knowing sooner. Looking back, maybe he was. "I like you since first class. Since you put your hands on me and I forget how to breathe like some virgin."

"But you—" Shane's brain was still trying to catch up to everything Ilya had just dumped on him in the past thirty seconds. "I just thought—"

"I know what you thought." Ilya stepped closer, close enough that Shane could smell his cologne and the faint scent of cigarette smoke. "And I think maybe you like me too, yes? Even when you think I am taken?"

Shane's face was on fire. Was he that obvious? "I wasn't—I didn't—"

"You blush every time I talk to you," Ilya said, reaching up to cup Shane's face again—thumb pressing down softly on his cheek. "You get so nervous when I am close. You try so hard to be professional and proper, but I see the way you look at me, Hollander. Blush does not lie."

"That's—" Shane's voice was barely working. He felt breathless and dizzy. "That's not fair."

"What is not fair?"

"You can't just—" Shane gestured helplessly between them. "I spent *weeks* feeling guilty. Trying not to—I thought you were with someone."

"But I am not." Ilya's said, tilting his head slightly, eyes roaming over Shane's freckles. "I am here. And I am single. And I am telling you that I like you."

Shane's eyes were stinging again, but for a completely different reason now.

"You're Ilya Rozanov," he reasoned, somewhat manically, like that fact alone was counterargument enough.

"Da. Is very nice name," he teased.

“You’re the captain of the Boston Bears,” Shane said disbelievingly, still waiting for punchline.

“Yes. You have my jersey.” The smug grin on his face reminded Shane of all those compilations he’d watched of opposing players dropping gloves for the chance to knock it off his face.

He was starting to understand what the appeal was.

"This is insane," Shane said, feeling a little hysterical.

"Yes," Ilya agreed. "Very insane. You want to kiss me anyway?"

Shane let out a breathless laugh. "Yeah. Yes. I really do."

Ilya's smile was bright and warm and devastating. "Good."

He kissed Shane right there in the parking lot, his hand still cradling Shane's jaw, and it felt like a thousand rubber bands snapping under his skin at once.

Shane’s hands came up, catching in the front of Ilya’s shirt and dragging him closer, his fists twisting into the soft cotton. He was still distantly aware of where they were—standing on a public sidewalk outside of his place of work. One of the other instructors—or worse, a client, could walk by any minute now.

He was being reckless.

Shane loosened his grip and made to step back, but one of Ilya’s hands caught him by the back of the neck and held him in place. He made a low, encouraging sound against Shane’s lips that he felt more than heard.

The sound was soft, almost lost against his mouth, but it steadied something in Shane’s chest—grounding and certain.

Ilya wasn’t rushing him, wasn’t forcing him to stay, but he wasn’t letting him run either.

It was all the permission Shane needed to let go of the last of his self-preservation instincts.

They moved cautiously, slowly at first—each of them testing the waters, finding their rhythm—before they both grew impatient and Ilya deepened the kiss.

His hands kept moving, like they couldn’t settle, even as his mouth moved with the same commanding confidence that he had on the ice. Shane opened for him, letting him in, their tongues brushing, the taste of him sharp and new and already addictive.

When Ilya pulled away, Shane had to stop himself from following. He could feel how out of breath he was but he didn’t care.

When he opened his eyes, Ilya was grinning.

"You taste like toothpaste," he said. "Very minty. Very healthy."

Shane laughed, his forehead dropping against Ilya's shoulder. It smelled like him—warm and safe and inviting. "You taste like cigarettes."

"I know. Is disgusting. You will have to kiss me many times until I taste like you instead."

"That's the worst logic I've ever heard." Shane smiled against the fabric of Ilya's sweatshirt.

"But you will do it anyway, yes?"

Shane pulled back just enough to look at him. Ilya's eyes were bright and happy, his smile so genuine it made Shane's chest ache.

"Yeah," Shane said softly. "I will."

Ilya kissed him again, slower, less urgent this time, and Shane let himself sink into it.

He reached up, weaving his fingers into the curls at Ilya's nape—his fingers tightening briefly before he could stop himself. Ilya grunted and cupped Shane's ass with those giant, tanned hands, pulling him up just enough to steal his balance and forcing him onto the balls of his feet. Shane made a small noise against his mouth—which, judging by the faint curve of Ilya's lips, had been the point.

A car rolled by on the street next to them, window open, and someone shouted "I give it six months!"

Shane broke into laughter, muffled against Ilya's lips, and Ilya dropped one hand to flip the guy off without even looking, then grabbed Shane's face and kissed him again, deeper this time—defiant and grinning.

When they finally pulled apart, Shane glanced at his watch and swore under his breath.

"We're going to be late for class," he said breathlessly. "I need to start setting up."

Ilya only grinned, dropping his hands to Shane's hips and squeezing, using it as leverage to pull Shane close again. He dipped his head, pressing a slow kiss just below Shane's ear.

"I think your watch is broken, Hollander," he murmured, playful and low. "I check already—we still have plenty of time."

"Easy for you to say," Shane laughed and pulled back enough that they could look each other in the eyes. "You're not the one whose job is on the line."

"Okay. Then we go now." But Ilya didn't move. He was still looking at Shane like he couldn't quite believe this was real.

Shane knew the feeling.

"Come on," Shane said, taking Ilya's hand. "Before Svetlana shows up and I have to apologize for thinking she was a cheater."

Ilya laughed, bright and loud, and laced their fingers together. "She will think is very funny. She has been telling me for weeks to just kiss you already."

"She *what*?"

"She says I am very obvious. That everyone can see I am—how does she say it—*pining*."

"You were not pining."

"I was pining *so much*, Hollander." Ilya squeezed his hand. "But is okay now. Because you were pining too."

Shane wanted to argue, but he couldn't. Ilya was right.

"You know," Ilya said, his voice dropping low as they reached the lobby door, "we have maybe fifteen minutes before class. I could get on my knees right now. I have been taking yoga class recently. Has been very good for my endurance. Let me show you."

Shane laughed, heat flooding his face even as his body responded to the image. "That would be extremely inappropriate. You can't proposition your yoga teacher fifteen minutes before class."

"Why not?" Ilya's grin was absolutely shameless. "You are very attractive teacher."

"Ilya—"

"Fine, fine." Ilya held up his hands in mock surrender, but his eyes were still gleaming with mirth. "After class, then."

Shane rolled his eyes, but didn't argue.

They walked into the gym together, close enough that their shoulders kept knocking every other step, and Shane felt lighter than he had in weeks. In his whole life, maybe.

He wasn't used to this—standing beside someone and not feeling like a secret, or a future regret. He kept waiting for the fear to come back, the boulder to appear in his stomach, but it didn't.

Part of him wanted to keep looking over his shoulder, to brace for something to go wrong—the snap of a knee, the impact of hitting the boards, the fist of his opponent flying towards his jaw. But this morning, that old reflex felt distant, dulled—walking through mud instead of quicksand.

When they reached the base of the stairs, Ilya went ahead first, bounding up the first two steps before turning back to look down at Shane, grinning, waiting for him to follow.

The morning light poured through the large windows, illuminating Ilya's silhouette from behind, haloing his curls and washing over his skin.

He reached his hand down, palm up and open—an invitation.

Shane hesitated, just for a heartbeat, staring at everything he was being offered.

He waited for the hit. The moment that would bring him back down to his knees.

But when he looked up at Ilya and saw him smiling back at him, the tension in his muscles eased. Even if the impact came, he wouldn't be taking it alone.

He had been living in the darkness for so long, staying on the ground so there was no room for him to fall, that he'd forgotten what it felt like to stand in the sun.

But here was Ilya, standing in front of him, holding his hand out for Shane to take, ready to pull him out into the light.

Shane reached out and took it.

Chapter End Notes

Only the epilogue left!

Thank you, as always, to TulipBlossoms.

I literally lost my mind over the course of writing this so if you liked it please let me know in the comments 🥹🥹.

Thank you to all the people who were kind enough to comment on the last chapter! You made my week.

Bonus shoutout: Someone linked me to an unbelievably kind, breathtakingly thoughtful TT someone made about my fic. To that person—you brought tears to my eyes. I can't thank you enough. Your words were in the back of my head as I was writing this. I hope I didn't let you down!

Chapter 8: Outro

Chapter Notes

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



One year later.

Shane was sprawled across Ilya's bed in the Beacon Hill townhouse, phone pressed to his ear, when Ilya's hand slid up his thigh.

"—so I was thinking Tuesday and Thursday mornings," Hayden was saying. "That way we can keep the evening slots open for the intermediate classes."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Shane's voice came out steady, normal. He swatted at Ilya's hand without looking. "And we could—"

Ilya's fingers hooked into the waistband of Shane's sweatpants.

Shane turned his head, eyes narrowing in warning. Ilya grinned back at him, shameless, and tugged the fabric down.

"Hold on," Shane said into the phone. He pressed it against his chest. "What are you doing? You're already late—you need to get changed and go."

"Cannot play while hard," Ilya said, his accent thicker than usual, his grin widening. "Is bad luck. Very important game tonight."

"That's not—" Shane started, but Ilya was already pulling his sweatpants down further, settling between his legs. "Ilya, I'm on the phone—"

"So talk." Ilya's mouth was hot against his hip, his hands spreading Shane's thighs wider. "I will do all the work."

Shane's breath caught. He stared at the ceiling for a second, then brought the phone back to his ear. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

"The Thursday morning slot," Hayden repeated. "Are you okay? You sound weird."

"I'm fine." Shane's voice hitched as Ilya's tongue traced a line up the inside of his leg. He bit down on his lip, hard. "Just—distracted. What about Thursday?"

Ilya sucked a mark into the soft flesh of Shane's inner thigh, slow and deliberate, then bit down. Shane yelped at the sharp sting of it, and he could only hope he'd cut it off fast enough that Hayden hadn't noticed.

Ilya's grin was dark and taunting when he pulled back to look at him—eyes briefly softening in mock-pity. His hands gripped Shane's thighs, spreading them open wider, before he lowered his mouth and took him into his mouth.

Shane's hand flew to Ilya's hair, fingers tightening reflexively. His hips jerked up before he could stop them, and he had to swallow down the sound trying to escape his throat.

"—and I thought maybe we could finally have you and Ilya over for dinner," Hayden was saying. "Jackie's been asking about him. She wants to meet the guy who's got you smiling like an idiot all the time."

"That's—" Shane's voice cracked like a teenager. He cleared his throat, trying again. "That's great. Yeah. Dinner sounds—*fuck*—."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Shane?"

"Fine. I'm fine." Shane squeezed his eyes shut. Ilya was doing something with his tongue that made coherent thought nearly impossible. "Just—stubbed my toe."

"Uh huh." Hayden's voice had gone flat with suspicion. "Your toe."

"Yeah." Shane's free hand fisted in the sheets. Ilya's mouth was warm and wet and perfect, and Shane was trying very hard not to make any noise that would give away exactly what was happening. "So dinner. When were you thinking?"

"Are you seriously—" Hayden stopped. Started again. "Shane. Are you—is someone—"

"Next week works," Shane said quickly, his voice strained. "We could do—ah—Wednesday? Or—"

Ilya pulled off just long enough to murmur, "Da. Wednesday is good," before taking Shane deeper.

Shane's hips bucked up involuntarily. A sound escaped him—half gasp, half moan—and he knew immediately that he was caught.

"Oh my god." Hayden's voice went up an octave. "Oh my *god*. Shane, are you—is Ilya—right now? While you're on the phone with me?"

"I can explain—"

"You are! You absolute—" Hayden was laughing now, that incredulous, slightly horrified laugh that meant Shane was never going to hear the end of this. "I cannot believe—Shane, what is wrong with you? You couldn't wait five minutes until we got off the phone?"

"He started it," Shane managed, which was possibly the least dignified thing he'd ever said. Ilya's shoulders were shaking with silent laughter, his breath warm against Shane's skin.

"I'm hanging up now," Hayden announced. "I'm hanging up and we're never speaking of this again. Wednesday at seven. Don't be late. And for god's sake, try to keep it in your pants from now on. I don't need to know what my best friend sounds like when he's in bed with the captain of my favorite team."

The line went dead.

Shane dropped the phone onto the mattress and looked down at Ilya, who had pulled off and was now laughing into Shane's hip, his whole body shaking with it.

"You heard that," Shane said flatly.

"Da." Ilya's grin was enormous. "Your friend has very loud voice."

"I hate you."

"No you don't." Ilya kissed his way back up Shane's body, still grinning. "You love me. You said so last night. Three times."

Shane's face went hot. "That was—I was—"

"Was very sweet. I have very adorable boyfriend who say he love me every time I make him cum," Ilya kissed him, slow and thorough. "Now I finish what I start, yes? Then shower, then game."

Shane was still painfully hard, his body still thrumming with need, but he narrowed his eyes and pushed at Ilya's chest. "No. I'm going to take a shower. Alone. You're not invited."

Ilya's face fell dramatically. "*Nyet*. Shane, no. You are being cruel."

"You got me in trouble with Hayden." Shane sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "You can deal with your bad luck superstition on your own."

He made it approximately three steps toward the bathroom before Ilya tackled him from behind.

Shane yelped as Ilya's arms wrapped around his waist, lifting him clean off his feet. "Ilya—what are you—put me down!"

"No." Ilya hoisted Shane over his shoulder like he weighed nothing. Stupid hockey muscles. "You come to shower. I make you forgive me. Will be very convincing, I show you."

"That's not—" Shane was laughing despite himself, his hands braced against Ilya's absurdly toned back. "You're going to be late!"

"Worth it," Ilya said, and carried him into the bathroom. "Besides, is for good luck before game. I am being good captain. Very responsible."

The shower was already running by the time Ilya set Shane down, steam beginning to fog the glass, settling over their skin like a blanket. Ilya's hands were on him immediately, pulling off the Bears t-shirt—*his* Bears t-shirt—Shane had managed to keep on in bed, his mouth hot against Shane's neck.

"You're infuriating," Shane said, but his hands were already sliding up Ilya's chest, pulling him closer.

"Da," Ilya agreed, grinning against his skin. He licked away the moisture that had settled in the crook of Shane's neck. "But you love me anyway."

And Shane did. God help him, he really did.

The locker room at TD Garden smelled like liniment, epoxy, and the particular metallic tang of meltwater and adrenaline. Ilya had been in hundreds of locker rooms before thousands of games—had more games behind him at twenty-six than most players saw in a career—but this one felt different.

The air itself seemed to hum with tension, every sound amplified—the snap of tape being pulled off the roll, the metallic slice of blades being tested like knives, the low, rumbling murmur of voices speaking in half a dozen languages—players dutifully reciting prayers, going over plays, and mouthing along to the pounding, primal beats of whatever songs were on their pre-game playlists.

Game Seven. Stanley Cup Finals. The kind of moment that defined careers and cemented your place in the Hall of Fame long after you were gone. A win that could take you from an unknown rookie into a household name and hometown hero overnight.

The anticipation in the atmosphere was so palpable that it felt like another body in the room—a second shadow that had attached itself to the heels of every player.

Ilya sat in his stall, methodically taping his stick. The black athletic tape wound around the blade in precise, overlapping layers—a ritual he'd performed since he was six years old, skating on frozen lakes outside Yekaterinburg. His hands moved on autopilot, muscle memory taking over while his mind cycled through plays and positioning, through the weight of the captain's C that would sit firmly on his chest in less than twenty minutes, burning through his jersey like a brand.

Around him, his teammates moved through their own preparations. Marlow was three stalls down, working through a series of stretches that looked almost meditative—rolling his shoulders, tilting his head side to side with deliberate slowness.

Connors was already fully dressed except for his helmet, sitting on the bench with his eyes closed and headphones in, his right leg bouncing to a rhythm only he could hear. The equipment manager moved between lockers like a ghost, checking skate laces, adjusting pads, making minute adjustments that might mean nothing or everything depending on how the next sixty minutes unfolded.

The puck rose and fell in Nash's hand on the far end of the room, same height every time. *Thock. Catch. Thock. Catch.* A stick of Big Red worked slow in his cheek—always Big Red, every game, no exceptions.

Across the stall, the newest rook, Anderson peeled the tape off his shin guard and started over, slower this time, pressing each wrap flat with his thumb like it might stay if he asked nicely.

Nash didn't look at him, but the puck stopped midair in his palm.

“Too tight,” he said.

Anderson paused. Loosened it a fraction.

The puck started bouncing again.

Someone's phone was playing music—something with a heavy bass line that Ilya felt more than heard. The sound mixed with the distant roar of the crowd filtering through the walls, a reminder that twenty thousand people were waiting for them to step onto the ice.

Ilya's gaze drifted to the photograph taped inside his locker door.

He'd put it up three months ago—right after New Year's—and despite the relentless ribbing from his teammates, he'd refused to take it down. It sat next to his mother's class 2 photograph—silvery blonde braids pinned neatly under two large white bows, grass stains on the knees of her otherwise pristine tights, faded just enough to suggest someone had tried desperately to remove them, Lenin pin just slightly crooked under her oversized collar, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

The impish satisfaction of a child who'd discovered a loose thread in the rules and couldn't help but pull.

The New Year's photo was ridiculous. Shane was wearing those absurd oversized novelty glasses Svetlana had bought—gold and sparkly, with "2026" spelled out across the frames in numbers so large they sat crookedly on his face, one side higher than the other. His cheeks were flushed pink

with drunkenness, eyes bright and slitted into crescent moons from the pressure of his smile. His nose was scrunched up in delighted disgust, freckles crinkling like tissue paper. And there was Ilya, caught mid-motion by Svetlana's camera, tongue hanging out like a dog, shamelessly licking Shane's cheek.

Svetlana had texted him the photo at two in the morning with a single caption:

Всё, ты под каблуком. Ты уже не человек — приложение к нему.

Ilya had made it his phone background within seconds. He'd gotten it printed at a Walgreens two days later and taped it inside his locker before practice, ignoring the looks from his teammates.

He could still remember that night with perfect clarity. Svetlana's apartment had been packed—her usual mix of Russian expats, hockey players, and whatever random group of coked-out supermodels she'd decided were interesting that week. The music had been too loud, the vodka had been flowing freely, and Ilya had been nursing the same drink for an hour, his attention split between the conversation happening around him and the door, waiting.

Shane had arrived late. He'd texted that he was running behind—a private client had booked a last-minute session—and Ilya had felt the exact moment he walked in. A shift in air pressure. A recalibration of gravity.

Svetlana had spotted him immediately. She'd been holding court near the kitchen, gesturing wildly while telling some story in rapid Russian, but she'd abandoned her audience the moment Shane appeared in the doorway.

"*Konechno!*" she'd called out, weaving through the crowd toward him. "Finally! I thought maybe you changed your mind."

Shane had grinned, shrugging off his coat. Ilya had watched his eyes trace over the figures in the room until landing on his. He'd looked Ilya up and down, taking in his outfit, the stretch of his sleeves over his biceps, before blinking and turning his attention back to Svetlana.

"Sorry. Client ran late."

"Always working," Svetlana had tsked, but she'd been smiling as she pulled him into a hug. He got a whiff of her jasmine perfume before she'd stepped back, looked him up and down, and switched to English loud enough for half the room to hear. "You look good, Shenya. Ilya will be insufferable about this."

"He's already insufferable," Shane had said, Eyes finding Ilya's again. Ilya had raised the vodka he'd been nursing in acknowledgement, relishing in the blush he'd gotten in return.

"*Da*, but now he will be worse." She'd looped her arm through his and steered him toward the kitchen. "Come. I have been waiting to teach you how to drink vodka properly. Like real Russian."

Her English had reverted back to broken phrases and stilted grammar like it always did when she'd been drinking. Ilya found it incredibly endearing.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Shane had said, but he'd been laughing.

"Is excellent idea," Svetlana had assured him. She'd caught Ilya's eye across the room and jerked her head toward the kitchen. "Ilyusha, budesh dobr—prinesi nam ryumki!"

He'd saluted dutifully and set his drink down to fetch the shot glasses.

"Kak prikazano, komandir," he said, handing the glasses over to Svetlana's waiting hands, his eyes never leaving Shane's.

"Spasibo, boyets," she said, before turning back to Shane. "Wait here, zyat', I will return with vodka!"

Svetlana disappeared into the crowd, leaving them alone in the small pocket of space near the kitchen doorway. The noise of the party continued around them—laughter, and music, and the clink of glasses—but it suddenly felt distant and muffled, like they were hearing it from another room.

Ilya stepped closer, close enough that Shane had to tilt his head back slightly to meet his eyes.

"Hi," Ilya said, his voice low and warm, pitched just for Shane.

Shane's mouth curved into a smile, but there was something shy in it, something that made Ilya's chest tighten. "Hi yourself."

"You are late."

"I texted you."

"*Da*. I saw. Have been waiting." Ilya let his gaze drift down, slow and deliberate, taking in the dark sweater Shane wore, the way it clung to his shoulders, the hem cut short enough that it would no doubt expose skin if Shane were to lift his arms too high or lean forward to reach for something. When he looked back up, Shane's cheeks had gone pink. "You are here now, though."

"Yeah," Shane said softly. "I'm here."

Ilya reached out, his fingers brushing against Shane's wrist, tracing the bone there. "I missed you."

"You saw me this morning," Shane huffed a laugh.

"Yes. I miss you anyway." His thumb pressed against Shane's pulse point, feeling the rapid flutter beneath the skin. "Missed these." He lifted his other hand, brushing his knuckles against Shane's cheek where the freckles were scattered like constellations. "Always miss these."

Shane's blush deepened, spreading down his neck, and Ilya couldn't help the grin that pulled at his mouth. Even after a year, he could still make Shane react like this—flustered, and wanting, and trying so hard to keep his composure.

"You're terrible," Shane said, but his voice had gone soft, breathless.

"You like when I am terrible, lyubitel plokhikh."

"That's not—" Shane started, but Ilya was already leaning in, his hand sliding up to cup Shane's jaw, his thumb pressing against the corner of his mouth.

"Shane," Ilya murmured, and Shane's breath hitched.

The kiss was slow when it came, unhurried. Ilya's mouth moved against Shane's with the kind of confidence that came from knowing exactly how Shane would respond—the way his lips would part, the way his hands would come up to grip Ilya's shirt, the soft sound he'd make in the back of his throat.

Ilya's thumb pressed against Shane's chin, coaxing his mouth open wider, deepening the kiss until Shane was leaning into him, pliant and warm.

“Khoroshiy,” he praised against Shane’s lips. His other hand slid to the back of Shane's neck, fingers threading through his hair, holding him there.

Shane whined against his lips, pressing in for more.

“Tishe... Ya znayu, chto tebe nuzhno—i dam,” Ilya soothed.

Don't fuss. I know what you need. I'll handle it. I'll take care of you.

Shane tasted like ginger ale, sweet and bright, and Ilya wanted to devour him—wanted to pull him closer, press him against the wall, make him forget there was a party happening around them at all.

But then Svetlana's voice cut through the haze, bright and amused.

"*Bozhe moy!* Can you two not keep hands off each other for five minutes?"

Ilya pulled back slowly, his grin lazy and unapologetic as he turned to look at her. Shane's face was flushed, his lips kiss-swollen, and he looked like he wanted the floor to swallow him whole.

Svetlana was standing there with a bottle of vodka in one hand and three shot glasses balanced precariously in the other, her expression caught somewhere between exasperation and delight.

"Is New Year's Eve," Ilya said with a shrug. "Is tradition."

"Tradition is at midnight, *durak*," Svetlana said, but she was grinning as she set the glasses down on the counter. "Now come. We drink. Shane must learn properly before midnight, or he will embarrass himself."

Svetlana poured the first round with the kind of precision that came from years of practice, filling each glass to the brim. She raised hers, her expression suddenly serious.

"To new family," she said, looking directly at Shane.

Shane's face went soft, surprised, and Ilya felt something warm settle in his chest. He raised his glass, watching as Shane fumbled to do the same.

"*Na zdorovie*," Ilya said.

They drank. Ilya tossed his back easily, the vodka smooth and familiar. Shane managed to maintain eye contact—Svetlana had been very clear about that rule—but the moment the vodka hit his throat, his face twisted.

"Don't make face!" Svetlana scolded, already pouring the second round.

"I'm not—" Shane coughed, his eyes watering slightly. "I'm fine."

By the third shot, Shane's cheeks had gone pink, a flush spreading down his neck that Ilya wanted to trace with his tongue. Shane was trying so hard to keep up, to follow Svetlana's instructions about the toasts and the eye contact and not grimacing, but his movements were already getting looser, his smile coming easier.

"To hockey!" Svetlana declared for the fourth toast, and Shane laughed—bright and unguarded—before drinking.

This time he didn't even try to hide the face he made.

"Svetlana," Ilya said, amused. "Maybe we slow down, *da*?"

"*Nyet*. Shane must build tolerance. Is important life skill."

Shane's eyes had gone glassy by the fifth shot, his weight listing slightly toward Ilya. When Svetlana poured the sixth, Shane just stared at it for a moment before picking it up with exaggerated care.

"I think," Shane said slowly, his words starting to blur at the edges, "that I'm drunk."

"*Da*," Ilya agreed, grinning. "You are very drunk."

"Your friend is mean."

"She is best friend in world," Ilya laughed, plucking the shot glass from Shane's hand and throwing back what was left of it. "You are just very bad drinker. Bédnyy moy kanádets...ne dlya etogo sozdan."

My poor Canadian lightweight wasn't built for this.

"She's terrifying," Shane mumbled into Ilya's shoulder, but he was smiling, soft and loose in a way Ilya rarely got to see. "But I like her."

"She likes you too," Ilya had said, and it had been true. The familial warmth with which she'd treated Shane since they'd first started dating was unlike anything she'd previously displayed with his past partners.

By midnight, he'd been leaning heavily against Ilya, his weight warm and solid, his words starting to slur together softly, consonants melting like candle wax. Ilya had never loved him more.

His arm tightened around Shane, fingers tracing slow circles at the base of his spine.

When Svetlana had produced the novelty glasses—gold, and sparkly, and gaudy in that uniquely American way—Shane had put them on without protest. The numbers had sat crooked on his face, too large and too garish, and he'd looked so happy, so unguarded, that Ilya had felt something crack open in his chest.

Svetlana had positioned them together, phone in hand. "Ulybnulis'!" she'd commanded.

Ilya hadn't smiled. He'd leaned in and licked Shane's cheek instead, his tongue flat against warm skin, tasting salt and vodka and something heady and uniquely Shane. The camera had caught Shane's expression perfectly—nose scrunched, eyes bright, mouth open in laughter protest.

“Fu, Ilya, ty pyos?” She’d complained in mock-disgust.

“Da, I am very loyal dog,” Ilya nodded, pulling Shane in closer. “Have best owner in the world.”

By one in the morning, Shane had been unable to walk in a straight line.

"I think I drank too much," he'd announced, swaying slightly.

"Da, bédnyy moy," Ilya had agreed, grinning down at him fondly. "I think this also."

"Your friend is a bad influence."

"Yes. She is terrible."

Getting Shane home had been an adventure. He'd made it down the stairs from Svetlana's apartment mostly under his own, but by the time they'd reached the street, he'd been listing to one side like a ship taking on water.

"I can walk," Shane had insisted, even as his knees buckled slightly.

"Of course, góre moyó," Ilya had agreed dutifully before he'd bent down and hoisted Shane over his shoulder in a fireman's carry.

Shane had yelped, his hands bracing against Ilya's back. "What are you—put me down!"

"Nyet. You will fall on face. I am saving you from yourself."

"I'm not that drunk," Shane had protested, but he'd been giggling, his body shaking with laughter against Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya had carried him back to the suite at the Envoy he'd booked them for the night, ignoring the looks from the few people still out at that hour. Shane had been a warm, solid weight against him, his breath hot against Ilya's neck, his hands eventually giving up on protest and just holding on.

"You're really strong," Shane had mumbled at one point.

"Da. I am professional athlete."

"It's hot."

Ilya's face had burned. Shane rarely felt comfortable enough to verbalize his attraction so openly and unselfconsciously, without the shield of sarcasm or desire. "You are very drunk."

"Doesn't make it less true."

By the time they'd reached the hotel, Shane had gone quiet, his breathing deep and even. Ilya had thought he'd fallen asleep until Shane had mumbled, "Thank you for carrying me."

"Is no problem, sweetheart."

“You’re a good person, Ilya Rozanov.”

Ilya went still.

His grip tightened before he could stop it. He pressed Shane closer, like he needed proof he was still there.

The January air bit at his face, but the only thing he registered was the heat of Shane against his shoulder.

He stood there longer than he needed to, memorizing the weight of him. The warmth. The way his name had sounded in Shane's mouth.

After a moment, he shifted his grip and kept walking.

Now, sitting in the locker room at the Garden with the Stanley Cup Finals waiting on the other side of the tunnel, Ilya looked at that photo and felt his chest loosen, despite the stakes of that night's game. Shane's face was unguarded and loose—the way he only ever was around Ilya—and Ilya wanted nothing more than to step back into that photo, back into Svetlana's overcrowded living room, and live that night all over again.

"Still can't believe you actually put that up," Connors said, leaning over to look. He was grinning, his helmet tucked under one arm.

"Is good photo," Ilya said, not looking up from his tape job.

"It's a photo of you licking your boyfriend's face."

"Da. Like I said. Good photo."

Connors laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. "You've been playing out of your mind all season. Whatever you're doing, keep doing it."

"Perks of dating a yoga instructor," Marlow called from his stall. "I'm telling you, it's real."

"Is very real," Ilya agreed, grinning. He pulled on his jersey, tapping the C twice, as was his ritual.

"He coming tonight?" Connors asked.

"Da." Ilya's grin widened. "He is wearing my jersey."

Connors released a low whistle.

"Oh, you're going to be distracted as hell," Marlow said, but he was smiling. "Try to remember there's actually a game happening, yeah?"

"I will play best game of my life," Ilya said seriously. "Shane is watching. I show off for him."

"Christ," Connors muttered, but there was warmth in it. "You really are gone for him."

Ilya didn't deny it. There was no point. Everyone in this locker room knew exactly how he felt about Shane—had known since the moment he'd put that ridiculous photo up and refused to take it down no matter how much shit they gave him.

Coach LeClaire appeared in the doorway, his presence immediately commanding attention. The room went quiet.

"Five minutes," he said. His voice was calm, steady, the same tone he used whether they were up by five or down by two. "You've worked your entire lives for this moment. Every practice, every game, every sacrifice—it all comes down to the next sixty minutes. So go out there and leave everything on the ice. No regrets. No what-ifs. Just hockey."

He paused, his gaze sweeping across the room. "Let's go make history."

The energy in the room shifted like a physical thing—focused, sharp, crystalline. This was it. Everything they'd worked for all season, each of their careers, came down to what happened next.

Ilya took one last look at the photo.

For so long, he'd kept parts of himself locked away. He'd told himself it was easier that way, safer. He used Svetlana as a shield without even fully realizing he was doing it, letting people believe what they wanted to believe because the alternative—being honest, being visible, being vulnerable—had felt impossible.

But Shane had changed that. Had made him want to be brave in a way that had nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with the terrifying, exhilarating prospect of being truly known by another person.

Ilya stood, rolling his shoulders, working out the last of the tension. Around him, his teammates were doing the same—a room full of men preparing to step into the moment they'd been chasing their entire lives.

"Let's go," Marlow said, and they moved as one toward the tunnel.

The air cooled as the hallway narrowed—concrete walls pressing in on either side, the sound of their skates moving in unison forming a rhythmic percussion, as familiar a song as the lullabies his mother used to sing to him before bed. The smell changed almost instantaneously, rubber and menthol giving way to the mineral bite of ice.

The noise of the waiting crowd didn't get louder so much as heavier, packing the space until it pressed through the soles of his skates and up into his ribs. Ahead was only white, the rink blown out under the lights—too bright to register the crowd as anything but a blur of yellow and black. He kept walking toward it, and somewhere in the last few steps his hand closed tighter around his stick without him telling it to.

This was his favorite part—the moment before, when everything was potential energy waiting to explode into motion. The moment when anything was still possible.

Then he stepped onto the ice.

The cold hit him first, sharp and clean and alive. The Zamboni had just finished its final pass, leaving the surface perfect and gleaming under the arena lights. The crowd's roar became deafening, a physical force that pressed against his chest insistently and made his bones hum and vibrate.

Ilya took a breath, let his gaze sweep across the stands.

Lower bowl, section 112.

Shane was there, wearing Ilya's jersey, the number 81 visible on his sleeves, even from this distance. Their eyes met across the expanse of ice and crowd and noise, and Shane's face broke into an encouraging smile that made Ilya's chest feel too small for his heart.

Ilya grinned back, huge and unrestrained. He let himself feel it—all of it. The joy, the gratitude, the fierce, protective love that had started sneaking up on him the first time he'd laid eyes on Shane.

The energy of the arena filled his veins like electricity traveling through a circuitboard. The ice beneath his skates, Shane in the stands wearing his name, his team at his back, and the Stanley Cup waiting somewhere beyond the next sixty minutes.

Ilya skated to center ice for the opening face-off. The referee was already in position, puck in hand. Across from him, the opposing center was settling into his stance, his expression focused and hard.

Ilya bent into position, his stick touching the ice, weight balanced and ready.

The puck dropped.

Game time.

The broadcast booth of TD Garden hummed with electric energy as commentators Derek "Sunday" Church and Marcus "The Hammer" Hamilton settled into their seats for the playoff finals. The crowd below was a sea of black and gold, the roar of thousands creating a constant, thrumming backdrop.

"Alright folks, Game Seven of the Stanley Cup Finals," Church said, adjusting his headset. "Bears and Admirals. Tied series, three games apiece. This is it."

"This is what you play for," Hamilton said. "Everything on the line. One game. And Derek, I gotta tell you—the way Rozanov's been playing this postseason? Kid's possessed."

"Sixty-seven goals in the regular season, eighty-nine assists. Third MVP nomination in a row." Church shuffled his notes. "Those aren't just good numbers, Marcus. Those are historic."

"You know what's funny? I ran into him at that charity thing last month, asked him what changed this year. You know what he said?" Hamilton leaned back. "Yoga."

Church laughed. "You're kidding."

"Dead serious. Said he's been doing yoga, working on flexibility, core strength. I thought he was messing with me, but—"

"Whatever works, right? Can't argue with the results."

"His yoga instructor's probably getting a nice Christmas bonus," Hamilton said.

The teams took the ice. The noise was overwhelming—twenty thousand people on their feet, the building shaking with it.

The first period was tight. Both teams feeling each other out, testing, probing. No goals. The second period opened up—Marlow scored for the Bears at 6:23, assisted by Rozanov. Then Connors at 14:47, Rozanov with another assist. 2-0 Bears.

The third period started with the Admirals pressing hard. At 8:15, they got one back. Kowalski from the point, deflected by Hunter. 2-1.

"Here we go," Church muttered. "Game on."

The Admirals kept pushing. At 12:33, they tied it. Morrison on a breakaway, five-hole on Lindqvist. 2-2.

"Oh boy," Hamilton said. "Oh boy, this is—this is anybody's game now."

The tension in the arena was suffocating. Every shift felt like it could be the one. The clock ticked down. Four minutes left. Three minutes. Two.

Then, with 1:47 remaining, the Admirals scored again.

"Hunter! Hunter scores!" Church's voice cracked. "The Admirals take the lead! 3-2 with under two minutes to play!"

"No, no, no—" Hamilton was half out of his seat. "Come on, Bears, you gotta—"

The Bears pulled Lindqvist. Six attackers. Desperation time.

Rozanov won the faceoff in the offensive zone. Forty-three seconds left. He passed to Marlow at the point, Marlow back to Connors, Connors across to Rozanov—

"Rozanov winds up—shoots—SCORES! Rozanov ties it! Thirty-eight seconds left and we're going to overtime!"

The building exploded. The noise was physical, pressing against the glass.

"Unbelievable!" Hamilton shouted. "Unbelievable! This kid, I'm telling you, this kid—"

"We're going to overtime in Game Seven of the Stanley Cup Finals!"

The intermission felt endless. Both teams looked exhausted. Overtime in Game Seven. Sudden death.

The puck dropped.

Three minutes in, nothing. Five minutes. Seven. Both goalies standing on their heads. Every shot felt like it could end it.

Then, at 9:23 of overtime, Rozanov got the puck at center ice.

"Rozanov at center, looking—he's got speed, he's moving—"

Kowalski stepped up to challenge. Rozanov pulled the puck back, a quick drag, pivoted—Kowalski's stick hit nothing.

"Rozanov through Kowalski—"

Another defender at the blue line. Rozanov dropped his shoulder, faked right, cut left so hard his skates sprayed ice. The puck stayed glued to his stick.

"He's in the zone, Marlow's open on the right—"

Rozanov didn't pass. He cut between two Admirals, weaving, the puck dancing on his blade.

"He's not passing, he's—Hutchins is challenging—"

Rozanov's stick came back. The windup was fast, compact.

"He shoots—"

The puck flew. Upper right corner. The *ping* of it hitting the post and going in echoed through the entire arena.

For one heartbeat, there was silence.

Then the building detonated.

"GOAL! GOAL! ROZANOV! ILYA ROZANOV WINS THE STANLEY CUP FOR BOSTON!"

Church was screaming. Hamilton was on his feet. The noise was beyond description.

"The Bears win the Cup! The Bears win the Cup! Rozanov with the overtime winner in Game Seven!"

The players mobbed each other at center ice, a pile of bodies and sticks and pure joy. But Rozanov —

"Wait, where's—where's Rozanov going?" Hamilton said.

Rozanov had broken away from the celebration. He was skating toward the boards. Toward the stands.

"He's not—he's skating away from his team," Church said, confused. "He's going to the—"

Rozanov vaulted over the boards. Just jumped right over, into the crowd.

"What is he doing?" Hamilton leaned forward. "Derek, what—"

"I don't know, he's—there's someone there, he's pushing through the crowd—"

Rozanov was moving with purpose, shoving past fans, his eyes locked on something. Someone.

"Who is that?" Church said. "Can we get a camera on—"

There was a man. Dark hair. Bears jersey. Rozanov's number on the sleeves.

"Is that—who is that?" Hamilton said.

Rozanov reached the man. Reached up. Cupped his face.

And kissed him.

Right there, in front of everyone.

The booth went silent.

The kiss lasted three seconds. Maybe four. When they broke apart, both men were grinning.

The arena went absolutely insane.

Church and Hamilton blinked, momentarily stunned.

"Did he just—" Hamilton started.

"I think—" Church said.

"Did that just happen?" Hamilton said.

"I think that just happened," Church said.

Another beat of silence. Then Church started laughing. Not a polite chuckle—a bellowing hulk of a noise that shook his entire body.

"Well," Church said, his voice shaking. "Well, folks, I—I think we just—"

"That's gotta be his boyfriend. Can't just be a fan," Hamilton said, like he was still processing it. "Rozanov just kissed his boyfriend on live television."

"After scoring the Cup-winning goal in overtime of Game Seven," Church added. "That's—I mean, that's—"

"That's a hell of a way to come out," Hamilton finished.

They both started laughing again.

"The yoga instructor," Church said suddenly. "Marcus, the yoga instructor—"

"Christ," Hamilton said. "You think that's—"

"With the way Rozanov was talking about him? That's gotta be the yoga instructor," Church said. "That's the guy who's been—"

"Getting him flexible," Hamilton said, and they both lost it.

"I'm sorry," Church said, wiping his eyes. "I'm sorry, that's—we should be professional, but—"

"No, no, you know what? Good for him," Hamilton said. "Seriously. Good for him. Kid just won the Stanley Cup, scored the game-winner, and went straight to his person. That's—that's beautiful, actually."

"That's commitment," Church agreed. "And after a season like this? After what we just watched? The man's earned it."

Below them, Rozanov was still in the stands, arm around the man's waist, both of them laughing as security tried to figure out what to do. The crowd around them was cheering, phones out and aimed at the two of them, no doubt trying to capture a viral moment.

"Thirty-two years in this booth, and I've never seen anything like that before."

"This is the new generation," Church said. "They're just—they're built different. And you know what? I'm here for it."

The camera cut back to the ice, where the Stanley Cup was being brought out. Rozanov's teammates were looking around, trying to find him.

"He's gotta get back on the ice," Hamilton said. "They're bringing out the Cup."

Rozanov must have seen it too, because he started making his way back, still grinning like an idiot. When he climbed back over the boards, his teammates mobbed him all over again, laughing and shoving him.

They hoisted him onto their shoulders. The Cup was there, gleaming under the lights.

Then Rozanov looked back toward the stands. Found the man immediately. Gestured—clear as day—*come here*.

The man shook his head, laughing.

Rozanov gestured again, more insistent.

"Oh, he wants him on the ice," Church said.

"But he's not coming," Hamilton added. "Smart man. That's a lot of attention."

The man was still shaking his head when three of Rozanov's teammates—Connors, Marlow, and Hayes—skated over to the boards. Security moved to stop them, but Connors waved them off. They reached over the glass and just—lifted the guy up and over, depositing him on the ice.

"Oh, they're not taking no for an answer," Church said, laughing.

The man stumbled, clearly overwhelmed, but Rozanov's teammates guided him across the ice. The crowd was going wild.

When he reached Rozanov, Rozanov leaned down and kissed the side of his head—gentle, unhurried—then raised the Cup high above both their heads. The man's hands came up to help support it, his face bright red, but he was smiling.

The roar of the crowd returned, swelling as the Cup caught the light.

"Kid wins the Cup," Hamilton paused, sobering, "and the first thing he does is find his person. Hell of a way to celebrate a championship."

"I'll be damned," Church shook his head once, a wry smile pulling at one corner of his mouth. "Kid's got nerve."

I can't believe I'm typing this, but.....the end 😭😭? This is my first ever finished chaptered fic.

Thank you so fucking much to everyone who read, commented, bookmarked, or even just clicked on this story. Truly. I don't think I understood how much it would mean to have people follow along until I was actually in it. And it was your support that constantly got me through my worst, darkest depression days where continuing to write literally felt like climbing Everest. Every comment, every little reaction, genuinely kept me going more than you could probably ever realize.

I also wanna know if any of you have any songs that remind you of this fic! Music was such a big part of me writing this (particularly this last chapter) so I wanna know what songs you guys associate with Baby, Bend Over.

Thank you for spending your time with this story. It genuinely means more to me than I can articulate.

Thank you again to the person who made a [video](#) about my fic (and to the kind commenter who linked it to me since I don't have a tt).

You can find my other work here:

My newest fics: [Smoke Signals](#). & [These Inconvenient Fireworks](#). (Please check her out, my daughter is struggling).

1. [Prove Me Wrong](#).
2. [The Social Media AUs](#).
3. [Whirring](#).

I don't wanna finish writing this note. I wanna live in this moment where it's still not finished forever. Thank you again. Each of you own a little piece of this and I hope you cherish it as much as I do!

End Notes

Comments and kudos are so encouraging, each one I receive makes me want to keep writing, so please consider leaving one if you liked this. If you have comment anxiety you can just leave your favorite emoji and I'll know what you mean! Thanks for reading.

A note about AI: I've seen some comments under other fics accusing authors of having written with the use of AI because of things like having a lot of em dashes in their writing. As an em dash abuser I just want to make it clear that I do not condone or support the use of AI outside of generative AI used in medical imaging. I'd also like to think I'm slightly more talented than ChatGPT lmfao.

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