

Second Line

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Second Line

by [sydhollanov](#)

Summary

They met at thirteen in a locker room that smelled like sweat and cheap detergent.

Shane thought he'd forget the loud Russian boy with the crooked smile.

He didn't.

Years later, they're drafted to the same team. Teammates. Strangers.

Except Shane still knows exactly where Ilya is on the ice without looking.

Some habits never die.

Notes

First ever fanfic on here! Hope you all enjoy it.

Chapter 1: Some Things Don't Stay Buried.

September 2016 - Montreal (Prologue)

Shane knows he's staring too long at his phone, but he can't look away from the screen. The notification sits there like a threat.

TRADED TO MONTREAL.

His pulse stutters. His throat goes dry.

Montreal.

Of all the cities. Of all the teams.

He hasn't seen Ilya Rozanov in six years.

Not since the last time they spoke.

Not since everything fell apart.

The car slows at the arena entrance, and suddenly Shane is thirteen again - smaller, scared, clutching his bag too tight - except this time he knows exactly what waits for him inside.

And it's worse.

The lobby smells like stale coffee and rubber mats. Skates scraping somewhere down the hall. Laughter. A stick clattering against tile.

Normal. Ordinary.

His chest still tightens like he's walking towards a firing squad.

He tells himself it's been six years. People change. Kids grow up.

Maybe Ilya won't even recognize him.

Maybe he won't recognize him either.

But the second he pushes past the locker room doors, his body already knows where to look.

Just like it always has.

Some habits never die.

Chapter 2: Before Everything

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter two

Summer 2005 - Ottawa

The rink smells like rubber mats and cheap deodorant, the kind that never washes out of your clothing no matter how many times you try.

It clings to his hoodie, his gloves, the inside of his bag - follows him home in the winter, settles into the backseat of his parents car, lives in his hair for days.

Shane has always thought it smells like nerves.

His dad parks farther from the entrance than usual, and by the time they make the walk across the lot his palms are already damp in his gloves, the straps of his duffel bag digging into his shoulder as he shifts it higher and higher like that somehow might make him smaller. The parking lot is already half full when they pull in, minivans and SUVs lined up crookedly along the curb, parents unloading duffel bags that look too big for the kids carrying them. Someone laughs too loud. A stick clatters onto the pavement. The arena doors keep opening and closing and opening and closing like the building is breathing.

The arena is already loud this early, full of slamming doors and raised voices and the sharp scrape of skates against the concrete, kids his age laughing like they have known each other their whole lives.

He keeps his eyes on the ground and counts his steps instead.

Forty three to the doors.

Forty three again, just to be sure.

If he focuses on that, he doesn't have to think about who's watching him.

Because they're always watching him.

They always do.

Three weeks, his brain supplies helpfully.

Three weeks without home. Without his own bed. Without his mom knocking on his door in the morning to tell him that breakfast is ready.

Three weeks without them.

"Hey," his mom says gently, nudging his arm before they go inside. "You have everything, right?" his mom asks for the third time, already unzipping his backpack to check anyway. Extra tape. Snacks. The folder with emergency numbers like he's going off to war instead of hockey camp.

"I've got it," Shane says, a bit too quickly.

He knows he sounds stiff when he's nervous. He always does.

His dad steps around them, carrying his bigger suitcase - the one with actual clothes in it, not just gear - and that's when it hits him that this isn't just practice. They're not coming back tonight. They won't be back tomorrow either. They're dropping him off.

"Hey," his dad says quietly, bumping his shoulder. "Just play your game. That's all you ever have to do."

His mom smiles at him as if she's trying very hard to not look worried. "Call us if you need us. It doesn't matter what time it is. Okay?"

Shane nods.

He doesn't say he probably won't call. Not because he doesn't want to - but because he never really knows what you're supposed to say on the phone.

He's better at skating than talking. Always has been.

Around them, kids are already clustered up into small groups, laughing like this is exactly where they are meant to be. They are shoving each other with their sticks, easy loud and effortless. Some of them glance at him. A couple of them whisper. He recognizes the look. They all know who he is.

Hollander.

The kid who never loses. The kid coaches won't shut up about.

The kid nobody really talks to.

His dad squeezes his shoulder twice, their quiet good-luck thing, warm and steady and solid. For a second, Shane leans into it.

Then the door swings open, cold air rushing out to meet him. The noise from the rink falls into his ears out into the parking lot. He steps inside. The cold hits him first. For a second it almost helps. Cold air always helps. Cold means the ice is close. Cold means hockey.

The lobby is louder than it looked outside, voices bouncing off of the high ceilings, sticks knocking against benches, parents talking over each other as though they're afraid they will miss something important. A folding table has been set up near the entrance with a handwritten sign taped to the front:

SUMMER ELITE DEVELOPMENT CAMP: CHECK IN

A woman with a clipboard smiles at them without really looking. Kids filter by while Shane keeps his head down.

"Name?" she asks automatically.

"Hollander. Shane," his mom says, already reaching for the paperwork.

The woman's pen stops mid-scratch. She looks up. Really looks at him this time.

Her eyebrows lift, and her face breaks out into an excited grin like she's just recognized someone from TV.

"Oh," she says. "You're *that* Hollander."

His stomach drops and his face flushes.

She flips a page on the clipboard, scanning. "Coach mentioned you. Said you're one of the fastest kids he's ever seen." She smiles at him like she expects him to smile back. Like this is exciting. Like this is good news.

Behind him, someone shifts. Someone whispers. Heat creeps up the back of his neck.

"Locker room three," she says while still smiling. "They're lucky to have you."

Lucky.

Shane nods because that is what you're supposed to do, even though he never knows what expression his face is making when people talk to him. He picks up his bag before she can say anything else. He can already feel the looks starting.

They always start like this.

"Well," his mom says, soft and bright and trying too hard. "This is it."

This is it. The words land somewhere between his ribs.

Kids stream past them in clumps, laughing, bumping shoulders, calling each other by last names like they have been on the same team for years already. Someone shouts across the lobby. Someone else skates by in just socks and guards like they own the place.

Nobody looks nervous. Nobody looks like they're about to be left behind for three weeks. His parents hug him at the same time, awkward and tight with all the gear between them.

"We're proud of you," his dad says into his hair.

"Text us when you get your room assignment," his mom adds quickly. "And please try to at least talk to a few of the others, please."

Shane nods into her jacket. He memorizes the way they feel, warm and familiar and safe. Then they pull away.

They wave. And they walk to the doors. He watches them go longer than he meant to. They don't look back again. The doors open. Then close.

And they're gone.

The lobby suddenly feels ten degrees colder. Locker room three is already half full.

Music plays too loud from someone's old speaker, tinny and disoriented. Bags are everywhere, sprawled open, half-unzipped, spilling tape and socks and tangled laces. Kids are talking over each other like they have never stopped talking once in their lives. Shane stands in the doorway a second too long, scanning for an empty space like he's looking for a seat in a cafeteria. No one looks up. He's grateful for that. He slips to the far end of the room and takes the last section of the bench near the corner, back against the cinderblock wall. Safe, out of the way.

He changes quickly, methodical, the way he always does.

Left skate first. Then right. Tape exactly the same way every time. Laces pulled tight enough that his toes go a little numb. He neatly folds the no longer needed items into his duffel bag, and places in behind him.

Routine is easy. Routine makes sense. Talking doesn't.

Across the locker room, someone says, "That's Hollander, right?" Heat rushes up Shane's neck.

"Yeah. The Ottawa kid."

"He's insane."

"Coach said he scored like forty goals last season or something."

A pause. "Try hard."

Though they don't say that part out loud. They don't have to. He keeps his head down like he doesn't hear. Like he never hears. It's easiest that way. The ice is the only place that ever feels normal.

The second his blades touch, everything inside him quiets. The noise in his head, the counting, the rehearsing what to say, the constant wrongness of being around other people - it all fades under the scrape of steel and the cold bite in his lungs. Coach blows the whistle. Warm up laps. Shane pushes off.

And then he's flying. The rink opens up under him like it's been waiting. One stride, two, crossover, edge. Faster.

Always faster.

The boards blur. The air burns. His heart settles into a rhythm that finally makes sense. By the second lap he's already ahead of everyone else. By the third, he's alone. He doesn't mean

to be. He just is.

He hears someone mutter behind him, "Of course." He pretends he doesn't. They run passing drills next. Pair up. He hesitates. Everyone else already has somebody. Of course they do. He's halfway to skating alone when the locker room door slams open behind the bench. Hard enough that it echoes. Everyone looks.

A kid stumbles out carrying way too much gear at once, a stick dangling under one arm, helmet dangling from his teeth, bag half open spilling tape across the floor. He's talking loudly into a phone in a language Shane doesn't understand, words fast and short.

"Da, da, ya znayu- wait, wait-" the helmet drops. Clatters. "Chyort-"

He laughs like it's the funniest thing that has ever happened to him.

Coach skates over. "You must be Rozanov."

The kid points at himself. "Da. Yes. Me."

"Phone away. Gear on. You're late."

He nods like that's totally fine, still grinning, blonde curls sticking up everywhere like he just rolled out of bed. Everything about him is loud. Loud voice, loud smile, loud existence. Like he takes up more space than everyone else without even trying. The opposite of Shane in every possible way.

He scans the ice, eyes landing on Shane like it's obvious. Then he skates right towards him. Not hesitant. Not careful. Straight. He stops a little too close.

"You," he says, pointing his stick to Shane's chest. "You are Hollander, yes?" His accent is thick, words careful and crooked.

Shane blinks. "Yeah?"

The kid grins wider, like Shane just passed some sort of test.

"Coach says you are fast." He taps his chest. "Ilya. Rozanov." He holds out his glove like they are shaking hands at a business meeting. Shane stares at it a second too long before bumping gloves awkwardly.

"I'm Shane."

"I know," Ilya says, like of course he does.

Then, like it's already decided, he nods towards the drill line. "We go together."

Not a question. Stated like a fact. Before Shane can overthink it, they are skating side by side. The first pass is messy. Too hard. It bounces off Ilya's stick. He laughs.

"Again."

The second one lands perfectly. Tape to tape. Ilya's head snaps up like he's surprised. He sends it back without looking. It lands exactly where Shane expects it to be. Like they practiced. Like they've done this a hundred times. They haven't. They've known each other for thirty seconds.

They go again.

And again.

And again.

Every pass cleaner. Faster. Like their brains are on the same frequency. Coach blows his whistle and mutters something sounding impressed. Ilya whoops like they just won the championship.

"See?" he says, bumping Shane's shoulder hard enough to knock him over. "You fast. I fast. Good, yes?"

Shane feels something strange in his chest. Not nerves. Not dread. Something lighter."

"Yeah," he says.

Yeah.

For the first time since walking into the rink, he doesn't feel like the kid standing alone at the doorway anymore.

He feels maybe, just maybe, he's not by himself here.

And Ilya is grinning at him like he figured that out five minutes ago.

Chapter End Notes

Wait this is so fun!! Thanks for reading :)

Chapter 3: Strangers.

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 3

September 2016 - Montreal

The locker room is already half full. Gear bags line the wall. Someone is playing music off a speaker in the corner of the room. Laughter bounces off the tile like nothing is wrong in the world.

Normal. Ordinary.

Shane just stands inside the doorway with his bag still slung over his shoulder, cold air clinging to the back of his throat.

His body already knows where to look. Left side. Third stall down. He sees the nameplate first.

ROZANOV.

White tape wrapped clean and tight around the knob of the stick resting against the bench. The exact same way it used to be when they were kids, neat spirals, no overlap, precise like muscle memory.

Like nothing ever changed. His stomach drops before his brain catches up.

Ilya is sitting there, elbows on his knees, laughing at something one of the guys beside him says.

Older. Broader shoulders. Sharper jaw. Hair a bit longer. But it's still him.

Still unmistakably him. For a second - just one second - Shane forgets how to breathe properly. Like maybe if he stands still enough, this part won't happen. Like Ilya won't look up.

He does. Their eyes meet. And then -

Nothing.

No smile. No recognition. No surprise. Just a flat, unreadable look.

And then Ilya turns back to his teammates like Shane isn't there at all.

A whistle cuts through the noise.

"Alright, boys, circle up."

The room shifts all at once, benches scraping, gear thudding to the floor, music clicking off mid-song. Conversation melts into that easy, practiced quiet of guys who have done this hundreds of times before. Shane forces his feet to move.

He drops his bag in the empty stall nearest to the door and steps forward with everyone else, careful, automatic, like if he keeps moving no one will notice how hard his hands are shaking. *Don't look again*, he tells himself. He looks anyways.

Ilya doesn't. He doesn't even glance over. He stays leaned against the bench, muttering lowly to the guy next to him like nothing changed, like there isn't six years of history standing ten feet away from him pretending he doesn't exist. Laughing. Easy. Loose. Like Shane isn't even here.

Coach claps his hands together once. "Listen up. We have a new face today." A few heads turn.

"Trade came through this week. Hollander. From Ottawa."

There's a split second where Shane braces himself for it. The looks, the whispers, the same tight resentment he's been getting his entire life.

Instead-

"Wait, Hollander?" someone says.

"No shit? *The* Hollander?" A couple guys straighten up, actually looking interested.

"I watched your highlights last year, man." another voice calls. "You're fast as hell."

Someone next to him bumps his shoulder. He's a similar height, kind smile resting on his face. "Glad you're on our side now. Ottawa sucks. Bet you're excited to actually win for once, yeah?" It throws him off so hard he almost forgets to nod.

"Oh- yeah. Thanks."

They're smiling. Grinning. Excited. Not threatened. Not annoyed. It feels wrong. Like he practiced his whole life for the wrong reaction. Out of the corner of his eye, he risks another look. Ilya's expression hasn't changed. Arms crossed now. Jaw tight. Stick resting against his leg. Not smiling, not reacting. Not even pretending to listen. His gaze drifts by Shane like he's just another body in the room.

It's worse than anger. Anger would mean something.

This-

This feels like nothing. Like being erased.

Coach gestures vaguely. "Find your stalls, get dressed, we're on the ice in five." The circle breaks.

Before Shane can figure out where he's supposed to go, someone drops on the bench beside him with a heavy thud. A grin is resting on his face. Shane recognizes him as the man who bumped his shoulder during the introduction.

"Hey," the guy says easily, sticking out his hand. "Hayden Pike. Don't stand there like you're going to get executed, man. It's just practice."

He's got an easy grin, messy dark hair shoved underneath his cap, the kind of face that looks like it's always halfway to a joke.

"Names Hollander, yeah?" Hayden adds. "Sick. I'm stealing you for the drills. I hate skating with JJ, he talks way too much."

Another player across the room, JJ, Shane assumes gasps. "Fuck off, Pike. Being in my presence is a privilege for you."

It's so casual it almost makes Shane laugh. Almost.

"Yeah," he says, finally managing something that sounds like a real voice. "Yeah, okay."

Hayden bumps his shoulder like it's already settled. Like they're already friends. And for a second, just for a second, the tightness in Shane's chest loosens. Until he looks up and catches sight of Ilya walking past them without slowing down, without looking over, like Shane isn't there at all.

Like he never was.

The Ice smells the same. That's the worst part.

Cold air, rubber, that faint metallic bite that settles in the back of his throat and never leaves. The kind of cold that crawls into your lungs and stays there. For a second, stepping through the tunnel almost tricks him - like muscle memory might take over, like everything will settle into place the way it always used to.

Ice meant quiet. Ice meant safe. Ice meant Ilya.

He hates the way his brain still makes that connection automatically.

The lights overhead buzz faintly. Someone taps their stick against the boards. A puck skips across the ice and clacks into the far wall. Normal practice noises. Normal Day. Except his hands won't stop shaking as he tightens his gloves.

They line up at the blue line as Coach talks, skates carving lazy half moons over the ice. Helmets click into place. Chinstraps snap. Someone coughs. Someone spits water onto the surface and wipes it away with their blade. Hayden drifts up to him like it's already decided.

"Told you," he says, knocking their skates together lightly. "We're stuck together. Try to not make me look too bad, superstar."

Shane snorts before he can stop himself.

"I won't."

"Good. Because JJ eats shit at least once a drill and I refuse to babysit anymore."

"Fuck you, Pike," JJ calls from down the line without even looking. A couple of the guys laugh. It's easy. Familiar. Loud in a way that doesn't feel sharp or aimed. Normal. Shane didn't realize how much he missed normal. Coach blows the whistle.

"Pairs. Blue line to blue line. Quick touch passes. Move your feet."

Hayden bumps his shoulder. "Come on, Ottawa." They push off.

The first pass lands clean. Tape to tape. Hayden's steady, not flashy, not trying to show off. He gives exactly what Shane needs every time. Same speed, same angle. Predictable in the best way. They fall into rhythm fast.

Receive, pass, turn, reset. Receive, pass, turn. It feels - easy. Like skating with someone who isn't trying to prove anything.

"See?" Hayden says after their fourth clean rep. "We're already elite. Dynamic duo. They're going to build statues of us."

Shane huffs out a laugh. "Relax."

"Nope. Hall of fame speeches start today."

It's stupid. Harmless. It almost makes Shane forget why his chest has felt tight since he walked in.

"Switch Partners!" Coach yells.

The line switches as bodies rotate. Guys peel off toward new spots.

And suddenly -

Ilya is right there.

Close enough that Shane catches the smell of his gear. Detergent and sweat and something stupidly familiar. Close enough that their elbows almost brush. Time does something weird and awful inside his head. For half a second, he's fifteen again. Summer ice. Too big Jerseys. Ilya grinning at him like he knows a secret only they understand.

We go together.

His fingers tighten around his stick. Say something. Anything.

Hey. Hi. It's been awhile-

Ilya glances at him. Just once. Quick. Blank. No spark of recognition, no hitch, nothing. Then he just looks past him.

"Bell," he calls, already skating away. "Switch."

Not even looking back. Not even glancing as he brushes past him. Like Shane wasn't even standing there. Like he wasn't even an option. Marcus Bell shrugs apologetically and slides into place. The whole thing takes maybe two seconds. It still feels like getting shoved into the boards.

"Oh," Hayden mutters under his breath. "Damn. Cold."

Shane pretends he didn't hear that. Pretends it didn't matter. It shouldn't matter. It's just a drill. Just a partner switch. Guys do it all the time.

So why does it feel like something just ended?

They run it again. Hayden passes, Shane receives. Perfect. He sends it back. Everything technically works just fine. And it still feels wrong.

Across the ice, Ilya is already laughing with Bell, skating hard and loose and bright in a way that used to drag Shane along behind him without thinking.

Their timing is effortless. Tape to tape. Tape to tape. Like nothing ever broke. Like they never stopped.

Shane misses Hayden's next shot completely. The puck slides under his stick and smacks the boards with a loud crack.

"Shit- sorry," he blurts.

Hayden just shrugs. "You good?"

"Yeah."

He's not. He hasn't felt this slow in years. Like every instinct he used to have just... stalled out. Like his body doesn't even know where Ilya is anymore. And that is worse than anything else.

They rotate drills for the next half an hour. Skating suicides, shooting reps, small-area scrimmage. Guys chirp each other constantly.

"Nice hands, JJ."

"Shut up, Pike."

"You skate like you're allergic to cardio."

Someone wipes out and slides halfway across the zone. Everyone laughs. It's normal. Messy. Alive. And every time Shane looks up, Ilya's somewhere else. Talking to someone else. Grinning wide. Alive. Just not with him. Never with him. It's ridiculous how much that still hurts.

When practice finally ends, the guys peel off towards the tunnel in clumps, blades ticking against the concrete.

Hayden skates backwards in front of him. "Beer after? Some of us hit that place down the street. You look like you could use not staring at a wall alone tonight."

Heat creeps up Shane's neck. "Is it that obvious?"

"Buddy," Hayden says, clapping his shoulder, "You walked in here looking like someone told you your dog died."

"Jesus."

"I'm serious. Come out. Team bonding. Mandatory. Doctors orders."

Shane glances past Hayden, watching Ilya disappear with a group of other players through the tunnel. He sighs.

"Yeah. Okay."

Hayden grins and claps him on the shoulder, "Atta boy." They skate towards the exit together.

Shane takes one glance at Ilya before leaving. Ilya is laughing at something JJ is saying, helmet off. His head is thrown back as he laughs. He doesn't look over. Not even once. Like Shane was never there to begin with.

Chapter End Notes

Are you guys liking this? I'd love to hear your thoughts!! Writing as I go, so if you have any ideas id be happy to read them!

Chapter 4: We Go Together

Chapter 4

Summer 2005 - Ottawa

By the fifth day of camp, Shane stops counting the steps to the rink. He doesn't even realize it at first. Just one morning he's halfway across the parking lot before he remembers he forgot. Forgot to keep his eyes on the ground. Forgot to rehearse what he would say if someone tried to talk to him. Forgot to brace himself for people staring. It hits him mid-step and makes him slow for a second, like he missed something important.

But nothing happens. Nobody is watching. Nobody cares. The glass doors don't feel like a stage anymore.

They just feel like doors.

Cold air spills out when he pushes inside, sharp and clean and familiar, biting at the back of his throat. The smells wrap around him instantly: rubber mats, old sweat, cheap deodorant, metal. For once, it doesn't smell like nerves. It just smells like hockey.

And hockey, he's good at.

The locker room is already loud. Music crackling through someone's busted speaker. Tape ripping in long, satisfying strips. A guy arguing about who stole his socks. Someone else laughing so hard they snort. Gear bags thrown open like they exploded mid-flight. It's messy and chaotic. Five days ago it all felt so overwhelming to Shane. Now it's just noise. Shane doesn't hesitate in the doorway this time. Doesn't scan for the safest corner or count empty benches like he's picking the least noticeable place to exist.

He already knows where he's going. Second bench from the left. Their bench. There's a stick laid across the spot beside it. Not tossed. Placed. Deliberate. Ilya's. Like a flag planted in the moon.

"Late," Ilya says immediately, not even glancing up.

He's hunched over his stick, tongue caught between his teeth while he retakes the blade with intense concentration like it's brain surgery instead of tape.

Shane drops his bag. "I'm five minutes early."

"Still late," Ilya replies. "I wait whole life already."

Shane pauses. "...What does that even mean?"

Ilya shrugs. "Is dramatic. You like."

Then he tosses a role of tape at Shane's chest like this conversation is settled.

It's weird how fast this happens. How easy. Three days ago Shane sat alone at the end of the bench pretending not to hear people whisper about him. Now if he sits anywhere else, Ilya just drags his stuff over and crowds his space anyway. Like gravity. Like Shane accidentally became something with mass.

At lunch, Ilya steals his fries without asking and complains they're cold while still eating them. In the hallway, he walks too close, shoulders bumping like it's on purpose. When they sit on the bench, Ilya always sits on the outside like he's blocking anyone from getting near. He doesn't explain it. He just does it. Like it's obvious. Like it's his job.

"Teach me something in Russian," Shane says, lacing his skates.

"Why?"

"So I know when you're making fun of me."

"I always making fun of you."

"That's not reassuring."

Ilya leans in too close, whispering something long and complicated that sounds like a sneeze and a cough stitched together. Shane repeats it. Massacres it. Tries again, still wrong. Ilya stares at him for three full seconds. Then doubles over laughing so hard he smacks his head into the locker with a loud thunk.

"What?" Shane's neck turns red in embarrassment.

"You just said 'I smell like old goat.'"

"You suck."

"Yes," Ilya says cheerfully. "Is true also."

On the ice, everything is easier. The second his blades touch down, something inside of him unwinds. It's like stepping underwater. Still, clear, and safe. With Ilya there too, it's different. Better. Like their brains are tuned into the same frequency. Shane doesn't even look anymore. He just knows. Knows when Ilya is going to cut inside. Knows when he's faking a shot. Knows exactly where his stick will be before it's there. It's terrifying how fast it clicks.

Tape to tape. Give and go. Backhand. Goal. Again and again and again. The other kids start to groan every time they line up together.

"Coach, split them up!"

"They're cheating!"

Coach just laughs. "I don't think that's possible."

After the third goal, Ilya slams hard into Shane's shoulder hard enough to almost knock him over.

"You see?" he says, breathless. "We destroy everyone."

Shane just laughs. "You're dramatic."

"Yes," Ilya agrees easily. "'Because I am right."

During scrimmage, someone shoves Shane from behind. Nothing huge. Just enough to rattle him. Just enough to remind him he's smaller. Before he can even turn around, Ilya is already there. Shoves the kid back twice as hard. Words spill out in angry Russian. Fast, sharp, and mean. It sounds like broken glass. The kid backs up immediately.

"You touch him again I break your legs. Simple." Ilya smiles brightly at the kid.

Coach blows the whistle. "Rozanov!"

Ilya skates back like nothing happened. Like threatening violence was something he already planned to do today. Shane's eyes widen as Ilya returns back in front of him.

"You didn't have to-"

"Yes I did," Ilya says flatly like Shane suggested something stupid. "You are mine." Ilya says under his breath.

Shane blinks. "What?"

"Line partner," Ilya says quickly. "Idiot." But his ears are red.

After practice they sit on the bench too long. Everyone else peels towards the showers, laughing and loud and dripping water across the floor. The rink gets quieter. Just the hum of the lights. The scrape of the Zamboni somewhere down the hall. The smell of wet ice and sweat.

Their shoulders touch. Neither of them move. Shane realizes, distantly, that he hasn't thought about home all day. Hasn't felt like he needed to disappear. He just... Played. Just existed.

"You are quiet," Ilya says.

"Just tired."

Ilya bumps their knees together. "You are less weird now."

"Wow. Thanks."

"Is compliment." Ilya grins at him. Shane smiles into his hands.

For the first time since his parents left, the rink doesn't feel temporary. It doesn't feel like something he has to survive. It feels like somewhere he belongs. Somewhere he could stay. He glances sideways. Ilya's already watching him. Soft. Curious. Like he's making sure Shane is still there.

"What?" Shane asks.

Ilya shrugs. Then grins.

"We go together," he says again.

Like it's the simplest truth in the world.

Chapter 5: Second String

Chapter Notes

Thought I'd say this here even though I should've made it clear 4 chapters ago lol. This story bounces back and forth between time! For now every chapter will go through their early teen years together and then go to present time (2016)! Sorry if that was confusing to anyone whoops

Chapter 5

September 2016 - Montreal

"Don't even think about ditching," Hayden says, grabbing Shane's hoodie sleeve before he can veer towards the parking lot.

"I wasn't-"

"You absolutely were."

"I was just-"

"Lying. Badly."

Hayden steers him through the doors with a firm shove between the shoulders like they've known each other longer than three hours. The rest of the team spills out onto the sidewalk ahead of them in a loud, messy pack of gear bags and half-zipped jackets. Someone's already arguing about music.

"Aux cords mine."

"Your playlist sucks."

"Shut the hell up, JJ."

"Are you gonna make me?"

It's loud, stupid, and easy. Shane walks in the middle like he accidentally wandered into someone else's friend group.

"You drink beer, right?" Hayden asks.

"Uh. Yeah. Sometimes."

"Good. I was prepared to leave you at the curb if you said no."

"That seems dramatic." Shane halfway smiles at Hayden.

"I'm a dramatic guy."

JJ spins around, walking backwards. "Pike's paying. Rookie rule."

"Fuck off," Hayden says immediately.

"Team vote says yes." JJ counters.

"Team vote says shut the hell up."

They're already shoving at each other again. It's so casual it makes Shane's head spin a little. No one's whispering. No one's staring. No one looks annoyed that he's here. They just... Include him. Like it's obvious. Like he's always been walking beside them. It's so different from Ottawa it almost feels like a trick. He keeps waiting for the catch. He keeps waiting for someone to remember who he is and decide they don't like him. Nothing happens. Just noise and laughter. Just Hayden bumping his shoulder every few minutes like they have been tethered together.

"Murphy's is this way," Hayden says. "Try to not disappear on me, superstar."

"I won't."

"You say that now. You've got strong 'Irish goodbye' energy."

Shane almost smiles. Almost. Because ten feet ahead of them-

Blond curls. Black hoodie. Number eighty one. Ilya.

Walking with Bell and JJ like they've done this a hundred times before. Like this is routine. Home. He doesn't slow down. He doesn't look back. Doesn't even glance at Shane behind him. Just keeps walking like he couldn't care less about Shane being behind him. He just keeps going. Shane's chest tightens anyway.

Because six years ago-

Ilya always waited.

Murphy's is louder than it looks from the outside.

The second the door swings open, the noise crashes over them - music too loud, chairs scraping, glasses clinking, somebody shouting over a game in the corner. The air smells like fryer oil and spilled beer and something sweet and stale underneath it all.

Hayden doesn't give Shane time to hesitate. He just grabs the back of his hoodie and steers him towards the long table in the back the guys have claimed like it's territory.

"Move, Bell, you're taking up four seats for no reason."

"I'm big-boned." Bell grins up at Hayden.

"You're twenty four."

"Still big-boned."

Someone shoves someone else. JJ almost trips over a chair. A pitcher sloshes dangerously close to the edge of the table. It's loud and messy and constant, everyone talking over each other like silence would physically hurt. Shane hovers for half a second too long, unsure where to sit. Hayden notices immediately.

"Here," he says, dragging a chair out with his foot. "Next to me. Don't make it weird."

"I'm not-"

"You absolutely are." Shane sits.

Menus get passed down. Someone steals fries off of someone else's plate before the food even arrives. Hayden slides a beer in front of him without asking and bumps his knee under the table like it's automatic. The whole thing moves fast, like a current, like if he stopped paying attention for one second the conversation would slip right past him. He tries to follow it. Tries to laugh when they laugh. But his shoulders never quite unclench.

Because-

The chair across from him scrapes back. He looks up. Of course.

Ilya.

He drops into the seat without a word, hoodie half unzipped, hair still damp from the shower. Bell sits on one side of him, JJ on the other like it's a formation they've used a hundred times before. Like this spot is his. Like it's always been his. Ilya reaches for the pitcher first. Pours, drinks, and doesn't look up.

Not at Shane. Not anywhere near him. Like there's nothing worth seeing.

Shane tells himself not to stare. He fails immediately.

Every movement feels too familiar. The way Ilya leans back in his chair. The way he hooks one ankle over the other knee. The way he talks with his hands when he tells a story. It's all exactly the same.

Like the last six years didn't happen. Like Shane imagined them.

"You good?" Hayden asks quietly beside him.

"Yeah. Fine." Shane says quickly, eyes darting to the drink in front of him.

"You look like you're about to throw up."

"I'm fine." Shane's eyes, quickly glance again at Ilya, hoping he isn't watching this. Of course he isn't.

Hayden studies him for a second, then follows his line of sight across the table. His eyes land on Ilya. Then on Shane. Then back to Ilya again. He frowns.

"You two... Know each other or something?"

Shane's throat tightens. "We used to-"

"No," Ilya says, flat and quick. Like he's cutting something off before it starts. The table goes a little quieter.

Hayden blinks. "Okay, that sounded like a yes."

Ilya shrugs. "Lots of players. Don't remember most." Casual. Dismissive. Like Shane's just another stat line.

Shane's heart leaps into his throat, constricting. He laughs because he feels like he has to. It comes out all wrong.

"Yeah," Shane says quietly. "Guess not."

Hayden looks between them again, clearly not buying it.

"Dude," he says to Ilya, "You're acting weird as hell. You haven't shut up all day and now you're quiet. What's the deal?"

"Nothing," Ilya says. One word. Hard stop.

Bell tries to jump back in with some joke about JJ's haircut and the noise swells up again around them, conversation crashing over the moment like it didn't happen. But it lingers anyways. Because now Shane can't stop noticing it. How Ilya never looks directly at him. How every time Shane talks, Ilya suddenly finds something else to watch. How his answers get shorter and shorter the closer the conversation drifts.

One word. Two at most. Like he's rationing them. Like speaking costs too much. The noise eventually swallows the moment. JJ starts arguing about darts. Bell knocks over someone's water. Hayden launches into a story about a road trip that ends with three flat tires and a raccoon. Everyone's laughing.

Everyone except Shane.

He keeps nodding at the right time. Smiling when someone looks at him. Taking sips of beer he can't taste. Across the table, Ilya barely speaks. Just listens. Watches everyone else. Watching everything except Shane. Which is somehow worse than if he just stared. Every time Shane glances up, Ilya's already looking somewhere else. Like he's doing it on purpose. Like it costs him something to even risk it.

Hayden leans over. "Are you sure you're good?"

"I'm fine."

"Why do you keep saying that like it's legally binding?"

"I'm good."

"Uh huh."

Shane reaches for the pitcher.

At the exact same time, Ilya does too. Their fingers brush. Barely. Just knuckles. It's nothing. It should be nothing.

But-

Ilya freezes. Just for a second. Then pulls his hand back. Too fast. Like Shane burned him. Like touching him was a mistake. Like instinct said yes and his brain screamed no.

"Sorry, Sh-" he cuts himself off. Too late. The start of it.

Shane. The way he used to say it. Soft. Familiar. Automatic. Like muscle memory. Like he forgot himself for half a second. Like for one stupid, careless second, they were thirteen again. It hits Shane right in the chest. His heart jumps so hard it almost hurts.

He can't breathe. He can't sit here. He can't-

He stands up so fast the chair screeches across the floor. The noise cuts through everything. A couple guys look over.

"Woah," Hayden says. "You good, man?"

"Yeah, I just-" Shane grabs his jacket. "I forgot. I have to- I gotta- something with the lease. The place. I forgot."

Hayden blinks. "Dude, what?"

"It's nothing. I just have to go."

"We just got here."

"I know. I just- yeah. Sorry."

"Stay for like one more drink, man. It's your first night in the city, just-"

"I can't. I'm sorry." He doesn't look at Ilya. He absolutely can not look at Ilya. If he looks, he's not leaving. If he looks, somethings going to break. He turns - and that's when it happens.

Ilya's already looking at him.

Not past him. Not through him. At him. Direct. Sharp. Something raw in his expression that Shane's never seen before. Not anger or indifference. Something tighter. Messier. Like there are a hundred words he's not saying and they're all fighting to get out at once. Like he's trying not to move. Like he's trying not to stand up too. The look hits Shane like a body check.

Too much. Too much feelings all at once. His chest caves in. Ilya looks away first. Of course he does.

"You're sure?" Hayden asks, looking at him warily.

"Yeah."

Shane's already backing towards the door. Already half way gone. Outside, the air is cold. Too cold. The streets loud with traffic and neon and strangers. He stands there for a second like he forgot how to exist. Then he pulls out his phone and orders a cab. The wait feels endless. His reflection in the window looks pale. Smaller than he remembers. The car shows up. He slides into the backseat. He gives the address to the penthouse rental.

The word still feels fake. Penthouse. Like he's pretending to be an adult. Like he's pretending to have his life together. The city blurs past the window. Streetlights smear into gold streaks. He leans his head back against the seat and closes his eyes. One thought racing through his mind.

He needs distance. Space. Anything. As far away from *him* as possible. If he could put an ocean between them, he would. If he could go back to Ottawa tonight, he would. If he could erase the last six hours, he would.

And the worst part of it all is-

God, this hurts.

Because six years ago - Ilya would've followed him out that door. He would've chased him down the sidewalk. Would've said, wait.

Now he didn't even stand up.

Chapter 6: Somewhere Between July and August

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 6

Summer 2005 - Ottawa

If you tried to pin it down later, if you asked Shane to point to a specific day or a specific moment and say *that's when it changed*, he wouldn't be able to tell you.

There wasn't a single turning point, no dramatic win or rink epiphany or conversation that neatly divided before and after. Instead, the shift happened slowly, so gradually that he only noticed it only when it had already settled into place, the way you only notice the sun setting when the room has already gone dark.

Somewhere between the second week of camp and the last day of August, Ilya stopped being the loud Russian kid he'd accidentally partnered with and started being something constant. Something Shane found himself orienting around without meaning to. It showed up in small, almost stupid ways.

In the space he left on the bench without thinking, even though Ilya wasn't there yet.

In the way he stopped hovering in doorways and just walked into rooms like he belonged in them.

In how his first thought after every drill, every whistle, every shift wasn't *did I mess up* or *who's watching me* but *where is he*.

Like the answer mattered. Like it always would.

By the last week of camp that summer, the days blurred together into something warm and indistinct, less a sequence of practices and more of a collection of moments stitched loosely together: flashes of Ilya stealing his lunch and declaring it terrible while eating it, of him arguing with vending machines in furious Russian like it had personally offended him, of him skating backwards during warm-ups just to chirp Shane until he finally laughed hard enough to forget anyone else was on the ice.

It was strange, looking back, how easy it all felt.

Not because camp got easier or drills got lighter - if anything, the coaches only pushed harder - but because being around Ilya dulled the sharp edges of everything else. The constant mental math Shane usually did around other people, the rehearsing and bracing and counting, the exhausting effort of trying not to be too much or too quiet or too noticeable, slowly faded into the background until one day he realized it wasn't there at all.

He hadn't stopped because he tried.

He stopped because he'd forgotten he'd ever need to.

And the only difference, the only real change he could point to, was every time he looked up, Ilya was already there beside him, acting like that had always been the plan.

And when the last week of camp finally crept up on him, it surprised Shane how disappointed he felt about it, because for most of his life endings had meant relief. The relief of going home, the relief of closing the door, of not having to preform anymore - but this time the thought of packing his bag felt strangely heavy, like he was folding something important away without knowing when he would get it back.

The days didn't feel numbered so much as compressed, each one sliding too quickly into the next until mornings bled into practices and practices bled into late night whispers across bunks long after lights-out, the room smelling like detergent and cheap shampoo while Ilya talked about everything and nothing in broken English. Sometimes, late at night, when the room finally went quiet except for the hum of the ancient box fan in the window and occasional creak of someone turning over in their bunk, Ilya would talk about nothing at all: about which NHL goalies were overrated, about how Canadian chocolate tasted "fake," about how he absolutely was going to make the league by eighteen and buy the ugliest car imaginable just to annoy everyone - stories that spiraled and overlapped until Shane lost track of where they started.

But anytime the conversation drifted anywhere near Russia, near his home, something in him changed so fast it almost gave Shane whiplash.

"Do you miss it?" Shane asked once, voice low in the dark.

There was a long pause. Long enough that Shane almost thought Ilya had fallen asleep.

"No," Ilya said, finally.

Just that. No. Too quick, too flat. Like the word had been rehearsed.

"What's it like?" Shane tried, softer.

"Cold," Ilya said.

"That's it? Cold?"

"Very cold." A beat. "Bad food, ugly buildings. You are lucky you are Canadian, Hollander."

He laughed after, loud and exaggerated, already pivoting into some dramatic rant about cafeteria soup like it had personally betrayed him. Conversation over.

Shane learned to not ask that again. Not because he wasn't curious, but because every time he pushed, even gently, Ilya's shoulders went tight and his voice got sharp around the edges. Like touching that subject meant stepping on thin ice. And for all his noise and confidence and endless talking, there were a few places inside Ilya that felt completely locked, doors Shane could see but never open.

So he stopped trying. Some things, he figured, you waited to be invited into.

Those were the only moments Shane ever saw him hesitate.

However, Ilya did open up about some things. Sometimes his voice got quieter when he would talk about missing his grandmothers cooking, he missed normal quiet Moscow winters or how his English always got worse when he was tired and when that happens, he felt like the dumbest person in the room.

And every time, without even thinking about it, Shane would answer back just as honestly, telling him things he never said out loud. How loud rooms made his brain feel like static, how he counted steps without meaning to, how sometimes he felt like everyone else got handed a script for being a person and he'd somehow missed the distribution.

Ilya never laughed at that. He never called him weird.

He just said, very simply, "So we make our own script, yes?" like it was the most obvious solution in the world. Like it wasn't something Shane had been trying and failing to do his entire life.

Somewhere, in those late night conversations, the last thin layer of distance between them dissolved without either of them noticing, until the space between their beds felt less like an aisle and more of a formality.

On the last day of camp, the arena felt different.

Not quieter, it was still loud and chaotic and dull of parents crowding the lobby with coffee cups and duffel bags, but thinner somehow. Like the whole place had been stretched too tight and was about to snap back into real life. Shane spotted his parents before they found him.

His mom was exactly where he expected her to be, already pressed against the glass like a scout instead of a parent, pointing something out to his dad with the intensity of someone diagramming a crime scene.

"There," she was saying, "watch the breakout- see that gap? That's exactly what I meant-"

"Hi, Mom," Shane said.

She startled like she forgot he could appear without skates on.

"Oh my god," she said immediately, grabbing his face with both hands. "You look thinner. Did they feed you? David, look at him, he looks thinner!"

"I'm fine," Shane said, automatically.

And then-

"There he is!"

Ilya.

Loud. Bright. Barreling across the lobby like gravity didn't apply to him.

He skidded to a stop in front of them, stuck his hand out like he was meeting diplomats instead of parents, and said, "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, I am Ilya, and I keep your son alive."

Shane choked. "What-"

"Is joke," Ilya said quickly, then grinned. "Mostly."

His mom laughed immediately. Actually laughed, that warm surprised laugh she usually only used around her family, and Shane watched in mild horror as Ilya launched straight into rapid-fire explanation of their line chemistry and practice stats and how "Shane is very fast, but brain too busy, I fix it," gesturing with both hands like he was presenting a thesis. And instead of his mom looking overwhelmed or confused, she leaned in like she found her new favorite podcast.

"Oh, you play wing with him?" she asked. "I noticed your zone entries, you cut inside really clean."

Ilya's eyes lit up like someone handed him a trophy. "Yes! Finally someone gets it."

His dad clapped him on the shoulder like he'd known him for years.

And Shane just stood there, helmet tucked under his arm, watching the three of them talk like this had always been the shape of things, like Ilya had always belonged in this little orbit of his life, and something in his chest went soft and wide and terrifying all at once. Because this felt too easy. It felt too permanent.

Because he wanted it to be.

When it was finally time to leave, the lobby thinned out fast. Bags slung over shoulders, parents calling names, doors opening and closing. Ilya stood a little apart from the crowd, hands shoved into his pockets, suddenly quieter than usual, like all the noise had drained out of him all at once.

"Well," he said, scuffing his sneaker against the floor. "You go home now."

"Yeah."

"Three hundred and twelve days," Ilya added.

"What?"

"Until next camp. I counted."

Of course he did. Shane swallowed.

"Oh."

"Not long," Ilya said, too quickly.

It felt long. For a second neither one of them moved.

Shane had never really been touchy with anyone, not even his parents unless they initiated first, because he never knew where his hands were supposed to go or how long you were supposed to hold on or what counted as normal.

But before he could overthink it, before his brain could talk him out of it, he stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Ilya's middle. It was awkward. Too tight. Helmet digging into someone's ribs. But Ilya froze for exactly half a second before hugging him back just as hard, chin bumping his shoulder like it belonged there.

Behind them, his mom went very quiet.

"David..." she whispered, like she just witnessed a miracle. Shane ignored that. He just held on.

Because for three weeks, this tall Russian kid had been the difference between surviving and actually living. Because not seeing him tomorrow made his chest hurt in a way he didn't have words for yet.

"Text me," Ilya said into his shirt.

"I will."

"MSN. Not phone. Phone expensive."

Shane laughed into his shoulder. "Okay."

"We go together," Ilya added, softer this time.

Not loud. Just certain. Like a promise.

And Shane nodded against him, already knowing, with a clarity that would haunt him years later, that whatever this was - whatever they were - it wasn't temporary at all.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone is having a great night!

Chapter 7: What We Don't Say

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 7

September 2016 - Montreal

Shane doesn't sleep so much as drift in and out of something shallow and restless, the kind of half-sleep where every sound feels like an interruption and every time he closes his eyes his brain drags him back to the same moment.

Ilya's hand jerking away. Him almost saying his name. Like muscle memory had reached for him before he could stop himself. Like Shane's name lived somewhere automatic. Like it had almost slipped out without permission.

By the time gray light starts leaking through the curtains, he gives up pretending he's going to rest and rolls onto his back, staring at the ceiling until the room starts to come into focus. The penthouse feels wrong in the mornings. Too quiet. Too large. Too empty. Every small sound echoes like it doesn't belong to him. It's the kind of place that looks impressive on paper and completely hollow in real life. Almost as if he left for five minutes, it would forget he was ever even there.

He makes coffee in a machine that has too many buttons and stands at the window as it brews, watching the city wake up in slow, indifferent pieces. Cars sliding through intersections, steam lifting off of rooftops. People walking outside like nothing in the world has changed. Although for Shane, it feels like everything has changed.

His phone buzzes in his pocket and he reaches for it. Mom. He debates letting it ring, but answers it anyway.

"Hi, sweetheart," she says, warm and awake already. "You're up early."

"Yeah. Couldn't sleep."

"First week nerves?"

"Something like that."

There's a pause, soft and careful.

"And... how's the team?"

Shane pauses, taking a shallow breath. "They're good. Nice guys."

"Good." There's a pause. "And... Him?"

She doesn't say Ilya's name like it's fragile. Just gentle, like she already knows the answer might hurt. Shane stares into his coffee.

"We haven't really talked," he says.

"Oh." Not disappointed. Just thinking. "I was digging through the freezer last night," she says after a moment. "Found those perogies he used to steal. Remember? Half the bag was gone and he'd swear it wasn't him."

Shane laughs underneath his breath before he can stop himself.

"He blamed me every time."

"You two used to be so close. I miss having him around. The house felt fuller. Louder. Like we accidentally adopted a hurricane. You used to be *yourself* around him, Shane. I don't know many people who brought that side out of you." Her voice softens. "I miss that kid."

Something twists low in his chest.

"I know things ended badly," she adds gently, "but maybe this isn't just bad. Maybe you two being on the same team again... maybe it's a chance?"

"He doesn't want to talk to me," Shane says.

"Maybe he doesn't know how," she says quietly.

That lands harder than anything. He grips the counter. His mom hasn't seen the way Ilya has been, she hasn't seen the way Ilya has avoided any interaction, any eye contact. She hasn't seen the way he's avoided *him*.

His throat tightens. "I have to go, mom."

"Okay. I love you."

"Love you too."

He gets to the rink too early.

Sitting alone in that apartment feels worse than anything the locker room might throw at him. The hallway noise hits him immediately: lockers slamming, someone blasting music, Bell arguing with JJ about tape. Normally that chaos would settle him, something familiar and predictable. Today it just slides past him.

He moves through everything slightly out of sync, like he's half a second late to the world.

At the sinks, he braces both hands on the counter and turns the tap without really thinking, staring down at the water like he's trying to anchor himself to something solid. The sound fills the room. For a second it's just that. Then the door opens behind him.

Footsteps. He doesn't have to look. His body knows before his brain can catch up.

Ilya.

Shane freezes.

In the mirror, he watches Ilya walk in and stop at the sink beside him, close enough that their elbows almost line up but not touching. He leans forward, palms flat on the porcelain, head bowed like he's catching his breath. It's such a small, human thing that it throws Shane completely. Ilya's shoulders rise and fall too fast. Almost as if he's bracing himself for something. Slowly, he lifts his head.

Their eyes meet through the mirror. Not directly, just reflected. But it hits harder than anything else has. Because it isn't cold. It's not blank or indifferent. It's raw. There's something there that Shane hasn't seen in years, something tight and startled and almost scared, like Ilya forgot to hold his face still for a second and everything slipped through.

Like he cares too much and doesn't know what to do with it.

Shane's chest aches. Say something. *Anything*. But neither of them moves. The moment stretches until it almost hurts. Ilya blinks first, jaw tightening. Everything shutters closed. He turns the faucet, rinses his hands, and walks out the door without turning back. And somehow that hurts worse than if he'd never looked at all.

By the time Shane gets dressed, his hands feel wrong, buzzing under his skin like adrenaline with nowhere to go. He tells himself it didn't mean anything. It was just eye contact. Just a mirror, just proximity. Except his chest hasn't unclenched since.

On the ice, nothing settles the way it's supposed to. He pushes too hard and nearly clips Bell's skate, misses an easy pass, and sends a shot wide that he would've buried without thinking last year.

"Easy, superstar," Hayden calls. "You trying to murder the glass?"

"Sorry." He hates that word.

They rotate drills, and halfway through he realizes he keeps skating into empty space, drifting towards lanes that don't even make sense anymore.

Then it hits him.

He's skating to where Ilya used to be. Instinctively. Like the last six years never happened, like he made them up in his head. Like his body never updated. His stomach drops. He hasn't felt this scrambled in years. Not since he was the kid counting steps to get through hallways. Forty-three to the doors. Forty-three back. He catches himself doing it now without thinking.

Counting strides. One. Two. Three. Four. Numbers might hold him together.

They used to, at least.

After practice, the locker room is loud and loose and half dressed. Bell towering his hair, JJ digging through someone else's bag, Hayden chirping someone about god knows what. Shane sits on the bench, unlacing his skates. He does his best not to look up. If he looks up he might meet his eyes again, and Shane can't chance that again. He can feel his presence like a weight is placed on his chest.

Then Bell says casually, "Didn't you two know each other before? Like camps or something? I read something online saying you and Hollander go way back."

Shane's hands stop. He doesn't look up. He just listens.

Ilya shrugs. "Net," he says lightly. "Lots of camps. Lots of guys. They blur together." A small laugh. "Probably just remembers me because I scored on him."

What the fuck? Something inside of Shane goes hot and hallow all at once. Not necessarily loud and dramatic, just this quiet, spreading heat. Ignoring him, pretending he doesn't exist, that's one thing. But this... erasing him is another. *Four years reduced to nothing*. They blur together. Like he was interchangeable. Forgettable? Is he kidding himself?

Before he can stop himself, he mutters, "Guess I was easy to forget, huh?"

A pause. He can feel the air being sucked out of his body. Like the temperature in the air suddenly dropped ten degrees. The noise in the locker room dissipated in Shane's ears.

"What was that?" Ilya asked. This is the first three words he had said to Shane intentionally since he got here. He sounded surprised, not angry. Almost as if he didn't expect Shane to overhear or speak back.

"I thought you didn't know who I was," he says, voice tight. "Why are you talking to me?"

Ilya opens his mouth. Closes it again.

Hayden looks between them and clears his throat. It snaps something inside of Shane. He quickly stands up.

"Hey-" Hayden interjects.

But Shane is already grabbing his bag.

"Shane, wait, man-"

"I'm *fine*."

He leaves without looking back. He can feel Ilya's eyes burning into his back.

Outside, the air this too sharp in his lungs. He tells himself he's angry. Anger is easier. Anger has edges.

But underneath it is something soft and worse and heavier - this awful grief that keeps whispering that if Ilya had just asked him to stay, to talk it out, none of this would be happening. It's been six *years*. Six years since that awful night. Six years since his world turned on its axis so much it was akin to sea sickness.

He pushes himself to walk down the sidewalk, his legs burning at the speed. He half expects Ilya to come out. He's half hoping he won't. The doors never opened behind him. There once was a time that Ilya would've walked after him. There once was a time that this would have never happened at all.

He misses camp so much it hurts.

Chapter End Notes

Long weekend this weekend!! Hopefully I can update a ton. Thanks for reading :-)

Chapter 8: Like Coming Home

Chapter Notes

I had so much fun with this chapter - I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it!!

Chapter 8

Summer 2006-2007 - Ottawa

He spots him before he hears him.

Second bench from the left. Same spot as always. Same stupid posture, hunched forward like he's coiled to launch himself into a sprint at any second. His stick is already taped, neat spirals, clean and precise. His bag is exploded across the bench like something inside it detonated.

For a second Shane just stands there in the doorway with his duffel strap cutting into his shoulder, watching him. It's ridiculous how quickly the sight of him settles something inside his chest. Like he can finally exhale. And then-

"SHANE!"

Half the locker room looks up.

Ilya barrels across the tile in just his socks, nearly eats shit, catches himself on someones shoulder, and crashes straight into him hard enough that Shane stumbles back into the lockers with a loud clang.

"You got taller," Ilya says immediately, hands already on Shane's shoulders, squinting at him like this is a personal betrayal. "I hate this. Stop."

"I didn't-" Shane laughs, trying to steady himself. "You can't just command me to stop growing."

"I can. I am older."

"By three months!"

"Still counts."

He says it with absolute conviction, like it's law, and then he grins. Wide and reckless and so familiar it almost hurts. And just like that - it's easy again. Like the last ten months didn't

happen. Like they were just a weird commercial break that nobody asked for.

"You almost killed me," Shane says, dropping his bag.

"You are dramatic."

"You tackled me."

"Because you look suspicious," Ilya insists, turning his face left and right like he's inspecting a science project. "Your face is longer. Something happened."

"That's puberty."

"Gross. Stop that also."

The laugh that rips out of Shane is loud and ugly and completely unguarded, and Ilya looks unbearably pleased with himself, like that exact sound was the whole goal.

And Shane realizes, distantly, that this is the only place he ever laughs like that.

The next two weeks blur together in noise. Constant noise. Talking while tapping sticks, chirping through drills, getting yelled at for talking too much and then immediately talking again anyway.

"Pass, idiot-"

"I am open, blind man-"

"That was your fault-"

"You are delusional-"

Coach makes them skate suicides twice because they won't shut up, and they argue the whole time about who's fault it is.

At lunch, Ilya steals half his sandwich and complains while eating it as always. In the dorms, he steals all of Shane's sweatshirts because it "smells like laundry soap and not despair," which somehow makes perfect sense. At night they lie in their bunks talking across the aisle long after lights-out, voices low and lazy, the box fan rattling in the window. It feels effortless. Like breathing. Not once does Shane have to monitor every word that comes out of his mouth.

The softer conversations sneak up on them.

One night, staring at the ceiling in the dark, Shane asks quietly, "Do you ever miss home?"

"This is home," Ilya says automatically.

"You know what I mean."

There's a long pause. The springs creak when Ilya shifts.

"It is... complicated," he says finally.

"Complicated how?"

Another pause.

"My father is loud," he says. "Always yelling loud."

Shane rolls onto his side, staring at the dark shape of him across the aisle.

"And my brother," Ilya adds, voice flatter now, "likes to agree with him. Whatever my father says, he says louder."

The words land heavy. Careful. Like he's stepping around somewhere sharp.

"That sounds kind of awful," Shane says.

"It is fine," Ilya says too fast.

It isn't. They both know it isn't.

Before he can lose his nerve, Shane blurts, "You could come stay with us next summer. After camp. For a few weeks."

Silence.

"I mean- not forever," he rushes. "Just if you wanted. My parents wouldn't care. My mom already likes you more than me."

Ilya goes very still. Shane almost thinks he screwed up.

Then, quietly-

"Okay," he says. Just that. Then softer, like he's afraid the words might disappear if he says them too loud, "I'd like that."

Summer 2007 comes back wrong.

Not loudly. Not obviously. Just... off. Like walking into a room where all the furniture is slightly out of place. Ilya still shows up. Still claims the same bench. But his smile doesn't reach his eyes like it did the summers before. It flashes on and off like a broken light. He laughs shorter. Snaps quicker. Moves like he hasn't slept.

When someone clips him during drills, he shoves back harder than necessary.

"Jesus, man," the kid mutters.

"Then don't touch," Ilya shoots back, already skating away. No grin, no joke followed after. Just gone.

At lunch, he doesn't steal Shane's food until Shane physically slides the fry in front of him. Even then he just eats them quietly, staring at nothing.

Then the calls started. That old flip phone buzzes and his whole body goes rigid.

"Back in minute," he mutters, already halfway out the door. Through the cracked window, Shane hears him speaking in Russian. Fast, sharp, and angry. Not teasing Russian like he's heard before, this just sounds like fighting. And when he comes back in afterward, his smile is too wide.

"Is good," he says before Shane even asks. It sounds rehearsed. Like he practiced saying it before walking back in.

The fight happens three days before camp ends.

They're sitting on the dorm floor with a vending machine sandwich between them. Ilya's been picking at the bread for ten minutes without actually eating it.

"Was that your brother again?" Shane asks quietly.

"Just family."

"You were yelling."

"I yell all the time."

"Not like that."

Ilya's shoulders tense. "Why do you always do this?" he mutters.

"Do what?"

"Dig. Dig. Dig. Like you try to find something wrong with me."

"I'm not digging. I'm worried about you."

"I am fine."

"You keep saying that like you're trying to convince yourself."

His jaw tightens. "Stop trying to fix me."

Shane sits up. "I'm not trying to fix you."

"Yes you are," Ilya snaps. "You look at me like broken thing."

"That's not- Ilya, I just care about you."

"I don't need babysitter!"

"I'm not your babysitter!" Shane says, voice rising despite himself. "I'm your *friend*."

"Then stop acting like I am problem!"

The hallway echos. They both freeze.

Shane swallows. "I just want you to let me in."

Ilya looks away. His hands are shaking.

"I... don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?"

A long pause.

"...Because if I say it out loud," he whispers, "then it is real."

The anger drains out of Shane's face so fast it almost makes him dizzy. Ilya just looks tired. So tired. He slides down the wall and rubs his face.

"Sorry," Ilya mutters. "I'm being asshole."

"You're not."

"I yelled at you."

"You always yell at me."

"Not like that."

Shane sits beside him. Their shoulders press together. After a second, Ilya leans sideways and rests his forehead against Shane's shoulder like he can't hold himself up anymore. Shane wraps an arm around him. Ilya grabs his sleeve and holds on tight.

"Don't go anywhere," Ilya says quietly.

"I'm not," Shane whispers. "I promise."

Three days later, camp ends in the usual chaos of duffel bags and shouting names and parents pressed up against the glass like they're scouting instead of picking up children. Shane spots his parents immediately.

His mom is halfway to the boards already, gesturing to something on the ice while explaining it to his dad with the intensity of a commentator. Beside him, Ilya goes quiet. Not nervous

exactly. Just... smaller. Like he's not sure where he's supposed to stand.

"You good?" Shane asks.

"Yes," he says, adjusting the strap of his duffel bag a little too tight. They walk over together.

Yuna sees them and lights up. "There you are-" she starts, then her eyes land on Ilya. "Ilya!"

She doesn't hesitate. Just pulls him into a hug like this has always been the plan.

"You look hungry," she says, holding him back to inspect him. "Are they feeding you? Or just skating you into the ground?"

Ilya blinks, surprised, then laughs. "Little bit both, maybe."

David claps him on the shoulder. "You still stealing my kid's food?"

"Always," Ilya says. "Is tradition."

"Good. Would've been worried if you stopped."

And that's it. No introductions. No explanations. He's just... included. Expected. Like of course he's coming home with them.

On the drive back, he loosens up inch by inch, talking louder, arguing hockey stats with Yuna like she's a coach, hands flying when he gets worked up. By the time they pull into the driveway, he's laughing so hard he forgets to translate half his English.

Inside, he hovers near the kitchen offering to help with everything, taking whatever job they give him like it's important, thanks them too much for dinner. Almost as if he's trying to earn something that is already his.

Later, on the couch, he ends up pressed against Shane without either of them noticing when it happened - knees touching, shoulders bumping, sharing a blanket like magnets snapping back together.

At one point Shane catches his mom watching them from the hallway. Not staring, just smiling. Soft. Like she's already decided something. Like she's already filed Ilya in the same place she keeps Shane. When she says goodnight, she ruffles both of their hair on her way past.

"Get some sleep, boys."

Boys. Plural. Ilya goes still for half a second, then nods.

"...Night, Mrs. Hollander," he says automatically.

Later, quieter, almost to himself-

"Night, Yuna."

Like he's trying it out. Like he hopes he's allowed.

Shane just smiles to himself. "Goodnight, Ilya."

A beat. "Goodnight, Shane."

Chapter 9: Reset

Chapter 9

October 2016 - Montreal

Away arenas always made Shane feel like he was borrowing someone else's air.

The bus drops them at the curb, and the whole team funnels through the back entrance in a loose, loud pack, shoulder bags thumping against thighs, guys chirping each other about nothing, laughing like it's any other night. Shane keeps pace, but his mind doesn't. It keeps lagging behind, snagging on details that shouldn't matter: how the hallway smells different here, how the opposing teams logo is everywhere, how the concrete under his shoes is too hard, like it's daring him to slip.

He tells himself it's just nerves about the first game, because that would be normal and manageable. Players get jittery. Especially on the first game with a new team. New guys want to prove themselves. He can handle that.

What he can't handle is the fact that he's about to play his first game for Montreal with Ilya Rozanov skating a few feet away, laughing at something a defenseman says, shoulders loose like his life hasn't been rearranged into some cruel joke.

Shane tries not to look at him.

He fails. Of course he does.

Ilya isn't doing anything dramatic and that almost makes it worse. He moves through the corridor with the same contained confidence Shane remembers from years ago, like he knows exactly how much space he takes up and refuses to apologize for any of it. He's talking to someone, Bell Shane thinks, from the way the guys head is thrown back in a laugh. But his eyes never drift towards Shane, not even in passing. Not even by accident.

It's the same kind of deliberate absence Shane has been choking on all week.

By the time they reach the locker room, Shane's jaw aches from how hard he's been holding it shut.

Inside, the room is already in chaos in the way hockey rooms always are before a game: the scrape of benches, the clatter of sticks, the thud of gear bags being tossed down. Someone is blasting music, but the beat feels distant to Shane, like it's happening on the other side of the wall.

Hayden drops his bag down beside him with the easy entitlement of someone who has already decided they're friends now and isn't going to be talked out of it. He nudges Shane's knee with his own shin, not gentle, not aggressive, just... present.

"You look like you're thinking too hard," Hayden says, already peeling tape off a roll with his teeth. "That's dangerous for your brand."

Shane glances over. "I have a brand?"

"Yeah. 'Quiet assassin.' It's big with the moms."

Shane snorts despite himself, and Hayden's grin widens like he's won something.

"You nervous?" Hayden asks, his voice dropping just a notch.

"A little," Shane admits, because lying feels pointless when Hayden has eyes like that. Quick, sharp, and always catching things. "First game. New team."

"That's normal," Hayden says immediately. "If you weren't nervous, I'd assume you were either dead inside or a serial killer."

Shane hums, tugging a shirt over his head. "Could be both."

"Oh, sick," Hayden says. "Just what I wanted. Great locker room vibes."

Shane reaches for his skates, then stops, because Hayden's eyes have flicked past him to over his shoulder, towards something behind Shane. Coach.

Coach is walking in with the whiteboard tucked under his arm and that expression he gets when he's about to make someone's night worse.

"Circle up," Coach calls.

The room shifts, conversations dying off in pieces, guys rolling their shoulders, tightening laces, standing. Shane gets up with everyone else, but he can feel his pulse thumping in his throat. It's stupid. It's just lines. It's just hockey.

Coach taps his marker against the board. "We're mixing it up a bit tonight. Want more pace on the second line."

Shane's stomach drops as if his body heard that sentence and already knows where it's going.

Coach doesn't look at him as he says it.

"Rozanov. Hollander. Together."

For a split second, the whole room does that subtle hockey thing: eyes darting, heads turning just enough to clock reactions without being obvious about it. Shane feels the attention like heat on the back of his neck, but doesn't look around. He doesn't want to give them a show. Even if both him and Ilya, mainly Ilya, have been pretty secretive about their own history, the team can feel the tension. The air almost always feels colder when they're in a room together. Or is it hotter? Shane can't even tell anymore.

He does, however, look at Ilya.

Ilya's face doesn't change. Not outwardly.

He stands there with his arms loose at his sides and his posture steady, like he's just been told the weather. If Shane didn't know him, if Shane didn't know what it looks like when Ilya is holding something in, he might've believed the blankness.

But Shane sees it. The tiny tightening of the corner of his mouth. The way his gaze shifts to the board and holds it there a second too long, like he's anchoring himself to something that isn't Shane.

"Got it," Ilya says.

Two words. Even tone. Nothing else.

Shane forces his voice to work. "Yeah."

Coach keeps talking. Strategies, matchups, power play setups. Shane nods at the right times, but the only thing he can really hear is his own internal voice, the ugly, insistent one that keeps whispering: *Of course. Of course it's him. Of course you can't even have one clean start without him being threaded through it like a needle.*

When Coach finally dismisses them, the room breaks back into motion, but the air has changed. Shane can feel it. A tension he didn't bring in with him, something new added to the walls.

Hayden steps close again, elbow brushing Shane's arm. "Well," he says, trying to keep it light, "guess we're all getting entertained tonight."

Shane swallows. He's not even sure why the next words come out of his mouth at all, maybe because Hayden is already looking at him like he already knows something and Shane hates feeling like a cornered animal, or maybe he just really needs to words to be real. So even he can hear the actual truth for the first time in years.

"We... went to camp together."

Hayden blinks. "You and Rozanov?"

Shane regrets it immediately. The sentence hangs in the air like a flare. Like an invitation for questions Shane doesn't want to answer and a truth Shane doesn't want dragged into the open.

"Yeah," Shane says anyways, because the words are already out there and he can't pull them back. "When we were kids. Summer camps. Same program."

Hayden's eyebrows lift. "That's-" he starts, then catches himself, glancing instinctively past Shane again, as if catching whether Ilya heard.

Shane doesn't have to look to know.

There's a sharp, sudden sound from across the room. A locker door slamming shut hard enough that the metal rings.

The room quiets around it for half a second, not fully silent, but noticeable in that way locker rooms notice things without acknowledging them.

Shane turns his head.

Ilya is standing at his stall with his back half turned, one hand still on the locker handle like he's trying to keep his grip steady. His shoulders are tight, drawn up, and even without seeing his face Shane can tell he's furious. Not loud fury, not the kind that explodes, but the kind that compresses into something sharp and dangerous.

He doesn't look at Shane. He doesn't have to. The message is clear anyway.

Don't talk about me.

Shane feels anger flare, hot and immediate, not because he's surprised, Ilya's been controlling the narrative since Shane had walked into the room on the first day, but because it is so absurd. As if Ilya gets to erase him in public and still dictate what Shane gets to say.

Hayden leans in again, voice low. "Okay," he murmurs, "that was not a normal locker slam."

Shane's fingers curl around his stick. "Drop it."

Hayden watches him for a beat, then nods once. "Yeah. Okay." He pauses, then adds, softer, "Just... Don't let him throw off your game."

Shane almost laughs at that, because Ilya *is his game*. Or he used to be. Shane swallows it down and focuses on dressing, piece by piece, like gear can build armor thick enough to keep the past from getting inside of him.

On the ice, it's worse.

Not because they're bad together.

Because they're good.

It happens immediately, the first time Shane picks up the puck along the boards and cuts towards the middle, expecting to have to create his own space, expecting to have to muscle through a gap that isn't there yet. And then the passing lane opens like a door because Ilya has already moved, already drawn a defender, already made the ice shift.

The puck leaves Shane's stick and lands on Ilya's tape as if it was meant to be there. Ilya doesn't look at Shane as he returns it. He doesn't need to.

That is what makes Shane's chest tighten, because it feels like stepping into a conversation you never stopped having. It feels like his body is remembering a conversation his brain has been trying to forget.

Hayden hops over the board mid shift and skates close enough to shout, "Oh, look at that, they're psychic."

Shane ignores him, but there's a spark of something: irritation, amusement, he can't tell. It flickers through him anyway.

Ilya glances towards Hayden, expression flat, and says something short that Shane doesn't catch over the noise. Hayden barks out a laugh.

Shane hates that. Hates that Ilya can still make people laugh without even trying, hates that the part of him that used to belong to Shane is just... out there, handed to whoever is nearby.

The game stays tight. The opposing team plays heavy, finishing checks, pressuring the corners. Shane takes hits he expects, absorbs them the way he's trained to, but the adrenaline has a different edge tonight. It's not just competition. It's proximity. It's the way Ilya's shadow keeps passing over the ice in Shane's peripheral vision.

Late in the second period, Shane catches a pass at the half wall and tries to spin off his defender. The defensemen times it well, shoulder to shoulder, driving him into the boards hard enough that the glass rattles. Shane's shoulder slams first, then his hip, then the ice when his skates slip out from under him.

For a second, all he can hear is the scrape of blades and the roar of the crowd swallowing the whistle.

He's on one knee when Ilya reaches him. Not slow. Not cautious. Immediate.

Ilya's glove closes around Shane's forearm, firm, anchoring, and his voice is low enough only Shane can hear it.

"Stay down. Are you hurt?"

The touch should be nothing. On ice contact happens all the time. Teammates grab each other, steady each other, help each other up like it's automatic.

But nothing about Ilya touching him is automatic anymore. It's like someone put a hand straight onto a nerve.

Shane jerks his arm free, hard.

"Don't," he snaps, voice tight.

Ilya's eyes widen, then flash. His jaw twitches like he's grinding his teeth. "What is your problem?"

"My problem?" Shane pushes himself upright, anger flaring up so fast it almost makes him dizzy. "You don't get to-"

A whistle shrills again. A linesman skates in. The play resets.

Shane forces himself to turn away before he says something he can't take back in front of four thousand strangers, but the heat stays in his chest, spreading, feeding on itself. He can feel Ilya's stare on the back of his helmet as Shane skates to the bench.

He finishes the shift, but his focus is wrecked. Every moment feels slightly too sharp. Every pass feels like it has an ounce of anger in it. He can tell Coach notices; Coach's eyes follow him longer than usual.

When the horn sounds at the end of the period, Shane doesn't wait for the intermission routine. He hops the boards and heads straight down the tunnel.

He doesn't leave the arena. He doesn't want to be in the open where someone can stop him, where his team can corral him back to "normal." He wants privacy. He wants air.

The locker room is empty when he gets there, the room echoing in a way it never does when it's full. Shane sits hard on the bench and starts ripping off his gear with too much force, straps snapping loose, gloves tossed aside. His shoulder throbs where he hit the boards, but the pain is manageable; it isn't what's making his hands shake.

It's the other pain. The one he can't ice.

The door opens behind him. Shane keeps his eyes on his skates.

He hears Ilya's blades on the rubber mat, the way they sound heavier than everyone else's, and then he hears the door shut, the click of it like a lock sliding into place.

Ilya doesn't speak at first. Shane can feel him standing there, watching him, and the silence feels like pressure.

Then Ilya says, quietly, "Are you hurt?"

Shane laughs once under his breath, short and humorless. "Why do you care?"

There's a pause, and when Ilya answers, his voice has sharpened. "What?"

"You heard me," Shane says, pulling his shin pads off with a jerk. "You don't know me. Remember? I'm just a guy you might have scored on once."

Ilya's jaw tightens. He steps forward. "I never said that."

"Oh, really? I must be hallucinating then. When I overheard you say that exact thing to Bell a few weeks ago. Did you not?"

"I was talking," Ilya says, controlled, "to someone who asked a question."

"And you answered by making me sound pathetic."

Ilya's nostrils flare. "And you want me to tell them the truth?"

Shane's throat tightens. "The truth about what?"

Ilya's eyes flicker, just for a second, like he almost forgets he's supposed to keep his face blank. He looks away quickly, gaze snapping to the row of hooks on the wall like it's safer than looking at Shane.

"You know," Ilya says through his teeth.

Shane stands up slowly, gear half off, sweat cooling on his skin. He can feel the anger in his body, but it isn't clean anger. It's tangled with grief, with humiliation, with that stubborn, stupid part of him that still wants Ilya to look at him the way he used to. Shane hates that part. He hates it's still alive.

"I don't know anything," Shane says, voice low. "Because you won't say a fucking thing to me."

Ilya's gaze snaps back. His eyes are sharp with something bright and restrained. "What?"

Shane sighs out. "This is the most words you've said to me since I joined the team a month ago. Do you not see that? Have I been hallucinating that too, then?"

"You-" Ilya cuts himself off. Takes a deep breath. "*You* left."

Shane's laugh turns into a rough exhale. "You *erased* me."

Ilya steps closer, and Shane can see it now. The tension in his hands, the way his fingers flex like he wants to grab something, the way his shoulders flex like they're bracing for impact.

"I did not erase you," Ilya says, and for the first time his control slips just enough that emotion leaks through. "You think I forgot you? You think I did not-"

He cuts himself off. The words hang there anyway, unfinished and dangerous.

Shane feels something in his chest twist, because there is not something Shane can admit to himself: Ilya *does* care. He cares so much it looks like it hurts him. And Shane hates that, because caring from Ilya doesn't feel like comfort anymore. It feels like an explosive. Like a door that keeps opening just to slam shut right in his face.

"Then why are you acting like this?" Shane asks, voice cracking just slightly around the edge. He clears his throat, furious at himself for it. "Why are you pretending I'm nothing?"

Ilya stares at him for a long beat, face unreadable in that way he's perfected: eyes giving away nothing, mouth set, posture steadied.

Then he says, very quietly, "Because if I don't... then it becomes something again."

Shane's stomach drops, because that is the closest thing to honesty Ilya has given him in six years, and it doesn't fix anything. It just makes everything even more confusing.

"Something," Shane repeats, testing the word like it's poison. "It was already *something*, Ilya."

Ilya's jaw ticks. He glances away. Looks back. "You're hurt."

Shane blinks. "What?"

"On the ice." Ilya's gaze flicks over to Shane's shoulder and stays there. It's such a small movement, but it gives him away. "I asked if you were hurt."

"You don't get to play concerned teammate when you can't even say my name."

Ilya flinches so quickly Shane almost doesn't see it.

"Why are you changing the-"

"Shane." Ilya says. One word. One stupid word, stupid name, and Shane's heart drops to the floor. He stares at Ilya with led in his eyes.

"What?" Shane says, voice low.

"Are you hurt?" Ilya asks again, quieter now.

"No," he says, his voice sharp with the effort of keeping it together. "No. I'm not hurt."

Ilya studies him, like he's trying to decide if he believes him.

Then, after a beat, he says, "Good."

One word, but it lands like a concession.

Ilya turns towards the door. His hand goes to the handle, then pauses there, fingers tightening, and for a second Shane thinks he will turn around, that he will walk back inside and actually *see* him. Look at him. *Stay* with him.

Instead, Ilya turns, without looking around, "I didn't forget."

Shane sucks in a tight breath. "What?"

"I just- I didn't. Forget anything."

And then he leaves, the door closing behind him with a soft click that feels louder than any slam.

Shane stands there in the empty locker room with his gear half off and his heart beating too hard, furious and gutted at the same time. He hates Ilya for acting like Shane is a secret, acting like the last eleven years didn't exist, and he hates himself even more for wanting to kick open that door they shut, run back in that hole they dug, push through the locker room door and beg Ilya to just *talk* to him.

And the worst part, the part that Shane doesn't even want to admit to himself, is that when Ilya asked him if he was hurt, his voice had been real.

Not performative. Not cruelty. Real concern, stubborn and immediate, like Ilya's body still knows Shane even when his mouth refuses to.

Shane hates that it still matters. He hates that it still feels like something.

And he hates, most of all, that for a split second in that locker room, when Ilya's control cracked and emotion flashed cross his face, Shane had wanted to reach for him so badly that it had made his hands shake.

Chapter 10: The Word

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your kindness these last ten chapters :) I don't know how much longer the fic is gonna be but I am having sm fun writing it!!

WARNING: this chapter contains descriptions of abuse. not in a lot of detail, but please read at your own risk!

Chapter 10

Summer 2008 - Ottawa

Shane spots him before the room can give him any warning, before the noise and the motion and the smell of tape and sweat can settle into the familiar shape of camp, and he thinks, *oh. There you are*, like it's a thought his body has been saving up all year.

Second bench from the left again, as if the universe has assigned Ilya that square of tile and never bothered to update the roster. He's hunched forward with his elbows on his knees, head tipped down, working the tape around his stick with that same patient precision that makes Shane irrationally annoyed because nothing about Ilya should be precise and yet here he is, neat spirals, careful overlap, fingers moving like he's done this in his sleep a thousand times. His bag is still a disaster. The bench is still half buried in gloves and laces and a towel that might've been white once. But Ilya himself looks... different.

Not in a way that Shane can point to cleanly, not in a way he can reduce to "taller" or "broader" and move on. It's something in the line of his shoulders, the way he's filled out enough that he doesn't look like a kid wearing a grown ups confidence anymore; he looks like he grew into it. There's a dark bruise blooming along one forearm that Shane doesn't remember seeing last summer, and the site of it sends a quick, sharp question through him before he can stop it.

He stands in the doorway too long, duffel bag cutting into his shoulder, suddenly aware of his own hands, of his own breathing, of the fact that he hasn't seen Ilya in ten months and his chest is doing something stupid about it.

Then Ilya's head jerks up like he felt the stare.

For half a second, his face is blank in that way he's been learning to be over the years: controlled, closed, unreadable. Then something cracks open so fast Shane almost misses it. His eyes go wide. His mouth parts like he's about to say something too loud. His whole body

pivots in a single decisive movement that doesn't look like hesitation or caution or even thought.

He doesn't cross the room casually. He closes the distance in four long strides, socks skidding on the tile, and when he reaches Shane he doesn't stop at arms length like they're polite acquaintances or teammates. He grabs him.

Not a quick clap to the shoulder, not a half hug meant for jokes. Both arms, hand around Shane's shoulders, pulling him in with enough force that Shane's back taps the lockers behind him. Shane's hands come up automatically, one hand landing at Ilya's waist, the other sliding between his shoulder blades, and the contact is so immediate and warm and solid, that for a brief moment Shane forgets to pretend he's normal.

Ilya squeezes once, tight, like he's checking whether Shane is real and not something he made up during the long stretch of winter, and Shane feels it in his bones. He feels the press of Ilya's chest, the heat through the fabric, the way his chin brushes the side of Shane's neck as he shifts, and something inside Shane jolts like a wire being touched.

It's just a hug, his brain tries to supply, late and unhelpful.

Except it doesn't feel like "just" anything.

Ilya pulls back far enough to look at him, hands still planted on Shane's shoulders like he's reluctant to fully let them go. His eyes are bright, almost fierce with relief, and his voice comes out lower than last year, rougher around the edges.

"You got bigger," he says, and it isn't teasing yet. It's an assessment, the way someone says something when they didn't expect the world to change when they weren't looking.

Shane swallows, because he can hear the stupid tremor in his own body like it's announcing itself. "So did you."

Ilya's mouth twitches like he wants to smile and can't decide if he's allowed to be soft for that long. His fingers curl in the fabric of Shane's shirt, just for half a second, and then drops as if he catches himself doing it.

"Still slow," he adds, the edge of the joke snapping into place like armor.

Shane exhales, grateful for the familiar landing. "Still dramatic."

"Always dramatic," Ilya says, and this time the grin shows up properly, wide and reckless and alive, and Shane feels his own face answer it without permission.

Around them, the locker room keeps moving. Bags thud. Someone laughs too loud on the far bench. A coach yells something about being late and nobody listens. Shane barely hears any of it. His body still remembers the weight of Ilya's arms, the way the hug lingered a beat too long before it broke apart, and his skin feels wrong in the aftermath, like it's holding onto warmth it shouldn't care about.

He's sixteen. This is his best friend. He's hugged him before.

So why does it feel like this?

"Come," Ilya says, grabbing Shane's wrist like he's pulling him into place, and the touch is so casual, so unthinking, that it almost makes it worse. "You take my bench spot again. You try steal my luck."

"It's not your luck," Shane protests, but he lets himself be hauled anyway, because the alternative is standing there alone with his own brain.

Ilya throws down Shane's bag like it's offended him, then launches into a running complaint about the dorms being "smells like socks and sadness" and how the vending machine "still hates him personally," and Shane's laugh comes easier than it should. It comes so easily it scares him, because it's always been like this at camp, Ilya pouring noise into the space until Shane forgets to be careful. That part hasn't changed.

What has changed is Shane noticing the way Ilya keeps touching him while he talks.

Not in a flirty way. Not in a way that means anything on purpose. A hand on Shane's shoulder when he's pushing him back onto the bench. A bump of their knees when they lean over the same skate lace. Fingers hooking briefly into Shane's sleeve as Ilya yanks him closer to show him something on the whiteboard across the room.

It's normal. It's all familiar.

Except Shane keeps feeling it, every single time, as if his body has suddenly become overly aware of its own boundaries.

He tries to ignore it.

He tries to tape his stick without looking at Ilya's hands. He tries to focus on drills, on coaches, on the sound of skates carving ice, on anything that doesn't involve the way Ilya's voice drops in volume when he says Shane's name in quieter moments, like it's something he doesn't want other people to touch.

They settle into rhythm quickly, the way they always do. Morning skates where their lines click into place like it's been waiting all year, afternoon drills where Ilya chirps him without mercy and Shane chirps right back, scrimmages where they find each other on the ice without needing to look.

"You drift too wide," Ilya mutters during a drill, skating backward with infuriating ease.

"You overcommit," Shane shoots back, digging his edges hard just to keep up with him.

"I do *not* overcommit."

"You absolutely overcommit," Shane says, hearing the grin in his own voice.

Ilya bumps him lightly in the hip as they glide to a stop, just enough to knock Shane off his balance without actually taking him down, and Shane shoves him back without thinking,

laughing as he regains his footing. Ilya's grin goes sharp with satisfaction like he lives for this exact kind of fight.

It's easy and loud and so then it's painful.

And yet Shane catches himself looking at him in the space between jokes, like there's something else he's trying to understand.

Sometimes he notices the bruise on Ilya's arm again and has to force himself not to ask, because asking means hearing an answer, and the answer might be Russia, and Ilya has always like a closed door.

Sometimes he notices the way Ilya's face goes still when a coach yells too sharp, a tiny tightening around his eyes like he's bracing for impact even when the words aren't aimed at him.

Sometimes, worse, he catches himself noticing the shape of Ilya's mouth when he smiles, the way his hair curls damp against his forehead after practice, the way his throat moves when he swallows from a water bottle.

And the moment Shane notices that he's noticing, embarrassment hits him like a physical thing. Heat under his skin. A flush in the back of his neck. A stupid, frantic urge to look away, as if someone might catch him and know.

Know what?

He doesn't even know what "what" is yet.

He just knows that the same things that used to feel normal are starting to feel... charged, like there's another current running underneath the old one, and Shane is terrified that if he touches it wrong, it'll spark and burn everything down.

The first time it really trips him up is in the cafeteria, two days in, when they slide into a bench together without thinking and end up shoulder to shoulder even though there's plenty of space on either side. Ilya talks with his hands the way he always does, gesturing with a fork as he launches into a rant about how Canadian milk tastes like "sad water," and at some point his knee presses against Shane's under the table.

Shane freezes, because his body reacts like it's been surprised. His stomach flips. His skin tightens. His brain goes blank in the stupidest way.

It's a knee. It's nothing. It's accidental.

Except Ilya doesn't move it. And Shane doesn't move it either.

They sit like that through half a meal, knees touching, talking like normal, and Shane feels like he's holding his breath the entire time without meaning to.

After lunch, in the locker room, a group of guys starts talking the way boys always do when there's nothing else to talk about. About home. Girlfriends. Almost girlfriends. People they

kissed at party before summer. Stories half bragged, half invented, tossed back and forth like tape rolls.

"Broke up with her right before I left," a guy says, leaning against the lockers like he's proud of himself. "Didn't want drama."

"Translation: she dumped you," someone else replies, and the room erupts in laughter.

"Shut up," the first guy replies, but his ears are red.

Another voice cuts in, "Hollander, what about you? You got a girl waiting back home?"

It isn't aggressive. It isn't mean. It's just the way boys talk when they want everyone to fit into the same story, when they want to pass the script around and pretend it's universal.

Shane keeps taping his stick, eyes down, pretending his hands don't suddenly feel too large and too visible.

"No," he says, and makes his voice flat enough that it sounds like a complete answer.

"Oh come on," someone replies. "You have to have someone."

Shane shrugs without looking up. "Not really- I mean, not right now at least."

A couple of guys groaned like he personally inconvenienced them. "Man, what do you do with your time?"

"Hockey," Shane says, and he manages to land it lightly enough that it gets a laugh, which is the point. The laugh means they'll move on.

They do, mostly.

But Shane feels something shift on the other side of the room, and when he finally looks up he catches Ilya watching him.

Not staring, not obvious. Just... watching. Quietly attentive in a way Ilya usually isn't in front of other people, like he's listening for something under the words Shane didn't say.

Their eyes meet for a second.

Ilya looks away first, jaw tightening like he swallowed something he didn't want.

Shane looks back down to his tape, pulse thudding stupidly in his throat, and thinks, very clearly, without meaning to:

I am gay. Am I gay?

The words land in his head like a slap and an answer at the same time. It isn't a neat conclusion. It doesn't make him feel relieved. It makes him feel like he's just said something

out loud in a room full of people and now he's waiting for someone to turn and point and laugh.

He's not brave enough for this. He isn't sure he's anything enough for this.

He tapes his stick faster, like speed can erase thoughts, like if he keeps moving his hands his brain will stop reaching for that word.

Gay.

He doesn't know what to do with it.

He doesn't know what it means about him, hockey, about the way boys talk, about the way everyone assumes the same thing and you're supposed to nod and join in even if it isn't yours.

And he's sure as hell he doesn't know what this means about Ilya.

That night, after lights out, when the dorm has finally gone quiet except for the steady churn of the old fan in the window, Shane lies awake staring up at the ceiling like it could somehow give him the answers to all of this, listening to his own thoughts trying to climb out of his head.

Across the aisle, Ilya shifts in his bed, mattress springs creaking.

"Shane?" Ilya says softly, like he's been waiting for the room to empty out of other words.

Shane turns his head, staring into the dark. "Yeah?"

"You were... quiet today," Ilya says, and the pause before the word makes it sound careful. "In locker room."

Shane's throat tightens, stupidly defensive. "Was I supposed to- what? Talk about girls?"

Ilya is silent for a moment, and Shane hears the bed creak again as he rolls onto his side. When Ilya speaks again, his voice is lower, steady in that way it gets when he means something.

"You do not have to say things you don't mean," he says.

Shane stares at the dark and feels something in his chest fold in on itself. "I didn't lie."

"I did not say you lie."

"Then what are you saying?"

Ilya exhales, the sound quiet, almost frustrated. "I am saying you do not have to perform for them."

The word perform makes Shane's stomach twist, because it hits too close to the thing he's been doing his entire life. The carefulness. The scripts. The monitoring every word to make

sure it lands right, so nobody looks too hard.

Shane swallows. "What if I don't know what I mean yet?"

There's a long pause.

Then Ilya says, quietly, "Then you don't know yet."

Like it's allowed. Like ignorance isn't a crime.

Shane turns onto his side, trying to make out Ilya's shape in the dark. "Do you know?"

Ilya doesn't answer right away. Shane catches him breathing, slow and controlled, like he's thinking through a minefield.

"Sometimes." Ilya says finally, and the word is so small Shane almost misses it. Then, like he's realized he said too much, he adds quickly, "I need to sleep."

And the conversation ends there, not with a slam, but with a gentle dodge, the way Ilya avoids anything that might make him feel too much if he stares at it too long.

Shane lies awake anyway, heart beating too hard, with the conversation echoing in his head like a puck hitting the boards.

Three afternoons later, the phone call comes.

They're near the side exit of the rink after drills, sweat cooling under their shirts, the hallway mostly empty except for a coach wheeling a cart of cones away. Ilya's flip phone buzzes in his pocket, and Shane sees the screen light up briefly before Ilya angles it away. Whatever name is there changes the line of his spine immediately. His shoulders go rigid, chin lifting like he's bracing.

He doesn't say a lot. Or anything at all, really. He just looks at Shane once, quick and unreadable, and steps outside.

Shane doesn't follow. He tells himself he isn't following. He just... doesn't move away either.

He stays close enough that the thin metal door becomes a speaker, and Ilya's voice carries through in clipped bursts.

“Я не слабый,” Ilya snaps, and even without understanding, Shane hears the shape of it: sharp, defensive, angry in a way that feels too old for sixteen. “Уя играю лучше, чем когда-либо.”

There's a pause, long enough that Shane imagines someone else talking on the other end, slow and heavy with authority.

"Нет," Ilya says, and the word comes out like a slammed gate. "Нет. Я не с ним боль'ше. Я сказал- нет."

The next part is quieter, controlled, almost rehearsed, like Ilya has learned volume is dangerous.

Shane catches fragments. Slabby. Weak. A word he's learned in Russian from the bits and pieces Ilya has taught him. A word he recognizes by tone: disappointment. Threat.

Then, clear as the edge of a blade, Ilya says in Russian, faster now, "I'm not weak. I am playing better than I ever have."

And then, after a beat, the line that makes Shane's stomach drop even though he only understands pieces of it:

"No. I am not hanging out with him anymore."

Him.

Shane.

The sentence hits him in the gut with a confused kind of pain, because he can't even tell if he's heard it right, and yet his body reacts like it did. Like he has.

When the door opens again, Ilya steps back inside with his face already smoothed into something neutral. Not calm, too controlled for calm, but set. His eyes don't give him away. His mouth doesn't twitch. His hands look steady.

He looks like someone who has been taught to pretend.

Shane forces himself to breathe like this isn't a knife.

"Everything okay?" he asks, because he doesn't know what else to do with the fact that he just heard himself being denied in a language he can't speak.

Ilya doesn't look at him right away. He flips the phone closed with a careful snap and sets it down on the bench a little too precisely, as if he moves gently enough nothing will crack.

"My father worries," he says.

"About what?" Shane asks, and keeps his voice even because he can hear the edge trying to climb into it.

Ilya's eyes flick up then, and for a moment Shane sees something raw beneath the neutrality: anger, maybe, or shame, or something that looks a little like exhaustion.

"About weakness," Ilya says, and the word sounds like he hates it. He pauses, then adds, "About distraction."

The words hangs between them, heavy in a way it has no right to be.

Shane swallows, forcing himself not to flinch. "You- he thinks... I'm a distraction?"

Ilya's eyes widen, realizing Shane might have picked up more of the conversation than he thought he would be able to. His jaw tightens, and he holds Shane's gaze for a long beat like he's measuring something, choosing his words carefully so he doesn't step wrong.

"I think," he says slowly, "he thinks anything that makes me feel something is a distraction."

It isn't a confession. It isn't even about Shane directly.

So why does his breath stutter?

Shane doesn't push. He wants to, badly. He wants to ask what Ilya feels. He wants to ask why he said he wasn't hanging out with him. He wants to ask why the thought of that sentence makes his chest feel hollow.

Instead he just nods, because nodding is safer than opening up his mouth and letting the wrong thing fall out.

They don't speak again until later that night, when the dorm has settled and the air is cool enough to bite, and slip out the back door like they've done a hundred times. The dock behind the dorm sits quiet over dark water, boards warm from the day and cooling fast under their hands. They sit with their feet dangling over the edge, shoes bumping gently against the wood.

Shane watches the water and tries to decide how to say what he needs to say without making his voice shake.

"You told him you weren't hanging out with me," he says finally, because he can't carry it alone.

Ilya doesn't pretend to not understand. He exhales through his nose, a short, irritated breath like the truth is an inconvenience he didn't want dragged into the light. He rubs the back of his neck, fingers digging into the muscle there.

"He asks too many questions," Ilya says.

"So you lied," Shane says, and he hates how flat his voice comes out, like he's accusing Ilya of something he already understands.

Ilya's shoulders lift in a small shrug that isn't careless, just helpless. "Yes."

Shane glances at him. "About me."

Ilya's mouth tightens. "About everything."

The admission should make Shane feel better. It doesn't, not entirely. It just shifts the pain into something else, something less personal and more complicated.

"Am I... a problem? A distraction like he said?" Shane asks, and he hates himself for asking it like that, like he's begging.

Ilya's head turns sharply. His eyes flash in the dark. "No."

The answer is immediate, almost angry, and it hits Shane like a hand on his chest.

"Then why," Shane says, quieter now, "did it sound like you were getting rid of me?"

Ilya stares out at the water for a long moment. When he speaks, his voice is controlled again, but there's something tired in it.

"He does not like... influence," Ilya says.

"Am I a bad influence?" Shane tries, attempting a joke because it's easier than being earnest.

A pause. "You are the worst influence," he mutters, but the line lands without bite, more familiar than mocking.

Shane waits, because he learned that if he waits long enough, Ilya sometimes continues.

Ilya's fingers pick at a splinter in the dock board, worrying it like a nervous habit. "He thinks," he says slowly, "that if I have something good here, then I will want... more."

"More of what?" Shane asks, and his voice is gentle, because he knows better than to shove.

Ilya's shoulders rise, then fall. "More life."

Shane's chest tightens.

"You're not weak," he says, because he can't let Ilya carry that word alone.

Ilya's mouth twists like he's heard that sentence before and it didn't stick. "In my house," he says, and the pause before the words makes it sound like he's choosing them carefully, "that word means everything."

Shane swallows, then says, softly, "Slabby."

Ilya's head turns sharply towards him, eyes narrowing. "You understood."

"Enough," Shane says, and he doesn't look away.

Silence stretches between them, dense but not uncomfortable, like both of them are holding something fragile and trying not to crush it by naming it wrong.

Shane's shoulder brushes Ilya's, almost accidental. Then stays.

Ilya doesn't move away. He shifts slightly, leaning back on one hand, and Shane follows without meaning to, letting their shoulders rest more fully together. It feels easy. It feels inevitable. And Shane hates how much his body wants it.

He stares into the water and tries to find a way to say the thing that has been stalking him all week without turning it into a confession that changes everything.

"Do you ever feel," Shane starts, then stops, because his throat tightens around the words.

Ilya waits. He's good at waiting when he wants the truth. "Feel what?"

"Like somethings different," Shane says slowly, forcing the sentence out one piece at a time, "and you don't know what to do with it."

Ilya's gaze is on him now, steady and quiet. "Different how?"

Shane opens his mouth, then closes it again, because the truth is too big to fit in the words he has. How do you say: I think I'm gay and you might be the reason and I'm terrified I'm going to ruin this?

He swallows. "I don't know," he admits. "I just keep... noticing things."

Ilya's brow furrows slightly. "Things?"

Shane's hands are on the dock boards between them, fingers spread. He can see Ilya's hands too, close enough that there's only an inch of wood between their knuckles.

He shouldn't say it. He should shut his mouth and turn around and go back inside.

"When you grabbed me the first day," Shane says, voice low, "it felt... weird?"

Ilya goes very still.

Shane rushes before Ilya can misunderstand. "Not bad weird. Just- different. Like my brain... didn't know what to do."

Ilya doesn't laugh. He doesn't tease. His eyes hold Shane's with a kind of careful attention that makes Shane's stomach flip.

"You didn't... like?" Ilya asks, and the way he phrases it makes it sound like he's asking about a bruise, not something else.

Shane's throat tightens again. "I did," he says, and hates how honest it sounds. "That's the problem."

Ilya's gaze drops, just briefly, to Shane's mouth.

It's small. It's fast. It's the kind of glance you only notice if you're waiting for it.

Shane feels his pulse jump like a startled animal.

For a second neither of them moves. The dock creaks softly under their weight. The water laps against the posts. Somewhere behind them a door shuts in the dorm and they both go rigid for half a breath, listening, then relax when no one comes outside.

Ilya shifts his hand slightly on the board, closer. Their fingers brush, barely anything, an accidental contact that could be dismissed as nothing.

It doesn't feel like nothing.

Shane's breath catches, and he hates himself for it. He hates how obvious his body is, how quickly it betrays him.

Ilya leans in closer.

Not dramatically. Not like a movie. Slowly, like he's testing whether the space between them is safe, like he's waiting for Shane to pull away.

Shane doesn't.

He doesn't move. He doesn't breathe. He just stays there, suspended in the moment where something could be real.

Ilya's face is close enough now that Shane can see tiny details: The mole on his cheek, the way his eyelashes cast a shadow, the tension at the corner of his mouth like he's fighting himself. Their noses almost brush.

Shane's heart is pounding so hard he can feel it in his throat. He thinks, very clearly, terrifyingly:

I want this.

And then something changes quickly in Ilya's expression, so quick Shane might have missed it if he wasn't watching him like his life depended on it. Something like awareness. Like he suddenly sees the shape of consequences. Like he remembers what a father's voice sounds like through a phone. Like he remembers wanting can be used against you.

He pulls back. Definitively enough that the space returns between them like a door clicking shut.

Ilya clears his throat, looking out at the lake like the water can save him. His jaw is tight. His shoulders are too still.

"We should go," he says, and his voice is rougher than it was a minute ago.

Shane forces air back into his lungs. He nods like he's not shaking on the inside. "Yeah," he manages.

They stand at the same time, careful not to touch, which feels absurd given how close they were a second ago. They walk back to the dorm without looking at each other, and Shane's skin feels too tight, like it doesn't feel right. They climb into their bunks like nothing happened, like they didn't just stand on the edge of something that could have changed the shape of their entire lives.

Shane lies awake staring at the ceiling, one hand pressing flat against his chest like he's trying to calm the rhythm there. His heart won't stop. His brain won't stop. He keeps replaying the moment Ilya leaned in, the moment his gaze dropped to Shane's mouth, the moment the space narrowed and everything went silent. He thinks about how he felt on that dock when Ilya was close enough to kiss, and how he didn't want to move.

He presses his palm harder against his chest, as if he can push the truth back down.

If that wasn't nothing, then what was that?

And if that wasn't nothing... what does that make me? Make us?

Across the aisle, Ilya shifts. The springs creak. Shane can tell he's awake too; there's a particular stillness that only happens when someone is pretending to be asleep. Neither of them speaks. Shane turns onto his side, facing the aisle.

In the dark, he can make out the shape of Ilya's arm hanging off the bunk, fingers loose, as if even in his sleep he can't fully unclench. Shane doesn't reach across.

He wants to.

Instead he closes his eyes and tells himself if he can keep this contained, that he can keep being Shane Hollander who skates and jokes and argues and doesn't ruin things, that he can keep this friendship and nothing else, because this friendship means more to him than he can ever even try to describe. This friendship means everything to him. This friendship is safe, and everything else is a threat.

But his body doesn't believe him.

And somewhere in the dark, he hears Ilya exhale, slow and controlled, like he's trying to do the same thing.

Like he's trying to keep it contained too.

Like he's failing.

Chapter 11: The Quiet Thing That Ruins You

Chapter Notes

"Alexa play all the things she said by t.A.T.u."

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

Chapter 11

November 2016 - Minneapolis

Two weeks pass, which is long enough for the shock of the locker room to fade and short enough that it still feels like Shane can taste it when he isn't careful. Ilya's voice in the empty room, the way it sharpened and then, for one strange second, softened, the way his mouth had actually formed Shane's name like it belonged there.

It doesn't change anything.

If anything it makes this new silence worse, because now Shane knows the quiet isn't just absence, it's a choice that keeps getting made on purpose. He sees Ilya every day at practice, sees him in locker rooms, sees him in the corner of his vision when he's taping his stick or tightening his skates, and there's this new thing layered over the old thing: the knowledge that Ilya can speak to him if he wants to, and he is not choosing to.

They go back to the same routine they had before that night, except it's tighter, more deliberate, as if the month of pretending they didn't exist has been upgraded into a system. On the ice they communicate only when they have to, even then it's clipped, functional, the kind of talk you use with an acquaintance: boards, middle, back, time. No names. No jokes. No little, thoughtless touches on the shoulder between shifts.

Shane tells himself he's grateful for that. Touch is dangerous now, because his body has been too honest lately, and he's tired of being betrayed by his own nervous system. But the truth is, and this is something Shane has come to know well these last few months, is when Ilya stops touching him, the absence feels like phantom pain.

He thinks about that more than he wants to admit. Not in the way he has words for, not even ready in a way he's ready to look straight at. It's worse than that: he misses him. He misses the way things were easier at camp, the way Ilya used to fill every quiet space with noise and certainty, the way Shane didn't have to monitor every breath around him because Ilya didn't leave room to be careful.

It isn't sweet, missing him. It's bitter and embarrassing. It makes Shane feel like an idiot, like he's still thirteen and waiting all winter for the next summer to start. It makes him angry in a way that's too sharp to be useful. He'll catch himself wanting to say something stupid and

ordinary: did you see that play, are you eating that, your tape job looks like shit. And then he remembers what it feels like to be erased out loud, remembers the way it feels when Ilya looks straight through him, and the words die in his throat.

The worst part is that when Ilya *did* talk to him in that locker room, the conversation didn't give him any clarity. It didn't resolve anything. It just carved a new question into him: if Ilya didn't forget, then what the hell is this?

By the time the away game in Minnesota came around, Shane is running on a low, constant static that never fully shuts off. He sleeps, but not well. He eats, but without noticing. He does everything he's supposed to do because he's good at being the person everyone expects: disciplined, quiet, and reliable. And because hockey gives him rules, and rules are something you can hold onto when the rest of your life feels like a door that won't stop swinging.

The morning they fly out, he's standing in the kitchen of his apartment with his bag half zipped, staring at the counter like something important is written there, like the right arrangement of keys and gum and a crumpled receipt might explain why his chest feels too tight every time he thinks about the next twenty four hours.

He checks his phone for the time, then checks it again like it might of changed out of spite, and then stares at his reflection in the microwave door and thinks, with the kind of exhausted humor he never says out loud, that if someone made a documentary about his life right now it would just be thirty minutes of him being silently mad at a man who keeps refusing to acknowledge he exists.

He tells himself it's irrational. It's just a trip. It's just a game. It's just-

It's Ilya.

He doesn't say his name in his head on purpose; it happens anyway, the way a bruise reminds you it's there when you lift something wrong.

At the airport, the team bunches into lines and clusters in the way people do when they try to pretend they're not traveling as a herd. There's the familiar chaos of hockey travel: sticks in travel cases, gear bags that look too big for civilized spaces, guys loud even though it's early, half of them wearing headphones and still somehow shouting over each other. A couple of rookies are arguing over who forgot their ID, one of the older guys is complaining about how "airports are designed by sadists," and a defenseman Shane barely knows keeps trying to convince everyone that airplane coffee is "actually decent," which gets him booed like he deserves.

Shane keeps his head down and follows the flow, trying to make himself small in a place that makes everyone feel exposed, but Hayden finds him anyway because Hayden seems to operate on a radar system built specifically to locate people trying to disappear.

Hayden falls into step beside him and looks over him like he's taking inventory. "You're doing that thing again where you look like you've been awake since Thursday."

Shane glances sideways. "It's Tuesday."

"Yeah," Hayden says, deadpan. "That's the problem."

Shane lets out a breath that almost counts as a laugh. "I'm fine."

Hayden hums like he doesn't buy it, but he doesn't push the way some people would. He keeps it light because that's what he's good at, because he can tell when someone is one wrong question away from cracking. "If you glare at the TSA like that, they're gonna make you take your skates off."

"I don't have skates on," Shane says.

"You'd find a way," Hayden replies, and bumps Shane's shoulder with his in a way that's casual but grounding, a reminder that Shane is here, moving, not stuck in his own head.

They reach the check-in kiosks, and Shane can feel Ilya's presence before he sees him, like the air in his peripheral vision gets denser. Ilya stands a few paces away, one hand on the handle of his suitcase, the other holding his phone without really looking at it, posture steady in a way that would read as calm to anyone who didn't know him.

Shane tries not to look at him.

He looks anyway, because his brain apparently believes self-preservation is optional.

Ilya isn't doing anything dramatic. He looks composed, the same contained confidence Shane remembers from years ago, except Shane can see the tightness if he stares long enough: the rigid lines of his shoulders, the way his jaw works once as if he's grinding his teeth. He's talking to one of the assistants about something logical, bags, boarding groups, whatever, and he doesn't look toward Shane not even once, not even by passing, not even by accident.

Shane tells himself, sharply, to stop acting like a teenager. He is a professional hockey player. He has flown on planes. He has played in hostile arenas. He can handle a man ignoring him.

What he can't handle is the part of his brain that keeps doing inventory anyway: how the sweatshirt sits on Ilya's shoulders, how his hands look too tense around his phone, how his posture is a little too still, like he's holding himself together by force.

In the security line, the team clumps and stretches and clumps again, everyone half awake and mildly annoyed. Shoes come off. Belts come out. One of the guys forgets he has a pocketknife and spends ten full minutes arguing with a TSA agent as if charisma can undo federal regulations, and Hayden, watching from behind Shane, says quietly, "You can't out-vibe the federal government," like he's offering a public service announcement.

Shane gets through the scanner and gathers his things, trying to make his hands move normally while he shoves his phone and wallet back into his pockets. Ilya is a few people ahead now, stepping away from the bins with his carry-on slung over one shoulder, and Shane watches him for half a second longer than he should because something looks off, like there's an extra stiffness in the way Ilya rolls his shoulders.

Hayden ends up beside him again as they walk toward the gate. "You sleep at all?" he asks, and the question is still casual, but it's not a joke.

"A Little," Shane says. It's not a lie. It's just not the whole truth, because he did sleep. He just kept waking up with that locker room echoing in his head.

Hayden nods like he hears the part Shane isn't saying. "Alright," he says simply. "Then we'll get through it."

On the plane, Shane ends up in a middle seat between two defensemen who immediately fall asleep, leaving him wedged and and stiff and unable to move without waking them. Across the aisle, Hayden is two rows ahead, leaning into the aisle to talk to someone behind him, gesturing with his hands like he's conducting an orchestra. Ilya is further up, on the other side, blocked by seatbelts and shoulders and the curve of the cabin.

Shane can't see him.

The relief of that surprises him, and then the disappointment surprises him more, which pisses him off because what kind of idiot is disappointed by not being able to watch someone ignore him?

He tries to read. He tries to scroll on his phone. He tries to let the drone of the engine drown out his thoughts, but his mind keeps circling back to that locker room. The way Ilya's voice had sounded when he said *I didn't forget*, the way it had cracked the silence just enough for Shane to see something underneath it. The problem is Shane can't stop wondering what would have happened if he'd said the right thing, or the wrong thing, or anything at all that might've made Ilya stay in the room another minute.

He hates that he misses him like this. He hates that the missing feels physical, like it has weight, like it sits in his chest and makes it harder to get a full breath when he's not paying attention.

About twenty minutes into the flight, the turbulence starts. It's mild at first, the kind of gentle bump that makes you look up and then go back to whatever you were doing, but it grows into something more insistent, the plane shuddering in brief, uneven jolts that make the overhead bins creak and the flight attendant pause mid-aisle with a practiced look of calm.

The defenseman on Shane's left snores right through it.

Shane would like to do the same. Instead his body tightens reflexively anyway, because nobody enjoys being in a metal tube that suddenly decides gravity is negotiable.

He glances up the aisle without thinking, and it takes him a second to find Ilya because there are heads and seats and the cramped geometry of economic travel, but then he spots him: two rows ahead on the opposite side, shoulders rigid, both hands clamped on the armrests like they're the only stable thing left in the world.

Shane's chest does a strange, sharp twist.

He knows that grip. He knows that stillness. He knows the particular way Ilya goes quiet, when he's trying to pretend he isn't scared, because it's not the same kind of quiet Ilya does when he's angry; this is contained, deliberate, almost stubborn, as if refusing to show fear could keep it from being true.

Shane watches him through another bump, sees Ilya's jaw tighten hard enough that muscle jumps once, sees the slight flare of his nostrils as he inhales, controlled and shallow, and suddenly Shane is back in a different time, different place, watching Ilya pretend nothing bothers him because that's how he survives. The memory feels invasive. It feels unfair. Shane hasn't been allowed to know Ilya lately, and yet his body recognizes him like it's a language it never forgot.

He tells himself to mind his business. He tells himself that caring is a trap. He tells himself that if he continues to watch him, that is weakness. And weakness is something that Ilya's world eats alive.

And then the plane dips again, sharper this time, and Ilya's fingers whiten on the armrest, and Shane's decision is already made up before his brain can stage an argument.

He unclips his own headphones from around his neck, the good ones, the ones he uses before games, and leans forward awkwardly between the sleeping defenseman and the seat in front of him, stretching his arms into the aisle. He taps the shoulder of the flight attendant as she passes, then nods towards Ilya with a quiet, wordless request for help with the distance.

The flight attendant gives him a quick, understanding look, takes the headphones, and steps forward.

Shane watches as she leans down near Ilya's seat and offers them. Ilya's head turns sharply, confusion flashing across his face at first, then suspicion, and then he looks over his shoulder, scanning, until his gaze lands on Shane.

For a second, the turbulence and the engine noise and the whole plane seems to recede into the background, because Ilya is looking at him like he's been handed something he doesn't know how to accept.

Shane doesn't smile. He doesn't shrug. He doesn't do anything that might make it feel like a joke, because the last thing he wants is to turn someone's fear into entertainment. He just lifts his chin once in a small, blunt gesture that says take them, and then looks away like he's giving Ilya privacy to decide.

When Shane looks back a moment later, Ilya has the headphones on. His posture is still tense, but the grip on the armrest loosens a fraction, and his breathing looks less shallow, the rise and fall of his chest steadier.

Ilya reaches up and adjusts the headphones, then turns his head slightly again, eyes catching Shane's through the narrow gap between seats.

His mouth opens like he's going to say something.

He doesn't.

But his expression changes anyway, something in his face softening and then quickly reassembling into control, like a crack sealed up fast before anyone can see inside. He gives Shane the smallest nod. Not even as gratitude, just acknowledgment, and then faces forward again.

Shane leans back in his seat, throat tight in a way he refuses to analyze, and thinks, not kindly, that this is the kind of thing that ruins a person, doing something simple and decent and then feeling like it mattered.

He stares at the seatback in front of him and tells himself it doesn't mean anything. He tells himself it was just headphones. He tells himself that the reason his chest feels weird is because the plane is still bouncing and he's tired.

He doesn't believe himself, but he keeps telling the lie anyway because he doesn't have a better one.

When they land, the bus ride to the hotel is too loud, too cramped, too full of jokes and the metallic clatter of sticks shifting in the undercarriage. Shane sits near the front because it's habit, because he likes being able to get off first, because he likes having the illusion of control. He keeps his head down to discourage conversation.

It doesn't work. Hayden slides into the seat beside him anyway like the laws of personal space don't apply.

"You okay?" Hayden asks, and says it like a normal question, not a performance.

Shane's answer comes out automatic. "Yeah."

Hayden looks at him for a second too long. "Alright," he says, like he's filling it away for later, and then he pivots to something safer because he's Hayden and Shane has learned these last few months that Hayden knows how to keep things from snapping. "If we lose to Minnesota, I'm blaming the guy who defended airplane coffee."

Shane snorts, quiet. "He deserves it."

Hayden nods, satisfied. "Good. Glad we're aligned."

At the hotel, the team floods the lobby in a tangle of bags and noise. The air smells like polished stone and someone's floral perfume. There's a long table with bottled water and a bowl of fruit nobody touches. A couple of guys immediately head toward the elevators, laughing, already talking about who's going out tonight.

Coach stands near the front desk with a clipboard in his hand and the expression he gets when he's about to ruin someone's day with logistics.

"Room assignments are up," Coach calls, tapping the paper on the table like he's announcing a penalty.

The guys surge towards it. Shane hangs back for half a second, letting the crowd go first, because he can already feel his heart starting to pound.

Hayden, of course, elbows his way through and then leans back toward Shane, eyebrows raised like he's watching a show.

Shane steps forward and scans the list quickly, eyes moving down the page, name after name. He's used to rooming assignments being random. He's used to being paired with whoever the staff thinks won't murder him in his sleep.

His eyes catch his own name.

HOLLANDER - ROZANOV

For a second, his brain refuses to process it, as if the letters don't mean anything until he says them out loud.

He doesn't say them out loud.

He just stands there, staring at the paper, feeling the blood drain from his face. Behind him, the lobby noise keeps going, laughter and wheels rolling and someone calling for a room key, but Shane's hearing narrows until it's mostly his own pulse.

Beside him, Hayden makes a low sound in his throat that might be amusement or sympathy. "Oh, Coach is sick," he murmurs, like he's impressed.

Shane's hands curl around the strap of his bag. "This is a mistake."

"Mm," Hayden says, not agreeing or disagreeing. "Or it's on purpose."

Shane turns toward Coach before he can talk himself out of it. Coach is already watching him, which suggests he has been waiting for this exact moment.

Shane stops a couple feet away, careful not to raise his voice. "Coach. Can I-"

Coach cuts him off with a look. Not angry. Not dramatic. Just tired. "No."

Shane blinks. "No?"

Coach shifts his clipboard to his other hand. "I'm not doing a reshuffle because two of my best players can't figure out how to be in the same space without acting like it's a war zone."

Shane's chest tightens. "It's not-"

Coach's eyes sharpen. "It is. It's a war zone every time you're on the ice together, and I'm done pretending nobody notices. It's costing us. It's going to keep costing us."

Shane's mouth goes dry. He wants to argue, he wants to insist he can compartmentalize, wants to insist this is none of Coach's business, but the truth is he can feel the team noticing. He can feel the atmosphere shift when he and Ilya are in the same room. He can feel it in the way Hayden watches him, in the way a couple of the older guys have started looking between them like they're waiting for sparks.

Coach leans in slightly, lowering his voice. "Fix it," he says, blunt and quiet. "Or at least learn how to function. I don't care what happened between you two. I care that we need you. And right now you're both acting like you'd rather bleed than communicate."

Shane's throat tightens around the word communicate. It feels like a joke. It feels like a knife.

Coach straightens. "Get your key," he says, voice back to normal, and then he's already turning to talk to another player like Shane is dismissed.

Shane stands there for a second too long, then forces his legs to move.

He doesn't look for Ilya. He refuses to look for Ilya.

He feels him anyway, somewhere behind the noise, like a pressure shift in the room.

Upstairs, Shane rides the elevator with three other guys, none of whom speak to him. He's grateful for that. His jaw aches from holding it shut. His shoulder still has a tender knot where he hit the boards last game, and now his stomach feels the same way: sore, bruised, and anticipating another hit. When the elevator doors open on their floor, he steps out and follows the carpeted hallway towards the room number on his card sleeve.

He tells himself he can do this. He can go in, put his bag down, claim a bed like it's territory, take a shower, go to the rink, play a game, come back, sleep. He can do all of that without touching the thing between him and Ilya.

He taps his keycard to the lock, pushes the door open, and steps into a room that smells like detergent and hotel air conditioning.

Two beds. Identical. White sheets pulled tight. A single lamp on the nightstand. The kind of room that feels temporary by design.

Shane puts his bag down by the bed closest to the window and sits on the edge of it like his legs are suddenly heavy.

He hears the door click shut behind him. He doesn't turn.

He can tell it's Ilya anyway by the sound of his footsteps, heavier than they should be on carpet, and by the silence that follows, like the room itself is waiting.

Ilya doesn't speak. Shane can feel him standing there, probably with his own bag still in hand, probably taking in the room the same way Shane had, probably avoiding Shane's presence like the plague. Shane stares at the pattern on the carpet until it blurs.

Finally Ilya sets his bag down, the thud is controlled, but the control is obvious, and Shane hears him move to the other bed. Clearly trying to give them maximum distance, the most he can without being ridiculous.

Shane keeps his eyes forward.

"We- we don't have to talk," Shane says, because he has to say something, because if he doesn't, the silence will eat him alive.

Ilya's answer is quiet. "Okay."

Shane's head turns despite himself. He looks at Ilya then, really looks, and he hates how his body registers the details before his anger can catch up: the way Ilya's curls fall over his face, the way his jaw is set like he's holding himself together by pure will, the faint shadow underneath his eyes that wasn't there at camp when they were kids.

Ilya doesn't look back for a second. When he does, his expression is flat.

"Then we don't talk," Ilya says, like it's a contract.

Shane nods once, because he can't trust his voice. He turns away and starts unpacking like his hands know what to do even when his brain doesn't.

They move around each other for the next hour like two magnets forced into the same space but held apart by something stronger than physics. Shane showers first, because he needs water on his skin to reset his nerves. When he comes out, towel around his waist, he sees Ilya sitting on the bed with his elbows on his knees, staring at his phone, but the screen isn't even on. He's just holding it. Shane stops for a fracture of a second.

Ilya doesn't look up.

Shane keeps moving.

At the rink, the game starts out badly and somehow gets worse.

Minnesota plays hard and fast, heavy on the forecheck, finishing checks in the corners, cutting off lanes before Montreal can settle. Shane can handle that. He can handle hard hockey. He can handle the pressure. What he can't handle is the way every time he looks up for Ilya, their timing is half a beat off.

He passes where Ilya should be, and Ilya is somewhere else. Ilya passes into space like he expects Shane to be there, and Shane isn't. They're both used to a kind of wordless communication that should be instinct by now, and maybe it would be, if they weren't also actively refusing to acknowledge each other as people.

Late in the first period, they both drift towards the same pocket of ice. It happens so fast neither of them have time to correct. Their shoulders clip. The puck squirts loose. Minnesota

picks it up and turns it into a rush the other way, and Shane watches the play collapse like a chain reaction he started with his own stubbornness.

The goal horn goes off.

Shane coasts to the bench with sweat already cooling underneath his gear, jaw tight, eyes burning in a way that has nothing to do with exertion.

Coach doesn't scream. That would almost be easier.

Coach just looks at them with a quiet, disappointed anger that sits heavy in the air. He says nothing, which feels worse than being called out, because it means Coach doesn't think words will help.

By the third period, Montreal is chasing the game. Shane's lungs ache. His shoulder throbs. His hands feel too tight around the stick. Every time he glances at Ilya, he sees the same contained fury on Ilya's face, the same refusal to crack, and it makes something in Shane twist because part of him still wants to reach out and shake him and say stop being like this, stop making me the enemy, stop making me miss you like a limb.

They lose anyway.

In the locker room after, the team is quiet in the way grown men get when they don't want to talk about how bad they felt out there. Gear hits the floor. Skates scrape. Someone curses under their breath. Shane sits at his stall and pulls his jersey over his head, sweat cooling, anger hardening into something dull and exhausted.

Ilya doesn't look at him. Shane doesn't look at Ilya.

Hayden throws his towel over his shoulder and strides past Shane like he has somewhere to be. He stops just long enough to bump Shane's arm with his elbow.

"Come out," Hayden says.

Shane blinks. "What?"

"A couple of us are going to a bar," Hayden says, voice casual, as if they didn't just eat a loss, and a big part of that was Shane's fault and his inability to communicate. "We need to forget that game happened."

Shane should say no. Shane should go back to the hotel, drink water, sleep, be a professional. But the thought of going back to that room and sitting in silence with Ilya makes his throat close.

"I'll go," Shane hears himself say.

Hayden studies him for a second like he's surprised Shane didn't refuse, then nods once, satisfied.

"Good. Ten minutes."

Shane dresses fast, hands shaking just slightly as he pulls on jeans and a sweatshirt. He tells himself he's going for the team. He tells himself he's going to have one drink. He tells himself a lot of things.

On his way to the bar, he goes with Hayden and forces himself to laugh at a couple of jokes. He can feel the edge of his own exhaustion, the way it makes his emotions unstable, like one wrong look could tip him into something embarrassing.

When they get there, the place is loud and crowded, the kind of bar that feeds on game nights: bright lights, too much music, the smell of alcohol and perfume and fried food. Then the team takes over a section almost immediately, bodies clustering, loud again in the way they always get when they're trying to scrap joy back into themselves.

Shane orders a drink and finishes it too quickly.

Then another.

Then a shot someone puts in front of him and says, "For the loss," like that's a reason.

He doesn't feel good. He feels numb and hot at the same time, like the alcohol is melting the edges of him. He can hear himself laughing louder than usual, can feel his own body loosening, and feel himself sliding towards a version of himself he doesn't like but can't stop. He deserves this, doesn't he? He deserves to have one night where doesn't have to second guess every move he makes. God, he can't remember the last time he has let himself break free of himself. Not since-

He cuts himself off.

At some point the group shifts towards the small dance floor near the back, and Shane goes with them because standing still feels worse. The music is loud enough to press into his bones. People are packed close, sweat and cologne and heat.

He dances with Hayden for a minute, mostly just moving like an idiot to make Hayden laugh, and Hayden laughs, delighted, and Shane lets himself have it because laughter is easier than thinking.

And then he looks up and sees Ilya.

Ilya is a few feet away, standing near the edge of the dance floor with a drink in his hand, posture steady, face unreadable. Someone is talking to him, a teammate, Shane thinks, but Ilya's attention isn't on the conversation. His gaze is on Shane like he can't stop himself.

Shane's stomach turns. He tells himself to look away.

He doesn't.

He holds Ilya's gaze for a second too long, and something ugly and desperate flares in him, because the attention feels like contact. It feels like being seen. It feels like the opposite of these last two weeks.

He dances harder, like it's a challenge, like he can shake the feeling out of his limbs.

A girl, a woman, he corrects vaguely, bumps into him and laughs, and Shane laughs back automatically, letting her hands on his shoulders guide him, letting her pull him closer because it's what you're supposed to do in a place like this. It's what the world expects. It's a script he can follow without thinking.

Except he can't stop looking at Ilya over her shoulder.

He sees Ilya's jaw tighten. He sees Ilya take a slow sip of his drink like he's trying to swallow something else. And he sees the way Ilya never, not even once, looks away from him.

And the stupidest part is that Shane feels triumphant for a second, like he's proven something, like he's won.

Then he feels sick, because the alcohol and the noise and the lights and Ilya's *eyes on him* and the weight of everything he's been holding in for years suddenly collide in his stomach.

He pulls away from the woman with a muttered apology he doesn't even know if she hears, and pushes through the crowd with his head down, breathing coming too fast.

He makes it to the bathroom and barely gets the stall door locked before he's on his knees, vomiting into a toilet that smells like bleach and beer.

The sound is humiliating. It's messy. His eyes water and his throat burns. He grips the edge of the bowl like it's keeping him from falling apart completely.

When he's done, he leans against the stall wall, shaking, forehead pressed into the cool metal. He wants to disappear. He wants to rewind the night. He wants to go back to the hotel and crawl under the blankets and pretend his body isn't a traitor.

He hears the bathroom door open. Not the heavy stumble of a drunk stranger.

Controlled. Familiar.

Shane's stomach tightens again.

The stall door doesn't open immediately. Whoever it is stops outside. There's a beat, and then a voice, low and careful, cuts through the noise of the music muffled outside.

"Shane."

His name.

Said like it matters.

Shane closes his eyes. "Go away," he mumbles, voice rough.

A pause. "I'm not-" Ilya starts, then stops. He exhales, like he's recalculating. "Are you okay?"

Shane laughs once, bitter and exhausted. "Why do you care."

The stall door creaks slightly as Ilya shifts his weight. Shane can picture him, standing there with his shoulders squared like he's bracing for a hit, jaw tight, eyes sharp.

"I care," Ilya says, and the honesty of it is so plain Shane almost hates him for it.

Shane wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and forces himself to speak like he has any dignity left. "I don't want to talk to you."

"I know," Ilya says, quiet.

Shane swallows, throat burning. "Then stop."

Ilya doesn't answer immediately. When he speaks again, his voice is softer. "You can't walk back to the hotel like this."

Shane's eyes sting, and he doesn't know if it's from the vomiting or something else. "I can do whatever I want."

"No," Ilya says, and there's a familiar firmness in it, the tone he used at camp when Shane was being stubborn. "You can't. Shane- please."

Shane hates that it works, hates that the tone of Ilya's voice makes him want to obey even now, hates that he's drunk and exposed and Ilya is still the one person who can reach into him with a sentence.

He fumbles with the lock, pushes the stall door open, and there Ilya is, standing too close in the narrow space of the bathroom, eyes on Shane with something that looks like anger and worry braided together.

Ilya's gaze drops to Shane's face, to his mouth, to the dampness on his chin like he's checking for blood, and then flicks away quickly like he caught himself looking.

"Come," Ilya says, and he doesn't grab Shane. He just holds his hand out, palm open in front of him, offering without forcing.

Shane stares at the hand for a second too long. He wants to refuse on principle. He wants to be cruel. He wants to punish Ilya for two weeks of silence and six years of whatever came before that.

But his legs feel like they aren't fully his, and his stomach is still rolling, and the open hand in front of him looks like a lifeline.

He puts his hand in Ilya's.

Ilya's fingers close around it immediately, firm and steady, and he guides Shane out of the bathroom without making a scene.

They move through the crowd. Shane keeps his head down. He can feel eyes on him, can hear someone call his name from the dance floor, can hear Hayden say something that sounds like, "You good?" but Shane can't answer without vomiting again or crying or both.

Ilya keeps them moving.

Outside, the air is cold enough to slap Shane awake a little. He breathes it in and it hurts his lungs, which is almost comforting because physical pain makes more sense than emotional confusion.

They walk back to the hotel in silence, Ilya's hand still around Shane's wrist now, not interlaced fingers, just grip, steadying him. Shane stumbles once, and Ilya tightens his hold without comment, as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

By the time they reach the elevator, Shane's head is spinning. He leans against the wall and closes his eyes.

Ilya stands behind him without touching him, but close enough that Shane can feel his heat.

When the doors open on their floor, they walk down the hallway. Shane's shoes scuff the carpet. His mouth tastes like acid and regret.

Ilya unlocks the door and ushers Shane inside. The room is dark except for the dim glow from the city outside the window. Shane stands there for a second like he's forgotten what he's supposed to do next. Ilya turns on the lamp, the warm light cutting through the dim.

"Sit," Ilya says.

Shane drops onto the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, head hanging. He feels sixteen again. He feels stupid. He feels like his skin doesn't fit.

Ilya moves around the room quietly, efficiently. He opens up a bottle of water and sets it on the nightstand. He pulls a towel from the bathroom and wets it, then comes back and holds it out.

Shane takes it and wipes his face, hands shaking.

Ilya crouches down in front of him without warning and starts untying his shoes.

Shane jolts. "What-"

"You can't sleep in shoes," Ilya says, voice flat like it's obvious.

Shane's throat tightens. The act is so domestic it feels obscene. So gentle it makes Shane want to push him away and pull him closer at the same time.

When Ilya finishes, he stands and steps back, giving Shane space like he's trying to be careful with him. Shane stares at the water bottle. His head swims. His chest aches.

He hears himself say, in a voice that doesn't sound like him, "I miss you."

The words land in the room like something fragile dropped on tile.

Ilya goes still.

Shane keeps going, because the alcohol has loosened the gate in his throat, because he's too tired to hold the line anymore, because he's been carrying this missing like a bruise for weeks. "I miss-" he swallows, eyes burning, "I miss when you were... you. When we were us. I miss when I didn't have to think this hard."

Ilya's face doesn't change much, but his eyes do. Something shifts behind them, something raw.

"Please," Ilya says quietly, and it isn't a command. It's almost a plea. "Go to bed."

Shane laughs, broken. "You won't even talk to me and you're telling me to go to bed."

Ilya's jaw tightens. He looks away for a second, like he's trying to keep his expression under control.

When he looks back, his voice is low. "You won't remember saying this tomorrow."

Shane blinks at him, trying to focus. "What?"

"You won't remember," Ilya repeats, softer, as if he's trying to convince himself more than Shane. "This... you will wake up and you will hate me again."

Shane's head tilts. The room sways slightly. He feels suddenly, horribly sad. "I don't hate you," he whispers, and it sounds like the truest thing he's said in weeks. "I tried. I don't think it's- it's not possible."

Ilya's breath catches.

Shane reaches for the blanket with clumsy fingers and drags it up, because his body is losing it's fight with gravity. He sinks back onto the pillow, eyelids heavy.

Ilya stands there for a moment, watching him as if he's trying to memorize him, like he's trying to decide whether to leave or stay.

Shane's eyes are half closed now, but he can still see the outline of Ilya in the lamplight, shoulders tense, hands flexing at his sides like he wants to grab something and doesn't know what.

Shane mumbles, words slipping, "Don't... don't do that. Don't say my name and then disappear."

Ilya doesn't answer.

Shane's consciousness starts to thin at the edges. He feels himself falling, not into sleep exactly, but into a soft, unavoidable dark.

In that last sliver of awareness, he hears movement. The bed shifts slightly as Ilya sits on the edge of the other mattress, not close enough to touch, but close enough that the room feels less empty. There's a long silence.

Then, so quietly Shane almost doesn't catch it, Ilya speaks into the dim.

"I miss you too," Ilya says, and his voice sounds older than it should, stripped of everything sharp. "And... I'm sorry."

Shane's eyes flutter. His mouth parts like he's going to answer.

But the words don't make it out.

Sleep takes him before he can hold onto anything, and the last thing he registers is the light brush of fingers on his cheeks and the sound of Ilya exhaling, slow and controlled, like he's trying to keep something contained and failing anyway.

In the morning, Shane will wake up with a headache and a sour mouth and gaps in his memory, and he will not remember the sentence that could've changed everything.

Ilya will.

And the room will still be too quiet.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was my problem child but I don't hate the end result! Also - all of your comments have made my day omg you all are so kind. thank you for reading!!!

Chapter 12: 2009

Chapter 12

Summer 2009 - Ottawa

Shane had been waiting for this drive for years, and now that it was here the steering wheel felt too small under his hands, like the car wasn't built for the weight he was carrying.

It was his car (technically his parent's old one, handed down with the quiet ceremony of adulthood), and the fact that he was the one driving himself to camp for the first time should have felt simple, a normal milestone, the kind the other guys would joke about like it meant freedom. For Shane it felt like standing on the edge of a cliff with a map that only showed half the terrain, because driving himself meant control, and control was the only thing that ever soothed the static in his brain, but it also meant there was no buffer anymore. No mom in the passenger seat asking if he packed extra socks. No dad reminding him about gas stations and speed limits. No familiar parental chatter to fill the air when his thoughts get too loud.

Just him. Just the road. Just the miles ticking down to a place that had always been a constant in his life and was now, abruptly, about to end.

Last year of camp.

He didn't like how that sentence tasted in his head. Camp had been the axis point for four summers, the one calendar date Shane could orient himself around without having to think too hard, and the idea that this was the last time he'd pull into this parking lot made his chest feel tight in a way he didn't fully understand. He'd always assumed it would keep existing, the way you assume summer itself will always return. Even when he'd grown up enough to know the program had an end, some part of him had still treated it like a permanent fixture, like the rink would be waiting, like the dorms and the cafeteria and the stupid vending machines and the staircase near the back exit would always be there.

Like Ilya would always be there.

That was the other reason the drive felt like a trap.

Driving himself meant he couldn't pretend he'd been delivered here by someone else's plans. He couldn't blame the schedule or his parents or circumstance. He had chosen this. He had turned the key in the ignition this morning and watched the dashboard lights flicker on, and he had driven straight toward a place that held the one moment he'd been trying not to replay all winter.

The dock.

The lake.

The almost.

He kept his eyes on the road, because if he let his mind drift even slightly, it dragged him back there as if it was waiting all year for permission. The sound of water against the boards. The way the air had been cool enough to bite. The way Ilya's shoulder had pressed against his, and then the way Ilya's hand had shifted closer, and the way his gaze had dropped to Shane's mouth. The way the space between them had narrowed until Shane had felt something in his body go absolutely still, like every instinct had been rerouted to one point.

And the way Ilya had pulled back, definitive, like he'd seen consequences in the shape of Shane's face.

They hadn't talked about it.

Not the next day. Not the next week. Not in the months that followed, when they messaged like normal, joked like normal, argued about hockey like normal, except normal had started to feel like a costume they both wore too carefully, always avoiding the seam where it might split.

Shane tightened his grip on the wheel until his knuckles went pale, then forced his hands to relax because he could feel himself doing that thing he did when he wanted to control a feeling by controlling something physical. The highway stretched ahead, straight and gray and indifferent, and he tried to focus on tangible things: the speed limit, the distance to the next exit, the way the sunlight flashed between the trees, the steady hum of tires on pavement.

He had promised himself he wouldn't overthink this year.

He had promised himself he wouldn't show up desperate, or raw, or looking for answers like a kid with his palms out.

He had promised himself he could do one last summer the way they always had, loud and easy and stitched together by routine, and then camp would end and they would go back to their lives and whatever had happened on the dock would stay safely unspoken, a thing that never had to be named.

Except as the Ottawa exit sign came into view, Shane felt something in his chest settle into the shape of certainty, and it wasn't comforting.

It was dread.

Because this was the last year of them.

And if he didn't understand what the dock had meant, if he didn't understand what Ilya was doing with that distance, then he was going to lose the only place where Shane had ever felt like he could be himself without rehearsing.

He pulled into the parking lot and turned the engine off, and the sudden silence inside the car felt loud. For a second he just sat there, hands still on the wheel, staring through the

windshield at the familiar low building and the row of cars and the boys dragging duffels toward the entrance.

He told himself to move. He told himself this was normal. That he was seventeen, that he had driven himself here like a normal person, that he was not about to walk into a locker room and let one boy rearrange his entire nervous system.

He grabbed his bag and got out anyway.

The air smelled like summer and asphalt and something faintly metallic drifting from the rink, and Shane felt his heart stutter once, because a part of him had already started searching.

He found Ilya in the locker room the way he always did: before he meant to, before his brain could protect him, like his body had its own compass.

Second bench from the left-

Except it wasn't.

The locker room was already loud, music rattling the terrible speaker in the corner, boys half dressed and shoving each other, the sharp rip of tape and the slap of towels and the constant overlapping noise of voices competing for space. Shane's shoulders did their usual instinctive lift, but it faded quickly, because this chaos was familiar, and because he was looking for one person who always made it feel like less.

He found Ilya on the wrong side of the room, tucked closer to the far wall where the older guys tended to cluster, where boys who already believed they were destined for something bigger sat like they owned the air. Ilya wasn't hunched over with elbows on his knees and energy coiled tight; he was upright, back against the bench, posture too composed, his stick leaned neatly against the wall like it had been placed rather than dropped, and the tape job on his blade was so clean it almost looked clinical.

He looked up when Shane came in, and Shane felt that stupid physical jolt of recognition, the one that always made his brain go briefly blank, because there he was, because of course he was, because Shane had spent the last year building his seasons around this return like it was something he could plan for.

Ilya's face changed in a way Shane almost didn't trust. Relief flashed in his eyes, quick and bright, and something else slid over it like a filter, caution maybe, restraint, as if the relief had to pass through a check before it was allowed to exist.

Ilya stood and crossed the room in long strides that were unmistakably his.

He hugged Shane.

He hugged him like it was a habit.

But it was shorter than it used to be, and Shane registered it in the same terrible instant he registered something else: the quick pressure of Ilya's arms and then the release, the way

Ilya's hands handed on Shane's shoulders and squeezed once, not lingering at the back of Shane's neck the way they used to, not holding on as if Shane might disappear again.

Shane's body tried to lean into him anyway, because his body still remembered the old version of this hug, the one that always felt like homecoming. For a second he almost chased the missing half second like an idiot.

Then Ilya stepped back, and the space returned between them like a door clicking shut.

"You drove," Ilya said, eyes flicking briefly past Shane toward the parking lot as if he could see the car through the walls.

Shane blinked, because the words landed weirdly, not teasing, not celebratory, just... noted. Like Ilya was filing it away.

"Yeah," Shane said, forcing his voice to sound normal. "First time."

Ilya's mouth twitched, almost a smile. "You are adult now," he said, and his tone tried for lightness and didn't quite get there. "Is terrifying."

Shane's laugh came out soft and strained. "It's not terrifying."

Ilya's eyes held his for a beat, like he didn't believe him. "Everything is terrifying," he said quietly, and for a second the sentence sounded like it belonged to someone older than seventeen.

Shane's gaze flicked past Ilya to the bench behind him, the wrong bench, and the confusion sharpened into something he couldn't ignore.

"What are you doing over here?" Shane asked, nodding toward the far wall.

Ilya's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. "It's nothing," he said.

"It's not nothing," Shane replied, and he hated how quickly his voice went serious. "That's not your bench."

Ilya's shoulders lifted in a half shrug that looked too controlled to be casual. "It's a bench," he said, like Shane was being ridiculous. "It's wood. It's same."

Shane's throat tightened in that way it did when he didn't know whether he was about to be laughed at or shut out. He lowered his voice without meaning to. "Did someone say something to you?"

Ilya blinked once, slow. "No."

"Then why-"

"Shane," Ilya cut in, and Shane felt the way his name sounded now, steadier, deeper, still unmistakably Ilya, and he hated that hearing it made his chest do something stupid.

Ilya's eyes held his for a moment, and there was a plea there, barely visible, the kind of look that said *don't, not here* without the words ever being spoken.

Shane swallowed. The locker room was loud, but he could still feel attention shifting in small magnetic pulls, boys clocking the fact that Ilya Rozanov had just crossed the room for Shane Hollander like it mattered.

"Fine," Shane said, because he didn't want their reunion to become a public interrogation. He forced a lighter tone that felt brittle. "But if you're stealing someone's spot, you better not start crying when they steal yours."

Ilya's mouth finally curved into something closer to a real smile, but it didn't reach all the way to his eyes. "I don't cry," he said, reflexively, and Shane's stomach dipped because he'd heard that phrase once through a thin door years ago, in Russian, loaded with a meaning that had nothing to do with teasing.

Shane let his bag drop onto the tile with a dull thud and stepped closer, because he didn't know how to be casual when something felt wrong. "I missed you," he said, and he hated how honest it sounded.

Ilya's eyes widened a fraction, and something soft flickered in his face like a light trying to turn on. "I know," he said too fast, then added quieter, "I missed you also."

Shane waited for the usual relief, the familiar settling.

It didn't come.

And that absence scared him more than anything else.

On the ice, Shane forgot to be careful, because the ice always rewired him into clarity, because his brain knew how to be here without having to rehearse. Within minutes he and Ilya were moving they always did, cutting and turning and passing without looking because they didn't have to. The puck came off Shane's stick and landed on Ilya's tape like it belonged there, and Shane felt that old, electric satisfaction - *there you are* - the part of him that remembered even when everything else felt wrong.

Except Ilya didn't look happy.

It wasn't obvious, not dramatic. Ilya was fast, sharp, lethal in that way that made the other boys swear when he blew past. He chirped a little, tossed out the occasional insult that made guys laugh. He looked composed to anyone who didn't know him.

But Shane knew the difference between Ilya performing confidence and Ilya feeling it.

His smile flashed on and off like it didn't belong to him. Whenever Shane did something well, Ilya's reaction was strained, a nod, a clipped "good," nothing more. Shane felt every missing shove and grin like a phantom limb.

And then there were the small things: the way Ilya didn't drift close on the bench between reps, the way he didn't bump Shane's shoulder when he passed behind him, the way his touches were suddenly absent.

Shane's body noticed the absence like hunger.

He tried to tell himself he was imagining it, that the dock had lodged in his head like a splinter and now everything felt infected. Because it had been months since that night, months since Ilya had leaned in close enough that Shane had almost tasted possibility.

They still hadn't talked about it. Not once.

And Shane had spent the winter telling himself it was fine, that it would fade, that he could outwait it.

It hadn't faded.

It had grown teeth.

Lunch should have felt safe, because it always had been, in its own chaotic way. The cafeteria noise was familiar, and for years it had been where they retreated together, shared table, shared food, Ilya stealing whatever scraps he could find off of Shane's plate.

Shane sat across from Ilya and watched him pick at his food, those quick restless fingers suddenly hesitant like he couldn't decide what he was allowed to want. The sight made Shane's chest ache with something stupidly tender, and it made him angry at himself because tenderness felt dangerous now, like it could be used against him.

Shane had been carrying a question since 2007, since the first summer Ilya came home with him and said "Night, Yuna" like he was trying the words out. He'd offered him refuge once and Ilya had taken it, and ever since then Shane had been quietly imagining it again, not just because he wanted Ilya around, but because the idea of Ilya going back to Russia after camp sat in his chest like a stone.

He swallowed, then forced the words out before he could talk himself into silence.

"Come home with me after camp," Shane said. "For a couple weeks. You could... just breathe. You could not have to deal with-" He stopped, because he didn't have a clean word for *your father*, because even thinking it made Ilya's shoulders look like they might go rigid.

Ilya's fork paused midair.

Shane's pulse thudded hard once. He hated how much hinged on this answer in his mind, hated the way he felt like he was asking for something bigger than a couch and a guest room.

"I can't," Ilya said.

The words were simple, but the way he said them wasn't dismissive; it was shut, like a door closing gently but firmly.

Shane tried to keep his voice even. "Why not?"

Ilya's gaze stayed on his plate. "I have to go back."

"Back where?" Shane asked, even though he knew, because he needed Ilya to say it. He needed it to be real.

Ilya's jaw tightened once. "Russia."

The word sat heavy between them, and Shane felt anger flair, not at Ilya, but at the way Russia could still claim him, the way it could pull him away no matter how much Shane wanted to keep him here in this simpler world of ice and dorm beds and stolen fries.

"You don't have to," Shane heard himself say, and he hated the pleading edge that slipped in. "You could stay. You could-"

"You don't understand," Ilya said quietly, and Shane could hear the exhaustion under it, like the sentence had been used on him before.

"Then explain it," Shane said, and he surprised himself with the bluntness, because he didn't want to be careful anymore. He was tired of careful.

Ilya looked at him then, really looked, and for a moment Shane thought he might actually let him in, might actually open the locked door the way Shane had been waiting for since they were fifteen.

Instead Ilya looked away again, jaw working like he was chewing down words.

"I can't," Ilya repeated, and this time it sounded less like refusal and more like resignation.

Something in Shane went hollow, and he hated the hollowness because it felt like the beginning of grief.

"Okay," Shane said, forcing the words out like it didn't matter. "Forget I asked."

Ilya's hand twitched on the table, as if he wanted to reach across and fix something and didn't know how. "Shane-"

"What," Shane snapped, sharper than he meant to, and immediately saw Ilya flinch at the edge in it, small but real. Guilt flashed through Shane. He swallowed it, because guilt wasn't going to fix this. "You've been acting like-" He stopped, because he couldn't say *like you regret me* without sounding insane.

Ilya's eyes went shuttered. "I'm tired," he said, and it was true, Shane could see it in the shadow under his eyes, but it was also an exit.

Shane nodded once because he didn't trust his voice, and he forced himself to eat, tasting nothing, while the gap between their shoulders felt like a canyon.

That night, the dorm always softened, the noise draining away until it was just the fan rattling in the window and the occasional creak of beds. For years, that had been their territory, the late night whispers, quiet jokes, the feeling of being the only two awake in a room full of sleeping boys.

Shane lay on his bunk staring at the ceiling and waited for Ilya's voice to cut through the dark.

It didn't.

Across the aisle, Ilya lay rigidly still, face turned toward the wall like he could pretend sleep into existence. Shane knew he was awake anyway; he'd learned the difference over the years.

Shane shifted, springs creaking, hating that he felt like he was intruding on his own friendship.

"Ilya?" he said softly.

A pause. Then, "What?"

"You're quiet," Shane said, and the sentence felt absurdly small compared to what he meant.

"I'm sleeping," Ilya replied.

"You're not sleeping," Shane said, trying for lightness, trying for normal. "You're doing that thing where you pretend to sleep so you don't have to talk."

Silence.

Shane's stomach twisted, because the silence felt like an answer.

"Did I do something?" Shane asked, and hated himself for how small it sounded, hated the way it dragged him back to the version of himself that always assumed he was the problem.

Ilya exhaled slowly. "No."

"Then what is this," Shane whispered, voice tightening despite himself, "because it feels like... like you're trying to leave while you're still here."

For a beat Shane thought Ilya might answer honestly, might finally let him touch the thing they'd been dancing around for months.

Instead Ilya's voice came quiet, almost tired. "Please," he said. "Go to bed."

The words were gentle, but they landed like dismissal.

Shane lay there staring at the ceiling while something in his chest curled tight and angry, because he wanted to shake Ilya, because he wanted to beg, because he wanted to be held and he didn't want to need it.

He rolled onto his side, pressed his palm against his chest as if he could physically hold the spiral down, and listened to Ilya's breathing across the aisle.

Maybe you hallucinated what happened on the dock, his mind whispered, cruelly. *Maybe it was nothing.*

Shane clenched his jaw until it ached, because if he let himself believe that, then he didn't know what it meant about him that it had felt like everything.

The next day, he heard it by accident.

They were in the locker room after skate, air thick with sweat and deodorant, boys loud in that exhausted, braggy way that always got worse when someone mentioned girls. Shane was at his stall taping his stick, trying not to look at Ilya across the room because looking felt like giving his brain a weapon.

A couple guys near Ilya were talking, voices overlapping.

"Rozanov," one of them said, laughing, "you got a girlfriend back home or what? In Russia? Someone waiting?"

Shane's fingers paused on the tape.

Ilya's voice came easy, practiced. "I don't do girlfriends." he said, like it was funny.

"Yeah?" another boy said, eyebrows raised. "So what do you do?"

Ilya shrugged with that casual arrogance he sometimes used like armor. "Whatever," he said, and the way he said it made it clear without him having to spell it out: yes, he'd been with girls; yes, he knew how to get what he wanted; yes, he could be wanted.

The boys laughed. Someone called him a menace. Someone else said something about Russian charm.

Shane felt heat crawl up his neck, irrational and immediate, because his first thought wasn't *good for him* like the way a normal friend would think, it was *why didn't you tell me*, then the sharper thought that made his stomach drop:

So the dock really meant nothing to him.

He taped faster, hands suddenly clumsy, because his mind went loud. If Ilya had been hooking up with girls all year, living a whole life Shane wasn't even allowed to know about, then what did that make Shane? A summer constant. A camp habit. A thing Ilya could step away from the second it got complicated.

And the dock-

Shane's stomach twisted, because it had felt real. It had felt undeniable. It had felt like the first time his body had told the truth faster than his brain could stop it.

Had he been insane?

He had stayed quiet, because he couldn't make himself the spectacle, because he couldn't say the truth out loud in a locker room full of boys who assumed the script was universal.

But the quiet inside him sharpened until it cut.

That night he found Ilya on the staircase near the vending machines, where they used to sit with stolen chips and soda that tasted like metal, where concrete steps held years of their arguments and secrets.

Ilya was there, back against the railing, a candy wrapper in one hand and his phone in the other, staring at the dark screen like it might tell him something.

Shane stopped at the bottom of the stairs and watched him for a second, because there was a time when this sight would have made him calm.

Tonight it just made him ache.

Ilya looked up and relief flickered in his eyes for half a second, and that softness made Shane's anger flare brighter, because it felt unfair that Ilya could still look at him like that while keeping him shut out.

"You're avoiding me," Shane said, voice flat.

Ilya's brow furrowed. "I'm here."

"That's not what I meant," Shane snapped, and hated the edge immediately but couldn't put it back. "You've been acting weird since-" he cut himself off, because saying *the dock* felt like lighting a match in a room full of gas.

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Don't," he said quietly.

Shane let out a harsh breath. "Don't what? Don't talk? Don't ask? Don't notice you've basically been-" He swallowed and forced the next words out because he couldn't carry them anymore. "Why didn't you tell me you hooked up with someone?"

Ilya blinked, startled. "What?"

"I heard you," Shane said. "Earlier. In the locker room."

Ilya's face went still, control snapping into place. "It's none of their business."

"That's not what I asked," Shane said, and his voice wanted to shake. "Why didn't you tell me. We tell each other everything."

Ilya's gaze flicked away and back, and now there was something raw under the control, something like panic held very tight. "It didn't matter enough to tell you," he said.

"It matters to me," Shane replied, and the honesty tasted like blood.

Ilya's throat bobbed. "Why?"

The question was quiet.

It was also devastating, because it meant Ilya was making Shane say it.

Shane's hands curled at his sides, fingers clenching and unclenching. He took another step up, close enough that Ilya had to tilt his head back slightly to look at him, close enough that Shane could see the tension at the corner of Ilya's mouth, close enough that the air between them felt charged with all the words they hadn't said for months.

"Because I feel crazy," Shane said, and the words came out raw and fast. "Because that night happened and you've been acting like it didn't, and now I hear you talking about girls like you've been living a whole life I don't even get to know, and I keep wondering if I imagined it, if I hallucinated it, if I'm making something out of nothing because I'm-" He stopped, because he couldn't say *because I want you* without feeling like the ground might split.

Ilya's eyes flashed. "You didn't imagine it."

Shane's breath caught hard. "Then why are you acting like this?"

Ilya's jaw worked once. He gripped the edge of the step like he needed the concrete to keep him steady. "Because you don't understand," he said low. "Because for you it's... it's just-"

"Just what?" Shane demanded. "Just camp? Just summer? Just me being convenient when you're here and gone when you're not?"

Ilya stood up so abruptly Shane flinched. He was close now, too close, and their breathing started to sync without permission.

"Stop," Ilya said, not loud, just sharp. "Stop making it sound like I don't-"

"Like you don't what?" Shane shot back, and the crack in his voice made him furious. "Because it sure feels like you regretted it the second you pulled away."

Something in Ilya's face tightened so hard it looked like pain. "I don't regret it," he said, and the sentence came out like it was being ripped from him. "I regret that I can't-"

Shane's heart hammered. His hands shook at his sides. He didn't know what he wanted, and explanation, a promise, a confession, only that he couldn't stand this half-life anymore.

"If you're going to ruin this," Shane said, voice shaking now, "at least admit what it is."

Ilya's eyes were bright with something dangerous and honest. He looked like he was trying not to drown.

Shane stepped back down one stair, turning away because leaving was the only way he knew to keep from breaking.

"Fine," he said, flat and final. "If you don't want to tell me things, then don't. If you're going to disappear, just do it."

He started to walk.

Behind him, "Shane-"

He kept moving.

Then Ilya's hand grabbed his wrist. Not violent, not painful. Instinctive.

The grip was firm enough to stop him, and the contact shot up Shane's arm like a spark because it was the first real touch Ilya had given him all week, because his skin had been starving for it in a way Shane refused to name.

Shane turned back hard. "What."

Ilya was too close. His fingers were fisted in Shane's sleeve like letting go would be a kind of death. His eyes were panicked and desperate at once.

"I don't regret it," Ilya repeated, and now it sounded like truth without armor. "But you don't understand what it costs me."

Shane's throat tightened. "Then tell me."

Ilya swallowed. His jaw clenched. His gaze flicked down, briefly, to Shane's mouth, and that tiny movement made Shane's body go very still.

Shane felt something inside him snap, not into anger, but into clarity, because he could see it now, the wanting held under restraint, the fear braided into desire, the way Ilya was trying to keep it contained and failing.

Shane stepped forward and kissed him.

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't careful. It was a collision, frustrated and desperate, like Shane had reached the end of pretending. For the briefest fraction of a second Ilya froze, not doubt, just the shock of reality, and then he kissed him back with a force that stole Shane's breath, immediately and unmistakably mutual, like he'd been starving.

Ilya's hand slid from Shane's sleeve to the back of his shirt, gripping hard, pulling him close until their bodies pressed tight and Shane could feel Ilya's heartbeat through his fabric, fast and frantic. Shane's hands found Ilya's jaw and waist, and the touch felt like a claim and a plea all at once.

The kiss broke and came back and broke again, messy and breathless, not a movie, not a fantasy, just two boys finally doing the thing their bodies had been screaming for while their brains tried to keep up with consequences.

When they finally pulled apart it was only because they had to breathe.

They stood there on the stairs with their foreheads pressed together, hands still fisted in each other's shirts like letting go would end the world. Shane's whole body trembled with adrenaline and relief and terror braided together.

Ilya's eyes were closed. His breath came too fast. When he spoke, his voice was rough, stripped down to something raw.

"I've wanted to do that," Ilya whispered, and the confusion hit Shane like a punch, "for so long I don't even know when it started."

Shane's eyes stung. He wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. He wanted to rewind his whole life and do this sooner and also never do it at all because he could already feel how dangerous it was, how it could ruin them, how it could be used against them like a weapon.

"This can't happen," Ilya said, and the words sounded like they were being dragged out of him against his will.

Shane swallowed hard. His hands shook against Ilya's shirt, but he didn't let go.

"It already did," Shane said, and the sentence felt like stepping over a line he could never uncross.

Ilya opened his eyes then, and in them Shane saw it: not regret, not confusion, but want, bare and terrifying, and something that looked dangerously like hope.

For a long beat they just stood there, breathing loud, foreheads touching, the weight of what they'd just done settling into the space between them like something alive.

Shane didn't know what came next.

He only knew that this was real, and for the first time in months he wasn't alone in the truth.

And that made him feel terrified.

And, heartbreakingly, hopeful.

Chapter 13: Held Between Floors

Chapter Notes

hehe this one was fun

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

Chapter 13

November 2016 - Minneapolis

Shane woke up the way he always woke after nights he couldn't fully account for, not with a clean return to consciousness but with the slow, humiliating realization that his body had kept living while his mind had been elsewhere, and now it wanted payment for the hours it had carried him through on muscle memory and whatever cheap courage alcohol could manufacture. His tongue felt too large for his mouth and this throat tasted like pennies and bile and regret. The air in the hotel room was dry and over conditioned, humming faintly through the vent like a held breath, and when he opened his eyes the ceiling was too bright, too bland, too calm for the noise happening inside his skull.

He didn't move right away. He let himself lie there with his forearm draped over his eyes, trying to locate the line between the headache and the anxiety, because they were braided together so tightly it was hard to tell where one ended and the other began. His stomach rolled with the kind of nausea that wasn't purely physical, the kind that came from remembering the shape of a night without remembering the details, and that was the part that made his chest tighten: those missing pieces, those gaps that his brain would fill with worst case scenarios whether he invited it to or not.

He remembered the bar in flashes, not scenes, just textures: the heat of the bodies pressed too close, the sticky floor that tugged at the soul of his shoes, a shot glass sweating in his hand. He remembered the bathroom in a way that made his skin crawl, the cold of the stall door against his forehead, the way his stomach had turned itself inside out and left him shaking with shame. He remembered, too, the sound of his own name spoken in that low, steady voice that his body still reacted to like a command.

He remembered Ilya.

He remembered a hand held out, palm open, not grabbing, not forcing, just offering as if Shane were something that could be handled gently.

After that, the memories blurred into a smear of lamplight and hotel carpet and water in a bottle that tasted like salvation, and somewhere in that blur there was the awful certainty that he had said something. He didn't know what it was, not exactly, but he knew the way his

mouth felt, the way his throat felt, like it had been used too much, like he had pushed words out past whatever gate he normally kept locked.

His pulse thudded hard behind his ribs. He pressed his palm against his sternum as if he could physically slow it down.

Don't panic, he told himself, because he always told himself that, because panic was the one thing he could not afford. He was a professional athlete, a disciplined person, the kind of man who knew how to hold the line even when everything inside him wanted to split. He was supposed to be able to wake up, take a shower, drink water, swallow two Advil, and behave like nothing in the world could rattle him.

But he was also the same boy who used to count steps down hallways until the numbers calmed the static in his brain, and right now the static was back, bright and relentless, buzzing at the edges of his thoughts.

He lowered his arm slightly and blinked until the room stopped tilting. The night clock glowed an unforgiving red: too early, too late, an hour that meant there was practice soon and a schedule he had to hold onto because the alternative was floating. His mouth was still sour. His head was still pounding. His sheets were twisted around his legs as if he had fought his way through sleep.

On the other bed, Ilya lay on his side with his back half turned, one arm thrown over the blanket like he'd fallen asleep without meaning to, like his body had finally given up. For a moment, Shane had the childish, irrational urge to pretend Ilya wasn't there at all, to close his eyes again and wake up in a room where nothing had happened, where there had been no bar and no bathroom and no hand held out in the quiet. But Ilya was there, undeniably, and Shane's body knew it before his mind did; his muscles tightened, the way they always did when Ilya entered his awareness, as if even the thought of him was an oncoming hit.

Shane tried to tell himself not to look. Looking would invite questions, and questions were dangerous when he couldn't remember the answers.

He looked anyway.

Ilya's hair was a mess, curls flattened on one side, his face softened by sleep in a way Shane almost never got to see anymore. The hard lines Ilya kept arranged so carefully during the day weren't there in the same way, and that should of made it easier, should have made him look less like the problem that kept cutting through Shane's life like a blade, but all it did was make Shane's chest tighten, because it was a reminder of how well he knew this person, how much of him lived in Shane's body like a memory, how unfair it was that knowing didn't mean having.

Ilya shifted, the mattress spring creaking softly, and his eyes opened.

The moment their gazes met, Shane felt the hangover/anxiety/whatever the fuck, spike so sharply that it almost stole his breath. It wasn't the eye contact itself, but there was something about being seen by Ilya that made him feel exposed in a way nothing else did, as if Ilya's eyes could reach inside him and find the exact place he kept trying to hide.

Ilya didn't look away.

That was new.

Not new in the sense that Ilya had never held Shane's gaze before, they had spent years doing it without thinking, quick glances across locker rooms, silent communication on the ice, but new in the sense that lately Ilya had treated Shane's existence like it was something to be avoided at all costs. This morning, Ilya's stayed on him as if he had forgotten to build the wall back up, as if he had woken up in the wrong version of himself.

"Dobroe," Ilya said, voice rough with sleep, the word sounding like it had been dragged out of his throat rather than spoken cleanly. Then, catching himself, he added in English, "Morning."

Shane swallowed. His throat hurt. "Yeah."

Ilya sat up slowly, rubbing his face with one hand. When he dropped his hand, he looked at Shane again, and there was something in his expression Shane couldn't immediately categorize, something that made his stomach clench harder than the nausea. It wasn't cold. It wasn't hostile. It was... attentive, almost careful, like Ilya was checking him the way you check someone after a bad fall, looking for injuries you can't see.

"You feel okay?" Ilya asked.

The question landed like a weight. Shane stared at him, trying to figure out what part of it was real and what part of it was a performance. Concern from Ilya should have been comforting, and once, years ago, it would have been, but now it felt like a trap, like an invitation to a space Shane had been locked out of for too long, like a door opening just wide enough to make him step toward it before it slammed.

"I'm fine," Shane said automatically, because it was the only sentence he trusted himself to say without revealing how close to the edge he felt.

Ilya's gaze didn't move. "You don't look fine."

Shane almost laughed, the sound caught somewhere in his chest, because what did "fine" even mean in a room where he couldn't remember his own words and Ilya was suddenly acting like Shane mattered? He sat up and swing his legs over the side of the bed, keeping his movements deliberate because sudden motion made his head pound harder. The carpet was cold under his feet. He stared down at it, because looking away was easier than holding Ilya's eyes while the shame gnawed at him.

"I'm hungover," Shane admitted, like that was something he could control, something that belonged to him and not whatever had happened between them last night.

"I know," Ilya said quietly.

The two words make Shane's skin tighten. I know, like Ilya had watched him, like Ilya had been there for the parts Shane couldn't remember, like Ilya had collected Shane's loose edges

with those steady hands and held them together while Shane fell apart. The thought was both humiliating and terrifyingly intimate.

Shane stood, not because he needed to but because he couldn't sit there under that gaze. Standing made him feel like he had more room. He moved toward the bathroom with careful steps, then paused, because he felt Ilya watching him even from across the room, and he couldn't take it.

"What?" Shane asked, sharper than he meant.

Ilya blinked as if he hadn't expected to be challenged. "What?"

"You keep looking at me like you're-" Shane cut himself off, because he didn't have a word that didn't sound pathetic. Like you're worried. Like you're waiting for me to say something else. Like last night didn't happen and you didn't just hear whatever I said.

Ilya's mouth tightened for a moment, a small movement that suggested restraint. "I'm looking at you," he said, and the simplicity of it made Shane's throat tighten, because it implied an intimacy that Shane didn't know how to handle anymore. "Because you are... pale."

Shane stared at him. "That's what you're going with."

Ilya's eyes narrowed slightly. Not anger, exactly. Something more complicated, something that looked like he was biting back a different response. "Yes."

Shane turned away and went into the bathroom before he could say something stupid, like ask, Did I say something? Did I say I miss you? Did I beg? Did I cry? Did I touch you? Did you touch me?

He shut the door and leaned over the sink, gripping the countertop till his knuckles whitened. The mirror showed him a face he recognized and didn't recognize at the same time: stubble along his jaw, hair sticking up at odd angles, eyes bloodshot and too bright. He looked like someone who had made mistakes.

He splashed water on his face and tried to breathe through the tightness in his chest.

He could do this, he told himself. He could get through the day. He could get through practice. He could get through the game. He could keep everything contained, keep his body from betraying him again, keep his voice steady, keep his expression flat. He had been doing that for years. He had built a whole life around that skill.

And then he heard a soft knock at the door.

"Shane?" Ilya's voice filtered through the wood. "You want water?"

Shane stared at his reflection, the anger flaring up in him not because of the water but because of the gentleness, because of how easily it slipped under his skin. "There's water in the room," he called back.

A pause. Then, quieter, "Okay."

Shane pressed his palms to the counter and bowed his head, willing his heart to slow.

When he came out of the bathroom, Ilya was sitting on the edge of his bed, already dressed in sweats and a team hoodie. He held his phone in his hand, screen dark, thumb resting on the side like he'd been holding it without using it. Shane recognized the posture from the airport, from those moments when Ilya looked calm only because he was holding his own panic in his fists.

Ilya looked up when Shane emerged, and again that careful attention sharpened in his eyes.

"I'm fine," Shane said before Ilya could ask again, because he couldn't bear the question again.

Ilya's gaze lingered anyway. "Eat something," he said, not unkindly.

Shane snorted. "I can't."

"You should try."

Shane grabbed his bag, because movement was safer than staying in this room, safer than being watched. "We have to go," he said. "We're going to be late."

Ilya stood immediately, as if he'd been waiting for the chance to stop sitting with that distance between them. "Yes," he said, and reached for his own bag, and the simple coordination of it, two people moving like they know each others rhythms, sent a jolt through Shane's chest that felt like grief.

They left the room together.

In the hallway, Shane kept his focus on the carpet pattern, because if he looked at Ilya too long he would start asking questions he didn't have the strength to hear answers to. Their footsteps fell into a familiar cadence, and Shane hated how comforting that felt, hated how his body still wanted this, wanted the ease of moving alongside someone who once felt like home.

At the elevator bank, other teammates clustered with sleepy faces and coffee cups, and Shane felt his shoulders loosen a fraction. People were easier. People were predictable. Around other guys, Ilya became the version of him that never slipped. Around other guys, Shane could pretend he's just another teammate, just another quiet forward who did his job and didn't have personal history sharp enough to cut through air.

They waited in the small crowd, and Shane could feel Ilya beside him without looking. He could smell his shampoo, something clean and faintly citrus, and it pulled Shane back to summers on bunk beds and damp hair after ice time, and that thought made his throat tighten unexpectedly.

The elevator doors slid open, and the group shuffled forward.

Shane stepped in first, because he always stepped in first, because he liked being near the panel, because control, however small, was a habit his body clung to. Ilya stepped in after

him, and somehow, without any conscious decision, the other guys kept moving, filling the next elevator, leaving Shane and Ilya alone in this one.

The doors began to close.

For a second, Shane's brain stalled, like it had been expecting the buffer of other bodies and now it had been stripped away. He glanced toward the widening seam of hallway between the doors and had the irrational urge to step out, to let the doors close without him, to pretend he hadn't walked into a space this small with Ilya's silence.

Then the doors shut with a soft thud, and the elevator began to lower.

Shane stared at the floor indicator as if the numbers could save him. He heard Ilya shift his weight behind him, heard the faint creak of his bag strap. The air felt thick, as if the elevator didn't have enough oxygen for the tension both of them were carrying.

Shane cleared his throat. "We're going to be late," he said, because logistics were safer than feelings.

"We have time," Ilya replied.

Shane forced a humorless laugh. "Sure."

The elevator jerked.

It wasn't violent. It wasn't dramatic. It was a brief, unsettling shudder that made Shane's stomach drop in the same way it dropped on planes, in the same way it dropped any time he lost the illusion of stability. The lights flickered once, barely noticeable, and then the elevator lurched again and stopped with a heavy, final click.

Shane's knees bent reflexively, his hand darting out to brace against the wall. For a split second, he didn't understand what had happened, because elevators weren't supposed to stop like that, not between floors, not with that kind of finality.

Then the floor indicator froze.

The hum of motion died.

The silence that followed was immediate and suffocating, the kind of silence that made Shane hear his own breathing too clearly.

He stared at the doors. "No," he said, voice flat.

Behind him, Ilya exhaled sharply. "Are we-"

"Yes," Shane cut in, because he could not tolerate uncertainty. He moved toward the panel and jabbed at the "Door Open" button, as if force could persuade machinery. Nothing happened. He pressed it again, harder. Still nothing.

He swallowed, trying to keep his breathing even. The hangover throbbed behind his eyes. The tightness in his head turned sharp.

"Okay," he said, forcing the words out like an order. "Okay. We press the emergency button."

He hit the call button, and a tinny beep sounded. A moment later, a crackling voice answered through the intercom.

"This is hotel security. What seems to be the problem?"

"We're stuck," Shane said, and he could hear the edge in his own voice despite the effort to keep it controlled. "The elevator stopped between floors."

"All right," the voice replied with the calm of someone who had said this sentence a hundred times. "We're dispatching maintenance. Please remain calm. We will have you out as soon as possible."

"How long?" Shane asked.

A pause that made Shane's stomach twist. "It may take some time, sir. The technician is on his way. It could be an hour or two."

Shane stared at the panel, hand still hovering near the button, as if he could press harder and get a better answer. An hour or two. Trapped. With Ilya. No exit. In a box suspended in a shaft.

His lungs tightened.

He reached for his phone automatically. No service. Of course there was no service. Concrete and steel and the universe laughing at him.

"Fuck," Shane muttered.

He forced himself to take a breath, then another, trying to activate the part of his brain that knew how to solve problems. Okay. Okay. Stay calm. Don't panic. It's just an elevator. It's not collapsing. It's not falling. It's just stopped.

But his body didn't believe in logic. His body believed in sensation: the closeness of the walls, the stillness of the air, the knowledge that he could not leave when he wanted to leave.

Behind him, Ilya's voice cut in, low and firm. "Shane."

Shane didn't turn. "We just have to wait," he said, trying to make it sound like a plan instead of a sentence that made him want to claw at the walls.

"Shane," Ilya repeated, and there was something in his tone that tugged at Shane's nerves, something that sounded like he was stepping into the role he used to play at camp, the one where he would steady Shane with a command and a grin. "You need to breathe."

Shane's jaw tightened. "I am breathing."

"You are not."

Shane laughed once, sharp and incredulous, because the accusation felt absurd and humiliating at the same time. "I am literally breathing, Ilya."

Ilya moved closer, and Shane felt it before he heard it, felt the shift in the air behind him like a body approaching. "Look at me," Ilya said.

The words hit Shane in a place that had nothing to do with the elevator. Look at me. Like it was an old pattern, like it was something Ilya had said a thousand times in different ways: in locker rooms, on docks, in dorm stairwells when Shane's brain had gotten too loud. Shane's throat tightened unexpectedly.

He didn't turn. He couldn't. Turning would mean meeting Ilya's eyes in a space this small, and Shane didn't trust what would happen if he did.

Ilya's voice softened just a fraction, which somehow made it worse. "Shane."

The second time he said his name, it landed with weight, because Shane had heard it last night in the bathroom, and then again this morning, and each time it had felt like a rope thrown into water. Shane hated that he wanted to grab it.

He turned, because the demand in Ilya's voice had always been a kind of gravity.

Their eyes met.

Ilya's face was controlled, but his eyes weren't empty. They were sharp, watchful, threaded with something that looked like concern and frustration and something Shane didn't let himself name. He was close enough that Shane could see the faint shadow under his eyes, could see the slight tension in his jaw as if he were holding back words.

"You're okay," Ilya said, low. "It's an elevator. It's not- we're fine."

Shane's chest clenched. The reassurance should have helped. It should have made his body relax. Instead it made anger flare, sudden and hot, because Ilya did not get to be the one offering calm now, not after weeks of silence, not after years of erasing.

"You don't get to do that," Shane said, and the words came out before he could stop them.

Ilya blinked. "Do what?"

"Act like you care," Shane said, voice tight, and he hated himself for how much it sounded like an accusation and a plea at the same time. "You don't get to ignore me for a month and then-" He gestured vaguely at the elevator walls, at the trapped air, at the absurdity of being here together. "-and then decide you're going to be... whatever this is."

Ilya's expression shifted, a small tightening around his eyes. "I was not-"

"Yes," Shane cut in, because he could not stand hearing excuses. "You were. You were ignoring me. You were making sure I understood that I was not allowed to exist near you

unless it's on the ice and even then we're barely-" Shane cut himself off, and shook his head. "You know what? Never mind. We're not going to do this again."

He stopped, because his breath hitched, because the hangover and the fear and the humiliation and the grief were pressing in from all sides and making his words feel too big for his mouth.

Ilya stared at him for a long beat. Then, in a movement that was almost violently controlled, he turned away and sat down on the elevator floor, back against the wall, elbows on his knees, head tipped forward. He ran both hands through his hair and held there, fingers tangled, as if he could physically keep himself from doing something reckless.

"Fuck," Ilya muttered, and there was no humor in it, only exhaustion.

Shane stood there, heart hammering, suddenly aware of how loud his own breathing was. The elevator seemed smaller now, not because the walls had moved but because the air between them had filled with everything unsaid.

He didn't want to look at Ilya sitting like that, because it made him think of Ilya at sixteen, forehead pressed to Shane's shoulder after a fight, saying don't go anywhere. It made him think of Ilya in the locker room in Montreal, saying I didn't forget, and then leaving anyway. It made him think of all the times Ilya's control had cracked and Shane had been close enough to see what was underneath and then had been shut out again.

Shane lowered himself slowly to the floor on the opposite side, as far away as he could get without being ridiculous, and leaned his head back against the wall. The carpet was thin and smelled faintly of industrial cleaner. His stomach still rolled.

Neither of them spoke.

Time passed in thick, quiet layers. Shane didn't have his watch on, but he could feel the minutes dragging like weights. His mind, with nothing else to do, began to run in circles.

It isn't fair, he thought, and the thought was so simple it made his throat tighten. It isn't fair that I carry him like this, that I still know the shape of his fear and the rhythm in his footsteps and the exact way he says my name when he's not thinking, and he gets to decide when I exist. It isn't fair that he can turn on concern like a light switch because the room is small and I'm panicking, and then later, he'll go back to treating me like a ghost.

He tried to breathe slowly, the way his therapist used to tell him to. In for four, hold, out for six. It helped, a little. Not enough.

He stared at the elevator doors, at the seam where they met, at the thin strip of metal that separated him from the rest of the hotel. He could hear faint sounds through the walls if he focused: distant footsteps, muffled voices, the building continuing on without them.

At some point, Ilya shifted. The fabric of his sweats rustled. Shane didn't look, but he felt the movement in his peripheral awareness like a twitch in a shared nerve.

"You will pass out if you keep breathing like that," Ilya said eventually, voice quieter now, less sharp.

Shane let out a slow breath, staring at the floor. "I'm not going to pass out."

Ilya didn't answer immediately. Shane could feel him watching, even without looking, could feel the weight of his attention in the small space. After a moment, Ilya said, "You always do this."

Shane's jaw tightened. "Do what?"

"You go into... machine." Ilya said, searching for the word like he hated needing it.

"Logistics. Control. Like if you make plan, then nothing can hurt you."

Shane's chest tightened, not because the observation was wrong but because Ilya was saying it out loud, because Ilya was seeing him in a way Shane didn't know how to handle right now.

"Maybe I like having a plan," Shane said, forcing his voice to stay even.

Ilya's laugh was quiet, humorless. "You don't like. You need."

Shane turned his head slightly, just enough to see Ilya out of the corner of his eye. Ilya's face was still angled down, but his gaze was on Shane now, steady and unsettlingly direct.

"And you," Shane said, and there was bitterness in it that he couldn't stop, "like acting like you don't care until you're forced into a box, apparently."

Ilya's mouth tightened. "I care."

The two words hit Shane harder than they should have. He felt something hot flare in his chest, anger and something softer braided together, because of course that was the problem. Of course that was what made everything worse. Not that Ilya didn't care, but that he did, and he still chose silence.

Shane's laugh came out rough. "Sure."

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Shane asked, and he heard the sharpness rising, heard the edge of himself approaching the place he didn't want to go.

"Don't act like you know how I feel," Ilya said, voice tightening.

Shane stared at him, and the anxiety spiked again, because that sentence opened a door in his mind that he had been trying to keep shut. What Ilya feels. What Ilya felt at thirteen. What Ilya felt on the dock. What he felt in that locker room. What he felt last night when Shane said whatever he said.

"I don't know anything," Shane said, voice low, because it was the truest thing he had.

"Because you don't tell me anything."

Ilya went still.

Shane felt his own pulse pounding in his throat. The elevator air was too warm. The walls felt too close.

"I know you don't," Shane continued, and he hated that his voice shook just slightly, hated that the vulnerability slipped in around the edges. "That's what you made very clear. You don't look at me, you don't speak to me unless you have to, and then this morning you're asking me if I'm okay like-" He swallowed hard. "Like last night didn't happen. Like the last month didn't happen. Like the last *six years* didn't happen."

Ilya's gaze snapped up, sharp. "You think I don't look at you?"

Shane's stomach clenched. "Do you?"

The question hung between them, heavy.

Ilya stood.

The movement was so sudden that Shane's body reacted before his mind did, shoulders tightening, breath catching. Ilya crossed the elevator in two steps, and the space shrunk instantly, not because the walls moved, but because he was close now, too close, standing over Shane with a kind of contained intensity that made Shane's skin feel too tight.

Shane didn't get up. He didn't move back. There was nowhere to move.

Ilya stared down at him, and for a moment the control in his face looked like it might crack, like something behind his eyes was pushing against the surface.

"You think I ignore you because I don't want you?" Ilya asked, voice low enough that it felt like it was meant only for Shane, meant to live in this box with them.

Shane's breath stuttered. The words didn't make sense in a safe way. They didn't fit into the narrative Shane had been trying to survive on, the one where Ilya's silence meant indifference, where Shane could be angry and righteous and therefore protected. Want was different. Want made everything dangerous.

"I think you ignore me because you can," Shane said, and he hated that it sounded so small compared to what Ilya just said.

Ilya's mouth tightened. "No."

Shane's throat felt too tight. He tried to swallow. "Then why," he forced out, and his voice cracked just slightly because his body was betraying him again, "do you do it."

Ilya leaned down, not all the way, but enough that Shane could feel his presence like heat, could see the fine details of his face, the slight flush along his cheekbones, the tension at the corner of his mouth, the faint shadow of stubble along his jaw. Ilya's hand came up and curled into the fabric of Shane's hoodie near his shoulder, not yanking, not grabbing, just anchoring, as if he needed something solid to hold onto.

The contact sent a jolt through Shane's body that was not fear and not anger and not anything he wanted to name while sober in a locked elevator.

"You have no idea," Ilya said, and his voice sounded rougher than it had a minute ago, like he was speaking through something in his throat, "what it does to me when you look at me like you are waiting for me to disappear."

Shane's heart hammered so hard it made him dizzy. He stared up at Ilya, unable to look away.

"This is what you wanted," Shane heard himself say, and he didn't know if it was accusation or desperation. "Isn't it. For me to stop."

Ilya's grip tightened just slightly, a fraction, and the movement made Shane's breath hitch again.

"No," Ilya said, and there was something like frustration in it, something like pain. "I wanted you to survive."

Shane's throat tightened. "By pretending I'm nothing."

Ilya's eyes flashed. "You are not nothing."

The words landed like a shove, because Shane didn't know what to do with them, because they should have been everything and instead they were too late and too tangled and too sharp.

He swallowed, forcing himself to keep his voice steady even as his body shook under the surface. "Then say it," Shane said, and his voice was low, raw. "Say what you're doing."

Ilya stared at him for a long beat, breathing hard enough that Shane could see his chest rise and fall. The elevator seemed to hold its breath with them.

"I am trying," Ilya said finally, and the sentence sounded like it cost him something. "I am trying to-" He stopped, jaw flexing, and his gaze flicked down, just briefly, to Shane's mouth.

The glance was small. It was fast. It was the kind of movement that could be dismissed as nothing if you weren't attuned to it.

Shane was attuned to it in a way that made his stomach flip.

His breath caught, and he hated himself for it, hated how his body kept announcing the truth he didn't want to say out loud. Ilya's eyes returned to his, and something in Ilya's expression changed, something that looked like decision pressing up against fear.

"Shane," Ilya said, and his voice softened just a fraction around the edges of Shane's name, like he couldn't help it.

Shane didn't answer. He couldn't, because the air between them felt charged, because Ilya was close enough that Shane could feel the heat of him, because Ilya's hand was still fisted in his hoodie like he didn't trust himself to let go.

Ilya leaned closer.

It was as if the proximity and the trapped air and the months of silence had condensed into one moment where both of them ran out of room to pretend.

Shane's body moved before his mind did, his chin lifting slightly, his breath stuttering, and the closeness sharpened until Shane could feel it everywhere, the pressure of Ilya's presence, the faint brush of Ilya's breath, the way Ilya's gaze kept flicking between Shane's eyes and his mouth as if he were fighting instinct.

It was going to happen.

Shane knew it with a cold clarity that made his stomach drop and his chest ache at the same time, because if it happened it would change everything, and if it didn't it would still change everything because Shane would never unfeel this moment.

The elevator jerked.

The sudden movement snapped something in Shane's nerves. The lights flickered. A mechanical groan rattled through the walls. And then, with a bright, abrupt chime that felt like a slap, the doors began to slide open.

Hallway light poured in, harsh and ordinary.

A maintenance worker stood there with a tool bag, and beside him, too close, too familiar, Hayden, eyebrows raised, face registering the scene in a fraction of a second: Ilya standing over Shane, hand still fisted in his hoodie, their bodies angled toward each other in a way that did not look like teammates discussing logistics.

Shane's brain blanked.

He scrambled up too fast, knees unsteady. He yanked his hoodie free from Ilya's hand with a movement that was more violent than he intended, because he couldn't stand the contact now that there were eyes on them, couldn't stand being seen in this position, exposed, leaning toward something he had sworn he wouldn't reach for.

"Okay," Shane heard himself say, and the word came out too bright, too loud, the kind of voice people used when they were trying to pretend nothing had happened. He didn't know who he was talking to. The maintenance worker. Hayden. Himself. "Yeah. Great. Thanks."

The maintenance worker nodded vaguely, already stepping aside to let them out as if they were just another minor inconvenience.

Shane didn't look at Ilya. If he looked at Ilya, he would see something in his face that would either destroy him or make him do something he couldn't take back.

He stepped out of the elevator into the hallway, the carpet suddenly feeling unstable under his feet, the air too cool against his overheated skin. He felt Hayden's stare like heat on his back. He felt Ilya behind him, still, silent.

"Shane?" Hayden said, voice cautious, like he wasn't sure what version of Shane he was about to get.

Shane didn't answer. Answering would require acknowledging what had almost happened, and Shane could not do that with someone watching, not with his head still pounding, not with his memory still full of holes, not with his heart in his throat.

He walked.

Then, as if walking wasn't enough, he turned the corner and broke into a run, because distance was the only thing that had ever made him feel safe, because he needed air that didn't taste like Ilya and steel and the edge of a kiss he couldn't unfeel.

His footsteps pounded down the hallway, too loud in the quiet hotel. The world narrowed to movement and breath and the desperate, shaking thought that kept repeating in his mind with no mercy at all:

What the fuck just happened. What the fuck just happened. What the fuck just happened.

Ilya's POV

The elevator doors slide shut again with a soft mechanical sound that feels absurdly calm compared to what just detonated inside his chest.

Ilya doesn't move.

He's still standing where Shane left him, hand half-raised as if the shape of Shane's hoodie is still there in his fist, the ghost of warmth lingering against his palm. The hallway light spills across the elevator floor in a pale rectangle, but the space already feels emptier without Shane in it, like something essential just ran down the corridor and took the air with it.

He exhales slowly through his nose, but it doesn't help. His pulse is hammering. His body feels electrified and hollow at the same time.

"Jesus," Hayden says quietly.

The maintenance guy clears his throat, oblivious to everything that matters, and mutters something about faulty wiring before stepping fully aside. Hayden remains planted in the doorway, eyes sharp in a way they rarely are when he's joking, taking in Ilya's expression with uncomfortable accuracy.

Ilya steps out into the hallway at last.

The door closes behind him.

For a second, neither of them speak. The hotel corridor is too bright, too normal. Somewhere down the hall a housekeeping cart rattles faintly. Life is continuing, and Ilya feels like he is standing in the aftermath of something seismic.

“What,” Hayden says slowly, “the hell was that?”

Ilya looks at him without blinking.

There are a dozen things he could say. A joke. A dismissal. A lie. He has been living inside lies for so long they feel like muscle memory. He could say Shane panicked. He could say they argued. He could say nothing at all.

Instead he says, “It is none of your business.”

Hayden doesn’t flinch. If anything, he straightens.

“No,” Hayden says, and there’s no humor in it now, no softness. “It became my business when you two walked out of a broken elevator looking like that.”

Ilya’s jaw tightens. “Looking like what.”

“Like someone was about to get kissed. Or punched. I’d prefer the first, to be honest,” Hayden replies bluntly.

The words hit harder than they should. Not because they’re wrong, they’re not, but because hearing them spoken out loud makes the almost of it feel real in a way Ilya can’t retreat from.

Hayden studies him carefully.

“I haven’t known the guy long,” Hayden continues, voice controlled but edged with something protective. “But he’s not okay. He hasn’t been okay since he got traded here. And whatever is happening between you two? It’s wrecking him.”

The defensiveness rises in Ilya automatically, hot and instinctive. “He is not wrecked.”

“Don’t do that,” Hayden snaps. “Don’t pretend you don’t see it.”

Ilya’s hands curl into fists at his sides. He forces them open.

“I see it,” he says quietly.

“Then what the hell are you doing?” Hayden demands.

The question lands squarely in the center of his chest, because it’s the same question he has been asking himself since September. Since Montreal. Since the first time he saw Shane walk into that locker room looking older and sharper and heartbreakingly familiar.

What am I doing.

He laughs once, but there’s no humor in it.

“I am trying to not ruin his life,” Ilya says.

Hayden blinks. “By ignoring him?”

“By keeping distance,” Ilya corrects sharply.

Hayden shakes his head slowly. “Distance isn’t what you’re giving him. You’re giving him whiplash.”

Ilya’s breath shortens.

“You think I do not know that?” he says, and the restraint in his voice begins to fray. “You think I wake up and choose this because it is fun?”

Hayden’s eyes narrow. “Then what is it.”

There it is. The edge. The place he has been holding shut for years.

Ilya feels it split.

“Because,” he says, and the word catches in his throat in a way that infuriates him, because he does not lose control like this, he does not stumble over sentences, he does not let anyone see the part of him that shakes.

He looks down the hallway, just for a second, as if Shane might reappear, as if he might still be close enough to hear.

He isn’t.

“Because,” Ilya says again, and this time the words come out harder, louder, ripped from somewhere he has been keeping locked since he was thirteen years old and standing on a dock pretending he didn’t want something that would change everything.

Hayden doesn’t move. Doesn’t soften. Just watches him with that maddening steadiness, like he’s not going to let Ilya dodge this with anger or silence or pride.

“What?” Hayden says. “Because what?”

Ilya hears himself exhale, and then the restraint gives way all at once, not gracefully, not carefully, but the way a door finally breaks off its hinges after too many years of being held shut.

“Because I’m fucking in love with him!” he shouts, and the sound ricochets down the corridor so hard it feels like it should bring someone running, like it should wake the entire hotel, like it should summon every consequence he has spent his life outrunning. His chest heaves once, twice, and he doesn’t even recognize the voice that came out of him, raw and furious and wrecked. “I have been since I was thirteen. I have been for *years*.”

The silence after is absolute.

Hayden stares at him like he’s just watched a man step off a cliff and somehow stay standing.

Ilya doesn’t look away. He can’t. If he does, he’ll fold.

He has spent years pretending it was smaller than it is. Manageable. Containable. Something he could survive if he kept it quiet enough.

He can't anymore.

Somewhere down the hall Shane was running from it, and Ilya stood in the wreckage knowing the truth didn't disappear just because you couldn't bear to hold it.

Chapter End Notes

dear god it is 2am and I have to somehow watch 120 children at work in the morning.
hope you guys enjoyed this one!

Chapter 14: The Decisive Factor

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains descriptions of child abuse, and child mistreatment. Please read only if you're able!

(Also I'm sorry in advance lol)

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

Chapter 14

Summer 2009 - Ottawa

Shane does not remember pulling Ilya back towards him. He does not remember deciding to close the space. He only remembers the moment their mouths collided again and the way something inside his chest stopped fighting itself for the first time in months.

The kiss is not careful now. It is not hesitant or testing. It is not even new. It feels like something that has been waiting for permission since they were thirteen and didn't know what the ache in their ribs meant. Shane feels it everywhere at once. In the way his hand fists the back of Ilya's shirt as if he's afraid he'll disappear, in the way his pulse thunders against his throat so hard he can barely swallow, in the way his entire body seems to lean toward Ilya without conscious instruction, like gravity has shifted and this is the only stable direction left.

He has spent so long trying to convince himself that what he feels is confusion, or projection, or proximity mistaken for something else, that the certainty of Ilya kissing him back without hesitation feels like the ground his giving away between his feet. Not because it is wrong. Because there is no ambiguity left to hide inside.

Ilya's hands are not tentative. One slides up into Shane's hair, fingers tangling at the base of his skull in a way that feels both grounding and possessive, and the other grips his waist with a firmness that says this is not an accident. Shane gasps into Ilya's mouth, a sound he doesn't even mean to make, something small and broken and relieved, and the fact that it escapes him so easily terrifies him more than anything else, because it means he has wanted this without armor.

When they finally break apart, it is not because they want to. It is because breathing becomes necessary.

Shane keeps his forehead pressed against Ilya's. He doesn't trust the world not to tilt if he steps back. He doesn't trust himself not to fold if Ilya lets go first. He can feel Ilya's breath against his mouth, uneven, fast, and that alone is enough to shatter the last defensive lie Shane has been carrying: that maybe he imagined it. That maybe it was one sided.

He swallowed, and his throat hurt like he'd been yelling, even though he hadn't said a word. His heart was doing something violently alive in his chest, and his hands, still fisted in Ilya's shirt, felt like they belonged to somebody else, somebody braver, somebody who didn't spend his life rehearsing normal.

Ilya's eyes were half lidded, unfocused in that way they got when he'd been hit hard in practice and had to blink himself back into the moment, except this was not a hit, this was something he had stepped into willingly, and the realization of that, of the fact that Ilya had kissed him back, fully, immediately, without hesitation, made Shane's stomach roll with a dizzying kind of relief that boarded on panic.

Shane tried to say something. Anything. A joke, maybe, because jokes had always been the bridge they used when the floor under them cracked. But his tongue felt too thick in his mouth, and every possible sentence sounded like it would either trivialize what had happened or explode it into something neither of them could carry.

For a long moment they just stood like that, pressed into the narrow space between the stair rail and the wall, listening to the building around them. The distant hum of the vending machine downstairs, a muffled burst of laughter somewhere down the hall, the soft metallic clink of someone's skates on the concrete outside, and Shane felt the absurdity of it like a second heartbeat: the world kept going. The world did not stop just because he had finally kissed the person he had been quietly, terrifyingly wanting for months.

Ilya was the first one to move, but he didn't pull away. He shifted his forehead against Shane's, as if the contact had become necessary, and Shane felt the brush of Ilya's eyelashes against his skin when he blinked.

"We should not-" Ilya started, and the words came out rough, like he'd scraped his throat on them.

Shane's stomach dropped so fast it felt like falling down the stairs.

Ilya inhaled again, sharp, and then his fingers tightened in Shane's shirt as if he could feel Shane beginning to back away inside his own body, could feel the reflexive retreat that came with every almost, every near miss, every moment Shane had spent convincing himself he was imagining things that were real.

"I mean," Ilya corrected quickly, and the frustration in his voice was aimed at himself more than Shane, "we should not stand here like idiots."

Shane let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding, so relieved it almost made him angry. "You started it," he managed, voice harsh.

Ilya's mouth twitched, the beginning of a smile that didn't quite land because too much else was sitting behind his eyes, too much that didn't know how to be softened. "You started it," Ilya shot back automatically, but the words didn't have their usual bite; they were almost tender, as if the argument was a habit their bodies reached for when they didn't know how to hold something new.

Shane shook his head, once, small, disbelieving. "I-" He stopped, because the truth was too big to pick up with one hand. His fingers loosened finally, not because he wanted to let go but because his muscles were starting to cramp, and he watched the fabric of Ilya's shirt smooth back into place like it was betrayal.

Ilya's gaze dropped to Shane's hands, then lifted again, and his eyes held Shane's for a long, quiet beat that felt like the pause before a puck dropped. Shane could see the conflict right there, bare in the way Ilya usually never allowed: the desire, obvious and unguarded; the fear, immediately following it like a shadow; and something else underneath both of those, a grim kind of determination that made Shane's throat tighten before he even knew why.

"What does this mean?" Shane asked, and hated how small it sounded, like a kid asking if a storm would pass. He tried to firm it up, to make it something he could stand behind. "Ilya. What- what are we doing?"

Ilya didn't look away. He didn't deflect. He didn't make a joke. That alone was enough to make Shane's pulse jump, because it felt like stepping into a room you'd only ever seen from the doorway.

"I don't know," Ilya said, and his voice was steady in a way that made it clear the uncertainty was not about wanting. "But I can't keep-" He stopped again and dragged a hand over his mouth, as if the words were too hot to hold. When he spoke again, it was lower, almost fierce. "I can't keep pretending I do not want this."

Shane's chest tightened painfully. "This" could mean the kiss. It could mean the friendship. It could mean everything Shane had been trying not to name since the dock. The fact that Ilya said it like it was obvious, like it had been burning in him too, made Shane feel both vindicated and terrified.

Ilya's hand moved, slow and deliberate, and rested against Shane's jaw, thumb brushing along the hinge like he was learning the shape of him in a new language. The touch was gentle, almost reverent, and it made Shane's eyes sting with something he refused to call emotion because that would be admitting he was already falling apart.

"You want... a future," Ilya said, and the way he said the word future made it sound like a dangerous thing, like a weapon and a miracle at the same time. "You want... more."

Shane swallowed. His throat tight enough that speaking felt like pushing the sound through fabric. "I don't know what I want," he admitted, because lying in this moment felt impossible. "I just know I can't- I can't go back to pretending nothing happened."

Ilya's thumb stilled against his skin, and then, unexpectedly, Ilya laughed, one short, breathless sound that held no humor at all. It was the laugh of someone who had been holding his breath for months and had finally exhaled too hard.

"Yes," Ilya said, like Shane had finally spoken a sentence in Ilya's own head. "Exactly."

Shane stared at him, bewildered. "Exactly what?"

Ilya leaned in, not all the way, not yet, and Shane felt the proximity like a tide pulling him forward.

"I have tried," Ilya said quietly, and the confession in his voice made Shane's stomach turn over, because it meant there had been an effort, a deliberate attempt at restraint that Shane had only ever experienced as distance and cruelty. "After the night on the dock. I tried to be normal. I tried to be-" He stopped, jaw tightening. "I tried to be what is expected."

"And you just... Couldn't?" Shane asked, and the question was raw, almost accusatory, because he needed it to be true, needed it to not be only him.

"Could you?"

Shane flinched, because the answer was no, and they both knew it.

The silence that followed wasn't empty. It was dense with everything they had not said in months: the awkward glances, the pulled away touches, the careful distance in public that had started to feel like punishment, the late nights where Shane had stared at the ceiling listening to Ilya breathe and tried to convince himself he was imagining the weight of something between them.

Ilya's hand slid from Shane's jaw to the back of his neck, fingers threading into his hair, and the intimacy of that touch, casual, proprietary, like it belonged there, made Shane's whole body go hot, then cold, then hot again.

Ilya kissed him again.

This time it wasn't frustration trying to break through a wall. It was slower, deeper, as if Ilya had decided that if they were doing this, he was going to do it honestly. Shane felt it down to his bones, felt the way Ilya's mouth fit against his like it had always known the shape, felt the quiet sound Ilya made when Shane leaned into it, that small involuntary noise that told Shane more than any sentence ever could.

Shane's hands found Ilya again, not grabbing now, not clinging, but holding, palms pressing into the solid line of Ilya's back, fingers splayed as if he was trying to anchor himself to something real. The kiss went on long enough that Shane's brain stopped attempting analysis and surrendered to sensation: the pressure, the warmth, the way Ilya's breath hitched when Shane's thumb brushed the edge of his ribs, the way their bodies aligned without thought.

When they finally broke apart, both of them were breathing hard, and Shane's mouth felt swollen, tender in a way that made his pulse race every time he swallowed.

Ilya's forehead found Shane's again. He stayed there, eyes closed for a second, as if he needed the darkness to say what came next.

"I want you," Ilya said, and the simplicity of it was almost brutal.

Shane's stomach flipped. He could not stop the words that came out of him, stripped of pride and caution. "Then why did you act like you didn't?"

Ilya's eyes opened. For a moment there was something like pain in them, sharp and immediate. "Because," Ilya said, and his voice tightened, "If I act like do, then I will never stop."

Shane stared at him, heart pounding. "That's not- Ilya, that's not an answer."

"It is," Ilya said, and the bitterness in it startled Shane, because it sounded like a sentence learned somewhere else, somewhere colder than this stairwell. "You just don't like it."

Shane's throat tightened. He wanted to push. He wanted to demand. He wanted to shake Ilya until the truth fell out cleanly. But the way Ilya's hands were trembling, only slightly, just at the fingertips against Shane's neck, made Shane hesitate, because it told him Ilya was already giving more than he knew how to survive.

Shane softened his voice without meaning to. "Then tell me what you can."

Ilya held his gaze for a long time, and Shane could see the battle in his face: the instinct to deflect, to protect himself with sarcasm, to shove it all back down; and the other instinct, the one that had pulled him into this stairwell and kissed Shane like he was starving.

Ilya swallowed. "I can tell you that I cannot keep doing this half thing. I can not keep looking at you like you are..." He exhaled, frustrated. "Like you are a problem."

Shane's chest tightened. "I thought you did think I was a problem."

Ilya's eyes flashed. "No."

Shane flinched anyway, because the months of distance had left bruises in his brain, bruises that flared at any sudden movement

Ilya's voice dropped, steadier now, as if he'd found a line he could hold. "I thought if I made it small," he said, "If I acted like it was nothing, then it would be something I could not control."

Shane's breath caught. "But it already was something."

Ilya's mouth tightened like he'd been waiting for that sentence and still didn't know how to take it. He looked away briefly, down the stairwell, as if expecting someone to appear and catch them mid-confession, and then his gaze snapped back to Shane.

"It has been something for a long time, hasn't it?" Ilya admitted, and his voice was quiet but absolute. "Since we were kids."

Shane's heart slammed against his ribs. "Since when?"

Ilya didn't smile. He didn't tease. He just looked at Shane like the answer was going to hurt and he was saying it anyway.

"Thirteen," Ilya said.

Shane went very still. The stairwell felt suddenly too small, the walls too close, the air too thin, because thirteen meant the beginning, meant summer camp and the second bench from the left and late night whispers and Ilya stealing his hoodies and Shane laughing like he never laughed anywhere else. Thirteen meant the year Shane had still believed friendship was a safe word, a simple category you could place people into and rely on.

Shane's voice came out fractured. "Why didn't you-"

Ilya cut him off, not unkindly but urgently, as if he couldn't let Shane follow that line too far yet. "Because I did not have words," Ilya said. "Because it was not... safe."

Safe. The word landed like a warning bell.

Shane's stomach sank. "Safe from who?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. For a moment Shane thought he would shut down completely, that he would close the door and slam it the way he always did when something got too close to the center of him. But Ilya stayed. He didn't back away. He didn't let go.

He just looked tired in a way Shane had never allowed himself to see.

"My father," Ilya said quietly.

Shane's chest tightened. He'd heard pieces over the years, sharp phone calls in Russian, Ilya's sudden stillness when a coach raised his voice, the way he flinched at certain kinds of touch as if his body had learned to anticipate punishment, but it had always been abstract, something Shane had circled without daring to name because naming it meant it was real.

Ilya's gaze held Shane's, and there was something almost clinical in the way he said the next words, as if he'd learned that emotion was dangerous.

"He wants control. Complete. He wants my life to be his, and he calls it love."

Shane's throat tightened. "Ilya-"

"He decides," Ilya continues, his voice steady but eyes bright, "what I eat, what I train, who I speak to, what I will become. If I push back, he calls it disrespect. If I cry, he calls it weakness. If I-" Ilya's mouth twitched, not humor, something darker. "If I feel anything at all that is not... approved, he fixes it."

Shane stared at him, and something cold pooled in his stomach. "Fixes it how?"

Ilya's silence was answer enough, but Shane couldn't leave it there, couldn't let the worst possibilities remain unspoken like a monster under a bed.

"Ilya," Shane said, voice breaking despite his efforts to keep it steady. "Did he hurt you?"

Ilya's jaw flexed. He didn't look away, and that was almost worse, because it meant he wasn't hiding.

"Yes," Ilya said simply.

The world tilted.

Shane felt tears hit his eyes before he could stop them, hot and humiliating and entirely beyond his control, because his brain was trying to absorb the fact that while Shane had been waiting all year for camp and thinking of Ilya as his constant, his anchor, his bright loud hurricane of a best friend, Ilya had been living inside something else entirely, something that had reached into him and made him learn silence as survival.

Shane's voice went raw. "How long?"

Ilya's mouth tightened. "Always. Since I was a boy."

Shane made a sound, half breath, half sob, and reached for Ilya without thinking, pulling him in hard enough that Ilya stumbled, their bodies colliding in a way that would've been a joke any other summer. This time it was necessity. Shane wrapped both arms around him, pressed his face into Ilya's shoulder, and felt Ilya go rigid for one heartbeat before his hands came up and gripped Shane's back like he was holding on to the only stable thing left in the world.

"I'm so sorry," Shane said into the fabric, voice muffled and shaking. He didn't even know what he was apologizing for, being safe when Ilya wasn't, not seeing it, not asking sooner, the unfairness of a world that could do this to someone Shane loved, but the words were all he had.

Ilya's breath hitched, just once. His fingers tightened. "Don't."

"Don't what?" Shane whispered, pulling back just enough to look at him, eyes wet.

"Don't look at me like I am..." Ilya struggled for the word. "Like I am something to fix."

Shane swallowed hard. "I'm not- Ilya, I'm not trying to fix you."

Ilya's eyes held his, sharp with something like fear. "Everyone tries," he said quietly. "Then they fail. Then they leave."

Shane's chest clenched. "I'm not leaving you."

The certainty in Shane's voice startled even him, because it felt like stepping off a ledge without knowing if there was ground. But he meant it so fiercely it made his hands shake. "I'm not leaving," Shane repeated, softer, as if saying it twice could make it true enough to protect him.

Ilya's mouth parted like he was about to argue, then closed again. He stared at Shane for a long beat, and the vulnerability in his face made Shane's heart split open.

"Okay."

Shane's breath shuddered out of him.

They stayed in the stairwell, pressed together, talking in quiet, careful circles the way people do when they're trying not to spook something fragile. Shane asked questions, not all at once, not like an interrogation, but because he couldn't help it: where did you go when you weren't at camp, what did your father want from you, what did he do when you got home. And Ilya answered what he could, sometimes with words and sometimes with silence, his body language doing the talking: the way his shoulders tightened at certain subjects, the way his gaze went distant for a second when he mentioned his brother, the way his fingers kept finding Shane's wrist as if he needed reassurance that Shane was still there.

At some point, Shane realized they were sitting on the stair, knees touching, Ilya's shoulder pressed into his, and Shane's hand was laced with Ilya's, fingers interwoven like a decision.

Shane's voice came out small, hesitant. "When camp ends... you can come with me."

Ilya went very still.

Shane rushed, heat flooding his face. "Not- not forever. I just mean... my house. My parents. You'd be safe there. We could tell them-"

Ilya's gaze dropped to their hands, then lifted again, and there was something painful in his expression, something that looked like longing and resignation at once.

"I can't," Ilya said quietly.

"Why not?"

Ilya's mouth tightened. "My father."

Shane's mind resisted the sentence on instinct, because it was too much, because it meant the danger wasn't contained to Russia, wasn't a distant, abstract shadow you could pretend wouldn't cross borders.

"He would come here," Shane said, voice unsteady. "To Canada?"

Ilya's eyes held his. "He will go anywhere," he said, and the certainty of it chilled the air. "If he thinks I am disappointing the family."

Shane's stomach knotted. He glanced down the stairwell as if expecting the man to appear at the bottom like a horror movie villain, as if naming him had summoned him.

Ilya's hand tightened around Shane's. "Don't be scared. Not like that."

"I'm scared for you, Ilya. I'm scared that he could ever put his hands on you again. Are you not scared?"

Ilya's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "I am," he admitted. Then, after a beat, "But I am good at hiding it."

Shane stared at him, tears threatening again. "You shouldn't have to be."

Ilya looked away. "I know."

And then, because they were both trapped in the open now, because there was no going back to ignorance, Ilya leaned in and kissed Shane again, softer this time, almost reverent, as if he wanted to seal the moment into Shane's body before the world could take it away.

Shane kissed him back like prayer.

When they finally pulled apart, Shane rested his forehead against Ilya's and whispered, "So what do we do?"

Ilya's breath was warm against Shane's mouth. "We take what we can," he said. "Here. Now."

Shane closed his eyes. He wanted to ask what happens after now, but the question felt like tempting fate, like inviting disaster in.

So he didn't.

He just stayed.

Ilya left him first, not because he wanted to, but because the building was full of doors and footsteps and rules, and even this camp, their place, the place that had always felt like an in-between world where reality softened at the edges, still had eyes.

Ilya squeezed Shane's hand once, hard, and then walked up the stairs with a controlled steadiness that didn't match the red of his mouth or the shine in his eyes. Shane watched him go until Ilya disappeared around the corner, and only then did Shane realize his whole body was shaking, the adrenaline finally catching up with him now that he was alone.

He stood there for a long time, staring at the empty stairwell, and tried to understand how the same space that had held their fight could now hold this, this impossible tenderness, this terrifying promise.

When he finally made himself move, when he finally climbed into his bunk and lay there staring at the ceiling with his heart still slamming against his ribs, Shane thought, with the stunned clarity of someone watching their life change shape in real time:

I have him.

And then, almost immediately, the darker thought arrived like a shadow:

For how long?

Across the aisle, he could hear Ilya breathing, slow and controlled, and the sound made Shane's chest ache with a sick kind of affection. Shane turned onto his side in the darkness, watched the outline of Ilya's bunk, and wanted, so badly it hurt, to reach across the aisle and touch him again just to prove he hadn't dreamed it.

He didn't.

He closed his eyes and tried to hold on to the warmth as if it could protect them.

Ilya's POV

Ilya woke before dawn.

He didn't mean to. Sleep had been shallow for years, the kind that left you half awake even when you were unconscious, because your body never fully trusted the world enough to let go. He lay still for a moment, listening to the dorm around him: the soft rustle of sheets, the occasional cough, the distant hum of the building settling. The air was cold. The window leaked a little, letting in the edge of morning.

His first thought as it often was, was Shane. The boy who consumed all of his thoughts for the last many years, the boy who is most definitely on his morning run as he always does before dawn.

He always thought of Shane.

Not in the frantic, hungry way of the night before, though that was there, pulsing under his ribs like an old injury, but in the quieter way that scared him more: the thought of Shane as a person he could lose, a person his father could take, not as punishment, not as anger, but simply as leverage.

Ilya stared at the ceiling for a long time, jaw clenched, trying to force his mind into something else: practice, drills, the day's schedule, anything that wasn't the memory of Shane's mouth and Shane's voice saying I'm not leaving.

He told himself it was fine.

He told himself, as he had told himself for years, that he could keep things contained.

Then he heard the door downstairs.

Not the casual, half-asleep shuffling of a counselor doing rounds.

Not the familiar footsteps of a kid trying not to get caught sneaking out.

This was heavier, measured, the kind of gait that did not belong here.

Ilya's stomach went cold.

He sat up, slowly, and listened harder.

A voice drifted faintly through the hallway, a man's voice, low and controlled, speaking English in the clipped, slightly strange cadence of someone who learned it as a tool, not as a home.

Ilya's blood turned to ice.

He didn't need to hear the words to know the sound.

Father?

The dorm room seemed to shrink around him as if the walls had suddenly remembered they were capable of trapping him.

He swung his legs over the side of the bunk, bare feet touching the cold floor, and for a moment he sat there frozen, staring at nothing, because a part of him, some young, stupid part, still wanted to believe this couldn't happen. That his father couldn't cross an ocean just to prove he could.

But of course he could.

Of course he would.

Ilya forced himself to stand.

He moved through the dorm with the practiced quiet of someone who had learned not to make noise when danger was nearby, even though there was no point; his father knew he was here. His father had come here for him.

He stopped at the end of the hallway where the morning light slanted in through a window, turning the dust in the air into tiny floating sparks. For a heartbeat he just stood there, breathing shallowly, trying to steel himself for what was coming.

Then he walked down the stairs.

His father was in the lobby area near the front entrance, talking to a staff member who looked both flattered and intimidated, as if he had been handed an important person and didn't know what to do with him. Ilya's father wore a dark coat that looked expensive and too formal for this place, his hair neat, his face composed in that way that always meant violence was possible without warning. He held himself like he owned the building, like the rules were something other people followed and he merely observed.

When his father saw him, his gaze locked on Ilya instantly, sharp as a blade.

He smiled.

It did not reach his eyes.

"Ilya," his father said, using the Russian punctuation that made the name sound like his possession. "There you are."

The staff member looked between them, confused by the sudden tension, then attempted a polite retreat. "I'll- uh, I'll give you two a moment," he stammered.

Ilya's father didn't acknowledge him. The man scurried away like he'd been dismissed.

Ilya stood a few feet away, posture straight, hands at his sides, and felt the old instinct settle into his bones: do not show fear, do not show anger, do not show anything that can be used.

His father's gaze flicked over him the way someone inspected a product. "You have grown," he spoke in Russian. "You look stronger."

Ilya kept his face blank. "Why are you here?"

His father's mouth twitched, almost amusement. "No greeting," he murmured. "No gratitude. I fly across the world and my son asks why."

"You didn't come to see me," Ilya said, and the flatness of it was a risk, but he could not pretend. "You came to what? Check?"

His father's eyes sharpened. "Of course I came to check," he said softly, as if it was the most reasonable thing in the world. "This camp. This program. All these years. Money. Time. If I invest, I expect return."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "I am not a stock."

His father's gaze flicked to Ilya's jaw, as if noting the tension, and the air seemed to sharpen around them. "Careful," his father said quietly.

Ilya's stomach clenched. He forced his hands to stay loose. "You cannot control everything, father. You should have just called," he said, and hated how small the rebellion sounded.

His father stepped closer, not fast, not dramatic, just enough to remind Ilya how quickly distance could disappear. "I control what matters," he said. His voice was calm, almost conversational. "Your career. Your future. Your discipline. You will not embarrass me."

The words landed like a familiar threat dressed up as responsibility.

Ilya's mind flashed, involuntary, to Shane, his mouth, his hands, and fear spiked so sharply Ilya almost tasted it.

His father's gaze narrowed slightly. "You look tired," he said, as if reading the microexpressions Ilya had spent his whole life trying to erase. "Are you staying focused?"

Ilya said nothing.

His father's eyes flicked past him, toward the hallway, toward the dorm stairs, and something in Ilya's chest tightened like a noose. "This camp," his father continued, "has always been strange."

Ilya felt the trap before it closed. "It's hockey," he said, voice clipped. "It's training."

His father hummed. "And yet I hear," he said softly, "so many distractions. Boys with too much freedom. Too much softness. Too much influence." He paused, deliberate, watching Ilya. "A boy who spends much time with you."

Ilya's stomach dropped.

He forced his face to remain blank. "Everyone knows everyone here."

His father's gaze sharpened, predatory. "Do they," he murmured. "Because I also hear-" He let the sentence hang for a beat, and the pause was violence in itself. "I hear your English has improved. I hear you have become close to certain people. Close enough to forget yourself."

Ilya's breath stayed shallow. He kept his eyes steady. "You're imagining things."

His father's smile returned, thin. "Am I," he asked, and the question was not really a question. "You know, Ilya, in my house, we do not confuse affection with weakness. We do not confuse what you call *friendship* with..." His eyes flicked coldly, disgust threading through the word that followed. "Deviance."

The word landed like a slap.

Ilya's vision narrowed.

Something in him snapped. Not a loud break, not a screaming shatter, but a clean severing of the instinct to stay quiet, because Shane's face flashed in his mind and the thought of his father's mouth forming anything about him made Ilya's blood turn to fire.

"Do not," Ilya said, voice low.

His father tilted his head. "Do not what?"

"Do not concern yourself with him," Ilya said, and the sentence came out before he could calculate the consequences, before fear could reassemble itself into caution.

His father went very still.

The silence that followed was not empty. It was the moment a predator confirmed it had found the artery.

"Ah," his father said softly.

Ilya's throat tightened.

His father's eyes held his with an unsettling calm. "So there is a him," he murmured. "Interesting."

Ilya's mouth went dry. He tried to pull back, to soften, to erase, but his father had already taken the shape of the truth and turned it in his mind like a knife.

"You are stupid," his father said, and his voice was almost gentle, which made it worse. "You bring your weakness into the open where anyone can see it. Have I not taught you better?"

"It's not weakness," Ilya snapped, and then regretted it instantly, because anger was a hook his father loved to pull on.

His father's gaze hardened. "Everything that makes you feel is weakness," he said, and the certainty in it was terrifying because it was not philosophy to him; it was doctrine. He stepped closer, close enough that Ilya could smell his cologne, could see the fine lines at the corners of his eyes, the face of a man who believed cruelty was correction.

"I did not send you here to learn to be soft," his father said quietly. "I did not pay for this Canadian nonsense so you could be infected by this small minded *boy*."

Ilya's heart pounded. "I said leave him out of this."

His father's eyes narrowed. "Out of this," he repeated, as if testing the words. "Ilya." His voice dropped further. "Do you understand what you are saying to me right now?"

Ilya's hands clenched at his sides despite himself.

His father's gaze flicked to his fists, and his mouth curved slightly, satisfaction. "You think you can protect this boy," he said with a small chuckle. "That is so sweet."

Ilya's blood went cold.

His father leaned in just enough that the staff at the front desk would not hear, just enough that the threat could live privately where it belonged. "You will end this," he said. "You will come home. And you will remember who you are."

"And if I don't?"

His father's eyes went flat. "Then you will learn what consequences feel like. And so will he."

Ilya's breath caught, sharp and involuntary.

His father watched it happen, watched the fear bloom, and his smile deepened, because this was what he had wanted: confirmation of leverage.

"He seems like a good boy," his father added, almost conversational, and the casualness of it made Ilya's stomach twist violently. "A family boy. A boy who believes in safety. It would be a shame if he learned who fragile safety is, wouldn't it?"

Ilya's vision blurred at the edges with sudden panic. He could not breathe properly. He forced air into his lungs anyway, shallow and controlled, because he could not give his father the satisfaction of seeing him break.

"You will not touch him," Ilya said, voice shaking despite himself.

His father's gaze was cold. "Then *behave*," he said, and the sentence was a key turning in a lock. "If you embarrass me, I will fix the problem. If you send my family into disgrace, I will remove the influence. Do you understand me?"

Ilya's throat hurt. "Yes," he forced out.

His father studied him for a beat longer, then straightened, smoothing his coat as if nothing had happened. "Good. Pack your things. We will leave today."

Ilya's stomach dropped. "Today?"

His father's eyes flicked to him, warning. "Today."

Ilya stood frozen for half a second too long, mind racing, because today meant Shane would know, Shane would see, Shane would try to fight, and Shane fighting was exactly what would get him hurt.

He forced himself to move, turning away before his father could see the terror on his face. He walked up the stairs with mechanical steadiness, each step heavy, each breath shallow, his whole body screaming to run back to the stairwell where Shane had been warm and real and safe.

Safe. The word felt like a cruel joke now.

By the time he reached the dorm, his hands were shaking so badly he had to press his palms hard against his thighs to stop them, to steady himself long enough to open his bag, to start shoving clothes inside like this was just packing a suitcase and not the worst thing that had ever happened to him.

He could hear laughter down the hallway. He could hear someone calling for tape. The camp was still camp, still bright and noisy and oblivious, and Ilya felt like he was drowning inside it.

He did not have time.

He did not have the luxury of honesty.

He had one job now: keep Shane safe.

Even if it meant destroying him.

Shane's POV

Shane found him because Shane always found him.

He didn't even know he was looking at first; he was still walking around the building with the stunned, floating aftershock of last night inside him, still carrying the memory of Ilya's mouth like a secret pressed under his tongue, still trying to pretend he could go through a normal morning routine, run, breakfast, drills, chirping, laughter, without something in him constantly reaching back for the stairwell.

But then he saw Ilya's father.

He didn't know it was Ilya's father at first, not immediately, because Shane had never met him, had only heard him, once or twice, through a thin door, through the speaker of a phone call that made Ilya's whole body go rigid. Shane saw a man in a dark coat standing in the lobby with the posture of someone who did not belong here, and the hairs on Shane's arms rose before his brain could explain why.

Ilya came up the stairs a minute later with his face set into something Shane had never seen on him so fully: not anger, not sarcasm, not even distance, but a kind of dead calm that looked like a mask welded in place.

Shane's stomach turned.

He watched Ilya disappear down the hallway toward the dorm rooms, and his body moved before his brain could argue with it, following, because everything in him screamed that something had changed.

He reached the dorm room door and pushed it open.

The sight inside made his blood go cold.

Ilya was on his knees by his bag, shoving clothes into it with jerky, efficient movements, like he was racing time. The room looked wrong, open drawers, scattered hangers, the towel on the bed half folded, small evidence of sudden departure.

Shane stood in the doorway, heart pounding "Ilya? What are you doing?"

Ilya didn't look up. "Packing."

"*Why?*"

Ilya's hands kept moving, folding and stuffing as if the act itself was the only thing keeping him upright. "I'm leaving."

The words didn't make sense. Shane blinked like he'd misheard. "Leaving," he repeated, stupidly. "Like- today? Right now?"

Ilya's jaw flexed. "Yes."

Shane took a step into the room, instinctively reaching for Ilya's shoulder, and then stopping mid motion because something about Ilya's posture warned him away, warned him that touch would not land the way it normally did, that it might crack something.

"Why?" Shane said again, and this time the word came out sharper, because his brain was finally catching up enough to understand the shape of panic. "What happened? What's wrong?"

Ilya's hands paused for half a beat, then resumed. He still didn't look up.

"My father is here," Ilya said, voice flat.

Shane's stomach dropped. "That- that man downstairs?"

"Yes."

Shane's mind raced. "Okay," he said, because logistics was what he did when emotions threatened to take over, and if he focused on the practical, maybe he could keep himself from falling apart in real time. "Okay, so- so he came, he's checking on you, fine, we can figure it out. But you don't have to leave because he showed up, you-"

"I have to," Ilya cut in, and the sentence was so cold it made Shane flinch.

Shane stared at him. "Ilya."

Ilya finally looked up.

His eyes were flat.

"Ilya," Shane repeated, softer now, because the first glimpse of Ilya's eyes made it clear that whatever was happening was bigger than Shane's fear. "Talk to me. Please. Tell me what's going on."

Ilya's gaze held his for a beat too long, and then his eyes flicked away, as if looking at Shane was dangerous.

"There is nothing to talk about, Shane. I'm leaving."

Shane's chest tightened like he'd been punched. "Nothing to talk about?" He echoed. "Last night you said-"

Ilya's jaw tightened. "Last night was-"

He stopped.

Shane's heart pounded. "Was *what*?"

Ilya's eyes flashed briefly with something like anger, not at Shane but at himself, at the situation, at the fact that he had no clean words left.

"A mistake. The whole thing was a mistake." Ilya said, and the sentence was delivered so evenly it almost sounded rehearsed.

Shane went very still, because the words hit him in a place that was already bruised.

"A mistake," Shane repeated, voice breaking. He shook his head once, small and disbelieving. "You kissed me back. We talked, Ilya, we finally-"

Ilya's mouth tightened, and for a moment Shane saw it, the flicker of pain, the crack in the mask, before it sealed again. "Stop," Ilya said, quiet but sharp.

Shane took another step into the room, and this time he couldn't stop himself from reaching for Ilya's wrist. His fingers wrapped around it, feeling the bones there, feeling how tense Ilya was, how hard he was holding himself together.

Ilya didn't yank away.

He didn't lean into it either.

He just held still, like a statue.

"Why are you doing this," Shane whispered, and his voice sounded young, scared in a way he hated. "Why are you acting like you don't- like we didn't-

Ilya's eyes snapped to Shane's hand on his wrist, and then up to Shane's face, and there was a silent command in his gaze: let go. do not make this harder.

Shane didn't.

He couldn't.

"Ilya," Shane said, and the name came out like a plea, "I don't understand. You can't- you can't just-

"I can," Ilya said, and the calmness of it was the cruelest part, because it made Shane feel insane for being shattered. "And you will let me."

Shane's throat constricted. "Why?"

Ilya's mouth opened, then closed again. His hand trembled once, barely visible, and Shane realized with a sick jolt that Ilya wasn't calm at all. He was controlled. There was a difference. Control was what you did when you were terrified and refusing to show it.

"Because you need to. You have to let me go. You have to *stop*."

"Stop what?" Shane demanded, and his voice broke on the word because he didn't even know what he was asking anymore. Stop wanting? Stop loving? Stop existing in Ilya's orbit?

Ilya's gaze hardened. "Stop looking at me like that."

Shane froze. "Ilya, I am so confused. Looking at you like what?"

Ilya's jaw flexed. "Like I am..." He swallowed hard. "Like you think I belong to you."

The sentence hit Shane like cold water. His grip loosened on Ilya's wrist without him meaning to.

"I never-" Shane started, horrified, and then stopped because the truth was, some part of him did feel like Ilya belonged with him, not as property, not as possession, but as *home*, as the only person in Shane's life who had ever made him feel entirely, recklessly himself.

His eyes burned. "Ilya, I'm not trying to- I just-"

Ilya stepped back, gently but decisively, and Shane's hand fell away. The absence of that contact felt like suddenly losing balance.

Ilya grabbed his bag, tugging the zipper closed with a harsh sound that made Shane's nerves jump. His movements were efficient now, final, like he'd made a decision and was executing it with the same cold precision he used on the ice.

Shane's chest tightened. "Don't leave. *Please*."

Ilya didn't look at him. He slung the bag strap over his shoulder.

"Ilya," Shane said, louder now, "*please*."

Ilya's shoulders tensed as if the word please physically hurt.

Shane stepped closer, desperate. "Tell me what happened," he begged. "Tell me what he said. Tell me what's going on. I can help you. I will help you. I can- I'll talk to him, I'll-"

"No," Ilya snapped, and the sharpness of it made Shane recoil. Ilya's gaze finally met his, and there was real fear there, real and naked beneath the mask for one heartbeat. "You will not talk to him, Shane. Do you understand me? You will not talk to him. Stay upstairs."

Shane stared at him. "Why?"

Ilya's jaw clenched hard enough that muscle jumped. "Because," he said through his teeth, "you do not understand what you are doing."

"Then make me understand," Shane pleaded.

Ilya's eyes flickered, and for a moment it looked like he might break, like he might finally say the truth out loud and let Shane hold it with him.

But then his gaze shifted. Past Shane, toward the door, toward the hallway, and the mask slammed back into place as if triggered by a sound only Ilya could hear.

His voice went cold again. "You have to stop," he said. "Let me go."

Shane's breath came too fast. His hands shook. "I can't. I can't just *let you go*, Ilya. Are you serious? How could you ask me to do that?"

Ilya adjusted the bag strap on his shoulder as if it was heavy, as if he needed the physical weight to keep himself from turning back. "You can," he said. "You will."

Shane's eyes burned. "Ilya."

Ilya took a step toward the door.

Shane moved in front of him without thinking, blocking the way, his whole body screaming no even as his mind tried to be reasonable, tried to understand that there was danger here, danger Shane couldn't see.

Ilya stopped short, and their proximity was suddenly too much, the space between them loaded with everything they had just started to claim and were now being forced to abandon.

Shane's voice cracked. "Please don't do this."

Ilya's eyes flickered, and for a second Shane saw the real Ilya in them: the boy who had barreled across locker rooms in socks, the boy who had stolen Shane's hoodies, the boy who had leaned in on the dock and almost kissed him like he didn't care what the world did next. That Ilya was still here, trapped behind something colder.

"I have to," Ilya said, and the words were barely audible.

Shane shook his head, tears spilling now because he couldn't stop them. "No," he whispered, voice breaking. "No, you don't. You don't have to- you don't have to go back to him. We could tell my parents, they could help you, you could stay with us- stay with *me*-"

Ilya's face tightened. "Stop," he said again, and the plea underneath it was sharper than the command. "Shane. Stop."

Shane's chest hurt. It felt like breathing glass. He had spent months convincing himself the dock had been a hallucination, that the almost-kiss had been his own desperate brain making stories out of body heat and late-night softness, and now he had proof it was real, proof Ilya wanted him back, and the world was taking it away immediately, violently, before Shane even had time to learn how to hold it.

Ilya's eyes flick to Shane's face, searching, almost memorizing any part of it he can. He opens his mouth, shutting it quickly, sighing and then turning towards the door.

Behind him, Shane makes a sound that is half sob, half gasp, the sound of someone trying to breathe through a panic attack. "Ilya," Shane says again, louder now, the way you call after someone who is walking into traffic. "Ilya, wait-"

Ilya keeps walking.

"Ilya!" Shane's voice breaks into something raw, and then, like a weapon thrown in desperation, like a final truth hurled because Shane has nothing left to lose, he yells, "I love you!"

The words slam into the room. They echo. They hang there, unstoppable.

Ilya froze so completely it was as if time had snapped in half around him. His bag strap hung stiff across his shoulder. His fingers curled around it too hard. He didn't turn his head. He didn't blink.

Shane stood there shaking, tears hot on his face, the words hanging between them like a flare shot into the night, because he could not put them back inside now that they were out. He did

not even know if he had meant to say them; he only knew they were true, and he was too tired of losing things to stay silent.

Ilya's shoulders trembled.

He still didn't face Shane.

For a long moment Shane thought Ilya might just walk out anyway, might leave without looking back, might let Shane's first I love you land on empty air.

Then Ilya's head turned slowly, like it weighed a hundred pounds.

His eyes met Shane's.

There was nothing cold in them now.

There was fear. There was grief. There was longing so raw it looked like pain.

Ilya's mouth parted, and Shane thought, absurdly, he might say it back, might confess right here in this room where socks and tape and hockey gear were strewn across the floor like evidence of a life that had once been simple.

Instead Ilya moved.

He dropped the bag strap off his shoulder like it no longer mattered and crossed the distance in two fast steps, hands coming up to Shane's face, fingers splaying along his jaw with frantic gentleness, like he needed to hold Shane steady, like he needed to memorize the shape of him before he disappeared.

He kissed him.

This kiss was desperation and goodbye braided together.

Shane made a sound into it that he could not stop, something broken and relieved and devastated all at once, and his hands grabbed Ilya's shirt again because his body did not know how to do anything else but cling.

Ilya kissed him like he was trying to carve the feeling into Shane's bones so it would survive the years, like he was trying to leave something behind that his father could not take.

When Ilya finally pulled back, their foreheads pressed together again, both of them shaking, Shane's tears smearing across Ilya's fingers.

Ilya's voice was rough, barely controlled. "Shane," he whispered, and the name sounded like surrender.

Shane's throat tightened. "Don't go."

Ilya's breath hitched. His hands stayed on Shane's face. His eyes closed for a second, and Shane could see the war in him, the part that wanted to stay, to fight, to choose love over fear,

and the part that had already made the decision that love here would be a death sentence.

When Ilya opened his eyes again, there was pain in them so sharp Shane almost couldn't look.

"Goodbye," Ilya said, and the word came out like it tore him.

Shane's breath caught. "Ilya-"

Ilya kissed his forehead, quick and trembling, and then he stepped back, hands falling away as if touch itself had become dangerous. He grabbed his bag with a sudden, violent motion, slung it over his shoulder again, and walked out of the room before Shane could stop him, before Shane could follow, before Shane could do something reckless like run downstairs and scream at a man Shane had never met.

The door clicked shut.

The sound was small.

It was also the loudest thing Shane had ever heard.

Shane stood there for a moment that did not feel like time, chest heaving, hands shaking at his sides like he had been struck by lightning and forgotten how to move afterward. His vision tunneled. The room tilted. His heart hammered as if it was trying to outrun grief.

He stumbled forward, reaching for the door, and then stopped because his legs went weak, because the idea of opening it and chasing Ilya into the hallway where his father existed felt like walking into a fire.

He slid down against the wall instead, knees hitting the floor hard, breath coming too fast, too shallow. The beginnings of a panic attack rose in him like a wave, familiar and monstrous, and he pressed his palms flat against his chest as if he could force his heart to slow by physical command.

It didn't work.

He could taste Ilya still, like a ghost.

He could feel the imprint of Ilya's hands on his face like phantom heat.

He stared at the door and waited for it to open again.

It didn't.

Somewhere down the hall, someone laughed. Someone called someone else's name. The camp kept breathing.

And Shane sat on the floor shaking, the word love still burning in his mouth like a brand, and realized with a sick, sinking clarity that this was not just heartbreak; this was the beginning of something that would haunt him for years, because whatever had just happened wasn't a

fight, wasn't a misunderstanding, wasn't something he could solve with an apology or a better conversation.

It was fear.

It was protection that looked like abandonment.

And Ilya had chosen it anyway.

Shane pressed the heel of his hand into his mouth to stop himself from making a sound that would draw attention, because the one thing he understood, without anyone having to say it, was that if Ilya had left like this, if Ilya had looked at him like that and still walked out, it meant something out there was bigger than both of them.

He didn't know what.

Not yet.

He just knew, in the trembling wreckage of himself, that the world had finally shown its teeth.

And somewhere in the building, beyond the door he couldn't bring himself to open, Ilya was leaving.

And Shane was being left behind.

Chapter End Notes

We're finally here!! Don't worry it's not the end of the book quite yet. But it is the bittersweet ending of the camp chapters. Only present on from here! Thanks for all of your kindness and support.

Chapter 15: Ground Rules

Chapter Notes

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

Chapter 15

November 2016 - Montreal

Shane should have felt relief when the plane touched down in Montreal, the familiar thud of wheels against runway, the way the city always seemed to greet him with the same cold, pragmatic indifference, as if it had no interest in whatever private disaster he was carrying under his ribs, but the only thing that arrived with the landing was a new kind of dread, quieter than panic and harder to outrun, because Minneapolis hadn't ended cleanly, it had simply been interrupted, and now the interruption lived inside him like a head breath he couldn't release.

He had been doing the replay since the moment he ran out of the hallway after the elevator doors opened, since the moment he felt Hayden's eyes on him and refused to look back, since the moment he slammed his own hotel door and pressed his forehead to it like he could push the whole morning backward through wood and paint. In the elevator, he had felt Ilya's hand in his sweatshirt and the heat of his body leaning in, and he had known, *known*, with that cruel, lucid certainty that sometimes hits right before you step off a cliff, that he would have met him halfway, that his mouth had been willing, that his body had already decided.

It wasn't just the almost kiss that made him feel like he was vibrating out of his skin, though; it was the betrayal of his own reaction, the way he had become so easy to read, so easy to move, as if six years of silence and almost two months of being treated like a ghost didn't matter as much as the sound of Ilya saying his name in a low voice that made Shane's spine go tight.

I can't believe it, his mind kept saying, looping back like it was searching for a better conclusion and finding none. *I can't believe I almost kissed him. I can't believe I almost-* and then his brain would stop before the word that mattered most, because admitting he wanted it felt like handing himself over to something that had never once handled him gently.

The drive home from the airport was a blur of streetlights and cold glass and his own hands locked on the steering wheel like he was trying to keep the car from drifting straight into a ditch. He told himself a dozen times that he was tired, that the weird, hollow shakiness in his chest was just travel and stress and that he'd get home, shower, eat something, sleep, and wake up with his body back under control.

It didn't work.

In his apartment, the quiet was too complete, the kind that made his thoughts echo louder, and he found himself moving through his routine with the frantic precision of a man trying to outrun a memory, shoes kicked off by the door, gear bag dropped where it always went, keys

placed on the counter as if alignment could become salvation. He stood in the kitchen long enough for the refrigerator to cycle on and off, staring at nothing, and realized his hands were shaking just slightly, the kind of tremor that didn't look like fear until you recognized it for what it was.

He tried to eat and couldn't. He tried to scroll on his phone and couldn't. He tried to take a shower hot enough to peel the day off his skin, and he just stood under the water thinking about the elevator again, thinking about the split second where his chin had lifted without permission and the air had become too charged to breathe normally, thinking about the only reason nothing happened was because a maintenance worker and Hayden arrived like a punchline.

When he finally got into bed, he lay staring at the ceiling, and the anger arrived late, like it always did when the initial shock wore off, sharp and bitter because it had nowhere productive to go.

What the fuck was Ilya doing?

What the fuck was Shane doing?

And why did it all feel, underneath the humiliation and the adrenaline and the rage, like the closest thing he'd had to honesty in months?

Sleep came in pieces, shallow and unhelpful, and when he woke up the next morning he felt wrung out, not hungover exactly, but scraped raw, like he'd spent the night grinding teeth around words he still hadn't said out loud. The light outside his window was dull, winter gray, and the city felt far away, as if it had decided to keep moving without him.

He lay there awhile, trying to listen to his own breathing and failing, because his body kept doing that stupid thing where it tightened at random, as if preparing for impact, as if the elevator might open again and he'd be back inside it with Ilya's hand in his hoodie and his mouth hovering an inch away from disaster.

This is ridiculous, he told himself, and the thought had the flat, exhausted tone of someone who knew better. He had taken hits harder than this. He had played through injuries that made his shoulder feel like it was full of broken glass. He had handled pressure in arenas that screamed his name like a threat.

He had never been good at handling Ilya.

He forced himself up anyway because he didn't trust what would happen if he stayed in bed thinking, and because practice existed, practice had rules, and rules were the closest thing to mercy he knew. He showered. He dressed. He drank his coffee he couldn't taste. He packed his bag with an almost spiteful thoroughness, as if over preparing could compensate for the part of his life that had become completely unmanageable.

At the rink, the normal noise hit him like a wall and he welcomed it, because it meant he didn't have to hear his own thoughts as clearly. The locker room was the same ecosystem it always was and Shane slipped into it like a man putting on armor. He said the right hellos. He nodded at the right jokes. He kept his face in place.

And then, inevitably, his attention went looking for Ilya like his brain had decided this was the only hazard worth tracking.

Ilya was there, at his stall, doing his usual methodical routine, but Shane immediately what he'd noticed the night before and couldn't unsee now: the fatigue. It was the kind of exhaustion that lived in posture and breath, in the slight slump of shoulders when no one was watching, in the way Ilya's jaw stayed tight as if he was holding back a headache along with everything else. His hair looked like it had been towel dried too aggressively, curls flattened in places and wild in others, and when someone said something to him from the row behind, Ilya answered with a clipped response that got a laugh anyway but didn't soften his face.

Shane felt the small, involuntary pinch of concern again, and hated himself for it, because concern was how you ended up offering someone headphones on a plane, or letting them haul you out of a bathroom and back to a hotel room, or almost letting them *kiss you in an elevator*; and Shane was getting tired of being the kind of person who kept handing Ilya pieces of him as if it didn't cost anything.

Practice went by in hard, clean drills that should have burned everything else out, and for a while Shane could almost pretend it was working, that he could skate hard enough to drown his thoughts, but every time he ended up near Ilya the air changed, subtle but undeniable, like static you only noticed once it started sparking. Their timing was still off, their communication still clipped, and the friction between them turned every small thing into something sharper than it should have been. Once, in the corner, they converged on the puck and their shoulders brushed, brief contact, nothing that would make a highlight reel, but Shane's entire body reacted like it was an electric shock, his nerves flaring awake with awareness so intense he almost lost his edge.

He caught himself. He recovered. He kept skating.

Ilya didn't look at him.

Or maybe he did and Shane didn't catch it, which somehow felt worse, because not catching it meant he wasn't in control of the room, and Shane's brain had always been a creature that demanded control.

By the time practice ended, Shane's frustration had hardened into something more focused, and the kind of resolve that only came when he stopped waiting for Ilya to do the decent thing and accepted that he would have to drag them both toward something functional.

A sponsor dinner had been scheduled for that night, one of those mandatory appearances the organization loved because it turned players into proof of value, and the dinner was being held at a hotel across town with banquet rooms and staff who smiled like their faces were part

of the architecture. They'd bus over, eat, shake hands, smile, endure a few speeches, and then, because it would run late, the team would stay overnight in rooms arranged by staff for "convenience."

Shane should have been able to get through it on autopilot. He'd done dozens of them. He knew the rhythm. He knew how to be polite and distant and safe.

The problem was that autopilot required a stable sky, and he still felt like he was flying through turbulence that only he could see.

On the bus to the hotel, Shane sat near the front, gaze locked on the window, watching Montreal slide past in cold lights and dark glass, and he tried, genuinely, to tell himself this was simple: he was going to be civil, he was going to keep his head down, he was going to make it through dinner, and if Ilya tried anything, if Ilya looked too long, if he said Shane's name in that low voice again, Shane would ignore it, because ignoring things was apparently the only language they were allowed to speak anymore.

The hotel lobby was warm and polished in that expensive way that made Shane feel like he was intruding, and the team flooded through it in a wave of dark suits and loud voices. Sponsors were already gathering in small groups, their partners holding glasses of wine, their smiles already practiced, and the staff shepherded them toward the banquet room like this was all carefully choreographed.

Shane stepped into the banquet room and immediately felt the familiar pressure of it: too many conversations braided together, music low enough to be background, light warm enough to flatter, the smell of food and perfume and money.

And there was Ilya.

Not across the room this time, not hidden behind teammates, but close enough that Shane's attention snagged on him the way it always did, because his body recognized Ilya before his mind could intervene. Ilya stood near the bar with a drink in his hand, tie loosened already as if he couldn't tolerate the restriction, posture stiff like he was holding himself upright by will alone. He laughed at something a sponsor said, but the laugh didn't reach his eyes, and when someone clapped him on the shoulder, Ilya smiled without softening, the expression more like a courtesy than a feeling.

Shane watched him for a beat too long and felt a flash of something that was not purely anger. Ilya looked... miserable. Not in the way anyone else would point out, but in the small, private ways Shane had learned to read back when he was allowed to read him.

He's not doing great either, Shane thought, and the thought should have made him feel less alone and instead made him feel more trapped, because if this was taking Ilya down too, then what the hell were they doing, dragging it out like this.

Dinner began with the usual speeches, the clink of glasses, the performative gratitude, and Shane sat where he was told, smiled when he was supposed to, answered questions about the season like he was a man with nothing more complicated in his life than hockey. He kept his face smooth. He kept his voice even. He did everything right.

But his mind kept drifting anyway, tracking Ilya as he moved through the room, polite with sponsors, clipped with teammates, the exhaustion in his posture never fully leaving him even when he laughed. And somewhere between the appetizer and the main course, Shane decided he was going to try something different, not because he wanted to talk about what had happened on the elevator or confess anything dangerous, but because he was tired of the constant charge between them, tired of the way every silence felt like a threat.

He was going to attempt, like a normal person, to have a normal conversation.

It felt absurdly brave, which was humiliating, because talking to someone you had known for years should not feel like stepping onto thin ice.

During a lull when people were shifting around, chairs scraping, sponsors drifting toward the bar, Shane found himself standing near the edge of the room with his drink in his hand and his shoulders tense, and Ilya drifted into the same space a moment later as if the room kept pushing them into proximity whether they wanted it or not. For a second they stood side by side without acknowledging each other, both looking out into the room like strangers forced into the same elevator.

Shane took a breath that felt too deliberate and turned his head.

"Hey," he said, like this was normal, like he hadn't almost put his mouth on Ilya's yesterday.

"What?" Ilya said, and it wasn't a question so much as a weary demand for context.

Shane felt his jaw tighten, because even that small edge hit a bruise. He forced his tone into something lighter, something civil. "I was saying hey."

Ilya stared at him for a beat and then made a sound in the back of his throat that could've been a laugh if he'd had the will for it. "Yes. Hello. We have accomplished greeting."

Shane blinked, then let out a short breath that almost counted as amusement, because the sarcasm was so blunt it was almost funny. Almost.

"How's your day been?" Shane asked anyway, leaning into the normality like it was a shield.

Ilya turned his head fully toward Shane now, eyes narrowed slightly as if Shane had asked him something obscene. "My day," he repeated, tasting the words like he didn't trust them. "My day has been practice, and then this, and now I am trapped in a room with people who keep asking me about my 'brand.'"

Shane's mouth twitched despite himself. "That sounds rough."

"It is," Ilya said flatly. He lifted his glass and took a sip, then added with the same dry exhaustion, "I will never recover."

Shane watched him for a beat, trying to calibrate, because this wasn't the current day Ilya everyone else seemed to see; this was Ilya as Shane had known him at seventeen in the dorm stairwell, cranky and too honest when he was tired, using sarcasm as a way to keep himself

from cracking. It hit Shane somewhere tender, which pissed him off, because tenderness was not helpful.

"You look tired," Shane said, and the words came out before he could soften them, not accusatory exactly, but too direct for a sponsor dinner.

Ilya's eyes flashed, not with anger, but with something like irritation at being noticed.

"I am tired," he said. "Thanks for observation."

Shane's eyebrows lifted. "I meant-"

"I know what you meant," Ilya cut in, and his voice wasn't cruel, just clipped, like he was trying to keep the conversation from turning into something else. He looked away toward the room, toward the tables, toward the sponsors and their smiles, and the movement made Shane's chest tighten, because it felt like a retreat.

Shane tried again, stubbornly, because he'd committed to this stupid normal conversation and he wasn't going to let Ilya's crankiness chase him off like a dog.

"Did you sleep at all?" Shane asked, immediately regretting it because it edged too close to Minneapolis, too close to the hotel room and the bathroom and the elevator.

Ilya's shoulders went subtly still. He didn't look at Shane. "Some."

Shane's stomach twisted. "Cool."

Ilya finally looked back, expression flat. "What do you want?"

Shane stared at him. "To have a normal conversation?"

Ilya's gaze held his for a beat too long, something heavy moving behind it, and then he looked away again, jaw flexing. "Shane, please," he said, and the word *please* landed strange, not pleading, not soft, just exhausted. "I am not in the mood for this."

"For what," Shane demanded, unable to stop himself. "For me asking how your day is?"

"For you," Ilya said, and the bluntness of it made Shane's chest tighten, because it sounded too personal and too tired, like Ilya didn't have the energy to dress the truth up. He took another sip of his drink and then lowered it, eyes narrowing slightly. "For you doing this thing where you pretend you are polite coworker and not... whatever you are right now."

Shane's throat tightened. "Whatever I am right now is me trying to stop us from looking like assholes in public."

Ilya's eyes flickered to him, sharp. "Then stop talking to me."

Shane barked a short laugh, incredulous. "That's your solution. Just- don't talk."

"Yes," Ilya said immediately, like it was obvious. "It has been working."

"It hasn't been working," Shane snapped, and then forced his voice down because people were close, because he could feel the proximity of sponsors and teammates like a spotlight. He leaned slightly toward Ilya, keeping the conversation contained between them. "It has been making everything worse."

Ilya stared at him for a moment, and Shane saw the fatigue there again, the way Ilya's eyes looked scraped down to the bone, like he was running on fumes.

"Shane," Ilya said, and there was a hint of warning in it, but also something else, something that sounded like defeat. "Not here."

"I'm not trying to talk about-" Shane stopped himself, because even saying the word *elevator* in this room felt like lighting a match. He forced himself back into the lane he'd started in, the lane of normal conversation, because that was what he'd promised himself. "Fine. We won't talk about anything. We'll just stand here like strangers."

Ilya's mouth twitched, not quite a smile. "Yes. Good. That is better."

Shane stared at him, and for a second he genuinely couldn't tell if Ilya was joking or if he was so exhausted he meant it.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Shane muttered, low enough that it didn't carry, but the frustration in it was real, because the crankiness had stopped being funny and started feeling like a wall.

Ilya's eyes closed briefly, and when they opened again, the look he gave Shane was so tired it almost hurt to see.

"Oh my god," Ilya said softly, like a man speaking to the ceiling. "Nothing is wrong with me. Everything is wrong with me. I don't know. I am tired. I do not want to do this right now."

"You're acting like I'm attacking you," Shane said, because he couldn't let it go, because his nerves were raw. "I'm literally just- trying to have a normal conversation with you."

Ilya's gaze snapped back to him, frustration flaring. "Because when you talk like this," he hissed, and his voice was still controlled, still low, "it is never just talk. You make it sound like it is, but it isn't. It's you trying to-" He cut himself off, jaw clenched, as if the next words were dangerous. He exhaled hard through his nose. "Please. Shane. Stop."

The word *stop* landed like a hand on Shane's chest, not pushing him away exactly, but halting him mid step, and Shane hated how familiar that was, how much his body wanted to obey even now.

He stood there, drink sweating in his hand, and he felt the humiliation bloom, because he'd come in trying to be normal, trying to be civil, and Ilya had shut him down like Shane was a problem to manage.

"Fine," Shane said, voice flat, and he meant it in the moment, meant that he was done trying to reach across whatever gulf Ilya kept insisting on. "I'll stop."

Ilya's shoulders loosened slightly, as if Shane had just taken weight off him. He didn't look relieved, exactly, just less braced.

Shane looked at him for a second longer, taking in the tight jaw, the tired eyes, the way his posture still screamed restraint, and he realized with a jolt that part of why Ilya was cranky wasn't because Shane was speaking to him, it was because speaking to Shane cost him something he didn't want to spend in public.

That realization didn't soften Shane. It made him angrier, because it meant Ilya was still treating him like a hazard.

Shane turned away before he could say something that would make a scene, and he moved through the room with a tight smile on his face, doing the polite sponsor circuit for another stretch of time until the speeches ended and the room began to loosen into that late night drift where people lingered out of obligation more than enjoyment.

Eventually Shane saw Ilya slip toward the elevators like a man escaping a fire.

Shane watched him go, felt something in his chest twist, and thought, with a sudden, cold clarity, *Enough*.

Not enough of the relationship talk, not enough of confession, because he wasn't going to do that, he couldn't, but enough of the public tension, enough of the way their private war kept bleeding into the team and into their careers.

He needed rules. He needed a structure that didn't rely on Ilya's mood or Ilya's avoidance. He needed a way to keep this from detonating in front of everyone.

He waited long enough that it wouldn't look like chasing, then excused himself with a polite lie about an early morning and headed for the elevators too, his pulse beating too hard for something that was supposed to be simple.

Upstairs, the hallway was quiet and carpeted and identical doors stretched out like a maze designed to make you feel lost. Shane walked with purpose anyway, shoulders squared, because purpose was what kept him from feeling like he was about to fall apart. He found Ilya's room number on the sheet they'd been given at check-in, and when he reached the door he didn't allow himself to hesitate.

He knocked.

No answer.

Shane's jaw tightened. He knocked again, harder.

The door swung open abruptly, and for a second Shane's brain didn't catch up to what his eyes were seeing: Ilya standing there in a towel, hair damp, skin still flushed from the shower, one hand braced on the doorframe like he'd yanked it open mid motion. The sight wasn't pornographic, not staged, not meant to be seductive, just... human, bare in a way

Shane didn't usually get to see, and Shane's mind betrayed him immediately with the most unhelpful thought possible: *fuck, he's still hot.*

Shane felt his throat go dry.

Ilya stared at him, expression blank with exhaustion and faint irritation, and then his eyes slid down Shane's face like he was taking inventory.

"What?" Ilya said, and this time it sounded like a genuine question, as if Shane's presence in his doorway in the middle of the night was so absurd he needed it explained.

Shane swallowed hard and forced his gaze upward, away from collarbones, away from water droplets, away from the fact that Ilya's bare shoulders looked like something Shane's hands had once known in another life.

"Put some clothes on," Shane blurted, and immediately hated himself because it sounded ridiculous and prissy and also like a man trying not to combust.

Ilya blinked once, slow. "You are in my doorway," he said, flatly. "You knock like police. And you tell me what to wear."

Shane's face heated. "I'm not- telling you what to wear. I'm asking you to put some clothes on so I can- talk to you."

Ilya sighed. "No."

Shane's stomach dropped. "No?"

Ilya's mouth tightened. "No. Please go."

Shane felt the anger flare, quick and hot, because of course it was no, because of course Ilya's default response to any attempt at anything was to shut him out.

"Ilya, this is hard enough without you being an asshole. Let me in."

Ilya stared at him for a beat, and then, with a weary exhale, he stepped back, leaving the door open wider in a silent, irritated invitation.

"Fine," Ilya said. "Come in. Be annoying in private."

Shane stepped into the room, heart pounding like he'd just made a reckless play. The room was dim, curtains mostly drawn, city lights bleeding faintly through, and the air felt cooler than the banquet room, quieter, like the hotel itself was holding its breath.

Ilya shut the door behind Shane and leaned back against it for a moment, towel still knotted at his waist, eyes closed briefly as if he was counting to ten.

Shane tried not to stare. He failed.

"You demanded I put clothes on," Ilya muttered, opening his eyes again, tone dry. "So do you mind?"

He turned toward his suitcase.

Shane's brain scrambled to keep up. "Yeah. Please. Thank you."

Ilya reached for the edge of the towel.

Shane's blood went cold.

"Wait-what," Shane said, too fast, because his body reacted before his mind could form a coherent sentence.

Ilya paused and looked over his shoulder, eyebrows lifting slightly in exhausted disbelief. "What do you mean wait? This is towel."

Shane felt his face go nuclear. "I meant- put on clothes like... I'll turn around. I'll-" He gestured helplessly and spun away toward the wall like a teenager who'd walked into the wrong locker room, which would have been funny if Shane wasn't twenty two and supposedly a professional adult.

Behind him, Ilya made a low sound that might have been a laugh if it wasn't so tired.

"You are unbelievable," Ilya said, voice muffled slightly by movement.

Shane stared at the wallpaper, jaw clenched. "I am not unbelievable, you're the one-" He stopped, because finishing that sentence felt like inviting chaos.

Fabric rustled behind him. A drawer opened and shut. Shane's whole body felt too aware, every nerve lit up with the ridiculous knowledge that Ilya was changing three feet behind him, and the awareness wasn't just embarrassment, it was hunger he didn't want to own.

"Okay," Ilya said eventually, and his voice sounded closer again. "You can turn around. I am dressed. You can stop being nun."

Shane turned slowly, swallowing hard.

Ilya had pulled on sweatpants and a t-shirt, hair damp and messy, face still tired but now edged with mild irritation, as if Shane had interrupted the one small moment of solitude he'd managed to steal. He looked less vulnerable now, more armored, and Shane hated that relief and disappointment hit him at the same time.

"Thank you," Shane said, forcing his voice steady.

Ilya stared at him. "What do you want? Why are you here?"

Shane exhaled slowly, trying to keep his thoughts from scattering. "Because this can't keep happening."

Ilya's eyes narrowed, and Shane could practically see him brace for a relationship conversation, for a fight, for a confession, for whatever he was terrified Shane might try to drag out of him.

Shane held up a hand immediately, like he was trying to stop Ilya from bolting. "Not- like that. I'm not doing the-" He searched for the word and came up empty because naming it felt dangerous. "I'm not asking what we are. I'm asking how we are going to function."

Ilya's mouth tightened. "We function."

"No," Shane said, sharper than he intended, then forced his tone down because he didn't want this to become another escalation. He walked farther into the room and stopped near the foot of the bed, keeping distance like distance was safety. "We don't. We're not. It's affecting practice. It affected the game. It's... obvious. People are beginning to notice."

Ilya dragged a hand down his face, slow, exhausted. "Yes."

Shane blinked. The agreement caught him off guard. "Yes?"

Ilya looked at him like Shane was missing the point. "Yes, Shane. I know. I have eyes. I have brain. I am there."

Shane's jaw tightened. "Okay. Then- help me. I want rules. I want boundaries. I want something we can both follow so we stop dragging this into public."

Ilya stared at him for a long beat, and Shane could see the fight in him, the instinct to refuse, to shut down, to make Shane the problem. Then Ilya exhaled, long and slow, like a man lowering a weapon because he's too tired to keep holding it up.

"Okay," Ilya said, flat. "Fine. Rules. Say your rules."

Shane swallowed hard, because he hadn't expected compliance either, and the reality of it made his nerves spike, because if Ilya was agreeing, it meant Ilya cared about the consequences, which meant Ilya cared, which meant everything was still a live wire under the surface.

Shane forced himself into logistics mode, because that was the only mode he trusted not to betray him.

"Rule one," Shane said, voice steady, "we don't talk about anything personal in public. We keep it professional. On the ice and off."

Ilya's eyes flicked toward him, and the corner of his mouth twitched faintly, like he found it almost funny that Shane was saying something so obvious out loud.

"Okay," Ilya said. "Easy."

Shane felt a flicker of irritation. "It hasn't been easy. Or we wouldn't be here right now."

Ilya's gaze sharpened slightly. "I said it is easy rule. Not easy life."

Shane huffed a breath that was almost a laugh, then continued before he could get derailed. "Rule two: on the ice, we communicate. No more clipped bullshit. If we need to call something, we call it. If you're there, you're there. I'm tired of this half second off because we're refusing to look at each other."

Ilya's jaw flexed, and his eyes slid away for a second like that hit too close. "Okay," he said anyway, voice tight. "Yes. Fine."

Shane nodded once, sharp. "Rule three: we don't-" He stopped, because this was the part that felt hardest to say without admitting too much. He forced it out anyway. "We don't bait each other. No provoking. No making the other person snap. We keep it contained."

Ilya's eyebrows lifted slightly. "You think I provoke you."

Shane stared at him, incredulous. "Are you kidding."

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "Shane, you come in my room like angry wife. You demand I put clothes on. You ask me 'how was your day' like you are-" He waved a hand vaguely, searching for the insult. "-like you are costumer service."

Shane felt heat rise in his face. "That wasn't baiting. That was me trying to be *civil*."

Ilya's mouth twisted. "It was torture."

Shane stared at him for a beat, then had to look away because the absurdity of that, civil conversation as torture, hit him in a place that was too raw and almost funny, and he didn't know what to do with the mix of emotions. When he looked back, Ilya's face had softened a fraction, not warm, not gentle, but less sharp, like the sarcasm had been a way to keep himself from cracking.

"Okay," Shane said, firm. "Then the rule is: we keep things neutral. We don't do anything that escalates. If one of us needs space, we say it like an adult and we walk away instead of-" He stopped himself before he said *instead of disappearing for six years*.

Ilya's eyes held his, steady and tired. "Okay," he said again, and this time the agreement sounded less like annoyance and more like resignation.

Shane swallowed. His chest felt tight. "And if we slip," he added, because he couldn't not acknowledge it, because pretending the elevator hadn't happened felt impossible in this room, "If something happens- if we... almost-"

He stopped again because the word wouldn't come out clean.

Ilya went very still.

Shane felt his pulse spike, because he had said too much, because he had dragged the edge of the truth into the room.

Ilya's gaze locked onto him, sharp, and for a second Shane thought he'd finally pushed too far, thought Ilya would explode or shut down completely. Instead Ilya's eyes narrowed with

something that looked like exhausted frustration at the universe.

"Shane," Ilya said, low. "I cannot do this conversation right now."

Shane's throat tightened. "I'm not asking for a conversation. I'm asking for a plan. If something happens, we don't do it in public. We don't make it- everyone's problem."

Ilya's mouth tightened, and he looked away like he was staring at the wall to keep himself from staring at Shane.

"Okay," he said finally, voice rougher. "Fine. If something happens, we'll stop. We breath. We walk away. We don't-" He stopped, jaw flexing, then forced the rest out like it tasted bad. "We don't make a scene."

Shane nodded, throat tight, because the agreement did not feel like relief. It felt like grief. It felt like them making rules around a fire they both knew was there and refusing to name it flame.

"Okay," Shane said quietly.

Ilya exhaled and sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, head tipped forward like the weight of the day had finally won. In that posture, he looked younger for a second, not in a pretty way, but in a tired way Shane recognized from camp stairwells and late nights when Ilya had been too worn down to keep performing control.

"Are you happy now?" Ilya muttered.

Shane's stomach twisted. "No."

Ilya's head lifted slightly, eyes flicking toward him. "Then what do you want?"

Shane stared at him, feeling his own exhaustion pull at him too, and for a second he wanted to say something honest, something dangerous, something like *I want you to stop acting like I'm poison*, but honesty was a door he didn't trust himself to open. He forced himself back into the safe lane again.

"I want us to stop fucking up," Shane said. "I want us to stop bringing this into the team. I want to keep my career intact, and I want you to keep yours intact, and I want-" He swallowed hard. "And I want to stop feeling like I'm losing my mind every time we end up in the same room."

Ilya's gaze held his for a beat, and something in his eyes shifted, quiet and heavy, like he understood too well.

"Okay," Ilya said again, but softer, and the softness in it hit Shane in a way that made his chest ache. "Won't be a problem anymore."

Shane nodded once, and he forced his legs to move toward the door before staying became a risk. "Thank you," he said, because he didn't know what else to say.

Ilya didn't look up as Shane reached for the handle. "Goodnight, Shane," he muttered, and it sounded like a man saying goodbye to something he couldn't afford.

Shane stepped into the hallway and shut the door behind him, and the click sounded too final. He stood there for a moment breathing in the quiet, letting his shoulders loosen a fraction, because he had done what he came to do. He had gotten rules. He had put structure around chaos.

And weirdly, that did make him feel a little better, like he had at least grabbed one corner of the situation and nailed it down so it couldn't flap wildly in the wind. He also felt annoyed, because Ilya had been a cranky bastard through the whole thing, and Shane hated how much that crankiness had felt... familiar, almost intimate, like the way you got with someone you trusted enough to be ugly around.

He started down the hall toward his own room, keycard in his pocket, mind still buzzing but less frantic, and he was halfway to the elevator bank when he rounded the corner and nearly walked into Hayden.

Hayden was leaning against the wall like he'd been waiting, posture casual but eyes too attentive to be truly relaxed, and the moment he saw Shane his expression shifted into something careful, something gentle, like he was approaching a skittish animal.

"Hey," Hayden said softly.

Shane stopped, instinctively squaring his shoulders. "Hey."

Hayden's gaze flicked past Shane's shoulder toward Ilya's room, then back to Shane's face, and Shane could feel the unasked questions hovering in the air. Hayden didn't ask where Shane had been because Hayden already knew. Hayden didn't ask what happened because Hayden was smart enough to understand Shane would die before he offered it freely.

Instead Hayden asked, "You okay?" In a tone that sounded like he was trying to keep Shane from shattering in a hallway.

Shane exhaled, slow. "Yeah," he said, then added because he couldn't stand how thin the lie felt, "We talked. It's... fine."

Hayden nodded once, like he was accepting the word *fine* as a temporary structure, not truth. He hesitated, and the hesitation made Shane's stomach tighten.

"What?" Shane said, the word coming out sharper than he intended.

Hayden winced slightly, not offended, just pained by the sharpness because it meant Shane was closer to the edge than he wanted to admit. He pushed off the wall and stepped closer, keeping his voice low.

"Coach told me something," Hayden said.

Shane's pulse kicked up immediately. "What?"

Hayden held Shane's gaze, steady and apologetic. "Ilya requested a trade."

For a second Shane's brain didn't process the sentence as language. It sounded like a foreign phrase, like something that belonged to another team, another life. He stared at Hayden, mouth slightly open, and the hallway seemed to tilt subtly, as if the building itself had shifted under his feet.

"A trade," Shane repeated, and his voice sounded wrong in his own ears. "What the fuck?"

Hayden's jaw tightened. "Yeah."

Shane's throat went dry. "When?"

Hayden's eyes softened, and that softness made Shane feel like he was being handled, like everyone around him already knew he was fragile.

"After Minneapolis," Hayden said quietly.

Shane's stomach dropped so hard it felt like nausea. He flashed to the elevator again, to Ilya leaning in, to the charged air, to the almost, and the irony hit like a slap: Shane had been trying to nail the chaos down with rules, and Ilya had apparently decided the easiest boundary was distance.

"Why?" Shane asked, and the word came out rough, not because he didn't know, but because he needed to hear someone else say it out loud to make it real.

Hayden didn't answer immediately, and the pause was its own kind of answer.

"He didn't say it to me," Hayden said finally, careful. "Coach told me because it affects the room, it affects- everything. And because..." He trailed off, eyes searching Shane's face, then finished softly, "because you deserve not to be blindsided."

Shane swallowed hard, hands curling into fists inside his pockets. He could feel the imprint of his keycard edge against his palm like a reminder that he was still here, still in his body.

He thought about Ilya in the room, tired, irritated, agreeing to Shane's rules like he was surrendering to a truce, and the thought landed now with a new, sick weight: maybe Ilya hadn't agreed because he believed in civility.

Maybe he'd agreed because he was already leaving.

Shane stared at the carpet, at the pattern that suddenly looked too sharp, too detailed, and he felt something cold settle under his ribs, not anger yet, not panic yet, but a hard, quiet comprehension that made his chest ache.

He lifted his eyes back to Hayden.

"A trade," Shane said again, and this time it wasn't disbelief so much as injury. "He's leaving."

Hayden's face tightened. He didn't deny it. He didn't offer false comfort. He just stood there like a guardrail, present without forcing Shane to lean.

Shane felt his throat close up around everything he couldn't say, because what he wanted to say was *of course he is*, and what he also wanted to say was *I can't survive that*, and both of those truths felt like knives.

He forced a breath in, slow and controlled, the way he did before faceoffs, the way he did before hits.

"Okay," Shane said, and the word came out flat, because he didn't know what else to give Hayden, because he didn't know what else to give himself.

Hayden's lips parted like he wanted to say something, something kind, something real, something that wouldn't fix it but would make Shane feel less alone, and then he seemed to think better of it, because maybe there weren't words for this, not ones that wouldn't make it worse.

Shane nodded once, not trusting his voice, and stepped around Hayden, moving toward his room with his heart beating too hard for a hallway. His keycard felt like a blade in his pocket.

Behind him, Hayden didn't follow. He didn't call out. He let Shane go, because Hayden understood that sometimes the only thing you could do for someone was not make them perform their pain.

Shane walked the rest of the hallway like a man moving through deep water, and with every step the same thought kept repeating, quiet and relentless, like a pulse that wouldn't slow.

He's leaving.

And Shane didn't know yet what terrified him more, that Ilya wanted to leave, or that some part of Shane, humiliatingly, catastrophically, had begun to understand that if Ilya left, Shane would not just lose a teammate.

He would lose the only person who had ever made him feel like the silence might be survivable.

And that's happened once before already, hasn't it?

Chapter End Notes

Signed off by cranky Ilya lol bro is over it

Chapter 16: Bloodline

Chapter Notes

Hi guys I know you're mad at me after the last chapter!! Regardless, hope everyone is having a great day! Thanks for reading as always :-)

WARNING: This chapter contains descriptions of verbal abuse and manipulation.

Chapter 16

November 2016 - Montreal

Ilya's POV

Shane's footsteps had barely faded down the corridor when the quiet in the room stopped feeling like relief and started feeling like pressure, the kind that built behind Ilya's ribs until he couldn't tell whether he was breathing or simply holding himself together by force, because Shane had been in his doorway with his jaw set and his eyes too bright and his stupid earnest, stubborn insistence that they could survive each other if they just made rules, and Ilya had said fine, fine, fine the way a man says yes to a knife he can see coming, and then Shane had left as if the conversation was a task completed rather than a wound reopened.

Ilya stood where he'd ended up standing when the door had closed, fully dressed now, shirt pulled on and buttons done with hands that had not been steady, hair still damp at the temples from the shower he'd taken before dinner and never really recovered from, and he stared at the hotel's bland framed print on the wall as if it might offer him something useful, as if a landscape could explain why his throat still felt scraped raw from not saying the thing that lived there, why he could still feel the ghost of Shane's presence in the air like heat after a body leaves a seat.

He could admit this much, alone, where it wouldn't become a weapon: he wasn't angry at Shane. He hadn't been angry at him in the elevator either, not really, not in the way Shane believed anger worked, where it meant a simple kind of dislike and not the other, uglier kind of feeling that came from wanting something so badly you started to resent your own pulse for making it obvious. What he was, in truth, was tired in a way that made his bones feel old, tired of biting down on every instinct he had around Shane, tired of carrying his own restraint like it was virtue when it was actually fear with better posture, tired of watching Shane flinch every time Ilya softened for half a second as if kindness was another trap.

He told himself, not for the first time, that he could still stop this, that he could still choose the clean, sensible option and make himself small and polite and uninteresting and let this season pass with minimal damage, but the lie didn't sit right anymore, not after the elevator,

not after Shane's hand in his hoodie and Shane's mouth almost close enough to make Ilya forget how to be a person, because the damage had already happened, and he had already made his choice the moment he filed the request he couldn't unfile and pretended it was strategy instead of desperation

Ilya turned away from the door, finally, and crossed the room barefoot, the carpet rough under his feet, the sheet on the nearest bed rumpled where he'd sat earlier like a man who didn't know what to do with his own hands, and he went to the nightstand where his phone lay face down beside the hotel's stupid little notepad and pen. He picked it up and the screen lit immediately with a notification he'd been pretending not to see for hours, because he had already done what he needed to do and looking at the proof only made it real.

Trade request received.

Underneath that, a few missed calls from a number with no name attached, because Ilya never saved it, because saving it would be a concession to the idea that the voice on the other end belonged to family and not to a man who had made himself into an anchor around Ilya's throat, and for a second Ilya stared at the missed calls with a kind of flat, resentful disbelief, as if the phone were a living thing that had chosen this moment to betray him.

His thumb hovered over the screen. He could ignore it. He had ignored it before. He had ignored it for weeks at a time in the early years after he left, when silence felt like the only power he had, when he believed distance could make him untouchable. He knew better now, because silence did not end a man like his father; it only gave him new angles.

The phone buzzed again in his hand, sharp and insistent, and Ilya's stomach tightened as if the sound itself had fingers.

He answered.

"Да," he said, because his mouth did what it had been trained to do, because the first word was always the same in this language with this voice, and because he refused to offer softness.

On the other end, his father did not bother with greeting. His father never greeted, not in any way that implied equality, because greetings were for people you respected.

"You have been difficult to reach," his father said in Russian, calm as a man discussing weather, and Ilya could hear the faint echo of a room behind him, the murmur of voices, a television on low, as if he were calling from a home that had never felt like one.

"I have been busy," Ilya said, keeping his tone level, and he shifted his weight, his fingers tightening around the phone as if pressure could keep his spine straight.

"Busy," his father repeated, and there was a pause that felt like a knife being chosen from a drawer. "I watched your game."

Ilya didn't answer. He didn't ask which game. It didn't matter. His father could have watched a highlight clip, could have watched a few seconds of him on a bench and decided he

understood his life; his father had always been capable of constructing entire stories out of a single glance.

"You are not playing well," his father continued, and Ilya could hear the faint approval in his voice, the satisfaction of finding a weakness. "You look distracted."

Ilya's jaw tightened. "We lost one game."

His father laughed once, quiet and humorless. "Do not tell me about performance. You think I do not understand the business that made you what you are."

He stared out the window at the city lights, at Montreal's ordinary glow, and tried to make his breathing slow and quiet, because his father listened for emotion the way predators listened for panic.

"What do you want," Ilya said, and he kept it flat, because questions were invitations and he refused to invite this man into anything.

There was another pause, and then his father's voice lowered, not in volume but in intimacy, in the way he spoke when he wanted the words to crawl under skin.

"I saw a video," his father said.

Ilya's blood went cold in a way that had nothing to do with winter. "What are you talking about?"

"A video," his father repeated, savoring it. "An elevator. A hotel. You are very careless."

He did not ask what video, because his mind had already supplied it with vicious clarity, the cramped elevator, Shane on the floor, Ilya too close, his hand fisted in Shane's hoodie like an idiot, like a man who had never learned restraint.

Ilya's grip on the phone tightened until his knuckles ached. "I have no idea what you are talking about. There is no video."

His father made a sound that might have been amusement. "Do you think denial changes reality? People record everything now. It is... how you say... *content*."

The English word in his father's mouth sounded obscene, as if he had spit it out. Ilya swallowed, feeling his throat tighten.

"And the boy," his father said, and the word boy was deliberate, insulting, designed to shrink Shane into something less than a man, less than a threat, less than someone worthy of Ilya's attention. "The Canadian boy. The one from your silly camp."

Ilya's heart hitched, hard, and his entire body reacted as if his father had stepped into the room and placed a hand on his neck. He remembered that summer in a series of flashes that had nothing to do with nostalgia: Shane's face when he said I love you and meant it like a wound; Ilya's own hands shaking as he packed; his father's eyes like stones when he realized what Shane was. His father remembering Shane meant his father had never let it go.

"Do not say his name," Ilya said, and his voice sharpened despite his effort, because the thought of his father shaping Shane's name with that mouth made something in him go feral.

His father hummed, and the sound was almost pleased. "You are still sensitive about him," he said. "After all these years. I wondered if you would be stupid enough to find him again."

Ilya's stomach twisted. "You have *no idea* what you are saying."

"I am observing," his father corrected, and now there was a hint of irritation, as if Ilya's refusal to submit was a childish inconvenience. "You have always been easy to read when you care. It is your greatest weakness. It will also be his."

Ilya closed his eyes, feeling heat flare behind them, anger and something colder. "Leave him out of this."

His father's voice turned soft in the way that always preceded harm. "You speak as if you can control what I do," he said. "You forget who you belong to."

Ilya opened his eyes and stared at his own reflection in the window, the blurred outline of his face over the city. "I do not belong to you."

There was silence for a beat, and then his father's calm slipped, just a fraction, enough to reveal the steel underneath. "Everything you have is because of the name I gave you," his father said. "Everything you are is because I made you strong enough to survive."

Ilya's laugh came out sharp, bitter. "You did not make me strong. You made me afraid."

The line hung between them, and for a moment Ilya could imagine his father's mouth tightening, his eyes narrowing, the familiar quiet rage that never needed volume to be lethal.

"You think you are safe because you left your own country," his father said slowly. "You think you are untouchable because you have money and crowds and fame?"

Ilya's chest tightened. "Do not threaten me."

His father did not deny it. "You have a career that depends on people believing certain things about you," he said. "You have sponsors. You have a league that sells men like you as heroes for weak boys to worship you."

Ilya felt nausea rise, not from fear for himself but from the shape of what his father was building. "What are you saying?"

"I am saying," his father replied, and now the satisfaction was back, because he had forced the question, he had forced Ilya to show he cared, "that if people see you in an elevator with another man, gripping him as if you want to devour him, then people will ask questions."

Ilya's throat went dry. He could hear his own pulse in his ears.

"And if people ask questions," his father continued, "they will not stop with you. They will look at him. They will look at his family. They will look at his past. They will look for a

story, and stories can be... unpleasant."

Ilya's fingers curled around the phone as if he wanted to crush it into silence. "You will not touch him."

His father exhaled, a long, patient breath, like a man indulging a child's tantrum. "I do not have to touch him," he said. "I only have to speak. You did the rest for me already."

Ilya's vision narrowed. "If you say his name to anyone-"

"To anyone," his father interrupted smoothly, "or to the press, or to a sponsor, or to someone who would enjoy watching a Canadian boy's life become entertainment," and the contempt in his voice made Ilya's skin crawl. "You think the world is kind to men who love other men. You think your team will protect him?"

Ilya could not stop the words that came out, low and furious. "Do not-"

His father's voice sharpened. "Do not *what*? Do not tell the truth? Do not remind you where you came from?" He paused, and then his tone shifted again, almost conversational, almost casual, which was worse. "There are also... financial concerns."

Ilya's jaw clenched. "No."

"Your brother is struggling," his father said, and Ilya could hear the false pity in it, the manipulative softness. "The business is not going well. There are debts."

"That is not my problem."

"It is," his father said, and now the calm snapped cleanly into anger, sudden and sharp. "It is your family. You will not embarrass us and refuse to help us."

Ilya's chest heaved once. He forced it down. "My money is not yours. I may have your last name, but I owe you nothing."

"You send us nothing and you think this ends?" his father said, and there was a hard edge to his voice that made Ilya's muscles tighten reflexively, as if his body remembered hands. "You think you can deny us and still keep your... boy?"

The word boy again, cruel, baiting.

Something in Ilya broke loose.

"Stop calling him that," Ilya said, and his voice rose despite himself, the volume echoing slightly off the hotel room's walls. He didn't care if someone in the hallway heard him; he didn't care if a neighbor complained; he was suddenly too full of rage to contain it. "You do not know him. You do not get to talk about him. You do not get to use him like a weapon because you cannot control me anymore."

There was a beat of shocked silence, as if his father had not expected him to shout, and then his father's voice turned ice cold.

"I know enough," he said. "I knew enough when you were seventeen and trembling in that dormitory, trying to pretend you did not love him. I know enough now. You forget that I have been always watching."

Ilya's stomach turned. The memory of that summer slammed into him so hard he almost tasted it, the feeling of his father's presence like a shadow across the camp, the way everything had narrowed to one choice: Shane or survival, love or safety.

"You will do what I say," his father continued. "You will send what you owe. You will stop this foolishness. You will always remember where your power comes from."

Ilya's voice dropped, rough. "My power has come from nowhere that belongs to this family."

His father's laugh was ugly. "Your *power* comes from the world believing you are something clean. Something respectable. Something they can sell. I can take that away from you with one single conversation, Ilya. Do not forget that."

Ilya's hands were shaking now, not with fear for his own reputation, not with dread of headlines or sponsors, but with the cold clarity that his father could drag Shane into this and enjoy it, could turn Shane into collateral with no more thought than a man knocking a glass off a table.

"*I will kill you*," Ilya said, and he meant it in the only way he could mean it across an ocean: as a promise of hatred that would never stop, as a vow that his father would not have peace.

His father did not flinch. "You will do nothing," he said. "Because you have always been weak in the same way. You care too much. That is why you will obey."

"I will not obey you," Ilya said, and the words were a growl. "You will not touch him."

His father's tone softened again, falsely gentle, the way it did when he wanted to end a conversation with his thumb on the wound. "Then prove it," he said. "I will expect the transfer soon."

"Why are you doing this? Why to your own *son*?" Ilya asked, and he could hear the thinness in his own voice, the way the rage had drained into something darker.

"I want you controlled," he said. "If you cannot control yourself, I will do it for you."

Ilya's throat tightened. He pictured Shane's face in the elevator, the way his chin had lifted without permission, the way his breath had caught, the way his body had moved toward Ilya like a truth it couldn't deny, and the thought of that moment being turned into a weapon against him made Ilya feel sick.

"You will send the money," his father said. "You will stop this. Or I will make sure the Canadian understands what he cost you."

Ilya's stomach lurched. "Do not speak to him."

His father's voice was calm again. "Goodnight, Ilya," he said, and the way he said Ilya's name made it sound like possession.

The call ended.

Ilya stood there with the phone still pressed to his ear, as if the line might reconnect, as if the voice might come back and continue to carve into him, and when the silence finally registered he lowered the phone slowly, staring at the screen like it was a living thing that had just bitten him.

He wanted to throw it across the room. He wanted to smash it into the wall until the glass turned to powder. He wanted to call Shane, immediately, and tell him everything in a rush of words, wanted to hear Shane's voice and let it ground him, wanted to say I am sorry, I am sorry, I am sorry, because apology was the only language he knew when he had hurt someone he loved.

But he could not do that, because if he called Shane and told him, Shane would fight, and Shane's fight would be public, loud, righteous, the kind of fight that made people choose sides, the kind of fight that would drag Shane into the exact spotlight Ilya was trying to keep him out of.

The trade request sat like a weight in his chest. He thought of it the way you thought of a door you had already closed, the way you could still feel the motion of your hand on the knob even after you walked away, because the act of leaving did not stop being real just because it was done.

He had told himself yesterday that it was the only thing left, that if he removed himself from Shane's orbit then his father would lose interest, that the media would lose its angle, that whatever rumor might exist would starve without proximity to feed it. He had told himself that Shane would be angry, yes, but anger was safer than exposure, anger was survivable, anger was something Shane could carry without losing his career.

He had not allowed himself to consider the other possibility, the one that made his stomach twist now: that Shane might not survive it the way Ilya had convinced himself he would, that Shane's quiet might turn into something darker, that Shane's need to understand might rot into self blame, because Shane always blamed himself first, Shane always assumed he was the problem, and the thought of Shane sitting alone in his apartment thinking I ruined him made Ilya's chest ache in a way that felt almost physical.

He brought the phone back up and stared at the missed calls again, and then, before he could stop himself, he opened the messages his father had sent earlier in the season, the ones he kept archived not because he wanted to read them but because part of him needed proof that the threat was real, needed to see the words so he could justify his own choices.

You owe your family.

You are embarrassing us.

I remember the Canadian.

And beneath those, one new message that made bile rise in Ilya's throat.

I can make him famous.

Ilya's vision blurred, not with tears, because he didn't cry easily, not anymore, but with the raw pressure behind his eyes that came when rage and fear occupied the same space.

A knock sounded at the door.

Ilya's head snapped up, his body going instantly tight, and for a split second he imagined his father somehow on the other side of it, imagined the impossible horror of that man in this hallway, but the knock came again, firmer, and then a voice filtered through the wood.

"Ilya," Hayden said, low, careful, as if he didn't want the whole floor listening. "Open the door, man."

Ilya stared at it, breathing hard, and the first impulse that rose in him was to tell Hayden to go away, to lock himself inside this room and let the walls hold him together until morning, but Hayden's voice carried a weight that made refusal feel pointless, because Hayden did not knock like that unless he meant it.

Ilya stood and crossed the room, his movements stiff, as if his joints had been replaced with wire, and when he opened the door Hayden was standing there in sweatpants and a hoodie, hair damp, eyes sharp and tired, the look of a man who had been carrying more than hockey lately and was not interested in pretending otherwise.

Hayden's gaze flicked over Ilya's face, quick and assessing, and then he exhaled once, slow, like he had been bracing himself for what he might find.

"I heard you. On the phone," Hayden said quietly.

Ilya's throat tightened. "You were listening."

Hayden's eyes narrowed. "I was walking down the hall and you were shouting in Russian like you were trying to start a war," he said, and there was a dry edge to it that might have been humor if his expression weren't so serious. "So yeah. I heard you."

Ilya's jaw clenched. "It was nothing."

Hayden's eyebrows lifted, unimpressed. "It didn't sound like nothing."

Ilya stepped back to let him in, because standing in the doorway felt too exposed, and Hayden walked in without hesitation, the way he did everywhere, like space belonged to him by default, but he didn't sprawl, didn't relax; he remained upright, controlled, his hands tucked into his hoodie pocket as if he needed them restrained.

The door clicked shut behind him, and the sound made something in Ilya's chest tighten, because closed doors had always meant danger in his father's house, but Hayden was not his father and the fear was old and stupid and still real.

Hayden looked at him for a moment, and then he said it, blunt and quiet, as if he were ripping off a bandage before either of them could flinch.

"You requested a trade."

Ilya's stomach dropped anyway, because even expected words could still hit like impact.

"Yes," Ilya said, and the simplicity of it tasted like ash.

Hayden stared at him. "Why?"

Ilya let out a humorless laugh. "Because I asked."

Hayden's jaw tightened. "Don't do that."

Ilya's shoulders tensed. "Don't do what?"

"Don't play stupid," Hayden said, and now there was a crack of something sharper underneath his control, the edge of anger he kept on a leash. He stepped closer, not aggressive, but present, filling the space the way he did on the ice when he wanted to cut off your options. "You don't request a trade the day after you almost kiss a teammate in a broken elevator because you're bored."

Ilya felt heat rise up his neck, fast and furious. "I did not almost-"

Hayden cut him off with a look. "I saw the way you were standing over him," he said, and his voice lowered, intent. "I saw his face. So don't waste my time."

Ilya swallowed. The urge to defend himself rose, reflexive and useless, and he hated that the memory of Shane's face in that elevator made his throat tighten, because it was not only fear he remembered there, not only panic, but the awful, unbearable closeness of wanting.

"You requested a trade," Hayden repeated, slower, like he wanted Ilya to hear how insane it sounded, "and you think that fixes what, exactly?"

"It fixes everything," Ilya said, and the lie came out too quick, too practiced, because he had been repeating it to himself since yesterday, since the moment he hit send and felt the floor drop out beneath him. "It makes it clean."

Hayden's eyes hardened. "Clean," he echoed, and there was disgust in the word. "You think leaving makes it clean."

Ilya's chest tightened. "It removes problem."

Hayden's gaze snapped sharp. "You think Shane is a *problem*?"

Ilya flinched, not physically but internally, because the instinct to protect Shane's name was immediate, violent. "I did not say he was the problem."

"You didn't have to," Hayden said, stepping closer until he was within arm's reach, his voice rising, frustration breaking through the careful restraint. "You're acting like he's radioactive. Like the only way to keep him safe is to disappear out of his life."

Ilya's hands curled at his sides. "You do not understand."

Hayden's laugh came out sharp. "Okay," he said, and now he was angry, openly, the kind of anger that made his words come fast and hot. "Then help me understand, because from where I'm standing, you're ruining him and ruining yourself, and you're calling it protection like that's noble."

Ilya's jaw clenched so hard it ached. "I am protecting him."

Hayden's eyes flashed. "From what?"

Ilya hesitated, because this was the line he didn't want to cross, the one that would turn his father into something real in this room, would bring that man's shadow into a space that belonged to hockey and teammates and the illusion of safety, but the echo of his father's voice still rang in his skull and it made his decision for him, because Hayden was already involved whether Ilya liked it or not, Hayden already knew enough to be dangerous, and if Hayden was going to keep pushing then Ilya needed him pushing in the right direction.

Ilya lifted the phone, thumb shaking slightly as he pulled up the message, and then he shoved it toward Hayden without ceremony.

Hayden took it, eyes scanning, his face changing in small increments as he read, the anger tightening into something colder.

When he looked up, his voice had dropped. "This is your dad."

Ilya nodded once, stiffly. "Yes."

"And he's using Shane," Hayden said, and the words landed heavy because Hayden spoke them like he understood what that meant, like he understood that using Shane was the only way to control Ilya.

Ilya's chest heaved once. "Yes."

Hayden handed the phone back slowly, like it was something sharp. "And your solution is to request a *trade*? Not... talk to him?"

Ilya's voice rose, the exhaustion in him finally snapping into something raw. "What solution do you want?" he demanded, and the anger was not truly at Hayden, not really, but Hayden was here and his body needed somewhere to throw the fire. "You want me to tell Shane, yes, and then he will do what he always does, he will be stubborn and righteous and he will fight, and then it will be public, and then my father will-"

Hayden cut in, and now he was shouting too, because the room was too small for restraint and because Hayden had never been good at watching people self destruct quietly. "You don't get to decide what he can *handle*, Roz."

Ilya froze, the sentence striking him in the chest with brutal precision.

Hayden stepped closer, eyes bright with anger and something like pleading, because under all the sarcasm and the steadiness, Hayden was still a man who cared about the people around him even when they made him furious. "You don't get to decide that he's too fragile for the truth," he said, voice hard. "You don't get to decide that he'd rather be left in the dark, thinking you hate him, than be given the chance to choose."

Ilya's throat tightened. "If he knows," he said, and his voice cracked at the edge of control, "he will go after my father."

Hayden stared at him, incredulous. "Then let him."

Ilya's eyes flashed. "No."

Hayden threw up his hands, pacing a short line across the carpet like the room couldn't contain his frustration. "Jesus Christ," he muttered, then turned back, his voice rising again. "You're acting like he's a kid and you're the only adult in the room. He's not. He's twenty two. He's a grown man who has been getting his heart ripped out by you for months, and you're sitting here acting like you're saving him from himself."

Ilya felt heat behind his eyes, sharp and humiliating. "I am saving him from my *father*."

"And you think the way to do that is vanish?"

Ilya's voice went low, furious. "It works."

Hayden stepped in close again, and now the anger in his face had shifted into something more direct, more personal. "It didn't work last time," he said, and the word last time hit like a fist because it dragged a ghost into the room without needing details, because it implied Hayden had figured out enough of the history to see the pattern. "It didn't work for six years, man. If it worked, you wouldn't be standing here in a hotel room in Montreal with your hands shaking and your dad still pulling your strings from Russia."

Ilya flinched, because it was true, because the trade request in his phone and the threat in his father's mouth were proof that leaving had not solved anything, it had only delayed it.

Hayden's voice lowered, intense. "Do you love him?"

The question was simple, almost quiet, but it hit Ilya like a sudden drop in altitude, because love was the one thing he had tried to keep out of language, the one thing he carried in his body and in his choices and in every stupid, doomed act of restraint, because naming it made it real in a way that could be used against him.

Ilya's jaw clenched. "You know answer."

Hayden's eyes didn't soften. "I want you to say it."

Ilya stared at him, the room suddenly too hot, his shirt clinging to his back, the phone heavy in his hand like a weapon. He thought of Shane's face in the elevator, the way Shane had

looked like he was bracing for impact even while he was being pulled toward it, and the thought made something inside Ilya split open.

"Yes," Ilya said, and the word came out rough, stripped. "I love him."

Hayden held his gaze. "Then stop punishing him for it."

Ilya's breath hitched. "I am not trying to punish him."

"You are though," Hayden said, and now his voice was quieter, not less intense but more careful, like he had crossed into a different kind of urgency. "If I know one thing about the guy, he is ruined over you. He's a walking train wreck. You're not any better."

Ilya's throat tightened. "I am tired," he said, and the confession sounded like weakness and he hated it, hated that it was true. "I am so tired."

Hayden's gaze softened just a fraction at that, not sympathy exactly, but recognition, because tired was something all of them understood in this life, the kind of tired that lived in bone and never left.

Ilya swallowed hard. "You think I want a trade?" he said, and his voice rose again because the anger returned, sharp and protective. "You think I *want* to leave him? You think I *want* to walk away again?"

Hayden didn't answer immediately, and the silence stretched tight, because both of them knew the answer was no, because wanting and doing were not the same thing, because Ilya's whole life had been a series of choices he had not wanted.

Finally Hayden said, "Then don't."

Ilya's laugh came out strangled. "You think it is that easy."

Hayden's jaw clenched. "No," he said, honest. "I think it's going to be the hardest thing you've ever done. I think telling him the truth is going to scare the shit out of you, because you're used to being the one who decides, and he's the one person you can't control, and that terrifies you."

Ilya stared at him, feeling exposed in a way that made his skin prickle.

Hayden took a breath. "But if you don't tell him," he said, voice steady now, captain's tone returning like a spine, "you're going to keep making decisions for him, and he's going to keep paying for choices he didn't get to make. And you can call that protection all you want, but it's still selfish."

Ilya's hands shook. He clenched them into fists to stop it. "He will hate me," he said, and the fear in it was old and ugly, because Shane's hate was the one thing Ilya had never been able to tolerate, because Shane was the person who had once looked at him like he was worth something.

Hayden's expression tightened. "He doesn't hate you," he said, and there was frustration there again, because it was obvious to him in a way it was never obvious to the people inside the mess. "He's hurt. There's a difference."

Ilya's mouth went dry. He wanted to believe that. He wanted to crawl into that sentence and live there, wanted it to be a shelter, but he had seen Shane's face too many times lately, the brittle control, the way Shane's eyes went distant when he was trying not to show pain, and Ilya did not trust his own ability to read what he had caused.

Hayden stared at him a moment longer, then stepped back, as if he had said what he came to say and now the rest was Ilya's responsibility. "You need to get it together," Hayden said, and the words were harsh but not unkind, because Hayden's care always came shaped like bluntness. "Not for me. Not for Coach. For him. Because if you leave without telling him why, you're going to break him in a way he won't recover from."

Ilya's chest tightened violently, because the thought of Shane broken was unbearable, because Shane's whole life was built on discipline and control and the quiet hope that if he did everything right he would be safe, and Ilya had been the first crack in that.

Hayden moved toward the door, then paused with his hand on the knob. He looked back, his eyes sharp again. "And for the record," he added, voice low, "if your dad wants a fight, he's not just dealing with you."

Ilya stared at him, startled, and Hayden's mouth tightened into something like grim resolve.

"Goodnight," Hayden said, and then he left, the door clicking shut behind him with a finality that made Ilya's stomach drop, because now he was alone with the truth and there was no more arguing with Hayden to distract him from it

Ilya stood in the middle of the room, breathing hard, and for a long time he didn't move, because moving would mean choosing what came next, and he was so tired of choices that felt like losing.

His phone buzzed again in his hand, another message from his father, and Ilya didn't open it. He couldn't bear to read more threats, couldn't bear the way words on a screen could still reach across an ocean and twist his insides.

He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face, staring at himself in the mirror, at the man he had become, and he tried to find the version of himself that had once been fearless enough to kiss Shane in a stairwell and believe it could be a beginning. He saw only a man with shadows under his eyes and a jaw that hurt from holding back words.

When he straightened, wiping his face with a towel, he heard the low hum of the hotel's ventilation, the distant muffled sound of someone laughing in the hallway, the building continuing on as if this room didn't contain a quiet catastrophe.

He put his phone down on the counter, stared at it, and then, slowly, deliberately, he opened his contacts and hovered over Shane's name, because part of him wanted to do it, wanted to press call and let Shane answer and let the truth spill out in a rush, wanted to hear Shane's

voice say what the hell and then something softer underneath it, wanted to be forgiven even though he did not deserve it.

His thumb did not press.

He lowered his hand.

He stared at the screen until it went dark.

In the morning, the team's routine swallowed him again the way it always did, hockey turning men into machines, schedules and meals and meetings and the constant, familiar pressure of performance, and Ilya moved through it with his body on autopilot and his mind somewhere else, because his mind kept circling the same image: Shane in the elevator with his chin tipped up, breath caught, eyes wide like he had been on the edge of something he couldn't stop.

At the rink, the fluorescent lights made everything look sharper than it should, the white of the ice almost glaring, the air cold enough to sting lungs, and Ilya skated hard because skating was the only place he knew how to turn feeling into something useful. He cut tight turns and drove his edges into the ice until the muscles in his legs burned, until his chest rose and fell with exertion instead of panic, and for a brief moment he could pretend he was only tired from training and not from being alive.

Then he saw Shane.

Shane was already on the ice, helmet on, moving in that controlled, efficient way that always made Ilya's throat tighten, because Shane skated like discipline made flesh, like someone who had learned early that if he kept himself perfect then no one could accuse him of being weak. Shane's posture was straight, his movements clean, his head turning with sharp awareness, and Ilya watched him from the corner of his vision the way you watched a flame you weren't allowed to touch.

Shane did not look at him.

Or maybe he did, briefly, and then looked away so fast Ilya could pretend it hadn't happened.

Ilya felt it anyway, the absence like pressure.

He pushed off and skated toward a line drill, taking his place with the others, and when Shane ended up a few feet away in the rotation, the air between them felt charged in a way that made Ilya's skin prickle under his gear.

Shane's mouth was set, expression neutral, professional, as if he were playing a role with perfect precision.

Ilya hated that expression on him, because he knew what it cost, because he knew Shane's neutrality was not peace but containment.

When the drill started, they moved like teammates, like men who had done this a thousand times, their timing precise because muscle memory didn't care about heartbreak, and for a few passes it almost felt normal, almost felt like the old instinct between them could survive anything, until Shane's stick tapped the ice once, a small signal, and Ilya's body responded automatically, shifting, offering a lane, and Shane's pass came sharp and perfect and impersonal, as if he were feeding the puck to any other teammate.

As if Ilya were nothing special.

The thought made Ilya's chest constrict.

After practice, the locker room was loud with the usual mix of complaints and laughter and the sound of skates scraping concrete, and Ilya sat at his stall with his elbows on his knees and his head tipped forward, staring at his hands as if they might tell him what to do, because his hands still remembered Shane's hoodie in the elevator, still remembered the temptation to pull him close, still remembered how easily he could ruin everything by giving in.

Across the room, Shane's voice rose briefly, answering someone with that polite steadiness he used as armor, and Ilya looked up without thinking, his gaze catching on Shane's profile, the line of his jaw, the way his shoulders held tension even when he pretended they didn't.

Shane didn't look back.

Ilya felt something in him twist, sharp and desperate, and he forced his eyes away, because staring was a form of hunger and hunger was dangerous.

He told himself, again, that the trade was mercy.

He told himself that if Shane thought Ilya was a bastard, if Shane thought Ilya was cold and cruel and selfish, then Shane would not follow him into whatever mess his father tried to create, Shane would not defend him publicly, Shane would not stand beside him and get burned by association.

He told himself that letting Shane hate him was safer than letting Shane love him.

The lie sat heavy in his chest, but he kept repeating it anyway, because he did not have another plan that didn't end with Shane's name in his father's mouth.

When he finally stood to leave, pulling his hoodie over his head, the fabric catching briefly on his hair, he glanced across the room one last time and saw Shane gathering his things with deliberate care, movements calm in the way they got when he was holding himself together by force.

Something in Ilya's throat tightened so hard it hurt.

He wanted to go to him. He wanted to say, quietly, I am not angry at you, I am just so tired, and done, and tired, because the truth was not that Shane exhausted him, not really, but that loving Shane had turned every day into a negotiation with fear, and fear was endless.

He did not go.

He walked past, eyes forward, because walking past was the only kind of restraint he had left.

And behind him, he could feel Shane's presence like heat, like gravity, like the thing he would never escape no matter how far he ran, because the problem was not proximity and it never had been; the problem was that Ilya carried Shane inside him, and his father, across an ocean, had somehow found the exact place to press.

Chapter 17: Magnetized

Chapter 17

November 2016 - Montreal

Shane woke up with the kind of tired that didn't feel like a lack of sleep so much as a bruise, a tenderness under the skin that made every small movement register too loudly, and for a few disorienting seconds he lay still in the gray light of his apartment and tried to pretend he didn't know what day it was, tried to pretend he hadn't spent the last forty eight hours replaying the same half second in an elevator until it stopped feeling like memory and started feeling like a physical location he kept returning to against his own will.

He could still feel it if he let himself, the press of too close air, the tug of fabric at his shoulder, the way his own chin had lifted like it belonged to someone braver than him, and then the doors opening and the hallway light spilling in like an accusation, the maintenance guy's neutral face, Hayden's eyebrows lifting in that instantaneous, unsparing comprehension, and Ilya's hand still fisted in Shane's hoodie as if his body had not gotten the memo that the moment was over.

Shane rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling until the sheet of paint became a map of hairline cracks he could memorize, because staring at something else gave his mind fewer places to go, but his mind went anyway, as it always did, into the same loop it had been running since the hotel: I can't believe it; I can't believe I almost kissed him; what the fuck is wrong with me; what the fuck is wrong with him; what the fuck does it mean that he said those things, that he looked at me like that, that he didn't let go until the world made him.

He reached for his phone on the nightstand and the screen lit up with too many notifications he didn't care about, too many group chats full of memes and logistics and reminders that the rest of the team's lives had not been reduced to a single seam between elevator doors. He wasn't looking for messages; he knew there wouldn't be any. He hadn't spoken to Ilya outside of the sponsor dinner boundaries talk, and even that had been more like a negotiation with a tired man in a towel than a conversation between people who used to share everything.

He thought, again, of the trade request.

The words had landed in him last night like a misfired puck, a sudden, blunt impact that left him more stunned than hurt at first, as if the body had to confer with the brain to decide what kind of pain it was supposed to be feeling, and now that pain was arriving late in waves, rising and falling beneath his ribs with a steady, nauseating rhythm that had nothing to do with hangover and everything to do with the fact that somewhere inside him a sixteen year old was still waiting at the dock, still looking up at a boy who would not say the thing he was thinking, still believing the silence must mean regret because the alternative was too dangerous to hold.

Requesting a trade meant one thing if you kept your life simple and your assumptions clean: it meant Ilya wanted out, wanted distance, wanted relief, wanted to stop living in the same

city as a man who made his control slip. It meant he had gotten trapped in a box with Shane for an hour and decided it had to never happen again.

It meant, Shane told himself with a bitterness that tasted like metal, that the elevator had not been a confession, it had been a mistake, and now Ilya was correcting it the only way he knew how, by removing himself entirely, by erasing the problem instead of speaking it out loud.

Fuck.

Shane throws himself off the bed and paces back and forth before moving quickly to the kitchen. He stands at the counter with his hands gripping the counter until his knuckles turn white.

He does not mean to call her.

The phone is already in his hand before he remembers deciding anything, already ringing before he can talk himself out of it, and for a second he stares at the glowing screen like it has betrayed him, like the name there is something he cannot possibly survive seeing right now because if she answers and asks him what is wrong he will have to either lie or tell the truth, and he is too tired to do either well.

She answers on the second ring.

“Hi, sweetheart.”

Her voice is steady, warm, not overly concerned, which almost undoes him more than if she had sounded alarmed, because it means she doesn’t know yet, it means she is still in a world where this is just a normal morning and not the morning where something fundamental feels like it is being ripped out of his chest.

He opens his mouth to say something neutral, something harmless like I just wanted to hear your voice, but what comes out instead is, “Mom.”

Just that.

And it is enough.

There is a pause on the other end of the line, not sharp, not panicked, just attentive, the kind of silence she has always known how to hold without filling, and he can feel her adjusting, feel her turning toward him fully even though she is miles away.

“What happened?” she asks gently.

He leans back against the kitchen counter and slides down until he is half sitting on the tile floor, because suddenly standing feels impossible, because his knees are weak in a way he did not expect, and he presses the heel of his hand into his eye as if he can force the sting away before it becomes something worse.

“He’s leaving,” he says, and his voice breaks on the second word, which is humiliating, because he had not meant for it to break, had not meant for any of this to sound like it matters as much as it does.

There is another quiet beat.

“Who’s leaving?” she asks, though he thinks she already knows.

He laughs once, but it sounds wrong, thin and brittle.

“Ilya,” he says, and the name feels like an injury. “He requested a trade. He’s-” His throat closes around the rest of it. “He’s leaving.”

The words feel final even though nothing has happened yet, even though paperwork is not goodbye, even though trades are rumors until they are not. His body reacts to them as if they are irreversible.

On the other end of the line, she exhales slowly.

“Oh, honey.”

He presses his forehead to his knee and closes his eyes, and it is easier to cry like this, easier when he is not trying to hold eye contact with anyone, easier when there is no one watching his face collapse.

“You don’t understand,” he says, because that is what you say when you are twenty two and still somehow twelve, when your chest feels like it is being squeezed from the inside. “He doesn’t want to be near me. He- he’s getting away from me.”

She doesn’t correct him immediately. She doesn’t rush in to deny it.

“You two,” she says carefully, “have never known how to exist without orbiting each other.”

He lets out a broken laugh.

“That’s not-”

“It is,” she says gently. “You have been like magnets since you were kids. You push and pull and pretend you don’t care, and then you end up right back in the same room.”

He shakes his head even though she cannot see him.

“He doesn’t want me anymore,” he says, and the word anymore feels like acid, like he has just admitted something he has been afraid to say out loud since he was sixteen and standing on a dock trying to pretend that the look in Ilya’s eyes meant nothing.

She is quiet for a moment.

Then she says, in the most matter of fact tone he has ever heard her use, “Sweetheart, that boy has cared about you from the minute he laid eyes on you.”

He laughs again, but it cracks.

“That’s not-”

“I am not saying anything dramatic,” she interrupts gently. “I am saying I have watched the two of you for years. I have seen the way he looks at you when you’re not paying attention. I have seen the way you look at him. You do not go through that kind of history and then wake up one morning and stop wanting someone in your life.”

He swallows hard.

“You don’t know that,” he says, but his voice has lost its conviction.

“I know that you’re scared,” she replies. “And I know that when you get scared, you assume the worst so you can prepare for it.”

He doesn’t answer.

“And I know,” she continues softly, “that if you don’t talk to him, you’re going to decide the ending for both of you without giving him the chance to speak.”

The sentence lands heavy.

He lifts his head slowly.

“I can’t,” he whispers. “He doesn’t- he doesn’t want me anymore.”

She does not sigh. She does not push.

She says, very quietly, “Then let him tell you that.”

He sits there for a long time after the call ends, phone still in his hand, the kitchen too bright around him, and he hates that her certainty has unsettled him more than the trade request itself, hates that now there is a small, treacherous voice in his head asking what if you’re wrong.

By the time he stands and leaves for practice, he is not calmer.

He is raw.

He dressed in sweats and team gear and drove to the rink with the radio off, because music made his thoughts louder and he didn’t trust where they would go if given the extra rhythm to march to. The city outside the windshield looked indifferent, same streets, same slush at the edges of sidewalks, same early-winter gray that made everything feel both too bright and too muted, and he kept thinking of how absurd it was that the world continued to function while his whole internal architecture was being quietly dismantled by one request, one rumor, one single line of text on a clipboard somewhere.

At the facility, the smell of sharpened skates and damp pads and coffee that had been sitting on a warmer too long hit him in the face like familiarity, and for a moment he wanted to be grateful for it, for the way hockey could reduce him to something simple and physical, but simplicity required peace, and he didn't have any.

He kept his head down and moved through the corridor with the same efficiency he always did, nodding at staff, stepping around equipment carts, forcing his body to act normal even as his mind kept trying to crawl out of his skin, and when he pushed through the locker room door he did the thing he hated most: he looked for Ilya without meaning to, as if his eyes had their own muscle memory and his brain had never been consulted.

Ilya was already there.

He wasn't doing anything dramatic; he rarely did. He sat at his stall with his elbows on his thighs, taping his stick with an almost aggressive precision, shoulders slightly hunched as if he was trying to fold himself smaller than he was, and there was something about the angle of his neck, the set of his jaw, that made Shane's stomach tighten, because exhaustion looked different on Ilya than it did on anyone else. It didn't soften him; it sharpened him, made his control feel more brittle, made his silence feel less like indifference and more like effort.

Ilya didn't look up when Shane walked in.

Shane hated that he noticed. He hated that he knew the difference between Ilya not looking up because he hadn't seen him and Ilya not looking up because he had.

He moved to his stall and started going through the motions, changing, stretching, checking laces, and around him the room filled the way it always did, with the low roar of men trying to make a job feel like a life, with jokes and swearing and the slap of tape torn from rolls, and he should have been able to disappear into it, should have been able to let it swallow him, but every sound felt a little too loud, every laugh a little too careless, because he could feel the invisible line between him and Ilya like a wire strung tight through the room.

At some point someone tossed a piece of equipment down the row and it thudded near Shane's skates, and when Shane bent to pick it up, his gaze lifted by accident and caught on Ilya's hands, on the way his fingers tightened around the tape, on the way the tape stretched and snapped with controlled violence, and Shane had a sudden, ugly thought he didn't like admitting to himself: he looks like he's bracing for impact, like he's preparing to take a hit he knows is coming.

And Shane, because he was a bastard when cornered, thought, *fine*.

On the ice, everything got easier and worse at the same time. Skates cut into the surface, breath turned into quick white clouds, drills started and restarted, and Shane's body settled into what it knew, into speed and timing and pressure, into the clean logic of a game where you were allowed to collide with someone and call it strategy.

He tried to keep it professional. He told himself he would be better today, that he would not bring whatever was happening between him and Ilya into the place where it could cost them

both, that he would not become the version of himself Coach had implied he was becoming, the one who could not function when a single person in his orbit went quiet.

But his attention kept snapping toward Ilya like a reflex, and every time it did he saw the same thing: not anger, not disdain, just that steady, tired containment, like Ilya was holding something heavy at arm's length and willing his arms not to shake.

When they ran a drill that brought them into the same lane, Shane did not adjust the way he normally would. He kept his line. He kept his speed. He told himself it was an accident even as his body made the choice, even as his shoulder angled just slightly, even as he felt the moment approaching with a clarity that made his mouth go dry.

Impact.

It wasn't a cheap shot; it wasn't a fight starter. It was a hard, clean shoulder check, enough to rattle, enough to make the boards vibrate, enough to make a couple of heads turn, and Shane felt it through his own shoulder, felt the jolt up his arm, felt the satisfaction of contact and the immediate sickness that followed, because he had wanted a reaction and he did not deserve to get one.

Ilya hit the boards and recovered in one smooth movement, skates catching, body rebalancing, and for half a second Shane saw something flash in his eyes, instinctive anger, maybe, or surprise, and then it was gone, swallowed back into that same exhausted control, and Ilya looked at him.

Not with outrage.

Not with a snarl.

With something that made Shane's stomach drop.

It was the look of someone who was not shocked by being hurt, someone who had been expecting it, someone who thought, yes, of course; that tracks; that is fair; that is what happens when you corner someone and they don't know what else to do.

Ilya's gaze held Shane's for a beat too long, and in that beat Shane felt himself exposed in a way he hated, because it was as if Ilya was seeing straight through the check to the thing underneath it: Shane's humiliation, Shane's fear, Shane's anger at being left behind again.

Then Ilya turned away and skated back into position without saying a word.

Shane's chest tightened like he'd been punched.

He told himself he didn't care. He told himself it didn't matter. He told himself Ilya deserved it for months of silence and a trade request that felt like abandonment.

And then, because his mind was a traitor, it offered him a memory of Ilya in an elevator, leaning down close enough that his breath had warmed Shane's face, saying, rough and low, *You have no idea*, and Shane's hands tightened around his stick until his knuckles went white.

After practice, the locker room was quieter than usual, that post-ice lull where adrenaline fades and men become aware again of soreness and schedules and the fact that their bodies are not machines no matter how badly they want them to be. Shane sat at his stall, sweat cooling under his gear, and he waited for the feeling of relief he usually got from having moved, from having done his job, from having forced his mind into his body for an hour.

Relief didn't come.

He kept glancing down the row, not directly, never directly, but in the way you glance at a wound you pretend isn't there, and Ilya moved through his own routine with the same deliberate efficiency, peeling off pads, rolling his shoulders, speaking to no one for longer than was normal even for him, and Shane felt something in him twist with a kind of helpless rage, because if Ilya was leaving, if he had already asked to leave, then what was the point of any of this pretending, what was the point of boundaries, of civility, of trying, if the end was the same: Ilya walking away and Shane standing in the quiet after.

Shane showered and dressed and left before he could do something stupid like follow him, before he could do something worse like ask him, in front of everyone, is it true, are you leaving, did you really ask to get away from me, and he hated himself for needing the answer so badly.

In the hallway outside the locker room, he slowed when he heard footsteps behind him, and for a moment his body did the thing it had been doing all season, that involuntary bracing as if his nerves were always anticipating contact from one direction in particular.

It wasn't Ilya.

Hayden fell into step beside him like he was trying to make it look casual, like he was not, in fact, a man who had seen too much and knew too much and was currently carrying the weight of two idiots who could not stop setting themselves on fire in public.

"You got a minute?" Hayden asked, and his voice was light enough to pass as normal, but his eyes were not.

Shane kept walking. "For what?"

Hayden didn't answer immediately, which was its own kind of answer, because Hayden rarely left silence unfilled unless he was choosing it on purpose. He matched Shane's pace without crowding him, which Shane noticed with a flash of irritation he immediately regretted, because treading lightly was exactly what Shane had wanted from everyone else and now that he was getting it, it felt like pity.

They turned into a quieter corridor, away from the main flow of staff and players, and Hayden stopped near a wall lined with framed photos of old teams, men grinning in black and white with a confidence that looked uncomplicated, as if the only thing that mattered in those pictures was winning.

Hayden leaned back against the wall and crossed his arms. He watched Shane the way he watched plays develop on the ice, patient and alert and waiting for the moment someone

committed.

Shane's throat tightened. "What?"

Hayden's gaze didn't flicker. "I heard about practice."

Shane let out a breath that was not a laugh. "Did you."

"I'm not your coach," Hayden said, and the gentle firmness in it made Shane's jaw clench. "I'm not here to lecture you."

"Then why are you here?"

Hayden held his gaze for a long moment, and Shane had the sudden, irrational urge to look away, because being looked at like that made him feel like he couldn't hide behind tone or jokes or anger, made him feel like a kid again, caught doing something he knew better than to do.

"I'm here," Hayden said, "because you're doing that thing where you think if you hurt first you won't get hurt later."

Shane's stomach dropped. "I didn't-"

Hayden lifted a hand slightly, not cutting him off sharply, just stopping him the way you stop a teammate from skating into a bad play. "You don't have to explain it to me."

Shane swallowed hard. He could feel heat rising in his chest, anger and embarrassment tangled together. "Then what," he demanded, and his voice came out harsher than he meant, because control was slipping around the edges. "What do you want from me?"

Hayden's expression softened by a fraction, like he was seeing the thing underneath Shane's tone, the fear disguised as aggression. "I want you to talk to him."

Shane stared at him. For a second he genuinely couldn't make sense of the sentence, because it felt like being told to jump into a fire and call it healing.

"Why," Shane said, and his voice was low, tight. "Why would I talk to someone who is trying to get the hell away from me?"

Hayden's jaw tightened. "Is that what you think this is?"

Shane felt something hot flare in him. "What else could it be?"

Hayden looked at him for a long beat, and Shane watched him choose his words, watched him restrain himself, watched him do the thing Shane had been failing to do all season: pause before reacting.

"I'm not going to talk for him," Hayden said finally, and there was a carefulness in it that made Shane's anger spike, because carefulness meant there was something to protect, something Hayden knew he couldn't say without breaking trust.

Shane's hands curled into fists at his sides. "So he did tell you something."

Hayden didn't answer immediately, and the silence was loud enough that Shane felt it in his teeth.

Shane stepped closer, not threatening, but intense in a way he couldn't stop. "Did he tell you something?"

Hayden's eyes held his. "Shane."

The way Hayden said his name was infuriatingly steady, like he was trying to keep Shane from tipping over the edge without grabbing him.

Shane laughed, sharp. "Don't. Don't do the captain voice on me."

"I'm not," Hayden said, and now there was a thread of frustration under his calm, something that sounded like, Jesus Christ, how are we still here. "I'm trying to keep you from making this worse."

"How?" Shane said, and his chest felt tight enough to crack. "How could it get worse?"

Hayden's gaze flicked over Shane's face, like he was taking inventory of the damage. "Because right now," he said, "you're living in a story you wrote in your own head, and you're treating it like fact."

Shane's throat burned. "It is fact. He requested a trade."

Hayden nodded once, slow. "And you decided why."

Shane stared at him, breathing hard, and for a moment he felt dangerously unmoored, because Hayden was right, and Shane hated him for it, because Shane had decided why the second he heard the words, because he needed the why to be something he could survive, something he could be angry at, something that made Ilya the villain instead of the man who had looked at Shane in an elevator like he was starving.

Hayden pushed off the wall, stepping closer in a way that felt less like confrontation and more like grounding. "You need to talk to him," he said again, and the repetition made it feel less like advice and more like a lifeline being offered for the last time. "Not to fight. Not to win. To talk."

Shane's laugh came out shaky. "He doesn't want to talk to me."

Hayden's eyes didn't move. "You don't know what he wants, because you haven't asked him."

Shane swallowed. The hallway felt too bright, too narrow, and he could feel the pulse in his neck like a countdown. "Did he tell you why?" Shane said, and the words came out softer despite his effort, because underneath all of it was the same question, the one that had been living in him for years. Why did you do this. Why did you leave. Why did you make me a ghost.

Hayden's jaw tightened again, and for the first time his composure cracked just enough that Shane could see how tired he was too, how much of this he had been carrying since that elevator door opened.

"I'm not doing this," Hayden said, and there was something almost pleading in it, like he needed Shane to understand without being told. "I'm not going to be the bridge between you two forever."

Shane stared at him. "So you did talk to him. You know something I don't."

Hayden exhaled slowly through his nose, like he was counting to ten in his head. "I know you're both running yourselves into the ground," he said. "I know you're both acting like protecting each other means shutting each other out. I know you're both stubborn enough to bleed about it. And I know," he added, voice lower, "that you're not going to be okay if you keep letting your worst assumptions be the only thing you listen to."

Shane's chest tightened around the word okay, because it sounded like Hayden meant more than the trade, more than the season, more than hockey, and Shane hated that he wanted to ask what he meant and hated even more that he was afraid of the answer.

Hayden held his gaze for another beat, then said, very quietly, "Go talk to him, Shane."

Shane felt his throat tighten. "And if he tells me to fuck off?"

Hayden's mouth twitched, not quite a smile, more like a grim recognition. "Then at least you'll know it's his words," he said, "and not yours."

Shane stood there, breathing hard, and he could feel the argument in him collapsing, not because Hayden had won, but because Shane was suddenly too exhausted to keep holding his anger up like a shield. He nodded once, a minimal movement that did not feel like surrender so much as inevitability, and Hayden watched him for a second longer, as if making sure Shane was still standing.

Then Hayden stepped back, giving him space, and Shane should have walked away right then, should have gone home and thought about it, should have waited until his pulse wasn't doing this frantic thing in his throat.

Instead he heard himself say, "Did he ask you to tell me this?"

Hayden's eyes softened, and for a moment Shane saw something like sympathy there, which made him feel sick. Hayden didn't answer the question directly; he didn't have to.

He just said, "Go."

Shane left the facility with his heart pounding and his hands shaking and his mind running too fast, and by the time he reached his car the decision had already solidified into something he couldn't stop, something that felt less like choice and more like gravity.

He drove without thinking about where he was going because his body knew, because there was only one place this could go now, only one door that could hold the answer to the

question eating him alive. The sky was already darkening, streetlights flickering on in a soft line of yellow, and the city blurred at the edges of his focus because he was too busy replaying Hayden's words, too busy hearing Ilya's voice over and over from the elevator: *You think I ignore you because I don't want you?* Too busy trying to keep his mind from doing the thing it always did when fear got too close, which was to turn it into anger so it felt like power.

At a red light, his phone buzzed in the cup holder and he glanced down without thinking, expecting nothing, and the screen lit up with a notification from a sports site about trade rumors, about possible movement before the deadline, and he felt something cold slide through him, because the universe had a cruel sense of timing, because it was one thing to hear it from Hayden's careful mouth in a hallway and another to see the word trade floating in the same space as ads and headlines, as if it were normal, as if it were entertainment.

He turned the phone face down and gripped the steering wheel harder, the leather creaking under his hands.

When he pulled up outside Ilya's building, he sat in the car for a moment too long, engine idling, breath fogging the windshield faintly, and he had a flash of lucidity that scared him: what am I doing. He imagined Ilya opening the door and looking at him with that tired resignation, and Shane felt suddenly young, suddenly raw, like he was about to walk back into a room where he would be told again, in a different language, that he didn't get to have what he wanted.

Then another thought rose up, steadier, sharper:

I don't get to be left without being told why.

He got out of the car.

The lobby was quiet, the kind of quiet that made footsteps sound too loud, and Shane moved through it with his shoulders tight and his jaw locked, nodding at no one, because he didn't trust his face to be neutral if someone looked at him too closely. The elevator ride up felt like a sick joke, four walls and fluorescent light and the soft mechanical hum of ascent, and for a second Shane's body flashed back, breath tightening, hands wanting to fist into fabric that wasn't there, but this elevator did not stop, it did not trap him, it did not force him into closeness; it delivered him cleanly to Ilya's floor like a sentence being carried out.

In the hallway, the carpet muted his steps, and the corridor looked identical door after identical door, but his hand didn't hesitate when it reached Ilya's number.

He knocked.

A firm, insistent pounding that made his knuckles sting, as if pain could keep him grounded.

For a second there was nothing, and Shane's heart beat hard enough that he felt dizzy, and he had the brief, horrifying vision of Ilya not being there, of Ilya already gone, already packing, already disappearing with no goodbye and no explanation, and then the lock clicked.

The door opened.

Ilya stood there fully dressed, hair damp like he'd showered recently, face blank in the way it went blank when he was trying not to show what he was feeling, and for a second Shane couldn't speak because the sight of him was too much, because his body did the thing it always did, registered the curve of his mouth, the sharp line of his jaw, the tired shadows under his eyes, and then caught up with his mind and remembered: trade request. leaving. running.

Ilya's gaze flicked over Shane's face like he was reading him, like he already knew the mood Shane had walked in with, and he didn't step aside, didn't invite him in, just stood there in the doorway like a barrier.

"Shane," Ilya said, voice flat, and there was no humor in it, only exhaustion.

Shane's chest rose and fell too fast. "Move," he said, and his voice came out low and rough, not loud yet, but dangerous in its restraint.

Ilya's eyebrows lifted a fraction. "No."

The word hit Shane like a spark.

He stepped forward anyway, not shoving, not violent, but claiming space, and Ilya's body shifted instinctively to block him, and for a second they were close enough that Shane could smell the clean soap of his shower, close enough that Shane's mind betrayed him with a flash of the elevator, and he hated himself for it so much that the anger surged hotter.

"Are you fucking serious?" Shane said, and his voice cracked just slightly, which made the rage sharpen, because vulnerability felt like losing. "You're going to stand there and act like I'm the problem when you're the one--"

Ilya's eyes narrowed. "Shane."

Hearing his name from Ilya's mouth in that tone, the warning tone, the don't do this tone, made something inside Shane snap cleanly into place, because he had spent months swallowing every urge to demand answers and now the dam was gone.

He pushed past the threshold.

Ilya caught his arm, not hard enough to bruise, but firm enough to stop him for a fraction of a second, and Shane turned, yanking his arm free with a motion that made his shoulder ache.

"Don't touch me," Shane said, and the lie of it burned his tongue the second it left, because he could still feel Ilya's hand on his hoodie in the elevator, because he had been wanting that touch and fearing it in equal measure for years.

Ilya went very still.

The apartment behind him was dim, lights low, the living room neat in that sparse way Ilya kept everything, as if clutter might be a vulnerability, and Shane stepped into it anyway, heart

pounding, and turned back to face him.

Ilya shut the door slowly behind them, as if they had all the time in the world, as if Shane wasn't vibrating with adrenaline, and when he turned, his expression was controlled, tired, guarded.

"What is this?" Ilya said, and he sounded genuinely weary, not cruel, not mocking, as if he had been carrying something heavy all day and Shane had just added another weight.

Shane's breath shook on the exhale. He stared at him, and all the words he'd rehearsed in the car, all the speeches and accusations and demands, tangled together in his throat.

Then the simplest one rose up, raw and ugly and honest.

"Tell me the truth," Shane said, and his voice was louder now, sharper, the restraint cracking. "Now."

Ilya's eyes held his, dark and unreadable.

Shane's chest tightened until it hurt, and he felt the whole season press down on this moment, the months of silence, the near kiss, the rules, the trade request, the way Hayden had looked at him like he was about to drown.

"Tell me," Shane repeated, and now there was no attempt at calm left in it, only desperation disguised as anger. "Or I swear to God I will lose my mind."

Ilya didn't move.

Shane felt his own pulse hammering in his throat like a countdown.

And somewhere deep inside him, beneath the rage and the fear, a quieter thought flared, terrifying in its clarity: if he tells me, everything changes; if he doesn't, I don't know how to keep living like this.

He took a step closer, jaw clenched, eyes burning.

"Fuck you," Shane said, and the words came out like a wound, not a performance, because there were years in them. "Tell me the truth. Now."

And Ilya, still in the doorway light, still controlled and shaking under the surface in a way Shane could somehow see even without proof, stared back at him like he was standing at the edge of something he couldn't climb down from without breaking.

Chapter 18: Boiling Point

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! Sorry for the late update. Went to a Heated Rivalry dance party last night so here's my severely hungover chapter hehe.

Check the notes at the end! (spoilers!!) comments and kudos appreciated!

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

Chapter 18

November 2016 - Montreal

Shane does not know which part of him is shaking first, whether it is his hands or the hollow place in his chest that has been widening for weeks as if something vital has been quietly removed and never replaced, but he knows that he cannot take another second of Ilya looking at him like this, with that exhausted, guarded attention that makes Shane feel simultaneously handled and held at a distance, as if Ilya is trying to decide whether Shane is a person to be cared for or a danger to be contained.

Ilya stands a few steps inside his own apartment with his hair still damp from a recent shower, curls darkening at his temples, the fabric of his T-shirt clinging faintly across his shoulders and chest, and Shane hates how immediately his mind notices those details, hates how his body treats Ilya's bare forearms and the slope of his neck as information worth cataloguing even now, even when Shane has come here furious and raw and sick with the knowledge that a trade request exists somewhere in a system that can uproot a person as cleanly as paperwork. The room itself feels too quiet for the storm Shane has dragged in, and the low lamplight throws soft shadows across Ilya's neat furniture and the blank walls, making the apartment look like a place built for control, for distance, for solitude, for a man who does not trust anything that cannot be arranged and put away.

"Please," Ilya says, and it is not dismissive, not mocking, not even properly sharp, but low and tight in a way that makes it sound like the word hurts to say. "Shane. You should leave. I cannot do this tonight."

The way he says cannot makes Shane's mouth go dry, because it lands like the same refrain Shane has been hearing in different forms all season, the unspoken rule that there will always be a reason why now is not the time and why Shane should accept that his questions do not deserve an answer. Shane hears himself laugh, brittle and wrong, the sound coming out before he can swallow it, and instead of backing toward the door the way a reasonable person would, he steps further into the apartment, closing distance as if distance has been the

weapon used against him for long enough that he does not know how to stop flinching from it.

“Yeah,” Shane says, and his voice is rising already, the restraint he promised himself in the car dissolving the moment he hears Ilya trying to send him away again. “You have been saying that. You always say that. *Leave, Shane, stop, Shane, I can’t, Shane, let it go, Shane,* and you act like I’m supposed to just keep swallowing it until it doesn’t hurt.”

Ilya’s hand comes up to his hair and rakes back through it, hard enough that the damp curls shift and spring, and his shoulders lift on a controlled breath that does not quite settle, as if his body has stopped trusting the idea of calm. “I am not trying to hurt you,” he says, and the sentence sounds practiced, like something he has been telling himself in the mirror, like something he has repeated so many times that the words have lost their ability to reassure. “You coming here like this-”

“Like what?” Shane cuts in, and the question comes out sharper than he means it to, but he cannot stop because the anger is not just anger, it is fear with nowhere to go and nowhere to hide. He takes another step, and his pulse is loud enough that he can feel it in his teeth. “Like I’m losing my mind? Because I am. I wake up every day not knowing whether you’re going to look at me or look through me, not knowing whether you’re going to talk to me like a teammate or act like I’m the thing you have to avoid to keep your life intact, not knowing whether you’re leaving because you hate me or because you can’t stand being in the same room with me.”

There is a small, involuntary reaction in Ilya’s face at the word hate, a tightening in the eyes and a slight flare in the nostrils as if Shane has said something that stings, and Shane catches it instantly, the way he catches every shift in Ilya as if his entire nervous system has been trained to track this one person’s tells. Shane hates himself for noticing and hates himself even more for the vicious relief that comes with it, because it means Ilya is reacting, and Shane has been starving for proof that anything he feels is still reaching Ilya at all.

“Shane,” Ilya says, stepping closer, and then stopping again at a careful distance, as if he is afraid that if he comes too close his body will betray him. “I am not trying to-”

“But you are,” Shane says, and the words tumble out faster now because restraint feels like a joke in his mouth. “You requested a trade and you didn’t even tell me. Do you know what it feels like to find that out from someone else? To realize everyone around us knows something about my life that I don’t, and they’re all tiptoeing like I’m some fragile idiot who might shatter if anyone says the wrong thing.”

Ilya’s eyes flash, and for an instant Shane expects anger, expects a snap, expects the sharp sarcasm that Ilya uses when he wants to cut a conversation off, but what shows up instead looks more panicked, more hunted, as if Shane has kicked open a door that Ilya was holding shut with his shoulder.

“Who told you?” Ilya asks, and the question comes too quickly, as if he cannot help himself.

Shane stares at him with disbelief that tastes like poison. “That’s your takeaway?” he says, and he hears how sharp he sounds and cannot make himself soften. “That’s what you care

about right now.”

Ilya’s hands lift, hovering briefly as if he wants to reach for Shane and then remembers he shouldn’t, and then his hands drop again and curl into fists at his sides. “You were not supposed to know,” he says, and the admission lands between them like something heavy and ugly. “Not yet.”

Not yet, Shane thinks, and the thought is almost nauseating because it means there was a timeline, a plan, a decision being made without him, and the familiarity of that is what really makes his chest crack, because it echoes the past too cleanly, the way things were decided when they were seventeen and Shane was left holding the aftermath with no explanation but silence.

“Right,” Shane says, and he nods once as if he is agreeing even though he isn’t, even though the movement is only his body trying to create something steady to hold on to. “Of course I wasn’t. Because why would I deserve that? Why would I deserve to be looped in on the fact that the person I’ve been circling for two months is trying to disappear again.”

“Stop,” Ilya says, and this time the word has more force, not in volume but in urgency, as if he is grabbing for Shane’s sleeve to keep him from running off a cliff. “Please. Stop talking like that.”

“*Like what?*” Shane demands, and his voice shakes at the end despite his effort, because the rawness is rising too fast now and he can feel it at the back of his throat. “Like this feels like you’re doing it to *me*. Like it feels like you are making me chase you and then punishing me for it.”

Ilya turns away abruptly, and Shane watches him take two steps toward the kitchen, then stop with both hands braced on the counter, head bowed as if he is trying to steady himself. The posture does something strange to Shane’s anger, because it looks less like indifference and more like effort, like Ilya is holding himself upright by will alone, and Shane is not prepared for the possibility that Ilya’s avoidance has been costing him something too.

“I am trying to fix it,” Ilya says without looking back, and the words are strained as if they have to push through something tight in his chest.

“Fix what?” Shane says, and he hears the edge of pleading underneath his own anger and hates it, because pleading feels like surrender. “Fix what, Ilya? Because you can’t just keep saying that and expect it to mean something.”

“This,” Ilya says, and he turns around sharply, gesturing between them with a kind of frustrated helplessness that makes his shoulders tense. “This constant-” He stops, jaw flexing, and then forces the rest out as if the word tastes bad. “Explosion. The elevator. The dinner. Practice. You shoulder checking me like you wanted to hurt me and then looking at me like I kicked your puppy.”

The mention of the shoulder check makes shame flare hot in Shane’s chest, because he had wanted that moment to feel like power and it had felt like a confession instead, an ugly one,

and he hates that Ilya saw straight through it. “You think I wanted to hurt you?” Shane says, and even as he says it he can hear how defensive he sounds, how young.

“I think you are angry,” Ilya replies, and there is no accusation in it, only a tired certainty that makes Shane feel exposed. “And I think you have reason. But every time you talk like this...” Ilya brings one hand up, pressing his palm briefly to his own chest, fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt as if the material is the only thing keeping something inside him from spilling out. “It feels like you are ripping something open that I am trying very hard to keep closed.”

The word closed catches on Shane’s brain like a hook.

“Closed,” Shane repeats, and disbelief and fury braid together so tightly he cannot separate them. “So that’s it. You’re trying to keep it closed. Great. That’s great. Meanwhile I’m walking around every day wondering what I did wrong, wondering what I did to make you hate me.”

The apartment seems to go still around them.

Ilya freezes as if Shane has slapped him.

“*Hate you?*” Ilya says slowly, and the look on his face is not sarcastic and not angry and not amused, but stricken in a way that makes Shane’s throat tighten. “Are you kidding me?”

“What else am I supposed to think?” Shane says, and he can feel tears threatening now, the humiliation of it burning behind his eyes because he is twenty two and he is a professional athlete and he should not be standing in another man’s apartment with his voice breaking like this, but he cannot stop. “You leave. You shut down. You ask for a trade. You won’t even have a normal conversation with me without looking like you’re being dragged to an execution.”

Ilya crosses the distance in quick strides, and Shane’s body tenses on instinct, bracing for impact, for anger, for being shoved out the door, but instead Ilya grabs him by the upper arms, firm enough to ground him, warm hands pressing through the thin fabric of Shane’s sweatshirt. The contact is so immediate and so physical that it steals Shane’s breath, and for an instant Shane’s mind flashes back to the elevator and the grip in his sweatshirt and the almost of it, and he has to bite down hard on the urge to lean into that memory even as his anger surges again, furious that his body is capable of this betrayal at the worst possible moment.

“Do not,” Ilya says, and his voice is rough, urgent, unsteady in a way Shane has not heard from him in years. “Do not ever say I hate you.”

Shane stares at him, throat closing. He tries to swallow and it doesn’t help. “*Then tell me what it is,*” he says, and the words come out cracked, a plea disguised as a demand because it is the only way he knows how to survive being this exposed. “Because I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep waking up feeling like I’m the only one fighting for something that I’m not even allowed to name.”

Ilya's grip tightens, then loosens, then tightens again as if he cannot decide whether holding on is safer than letting go. His eyes search Shane's face with a frantic intensity, scanning him like he is trying to memorize something, like he is trying to gather enough evidence of Shane being real to justify whatever he is about to say.

"You think I don't fight?" Ilya says quietly, and the quietness is more devastating than shouting would be because it makes the words feel honest, stripped. "You think I do not wake up every day and think about you before I even open my eyes?"

Shane's heart slams against his ribs so hard it hurts, and he hates the immediate, irrational spike of hope that follows, hates the way his brain tries to seize on this sentence as if it can erase the trade request, the distance, the months of silence. He wants to demand more, wants to shake Ilya and make him say it again and again until it becomes something Shane can trust, but he also wants to retreat from the tenderness of it because tenderness has always been the part that ruins him.

"You think I don't hear you in my head when I am trying to focus?" Ilya continues, his voice gaining intensity without rising, the words pressed out as if he has been holding them behind his teeth for too long. "When I am trying to sleep. When I am trying to make a decision that will not—" He stops abruptly, jaw clenched, breath catching like he has run into an invisible wall, and Shane feels the abrupt halt like a tug at his own nerves.

"That will not what?" Shane asks, softer now despite himself, because something in Ilya's face has shifted into genuine fear, and Shane is not used to seeing fear on him unless it is disguised as anger.

Ilya's eyes flicker away, toward the floor, toward the counter, toward anything but Shane's face. He swallows, his throat working visibly, and for a second he looks younger, not in a soft way but in a stripped way, as if the layers of control he wears are peeling back under strain.

"You think I asked for a trade because I cannot stand you?" Ilya says again, and now the words are almost furious with their own necessity. "Because I want to be free of you?"

Shane's mouth goes dry. "Then why?" he says, and he can barely recognize his own voice because it sounds too vulnerable, too earnest. "Why did you ask?"

Ilya's hands slide up Shane's arms to his shoulders, then down again, restless, as if he cannot find a place to put them that does not feel like either possession or goodbye. His eyes are dark, bright at the edges, and Shane suddenly understands in a visceral way that Ilya is hanging on by threads, that something has been pulling him tight from the inside and Shane has walked in and grabbed the thread and yanked.

"I asked for a trade," Ilya says, and his voice shakes, the admission scraping out of him, "because I am trying to protect you."

The sentence is so stark that it makes Shane's anger flare again, because protect is a word used by people who refuse to let you choose, and Shane has had enough of other people deciding what he deserves and what he can withstand.

“From *what*?” Shane demands immediately, and he can feel himself leaning forward into the question as if proximity will force an answer. “From what, Ilya. Say it.”

Ilya’s mouth closes hard, his jaw tightening, and the silence that follows is thick enough that Shane can feel it in his lungs. Ilya looks like a man being asked to open a door he has been holding shut with his whole body, and Shane watches him fight himself, watches the tremor in his hands, watches the flicker of something almost pained across his face.

“You do not need to know,” Ilya says finally, and the sentence comes out harsh, but the harshness is not cruelty so much as desperation.

Shane lets out a short laugh that sounds like it might turn into a sob if he lets it go any longer. “Like hell I don’t,” he says, and he steps closer, refusing to let the space return because space is how Ilya escapes. “You don’t get to decide that for me. You don’t get to make decisions about my life and my career and my fucking sanity and then tell me I don’t need to know why.”

“I am not trying to control you,” Ilya snaps, and the crack in his composure widens, showing something jagged underneath. “I am trying to keep you out of something.”

“Out of what?” Shane presses, and he hears the pleading now, raw and obvious, but he cannot stop because the alternative is drowning in guesses. “Out of what, Ilya? Just tell me what you’re so afraid of.”

Ilya shakes his head sharply, and for a second his hands leave Shane’s shoulders and lift toward his own face as if he wants to cover his mouth, as if he is trying to hold the words in physically. “I cannot,” he says, and the sentence comes out rougher than before, like he is close to losing his voice. “You do not understand. If you know, you will try to fix it, and you will not be careful, and you will-”

He stops again, cutting himself off, and the way he cannot finish the thought makes Shane’s stomach twist.

“I will what?” Shane whispers, and the softness of his voice seems to make Ilya flinch, as if gentleness is the most dangerous thing Shane can offer right now.

Ilya’s gaze snaps back to Shane’s face, and the look in his eyes is so nakedly desperate that Shane feels it like a physical shove. “You will get yourself hurt,” Ilya says, and the words sound like they have been sitting on his tongue like poison. “Not because you are weak. Because you are you.”

Shane’s chest tightens, anger and fear colliding, because that is exactly the kind of statement that feels like truth without being explanation, like a warning without context, and Shane cannot survive that kind of half answer anymore.

“You don’t get to decide what I can handle,” Shane says, and he grabs the front of Ilya’s shirt, fisting the fabric the way Ilya had fisted Shane’s hoodie, because he needs something to hold, something tangible, something that proves Ilya is real and not a ghost he has been arguing with in his own head. “I am not made of glass.”

“I know,” Ilya says, and his voice goes sharp with pain. “That is the problem.”

They are close enough now that Shane can feel Ilya’s breath on his mouth, can feel the heat of him, can smell the clean soap from his shower mixed with something faintly metallic that might be adrenaline, and the closeness makes Shane’s entire body hum with awareness he does not want to admit to. This is the part that always ruins him, the part where anger and want become indistinguishable, the part where he is so desperate to be understood that he reaches for the nearest form of contact like it will keep him from falling apart.

“I need to know what I did,” Shane says, and the words come out softer despite his effort, the edge cracking into something almost broken. “I need to know why you look at me like I’m something you have to survive.”

Ilya’s expression twists, wounded and incredulous at once. “Survive you?” he repeats, and his voice is raw now. “Shane, I am surviving *because of you*.”

The sentence makes something in Shane’s chest break open, because it is not the answer he has been demanding and yet it lands in the place his demands have been coming from. He stares at Ilya’s face, at the way the control is slipping, at the way Ilya’s eyes look too bright, and he suddenly understands that Ilya is not just tired, he is unraveling in front of him, and the sight is terrifying because it means Ilya has been holding this together by force and Shane has finally pulled hard enough to make the force fail.

Ilya releases Shane’s shoulders only to grab him again, this time with one hand sliding behind Shane’s neck, fingers splaying into the hair at the nape, pulling him forward with a force that is not cruel but is no longer restrained, and Shane’s breath catches because his body recognizes what is happening half a second before his mind does. There is no gentle warning. No careful lean in. Ilya’s mouth crashes against his.

The kiss is not soft. It is not cautious. It is not romantic in a way that suggests safety. It is desperation.

It is months of silence splitting open.

It is frustration and hunger and fear packed into contact that feels like collision at first, teeth clashing slightly before they adjust, and Shane makes a broken sound into Ilya’s mouth that is not quite a gasp and not quite a groan, because shock and relief hit at the same time, because this is proof and this is danger and this is exactly what Shane has been replaying in his head since Minneapolis with a kind of sick longing he refused to name. For a moment his mind floods with too many thoughts at once, trade request, leaving, protection, lying, the elevator, the way Ilya’s hand had fisted his hoodie like he couldn’t let go, and then the thoughts dissolve into heat because Ilya’s mouth is on his and nothing about it feels like hatred.

Shane’s hands move without permission, sliding up Ilya’s sides and around his back, fingers spreading wide as if he needs to confirm the solidity of him, as if he needs to make sure this is not another almost that will become a memory he has to live inside later. He pulls Ilya in closer, and the contact is immediate and overwhelming, chest to chest, the friction of fabric against fabric carrying an electric charge that makes Shane’s whole body tighten with want he can barely tolerate.

He kisses back like a man starving, and he hates how true that is.

He hates how quickly his anger turns into need, hates how his body has been waiting for this even while his brain insisted he came here for answers. His grip tightens in Ilya's shirt at the shoulder blade, gathering the fabric as if he is afraid Ilya will vanish if he loosens his hands, and the fear is humiliating because it is old, because it belongs to the version of Shane who stood on a dock at sixteen and watched Ilya leave without explanation, but the fear is also real because a trade request exists and because leaving is not just memory for Shane, it is a pattern.

If you are going to leave, Shane thinks wildly, pressing harder into the kiss as if pressure can anchor something in place, you don't get to pretend this isn't real.

Ilya's hand at the back of Shane's neck tightens, fingers flexing as if he cannot decide whether to hold Shane there or push him away, and the indecision makes Shane's pulse spike because it feels like the whole story between them in one motion, the push and pull, the wanting and the fear of wanting. Shane tilts his head and deepens the kiss, and when Ilya exhales harshly into his mouth, the sound goes straight through him like a shock, because it is not polite or controlled, it is the noise of someone losing the battle he has been fighting against himself.

Shane breaks the kiss just enough to breathe, his mouth still close, his forehead almost touching Ilya's, and he can feel his own breath coming too fast, too uneven, can feel his body trembling with the strain of holding so much feeling in one place. He looks at Ilya's face up close, at the way his mouth has gone slightly swollen, at the way his eyes are darker than usual, at the way his composure has fractured into something raw and unguarded, and the sight hits Shane harder than any accusation could, because it is proof that the distance has never been indifference, that the avoidance has been effort, that Ilya has been trying not to break in exactly this way.

Shane's hand slides up the side of Ilya's neck, thumb brushing warm skin where a pulse beats fast, and the physical evidence of Ilya's loss of control does something catastrophic to Shane's restraint. For months he has felt alone in the humiliation of wanting someone who acted like closeness was a liability, alone in the spiraling thoughts that told him he was the only one losing his mind, and now Ilya is here, breathing hard, holding him, kissing him like letting go might be worse.

The relief is so sharp it hurts.

The fear underneath it does not disappear, and that only makes the want more frantic, because if this ends badly, if this is the last time, Shane's body seems determined to take everything it can from the moment while it exists.

He kisses Ilya again, slower only because he needs air, because his lungs are burning, but no less intense, pouring into it everything he has been carrying, his anger dissolving into something more vulnerable and more dangerous. He presses closer, dragging Ilya flush, and the line of Ilya's body against his makes Shane's stomach tighten with a heat that is not separate from emotion, that is braided into it, that makes his thoughts stumble into need.

Ilya makes a rough sound against Shane's mouth, something that might have been Shane's name swallowed and ruined, and Shane's grip tightens reflexively as if he can hold that sound in place. His hands move over Ilya's back with desperate purpose, not graceful, not exploratory in a neat way, but grounding, claiming, memorizing, because he does not trust words right now, does not trust anything that can be twisted into misunderstanding later.

Somewhere in the closeness, Shane feels the ache in his chest shift, not vanish, but change shape, because the kiss is not an answer and yet it proves something he has been too afraid to hope for. Ilya cannot look at him like this and hate him. Ilya cannot hold him like this and be trying to get away because Shane is worthless. If Ilya is leaving, then the leaving is not because Shane is unwanted, and that realization is both relief and a new kind of terror, because it means there is something else, something big enough to outweigh want.

Shane pulls back again, only a fraction, breathing hard, his mouth still close enough that his lips brush Ilya's when he speaks.

"Don't," Shane says, and even he does not know exactly what he means: *don't leave, don't lie, don't kiss me like this if you're going to disappear, don't keep making decisions without me?* But the word is all he can manage around the tightness in his throat.

Ilya's eyes search his face, and there is a split second where he looks like he might say something, might finally open his mouth and let the truth spill out, and Shane's entire body goes still with the sudden, desperate hope of it.

Instead Ilya shakes his head once, small, pained, and his hand at Shane's neck tightens as if he needs to hold on to keep himself from falling.

"I can't," Ilya says, and the sentence is not refusal in the way Shane has heard before, not cold or dismissive, but broken, almost pleading. "Not all of it. Not like this."

Shane's chest heaves, frustration flaring again because he is still being held at the edge of the answer, because the truth is still being rationed out like something Shane cannot be trusted with, but the anger does not fully catch because Ilya is still holding him, because Ilya is still here, because whatever is happening in Ilya's face looks like fear rather than cruelty.

Shane swallows hard, his hands still fisted in Ilya's shirt as if letting go would make the room tilt.

"Then give me something," Shane says, and he hears the rawness in his own voice and does not care anymore about pride. "Give me enough that I'm not just... guessing myself to death."

Ilya's eyes close for a beat, and when they open again they are glassy at the edges, the kind of shine that looks like a man who is too close to losing control.

"I am trying," Ilya says hoarsely, and the words tremble. "I have been trying. You do not see it because I do not let you see it, because if you saw it—" He stops, jaw tightening, as if the next part is the thing he cannot say. He swallows. "If you saw it, you would come closer, and I am afraid of what happens when you come closer."

Shane's breath catches.

He wants to demand again, wants to push again, but the honesty in that last sentence hits him somewhere deep, because it sounds like the truth without the details, sounds like a confession of fear without naming the threat, and Shane feels his own desperation twist into something shakier, something that is not just anger anymore but grief for all the times they have been close enough to reach and have chosen distance instead.

Shane kisses Ilya again, not because it solves anything, not because it makes the trade request vanish, but because his body cannot bear the space that opens when words fail, because he is done standing at arm's length from the thing that has been haunting him for years. He kisses him with a need that is not pretty, his hands tightening, his body leaning in as if gravity itself is on Ilya's side, and he feels Ilya respond immediately, pulling him closer with an urgency that feels like surrender and panic tangled together.

In the press of mouth to mouth, in the heat of Ilya's hand at his neck and the frantic grip of Shane's hands in Ilya's shirt, Shane cannot tell where his anger ends and his want begins, cannot separate the desire to be held from the need to be answered, and perhaps he does not need to, because both have been the same hunger all along.

He only knows that Ilya is here, and Ilya is breaking, and Shane is breaking with him, and whatever truth is waiting for them in the next part of them is still trapped behind Ilya's teeth, but the kiss is proof of something Shane has needed to survive: that the distance was never because Shane did not matter.

It was because he mattered too much.

Chapter End Notes

Okay guys not gonna lie to you:

This chapter has taken over my brain for like days. I have had this whole book written out for the most part for months, but I completely reworked the way I was originally going to do the chapter. To be honest, the smut felt way too forced between these versions of them and I wanted to rework the emotional communication. Sorry if that disappoints anyone! Sending love to all :-)

Chapter 19: The Things We Say Out loud

Chapter Notes

hi omg??? 10k readers????? i genuinely don't have words. thank you for being here, for screaming with me in the comments, for caring about these idiots as much as i do. i'm so grateful. ♥

Chapter 19

November 2016 - Montreal

Shane wakes into warmth before he wakes into memory, and for several suspended seconds he lies there without moving, afraid that even the smallest shift in his body might undo whatever fragile alignment the universe has arranged around him, because there is weight pressed along his back and breath steady at his neck and an arm wrapped around his waist with a solidity that does not feel temporary, does not feel cautious, does not feel like something that will be corrected once consciousness fully arrives. He inhales slowly, carefully, and the air smells faintly like clean soap and Ilya's shampoo and something warmer underneath that belongs specifically to him, something Shane has known since they were kids and pretended not to notice, something that hits him now with a quiet familiarity that makes his throat tighten before he can decide whether he is allowed to feel this much this early in the morning.

He keeps his eyes closed at first, cataloguing the contact instead of looking at it, because the contact feels more reliable than sight. Ilya's forearm rests heavy under his ribs, palm splayed flat across his stomach as if he fell asleep mid claim. Their legs are tangled without strain, shin pressed against shin, knee hooked loosely behind Shane's thigh. There is no stiffness in Ilya's body, no subtle bracing, no hesitation in the way he is holding him, and the absence of that hesitation feels like its own kind of confession, the kind that can't be walked back later with words.

He is sleeping like this is safe.

The thought expands slowly until it becomes something dangerous.

Shane opens his eyes.

Gray light filters weakly through the curtains, outlining the room without exposing it, and he turns his head just enough to look over his shoulder, careful not to disturb the arm anchoring him in place. Ilya's face in sleep is stripped of its armor, the tension that usually sharpens his features smoothed into something almost boyish, curls flattened against the pillow, mouth slightly parted. There is still a faint crease between his brows, as if vigilance never dissolves

entirely, but it is softer than Shane has ever seen it. The sight of him like this makes Shane's chest ache with a tenderness so immediate it almost feels like pain, because it is one thing to want someone when they are looking back at you with heat and hunger, and another thing entirely to see them unguarded and vulnerable and still choosing to stay close.

He lets himself look. He lets himself take in the details without flinching away.

Last night comes back in pieces that are not fragmented so much as overwhelming, the argument that finally stopped circling and started bleeding, the way Ilya's voice cracked around truths he had been carrying alone for years without ever letting them show, the way Shane's own anger collapsed under the weight of a man he couldn't bear to see cornered, the way proximity stopped feeling like war and started feeling like surrender. Shane is aware of the sheets, rumpled and warm; aware of his own body in a way that is both startling and grounding; aware of the faint soreness that makes it impossible to pretend nothing happened and impossible to regret it at the same time, because his body recognizes this as real even when his mind keeps trying to find the catch.

Heat rises in his chest at the memory, not embarrassment, not regret, but something fuller and heavier, like a door inside him swung open and never shut again.

He shifts slightly, just enough to face Ilya more fully, and the movement triggers something instinctive. Ilya's arm tightens immediately. His hand spreads, fingers flexing against Shane's stomach before settling again, pulling him closer in a reflex so unconscious it cannot be mistaken for performance, and the simple certainty of that motion knocks the air out of Shane's lungs more effectively than any kiss.

Shane's breath stutters.

He reached for me.

Not because he was asked. Not because he was arguing. Not because he was trying to manage anything. Just because he wanted to keep him here.

The realization lands without drama and without warning, and it does not feel like a lightning bolt so much as a long-held truth finally being allowed to settle where it has always belonged.

I love him.

The word does not explode inside his head. It does not announce itself. It simply becomes undeniable in the same way gravity becomes undeniable once acknowledged.

I love him.

Not in the abstract way he has framed it for years when he needed distance to survive. Not as nostalgia, not as unfinished business, not as a wound he kept touching to make sure it still hurt. This version. This morning. This arm around him. The steadiness of being held without bargaining.

I love him completely.

The admission settles into his chest and immediately makes everything sharper, because loving him makes this morning luminous and makes it terrifying at the same time. Loving him means this cannot be casual. Loving him means this cannot be treated as a one-night anomaly, a temporary truce, an accident. Loving him means that everything that has been looming at the edges of the last few months is not background noise anymore.

The warmth does not disappear, but it shifts in meaning as one thought moves in slowly and then all at once, heavy as a stone dropped into still water.

He requested a trade.

Shane studies Ilya's sleeping face again, searching for evidence in unconscious expression as if the answer might be written there. If he loves him, and he does, he knows now that he does, then what does the trade mean? Was it filed before last night? Was it rescinded? Did last night change anything? Or was last night something Ilya needed before leaving cleanly, something to get out of his system, some final proof that it mattered before he shut the door?

His mind begins building outcomes with brutal efficiency, the way it always does when he feels threatened, because if he can map the pain in advance then he can at least pretend he has control over where it lands.

Maybe he planned to tell me this morning. Maybe he already canceled it. Maybe he hasn't. Maybe last night was goodbye disguised as honesty.

Maybe this was the last time.

The happiness that had been swelling quietly inside him fractures under the weight of it. His pulse begins to climb, and it is embarrassing, how fast he can go from safe to panicked, how quickly his nervous system remembers the pattern even while Ilya is still here, still warm, still holding him like a man who has no intention of letting go.

Pattern recognition does not wait for permission.

Proximity. Intensity. Disappearance.

Shane's throat tightens.

What if I let myself believe this is safety and it's just the beginning of another collapse?

He shifts without meaning to, and Ilya's arm tightens again, pulling him back instinctively, a low murmur leaving his throat as he drags Shane closer in his sleep. The closeness should soothe him. Instead it destabilizes him further, because if this is real, if this is love, then losing it again will not just hurt.

It will undo him.

He closes his eyes briefly and presses his forehead into the pillow, trying to steady the surge moving through him. He listens to Ilya's breathing and tries to match it. He tells himself that

this is not the time to spiral, that he can wait until Ilya wakes up, that he can ask calmly, that he can be a grown man about it.

But fear is not interested in maturity.

I cannot lose him again. I won't survive it this time.

The thought does not feel dramatic. It feels logistical, like a fact he has finally admitted after months of avoiding it.

He moves carefully, slowly lifting Ilya's arm off his waist. The absence of weight is immediate and jarring, as if someone turned off a light. He sits up before he fully decides to, heart hammering, and the air feels colder without that contact. He reaches for his pants and pulls them on too quickly, fingers clumsy, movements uncoordinated with the rush under his skin, because staying still feels like waiting for impact and he cannot do waiting.

Behind him, the mattress shifts.

"Shane?"

Ilya's voice is thick with sleep, confused but not guarded yet, as if his first instinct is not to shut down but to orient himself around the fact that Shane is moving away.

"What are you doing?"

Shane doesn't turn around. If he turns around, he will fold. He drags his shirt over his head and swallows hard against the burn in his throat.

"I'm sorry," he says, and the words feel like they are being pulled out of him rather than chosen. "I can't. I can't do this."

The bed creaks. Sheets rustle.

"What do you mean you can't do this?" Ilya asks, more awake now, tension sliding into his voice as the morning gathers itself into reality.

Shane's hands fumble with his belt. "I can't wake up like this and pretend everything's fine if you're still planning to leave," he says, and his voice is already cracking despite his effort to keep it steady. "I can't do this halfway. I can't be the person you want at night and the person you're trying to protect from yourself during the day, because it's going to kill me. It already has been killing me."

There is a brief, awful quiet behind him that makes his chest seize, because silence has always been the precursor to Ilya disappearing, and Shane can already feel himself bracing for the familiar pivot, the coldness, the withdrawal, the cutting distance that makes everything "manageable."

He hates how broken he sounds.

"I can't lose you again," he says, and this time it comes out fully fractured, stripped of anything resembling pride. "I won't survive it."

The bed shifts again, faster now. Footsteps cross the room.

"Shane," Ilya says, closer. "Shane. Look at me."

Shane shakes his head and reaches for his jacket, and the movement is desperate, almost panicked, because if he gets out of the apartment then at least he can breathe without feeling like every inhale is borrowed time.

Strong fingers close around his wrist.

"Stop," Ilya says, and there is no sleep left in his voice now. Only urgency. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," Shane says honestly, tears blurring his vision. "I just know I can't stay here if you're still planning to walk away from me."

Ilya's grip tightens.

"I am not walking away from you," he says, and something breaks open in the sentence, something raw and unsteady, as if he is saying it to convince himself as much as Shane.

"Then why does it still feel like you are?" Shane whispers.

And that, that is what finally undoes him.

Shane watches it happen. He watches the control leave Ilya's face in real time. He watches composure fracture, and it doesn't shatter dramatically; it collapses in a quieter, more devastating way, like a man who has been holding something up for too long and suddenly doesn't have the strength. Ilya's eyes go wet, and he doesn't blink it back fast enough. His mouth opens as if to say something practiced, something safe, and then he fails at it, and the failure is so human it hits Shane like a blow.

"I don't know how to do this," Ilya says, voice shaking. "I don't know how to love you without feeling like I am putting you in a target."

The word target lands in the room like a gunshot.

Shane stops moving entirely.

Because this is not the Ilya who disappears. This is the Ilya who is terrified. And suddenly the question is no longer why are you leaving.

It is what is he so afraid of that he thinks leaving is mercy.

Shane turns then, finally, because he cannot not turn, not when Ilya is standing there barefoot on the cold floor with tears on his face and his hands still on Shane like he is trying to keep him from vanishing the way he has always vanished first.

Ilya's hair is a mess, flattened on one side from the pillow, curls springing up in uneven defiance, and his bare chest is visible where the sheet is twisted around his hips. He looks too exposed, too unarmored, as if the night took everything out of him and left him without his usual defenses. Shane feels the urge to gather him up and hide him somewhere safe, and the urge is so immediate it scares him.

What could possibly be dangerous enough to make him look like this?

"You keep saying that," Shane says, and his voice is quiet now, not because the emotion is smaller but because it's too big to risk raising. "You keep saying you're protecting me, and you keep acting like I'm going to break if you tell me what you're protecting me from."

Ilya's throat works like he is swallowing something sharp.

"I am protecting you from my life," he says, and it sounds like a confession and an apology at the same time.

Shane feels heat flare under his skin. "I'm already in your life," he says, and his voice tightens. "You don't get to decide that now."

Ilya's gaze flicks over Shane's face in a quick, desperate scan, as if he is trying to memorize him again, as if the fear is not only of losing him but of losing the right to look at him this closely. He drags a hand down his own face, smearing at the tears without actually stopping them.

"You want the truth," Ilya says, and the words don't sound like surrender so much as resignation. "Fine."

There is a pause that feels like it changes the temperature in the room.

Shane's heart is pounding so hard he can feel it in his ears.

"You remember 2009," Ilya says slowly, and Shane's stomach drops immediately because he knows this tone, this is the tone of something being dragged out of storage and set on the table without wrapping. "The last year. When my father came to camp."

Shane's breath catches.

Of course he remembers.

He remembers the way the world seemed to tilt when he saw a man in a coat too expensive for that place step out and speak to the staff like he owned the ground. He remembers the way Ilya's face changed when he saw him, the way his eyes went flat, the way his body went rigid, the way he stopped being a kid overnight and became something quiet and controlled and unreachable. Shane remembers watching him pack. Shane remembers waiting for an explanation that never came.

"You knew he was there," Ilya continues. "You know he showed up."

"I didn't know why," Shane says quietly. "I knew something was wrong. I just- I didn't understand what kind of wrong."

Ilya lets out a broken sound that might have been a laugh if it didn't sound so close to a crack in bone.

"He told me," Ilya says, and now his hands are shaking again, and he doesn't seem to notice, "that if I didn't get into his car, if I didn't come home immediately, he would make sure something happened to you."

The words don't land all at once. They arrive in pieces, like Shane's brain can only let them in a little at a time.

Something happened to you.

Shane goes still.

"What?" It comes out barely audible, and he hates how small his voice is, hates that his body has gone cold.

"He knew where you lived," Ilya says, and the steadiness in his voice is gone now, replaced by something that sounds like he is back there, back in that parking lot with gravel under his shoes and his father's shadow stretching too long. "He knew your mother's name. He knew your address. He knew your schedule. He told me that if I stayed, If I made him look stupid in front of those coaches, he would send someone to your house. He said he would make sure you understood that I do not get to choose things."

Shane's brain stutters.

He had thought it was pride. He had thought it was control.

He had thought Ilya had just... left.

"You didn't tell me," Shane whispers, and the sentence is not accusation, not anger, but grief sharpened into disbelief, because he is suddenly looking back at seventeen year old Shane with a new cruelty, the cruelty of realizing he spent years blaming himself for a choice that had never been his to understand.

"I couldn't," Ilya snaps, and the volume spikes not in anger but in panic, like a reflex he cannot stop. "You think I could tell you that and then just leave you there? You think I could say, by the way, my father threatened you, and then get on a plane and not lose my fucking mind every second?"

His voice breaks hard on that, and he looks away like he can't stand seeing what he's done to Shane by saying it.

"I thought if I left clean," Ilya continues, breathing unevenly now, "If I made it look like I didn't care, like it was easy, like you didn't matter that much, then he would not use you as leverage."

Shane's knees feel weak.

I didn't matter that much?

The sentence hits differently now, because it is no longer rejection, no longer dismissal; it is strategy born from terror, and the knowledge of that makes Shane's chest ache in a new place, one he didn't know existed.

"He said," Ilya goes on, swallowing hard, "that I have weaknesses. He said I get attached to things. That it makes me stupid. He told me that if I wanted to play hockey, if I wanted the money and the sponsorships and the life he had built for me, then I do not get to have attachments that he does not approve of."

His hands drop from Shane's shoulders as if he can't stand touching him while confessing this, as if it feels like bringing dirt onto something clean.

"They have been deciding things for me my whole life," Ilya says, and his voice has dropped lower, not quieter but heavier. "My father. My brother. What I eat. Where I train. Who I talk to. What I post. Who I am seen with. They track everything. They have people everywhere. They call it protecting the brand."

The word brand sounds like poison in his mouth, and Shane feels an immediate, visceral disgust, because the phrase is familiar even in North America, familiar in its slickness, but in Ilya's mouth it sounds like something that has been used to justify cruelty for years.

"And you," Ilya says, looking at him fully now, eyes wet and furious and exhausted, "were the first thing that was mine. That wasn't theirs. And he saw it."

Shane's vision blurs.

"So you left," he says, not accusing, just trying to follow the logic through the wreckage, trying to put pieces of their history back into a shape that makes sense.

"I left," Ilya confirms, and his shoulders lift with a ragged breath. "Because I thought that if I broke it myself, he would not try to break it worse."

The room feels too small.

"And now?" Shane asks, and his voice trembles despite himself, because he can feel the second half of this coming like a storm line. "What about now? Why now?"

Ilya looks away for a second, and Shane sees something flicker across his face that looks like shame and fury tangled together, and then he looks back as if he has decided he is done flinching away from the truth.

"The elevator."

Shane's chest tightens immediately.

"He has people," Ilya says, and his voice is steadier now but it is the steadiness of someone stepping into something awful on purpose, because if he doesn't step into it then it will swallow him. "In the building. In the team. Around me. Always. There is a video."

Shane's blood runs cold.

"What video?"

Ilya's jaw flexes.

"Of the elevator," he says. "Of you and me. Close. Almost kissing. My hand in your sweatshirt. The way I looked at you."

Shane feels like the floor drops out from under him, not because of the video itself but because of what it implies: eyes on them, always; the sense that the one moment of truth he has been clinging to can be used like a weapon.

"He called me," Ilya continues, and now the tears are sliding freely down his face without restraint. "He said if I do not send him money, send my brother money, he will release it. He said he will make sure it trends. He will send it to reporters. He will make it into a scandal. He will make you into something they will tear apart."

The room is silent except for their breathing.

"I asked for a trade," Ilya says, voice cracking completely now, "because I would rather you hate me than have your career ruined because of me. I would rather have you think I am asshole than have them drag you through that."

Shane feels something inside him collapse and rebuild in the same second, because suddenly the trade request is no longer abandonment in his mind; it is a shield thrown in front of him without permission. It is Ilya stepping into the line of fire alone because he believes that is what love requires.

"You were protecting me," he says slowly.

"I was trying," Ilya corrects, and now he is crying openly, not wiping at it, not hiding it. "I am not good at it. I just know what they are capable of. You do not understand how far he will go."

Shane steps toward him without thinking, and the movement is instinctive and careful at the same time, as if he is approaching a wild animal that is also the person he wants to touch most in the world.

"You should have told me," Shane says, and it comes out softer than anything he has said tonight.

Ilya's laugh is small and broken. "I was ashamed," he admits, and that word seems to cost him more than anything else has. "Ashamed that I am still afraid of him. Ashamed that at twenty two I still jump when my phone rings. Ashamed that my brother still talks to me like I am an investment instead of a person. I did not want you to see that."

Shane's throat closes. "You think I would think less of you?"

"I think you would try to fix it," Ilya says immediately, and there is genuine fear in that answer. "And I cannot have you talking to him. I cannot have you confronting him. You do not know what he is like when he feels challenged."

Shane's brain is already moving, because this is what his mind does when his heart is frightened: it reaches for something it can solve. He feels the familiar click of focus settling in, the part of him that maps and organizes and plans, the part of him that can breathe as long as there is a next step.

Patterns. Leverage. Exposure.

"You still have the video?" Shane asks, and his voice steadies only because the question is a foothold.

Ilya blinks at him, as if the pivot into logistics is disorienting.

"Yes."

"He sent it to you?"

"Yes."

"Did he send it to anyone else?"

"No," Ilya says, and his throat tightens again. "Not yet."

Shane inhales sharply.

Not yet means there's still time.

"He's bluffing," Shane says slowly, the logic assembling itself as he speaks, piece by piece. "Not that he wouldn't do it, not that he doesn't want to, but if he releases it without leverage, he loses the leverage. He only has power if you're afraid of him using it."

Ilya stares at him, and Shane can see how badly he wants to believe it and how deeply he distrusts belief.

"Shane," Ilya says carefully, "this is not a game."

"I know it's not a game," Shane snaps, but there is clarity in him now instead of panic. "But this is what he does, right? He creates pressure and waits for you to move. He wants you to request the trade. He wants you to self destruct so he doesn't have to do it himself."

Ilya's breathing slows slightly, not because the fear is gone but because the room has shifted from confession to possibility, and possibility is dangerous but it is also oxygen.

"We get ahead of it," Shane continues, words accelerating as his brain locks into problem solving. "If it leaks, it's not a surprise. That's the biggest thing. Surprise is what makes people

panic, and panic is what he's counting on. If the team knows something's going on, if the league knows there's a risk, we can keep it from becoming a circus."

Ilya's eyes narrow. "We?"

"Yes, we," Shane says, and he steps closer again, refusing to let Ilya stand alone in this even with a plan in his head, because plans mean nothing if you still feel abandoned. "We don't have to tell the whole world our business, at least not right now, but we can quietly make sure you're not isolated. We can loop in legal. We can document everything. We keep your messages. We keep his threats. We don't give him anything he can twist, and we don't let you make decisions in a vacuum where fear is the only voice."

Ilya's face is still wet with tears.

"You would be dragged," he says quietly. "They would call you things. They would question your contracts."

Shane's mouth twists. "Then let them," he says, and he surprises himself with how true it feels. "I would rather be called whatever they want to call me than spend another six years wondering if I hallucinated you."

Something in Ilya's expression changes at that, the last of the defensive distance crumbling, and he takes a step forward like his body has decided it can't stand being far away.

Shane reaches up without hesitation and cups his face with both hands, thumbs brushing at wet skin, and the intimacy of that touch makes him feel like he might shatter again because this is not theoretical anymore, not imagined, not something he is chasing alone.

"I would rather fight it with you," Shane says, voice shaking, "than lose you again. I would risk any of that. All of that. I can't lose you again, Ilya."

Ilya's composure shatters completely at that.

"I love you," he says, and it does not come out polished or cinematic or controlled. It comes out desperate and raw, like it's been caught in his throat for years and finally forced through. "I have loved you since you were thirteen and stupid and stubborn and thought you could outskate your own feelings. I have loved you through airports and draft days and interviews and fucking sponsorship dinners where I have to pretend I am something I am not. And I did not tell you because I thought loving you meant making you smaller so they would not see you. And you never deserve to be made small, you are not small. You are everything."

Shane's eyes flood instantly, and the tears feel like relief as much as grief, because the word love finally exists out loud between them and it changes the air.

He tries to speak and fails on the first attempt, his throat closing with the sheer magnitude of being loved back by the person he has been circling since he was a kid.

When he finally manages it, his voice is wrecked.

"You don't have to shrink me to love me," Shane says through tears, and the sentence comes out fierce because he needs Ilya to hear it, needs him to believe it. "You love me by standing next to me, not by pushing me away and calling it mercy. You love me by letting me choose. I choose you, Ilya. I've always chosen you. That's not stopping now."

Ilya's hands clutch at Shane's shirt like he needs something physical to hold onto while the world tilts.

"I am terrified," Ilya says openly now, and the honesty in it is almost unbearable. "Terrified that if I stand next to you, they will take something away from you."

"They already did," Shane says, and the bitterness in his voice is not aimed at Ilya but at the years stolen by fear and silence. "They took six years."

Ilya's body folds forward like the sentence knocked the breath out of him, and Shane catches him automatically, arms wrapping around him without hesitation, pulling him in as Ilya's shoulders shake for the first time in all the years Shane has known him. The sobs are quiet at first, forced inward like Ilya is still trying to keep them contained, and then they grow into something he can't stop, and Shane holds him tighter, stunned by how instinctive it feels to be the person Ilya collapses into instead of the person he runs from.

"I don't want to be afraid anymore," Ilya says into Shane's chest, voice breaking. "I don't want to make decisions because he is watching. I don't want to choose distance when all I want is you."

"Then don't," Shane whispers, pressing his mouth into Ilya's hair. "We do this together. We go together, Ilya. Always have."

Ilya stares at him like he is seeing him clearly for the first time, like he is trying to reconcile Shane the teammate, Shane the kid from camp, Shane the man who woke up this morning in Ilya's arms and still tried to run because fear is faster than hope.

"You would do all of this?" Ilya says quietly.

Shane's mouth trembles.

"I love you," he says back. It is simply the truest thing in the room. "And I'm done pretending that means I'm supposed to be careful about how much I care."

Something in Ilya's face softens so completely it almost hurts to see, as if hearing it aloud gives him permission to stop bracing for the impact of it.

He leans forward and presses his forehead to Shane's, and his eyes are closed when he speaks, like he can't bear to look at the relief on Shane's face because it would destroy him.

"I am so tired of carrying this alone," he whispers.

"You don't have to anymore," Shane says.

They stand there breathing each other's air for a long moment, and Shane can feel the room settling around them, not into peace exactly but into something steadier than panic, something that has room for fear without letting fear make the decisions. Shane's hands remain on Ilya's back, fingers spread wide like he is anchoring him in place, and he realizes how much of his life has been spent reaching for Ilya through distance, through silence, through absence, and how different it feels to have him here and not moving away.

Ilya's hand lifts hesitantly and then cups the back of Shane's neck with a tenderness that feels almost unfamiliar, as if he is allowing himself something he has denied himself for years.

"Come back," Shane says quietly, not from the apartment, not to the bed, but to the moment, to the decision, to the idea of staying.

Ilya exhales, shaky, and nods once.

They move back to the bed together not because the crisis is over but because neither of them has the strength to stay upright, and because the bed is where they began and where they keep ending up when the truth becomes too heavy to hold at a distance. The sheets are still warm, still rumpled with the evidence of the night, and Shane feels the familiar spike of vulnerability at returning to it, as if getting back under the covers is an admission that this is real and not something he can compartmentalize.

Ilya slides in first, then reaches immediately, pulling Shane down with him, arms wrapping around him with more intention than before, not merely holding but claiming space as if he is terrified Shane will vanish again if he doesn't keep contact.

Shane lets himself be pulled.

He curls into Ilya's chest and feels Ilya press his face into Shane's hair, breathing in like he needs the proof that Shane is still here.

They are crying. Not loudly, not in a way that feels theatrical, but in the quiet, exhausted way people cry when they have been carrying something too long and finally set it down.

Shane's hands find Ilya's ribs, then his back, and he holds him the way he wanted to hold him at seventeen, the way he wanted to hold him on that dock, the way he wanted to hold him every time the story in Shane's head ended with Ilya leaving and Shane standing alone with questions.

This is not a goodbye.

The thought is fragile, but it is there.

Ilya's voice is muffled against Shane's hair when he speaks. "I am sorry," he says, and it sounds like it contains six years, contains every time he chose silence because he thought silence was safer than the truth.

Shane swallows hard. "Do not apologize for loving me," he says, voice thick. "Apologize for not letting me love you back."

Ilya's hand slides up Shane's back in a slow, soothing motion that feels like an apology and a promise at once, and Shane realizes, with a soft shock, that the fear hasn't vanished. The threat is still out there. The trade request is still a thing that exists in paperwork and rumor and possibility. The world is still full of people who would love to turn their lives into a story.

But in this room, in this bed, there is finally something that doesn't feel like a story Shane wrote alone.

It feels like a decision made by two people at the same time.

Shane lifts his head just enough to look at Ilya, and Ilya looks back, eyes red, face still damp, curls fallen into his forehead again, and there is a small, shaky smile there that looks like it was earned the hard way.

Shane touches his cheek, thumb brushing the dampness under his eye, and Ilya leans into the touch as if it's permission to be held without earning it.

He pulls Shane closer again, and Shane goes willingly, letting his body settle into the curve of Ilya's, letting the warmth become something he can keep without immediately preparing for its loss.

Outside, Montreal wakes slowly, indifferent, the city continuing as if nothing in this apartment has shifted.

Inside, two men hold each other and breathe through the aftermath of truth, and the quiet that fills the room is not the quiet of avoidance this time.

It is the quiet of staying.

And when Shane finally lets his eyes close again, face tucked against Ilya's throat, it is not because he is trying to escape the fear, but because for the first time in a long time he trusts that when he opens them, Ilya will still be there.

Chapter 20: Home

Chapter Notes

Well... we made it.

11k of you read this and decided to emotionally suffer with me, which is honestly wild and very flattering. Thank you for loving them, yelling at them, and waiting for them to get it together.

I think this is where they stop running.

Thank you for being here. ❤️

Chapter 20 (epilogue)

August 2017 - Ottawa

Shane steps out of the car into air that feels thick with summer, that particular late August warmth that sits on skin instead of passing through it, carrying the smell of sunscreen and sap and sun-baked wood, and for a moment he just stands there with the door open behind him and his hand on the roof, letting his eyes adjust to the brightness until the outlines of the camp sharpen into something recognizable. It looks the way places look when you haven't been back in years and your memory has kept them frozen in one specific season of your life, because everything is familiar in structure and unfamiliar in detail, the buildings a little more weathered than he remembers, the paint more faded, the trees not as towering now that he isn't a kid craning his neck, the whole place quieter than it used to feel in his head, as if time has taken the sharp corners off it.

He hadn't realized how much of his body still expected to tense at the sight of it until he notices that it doesn't, that his shoulders stay loose, that his breath stays even, that he isn't bracing for a hit that isn't coming, and the absence of that reflex is disorienting in its own way, because for years the idea of returning here would have felt like walking back into the moment that split his life in two.

Behind him, Ilya shuts his own door and comes around the front of the car with the kind of unhurried confidence that still catches Shane off guard sometimes, because there had been a time when Ilya moved like he was always calculating angles, always tracking exits, always deciding what version of himself was safest to show, and now he moves like he owns his body again, like the weight of being watched has finally loosened enough to let him exist without constant correction.

Shane turns toward him, still half dazed by the sun and the memories, and that is when Ilya reaches out and lifts Shane's hat off his head with two fingers, an effortless theft that would be annoying if it weren't so unmistakably affectionate.

Shane's hand shoots up on instinct, more reflex than thought, and he reaches for it while Ilya steps back just far enough to make him miss, the motion smooth and practiced in a way that suggests he has been doing this for months, because he has, because this is the kind of thing Ilya does when he wants to interrupt Shane's spiraling before it can gather too much speed.

"What are you doing?" Shane says, and even as he hears the warning edge in his own tone he knows it isn't anger, not really, because his mouth is already threatening to curve and he hates himself for how predictable he is.

Ilya lifts his eyebrows in a mild, infuriating imitation of innocence as he holds the hat up out of reach. "You were standing there like statue," he says, and his accent rounds the words in a way that still makes Shane's chest warm, still hits some old place in him that responds before his brain can intervene. "I decided you needed to be reminded you are alive."

Shane takes a step toward him, and Ilya takes a step back, and then Shane takes another, faster, trying to close the distance before Ilya can keep playing it out, but Ilya pivots lightly, laughter already in his throat, and for a second it is so easy it almost feels like they are the only two people in the world. Shane catches him anyway, because he knows the way Ilya moves now, because he has learned the patterns of his body the same way he learned his timing on the ice, and when he hooks an arm around Ilya's waist and tugs him in, it isn't a tackle so much as a claim disguised as play.

Ilya lets himself be pulled, but not without pressing his palm flat against Shane's stomach, not without steadying him as they both bump gently into the side of the car, and Shane feels that touch like a bright, simple fact, because it is not tentative or coded. It is the way you hold someone when you are used to holding them, when the instinct is automatic and the permission is assumed.

"You are ridiculous," Ilya says, though he doesn't make any move to step away, and his mouth is still curved with a smile that has nothing guarded in it.

"You stole my hat," Shane says, and he hears the softness under his own voice and doesn't bother trying to hide it.

"I saved you from your own seriousness," Ilya replies, and then, with deliberate slowness, he places the hat back on Shane's head and adjusts it as if it matters, fingertips brushing Shane's hair at the edge of his forehead in a gesture that makes Shane's breath catch in a way that isn't visible unless you know him well enough to see it.

Shane does know him well enough now, and he knows that the softness isn't an accident, that Ilya does these small things constantly, touches that are almost absent minded but always precise, always returning to Shane like his hands are pulled there by habit. He had once thought of habit as something safe and boring, something that dulled intensity into routine, but with Ilya it feels like proof, like something that has been chosen so many times it no longer needs ceremony.

There are teenagers unloading equipment from a truck a few rows away, and Shane can feel their attention flicker toward them the way it does whenever players are recognized, but he also feels, with a kind of quiet astonishment, that neither of them reacts to it the way they

would have a year ago. There is no subtle widening of space, no automatic step back, no calculated neutrality. Ilya's hand stays on the brim of Shane's hat for a beat too long, as if he is grounding him, as if he is telling him without words that this is real and it is theirs and it is not going to be managed into disappearance.

Shane turns his head slightly, and his gaze catches on the dock beyond the buildings, the thin line of wood stretching into the lake, and something in his chest tightens in a way that is not pain anymore but recognition, because that dock has lived in him as a symbol for too long. He feels the old memory stir, the ghost of standing there with a throat full of words and no place to put them, and then he feels Ilya's fingers slide down from the hat brim to the side of his face, the knuckles brushing his cheek as if Ilya has noticed the shift in him without being told.

"You are thinking," Ilya says quietly.

Shane lets out a breath that is almost a laugh, because it isn't a question, it's an observation, and it is also, in its own way, an invitation. "I'm always thinking," he says.

Ilya's eyes narrow faintly, like he doesn't accept that as an excuse anymore. "You are thinking like you are trying to solve something," he says, and then, because he can never resist being annoying when he is right, he adds, "and I am telling you there is nothing to solve today."

Shane should argue. Shane's reflex is always to argue. Instead he reaches for Ilya's hand.

He doesn't pause to decide whether that will draw attention, and he doesn't soften the gesture into something casual to make it easier to deny; he simply takes Ilya's fingers and threads them through his, and the way Ilya's grip tightens instantly, steady and warm, is such a simple confirmation that Shane feels it in his ribs.

They start walking toward the dock together, cutting across the gravel with the sun glaring off the pale stones, and Shane finds himself noticing details he didn't expect to notice, the way Ilya's thumb rubs absently across the back of his hand as they walk, the way Ilya keeps drifting closer until their shoulders brush, the way their steps match without effort. There is a quiet physicality to it that makes Shane feel almost dizzy sometimes, because for so long everything between them had been either a collision or a distance, and now it is this steady, constant contact that doesn't ask permission because permission was granted and reaffirmed and built into the architecture of their life.

The lake flashes through the gaps between the trees as they get closer, the surface bright with light, and the sound of it, the soft slap of water against wood, slides into Shane's body like a remembered song. He thinks, briefly, of last November, of Montreal gray and cold and fear, of waking up in a bed and nearly running because the idea of losing Ilya again had felt like it would kill him, and then he thinks of everything that came after that morning, the weeks of hard conversations, the careful legal steps, the documentation, the quiet meetings with people who could actually help, the slow, frustrating reality of separating Ilya's life from the gravity of his father's control.

It had not ended with a dramatic, cinematic confrontation, because real life rarely offers those, but it had ended with leverage shifting, with threats losing their teeth when they were met with strategy instead of panic, with Ilya learning, in small increments, that he could say no and the world would not collapse. There were still bad days, still nights when Ilya woke up tense and silent and needed Shane's hand on his back like an anchor, still moments when old reflexes flared and Ilya's first instinct was to take the impact alone, but the pattern had begun to change, not in a single heroic moment but in dozens of ordinary ones, in Shane refusing to be pushed away, in Ilya letting himself be held even when he felt undeserving of it.

By the time they step onto the dock, the boards warm under their feet, Shane realizes his stomach isn't twisting the way he expected it to, and that alone makes his throat tighten with something that feels dangerously close to gratitude.

They reach the end and sit, legs dangling over the water, their thighs pressed together, and Shane rests his hands behind him on the wood while Ilya leans slightly into his shoulder, the contact casual and constant.

"You look less haunted," Ilya says after a moment, and his voice is light, but the care under it is unmistakable.

Shane turns his head and looks at him, taking in the line of his profile against the bright water, the curls pushed back by the breeze, the faint sun reddening at the top of his shoulders where his shirt collar sits. "Is that a compliment?"

"It is an insult and a compliment," Ilya says, eyes flicking toward him briefly. "It depends on how you behave."

Shane laughs, and the sound startles him a little, because it comes easily here, and then he notices Ilya watching him with a softness that still makes Shane's chest do something strange, because the look isn't hungry, not right now, and it isn't guarded either; it is simply fond, as if Ilya has learned how to let affection sit openly on his face without immediately translating it into risk.

Shane's gaze drifts back to the shore, where a couple of younger kids are running along the grass, shouting at each other in a way that makes the whole place feel alive. He can feel memory trying to overlay itself on what he's seeing, can feel the past pressing at the edges of the present, and he lets it, because he is not afraid of it in the same way anymore. The past exists, and it hurt, and it shaped them, but it does not get to dictate what happens now unless they let it.

"I used to think this place was where everything ended," Shane says with a small smile on his face.

Ilya is quiet for a beat, and when he answers, his voice has gone steadier, lower. "I know," he says.

Shane swallows. "I thought if I had said the right thing, you would've stayed," he admits, and he feels a familiar flare of embarrassment at how young that thought makes him sound, but

he has learned that honesty is not weakness when it is offered to someone who will hold it carefully.

Ilya shifts slightly, turning his torso toward Shane so their knees knock softly, and the movement is slow and deliberate, the kind of repositioning you do when you are choosing closeness instead of ending a conversation. "I always wanted to stay," Ilya says, and the words are simple, but the weight behind them is heavy enough that Shane feels it land in his chest. "I just did not know how to keep you safe and keep myself alive at the same time."

Shane looks at him, and the instinctive response in him is to argue with the framing, to tell Ilya he shouldn't have been responsible for Shane's safety, that it was unfair, that it still makes him furious in a way that doesn't have anywhere to go. Instead he reaches up and brushes his thumb along Ilya's knuckles, where their hands are still linked, and he lets the gesture carry what he doesn't want to sharpen into blame.

"You did," Shane says quietly. "You kept me safe."

Ilya's jaw tightens faintly, the old self accusation flickering, and Shane can see the impulse in him to reject the kindness, to say it wasn't enough, to say it cost too much, but then Ilya exhales and leans his shoulder into Shane's again as if he is letting himself accept it, at least for this moment.

They sit like that for a while, watching the water, letting the sun warm their skin, letting the quiet do something different than it used to. Shane becomes aware, slowly, of the way his mind keeps trying to reach for the edge of anxiety out of habit, keeps scanning for the catch, and he also becomes aware of how quickly that scan dissolves when Ilya nudges him gently with his knee or shifts close enough that their hips brush, as if Ilya's body has learned how to call Shane back without words.

"You are here," Shane says suddenly, and the simplicity of the statement surprises him, because it feels like he is saying it to himself as much as to Ilya.

Ilya turns his head with a soft smile. "Yes."

Shane smiles despite himself, and then, because he can't help it, because some part of him will always be the kid who needs to test the edges, he says, "You're not going to steal my hat again?"

Ilya's mouth twitches. "I am considering," he says, and then he leans closer, his breath warm against Shane's cheek as he speaks, "because you look too content. Is suspicious."

Shane laughs again and turns his face toward Ilya without thinking, their noses nearly brushing, and the closeness is so natural now that it barely registers as a decision. He can see the gold flecks in Ilya's eyes in the sun, can see the faint crease near his mouth that only appears when he is trying not to smile too openly, and something in Shane's chest softens so completely that it almost hurts.

He kisses Ilya's temple, quick and casual, the way you do when you have kissed someone a thousand times and it doesn't need to be a moment to be meaningful, and Ilya huffs a quiet

laugh and tilts his head just enough to steal the next one on Shane's mouth instead, not deep, not desperate, just warm and familiar and faintly smug, as if he is proving a point about who belongs to whom now.

When they pull back, Shane sees Ilya watching him with that steady, openly held affection again, and Shane feels the old fear try to rise and then fail, because the present is too solid for it to take hold.

"I hate you," Shane says, because he has always needed to ruin tenderness with humor before it can make him cry.

Ilya's smile widens. "No," he says, and the certainty in it is so calm it makes Shane's throat tighten anyway. "You love me."

Shane opens his mouth to argue out of habit, and then he closes it, because there is no point pretending anymore, and because, near the end of a dock in warm August air, with Ilya pressed against him like this, the truth feels easy instead of frightening.

He squeezes Ilya's hand. "Yeah," he says, letting it be plain. "I do."

Ilya's gaze holds his for a moment longer than it needs to, and then he leans his head against Shane's shoulder again, as if he has decided that this is where he belongs, and Shane lets himself believe it without immediately rehearsing how it might be taken away.

After a while, Shane shifts as if to stand, and Ilya's hand tightens around his fingers, not stopping him, just acknowledging the movement, and Shane looks down at him and sees the question in his eyes without it being asked.

"I'm not going anywhere," Shane says, and the words come out gentle.

Ilya's mouth curves. "Good," he says, and then, with the familiar quickness of someone who has never been able to resist, he reaches up and flicks the brim of Shane's hat again, tipping it down over Shane's eyes so the world goes briefly shadowed.

Shane groans and catches Ilya's wrist, laughing as he pushes the hat back up, and when he looks down again Ilya is watching him like he has won something.

Shane shakes his head at him, still smiling despite himself, and leans in as if he means to steal another easy kiss, but he doesn't stop at easy; he lets it linger, lets his hand slide up into Ilya's hair, fingers curling at the nape of his neck, because this is not seventeen anymore and it is not November and it is not something that has to be rationed. Ilya answers without hesitation, mouth warm and sure against his, one hand coming up to rest at Shane's waist as if anchoring him there is second nature now, and the familiarity of it is what makes Shane's chest tighten, because there is no desperation in it, no frantic edge, just the steady rhythm of two people who have learned the shape of each other's mouths and no longer treat contact like it might be stolen back.

When they separate, Ilya stays close, breath mingling with his, forehead brushing Shane's temple before settling there, and Shane feels the quiet weight of him in a way that makes the

dock beneath them feel less like a place from memory and more like solid ground.

"You remember," Ilya says after a moment, his voice low and almost thoughtful, "how even as kids, you used to know where I was on the ice without looking?"

Shane huffs softly, because he does remember, because he still does, because that instinct never went anywhere even when everything else did. "You weren't exactly subtle," he says, and Ilya makes a faint offended sound that makes Shane's mouth curve again.

But then Ilya shifts, just slightly, pulling back enough that Shane has to look at him fully, and there is something open in his expression that makes Shane's breath slow instinctively, because he recognizes that look now, not fear, not restraint, not apology, but intention.

"I always knew where you were too," Ilya says, and he doesn't rush the words, doesn't dress them up, just lets them exist between them. "Even when I wasn't supposed to."

Shane feels that land in him in a way that goes deeper than nostalgia, deeper than the dock and the camp and the years between, because it is not about memory anymore. It is about continuity. It is about the fact that even in distance, even in silence, even in absence, they had been oriented toward each other.

Shane exhales slowly and looks out over the water for a moment, watching the sun fracture itself across the surface in a thousand small flashes, and he realizes that the ache he used to associate with this place has shifted shape entirely. It is no longer sharp. It no longer feels unfinished. It feels integrated, like something that happened to him but does not define him, like a scar that has faded enough to stop dictating how he moves.

"I thought this dock was the last time I would know you like this," he says quietly, and he doesn't need to clarify what this means, because Ilya knows.

Ilya's thumb traces a slow line along the inside of Shane's wrist where their hands are still linked, a gesture so absent-minded and so intimate that Shane feels it more than he sees it. "It was not end," Ilya says. "It was interruption."

Shane turns back to him at that, because the word feels deliberate, feels chosen, and he studies Ilya's face as if seeing it through a different lens. There is sunlight caught in his hair. There is ease in his posture. There is no shadow of someone about to leave.

An interruption.

Something paused, not erased.

Shane leans in again, but this time he doesn't kiss him. He presses his forehead to Ilya's and just stays there, breathing in sync, letting the quiet stretch without needing to fill it. He thinks of the years they spent misreading each other's silence. He thinks of the night in Montreal when everything cracked open. He thinks of the months after, the lawyers and the paperwork and the threats that lost their teeth when they were dragged into light instead of hidden in shame. He thinks of waking up next to Ilya in ordinary mornings, of grocery lists and inside

jokes and the way Ilya always steals his hat when Shane looks too serious, as if joy is something that must be enforced.

He thinks of how love stopped feeling like a risk he had to calculate and started feeling like something he could stand inside without bracing.

When he opens his eyes, Ilya is already looking at him, and there is nothing guarded in that gaze, nothing measuring or flinching, just the simple, steady awareness of being chosen and choosing back.

Shane smiles slowly, and it feels different from every smile he has given him before, less sharp, less defensive, less afraid.

Ilya reaches up then, almost absently, and flicks the brim of Shane's hat again, tipping it down over his eyes, and the gesture is so familiar, so utterly unchanged from the boy who used to do it in locker rooms and bus aisles and anywhere Shane looked too intense for his own good, that Shane laughs despite himself and catches Ilya's wrist before he can pull away.

He pushes the hat back up and shakes his head, but he doesn't let go of Ilya's hand, and instead of letting the moment dissolve into teasing he leans forward and kisses him again, slower this time, deeper, letting the world narrow to the warmth of Ilya's mouth and the steady pressure of his fingers at Shane's hip. The lake continues moving behind them. The camp continues existing. The world continues in its indifferent orbit. But in this small space at the end of the dock, nothing feels temporary.

When they pull back, Shane rests his forehead against Ilya's once more, and this time he lets himself feel the full weight of what it means that they are here together. That they've chosen the hard path but are still standing.

He thinks, not with fear, not with superstition, but with something that feels almost like gratitude.

Some habits never die.

Ilya smiles like he understands without being told, and he pulls Shane in closer, arms wrapping around him with easy familiarity, and Shane goes willingly, fitting against him the way he always has, the way he always will.

The dock is warm beneath them. The lake moves steadily ahead. August light presses soft and golden against their skin.

And this time, when Shane looks out over the water, he does not feel like he is waiting for something to be taken from him.

He feels like he has already come home.

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