

hanging by a moment

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by [frozenmorningdew \(goldenboygate\)](#)

Summary

Ilya starts calling Shane boring regularly after that, not cruelly but persistently, the way you press a bruise you know is there just to confirm it still hurts. Shane's cereal is boring, Shane's training schedule is boring, Shane's shoes lined up by the door are boring, and Shane responds with variations of "fuck off" and "you're an asshole" that become increasingly creative and occasionally surprising. They do not talk about anything that matters. They talk about groceries and whose turn it is to take out the trash and whether Ilya's music is too loud at midnight, which it is.

On the ice, Shane is someone else entirely. Ilya watches him from the upper stands every morning with vending machine coffee going cold in his hand and doesn't tell anyone.

Or: Shane asked Ilya once how you know when it's the right person. Ilya described Shane to him, and Shane didn't recognise himself.

Notes

Those who have read my longfics know I'm heavy on the worldbuilding, so this is a PSA for those who don't know me. The first few chapters are a solid groundwork before we get to the good stuff. Excessive but necessary.

I hope you enjoy, and I would love to hear what you think (but please be nice to me, I'm a sensitive pisces like Connor) <3

Chapter 1: shane

Shane Hollander has had a great life, or so he's been told.

His parents love him. He knows this because they tell him, and because the evidence is there in the years of early mornings and long drives, in the sacrifices made quietly and without complaint. His mother's hand finds his shoulder before every competition like she is pressing certainty directly into his bones. His parents love him, and he has never doubted it, and he has built a career out of a talent that appeared early and has never wavered. By any reasonable metric, Shane Hollander's life is a success story. He just isn't sure it's his.

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The story, as it's been told to him, begins like this.

David Hollander plays hockey for McGill University. He is not exceptional. A solid defenseman, reliable enough to play every game but not talented enough for anyone to remember him afterwards. He studies economics because it's practical and because his father studied economics and because David, at twenty, does not yet know that the most important decisions of his life will have nothing to do with practicality.

Yuna Tanaka is in the commerce program. She is the daughter of Haruki and Michiko Tanaka, who came to Montreal from Osaka in 1965 with two suitcases and a set of expectations that would shape three generations. She speaks Japanese at home and English and French everywhere else. She carries herself with the particular composure of a woman who learned young that being excellent is not optional when you are also visible. She loves hockey the way some people love music, not as a hobby but as a language, a system of movement and strategy that makes the world cohere. She understands forechecking the way other girls in her program understand supply chains. She will build a career out of this love, but she doesn't know that yet.

They meet at a game, McGill versus Concordia in January, the rink so cold you can see your breath from the stands. Yuna is there because she is always there. David is on the ice because he is always on the ice. The story, as David tells it, is that he took a bad penalty in the second period and sat in the box feeling sorry for himself and looked up into the stands and saw a girl in a red coat shaking her head at him with an expression of such precise disappointment that he felt it in his sternum.

The story, as Yuna tells it, is that the penalty was deserved.

They start dating in March and marry three years later. The ceremony brings together David's sprawling Anglo family and Yuna's small, formal one, and the photographs show a gap between the two sides of the room that no one comments on but everyone can see. They move to Ottawa for David's job at the Treasury Board, a sensible and stable government position that will anchor their lives for decades. David commutes to an office where he reviews fiscal projections. Yuna works at a sports management firm in Ottawa, marketing work that will eventually lead her to managing players for the Montreal Metros, but that is still years away.

Shane is born in May of 1991, on a Friday, three weeks early. David will later describe the birth as "terrifying." Yuna will describe it as "efficient." These two accounts, contradictory and both completely true, are a reasonable summary of their marriage.

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Shane's first memories are of ice. Not the rink but the canal in winter, the Rideau, frozen solid and crowded with families. His father lacing his skates on a bench while his mother watches with her hands in her pockets, breath clouding in the cold air. The first time Shane stands on blades, he is three years old, and he doesn't fall. This is the detail his parents always include when they tell the story, as if even then his body knew something about edges and balance that the rest of him was still working out.

By four he is in a hockey program, because this is Ottawa and he is David and Yuna Hollander's son and there is no other conceivable starting point. Hockey is the family language, the thing that brought his parents together. Of course their son will speak it.

Shane is a beautiful skater. This is what everyone notices first, and it's what keeps him in the program longer than he should be. His edges are clean, and his crossovers are seamless. He moves on ice the way some children move through water, without resistance, as if the medium were made for him. Coaches see this and project a future: travel team, junior hockey, maybe McGill like his father, maybe further. They see the skating and assume the rest will follow.

The rest does not follow.

Hockey is chaos. Ten children on the ice chasing a puck with no discernible pattern, crashing into each other and the boards with a violence that is apparently fun. Shane doesn't understand the fun. He understands the rules, icing and off-sides and the dimensions of the crease, and he follows them precisely while the other children improvise around him. He is always in the right position but never in the right moment.

The locker room is worse than the ice. Sticks clattering, boys yelling, equipment bags hitting the floor with damp thuds that Shane can feel in his teeth. The smell of sweat and rubber and the particular ammonia sharpness of gear that's been left in a car overnight. The physical closeness of other boys' bodies, shoulders bumping, towels snapping, a culture of casual contact that operates by rules Shane hasn't been given. He sits in his stall and laces his skates with methodical precision and pretends he can't hear the conversations happening around him, conversations that move too fast and rely on references he doesn't have.

He doesn't make friends. He doesn't make enemies either, because he's not visible enough for that. He exists in the specific loneliness of a child who is present but not included, whose name the other boys know but whose company no one seeks. They don't dislike him. They just don't think of him. He is the boy who skates perfectly and never passes at the right time, the boy who answers questions literally and doesn't laugh when he's supposed to, the boy who is, in some way that none of them could articulate but all of them can feel, different.

The coaches call it a lack of hockey sense. What they mean is that he treats the game like a problem with a correct answer, and hockey isn't a problem with a correct answer.

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There are other things too, things that have nothing to do with hockey.

Shane is the only half-Japanese kid in his program, and often the only non-white kid in the room. Ottawa is not a city that thinks of itself as having a race problem. It is polite and progressive and also a place where Yuna is asked, at every parent meeting, if she needs anything translated. Where

Shane is complimented on his English by coaches who've known him for two seasons. Where a father in the stands, watching his son play against Shane's team, says something about "the little Chinese kid" loudly enough that Yuna hears it from three rows back and does not react, or at least does not react visibly, which Shane will eventually understand is its own kind of reaction.

He doesn't cry or rage about these moments. He catalogues them. He notices that adults speak to his mother differently than they speak to his father. He notices that when his parents stand together at the boards, people's eyes move between them with a flicker of something, surprise or maybe recalibration, the quick mental adjustment of a story that doesn't quite match expectations. He notices that his mother dresses carefully for every hockey event, that her hair is always precise, that she never raises her voice even when other parents are screaming at referees.

Yuna's response to all of it is to be better. She teaches Shane this without meaning to, without ever saying it aloud, but the lesson is in everything she does. The perfect coat. The volunteer hours at the hockey association. The way she learns every coach's name and every rule in the handbook and makes herself so competent, so indispensable that there is no room for anyone to question her belonging. The message is clear: if they can't find fault with you, they can't hurt you.

Shane absorbs this. It settles into his bones alongside the skating and the silence and becomes part of the person he is building, brick by brick, in the space between what the world expects and what he actually feels.

David sees some of it. He is a white man in a country that was built for white men, and this limits his vision in ways he tries, imperfectly, to compensate for. He worries about Shane, not about the racism specifically, because he doesn't always see it happening, but about the quiet, about the way Shane comes home from hockey and goes straight to his room and lines up his equipment in a precise row and doesn't talk about practice. David doesn't have a word for what he senses. But he senses something, and his response is to be present without pushing, to sit on the floor of Shane's room and talk about nothing, to not require Shane to be anything other than what he is.

It's not enough, but it's something.

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The figure skating happens almost by accident.

Shane is seven, and there's a public skating session at a rink across town. Yuna takes him because his hockey practice has been cancelled, and the alternative is an afternoon at home, where Shane has already organised his bookshelf twice and is starting on the kitchen drawers. The public session is crowded and noisy, and Shane doesn't like it. There's too many people moving unpredictably and too many bodies in his space, but there's a corner of the rink near the far boards where a girl a few years older is practising spins.

He watches her. He stands against the boards for twenty minutes, and something in his body goes very still.

It's the geometry. One movement follows another, follows another in a sequence that makes sense, that has rules, that can be learned and repeated and perfected. There is no puck to chase, no opposing team, and no one crashing into him from an angle he didn't anticipate. There is just the ice and the body and the beautiful, solvable problem of how to make them work together.

Yuna finds him there, transfixed. She is observant enough to understand what she's seeing, even if she doesn't yet know what to do with it.

He starts taking lessons within the month, and gymnastics too, because Yuna researches both, because she researches everything. The combination will build the strength, flexibility, and body awareness that a young skater needs. Shane takes to both immediately, but the ice is where he belongs. In gymnastics, he is good. On the ice, he is something else entirely. His coach, a retired singles skater named Marguerite who teaches out of a municipal rink in Ottawa's west end, tells Yuna after three months that Shane has "an unusual ear for the ice." What she means is that he listens to his edges the way a musician listens to pitch, instinctively and constantly, making micro-adjustments that most children don't learn for years.

By eight, he is competing at the regional level. By nine, he is winning. By ten, his talent has outgrown every coach in Ottawa, and Marguerite, who is honest enough to know her own limits, sits Yuna down and tells her that Shane needs more than she can give him.

This is the conversation that changes everything. Not the figure skating itself, because that was always going to happen, was already the thing that made Shane's face open up in a way that hockey and school and most of human interaction never had. But the logistics of it, the sacrifices it will require, the rearrangement of a family's life around one child's extraordinary talent. All of that begins here, in a municipal rink office, with a retired skater telling a driven mother that her son is special.

Yuna researches coaches in Montreal, of course, she does. Montreal is the heart of Canadian figure skating and home to the best training programs in the country, and Yuna is not a woman who settles for second best. She identifies three coaches, makes calls, sends video, and arranges tryout sessions. The best of them, a coach named Jean-Marc Gagnon, watches Shane skate for ten minutes and offers to take him immediately.

The problem is the distance. Ottawa to Montreal is two hours on a good day, longer in winter, longer still when you account for a ten-year-old who needs to eat and stretch and decompress before and after training. There is a discussion, a real one, conducted over several evenings at the kitchen table while Shane is in bed.

They could move the whole family, but David's position at the Treasury Board is not portable. Government careers in Ottawa are built over decades, and uprooting would mean starting over in a city where his particular expertise has no equivalent market value. David doesn't say this with resentment. He says it with the careful, factual tone of a man who has already done the math.

They could split the household, Yuna and Shane in Montreal during the week and Ottawa on weekends. This is considered seriously enough that Yuna looks at apartment listings in Villé-Emard and Verdun. But the strain would be real. David and Yuna are a unit. They both know without fully articulating it that their marriage works because they are in the same house at the end of every day, because David's steadiness needs Yuna's presence and Yuna's intensity needs David's calm. Separating them even partially, even for a good reason, would cost something neither of them can afford.

So Yuna drives.

Four days a week, Ottawa to Montreal and back. She drops Shane at the rink at seven in the morning and picks him up at noon, and they're home by two-thirty if the traffic cooperates, which it often doesn't. In the car, Shane does schoolwork because Yuna has pulled him from school by now,

hired a tutor, and structured his education around the training schedule with the same meticulous attention she brings to everything. He doesn't miss school. He wasn't happy there. The relief of not having to navigate the hallways and the cafeteria and the group projects where his contributions are either ignored or resented is so profound that Shane doesn't have a name for it. He just knows the car is better. The car is quiet, smells like Yuna's perfume and sounds like the hum of the highway, and the routine repeats, identically, four times a week.

Those drives are hours of Yuna's life, every week, for years. She does it because that's who she is, because when Yuna decides something will happen, logistics are just problems to be solved. Shane sits in the passenger seat and doesn't fully understand the sacrifice, because he's a child and because Yuna would never frame it as a sacrifice.

But it shapes their relationship in ways that will matter later. The entanglement of her identity with his career. The quiet expectation, never stated but deeply felt, that this investment must pay off. Not financially, but emotionally. She needs this to have been worth it, because if it wasn't, then what were all those hours for?

She also needs it because something shifted when Shane found skating. The hockey dream, the one she'd carried since before he was born, died quietly in a municipal rink in Ottawa's west end, and Yuna grieved it the only way she knows how, which is by replacing it with a better plan. But the grief is still there, small and unexamined. It shows up in the way she sometimes watches hockey on television with an expression Shane can't read. In the way she keeps his old hockey equipment in the basement longer than makes sense. In the way she manages his skating career with the same intensity she will eventually bring to managing professional hockey players, as if she can love figure skating into being the sport she originally wanted for her son.

David, meanwhile, sits in the passenger seat when he can. He learns the names of Shane's jumps. He claps at competitions. He doesn't fully understand the scoring system, but he understands that his son steps onto the ice looking like one person and steps off looking like someone lighter, and that is enough. It has always been enough.

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The rink in Montreal is where Shane meets Hayden and JJ.

It's a multiplex, figure skating on one sheet and minor hockey on the other, separated by a lobby with vending machines and rubber floor mats and the particular institutional smell of Zamboni exhaust and concession stand coffee. The hockey kids and the skating kids share the building but not the culture, passing each other in the hallways like citizens of neighbouring countries, aware of each other's existence but largely indifferent to it.

Shane is ten. Hayden Pike is eleven and small for his age with light brown hair falling in his eyes. He's the kind of kid who looks like a stiff wind could knock him over but who talks loud enough to fill any room he's in, and he's missing a tooth he lost in a game the previous weekend and hasn't shut up about since. Jean-Jacques Boiziau is twelve and enormous, taller than most adults in the building, Haitian-Canadian and Québécois to his bones, with the easy charisma of a kid who has never once wondered whether he belongs in a room.

The way Shane remembers it, he is sitting in the lobby between his morning session and the thirty minutes he has before Yuna comes to pick him up. He's eating an apple. His skate bag is on the bench beside him, and his water bottle is lined up with the edge of the seat. He is sitting on the bench outside the locker room when the hockey kids come out, still shoving each other and yelling

about something that happened on the ice. They move in a pack, elbows and equipment bags and voices that carry down the hallway, and Shane watches them the way he always watches, quietly, from the bench, not expecting anyone to stop.

Hayden drops his stick. It clatters on the rubber mat and slides toward Shane's bench, and Hayden comes after it with the graceless urgency of an eleven-year-old and says, "Sorry, man, my bad."

"It's fine," Shane says. "Your tape job is unravelling."

It is. The tape on the blade is peeling from the toe. Shane notices things like this, details that are wrong, patterns that are broken.

Hayden looks at his stick and then looks at Shane. "You play hockey?"

"No, I'm a figure skater."

Hayden says "Cool" and sits down next to Shane on the bench without being invited, and starts retaping his stick and talks for fifteen minutes about nothing in particular. The game he just played. The vending machine that steals your quarters. The Zamboni driver who Hayden is convinced is a former spy. Shane listens and doesn't contribute much, but Hayden doesn't seem to mind the silence, he just fills it cheerfully.

JJ appears ten minutes in, fresh from the shower and smelling like cheap shampoo, and drops onto the bench on Shane's other side. "Who's this?" he says to Hayden.

"Shane. He's a figure skater. He noticed my tape job was bad."

JJ looks at Shane with the frank, assessing gaze of a twelve-year-old who is already learning to read people. He nods. "Your tape job is always bad," he says to Hayden, and the conversation continues as if Shane has always been part of it.

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It's not a dramatic thing, the way they become friends. There's no single moment Shane can point to and say this is when it happened. It's cumulative, built on the fact that Hayden and JJ are at the rink on the same days Shane is, and gradually Shane stops bringing a book to read while he waits for Yuna. The thirty minutes fill themselves: the bench, the vending machine, Hayden talking and JJ talking and Shane listening. Occasionally, he says something precise and unexpected that makes Hayden laugh and makes JJ raise an eyebrow in a way that Shane will learn, over time, means approval.

They don't treat him like a project or a charity case. They don't modify themselves for him. They're just two hockey kids who've decided that the quiet figure skater on the bench is theirs. Hayden starts saving Shane a seat. JJ starts bringing him a bag of chips from the vending machine without being asked, always the same kind, because JJ noticed once which kind Shane chose, and JJ remembers things like that.

They don't know they're doing anything important. They're eleven and twelve, and they don't know that Shane has never had this before, has never had friends who seek him out and save him a spot and absorb his silences without trying to fill them with questions about why he's so quiet. They don't know about the hockey team he couldn't fit into, or the school hallways he doesn't miss, or the

particular loneliness of a child who is loved enormously by his parents and understood by almost no one.

They just like him. It's that simple. For Shane, who has spent his whole short life decoding a world that doesn't come with instructions, simple is the most extraordinary thing anyone has ever offered him.

Yuna sees it happening. She arrives to pick Shane up and finds him sitting between two hockey boys who are arguing about whether a hot dog is a sandwich, and Shane is listening with an expression she doesn't often see on his face. Not smiling exactly, but present, in a way she recognises as happiness because she's his mother and she's learned to read his particular dialect of it.

She doesn't interrupt. She stands by the door and watches for a moment, and something in her chest does something complicated, because her son, who couldn't find his place in hockey, has found hockey anyway. Or hockey has found him, through the back door, in the form of two loud boys who don't care that Shane does triple axels instead of slapshots. The sport she loves didn't reject her son after all. It just had to find a different way to hold him.

She lets him have five more minutes before she calls his name.

Chapter 2: Ilya

The Rozanov family has lived in Moscow for three generations, which in Russia means they are practically new arrivals.

Grigori Arkadyevich Rozanov is born in 1940, the son of a factory foreman and a schoolteacher, in a communal apartment in the Basmanny district, where four families share a kitchen and the hallway always smells like boiled cabbage and cigarette smoke. He is not a man built for tenderness. Tenderness is not what the Soviet Union asks of its men. He serves in the military because that is what men from families like his do, and he is good at it, good at following orders and better at giving them. When he is recruited into the KGB, it surprises no one who knows him. Grigori has always understood authority as the natural order of things.

He does not talk about what he does there. He will never talk about it. What is known is that he rises steadily, with the cold, efficient competence of a man who does what needs doing without making a fuss about it. By the time the Soviet Union collapses and the KGB is dissolved and reconstituted into something with a different name and the same teeth, Grigori Rozanov has accumulated the kind of connections that survive regime changes. The kind that translates seamlessly into the new Russia of privatisation and favours and men who know men who can make things happen.

By the time his sons are born, he has a large apartment in Khamovniki. Four rooms, high ceilings, a view of the river. The kind of apartment that people in Moscow understand means something without needing to be told what. He has a dacha outside the city that he drives to on weekends, alone, always alone, and the family does not go there and does not ask about it. What happens at the dacha is something Ilya will not piece together until he is much older. The women. The weekends that stretch into weeks. The second life that Grigori maintains with the same operational discretion he learned in the service. Irina knows, or suspects, or has decided not to know, which in a marriage like theirs amounts to the same thing.

Grigori is cruel. This matters, because it would be easier if he were simply absent. Simply cold. Simply a man who didn't know how to love his sons. But Grigori knows exactly where the soft places are. He finds them with the same precision he brought to his work, and he presses. Not with his fists, not often, though there are nights when his hand is faster than his patience. He presses with his voice. With the words he chooses and the silences he deploys and the way he can look at his younger son across the dinner table and make Ilya feel like something that has been weighed and found insufficient. He controls the household the way he once controlled operations, through fear and predictability and the understanding that any deviation will be noticed and corrected. The apartment is large and well furnished, and always clean and perfectly quiet in the way that houses are quiet when everyone in them is afraid.

He meets Irina in 1984. She is twenty-two, and he is forty-four. Later, when Ilya does the math, the age gap will feel like an abyss, a generational divide that explains something fundamental about how his parents existed in the same space without ever inhabiting the same world. Grigori is a Soviet man in the fullest sense, shaped by military service and institutional cruelty and a conception of masculinity that has no room for softness. Irina is young, musical, and bright in all the ways that Grigori is not. What draws them together is something Ilya will never fully understand. Whether it was love or necessity or the particular gravity that powerful, certain men exert over women who have not yet learned to trust their own certainty.

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Irina Mikhailovna Rozanova is beautiful. She has blue eyes, a wide mouth and hair she wears long because Grigori prefers it that way. When she smiles, which she does often when the boys are young, the whole room rearranges itself around her.

She is a piano teacher. She trained at a music school as a girl and was good enough to audition for the conservatory, but not good enough to get in. Or maybe not confident enough. Or maybe not connected enough, because in the Soviet Union, these things are often indistinguishable. She teaches children in the neighbourhood, and when Ilya is very small, he sits under the piano while she gives lessons and lets the vibrations travel through the floorboards and into his body. This is one of the memories he will carry longest. The feeling of music arriving not through his ears but through his skin.

Irina loves her sons with a ferocity that is sometimes indistinguishable from desperation. She reads to them at night. She checks Ilya's homework and braids the thread bracelets he likes to wear on his wrist, and makes blini on Sunday mornings with the radio playing in the kitchen. She notices when Ilya is upset before he says anything, can read the set of his shoulders and the rhythm of his breathing like a language only she speaks. When he is small and afraid of the dark, afraid of the older boys at school, afraid of the thunder that rattles the apartment windows in summer, she puts her hand on his face and says, "Yes, it's scary, but you're brave," and the way she says it makes it true. Makes bravery feel like something she can see in him as clearly as the colour of his eyes. She is warm and funny, and she sings while she cooks, old folk songs and pop songs from the radio and sometimes things she makes up, melodies that don't go anywhere but sound like home.

She is also, for as long as Ilya can remember, sometimes not there.

It started after he was born, though he doesn't know this until much later, until he is old enough to piece the story together from fragments his aunt lets slip and things Alexei says when he is drunk and careless. Irina had Alexei at twenty-three and the birth was uncomplicated. She was fine. Then she had Ilya at twenty-nine, and she was not fine. Something came loose in her after the second delivery, something that should've been treatable, except that it was 1991 in what was left of the Soviet Union, and postpartum depression was not a diagnosis that existed in the vocabulary of the hospitals she had access to.

It is not that they couldn't afford help. The money was there. The apartment was warm, the cupboards were full, and this was part of what made it invisible, because Grigori could point to the evidence of provision and call it proof that nothing was wrong. She has everything she needs, he would tell people, and mean it. This was crueller than poverty would have been, because poverty would have been an explanation. Instead, there was only Grigori standing in the hallway outside the bedroom, calling her lazy. Telling her to get up. That dinner isn't going to make itself. That he didn't marry a woman who lies in bed all day. The word was always the same. Always lazy. He said it without hesitation, with the absolute conviction of a man who has never been ill in a way that didn't show on his body, who does not believe in sickness you cannot see.

She got better, eventually, the way women have always gotten better when the alternative is the complete dissolution of a household, which is to say she forced herself upright and back into the kitchen and back to the piano and willed herself into something that resembled functioning. For long stretches, she was fine. She was herself. She was the mother who sang while she cooked, put her hand on Ilya's face, and told him he was brave. But the thing that came loose after his birth never fully healed. It came back. It came back again. Each time it stayed a little longer and went a

little deeper, and Grigori never stopped calling it laziness, and Irina never got help, because help would have required Grigori to admit that something was wrong in his house that he couldn't control. Grigori does not admit to things he cannot control.

Ilya learns early to read the signs. There are days when she doesn't get out of bed and the lessons are cancelled, and the kitchen stays dark, and Ilya comes home from school to find her lying on her side with her face turned toward the wall and her hair unwashed and the apartment so quiet it feels like something has been removed from the air. On those days, Alexei steers Ilya away from the bedroom door and makes him dinner. Bread and cheese, usually. Sometimes cold soup from a jar. They eat together in silence while the bedroom stays closed.

When she does get up, and she always gets up eventually, she reappears in the kitchen with wet hair and a smile that is almost the same as her real smile and makes dinner as if nothing has happened. Grigori accepts this because it confirms what he already believes. She could have gotten up all along if she'd wanted to badly enough.

It is the word lazy that Ilya will carry longest from his father's mouth. Longer even than the silences. Longer even than the back of his hand. Because Grigori uses the same word on him. When Ilya doesn't want to go to school, lazy. When Ilya sleeps past seven on a weekend, lazy. When Ilya sits at the kitchen table staring at nothing, the way his mother sometimes stares at nothing, Grigori's voice cuts across the room, and the word is always the same. What it really means, what Ilya will spend years understanding, is that Grigori is terrified of seeing his wife in his son. Terrified of the softness and the stillness. Ilya will grow up to be the loudest person in every room he enters, the last to sit still and the first to move. He will tell himself this is just who he is, that he was born restless. The truth is that stillness was taken from him by a man who made it synonymous with failure, and Ilya has been running from it ever since.

Ilya learns early that love can exist in the same house as cruelty. That a mother can hold you so close you can hear her heartbeat and then, the next day, be unreachable. He learns that the people who love you can disappear without leaving the room.

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Alexei Grigorevich Rozanov is born in 1985, six years before Ilya, and he is his father's son in ways that Ilya will never be. Big and physical and loud. Comfortable in the world of men, the world of the military, the police and the particular brand of Russian masculinity that values hardness over everything. He does his military service at eighteen, the way all Russian men must (except Ilya, since he gets an exemption through his elite athlete status, and that is just one more thing for his brother to resent him for), and joins the police afterwards because that is the family path. Alexei has never been the kind of person who questions a path once it's been laid.

He is not a good brother. Alexei is cruel, the way a dog is cruel when it's been kicked enough times. He learned it from Grigori, absorbed it through the walls of the apartment the way Ilya absorbed music through the floorboards. The sharp comments. The sudden hands. The particular talent for finding the thing you care about most and making you feel stupid for caring about it. He is rough with Ilya when they are young, dismissive when they are older. By the time Ilya is ten and Alexei is fifteen, Alexei is already drinking, already running with a crowd that matches the cruelty he was raised on. The drinking gets worse. Other things appear alongside it, pills and powders that Ilya doesn't have names for yet, but recognises by their effects. Alexei's moods swing wider. His absences grow longer. The apartment is quieter when he's gone, which should be a relief but isn't, because Ilya has learned that quiet is never simple in this family.

What Alexei does give Ilya, without meaning to, is hockey.

Alexei plays at the district level when he is thirteen, and Ilya, who is seven, sits in the cold concrete stands of the municipal rink and watches with the total absorption of a child who has found the thing that will define him. The speed, the sound of blades on ice, the way the puck moves between the sticks. Ilya watches his brother play, and something in his chest opens up like a door. After the game, he asks Grigori if he can play too. Grigori says yes, because it will keep him out of the apartment, away from Grigori.

Ilya is good from the start. Within a year, he is better than Alexei, and this is the first fracture between them, the first time Ilya surpasses his brother at something that matters. Alexei handles it the way he handles most things, by pretending it doesn't bother him and becoming meaner in the small, deniable ways that older brothers specialise in.

Ilya doesn't care, or tells himself he doesn't, because the ice is the one place where everything makes sense. He is fast, creative, and fearless in a way that makes coaches pay attention. By ten, he is in a development program that feeds into the major junior system, training four days a week at a rink in Sokolniki with boys who are older and bigger and have been doing this longer. He holds his own. On the ice, Ilya is allowed to be loud, to take up space, to move through the world with a confidence that has no analogue in the quiet, careful negotiation of life in the Rozanov apartment. On the ice, he is brilliant. Brilliance is a kind of armour, and Ilya is already learning, at ten, that armour is something he is going to need.

By twelve, people know his name. Not just the coaches at Sokolniki, not just the other parents in the stands, but the people who matter. The scouts, the development directors, the men in suits who show up to games with clipboards and watch with the particular attention of people calculating futures. Ilya Rozanov is going to be somebody. They say it with the certainty of people who have seen enough boys come through the system to know which ones are different. Ilya is different. He is fast in a way that can't be taught. Creative in a way that can't be coached. He plays with a recklessness that looks like joy but is actually something closer to need, and the combination is magnetic. Grigori notices, because Grigori always notices when something can be leveraged. For the first time, he pays attention to Ilya's hockey the way he pays attention to things that have value. He starts showing up at games he used to skip, talking to coaches he used to ignore. Beginning to understand that his younger son might be worth something in a currency he respects.

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Svetlana Vetrova enters Ilya's life because of hockey, the way most things enter Ilya's life.

Her father is Sergei Vetrov, who was a goaltender for the USSR national team and who now occupies a series of increasingly important positions within the Russian sports ministry. A trajectory that will eventually make him Minister of Sport. Sergei is a large, serious man who commands respect the way former athletes who become politicians often do. He is a fixture at the rinks and training centres where Russia develops its next generation of hockey players. Grigori knows him, of course. Grigori knows everyone worth knowing. When Sergei begins attending Ilya's games, it is unclear whether he has come because Ilya is talented or because Grigori has made a phone call. Ilya will never know the answer and will learn not to care about the distinction.

They meet when they are both ten at a tournament where Sergei is presenting medals, and his daughter is sitting in the stands with a book, looking profoundly bored. She has curly hair that she wears naturally, which is something Ilya notices because it is unusual and because she is beautiful

in a way that even a ten-year-old boy can register. The kind of face that makes you look twice and then a third time.

She is also, he will discover very quickly, someone who knows more about hockey than most of the boys playing it. She has been watching games since before she could walk, and is not impressed by ten-year-old boys who have just scored a hat trick, because she has seen Fedorov and Bure and Mogilny do things that make a youth tournament hat trick look like a warm-up drill.

"You're Sergei Vetrov's daughter," Ilya says to her after the medal ceremony, because he has seen her with her father and because he is not yet old enough to know that this is not a good opening line.

"You're observant," she says, without looking up from her book.

It should be the end of the conversation. But Ilya has never been good at leaving things alone, and Svetlana has never been good at being left alone in the way she pretends to want. They keep talking, badly at first and then less badly. By the end of the tournament, they have exchanged phone numbers and the beginning of something that will become the most honest relationship of Ilya's life has taken root in a concrete hockey rink in Moscow.

Svetlana knows the world Ilya comes from without needing it explained, because she comes from the same one. The world of Russian sports and Russian men, and the particular pressures that come with being visible in a country that demands performance from its athletes, the way it demands obedience from its citizens. She is the daughter of a powerful man. She is mixed race in a country that is not kind about that. She has learned, the same way Ilya has learned, to build a version of herself that can survive the scrutiny. The difference is that where Ilya performs confidence, Svetlana performs indifference. Where Ilya fills rooms with noise, Svetlana fills them with the particular, pointed silence of a girl who has decided that the world's opinion of her is not worth her attention.

She can say anything to Ilya, and he won't mind. This is true from the very beginning, from the first day at the tournament when she tells him his skating is good but his haircut is terrible. Ilya laughs in a way that he doesn't laugh with anyone else, surprised and real, because most people tell Ilya what they think he wants to hear, and Svetlana tells him what she actually thinks. The relief of that is enormous.

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The fall of 2003 is long and cold, and Irina has been in bed for most of it.

Ilya is twelve and has learned by now to read the rhythm of his mother's illness. The way the good days cluster and the bad days stretch, and the space between them grows shorter as the years go on. He knows what it looks like when she is sliding. The music stops first, then the cooking, then the talking, and lastly the getting dressed.

Grigori does what Grigori always does. He goes to the dacha for the weekend and does not come back until Monday. He tells Ilya to make sure the apartment is clean when he returns. He does not ask about Irina. Alexei is eighteen and barely home, already deep into his service, already drinking more than he should, already becoming the person he is going to be. So it is Ilya who sits on the floor outside his mother's bedroom door with his back against the wall and his homework in his lap and waits for the sound of her moving. Any sound. A cough or the creak of the bed or the shuffle of slippers on the floor. Anything that means she is still in there, still present, still his.

This is the year everyone knows Ilya's name. He has just been selected for the U14 national development camp, the youngest player invited. There are articles in the hockey press with his photograph, a skinny twelve-year-old with blond hair and a grin that takes up half his face. The articles say things like generational talent, once in a decade, and the next great Russian forward. Grigori keeps the clippings in a folder. He does not keep them because he is proud, or if he is proud, he does not show it in any way Ilya can recognise. He keeps them the way he keeps everything. As evidence of value. As something that can be produced when needed.

On the good days, Irina comes out, and they sit together at the kitchen table, and she helps him with his math, her hand shaking slightly as she holds the pencil. She asks about hockey and listens to his answers with an attention that makes him feel like the most important person in the world. When he tells her about the national camp, about the coaches who want him, about the future everyone keeps describing to him as if it is already decided, she puts her hand on his face the way she's done since he was small and says, "You are going to be extraordinary." Ilya believes her because she is his mother, her hand is warm, and she has never lied to him about anything that matters. On the good days, she makes tea, and they drink it together, and she tells him stories about when she was young, about the conservatory audition and the music she used to play, and her voice fills the kitchen the way it used to. Ilya holds these afternoons so tightly inside himself that they leave marks.

On the bad days, he comes home from school, and the apartment is dark, and the bedroom door is closed, and he makes himself bread and cheese the way Alexei taught him years ago. He eats alone at the kitchen table. Does his homework. Goes to bed. Tries not to think about the sound of his mother breathing on the other side of the wall, which is the loneliest sound he knows.

It happens on a Wednesday in September.

Ilya comes home from practice at half past five. The apartment is quiet in the way it is always quiet on the bad days, but there is something else in the air, something he can feel but can't name. A stillness that goes beyond silence into something denser. The kitchen light is off. The hallway light is off. The bedroom door is open, which is wrong, because on the bad days the door is always closed, and the fact that it is open makes Ilya's heart do something fast and arrhythmic in his chest.

He drops his hockey bag in the hallway. He can hear the neighbours' television through the wall, the tinny sound of a game show, laughter that doesn't belong in this moment but doesn't know it yet.

He walks to the bedroom doorway and sees her.

She is on the bed, on her side, facing the wall. For a moment, he thinks she is sleeping because that is what she looks like. A woman sleeping in her clothes, still wearing the blue cardigan she puts on when she's cold, which is always. Her hair is spread across the pillow. The pill bottle is on the nightstand, empty, lid off, lying on its side like it has been dropped.

Ilya stands in the doorway for a very long time, or what feels like a very long time. He says "Mama" and the word comes out wrong, comes out like something that has been broken in his throat. She doesn't move. The light from the hallway falls across the bed and across her face and he can see that her lips are blue, that the colour has gone from them in a way that means something he is not old enough to understand but understands anyway, in the deep, animal part of his brain that knows what death looks like even though he has never seen it before.

He calls for an ambulance because he doesn't know what else to do. The phone in the hallway, the landline with the curled cord that Irina used to stretch into the kitchen so she could talk to her sister

while she cooked. His hands are shaking so badly that he has to dial the number three times. The woman on the line asks him questions, and he answers them in a voice that doesn't sound like his. Flat and precise and very far away. She tells him to stay on the line and he does, standing in the hallway with the phone pressed to his ear and his hockey bag at his feet. He doesn't go back into the bedroom because he cannot go back into the bedroom. He doesn't cry, he can't.

The ambulance comes. People come into the apartment and go into the bedroom. There are voices and sounds. At some point, someone guides Ilya to the kitchen and sits him down at the table where he and his mother used to drink tea. Someone asks if there is an adult who can be called. Ilya gives them Grigori's number because he doesn't know where Alexei is.

Grigori arrives in two hours. The paramedics and the police defer to him in the automatic way that people in Moscow defer to men like Grigori. He speaks to the officers in the hallway in a voice too low for Ilya to hear, and whatever he says makes things move faster, makes the questions stop, makes the paperwork happen with an efficiency that has nothing to do with grief and everything to do with control. Then he goes into the bedroom, closes the door, and stays there for eleven minutes. Ilya knows it is eleven minutes because he counts them, sitting at the kitchen table with his hands flat on the surface, counting seconds the way he counts them during penalty kills.

When Grigori comes out of the bedroom, his face is the same as it was when he went in. He does not look at Ilya. He does not say anything. He sits down in his chair in the living room and turns on the television. That is how Ilya learns that his father's grief looks exactly like his father's indifference, and that he will never be able to tell the difference between the two.

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Ilya does not cry at the funeral.

He watches the casket, he listens to the words, and yet he feels nothing. Not sadness and not anger and not even the numb shock of the first day, but a hollowness that has settled into the centre of his chest and replaced whatever used to be there.

Alexei cries, briefly and furiously, his jaw tight and his fists clenched at his sides, and then he stops and does not cry again, not in front of Ilya, not ever. Grigori does not cry. The neighbours cry. Irina's sister cries. Ilya stands very straight and very still and thinks about the ice, about the weight of a stick in his hands, about the feeling of acceleration, about anything that is not this room and this box and the sound of his mother's name being spoken in the past tense.

Afterwards, there is food at the apartment. People come and go. Someone pats Ilya on the shoulder and tells him he needs to be strong for his father, and Ilya nods and doesn't say anything because what is there to say to that. What possible response exists for a twelve-year-old boy who has been told to be strong by a person who does not know that Ilya found his mother's body and sat in the kitchen counting seconds while strangers carried her away.

He goes back to hockey practice three days later. His coach, a hard, compact man named Viktor who has been coaching boys in Sokolniki for twenty years, looks at him when he steps onto the ice and says nothing. Just nods. Ilya is grateful for the nod in a way he will never be able to articulate. The nod means Viktor knows and isn't going to make him talk about it. The ice means that for the next two hours, Ilya can be someone whose only problem is a puck and an opponent. The cold air on his face feels like the first clean breath he's taken in days.

He plays harder after that. Faster, meaner, more reckless. He takes hits he doesn't need to take and delivers checks that are borderline, and picks fights with boys who are older and heavier and not at all interested in fighting a twelve-year-old who has suddenly started playing like he's trying to break himself against the boards. Viktor watches this for a week and then pulls him aside and tells him that the ice is not a place to die. Ilya looks at him with an expression that makes Viktor's face change in a way Ilya doesn't understand, something that might be pity or might be recognition. Viktor puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes once, and doesn't say anything else.

Ilya goes home that night to an apartment that is large and well-furnished and perfectly quiet. The quiet used to mean that Irina was having a bad day and would come back. Now it means she is never coming back. The difference between those two kinds of silence is something Ilya will spend the rest of his life trying to outrun. He heats up leftover soup and eats it standing at the counter because sitting at the table requires occupying the chair across from where she used to sit. He cannot do that. Not yet. Not for a long time.

Grigori is in the living room watching television. Alexei is not home. In two weeks, Grigori will tell Ilya to stop moping. That he is being lazy. The word will land in Ilya's chest like something that has been there before, because it has. The same word in the same voice that Grigori used about Irina. Hearing it directed at him will teach Ilya that his father sees grief the same way he sees depression, as a failure of will, as something you should be able to walk off the way you walk off a hit on the ice. Ilya will get out of bed the next morning and every morning after that. He will not mope. He will not be lazy. He will learn to carry the weight so deep inside himself that no one, not Grigori, not anyone, can see it and call it by that name.

The newspaper clippings are still in Grigori's folder. The articles still say generational talent. The scouts still come to his games. The future everyone has been describing to Ilya is still there, waiting for him, gleaming and certain. Nobody asks whether the boy who is supposed to inhabit that future is still the same boy he was before that day in September. In Russia, you do not ask boys questions like that. Ilya would not know how to answer them if they did.

The neighbour's television is playing through the wall. The same game show. The same laughter. Ilya finishes his soup, washes the bowl, and goes to his room and lies on his bed in the dark and presses his face into the pillow and breathes.

He does not cry, and he will not cry for a very long time, because crying requires access to the part of himself that is being sealed shut even as he lies there.

He is twelve years old. The boy who loved his mother and sat under the piano while she played and drank tea with her at the kitchen table and believed her when she told him he was going to be extraordinary, that boy is being buried alongside her, quietly and without ceremony. In his place, something else is growing. Something harder and louder and more brilliant. Something that will carry a hockey stick and a smile that looks real and a laugh that sounds easy and a name, Rozanov, that will come to mean something in the world.

The real Ilya, the soft one, the one who listened to music through the floorboards and believed his mother when she told him he was brave, he goes somewhere deep and dark and locked, and he stays there for a very long time.

Chapter 3: shane ii

The growth spurt hits at fifteen. Late enough that everyone has stopped expecting it. It arrives not gradually but in a cruel, compressed rush over six months that changes everything. He grows four inches between October and March. This doesn't sound like much until you understand what four inches does to a figure skater's body. The axis of every rotation. The timing of every takeoff. The centre of gravity that Shane has spent a decade learning to trust.

He is a Canadian junior champion at fourteen. Third at the North American Championships that same year, the youngest man on the podium. The commentators talk about his technical consistency and his mature presentation. The fact that he has not yet hit his ceiling. Yuna records every broadcast. Files the clippings. Jean-Marc Gagnon maps out a plan that ends at the Olympics in 2014, when Shane will be twenty-three and in his prime.

And then he grows, and the plan falls apart.

It doesn't happen all at once. The first thing he loses is the triple axel. It's the hardest jump in his repertoire, the one that requires the most precise timing on the takeoff. When his legs are suddenly longer than his muscle memory accounts for, the takeoff is wrong by fractions of a second that might as well be hours. He under-rotates. Lands on the wrong edge. Falls. Falls again. He drills it and drills it, and his body, which has always been the one thing that does what he tells it to, refuses. The Lutz goes next, and then the flip. By January, he is standing on the ice after a practice session where he has fallen nine times in forty minutes. His hip is bruised. His hands are raw. Jean-Marc is watching him with an expression Shane has never seen on his coach's face before. Doubt.

Shane does what Shane always does when something is broken. He works harder. Trains longer. Skates more sessions. Drills the jumps until his legs are shaking. And he starts paying attention to what he eats.

It makes sense, at first. It makes perfect sense, actually, in the same way that drilling a jump fifty times makes sense, in the same way that arriving at the rink before anyone else makes sense. The problem is that his body has changed. The solution, logically, is to change it back. If he is lighter, he will rotate faster. If he rotates faster, the axel will come back. It is a physics problem, and Shane is good at physics problems, so he starts solving it the way he solves everything, precisely and methodically and without telling anyone.

It doesn't fix the jumps. He knows this, somewhere, in the part of his brain that is still thinking clearly. But the not-fixing doesn't make him stop. It makes him try harder.

Yuna drives him to Montreal four days a week and does not say that she is worried, because saying it would make it real. He adjusts his technique. Compensates for the new length of his limbs. Tries to rebuild from the ground up the things that used to be instinctive. Some of it comes back, slowly and imperfectly. Some of it doesn't come back at all.

The triple axel never comes back. Not fully. Not the way it was. He can land it in practice, sometimes, on good days when his body feels like his body and not like a house someone has rearranged in the night. But he cannot land it under pressure. Cannot trust it in competition, the way a singles skater must trust his hardest jump. The way you trust the ground. Without thinking. In men's singles, where the technical element score is built on quads and triple axels and

combinations that require absolute certainty in the air, a skater who cannot trust his jumps is a skater who cannot win.

Jean-Marc sits Yuna down in his office in the spring of 2007. Shane is almost sixteen. Jean-Marc tells her the truth. Shane is still a beautiful skater. One of the most naturally gifted he has ever coached. But the growth spurt has changed his body in ways that training alone cannot undo. The path to the top in men's singles is no longer realistic. He says this carefully, with kindness, because Jean-Marc is a kind man. Because he knows what this will cost Yuna, who has driven eight hundred kilometres a week for six years for this.

Shane is not in the room for this conversation. He knows what it contains before Yuna tells him. He has been living inside his body for the past six months. He knows what it can do and what it can't. The distance between those two things has been widening long enough that the official word for it is just confirmation of something he already understood.

He expects to feel devastated. He waits for it the way you wait for a bus you see coming or a punch you feel approaching. But what arrives instead is something quieter. Something closer to relief. The worst thing has happened, and it is over. He doesn't have to stand on the ice every morning and try to make his body do things it has decided it will not do. The fighting is over. He just doesn't know what comes next.

Yuna takes it harder. She doesn't cry because Yuna doesn't cry, but she goes very quiet for several days. The quietness in her is different from the quietness in Shane. Shane's quiet is how he processes. Yuna's quiet is how she plans. What she is planning, Shane will learn later, is the next thing.

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The next thing is Rose.

Rose Landry is seventeen years old, and she has a problem. Her partner of three years has torn his ACL in a training accident. He will not skate competitively again. She is based in Montreal, trains with a coach named H  l  ne Martineau who specialises in pairs. She is good enough that losing a partner at seventeen is a setback, not an ending. But only if she finds someone soon. The competitive window in pairs skating is not wide. Rose is not willing to sit still and wait for it to close.

Shane meets her because Jean-Marc knows H  l  ne. The figure skating world in Montreal is small enough that everyone knows everyone. Jean-Marc watches Shane skate after the conversation with Yuna and thinks about what he sees. A boy who has grown into exactly the kind of body that pairs skating needs. Tall, strong, with a base of technical skill that most men would kill for. He calls H  l  ne. "I have someone you should see."

The tryout happens on a Tuesday in June, in the same Montreal rink where Shane has trained since he was ten. Rose is already on the ice when he arrives, warming up. The first thing Shane notices is that she is not nervous. Not performing calm the way he is performing calm. Genuinely at ease in her body and on the ice in a way that Shane recognises as talent before he recognises it as anything else.

She is smaller than him by nearly a head. Her auburn hair is pulled back, and her face is open and friendly in a way Shane's face never is. H  l  ne introduces them. Rose says, "Hi, I'm Rose, I hear

you're a jumper." Shane says, "I was." Rose looks at him for a moment. "Good," she says. "That means you know how to land."

They skate together for an hour. It is not magic, because Shane does not believe in magic. But it is something. A rightness in the way their bodies move together that has nothing to do with romance and everything to do with physics. His strength meets her flexibility. Her instinct for performance meets his instinct for precision. He lifts her for the first time. The weight is right. The balance is right. She trusts him immediately. He knows because he can feel it in her body, the absence of resistance. Trusting a stranger to hold you above his head on ice is not a small thing. Rose does it like breathing.

Afterwards, in the lobby, Rose sits next to him on the bench. "I think that went well." Shane says, "Your extension on the spiral was two degrees short on the left side." Rose laughs, not at him but in a way that includes him. "You noticed that in the first hour?" Shane says, "Yes," because he did. Rose says, "I think we're going to be fine."

They are more than fine. Shane starts eating again. Not all at once, not a decision he makes consciously, but pairs skating requires strength in a way that singles never did. He has to lift Rose above his head. He has to hold her there. He has to be solid and reliable and present in his body in a way that he has not been for over a year, and his body, which he has been starving into submission, starts to become something he needs instead of something he is fighting. He eats what Rose eats after practice. He stops counting. It is not a recovery, because he has never named what it was, but the quiet arithmetic in his head goes silent for the first time in months, and he lets it.

They train together through the summer and fall. The transition from singles to pairs is not seamless. It requires Shane to do something that runs against every instinct he has. Share the ice. Be responsible for another person's body. Adjust his rhythm to match someone else's. In singles he was self-contained. In pairs he has to be half of something, the half that holds and throws and catches. Rose's safety is in his hands in a literal, physical way that makes him careful to the point of rigidity. Rose tells him, gently, that he needs to stop treating her like she's made of glass.

It takes months. Rose learns the way Shane processes information, which is technically and specifically. Shane learns the way Rose processes the ice, which is emotionally and musically. They learn that the thing they make together is better than either of them alone. His precision gives her room to be expressive. Her expressiveness gives his precision a heart.

By the spring of 2008, they are competing. By the winter, they are winning. Yuna begins researching coaches who can take them further.

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Linda Hewitt says no the first time.

Or rather, she says, "Send me a video," and then watches the video and does not respond for three weeks. Yuna, who is not accustomed to being ignored, calls twice. Sends a follow-up email. Is drafting a second one when Linda finally replies with a single sentence: "They can come for a week in April."

The week in April is an audition. Both Shane and Yuna understand this, even though Linda never uses the word. Shane and Rose fly to Boston on a Sunday evening. Check into a hotel near the training facility. They are on the ice by six the next morning. Linda is already there, standing at the boards in a fleece jacket with a coffee in her hand and an expression that gives away nothing.

She watches them skate for two hours on the first day. Says almost nothing. On the second day, she gives Shane three corrections. All technical, all specific. Shane makes each one on the next pass because the corrections are precise enough to act on, which is not always the case with coaches. He sees Linda notice this. Something shifts in her expression that might be approval. On the third day, she works with Rose alone for an hour while Shane watches from the stands. On the fourth day, she tells them to run their long program from the top and stands at the boards without moving, without writing anything, her coffee going cold in her hand.

On Friday, she sits them down in her office. Small and cluttered, with photographs on the wall of pairs Shane recognises from international competitions. "You're not ready for where you want to go," she says. "But you could be. If you're willing to work the way I work, which is slow and correct and not always fun, and if you can move here by September, I'll take you."

Rose says yes immediately. Shane says yes three seconds later, which for Shane is immediately.

Yuna, on the phone that night: "I need to talk to Linda myself." Shane says, "She said September." Yuna says, "I heard you. I need to talk to her myself." Shane lets her. This is how Yuna works. He has learned that the fastest way through her need to control a situation is to let her feel like she has.

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Shane turns eighteen in May of 2009, on a Friday. Yuna makes a cake. Vanilla with buttercream, a single candle, because Shane has never liked the fuss of too many of them. Yuna knows this. Has always known the precise amount of celebration her son can tolerate. David is there. Hayden calls from Montreal to sing happy birthday badly. JJ calls after to sing it worse, and in French. Shane sits at the kitchen table in Ottawa and eats one piece of cake and feels, with a certainty that has been building for months, that he is ready to leave.

He has been ready for a while. Not because he is unhappy. It is more that he has outgrown this kitchen and this table and the particular shape of his life here. The way he outgrew his coaches. His competitors. Eventually, his own body.

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The call from Linda comes two weeks before the move, in the middle of August. Shane is in his bedroom packing boxes when his phone rings.

"Shane, it's Linda. I have a question for you."

Linda does not do small talk. Shane appreciates this the same way he appreciates clearly marked exits and menus with numbered items. She asks him directly. Her wife, who is a physical therapist for the Boston Bears, has mentioned that there is a new player on the team. A rookie who needs a roommate. The Raiders and the skating program share a training facility. The logistics would be simple. The rent would be split. She is not telling Shane what to do. She is presenting an option.

Shane says nothing for several seconds. Linda allows the silence without filling it. He does not want a roommate. The apartment is small and his, and the idea of another person in his space makes something in his chest tighten. Not quite anxiety. Adjacent to it. But the rent is not nothing. Yuna has offered to help, and he has refused. Splitting the cost would make the math work without accepting his mother's money. This feels important in a way he cannot fully explain.

“What kind of person?” Shane asks. Linda says, “I don’t know him. He’s eighteen, Russian, first overall pick. My wife says he’s fine.” The way she says fine makes it clear that this is the extent of her intel and that she considers it sufficient.

Shane says yes because the math works. Because saying no to Linda Hewitt, even about something that is not about skating, feels like a bad way to begin. He hangs up. Sits on his bed surrounded by half-packed boxes. Wonders what he has agreed to. The wondering has a texture to it that he files alongside the other things he doesn’t examine. The word Russian made him think of hockey. Hockey made him think of the locker rooms he couldn’t navigate at five years old. The boys who didn’t think of him. He closes that file. Goes back to packing.

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He breaks up with Jessica on a Saturday, two weeks before the move.

They have been together for eight months. She is pretty and kind, and she likes him, and Shane has never been able to figure out why this isn't enough. He went along with it because she was there and because saying yes was easier than explaining why he might say no when he didn't have a reason for no.

They sit in her car in the parking lot of the coffee shop where they had their first date. Shane says what he has planned to say. It's the move, the distance. Jessica listens, and her eyes get redder and redder.

"Is it just the move," she says, "or is it something else?"

"It's the move," Shane says.

Jessica cries. It's not dramatic, just tears that slide down her face while she holds very still. Shane sits in the passenger seat and watches her, and his hands are in his lap, and he doesn't reach for her. He should reach for her. He knows this the way he knows the correct entry for a triple lutz, technically and from the outside. He doesn't reach for her.

She drives him home. They don't speak in the car. When she drops him off, she says, "I hope Boston is good for you, Shane." He says, "Thank you." He walks into the house. Goes upstairs. Sits on his bed. The house is quiet. He waits for something to arrive, some feeling about what just happened, and nothing comes. He has spent eight months kissing this girl and felt nothing. Not dislike. Not discomfort. Nothing. A flat, clean absence where he has been told there should be something.

He adds this to the file with all the other things he doesn't examine. He does not open the file.

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They leave on a Wednesday morning in September. David and Yuna drive Shane from Ottawa to Montreal, two hours in the car with his suitcases in the trunk and his skate bag between his feet in the backseat. They don’t talk much. David plays the radio. Yuna sits in the passenger seat with her hands in her lap and looks out the window at the highway she has driven a thousand times for lessons and competitions and coaches, and Shane watches the back of her head and thinks about the fact that this is the last time she will make this drive for him.

They meet Rose in the parking lot of the Montreal rink. Rose's car is a blue Honda Civic that is older than both of them and makes a sound when it idles that Rose insists is normal, and Shane is not convinced by. The car is already packed with Rose's things. Shane's suitcases go in the trunk. Two suitcases. A box of books. His skate bag. A pillow from home that he is mildly embarrassed about, but that smells like his bedroom and the particular detergent Yuna uses. He is not ready to sleep in a place that smells like nothing.

Yuna does not cry, because Yuna does not cry, but she holds Shane for longer than she usually holds him. "Call me when you get there." Then: "Call me every day." Then: "Be careful with your knees," which is what she says when she means I love you, but has already said it twice and doesn't want to say it again because the third time might crack something. David hugs him. "You're going to be great, kid." He means it the way David means everything. Simply and without conditions.

Shane gets in Rose's car. They pull out of the parking lot. In the side mirror, he can see his parents standing next to the sedan, David's arm around Yuna's shoulders. They get smaller and smaller, and then the mirror shows only the highway.

The drive to Boston is five hours if the traffic cooperates. It doesn't. Rose talks for most of it. Linda, the training facility, and the apartment she's found in the same building Shane will be living in. Shane listens to the sounds. He watches the highway and feels the particular combination of terror and excitement that he associates with the first day of anything. The same feeling he had the first time he stood on ice. The first time he competed. The first time he landed a clean triple loop in practice and felt, for one perfect second, like the entire world was an equation he'd just solved.

They arrive in Boston in the late afternoon. The city is louder, more crowded, and more complicated than Ottawa or Montreal in every way. Shane's apartment is on the third floor of a building that smells like cleaning products and someone else's cooking. His room is small. The kitchen is small. There is a second bedroom with a closed door. Behind it, a space that belongs to someone Shane has never met. A Russian hockey player whose name Linda mentioned once, and Shane has already forgotten. The apartment is quiet and empty. For one night, just tonight, it is only his.

He unpacks his suitcases. Lines his shoes up by the door. Puts his pillow on the bed. Calls his mom to let her know he's arrived. He doesn't sleep well that first night. The sounds are wrong. The shadows are wrong. The mattress is too soft. But he still sleeps. In the morning, he gets up, walks to the rink, puts on his skates, and steps onto the ice. The ice is the same. Always the same. The one constant in a life that is about to change in ways he can't anticipate and wouldn't believe if someone told him.

The second bedroom door is still closed when he leaves. He doesn't check if anyone is in it.

Chapter 4: Ilya II

Ilya starts smoking at twelve, three months after the funeral. He steals cigarettes from the pack Grigori leaves on the kitchen counter every night. Smokes his first one on the balcony while Grigori watches television in the living room, and Alexei is wherever Alexei goes. The smoke burns his throat and makes him cough until his eyes water. He hates it. Hates the taste and the sting of it. He smokes another one the next night, and another one after that. The burning stops feeling like burning and starts feeling like something else, something he doesn't have a word for, except that it makes his hands stop shaking and his mind stop replaying the bedroom doorway and the pill bottle on its side.

Grigori notices the missing cigarettes and says nothing. This is the full extent of his parenting on the subject.

By thirteen, Ilya is buying his own at a kiosk near the rink in Sokolniki. The woman behind the counter doesn't ask his age because he is tall enough and hard-looking enough to pass for seventeen, and because this is Moscow and no one cares. He smokes between practices, after school, on the walk home, and on the balcony before bed. The ritual of it, the flick of the lighter and the first drag and the slow exhale into cold air, becomes the structure around which his evenings are built. The thing he does instead of sitting at the kitchen table where his mother used to sit.

The drinking starts at fourteen. Alexei is twenty, and all of Alexei's friends drink. They come to the apartment when Grigori is at the dacha, or Alexei takes Ilya along when he goes out, not because Alexei wants him there but because Ilya has figured out that if he is quiet and useful, if he fetches bottles and cleans up and doesn't talk too much, Alexei will let him stay. The vodka is cheap. It burns the same way the cigarettes burn, and then it doesn't. Then it makes the quiet inside him feel less like an absence and more like a choice.

He is never drunk at practice. This is the line he draws. He draws it early and never crosses it. It is the first of many lines Ilya will draw between the person he is on the ice and the person he is everywhere else.

Grigori remarries when Ilya is fourteen. Her name is Polina. She is twenty-eight. Grigori is sixty-three.

Polina comes from money, old money. Her family has connections in real estate and government, and Polina is the particular kind of woman who has been groomed since childhood for rooms with high ceilings and important men. She is beautiful in a way that is maintained rather than natural. Her clothes are expensive, her smile is expensive. Everything about her is a surface, and underneath the surface is more surface.

Ilya knows she is one of the dacha women. He doesn't know how he knows this. Maybe it's the way she moves through the apartment like she has been there before, like the rooms are not new to her, even though she is supposedly new to them. Maybe it's the way Grigori doesn't introduce her so much as install her, the way you install new furniture.

The apartment is not good enough for Polina. Four rooms in Khamovniki with high ceilings and a view of the river, the apartment that Ilya has lived in his entire life, and Polina walks through it

once and says nothing, and within a month, they are moving to a house. A real house. Gated, in a neighbourhood where the cars are German, and the fences are high. The piano does not come with them. Irina's things do not come with them. Ilya's bedroom is larger and whiter and has nothing in it that he recognises, and the kitchen is twice the size of the old one and has a marble island where Polina's housekeeper prepares meals that no one eats together.

She is not a mother to them. She does not try to be, and Ilya doesn't want her to be. This is perhaps the most honest thing about her. She has no interest in two boys, one of whom smells like cigarettes and the other of whom smells like vodka, and she makes this clear not through cruelty but through absence, through the way her eyes move past them in the hallway as if they are part of the house's architecture. She is interested in Grigori's connections. The dinners, and the galas, and the social machinery of Moscow's elite. She is interested in being Grigori Rozanov's wife in the way that Grigori is interested in having a wife.

Alexei hates her. Ilya doesn't. He doesn't feel enough about her to hate her. She is just another person in the house who is not his mother, and by now, Ilya has gotten very good at not feeling things about people who are not his mother.

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On the ice, he gets better.

Not gradually. Not in the steady incremental way that most young athletes improve. In surges, like something inside him keeps unlocking. He grows into his body the way some boys do at fourteen and fifteen. The gangly limbs thicken with muscle. The coordination catches up to the height. He is fast, much faster than anyone his age and faster than most of the boys who are older. He finds spaces on the ice before they open. Arrives where the puck is going to be before it gets there.

He is also mean, but not dirty. Never dirty. He's not the kind of player who slashes ankles and spears when the referees aren't looking, but he's mean in the way that gets inside your head. The chirping. The smiling. The way he scores on you and then says something that you can't really hear, but that makes his teammates laugh. Ilya learns early that if you can make someone angry, they make mistakes. If they make mistakes, you win. Winning is the only thing that makes him feel anything at all.

He does not make friends this way. The boys on opposing teams hate him. He expects this. The boys on his own team respect him, but keep their distance. He tells himself he prefers it. Viktor watches the meanness develop and says nothing about it for a long time. Then one day, after practice, he says, "You are good enough to win without making enemies." Ilya asks, "Where's the fun in that?" Viktor looks at him, doesn't smile. "You tell me when you find out."

By sixteen, he is the best player in his age group in Moscow. One of the best in Russia. The scouts come to his games. Men in good coats with notebooks who sit in the stands and write things down and don't cheer. Ilya plays for them the way he plays for everyone. Like he doesn't care. Like the ice is a party he's throwing, and the rest of them are lucky to be invited.

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Sex starts at fourteen. It starts the way most things start for Ilya. Fast, without much thought, with a girl at a party that Alexei takes him to. He doesn't remember her name afterwards. Not because he doesn't care, but because remembering isn't the point. The point is her hands on his skin and his mouth on her neck and the twenty minutes where his mind goes blank. Nothing in his head except

his own body and someone else's. He forgets the apartment, the kitchen table, the bedroom door for the time it lasts. There's just heat and pressure and the sound of breathing that isn't his. When it's over, the quiet comes back, but it takes a few minutes. Those few minutes are worth everything.

He sleeps with five more girls that year. More the year after that. He is good at sex the way he is good at hockey. Instinctively and with attention, because he is always paying attention to what the other person wants, even when he pretends not to be. The girls like him. They like the confidence and the body and the way he makes them feel. He likes being liked. Likes the warmth of it, even though the warmth never lasts past morning.

Sasha is different.

Sasha is his coach, Viktor's son. Sixteen to Ilya's fifteen. Quiet, dark-haired, watchful in a way that Ilya is not watchful about anything. They have known each other for years, since Ilya started training at Sokolniki. Sasha has always been around. At the rink after school, in Viktor's office, doing homework, leaning against the boards during practice with his eyes on Ilya in a way that Ilya registers but doesn't examine.

It starts with Sasha's hand on his thigh in Viktor's kitchen. Ilya doesn't move it. Doesn't know if he wants to move it or not. Sasha takes the not-moving as an answer. His hand goes higher. and Ilya lets it.

The first time Sasha kisses him it is in the hallway of Viktor's apartment while Viktor is at the rink. Ilya's hands shake, and afterwards they sit on the floor. Sasha says, "You liked that." Ilya says, "Yeah." He thinks he did. He's not entirely sure, but Sasha is already talking about next time, and the not-sure gets swept along in the momentum of it.

It goes on for almost two years, quietly and carefully. In stolen hours when Viktor is coaching, and Alexei is elsewhere, and Grigori is watching television. Ilya wants parts of it. He wants the closeness, the feeling of someone choosing him, specifically him. He wants to be touched by someone who isn't hitting him. These things are real. But there are other parts he isn't sure about. Parts where Sasha moves faster than Ilya is ready for, and Ilya goes along with it because Sasha is already there and pulling back would mean explaining something he doesn't have words for. He is fifteen years old. He doesn't know yet that wanting some of it and not wanting all of it is something you're allowed to say.

Sasha isn't cruel about it. He just doesn't ask. He is a sixteen-year-old boy who wants something and doesn't slow down long enough to notice that Ilya's "yes" is sometimes closer to "I don't know." The secrecy makes it harder. They can't talk about what this is, not in Russia, not in Moscow, not at home. So the questions Ilya might ask, like *do I want this* and *what happens if I say not yet*, those questions don't have anywhere to go. They stay inside him, get quiet and eventually he stops hearing them.

It ends when Ilya is seventeen. His hockey career is accelerating. The time between them shrinks until there's nothing left. Sasha is the one who ends it. He says they have to stop. Too risky. Ilya nods and feels something he expects to be loss but is actually closer to relief. A door closing that he didn't know he wanted closed. He doesn't examine the relief, not for a long time at least.

He keeps sleeping with girls. He sleeps with Svetlana for the first time when they are both sixteen in her father's mansion in Moscow. Sergei is at a conference in St. Petersburg. It is different from the other girls because Svetlana knows him, like, actually knows him. She says "stop performing"

halfway through, and Ilya laughs, doesn't really understand what she means. Then he realises and stops. Afterwards, she lies next to him. "You don't have to pretend with me."

"I'm not pretending," Ilya will reply, which elicits a snort from Svetlana.

"You're always pretending, but it's okay, I don't mind." They fall asleep in Sergei Vetrov's guest bedroom, and Ilya sleeps without dreaming of his mother for the first time in years.

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Alexei gets worse.

It happens in the same way everything in the Rozanov house happens. Slowly and then all at once. By the time Ilya is sixteen, and Alexei is twenty-two, the cocaine is no longer something Alexei does at parties with his friends. It's something he does in his room with the door locked. The difference shows in his face and his temper. The way his hands move, restless and sharp. The way he looks at Ilya.

The looking is the thing Ilya notices first. Alexei has always been dismissive. Careless in the way older brothers can be careless. But there is something new in it now. Something that has curdled past carelessness into something hotter. Ilya is sixteen and already being scouted for the NHL. Alexei is twenty-two and working a job he hates in the police force and snorting cocaine in the daytime. The distance between their trajectories is visible to everyone who knows them, and Alexei cannot stand it.

The first time Alexei hits him, it is an open-handed slap across the face. Hard enough to make Ilya's ear ring. Over something trivial that Ilya will not remember later, because the reason doesn't matter. The reason is never the real reason. The real reason is that Ilya is going to leave and Alexei is going to stay. That Ilya is becoming something while Alexei is becoming nothing. The unfairness of it, the way talent landed in one brother and missed the other, is a wound that cocaine makes bigger.

Ilya doesn't hit back. He is the same height as Alexei by now. Stronger. He could hit him, he could hurt him. The fact that he doesn't is not about fear. It is about something more complicated. Alexei is the only person left from the life before. The only one who remembers their mother the way Ilya remembers her. Who ate bread and cheese with him at the kitchen table on the bad days. Hitting Alexei back would mean admitting that what they have is gone. Ilya is not ready to admit that.

The hitting becomes a pattern. It's not constant, and doesn't happen every day. But often enough that Ilya learns to read Alexei the way he used to read Irina. The clenched jaw, the dilated pupils, that particular restlessness that means tonight is going to be bad. He takes the hits and doesn't talk about them. When he shows up to practice with a bruise on his jaw or a split lip, Viktor looks at him and says nothing. Ilya appreciates the nothing because the nothing means he doesn't have to explain.

Grigori sees it. He must see it. Ilya isn't good at hiding it. But Grigori has been not-seeing things for decades. By now, the not-seeing is so practised it might as well be blindness.

The words are worse than the hitting. Alexei starts calling him пидор when Grigori isn't around. Faggot. He says it casually, the way he says everything cruel. Tossed off and deniable. He never confronts Ilya directly. Never says I know or I saw, he doesn't need to. The word is enough. It lands in Ilya's chest and sits there like a coal. Ilya doesn't react because reacting would confirm

something. He has learned from Grigori, from his young life, from this family, that the thing you react to is the thing they know is true.

Then Ilya sleeps with Alexei's girlfriend.

Her name is Katya. She is twenty-three. She has long legs and a bored mouth, and she's been dating Alexei for four months, which in Alexei's world counts as serious. She comes to the house on a Saturday night when Alexei is working a shift. Ilya is in the kitchen. She leans against the counter and talks to him, and her eyes do the thing that women's eyes do when they are making a decision, and Ilya sees it happening and doesn't stop it. Doesn't think about stopping it. He's only seventeen, but he's long ago stopped thinking about consequences the way other people stop thinking about the weather. She is there. He is there. Alexei is not.

Alexei finds out. Ilya doesn't know how. Katya, probably. It doesn't matter. What matters is Alexei standing in the hallway of the house with his jaw tight and his fists at his sides.

"You fucked my girlfriend," Alexei says.

Ilya looks at him and doesn't flinch.

"Yeah," Ilya says. "I did."

Alexei steps closer. "You're a fucking пидор and you fucked my girlfriend."

"I may be a faggot," Ilya says. "But I can pleasure her better than you."

The hallway goes quiet. Alexei's face does something Ilya has never seen before. Not anger. Something underneath anger. Something that looks, for just a second, like the recognition that Ilya is no longer someone he can break.

Ilya picks up his jacket from the hook by the door, and walks out. Goes to the rink because the rink is the only place that makes sense. Skates for two hours and doesn't think about the look on Alexei's face or the words that came out of his own mouth or the fact that none of it made the coal in his chest feel any smaller.

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The NHL draft is in Los Angeles in June 2009. Ilya flies there with his father.

It surprises Ilya that his father wants to come along. Grigori does not approve of the NHL. He considers it an inferior league in a country he considers beneath them. He has said this many times, in the flat, certain tone he uses for everything. Ilya should stay and play in the KHL the way Russian boys are supposed to. Close to home. Under the authority of coaches and institutions that Grigori understands. But Grigori comes, because Grigori understands events that have cameras and handshakes and men in suits. He understands the value of being seen.

Ilya is drafted first overall by the Boston Bears. When they call his name he walks to the stage in a suit that fits because Svetlana helped him buy it in Moscow. He shakes hands, smiles, holds the jersey in trembling hands and lets the cameras flash. The smile and pride he feels are real.

Afterwards, there are meetings and introductions. Men from the Bears who shake Ilya's hand and tell him how excited they are. Grigori stands beside him in his own good suit and shakes their

hands too. He is charming in the way that powerful men can be charming when they decide to be.

"We're not passing on a kid this strong with those hands," one of the executives says. "Not in Boston, Mr Rozanov. He's a very natural number one pick. Congratulations again, Ilya."

Grigori nods, barely smiles. "He is strong," he says. "But he needs discipline. He can be, how you say, lazy."

The room shifts. The executive laughs because he thinks it's a joke, but Ilya's face does nothing. His face has been doing nothing in response to that word for years. He is very good at it by now.

But something behind his face breaks, because this is not the kitchen in Khamovniki. This is not Polina's gated house. This is the best day of Ilya's life. He has just been drafted first overall in the NHL. He is standing in a room full of people who have just told him he is worth something, and his father has found the moment, has chosen it precisely, the way he has always chosen precisely, and put the word into the air like a pin into a balloon. Lazy. In front of everyone. And the worst part is that Grigori is smiling when he says it, and the smile looks like pride, and only Ilya knows that it isn't. Ilya stands in his suit with his father's voice in his ears. He will carry that word all the way to Boston.

He calls Svetlana from the hotel that night. She picks up on the first ring. "First overall, obviously." Ilya laughs. It's his real laugh, the one he barely ever manages nowadays, the one that only Svetlana gets. "How does it feel?"

"I don't know yet," he replies, and it's the truth.

"That's okay. You don't have to know yet." They talk for an hour about nothing and everything. When he hangs up he feels something close to okay. Close, but still not fully.

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He moves to Boston in August. The apartment is arranged by his new team's coaching staff after he tells them he doesn't want to billet with a host family. The idea of performing gratitude in some stranger's house, sitting at their dinner table and smiling and pretending to be the kind of polite young man that billets expect, makes him want to smoke an entire pack on the balcony.

The apartment is fine. It has two bedrooms, a small kitchen, and a bathroom. Enough space for one person and eventually two. The team has told him a roommate is coming. Someone who trains at the same facility, a figure skater. Ilya doesn't think about this very much because he doesn't think about anything that is more than a week away. This is how he has survived this long.

For the first three weeks in Boston, Ilya is alone.

The apartment is quiet, but he had expected that. The quiet is the same as it is everywhere, the same flat silence he has been carrying since Moscow. He fills it the way he always fills it. With music, with people. The particular rhythm of a life that looks, from the outside, like someone who is having a great time. He goes to team practices and skates harder than anyone. Chirps in broken English that gets better by the day. Goes to bars with teammates who are still learning his name. He drinks and laughs. He makes them laugh, and he thinks everything will be okay. He goes home from practise with their numbers in his phone and a warmth in his chest that lasts until the door of the apartment closes behind him.

He starts sleeping with women in Boston almost immediately. A girl from a bar in Back Bay during the second week. A girl from another bar in Southie the week after. Then more, and more, and more. It turns into a rhythm that establishes itself quickly because this is what Ilya knows. What he's good at. The finding and the charming and the brief bright hours where someone else's body makes his body feel like a place he wants to live. Then the morning breaks, and they leave. He never asks them to stay, he never wants to.

The second bedroom stays empty. The figure skater's stuff arrives before the figure skater does. Boxes that appear one afternoon while Ilya is at practice, stacked neatly in the hallway and labelled in handwriting that is small and precise. Ilya steps over them and goes about his day like always. He lounges on the couch, eats cereal standing at the counter and doesn't think about the person who is coming.

He smokes on the balcony that night. Looks out at Boston, which is smaller than Moscow and louder and wetter and full of a particular kind of American energy that he doesn't have a word for yet. He is eighteen years old. He's over four thousand miles from the apartment where his mother died. The silence here sounds exactly the same as the silence there. He finishes his cigarette and goes to bed dreaming of an apartment in Khamovniki, a kitchen table and a bedroom door.

Chapter 5: twenty-five feet

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya finally meet

Shane wakes up at five-fifteen on his first morning in Boston because that is when he always wakes up, and for several seconds, he doesn't know where he is. The ceiling is wrong, lower than his ceiling in Ottawa and a different shade of white, and the light is coming from the wrong direction, and the sounds are wrong. There's traffic instead of the quiet street where his parents live, and his body goes tight and alert in the way it does when something is out of place, every nerve awake and cataloguing, and then he remembers: Boston, the apartment, the second bedroom with the closed door, the life he is supposed to be starting.

He gets out of bed, showers, dresses and eats a bowl of the cereal he brought from home because the brand is right and the taste is right, and he is not ready to navigate an American grocery store yet. He brushes his teeth for two minutes, puts on his shoes, picks up his skate bag, and leaves the apartment. The second bedroom door is still closed, and he does not know if there is a person behind it or not, and he doesn't check. It's not what's important right now. Right now, he needs to get to the rink.

It's a twelve-minute walk from the apartment, which Shane knows because he timed it yesterday on a practice run. The route is simple, three turns, and the September morning is warm enough that he doesn't need a jacket but cool enough that the air feels good on his face. By the time he reaches the facility, his heart rate has settled into the steady, efficient rhythm that means his body is ready to work.

Rose is already there, stretching in the lobby. "Big day," she beams at him.

"Yes," Shane agrees, because it is, and they lace their skates and walk to the ice together. Linda Hewitt is already at the boards with a coffee in one hand and a clipboard in the other, her expression giving away nothing, not warmth and not hostility, just the steady evaluative attention that Shane felt on his skin the first time they skated for her in April.

"Good morning," she says. "We're going to start with compulsory elements. Side by side spins first. Show me what you've got and then I'll tell you what's wrong with it."

The practice is the most demanding two hours Shane has ever spent on ice. Not physically, though his legs are shaking by the end, but mentally, because Linda coaches the way Shane thinks; in specifics, in measurements, in corrections so precise that each one reshapes what he thought he already knew.

"Your right shoulder is dropping two centimetres on the entry to the throw," she says to Shane during the first hour, and he adjusts, and she watches and says, "Better, but you're compensating with your hip now, which means you'll lose power on the release, do it again." He does it again, and

she says, "Again," and he does it again, and by the fourth attempt, the entry is clean, and Linda says nothing, which Shane understands as approval.

She's warmer with Rose, and Shane notices this. She's still precise, but there is something in her voice that is fractionally warmer, a "good" after a clean spiral sequence that she would never give Shane because Shane doesn't need it the same way, and Rose responds to the warmth by skating bigger, more expressively, while Shane responds to the corrections by skating more accurately. Linda is reading what each of them needs and adjusting, and Shane recognises this as a kind of intelligence that he respects deeply, the ability to see two different systems operating and optimise them simultaneously.

By the time she sends them off, the rink is filling up, and the Zamboni is running on the hockey sheet next door, its vibration travelling through the building into Shane's feet and settling somewhere behind his teeth. The fluorescent lights in the lobby are buzzing at a frequency he's certain no one else can hear, and voices and skate blades and music are layering on top of each other in a way that makes his skin feel too thin, and his body is sending him the signals he has learned to obey. He needs to leave, go somewhere quieter, now.

Rose is deep in conversation with another skater about hair products. Shane doesn't interrupt. He grabs his bag and slips through a side door into the September air.

The alley between the rink and the parking structure is narrow and mostly forgotten. There's an overflowing dumpster, a chain-link fence, and an old flyer for an improv class that's peeling off the brick wall. Shane leans against the wall, closes his eyes and lets his breathing slow, counting the way his body has taught itself: In for four, hold for four, out for four. The brick is cool against his back, and the quiet wraps around him like water. For a moment, just for a moment, everything is manageable.

That's when he smells it.

Cigarette smoke. Sharp and acrid, curling through the clean air, and Shane's eyes snap open because this was his quiet, and someone is in it.

There is a boy leaning against the opposite wall, maybe ten feet away. He looks to be about Shane's height, with blond-ish curly hair spilling out from under a toque and a jaw that hasn't quite decided if it belongs to a teenager or an adult. He's wearing athletic shorts and a t-shirt with faded Cyrillic lettering, and he is smoking with the unhurried ease of someone who has been doing it for years, weight on one hip, free hand in his pocket, the whole posture so thoroughly unbothered that something flares in Shane's chest. It's not quite anger, something more precise, the particular irritation of a rule being broken by someone who doesn't know it's a rule.

He hasn't noticed Shane. Or if he has, he doesn't care.

"You can't smoke here."

The boy looks at him. His eyes are light, grey or green, Shane can't tell in the alley light, and they move over Shane with an unhurried attention that makes Shane aware of himself in a way he doesn't like. His hair is sweaty, still damp from the practice and starting to curl at the back of his neck. His training clothes are rumpled, black leggings and a compression shirt that shows too much of his body.

The boy says something in Russian. Then, after a beat, in English: "Says who?"

"The city of Boston. There's an ordinance. No smoking within twenty-five feet of any entrance to a public building." Shane points at the door behind him. "That's an entrance."

The boy looks at the door, then looks at Shane. He takes a drag of the cigarette, slow and deliberate, and exhales the smoke in a stream that catches the light between them.

"Is not real door. Is side door. For garbage."

"It's still a door. The ordinance doesn't differentiate."

The boy smiles, slow and crooked, like something being unwrapped. It changes his whole face, rearranges it into something less guarded and more interesting, and Shane notices this the way he notices the two-centimeter shoulder drop. Automatically, without choosing to, and the noticing sends a flicker of something through him that he doesn't stop to identify.

"You are, what is word..?" The boy waves the cigarette in a small circle, searching. "Like police."

"I'm not like the police. I just know the rules."

"Same thing."

"It's not the same thing."

"In Russia is same thing." The grin widens. It's more deliberate now, the performance of a boy who knows exactly what his face does when he smiles and has been using it as currency for years. "You are hockey? You train here?"

"I'm a figure skater."

Something shifts in the boy's expression. The amusement doesn't leave, but something sharper joins it, an attention that wasn't there before, like a lens adjusting its focus.

"You live on Marlborough Street?" the boy asks, tilting his head. "Third floor?"

Shane's whole body goes still. "How do you know that?"

"Because I live there too." And the boy pushes off the wall and extends the hand that isn't holding the cigarette. It oozes confidence, completely at odds with the fact that Shane has gone rigid, every muscle pulling tight at once. "Ilya. Ilya Rozanov. I am your roommate."

Shane stares at the offered hand. At the cigarette still burning in the other one. At the Cyrillic t-shirt and the curls spilling out from under the toque and the easy, amused posture of a boy who has just told Shane that he will be sleeping on the other side of his wall and existing in his kitchen and his bathroom and his life for the foreseeable future.

He takes the hand because not taking it would require an explanation he doesn't have. "Shane. Hollander."

"Shane," Ilya repeats, tasting it, turning it over in his mouth like something he's deciding whether to keep. "Okay, Shane. I smoke somewhere else."

He lets go and walks past Shane toward the parking lot, close enough that Shane catches a whiff of him. He smells like smoke and sweat and underneath, something clean and warm, soap or

deodorant, something that doesn't belong with the cigarettes but exists alongside them anyway.

Shane watches him disappear around the corner and becomes aware of his pulse beating in a place he can't identify. Not his chest, not his throat. Somewhere deeper, somewhere without a name. He stands in the alley for a long time after Ilya is gone, his back against the brick, his breathing unsteady, and he does not think about why.

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Ilya finishes his cigarette in the parking lot and grinds it out with his shoe and stands there for a while with his hands in his pockets, face tilted up toward the sky.

His roommate is a figure skater. He already knew this, Meg (the Bears' physical therapist), had mentioned it weeks ago, but knowing it as a fact and meeting it as a person are completely different experiences. He'd expected someone small. Someone soft. Someone who sparkled and smiled and waved. Instead he got a boy with sweaty hair and a rigid jaw who cited municipal ordinances without a trace of humour and meant every single word. Who looked at Ilya the way a scientist looks at something under glass — total attention, absolutely zero warmth.

Shane Hollander. Even the name is tidy, precise, like the handwriting on the boxes that arrived last week, stacked so neatly in the hallway that Ilya had to physically restrain himself from nudging one crooked.

He lights another cigarette because the figure skater isn't here to stop him, and smokes it slowly, watching people come and go from the facility. The apartment has been his alone for three weeks. It's just been Ilya and the television and the women he brings home to fill the silence. He waits for the annoyance to arrive, the territorial resistance to sharing his space with a stranger, but it doesn't come. Instead, there's a curiosity that surprises him. This particular person, with his regulations and his posture and his absolute immunity to Ilya's smile, is interesting. Ilya hasn't found anything genuinely interesting in a long time.

He walks home. His room is exactly as he left it. There's a cereal bowl on the desk, clothes on the floor, and last night's beer bottle still on the bedside table. But Shane's bedroom door is open now, and it wasn't this morning, and Ilya goes back into the hallway.

The bed is made with precision. Corners tucked like someone's life depends on it, pillows aligned, not a wrinkle anywhere. Four pairs of shoes along the wall, arranged by type. Books on the desk are organised by height. Skate bag hanging from the back of the door, centred perfectly. There's nothing on the walls. No posters, no photographs, nothing personal at all except on the bed there's a crumpled pillow that doesn't match the bedding.

Something turns over in Ilya's chest, recognition. He is looking at a system someone has built to keep the world at a manageable distance, every object in its place, because the objects being in place means safety, means control, and Ilya knows this architecture because he lives inside his own version. His just looks like noise and sex and laughter instead of silence and order and perfectly made beds.

He eases the door back to where it was, not quite closed, not quite open, the way he found it. He goes to the fridge, pulls out a beer and sits on the couch. He turns on the Russian channel he found last week, and the apartment fills with voices that sound like home.

He calls Svetlana because he hasn't talked to anyone real in two days, and the sound of his own voice is starting to feel strange to him.

"How's America," she says. It's framed as a question, but Ilya knows it isn't.

"Boring."

"You've been there three weeks. Give it time."

"I met my roommate."

"The figure skater?"

"He told me I can't smoke in the alley behind the rink. He cited a municipal ordinance."

Svetlana laughs, the full one, the one that means she's actually delighted. "I already like him."

"He's insane. He's completely rigid. He's like..." Ilya searches for the word, waves his hand even though she can't see him. "Like a robot. Like a robot who is angry about cigarettes."

"An angry cigarette robot. Very descriptive."

"You would like him. You would both stand there and judge me together."

"That sounds perfect, actually. Send me a photo."

"I don't have a photo, Sveta. I met him for three minutes in an alley."

"Then take one later. I want to see the angry robot."

They talk for another twenty minutes about everything and nothing. Her classes, his teammates, the bar in Back Bay where the bartender doesn't card, and when they hang up the apartment feels slightly less empty, the way everything always does after Svetlana, like she's left something behind in the air.

He makes pelmeni because it's the only thing he knows how to cook properly, because his mother taught him when he was ten, and the muscle memory has outlived everything else from that kitchen. The making of them, the dough, the filling, the folding, requires just enough attention to keep his hands busy and his mind somewhere other than the quiet. He fries them in too much oil the way Irina used to, until they're golden and crispy, and the smell fills the apartment, and for a few minutes the kitchen in Boston smells like the kitchen in Khamovniki on a Sunday morning, and Ilya stands at the stove and breathes it in and doesn't think about why his eyes sting.

He makes enough for two. He doesn't think about why he does this either.

He puts a plate on the counter for Shane, takes his own to the couch, and waits.

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Shane comes home at seven.

He spent the afternoon three floors down at Rose's, sitting on her couch while she cooked pasta and talked about the practice and the facility and the neighbourhood and the coffee shop she'd found

that uses oat milk. Shane ate and said almost nothing, and Rose let him be, because she has been skating with him long enough to know when he's processing and that pushing won't help.

Eventually, over a second serving he didn't ask for, but she put in front of him anyway, he told her.

"I met my roommate. He was smoking in the alley behind the rink."

"Is he nice?"

"He smokes."

Rose laughed. "That's not an answer, Shane."

"He's Russian. Plays hockey. He's loud."

"You've known him for five minutes."

"He's loud."

What's his name?"

Shane had to think about this for a second. "Ilya. Rozanov."

"Wait? Ilya Rozanov? First overall pick?" Rose put her fork down. "Shane, he's supposed to be incredible. My brother watched the draft. He said the kid could be generational."

Shane didn't know what to do with this information.

Rose gave him the look, the one that means she knows there's more but also knows he's not going to give it to her. She let it go and changed the subject, and Shane was grateful in the quiet, private way he is always grateful for Rose, who has learned over two years that the best thing she can do for him is not make him explain.

"You want to watch something?" she asked instead, reaching for the remote, and Shane nodded, and they watched a baking competition for two hours and Rose provided commentary, and Shane didn't talk, and the afternoon passed the way afternoons with Rose always passed, in the particular comfort of someone who does not require you to perform.

Now he lets himself into the apartment, and the television is on, something in Russian, and the air smells different from the way it did that morning. It's not cigarette smoke but something fried, oil, garlic and something sweet he can't place. Ilya is on the couch with his feet on the coffee table and a beer in his hand, and he looks up when Shane walks in, and there it is again, the crooked smile.

"Shane. You are home."

"Yes." His voice comes out shaky, and he hopes Ilya doesn't hear it. The apartment is warm and lit up and full of noise and smells and another person, and three hours ago Shane left a quiet, empty space that belonged to him and has come back to something that doesn't, and he doesn't know what to do with himself, where to stand, where to put his bag, how to exist in a room that has been rearranged by someone else's presence without a single piece of furniture being moved.

"You want beer?"

"No, thank you."

"I make food. Is in kitchen. Pelmeni." A vague gesture with the bottle. "Russian dumplings. Is good."

Shane glances toward the kitchen. There's a pot on the stove and a plate of dumplings on the counter, and oil splattered across the stovetop, and a cutting board covered in onion skins and an unwashed knife, and the kitchen he left clean and ordered this morning is unrecognisable. Something in him flinches at it, small and involuntary.

"Thank you. I already ate."

"You don't have to eat a lot. Just try."

Shane looks at the plate. The dumplings are small and neatly folded, which surprises him, because nothing else about Ilya so far has been neat. They don't match the chaos of the kitchen they were made in.

"Maybe later," he hears himself say, which is not what he meant to say. He meant to say no.

Ilya nods like this is a completely acceptable answer. "They are better hot, but okay. I put in fridge for you." He unfolds himself from the couch and takes the plate and covers it with cling film and puts it in the refrigerator, and the gesture is casual and unbothered, just the way someone does something when it doesn't occur to them not to. He opens another beer while he's up and goes back to the couch.

"You want to sit?"

He nods toward the other end of the couch, the gesture easy, an invitation that costs him nothing and means nothing and should be simple to accept.

Shane looks at the couch, and at Ilya's legs sprawled across it and the beer sweating a ring onto the coffee table with no coaster and the television filling the room with Russian he doesn't understand, and the proximity of it all presses against him like a hand on his chest, and something tightens, and he can't.

"I'm going to my room. I need to stretch."

"Okay," Ilya says, and the word carries something that is odd to Shane's ear. Amusement, maybe, or disappointment, or maybe nothing. Yeah, probably nothing.

Shane closes his bedroom door, sits on his bed, puts his hands on his thighs, and breathes. Just breathes. Through the wall, he can hear Ilya settling back into the couch, the creak of cushions, the television volume going up slightly. He thinks about the dumplings in the refrigerator, covered in cling film. He thinks about the way Ilya said my mother's recipe and the thing that moved across his face before the smile came back.

He thinks about the fact that he said maybe later, when he meant to say no.

Through the wall, the television murmurs in Russian, and Ilya moves around the kitchen, water running, the clank of a pot, the fridge opening and closing. The ordinary sounds of another person living in the space that Shane needs to make his own. They press in on him, too much and too

close. And also, in a way, he barely recognises and would never say out loud, not entirely unwelcome. The apartment last night was so quiet. The kind of quiet that makes you aware of your own heartbeat, your own breathing, the sound of yourself existing alone in a room, and Shane has spent his whole life being too aware of these things.

He lies down, faces the wall, and closes his eyes. Through the plaster comes the sound of Ilya laughing at something on the television, a real laugh, sudden and warm, and Shane lies in the dark and listens to it without understanding why he's listening or why the sound of it makes the tight thing in his chest loosen, just slightly, just enough.

Eventually, much later than usual, he sleeps.

Chapter 6: five-fifteen

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane navigate their first two months as roommates.

The first thing Ilya learns about Shane Hollander is that he wakes up at the same time every morning.

Five-fifteen. Ilya knows this because he is often still awake at five-fifteen, lying in bed scrolling through nothing on his phone, or smoking on the balcony, or just coming home from somewhere he shouldn't have been. At five-fifteen, the alarm goes off on the other side of the wall, and Ilya finds it psychotic that it's a single tone. Not a song and not a buzzer, one clean sound like a bell struck once, then silence before feet hit the floor, and the shower starts up, following with the kettle, and then the front door. The sequence never varies. Monday, Tuesday, Saturday, Sunday.

Even Shane's soap is unscented. Ilya checked once, out of curiosity.

The second thing he learns is that Shane does not like to be touched.

Not that Ilya is trying, not deliberately at least, but Ilya is a physical person who moves through the world body first, who claps shoulders and bumps into people in doorways and takes up more space than he technically requires. And the thing is, the apartment isn't large. The kitchen is narrow enough that two people can't pass without one of them turning sideways, and the first time Ilya reaches for a glass and his elbow brushes Shane's arm, Shane flinches. It's not a jump, it's more of a... pulling-in. Like something retreating into its shell. Ilya says sorry, and Shane says it's fine, in a voice that means it is not fine and also that he is not going to explain why.

After that, Ilya notices it everywhere. Shane angles his body away when they're in the same room. He waits for Ilya to leave the kitchen before entering it, holds himself in doorways with his elbows tucked to his sides like he's trying to take up the smallest possible amount of space. And Ilya, who has spent his whole life making himself bigger and louder, does not know what to do with someone who is trying to disappear.

The third thing he learns, which takes longer, is that Shane is not a cold person, no matter what his exterior implies.

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The women are a problem.

The first one after Shane moves in is a girl Ilya meets at a bar in Allston. They come home at two a.m. and make grilled cheese in the kitchen before stumbling to his room, leaving crumbs and a greasy pan and a smear of butter on the counter. A bleary-eyed and hungover Ilya had woken at five-fifteen when the alarm in the next room went off, the single psychotic tone cutting through his skull, and he'd lain there listening to the sequence — shower, kettle, door — while the girl beside

him stirred and mumbled something and pulled the sheet over her head. By the time he dragged himself to the kitchen at nine, she'd already slipped out, leaving nothing behind but a hair tie on the nightstand. The counter was spotless. The pan was washed and dried, and back on its hook. And there was a bottle of cleaning spray positioned exactly where Ilya would see it. No note. But Ilya understood perfectly: I cleaned up your mess. Don't make me do it again.

After that, it becomes a pattern. The girl from Northeastern, blonde and athletic, who laughs at his accent and puts her hand on his thigh in the cab. The one from Southie who stays for breakfast and uses Shane's mug. The one who wanders to the bathroom past Shane's door at three a.m. and giggles in the hallway. Each time the cleaning spray appears on the counter. Each time, Ilya understands. Each time he brings them home anyway, because that is what Ilya does, because the bars are good and his body is full of the easy, careless energy that alcohol gives him, and the apartment is going to be quiet when he gets back, and quiet is the thing he's still trying to outrun.

The men are a different thing entirely. The men are rare and careful and never come home. The men happen in club bathrooms with the bass shaking through the walls, or in the back seat of someone's car in a parking garage, or once in a hotel room he paid cash for and left before morning. Feller tells him about Grindr one night after practice, laughing about a friend who uses it, and Ilya downloads it in the bathroom and then deletes it and downloads it again. It makes the men easier to find and harder to pretend don't exist. The men are the thing Ilya keeps sealed behind a wall so thick he sometimes forgets it's there, except that he never forgets, not really, because the wall is the thing that keeps him alive. Russia is on the other side of it. Grigori is on the other side of it. The hockey world, with its locker rooms and its casual cruelty and the word that gets thrown around like it means nothing, is on the other side of it. The men happen, and Ilya doesn't think about them afterwards, and he never, ever takes them home.

The women he takes home, and the cleaning spray is on the kitchen counter every single morning.

He calls Svetlana about it.

"I think my roommate communicates through cleaning products."

"What?"

"When I bring a girl home, he leaves the cleaning spray on the counter. He doesn't say anything. He just... leaves it there."

"Because you're disgusting and he wants you to clean up."

"Yes, obviously. But he won't say that. He'll just put the spray somewhere I'll see it. Like a little monument to my failures."

Svetlana is quiet for a moment. "I think I love him."

"You've never met him."

"I don't need to meet him. Anyone who gets under your skin this much is my kind of person. Does he actually talk to you?"

"He says 'good morning' and 'I already ate' and 'it's fine.' That's his whole vocabulary. Three phrases. Like a very polite parrot."

"Maybe he'd talk more if you stopped bringing loud women into his home at one in the morning."

Ilya doesn't respond to this, because Svetlana is right and they both know it, and being right is Svetlana's favourite hobby.

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He should stop. He knows he should stop, or at least be quieter about it, or at least wipe down the kitchen counter when he's done. But the rhythm of women and bars and the brief bright hours where his head goes quiet is the rhythm that has kept him functional since he was fourteen, and Shane's arrival hasn't changed the need for it, just made him aware of the mess it leaves behind. Awareness is uncomfortable. Ilya does not like being uncomfortable.

So he brings another girl home the following week. Another one after that. Each time Shane says nothing, leaves the spray, and goes to the rink at five-forty-five. The silence between them thickens into something with a texture. It's not hostile but not neutral, the particular heaviness of two people who have decided, independently, that the other is a problem to be managed rather than a person to be known.

His teammates ask about the roommate. They're at a bar in Southie after a preseason game, Ilya, Marleau, Connors and a couple of the older guys whose approval still matters, and Marleau says, "So what's the deal with your roommate, Roz? He's one of the figure skaters, right?"

"He is figure skater, yes."

"What's he like?"

Ilya takes a drink of his beer and considers this. What Shane is like. The five-fifteen alarm and the unscented soap and the shoes by the door and the cleaning spray and the flinch and the silence. The way he said it's fine about the elbow in a voice that meant it was not fine.

"He's very quiet," Ilya says. "He eats same food every day. Goes to bed at nine. Has four pairs of shoes, and they are lined up like soldiers."

"Jesus," Carter says. "That sounds miserable."

"Is not miserable. Is just—" Ilya waves his hand, searching for the English. "Controlled. Everything is controlled. Like a machine. He's very boring."

"Does he talk to you?"

"Not really. He nods at me in the kitchen and goes to his room. I think he'd be happier if I didn't exist."

They laugh at this because to them it's funny. Ilya performs the grin that has gotten him through every room he's walked into since he was twelve, the one that says I am having a great time and everything is easy and nothing hurts. He's good at this. He's always been good at this. The teammates clap him on the back and buy him another beer, and the conversation moves on to LeClaire's defensive system and whether the new goalie can actually stop a breakaway, and Ilya laughs and talks and takes up space and is, for the duration of the evening, exactly who everyone expects him to be.

He goes home alone, which he doesn't always do but does tonight, and lets himself into the apartment quietly for once. Shane's door is closed, the apartment is dark, the television is off, and the silence is the kind he usually fills with noise, but tonight he just stands in the kitchen and drinks a glass of water. He looks at Shane's door and thinks about the word boring and whether it's true, and knows that it isn't. Knows it the way he knows where a pass is going before it arrives. He goes to bed and lies in the dark and listens to the silence on Shane's side of the wall and doesn't sleep for a long time.

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Ilya tries to crack it open on a Wednesday in the third week.

He comes home from practice to find Shane in the kitchen making dinner. Grilled chicken, rice, steamed broccoli. The same meal Shane makes every Monday and Wednesday.

Ilya leans against the doorframe and watches him. "You always eat same thing."

"Yes."

"You don't get bored?"

Shane looks at him. His expression gives away nothing. "No."

Ilya grins. "You are most boring person I ever meet."

And something happens. Shane's jaw tightens, a small movement, the muscle flexing, the mouth pressing shut, and he says, quietly, without looking up from his plate, "Fuck off."

Ilya is so delighted he almost laughs. Because this is the first real thing Shane has said to him. Not polite, not measured, not communicated through the positioning of cleaning products. An actual reaction. An insult, which requires engagement, which means Shane is in the room with him, actually in the room, and not just occupying space.

"See," Ilya says. "Not boring now."

Shane doesn't respond. He finishes his chicken, washes his plate and goes to his room and closes the door, and the word boring hangs in the apartment the way the cigarette smoke hung in the alley.

Ilya orders pizza and eats it on the couch and thinks about the way Shane's jaw tightened, the heat in his voice when he said fuck off, the life in it, and he knows it landed somewhere that hurt, and he knows he should feel bad but what he actually feels is something closer to hunger. Because Shane looked at him. And the look had heat in it. And heat is a thousand times more interesting than the careful neutral face Shane wears like a uniform.

He wants to see it again.

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He starts calling Shane boring regularly after that. Not cruelly (or not only cruelly), but persistently, the way you press a bruise to confirm it still hurts. Shane's cereal is boring. Shane's training schedule is boring. Shane's shoes lined up by the door are boring.

"Your music is boring," Ilya says one evening, passing Shane's open door and hearing something acoustic and Canadian drifting out.

"Fuck off."

"What is that, a lullaby? I'm falling asleep."

"Then go to sleep. That would be ideal."

"See? Boring response. 'Go to sleep.' Very creative."

Shane looks up from his book, and his eyes are flat and unimpressed, and he says, "You're an asshole, and your pelmeni are overcooked," which is both an insult and a food opinion and the longest voluntary sentence Shane has directed at Ilya in three weeks.

Ilya grins at him. "See? Not boring."

Something happens on Shane's face, the very beginning of a smile, barely there, gone before it fully forms. He goes back to his book. Ilya stands in the doorway for a second longer than necessary, close enough now to see the freckles across Shane's nose and cheeks, pale brown, scattered like someone flicked a brush at him, and holds onto the almost-smile, and then walks to the kitchen.

He calls Svetlana that night.

"He told me my pelmeni are overcooked."

"They are."

"They are not. My mother's pelmeni are not overcooked."

"Your mother's were perfect. Yours are overcooked."

"You're supposed to be on my side."

"I'm on the side of correctly cooked pelmeni. Tell me more about the angry robot."

"He almost smiled today. Almost. Like the sun almost came out and then changed its mind."

"You sound very focused on this boy's face."

"I'm focused on making him react. It's a project."

"Mmhm," Svetlana says, in a tone that means she has drawn a conclusion she is not yet sharing. Ilya ignores this. It's the safest option.

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Two weeks into October, on a Tuesday, Ilya finds out he can watch the figure skaters from the upper stands.

It happens by accident. The girl from last night left at four, and he couldn't fall back asleep, so he walked to the rink at six and wandered the building with a vending machine coffee that tasted like plain hot water. He ended up on the upper level, where the stands overlook both sheets of ice,

hockey on one side, figure skating on the other, separated by plexiglass that doesn't quite reach the ceiling.

Shane is on the ice.

Ilya stops walking and comes to a halt at the top of the stands with the bad coffee in his hand. And what he sees makes him very still.

He's watched figure skating on television during the Olympics and other competitions Russia dominates, with the half-attention of an athlete who respects the sport without feeling it in his hands. But television is flat. What Shane is doing on the ice is not flat.

Shane is alone, without his partner, running through elements Ilya doesn't know the names for. Spins and step sequences and something that involves a change of edge so smooth it looks like the ice itself is moving. He's in black training clothes with his hair pushed back, and his face has an expression Ilya has never seen. It's not the closed face from the apartment, not the rigid face from the alley, but something open, something concentrated in a way that looks like the opposite of effort. His body is doing things that Ilya's body, trained to the edge of what is physically possible, could not do.

Ilya sits down slowly in the empty stands. Puts the coffee on the seat beside him.

There's a spin where Shane pulls his arms in and the rotation accelerates until he's a blur, and when he comes out of it his edges are so clean the transition looks like a sentence ending with a period. There's footwork that covers the entire length of the ice, changes of direction so fast Ilya loses track of his feet, and the sound of the blades is different from hockey blades — sharper, more deliberate, each edge a note in something closer to music than sport.

And the way he moves. Ilya has played hockey with some of the most gifted athletes in Russia, boys who could do things on ice that looked like they were cheating the laws of physics, and Shane moves like that but differently. He doesn't move with power (although with the way his muscles are flexing Ilya can clearly see how powerful he is), but with something else, something Ilya doesn't have a word for in English or Russian, a quality of control that is so complete it has crossed over into something that looks effortless, the way the best things always look effortless when in fact they are the hardest things of all.

He thinks about Shane in the apartment, holding himself in doorways, flinching away from an accidental elbow. The same body. Completely different person.

Ilya watches for twenty minutes without moving. Watches Shane run the same sequence three times, adjusting something between each pass that Ilya can't see but that Shane apparently can, and on the third pass, Linda says something from the boards, and Shane nods and does it again, and Linda says nothing, which Ilya already knows means it was right.

Then his partner—Rose, if Ilya remembers correctly—arrives, and they skate together; this is different, something Ilya was not prepared for. What gets him is the way they move as a unit — Shane lifts her, and she's in the air, and his arms are steady and his face is focused and there is a trust in the mechanics of it that Ilya recognises from hockey, the trust between a centre and a winger who've played together long enough that the pass arrives without looking. When Shane puts Rose down, the transition is so smooth that it looks like she never left the ice.

He watches the whole practice. The coffee goes cold, but he doesn't notice, doesn't care. When he finally arrives in the locker rooms, his coach asks him where the fuck he was. Ilya says traffic. LeClaire says bullshit but drops it.

Ilya spends the practice thinking about edges and music and the expression on Shane's face when he thought no one was watching. The open one. The real one. The one that looked like a person rather than a system. That is not the same person. The one on the ice and the one in the apartment are not the same. The one on the ice is the real one. The one in the apartment is the one that is surviving.

Ilya knows about surviving. He has been doing it since he was twelve.

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He goes back the next morning. And the morning after that. By the end of the week it's a habit, which is not a word Ilya usually associates with himself, but it's accurate — he arrives early, gets the bad coffee, sits in the upper stands, watches Shane skate. He doesn't tell anyone. Not his teammates, who would chirp him endlessly. Not Shane, because telling Shane would mean explaining why, and Ilya does not have an explanation he's willing to say out loud.

He starts to learn things. Shane always begins with edges — long arcs across the ice that look simple until you watch the blade and see the control it takes, the quiet strength in the ankle, the stillness in the upper body while the lower body works. Linda rarely raises her voice, and when she does speak it's short and specific and Shane responds to corrections instantly, no argument, no emotion. Rose arrives later and warms up differently, more expressively, her arms moving like she's having a conversation with the air, and when she and Shane skate together something changes in both of them — Rose becomes more precise and Shane becomes more fluid, each one pulling the other toward the centre of what they can be.

He learns that Shane's face when he skates is a face that doesn't exist in the apartment. And that the distance between the two faces is the distance between surviving and living.

What he has, sitting in the stands with his bad coffee going cold in his hand, is this: watching Shane skate is the first thing in Boston that has made Ilya feel quiet in a way that doesn't hurt.

He doesn't tell anyone about that either.

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At the end of October, on a night when Ilya has not brought anyone home, and the apartment is quiet in the way it always is when it's just the two of them, he's on the couch watching a hockey game with the volume low, and Shane comes out of his room.

This doesn't happen often. By evening, Shane is usually behind his door, and the door stays closed, and whatever Shane does in there — reads, stretches, exists in his careful solitude — happens on the other side of the wall where Ilya can hear the faint sounds of it but not see them.

But tonight Shane comes out and goes to the kitchen, opens the fridge and stands there looking into it, and Ilya watches him over the back of the couch.

"There's leftover pirozhki," Ilya says. "From yesterday. Still good."

Shane stands at the open fridge for a moment. Then he takes the plate out, peels off the cling film, puts it in the microwave, and the microwave hums. Shane stands in front of it with his arms crossed, watching the plate rotate.

Ilya turns back to the hockey game. He doesn't say anything. He has learned, slowly, through trial and error and cleaning spray and fuck offs, that Shane is like a stray cat — if you look at him directly, he bolts, but if you pretend not to notice him, he will sometimes, very carefully, come closer.

The microwave beeps, and Shane takes the plate out. He stands in the kitchen for a moment, and Ilya keeps his eyes on the television, and then Shane walks to the living room and sits down at the far end of the couch. As far from Ilya as the couch allows. He eats the pirozhki, slowly, and watches the hockey game, and doesn't say a word.

Ilya doesn't say a word either. He keeps his eyes on the screen and his body very still, the way you hold still when something wild has come close enough to touch, and the apartment is quiet except for the game, and the hum of the refrigerator, and they sit there like that for forty minutes, not talking, not looking at each other, and it is the closest thing to comfortable that Ilya has felt in this apartment since he moved in.

When Shane finishes, he takes his plate to the sink, washes it, puts it in the rack, and goes back to his room without a word. The door closes, and the couch is empty again.

Ilya sits there and stares at the television and doesn't see the game and thinks about the fact that Shane came out of his room and ate his pirozhki while sitting on the couch next to Ilya, watching hockey with him in silence, and that this, this nothing, this forty minutes of not talking on opposite ends of a couch, is the most Shane has given him.

He calls Svetlana. It's four in the morning in Moscow, but she picks up because she always picks up.

"He ate my pirozhki," Ilya says.

"...what?"

"The angry robot. He ate my pirozhki. And he sat on the couch."

"Ilya, it's four a.m."

"He sat on the couch and watched hockey with me. For forty minutes. He didn't say anything."

Svetlana yawns. "So your roommate ate your food and sat on your couch. This is why you're calling me at four a.m."

"You don't understand. He never sits on the couch. He goes to his room every night. This is the first time."

"Maybe he was hungry."

"He was hungry, and he sat on the couch, and he didn't say a single word, and it was the best forty minutes I've had in this apartment."

"You need more friends, Ilya."

"I have friends. I have too many friends. That's not—" He stops, rubs his face with his left hand.
"Never mind. Go back to sleep."

"You called me to tell me your roommate ate pirozhki."

"Yes."

"At four in the morning."

"Yes."

"Okay," Svetlana says, and yawns again. "I'm glad he ate the pirozhki. Good night."

Ilya hangs up and sits in the dark apartment, and doesn't think about why he called. He's good at that. Not thinking. He's been doing it for years.

Chapter 7: different kinds of laughs

Chapter Summary

Shane learns to live with Ilya and starts experiencing things he doesn't know how to explain

By November, Shane has learned to live with Ilya Rozanov the way you learn to live with the weather. You adjust around it; you don't expect it to adjust around you.

He has learned the sounds. Ilya doesn't use an alarm. He just wakes up whenever his body decides to, which is sometimes eight and sometimes ten and once, memorably, at three in the afternoon after a game that went to overtime and a night that went wherever Ilya's nights go. The television is always on when Ilya is home and sometimes on when he's not, left playing to an empty apartment. Russian channel, hockey highlights, American shows that Ilya watches with subtitles and laughs at in the wrong places. Shane has learned the smell of Ilya's cooking, which ranges from surprisingly good to actively alarming, and the smell of his cigarettes, which clings to his jacket and his hair and drifts in through the balcony door no matter how carefully he closes it. Shane has stopped saying anything about the smoking. Saying something accomplished nothing the first twelve times. It will accomplish nothing on the thirteenth.

He has learned the women. Not their names — he doesn't know their names and doesn't want to — but the pattern of them. Thursday nights, Saturday nights, the occasional Tuesdays when Ilya comes home late and not alone. Shane has trained himself to block the sounds through the wall with headphones and the white noise app Rose downloaded for him after he mentioned, once and carefully, that the apartment was sometimes loud at night.

He has also learned, against his will and without his consent, the specific quality of Ilya's laugh.

There are several kinds. The one he uses with teammates is big and easy and performative, designed to fill a room and make everyone feel like they're at a party Ilya is hosting. The one he uses on the phone with whoever he speaks Russian to is lower and more private, with a warmth that makes Shane feel like he's overhearing something he shouldn't. The one he directs at Shane when he calls him boring is sharp and delighted and has a quality of invitation to it that Shane refuses to accept.

And there is another one. Rare. Shane has heard it twice. Once, when Ilya was on the phone on the balcony late at night, and once when Shane said, "You're an asshole, and your taste in music is a war crime." This one is different from all the others. Surprised and real and without any performance in it at all.

Shane doesn't know why he's cataloguing Ilya's laughs. He doesn't want to know. He's going to stop.

He won't stop.

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It is Rose who tells him, on a Tuesday morning in November, after practice.

They're in the changing room. Rose is unlacing her skates, and Shane is stretching on the floor, same stretches in the same order, a structure he can rest inside while his brain processes the instructions Linda gave him that day. Rose says, casually, the way she says things that are not casual at all, "Your roommate was in the stands again this morning."

Shane stops stretching. "What?"

"Ilya. He sits in the upper stands. He's been coming almost every day for a while now." Rose pulls off her skate, puts it in her bag, and looks at him with an expression that is mild, interested, and completely aware of what she has just detonated. "I thought you knew."

Shane did not know.

"How long?" he asks.

"Weeks? I noticed him in early October. He gets coffee from the vending machine and sits in the same seat." Rose zips her bag. "He watches the whole practice. Yours and ours."

"That's strange."

"Is it? Maybe he's bored. Hockey practice doesn't start until nine."

"Why would a hockey player watch figure skating practice every morning when he doesn't have to be here?"

Rose shrugs. "Maybe he thinks it's interesting. Some people do."

"Figure skating is not interesting to hockey players."

"This one seems to find it interesting."

Something cold and small moves through Shane's chest. He thinks about Rose on the ice — the way she moves, the expressiveness, the way her face opens up when she skates. He thinks about the fact that she is pretty and warm and the kind of person people are drawn to, and that Ilya has been sitting in the stands watching her for weeks.

He picks up his bag and walks to the lobby, and looks up at the upper stands, which are empty now. Grey plastic seats, vending machine in the corner. Nothing up there that would explain why a person would choose to sit in it every morning.

He thinks about Ilya watching Rose, and the cold small thing in his chest shifts and settles somewhere he can't reach.

That evening at Rose's apartment, while she makes tea and Shane sits on her couch pretending to read a book he hasn't turned a page of in twenty minutes, he says, "Does Ilya ever talk to you?"

Rose looks over from the kitchen. "Your Ilya?"

"He's not my Ilya."

"Your roommate Ilya. Does he talk to me?" She brings the tea over and sits in the armchair across from him. "Sometimes, yeah. At the facility. He said hi to me last week in the lobby. Asked how the season was going."

"What did you say?"

"I said it was going well. Why?"

Shane looks at his book. "No reason."

"Shane."

"I'm just wondering why he watches practice. If it's — if there's a reason."

Rose sips her tea. "You think he's watching practice because of me."

"It would make sense. You're—" He gestures vaguely. "People like you. You're expressive on the ice."

Rose considers this. "I mean, maybe? He's always nice to me in the lobby. He asked about our season last week." She shrugs. "He's cute. If he asked me out I'd probably say yes."

Something drops through Shane's stomach. Fast, cold, gone before he can catch it.

"You should," he says. "If he asks."

"Yeah?" Rose grins. "Maybe I'll talk to him more. See if he's interested."

Shane looks at his book. The words aren't making sense. They haven't been making sense for twenty minutes. "That would be... yeah. You should."

Rose takes another sip of tea and starts talking about her old choreographer back in Montreal, and the new program structure, and Shane listens and nods, and the cold thing in his chest settles into place, and he doesn't understand it, and he doesn't try to.

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The next morning, Shane is on the ice at six, and he looks up at the stands, and Ilya is there.

Same seat Rose described, upper section, middle row. A paper cup in his hand, that must be the vending machine coffee. He's wearing a Bears hoodie that's too big for him, which it shouldn't be because Ilya is not a small person, but the hoodie is enormous, and his legs are stretched out across the seat in front of him with such complete ease that Shane, whose body is never at ease, feels a flicker of something that might be envy.

Ilya is watching the ice with a focused, quiet attention that is nothing like the way he pays attention to anything else. This is not loud, not scattered, not accompanied by commentary Shane can hear from two rooms away. This is the attention of someone who is actually seeing what is in front of him.

Shane's shoulders pull back, and he lifts his chin. His edges sharpen, the way they do when he knows Linda is watching, when he knows he's being evaluated. Except this isn't an evaluation. This

is something else. The 'something else' makes his stomach feel strange, which he attributes to not eating enough this morning.

He skates the practice. Does not look up again, except that he does. He looks up twice, quickly, both times during a spin when the rotation carries his gaze upward, and it isn't really looking if you're already spinning in that direction.

Linda says nothing about the practice, which means it was good.

He does not think about Ilya in the stands.

He thinks about Ilya in the stands constantly. A low hum underneath every edge, spin, and correction. The awareness of being watched by someone who keeps choosing to be there, morning after morning. He thinks about Rose's shrug when he said, "I think he might be watching practice because of you", and the easy way she said could be, and something about it nags at him but he can't find the shape of it, so he pushes it away.

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Two nights later, Shane comes home from Rose's at eight p.m., and the apartment is wrong.

Not wrong in a visible way. The lights are on, and Ilya's shoes are by the door, which means he's home. But the television is off. This is the first wrong thing, because the television is never off when Ilya is home. The second wrong thing is the smell. It's not cigarettes, not cooking, but vodka, sharp and clean and present in the air.

Shane puts his bag down and walks into the living room.

Ilya is on the couch in the dark. Which is the third wrong thing, because Ilya doesn't sit in the dark. Ilya turns on every light in every room he enters like he's trying to burn the darkness out through sheer wattage. He's holding a glass, not a beer, but a glass, and there's a half-empty bottle on the coffee table. His phone is face-down on the cushion next to him. He's looking at the wall with an expression Shane has never seen on his face.

It isn't sadness, exactly. It's flatter than sadness. Emptier. Like someone has reached into Ilya and turned off the thing that makes him Ilya, the brightness and the noise and the constant restless energy, and what's left is just a body on a couch in a dark room with a bottle of vodka.

"Ilya?"

He looks up. His eyes are slower than usual, and it takes him a moment to focus. When he does, a smile appears, but it's the wrong one. This one is a version with nothing behind it, scaffolding without a building.

"Shane." His voice is thicker than usual, the accent heavier. "You are home. Eight p.m. Like clock."

"Are you drunk?"

"Little bit." He holds up the glass and looks at it like he's forgotten it's in his hand. "Maybe more than little bit."

Shane should go to his room. That's what he usually does. That's the pattern. He comes home, closes the door, whatever Ilya does in the rest of the apartment is Ilya's business. But the television

is off, and there are no women and no laughter, and the wrong smile is worse than no smile at all.

He stays in the doorway. "Did something happen?"

The question feels strange in his mouth. He has never asked Ilya a personal question before. Never indicated any interest in the interior of Ilya's life beyond the ways it disrupts Shane's need for quiet and order. Something shifts in Ilya's expression — surprise, maybe, that Shane is still standing there.

"My brother calls," Ilya says. He puts the glass down, leans back, and looks at the ceiling. "Alexei. He needs money. Always needs money."

Shane doesn't say anything. The silence seems to be working, creating a space that Ilya is choosing to fill, which is different from the noise Ilya normally generates to keep the quiet from settling.

"And my father. He calls after. To tell me Alexei needs money, in case Alexei didn't tell me. Which he did." Ilya's voice is stripped of the usual performance. Flat and tired. "My father thinks I should come home. Play in KHL. Be Russian, be good son, be close to family instead of running away to America."

He pauses. Picks up the glass again, then puts it down without drinking.

"He says I am selfish. He says I am, you know." Another pause, longer. "Lazy."

The word lands in the dark apartment like something dropped from a height.

Shane doesn't know its full weight. He doesn't know that it has a history that started long before Ilya, that it was used on someone who couldn't get out of bed and was never given a reason kinder than laziness. But he can hear the weight in Ilya's voice. Can hear that this word is not a word but a wound. He doesn't need the specifics to understand that much.

He walks to the couch and sits down.

Not close. Not touching. But on the same piece of furniture, which he has rarely done voluntarily before, and Ilya looks at him with genuine surprise.

"You're not lazy," Shane says.

Ilya stares at him. "What?"

"I've seen you skate. You're not lazy."

It isn't much. It's just a factual observation based on available evidence, the kind of statement Shane makes about everything. Precise, limited, supported by data. Entirely inadequate. He doesn't know how to say the comforting thing, the warm thing, the thing a different kind of person would say. He can only say what's true, and what's true is that Ilya Rozanov is many things Shane finds difficult and disruptive and incomprehensible, but he is not lazy.

Ilya is still staring at him, and something complicated is moving across his face, and then he says, "You think I'm boring, though, yes?" and the joke is terrible, and his voice cracks slightly on the word, and Shane says, "I have never once called you boring. You call me boring."

Ilya laughs. Not any of the catalogued laughs. The rare one. Surprised, unperformed, short and rough and slightly wet, and it fills the dark living room in a way the television and the women and the constant noise never have. Shane sits on the couch and listens to it and feels something in his chest that he cannot name and does not examine, because examining it would mean looking at it, and he is not ready to look at it.

It stays where it is. Loose and warm and terrifying.

They sit for a long time. Ilya pours himself another measure of vodka, but drinks it slowly this time, which is different from how he was drinking before Shane sat down. The bottle level tells Shane it was not slowly before.

"Your family," Shane says, after a while. "Are they always like that?"

Ilya looks at him sideways. "Like what?"

Shane doesn't know how to say what he means. He means: is there always a phone call that puts you in the dark with a bottle. He means: does your father always call you lazy. He means: is this why you fill the apartment with noise and people and women, because the alternative is this. He doesn't know how to say any of it, so he says, "Difficult."

Ilya looks at him for a long moment, weighing something.

"Yes," he says. "Always like that."

Shane nods. He doesn't say I'm sorry. He doesn't know why he doesn't. It would probably be the normal thing to say, but something tells him that sorry is the wrong word here, that it would close whatever just opened between them, so he just nods and sits in the dark and lets the silence hold it.

They sit. The silence is different now. Not the heavy-loaded silence of two people avoiding each other, but something simpler. Two people in the same room who have decided, without saying so, that the room is enough.

Shane almost asks. The question is right there. *Do you like Rose, is that why you watch, is that what this is?* and it would explain everything, would give the cold small thing in his chest a name and a reason and a place to rest. But the question feels wrong here, in the dark, with the vodka and the phone call and the word lazy still hanging in the air. It would be unkind to ask it now. Shane may not know how to say warm things, but he knows when not to say cold ones.

Eventually, Ilya says, "You know I watch you skate."

Shane's pulse does the thing, the same thing it did in the alley those months back.

"Rose told me," Shane says, and his voice sounds normal, which is a miracle. He almost adds 'and Rose, you watch Rose too', but doesn't, because the dark and the vodka and the word lazy are still in the air, and this isn't the moment.

"Are you angry?"

Shane thinks about this. Runs the question through his head, looking for the accurate answer rather than the expected one. "No." He's surprised to find it's true.

"Good," Ilya says. "Because I am not going to stop."

He says it simply. No smile, no charm. A statement of fact delivered in a voice still thick with vodka and whatever came before it. Shane looks at him in the dark.

"Okay," Shane says, and he's startled to know that he means it.

The word is small and plain. But something shifts in the air between them when he says it, something Shane can feel on his skin the way he felt Linda's attention on his first day and the smoke in the alley on his first morning. A change in pressure.

He doesn't name it. He goes to bed, lies in the dark, and listens to Ilya moving through the apartment. Hears him putting away the vodka, rinsing the glass, locking the front door, and going to his room. The same sounds as always, except that now Shane knows something about the person making them, and the knowing changes everything. Makes the sounds heavier. More real.

He thinks about the couch and the dark and the way Ilya's voice sounded without the performance in it, stripped down to something raw. He thinks about the word *lazy* and the way it landed. He thinks about the irrational theory he'd built about Rose, and he thinks about the way Ilya said *you know I watch you skate*, and the *you* was specific, was aimed, was not about Rose at all, and Shane lies in the dark and doesn't know what to do with this.

In the morning, he gets up at five-fifteen, showers, makes his coffee, and eats his cereal. The apartment is still dark, and Ilya's door is closed.

Before he leaves, Shane puts a glass of water and two ibuprofen on the kitchen counter where Ilya will find them. He doesn't leave a note. The water and the ibuprofen speak for themselves, the same way the cleaning spray spoke for itself, except that this is saying something different. The cleaning spray said 'I cleaned up after you.' The water says 'I'll take care of you (if you let me).' Shane hopes Ilya won't understand it.

He stands in the kitchen for a moment looking at the glass of water on the counter, and then he straightens it so it's centred on the placemat, and then he leaves and closes the door behind him and walks to the rink in the November cold.

The air is sharp, and the sky is still dark. It's cold, so his breath comes out in clouds, and his hands are cold because he forgot his gloves, which he never does. Shane never forgets things.

Ilya is not in the stands that morning. He skates the practice, and it's fine, and Linda says nothing, and Rose says nothing, and the empty seat says nothing.

Shane keeps looking at it anyway.

When he gets home at noon, Ilya is in the kitchen making eggs, moving slowly, squinting against the light. The glass of water is empty, the ibuprofen is gone, and the glass has been washed and placed in the drying rack.

Ilya looks at him. His eyes are puffy, and his curls are crushed flat on one side, and he looks terrible and young and human in a way that the performance usually hides.

"Thank you," he says. "For the water."

"You look like you were hit by a car."

Ilya blinks. Then the crooked smile, slow and slightly pained. "This is how you say 'you're welcome' in Canada?"

"I didn't say you're welcome. I said you look like you were hit by a car. Those are different sentences."

They stand in the kitchen. Ilya cracks an egg into the pan. Shane should go to his room. He always goes to his room.

"Do you want eggs?" Ilya asks, not looking up from the stove.

Shane should say no. He already ate. He has his routine, and eggs are not in it, and the kitchen is small, and Ilya is right there, close enough that Shane can smell the sleep on him, warm and stale and human.

"Okay," Shane says.

Ilya doesn't make a big deal of it. Doesn't smile the crooked smile or make a joke. He just cracks two more eggs into the pan, and they stand in the kitchen together in the grey November light, not talking, and the eggs sizzle while the kettle boils and the apartment smells like breakfast at noon, and something between them has changed. Shane can feel it. He doesn't know what to call it.

Chapter 8: the problem

Chapter Summary

Ilya's teammates think he has a crush on a figure skater. They're not completely wrong.

Marleau is the one who catches him.

It's a Thursday morning in early December, and Ilya is in his usual seat in the upper stands with his usual bad coffee, watching Shane run through a step sequence that makes the ice look like it's breathing, when Marleau drops into the seat next to him and says, "Dude."

Ilya doesn't jump. He has very good reflexes. But his hand tightens on the coffee cup.

"What are you doing here?" Ilya asks.

"What are you doing here? I came to grab tape from the equipment room, saw you sneaking up the stairs like a fucking creep." Marleau looks at the ice, where Shane is mid-sequence, and then at Rose, who is warming up along the far boards, and then back at Ilya. Marleau grins. "Oh, I see."

"You see nothing."

"I see you sitting here watching the figure skaters at eight in the morning when you don't have to be here until nine." Marleau leans back, stretching his legs out. "Which one is it? The redhead?"

Rose is doing a slow spiral along the boards, her hair pulled back, one leg extended behind her. She looks beautiful. She always looks beautiful on the ice.

"Shut up," Ilya says.

"It's the redhead. Holy shit, Roz." Marleau punches his shoulder. "She's hot. She's your roommate's partner, right? You should ask her out."

"I'm not asking anyone out."

"Why not? You ask everyone out."

This is true enough that Ilya doesn't argue it. Down on the ice, Shane finishes the sequence and glides to the boards where Linda is waiting, and the morning light through the high windows catches his hair, and the line of his shoulders, and Ilya takes a sip of his terrible coffee and says nothing.

"How long have you been doing this?" Marleau asks.

"Doing what?"

"Sitting up here being a stalker."

"I'm not a stalker. I like the coffee."

Marleu looks at the vending machine in the corner with an expression of deep scepticism. "That coffee tastes like someone boiled a shoe."

"I have Russian taste. We like suffering."

Marleu laughs and claps him on the back and stands up. "I'm telling the guys."

"You're telling them nothing."

"I'm telling them everything. Rozanov's in love with the figure skater." He's already walking toward the stairs, grinning over his shoulder. "Ask her out, man. What's the worst that happens?"

Ilya watches him go. Down on the ice, Rose and Shane have started skating together, and Shane lifts her, and her body arcs through the air. Shane's arms are steady, and his face is focused, and the trust between them is visible even from up here, and Ilya sits in the stands and drinks his terrible coffee and lets Marleu think what Marleu thinks.

It's easier this way. It has always been easier this way.

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By the end of the week, the whole team knows. Or thinks they know, which amounts to the same thing.

"Roz has a thing for one of the figure skaters," Carmichael announces at practice on Friday, and the chirping starts immediately and does not stop. They want to know her name (Rose), whether she's single (Ilya says he doesn't know, which is a lie, he knows she is), whether she's seen Ilya play (he doesn't know this either, and this one is true), and whether Ilya has made a move.

"I have not made a move," Ilya says, which is the most honest thing he's said about any of this.

"Why the fuck not?" yells Dubek, one of the older defensemen, who has taken it upon himself to mentor Ilya in the ways of American dating, which Ilya does not need or want. "You're a first overall pick. You're not ugly. Just go talk to her."

"Maybe I like watching from a distance."

"That's creepy, Roz."

"Is romantic."

"In Russia, maybe."

Ilya rubs his nose with his thumb and forefinger — quick, absent, the gesture he makes when something is pressing on him from the inside — and grins and lets them run with it, lets the story build. Rozanov has a crush on the figure skater; he watches her practice every morning; he is too chickenshit to make a move; and the story is wrong, but the wrongness protects him, wraps around the real thing like padding around something fragile. He has been doing this since he was fifteen, building a false wall in front of the real one so that anyone who comes looking finds plaster instead of brick.

He thinks about Sasha. Briefly, for the first time in a long time. The hallway in Viktor's apartment. The secrecy. He pushes the thought away. This is different. This is not the same thing at all.

After practice, LeClaire calls him into his office to go over video from the last game, and on his way out, Ilya passes through the lobby, and Rose is there, sitting on a bench, retying her skates, and she looks up and smiles at him.

"Hey, Ilya."

"Hey, Rose."

"Good practice?"

"LeClaire yelled at me for fifteen minutes about my defensive positioning. So, yes, very good."

Rose laughs. She has an easy laugh, open and generous, the kind of laugh that makes you want to say more things that earn it, and Ilya likes her. He genuinely does. He likes her in a way that has nothing underneath it, no charge, no want, just the uncomplicated warmth of a person who is kind and talented and treats him like a normal human being instead of a first overall pick or a loud Russian who brings too many women home.

"Shane says you're having a good season," Rose says, and Ilya's brain snags on the first two words.

"Shane says?"

"He watches the highlights sometimes. On the sports channel. He won't admit it, but I've caught him checking the scores." Rose grins. "Don't tell him I told you."

Something warm moves through Ilya's chest. He keeps his face easy. "Your secret is safe."

"Also," Rose says, "I've noticed you watching our practices..." and something happens to Ilya's face, a flicker, fast, the grin slipping for half a second before he catches it, and Rose must see it because she keeps talking without a breath, "which is sweet. You should come say hi sometime instead of lurking in the stands like a weirdo."

Ilya grins. "I like the stands. Good view."

"Of the skating?"

"Of everything."

Rose laughs and swings her skate bag over her shoulder. "Well, if you ever want to learn a crossover, I'm available for lessons. Cheaper than your hockey coaches and better looking."

"I will keep this in mind," Ilya says, and Rose grins and walks away, and Ilya stands in the lobby and watches her go and thinks about the fact that she said Shane watches his highlights, and the warmth in his chest from that piece of information is still there, quiet and specific.

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One night in mid-December, they're standing at the counter eating — Ilya's leftover pizza, Shane's chicken and rice — and Ilya is telling him about a girl from the night before, the way he tells Shane about all of them, casually, with just enough detail to be entertaining and not enough to be crude.

This one laughed too loudly in the cab. That one left an earring on his nightstand that he found a week later. The one from Back Bay who called him "exotic," which Ilya found hilarious, and Shane found appalling.

"You ever have girlfriend?" Ilya asks, mid-bite, like the question is nothing.

"Once. In Ottawa. Before I moved here."

"What happened?"

"I broke up with her before the move. It didn't make sense to do long distance."

Ilya looks at him. "You loved her?"

Shane thinks about Jessica in the car. The tears sliding down her face. His hands in his lap. The not-reaching.

"She was nice," Shane says. "It just didn't — I don't know. It wasn't enough."

"What wasn't enough?"

Shane doesn't have an answer for this, or he has one, and it lives somewhere he won't look, and he says, "It just didn't work," and Ilya nods and doesn't push, and they go back to eating.

Later, on the balcony, cigarette in hand, Ilya runs through it. Shane had a girlfriend. Shane is straight. Whatever Ilya feels sometimes — the pulse thing, the flutter when Shane almost laughs, the way his chest tightens when their elbows touch at the counter — that's his problem. Not Shane's. Ilya needs to move on.

He flicks the cigarette off the balcony and goes inside.

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The friendship happens without either of them deciding it should.

It happens on Saturday mornings in the kitchen at seven when Ilya makes eggs, and Shane says okay, and they eat standing at the counter because neither of them has suggested sitting at the table, and the counter has become their place without either of them naming it. It happens on the couch on Sunday afternoons when Shane reads, and Ilya watches hockey, and neither of them speaks for two hours, and the silence is comfortable now, a thing they share rather than a thing they endure.

It happens in small negotiations. Shane buys coasters and puts them on the coffee table without saying anything, and Ilya uses them without being asked. Ilya starts smoking exclusively on the balcony with the door closed, and Shane stops leaving the cleaning spray out. Shane starts buying the kind of cereal Ilya likes alongside his own, and doesn't mention it, and Ilya doesn't mention it either, and the two boxes sit next to each other on the counter. The fridge organises itself along the same lines — Shane's ginger ale on one shelf, Ilya's Coca-Cola on the other, and they never touch each other's, but they always make sure the other one doesn't run out.

It happens in the arguments, which are small and domestic and nothing like the fights Ilya grew up around. Shane thinks the dishwasher should be loaded in a specific configuration. Ilya thinks the dishwasher should just be... loaded, which is already a generous concession. Shane leaves a diagram on the counter — an actual diagram, hand-drawn, with arrows — and Ilya follows it for a

week and then deliberately puts a bowl in the wrong slot to see what happens, and what happens is Shane standing in the kitchen saying "this is going to affect the water flow" in a voice so serious that Ilya has to leave the room so Shane won't see him laughing.

It happens on road trips. Ilya is away for days at a time — Pittsburgh, Detroit, Toronto, the bus rides and the hotel rooms and the game-day routines — and when he comes home the apartment is exactly as he left it except cleaner, because Shane's response to Ilya's absence is to clean things that don't need cleaning, which Ilya finds devastating for reasons he can't explain. He comes home from a five-day road trip in December and the grout between the bathroom tiles is whiter than it's ever been, and he stands in the bathroom looking at the grout and thinking about Shane on his knees with a toothbrush scrubbing tile lines at eleven at night because Ilya wasn't there to fill the silence, and the tenderness of this image nearly kills him.

It happens in the things Ilya learns. Shane has a way of laughing that is almost inaudible. Not the fuck off or the you're an asshole but a sound that is barely more than an exhale through his nose, accompanied by the very slightest movement at the corner of his mouth, and it took Ilya three weeks to realise this was laughing and now he looks for it constantly, aims for it, adjusts his material based on what gets the exhale and what doesn't. Observational humour works. Self-deprecation works. Anything that requires Shane to follow a logical chain to the punchline works best, because Shane's brain is built for logical chains and the moment of arrival, the click of understanding, is when the almost-laugh happens.

Ilya is, he realises, performing for an audience of one. He's been doing it for weeks. This realisation arrives on a Wednesday evening while he's telling Shane about LeClaire's meltdown over a botched line change, and Shane does the exhale-laugh. His head tilts back slightly, and the kitchen light catches the freckles across his nose, and Ilya feels it in his chest like a small warm explosion, and he thinks, oh.

Oh, this is a problem.

He calls Svetlana that night from the balcony, cigarette in one hand, phone in the other, the December cold sharp enough that his breath and the smoke are indistinguishable.

"I have a problem," he says.

"You always have a problem."

"A real one."

Svetlana is quiet for a moment. She knows the difference between Ilya's problems and Ilya's real problems, because she has been sorting them since they were ten. "Tell me."

"I—" He stops. Takes a drag. The city is lit up below him, cold and bright and nothing like Moscow. "I think I like someone."

"A girl?"

"No."

This lands differently. Svetlana knows about Sasha, knows Ilya sleeps with men sometimes, has known since they were fifteen. But Ilya has never said 'I like someone' about a man before. The

women are frequent and disposable, and he talks about them like the weather. The men are occasional and secret, and he doesn't talk about them at all. This is new.

"Who?" she asks.

"You can't laugh."

"I'm not going to laugh."

"My roommate."

Svetlana is quiet. Then: "The figure skater? The angry robot?"

"Don't call him that."

"You called him that."

"That was before I—" He stops. Takes another drag. "Before."

"Before what?"

Before the couch in the dark. Before the eggs in the morning. Before the almost-laugh that Ilya hunts for like it's the only thing worth scoring. Before the way Shane said you're not lazy and it mattered more than anything anyone has said to Ilya in years, because Shane doesn't say things he doesn't mean.

"Before," Ilya says. "Just before."

"Does he know?"

"No. He's—" Ilya laughs, and it is not a good laugh. "Sveta, he's the most oblivious person alive. He had a girlfriend in Ottawa. His teammates think I like his skating partner. He thinks I like his skating partner. Everyone has a theory, and none of them are right."

"Maybe you should tell him."

"Tell him what? 'Hello Shane, I know you are straight, and I know you flinch when people touch your arm, but I think about your face when I'm trying to fall asleep.' That will go well."

"You think about his face?"

"Shut up."

"You think about his face when you're trying to fall asleep."

"I'm hanging up."

"Ilyusha—"

"I know, Sveta."

"Just... be careful. Okay? Be careful with this."

"I'm always careful."

"You are never careful. That's the whole problem."

They talk for another twenty minutes about other things. Her exams, his season, whether Grigori has called (he has, Ilya didn't answer), and when they hang up Ilya sits on the balcony in the cold until his cigarette is done and his fingers are numb and then he goes inside.

Shane is in the kitchen making tea. He looks up when Ilya comes in from the balcony.

"You'll freeze out there," Shane says.

"I'm Russian. We don't freeze."

"That's not how biology works."

"Is how Russian biology works. Different system."

Shane does the exhale-laugh, the one Ilya has been chasing for weeks, and Ilya stands in the kitchen doorway with his numb fingers and his cold face and the smell of smoke on his jacket and thinks, I am so fucked.

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Christmas is strange.

Ilya doesn't celebrate Christmas on December twenty-fifth. Russian Christmas is January seventh, and even that was never much in the Rozanov household. Grigori considered holidays an interruption, and Irina was the one who made them matter, and after Irina died the holidays stopped being anything at all. But Shane celebrates on the twenty-fifth, or Shane's version of celebrating, which is calling Yuna and eating slightly better food and sitting on the couch in socks and pyjamas.

Shane calls Yuna on Christmas morning and talks for forty minutes in the living room while Ilya makes coffee and pretends not to listen. He can hear Yuna's voice through the phone. It's warm and steady and a little too loud, the way mothers' voices get when their children are far away, and Shane's voice is different when he talks to her. It's softer, younger, less defended. He says, "I'm fine, Mom. Yes, I ate. Yes, the apartment is fine. My roommate is—" and he pauses and looks at Ilya, who is standing at the counter in a t-shirt and sweatpants, and says, "He's fine."

Ilya mouths the word boring at him across the kitchen. Shane's mouth does the thing.

"He's fine," Shane repeats, and goes back to his conversation.

Shane finishes the call and sits on the couch with his tea and Ilya brings his coffee and sits at the other end, and the apartment is quiet in the particular way apartments are quiet on holidays. The building is emptier than usual, the traffic outside thinner, the world holding its breath. Shane has a competition in January and didn't fly home to Ottawa, and Ilya has a game on the twenty-seventh so there was no way he could've flown home to Moscow (not that he wanted to), and so they're here, the two of them, in this apartment that has become their apartment, on a holiday that belongs to neither of them in the way it should.

Ilya calls Svetlana because calling her is easy. They talk for twenty minutes, and she tells him about the snowstorm in Moscow and her mother's cooking and the neighbour's dog that ate an entire roast

off the counter, and Ilya laughs, and it feels real and uncomplicated, and when he hangs up, the apartment feels warmer.

He calls Grigori because not calling would be noticed. The conversation lasts three minutes and contains the words lazy, ungrateful, and selfish, in that order, delivered in Grigori's flat, certain tone. Ilya says "yes, Papa" and "I know, Papa" and hangs up and stands in his bedroom with the phone in his hand and rubs his nose with his thumb, pressing hard, and the familiar cold weight settles in his chest. It's Christmas Day. It's Christmas Day, not his Christmas, not for another two weeks, but still, and his father has called him three things and none of them were his name.

When he comes back to the living room, Shane is still sitting on the couch with his mug of tea, and he looks at Ilya, and something moves in his expression. It's not pity, Shane doesn't do pity, but there's recognition in his eyes, the same look he had on the couch in the dark, the one that said 'I don't know your specifics, but I know the shape of what you're carrying.'

"Bad call?" Shane asks.

"Is always bad call."

Shane nods. Doesn't push. Moves his legs slightly to make room on the couch, and the gesture is so small and so deliberate and so precisely the right amount of invitation, not warm enough to be overwhelming, just the creation of a space and the silent permission to fill it, that Ilya's chest aches.

He sits down. They watch a Christmas movie that neither of them has chosen, something already playing on whatever channel the television was tuned to, and the movie is terrible and the apartment is warm and outside the December light is grey and flat. Shane asks questions about the plot that suggest he has never seen a romantic comedy before, and Ilya explains the conventions — the misunderstanding, the airport chase, the speech in the rain — with the authority of someone who has watched hundreds of bad movies in hotel rooms on road trips.

"That's not how airports work," Shane says. "You can't run through security."

"Is a movie, Shane."

"It's an inaccurate movie."

"All movies are inaccurate. That's why they're movies and not documentaries."

"Documentaries can also be inaccurate."

"You are impossible to watch things with."

Shane almost smiles. The exhale-laugh, barely there, and Ilya catches it and holds it, and the movie plays on, and neither of them moves from the couch.

Later, in the evening, Ilya makes borscht. He hasn't planned this, not really, although he did buy all the ingredients at the store the other day in a just-in-case scenario. He hasn't made borscht since Moscow, shortly after his mother's death, when he had tried to bring himself, Alexei, and Grigori together by making the food Irina had taught him. Grigori had eaten it without comment. Alexei hadn't come home.

Shane appears in the kitchen doorway. He watches Ilya peel beets for a moment, silent, cataloguing.

"What are you making?"

"Borscht. My mother's recipe."

"Can I help?"

Ilya looks at him. Shane's face is serious, the way it's serious about everything — training, dishwasher configuration, the structural integrity of airport security in romantic comedies — and Ilya thinks about his mother in the kitchen and the way she hummed while she worked, and he says, "You can chop the cabbage. Thin. I'll show you."

He shows Shane how thin the cabbage should be, how to dice the onion, how to grate the beets so the colour bleeds into everything. Shane's knife work is precise and even, because of course it is, and within five minutes he's chopping faster than Ilya, and the cuts are more uniform, and Ilya says, "Of course you are good at this," and Shane says, "Repetitive fine motor tasks. It's basically skating."

"It's not basically skating."

"It's the same hand-eye coordination. Same precision. Same—"

"It's soup."

They stand at the counter together and the kitchen fills with the smell of beets and onion and dill, and both of their hands are stained red from the beets, and Ilya looks at Shane's hands working. They're precise, steady, the same hands that hold Rose in the air every morning, and the tenderness in his chest is so large and so specific that he has to look away.

The borscht simmers for an hour. They sit on the couch while it cooks, and the apartment smells like Irina's kitchen, which Ilya wasn't prepared for, the way smell can carry you backwards through years without warning.

They eat on the couch with the bowls in their laps. The borscht is good, not as good as Irina's, never as good as Irina's, but close, closer than Ilya has ever gotten, and Shane eats it with the quiet focus he applies to everything and says, "This is good," which from Shane is a rave review.

"My mother's was better," Ilya says.

"Tell me about her."

Ilya looks at the television, which is still playing Christmas movies to no one. "She was small. And she hummed when she cooked. Always. She could not carry a tune, but she hummed anyway, and my father would tell her to stop, and she would stop for thirty seconds and then start again, because that was my mother. She did what she wanted. She was only person in the house who did what she wanted."

Shane doesn't say anything. He eats another spoonful and waits.

"She died when I was twelve. One day she was there, and then she was gone, and the apartment stopped humming."

"I'm sorry," Shane says.

"She would have liked you," Ilya says, which is true, and which he hadn't planned to say, and which lands in the room like something fragile.

Shane looks at him. "Yeah?"

"She liked quiet people. She said quiet people are the ones paying attention."

They sit on the couch on Christmas Day, miles upon miles from the places they came from, with beet-stained hands and bowls in their laps and a terrible movie playing to an empty room, and it is enough.

For now, it's enough.

Chapter 9: both versions

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane watch the 2010 Olympics on their couch, and the Montreal Voyageurs play Boston.

They watch the Olympics on the couch.

Vancouver, February 2010. The pairs event is on a Thursday night, and Shane and Rose come back from evening practice and crowd into Shane and Ilya's apartment because their television is bigger and because Ilya, who was already on the couch when they arrived, said, "We have better TV, come," and waved them in like he was hosting a party.

Rose sits on the floor with her back against the couch because she says it's better for her hips. Shane sits at his end. Ilya sits at his end. The gap between them is the same gap it always is — close enough to share a bowl of chips, far enough that their knees don't touch.

On the screen, a Chinese pairs team is skating their long program, and Shane watches with the intensity he brings to everything, scoring the technical elements in his head before the judges do. He's usually within half a point. Rose is worse at the math but better at reading artistic impression, and they argue about component scores the way other people argue about football.

"You are fighting about points that don't exist yet," Ilya says from his end of the couch. "The skating is happening now. Watch the skating."

"The points are the skating," Shane says.

"No. The skating is the skating. The points are what other people think about the skating. Is different."

Shane opens his mouth to argue and then closes it, because Ilya is not entirely wrong, and the experience of Ilya being not entirely wrong about figure skating is novel enough that he needs a moment.

"He has a point," Rose says from the floor.

"He does not have a point."

"He has a small point."

"Thank you, Rose," Ilya says. "I have small point."

The Canadian pair comes on, and the apartment goes quiet. They're good — clean lifts, solid throws, an energy between them that reads even through the television — and Shane watches and thinks about 2014. Sochi. Four years away. The thought is enormous and distant and real in a way that makes his hands tingle.

"That could be us," Rose says quietly.

"It will be us," Shane says, and means it, and Rose turns and looks up at him, and her eyes are bright.

"You will be better," Ilya says. "Their throw is sloppy. You do it cleaner."

Shane stares at him. "You can tell that?"

"I watch you do it every morning, Shane. I know what it looks like when is clean." He takes a sip of his Coke and turns back to the screen. "Also his footwork is shit. You would be angry about his footwork."

"His crossovers are lazy," Shane says, because they are, and because talking about crossovers is safer than sitting with the thing Ilya just said — the casual certainty of it, the 'I know what it looks like when it's clean', spoken like it was nothing, like watching Shane skate every morning has given Ilya a vocabulary for a sport that isn't his.

They watch until midnight. Rose falls asleep on the floor with a couch cushion under her head. Shane keeps watching. Ilya keeps watching, not because he cares about ice dance but because Shane cares about ice dance, and Shane doesn't notice this. He notices the German team's twizzle sequence being out of sync by a quarter beat. He does not notice Ilya watching his face more than the screen.

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A few nights later, the men's hockey tournament starts. Ilya is at a five-day training camp the Bears organised for the players who didn't make Olympic rosters (which was most of the team), which entails skating drills and conditioning while the rest of the league watches from their couches. He texts Shane from the hotel.

Ilya

Russia plays Czech Republic tonight. Watch it for me. Tell me everything.

Shane watches it. He doesn't know why he watches it. He doesn't care about hockey, has built his identity partly around not caring about hockey, but Ilya asked, so he turns on the game and sits on the couch with his ginger ale and watches.

Russia wins 4-2. Shane texts Ilya a summary that is factual and thorough and contains zero emotional content.

Shane

Russia won. Two goals in the first period. Czech goalie was weak glove side. Third goal was power play, sloppy puck movement but it went in.

Ilya

You are worst sports commentator alive. No feeling. No drama. Just "it went in."

Shane

It did go in. That's what happened.

Ilya

Shane. There is a difference between what happened and how it felt.

Shane doesn't answer, just sits with it.

Russia plays Canada in the semifinals on a Friday, and this time Rose comes over because she actually wants to watch, and the three of them are on the couch cause Ilya came home from training camp that afternoon. Rose in the middle, Shane on his end, Ilya on his end. Shane is aware of Rose's shoulder against Ilya's shoulder and Ilya's arm along the back of the couch behind Rose's head, and the easy way they sit together, the physical comfort of it, and the cold small thing in his chest tightens.

Rose and Ilya talk during the game. They talk easily, naturally, in the way that people talk when proximity has made them comfortable, and Ilya explains the forechecking system and Rose asks questions that are actually intelligent and Ilya's face lights up when he talks about hockey the way Shane's face lights up when he talks about component scores, and Shane sits on his end of the couch and watches the game and says very little.

On screen, Russia's first line is cycling the puck in the offensive zone, and Ilya leans forward, elbows on his knees, and says, "This is wrong. Kovalenko is too deep. He needs to be higher, at the circle. If he's at the circle the passing lane is open and—" He waves at the screen. "See? Too late. They lost it."

"Would you have been on this team?" Rose asks.

"I should be on this team." There's no arrogance in it, or the arrogance is so total that it circles back around to fact. "I'm better than half these guys. Petrov on the second line? I'm faster than Petrov. Kovalenko? He can't pass. I can pass."

"Then why aren't you there?"

"Because I play in the NHL now. Because my team is here. Because—" He stops. Something crosses his face, quick and complicated. "Because Russia didn't ask."

The room gets quiet for a second. Rose puts her hand on Ilya's knee, a brief gesture of warmth, and Ilya covers it with his own hand for a moment and then lets go, and Shane watches this happen, and the cold thing in his chest shifts and settles, and he looks at the screen and says nothing.

Canada scores on a two-on-one, and Ilya swears in Russian, loud and sharp, and Rose laughs, and Ilya launches into a tirade about the Russian defensive system that is partly in English and partly in

Russian and entirely furious, and Shane sits on his end of the couch and watches Ilya's face and the anger in it and the love underneath the anger. The love for a country and a sport that are braided together in Ilya's chest in a way that Shane, who loves one sport and has a cautious relationship with his country, doesn't fully understand.

Russia loses 7-3. It's not close. By the third period, Ilya is silent, his jaw tight, his eyes on the screen, and Rose has gone quiet too. The apartment is still, and when the final buzzer sounds, Ilya stands up and goes to the balcony without a word, and the sliding door closes behind him, and Shane can see the orange point of a cigarette through the glass.

Rose looks at Shane. "Should someone..."

"Give him a minute."

They wait. Rose leaves after fifteen minutes, hugging Shane at the door, and Shane stands in the kitchen and pours himself a ginger ale. He listens to the silence and the faint sound of Ilya on the balcony, and after a while, the door slides open and Ilya comes back in smelling like smoke and cold air.

"7-3," Ilya says. "Seven to three. Against Canada."

"It was bad."

"It was humiliating. I would have been better. I know that sounds..." He waves his hand.
"Arrogant."

"It doesn't sound arrogant. It sounds true."

Ilya looks at him. The look holds for a second longer than it should, and something flickers in it, gratitude or surprise or something Shane doesn't have a name for, and Ilya says, "You are very strange person, Shane Hollander."

"So I've been told."

"I mean it as compliment."

"I know."

They stand in the kitchen. The game is over, the apartment is quiet, and Shane pours Ilya a Coke without being asked, and Ilya takes it. Their fingers don't touch on the glass, but they almost do.

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The Bears play the Montreal Voyageurs on a Saturday night in late February.

Shane goes, which is unusual. He doesn't go to hockey games. He has a complicated relationship with hockey that dates back to a locker room in Ottawa when he was young, and he has lived alongside it his entire time in Boston. Sharing a facility, sharing an apartment with a hockey player without ever seeing a game in person.

But Hayden and JJ play for the Voyageurs. Hayden was drafted in the third round last year, JJ in the second, and they're both on the roster, and Hayden has been texting about this game for two weeks.

Hayden

bro you HAVE to come me and jj are gonna destroy your roommate it's gonna be SICK

Rose comes because Rose comes to everything, and because she actually likes hockey and doesn't carry a locker room wound from childhood. They sit in the lower bowl, close enough to hear the blades and the sticks and the sharp calls between players.

The Voyageurs come out for warmups, and Shane spots Hayden immediately. They're basically the same height now, still loud, visor up, grinning at someone on the bench. JJ is behind him, taller, calmer, steadier. They skate past, and Hayden spots Shane and bangs his stick on the glass, and the grin gets wider, and something warm and old moves through Shane's chest. His first people. From the rink in Ottawa. From the bench where he sat and waited and was eventually found.

Then the Bears come out.

Shane has seen Ilya at the rink before, in fragments passing through the facility, a glimpse through the plexiglass. But he has never seen Ilya play.

Ilya comes through the tunnel, and he is a different person.

Not the couch Ilya. Not the pelmeni Ilya. Not the boy who says 'you are home' with a crooked smile and drinks Coca-Cola standing at the counter. This Ilya is fast and fluid and occupies the entire ice like he owns it, like the other players are guests at something he's hosting, and even in warmups, Shane can see it. The way he moves, the way he finds space before it opens, the way his body operates with a carelessness that is actually precision wearing a disguise.

"Oh," Rose says beside him. "He's good."

He's better than good. Shane watches the warmup, and something recalibrates in his understanding of the person he lives with. He has known, abstractly, that Ilya was drafted first overall, that Ilya is considered a generational talent, that hockey people talk about Ilya the way skating people talk about the athletes who come along once a decade. But knowing it as a fact and seeing it as a body on ice are different things.

The game starts, and it gets worse.

Ilya is mean. Shane has heard this word applied to hockey players before without fully understanding what it meant, and now he understands. Ilya chirps constantly. Shane can't hear the words from the stands, but he can see the effect, the way opposing players tighten up when Ilya skates near them, the way they make mistakes they wouldn't otherwise make. He scores on a breakaway in the first period that is so fast and so clean that the arena erupts. Shane's hands grip his knees, Rose screams next to him, and Shane's heart does something very fast and very inconvenient.

In the second period, Ilya checks a Voyageurs defenseman into the boards and comes away grinning. He scores again on the power play, a one-timer from the circle that beats the goaltender clean, and the arena is deafening. Shane watches intently, and he cannot reconcile the person on the

ice with the person who leaves his shoes kicked off by the door and mouths the word boring at Shane across the kitchen.

Hayden and Ilya collide behind the Voyageurs' net in the third period, and Hayden comes up swinging. Ilya laughs at him, actually laughs, and says something Shane can't hear, but that makes Hayden angrier, which ends with the referees separating them, and Hayden goes to the penalty box. Ilya skates to the bench, still smiling.

"Your roommate," Rose says, leaning over, "is kind of terrifying."

"Yes," Shane says.

The Bears win 4-2. Ilya has two goals and an assist. Hayden has a fighting major and twelve penalty minutes.

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They meet Hayden and JJ at a bar in Back Bay afterwards. Shane has a gift bag with him. It's a watch, nothing expensive, but good, because Hayden turned twenty in January, and Shane had ordered it online and carried it to the game because he wasn't sure when he'd see Hayden next. Hayden opens it at the table and goes quiet for a second, turning it over in his hands, and then he says, "Dude," in a voice that is trying very hard not to be emotional, and puts it on immediately.

"I asked your mom which one I should buy," Shane says sheepishly.

"My mom has great taste. Your mom also has great taste. Speaking of which, you need to be a good son; your mom helped me so much with the contract stuff. She's been incredible."

Yuna manages Hayden and JJ now. This happened six months ago. Hayden's previous agent had been disorganised and dismissive, and Shane had mentioned it to Yuna, and Yuna had called Hayden the next day and sorted out his contract situation in a week. JJ followed a month later. Shane hadn't asked her to take them on, but he hadn't been surprised when she did.

The waitress takes Rose's order and Hayden's order at normal speed and then turns to Shane and JJ and does the thing — the slight slowing down, the careful enunciation, the smile that's a little too wide, as if volume and patience are the same as politeness. "And for you guys?" Shane and JJ order. JJ catches Shane's eye across the table, and they share a look, brief and tired and familiar, the look of two people who have had this happen enough times that it doesn't need to be discussed.

Hayden drinks half his beer in one go, still buzzing from the game, still angry.

"Your roommate is a fucking asshole," Hayden says.

"I know," Shane says.

"He chirped me all night. Called me a—I don't even know what he called me, half of it was in Russian. JJ, what did he call me?"

JJ, who is sitting across the booth with the calm patience of someone who has been absorbing Hayden's energy for a decade, says, "I t'ink he said your skating looks like a baby deer on roller skates." JJ's voice has the accent it's always had, Québécois French underneath the English, the soft

th's and the rounded vowels he got from his parents, who came from Port-au-Prince to Brossard before he was born.

"In Russian?" Shane asks.

"In English, actually. His English is pretty good," JJ says, a small smile on his lips.

"His English is fucking great, that's the problem. If he was chirping me in Russian I could ignore it." Hayden takes another drink. "Is he like that at home? Tell me he's like that at home."

Shane thinks about Ilya on the couch watching the Olympics, Ilya making eggs in the morning, Ilya mouthing boring across the kitchen on Christmas Day. "He's different at home."

"Different how?"

"Quieter."

Hayden stares at him. "Ilya Rozanov is quiet."

"Comparatively."

"Compared to what? A jet engine?"

Rose laughs. JJ smiles. Shane takes a sip of his ginger ale and doesn't say the thing he's thinking, which is that there are versions of Ilya that Hayden will never see and that the version on the ice tonight, the mean one, the grinning one, is real, but it's not the whole thing. There's another version that sits in the dark and drinks vodka when his father calls him lazy. Another one who watches figure skating every morning with bad coffee and quiet attention. Another one that makes pelmeni from his dead mother's recipe and puts a plate in the fridge covered in cling film for a person who said maybe later when he meant no.

He doesn't say any of this. It feels private. It feels like it belongs in the apartment and not in a bar in Back Bay.

"Anyway," Hayden says, and the energy shifts, the anger about Ilya burning off the way it always does with Hayden, fast and hot and then gone. "I met a girl."

JJ raises an eyebrow. "Ah, bon. 'Ere we go."

"Shut up, it's real this time. Her name's Jackie. She works at this café near our practice facility in Montreal. She's..." Hayden pauses, and something happens on his face that Shane has never seen before, something soft and slightly bewildered, like he's surprised by his own feelings. "She's really great, man. Like, actually great. Not just hot. I mean, she's hot, but she's also... she laughs at my jokes."

"Everyone laughs at your jokes," JJ says. "You're very loud. C'est pas la même chose."

"She laughs at the ones that aren't funny. That's different." Hayden grins, and the grin is the same one Shane remembers from the rink in Ottawa, bright and completely unguarded. "I think I'm gonna ask her to be my girlfriend. Is that a thing? Do people still ask that?"

"I think people still ask that," Rose says softly.

"Cool. I'm gonna ask her. JJ, you've met her, tell Shane she's great."

"She's great," JJ confirms. "She's also way too good for you, mon gars."

"Obviously. That's the whole point."

They stay for two hours. Hayden talks about Jackie and hockey and the apartment he and JJ share in Montreal and the French he's trying and failing to learn. JJ talks about his parents and his sister and the book he's reading, which is about the history of bread, and Shane listens and feels the particular warmth of being with people who knew him before Boston, before the growth spurt, before the pairs transition, before any of it. People who knew him when he was a small boy on a bench without any friends.

Rose drives them home. Shane sits in the passenger seat and watches the city go by, streetlights and brownstones and the Charles River in the dark, and he thinks about the game. About Ilya on the ice, fast and mean and grinning, and the way Shane's heart had done the inconvenient thing during the breakaway goal, and the way he'd gripped his knees, and the fact that he has now seen both versions of him. The one on the ice, and the one in the apartment, and they are the same person and yet completely different people. The distance between them is the same distance that exists in Shane, between the boy on the ice who is open and free and the boy in the apartment who holds himself in doorways.

"You're quiet," Rose says.

"I'm always quiet."

"Quieter than your usual quiet. What are you thinking about?"

He's thinking about Ilya's breakaway goal and the sound the arena made and the way his own body responded to it, the heart and the hands and the thing in the unnamed place. He's thinking about Hayden saying your roommate is a fucking asshole and the fact that he wanted to defend Ilya and didn't, and the fact that not defending him felt like a betrayal of something he can't identify.

"Crossovers," Shane says. "The German team's crossovers were really lazy."

Rose looks at him sideways. "That was days ago."

"I'm a thorough thinker."

Rose smiles and doesn't push, and they drive the rest of the way in silence, and when Shane gets home, the apartment is dark. Ilya's shoes are by the door, the television is off and through the bedroom wall, Shane can hear Ilya talking on the phone in Russian, his voice low and warm, the private laugh. Shane stands in the kitchen, pours himself a glass of ginger ale, and drinks it slowly, leaning against the counter. He listens to the sound of Ilya's voice through the wall as it fills the apartment the way the television never does.

Chapter 10: a summer in moscow

Chapter Summary

Ilya's rookie season is over, and he goes to Moscow, where he has to deal with his family

Chapter Notes

An extra chapter cause I love ya'll so much!!!

The Bears lose in the first round of the playoffs to Philadelphia in six games, and Ilya's first season in the NHL ends on an April night with his back against the locker room wall and his jersey soaked through with sweat and the taste of failure sitting in his mouth like copper.

He played well. He knows he played well — fifty-six points in the regular season, which is outstanding for a rookie, and which the hockey press has been writing about for weeks. He's in the conversation for the Calder Memorial Trophy. Generational talent confirmed. But the series loss sits in his chest like a stone, because Ilya does not care about regular season numbers the way he cares about winning, and they did not win, and the locker room is quiet the way locker rooms are quiet after elimination. It's full of men who are already somewhere else in their heads, already thinking about summer, already gone.

LeClaire gives a speech that Ilya doesn't listen to. Marleau claps his shoulder. Dubek says, "Next year, kid." Ilya showers, changes, and drives home in the Ferrari that he splurged on last month. The Boston streets are dark and wet with spring rain, and the apartment is warm and lit, and Shane is on the couch reading, because Shane is always on the couch reading, and he looks up when Ilya comes in.

"I'm sorry," Shane says.

Ilya stops in the doorway. "You watched?"

"Rose and I went. We were in the upper section."

Something moves through Ilya's chest that has nothing to do with the series loss. Shane went. Shane went to his game, sat in the stands, watched him play, the way Ilya watches Shane skate every morning.

"You didn't tell me you were coming," Ilya says.

"I didn't want to make you nervous."

Ilya almost laughs. "I don't get nervous."

"Everyone gets nervous."

"Not me. I am Russian. We don't do that."

Shane does something with his mouth that is more than the exhale-laugh. It's an actual smile, small but real, visible, the kind that eight months ago Ilya had to hunt for and now arrives more easily, and the sight of it hits Ilya somewhere low and deep and final.

He's standing in the doorway of his own apartment, tired and sad about the loss, and he is looking at Shane's smile and the thought arrives fully formed, not creeping, not gradual, just there, like a light switched on in a room he didn't know he was standing in.

I'm in love with him.

Not I like him, not I want him, not the flutter and the pulse and the freckles and the almost-laugh. In love. The real thing. Eight months. It took eight months.

Ilya has slept with dozens of people and has had a friends with benefits situation with Svetlana for years and never once felt the floor drop out from under him like this, never once looked at another person and thought 'I would rearrange my entire life around your smile', and he is so unprepared for it that he just stands there, bag still on his shoulder, and doesn't move.

"There's food in the fridge," Shane says. "I made extra."

Shane made extra. Shane, who eats the same thing every day and makes exactly the right portion and never leaves a crumb on the counter, made extra food because Ilya was going to come home from a playoff loss and need something to eat.

"Thank you," Ilya says, and goes to the kitchen and heats up Shane's chicken and rice and eats it standing at the counter, and it is bland and perfectly cooked and exactly what he needs.

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Summer means leaving.

Shane goes first, late May, back to Ottawa for two weeks to see his parents and then to a training camp in Montreal, where he and Rose will work with a choreographer on their new programs for the season. He packs the way he does everything — precisely, his suitcase organised by category, his room left exactly as it always is, bed made, shoes lined up, skate bag on the hook.

"I'll be back in August," he says, standing at the front door with his bag. "You'll remember to—"

"Lock the door. Don't smoke inside. Wipe the counter."

"And the—"

"Recycling goes on Tuesday. I know, Shane."

Shane looks at him, and something flickers across his face. It's soft and quick, like a hand reaching out and pulling back, and he says, "Okay. Have a good summer. Try not to be a complete disaster without me."

"You say this like I need you. I survived nineteen years without your recycling schedule."

"You're an asshole," Shane says, but his mouth is doing the thing.

"You're boring," Ilya says, and Shane nods once, like this is a reasonable assessment, and leaves.

"You're boring now, too."

And he leaves. The door closes, and the apartment is quiet.

Ilya stands in the hallway and listens to the quiet. It's the same quiet as before Shane, the same silence he used to fill with television and women and noise, except that now it's different because it has a shape to it. The shape of something missing. He goes to the kitchen and opens the fridge, and Shane's ginger ale shelf is empty, and Ilya looks at it for longer than makes sense, then closes the fridge and sits on the couch. He turns on the television, and the apartment is the same apartment it was an hour ago, yet it is completely different.

He gives himself one day of this. One day of sitting in the quiet apartment, noticing the empty shelf and the too-neat room and the silence. Then he books a flight to Moscow.

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Moscow in June is green and bright and full of a light that lasts all evening, and Ilya hates it.

He doesn't hate Moscow. He hates what Moscow contains. The house in the gated area with its high ceilings and its heavy furniture, and Grigori sitting at the head of the table like a man who has never once been uncertain about anything in his life. Polina, who has her own life in this house that doesn't include Grigori. Her friends, her lunches, the money Grigori (Ilya) provides, and who has never been particularly interested in Grigori's moods or anyone else's. Alexei, who is there when Ilya arrives and gone within two days, taking money that Ilya gave him and disappearing into whatever life Alexei lives now, the one that involves bars and debts and women who call the house looking for him.

Grigori is the same. Except that he isn't, and Ilya is the only one who notices.

It's small. A word repeated twice in the same sentence, as if the first time didn't register. Car keys left in the refrigerator, which Polina finds and puts back on the hook without comment. A pause in the middle of a story about a colleague. It's not a dramatic pause, not a regular Grigori pause, which is always deliberate and weaponised, but a blank one, a gap where something should be and isn't. Grigori covers it smoothly, picks up the thread a sentence later, and no one at the table reacts. Polina is cutting her food. Alexei is nowhere to be found.

But Ilya sees it. He sees it because he has spent his entire life watching his father's face the way prey watches a predator. He's spent years tracking every micro-movement, learning the system, anticipating the strike. He knows Grigori's rhythms better than anyone alive, and the rhythms are off.

At dinner on the second night, Grigori calls him Alexei. He corrects himself immediately, without acknowledging the slip, and continues talking about the playoff loss. Polina doesn't look up. Ilya sits with the wrong name in his ears and feels something he doesn't expect. It's not satisfaction, not quite, and it's not the dark vindication of watching a powerful man begin to crumble. It feels more like dread. Because Grigori, with his mind intact, is a man Ilya knows how to survive. He has spent twenty years learning the system, building the walls, and predicting the strikes. Grigori without his

mind is something Ilya has no map for, and the unmapped thing is more frightening than the known one.

He tries once, carefully, with Polina. "Has Papa seemed different to you?"

Polina is washing dishes. It's something she rarely does, but her housekeeper called in sick today. "Different how?"

"The keys in the fridge. The way he repeats things."

"He's tired. He's just a little getting older." She rinses a plate and sets it in the rack. "He's fine, Ilya."

She says it the way she says everything, and that's without much interest. Polina married Grigori for reasons that have never included paying close attention to him, and she's not going to start now. Grigori's mind is Grigori's business.

Ilya rubs his nose, thumb and forefinger pressing the bridge, and doesn't push it.

He doesn't bring it up with Alexei because Alexei is never there, and because Alexei's relationship with Grigori has always been simpler than Ilya's. Alexei absorbs the blows, asks for money, and disappears, and the system works for him in its brutal way. Alexei doesn't need Grigori's mind to be intact. Alexei has always just needed Grigori's wallet, and now he needs Ilya's.

So Ilya carries it alone, this small new knowledge, and adds it to the things he doesn't talk about.

The words are the same. Lazy comes out on the second day, over dinner, inserted into a sentence about the playoff loss with the surgical precision that is Grigori's particular talent. "Six games. Your defensive play in game four was lazy. You gave them the power play that won the game."

"My defensive play was fine," Ilya says, which is a mistake, because contradicting Grigori doesn't change Grigori's mind. It just extends the conversation.

"Fine is not enough. Fine is what average players are. You are not average. Or you shouldn't be." Grigori cuts his steak with the same measured deliberation he brings to everything. "Your mother would have told you the same thing."

This is the knife. It's always the knife. Irina, invoked as a weapon, her memory bent into whatever shape Grigori needs. *Your mother would have told you. Your mother would have wanted you to come home. Your mother would be disappointed.* Ilya has no way to argue with a dead woman's hypothetical opinions, and Grigori knows this, and uses it the way he uses everything. With precision and without mercy.

"Your mother wanted you in Russia," Grigori says. "She wanted you close."

"My mother is dead," Ilya says, and the table goes quiet.

Polina looks at her plate. Grigori looks at Ilya, and his expression doesn't change. His expression never changes, that's the horror of it, the flat steady certainty that nothing Ilya says or does or becomes will alter the shape of his father's face. "You are disrespectful."

"I'm honest."

"You are disrespectful, and you are selfish, and your season was adequate, not exceptional. Come home. Play in the KHL. Be useful."

Ilya finishes his dinner. Goes to the bedroom, which he had from when he was fourteen until he managed to escape at eighteen. It still has his hockey posters on the walls and still smells faintly of the cigarettes he started smoking at fourteen. He lies on the bed, stares at the ceiling, and calls Svetlana.

"Come get me," he says.

"Where are you?"

"My father's house. I'm going to kill him."

"You're not going to kill him. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Svetlana arrives in a car she borrowed from a friend, and they drive to her parent's apartment in Patriarchy Ponds, and sit on the narrow balcony and smoke and drink tea. The Moscow sky is pale and endless at eleven p.m., and Ilya breathes for the first time since he landed.

"He used my mother again," Ilya says.

"He always uses your mother."

"He said my season was adequate."

Svetlana lights a cigarette. "Your season was incredible. Fifty-six points. Every hockey person in Russia knows your name."

"He knows my name, too. He just doesn't think it's worth what I think it's worth."

They sit while city hums below them. Svetlana smokes, and Ilya smokes, and the silence between them is the only silence other than Shane's that Ilya can stand, and he thinks about this, about what it means. About the fact that there are exactly two people in his life whose quiet doesn't make him reach for noise.

"How's the angry robot?" Svetlana asks.

"Don't call him that."

"How's Shane?"

"He's in Ottawa, with his family." Ilya taps ash off the balcony. "His mother is Japanese. Yuna. He talks to her on the phone, and his voice gets softer." He doesn't mention the freckles. He doesn't mention that he thinks about the freckles across Shane's nose at odd times — in the gym, on the ice, lying in his Moscow bed staring at the ceiling. He doesn't mention them because mentioning them would make this real.

"You're still hung up on him?"

"I'm not hung up. I told you, it's not going anywhere. He's straight. It's just—" He waves his hand. "A thing. It'll pass."

"Okay," Svetlana says, in a tone that is neutral enough to be either agreement or doubt.

"My agent says I should get my own place," Ilya says. "In Boston. I can afford it now. The contract is—I could get something nice. On the waterfront, maybe. Back Bay."

"So get something nice."

"I don't want to."

Svetlana smokes her cigarette and waits.

"The apartment is fine. It's close to the rink. The lease makes sense."

"The lease makes sense," Svetlana repeats.

"It does."

"And the roommate has nothing to do with it."

"The roommate is a factor in the lease. The rent is split. It's practical."

"Ilya."

"What?"

"You are about to become a millionaire, and yet you are choosing to live in a two-bedroom apartment with a figure skater because the lease makes sense."

"Yes."

"And you don't hear how that sounds."

"It sounds practical."

Svetlana finishes her cigarette, stubs it out and looks at him with the expression she's been using since they were ten, the one that says I love you and you are an idiot and I will wait.

"Okay," she says. "The lease makes sense."

They stay on the balcony until one in the morning, talking about everything and nothing. Her work at the university, his teammates, whether Alexei will ever get clean (they both know the answer, they both don't say it), when she'll come and visit, Moscow summers. Ilya tells her about the Olympics on the couch and the way Shane said it will be us with absolute certainty, and Svetlana smiles and says, "He sounds very sure."

"Shane is sure about everything except the things that matter," Ilya says, and the words come out quieter than he intended, aimed at the Moscow skyline rather than at her.

Svetlana turns her head. "What does that mean?"

Ilya takes a long drag and lets the smoke out slowly. "Nothing. Never mind."

They go inside when the cold finally wins. Svetlana's childhood room is large and hasn't changed since she was sixteen. There are books stacked on every surface, a poster of a French film Ilya has

never seen, a bed that is big enough for one person, and can fit two if need be. Ilya lies down, and Svetlana lies next to him, and they talk for a while in the dark about nothing, and then they stop talking. His hand moves to her waist, and her mouth is on his jaw, and it happens the way it always happens between them — easy, unhurried, familiar as a conversation they've had a hundred times. She knows his body, and he knows hers, and there is a comfort in that, in the lack of performance, in the fact that he doesn't have to be charming or loud or any of the things he is with the women in Boston. With Svetlana, he can just be the version of himself that is tired and sad and wants to be touched by someone who knows him.

Afterwards, they lie in the narrow bed, and Svetlana puts her head on his chest, and Ilya stares at the ceiling. Something is different this time. Not the sex, which was good, which is always good with Svetlana. Something afterwards. A restlessness he can't place, a feeling like he's left something somewhere and can't remember what or where. He pushes it away. Svetlana traces a pattern on his collarbone with her finger.

"Stay tonight," she says. "Don't go back there."

"I'm not going back tonight."

"I mean ever. Just live on my balcony. Smoke cigarettes and be sad. It'll be romantic."

Ilya smiles. "Your mother would love that."

"My mother already loves you more than she loves me. She'd probably charge you rent, though."

He stays. Sleeps in the narrow bed with Svetlana's hair in his face and her knee digging into his thigh, and it's uncomfortable and warm and the closest thing to peace he's felt since he left Boston. Since he left Shane.

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He spends six weeks in Moscow, and it is too long by five weeks. He trains at Sokolniki with the boys he grew up playing with, and they are glad to see him, and he is glad to see them. It means less than it should, and he knows this, and the knowing makes him feel guilty, like he is betraying something by having left, by having a life that is bigger than the one Moscow offered.

He visits Irina's grave on a Saturday morning, alone, and stands there with his hands in his pockets and doesn't say anything because he has never known what to say to graves. He smokes a cigarette and watches it burn down and thinks about the kitchen in Khamovniki on Sunday mornings when she was alive, the smell of pelmeni, the sound of her voice, the way she could make the apartment feel warm just by being in it, and the memory is faded now, worn soft at the edges like a photograph handled too many times. He is forgetting her. Not the facts of her but the feel of her, the specific texture of what it was like to be her son, and this is the thing he cannot tell anyone, the loss underneath the loss.

He flies back to Boston in mid-July, three weeks before he needs to, because the training camp doesn't start until August and there is no reason to be there early except that the apartment is there and the couch is there and the cereal boxes are there, or his is, Shane's side of the counter will be empty until Shane comes back.

Shane is not there. Of course, Shane is not there. Shane is in Montreal with Rose, working on new programs, being precise and disciplined and exactly himself somewhere else. The apartment is

clean and quiet, and Shane's room is closed. Ilya puts his bag down in the hallway and stands there.

He buys ginger ale at the store that afternoon. Puts it on Shane's shelf in the fridge.

He trains alone, runs along the Charles River in the July heat, lifts weights at the facility, and skates on the empty sheet. He eats takeout and watches television, and the apartment is quiet, and he lets it be quiet, doesn't fill it with women or noise, just exists in it alone and waits.

Shane comes back on a Sunday in early August. Ilya is on the couch when the front door opens, and Shane walks in with his bag and his skate bag and his precise, careful way of entering a room, checking it for changes, cataloguing.

"Hey," Ilya says.

"Hi." Shane puts his bags down. His eyes move around the apartment, the couch, the kitchen, the counter, the television. Landing on things. Checking that they're the same.

"Good summer?" Ilya asks.

"Productive. New programs are strong. Rose learned a new throw." Shane pauses. He's looking at the fridge. "Did you buy ginger ale?"

"Was on sale."

Shane looks at him. Something moves across his face, soft and quick, the reaching-and-pulling-back thing. "Thank you."

"Is nothing."

Shane takes his bags to his room and closes the door. Ilya hears him unpacking, the sounds of Shane putting his world back in order. The sounds of home.

Ilya sits on the couch and listens, and the quiet is different now. Not empty. Full. Full of the sounds of another person who came back, and Ilya lets the fullness settle into him and doesn't fight it and doesn't name it.

Outside, the August sun is setting over Boston. Inside, the apartment is warm, and the fridge has ginger ale on one shelf, and Coca-Cola on the other and everything is exactly where it should be.

Chapter 11: the green-eyed monster

Chapter Summary

Rose and Shane compete at their first Grand Prix, and jealousy rears its ugly head for the first time.

Chapter Notes

This one is a bit longer than usual, but there were a lot of things I needed to get into this chapter <3

Shane comes back to the apartment on a Sunday in early August.

His room is exactly as he left it. His bed is made, shoes lined up along the wall, except that there's a mug on his desk that wasn't there before. It's plain white, no design, and when he picks it up, there's a sticky note on the bottom in Ilya's handwriting that says YOUR OLD ONE HAD A CRACK IN IT. Shane checks the cabinet in the kitchen. His old mug is gone.

The new one is the same size, same shape, same weight. Ilya found a mug that was functionally identical and replaced it without asking, because asking would have meant acknowledging that he'd noticed Shane's mug had a crack in it, which would have meant acknowledging that he pays attention to Shane's things with a specificity that neither of them is willing to discuss.

Shane puts the new mug in the cabinet. He does not throw away the sticky note.

The apartment has a rhythm now that belongs to both of them. Ilya's alarm doesn't go off but Shane's does, and the five-fifteen sequence runs the same as always — shower, kettle, cereal, shoes, door — except that now, maybe twice a week, Ilya is already awake and in the kitchen, not because he has to be but because his body has started waking earlier, adjusting itself around Shane's schedule the way Shane's body has adjusted around the sound of Russian television at night.

They eat breakfast at the counter on those mornings. Ilya makes eggs while Shane makes coffee. They don't talk much. Ilya scrolls his phone. Shane reads the news. The silence is the good kind, just two people sharing a small space without needing to justify it. Sometimes Ilya says something about practice, or about a game, or about something he read on his phone that made him laugh, and Shane listens and occasionally responds. The exchange lasts maybe three minutes, and then they go back to the silence, and the silence is fine.

Shane has never had this with anyone except Rose. The ability to be in a room with someone and not perform. Ilya doesn't require anything from him. Shane can be quiet, and Ilya fills the space. Shane can be rigid, and Ilya bends around it. Shane can be difficult (and he knows he is difficult,

has always known), and Ilya treats the difficulty like something that is just part of the landscape and navigates it without complaint.

He doesn't know when Ilya became essential. It happened gradually. One day, the apartment was a place he lived, and then it was a place he came home to, and the difference was Ilya, and Shane cannot pinpoint when the shift occurred any more than he could pinpoint the exact moment he stopped hating the sound of Russian television and started finding it comforting.

On a Thursday morning in late September, Ilya is telling him about a dream he had where LeClaire made the entire team skate in figure skating costumes. "With the sparkles, Shane. Dubek in sparkles. It was beautiful and terrible."

"Dubek doesn't have the legs for sparkles."

Ilya's head snaps up from his phone. He stares at Shane. Shane takes a sip of coffee and doesn't look up.

"Did you just make a joke?" Ilya says.

"I made an observation about Dubek's legs. Observations aren't jokes."

"That was a joke. Shane Hollander made a joke at six in the morning."

"I stand by my assessment of Dubek's legs."

Ilya is grinning now, the full grin, and something in his eyes is bright and delighted in a way that makes Shane's chest do a complicated thing. "Say another one."

"I don't perform on command."

"You are performing right now. You are being funny on purpose. This is the best day of my life."

"Your standards are very low," Shane says, and goes back to his coffee, but he's smiling. An actual smile, small but unmistakable, and Ilya sees it and stares at it like it's something he's going to need to remember later.

"You're boring," Ilya says, still grinning.

"You're an asshole," Shane says, without looking up from his coffee, and the exchange is automatic now, worn smooth between them like a stone in a river.

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Linda is pushing them hard this season.

"Sochi is 2014," she says on a Monday morning in early October, standing at the boards with her clipboard and her coffee. "That's barely four years. It sounds like a long time. It's not. Every competition between now and then is a stepping stone or a stumbling block, and I don't train people who stumble."

She has entered them in Skate Canada in late October, their first Grand Prix assignment. It's in Kingston, Ontario, which is close enough to Ottawa that Shane's parents are driving down. Shane

hasn't competed at this level in pairs yet. Singles, yes — the junior circuit, the small competitions that faded when his body changed — but not this. Not with Rose.

Not at a level where the cameras find your face and the commentators say your name and someone, inevitably, mentions his background. Half-Japanese, half-Canadian, raised in Ottawa. The commentators always mention it, as if his heritage is a shortcut to understanding him — the precision, the discipline, the composure — rather than one thread in something more complicated. Shane has stopped correcting people about this. Correcting requires a conversation he doesn't want to have, about growing up between two cultures in a sport that doesn't quite know what to do with you, about being too Japanese for the Canadian federation's promotional material and too Canadian for the Japanese media's interest, about existing in the gap and making the gap your home.

The programs are new. The short program is set to Debussy, all clean lines and precision, built to showcase their technical elements — the side-by-side triple toe loops, the throw triple Lutz, the death spiral that Linda has been refining since July. Shane likes the short program. The short program makes sense to him. It's architecture: build the elements, connect them cleanly, leave nothing to interpretation.

The long program is something else. A contemporary piece Linda chose, darker and more emotional, and it asks Shane to do something he finds almost impossible, which is to perform vulnerability on ice. Technically, he can do it. Technically, he can do anything Linda asks him to do. But the emotional quality she wants — the softness, the openness, the willingness to let the audience see something real — goes against every instinct Shane has developed over nineteen years of keeping himself held together.

"You're skating it like a technical exercise," Linda tells him after a run-through in mid-October. "It's clean, it's accurate, I can't fault the elements. But you're not in it, Shane. You're above it, watching yourself do it. I need you inside it."

"I am inside it."

"You're not. You're correcting while you perform. I can see it! I can see the micro-adjustments, the checking. Your body is in the program, and your brain is in the stands with a clipboard."

This is accurate, and Shane hates that it's accurate.

"Watch Rose," Linda says. "Watch her face during the spiral sequence. She's not thinking about the position of her hip or the angle of her blade. She's feeling something, and the audience can see it. I need that from you."

He doesn't know how to be inside it. He knows how to be above it. Above it is safe. Above it is where the corrections happen, and the measurements are made, and the two-centimetre shoulder drop gets fixed. Inside it is where the feelings are, and the feelings are locked away, and Shane is not opening that door.

Rose helps. Rose always helps. She carries the emotional weight of their programs the way she carries the spirals, with her whole body, and Shane trusts her to do this the way she trusts his arms when he throws her, completely and without question. But Linda wants more than Rose carrying it for him. Linda wants Shane to carry his own.

"Think about something real," Rose tells him one afternoon after practice. They're at her apartment, Shane on the couch, Rose cross-legged on the floor with a bowl of pasta. "When you're in the long

program, in the slow section before the throw, think about something that actually makes you feel something."

"I feel things."

"I know you feel things. I mean, think about a specific thing. A memory, a person, a moment. Something that opens you up."

Shane thinks about this. He runs through the inventory. His mom in the car driving him to practice, the ice at the outdoor rink in Ottawa, the first time he landed a clean triple toe loop, the morning light through the facility windows, Yuna's miso soup on cold mornings before dawn, the way the kitchen in Ottawa smelled like dashi and coffee simultaneously because his parents' cultures lived side by side in the same house the way they lived side by side in his face and yet none of it opens him. They're good memories, precise memories, but they sit in his chest the way his performance sits in the program, clean and accurate and above.

Then he thinks about the couch. Christmas Day. The terrible movie and the warm apartment and Ilya beside him, not close, not touching, but there. The borscht with beet-stained hands. The way Ilya's presence filled the room, the way the Russian television fills the apartment at night, not with meaning but with something more fundamental — presence, warmth, the fact of another person choosing to be in the same space. He thinks about Ilya's mother, who hummed while she cooked, and the way Ilya's voice sounded when he talked about her, and the apartment that stopped humming.

Something shifts. He doesn't tell Rose this. He says, "I'll work on it."

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Skate Canada goes well. Not perfectly — Shane two-foots the landing on the triple twist in the short program and loses points he shouldn't have lost, and the throw triple Lutz is slightly under-rotated, and the Debussy program scores lower than it should because Linda is right, he's correcting while he performs and the judges can see it too — but the long program is different.

In the slow section before the throw, Shane thinks about the couch. He doesn't plan to. The music drops, and Rose glides toward him. Shane's body is in the lift, and suddenly his brain is in the apartment on Christmas Day: the grey light through the windows, the weight of Ilya beside him, the terrible movie on the TV, and how neither of them moved, and something in his face changes. He can feel it happen, and the audience doesn't know what they're seeing, but they can feel it, and the scores reflect it.

They place third, get the bronze. Their first Grand Prix medal. Linda stands at the boards with her clipboard, and her face does something Shane has never seen it do, it softens, just for a second, before the clipboard comes back up. "Acceptable," she says. And then, quieter: "The long program was better. Whatever you did in the slow section, do it again. Do it every time."

In the corridor afterwards, waiting for scores, a male skater from one of the other pairs teams passes Shane and says, casually, the way you'd comment on the weather, "Looking lean, Hollander. Whatever you're doing, it's working." He means it as a compliment. Shane knows he means it as a compliment. The skater claps him on the shoulder and walks on and doesn't think about it again.

(Shane thinks about it for three days).

Looking lean. The words sit in his chest, and they join something that's been living in him for a long time now, something that started before Linda, before Boston, before any of it.

Shane was fifteen when it started. A coach at a training camp in Toronto weighed all the skaters in front of each other and read the numbers out loud, and Shane's number was fine; it was normal. But the reading-out-loud planted something in him that grew roots. And then Linda, in their first month of training, looked at his body the way she looks at everything — clinically, precisely, without sentiment — and said, "You'll need to watch your weight as you grow. Pairs skating is about lines. The audience sees the line before they see the element. If the line is wrong, nothing else matters." She wasn't being cruel. She was being Linda. She was telling him a fact about his sport, and Shane absorbed it the way he absorbed everything Linda said, and the thing the camp coach planted and Linda watered became a system.

The measuring started gradually after that. The kitchen scale. The levelled cup of rice. The broccoli in exact portions. The breakfast that doesn't vary because variation introduces uncertainty and uncertainty is where the bad math lives, the math that says you ate too much or not enough or the wrong thing at the wrong time.

He eats well. He wants to be clear about this, even to himself. He eats enough. He is a professional athlete, and his body requires fuel, which he provides in the correct amounts at the correct times. He is not starving himself. He is not skipping meals. He is managing. The management is precise and total and takes up more of his brain than anyone knows, and the fact that no one knows is the point, because the management looks like discipline from the outside, looks like the same Shane-being-Shane precision that governs everything else in his life, and no one questions discipline in an athlete. No one looks at a figure skater who measures his rice and thinks something is wrong.

Linda doesn't know what she built up. She said a true thing about a sport that punishes bodies, and Shane took the true thing and built a system around it, and the system works, and the system is also a cage, and Shane lives inside it and doesn't tell anyone that he doesn't know how to get out.

Ilya offers him pelmeni sometimes. Shane runs the calculation — what he ate that morning, what he'll eat for dinner, the training load, the number — and says yes or no based on the calculations. Ilya doesn't push when Shane says no. Ilya says "okay" and puts the pelmeni on his own plate and doesn't make it a thing, and this is one of the reasons Shane can breathe in this apartment, because Ilya treats Shane's no the same way he treats Shane's silence, as something that just is.

Shane's parents are waiting in the corridor outside the arena when he and Rose come through with their bags. Linda is already talking to Yuna. They've met before, and Yuna likes Linda because Linda speaks her language, the language of results and standards, and not wasting time. They're discussing the technical deduction for the two-footed landing when David sees Shane and his face opens up, the way it always does, the emotion arriving immediately and without filtration, and he crosses the distance and wraps Shane in a hug that lifts him slightly off the ground.

"I'm so proud of you," David says, and his voice is thick, and Shane lets himself be hugged because this is what his dad does. He feels things immediately and completely and without the delay that Shane inherited from Yuna, and fighting it has never once worked.

Yuna waits. She watches David hug Shane with the expression she wears for most things — calm, assessing, the face of a woman who processes the world through competence rather than sentiment. When David lets go, Yuna steps forward and puts her hand on Shane's cheek, and says, "You did amazing, sweetheart."

They go to dinner at a restaurant in Kingston that Yuna found. Rose comes, because Rose always comes, and David spends the first twenty minutes asking Rose about her family and her training and whether she's happy in Boston, because David talks to everyone the way he talks to Shane. Warmly, openly, with a genuine interest that makes people tell him things they hadn't planned to say. Rose blooms under it. Yuna watches this, sipping her wine, and at one point catches Shane's eye across the table and gives him a look that says your father is adopting another one, and Shane almost smiles.

At dinner, Yuna asks Shane about the training schedule for the rest of the season and whether the throw Lutz under-rotation was a takeoff issue or a spotting issue. This is how they connect — through the work, through the details, through the shared understanding that loving something means taking it seriously.

"You looked different in the long program," David says. He's watching Shane across the table with the soft, open expression that Shane finds difficult to hold eye contact with, not because it's unpleasant, but because it sees too much. "You looked like you were feeling something."

"I was skating, Dad."

"You were feeling something. I saw it." He takes a sip of water. "Whatever it was, it was beautiful."

Shane looks at his father, and his father looks at him, really looks. It's too much, and Shane looks down at his plate and says, "Thank you."

David tears up in the car afterwards, quietly, the way he does, and Yuna drives with one hand and reaches over and squeezes David's knee once, briefly, a gesture so efficient and unremarkable that they probably don't even notice it, and Shane sits in the back seat and watches his parents in the front.

Rose hugs him at the hotel. "We're going to Sochi, Shane."

"We have three and a half years of work to do before that's true."

"We're going to Sochi."

He almost believes her.

They fly back to Boston, and Shane lets himself into the apartment at eleven at night. The lights are on, and the television is on. Ilya is on the couch with a beer, and he stands up when Shane walks in.

"Bronze," Ilya says. "I watched."

"You watched Skate Canada?"

"I watched your clips on YouTube. The long program." He's standing in the middle of the living room, and his expression is different from the ones Shane knows — not the crooked smile, not the performance, but something unguarded and almost solemn. "The slow part. Before the throw. You did something different."

Shane puts his bag down. "What do you mean?"

"Your face. It was—" Ilya waves his hand, searching. "Open. Like when you skate in the morning, and you don't know I'm watching. That face. You did it in the program."

Shane stands in the doorway and absorbs this. The fact that Ilya watched. The fact that Ilya noticed. The fact that Ilya can tell the difference between Shane's performing face and Shane's real face, can identify the exact moment in the program where something shifted, and the thing that shifted was Shane thinking about the couch on Christmas Day, thinking about Ilya being there.

"Thank you," Shane says, because he doesn't know what else to say.

"Was beautiful, Shane." Ilya says it quietly, without the grin, without the charm. "Really beautiful."

Something in Shane's chest cracks open. Just a fracture. "I'm tired," he says. "I'm going to bed."

"Okay." Ilya sits back down, picks up his beer, and turns back to the television. "Good night, Shane."

Shane goes to his room, closes the door, sits on his bed and puts his hands on his thighs. Through the wall, the Russian television murmurs. Through the wall, Ilya is ten feet away, living his life, filling the apartment with the warmth and the noise that Shane has come to need without understanding when the needing started.

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November brings something Shane is not prepared for.

He's at the facility on a Tuesday afternoon, later than usual — he and Rose had an extra session with Linda working on their throw, which is getting better but still not where Linda wants it. In the corridor outside the changing rooms, Shane passes a pairs skater from another team who trains at the facility. He's called Colton, and he's friendly enough and talks too much. Colton is eating a protein bar and says, through a mouthful, "Hey, Hollander. I've started weighing all my food, man. My coach has me on this whole plan." He looks Shane up and down, the casual full-body scan that skaters do to each other constantly, assessing lines the way Linda taught Shane to assess lines. "You probably should, too. You're looking — I mean, it wouldn't hurt, right? For the lifts."

Colton keeps walking. He's already moved on, already thinking about something else.

Shane stands in the corridor, and the math starts. The math that lives underneath everything, the quiet calculator that is always running, always adding and subtracting. Shane breathes. In for four, hold for four, out for four. He walks through the lobby toward the exit, already tight, always running the numbers, and that's when he sees them.

Ilya and Rose, sitting on the bench by the vending machines. Rose is laughing at something Ilya has said, her head tilted back, the full laugh, and Ilya is leaning toward her with the grin on his face, the charming one. His hand is on the back of the bench behind Rose's shoulders, not touching her but almost, and the body language is easy. Warm and intimate in a way that makes Shane stop walking.

He stands in the lobby and watches them, and something cold moves through his chest. The same cold thing from when Rose first told him about the stands, the thing he'd sealed away under *Ilya likes Rose*.

Rose says something, and Ilya throws his head back and laughs. The laugh is big and easy, the one he uses with his teammates, and Rose reaches over and pushes his shoulder the way people push the shoulders of people they're comfortable with. Ilya catches her hand for a second before letting it

go, a gesture that is playful and casual and could mean nothing but could mean everything, and Shane watches this from across the lobby, and the cold thing in his chest is not small anymore.

He thinks about the teammates chirping Ilya about the figure skater, about the redhead, about Rose. He thinks about Ilya in the stands every morning, the bad coffee, the attention. He thinks about Rose laughing right now, the open warm generous laugh, and Ilya leaning in, and how easy they look together, how right. Just two people who are comfortable in their bodies and comfortable with each other and comfortable in the world in a way that Shane has never been comfortable in anything.

He walks over. His body feels strange — tight, the way it feels before a competition, every muscle aware of itself.

"Hey," Rose says, looking up. "I thought you'd left."

"I was finishing up." His voice sounds normal. This is a miracle. "What are you two talking about?"

"Ilya was telling me about his coach's meltdown at practice." Rose grins. "Apparently, LeClaire threw a clipboard."

"He threw clipboard at the wall," Ilya confirms. "Not at a person. Important distinction."

Shane looks at Ilya's hand, which is back on the bench behind Rose's shoulders. He looks at the space between them, which is small. He looks at Rose's face, which is open and happy, the way it is with everyone, because Rose is open and happy with everyone, and he looks at Ilya's face, which is wearing the grin, the easy, charming grin, and something is building in Shane's chest that he cannot identify and does not want.

"I'm going home," he says.

"You're walking?" Rose asks. "It's freezing."

"Yeah, I'm gonna walk."

"I drive you," Ilya says. "Give me two minutes, Rose is telling me about your throw. The new one."

"It's fine. I'll walk."

"Shane, it takes too long in the cold—"

"I said I'll walk."

The words come out sharper than he intends. He can hear it — the edge in his voice, the tightness — and Ilya hears it, something shifting in his expression, curiosity or surprise. Rose hears it too. Her eyebrows move upwards, just slightly.

Shane turns and walks toward the doors. Behind him he hears Ilya say "sorry, I go" and Rose say "go, it's fine" and then the sound of Ilya's footsteps catching up, quick on the lobby floor.

They walk to the parking lot in silence. The November air is sharp. The lot is half-empty, the hockey team still inside, the rink lights spilling yellow across the asphalt. Ilya walks beside Shane and doesn't say anything, which is unusual, because Ilya always says something, always fills the

space with words or jokes or observations. The silence between them is different from the comfortable couch silence. This silence has a texture. This silence is waiting for something.

They get in the Porsche. Ilya drives. The streets are dark, and the headlights sweep across wet pavement, and Shane sits in the passenger seat with his bag on his lap and his jaw tight and doesn't speak.

"Shane," Ilya says, about halfway home.

"What?"

"Are you angry?"

"No."

"You seem angry."

"I'm not angry. I'm just sitting."

"You can sit and be angry. Both can be true. Is not hard."

Shane's jaw tightens further. He doesn't respond. Ilya glances at him — Shane can feel it, the weight of Ilya's attention, the reading-Shane look — and then turns back to the road and says nothing else.

In the apartment, Shane goes to his room and closes the door. He sits on his bed and doesn't understand why he's angry. He has no reason to be angry. Ilya and Rose were talking on a bench. People talk on benches. Rose is his skating partner, and Ilya is his roommate, and they're allowed to talk on benches, and the hand on the back of the bench means nothing.

The hand means nothing.

He sits on the bed and runs through the evidence. Ilya watches their practices — this could be about Rose. Ilya is charming with Rose — Ilya is charming with everyone. The teammates think Ilya likes Rose — the teammates think a lot of things. None of this is evidence. None of this warrants the cold thing in his chest, which is still there, still pressing, still refusing to be named.

Through the wall, Ilya turns on the television. The familiar murmur of Russian. The sounds of the apartment, the sounds of home. Shane sits on his bed and breathes and doesn't look at the thing in his chest.

Except that something has shifted. He can feel it. Something is rearranging itself inside him, quietly, without his permission. Something is coming that Shane is not ready for, cannot name, and will not look at.

He lies down, faces the wall and closes his eyes. Through the wall, the television murmurs. Through the wall, Ilya is there.

Shane listens. That's all he does. He listens.

Chapter 12: no girlfriend, no boyfriend

Chapter Summary

Svetlana visits Ilya, and she and Shane bond, but Shane also realises who she is to him.

Chapter Notes

This chapter came out long as well, I apologise <3

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

Svetlana arrives on a Friday afternoon in January with one suitcase, a fur hat that she wears unironically, and the particular energy of a person who has just spent nine hours on a plane and intends to make it everyone else's problem.

"Your city is freezing," she says, getting into Ilya's car at the airport. "And ugly."

"You're from Moscow."

"Moscow is freezing and beautiful. This is freezing and brown."

"Wait until you see the apartment."

"Is it also brown?"

"The couch is brown."

"Wonderful."

He's missed her. The missing hits him as they drive through the tunnel toward Back Bay, Svetlana with her boots on the dashboard and her coat still on and her face turned toward the window, watching the city the way she watches everything — with an attention that is also a judgment. He's missed the way she takes up space without apology, the way her voice fills a car, the way being near her makes the world feel less serious and more survivable.

Svetlana has always been the person who makes the room larger just by being in it, who makes the walls push back, who makes the ceiling lift. In Moscow, she does this effortlessly, and in Boston, in the Porsche with the heat blasting and the January light flat and grey through the windshield, she does it the same way, and Ilya breathes easier for the first time in weeks.

"How long are you staying?" he asks.

"A week. Maybe ten days. Depends on how boring your life is."

"My life is not boring."

"Everyone says that. Then I arrive, and it's boring." She looks at him sideways. "How's the roommate?"

"Fine. He's fine."

"Still straight?"

"Still straight."

"Still doing the thing where you pretend you don't care?"

"I don't pretend. I genuinely don't care. It passed, like I said."

Svetlana makes a sound that is not quite a laugh and not quite a word and turns back to the window. She doesn't believe him. She has never believed him about this, and the fact that she's right makes the not-believing worse. Ilya drives and watches the road and does not think about whether he's lying.

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The apartment is clean when they arrive, which isn't unusual. Ilya cleaned it this morning. He wiped down the counters, did the dishes, put his shoes by the door instead of kicking across the hallway, and he's aware that he did this because Svetlana is coming and also aware that the apartment is always clean because Shane keeps it clean, and the cleaning Ilya did this morning was mostly performative, tidying things that were already tidy.

Svetlana walks through the apartment the way a detective walks through a crime scene. She touches the back of the couch, runs her fingers along the kitchen counter, opens the cabinet and looks at the two mugs — Ilya's and Shane's, side by side, the same spot they always occupy. She opens the fridge and looks at the ginger ale on one shelf and the Coca-Cola on the other.

"Cute," she says.

"It's not cute. It's a fridge."

"You have separate shelves. Like a married couple."

"Like roommates who buy different drinks."

"Ilya. I have lived with three different roommates in Moscow. None of them had a system like this."

"Shane is an organised person. He organises everything. It's who he is."

Svetlana closes the fridge and gives him a look that says I am choosing not to argue about this right now, and moves to the hallway, looks at Shane's closed door and then at Ilya's open one and then back at Shane's.

"Which one is his?"

"The closed one. Obviously."

"Obviously," Svetlana repeats, and something in her voice has a quality Ilya doesn't like, an observational sharpness, so he picks up her suitcase and carries it to his room and says, "You're in here. I can sleep on the couch."

"Don't be stupid. We'll share."

"The bed is small."

"My bed in Moscow is smaller, and we manage fine." She drops her coat on his bed and looks around his room — the unmade sheets, the hockey gear in the corner, the pile of books on the nightstand that he's been meaning to read and hasn't. "Your room looks like a crime happened in it."

"I know. It has character."

"It has laundry on the floor. Where is your hamper?"

She opens the closet. She looks at the bathroom. She picks up the book on his nightstand — a thriller he bought at the airport in September and has read forty pages of — and puts it down again. She's cataloguing. Svetlana catalogues the way Shane catalogues, but louder, with more commentary, and Ilya lets her do it because stopping Svetlana from doing anything she wants to do has never once worked in all the years they've known each other.

"It's a good apartment," she says finally. "Small. But good."

"I know."

"You could afford bigger."

"I know."

"But you like this one."

"The lease makes sense."

She looks at him. He looks away.

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Shane comes home at six.

Ilya hears the front door and the familiar sequence — bag down, shoes placed by the door, jacket on the hook — and then the pause that means Shane has registered something different in the apartment, a new coat on the rack, a suitcase in the hallway, a pair of women's boots by the door. The pause lasts longer than usual. Three seconds, maybe four, Shane's brain processing the unfamiliar data, running it through his system.

Ilya comes out of his room. "Shane. This is Svetlana. Sveta, this is Shane."

Svetlana is standing in the kitchen holding a glass of water and wearing one of Ilya's t-shirts over her jeans because she spilt tea on her own shirt ten minutes ago, and her hair is down, and she is beautiful in the careless way that Svetlana is always beautiful. She looks at Shane, and Shane looks at her, and Ilya watches them look at each other, and something cold and complicated moves through his chest.

"Hi," Shane says. His voice is neutral. His body is doing the thing it does when new people enter his space — pulling in, tightening, the flinch that isn't a flinch but a recalibration, the system adjusting for an unknown variable. His eyes move from Svetlana's face to Ilya's t-shirt on her body and back to her face, and the movement is fast, clinical, and if Ilya weren't watching for it he would have missed it.

"Hello, Shane." Svetlana smiles. Not the full smile, the polite one, but warm enough. "Ilya talks about you."

"He does?"

"All the time. You are the boring roommate, yes?"

Shane blinks. Then the corner of his mouth moves. "He calls me that, yes."

"Are you boring?"

"Apparently. Although I think the data is inconclusive."

Svetlana laughs, a real one laugh, and turns to Ilya with her eyebrows raised. "He's funny."

"He is funny," Ilya says. "I keep telling him this. He does not believe me."

"I assure you I'm not funny," Shane says. "Ask any of my friends."

"Funny people always say they're not funny," Svetlana says. "It's the unfunny ones who think they're hilarious." She looks at Ilya when she says this. Ilya gives her a look that says shut up and she gives him a look that says make me.

Shane watches this exchange with an expression Ilya can't read. His eyes move between them, tracking the shorthand, the decades of familiarity compressed into glances. Then he picks up his bag and says, "I'll let you get settled. It's nice to meet you, Svetlana."

"Sveta is fine."

"Sveta." He nods and goes to his room and closes the door. The click of the latch is the loudest sound in the apartment.

Svetlana waits exactly three seconds after the door closes before she turns to Ilya with wide eyes.

"He's not what I expected," she whispers.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know. A robot. You said robot. He's not a robot." She leans against the counter. "He's—"

"Don't."

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"You were going to say something. I can see it in your face. Don't."

Svetlana holds up her hands. "I was going to say he has nice eyes. That's all. Am I allowed to say he has nice eyes?"

"No."

"He has nice eyes, Ilya."

"I'm aware."

"And he noticed the t-shirt." She looks down at Ilya's shirt on her body. "His eyes went right to it."

Ilya rubs his nose, thumb and forefinger pressing the bridge, and says nothing.

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The week unfolds in a way Ilya didn't anticipate.

He expected Svetlana to be a disruption — a loud, warm, Russian disruption that would make Shane retreat further into his room. This is not what happens. What happens is that Svetlana, who has never met a closed door she didn't want to open, finds a way in.

It starts on the second morning. Shane is in the kitchen at his usual time, making coffee, and Svetlana stumbles out of Ilya's room at six a.m. cause she's still jet-lagged and it's three p.m. Moscow time, and stands in the kitchen doorway blinking at the light.

"Is that coffee," she says. Not a question.

Shane pours her a cup without being asked, sets it on the counter, and goes back to his cereal.

Svetlana takes the coffee and stands at the counter and drinks it in silence, and Shane eats his cereal in silence, and neither of them speaks, and this — this is the thing that Ilya would never have predicted — the silence is comfortable. Svetlana, who fills every room she enters with noise and opinions and the force of her personality, stands in Shane's kitchen at six in the morning and is quiet, and Shane, who retreats from every new person like they're a threat, accepts her presence without flinching.

Ilya watches this from the hallway, one shoulder against the doorframe, and feels something he can't name. Pride, maybe. Or fear. Or the particular vertigo of watching two people you care about exist in the same room.

By the third day, they have a routine. Coffee at six. Svetlana asks Shane one question about figure skating, and Shane answers it with more detail than he gives anyone except Rose, because Svetlana's questions are specific and intelligent, and Shane responds to specificity the way flowers respond to the sun. On the fourth morning Svetlana asks about the scoring system and Shane explains it for twenty minutes and Svetlana listens with genuine fascination, and when Ilya comes into the kitchen Shane is drawing diagrams on a napkin and Svetlana is leaning over them saying "but that doesn't make sense, the artistic score should be weighted higher," and Shane is saying "I agree, but the ISU disagrees, and the ISU is wrong about most things."

"You two are getting along," Ilya says from the doorway.

"Your roommate is explaining to me why figure skating judges are idiots," Svetlana says.

"They're not idiots," Shane says. "They're operating within a flawed framework. There's a distinction."

"He's very precise," Svetlana says to Ilya in Russian.

"He's very boring," Ilya says.

"You're an asshole," Shane says, not looking up from the napkin, and Svetlana's eyes go wide and dart between them and Ilya shrugs as if to say this is how we talk, and Shane's mouth does the thing, and Ilya sees it and Svetlana sees it and for a moment the kitchen is warm and bright and full of something that feels like the future.

On the fifth day, Svetlana meets Rose. This is not planned. Rose comes to the apartment to drop off a training schedule, and Svetlana opens the door, and they look at each other.

"Hi, I'm Rose," and Svetlana says "I'm Svetlana, Ilya's — friend" and the pause before friend is small but present and Rose catches it because Rose catches everything.

They end up at the kitchen counter drinking tea for two hours while Ilya and Shane are at their respective practices, and when Ilya comes home, Svetlana is alone and grinning.

"I love her," Svetlana announces.

"You love everyone."

"I don't love everyone. I love specific people who deserve it. Rose deserves it. She told me about the time Shane argued with a judge for fifteen minutes about a component score, and the judge eventually agreed with him."

"That sounds like Shane."

"It sounds exactly like Shane. She also told me you watch their practices every morning."

Ilya goes to the fridge, takes out a Coke, and does not look at Svetlana. "I like the coffee."

"There is no good coffee in that rink. I've had rink coffee. It's an abomination everywhere."

"I guess I have bad taste," Ilya says, shrugging his shoulders.

"You have Shane taste. That's what you have." She takes a sip of tea. "Rose is very perceptive, you know. She sees things."

"Rose sees skating. That's what she sees."

"Rose sees everything. I think you should be careful."

Ilya opens his Coke and drinks and does not respond to this because responding would require admitting that Svetlana is right, and admitting Svetlana is right would require admitting that the thing he feels is visible, and if it's visible to Rose then it might be visible to Shane, and if it's visible to Shane then the comfortable silence and the life he's built around a person who doesn't know he's the foundation — all of it could come apart.

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They sleep together on the fifth night.

Svetlana has been out exploring the city all day. She went to the MFA and spent three hours in the European paintings wing and then walked to a bookshop in Cambridge and came home with two bags of books and opinions about American public transport.

Ilya cooked dinner, actual dinner, something he found online, a chicken thing with too much garlic that turned out better than expected, and Shane ate with them at the table. He sat across from Svetlana and listened to her tell stories about Moscow with the focused attention he gives to everything and the occasional dry comment that made her laugh, and Ilya sat between them and watched them talk and the warmth in the kitchen was the warmth of a thing he wanted and couldn't have — both of them, this, the table and the food and the laughter.

Later, after Shane goes to his room, Svetlana is drying a plate and says, without looking at Ilya, "He measured the rice."

"What?"

"Before dinner. When you were checking on the chicken. He was at the counter with a measuring cup, and he levelled it off with a knife. And then he put exactly the same amount on his plate that he puts on every time, because I've been watching and it doesn't change."

Ilya is quiet. He knows this. He's known for months. He knows about the he scale in the cabinet, the portions that never vary, the calculation Shane runs before accepting or declining food. He's never said it out loud.

"Is it a problem?" Svetlana asks.

"I don't know."

"Ilya."

"I don't know, Sveta. He eats. He's an athlete. Athletes are specific about food."

"I know athletes are specific, Ilya. I was raised by athletes. That's not specific, that's something else." She puts the plate in the rack. "Has anyone talked to him about it?"

"He doesn't talk about things."

"That's not what I asked."

Ilya doesn't answer. Svetlana looks at him for a long moment and then lets it go, the way she lets things go when she knows pushing will close the door, and they finish the dishes in silence.

After, they sit on the couch and drink wine, and Svetlana puts her feet in Ilya's lap, and they watch something on television that neither of them pays attention to. It's familiar and warm, and at some point her hand is on his neck, and his mouth is on hers, and they move to the bedroom and close the door.

It's good. Svetlana is always good. She's warm and present and uncomplicated in a way that no one else in Ilya's life is. She knows what he likes, and he knows what she likes, and the mechanics of it are practised and easy, and Ilya is there, he's in it, his body is doing what his body does, and it's good.

Except.

There's a moment, near the end, when Svetlana makes a sound and Ilya's brain — his traitorous, ungovernable brain — flickers. Just for a second. Not to a person, not to a face, but to the wall. To the other side of the wall. To the awareness of who is on the other side of it, ten feet away, and whether he can hear this, and what his face looks like right now, and whether he's lying in his precisely made bed with his hands on his thighs staring at the ceiling, and the awareness passes through Ilya like a current and he shuts it down, hard, and comes back to Svetlana, to her skin and her warmth and the reality of her, and it's fine. It's fine.

Except that the shutting down takes effort. The shutting down used to be automatic — the way he shuts down the thoughts about Sasha, about the men on Grindr, about the whole hidden architecture of what he wants. And now it takes effort, and the effort is new, and the newness of it terrifies him.

Afterwards, she lies next to him, and he lies next to her. The room is dark and quiet, and through the wall, there is no sound at all. Shane's side of the apartment is silent. Ilya wonders if the silence is Shane being asleep or Shane being awake and choosing not to make a sound, and the wondering is unbearable, so he stops.

"That was good," Svetlana says.

"Yes."

"You seem distracted."

"I'm not distracted. I'm tired."

She rolls onto her side and looks at him. Her eyes are dark in the low light, and her expression is the one she wears when she's thinking about something she hasn't decided whether to say. Svetlana has always been able to read him — better than anyone, better than he reads himself — and the reading is happening now, in the dark, in the bed, and Ilya can feel it like a hand on his chest.

"What?" Ilya says.

"Nothing." She puts her head on his chest. "Go to sleep."

He doesn't sleep. He lies in the dark and listens to Svetlana's breathing slow and even out, and he listens to the silence on the other side of the wall, and he thinks about the flicker and what it means and whether it's getting worse and whether "worse" is even the right word for a thing that feels, when he's honest with himself, like drowning.

In the middle of the night Ilya gets up to get water. Svetlana is still asleep, the sheets tangled around her, and Ilya pulls on his boxers and nothing else and goes to the kitchen.

He doesn't usually walk around the apartment like this. Shane doesn't... Shane is always covered, always a t-shirt and sweats at minimum, the body contained the way everything about Shane is contained, and somewhere in the first few months Ilya started doing the same, matching Shane's unspoken rule without being asked, the way he matched the shoe arrangement and the fridge organisation and all the other systems Shane built that Ilya absorbed by proximity. So the boxers and nothing else is new. The boxers and nothing else is because it's two in the morning, and Shane is asleep, and the kitchen will be empty.

The kitchen is not empty. Shane is at the counter with a glass of water, in the dark, the only light coming from the street through the window.

Ilya stops in the doorway. Boxers. No shirt. Hair wrecked from Svetlana's hands. He looks exactly like what he is, and that is a man who just got out of a bed that has someone else in it.

"Couldn't sleep," Shane says, not looking up.

"Me neither." Ilya goes to the cabinet, gets a glass, fills it, and they stand in the kitchen in the dark and drink water and don't talk, and Shane's face does nothing. Shane's body does nothing. Shane looks at Ilya standing half-naked in the kitchen in the middle of the night, and there is nothing on his face — not curiosity, not discomfort, not anything. He finishes his water, rinses the glass, puts it in the rack, says "night", and goes back to his room, and the door closes.

Ilya stands in the dark kitchen, drinks his water, and thinks: *Nothing*. Shane felt nothing. And the nothing is confirmation of something Ilya already knew but hadn't fully absorbed — that whatever this is, whatever he feels when Shane smiles or laughs or stands at the counter with flour on his cheek, it goes in one direction only. Shane doesn't look at him and feel things. Shane looks at him and sees his roommate getting water.

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Shane is different in the morning after.

They're all in the kitchen making breakfast, and Svetlana is talking about a friend in Moscow who just got engaged, and she turns to Ilya and says, casually, the way she says everything, "And you? Still no one?"

"No," Ilya says. "No girlfriend, no boyfriend. Just hockey and bad decisions."

"Those are the same thing," Svetlana says, and takes a sip of her coffee.

Ilya doesn't look at Shane. He doesn't need to. He can feel the shift in the room. Shane's hand pauses on his mug for half a second. Then he takes a sip of coffee and says nothing, and the morning continues, and nobody mentions it again.

Svetlana keeps talking, says something about Russian winters — how the cold in Moscow is dry and clean, not wet and miserable like Boston — and Ilya laughs and reaches over and pushes a strand of hair off her face, casual, automatic, the kind of touch that means nothing between two people who have known each other since they were children. His fingers brush her temple, and she smiles, and Ilya's hand drops back to his coffee.

Shane, who is standing at the counter with his mug in his hand, goes still.

The stillness is cold and precise, and his face does nothing — literally nothing, a blank that is more alarming than any expression — and then he puts his mug in the sink and says, "I'm going to Rose's," and leaves.

The door closes. The apartment is quiet. Ilya stares after him.

"What was that?" Svetlana asks.

"I don't know."

"He looked—" She pauses. "I don't know. Strange."

"Strange how?"

"Like someone turned him off. Like — one second he was here, and then he wasn't. He just went blank." She wraps her hands around her mug. "Ilya. When you touched my hair. That's when it happened."

"That's a coincidence."

"That's not a coincidence."

Ilya doesn't know what it is. He replays the moment — the hair, the touch, Shane's face going blank — and he doesn't understand it because the only explanation that makes sense is an explanation he has decided is impossible, and he is not going to un-decide this, he is not going to let himself hope, because hope is the thing that will destroy him if it's wrong.

"He doesn't like new people," Ilya says. "He's probably just tired of having someone in his space."

"He doesn't seem tired of me," Svetlana says. "He was drawing me scoring diagrams on napkins two days ago. He explained the entire ISU judging system. That's not a man who's tired of my presence." She sets down her mug. "That's a man who doesn't like watching you touch my hair."

"Stop."

"Ilya—"

"Stop. You're seeing something that isn't there because you want it to be there, because it would make a good story, and you love good stories. This is not what you think it is."

Svetlana looks at him for a long moment. "Okay," she says. "Okay."

But she doesn't look convinced, and the not-looking-convinced stays in the room like smoke after she goes back to her tea.

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Svetlana leaves on a Tuesday morning. Ilya drives her to the airport, and they sit in the departures drop-off zone with the car idling. The January cold presses against the windows, and Svetlana is wearing the fur hat, her coat buttoned to her chin, and her suitcase is in the back seat, and neither of them has unbuckled their seatbelt.

"I like your life here," she says. "I like your apartment and your couch and your terrible coffee and your roommate."

"He's not my roommate."

"He is literally your roommate."

"I mean... you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean." She unbuckles her seatbelt and turns to face him. "Ilya. I need to ask you something and I need you to answer me honestly."

"Okay."

"When we were in bed. On Thursday. Where were you?"

The question hits him like a check into the boards. Clean, hard, centre mass. "I was there. I was with you."

"You were with me. And then for a second you weren't."

He doesn't say anything. The car idles. Outside, people are pulling suitcases from trunks and hugging and saying goodbye, the ordinary logistics of leaving. A woman in a red coat is crying. A man is holding two children by their jacket hoods. The world is full of departures and none of them are as complicated as this one.

"It's okay," Svetlana says. "I'm not angry. I just need to know."

"Know what?"

"Is this still what it is? You and me? Or has it become something else?"

Ilya looks at her. She's looking at him with the expression that isn't judgment or hurt but something clearer, something that wants the truth the way Shane wants the truth, directly and without decoration. Svetlana has always deserved better than what Ilya gives her. She has always deserved someone who is fully in the room when they're in the room, and Ilya has been fully in the room for years, for most of their friendship, for all of the sex and most of the love, and now he's not, and she can feel it, and the feeling is what's sitting between them in the car.

"I don't know," Ilya says, and rubs his nose with his thumb and forefinger, pressing hard, and it's the most honest thing he's said in months.

Svetlana nods. Slowly, like the nod is carrying weight. Then she leans over and kisses him on the cheek. Her lips are warm, and her perfume is the same perfume she's worn since she was sixteen, and the familiarity of it makes Ilya's chest ache in a way he wasn't prepared for.

"Figure it out," she says. "And call me when you do."

She gets out of the car, takes her suitcase, and walks into the terminal without looking back, because Svetlana never looks back. Ilya sits in the car with the engine running and his hands on the wheel, and watches her go and thinks about the wall. The other side of the wall. The silence on the other side of the wall, and the person in it, and the fact that the person in it has changed everything without doing a single thing.

He drives home. The apartment is quiet. Shane's door is open, which it sometimes is now, and Ilya can see the edge of the precisely made bed and the shoes along the wall and a book face-down on the pillow. Shane is at the rink.

Ilya walks through the apartment. The kitchen counter is clean. The two mugs are in the cabinet. The fridge has ginger ale on one shelf and Coca-Cola on the other. Svetlana's perfume is still in the air, fading, mixing with Shane's soap and the coffee from this morning. The apartment holds all three of them for a little while longer, and then it will hold only two, and the two is what Ilya wants, and the two is what terrifies him.

He sits on the couch. He does not turn on the television. He does not fill the silence. For the first time since he was twelve years old, he lets himself feel the full weight of what he wants, and it is enormous, and it is terrifying, and it has a name, and the name is Shane.

Chapter End Notes

So, currently, I'm being fuelled by unmedicated ADHD hyper fixation and hoping I won't crash out before this fic is over. Thankfully, I'm like 5 chapters ahead, so no one needs to worry (YET)!!!!

Chapter 13: two numbers

Chapter Summary

A girl gives Shane her number, and he feels nothing. A man gives Shane his number, and he does.

The Bears play the Voyageurs again in mid-February, and this time Shane doesn't need Hayden's texts to convince him to go.

He hasn't eaten dinner. He should have. He and Rose are leaving soon, and the game will be long, and he trained hard this morning, but the calculator has been loud for the past few months, the numbers recalibrating, the portions getting smaller in increments that are too small for anyone to notice but large enough for Shane to track. Half a cup of rice instead of three-quarters. The chicken breast weighed once and then weighed again, as if the scale might have been generous the first time. He tells himself he's fine. He tells himself this is discipline. The calculator tells him the number is still too high.

Going to the games is new. A year ago, Rose had to talk him into it, and the year before that, the idea of attending a hockey game voluntarily would have felt like visiting a country he'd been exiled from. But something has shifted. He's been to three Bears games this season, always with Rose, always in the lower bowl, and he's learned things about hockey that he didn't know he wanted to learn. The way a power play builds pressure the same way a step sequence builds momentum. The way a good line change is its own kind of choreography. The way Ilya finds space on the ice that shouldn't exist and puts himself in it before anyone else sees it.

He doesn't tell Ilya he's coming. He didn't tell him last time either. It's become a thing. Shane in the stands, watching, the way Ilya watches him in the morning. The mirror of it sits in his chest in a place he doesn't examine.

He's been thinking about what Ilya said in the kitchen three weeks ago. No girlfriend, no boyfriend. Not constantly, not in any organised way. It just surfaces at random times. In the shower, at the rink, in the middle of a training session, when his brain should be on the throw entry and instead it's on Ilya saying *no girlfriend, no boyfriend, just hockey and bad decisions*, and the way his voice didn't change on the word boyfriend, didn't hesitate, didn't flinch. He doesn't know why it matters. He doesn't know why he's still thinking about it. He doesn't know why, when he thinks about it, something in his chest rearranges itself, quietly, and won't settle back into place.

He and Rose leave at six-thirty. She's wearing a Bears scarf she bought at the last game, which Shane finds privately ridiculous and has not said so.

"Nice scarf," he says, getting in the car.

"Thank you. I'm a fan now."

"You're a figure skater wearing hockey merchandise. Linda would have thoughts."

"Linda has thoughts about everything. That's what makes her Linda." Rose pulls out of the parking spot. "Are you excited?"

"I don't get excited for hockey."

"You're doing the thing with your knee."

Shane looks down. His knee is bouncing. He stops it. "I'm not excited."

"You're excited. You're excited to watch your roommate play hockey."

"I'm excited to see Hayden and JJ."

"Sure," Rose says. "That too."

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The game is good. The game is better than good.

The arena is loud with seventeen thousand people making a sound that is less a noise and more a pressure, a physical thing that pushes against Shane's chest and vibrates in his teeth. He has been to three games this season, and he still isn't used to it, the scale of it, the way an entire building breathes as one when the puck drops and then holds that breath and then releases it in a roar that makes the plastic seat rattle under him. Figure skating audiences clap politely. Hockey audiences scream like they're trying to tear the roof off with their voices.

Ilya scores in the first five minutes with a wrist shot from the circle that beats the Voyageurs' goaltender glove side, and Shane's hands grip his knees the way they did last time, and the arena erupts. Rose screams beside him, and Shane's heart does the thing, the inconvenient thing, and he has stopped pretending it isn't about Ilya.

He watches Ilya the way he watches anything he's trying to understand, with total attention. The way Ilya's weight shifts before a turn. The way he reads the ice two passes ahead, arriving where the puck is going to be before it gets there. The way his body operates at a speed that should be reckless but is actually precise, every movement calculated underneath the chaos. Shane has spent his whole life believing that precision and recklessness are opposites. Ilya is evidence that they're not. Ilya is evidence that the most controlled thing in the arena is the person who looks the most out of control, and this realisation does something to Shane's understanding of the world that he isn't prepared to examine.

Between shifts, Ilya sits on the bench and drinks water and chirps at the opposing bench and bounces his legs, and Shane watches this too — the in-between Ilya, the version that exists when the game is happening around him but not through him — and even sitting down, Ilya takes up more space than anyone else on the bench.

Ilya pulls his jersey to wipe sweat from his face, and for a second Shane can see the line of his stomach, the strip of skin between the pads and the jersey, and the seeing hits him in a place he doesn't have a name for because the seeing connects to another seeing, three weeks ago, in the kitchen.

The night Ilya slept with Svetlana. Two in the morning. Shane couldn't sleep. He'd heard them through the wall, the sounds he didn't want to hear, and the not-sleeping had driven him to the

kitchen for water. And then Ilya's door opened, and Ilya was there. Boxers and nothing else. Hair wrecked. The bare chest and the shoulders and the whole of him right there in the dark kitchen, and Shane's body did something it had never done before. Every system went offline. Every thought evacuated. His brain produced nothing except a white static that started in his stomach and dropped and kept dropping. It was heat, and it was want, and the want was so immediate and so total that Shane couldn't breathe.

He'd finished his water, rinsed the glass and said "night" and gone back to his room, the way he goes back to his room, where he had jerked off with images of Ilya behind his closed eyes. That was a first. And now he was here, in the arena, watching Ilya wipe sweat from his face and the strip of skin appearing and disappearing, and Shane grips his knees and tries to redirect his thoughts.

Hayden is having a good game, too. He's faster than last year, more confident, throwing checks and winning board battles with an energy that is pure Hayden — loud, relentless, burning. In the second period, he and Ilya end up in a scrum behind the Bears' net, and Shane watches Ilya say something, and Hayden's face goes red. The referees have to separate them, and Hayden skates to the bench with his jaw tight and his eyes furious.

"What did he say?" Rose asks.

"I don't know. Something devastating, probably."

"Does he always chirp that much?"

"It's his primary skill set. The hockey is secondary."

Rose laughs. On the ice, Ilya wins a faceoff cleanly and sends a pass to the point that starts a cycle that ends in the Bears' second goal. Ilya pumps his fist and skates past the Voyageurs bench with the grin, the on-ice one, and Shane watches him and thinks about the other grin, the one from the kitchen, the one that is not a weapon but something softer. Something that Ilya only wears at home, and the distance between the two grins is the distance between ice Ilya and apartment Ilya, and the fact that Shane knows both versions is a piece of data he is choosing not to analyse.

In the third period, the Voyageurs pull their goaltender with two minutes left, and the ice gets chaotic, bodies everywhere, and Ilya is out there killing the clock, and there's a moment where a Voyageur defenseman catches him with a hit along the boards — clean, legal, hard enough that the glass shudders — and Ilya goes down. He goes down, and he doesn't get up immediately, and Shane's body does something involuntary, a lurch forward, hands on the seat in front of him, and Rose puts her hand on his arm and says, "he's fine, he's fine," and Ilya gets up. Shakes it off. Grins at the defenseman who hit him and says something that makes the man's face tighten, and skates back to the bench under his own power, and Shane sits back in his seat. His heart is hammering, and his hands are shaking, and Rose is looking at him with an expression he doesn't want to decode.

"I'm fine," Shane says.

"I didn't ask."

"I know. I'm telling you anyway."

The Bears win 3-1. Ilya has a goal and two assists. Hayden has a fight in the third period that is not with Ilya, which Shane suspects is because Hayden used up all his Ilya-related anger in the second.

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They meet at a bar in the South End afterwards. Not the same bar as last time. This one is quieter, with booths and low lighting and a bartender who doesn't blink at Shane ordering ginger ale, which Shane appreciates more than he'd admit. They get a booth in the back. Rose slides in first, then Shane, then Hayden and JJ across from them.

Shane orders a beer. Rose looks at him.

"What?" Shane says.

"You don't drink beer."

"I drink beer sometimes." He doesn't drink beer. He has never ordered a beer in front of Rose. But he hasn't eaten since a half portion of chicken at noon, his stomach is empty, the game left him buzzing, and the calculator in his head is loud, and a beer will make everything quiet, and the quieting is what he wants more than the beer.

Hayden is still buzzing from the game. His hair is wet from the shower, his cheeks are flushed, and there's a cut above his eyebrow from the third-period fight that he hasn't bothered to cover, and he looks, Shane thinks, exactly like he looked at fourteen, which is to say alive in a way that takes up the whole room.

"Your roommate," Hayden says, sliding his beer across the table, "is still a fucking asshole."

"I know."

"He called my skating 'adorable.' Adorable, Shane. In front of the ref."

"That does sound like him."

"And then he scored on us. While smiling. Who scores while smiling?"

"Ilya scores while smiling."

"It's unnatural. It's psychotic. He's a psychopath on skates."

"He's not a psychopath. He's enthusiastic."

"Enthusiastic. That's what we're calling it." Hayden takes a long drink. "Tell him I hate him."

"He knows you hate him. He considers it a compliment."

JJ slides in next to Hayden, calm as always, a beer in one hand and his phone in the other. "T'es en train d'obséder, là."

"English, JJ."

"You're obsessing."

"I'm not obsessing. I'm processing."

"You've been processing for forty minutes. In the shower. Out loud."

"He called my skating adorable, JJ."

"Your skating is adorable. You're five-foot-eight and you skate like an angry terrier. C'est cute, honestly."

Rose almost spits out her wine. Shane does the exhale-laugh, the one that is barely a sound, and Hayden points at him.

"You laughed. I saw it. Don't pretend."

"I didn't laugh. That was a respiratory event."

"A respiratory — Shane, that's — JJ, he called laughing a respiratory event."

"I heard."

Hayden shakes his head, drinks his beer and then puts it down and his face changes. The anger about Ilya burns off, fast and complete, the way it always does with Hayden, and what's underneath is something Shane hasn't seen before. Nervous. Hayden looks nervous. He's turning his beer glass in his hands, rotating it slowly, and his eyes are doing something complicated.

"So," Hayden says. "I have news."

JJ is smiling already. JJ clearly knows the news.

"Jackie and I are engaged."

The table goes quiet. Rose puts her hand over her mouth. Shane stares at Hayden and processes this — Hayden, who is twenty-one years old, who still laughs like a teenager and eats cereal for dinner, and once called Shane at midnight to ask how to do laundry, is getting married.

"You're twenty-one," Shane says.

"I know how old I am."

"You called me last month because you couldn't figure out the dishwasher."

"The dishwasher was broken, Shane. That's different." Hayden is grinning now, bright and defenceless. "She said yes. I asked her in the café where we met. I got down on one knee and everything. JJ helped me pick the ring."

"I picked the ring," JJ corrects. "You picked a ring that looked like a candy machine prize. I had to intervene."

"It was vintage."

"It was seven dollars."

Rose laughs. "When's the wedding?"

"June. In Montreal. Her mom is already planning it. Her mom is terrifying, actually. She looked at me the first time we met and said 'what are your intentions' and I said 'I don't know, ma'am, I'm

nineteen' and she didn't speak to me for two weeks." He grins. "She loves me now. I grew on her. Like mould."

"That's romantic," Shane says.

"It is romantic. Mould is persistent. Mould commits." Hayden looks at Shane, and the nervousness is back, under the grin. "Which brings me to the other thing. Shane. JJ. I want you both to be my best men."

"Les deux?" JJ asks.

"Both of you. I can't pick. You're my, you know. You're my guys. From the beginning. From the rink." Hayden's voice does something unexpected — it gets thick, the way voices get when a feeling arrives that's bigger than the person carrying it. "You were the first people who were ever nice to me when I didn't have to be nice back, and I want you standing up there when I marry her."

The table is quiet again. A different kind of quiet. Rose's eyes are shining. JJ is nodding slowly, the way JJ nods when something matters, and Shane sits in the booth with his ginger ale and feels something move through his chest that is warm and enormous and entirely uncomplicated, which is rare for Shane, whose feelings are almost never uncomplicated, and he says, "Yes."

"Yeah?" Hayden's eyes are bright.

"Of course, yes."

"JJ?"

"Obviously yes, espèce d'idiot."

Hayden makes a sound that is somewhere between a laugh and something else, and he reaches across the table and grabs Shane's hand and then JJ's hand and holds them both for a second, and Shane lets him, doesn't flinch, doesn't pull away, because this is Hayden, who sat next to him on a bench when they were ten years old and accepted him just the way he is, and Shane loves him, simply and without complication.

He takes a sip of his beer and swallows it all down.

Hayden talks about Jackie for the next hour. The café where they met. The way she laughs at his bad French. The apartment they just got together, small, with a balcony that faces the wrong direction, but Jackie put plants on it anyway. The way she calls him Hayds, which no one else calls him. The way she falls asleep with her hand on his chest, like she's checking his heartbeat.

"She makes me want to be less of a disaster," Hayden says, and for once, he's not performing, not being loud for the sake of volume. He means it. "Like, I still am a disaster. But she makes me want to try."

"That's really beautiful," Rose says.

"That's really terrifying," Shane says, and Hayden laughs, and Shane means both — beautiful and terrifying — because the idea of someone making you want to change the shape of your life is both of those things, and Shane knows this even though he can't explain how he knows it.

JJ talks about his own life — the apartment in Montreal, the bread book he finished (he's moved on to a book about cheese, which Hayden finds hilarious), his sister's new baby. "She named her Madeleine, after our grand-mère," JJ says, and the French slides in the way it always does with JJ, easy and unselfconscious, the Brossard accent surfacing in the names. He's steady and calm and the same as he's always been, the still centre of a friendship that has lasted ten years, and Shane is grateful for this in the same quiet way he's grateful for everything — privately, intensely, without saying so.

"You have to come to Montreal for the wedding," Hayden says, pointing at Rose. "You're invited too. Obviously."

"I barely know you," Rose says, smiling.

"You know Shane, Shane knows me, therefore you know me. Transitive property. JJ, back me up."

"That's not how the transitive property works," JJ says.

"That's exactly how it works. Ask Shane, he's smart."

"It's not how it works," Shane confirms. "But Rose will come."

"I will?" Rose looks at him.

"You'll come," Shane says, and Rose smiles and says okay, and the evening folds into itself the way good evenings do, warm and shapeless and easy, and Shane sits in the booth and drinks his and drinks his beer (his second beer, which Rose has noticed and not commented on), and listens to his oldest friends talk about love and cheese and the transitive property and feels, for a few hours, like the world is a simple place where people fall in love and get married and ask their childhood friends to stand beside them, and the unnamed thing in his chest stays quiet and everything is fine.

At some point Hayden and JJ go to the bar for another round, and a girl comes over. She's pretty — dark hair, red lipstick, a smile aimed directly at Shane — and she leans against the booth and says, "You look like you're having a good night."

"I'm here with friends," Shane says.

"Are you sure? My friend over there thinks you're cute." She gestures toward a table near the window where another girl waves, and Shane looks at them and feels nothing. The flat nothing. The familiar, reliable nothing that he felt with Jessica and every other woman who has ever directed attention at him. He knows this nothing. He's lived inside it for almost twenty years.

"Thank you," Shane says. "I'm not really — I'm here with friends."

"Okay. Well, if you change your mind." She puts a napkin on the table with a phone number on it and walks away, and Rose watches this happen with the expression she wears when she's choosing not to say something.

"That happens to you a lot," Rose says.

"What does?"

"Women approaching you. You never seem interested."

"I'm rarely in bars."

"Even outside of bars. At the rink. At competitions. You just — deflect."

Shane deflects. This is true. He has been deflecting since he was sixteen, since girls started noticing him and he started noticing the noticing and feeling nothing about it. In Ottawa, it was worse — the girls who approached him always seemed to be approaching a version of him they'd assembled from the outside, the half-Japanese figure skater, exotic and precise, and the word exotic had been used more than once, and each time it landed on his skin like something sticky he couldn't wash off. He's not exotic. He's from Ottawa.

"I'm focused on skating."

"You're always focused on skating. That's not what I'm asking."

Shane takes a sip of his beer and doesn't respond.

It's later, when Shane is coming back from the bathroom, that it happens. He's moving through the narrow corridor between the bar and the booths, and a man is coming the other way. He's tall, dark-haired, a few years older than Shane, and they do the thing where two people try to pass each other in a small space and both go the same direction, and the man smiles and says "sorry" and puts his hand briefly on Shane's arm to steady himself as they pass, and Shane's body does not flinch.

His body does not flinch, and the not-flinching is so unusual that it registers like a sound in a quiet room. Shane flinches when people touch his arm. He flinches when women touch his arm. He did not flinch.

The man moves past him, and then stops and turns and says, "Hey, sorry, this is random, but are you a skater? You move like a skater."

Shane stops. "Figure skater. Yes."

"I knew it. Something about the way you carry yourself." The man smiles. He has an easy smile, unhurried. "I'm Matt."

"Shane."

"Nice to meet you, Shane."

And that's it. That's the whole conversation. Matt nods and walks back toward the bar, and Shane walks back toward the booth where Rose is talking to JJ about bread-making, and Hayden is on his phone texting Jackie, and nobody saw it, nobody noticed, and the moment is nothing, it's a stranger in a corridor, it means nothing.

Except that when Shane stands up to leave, twenty minutes later, there's a napkin on the edge of the booth nearest the corridor. Folded once. A phone number in neat handwriting, and underneath it: *Nice meeting you, Shane.*

Something moves through Shane's body that was not the flat nothing.

He picks up the napkin. He folds it once more and puts it in his jacket pocket, and he doesn't think about it again until later.

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Rose drives him home. The city is dark and cold, and the streetlights streak by in the window. Shane sits in the passenger seat and watches Boston go past and feels the evening settling into him, the warmth of it mixing with something else, something colder and quieter.

"You okay?" Rose asks.

"I'm fine."

"You went quiet at the end."

"I'm always quiet."

"Quieter. The Hayden-announcing-his-engagement quiet. You had a specific face."

"I don't have a specific face."

"You have many specific faces. This one was the one where you're thinking about something you're not going to tell me about."

Shane watches the road. The Charles River is black and glinting in the dark, and the city skyline is lit up on the other side, and the car is warm and smells like Rose's perfume and the cold from the arena.

"He's twenty-one years old," Shane says.

"And you're almost twenty."

"I know. That's the problem."

Rose glances at him. "What do you mean?"

Shane doesn't know what he means. Or he knows, and the knowing is buried somewhere he won't reach. He means that Hayden is twenty-one and engaged and talks about Jackie the way people talk about oxygen. Like she's necessary, fundamental, the thing that makes the rest of it possible, and Shane is almost twenty and has never felt that about anyone. Has never felt the thing Hayden described, the wanting to be less of a disaster, the hand on the chest checking the heartbeat. He had Jessica, and Jessica was nice, and it didn't work, and he didn't know why, and the not-knowing has been sitting in his chest for two years, getting heavier, and tonight, listening to Hayden talk about Jackie with that defenceless grin, the weight shifted into something sharper.

He thinks about the arena. Ilya going down along the boards. The lurch forward in his seat, the hands on the plastic, the heart hammering. Rose saying he's fine, he's fine, and Shane's body not believing her until it saw Ilya stand up.

"Nothing," he says. "I'm happy for him."

"You are happy for him."

"I just said that."

"I know. I'm confirming. Because sometimes you say things and mean other things."

"I'm happy for him, and I don't mean other things."

Rose lets it go. She always lets it go. They drive the rest of the way in silence, and when Shane gets home the apartment is dark and Ilya is asleep — or pretending to be asleep, the way he sometimes does when Shane comes home late, a courtesy that Shane appreciates without acknowledging.

He stands in the kitchen and pours himself a ginger ale and thinks about Hayden saying *she makes me want to be less of a disaster*, and the warmth in Hayden's voice, the total lack of defence in it, the willingness to be seen wanting something that much. And then he thinks about Ilya going down on the ice and the sound his own body made, the involuntary lurch, the way his hands shook for thirty seconds after Ilya stood up. And then he thinks about the corridor. The man's hand on his arm. The not-flinching. The napkin with the phone number.

Shane finishes his ginger ale and rinses the glass, puts it in the rack and goes to bed and lies in the dark, and the question he will not ask himself stays where it is, quiet and patient, waiting for him to be ready.

He is not ready.

Chapter 14: like a second heartbeat

Chapter Summary

Ilya has the best season of his (young) life, tries to quit smoking for Shane, and wishes Shane cared enough to be jealous.

Chapter Notes

A real chapter to make up for the fake chapter earlier today <3

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

The season is the best of Ilya's life, and the worst of Ilya's life, and these two things exist simultaneously without cancelling each other out.

The hockey is exceptional. Ilya is on pace for seventy points by Christmas, which puts him in conversations about the Hart Trophy that he pretends not to hear and secretly replays in his head at night. The game has opened up for him this year in a way it didn't in his rookie season — the ice is slower, the reads are faster, and his body does what he asks it to do without the half-second delay that used to cost him in tight spaces. LeClaire has started trusting him in late-game situations, putting him on the ice with thirty seconds left and the lead at one, and the trust is a drug. Ilya has been performing for approval his entire life. Grigori's approval, which was a moving target, and the hockey world's approval, which was louder and more reliable, and LeClaire's quiet trust is different from both. It's earned. It's specific. It belongs to Ilya and no one else.

The locker room is good too, in the way that locker rooms are good — loud and crude and warm, full of men who know each other's bodies and routines and superstitions, who tape each other's sticks and chirp each other's haircuts and exist in a closeness that is physical and emotional and entirely bounded by the unspoken rules of what men are allowed to be to each other. Marleau calls him Roz. Connors calls him kid even though Connors is only four years older. Dubois calls him something in French that Ilya suspects is insulting but can't confirm.

Marleau is Ilya's closest friend on the team, which is a strange thing to say about a man who knows almost nothing about Ilya's actual life. Marleau knows that Ilya has a roommate named Shane. Marleau knows that Ilya is from Moscow and that his father was a police officer (Ilya hasn't dared to tell anyone the truth, that he's actually a former KGB officer). Marleau does not know that Ilya still frequently watches his roommate skate in the morning before practice, or that his roommate's freckles are the most beautiful thing in the apartment, or that Ilya has been in love for a year and the being-in-love is the reason he's cut back on drinking and stopped bringing women home as often and started going to bed before midnight, and Marleau thinks this is because Ilya is "maturing," which is the word he uses, and Ilya lets him think this because the truth is not a thing Marleau is equipped to hold.

Carmichael is married. He talks about his wife — Anna — with a frequency and openness that used to make Ilya uncomfortable and now makes him envious. Carmichael shows the room pictures of Anna. Carmichael tells the room what Anna cooked for dinner. Carmichael, once, after a loss in overtime, sat in his stall with his head in his hands and said "I just want to go home to my wife" and nobody laughed, nobody chirped him, the room just nodded because the wanting to go home to your person is understood, is respected, is part of the architecture of the locker room, and Ilya sat in his stall three feet away and thought I want to go home to my person too and the thought was so loud he was sure someone would hear it.

Nobody heard it. Nobody ever hears it. That's the whole point.

They go out after wins. They go out after some losses. The bars in the Seaport and Back Bay fill with men in suits who are too large for the furniture, and Ilya drinks and laughs and performs the version of himself that the room requires, and the performing used to be easy and is getting harder because the version of himself that the room requires is the version that laughs at the word, the version that grins when someone says something about a player on another team, the version that takes women home and doesn't think about the wall.

He's started noticing things he didn't notice before. Or he noticed them and looked away, and looking away is getting harder. The way Dubois throws an arm around Connors after a win and nobody thinks twice. The way Carmichael talks about Anna with the love right there on the surface, and nobody flinches. The way the room accommodates all of this — the arms and the love and the loud, easy affection — and the accommodation has limits that nobody states because nobody needs to state them. The limits are in the air, and Ilya breathes them in every day and they taste like the cigarettes he's trying to quit, familiar and poisonous and hard to give up.

He doesn't think about this. He plays hockey. He plays hockey, and he goes home.

Going home is a problem, and it has nothing to do with the apartment. The apartment is the only place where nothing hurts. The problem is the space between wherever he is at any given moment and the apartment, when the performance ends, and Ilya is just Ilya, alone, and the flatness comes back.

It always comes back. After every game, after every win, after every night out with the guys. The high burns off, and underneath it is the thing Ilya has been carrying since he was twelve years old and lay next to his mother's body and waited for her to wake up. He doesn't know what to call it. He doesn't know it has a name. He knows that some mornings the alarm goes off and his body doesn't want to move, not because he's tired but because the distance between the bed and the ice feels impossible. He knows that the performing — the grin, the charm, the loud easy version of himself that fills every room — costs him something, and the cost is paid in the car on the way home, in the shower, in the minutes before sleep when the performing stops and what's left is just the flat grey quiet that doesn't respond to anything except Shane's shy smile or Shane's voice through the wall or the five-fifteen alarm that means Shane is still here.

The apartment is the only place the flatness lifts. Not because Shane fixes it. Shane doesn't fix it, can't fix it, probably doesn't even know it's there. But Shane's presence changes the weight of it.

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Home is Shane.

He still goes and watches Shane skate in the mornings. This is not new; he's been doing it since the first month. But it's different now. The watching has changed because Ilya has changed, because the thought that arrived to him almost a year ago, the: I'm in love with him, has not gone away. It has settled. It has made itself comfortable. It lives in Ilya's chest like a second heartbeat, steady and insistent, and it colours everything.

Shane's skating is better this year. The programs Rose and Shane are building for the season are more ambitious — harder lifts, riskier throws, a step sequence that Shane executes with a precision that makes Ilya's chest hurt because the precision is beautiful.

Ilya watches from the stands and drinks the bad coffee and thinks about the kitchen and the couch and the ginger ale shelf and the way Shane said you're an asshole this morning with his mouth doing the thing.

He goes home after practice, and Shane almost always stays at the rink — he trains for hours after the morning session, so the apartment is normally empty, and Ilya gets in the shower and the water is hot and his body is tired from his own practice and his brain is still in the stands, and he replays Shane on the ice.

It becomes Shane's hands. Shane's forearms. Shane's face when the music drops and the programme turns slow. Shane's collarbones and the freckles that cross them, and the t-shirt that sits on his shoulders in a way Ilya has catalogued without meaning to. Shane's mouth doing the thing. Shane's mouth.

Ilya puts his hand on the tile and stands under the water, and the wanting is not new. The wanting has been there since the alley, since that first September, but the intensity of it is new. He stays in those thoughts. Shane's mouth, Shane's hands, Shane's voice saying you're an asshole in the flat way that means something tender, and Ilya comes in the shower with Shane's name in his mouth, the sound of it too dangerous to make. The water washes it away and the guilt arrives immediately and sits in his chest alongside the second heartbeat, and the guilt is not about wanting Shane.

The guilt is about the fact that Shane is ten feet away every night, on the other side of the wall, and doesn't know. Doesn't know that Ilya lies in his bed and thinks about him. Doesn't know that the mornings in the stands are not about being bored enough to watch him skate. Doesn't know that the boring and the ginger ale shelf and the pelmeni on Christmas Eve are all the same thing, which is a man in love performing friendship because the friendship is all he's allowed to have.

He gets out of the shower, gets dressed, and makes coffee. Shane comes home at 2 p.m., puts his bag by the door, and says, "The throw is getting better."

"Good," Ilya says, and doesn't look at him because looking at him right now would show everything.

Some mornings, Rose waves at him from the ice, and he waves back. Some mornings she skates over to the boards during a water break and says something that makes him laugh — Rose has gotten funnier this year, or Ilya has gotten easier to make laugh, which is the same thing — and Shane watches them from the centre of the ice with an expression Ilya can't read.

"He's different this year," Rose says one morning at the boards, towelling her face. "On the ice."

"Different how?"

"More open. Whatever Linda's been working on with him, it's landing. He's actually feeling things in the program instead of just executing them." She takes a drink of water. "He's also different off the ice. Have you noticed?"

"Noticed what?"

Rose hesitates. It's a small hesitation, the kind that means she's deciding how much to say. "He's thinner."

Ilya's hand tightens on his coffee cup. "He's training hard."

"I know he's training hard. I train with him six hours a day. I'm not talking about training." She looks at him, and the look has weight to it. "The portions at lunch are smaller. He skipped breakfast twice last week. He's weighing everything again — not just the rice, the vegetables too. The yoghurt is gone."

"The yoghurt—"

"He used to eat yoghurt after morning practice. Every day. It's gone." Rose wraps the towel around her neck. "I'm not saying it's a crisis. I'm saying I'm watching it, and you should watch it too."

"I watch it," Ilya says, and his voice comes out rougher than he intended.

"I know you do." Rose looks at him for a second longer than necessary, and the look has something in it that Ilya doesn't want to examine, and then she skates back to Shane and they start the throw and Ilya stands behinds the boards with his coffee and his second heartbeat and the knowledge that Rose sees more than she says about everything, about Shane, about Ilya in the stands every morning with his bad coffee and his obvious, unbearable love.

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He tries to quit smoking.

He's been smoking since he was twelve. Someone's older brother had brought a pack. He remember the first drag that made him cough and the second drag that didn't, and by thirteen it was a habit and by fifteen it was a need and by seventeen it was part of him. The balcony and the lighter, the one place where his body did a thing that wasn't hockey or sex or performing, the one act that was entirely his own, private and destructive and his.

He quits because of Shane.

Not because Shane asked him to. Shane doesn't ask Ilya for things — not directly, not in the way that would give Ilya something to respond to. But Shane said something. A small thing, in passing, standing on the balcony one evening while Ilya smoked and the city lights blinked below them. Shane had come out to tell Ilya that Rose had changed their practice time, and then he'd stayed. Leaned against the railing. Watched the city. Didn't go inside.

"Those will kill you," Shane said. Not with judgment. Not with the tone people use when they say things about cigarettes, the disapproving, health-lecture tone. Shane said it flatly, factually, the way he says everything, and then added, quieter, almost to himself: "You should be around for a while."

You should be around for a while. Seven words. Shane said them, went inside, and the door closed, and Ilya stood on the balcony with his cigarette and heard the words again in his head — you should be around for a while. The words scrambled in his head and assembled themselves into a sentence that meant Shane wanted Ilya to exist in the future, and the cigarette tasted different after that. It tasted like something he was doing to himself that would take him away from the person who wanted him around, and the wanting-him-around was the closest Shane had ever come to saying you matter to me and Ilya was not going to waste it on tar and nicotine and a habit he picked up when he was a kid who didn't know he had something to live for.

He throws out the pack the next morning. Buys nicotine patches at the pharmacy on Newbury Street and wears them under his sleeve, which makes him sweat during practice, which LeClaire notices and doesn't comment on. The withdrawal is physical and mean — headaches, irritability, the constant reaching for something that isn't there. His hands need occupation. He starts chewing gum. He starts fidgeting with his phone. He starts doing the thing with his nose — the thumb and forefinger pressing the bridge — more often, and he doesn't realise this until Shane says, from the couch, "You keep touching your nose."

"Allergies," Ilya says.

"It's January."

"Russian allergies."

Shane looks at him. It's soft, and then he goes back to his book and doesn't push, and Shane not pushing is a kindness, and Ilya sits on his end of the couch and doesn't smoke and doesn't tell Shane why.

He lasts eleven days before he breaks. Smokes one on the balcony at midnight, alone, in the cold, hands shaking, and the first drag is relief and the second drag is guilt, and the guilt is immediate and specific and has Shane's face on it. You should be around for a while. He finishes the cigarette, crushes it out, and stands in the cold and thinks about Shane asleep on the other side of the wall and the future Shane wants him in and the fact that he just inhaled poison.

He tries again. Lasts eight days. Breaks again — this time after a loss to Montreal, the frustration needing an outlet, the balcony is the only place where the outlet exists. Tries again. Day three, day five, day seven. On day nine Marleu offers him a cigarette outside the arena after practice and Ilya says "I quit" and Marleu says "since when" and Ilya says "nine days ago" and Marleu says "good for you, Roz" and claps him on the shoulder and doesn't know that the quitting is for a person, that every hour without a cigarette is an hour Ilya is adding to the future that Shane asked him to be in. That's the whole shape of his love — enormous, invisible, expressed in the things he gives up rather than the things he says.

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Svetlana calls on a Tuesday night in March.

"How is the hockey?"

"Good. We're second in the division."

"How is the apartment?"

"Good."

"How is Shane?"

Ilya is on the balcony. No cigarette — day six of the third attempt. The air is cold, and the city is below him, and the apartment is behind him, warm and lit.

"Shane is fine," Ilya says.

"You're lying."

"I'm not lying. He's fine. He's — the skating is going well. They have a competition in—"

"I'm not asking about the skating, Ilya."

There's silence. Moscow at 8 a.m. is quiet in a way that Boston at midnight isn't — or Svetlana's apartment in Presnya is quiet, the heavy walls and the double-glazed windows keeping the city out, and Ilya can hear the quiet through the phone and it reminds him of summers, of balconies, of the life he used to have before the life he has now.

"He's thinner," Ilya says.

"Thinner how?"

"Thinner. Like — his collarbones. His wrists. The way his clothes fit." Ilya rubs his nose, thumb and forefinger pressing the bridge. "Rose noticed it too."

"Have you talked to him?"

"You can't talk to Shane about things Shane doesn't want to talk about. The door shuts."

"So you're just going to watch him get thinner."

"What am I supposed to do, Sveta? Force him to eat? I'm his roommate. I'm not his—" He stops. The sentence has a word at the end of it that he can't say.

"You're not his what?"

"I'm not his anything."

Svetlana is quiet for a long moment. "You're his something, Ilya. You're his something, and you know it, and he knows it, and the only people who don't know it are the two of you."

Ilya leans against the railing and looks at the city, and doesn't answer.

"Cook for him," Svetlana says. "Don't make it a thing. Just cook. Put food in front of him. Make it easy."

"He'll know what I'm doing."

"Let him know. Let him know that someone sees it and cares. That's not nothing."

Ilya is quiet. Through the sliding door, he can see the living room, empty, the lamp still on. Shane went to bed hours ago. The apartment is quiet in the way, and Ilya stands on the balcony and looks

at the city, holds the phone and misses someone who is twenty feet away.

"Okay," he says.

"Okay."

"Sveta."

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Just feed him."

He starts cooking more. Not obviously, there are no big meals, no sit-down-at-the-table meals that would trigger anything, just small things. Eggs in the morning left on the counter near Shane's spot. Half a sandwich on a plate when Shane comes home from practice. Pelmeni on a Tuesday for no reason, a bowl in the fridge with cling film, and sometimes Shane eats it and sometimes he doesn't, and when he doesn't, Ilya says nothing, and when he does, Ilya says nothing, and the nothing is the hardest part.

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The playoffs might as well be a different sport.

Ilya has known this theoretically; he played some matches last season before the Bears were eliminated in the first round, but the reality of actually progressing is something else. The hitting is harder. The ice is faster. Every shift matters in a way that regular season shifts don't, and the arena noise is a living thing, a wall of sound that presses against Ilya's body and fills the space behind his teeth and makes him feel alive in a way that almost nothing else does.

Almost.

The Bears are in the second round for the first time in three years. They beat Tampa in five games in the first round, and now they're playing Pittsburgh, and the series is tied 2-2, and Ilya is playing the best hockey of his life. He can feel it — the way the game has slowed down for him, the way he can see plays developing two passes before they happen, the way his body responds to his brain without lag, like the ice is an extension of his nervous system. LeClair has him on the first line, and the first power play and the penalty kill, and Ilya is logging twenty-three minutes a night and loving every second of it.

The team is close in a way they weren't during the regular season. Playoff teams sharpen into something different — tighter, meaner, more dependent on each other. They eat together after practice, watch video together, and go out together after wins, which is how Ilya ends up at a bar in the Seaport after Game 4, which they won 4-1, surrounded by teammates who are loud and drunk and celebrating with the particular ferocity of men who know the season could end at any time.

Marleu buys him a shot. Connor's buys him another. Dubek buys him a third. Ilya is a big man and he can hold his liquor, but he hasn't been drinking much this season — during the regular season he cut back, quietly, without announcing it, because the apartment had become a place he wanted to be present in and being present required being sober, and being sober was easier than he expected

because the thing he'd been using alcohol to avoid was loneliness and the loneliness had gotten smaller.

But tonight the team is here, and the shots are here, and the game was good, and his body is full of the electric aftermath of winning, and by midnight, Ilya is drunker than he's been since November.

There's a girl. There's always a girl when Ilya is drunk — they appear like weather, inevitable and uncomplicated, drawn to the confidence and the accent and the smile that Ilya can deploy in his sleep. This one is blond. Or maybe brunette. He'll forget by morning. She's pretty and she laughs too loud and she puts her hand on his arm and says something about hockey that she clearly doesn't understand, and Ilya grins at her because grinning at women is a reflex that alcohol strips of any resistance, and she grins back.

He takes her home.

He takes her home and it's a mistake and he knows it's a mistake as they stumble through the front door at one-thirty in the morning, her laughing, Ilya shushing her the way he used to shush them in the early days before Shane, before everything, and the apartment is dark and Shane's door is closed and Shane is asleep or awake or lying in his bed listening and Ilya knows this and takes her to his room anyway because he is drunk and the drunk version of him does not make good decisions, has never made good decisions, and the door closes and what follows is not quiet.

She's warm and willing, and her hands are on him, and his hands are on her, and it's fine. Ilya's body knows how to do this the way it knows how to skate — automatically, without his brain fully arriving. And his brain doesn't arrive. His brain is on the other side of the wall. His brain is in the shower with Shane's name in his mouth. His brain is in the stands watching Shane's body move in the step sequence. His brain is at the counter at six a.m., watching Shane eat cereal in his sweatpants, the collarbones, the freckles, the precise way Shane holds a spoon.

He closes his eyes. The girl makes a sound, but Ilya is long gone. He is with the image. Shane's face in the slow section of the programme, and the image is so vivid and so specific that Ilya's body responds to it harder than it responds to the actual person beneath him. This is what he does, this is what he's done since he met Shane. He fucks women and thinks about a man, and the thinking is the truest sex he has.

He comes fast. Faster than he's ever come with anyone, so fast that it's almost embarrassing, and the orgasm hits him like something breaking, hard and total and wrong. Afterwards, she lies beside him and talks about something, and Ilya doesn't hear it because the guilt is enormous. The guilt about using her as a screen to project Shane onto, and it's cruel, even though she'll never know.

In the morning, the girl is gone. She left while Ilya was still asleep, which is a kindness he doesn't deserve, and the apartment is quiet, and Ilya lies in bed with his hangover pressing against the inside of his skull and listens to the five-fifteen alarm go off through the wall, and the shower, the kettle, the cereal, the shoes, and the door.

The sequence is the same. Exactly the same. Not one variation, not one pause, not one extra second between any step. Shane's routine is running like clockwork, and Ilya lies there and wishes it weren't. Wishes the routine were different. Wishes Shane had slammed a cabinet or left the cleaning spray on the counter or come out of his room and said what the fuck, Ilya, because any of those things would mean Shane cared.

Any of those things would mean last night mattered. The noise through the wall, the woman in the apartment, the fact that Ilya brought someone home, and Shane was ten feet away. Mattering would mean something, and the something is the thing Ilya wants so badly that the wanting is making him sick.

But the routine is the same. Shane is the same. The door closes at six a.m., and the apartment is empty, and Ilya lies in bed and stares at the ceiling and thinks: he didn't care. It didn't matter. I don't matter. And the thought is unbearable, and also exactly what he deserves.

He gets up, showers, and makes coffee. The kitchen is clean. Shane's mug is in the rack, rinsed and placed exactly where it always goes. There is no cleaning spray on the counter. There is no note. There is nothing at all.

He doesn't bring anyone home again. But the damage, whatever it is, has been done, and bringing women home and thinking about Shane the entire time is a thing Ilya cannot survive doing anymore

Chapter End Notes

Those who witnessed my freakout in real time, this is the right chapter, I'm just real fck stupid :)

Chapter 15: nora

Chapter Summary

Shane contemplates calling the guy from the bar. He then meets a woman called Nora at Hayden's wedding and asks her out.

The napkin is in the drawer of his nightstand.

He put it there the morning after the bar, folded it once more and slid it underneath the training schedules and the pen he never uses and the packet of ibuprofen he keeps for competition days. He told himself he was putting it there to get it out of his jacket pocket, which was practical, which was the kind of thing Shane does without it meaning anything.

It means something.

He's dialled the number four times. The first time was two days after the bar, sitting on his bed at eleven at night with his phone in his hand and Ilya's television murmuring through the wall. He typed in the digits and stared at them, and his thumb hovered over the call button, and his heart was doing something fast and stupid, and he pressed the red button instead and put the phone on the nightstand and lay down and stared at the ceiling.

The second time was a week later, after a bad practice where Linda told him his transitions were mechanical, and Rose looked at him with the worried expression she's been wearing more often. He dialled in the bathroom with the door locked and the shower running so nobody could hear him, not talking to anyone, and he got as far as the first ring before he hung up. One ring. He doesn't know if Matt heard it. He doesn't know if Matt remembers him. He doesn't know why he's doing this except that Matt's hand was on his arm and Shane didn't flinch, and it opened a door that Shane has been standing in front of ever since. Not going through, not walking away, just standing.

The third and fourth times were both in March, both at night, both ending with Shane pressing the red button and putting the phone down and sitting in the dark with his pulse loud in his ears and the question pressing against the walls of the room he's locked it in.

He never calls. He never deletes the number either. The napkin stays in the drawer, and Shane knows it's there the way he knows everything in his apartment is where he put it, precisely, in its place, accounted for.

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The wedding is in Montreal in mid-June 2011, three weeks after the Bears are eliminated in the conference finals. Shane knows the series score because he watched every game. He knows Ilya had four goals and seven assists in the playoffs. He knows Ilya was named to the All-Star Team. He knows these things because he watched, and because watching Ilya play hockey has become another thing Shane does without examining why.

He flies to Montreal with Rose. They have a competition in July — a summer invitational in Lake Placid — and Rose has been using the wedding as a reward, a bright spot to aim for between training blocks. She bought a new dress. Shane is wearing the suit Yuna sent him, dark blue, well-fitted, the kind of suit that mothers buy their sons when they want them to look like someone who has their life together.

The ceremony is in a church in Old Montreal with stone walls, stained glass and wooden pews that make sounds when you sit in them. Jackie's family is large, loud and French-Canadian, and they fill the church with warmth and noise and the particular energy of people who love each other without restraint. Shane stands at the altar with JJ, both of them in suits, waiting for Hayden, who arrives last because Hayden is always last, bouncing on his toes in a suit that doesn't quite fit.

Jackie comes down the aisle, and Shane watches Hayden's face change. All the noise drains out of it. The bouncing stops. Hayden goes completely still, and his eyes fill up, and his mouth does something that isn't quite a smile. It's bigger and more helpless than a smile, and Shane watches this and thinks, that is what it looks like. The thing. The wanting thing. That's what it looks like when it happens.

He holds the rings and doesn't drop them, which he was privately terrified of, and Hayden says his vows in a voice that shakes, and Jackie says hers in a voice that doesn't. When the priest says you may kiss the bride, Hayden takes Jackie's face in his hands and kisses her like they're alone in the room, and the church erupts. Shane stands beside his oldest friends and feels the warm, enormous thing in his chest and also the other thing, the colder thing, the thing that asks: *Will this ever happen to me? Am I capable of this? Is there something wrong with the wiring, something missing?*

He pushes the question away. He smiles. He claps Hayden on the back and says congratulations, and means it, and the weight in his chest gets heavier.

+++

The reception is at a restaurant two blocks from the church with long tables, fairy lights and a dance floor that Hayden has clearly been planning to dominate. The food is good, the wine is good. Shane drinks ginger ale and sits at the head table and watches Hayden dance with Jackie, badly and enthusiastically, and he's happy. He's genuinely happy.

Jackie's family fills the room. They're warm and physical and unapologetically loud, and they hug Shane when they meet him as if hugging is the default setting for human interaction, and Shane endures this with the stiff grace of someone who was raised in a house where affection was real but contained. Yuna's hand on his cheek, David's arm around his shoulder, gestures that meant everything because they were chosen carefully. At one point Jackie's grandmother cups Shane's face and says something in French and then switches to English and says "so handsome, you look like a movie star," and Shane says "thank you" and doesn't say what he's thinking, which is that he's spent his whole life being told he looks like something — a movie star, a model, interesting, different, where are you from, no where are you really from — and none of it has ever felt like it was about him. It was about the face. The Japanese eyes with the freckles. The combination that people find striking.

JJ gives a toast that is short and precise and makes everyone cry. Shane gives a toast that is shorter and drier and makes everyone laugh, which surprises him. He says, "I've known Hayden for ten years, and in that time he's broken four bones, lost three teeth, and failed to learn how to do

laundry. Jackie, I'm not saying you should reconsider, but I want you to know what you're getting into." The room laughs. Hayden throws a napkin at him. Jackie raises her glass.

After the toasts, after the first dance, after Hayden's mother cries and Jackie's father makes a speech in French that Shane understands perfectly but that hits differently spoken aloud in this room, to these people, a girl sits down next to Shane at the table.

"You're the best man," she says. "One of them."

"One of them, yes."

"Your toast was funny. The laundry thing."

"It's not a joke. He genuinely doesn't know how to separate whites."

She laughs. She has a good laugh — easy, unforced, the kind that means she's actually amused and not performing amusement. She's pretty in a way that Shane registers clinically — dark hair, dark eyes, a dress the colour of wine. She extends her hand.

"Nora. Nora Chen. I'm Jackie's friend from BU."

"Shane Hollander."

"I know. Hayden talks about you. He says you're a figure skater who's allergic to fun."

"I'm not allergic to fun. I'm selective about fun."

Nora grins. "Selective. I like that." She picks up her wine glass and settles into the chair like she's planning to stay. "So what does a figure skater who's selective about fun do for fun?"

"I skate."

"That's your job."

"My job is fun."

"What else?"

Shane thinks about this. What he does. The rink, the apartment, the couch. The counter breakfasts and the ginger ale and the sound of Russian television through the wall. "I read," he says.

"What do you read?"

"Non-fiction mostly. Biomechanics. Sports psychology. Occasionally, something Rose, my doubles partner, gives me, which is usually a novel about a woman who moves to a small town and opens a bakery."

Nora laughs again. Shane notices that the laugh doesn't make his chest do the thing. It's just a laugh. Pleasant, warm, external. It stays on his surface like rain on a jacket.

They talk for an hour. Nora is easy to talk to in a way that Shane appreciates. She asks specific questions and listens to the full answers and doesn't interrupt and doesn't try to fill the pauses, and Shane finds himself saying more than he usually says, not because she's drawing it out of him but

because the conversation has a rhythm that suits him, unhurried and direct. She's studying art history at BU. She grew up in Montreal. Her parents are both doctors. She wants to work in a museum.

"You're easy to talk to," she tells him, and Shane blinks because no one has ever said this to him before. People say he's quiet. People say he's intense. People do not say he's easy to talk to.

"I think you might be the first person to say that," he says.

"Then everyone else isn't paying attention."

Rose appears at the table, flushed from dancing. "Shane! Come dance."

"I don't dance."

"Shane! Come dance! Hayden is requesting you. He says if you don't dance at his wedding, he's never speaking to you again."

Shane looks at Nora. Nora looks at Shane. "Go dance," Nora says. "I'll be here."

He dances, very badly. Hayden pulls him into a circle with JJ and Jackie's cousins, and the music is too loud. The floor is too crowded, there are too many people, and Shane's body sends him the signals — leave — but he stays, because Hayden is getting married and Hayden asked him to dance, and sometimes you override the system for the people you love.

When he comes back to the table, Nora is still there, talking to Rose, and they're laughing about something, and Rose catches Shane's eye and gives him a look that he reads as she's nice and he reads it correctly because Rose mouths the words she's nice at him over Nora's head.

At the end of the night, when the restaurant is emptying out, and Hayden and Jackie have left in a car covered in streamers, Nora writes her number on a cocktail napkin and slides it across the table.

"In case you want to be selective about fun sometimes," she says.

Shane takes the napkin. "I don't really date," he says, because honesty is the only language he speaks fluently.

"I'm not asking you to date me. I'm giving you my number. Those are different things."

He looks at the napkin. Neat handwriting. Ten digits. A small drawing of what might be a figure skate or might be a boot.

"Is that a skate?" he asks.

"It's a skate. I drew it for you."

"It looks like a boot."

"It's a skate, Shane."

Something in his chest does a small, tentative thing. Not the pulse thing he feels when he's with Ilya. This is something quieter and less frightening.

He puts the napkin in his jacket pocket. "Thank you, Nora."

"You're welcome, Shane."

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He keeps the napkin all summer.

In Ottawa with his parents, and training in Montreal with Rose, the napkin sits in the pocket of his suit jacket in the closet, and Shane thinks about it sometimes — at night, or in the car, or during the blank minutes between practice and sleep.

He doesn't call her. Not because he doesn't want to, but because he doesn't know what he'd say, and Shane doesn't do things he hasn't planned for. The summer passes the way summers pass — training, his parents, Rose, the choreographer, the new programs taking shape for the 2011-2012 season. Sochi is less than three years away, and Linda's voice is in his head constantly, a metronome of corrections and expectations.

Ilya is in Moscow. Shane doesn't ask about Moscow, and Ilya doesn't offer, but there are a few texts — sparse, the way they communicate when they're apart, which is not the way they communicate when they're together. Ilya texts him a photo of a cat on a Moscow street. Shane responds with a picture of a dog. Ilya responds with seventeen exclamation marks. This is their language.

He comes back to Boston in early August. Ilya is already there; he came back early again, the way he did last year. The apartment is the same. The ginger ale is on his shelf. The Coca-Cola is on the other. Ilya is on the couch.

"Hey," Ilya says.

"Hi."

"Good summer?"

"Productive."

"Boring?"

"You're an asshole."

Ilya grins. The apartment settles around him like a coat. Everything in its place.

On the second night back, they're on the couch. It's late, past midnight, the television off for once, the apartment quiet in the August heat with the windows open and the city sounds drifting in. Shane has a glass of ginger ale. Ilya has a Coke. They've been talking about nothing — the summer, Ilya's expectations for the season, the new choreography — and there's a pause, the comfortable kind, and then Shane says something he hasn't planned to say.

"How do you know when it's the right person?"

Ilya looks at him. The question sits in the room. Shane doesn't know where it came from — the wedding, maybe, Hayden's face at the altar, the napkin in his jacket pocket, the flat nothing with Jessica that he still can't explain. He doesn't take it back.

"The right person," Ilya repeats.

"Yes. How do you know? What does it feel like?"

Ilya is quiet for a moment. He turns his Coke can in his hands, slowly, and his face is doing something Shane hasn't seen before — open and careful at the same time, like he's choosing his words the way he chooses his passes on the ice, precisely, with full awareness of where they'll land.

"The right person," Ilya says, "is person who makes the room feel different just by being in it. Not better, just... different. Like the air changes. Like everything you think you know about the room is wrong because they are there and the room is new."

Shane listens.

"The right person makes you want to stay. Not because leaving is hard, but because staying is... easy. And you are not person who finds things easy, but with them it is. The silence is easy. The morning is easy. The coffee is easy." He pauses. The English is reaching for something bigger than it can hold, and Ilya pushes through it the way he pushes through a forecheck, with force and not much grace. "Right person knows how you take your coffee without asking. Right person reads next to you and doesn't need you to talk."

Ilya is looking at his Coke, not at Shane.

The apartment is very quiet. Shane can hear the city outside, the faint hum of traffic, someone's music from a window down the street.

"The right person," Ilya says, and his voice is lower now, quieter, "is the person you think about when you're trying to fall asleep. Not because you want them. Because they're the last thing your brain reaches for when everything else goes quiet."

"That's very specific," Shane says.

"You asked specific question."

"Have you felt that? About someone?"

Ilya takes a sip of his Coke. His jaw tightens, barely, and he rubs his nose with his thumb and forefinger and says, "Once. Maybe."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. Nothing happened."

"Why not?"

"Because sometimes the right person doesn't know they're the right person. And you can't tell them. Because telling them would change the room, and the room is the only good thing you have."

The silence after this is different from the comfortable silence. It's loaded, full, pressing against the walls of the apartment, and Shane can feel it on his skin, and he doesn't know what to do with it, so he does what he always does — he puts it away. Files the conversation somewhere he won't look. Drinks his ginger ale.

"I met someone at Hayden's wedding," Shane says. "She gave me her number."

"Yeah?" Ilya's voice is even. Perfectly even. "That's good, Shane."

"I haven't called her yet."

"You should call her."

"Yeah. Maybe."

They sit on the couch and the conversation is over and the room holds whatever it's holding and Shane finishes his ginger ale and goes to bed and lies in the dark and thinks about what Ilya said — the room that feels different, the silence that's easy, the last thing your brain reaches for.

Three days later, sitting on his bed with the door closed and Ilya's television murmuring through the wall, Shane reaches for the napkin and calls the number.

She picks up on the second ring. "The figure skater. I was starting to think you weren't going to call."

"I needed to evaluate the data."

"For two months?"

"I'm thorough."

She laughs. The surface laugh. Warm, pleasant, external. They talk for forty minutes about nothing — her summer, his training, the wedding, Hayden's dancing. She's funny and direct and doesn't require Shane to be anything other than what he is.

He asks her to dinner, and she says yes. He hangs up and sits on his bed for a moment, and then he opens his door and goes to the kitchen for a ginger ale, and Ilya is on the couch, feet up, hockey on the screen.

"I have a date," Shane says, because he doesn't know how else to say it. Directness is the only language he speaks.

Ilya's head turns. "A date."

"Yes."

"With who?"

"The girl I met at Hayden's wedding, remember? You said I should call her. Her name is Nora."

"Nora?" Ilya says. "Nora??" He sits up straighter. "I have never heard of this name before. I think it is fake."

"It's not fake. It's a name."

"Is not a name. Is a sound. Like a sneeze. Nora." He says it again, testing it, his face scrunched.

"No. I don't believe it."

"You don't have to believe it. I'm still going to dinner with her."

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know yet."

"Don't take her somewhere boring. Don't take her to the place you go with Rose where they serve fish on wooden board."

"What's wrong with fish on a wooden board?"

"Everything, Shane. Everything is wrong with fish on wooden board."

Shane takes his ginger ale and goes back to his room and closes the door, and through the wall he can hear Ilya saying "Nora" one more time, to himself, like he's still testing it, and then the hockey broadcast comes back up and the apartment settles and Shane sits on his bed and tells himself that this — Nora, the napkin, the dinner — is what he wants.

He tells himself this firmly and clearly and with conviction, the way he tells himself anything he needs to believe.

Chapter 16: christmas lights

Chapter Summary

Ilya meets Nora and hates that he actually likes her. Shane and Ilya spend Christmas together in the apartment, and for a brief second, Ilya allows himself to reach for what he wants.

Chapter Notes

This one's for AO3 user thatlady. I couldn't resist 🍷

Nora comes to the apartment on a Saturday evening in September, and Ilya meets her, and she is exactly what Ilya expected and also the worst possible thing.

She's pretty with dark hair, dark eyes, and a quick smile that arrives easily and stays. She's wearing jeans and a sweater, and she carries herself the way comfortable people do, without rigidity or effort. She laughs when Shane introduces them, a real laugh, and she extends her hand and says, "The roommate. I've heard a lot about you."

"All bad, I hope," Ilya says, and gives her the smile — the charming one — because the charming smile is what the moment requires, and because the alternative is standing in his own kitchen, looking at the girl his roommate is dating, and letting his face do something honest.

"Mostly bad," Nora says. "But Shane says your pelmeni are acceptable, which I think is high praise."

"From Shane, acceptable is like Nobel Prize."

Nora laughs again. Shane is standing beside her, and his body is doing something Ilya has learned to read over two years of close observation — he's performing. The shoulders are slightly back. The posture is slightly too straight. His face is arranged into an expression that looks like ease but isn't, the way a mannequin looks like a person but isn't, close enough to pass but missing the thing underneath that makes it real.

This is not the Shane who stands at the counter at six a.m., eating cereal in his sweatpants. Not the Shane who does the exhale-laugh at Ilya's jokes. Not the Shane who sat on the couch on Christmas Day and let the silence be enough. This is the public Shane, the one who performs normalcy for an audience, and Nora is the audience, and she doesn't know the difference because she's never seen the real Shane.

Ilya knows the difference.

They eat dinner. Ilya cooks because he always cooks when there's a guest, and Nora helps him in the kitchen while Shane sets the table. Nora chops onions, tells him about her art history thesis, and asks about hockey with the kind of specificity that suggests she either actually cares or is very good at pretending, and Ilya likes her.

That is the worst part. He likes her. She's smart and funny and easy, and she treats Shane with a gentle warmth that Shane clearly needs and rarely gets, and Ilya can see why Shane chose her, and it's like swallowing glass.

After dinner, Shane walks Nora to the door, and they stand in the hallway. Ilya stays in the kitchen because he has nowhere else to go, and the kitchen is as far from the hallway as the apartment allows. He hears Nora say something soft and Shane say something back, and then the sound of a kiss, and then the door closes, and Shane comes back into the kitchen.

"She is nice," Ilya says, because he has to say something and nice is the safest word.

"She is."

"You like her?"

Shane picks up a plate and takes it to the sink. "Yes."

The yes is flat. Ilya watches Shane wash the plate and knows that "yes" is not the whole answer.

"Good," Ilya says. "She is nice."

He goes to his room, closes the door, sits on his bed, and does not call Svetlana because calling Svetlana would mean saying it out loud, and saying it out loud would make it real.

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The fall is long.

Nora comes to the apartment once a week, sometimes twice. She and Shane go to dinner at restaurants Shane picks. Not the fish-on-a-wooden-board place, Ilya checked and to movies and to a museum that Nora likes in the Fenway. Shane mentions these things casually, the way he mentions everything, "We went to dinner." "We saw a movie." "Nora liked the exhibition." Ilya absorbs these statements, nods, and says "good" or "nice," then goes to the rink.

He watches Shane with Nora the way he watches everything about Shane — too closely, from too far away. He watches Shane open the door for her, hand on the small of her back. He watches Shane laugh at something Nora says over dinner, and the laugh is the polite one, the public one, not the exhale-laugh, not the almost-smile that Ilya has to earn. He watches Shane sit next to Nora on the couch when Ilya is pretending to watch television, their bodies close but not touching, a careful inch of distance that Shane maintains like a perimeter, and Nora doesn't seem to notice the inch but Ilya notices it because Ilya has spent two years mapping the distances Shane keeps between himself and other people.

One night in October, Ilya comes home from the rink and Nora is in the kitchen cooking. She's made pasta, real pasta, from scratch, flour on the counter and a pot boiling and the apartment smelling like garlic and basil, and she's talking to Shane, who is sitting at the counter watching her, and for a moment, from the doorway, Ilya sees what it would look like if this were real. Shane at

the counter. A woman in the kitchen. The warm domestic scene, the life that Shane is supposed to want, the life that everyone assumes Shane wants because Shane is handsome and careful and dates women who cook pasta.

Then Shane's eyes move from Nora to Ilya in the doorway, and the look lasts half a second, and in that half-second something passes across Shane's face that is not the performing face, something quick and raw and immediately suppressed, and then Shane looks back at Nora and says "that smells great" and the moment is gone.

Ilya goes to his room. He sits on his bed. He thinks about the half-second look and what was in it and whether he imagined it and knows that he didn't and knows that knowing changes nothing.

He still watches Shane skate. This has not changed, and he doubts it ever will. The stands are the one place where nothing is different, where the apartment and Nora and the performing version of Shane don't exist, where there is only the ice and the edges and the face Shane wears when he doesn't know he's being watched. The real face. The open one.

The Bears are in the middle of another strong season. Ilya is the captain now. They gave him the C in October, which surprised everyone, due to his age, except the locker room, and the locker room is the only place where it matters. The hockey is good. Hockey is the place where the noise in his head goes quiet, where his body does what it does, and the ice makes sense, and the performing isn't performing because on the ice, the loud, aggressive version of himself is the real one.

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Nora stays over for the first time in early November.

Ilya is in his room when they come in. He hears the door and the voices — Shane's low and measured, Nora's lighter, laughing about something — and then Shane's bedroom door closes. And the apartment is quiet.

He lies in bed and listens. Through the wall come the sounds. The bed, the murmuring, and then Shane, a sound that is soft and unmistakable, and Ilya's whole body goes rigid. He puts his headphones in. Turns the music up, but it doesn't cover it. He turns it up louder, stares at the ceiling, and doesn't sleep.

In the morning, Nora is in the kitchen making coffee. She's wearing one of Shane's t-shirts, and her hair is down, and she smiles at Ilya when he comes out of his room.

"Morning," she says. "Coffee?"

"Please."

She pours him a cup and they stand at the counter the way Ilya and Shane stand at the counter, except that this is different, this is wrong, this is Nora in the space where Shane should be, and Ilya takes his coffee and says "thank you" and goes back to his room and sits on his bed and drinks it and tastes nothing.

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December comes. The apartment is decorated because Nora brought a small tree and a set of lights and put them up while Shane watched with an expression that was half bewildered and half

something Ilya couldn't read. The tree sits in the corner of the living room. The lights blink. Ilya finds them oddly comforting — warm and mindless, doing their one job without complication.

Nora goes home to Montreal for the holidays. Shane doesn't go to Ottawa this year — he and Rose have a competition in early January, and Linda wants them on the ice through December.

On the second night, Shane is on the couch reading, and Ilya is on his end watching television, and it's the same as it's always been, the same good silence, and then Shane reaches into the pocket of his hoodie and puts on a pair of glasses.

Reading glasses. Dark-framed, rectangular. He puts them on without comment, without looking up, without any indication that he has just fundamentally altered the geometry of Ilya's evening, and goes back to his book.

Ilya stares at the television but does not see the television.

The glasses are — he doesn't have a word. The glasses change Shane's face in a way that shouldn't matter, yet matters so much that Ilya's brain goes blank for several seconds. Shane looks older with the glasses. Shane looks softer with the glasses. Shane looks like a person sitting in a library in a film Ilya would watch twice, and Ilya is aware that he is having an unhinged reaction to corrective eyewear, and he cannot stop it.

"When did you get glasses?" Ilya asks, and his voice comes out wrong — too flat, too controlled, the voice he uses when he's trying very hard not to sound like anything.

"Last week. The eye doctor said I need them for reading." Shane turns a page. "Apparently, staring at scoring sheets for twenty years has consequences."

"They look—" Ilya stops. Good. They look good. They look so good that I need to leave this room. "Fine. They look fine."

"Thanks for your comprehensive review."

Ilya turns back to the television and watches the screen without processing a single image for the next forty minutes, and Shane reads his book in the glasses, and Ilya is losing his mind over dark frames, and he knows it, and he cannot do a single thing about it.

The days settle into something that feels dangerously like enough. They watch television. They eat at the counter. Shane cooks his measured meals and Ilya orders takeout and sometimes they combine — Shane's rice and Ilya's Chinese food, Shane's chicken and Ilya's sauce — and the combining is domestic in a way that makes Ilya's chest ache because it's not domestic, it's roommates, it's two men sharing a kitchen, and the fact that it feels like more is Ilya's problem and not Shane's.

Shane's portions are smaller. Ilya has been watching the portions the way he's been watching everything about Shane, precisely, and the rice is less than it was in September. The chicken is less than it was in September. The cereal in the morning has gone from a full bowl to three-quarters of a bowl and the yoghurt has disappeared entirely, and when Ilya offers to cook for both of them Shane says "I already ate" more often than he used to.

"You want some?" Ilya says one evening, holding up a container of pad thai.

"I already ate."

"You had half a chicken breast three hours ago."

Shane looks at him. The look is brief and sharp, with an edge Ilya hasn't seen before, something close to a warning. "I said I already ate."

Ilya puts the pad thai down. "Okay." He doesn't push. He has learned which parts of Shane can be pushed and which parts can't.

On a Wednesday night, they're both on the couch, and Shane is reading, and Ilya is on his phone, and Shane says, without looking up, "You're being very quiet."

"I am always quiet."

"No. You're always loud."

Ilya looks at him. Shane is still looking at his book, but he's not reading — his eyes aren't moving, the page hasn't turned. He's waiting. Shane, who never initiates conversations about feelings, is waiting for Ilya to say something.

"I am thinking," Ilya says.

"About what?"

About you. About the glasses. About the fact that you're sitting three feet away from me and I can smell your soap and I want to put my hand in your hair and I will never, ever do it.

"About whether we can beat Montreal on Saturday," Ilya says.

"You can't," Shane says. "Montreal's defensive structure is better, and their goaltending is more consistent."

"You do not even like hockey."

"I don't have to like hockey to read a standings table." Shane turns a page. "Your penalty kill is also terrible."

"My penalty kill is top ten in league."

"Tenth is not a number you should be proud of."

Ilya grins at the ceiling. This. This is what he can't give up. The couch and the arguments and the way Shane's brain works, the way Shane can dismantle any topic with data and deliver the dismantling in a voice so flat it takes Ilya a second to realise he's being funny. This is what Nora doesn't get. This is what nobody gets except Ilya, and the exclusivity of it is the thing he holds onto when the rest of it gets unbearable.

On Christmas Eve, they're in the kitchen making pelmeni. Ilya is making them, Shane is assisting with the precision of a surgical nurse, folding each one into an exact replica of the last. They've done this before. Last year, and the year before. It's become a thing, Christmas Eve pelmeni, and neither of them has named it because naming it would make it something, and they are two people who are very good at not naming things.

The kitchen is small. It has always been small. Shane is rolling dough, and Ilya is beside him, folding, and their arms are close. Close enough that Ilya can feel the warmth coming off Shane's skin, can smell the soap that started as unscented when Shane moved in, but now has a faint cedar-wood smell, which has become the most specific smell in Ilya's life. Shane's sleeves are pushed up to his elbows, and his forearms are dusted with flour, and Ilya watches Shane's hands work. Precise and steady, the way they always are, and there's flour on Shane's cheek, a white streak across the freckles. The freckles are right there, close enough to count, and Ilya has been counting them for two years, and the counting has become a thing he does the way breathing is a thing he does, involuntary and constant and necessary.

Shane is talking about something. The competition in January, the throw they need to fix, a technical detail about the entry angle that Ilya doesn't understand and doesn't need to understand because Shane's voice when he talks about skating is the best sound in the world, low and focused and alive in a way it isn't about anything else, and Ilya is listening and not listening, hearing the voice and not the words, watching the hands and the flour and the freckles, and he does something he hasn't planned and can't take back.

He puts his hand over Shane's. Gently. Just lets it rest there, his fingers curling loosely around Shane's wrist, his thumb moving in a slow circle against the back of Shane's hand.

Shane stops talking mid-sentence. The sentence just ends, the technical detail about the entry angle abandoned in the air, and Shane goes still. He doesn't flinch or pull his hand away. No, this is a different type of stillness, the stillness of a person who has stopped breathing.

The kitchen is warm, and the pelmeni dough is on the counter, and the Christmas lights are blinking in the living room, and Ilya's thumb is drawing a circle on Shane's skin. Small, slow circles. Shane's pulse is under Ilya's fingers. It's fast, faster than it should be, the heart rate of someone who is not calm, who is the opposite of calm and Shane is still not pulling away.

He is not pulling away.

Ilya looks at Shane.

Shane is looking at their hands. His face is doing something Ilya has never seen before, it's open and startled and raw.

For one second — one — their eyes meet, and the kitchen fades away. Whatever Shane keeps locked away, whatever he's been sealing and refusing to look at, it is right there, on his face, and Ilya can see it, and it looks like everything Ilya has wanted for two years.

Then Shane pulls his hand away.

"Sorry," Shane says. His voice is steady. His face is closing, swinging shut, possibility disappearing with it. "I need to — the flour—"

"Shane."

But Shane is already moving, turning away, and the moment is over. It lasted one second. Maybe less. And now Shane is in the cabinet getting flour that they don't need, and his hands are shaking slightly, and Ilya can see them shaking from across the kitchen, and he doesn't say anything because what would he say? Shane comes back with the flour and puts it on the counter, and doesn't look at Ilya, and they finish the pelmeni in silence.

They eat on the couch. The television is on. Russian channel. The lights blink. Shane eats his pelmeni and doesn't talk, and Ilya eats his pelmeni and doesn't talk, and the silence is different from every other silence they've shared. It's heavier, charged, full of the thing that happened and the way it ended. Ilya sits on the couch and thinks about Shane's face in that one second, the open, startled, raw thing, and tells himself it was nothing. Tells himself it was the proximity, the holiday, and the fact that Shane hasn't seen Nora in a week. Tells himself anything other than what it was, because believing what it was would mean hoping, and hope is the thing that will break him.

Shane goes to bed early. "Merry Christmas, Ilya."

"Merry Christmas, Shane."

The door closes. Shane's light goes off. The apartment is dark except for the blinking Christmas lights, red and green and white cycling through the living room, throwing coloured shadows on the wall and the ceiling and the leftover pelmeni on the counter and the flour that is still there. The flour that nobody needed, the flour that was Shane's excuse to pull his hand away and leave.

Ilya sits on the couch and stares at the blinking lights, and replays it. The thumb on Shane's skin. The pulse underneath, fast and frightened. The face — the open, startled, raw thing that lasted one second before the door slammed shut.

He replays it again and again. Each time he looks for the thing that tells him he was wrong, that it was nothing, that Shane pulled away because the touch was unwelcome and the sorry meant I don't want this. But the face. The face was not the face of a person who doesn't want this. The face was the face of a person who wants this so much that the wanting is terrifying, and the terror is what made him run.

Ilya knows terror. Ilya has been living inside terror for years— the terror of wanting someone who might not want him back, the terror of being wrong, the terror of the locker room and the word and the laugh that is a shield. He knows what it looks like when a person is scared of what they feel, because he sees it in the mirror every morning.

He saw it on Shane's face tonight.

The hope tries to climb up through his chest, and he pushes it back down, hard, because he's been here before, the edge of wanting something that isn't his, and the fall from the edge is the thing he can't survive again. But the hope is stronger now.

He calls Svetlana.

"Come to Boston," he says.

"What? When?"

"January. February. Whenever. Just come."

"Ilya, what happened?"

"Nothing happened. I just—" He closes his eyes. The lights blink red and green and white behind his eyelids. "I need you here. Please."

Svetlana is quiet for a moment. She can hear something in his voice, she always can, and she doesn't push. "Okay," she says. "I'll come."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Just — tell me when I get there. Whatever this is."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Ilya hangs up and sits on the couch, and the Christmas lights blink red and green and white, and the apartment is quiet. Shane is on the other side of the wall, and the hope, the unbearable, terrifying hope, climbs up through his chest, and this time he doesn't push it back down.

He lets it stay.

Chapter 17: wrong outlet

Chapter Summary

Svetlana's visit changes things. Shane breaks up with Nora, and tells Rose the truth.

Svetlana arrives in late January, and this time everything is different.

Shane knows it's different because of the way Ilya is with her. Last time Svetlana visited, they slept together, and Shane heard them through the wall. This time, the wall is quiet at night. No sounds, no bed, nothing. Shane doesn't know what that means. It could mean they're being quieter. It could mean nothing has changed and they're just more considerate. It could mean something else entirely, and Shane is not going to think about what the something else might be because the something else lives in a part of his brain he has sealed shut.

What he does know is that Svetlana is in Ilya's room. The door closes at night with both of them behind it. Shane hears the murmuring in Russian, and then silence, and the silence could contain anything.

But the closeness during the day is what gets him. Without the sounds through the wall to be angry about, Shane has nothing to focus on except the way Ilya and Svetlana exist in each other's space — the arm around her waist in the kitchen, the way she puts her head in his lap on the couch and Ilya's hand goes to her hair, the way they speak Russian to each other, low and warm, a whole world Shane can't enter. The laughing. The constant, easy laughing, as if being near each other is inherently good, and the goodness doesn't require the effort that Shane needs for every human interaction he's ever had.

Shane watches this, and the thing in his chest is hot and sharp, and it gets worse every day because every day he sees more of what Ilya and Svetlana have — the shorthand, the history, the decade-long friendship — and every day the hot, sharp thing clarifies into something Shane can almost name. Want. He wants what they have. He wants to be the person Ilya speaks Russian to in the kitchen. He wants to be the person whose hair Ilya touches without thinking.

On the first evening, they're all on the couch. Shane at his end, Svetlana in the middle, Ilya at his end, and Svetlana falls asleep. Her head drops onto Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya adjusts without waking her, shifting his body to accommodate the weight, his arm coming around her, and the adjusting is so automatic and so practised that it looks like breathing. Shane watches this from three feet away and thinks about what it would feel like to fall asleep on Ilya's shoulder and have Ilya adjust without waking him, and the thinking is a door he's not supposed to open, and the door opens anyway.

On the second morning, Svetlana comes out of the shower with wet hair, and Ilya is in the kitchen, and he hands her a towel without looking, without being asked, the way Shane hands Rose her water bottle at the boards. Shane watches the towel pass from Ilya's hand to Svetlana's hand, and the passing is nothing; it's only a towel, the smallest possible gesture, and Shane's chest does the hot, sharp thing, and he has to leave the kitchen.

Svetlana is kind to Shane. This makes it worse. She asks about his skating with genuine interest. She remembers details from her last visit — the scoring system diagrams, the ISU conversation. She brings him coffee one morning without being asked and the coffee is made the way Shane likes it, which means Ilya told her how Shane takes his coffee, which means Ilya talks about Shane to Svetlana, which means Shane exists in their private Russian world as a topic, as a presence, and Shane doesn't know whether this makes the jealousy better or worse.

On the second night, they cook together. Ilya and Svetlana are in the kitchen, speaking Russian, laughing, and Shane is at the table pretending to read a training schedule. Ilya is making something complicated, and Svetlana is stealing pieces of pepper off the cutting board, and Ilya keeps swatting her hand away, and she keeps reaching back. Shane watches Ilya's hand close around Svetlana's wrist, gentle and playful, and Ilya pulls her hand to his mouth and bites her finger lightly and Svetlana shrieks and laughs, and Shane looks down at his training schedule, and the numbers swim.

He excuses himself. Goes to his room. Sits on his bed in the dark and puts his hand flat on his chest and feels his heart going too fast and thinks: this is jealousy. He's known it since he saw Ilya on that bench with Rose. But that was manageable. This is not manageable. This is Ilya biting someone's finger in the kitchen and Shane's whole body reacting as if it were a personal betrayal, which it isn't, which it can't be, because Ilya doesn't belong to Shane and Shane has no claim over him.

On the third morning, Shane is up early. He's heading for the door when he passes Ilya's bedroom — the door is open, Svetlana already in the kitchen — and he glances in without meaning to and stops.

There's a blow-up mattress on the floor beside the bed. A pillow. A blanket, tangled, kicked half off.

Ilya has been sleeping on the floor.

Shane stands in the hallway and looks at the mattress and the bed, and at the space between them, which means they're not sleeping together. The silence through the wall was silence. The door closing at night with both of them behind it was two people going to the same room and sleeping apart, and Ilya has been on a blow-up mattress on the floor of his own bedroom for — how many nights? Every night of the visit. Every night, Shane lay in his bed and tortured himself with what the closed door might contain.

It contained nothing. It contained friendship. It contained the same thing it always contained, which is Svetlana and Ilya loving each other in a way that is real and warm and not the thing Shane was afraid of.

The relief is immediate and enormous and followed instantly by something worse — shame. Because the relief means the jealousy was about sex. The relief means Shane was jealous of Svetlana sleeping with Ilya, which means Shane wanted to be the person sleeping with Ilya, which means —

He walks to the rink. He doesn't finish the thought.

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He breaks up with Nora on a Tuesday.

It happens fast, and the decision doesn't actually feel like a decision. She comes to the apartment for dinner and they sit at the table and she talks about her thesis and a museum opening and a friend's birthday, and Shane listens and nods and eats and feels the flatness, the same flatness he felt with Jessica, the surface quality of it, and Nora is mid-sentence about a Rothko exhibition when Shane says, "I don't think this is working."

Nora stops talking. She puts her fork down.

"Okay," she says. Carefully. "Can you tell me why?"

Shane owes her honesty because honesty is the only thing he's good at, and he doesn't have it. He doesn't know why. Or he knows, and the knowing is locked somewhere he can't reach, not here, not at this table, with this person who has been nothing but kind.

"It's not you," he says, and knows how it sounds.

"It's not me," Nora repeats.

"You're... you've been great. I just don't think I can give you what you deserve."

Nora looks at him for a long moment. She is not crying. She is not angry. She is looking at him with an expression that is sad and also, underneath the sadness, something that looks like recognition, like she is seeing something she's suspected for a while and is only now allowing herself to confirm.

"Shane," she says. "Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"When we're together — when we're in bed, or when we're at dinner, or when we're doing anything — are you there? Like, actually there?"

The question hits something deep and true. He thinks about the bed. About Nora beside him, warm and willing, and the mechanical quality of his response, the way his body performed without his mind arriving, the way he lay afterwards and felt the same nothing he felt after Jessica, the same baffling blankness where a feeling should be.

"No," he says. "I don't think I am."

Nora nods. She picks up her fork, puts it down again, stands up, and puts on her coat, and Shane stands too because standing is what you do when someone is leaving.

"I hope you figure it out," she says at the door. "Whatever it is. I really do."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just figure it out."

She leaves. The door closes. From the living room, Shane can hear the Russian television and Svetlana laughing at something, and Ilya's voice, low and warm, and the sound of it makes the hot, sharp thing in his chest flare so hard that he has to put his hand on the kitchen counter and breathe.

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He carries the breakup for three days, and the three days are the worst three days of Shane's life, worse than the first week in the apartment with Ilya, worse than the night Ilya brought the last girl home, and the sounds through the wall made Shane's jaw ache.

On the first day, he goes to the rink and trains for five hours, and Linda says his extensions are the best they've been all season, but his focus is the worst. "Your body is here," Linda says. "Where's the rest of you?"

"I'm here."

"You're not. But the body work is good, so I'll take it." She makes a note on her clipboard. "Whatever's going on, bring it to the ice or leave it at home. Don't bring half."

The second day he comes home from practice and Ilya is on the couch watching hockey highlights.

"How was practice?" Ilya asks, and Shane says, "Fine."

"You want to watch the Toronto game tonight?" and Shane answers "no".

The no hangs between them. Shane never says no to the couch. The couch is theirs, the couch is the sacred space, and the no is a crack in the surface, and Ilya hears it. Shane can tell Ilya hears it from the half-second of silence that follows, the silence where Ilya's brain processes the no and decides whether to push.

Ilya doesn't push. This is one of the things about Ilya that Shane has never been able to explain to anyone. How the loudest person in every room is also the person who knows when to be quiet. Ilya says "okay" and turns back to the television, and Shane goes to his room, closes his door, sits on the bed and stares at the wall, and the wall has nothing to tell him.

The third day is Saturday. Shane wakes up at eight a.m. He lies in bed and listens to the apartment. Ilya is asleep. The apartment holds the particular quiet of early morning, the quiet Shane has always loved, the quiet that belongs to him before anyone else wakes up. But the quiet isn't working today. The quiet is the place where the thoughts live, and the thoughts are: Nora's face when she said, "Are you there?" Jessica's face when he felt nothing. Ilya's thumb on his hand on Christmas Eve, and the way his entire nervous system caught fire. The blow-up mattress on the floor. The way Ilya's voice sounds when he says Shane's name, the way the sh is softer than it should be because Russian doesn't have the same sh, and Ilya has never quite fixed it, and Shane doesn't want him to fix it.

He calls Rose at ten. By eleven, he's on her couch with a cup of tea he's not drinking, and he says, "I need to talk to you about something."

Rose is on the floor stretching. She looks up. "Okay."

"I broke up with Nora."

"Oh." Rose sits up. "Shane, I'm sorry. What happened?"

"Nothing happened. She was great. I just—" He stares at the tea which is getting cold. The tea has been getting cold for twenty minutes. "I felt nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean nothing. With Nora. The same thing I felt with Jessica. The same... flatness. Like there's a place where a feeling should be and there's just..." He makes a gesture with his hand. Empty.

Rose is watching him carefully. Not with judgment, not with concern, just with attention. The same attention she gives to the ice. "Okay. Have you thought about why?"

"I've thought about nothing else for three days."

"And?"

Shane puts the tea down. His hands are shaking slightly, the same way they shook in the kitchen on Christmas Eve, and he looks at them and thinks about the flour and Ilya's thumb drawing a circle on the back of his hand and the way his entire body went electric, every nerve alive and present in a way that it has never been with Jessica or Nora or anyone, and the thought is so clear and so enormous and so terrifying that his vision blurs for a second.

"I think there might be something wrong with me," he says.

"There's nothing wrong with you."

"There might be. Because I can't — with women. I can't feel the thing. The thing Hayden has. The thing everyone has. I do everything right and I feel nothing and then—"

He stops. The sentence has a destination and the destination is a cliff and he is standing at the edge of it.

Rose waits. She has always been good at waiting.

"Then what?" she says gently.

Shane closes his eyes. The kitchen. The flour. The thumb on his hand. The way his body lit up like every circuit completing at once. The couch on Christmas Day, the first year, the apartment was warm, and Ilya was beside him, and the silence was enough. The breakaway goal and his hands on his knees. The laugh through the wall that made the tight thing in his chest loosen. The stands in the morning, the bad vending machine coffee, and the boy in the Bears hoodie watching him skate. The alley. The cigarette smoke. The crooked smile and the light eyes and the voice that said Shane like it was tasting the word.

All of it. Every moment. Every sealed, locked, and deliberately unopened thing. He sees it now. He's always seen it. He just refused to look.

"Shane," Rose says, and her voice is far away and very close at the same time. "What are you telling me?"

"I think I'm—" His voice cracks. He hasn't cried since he was thirteen, and he isn't going to cry now, but something behind his eyes is burning, and his hands are shaking, and the word is right there, the simple, obvious word that changes everything, and he says it.

"I think I'm gay."

Rose doesn't move. Doesn't gasp, doesn't reach for him, doesn't do any of the things that would make this worse. She sits on her floor and looks at him, and her eyes are full, and her expression is steady, and she says, "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay." She nods. Slow, certain. "Okay, Shane."

"You don't—" He doesn't know what he was going to say. You don't hate me. You don't think I'm broken. You don't think this changes everything. All of the above.

"I don't anything," Rose says. "I love you. This doesn't change that. Nothing changes that."

Something in Shane breaks, the kind where something that was held too tightly for too long is finally released, and the release hurts, but the hurt is also relief, and he puts his face in his hands, and his shoulders shake. Rose gets up from the floor and sits beside him on the couch, puts her arm around him, and holds him, and Shane lets her, which is the bravest thing he has ever done.

They sit like that for a long time. Rose doesn't ask who. She doesn't ask when or how or why. She just holds him, and Shane breathes and breathes and breathes.

Eventually, he lifts his head. His eyes are dry. The burning has passed. He feels hollowed out and raw, and also, underneath all of it, lighter. Like something that was pressing on his chest has been removed, and his lungs are expanding for the first time in years.

"I don't know what to do," he says.

"You don't have to do anything right now."

"There's a person."

Rose nods. She doesn't ask who. Shane suspects she doesn't need to, but she doesn't say so.

"It's complicated," Shane says.

"It usually is."

"He has someone, or many of them, actually."

"Okay."

"I'm not going to do anything about it."

"You don't have to do anything about it."

"I just needed to say it. Out loud to someone."

"You said it. I heard it. It's real." Rose squeezes his arm. "And Shane? There's nothing wrong with your wiring. The wiring is fine. You're just trying to plug yourself into the wrong outlet."

Shane looks at her. And for the first time in three days, for the first time in weeks, for the first time in what feels like his entire life, Shane laughs. Sudden and surprised and full, and it sounds strange in his own ears because he almost never makes this sound. Rose is smiling at him, and the world is the same world it was an hour ago, and also completely different.

"Wrong outlet," he says.

"Wrong outlet," Rose confirms.

Shane goes home. The apartment is dark. Svetlana has gone out somewhere, and Ilya is on the couch watching hockey with the volume low, and he looks up when Shane comes in, and the crooked smile appears, and he says, "Shane. You are home."

Shane stands in the doorway and looks at Ilya on the couch — the curls, the hoodie, the beer, the television light on his face — and for the first time, he lets himself see what he's looking at. Actually see it.

He's looking at the person he's in love with.

"Yeah," Shane says. "I'm home."

He goes to his room, closes the door, sits on his bed, puts his hands on his thighs, and breathes. Through the wall, the hockey broadcast murmurs. Through the wall, Ilya is there.

Shane sits in the dark and feels the full weight of what he knows now, and it is enormous, and it is terrifying, and it is also, in a way he didn't expect, a relief. The door is open. The room behind the door, the room he's been trying to keep sealed for so long, is visible, and the room is full of light, and the light has a name.

The name is Ilya.

Chapter 18: the fight

Chapter Summary

Svetlana sees that Ilya is falling apart. Shane tells him about Nora, and the fight that follows nearly breaks them.

Something is wrong with Shane, and Ilya can't fix it because he doesn't know what it is.

It started before Svetlana arrived — after Christmas, after the kitchen and the flour and the thumb and the second of Shane's face being open and then the door slamming shut. Shane had been quieter since then, more careful, but it was manageable. Ilya could live with careful.

Then Svetlana came, and the careful turned into something else. Shane is present but not there. He comes to the counter for breakfast but doesn't say much. He sits on the couch but more often than not, leaves when Svetlana joins them. He's polite with her — genuinely polite, asks about her day, lets her make him coffee — but there's something underneath the politeness that Ilya can feel, a vibration, like a wire pulled too tight.

Ilya knows what this is. He knows because he caused it. Christmas Eve, the kitchen, his hand on Shane's hand. His thumb on Shane's skin. The look on Shane's face and then the retreat and the sorry and the shaking hands and the flour they didn't need. Ilya crossed a line and Shane felt it and now Shane is recalibrating, adjusting, building a new wall to replace the one Ilya breached, and the new wall is polite and careful and worse than the old one because the old one was built from not knowing and this one is built from knowing too much.

He should apologise. He should say something. *I'm sorry, I was out of line, it won't happen again, you're my friend and I fucked up.* But the apology would require naming what happened, and naming what happened would require admitting what it was, and admitting what it was would mean standing in the kitchen and saying I touched your hand because I'm in love with you and I have been for over two years and I couldn't stop myself, and that sentence is not a sentence Ilya can survive saying out loud to a person who pulled away.

So he does what he does. He performs. Svetlana is here, and Svetlana is the performance. His hand on her waist, his mouth on her hair, the easy physical closeness of two people who know each other's bodies, and it looks like love but isn't, and both Ilya and Svetlana know it isn't and the pretending is getting harder.

The performing is always harder now. Not just with Svetlana, but everywhere. The locker room grin takes more effort. The bar laugh takes more effort. The charming version of himself that he puts on every morning like a uniform is heavier this season. It waits for the car ride home. It waits for the shower. It waits for the dark bedroom and the ceiling and the minutes when nobody needs him to be anything, and then it arrives, quiet, cold, and total. He lies in bed and the flatness fills the room and his body is heavy and his mind is empty and the only thing that breaks the surface is the sound of Shane's alarm through the wall. Proof that he's still here, still real.

"You're different this time," Svetlana tells him on a Wednesday morning, sitting on his bed while he gets dressed for practice. "With me. With everything."

"Different how?"

"Slower." She watches him pull his hoodie over his head. "You're moving slower. You used to get dressed in forty-five seconds. I've been sitting here for five minutes."

"I'm tired."

"You're always tired. This is different. You're—" She searches for the word. "Heavy. Like something is sitting on you that wasn't there last time."

"I have a hockey season sitting on me. I'm captain now, I have responsibilities."

"Ilya." She pulls her knees up on the bed. "When did you last sleep through the night?"

"I sleep."

"That's not what I asked."

He doesn't answer. He doesn't sleep through the night. He hasn't slept through the night in weeks, not since Christmas. He falls asleep around two and wakes at four and lies in the dark listening. Listening to the five-fifteen alarm, Shane's feet on the floor, the shower, the proof that the distance between them hasn't grown overnight.

"You're not eating properly either," Svetlana says. "Last night you made dinner for three people and ate half a plate."

"I wasn't hungry."

"You're never hungry anymore. You used to eat like an animal. Now you pick at things." She's watching him with the expression she uses when she's assembling something — pieces clicking into place, a picture forming that she can see and he can't. "And you're louder with me than usual. You kissed me in the kitchen yesterday morning while he was standing right there."

"I kiss you in kitchens. That's a thing we do."

"Not like that. That was a kiss for an audience." She pauses. "You're performing happy and you're not happy, and the gap between the two is bigger than I've ever seen it, and it scares me."

Ilya sits on the edge of the inflatable mattress with his hoodie half-zipped and doesn't look at her.

"When your mother died," Svetlana says carefully, "you got like this. The performing got louder and the person underneath got quieter. You were twelve and I watched it happen and I didn't know what I was watching. I know now."

"This is not—"

"I'm not saying it's the same. I'm saying the pattern is the same. Something is hurting you and instead of feeling it you're filling the space with noise. With me, with the team, with the grinning and the charming. But when the noise stops — when you're in this room, when it's just us — I can see it. The quiet underneath. And the quiet is getting louder, Ilya."

He zips the hoodie. Picks up his bag. "I have practice."

"I know you have practice."

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. But you're going to go to practice and skate until your legs shake because that's the other thing you do when it gets bad, and I'm going to be here when you get back, and at some point you're going to tell me what's actually happening."

Ilya leaves for practice and skates hard enough that LeClaire tells him to dial it back and he doesn't dial it back and by the end his legs are shaking and his lungs are raw and Svetlana is right about everything, like she always is.

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Nora stops coming to the apartment.

She was supposed to come for dinner on day three of Svetlana's visit. Shane cancelled, said practice ran long, said he was tired, that she was tired. She was supposed to come on Saturday. Shane cancelled again. No explanation this time, just a text Ilya saw him send from the counter, thumb moving fast, face closed.

Ilya doesn't ask. Asking would be... he doesn't ask.

By the middle of the visit Shane has stopped mentioning Nora entirely. No texts lighting up his phone at the counter, no plans mentioned, no museum trips or dinners at restaurants that serve fish on wooden boards. The couch time is less. The counter time is less. The exhale-laugh is gone. The you're boring and the you're an asshole that have been their shorthand for three years is gone. Replaced by a careful neutrality that Ilya can feel pressing against his skin, and the absence of the stupid exchange hurts more than it should because the stupid exchange was theirs and now it's not there. The cereal bowl in the morning is less than half-full, and some mornings Shane skips it entirely, just coffee, just the door at five-thirty, and Ilya lies in on the inflatable mattress and listens and counts the sounds.

On the Tuesday night, day nine of Svetlana's visit, Ilya is in the kitchen making dinner and Shane comes out of his room and stands in the doorway and says, "Nora and I broke up."

Ilya's hand stops on the knife. "What?"

"On Friday. We broke up."

"On Friday?"

"Yes."

"You broke up with your girlfriend four days ago and you did not... you have been here all weekend and you did not say anything?"

"I'm saying it now."

The kitchen is quiet. Shane is waiting.

"I thought something was wrong," Ilya says finally.

"Something was wrong. I told you. Nora and I broke up."

"Is that why you are in such a bad mood? Is that what all this is?"

Shane doesn't answer immediately. His jaw tightens.

"Just call her," Ilya says, rubbing his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "She was good for you. She will have you back. Call her and stop being—"

"Stop being what?"

"Like this. Stop being like this."

"Like what, Ilya? What am I being like?"

"Like you do not want to be here. Like the apartment is a place you come for sleep and nothing else. You do not sit on couch. You do not talk to me. You eat half bowl of cereal and leave before I am awake and come home and go to your room and I am—" He stops himself. Rubs his nose again. "I am worried about you."

"Don't be worried about me."

"Too late."

"I said don't."

"And I said too late. You do not get to tell me not to worry when you have been pulling away for weeks. You walk through the apartment like is a hospital corridor. You look at me like—" He stops again because the sentence ends in a place he can't go.

"Like what?" Shane's voice is quiet. Dangerous quiet.

"Like I did something to you." Ilya watches Shane's face and the face is doing the thing, like it's trying to hold two expressions at once and the holding is costing everything.

"You didn't do anything to me," Shane says.

"Then why don't you look at me?"

"I'm looking at you right now."

"Not like this. Not in the kitchen with three feet between us. I mean on the couch. At the counter. The way you used to look at me when you said you are boring and I said you are an asshole and we were—" His voice breaks. The breaking is small, a crack in the word, and it sounds like the break on the vodka night, and they both hear it.

"We were what?" Shane says. His voice is shaking now too.

"We were us. And now we are not. And I do not know why."

"You want to know why?"

"Yes."

"You really want to know?"

"Shane. Yes."

Shane's hands are fists at his sides. His jaw is tight and his eyes are bright and he's standing in the kitchen doorway looking at Ilya, and his mouth opens and for one second Ilya thinks he's going to say it, whatever it is, the thing that's been living behind the careful face for weeks.

"Call Nora," Shane says instead. "That's your advice. Call her. Cause that's what you do, Ilya. You want me to call her and go back to her because that's performing, and that's all you know."

"What does that mean?"

"It means you perform for everyone, Ilya. Svetlana, the locker room, me. You're always performing. The grin and the charm and the arm around whoever's closest. And I can't—" He stops, then starts again. "I can't watch it anymore."

"You can't watch what?"

"You. With her. With anyone. The way you touch people like it's nothing, like it costs you nothing, and maybe it doesn't cost you anything but it costs me—" He stops, then starts again, rougher.

"I felt nothing with Nora. Nothing with Jessica. Nothing my entire—" He catches himself. The sentence runs into a wall and Shane pulls it back and his face goes white with the effort.

"Your entire what?" Ilya says.

Shane ignores him, keeps going. "And then I watch you put your hand in Svetlana's hair like it's the easiest thing in the world and I—" He stops again. The gate is closing. Shane's hands are fists at his sides.

"It costs you what?" Ilya whispers.

"Forget it."

"Shane. You felt nothing your entire what? And it costs you what?"

"I said forget it."

"No. You said you felt nothing your entire... what? Your entire life? Every relationship? What are you saying? And now it costs you — what does it cost you to watch me with Svetlana?"

Shane's face is white. Not just pale, it's ghost white. The colour has left his skin, his hands are clenched at his sides and Ilya can see the tremor in them, the same tremor from the kitchen on Christmas Eve, and something in Ilya's chest shifts from anger to fear because Shane looks like he's standing on the edge of something and the edge is crumbling.

"Shane," Ilya says, and his voice is different now, the anger gone, replaced by something softer. "What are you telling me?"

"Nothing. I'm not telling you anything. I'm going out."

"It's eleven at night."

"I'm going to Rose's."

"Shane—"

"Leave me alone, Ilya."

The words are sharp and final and they hit Ilya in the chest and he stands in the kitchen with the chicken half-cut on the board and watches Shane put on his shoes and his jacket and leave,. The door closes and the apartment is quiet and Ilya stands there, his hands shaking and replays the sentence Shane didn't finish. *It costs me*, and the him not finishing it is louder than any finished sentence has ever been

Svetlana comes out of his room a few minutes later. She's been reading on the bed, and Ilya forgot she was there, which tells him how far gone he is. She stands in the kitchen doorway and looks at the half-cut chicken and the knife on the counter and Ilya leaning against the stove with his arms crossed and his jaw tight.

"I heard that," she says.

"I know."

"All of it."

"I know, Sveta."

She comes into the kitchen and leans against the counter across from him. "That wasn't about Nora."

"It was about Nora. He broke up with her, and he's—"

"Ilyusha. Stop." Her voice is sharp. Not unkind, it never is, but sharp the way a blade is sharp, precise, meant to cut through something. "I've been watching you two for a long time, I've been listening to you talk about him even longer. I was here last January, and I'm here now, and I have eyes. That was not about Nora."

"Then what was it about?"

"You tell me. He said it costs him to watch you with me. He said those words. What do you think that means?"

"He's upset. He's—"

"He said I can't watch you with her anymore. He said you perform for everyone. He said it costs him." Svetlana counts these on her fingers. "And before that, he said he felt nothing with Nora. Nothing with Jessica. Nothing his entire life. What do you think the rest of that sentence was?"

Ilya's arms are tight across his chest. "You don't know what you're—"

"I know exactly what I'm saying. A man who is upset about losing his girlfriend doesn't fight like that. He doesn't say it costs me to watch you touch someone else and then run out of the apartment at eleven at night." Svetlana's eyes are steady, and her voice is the voice she uses when she's not

going to let him hide. "Something else is happening. And you know it. You've known it for a long time."

"He pulled away. At Christmas. I touched his hand, and he pulled away and said sorry."

"He said sorry."

"Yes."

"He was sorry. Not disgusted. Not angry. Sorry. Like he did something wrong."

Ilya opens his mouth and closes it.

"And tonight he almost told you. He was right there, Ilya. I heard his voice through the wall. He was about to say something, and he stopped himself, and you know what he was going to say."

"I don't—"

"You do. Say it."

"I can't."

"Say it, Ilya."

"I can't! Because if I say it and I'm wrong—"

"You're not wrong."

"You don't know that."

"I do know that. Because I've watched you fall in love with someone for three years, and I've watched that someone change every time you walk into a room. His whole body changes. The way he holds himself changes. He gets... quieter. Like your presence is the thing that makes the noise in his head stop." She steps closer. "And tonight he told you that watching you touch me is costing him something he can't name. What do you think the name is?"

The kitchen is silent. Ilya's chest is so tight he can feel his heartbeat in his throat.

"Has it occurred to you," Svetlana says, more gently now, "that he pulled away because he felt something and it scared him?"

Ilya doesn't answer. Shane is two floors down at Rose's apartment, which is close enough to hear if Ilya shouted and far enough to feel like another country.

"I can't hope for this," Ilya says. "If I hope for this and I'm wrong—"

"I know."

"I won't survive it."

"I know." Svetlana walks over to him, puts her hands on his face, and looks at him. "But I think you're not wrong. And I think you know you're not wrong. And I think the thing you're actually afraid of isn't being wrong. It's being right. Because if he wants you back, then the hiding stops

being about protecting yourself and starts being about choosing fear over him. And you're not ready for that."

Ilya closes his eyes. Svetlana's hands are warm on his face, and she is his oldest friend, and she is right, and he is terrified.

"What do I do?" he whispers.

"You wait for him to come back. And when he comes back, you don't push. You just let him know the door is open."

"What door?"

"Any door. Every door. All the doors you've been keeping locked because you thought he didn't want to walk through them." She drops her hands. "And Ilya? Our door.. It needs to close."

He nods. He knows, has known for a long time. It's not like they've slept together since last January, but it was always there, open and reciprocal. But he doesn't want to walk through that door anymore, doesn't need it.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Don't be sorry. I love you. This doesn't change that." She smiles, and the smile is sad and generous and certain. "But I'm not going to be the wall you hide behind anymore. Not from this."

+++

Shane comes home at two in the morning.

Ilya is on the couch and the television is off. He didn't turn it on, not once, in the three hours Shane was gone. Svetlana went to bed an hour ago. She squeezed Ilya's shoulder on her way to his room and said "leave the door open", and Ilya didn't know if she meant the bedroom door or the other kind, and she probably meant both.

The apartment is dark except for the kitchen light, which Ilya left on because Shane navigates the apartment by the kitchen light when he comes home late.

The door opens. Shane's shoes are on the mat. His jacket is on the hook. The familiar sequence, except slower, like each step is costing him something. There's a long pause in the hallway, and Shane standing there, Ilya can hear him standing there, the particular quality of a person deciding whether to go to their room or come into the living room.

Shane comes into the living room. He sees Ilya on the couch and stops.

"Hey," Ilya says.

"Hi."

"I am sorry. About before. About Nora, and telling you to call her. I was—" He chooses the word carefully. "Wrong."

Shane stands in the doorway. He looks exhausted. His eyes are red-rimmed, and his hair is flat on one side, as if he were lying on Rose's couch, and he looks like someone who has been through

something that changed the shape of him.

"It's okay," Shane says.

"It is not okay. I should not tell you what you need. You are right. I do not know."

Shane doesn't sit. He stands in the doorway, and Ilya is on the couch, and the distance between them is the length of the living room, which is ten feet, which used to feel like nothing and now feels like the most important ten feet in the world.

"Can I say something?" Ilya says.

Shane nods. Once.

"I care that you eat breakfast. I care that you sit on the couch. I care that you are here, in this apartment, and that the apartment feels like... like the place it is supposed to feel like. And since Christmas, it has not felt like that. And I need it to feel like that. Because this—" He gestures at the apartment, the couch, the kitchen light he left on. "This is the only place that works for me. You are the only place that works for me."

The sentence comes out before he can rein it. He hears it after he says it and his hand goes to his nose and his heart is hammering and the sentence is too much, is almost the real thing, and Shane is standing in the doorway looking at him and Shane's face is doing something Ilya has never seen before. It's open and careful and full, like a person who has just been given something fragile and is deciding whether they can hold it without breaking it.

"You know more than you think," Shane says quietly.

"What does that mean?"

Shane doesn't answer. He looks at Ilya on the couch. The look is long, and it contains something that Ilya can almost read, and then Shane says, "Good night, Ilya," and goes to his room.

The door doesn't close all the way. Shane leaves it open. An inch, maybe two. The door has been closed every night since Christmas and tonight it's open. It may only be an inch or two, but those inches are everything.

Ilya sits on the couch in the dark apartment with the television off and Svetlana asleep in his room and Shane on the other side of a door that is open for the first time in weeks, and the hope — the unbearable, terrifying hope — climbs up through his chest, and this time he not only allows it to stay, he promises himself to do something with it.

Chapter 19: the rhythm of your heart

Chapter Summary

They finally talk.

Chapter Notes

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

Svetlana leaves the morning after the fight.

She packs her suitcase the way she unpacked it. Efficiently, without sentiment, folding clothes into neat stacks that would surprise anyone who's seen the chaos of her apartment in Moscow. Ilya sits on the bed and watches her, not helping because helping would mean this is ending, and he's not ready for it to end, even though he knows it has to, even though she's right about everything she said in the kitchen.

"Stop looking at me like that," she says, folding a sweater.

"Like what?"

"Like I'm dying. I'm going to Moscow. We will call each other all the time, like usual."

"It won't be the same."

"No. It'll be better." She puts the sweater in the suitcase and turns and looks at him. "For both of us."

Shane is in the kitchen when they come out. He's at the counter with his cereal, the five-fifteen routine, and he looks up when he sees the suitcase.

"You're leaving," he says.

"Back to the real world." Svetlana sets the suitcase by the door and comes into the kitchen and does something Ilya doesn't expect — she walks up to Shane and hugs him. It's real and grounding, her arms around him, her chin on his shoulder, and Shane goes stiff for half a second, but then his hands come up, and he hugs her back. Ilya watches this from the hallway, and his chest does something enormous and complicated.

"Take care of yourself," Svetlana says, pulling back. She's looking at Shane with an expression Ilya knows — the one that means she's saying something with her face that she's not saying with her words.

"You too," Shane says. "It was good to meet you. Both times."

"Both times," Svetlana confirms. She turns to Ilya. "Walk me down?"

At the Uber, she kisses him on the cheek, holds his face, and looks at him.

"The doors, Ilya. Open them."

"I know."

"All of them."

"I know."

"Call me on Friday."

"I'll call you on Thursday."

She smiles and gets in the car. It drives away, and Ilya stands on the sidewalk in the late January cold and watches her go, and then he goes back upstairs.

Shane is still at the counter. The cereal is finished, and the mug is in his hands. He's looking at the counter the way he looks at it when he's processing something, eyes fixed on a point, brain somewhere else.

"She's gone?" Shane asks.

"She's gone."

The apartment settles around them. Shane finishes his coffee and then leaves for the rink, leaving Ilya behind.

+++

The week that follows is the strangest week they've had since the first month.

It's not bad, or tense, not really. It's strange in the way that air is strange before a storm — too still, too clear, every small sound amplified. Ilya leaves the doors open. Not literally, but figuratively, emotionally, in ways that might cost him something. He doesn't perform. Doesn't fill the apartment with noise or anything else. He's just there. On the couch, in the kitchen, at the counter. Present and available and trying, for the first time in his life, to be visible without a wall in front of him.

He makes breakfast and doesn't make a joke. He sits on the couch and doesn't turn on the television. He skates in the morning and comes home, and Shane is there, and they stand in the kitchen, and the silence is new. This silence is not the comfortable silence they built, nor the loaded silence of the last month, but something expectant.

Ilya doesn't push. Svetlana said don't push. He holds the door open and waits for Shane to walk through it.

Shane doesn't walk through it.

Four days. Five. Six. The apartment is quiet, and the doors are open, and Shane is right there, on the other side of all of them, and he doesn't move. He comes to the counter, eats breakfast, goes to practice, comes home, sits on the couch, reads, and goes to his room, and the routine is the same, but there's something underneath it, something Ilya can feel gathering.

On Wednesday night, Ilya is on the couch, and Shane comes out of his room and stands in the doorway and looks at him, and Ilya looks back, and neither of them says anything for a long time.

"What?" Ilya says, finally.

"Nothing." Shane looks at the couch, then at Ilya. At the space beside Ilya. "Can I—"

"You do not have to ask, Shane. You have never had to ask."

Shane sits down. But he doesn't sit down at his end. he sits in the middle. Closer than he's ever sat voluntarily, close enough that Ilya can feel the warmth of him and smell the soap he uses and see the small scar on his jaw from a childhood skating fall. And the freckles. All the freckles. The proximity makes Ilya's breath stop and then restart, and he keeps his eyes on the television that isn't on because looking at Shane right now would be too much.

They sit in the silence. The apartment hums. Outside, Boston makes its noise. There's traffic, and sirens, the distant sound of the harbour.

"Ilya," Shane says.

"Yes."

"I need to tell you something."

He's been building toward this for a week.

Since Rose's apartment. Since the word, the simple word, the one that changed the shape of everything. Since coming home and seeing Ilya on the couch and knowing what he was looking at and letting himself know, for the first time, without the walls and the system and the twenty years of not looking.

He's been building toward it through the fight and the walking out and the coming back, and the *you know more than you think* that he said without planning to. Through Svetlana leaving and the hug in the kitchen that cracked something in him — the way she held him, the way she looked at him, the way it felt like a handoff, like she was giving him something and trusting him to carry it.

He's been building through it for a week of Ilya being different. The performance is gone. Ilya in the apartment is the way Ilya is in the stands. He's quiet, attentive, present in a way that has no agenda except being there.

He sat on the couch in the middle because the middle was closer and closer to what he wanted, and for once, just once, he was going to do the thing he wanted instead of the thing his system required.

"I need to tell you something," he says.

His heart is doing the thing. The alley thing, the stands thing, the Christmas Eve thing. The unnamed-place thing. Except it has a name now, and the name is want, and the want is specific, and it is sitting next to him on the couch, and its name is Ilya.

"Okay," Ilya says. His voice is careful. Steady. The same voice from the couch in the dark on the vodka night, when Shane told him he wasn't lazy.

Shane looks at his hands. They're on his thighs, the way they always are when he's nervous, and they're shaking, the way they shook in the kitchen on Christmas Eve, and he watches them shake. He thinks about Rose saying *there's nothing wrong with your wiring*, and Nora saying *figure it out*, and Svetlana's hug, and Hayden at the altar with Jackie's face in his hands, and the particular expression that was bigger and more helpless than a smile.

"I broke up with Nora because I felt nothing," Shane says. "The same nothing I felt with Jessica. The same nothing I've felt with every—" He stops. Breathes. "With every woman."

Ilya is very still beside him.

"I told Rose two weeks ago. I sat in her apartment and I—" His voice is doing something he can't control, going thin and uneven at the edges. "I said something out loud for the first time. Something I should have known a long time ago but didn't, because I'd pushed it away, because I'm very good at pushing things away and not looking at them."

"Shane," Ilya says, and his voice is barely a sound.

"I'm gay." The word comes out steadier than he expected. Like it's been practising in his chest, running drills, learning its edges. "I'm gay, and I've known for weeks, and I didn't know how to tell you because—"

Because you have Svetlana. Because you touched my hand in the kitchen, and I ran. Because I've been in love with you since the alley outside the rink on my first morning in Boston, and I didn't know what it was, and now I do, and the knowing is the most frightening thing that has ever happened to me.

He doesn't say all of this. He says, "Because it changes things."

Ilya hasn't moved. Shane can feel him not moving, can feel the stillness radiating off him like heat, and Shane still hasn't looked at him because looking would mean seeing his face and his face will contain the answer and Shane is not ready for the answer except that he has to be ready because he's sitting in the middle of the couch and the words are out and there's nowhere to go.

He looks at Ilya.

Ilya's eyes are full. Not crying — Ilya doesn't cry, or not in front of people, or not in front of Shane — but full, bright, the way eyes get when something is pressing against them from inside. His face is open in a way Shane has only seen once before, in the stands in the morning when Ilya thinks no one is watching.

"Shane," Ilya says again.

"I know you're — I'm not asking for anything. I don't expect anything to change. I just needed you to know because you're my—" The word *friend* arrives and it is wrong, it has always been wrong, it has been wrong since the alley. "Because you're you. And I can't be in this apartment pretending that you're not the reason I know."

"The reason you know?"

"That I'm gay." Shane's hands are still shaking. He looks at them instead of at Ilya because Ilya's face is too much. "You're the reason I know. You've always been the reason."

"Shane—"

"I know this doesn't change anything for you. I just couldn't keep... I've been keeping it in for so long, and the keeping it in was making me someone I don't want to be, and I—" He stops. Breathes. His hands are shaking so badly now that he presses them flat against his thighs to still them. "On Christmas Eve, when you touched my hand, I felt more in that one second than I've felt in my entire life. With anyone. And I ran because feeling that much was... I didn't know what to do with it. I've never known what to do with it. I'm almost twenty-one years old, and I have never known what wanting someone feels like, and now I know, and it's you, and I'm sorry."

"Do not say sorry."

"I am sorry. Because this is going to make things weird and you're my — you're the most important person in my life, and I don't want to lose—"

"Shane." Ilya's voice is strange. Thick. "Stop."

Shane stops. He stares at his shaking hands and waits for the answer, which will be kind, because Ilya is always kind underneath the performance, and kind is the thing Shane can't survive right now — kindness and understanding and *I'm flattered but I don't feel the same way*, the gentle letdown, the careful handling of Shane's heart like it's something fragile and breakable and not Ilya's to hold.

"Shane," Ilya says, for the third time, and his voice breaks on the word. "Look at me."

Shane looks at him.

Ilya's face is — Shane doesn't have a word for Ilya's face. It is not kind. It is not gentle. It is not the letdown he was bracing for. It is wrecked and open and raw and there are tears on his cheeks now, actually on his cheeks, and Ilya is crying and Shane has never seen him cry, not once in two and a half years, and Ilya says, "Shane. It changes everything for me."

"What?"

"You said this does not change anything for me. It changes everything." He wipes his face with the back of his hand. "I have wanted you, wanted this, since the first week. Since the alley. Since you told me about the ordinance, and I thought — Who is this person?"

"You—"

"I touched your hand at Christmas because I could not stop myself. I have been not stopping myself for two years. Every morning in the stands. Every time I say you are boring." He's struggling with the English, the way he does when the emotion outpaces the language. "You think I do not want you. Shane. You are the only thing I want. You are the only thing I have wanted."

Shane is staring at him. His hands have stopped shaking.

"I tried to stop," Ilya says. "I tried with the women at the bars. I tried to make it go away because the locker room is — you do not know what the locker room is. The things they say. The word they use. And I laughed. Every time. I laughed because laughing keeps me alive. And then I come home, and you are at the counter, and you do not say anything, and you do not need me to be anything, and I can be me and just—" His voice breaks again. "Be here."

They're looking at each other. They're so close and Shane can see the wet on Ilya's face and the light in his eyes and the way his mouth is doing something that is trying to be a smile and can't quite get there because there's too much behind it.

"I didn't know until Christmas Eve," Shane says. "Maybe before. Maybe I knew and wouldn't look at it. But Christmas Eve is when I—" He swallows. "Your thumb was on my hand and my whole body was — I'd never felt that. Not once. Not with anyone. And I pulled away because I thought something was wrong with me."

"Nothing is wrong with you."

"I know that now." He pauses. "Rose told me. Wrong outlet, she said."

"Wrong outlet?"

"Never mind. It's a Rose thing."

He doesn't know who moves first. Maybe it's him. Maybe it's Ilya. Maybe they both move at the same time, closing the last few inches of the gap that has existed since the first day, the couch gap, the careful calibrated distance that was never about space but about everything they were afraid to cross.

Ilya's hand comes up and touches Shane's face. His thumb on Shane's cheekbone, tracing the freckles, the same slow circle from the kitchen, and Shane's eyes close and his breath shakes, and he doesn't pull away. He leans in.

The kiss is not what Shane expected. He expected it to be like Jessica, like Nora — mechanical, performative, his body going through motions his mind watched from above. This is nothing like that. This is Ilya's mouth on his mouth and Ilya's hand on his face and every nerve in Shane's body arriving at the same place at the same time, and the place is here, and the feeling is everything, and Shane makes a sound against Ilya's mouth that he has never made before, a small broken thing that comes from somewhere deep and newly opened.

Ilya pulls back. Just enough to look at him. His eyes are wet, and his thumb is still on Shane's cheek, and his expression is one of focused, quiet attention.

"Okay?" Ilya says.

Shane nods. He doesn't trust his voice.

"Okay," Ilya says, and kisses him again.

The second kiss is different from the first. The first was the question. The second is the answer. Ilya's hand slides from Shane's cheek to the back of his neck and Shane's hand comes up — shaking, still shaking — and finds Ilya's chest, the solid warm plane of it, and he can feel Ilya's heart underneath his palm and it's hammering, going as fast as Shane's, and the matching speed of their hearts is a piece of data that Shane finds devastatingly important.

Ilya kisses the way he does everything — fully, without reservation, with his whole body leaning in. Shane kisses back and discovers that he has been wrong about kissing his entire life. Kissing is not a mechanical act. Kissing is not a thing performed. Kissing, when the person is right, when the

wiring is plugged into the right outlet, is the most specific and present thing Shane has ever experienced, more present than the ice, more present than the score, more present than anything.

They break apart. Shane is breathing hard. Ilya is breathing hard. They are sitting on the couch in the dark apartment, and they are both breathing hard and looking at each other, and Shane starts laughing. He doesn't mean to — it comes out of nowhere, sudden and unexpected, and the laughing is not the exhale-laugh and not the almost-smile, it's a real laugh, full and helpless, and Ilya stares at him and says "why are you laughing" and Shane says "because I've been an idiot" and Ilya says "yes" and starts laughing too, and they sit on the couch and laugh. The laughing is wet and shaky and turns into something else, something that might be crying or might just be the release of two and a half years of pressure, and Shane puts his forehead against Ilya's shoulder and breathes, and Ilya puts his hand in Shane's hair and holds him there.

Later — minutes or hours, he doesn't know, time has become unreliable — they're still on the couch. Shane is against his side with his head on Ilya's shoulder and Ilya's arm is around him and Shane's hand is on Ilya's chest, over his heart, and the weight of it is the only real thing in the world.

Shane hasn't said much since the kiss. This doesn't worry Ilya. Shane's silence has always spoken more than other people's words, and the silence right now is saying something Ilya can feel through his whole body.

His hand is in Shane's hair. He keeps running his fingers through it, slow and careful, learning the texture, the weight, the way Shane leans into it every time like a thing he didn't know he needed. Shane's hair is softer than Ilya imagined, and Ilya has imagined it many times, in the stands and at the counter and on the balcony at midnight not smoking, and the reality of it is better than every imagining because the reality includes Shane's breathing against his collarbone and Shane's fingers curled in his shirt and the small sound Shane makes when Ilya's hand passes over a particular spot behind his ear.

"I should call Svetlana," Ilya says.

"Now?"

"She will want to know."

"It's four a.m. in Moscow."

"She told me to call when I figured it out. She did not specify a time."

Shane lifts his head and looks at Ilya. His eyes are still red but there's something behind them that wasn't there an hour ago — a looseness, a quiet, like a knot that's been untied. He looks younger. He looks like someone who just put something heavy down.

"You told Svetlana about me," Shane says.

"I told Svetlana about you in December 2009."

"2009?"

"The first December. I called her and said I think I like someone and she said—" He smiles. "She already knew."

"What did she say?"

"She said be careful." Ilya's hand moves through Shane's hair, which is something he has wanted to do for two and a half years, and Shane doesn't flinch, doesn't pull away, leans into it slightly, and Ilya's chest does the small warm explosion thing and then does it again. "I was not careful."

"No," Shane agrees. "You were not."

They sit. The apartment is dark and quiet, and the television is off, and it has been off all week, and Ilya hasn't missed it, not once, because the silence is full now, full of the thing that has been building since the alley.

"I'm scared," Shane says. Quietly, into Ilya's shoulder.

"Of what?"

"I don't know. Everything. That this will change things. That I'll be bad at this. That I don't know how to—" He pauses. "I've never done this. With anyone. Not really."

"I know."

"I was closed off for a long time."

"I know."

"I'm not sure I know how to... manage this."

Ilya tightens his arm around Shane's shoulders. "You don't have to manage anything. You just have to be here."

"I'm here."

"Then that's enough."

Shane puts his head back on Ilya's shoulder. His hand is still on Ilya's chest, over his heart, and Ilya wonders if Shane can feel it beating, whether the rhythm tells him anything, whether the heart that has been his since the alley is finally saying the thing out loud.

Outside, the February night is cold and dark, and the city is asleep. But inside their apartment, it's warm, and the couch is holding both of them.

Ilya reaches for his phone with his free hand, the one that isn't around Shane. He opens a text to Svetlana and types three words.

He's here, Sveta.

He puts the phone down. Svetlana will see it when she wakes. She'll know what it means.

Shane's breathing is slowing against his shoulder. Not asleep — just settling.

Ilya closes his eyes and just holds him. For the first time in his life, he is exactly where he is, with exactly who he wants, and it is enough.

It is enough.

Chapter End Notes

Now that they're together, we'll be getting some chapters with dual POV !!

Chapter 20: the hallway

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya are in a cocoon of the slow, terrifying discovery that this is what it was supposed to feel like all along.

The first week is a cocoon.

Shane doesn't have another word for it. The apartment is the same apartment, but the air inside it has changed, become warmer and softer, like someone adjusted the thermostat on the whole world and forgot to tell anyone except them.

They don't tell anyone. This is a decision they make without discussing it, the way they've always made decisions — silently, by mutual understanding, the same way they divided the fridge and the counter and the couch. Shane isn't ready for anyone to know. The word gay is still new in his mouth, still sharp-edged, and the idea of saying it to his parents or Rose or Hayden makes his chest tighten in a way that has nothing to do with Ilya and everything to do with the world outside the apartment. Ilya is the same, except

But for Ilya, the hiding is not about readiness. It's about survival. Ilya has a family in Russia and a career in a sport that has never had an openly gay player and a locker room where the word is furniture and a country that is moving, steadily and deliberately, toward making people like him illegal. Shane's hiding is a cocoon he'll eventually leave. Ilya's hiding is a wall that keeps people alive. The fact that Shane's closet has a door he'll open when he's ready and Ilya's closet may not have a door at all is something neither of them talks about because talking about it would mean acknowledging that their futures might not look the same.

They kiss a lot.

This is the thing Shane was not prepared for. He was prepared for the conversation and the confession and the terror of saying I'm gay out loud to the person he's in love with. He was not prepared for what came after, which is that Ilya kisses him in the kitchen while the coffee is brewing and Ilya kisses him on the couch when the hockey highlights are on and Ilya kisses him in the hallway when they pass each other going to and from the bathroom, and every single time it happens Shane's entire nervous system lights up like a city switching on at dusk.

He had no idea it could feel like this. With Jessica, kissing was a thing he performed — mechanical, dutiful, his mouth going through motions while his brain observed from above. With Nora, it was better, warmer, but still surface-level. With Ilya, it's not surface-level. With Ilya, it's underneath, inside, somewhere in the architecture of him, and when Ilya's mouth is on his mouth, Shane's brain doesn't observe from above because Shane's brain is finally, for the first time in his life, in the same place as his body.

The counter breakfasts are different now. Ilya stands closer. Their elbows touch, and Shane doesn't flinch, which still surprises him every time, the way his body has decided that Ilya is safe. Ilya puts

his hand on Shane's lower back when he reaches past him for the cereal, and the hand stays there for a second longer than necessary, and Shane leans into it, slightly, barely, and Ilya notices because Ilya notices everything.

They watch television on the couch with Shane's head on Ilya's shoulder. They watch television on the couch with Ilya's arm around Shane. They watch television on the couch with their legs tangled together and Ilya's hand in Shane's hair and Shane's hand on Ilya's chest, over his heart, which has become Shane's favourite place to put his hand because he can feel Ilya's heartbeat and the heartbeat speeds up when Shane is close, and this is something Shane finds very satisfying.

"You're monitoring my heart rate," Ilya says one evening.

"Yes."

"Like a doctor."

"Like a person who likes data."

"What does the data say?"

"That your heart rate increases approximately fifteen percent when I'm within six inches of you."

Ilya looks at him. "You calculated percentage."

"Estimated. I'd need equipment for an accurate reading."

"Shane."

"Yes?"

"You are the most insane person I have ever met. Come here."

Shane goes there. Ilya kisses him. His heart rate increases, which Shane estimates is significantly more than fifteen percent.

+++

The problem starts in the second week.

It's not a problem exactly. It's more of a... discrepancy. A gap between what Shane wants and what is happening. What Shane wants is more. What is happening is that Ilya keeps stopping.

It starts on a Tuesday night on the couch. They're kissing, which they're always doing now, and the kissing has progressed past the gentle exploratory stage into something deeper, hotter, Ilya's hand on Shane's hip and Shane's hand on Ilya's neck and the space between them narrowing until Shane is practically in Ilya's lap, and Shane can feel Ilya hard against his thigh and his own body responding in a way that is new and electric and very clear about what it wants, and he shifts his hips, deliberate, pressing closer, and Ilya makes a sound against his mouth that goes through Shane like a current.

And then Ilya pulls back.

"We should—" Ilya's voice is rough. His eyes are dark. His hand is still on Shane's hip, but it's moved to a neutral position, safe, above the waistband. "We should slow down."

"Why?"

"Because I do not want to—" He swallows. "Rush you."

Shane looks at him. "You're not rushing me."

"You have never done this before. With a man. I want you to be comfortable."

"I'm comfortable."

"Shane."

"I'm comfortable, Ilya. I'm the one who moved closer."

Ilya's jaw does something complicated, and his hand tightens on Shane's hip for a second and then loosens, and he says, "I know. But there is no hurry. We have time."

And then he kisses Shane's forehead, which is tender and sweet and makes Shane want to scream, and reaches for the remote and turns the hockey back on.

Shane sits on the couch and watches hockey and vibrates with a frustration he doesn't know how to articulate, because Ilya is being considerate and careful and exactly the kind of person who stops when he thinks his partner might not be ready, and Shane wants to grab him by the front of his hoodie and say *I am ready, I have been ready, my body has been sending extremely clear signals that you are apparently choosing to interpret as confusion*.

He doesn't say this. He watches the hockey.

It happens again on Thursday. The kitchen this time. Shane is making coffee, and Ilya comes up behind him and puts his arms around Shane's waist and his chin on Shane's shoulder and says something in Russian against Shane's neck that Shane doesn't understand, but that makes his skin prickle and his breath catch. Shane turns around in his arms and kisses him and Ilya kisses him back and Shane's hands go to the hem of Ilya's t-shirt and he pulls it up, just slightly, his fingers on the warm skin of Ilya's stomach, and Ilya's breath hitches and his hips press forward and for three seconds everything is exactly where Shane wants it to be.

Then Ilya catches Shane's wrists. Gently. Brings them back up.

"Coffee's ready," he says, and his voice is strained, and he steps back and pours two mugs, and his hands are not entirely steady.

Shane takes his coffee and drinks it and does not throw it against the wall, which he considers a significant exercise in self-control.

Saturday. The couch again. A movie neither of them is watching. Shane has decided on a strategy, which is to be more direct, because directness is his primary skill, and he might as well use it. He

puts his hand on Ilya's thigh. High, deliberate, and in no way ambiguous.

Ilya looks at Shane's hand, then looks at Shane. His eyes are dark, and his breathing has changed and he says, "Shane—"

"I want this."

"I know you think you—"

"I don't think I want this. I want this. There's no ambiguity. I'm placing my hand on your thigh in a way that communicates a very specific intention."

Ilya closes his eyes. "You are killing me."

"Good. Then stop stopping."

"I am trying to be—"

"I know what you're trying to be. You're trying to be patient and respectful and give me time to adjust, and it's very considerate, and I need you to stop."

Ilya opens his eyes. Shane is looking at him with the focused intensity he usually reserves for analysing jump technique, and Ilya's mouth does something that is trying to be a smile and is also trying to be several other things.

"You are sure?" Ilya asks.

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life, and I once told a panel of international judges that my triple axel was clean when three of them thought it was under-rotated. It was clean. I was right. I'm right about this, too."

Ilya stares at him for a long moment, and then he laughs. Shane has been hearing this laugh more in the past two weeks than in the previous two years — the real one, the one without the grin attached, the one that comes from somewhere deep and surprised — and every time it happens Shane's chest does something he still doesn't have a name for. He's started doing things specifically to cause it. Saying things he knows are absurd in his flattest voice and waiting for the crack. It's becoming a hobby. "You are comparing sex to a triple axel."

"I'm comparing my certainty about sex to my certainty about the triple axel. There's a distinction."

"There really isn't."

"There really is. Are you going to keep arguing with me or are you going to—"

Ilya kisses him. Not the gentle kiss, not the forehead kiss, not the kitchen kiss that stays above the waistband. A different kiss. The kind of kiss that has a destination, and Shane's brain goes quiet for the first time in days and his body is finally in charge and his body knows exactly where it wants to go.

They don't make it to the bedroom.

They make it to the hallway, which is four steps from the couch, and then Ilya pushes Shane against the wall, and the push is not gentle, has force behind it, and the sound Shane makes when his back

hits the wall surprises both of them. Ilya pulls back, eyes dark, checking, and Shane grabs the front of his hoodie and pulls him back in and says "don't stop" and Ilya doesn't stop.

Ilya's mouth moves from Shane's mouth to his jaw to his neck and Shane tips his head back against the wall and closes his eyes and feels the heat of Ilya's mouth on his throat, the scrape of teeth, the way Ilya's tongue traces the tendon in his neck and presses and Shane's hips jerk forward without his permission, grinding against Ilya's thigh, and the friction makes him gasp, a sharp involuntary sound that he would be embarrassed about if his brain were online, which it isn't.

"Off," Shane says, pulling at Ilya's hoodie, and Ilya leans back long enough to drag it over his head and Shane's hands are on him immediately, on the bare skin of his chest, his shoulders, the hard planes of his stomach. There's a line of dark hair below Ilya's navel that disappears into the waistband of his sweatpants, and Shane's brain short-circuits at the sight of it because this is a thing he's been not-looking at for two years, the glimpses in the kitchen and the bathroom doorway and the mornings when Ilya stretches and his shirt rides up, and now he's looking and the looking is allowed and his hands follow the looking, fingers tracing the trail of hair downward, and Ilya's stomach tightens under his touch.

Shane hooks his fingers in the waistband and pulls. Sweatpants and boxers together, down, and Ilya helps, kicking them off, and Shane drops to his knees on the hallway carpet and takes Ilya in his mouth.

He doesn't think about it. His body does it because his body wants to and for the first time in Shane's life his body is in charge and his brain is somewhere else entirely. Ilya's hand finds the wall and his other hand finds Shane's hair and Shane works him — clumsy, unpractised, learning in real time the weight and heat of it, the way Ilya's hips twitch, the sounds Ilya makes above him, broken and Russian and barely words.

After about a minute, maybe less, Ilya's hand tightens in Shane's hair and his voice comes out wrecked: "Oh — stop, stop, stop—"

Shane pulls back, and looks up. His mouth is wet and his knees hurt and the insecurity arrives instantly, the system booting back up: "Was that bad?"

"Was that—" Ilya stares down at him. His chest is heaving and his eyes are black and he looks like a person who has been electrocuted in a way he enjoyed. "No. Shane. Opposite. Too much. Too good. If you don't stop I'm going to—" He pulls Shane up by the shoulders, urgent, and kisses him, deep and filthy, tasting himself on Shane's mouth, and the kiss is the answer to the question.

They're frantic now. Ilya walks Shane backward until Shane's back hits the opposite wall and then they're sliding down together, onto the hallway carpet, Ilya on top of him, and Shane gets Ilya's remaining clothes off and Ilya gets Shane's off and they're naked on the hallway floor and the carpet is terrible and neither of them cares.

Ilya's hips roll against Shane's. Skin on skin, nothing between them, and the friction is blunt and perfect and Shane's hips come up to meet him and they find a rhythm — messy, graceless, two bodies that have never done this together figuring out the mechanics through urgency — and Shane wraps his legs around Ilya's waist and Ilya braces his forearm beside Shane's head and they move together and Shane can feel everything, every point of contact, and the pleasure is building.

Ilya's forehead is against his and they're breathing the same air and Shane says "Ilya" in a voice he doesn't recognise, and Ilya says "I know, I know" and rolls his hips harder and Shane comes first,

sudden, his whole body shuddering, face pressed into Ilya's neck, and Ilya follows seconds later, groaning into Shane's shoulder, and they stay like that, pinned together on the hallway carpet, breathing hard, for a long time.

Ilya collapses onto him. Full weight, heavy, breathing hard, and Shane takes it — the weight, the heat, the sweat — and it's good, it's the opposite of the nothing he felt with everyone else. After a minute Ilya rolls off and lies beside him on the carpet, arm over his eyes, chest rising and falling like he's just finished hockey practice. Shane has a carpet burn on his back that he will feel at the rink tomorrow.

"The hallway," Ilya says.

"The hallway."

"We have two bedrooms."

"We do."

"And a couch."

"Also true."

"And we are on the floor. In the hallway."

"Your observational skills are excellent."

Ilya moves his arm and looks at Shane, and Shane looks back, and they're both on the floor and the carpet is terrible and the light overhead is the unflattering kind and Shane is looking at Ilya's face — the curls, the light eyes, the freckles of sweat on his collarbone — and he feels something so large and so simple.

"That was—" Shane starts, and doesn't finish, because he doesn't have a word for what that was. It wasn't like Jessica. It wasn't like Nora. It wasn't like anything. It was the first time his body and his brain were in the same room at the same time doing the same thing, and the thing they were doing was wanting Ilya.

"Yeah," Ilya says. "It was."

They lie on the hallway floor for a while. Shane puts his hand on Ilya's chest, over his heart. The heartbeat is fast and slowing and Shane monitors it with satisfaction.

"Still calculating percentages?" Ilya asks.

"Always."

"What is the verdict?"

"Significantly elevated. I'd estimate forty percent above resting."

"Only forty?"

"Give it a minute. You'll recover."

Ilya laughs and Shane lies on the terrible carpet and listens to it and feels, for the first time in his life, like he's exactly where he's supposed to be.

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After the hallway, the apartment becomes a different place.

The cocoon has become something else, something charged, because Shane's body has woken up and it has opinions and the opinions are loud and specific and all of them involve Ilya.

Shane has spent almost twenty-one years in a body that felt like a machine — a well-maintained, precisely calibrated machine that did what he told it to do on the ice and felt nothing the rest of the time. Now the machine has become a person. The person wants things. The person wants Ilya's hands, and Ilya's mouth, and the sound Ilya makes when Shane touches him, the low, rough sound that goes straight through Shane's chest. The person wants to be touched back, wants Ilya's weight on top of him, wants the heat and the pressure and the particular electricity of skin on skin. The wanting is relentless. The wanting doesn't have an off switch. Shane, who has controlled every input and output of his body since he was ten years old, cannot control this, and the it's terrifying and also the best thing he's ever felt.

They learn each other in the apartment the way they learned each other in every other way — slowly, through proximity and repetition, through the careful accumulation of data. Shane learns that Ilya is sensitive behind his ears and on the inside of his wrists and along the line where his hip meets his thigh. Ilya learns that Shane makes a sound when you bite his collarbone — a sharp, quiet sound, almost inaudible, that Shane is embarrassed about and Ilya is obsessed with.

Shane gives blowjobs with the focus of a person preparing for competition. This becomes apparent over the next week — he refines his approach every time, cataloguing what makes Ilya's hips lift and what makes Ilya's hand tighten and what makes Ilya say his name in the soft broken way that is Shane's favourite sound on earth. He may have watched instructional content on his phone in the bathroom with the door locked. He will never admit this to anyone.

Ilya returns the favour on a Wednesday, in bed, and Shane discovers that receiving is harder than giving because receiving requires letting go and letting go is not Shane's strongest skill. But Ilya is patient — patient in a way he is patient with nothing else in his life — and he goes slow and checks in and his hands are on Shane's hips holding him steady and his mouth is warm and sure and when Shane comes he grips the headboard with both hands and his back arches off the bed and the sound he makes is the loudest sound he has ever made in this apartment.

Shane lies there afterwards, staring at the ceiling, his whole body still humming. Ilya is beside him, propped on one elbow, tracing the freckles on Shane's shoulder with one finger. Slow, idle, like he has all the time in the world.

Shane looks at him. The curls. The moles on his stomach. The way his mouth sits when he's not performing — softer, quieter, the real mouth, the one that only exists in this apartment.

I love him.

The thought arrives without warning, fully formed, enormous and simple, and Shane's breath catches because the thought is not new, the thought has been there for a long time, but the knowing of it is new. The certainty. *I love him. I love him so much.*

He almost says it. The words are right there and Shane almost says them, but it's been three weeks, and three weeks feels too soon for words that size, and Shane doesn't trust himself with words yet, not out loud, not when his voice might crack and the cracking might scare Ilya into thinking something is wrong when everything is, for the first time, completely right.

So he doesn't say it. He reaches up and touches Ilya's jaw and Ilya turns his head and kisses Shane's palm, and the kiss is warm and light and Shane holds the three words in his chest and lets them stay.

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By the end of March they've mapped each other's bodies the way cartographers map terrain. Thoroughly, with attention to elevation and contour and the places where the ground shifts underfoot. Shane knows every scar on Ilya's body, the one on his shin from a skate blade in juniors, the one on his eyebrow from a fight, the small one on his hip that he won't explain. He knows the moles on Ilya's back, a constellation of them scattered across his shoulder blades and down his spine, and the ones on his stomach that Shane traces with his finger while Ilya lies still and watches him with the focused, quiet expression from the stands. Ilya knows every freckle on Shane's body, has counted them, has made a running tally that he updates out loud while Shane lies still and lets himself be catalogued. They are each other's most detailed map.

They haven't gone further than mouths and hands. Not because Shane doesn't want to. Shane wants to, the wanting is a constant hum underneath everything, but because the wanting has a quality to it that is different from the urgency of the first weeks. The wanting is patient now. The wanting knows that Ilya is here and not leaving, and them together means there's no rush, and it's a kind of luxury that Shane has never experienced, the luxury of wanting something and knowing it will still be there tomorrow.

But the patience has an edge. On a Friday in early April, Ilya is behind Shane in bed, spooned against him, and Ilya's hand is moving slowly on Shane's stomach, and his mouth is on the back of Shane's neck, and Shane pushes back against him, and it makes them both stop breathing for a second.

"Is that—" Ilya says, his voice careful. "Do you want—"

"I don't know," Shane says. Honestly. Because he doesn't know. His body is saying yes, and his brain is saying maybe. "Not tonight. But soon."

"Soon," Ilya says, and kisses the back of Shane's neck, and his hand keeps moving, and the soon sits between them like a promise.

Chapter 21: the napkin

Chapter Summary

The apartment is their safe space, the sex is everywhere, and Marleau wants to know why Ilya still lives like a college kid.

The first time they fuck, Shane cries.

Not during. During he is focused and present and more inside his body than he has ever been, which is saying something for a person who makes his living on the precise positioning of his limbs. During, Ilya is above him and inside him and the weight of Ilya's body is pressing him into the mattress, and Shane's hands are on Ilya's back, his nails in the muscle, and the feeling is so far beyond anything he has experienced that his brain shuts off entirely and there is only sensation — the stretch, the fullness, the particular overwhelming intimacy of another person that close, that deep, that much.

They've been building to this for weeks. Since the hallway, since the first time Ilya's hand wrapped around him and Shane discovered what it felt like to be touched by someone who wanted to touch him, everything has been an escalation — mouths and hands and the slow patient learning of each other's bodies. Ilya teaching and Shane cataloguing, because Shane catalogues everything, and Ilya's body is the most important data set he has ever studied. He knows the sounds Ilya makes when Shane's mouth is on his neck. He knows the spot on Ilya's hip that makes him swear in Russian. He knows the way Ilya's whole body goes taut before he comes, the tension gathering and then releasing, and Shane has catalogued every detail with the attention of someone who understands that this knowledge is a privilege.

But this is different.

Shane brings it up on a Tuesday night, because he is Shane, and directness is the only approach he trusts. They're on the couch, and Ilya's hand is in Shane's hair, and the hockey highlights are on, and Shane says, "I want you to fuck me."

Ilya's hand stops.

"Not right now," Shane adds. "Not on the couch. But — soon. I want to."

"Shane—"

"I've researched it."

Ilya closes his eyes. "You have researched it."

"Extensively. There are several well-sourced guides. I've also ordered—" He pauses. "Supplies."

"Supplies."

"Lubricant. And — yes. Supplies."

Ilya opens his eyes and looks at Shane with an expression that is simultaneously fond, incredulous, and turned on, which is a combination Shane hadn't known was possible until Ilya.

"You ordered supplies and read guides," Ilya says. "For sex."

"Preparation reduces anxiety and improves outcomes. This is well-documented."

"Shane. It's not a — you do not need outcomes. There is only one outcome."

"I want it to be good."

Ilya's face changes. The fondness stays, but the incredulity leaves, and what replaces it is something softer, something that Shane still doesn't have the vocabulary for, even though he sees it every morning when Ilya looks at him across the counter.

"It will be good," Ilya says. "Because it is us. That is the only thing that matters."

They don't do it on Tuesday. They do it on Thursday, in the bed, in the dark, with the windows open and the April air coming in. Ilya is careful in a way that Shane would normally object to — the way Shane objected to careful in the hallway, except that this time the carefulness is right, the carefulness is necessary, because Ilya's fingers are inside him first, slow and slick, and Shane's body is learning a new language, and it requires patience.

"Okay?" Ilya asks, for the first time and the fifth time and the tenth time, his mouth against Shane's temple, his hand steady.

"Yes. More."

"We don't have to—"

"More, Ilya."

The preparation takes longer than Shane expected. He'd read the guides and understood the mechanics and thought he was ready, and then Ilya's fingers are curling inside him and hitting something that makes Shane's back arch off the bed and his vision go bright at the edges, and he makes a sound he's never made before, a desperate startled thing, and Ilya says "there?" and Shane can't speak so he nods and Ilya does it again and Shane's hands grip the sheets so hard his knuckles ache.

When Ilya finally pushes inside him, Shane holds his breath without meaning to, and Ilya stops immediately, completely, holds himself still above Shane and waits, and his arms are shaking with the effort of not moving. His eyes are completely dark, and his face is wrecked, and he says "breathe, Shane, breathe" and Shane breathes, and his body adjusts, and the stretch becomes less sharp, then becomes something else entirely. Something full and deep and connected in a way that sex with women never was, that sex with women never could have been, because this is Ilya and Ilya is the answer to every question Shane spent his whole life not asking.

Ilya moves. Slow at first, reading Shane's face the way he reads the ice — the flinches, the gasps, the moments where Shane's mouth opens and no sound comes out — and then faster when Shane says "you can — more" and wraps his legs around Ilya's waist and pulls him deeper. And the

rhythm that builds between them is different from the hallway, different from the hands and mouths of the last few weeks, different from anything, because Ilya is inside him and above him and around him, and Shane has never felt less alone in his life.

He comes with Ilya's hand around his dick and Ilya's body pressed against his, and the orgasm moves through him like a wave that doesn't stop, and Ilya follows him over the edge seconds later, his face buried in Shane's neck, saying Shane's name in the broken Russian-accented way that Shane will hear in his dreams for the rest of his life.

Afterwards is when Shane cries.

Not a lot, and not in a dramatic fashion. His eyes fill, and two tears track down his temples into his hair, and he lies there looking at the ceiling, feeling them fall and not understanding why they're there, because he's not sad. He's the opposite of sad. He's so far from sad that the distance is what's making him cry — the distance between where he was a year ago, sitting in the dark not knowing what he was, and where he is now, in this bed with this person, feeling everything.

Ilya sees the tears. He doesn't say anything. He wipes them with his thumb — the one that started everything in the kitchen on Christmas Eve — and then he pulls Shane against his chest and holds him, and Shane lets himself be held. The crying stops, his breathing evens out, and the apartment is dark and warm.

"That was—" Shane starts.

"I know," Ilya says.

"I didn't know it could—"

"I know."

"Is it always like that?"

Ilya is quiet for a moment. His hand is in Shane's hair. "No," he says. "It is not always like that. It was like that because it was you."

Shane closes his eyes. Ilya's heartbeat under his ear. Ilya's fingers in his hair. The bed that is their bed. The apartment that is their apartment. The life that is their life.

He falls asleep and doesn't dream (because all of his dreams have come true), and in the morning, the five-fifteen alarm goes off, and Ilya's arm tightens around him, and Shane extracts himself carefully and goes to practice and skates better than he has skated in years.

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It's been almost three months since they got together, and Shane has learned the specific weight of Ilya's footsteps in the hallway. He knows how long it takes between the front door opening and Ilya appearing in the kitchen — four seconds if he's in a good mood, seven if he's tired, twelve if he stops to check his phone.

He also knows the twelve-second days are sometimes not about the phone.

There are days when Ilya comes home, and the performance is still running. The grin, the energy, the filling of the room, and then it switches off, abruptly, like a light, and what's underneath is flat

and grey and quiet in a way that has nothing to do with tiredness. On those days, Ilya sits on the couch and doesn't turn on the television and doesn't talk and doesn't move, and Shane has learned not to ask what's wrong because asking makes Ilya perform the answer, and the performing is the problem.

Instead, Shane sits beside him. Puts his hand on Ilya's knee. Reads his book. Lets the quiet be quiet. And eventually — ten minutes, twenty, sometimes an hour — Ilya's hand comes up and covers Shane's hand, and the grip is tight, and the tightness says something that Ilya's voice doesn't, and Shane holds on and doesn't let go.

He doesn't know what this is. He knows it's something. He knows it lives in the same place as the smoking and the drinking and the noise that Ilya uses to fill every room, and he suspects it's been there longer than Shane has, longer than Boston, longer than hockey. He doesn't push on it. He's learned which parts of Ilya can be pushed and which parts need to be sat with, and this is a sitting-with thing, and Shane is getting better at sitting with things.

He's aware that this level of monitoring is not normal. He doesn't care.

May is warm. The apartment windows are open, and the Boston air comes in, smelling of the harbour, exhaust, and the particular greenness of late spring, and the apartment has become a different place with the warmth. It's lighter and louder, the sounds of the city mixing with theirs. Shane cooks dinner now, which he didn't use to do. Not really, except his chicken and broccoli recipes, but he's cooking now because Ilya taught him three recipes, and Shane applied the same precision to cooking that he applies to everything, and now he makes chicken and rice and a pasta that Ilya eats without complaint, which, from Ilya, is a standing ovation.

They've settled into something. Shane wakes at five-fifteen, and Ilya's arm tightens around him in his sleep, and Shane extracts himself carefully, quietly, like he's diffusing something precious, and goes to the rink. By the time Shane finishes with Linda, Ilya is already at Bears practice. They orbit each other through the day — same rink, different schedules, different sports — and come home at different hours, and the apartment collects them both. The evenings are theirs. The couch, the counter, and the bed. The bed is the thing Shane was most afraid of and is now the thing he can't imagine being without — not for the sex, though the sex is very good — but for the after, for the dark and the quiet and Ilya's breathing and the weight of Ilya's arm across his chest and the particular peace of being held by someone who chose to hold you.

Ilya is different now. This Ilya is playful, silly. The sarcasm that used to be a shield is now just funny, deployed for the purpose of making Shane smile, and Ilya is devoted to making him smile. He narrates their life like a sports commentator while Shane cooks dinner. "Hollander approaches the cutting board with confidence, the knife work is precise, the onion doesn't stand a chance", and Shane should find this annoying, but doesn't. He sings in the shower, badly. Russian songs that Shane can't understand, and when Shane tells him to stop, he sings louder and in English, and the English versions are worse. He leaves notes on the fridge in a mix of Russian and English — drawings of bears with speech bubbles, grocery lists with editorial comments (yoghurt — IMPORTANT, bread — boring bread not the good bread, Shane's weird cereal — why???)

Shane is a sucker for all of it. This is the thing he didn't expect — that Ilya's silliness would undo him more completely than Ilya's intensity. When Ilya does the sports commentary, Shane smiles, and Ilya sees it and does more, and Shane smiles harder, and the feedback loop is ridiculous and

endless, and Shane loves it. He loves it the way he loves the freckle-counting and the pelmeni and the couch — utterly and completely.

And the sex. The sex is... yeah. They are, it turns out, both insatiable. Shane, who spent twenty years in a body that felt nothing, now has a body that wants everything, constantly, at inconvenient times and in inconvenient places. Ilya, who spent years using sex to fill the gaps and finding it empty, now has sex that fills something real, and the filling makes him want more instead of less. They have sex in the morning before Shane's alarm — quick, half-asleep, Ilya behind him, both of them too tired for anything complicated but too hungry for each other to wait. They have sex on the couch after hockey games, Ilya still buzzing with adrenaline, Shane pulling him down by his collar. They have sex in the shower, which is logistically difficult and occasionally dangerous, but worth it every time. They have sex on the kitchen counter one Tuesday afternoon when Shane is supposed to be reviewing competition footage, and Ilya comes home early and finds him in the reading glasses, and the glasses apparently override every other consideration.

"It is the glasses," Ilya says afterwards, sitting on the counter, breathing hard. "Every time. I see the glasses, and my brain stops."

"That's a significant cognitive impairment. You should see a doctor."

"The doctor will say make your boyfriend stop wearing glasses. I do not want you to stop wearing glasses. I want you to keep wearing glasses forever."

"They're reading glasses. I wear them to read."

"Wear them to everything. Wear them to practice. Wear them to competitions. Wear them to bed."

"That's impractical."

"I do not care about practical. I care about the glasses."

Shane takes the glasses off and puts them on the counter, and Ilya picks them up and puts them back on Shane's face and kisses him, and they have sex again, and Shane is twenty minutes late for his evening gym session and doesn't care.

The eating is better, easier. The portions are closer to full. The yoghurt is on the counter every morning, and Shane eats it without the negotiation that used to happen. Being happy has done something to the calculator — turned the volume down, loosened the grip — and the loosening feels like relief and also frightens him, because if the eating is better because of Ilya, then the eating is dependent on Ilya, and dependency is not something Shane has ever done before.

What if this isn't enough? What if being loved doesn't fix the thing? What if it starts back up — not if, when, because Shane knows it will come back, the way he knows his jumps and his scores, with the certainty of a person who has lived inside a pattern long enough to see its shape. And when it comes back, what then? Will Ilya be enough? Will the apartment be enough? Will the weight of Ilya's arm across his chest at night be enough to keep the number from screaming?

Shane doesn't know. He eats the yoghurt and doesn't know, and not knowing is its own kind of bravery. It's smaller than the confession and the coming out and the couch, but bravery nonetheless. The bravery of eating breakfast without a guarantee that tomorrow's breakfast will be this easy.

They sleep in Ilya's room because Ilya's bed is bigger. Shane's room has become a storage space, his skating bags, books and the precisely made bed that no one sleeps in. He should give up the room, practically speaking, but something in the back of his head tells him to hold onto it. Just in case. Shane does move his nightstand stuff, though — the book, the glasses, the phone charger. Ilya helps, which means Ilya carries things and opens drawers without asking, and on a Tuesday afternoon, pulls out a cocktail napkin from Shane's nightstand drawer and holds it up.

"What is this?"

Shane looks. The napkin. Matt's napkin. The name and the number in blue ink, from the bar, from the night Shane hadn't eaten dinner and drank a beer that went straight to his head, and a man smiled at him, and Shane's hands shook.

"Nothing," Shane says. "It's old."

"Is phone number. Whose phone number?"

"A guy I met. Before us. It's not—"

"Before us." Ilya is looking at the napkin the way he looks at a bad pass — assessing, not angry, but the jaw is doing the thing. "Did you call him?"

"No."

"But you kept it."

"I forgot it was there."

"In your nightstand. The drawer you open every night. You forgot."

Shane takes the napkin from Ilya's hand. "I dialled the number four times and never pressed call. It was before I knew what I wanted. It was before you."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. Then: "Four times."

"Four times."

"And you never called."

"I never called."

"Because?"

"Because he wasn't you. I didn't know that then, but that's why."

Ilya's jaw loosens. The assessment fades. He takes the napkin back, looks at it, and tears it in half. Then in quarters. Drops the pieces in the bin.

"Good," Ilya says. "Now is really nothing."

Shane watches the pieces fall and feels lighter than a torn napkin should make a person feel.

On a Sunday evening in May, Shane is in bed reading. He's wearing the glasses — the ones that Ilya stares at like they've personally wronged him — and the book is a hockey tactics book he bought without telling Ilya, because Shane has started reading about hockey the way he reads about everything, thoroughly and with complete commitment, and the reading is for Ilya. Just like the way Ilya's mornings in the stands were for Shane, the 'watching your person's sport' as a form of devotion that neither of them has named.

Ilya comes to bed late. He's been on the phone with Alexei, Shane could hear the Russian through the wall, the low steady voice Ilya uses for Moscow calls — and when he comes into the bedroom, his face has the grey quality it gets after those calls, the tiredness that isn't physical. He doesn't say anything. He gets into bed, lies down, puts his head on Shane's chest and his arm across Shane's body, and his eyes close.

Shane keeps reading. His free hand comes up and finds Ilya's hair — the curls, which Shane has learned the geography of, the way certain curls fall and the way others resist and the one behind Ilya's left ear that's always tangled — and his fingers move through them, slow, automatic, the way Ilya's hand finds Shane's hair without looking.

Ilya's breathing evens out. He falls asleep in under a minute, which only happens when the grey thing is bad, when the exhaustion wins, and Shane holds the book in one hand and Ilya's head on his chest and reads about forechecking systems while the person he loves sleeps against him.

He reads until his eyes get tired, then he puts the book on the nightstand, takes off his glasses, sets them on top of the book, and slides down into the bed, carefully, without waking Ilya. Ilya shifts in his sleep and tightens his arm and pulls Shane closer and murmurs something in Russian that Shane doesn't understand and doesn't need to.

Shane closes his eyes. The lamp is still on. He'll turn it off later, or he won't. It doesn't matter. The light is warm, and Ilya is warm, and the apartment holds them both, and the night is long, and they have nowhere to be except here.

Nobody knows. This is the agreement, unspoken, maintained by habit and fear and the particular caution of two men who have everything to lose. Shane's career exists in a sport that scores him on artistry and presentation and puts him in front of judges who assess his body for a living. Ilya's career exists in locker rooms where the word faggot gets tossed around like tape, and no one has ever come out, not once, not in the entire history of the NHL. The closet is not a choice. The closet is the architecture they live inside, and the apartment is the one room in the building where the walls come down.

It works. It's working. Shane tells himself it's working.

The question comes from Marleau, in the locker room, after a Tuesday practice in May.

"Serious question, Roz." Marleau is putting on his shoes, not looking at Ilya, which is how Marleau asks serious questions. Sideways, casual, like the answer doesn't matter. "When are you getting a place?"

"I have a place."

"You have a shitty apartment with a figure skater. You make what? Seven million dollars a year? Dubek just bought a townhouse in the Back Bay. Dubois has a condo with a view of the harbour. You live in a two-bedroom walk-up with a roommate."

"I like the apartment."

"Nobody likes that apartment. The elevator doesn't work half the time."

"I like the roommate."

"The roommate's fine. From what I've seen, the roommate is very clean and very quiet. That's not a reason to live like a college kid when you're pulling seven figures."

Ilya opens his stall, takes out his phone, and doesn't look at Marleau. "Is there question coming?"

"The question is why. Why are you still there? You've been there three years. Most guys get their own place after the first season."

The locker room is emptying out. Connors is already gone, Dubois is in the shower, Korhonen is somewhere being Finnish and silent. Marleau is the last one, which means Marleau chose to be the last one, which means this conversation is not casual.

"I am comfortable," Ilya says.

"You're comfortable." Marleau nods and stands up from the bench. "Okay. You're comfortable. That's fine. I'm just saying, people notice, Roz. The front office notices. Media would notice if they paid attention. The star of the team, the captain, lives with a roommate. It's a weird look."

"I do not care about the look."

"I know you don't. That's why I'm mentioning it." Marleau claps him on the shoulder. "Think about it."

Marleau leaves. Ilya sits in his stall and holds his phone, and the locker room is empty, and the question sits in the air like smoke. When are you getting a place. People notice. It's a weird look.

He thinks about this on the drive home. The apartment. The two-bedroom walk-up that costs a fraction of what Ilya could afford, the elevator that breaks, the hallway carpet that gave Shane a burn. He could buy a condo. He could buy a house. He could buy the entire building, probably, and the buying would make sense — would look normal, would stop the questions, would be what a twenty-one-year-old NHL captain with a seven-million-dollar contract is supposed to do.

But the buying would mean leaving the apartment. And leaving the apartment would mean, what? Shane coming with him? Shane can't come with him. Shane can't move into Ilya Rozanov's new condo without every sports journalist in Boston writing a story about why the Bears' captain lives with a male figure skater.

So the apartment stays. The shitty elevator stays. The two bedrooms, the made bed, the carpet, and the couch stay. At least for now. And Ilya performs comfortable in the locker room and performs roommate in public, and the performance is the tax he pays for having Shane, and the tax is getting higher.

He goes home. Shane is at the counter with ginger ale, the dark-framed glasses, and the hockey tactics book, and Ilya stands in the doorway and looks at him. Looking at Shane fills his chest with something warm and enormous and also sharp, because the warm thing is love and the sharp thing is fear, and they live in the same place and they always will.

Chapter 22: 12 minutes

Chapter Summary

Ilya goes to a bar with his team and Shane discovers what real jealousy feels like

It's a Thursday in late May when Ilya comes home from practice and says, "The guys want me to come out tonight."

Shane is at the counter, eating an apple and reading his hockey book, wearing the dark-framed reading glasses that still make Ilya's brain stall every time, even now, even after weeks of being allowed to touch the face they sit on. "Okay."

"I told them no the last three times. Marleau said if I say no again, he's going to show up here and physically carry me to the bar." Ilya opens the fridge and takes out a Coke. "Dubek said I've become a hermit. Dubois said I'm boring." He grins. "Boring. Me."

"The irony."

"They think I have secret girlfriend."

Shane's hand tightens on the apple. "What did you say?"

"I said no. I said I am just tired." Ilya leans against the counter across from Shane. "But I think I have to go. They are getting... you know. Curious. If I keep saying no, they will start asking real questions, and I am running out of answers that are not lies."

"Right. Of course. You should go."

Ilya looks at him. The look is careful; he can read Shane like a book nowadays. Shane has become better at recognising this look, which means he's also become worse at hiding from it.

"It is just a bar. Few drinks with the guys. I will be home by midnight."

"You don't have to explain your evening to me. Go out with your team."

"Shane."

"I'm fine. Go."

Ilya walks over and puts his hand on the back of Shane's neck, thumb against his hairline, the spot that makes Shane's eyes close without his permission, and leans in and kisses him. Slow, deliberate, the kind of kiss that is also a sentence, and the sentence is you are what I'm coming home to.

"Midnight," Ilya says.

"You said that."

"I am saying it again. Because you are doing the thing with your jaw."

"I'm not doing a thing with my jaw."

"You are clenching it. You clench your jaw when you are pretending to be fine, and you are not fine. I have been studying your jaw for three years, Shane. I have PhD in your jaw."

"That's not a real qualification."

"In Russia it is. Very prestigious. The jaw sciences."

Shane unclenches his jaw. "Go to the bar."

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Ilya showers. This shouldn't mean anything. He puts on jeans and a shirt Shane hasn't seen before, dark blue, which also shouldn't mean anything. He spends time on his hair, which definitely shouldn't mean anything because Ilya always spends time on his hair, the curls require management.

He looks good. This is the problem. He always looks good — the curls and the shoulders and the crooked smile and the easy way he carries himself, the way that says I know what I look like and I'm not sorry about it — and Shane watches him leave and thinks about the bars. About the women. The Northeastern girl. The one from Southie. The girl from Allston who made grilled cheese at two a.m. Every woman who put her hand on Ilya's thigh in a cab and laughed at his accent and went home with him.

That was before. Shane knows that was before. Ilya hasn't brought anyone home since November, hasn't looked at anyone, hasn't done anything except be here, in this apartment, on this couch, in this bed, with Shane. Shane knows this. The evidence is overwhelming. But it doesn't help.

The door closes, and Shane stands in the hallway and listens to Ilya's footsteps recede down the corridor and then the elevator and then nothing, and the nothing is the problem, the nothing is where the thoughts live, and the thoughts are already starting.

He goes to the couch and sits down. He picks up the hockey tactics book, the one he bought to understand Ilya's sport, the one he's been reading in bed, and opens it to where he left off. The chapter is about defensive zone breakouts. Shane reads the same paragraph four times and retains nothing. Shane's brain is thinking about Ilya at a bar.

He gets up, goes to the kitchen, pours a ginger ale and stands at the counter and drinks it. The counter is the same counter where Ilya kissed him this morning, lazy and unhurried, tasting like coffee, his hand on Shane's hip, and Shane had pushed back against him and Ilya had laughed against his mouth and said "you're going to be late for practice" and Shane had said "I'm never late for practice" and Ilya had said "you will be if you keep doing that" and Shane had kept doing it and had been, for the first time in his career, four minutes late for practice.

He finishes the ginger ale, rinses the glass, puts it in the rack and goes back to the couch.

He picks up the book, puts the book down, picks up his phone, puts his phone down. Picks up the remote and turns on the television, which feels wrong because the television is Ilya's domain, always has been, the Russian channels and the hockey highlights and the terrible action movies.

He turns it off and looks at his phone and does not text Ilya because texting Ilya would be needy, and Shane is not needy, has never been needy, has spent his entire life being the opposite of needy, self-contained and self-sufficient and perfectly capable of spending an evening alone.

He texts Rose.

Shane

Are you busy?

Rose

At home stretching. What's up?

Shane

Nothing. Just checking in.

Rose

Shane Hollander does not "check in." What's wrong?

Shane stares at the screen. Because I'm sitting in a dark apartment and the person I'm in love with is at a bar and I can't tell you that I'm in love with him because I haven't told you that part yet, and the not-telling is starting to feel like a wall I'm building between us and I hate walls and I especially hate walls I'm building myself.

Shane

Nothing. Ilya went out with his team. I'm just at home.

Rose

Ok and? You have the apartment to yourself. Watch something. Read a book. Enjoy the quiet.

Shane

I'm enjoying the quiet.

Rose

You are clearly not enjoying the quiet. Do you want to come over?

He considers this. But he'd have to perform normalcy, and he's not sure he can, not tonight, not with the thoughts running.

Shane

I'm fine. Enjoy your stretching.

Rose

You're being weird. But ok. Call me if you need me.

The apartment is so quiet without Ilya. Shane has lived in silence his whole life — sought it out, cultivated it, built his routines around its reliable emptiness — and now the silence feels wrong, and he hates this, hates that Ilya has made the silence into something that needs to be filled, hates that the filling is Ilya and Ilya is not here.

Ilya texts at ten.

Ilya

Marleau is already drunk. Connors bet Dubois he could not eat six wings in one minute. Dubois threw up. It is disgusting. I miss you.

Shane stares at the text. The *"I miss you"* sits on the screen like a small, bright thing, and Shane reads it three times, types a response, deletes it, types another one, deletes it, types *"ok"* and sends it, and immediately wants to throw his phone into the harbour.

Ilya

Ok? I text you love poem about Dubois vomiting and you say ok?

Shane

That wasn't a love poem.

Ilya

Everything I say to you is a love poem.

Shane

That was about Dubois throwing up.

Ilya

Still love poem. Context is not important. Feeling is important.

Shane almost smiles. Almost. He puts the phone face down on the couch cushion, presses his hands against his eyes, and breathes. The fridge hums. The windows are open, and Boston does its thing — traffic, sirens, the distant sound of people living their lives without the specific torture of being in love with someone who is currently in a bar looking the way Ilya looks.

He picks up the phone.

Ilya has sent a photo. It's blurry and dark of a bar table covered in wing bones and empty glasses, and someone's arm in the corner of the frame. The photo is about the mess, about the chaos, about Dubois's wing challenge. Shane understands this. But in the bottom right corner, barely visible, there's a woman's hand on the edge of the table. Red nails.

Ilya didn't mean to include the hand, probably didn't even notice it, and Shane knows this. The hand is incidental, a fragment, someone at the next table or the next stool. Shane knows this the way he knows his own routines, with certainty and precision.

He stares at the red nails for a very long time.

The bar is loud, and the performance is on, and the performance is exhausting.

Marleau is drunk. Dubek is telling a story about his daughter's first word, which was apparently a profanity, and Dubois is recovering from the wing challenge with the dignified suffering of a man who knows he did this to himself. The bar is full of the Thursday-night energy that Ilya used to thrive on — the noise, the bodies, the women who smile at him from across the room because he's tall and Russian and wearing the smile that says I know what I look like and I'm not sorry about it.

He's not thriving. He's performing. The smile is on, and the beer is in his hand, and he's saying the right things at the right times, and underneath all of it, his brain is in the apartment, on the couch, where Shane is sitting alone, reading the hockey tactics book and probably calculating something.

A girl at the next table catches his eye. Blonde. Pretty. She does the thing. The smile, the look, the slight lean forward that says I'm available if you're interested. A year ago, Ilya would have leaned back. A year ago, the girl would have been in the apartment by midnight, noise and warmth, a temporary fix that lasted until morning. Now the lean doesn't register. It hits the shield and bounces off.

The tax is everywhere tonight. The tax is Marleau's question about the apartment. The tax is Dubois saying, "You should bring a girl next time, Roz, you've been single for months", and Ilya saying, "I'm focusing on hockey," and the sentence being the most boring lie he's ever told. The tax is the phone in his pocket buzzing with a text from Shane —*ok*— and Ilya reading it under the table, below the sightline, the way you read a letter in a war zone, furtive and fast and desperate.

He texts Shane. About the wings, about Dubois vomiting. He sends a photo of the table, the mess, the chaos, and doesn't check the frame carefully enough because he's texting under the table, and the bar is loud, and his brain is on the couch.

His phone buzzes in his pocket. He doesn't check it. Carmichael is telling a story about his kid, and Carmichael's stories about his kid require eye contact and nodding, and Ilya being interested, and Ilya tries his best to convey that while the phone sits in his pocket with whatever Shane just sent.

Three minutes. Four. Carmichael finishes the story, and Carter starts another, and Ilya finally pulls his phone out under the table.

Are there women there.

Ilya reads the text, and his stomach drops. His stomach drops because Ilya put Shane in this position. Ilya is at a bar performing a song while the person he loves sits in a dark apartment spiralling, and the performing is necessary, and the spiralling is the cost, and the cost is being paid by Shane, not by Ilya, and that is not acceptable.

He stands up. "I need to make a call."

"Girlfriend?" Carter says, grinning.

"Something like that." He walks outside.

He thinks about the girls from before. The way they appeared at the apartment, easy and laughing, leaving hair ties on nightstands and pizza boxes on counters. The way Ilya moved through them without effort, the charming smile, the accent, the body and the particular gravity that pulled people in. The way it stopped. The way it stopped because of Shane, and the thing that was building between them, and the stopping was never discussed, never agreed upon, it just happened.

But Ilya is at a bar. And Ilya at a bar is the version of Ilya that Shane didn't fall in love with, doesn't even know. And Shane is sitting on a couch in a dark apartment with a phone in his hand, and he is thinking about red fingernails, and he knows, he knows, that this is irrational, and the knowing does not help.

Are there women there.

He sends it before he can stop himself. The text sits on the screen, blue and damning, and Shane stares at it and feels his face get hot because the text says everything he didn't want to say. It says I'm jealous. It says I don't trust this yet. It says I've had this for three months, and I'm already terrified of losing it because I spent twenty years not knowing I could have it, and now that I have it, the idea of it disappearing makes me feel like I'm standing on the edge of something without a railing.

He wants to unsend it. He can't unsend it. The text exists now, evidence of a weakness Shane didn't want to have and can't defend.

One minute. Two. Three. Five. Ilya doesn't respond for five minutes, which is long enough for Shane to construct several detailed scenarios, none of them good, all of them involving Ilya's smile and a girl at the bar and the particular gravity of Ilya's body when it decides to lean toward someone. He knows these scenarios are irrational. He knows Ilya cares for him, wants only him. He knows this with the same certainty he knows the biomechanics of a triple axel, at the level of bone and muscle and the fundamental architecture of his understanding.

The knowing doesn't help. The fear isn't rational and it doesn't respond to rational arguments and it doesn't care about data or evidence. The fear is older than Ilya. The fear is the flat nothing Shane felt for twenty years and the bewildering something he feels now.

The phone buzzes.

Ilya

I'm calling you.

Shane picks up on the first ring and says nothing.

"Shane." Ilya's voice is low. There's bar noise behind him — music, shouting, the clatter of a busy Thursday night — and Ilya has clearly walked somewhere quieter because the noise dims as he moves. "There are women in the bar, yes. There are women in most bars. This is how bars work. None of them are relevant."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes. I know. I shouldn't have sent that."

"You should send whatever you feel. Always. Even the crazy texts. Especially the crazy texts." The bar noise is gone now. He's outside, maybe, or in a hallway. His voice is clear and close and private. "But I need you to hear me. I'm not looking at anyone. I have not looked at anyone for a long time. And even when I looked at someone, no one has mattered except you. You think some girl with red fingernails is going to change that?"

"You saw the fingernails?"

"I saw the text. I looked at the photo. I found the fingernails. You are very observant and very insane."

Shane closes his eyes. "I know I'm being—"

"You are scared. That is allowed. But I need you to hear the next thing I say because it is the same thing I am going to say every day for the rest of my life." Ilya's voice drops, lower, the voice that used to come through the wall when he called Svetlana, the voice Shane now knows is reserved for the people Ilya cares about. "I have never wanted anyone the way I want you. Before you, I did not know there was a difference between wanting someone and wanting to not be alone. There is a difference. You are the difference. Do you understand?"

Shane doesn't say anything for a moment. His throat is doing something and his eyes are doing something, and he's sitting on the couch in the dark pressing the phone against his ear, and the words are landing in the place where the fear lives, and they're not killing the fear, not exactly, but they're standing next to it, taking up space, making it smaller.

"Yes," he says. "I understand."

"Good. Now, I am coming home."

"You don't have to come home. I'm being irrational. I know I'm being irrational. Go back inside, have a drink, I'll be fine by the time—"

"I am coming home. I am already walking to my car. Tell me what colour are your socks right now."

"What?"

"Your socks. What colour?"

"White. Why does that—"

"Because I want to picture you. On the couch in white socks. Reading hockey book without me. This is emergency. I am coming home."

"That doesn't constitute an emergency."

"It constitutes emergency to me. You said you are sitting in the dark spiralling over fingernails. I am not going to stay at a bar drinking with Dubois while you sit in the dark spiralling over fingernails. This is not a difficult decision, Shane." He hears a car door open and close. "Fifteen minutes."

"You shouldn't drive fast."

"I am driving speed limit. Speed limit is very fast on this road."

"It's not."

"It should be. I am hanging up now. Do not spiral. I am coming."

He hangs up. Shane sits on the couch, phone in hand, feeling stupid and relieved and angry at himself for feeling relieved, because he knows this isn't fair. He knows Ilya should be able to go to a bar without Shane unravelling. He knows the jealousy is about him, not about Ilya. It's about the years of not knowing and the months of knowing and the terror in the gap between them. He knows all of this and the knowing doesn't change the feeling, which is that the front door is going to open and Ilya is going to walk through it and the apartment is going to become the apartment again, the one where the walls are down.

He sits on the couch and waits.

Ilya gets home in twelve minutes, which means he absolutely drove too fast. Then Ilya is in the living room. His cheeks are flushed from the cold and his curls are messy from the wind and he smells like beer and fried food and the cologne that Marleau wears too much of.

"Hi," Ilya says.

"Hi."

"I smell like Dubois's wings and Marleau's cologne."

"That's disgusting."

"It is a very bad combination. Shower first or—"

"Come here."

Ilya comes there. He sits on the couch and Shane is in his arms immediately, face against his neck, breathing in the bar smell — the beer and the wings and the cologne and underneath all of it, underneath everything, the smell that is just Ilya, warm and specific and his.

"I'm sorry," Shane says into his neck.

"Do not be sorry."

"I sent a jealous text like a teenager. Over fingernails."

"It was a very controlled jealous text. Very Shane. Are there women there. No exclamation mark. No emoji. No capslock. The most dignified jealousy I have ever seen."

"I'll work on it."

"You do not need to work on it, Shane. You just need to tell me when you are scared, because I cannot fix it if you do not tell me."

"I'm scared."

"I know." Ilya's hand is in Shane's hair, the slow movement that Shane didn't know he needed until he had it and now can't imagine living without. "I am here. I am always going to be here. You understand? You are stuck with me. We have a lease."

Shane presses his face harder into Ilya's neck and doesn't say anything because there's nothing left to say. Ilya is here. Ilya came home in twelve minutes because Shane was sitting in the dark spiralling over fingernails, and this is what it is. This is what it feels like. Having something and being terrified and having it anyway.

They stay on the couch for a long time. Shane's hand is on Ilya's chest, over his heart. The heartbeat is steady and slow and Shane monitors it and the monitoring calms him, data he can hold, evidence that the world hasn't taken this away.

"Shane," Ilya says eventually.

"Yes."

"Next time I go out—"

"I know. I'll be better."

"I was going to say, next time I go out, come with me."

Shane lifts his head. "To a bar. With your hockey team."

"Yes."

"As what?"

"As my roommate. As my friend. As the boring figure skater who drinks ginger ale and does not dance." Ilya's thumb traces Shane's jaw, the line of it, slow. "Nobody has to know anything. It is better than sitting here alone staring at fingernails."

Shane considers this. The bar. The teammates. Marleau and Dubios and Connors. The performance of being just roommates, just friends, while sitting next to the person he loves. It sounds terrible. It sounds significantly better than this.

It's like Ilya can see what he's thinking about, can hear his thoughts. "I want you with me, always."

Shane's skin goes hot where Ilya's hand is holding his neck, and his breath catches, and his whole body leans forward, involuntarily, cause his body wants to be closer to the person who just said always like it was simple. Like it was fact.

"Okay," Shane says.

"Yeah?"

"Next time. I'll come."

Ilya kisses his forehead. Then his nose. Then the freckles on his cheek, one by one, a slow deliberate path across Shane's skin that makes Shane's eyes close and his breath go uneven.

"You're counting them again," Shane says.

"I'm always counting them. I have a PhD in your freckles also. Very prestigious. The freckle sciences."

"Two fake PhDs."

"In Russia, all PhDs are real. Even the fake ones. Especially the fake ones."

Shane closes his eyes and lets Ilya count his freckles and doesn't think about anything except his mouth moving lower, kissing his jaw, throat, the spot below Shane's ear that makes his whole body tighten.

"Ilya," Shane says. His voice has changed. Lower. The voice that Ilya heard for the first time three weeks ago, and has been trying to hear again ever since.

"Yes."

"Take me to bed."

Ilya pulls back just enough to look at him. His eyes are dark, the bar flush still on his cheeks, and the look on his face is the look Shane is learning to read — the one that says I want you so much it's difficult to breathe, the one that existed in the stands every morning for two years and is now allowed to be here, on the couch, in the open.

"You're sure? You were upset—"

"I was upset because you were somewhere I couldn't touch you. You're not somewhere else now."

Ilya's jaw tightens. They walk to the bedroom, and Ilya closes the door, and Shane pushes him against it.

The kissing is different tonight. Not careful, not the slow exploring they've been doing for weeks, learning each other's mouths and hands and the sounds they make. This is Shane's mouth on Ilya's throat, saying mine without saying it, his hands pulling Ilya's shirt over his head, his fingers on the bare skin of Ilya's waist with a grip that is not gentle.

"Shane—"

"I don't want to be careful tonight."

"Okay." Ilya's voice is rough. His hands find Shane's hips and pull him closer, and the closeness is a relief so sharp it's almost painful, the undoing of three hours of distance. "Okay. Not careful."

Shane pushes Ilya onto the bed. Ilya goes — Ilya always goes where Shane puts him, has always gone, from the first morning when Shane said you can't smoke here and Ilya moved — and Shane climbs over him, and the weight of Shane on top of Ilya makes them both make sounds, Shane's quiet and precise, Ilya's low and broken.

They're still new at this. Shane is still learning what his body does, what it wants, what the right outlet feels like when you're finally plugged in. Every time is a discovery — oh, this is what it's supposed to feel like, this is what everyone was talking about, this is why people lose their minds over this — and tonight the discovery is that jealousy makes everything sharper. Every touch is louder. Every sound Ilya makes goes straight through Shane's body like a current.

Shane's mouth is on Ilya's chest, his stomach, the line of muscle below his navel, and Ilya's hand is in Shane's hair and Ilya is saying Shane's name the way he says it — the soft sh, the way it sounds like a secret — and Shane takes him in his mouth and the sound Ilya makes is the sound Shane has been waiting to hear all night, the sound that says I'm yours, I was yours at the bar, I am yours, I will always be yours.

After — Ilya on top, Shane's legs around him, Shane's hands on Ilya's back feeling the muscles move, and the first time Shane said yes to this he was shaking and Ilya was so careful it almost hurt and tonight Shane is not shaking and Ilya is not careful and this is exactly what they both need, the proof that this is real and solid and can hold weight, that it doesn't need to be handled like glass.

Ilya says Shane's name when he comes. He says Shane's name and something in Russian that Shane doesn't understand, but he also does understand it.

They lie in the dark afterwards. Shane's head is on Ilya's chest, and Ilya's hand is in Shane's hair, and their breathing is slowing, and the apartment is theirs, and the bar is a building across the city that doesn't matter.

"Shane," Ilya says.

"Yes."

"The fingernails belonged to Connors' wife."

Shane is quiet for a second. Then he laughs, and Ilya laughs too, and the laughter shakes the bed, and Shane presses his face into Ilya's chest and laughs harder, and the sound fills the apartment the way the television used to, except this is better, this is so much better.

Chapter 23: a summer in ottawa

Chapter Summary

Shane goes to Ottawa for the summer, and his parents can tell that something is different. When he goes to Montreal, he comes out to Hayden and JJ.

Chapter Notes

I was putting my unfinished WIPs into a hidden collection and accidentally put this one in as well, and didn't notice until I was about to update! I'm sorry to those who noticed <3

The last night before summer, Shane lies on Ilya's chest in the dark and says, "Don't go."

He never says things like this. He says have a safe flight and call me when you land, because Shane is a person who manages departures the way he manages everything — efficiently, without visible emotion. But tonight the suitcase is on the floor, and the flight to Moscow is in seven hours, and Shane's hand is gripping Ilya's t-shirt, and the word comes out before he can catch it.

"I have to go," Ilya says.

"I know."

"My father—"

"I know."

The apartment is quiet. Shane lifts his head and looks at Ilya in the dark, and Ilya looks back, and they both know what the next eight weeks mean — phone calls instead of skin, a voice instead of a body, the twin bed in Ottawa and the bedroom in Grigori's house and seven thousand kilometres of distance that starts tomorrow morning.

Shane kisses him. Ilya responds immediately — his hands on Shane's waist, pulling him closer, rolling them so Shane is underneath him, and Shane hooks his leg around Ilya's hip, and the urgency is mutual and specific, the urgency of two people trying to fit two months of touching into one night.

"I want to remember this," Shane says. His voice is rough. His hands are on Ilya's back, pulling Ilya's shirt up, finding the moles on his spine. "All of it. I want to remember how you feel."

"You will remember."

"I want to make sure."

They are slow about it. There's no urgency, no need to prove anything. This is Shane's hands memorising Ilya's body the way he learns choreography, through deliberate repetition, the conscious retaining of every detail. The weight of Ilya's hips between his thighs. The sound Ilya makes when Shane bites his shoulder — the low, broken Russian sound, the one that lives in Shane's chest long after the sound itself fades. The way Ilya's back arches when Shane's hand wraps around him. The freckle of sweat on Ilya's collarbone that Shane licks and tastes salt and skin.

They take turns. Shane on top first — riding Ilya slow, his hands on Ilya's chest, Ilya's hands on Shane's hips, and Shane watches Ilya's face because he wants to memorise the face too, the way it opens, the way the performance falls away, and what's left is just want, raw and helpless. Then Ilya on top, Shane's legs around him, Ilya's forehead against Shane's, moving slow because slow is what the last night requires, slow is the body saying I don't want this to end.

Shane comes with his face in Ilya's neck and his hands gripping Ilya's shoulders and Ilya's name in his mouth, quiet this time, the private one, the one that is only for this bed and this person and this last night before the suitcase and the airport and the seven thousand kilometres.

Ilya comes a minute later, still inside him, still moving, and the sound he makes is Shane's name and something in Russian and then silence, and the silence is the loudest thing in the apartment.

"I will call you every day," Ilya says.

"The time difference is eight hours."

"I will call you every day at a time that accommodates the eight-hour difference."

"That's logistically complicated."

"I am capable of logistics, Shane."

"You forgot to pack socks."

"That was one time."

"It was this afternoon. I packed them for you. They're in the front pocket."

Ilya's arm tightens around him. His mouth presses against the top of Shane's head and stays there.

"August," Ilya says.

"August."

"I will come back early."

"You always come back early."

"This time I will come back earlier."

Shane lifts his head. In the dark, he can see the outline of Ilya's face — the jaw, the curls, the light eyes that are not quite visible but are there, always there. "I'm going to miss you," he says.

They don't sleep. They talk until three and then they stop talking and lie there, Shane's hand on Ilya's heart and Ilya's hand in Shane's hair.

Shane drives him to the airport in the morning in the car he bought two weeks earlier. British. Dependable. They can't kiss at departures. They can't touch. Shane pulls up and they sit in the car with the engine running and neither of them says anything because everything has been said and also because if either of them opens their mouth right now the car will never move.

"Go," Shane says. "You'll miss your flight."

"I do not care about the flight."

"You care about the flight. Go."

Ilya gets out. Takes his bag. Leans down to look at Shane through the window, and Shane looks back, and his face is doing the controlled thing, but his eyes are bright and his jaw is clenched and the cost of it is visible to exactly one person.

"August," Ilya says.

"August."

Ilya walks into the terminal. Shane sits in the car at departures until someone honks behind him. Then he drives home to an empty apartment and stands in the hallway and the hallway still smells like Ilya's cologne and Shane stands there and breathes it in and doesn't move for a long time.

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Ottawa in June smells like cut grass and the river. Yuna picks him up at the airport. She hugs him — brief and firm — and holds him at arm's length and looks at his face and says, "Something is different."

"I'm fine."

"I didn't say you weren't fine. I said something is different." She studies him the way she studies game film. Frame by frame, looking for the detail that explains the whole picture. "You look lighter."

She's right. Something is different. Shane can feel it in his own face — a looseness that wasn't there before, something around his mouth and his eyes that he doesn't know how to control because he's never had to control it before. He looks like a person with a secret that makes him happy, and Yuna can read him the way she reads a contract.

"Training's going well," Shane says.

Yuna accepts this and they drive home.

David is waiting at the door. He hugs him the way David always hugs him — longer than necessary, both arms, his chin on Shane's shoulder — and when he pulls back his eyes are wet, and he says, "You seem happy, Shane."

Happy. The word sits on the porch between them. Shane thinks about the apartment and the couch and the person who is currently in Moscow.

"It's good to be home," Shane says, which is true and also not the whole answer.

The house is the same. The kitchen with the worn countertops and the window over the sink that looks out at the backyard. The living room with David's bookshelves and Yuna's framed competition photos, the stairs that creak on the third step. Shane's room, which is exactly as he left it at eighteen — the twin bed, the desk where he did his homeschool work, the shelf of textbooks, organised by subject.

The twin bed is the problem.

Shane lies in it the first night and the bed is too small and too empty and the wrong shape. He has spent three months sleeping in Ilya's bed — their bed — with Ilya's arm across his chest and Ilya's breathing in his ear and the warm solid weight of another person beside him, and the twin bed in Ottawa is a single-occupancy thing that holds one body and one body's silence and nothing else. Shane lies in it and stares at the ceiling and his hand goes to the space beside him and the space is cold and flat.

He calls Ilya from the bed. Moscow is eight hours ahead — it's early morning there, Ilya's voice thick with sleep.

"I hate this bed," Shane says.

"Is bad bed?"

"It's a twin. I've been sleeping in it since I was twelve."

"Twin is very small. Not enough room for—" A pause. Ilya is choosing his words. "For a full-sized person."

"For a full-sized person."

"Yes. You need bigger bed. For the — the stretching. Athletes need space for stretching."

"We're talking about stretching."

"We are talking about stretching. What else would we talk about?"

Shane closes his eyes. Ilya's voice in his ear, rough with sleep and warm with the particular warmth that is only for Shane, and the twin bed is still too small but the voice makes the smallness bearable.

"Go back to sleep," Shane says.

"Call me tomorrow."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"At our time."

"At our time."

They have a time. Three p.m. Boston, eleven p.m. Moscow. The time was established before either of them left, the way everything between them is established — silently, by mutual understanding,

the way the fridge shelves happened.

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The first week is dinners and the rink and the strange, doubled life of being in one place while belonging to another.

Shane trains at a facility in Ottawa — not his childhood rink, a newer one, with better ice and a coach named Sauriol who Linda approved and who runs Shane through the summer maintenance program. The sessions are good. Shane's body is strong, the quad toe loop clean, the lifts powerful from the months of Ilya cooking him full portions.

The rink is different without Rose and Linda. Without the upper stands where a person used to sit with bad coffee every morning. The rink in Ottawa is just a rink — ice and boards and the smell of cold air — and Shane skates alone, and it's fine, but there's also grief mingled because the mornings in Boston had Ilya watching from the stands and the mornings in Ottawa have nobody.

He trains hard. The programs for next season are ambitious. Linda sent notes, pages of notes, the Beethoven is being considered for the long, the difficulty level is a step up from anything they've done — and Shane implements the notes with the focus he's known for, the focus that Linda calls his greatest asset and that Shane knows is also the thing that makes him disappear into work when the rest of his life is difficult.

The rest of his life is difficult. Not bad, far from it, but it's difficult. He's in Ottawa, and Ilya is in Moscow, and his parents are watching him with the particular attention of people who know something has changed and don't know what. Every dinner is an assessment. Every breakfast is an observation. Yuna watches him eat. David watches him be happy. Both of them are waiting for Shane to explain the happiness, and Shane is not ready to explain it, so the happiness sits at the table with them like an uninvited guest, and everyone pretends it isn't there.

David is the harder parent to hide from. Not because David pushes — David never pushes — but because David notices with his whole body. David notices that Shane checks his phone at three p.m. every day and smiles at whatever he sees. David notices that Shane hums in the kitchen, which Shane has never done, because Shane doesn't hum, except apparently now he does. David notices that Shane said "we" once at dinner — "we usually eat around seven" — and corrected himself to "I" a beat too late, and David's fork paused for exactly one second before he continued eating.

David doesn't ask. David waits. David's waiting is the most patient, most devastating thing in Shane's life.

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David usually cooks — this is established, this is the Hollander arrangement. But sometimes Yuna makes Japanese food, the recipes her parents taught her, and tonight she's made nikujaga — the beef stew with potatoes and soy sauce that she makes when Shane comes home. The Japanese comfort food that tastes like every return, every homecoming, every time Shane walked back into this house after being somewhere that wasn't here.

"So," Yuna says, pouring tea. "How's Nora?"

The question lands on the table like a glass dropped from a height. Shane puts his chopsticks down.

"We broke up."

Yuna's hand pauses on the teapot. David stops chewing.

"When?" Yuna asks.

"January."

"January." Yuna's voice is flat. "It's June, Shane."

"I know what month it is."

"You broke up with your girlfriend five months ago and you didn't mention it. Not on the phone, not in a text, not once in five months of weekly calls."

"It didn't seem—"

"If it didn't seem important enough to mention, then why do you look happier than I've ever seen you?"

The kitchen is very quiet. David is looking at his plate. Yuna is looking at Shane. Shane is looking at the nikujaga, which is getting cold.

"Yuna," David says gently. "Let him eat."

"I'm asking a question."

"You're asking four questions at once. Let him eat."

Yuna sits back. Shane picks up his chopsticks. The kitchen smells like home and his mother just asked why he's happy and the answer is in Moscow right now, on the other side of the world, probably sitting with his father in the house in Ilya hates being in, and Shane can't say this yet.

He eats the nikujaga, a full portion. David watches and relaxes. Yuna watches and doesn't.

+++

The eating confrontation happens on the eight night.

David cooks — something ambitious with too much garlic, which is David's signature. They eat at the kitchen table the way they've always eaten, David talking about work, Yuna correcting details, Shane mostly quiet. After dinner, they clear together. David washes, Shane dries, Yuna wraps leftovers in cling film and stacks them in the fridge, the three-person system they've had since Shane was tall enough to reach the counter.

David hands Shane a plate to dry. "You barely ate tonight."

"I ate."

"You had three bites of chicken and no potatoes. I watched." David keeps washing. His hands are in the suds, and his voice is casual, the casualness of a man who is trying very hard not to sound scared. "You used to love my chicken."

"I had a big lunch."

Yuna is behind them, putting cling film over a bowl. She doesn't turn around, but her hands slow down.

"Shane," David says. He passes another plate. "I'm not trying to — I just noticed."

"There's nothing to notice."

Yuna puts the bowl in the fridge, closes it and turns around. She leans against the counter, crosses her arms, and looks at Shane with the expression that is not warm and patient but sharp and assessing, the competition expression, the one that misses nothing.

"How much do you weigh?" she asks.

"Honey—"

"How much, Shane?"

David's hands stop in the water. The kitchen is quiet except for the drip of the tap.

Shane tells her. Her jaw tightens. David pulls his hands out of the sink and dries them on the dish towel slowly, the way you do things slowly when you're buying time before you have to feel something.

"That's fifteen pounds less than last summer," David says. "Shane. Fifteen pounds."

"I'm training harder. The programs for next season are—"

"The weight is not fine," Yuna says. She uncrosses her arms. "I've been watching you since you got here. The portions are small. You measure everything. You won't eat anything your father cooks without calculating it first." She pulls out the chair across from him and sits. David stays at the sink, dish towel in his hands, his face doing something that is trying to be calm and not managing it.

"How long has this been happening?" Yuna asks.

Shane stares at the table. The table is wood and old, and he sat at this table when he was eight years old and ate everything on his plate without thinking about it. The distance between eight and twenty-one is thirteen years, and in those years, something went wrong, and he didn't notice it going wrong because the wrong felt like discipline, and the discipline felt like control, and the control felt like the only safe thing.

"A while," he says.

"A while." Yuna's voice softens. Not much — a degree, maybe two — but the softening is Yuna saying I'm scared and I love you in the only language she has. "You're going to see a nutritionist. Here, in Ottawa. Before you go to Montreal."

"Mom—"

"This is not a negotiation."

Shane looks at David. David is still holding the dish towel. His eyes are wet, and his hands are wet, and his face is the face of a man who just understood something he's been sensing for a long time.

"Please, Shane," David says. "For us."

Shane nods. The nodding is surrender, and the surrender is a relief he didn't expect — the particular relief of being caught, of having the thing he's been hiding seen by people who love him enough to say stop.

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He sees the nutritionist. A woman named Claire, Yuna's age, practised and kind and not fooled by Shane's system. She asks questions Shane doesn't want to answer, and he answers them anyway because the answers are the point, and the point is getting better and getting better requires honesty, and honesty is the hardest thing Shane does that isn't skating.

Claire gives him a plan. The plan is numbers — calories, macros, portions — and the numbers are familiar because numbers are Shane's language, and the plan feels like a system and the system feels safe.

He calls Ilya that night from his bedroom.

"I saw a nutritionist," Shane says.

The line is quiet for a moment. Moscow is eight hours ahead. It's two in the morning for Ilya.

"Good," Ilya says. His voice is rough with sleep and careful with something else. "That is good, Shane."

"My parents made me."

"Your parents are smart."

"You knew. You've known for a while."

"I knew something. I did not know — I did not know the right word for it. I knew the yoghurt was gone sometimes. I knew the portions were getting smaller. I did not know what to do about it." His voice is quiet. "I still do not know what to do about it."

"You don't have to do anything. You already do the thing."

"What thing?"

"You stay. You're at the counter when I eat. You don't comment. You just — stay."

Ilya is quiet for a long time. Shane can hear him breathing, the slow breathing of two in the morning, and the breathing is the most comforting sound in the world.

"I will always stay," Ilya says.

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He tells them the next week.

He plans it the way he plans programs — the timing, the setting, the approach. Not at dinner. Not in the kitchen. Not anywhere near food, because Shane cannot have the two hardest conversations of his life in the same room. He chooses the porch, after dinner, tea in hand, the Ottawa evening warm and long, the sky still light at nine. The neighbours' sprinkler clicks, a dog barks somewhere down the street, and the porch smells like the geraniums David planted in May, the ones he talks to when he thinks nobody's watching.

Shane has been rehearsing this for three days. Not the words — the words are simple, two words, I'm gay — but the aftermath. The silence that will follow. The way his mother's face will change. The way his father's face will change. Shane has run the scenarios the way he runs competition scenarios, accounting for variables, preparing for outcomes, and the preparation hasn't helped because the preparation can't account for the thing that terrifies him most, which is not rejection but love. The possibility that his parents will love him through this, that the love won't change, that he'll have to sit on the porch and receive love he didn't earn and doesn't know how to hold.

"I need to tell you something," Shane says.

David puts his tea down. Yuna holds hers. The sky is pink at the edges, and the sprinkler clicks, and Shane's hands are on his mug, and the mug is warm, and he looks at the geraniums.

"The reason I'm happy. The reason I look different. It's not Nora. It was never Nora." He looks at the yard, the grass, the fence David painted last spring. "I broke up with Nora because I felt nothing. The same nothing I felt with Jessica. The same nothing I've felt with every woman I've been with."

The porch is quiet. The sprinkler clicks.

"I'm gay."

He says it the way he said it to Rose — steady, practised, the word that has been living in his chest for months and has gotten smoother with use. It doesn't crack this time. It comes out whole.

Nobody speaks for a moment. The moment is long. The moment contains the sound of the sprinkler and the dog and the evening and Shane's heartbeat, which is fast but steady, because he's done this before — for Rose, for himself on a couch in another apartment — and the practice has made the word survivable.

David makes a sound. Not a word — a sound, the sound of a man whose chest has just expanded with something too big for language, and his hand comes up and covers his mouth and his eyes fill and he stands up from his chair and the chair scrapes on the porch boards and he crosses the porch in two steps and puts his arms around Shane and holds him.

David holds him the way David has always held him — with his whole body, without reservation, the hug that goes on too long and says too much and is exactly what Shane needs even when Shane doesn't know he needs it. David's chin is on Shane's shoulder, and his arms are tight, and he says "thank you for telling us" into Shane's hair, and his voice is thick and broken and full. Shane can feel his father shaking, the small tremors of a man who is crying and trying not to cry and failing at both, and Shane's own eyes burn, but he doesn't cry. He holds his father and lets himself be held.

David pulls back. Wipes his face with the back of his hand. Sits down. Picks up his tea. Puts it down. Picks it up again. His hands are not steady.

"I love you," David says. "You know that. This doesn't — Shane, this changes nothing. Not one thing."

"I know, Dad."

"I mean it. Not one thing." David's voice cracks on the word thing. "You're my son. You're my son, and I'm proud of you, and I love you."

Yuna stays in her chair. She holds her tea. Her face is doing the thing it does when she's processing something large — still, contained, the gears turning behind the surface. She watches David hold Shane, and her chin does the thing, the slight tightening that means she's holding steady against something that wants to loosen.

"Okay," Yuna says. Her voice is steady, and she puts her tea on the armrest and stands up, and Shane thinks she's going inside, but she doesn't go inside. She crosses the porch and puts her arms around him.

Yuna doesn't hug like David. Yuna's hugs are brief, firm, and purposeful. This one is not brief. This one lasts, her arms tight around Shane's shoulders, her face against the side of his head, and Shane can feel her breathing — controlled, deliberate, a woman holding herself together — and he puts his arms around her and holds on. His mother is small and strong and shaking slightly and the shaking is the thing she'll never admit to.

She pulls back. Puts her hands on his face, and looks at him.

"Okay," she says again. Quieter. Then: "Is there someone?"

Shane nods.

"Someone I know?"

"You know of him."

Yuna's hands are still on his face. Her eyes do a rapid calculation. Shane talks about the roommate on every phone call, the roommate who cooks for him, the roommate whose hockey games Shane watches, the roommate Shane has lived with for three years and never once complained about — and she says, "The roommate."

Shane doesn't answer, and that in itself is the answer.

Yuna lets go of his face. "How long?"

"Since February."

"And before February?"

"I didn't know. Or I knew and didn't look at it."

Yuna is quiet for a moment. "Does Linda know?"

"Not yet."

"She needs to know before Sochi." Yuna's brain has already shifted from mother to manager. She looks at him, and something in her face shifts, the manager receding and the mother arriving, and she reaches for him again and puts her hand on his cheek.

"I'm proud of you," she says. "This is brave, and I'm proud of you."

Shane put his hand on top of hers. His mother's hand is small yet strong and certain.

He calls Ilya from his bedroom at midnight. Ilya picks up on the first ring.

"I told them."

"Both?"

"Both. Dad cried. He cried a lot. He's probably still crying."

"How did your mother react?"

"She asked if Linda knows. Then she asked about the Sochi timeline."

Ilya laughs. "Of course she did. She is already making a plan. You told me this is what happens."

"Yeah, she's always making a plan."

"She sounds terrifying."

"She's not terrifying. She's thorough."

"Thorough is Russian word for terrifying."

"That's not what thorough means."

"In Russia it is. Thorough people are the ones who find things. I do not want your mother to find things, Shane."

"She already found things. She guessed it's you."

"Of course, she guessed. Mothers always guess. My mama would have guessed." He's quiet for a second. Then: "I want to meet them. Your parents."

"You will."

"When?"

"Soon. When you're back."

"I will be very charming. I will bring flowers. Very impressive."

"You don't need to bring flowers."

"I am bringing flowers. You said your Papa loves flowers. You said he cries at everything. I will bring flowers and David will cry, and your mother will assess me, and I will pass the assessment because I am very good at assessments."

"You forgot to pack socks."

"The socks are not relevant to the assessment."

Shane lies in the twin bed that is too small and holds the phone, and Ilya's voice is in his ear, and Moscow is eight hours away, and his parents know, and the world is the same, yet it's different.

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The phone calls become the structure of the summer.

Three p.m. Boston, eleven p.m. Moscow. Every day. Shane picks up on the first ring, and Ilya's voice arrives, and the twin bed gets smaller, and the distance gets larger, and the calls are sustaining and not enough.

They talk about everything. Ilya tells him about Grigori — the bad days, the worse days, the rare good days when Grigori tells a hockey story from 1978 and his eyes are sharp and his voice is the old voice and Ilya has to leave the room because the clarity is harder than the confusion. Shane tells Ilya about training — the Ottawa rink, Sauriol's drills, the way the Beethoven feels different without Rose, like a conversation with one person missing.

They talk about nothing. What Shane ate for dinner. What Ilya watched on television. The specific way David loads a dishwasher that is both inefficient and endearing. The way Svetlana's cat knocked a plant off the balcony, and Svetlana blamed Ilya, and Ilya blamed the wind, and the cat watched them both with contempt.

"I miss your hands," Ilya says one night, quiet, late, the Moscow voice that is softer than the Boston voice.

"My hands."

"On my chest. When we sleep. Your hand on my chest. I miss that."

Shane is quiet. His hand goes to his own chest, over his own heart, and the heartbeat is there, but the hand is wrong — it's his hand, not Ilya's, and the wrongness of it aches.

"Thirty-two days," Shane says.

"You are counting."

"I'm always counting."

On the nights when the calls end, and the phone goes dark, Shane lies in the twin bed and stares at the ceiling the way he imagines Ilya staring at a different ceiling in a different country. August. August is coming. Ilya will come back early because Ilya always comes back early, and the apartment will be theirs again, and the twin bed will be a memory, and Ilya's hand will be on Shane's chest, and the hand will be the right hand.

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Shane spends five weeks in Ottawa and then goes to Montreal.

He trains with Rose in the mornings — their summer schedule, maintenance work, keeping the throws sharp, and the lifts strong. Rose is the same Rose — warm, steady, the partner who knows his body better than anyone except Ilya, and even Ilya knows it differently. Rose knows the professional body. Ilya knows the rest.

On the second day, sitting on the bench after practice, Shane says, "I'm seeing someone."

Rose looks at him, and waits.

"It's Ilya."

Rose's face does something complicated — not surprise, not shock, something closer to a lock clicking into place. "Since when?"

"February."

"February." She nods slowly.

"I asked him if it was okay to tell you. He said yes."

"He said yes because he's not an idiot and he knows I already knew." Rose pulls off her skate guard and puts it on the bench. "Shane. I've watched him watch you from the stands for three years. The man has a PhD in your face."

"He actually says that. He says he has a PhD in my freckles."

Rose laughs. "Of course he does." She puts her hand on Shane's arm. "Are you happy?"

"Yes."

"Is he good to you?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm glad. And also I'm glad you told me instead of making me pretend I didn't know for another year, because the pretending was exhausting."

She notices the eating on day four.

Shane is at the training facility cafeteria, measuring his lunch — the nutritionist's plan, the portions Claire designed — and the measuring is correct, the numbers are right, but Rose has been skating with Shane for six years and she knows his body the way a partner knows a body, through proximity and practice and the daily evidence of throws and lifts, and his body is lighter than it should be.

"You're lighter," Rose says.

"I've been training hard."

"You've always trained hard. You're lighter." She watches him eat. She watches him the way Ilya watches him — not commenting, not pushing, just present. "Is Claire's plan working?"

"How do you know about Claire?"

"Your mother called me."

"Of course she did."

"She's worried. I'm worried. You're down from where you were in April, and April was already—" Rose stops herself. "Shane. Are you following the plan?"

"I'm following the plan."

"The full plan? Every meal?"

Shane doesn't answer immediately, and like it always is with Shane, not answering is the answer, and Rose hears it the way she hears everything — through the silence.

"Okay," Rose says. She doesn't push. She changes the subject to the short program and the new death spiral and the Chopin music that Linda sent them, and Shane is grateful for the redirect and also knows that Rose is not done, that Rose has filed this and will act on it, because Rose is the person who notices and the person who acts on things.

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Shane meets Hayden and JJ for lunch at a place in the Plateau that JJ chose because JJ has opinions about restaurants the way Shane has opinions about scoring systems.

It's good to see them. It's always good to see them. Hayden, loud and sunburned after a week in Hawaii, filling the restaurant with his voice, and JJ calm and enormous and eating bread with the focus of a man who reads bread magazines.

"So," Hayden says, halfway through his burger. "What's new. How's Boston? How's the skating? How's the roommate?"

"The roommate is fine."

"The roommate is a menace. Last time we played them, he cross-checked me into the boards in the second period. I swear I'm still bruised."

"That's 'ockey," JJ says.

"That's Rozanov being Rozanov. The guy plays like he's got something to prove every shift. It's exhausting." Hayden takes a bite of his burger. "How do you live with him? Seriously. Does he just go around the apartment cross-checking things?"

"He's not that bad at home."

"I don't believe you. I think he probably checks the furniture. The couch probably has a bruise."

JJ shakes his head. "T'es obsédé, 'ayden."

"I'm not obsessed. I'm informing our friend about his roommate's behaviour. There's a difference."

Shane drinks his water and listens to Hayden bitch about Ilya and the listening is surreal, because the person Hayden is describing — the menace, the cross-checker, the guy who plays like he's got something to prove — is also the person who cooks Shane dinner and counts his freckles and says I want you with me, always.

"I have something to tell you," Shane says.

Hayden puts his burger down. JJ looks up from his bread.

"I'm gay."

The restaurant continues around them. Dishes clinking, conversations at other tables, the espresso machine hissing. The word sits between the three of them, and Hayden's face goes through several expressions in rapid succession — surprise, processing, recalibration — and JJ's face stays steady because JJ's face is always steady.

"Okay," Hayden says. Then: "Okay. Yeah. Okay."

"You said okay three times," JJ says.

"I'm processing. Give me a second." Hayden picks up his burger, puts it down again. "Since when?"

"I've always — I just didn't know until recently."

"How recently?"

"This year."

Hayden nods. He's still processing — Shane can see the gears turning, the recalibration happening in real time, Hayden's brain rearranging years of assumptions. JJ reaches across the table and squeezes Shane's arm once.

"Ça change rien," JJ says. Simply. The way JJ says everything important — in French, without fuss.

"Are you — is there someone?" Hayden asks.

"Yes. But I'm not ready to talk about who."

Hayden opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again. "Okay. When you're ready."

The conversation moves on, the way it does with people who love you — not away from the thing but around it, absorbing it, making space. Hayden announces that Jackie is expecting twins, and the announcement lands like a grenade of joy, and the table erupts, and Shane shakes Hayden's hand, and JJ hugs Hayden and says something in French that makes Hayden's eyes fill. JJ mentions he's seeing someone — doesn't say much, just the fact of it, the way JJ does things, private and certain.

They walk out of the restaurant together and Hayden puts his arm around Shane's shoulders on the sidewalk and says, "I love you, man. You know that. Nothing changes."

"I know."

"And when you're ready to tell me who, I promise I won't fight him."

"You'll definitely fight him."

"I'll probably fight him. But I'll feel bad about it."

Chapter 24: moscow

Chapter Summary

Ilya spends the summer in Moscow with a father who doesn't remember his name and a city that feels like a cage.

Moscow is the same, and Grigori is not.

Ilya notices it the first evening. Grigori is at the house, which is where he's always been, in the chair by the window with the television on and a glass of tea going cold on the table beside him. The house looks the same — the heavy furniture, the dark wood, the photographs of him and Polina at various functions. But Grigori himself has changed.

He's thinner. His hands shake when he picks up the tea. He called Ilya by Alexei's name twice in the first hour and didn't correct himself, didn't notice, just kept talking about the television programme as if the wrong name were the right one.

"You look tired," Grigori tells him. "You're not training enough."

"I'm training plenty, Papa."

"You need to train harder, Alexei."

"I'm not Alexei."

Grigori looks at him with an expression that flickers between confusion and something older, meaner, the expression Ilya grew up fearing. "Of course you're not Alexei. Alexei has discipline."

The word lands the way it always has in the place Grigori aimed it. Twenty-one years of this man calibrating his cruelty, and the calibration survives even as the rest of him erodes. Ilya sits in the chair and takes it and thinks about Shane saying *you're not lazy* on the couch in the dark, the certainty in Shane's voice, the way it landed on the bruise Grigori left and held there like a hand.

On the third day, Grigori has a good morning. He makes tea for both of them without being asked and sits at the kitchen table and tells Ilya about a patrol he ran in 1978. It's a story Ilya has heard a hundred times: The checkpoint outside Gorky, the lieutenant who lost his nerve. The telling is sharp and detailed and full of the old Grigori, the one whose cruelty came from a place of clarity rather than confusion. And then in the middle of the story Grigori stops, and his eyes go blank. The sentence dissolves, and he looks at Ilya and says, "Who are you visiting?" The question is genuine, and the blankness is total. Ilya says, "It's Ilya, Papa," and Grigori says, "Ilya," as if tasting the name for the first time.

The moment passes. Grigori picks up the story where he left off as if nothing happened. Ilya drinks his tea and doesn't say anything. He all doesn't listen because somewhere in Ottawa, Shane is at the rink, and Ilya wants to be there so badly that his hands ache with it.

He hires a woman to come to the house every day. Natalya. She's a nurse, recommended by Svetlana's mother, and she's firm and kind and doesn't take Grigori's cruelty personally, which is the most important qualification. Grigori calls her the wrong name for the first week and then stops calling her anything, and then, on the ninth day, calls her Irina, and Ilya is in the hallway when he hears it and has to put his hand on the wall to steady himself.

Polina comes once a week. She sits with Grigori for an hour, talks to Natalya about his medications, and leaves without asking how he is because she already knows. Polina stopped caring about Grigori a long time ago, long before the dementia, back when caring about him was still something that could hurt her.

No one else comes.

Alexei is in Saint Petersburg, or was the last time anyone heard from him, which was four months ago. Alexei has his own problems. The drinking, the jobs that don't last, the women who leave, and Grigori is not one of them. Grigori was never kind to Alexei either, but Alexei's response was different from Ilya's. Alexei left. Ilya keeps coming back.

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Moscow without Shane is a different kind of grey. Anywhere without Shane is grey.

The grey thing has always been there. Since his mother's death, since the years of filling rooms with noise to cover the silence underneath. But in Boston, the grey thing had a counterweight. Shane at the counter. Shane's alarm at five-fifteen. The heartbeat under Ilya's hand at night. The counterweight didn't cure it, nothing cures it. Ilya is beginning to understand this, but it did make it lighter. Made the getting-out-of-bed possible. Made the performing possible. Made the living possible.

In Moscow, the counterweight is seven thousand kilometres away, and the grey thing has the whole bed to itself.

Ilya wakes at noon because there's no five-fifteen alarm. He lies in his old bedroom and stares at the ceiling, and the ceiling stares back. His body is heavy in the way that has nothing to do with fatigue. The heaviness is the thing he doesn't have a name for. The thing that sits on his chest like a hand pressing down. He should get up. He should eat. He should train. The gym in Presnya is a twenty-minute walk, the ice is available at the CSKA facility if he calls ahead.

He doesn't get up for an hour. Sometimes two. He lies in the bed and holds his phone and reads Shane's last text — always something small, a fact, a schedule update, a single sentence that is so specifically Shane that Ilya can hear the flat precise voice in his head — and the reading is the thing that eventually makes his legs move. Not the training. Not the obligation. Shane's voice in his head saying get up, which Shane has never actually said because Shane doesn't know about the mornings in Moscow, doesn't know about the heaviness, doesn't know that the person who grins and charms and fills every room is also the person who can't get out of bed on a Tuesday in June for no reason at all.

He misses Shane in his body. Not abstractly, but physically. His hands miss the weight of Shane's head on his chest. His arm misses the shape of Shane's shoulders underneath it. His mouth misses the spot behind Shane's ear where the skin is softest, and Shane makes the quiet sound. His chest misses the hand, the monitoring hand, the one that tracks his heartbeat through sleep. Ilya has never been a person who misses people physically. He misses them in concept, in absence, in the

awareness that someone is not here, but Shane has taught his body a new language, and the language is proximity, and the vocabulary is specific, and every word in it starts with touch.

The house is too quiet, the wrong kind of quiet. Grigori's television is on, but Grigori doesn't always know what he's watching, and the conversations are loops, the same stories, the same questions. Ilya tells him about hockey because hockey is the only subject that reaches whatever is left of Grigori's brain, the one pathway still firing, and even that pathway misfires. Grigori confuses the Bears with Spartak, confuses the NHL with the Soviet league, asks Ilya if he's met a player who retired in 1985.

"You need to score more," Grigori says on a Thursday. A clear day, a cruel day. "Your shot selection is poor. Like your mother's family."

Ilya sits in the chair and takes it. His mother's family — Grigori's favourite weapon, the one that survived the dementia intact. Irina was soft, Irina's family was soft, and Ilya takes after Irina, and the that is Grigori's oldest grievance.

"My shot selection is fine, Papa."

"Fine is not enough. Fine is mediocre. You want to be mediocre?"

"I won the scoring title last year."

"In America. American hockey is soft, Russian hockey is hard. You play soft."

Ilya drinks his tea. Grigori is wrong about everything and right about nothing, and the cruelty doesn't land the way it used to because Shane's voice is in Ilya's head, saying *you're not lazy*, and the voice is louder than Grigori's, which is a miracle Ilya didn't know he needed.

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He tells Svetlana about it on the balcony, their balcony, the one in Presnya where the Moscow sky goes pale at eleven p.m. They don't sleep together this time. They sit and smoke and the absence of sex between them is comfortable now. Svetlana asks about Shane in a voice that is warm and curious and not at all jealous, and Ilya tells her everything. He tell her about the couch and the hallway and the freckles and the way Shane monitors his heartbeat and the way Shane said *don't go* while they're were tangled in bed.

"You love him," Svetlana says.

"I've loved him since the alley."

"No, I know you've wanted him since the alley. I'm saying you love him. The real thing. The big one."

Ilya smokes and looks at the Moscow sky. "Yes."

"Does he know?"

"I haven't said it."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a coward."

"You're not a coward. You're careful. There's a difference." She ashes her cigarette over the railing.
"Does he love you?"

"He drove me to the airport and sat in the car and clenched his jaw so hard I thought he'd crack a tooth. And then his eyes got red and he told me to go and his voice was—" Ilya stops. "Shane doesn't do that. Shane doesn't let people see that."

"That's a yes."

"That's a yes."

Svetlana smiles. "Tell him. When you go back. Say the words."

"I will."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

They sit on the balcony until one in the morning, and Ilya goes back to the house. Grigori is asleep in the chair with the television still on and the tea cold and untouched. Ilya turns off the television and puts a blanket over his father's legs and stands there in the dark living room and looks at the man who has called him lazy and selfish and a disappointment for twenty-one years and feels something that is not love and not hate but something more complicated. Something that has no word in Russian or English, the feeling of watching a person who hurt you become a person who can't remember that they did.

He calls Shane every day. The time difference is eight hours, and they manage it — Ilya calls at eleven p.m. Moscow, which is three p.m. in Ottawa, and Shane picks up on the first ring every time.

"What did you eat today?" Ilya asks. He asks this every call. He started asking it on day three and Shane pushed back — "I'm not reporting to you" — and Ilya said "I am not asking for report. I am asking because I care and because this question is only way I can be in the kitchen with you from so far away" and Shane goes quiet and then says "chicken and rice. Full portion. And a yoghurt."

On the tenth day, Shane tells him about the nutritionist. Shane's voice is tight when he says it.

"Good," Ilya says. "That's good, Shane."

"It's humiliating."

"It's brave."

Shane is quiet. Then: "The hardest thing I've done since telling you on the couch."

Ilya closes his eyes. "Second hardest, then."

On other nights, they talk about nothing. Ilya's training, a movie he watched, a thing Marleau texted him about the offseason program. They talk about Rose's new choreography, Linda's notes, and the throw Lutz that still needs work. They talk about Grigori on the nights when Ilya can stand to talk

about Grigori, and on the nights he can't Shane talks about the weather in Ottawa and the book he's reading, and that is its own kind of intimacy.

On the twenty-eighth night, Shane says, "I ate everything at dinner tonight. The full plate. Dad made his chicken, and I ate all of it, and I didn't count anything."

Ilya closes his eyes. "How did it feel?"

"Terrifying." A pause. "Also good. It felt good."

"I am proud of you."

"Don't."

"Too bad. I am proud of you. I am going to say it."

"You're an asshole."

"You are boring."

Shane makes a sound that is almost a laugh, seven thousand kilometres away, and Ilya holds the phone and listens to it, and the sound is the best thing he's heard all summer.

The calls are good, they're sustaining, but they're not enough. They're a photograph of a meal. They remind you of the taste without providing it.

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He flies back on August first, eleven days early. He doesn't tell Shane.

He lands at Logan at four in the afternoon and takes a cab to the apartment and lets himself in, and the apartment is empty because Shane isn't back yet. Shane is still in Montreal; Shane's flight isn't until next week. But the apartment is clean, and Shane's ginger ale is on his shelf because Shane stocked it before he left, the same way Ilya stocked it last summer.

Ilya puts his bag down. He walks through the apartment, cataloguing everything. The couch, the counter, the hallway where they had sex for the first time, the carpet that gave Shane a burn he felt for three days. Ilya's room, which is their room, the bed that holds the shape of both of them. Everything is the same. Everything is waiting.

He calls Shane.

"I am at the apartment."

"What? Your flight isn't until—"

"I changed it."

"Ilya, that's—"

"I know. It is dramatic. I am Russian. Come home."

Shane is quiet for a moment. Ilya can hear him thinking, can hear the calculations — the flight, the schedule, Linda's training plan, the logistics of leaving Montreal a week early.

"I'll be there tomorrow," Shane says.

"Tomorrow?"

"I'm looking at flights right now. There's one at nine a.m."

"You do not have to—"

"I'll be there tomorrow."

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He takes the nine a.m. flight. He doesn't tell Rose why. He says something about the training schedule and an early start, and Rose drives him to the airport and hugs him and says, "Tell him I said hello," because she knows why he's leaving early, and Shane says, "I will."

The flight is 90 minutes. Shane sits in the window seat and watches the clouds. His body is vibrating with something that is not anxiety, that is the opposite of anxiety, that is the specific frequency of a person who is about to see the person they've missed for two months. The vibrating gets worse as the plane descends into Boston and worse as he gets his bag and worse as he takes a cab from the airport and worse as the cab turns onto their street and worse as he rides the elevator up and worse as he stands in front of the door.

He puts the key in, and turns it.

The apartment door opens, and Ilya is in the hallway.

He's standing there like he's been standing there since Shane called from the airport, which he probably has. He's wearing sweatpants and a t-shirt and his hair is a mess and he looks tired from the flight. His feet are bare on the hardwood floor, and Shane drops his bag in the doorway, crosses the distance between them in three steps, and Ilya catches him.

The kiss is not gentle. The kiss is two months of phone calls and counting days, and the Moscow sky at eleven p.m., and forty-three days, and then forty-one, and then twenty, and then seven, and then one, and then none. Shane's mouth is on Ilya's mouth and his hands are in Ilya's hair and Ilya's arms are around him so tight that Shane's ribs compress and he doesn't care. He doesn't care about breathing, doesn't care about anything except the fact that Ilya is solid and warm and real and here and smells like the apartment and soap and himself.

They hit the wall. Shane's back, the same wall, the hallway, and Ilya's hands are on his face and in his hair, pulling at his jacket. Shane is pulling at Ilya's shirt, and the shirt comes off, and Shane's jacket comes off, and they're skin against skin, and the contact after two months of no contact is so intense that Shane makes a sound that is almost a sob, a wrecked, broken noise from somewhere he didn't know existed.

"I missed you," Ilya says against his mouth, and his voice is ragged, "I missed you, I missed you—"

"Show me."

Ilya shows him.

He lifts Shane, hands under his thighs, and Shane wraps his legs around Ilya's waist, and the wall takes their weight. Ilya's mouth is on Shane's neck, his throat, the place behind his ear that makes Shane's vision go white, and Shane's hands are on Ilya's back, nails digging in, pulling him closer, closer, the two months of distance collapsing into nothing.

They get to the bedroom this time. Barely. Ilya carries him down the hallway, and they fall onto the bed. The sheets smell like the apartment, and Shane pulls Ilya down on top of him, and the weight of him, the full solid weight, makes Shane's eyes burn because he's been sleeping alone for two months in his childhood bed in Ottawa, and his body has been wrong without this, incomplete, running at half capacity.

Clothes come off. Fast, graceless, Shane is kicking his jeans off while Ilya pulls his own sweatpants down, and they're both naked and Shane looks at Ilya above him — the shoulders, the chest, the dark blond curls falling forward, the light eyes — and says, "I want—"

"What do you want?"

"Everything. I want everything."

"Shane—"

"Don't be careful. I've had two months of phone calls, and I want your hands on me, and I want this to not be careful."

Ilya's eyes go dark, his jaw tightens. And then his mouth is on Shane's collarbone, his chest, moving down, teeth grazing Shane's nipple, tongue flat on his stomach, and Shane's hands grip the sheets, and his breathing is already gone.

Ilya keeps going. Past Shane's navel, past the jut of his hipbone, mouth on the inside of Shane's thigh where the skin is thin and the nerves are close, and Shane makes the sound, the quiet one. Ilya's hands slide under Shane's thighs and push them up and apart, and Shane lets him, lets himself be opened.

"Turn over," Ilya says, and his voice is low and rough and not a request.

Shane turns over. Face down, arms under the pillow, and Ilya's hands are on the backs of his thighs, spreading him. Ilya's mouth is on the base of Shane's spine, kissing down, slow, deliberate, each vertebra, and Shane knows where this is going, and his whole body tightens, and his face is hot against the pillow.

Ilya's tongue finds him. Flat and wet and slow, dragging over his hole, and Shane's entire body jerks, and the sound he makes is loud, involuntary, pulled from somewhere deep. His hands fist in the sheets, and his hips push back against Ilya's mouth. Ilya's hands grip his ass and hold him open, and he does it again and again.

Ilya is slow, patient, and thorough. The way Ilya does everything when the performance is off, and the real person is here. His tongue circles and presses and pushes inside, and Shane's thighs are shaking. His face is in the pillow, and his brain has left entirely. What's left is just nerve endings and the sound of his own breathing and Ilya's mouth doing things Shane didn't know a mouth could do, things that are making his cock ache against the mattress without anyone touching it.

"Ilya — fuck —" Shane's voice is wrecked, muffled by the pillow. He's rocking back against Ilya's mouth, and it's not dignified, but Shane doesn't care about dignity. The dignity left him the moment Ilya's tongue pushed inside him, and its absence is freedom, and the freedom feels like this — wet and messy and desperate, and Ilya making low hungry sounds against him that vibrate through Shane's body.

Ilya pulls back. Shane groans at the loss and Ilya says "patience" in a voice that is barely English, and then his tongue is back and his hand reaches between Shane's legs and wraps around his cock. The combination, Ilya's mouth on him and Ilya's hand on him, makes Shane's vision white out. His whole body goes rigid and he comes hard, harder than he's ever come, face pressed into the pillow and Ilya's name in his mouth and his body shaking in waves that don't stop.

Ilya crawls up the bed and collapses beside him. Shane hasn't moved. His face is still in the pillow and his body is still vibrating.

"Where," Shane says into the pillow, "did you learn that."

"Natural talent. Russian education. Very comprehensive."

"That's not a real answer."

"Is the only answer you are getting."

Shane turns his head and looks at Ilya. Ilya's lips are wet and swollen, his hair is wrecked and he looks extremely pleased with himself. Shane pulls him close and reaches for him. Ilya is hard and straining and Shane takes him in hand and works him fast, the way he's learned, and Ilya comes in under a minute, gasping against Shane's neck, and they lie there tangled and sweating in the August afternoon.

They lie there for maybe ten minutes. Maybe less. Shane's body is still humming from the first orgasm and Ilya is beside him, one hand tracing lazy circles on Shane's hip, and Shane rolls onto his side and looks at him and says, "I want you inside me."

"Now?"

"Now."

Ilya's hand stops on Shane's hip. His eyes search Shane's face for the hesitation that used to be there in the early days, the first times, the careful checking, and doesn't find it. What he finds is Shane, clear-eyed and certain, looking at him the way Shane looks at the ice before a program.

Ilya reaches for the nightstand — lube, and his hand goes to the condom box beside it, automatic, the routine they've developed. Shane's hand catches his wrist.

"No," Shane says.

Ilya looks at him. "No?"

"No condom."

"Shane, are you—"

"I want to feel you. All of you. I've been thinking about it for two months, and I don't want anything between us."

Ilya's breath leaves him in a rush. His hand is still in Shane's grip, and Shane's eyes are steady and certain. It's not a small ask; the asking is Shane saying *I trust you with my body completely*.

"Okay," Ilya says. His voice is rough. "Okay."

He slicks his fingers instead, and Shane rolls onto his back and pulls his knees up, and the openness of it — the deliberate, unhesitating offering of himself — makes Ilya's breath catch.

One finger first. Slow, circling, pressing in. Shane's body takes it easily. The rimming did its work, loosened him, and Ilya's finger slides inside. Shane's eyes close, his lips part, and his hips tilt, asking for more. Ilya gives him more. Two fingers, stretching, crooking, finding the place inside that makes Shane's whole body jolt and a sound come out of him that is sharp and startled and greedy.

"There," Shane says. His voice is the precise voice even now, even with Ilya's fingers inside him. "Right there."

Ilya works him there. Patient, relentless, his fingers pressing and rubbing, and Shane's cock is hard again, flushed and leaking against his stomach. Shane's hands are gripping Ilya's shoulders, his breathing is ragged, and his hips are moving, fucking himself down onto Ilya's fingers, and the sight of Shane Hollander losing his composure — the precise, controlled man coming apart on Ilya's hand — is the most devastating thing Ilya has ever seen.

"Now," Shane says. "Ilya, now."

Ilya pulls his fingers out, slicks himself. Shane's legs wrap around his waist, and Ilya lines up and pushes in, slow, the head breaching and then the length of him sinking in inch by inch. Shane's mouth falls open, and his eyes go wide, and his hands grip Ilya's arms hard enough to bruise.

"Okay?" Ilya says, and his voice is shaking because Shane is tight and hot around him, and the sensation is so intense that his arms are trembling where they're braced on either side of Shane's head.

"Move," Shane says. "Move, please—"

Ilya moves. Pulls back and pushes in again, deeper, and Shane's back arches and his head tips back and the sound he makes is wrecked and raw and nothing like Shane's voice — low and open and shaking. Ilya sets a rhythm. Slow at first, long strokes, pulling almost all the way out and pushing back in, and each thrust makes Shane's body rock up the bed, and Shane's hands find the headboard and grip it, and the headboard creaks against the wall.

"Harder," Shane says. He doesn't say please this time.

Ilya goes harder. Snaps his hips forward, and Shane cries out, and the sound is not controlled, not measured, not anything Ilya has ever heard from Shane before. He wants more. Ilya finds the angle — the one that makes Shane's whole body tighten, the one that hits the place his fingers found — and drives into it, and Shane's legs tighten around his waist, and Shane is pulling him closer, deeper, heels pressing into the small of Ilya's back, demanding more.

The headboard is hitting the wall with every thrust and the rhythm is fast now, both of them sweating, Ilya's forearms burning from holding himself up and Shane underneath him flushed from his chest to his face. His cock leaking between their stomachs, his mouth open and his eyes half-closed and he is the most beautiful thing Ilya has ever seen, this man, this precise careful man, wrecked and open and taking everything Ilya gives him and asking for more.

Shane reaches between them and wraps his hand around his own cock and strokes himself in time with Ilya's thrusts, and the coordination (of course Shane coordinates, even now, even in this) makes Ilya groan and bury his face in Shane's neck.

"I'm close," Shane says, and his voice cracks on it.

"Me too. Shane — look at me."

Shane opens his eyes. They look at each other. Ilya's hips are driving into him, and Shane's hand is on himself, and they are looking at each other, and it's the most intimate part of all of it, more intimate than the fucking, the two of them fully present and fully seen.

Shane comes first. His whole body seizes, his hand stuttering on his cock, and he spills between them, hot and wet across his stomach and Ilya's stomach, and the clenching of his body around Ilya is what finishes it. Ilya thrusts once more, twice, and his mouth is against Shane's ear, and he says something, "ya tebya lyublyu", and the words are broken and desperate, and Shane doesn't speak Russian, but he knows lyublyu. He has heard it enough times to know what it sounds like when Ilya means it, and Ilya is saying it while pushing inside him one last time, and then he's coming inside Shane, no barrier, nothing between them, and Shane feels it. The heat, the pulse, the proof of what he asked for — and his legs tighten around Ilya and he holds him there, deep.

He collapses, his full weight on Shane's chest. Shane takes it. Takes the weight, the sweat, the heat, the everything, and his arms come around Ilya's back and hold him there, and they breathe together, their chests rising and falling in sync. The bed is wrecked, and the headboard is crooked, and the apartment is silent except for the sound of two people who have been apart for two months and are not apart anymore.

They lie in the wrecked bed afterwards. The sheets are tangled, the pillows on the floor. Shane's elbow is bruising and Ilya has scratches down his back and neither of them has moved.

"Hi," Shane says.

"Hi."

"The bed's all dirty now."

Ilya laughs into Shane's shoulder. "You are thinking about the bed."

"Someone has to think about the bed."

"We just... I just... and you are thinking about laundry."

"I'm thinking about the fact that we have to sleep in this bed tonight and it's—"

"Shane."

"It's a valid concern."

"It is not valid concern. It is least valid concern in history of concerns. We will wash the sheets. Later. Much later."

"That was—"

"Yes."

"I think you broke the headboard."

"I think you broke my back."

"You'll recover."

"I might not. I might need to stay in this bed forever. For medical reasons."

Shane is quiet for a moment. Then: "What did you say? At the end. In Russian."

Ilya goes still beside him. The stillness of a person deciding how honest to be.

"You know what lyublyu means," Ilya says.

"I know what it sounds like. I don't know what you said."

Ilya turns his head on the pillow, and looks at Shane. He looks... serious. No grin, no charm, no shield. Just Ilya, bare-faced and open.

"I said I love you," Ilya says. In English this time. Plain and rough and without decoration. "Ya tebya lyublyu. I love you. That is what I said."

Shane looks at him. The curls on the pillow, the light eyes, the mouth that was on every part of Shane's body twenty minutes ago and is now saying the simplest thing in the world.

"Say it again," Shane says.

"Ya tebya lyublyu."

"Again."

"Ya tebya lyublyu, Shane. How many times do you need?"

"I don't know. Keep going."

Ilya laughs, surprised and warm and rolls toward him and puts his mouth against Shane's temple and says it again, quiet, into Shane's skin, and the words are warm and Russian, and Shane doesn't need to understand the grammar to understand the meaning.

Shane turns his head on the pillow and puts his hand on Ilya's chest, over his heart, the place, their place, and the heartbeat is very fast and showing no signs of slowing.

"Forty percent?" Ilya asks.

"At least sixty. Possibly seventy."

"New record."

"New record."

They lie there. The apartment is warm. August light comes through the window, golden and thick, and the bed holds them and the walls hold the bed and the apartment holds the walls, and Shane is home.

"Ilya," Shane says.

"Yes."

"I love you."

It comes out the way everything comes out of Shane — directly, without decoration. He just says it, because it's true and because Ilya said it first, in Russian, inside him, and now Shane is saying it back, in English, and the two languages meet in the space between them and mean the same thing.

Ilya is quiet for a moment. Then he rolls toward Shane, puts his face in Shane's neck, and his arm across Shane's chest, wrapping around him, and Shane lets him, holds him, puts his hand in Ilya's hair.

"I love you too," Ilya says into his neck. "Since the beginning."

They lie there, and the world outside keeps moving, but right now the world is their bed.

"We should wash the sheets," Shane says.

"No."

"They're genuinely—"

"No. We are staying in this bed. The sheets can wait. Everything can wait."

Shane closes his eyes and listens to Ilya's heartbeat under his ear. The season is coming, and Worlds are coming, but not yet. Not yet.

Chapter 25: the sleepover

Chapter Summary

Ilya tries his best to support Shane, Hayden and JJ come over for a sleepover and Ilya has trouble sleeping.

The apartment has a new geography.

Shane's room is still Shane's room. The bed is made, the shoes lined along the wall, the books on the nightstand. But nobody sleeps in it. Shane sleeps in Ilya's bed, which is their bed, and has been their bed since February, and the made bed in Shane's room exists for the sole reason that someone might come over and might notice and the noticing would be the beginning of the end.

Ilya hates the made bed. He hates it specifically and personally, the way he hates the locker room words and the shield laugh and every other concession to a world that won't let them be what they are. The made bed is a lie. The made bed says Shane Hollander sleeps here, alone, in his own room, and the lie costs nothing in practical terms — it's just a bed, just sheets, just a door left open to suggest occupancy — but it costs something in the other terms, the ones that matter, because every time Ilya walks past it he thinks: this is what hiding looks like. This is the shape of it. A bed nobody sleeps in, in a room nobody uses, maintained with the precision of a man who has been managing appearances his entire life.

Shane doesn't seem to mind. Or Shane minds and doesn't say so, which is different, and Ilya can't always tell. Shane is better at hiding than Ilya is.

The mornings are the best part. Shane's alarm goes off at five-fifteen and Ilya's arm tightens around him and Shane extracts himself the way he always does — carefully, precisely, like he's defusing something — and goes to the bathroom. The shower runs. The kettle clicks. And then, before he leaves, Shane comes back to the bedroom and stands in the doorway and says "I'm going" and Ilya says something that is mostly consonants because he is not a person at five-fifteen in the morning, and Shane smiles and leaves, and the apartment holds the shape of him for the rest of the hour until Ilya gets up.

Ilya has learned to cook Shane's meals. This started with a conversation in August, the week Ilya got back from Moscow, the two of them at the counter, Ilya with his Coke and Shane with his ginger ale and the late-summer light making the apartment gold.

"I hired nutritionist," Ilya said. Casual. The way he says things that are not casual.

Shane looks at him. "You hired a nutritionist."

"For the season. I'm captain. I need to take things more serious. If I'm asking the team to be better, I need to be better. Set example." Ilya takes a sip of his Coke. "Also LeClaire wants to win the Cup this year. Nutrition is part of that."

"You've never cared about nutrition."

"I care now. I'm the captain. Captains care about nutrition."

Shane holds his ginger ale and looks at Ilya. Shane already has Claire, the nutritionist in Ottawa. Shane has been following Claire's plan since the summer, measuring and weighing and fighting the calculator every meal. And now Ilya — who has eaten with the cheerful disregard for nutrition of a man who considers Nutella a special food group — is hiring his own nutritionist.

Because of the captaincy. Because of the Cup. Because of setting an example.

Except it isn't because of any of those things. The thing underneath is Ilya wanting to do this together. The thing underneath is Ilya not wanting Shane to be the only person in the apartment measuring portions and weighing rice, not wanting Shane to sit at the counter with his careful plate while Ilya eats takeout and pelmeni and pretends not to notice. The thing underneath is love expressed as logistics — if they both have nutritionists, if they both have plans, if the measuring and the weighing and the eating becomes something they do together instead of something Shane does alone, then maybe, maybe it will become easier.

Shane sees all of this in Ilya's face. Ilya knows Shane sees it. Neither of them says it.

"That makes sense," Shane says. "For the cup."

"For the cup," Ilya confirms.

"Maybe we should coordinate the plans. Same meals. It's more efficient if we're not cooking two separate things."

"Very efficient. I was going to suggest this."

"You were not going to suggest this."

"I was going to suggest this eventually. You suggested it first. This is fine."

Ilya buys a second kitchen scale cause Shane is very particular about his. He learns the portions. He makes the chicken the way the plan says, weighs the rice the way the plan says, and puts the plate on the counter at Shane's spot, and the making of the meal is not about the food. The making of the meal is about Shane not having to carry it alone.

Some nights, Shane eats the full portion. Some nights he doesn't. On the nights he doesn't, Ilya covers the plate in cling film and puts it in the fridge and doesn't mention it, and sometimes the plate is empty in the mornin, and sometimes it isn't. Ilya is learning that patience is a language he never spoke before Shane and is becoming fluent in now.

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Shane keeps a friendship with Nora.

This happens naturally. Nora texts in July to say she's seen a Rothko exhibition that reminded her of him, and Shane texts back because Nora was kind to him, and kindness deserves a response. The texting becomes occasional and easy, and about art and books, and the specific kind of conversation Shane had with Nora that was always the best part of dating her, which was the friendship underneath the romance that Shane couldn't feel.

Ilya handles this with the grace and maturity of a man who is not at all bothered.

"Who is texting you?" Ilya asks from the couch, not looking up from the television.

"Nora."

"Mmm." Ilya's jaw does the thing. "Just Nora."

"She's checking in. She saw an exhibition." Shane looks up from his phone. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"No."

"You're doing the jaw thing."

"I am not doing jaw thing."

"You are. The jaw thing and the nose thing. Both at the same time."

"I am doing neither thing. I am watching hockey. Who is jealous of Nora? I am not jealous of Nora."

"Ilya, I'm gay."

"Not so gay you can't fuck Nora."

The sentence lands in the apartment, and Ilya hears himself say it, and his hand goes to his nose, and Shane stares at him. The staring goes on for a very long time, and then Shane starts laughing, and it makes Ilya's face crack and then Ilya is laughing too. The ridiculousness of it, the absurdity. Ilya Rozanov, who spent two years pining after Shane and dying about it, is now jealous of the same woman whom Shane felt nothing for and who Shane is texting about Rothko.

"Not so gay I can't fuck Nora," Shane repeats, still laughing. "That's what you went with."

"I panicked."

"We only talk about art," Shane says, when the laughing subsides.

"You talk about art with me."

"You don't know anything about art."

"I know about art. I know the — the painting. With the clock. The melting clock."

"Dalí."

"Dalí. I know Dalí. I am very cultured. You do not need Nora for art."

Shane puts his phone down and crosses the couch and kisses Ilya, which shuts him up, and Ilya's hand finds Shane's waist and pulls him closer. The jealousy dissolves the way Ilya's jealousy always dissolves, into Shane, into the touch, into the proof that Shane is here and not anywhere else.

"I'm gay, Ilya," Shane says against his mouth.

"I know you're gay."

"Extremely, comprehensively gay."

"I know."

""Then stop worrying about Nora."

"I am not worrying. I am complaining. There is a difference."

"There really isn't."

"Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. You can text Nora about Rothko. But if she texts you about Dalí, is over. Dalí is mine."

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JJ calls in late August. "Ayden and I are in Boston this weekend. Your mother, she got us into some sponsorship thing, the sports equipment company, the one with the logo, you know?"

"I know the one."

"They put us at a 'otel, but we thought, why stay at a 'otel when we can stay at yours. Like when we were kids." Shane can hear the smile in his voice. "Sleepovers, eh."

"We're in our twenties, JJ."

"We are in our twenties, and I am six feet, and 'Ayden takes up the space of two people emotionally. It will be tight. But it will be like old times. Say yes."

"Yes."

Shane hangs up and stands in the kitchen and realises what he's just agreed to: Hayden and JJ, in the apartment, for 24 hours. Hayden, who notices everything because Hayden moves through the world at full volume and full attention. JJ, who notices everything because JJ moves through the world quietly and misses nothing. Both of them, in the apartment where Shane's clothes are in Ilya's closet and Shane's pillow is on Ilya's bed and the couch has a dent in the middle where two people sit together and the fridge has a shelf that says his and a shelf that says mine and a third shelf that says ours without either of them ever putting a label on it.

"Hayden and JJ are coming on Saturday," Shane tells Ilya that evening.

Ilya is on the couch. His hand stops in Shane's hair. "Here? To the apartment?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"One day. They have a photoshoot on Saturday, and they will leave Sunday night."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. "Okay."

"We need to—"

"I know."

They both know. Shane's room needs to look lived-in. Shane's clothes need to take up space in his own closet. The pillow needs to move. The reading glasses need to come off Ilya's nightstand and go back on Shane's.

Shane moves his things on Friday afternoon. He stands in his own room, the room he hasn't slept in since February, and looks at the made bed and the shoes along the wall and the books on the nightstand and feels the particular flatness of being in a space that used to be his and now belongs to a version of himself that isn't real.

"I hate this," Ilya says from the doorway.

"It's one day"

"I hate it anyway."

"I know. One day."

The sponsorship event is Saturday afternoon. Some equipment company showcase at a downtown hotel, the kind of thing Yuna books because Yuna believes in diversified income streams. Hayden and JJ do the event while Shane trains at the rink, and afterwards they come straight to the apartment with bags and beer and the particular energy of two men who have been performing corporate friendliness for four hours and are dealing with it through volume and carbohydrates. Hayden is already complaining about the event. The handshaking, the smiling, the small talk with executives who don't know the difference between a slap shot and a wrist shot. JJ is calm and carrying three pizzas and a box from a Japanese bakery in Coolidge Corner that he found online and insisted they visit on the way.

"Melonpan," JJ says, putting the box on the counter. "You 'ave to try it, Shane. C'est incroyable."

Shane opens the box. The bread is perfect. It's round, golden, with a crackled cookie crust on top, and the smell of it hits him. Yuna used to buy melonpan from a bakery in Ottawa's small Japanese grocery, a treat for competition days, and it smells like childhood and his mother's hand on his cheek and the particular safety of being small and fed and loved.

"It's good," Shane says, and eats a piece, and the eating is easy, which surprises him. Some foods are easier than others now. The foods that carry memory are easier. The nutritionist said this would happen. That reconnecting food to feeling rather than numbers would change the math, and Shane didn't believe her and is still surprised every time she's right.

Ilya is performing, and Shane can see it right away. Right now, he's showing off the charming version, the one for guests, the roommate who is friendly and easy and maintains the appropriate distance. Ilya offers Hayden a beer and makes a joke about the sponsorship event, and sits on his end of the couch.

Ilya gets ready to go out around nine. The guys are meeting at a bar downtown. It's Marleau's birthday, and the whole team is going. Ilya showers, puts on jeans and a shirt, does the thing with

his hair and comes out of the bathroom smelling like cologne and looking like a person who should be on a magazine cover.

"You look nice, Rozanov," Hayden says from the couch.

"Thank you, Hollander's friend. You also look nice. Your sunburn is very, how do you say, becoming."

"I'm not sunburned."

"Your nose is red. Like Rudolph. Is very festive."

"It's August."

"Festive is not seasonal." Ilya grins. It's the grin that fills rooms and makes opponents want to hit him, and Shane want to kiss him. "Also, your team lost to us four times last season. Maybe this year you try harder."

Hayden's face goes through several colours. "We lost three times. The fourth was a shootout."

"A shootout is a loss. I should know. I scored the winning goal."

"JJ. JJ, are you hearing this?"

"I am 'earing this. I am choosing not to engage."

Ilya picks up his keys and winks at Hayden — an actual wink, deliberate and infuriating — and says "don't wait up, roommate" to Shane without looking at him, which is how Ilya says goodbye when there are people in the room who can't know what goodbye actually looks like.

The door closes. Hayden stares at it.

"I hate him," Hayden says.

"You don't 'ate him," JJ says.

"I hate him specifically and personally."

Shane drinks his ginger ale and says nothing.

The evening is good. Hayden and JJ are on the couch, old episodes of Futurama are on, and between them is the easy conversation of people who have known each other since before they knew anything. Hayden talks about Jackie and the twins — the names they've picked, the nursery they're building, the way Jackie throws things at him when he suggests hockey-themed wallpaper. JJ talks about the person he's seeing — doesn't say much, just the fact of it, the warmth in his voice when he mentions a name Shane doesn't catch. They eat melonpan from the bakery and drink beer, and the apartment feels like the sleepovers they used to have at Hayden's parents' house in Ottawa, sleeping bags on the floor, cartoons on the television, the particular safety of being with people who know you.

Around eleven, Shane checks his phone. It's a force of habit; he checks his phone when Ilya is out, the way he checks his phone at three p.m. when Ilya is in Moscow, compulsively, monitoring a form of closeness. There's a Google alert. Shane has a Google alert on Ilya's name — he set it up

two years ago, before they were together, when Ilya was on the road, and Shane wanted to know the scores without admitting he wanted to know the scores. The alert stayed because the alert is useful for tracking press and news, and the things Shane tells himself justify the surveillance.

The alert is from Perez Hilton. Shane's stomach drops before he opens it.

The photo is of Ilya leaving a bar with a woman. She's tall, dark-haired, and laughing at something. Ilya's hand is on the small of her back, guiding her through the door, probably, the automatic manners Ilya has with everyone. But the photo is framed to suggest more. The caption says something about Boston's hottest hockey captain and a mystery brunette, and Shane doesn't read the rest because reading the rest would require acknowledging that the public version of Ilya is single and available and photographed with women, while the private version of Ilya is the person Shane rearranged his entire life for.

The photo shouldn't bother him, but it does.

It's not jealousy, not like that. Shane knows the woman is nobody, knows Ilya, knows the truth of what they are. What bothers him is the asymmetry. Ilya gets photographed with a woman leaving a bar, and the world sees a hockey player on a date. If Shane were photographed leaving a bar with Ilya, the world would see... what? Two roommates? Two friends? The world wouldn't see what they are because the world doesn't have the framework for what they are, and it's the kind of erasure that Shane feels in his chest like a bruise.

He can't casually walk down the street with Ilya, their hands connected. Can't sit across from him at a restaurant where someone might take a photo. Can't exist in the world as the person Ilya comes home to. And somewhere underneath the bruise, in a place Shane doesn't want to look at, there's something else. A thread of shame, old and stubborn, that says the reason he can't do these things is because of what he is, and what he is requires hiding, and the hiding is correct even though he knows it's not.

The shame doesn't listen to reason.

He puts the phone face down on the couch. Hayden is telling a story about Jackie's mother and a crib assembly that went catastrophically wrong. JJ is laughing. The apartment is warm, and the evening is normal, and the photo is on a celebrity gossip site somewhere, and nobody in this room except Shane knows it's there.

Ilya gets home around one. Shane hears the door, the shoes on the mat, and the keys on the hook. Ilya pokes his head into the living room. Hayden is asleep on the couch, JJ is on the air mattress Ilya dug out of the closet, and looks at Shane, who is still awake, sitting in the dark with his phone face down.

Ilya tilts his head toward the bedroom, and Shane follows.

In the dark room, door closed, Ilya whispers: "Good evening?"

"Fine. Hayden hates you."

"Hayden always hates me. This is our relationship. Is very healthy." He sits on the bed and pulls off his shirt, and Shane can smell the bar on him, beer, other people's cologne, the faint trace of cigarette smoke that Shane knows is from Ilya even though he's been trying to quit for a long time.

Shane sits beside him. "There's a photo. Online. Of you leaving the bar with a woman."

Ilya goes still. "What woman?"

"I don't know. Perez Hilton."

"Perez—" Ilya runs his hand through his hair. "That's — she's Marleau's sister. She was at his birthday. She needed a cab, and I walked her out. It was thirty seconds."

"I know. I know it's nothing."

"Then why are you telling me at one in the morning in the dark?"

Shane is quiet. The quiet is the answer. The quiet says I saw the photo and it hurt, not because of the woman but because of the world, because of the fact that you exist in public and I exist in this apartment, and the two lives don't touch.

Ilya's hand finds Shane's hand in the dark. "I am sorry."

"You don't have anything to be sorry for."

"I am sorry anyway. For the photo. For the — the way it looks. For all of it."

Shane leans against him, and Ilya's arm comes around him. Through the wall, Hayden snores.

"I have a Google alert on your name," Shane says.

"I know."

"You know?"

"Shane. You know my ice time before I know my ice time. You quote my plus-minus at me over breakfast. Of course, you have Google alert."

Shane almost smiles. Ilya pulls him down onto the bed, and they lie there in the dark, fully clothed, with Hayden snoring through the wall. Shane sneaks out of the room at 5 a.m., and hopes both Hayden and JJ are still asleep.

When Shane wakes up the morning after, Ilya is not in his room. There's a note on the counter in Ilya's handwriting: *Getting bread. Don't let your friends eat my cereal.*

Hayden is already awake, sitting at the counter with coffee he made himself, which is brave given that Hayden's coffee is famously terrible. JJ is still asleep on the air mattress, one enormous arm hanging off the side.

Shane gets himself a glass of water (he's not touching the coffee) and stands at the counter across from Hayden. The morning light comes through the kitchen window, and the apartment is serene, and Hayden is looking at Shane with the expression Shane has been dreading since yesterday.

"It's him," Hayden says. "Isn't it?"

It's a question, but also a statement. Shane puts his glass down.

"The person you told us about in Montreal. The someone." Hayden takes a sip of his terrible coffee. "It's Rozanov."

Shane could deny it. The denial is right there, the easy lie, the performance. But the apartment smells like Ilya's cologne from last night, and there's a note on the counter in Ilya's handwriting, and Hayden is sitting in the kitchen where Shane and Ilya eat breakfast every morning, and the lying feels wrong here.

"Yes," Shane says.

Hayden nods. Slowly. He doesn't look surprised. He looks like a person who suspected something and just had it confirmed, and the confirmation is landing somewhere between relief and disbelief.

"How did you know?" Shane asks.

"Shane. The way you look at him. The way you smile when he walks into the room. You don't smile like that, you don't smile like that at anyone." Hayden puts his coffee down. He gestures at the apartment — the small kitchen, the narrow hallway, the carpet. "Also, he's a millionaire. Why else would he still be living in this shitty apartment?"

"It's a nice apartment."

"It's a horrible apartment." Hayden looks at him. "How long?"

"Since February."

"February." Hayden sits back on the stool. "The guy I've been bitching about all summer. The guy who cross-checked me into the boards. The guy I called a menace at lunch while you sat there and —" He stops. His face does something. "Oh, my God. I spent twenty minutes complaining about your boyfriend to your face, and you just sat there and ate melonpan."

"You are very passionate about that cross-check."

"I'm going to die."

"You're not going to die."

"Last night he — he winked at me. He winked at me, Shane. Your boyfriend winked at me to piss me off, and it worked, and he knew it would work and—" Hayden puts his head in his hands. "I've been chirped by your boyfriend for years, and I didn't even know he was your boyfriend."

JJ speaks up from the air mattress. "I knew," he says, his voice muffled by the pillow.

"You knew?" Hayden says.

"Since Montreal," JJ says. He rolls over and props himself on one elbow. "Since the lunch. You told us you were seeing someone and you wouldn't say who." He shrugs. "Is not complicated, Shane."

"You've known since Montreal?"

"I suspected since Montreal. Last night I was sure."

Hayden stares at JJ, then at Shane, before picking up his terrible coffee and putting it down again.

"Is he good to you?" Hayden asks.

"Yes."

"Does he make you happy?"

"Yes."

"Then I'm happy. And JJ's happy. And if he's ever not good to you, I will personally fight him, which I've been wanting to do for three years anyway, so this works out."

"That's not 'ow friendship works," JJ says from the mattress.

"That's exactly how friendship works. I've been his friend since he was ten."

The front door opens. Ilya comes in carrying a bag from the bakery down the street and stops in the kitchen doorway and looks at Shane's face and then at Hayden's face and then at JJ on the air mattress and reads the room in under a second.

"You told them," Ilya says.

"They figured it out."

Ilya puts the bread on the counter. Looks at Hayden. "You want to fight me now?"

"I always want to fight you. This changes nothing about the fighting."

"Good. Fighting is important. Keeps the relationship honest." Ilya opens the bread bag and starts slicing. "Coffee is terrible, by the way. Who made this?"

"I made this," Hayden says.

"Don't make coffee again. Ever. In any apartment. This is a crime against coffee."

Hayden looks at Shane. "I hate your boyfriend."

"I know."

"I hate him, and he makes terrible chirps, and his coffee opinions are wrong."

"His coffee opinions are correct," Shane says. "Your coffee is terrible."

"Traitor."

Ilya grins. He puts toast on a plate and slides it across the counter to Shane, automatic, without asking, the way he does everything for Shane, and Hayden watches it happen, and his face does something complicated and soft, and he picks up his terrible coffee and doesn't say anything else.

They leave that afternoon. Hayden hugs Shane at the door. It's the kind of hug that says I know now and it doesn't change anything, and JJ hugs him too, and then JJ shakes Ilya's hand and Hayden

shakes Ilya's hand and says "take care of him or I'll end you, Rozanov" and Ilya says "noted" and Hayden says "I mean it" and Ilya says "I know you mean it."

The door closes, and the apartment is theirs again.

Ilya stands in the hallway and looks at Shane, and Shane looks at Ilya, and neither of them moves for a moment. Twenty-four hours of performing. Twenty-four hours of the gap on the couch. Twenty-four hours of not sleeping in the same bed.

"They're gone," Shane says.

"They're gone."

Shane crosses the hallway in three steps and kisses him. Ilya's back hits the wall, and Shane's hands are on his face. The kissing is urgent and graceless, and Ilya makes a sound against Shane's mouth that he didn't make all weekend because he couldn't, and the sound is relief and want and twenty-four hours of not touching compressed into a single noise.

"Bedroom," Shane says against his mouth.

"Bedroom," Ilya agrees.

They don't make it to the bedroom. They make it to the couch, and Shane pushes Ilya down and climbs over him, and the couch creaks the way it always creaks. Ilya pulls Shane's shirt off, and Shane pulls Ilya's shirt off, and the skin-on-skin is the first real touch in twenty-four hours, and it's electric, every nerve awake.

"I hated that," Shane says, his mouth on Ilya's collarbone. "Pretending."

"I know."

"I hated sitting three feet away from you while Hayden was in the middle."

"I know." Ilya's hands are on Shane's back, pulling him closer, closer. "I hated it too."

"Don't let me do it again. I don't want to do it again."

Ilya pulls back and looks at him. Shane's face is open and flushed and serious, and underneath the want there's something else. The cost of hiding in his own home, the particular exhaustion of a person who spent twenty years in a closet and got out and then had to step back in for a weekend.

"We won't always have to," Ilya says.

"Promise me."

"I— I promise."

Shane kisses him again, harder, and Ilya wraps his arms around Shane's waist and rolls them so Shane is underneath him. Shane's legs come up around Ilya's hips, and they move against each other on the couch, still half-dressed, jeans and skin, and the friction is not enough and too much at the same time. Ilya takes Shane's jeans off, and Shane takes Ilya's off.

The couch is too small for this. It's always too small, they've done this before, and it's always a mess of elbows and cushions and someone's knee in the wrong place, but neither of them is willing to stop long enough to move to the bed because the bed is twenty feet away and twenty feet is too far after the last twenty-four hours.

Ilya takes Shane in his hand, and Shane's head drops back against the armrest, and his eyes close. The sound he makes is filthy yet controlled, measured and careful, and Ilya loves it and also loves the moments when the control breaks, when Shane's voice cracks open and something unplanned comes out. He works for those sounds, moves his hand the way he's learned Shane likes, and Shane's hips lift off the couch, and his hand finds Ilya's hair and grips. The grip is not controlled, the grip is desperate, and there it is, the crack, the sound, the one that means Shane is almost gone.

"Ilya — I'm going to—"

"Good. I want you to."

Shane comes with Ilya's name in his mouth, not silent this time, not swallowed, out loud, and Ilya watches his face, and the face is, as always, the most beautiful thing he's ever seen.

After, Ilya is still hard, and Shane reaches for him. Ilya says, "You don't have to", and Shane says, "I want to", and his hand wraps around Ilya and moves with the same focus he brings to everything. Ilya watches Shane's face right back, and the watching is the thing, the looking at each other while it happens, and when Ilya comes, it's with Shane's eyes on him and Shane's hand on him, and the feeling is too big for his body. Because nobody has ever looked at him like this while touching him — like he matters, like the looking is the point, like Shane wants to see every part of it and isn't afraid of what he finds.

They lie on the couch, tangled together, half on the cushions, half off. Ilya's leg is hanging off the edge, with Shane's head on his chest. The apartment smells like them, and the couch will need to be wiped down.

"Shane," Ilya says.

"Yes."

"Hayden wants to fight me."

"Hayden wants to fight everyone. It's his love language."

Ilya grins, and so does Shane.

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The season hasn't started yet, but the preseason games feel different. The summer conditioning paid off. Ilya came back from Moscow bigger and angrier, the anger having nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with Grigori's blank stare and the word discipline and the nurse he calls Irina, and the anger translates on the ice the way it always does, into speed and precision and the particular ruthlessness that makes Ilya the kind of player opponents hate to play against. LeClaire has built the team around him now. First line, first power play, penalty kill, late-game situations, and the team has responded to the building. Marleau is having a career year. Dubek is healthy for the first time in two seasons. Dubois has found a chemistry with Ilya that borders on telepathic, the kind of connection where a pass arrives before the thought is finished.

The word Cup is already appearing in preseason articles, and in the careful way LeClaire doesn't say it during team meetings, which is its own way of saying it.

Ilya can feel it. The team can feel it. Something is building this year that wasn't there in previous seasons. A momentum, a confidence, the particular energy of a group of men who believe, for the first time, that they are capable of the thing they've been training for their entire lives. The locker room is different, louder and tighter. The jokes are sharper, and the silences after losses are shorter, and the wins have a quality to them that Ilya has never experienced, an inevitability, as if the hockey is happening through them rather than because of them.

He comes home from games buzzing, electric, the adrenaline still running, and Shane is on the couch or in bed or at the counter with his ginger ale and his glasses and his book, and Ilya's body is full of the game, and his heart is full of this person and the two things exist side by side and neither diminishes the other.

But the buzzing doesn't last. It burns off. Sometimes in an hour, sometimes two, and then the flatness comes, the quiet underneath, and Ilya lies in bed next to Shane and stares at the ceiling, trying to pretend that there is nothing wrong. There is nothing wrong, and yet his body feels heavy, his thoughts move slowly, and the bed is a place he doesn't want to leave, not because he's tired but because Shane is asleep beside him.

Shane is sleeping peacefully, and Ilya doesn't want to wake him because what would he say? *I'm fine. Nothing is wrong. Everything is good, but I also can't move, and I don't know why.*

Shane notices anyway because Shane notices everything.

"You were awake last night," Shane says one morning at the counter, not looking up from his training schedule. "For a long time."

"Could not sleep."

"You slept fine before the game. The only time you can't sleep is after."

Ilya takes a sip of his coffee and doesn't respond.

"Is it the adrenaline?" Shane asks.

"Yes," Ilya says, because adrenaline is the easy answer, the answer that doesn't require explaining the grey thing to a person who has his own grey thing, his own cage, his own system of managing the unmanageable. They are two people who carry things they don't fully understand, and it's private even when the life is shared.

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"Good game?" Shane says from the couch, not looking up, already knowing the answer because Shane watches every home game from the stands now, sits with Rose in their seats, and tracks Ilya's ice time and plus-minus with the same precision he tracks his own component scores.

"Three points," Ilya says, kicking off his shoes.

"I know. Your second assist was lucky. The pass was behind Dubois."

"The pass was perfect."

"The pass was six inches behind him. He adjusted."

"That is what good wingers do."

"That's what wingers do when the pass is behind them." Shane turns a page. "You also took a bad penalty in the second. The cross-check was unnecessary."

"He deserved it."

"Nobody deserves a cross-check from behind."

"He said something about my hair."

"He did not say something about your hair."

"He implied something about my hair. With his eyes. I could tell."

"You cross-checked a man because of an implied hair comment?"

"My hair is important to me, Shane. You know this."

Shane smiles at the ridiculousness. Ilya sits on the couch, in the middle, where Shane is, and puts his head on Shane's shoulder. Shane's hand comes up and finds Ilya's hair without putting the book down.

Ilya is asleep in under ten minutes. Shane can tell from the breathing — the slow even rhythm, the weight of his head getting heavier. Ilya hasn't been sleeping well, but here, on the couch, with Shane's hand in his hair, Ilya sleeps.

Shane keeps reading. He doesn't move. He'll stay right here, like this, as long as Ilya needs.

Chapter 26: just two roommates

Chapter Summary

Ilya contacts Alexei and pays him to take care of their father. Shane's parents come for a visit and meet Ilya, which emboldens them, and they go out on their first date.

Natalya calls on a Thursday morning in October.

Ilya is at the rink, lacing up for practice. The locker room is loud around him. Marleau is arguing with Dubois about something, Carmichael is taping his stick, and all around is the usual pre-practice noise. His phone buzzes in his stall, and the name on the screen is the name that makes his stomach drop every time because Natalya doesn't call with good news. Natalya calls with information, and the information is always the same shape: your father is worse.

He steps into the corridor. "What happened?"

"He left the house." Natalya's voice is steady, the professional calm of someone who delivers difficult facts for a living. "This morning, early. I arrived at eight, and he wasn't here. The door was open, and I found him two streets away in his slippers. He didn't know where he was."

Ilya puts his hand on the wall. The corridor is cold and smells of rubber, sweat, and the particular institutional smell of hockey facilities everywhere. Ilya stands in it and closes his eyes and sees his father in his slippers on a Moscow street in October, confused, the man who once filled every room he entered now unable to find his way back to his own house.

"Is he hurt?"

"No. He was cold and disoriented. He's home now. He's sleeping."

"Did he know who you were?"

Natalya pauses. "He called me Irina again."

Ilya rubs his nose, thumb and forefinger pressing the bridge. Irina. His mother's name. The name Grigori gives to the women who take care of him because the only woman who ever took care of Grigori was Irina, and she's been dead for nine years, and Grigori's brain has collapsed the timeline, folded the past into the present, and in this version Irina is still alive. In his mind, she's still making tea and still standing in the kitchen with her quiet patience, and Ilya wants to scream, wants to cry, and does neither because he's in the corridor of a hockey facility.

"He needs more care," Natalya says. "I come five days a week, but the mornings and evenings... he can't be alone, Ilya. Not anymore."

"I know."

"Can your brother—"

"I'll call Alexei."

He calls Alexei that afternoon from the balcony, a cigarette in his hand. Shane is inside, on the couch, reading. Shane knows about the call because Ilya told him, and Shane said, "Do you want me to come out with you?", and Ilya said, "No, stay," because this is the part of his life that happens in Russian, and he doesn't want Shane to have to experience it.

Alexei picks up on the fourth ring. There's background noise — a bar, music, voices. Saint Petersburg at midnight.

"Baby brother," Alexei says. The word is warm and distant in the way Alexei is always warm and distant, the affection real but unreliable, a light that flickers.

"Papa left the house this morning. Walked two streets in his slippers. Didn't know where he was."

Silence. The bar noise fills it.

"Alexei."

"I heard you."

"Natalya can't do it alone. She needs help. He needs someone there in the mornings and evenings."

"So hire someone."

"I've hired someone. I've hired Natalya. I'm paying Natalya. I'm paying for the house. I'm paying for the food, the utilities, and the medication that Papa doesn't remember to take. What I can't pay for is a person who is there when Natalya isn't, and that person needs to be you."

"Ilya—"

"You're in Saint Petersburg. Moscow is a flight away. I'm in Boston. I can't do this from Boston."

"I have a life here."

"You have a bar that's barely open and an apartment I paid the deposit on. And you have a daughter in Moscow you never see."

The line goes quiet. The bar noise is still there, but Alexei's breathing has changed.

"Elizaveta is three years old," Ilya says. "She lives with her mother, twenty minutes from Papa's house, and you've seen her — what? Twice this year?"

"Don't."

"I'm not judging you, Alexei. I'm telling you what I see. You're in Saint Petersburg running from everything that's in Moscow — Papa, Elizaveta, all of it. And I understand running. I'm in Boston. I ran further than you did. But I can't be there, and you can."

"It's not that simple."

"It is that simple. Go to Moscow. See your daughter. Be at the house when Natalya isn't. I'll pay for it — the travel, the rent on a place in Moscow, whatever you need. I'll pay you the same as Natalya,

monthly. You won't lose the bar in Petersburg."

"You're paying me to take care of our father."

"I'm paying you to be in the same city as your daughter. Papa is the excuse. Elizaveta is the reason."

Alexei is quiet for a long time. The bar noise fills the silence — glasses, voices, the dull thump of music through walls.

"That's fucked up, Ilya."

"I know. Will you do it?"

Another silence. Then, "Yeah. I'll do it."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Just keep sending the money."

Ilya hangs up and stands on the balcony and looks at Boston below him and thinks about everything he left in Russia, the physical distance and the emotional distance, the one that has been there since Irina died and Grigori stopped being a father and became a system of criticism and control that produced two sons who cope differently with the same wound.

The sliding door opens, and Shane comes out. He doesn't say anything. He just stands beside Ilya and leans against the railing and looks at the city, and the silence between them is the good silence, the one that doesn't need filling, and after a while, Shane's hand finds Ilya's hand on the railing and holds it.

"He will do it," Ilya says.

"Good."

"I am paying him."

"I know."

"It is — it feels wrong. Paying your brother to take care of your father."

"It's... not wrong. It's practical. You're in Boston. He's in Russia. Money is the bridge between that." Shane's thumb moves on Ilya's hand, the slow circle, their circle. "You're doing more than anyone could ask."

"I could go back."

"You could."

"But—"

"But you have a season and a career and a life here. And hiring people to help isn't abandoning him. It's the opposite."

Ilya looks at Shane in the dark. Shane's face is steady, the way it always is when he's saying something he means.

"When did you get wise?" Ilya asks.

"I'm not wise. I'm logical. There's a distinction."

Ilya almost smiles. "You sound like you."

"I am me. That's how that works."

They stand on the balcony and hold hands while the city hums below them.

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October is the month the apartment becomes two headquarters.

Shane's competition season starts in earnest. Worlds is in March in Ontario, and Linda has them on the ice six hours a day. The Rachmaninoff long program is still being shaped, the throw Lutz drilled until Rose can land it in her sleep. Rose is at the rink every morning at six and stays until two, and the hours between are the most focused hours of Shane's life.

Ilya's season starts, too. The Bears open at home against Montreal — Hayden's team, which means Ilya spends the week before the game sending Hayden texts that Shane can see on Ilya's phone and that contain increasingly absurd predictions about the score. Hayden responds in all caps. They seem to have settled on a relationship that includes chirping even off the ice.

The apartment holds both of them. Shane's training binders are on the counter beside Ilya's playbook. The fridge is stocked for two athletes on two different nutritional plans — Shane's precise portions on one shelf, Ilya's equally precise (and larger) portions on the other, the two plans coordinated so they eat the same meals at the same time.

They watch each other's sports. This is not new. Ilya has been in the stands since Shane's first year, and Shane has been watching Bears games since the first season, but it's different now, more detailed. Shane reads Ilya's game reports and corrects his positioning in the neutral zone over breakfast. Ilya watches Shane's training footage and asks questions about the Rachmaninoff that are surprisingly specific for a person who claims to know nothing about figure skating.

"The lift in the second half," Ilya says one evening. "The one where Rose is above your head. You're dropping your left shoulder."

Shane looks at him. "You noticed my left shoulder?"

"I notice everything about your body, Shane."

"That's not what I — you're right, about the shoulder. Linda said the same thing yesterday."

"Linda and I have similar eye for detail."

"Linda has been coaching figure skating for thirty years."

"And I have been watching you for three years. Is comparable experience."

Shane smiles. He smiles more now than he did a year ago, more than he did two years ago, and the smiling is Ilya's doing. The silliness, the fridge notes, the sports commentary, the relentless gentle push toward a version of Shane that doesn't hold everything so tight.

Worlds is just over four months away. The biggest competition of Shane's career so far — the stage where Olympic qualifications are secured, where the judges see you, where the programs either work or don't. Shane doesn't talk about it, he can't. But what he can do is stay here, on this sofa, with Ilya's knee warm against his, and not think about it all. Not yet.

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Shane's parents come to Boston in November. They've known about Ilya since the summer, Yuna guessed, and Shane confirmed, but they've never met him. Every year, Yuna and David visit, and every year, Ilya has been on the road. A game in Detroit one time, a stretch in Western Canada another, and Shane has never been sure if the timing was a coincidence or Ilya's subconscious arranging things.

This time there's no road trip to hide behind. The Bears are home all week, and Ilya is going to meet Shane's parents, and he is, for the first time in his adult life, nervous about something that isn't skating.

Shane spends three days in a state of controlled preparation before they arrive, which Ilya recognises as panic expressed through cleaning.

"The bathroom is already clean," Ilya says, watching Shane scrub the sink for the second time.

"It's not clean enough."

"It was clean enough for you to have sex with me in it last Tuesday."

"That's a different standard of clean."

"Shane. Your parents are not going to inspect the grout."

Shane scrubs the grout.

They arrive on a Friday and stay at a hotel in Back Bay. When they come to the apartment, Shane doesn't pull out a performance. Shane's room door is closed, and the bed inside is unmade because nobody made it because nobody sleeps in it. Ilya's room, their room, has two pillows and Shane's book on the nightstand and the dark-framed reading glasses folded on top. Yuna walks past the open door and looks in, and her face does something complicated and private, and she doesn't comment.

David is easier. David has always been easier, or so Shane had said, and Ilya can see it immediately.

He arrives and shakes Ilya's hand, and the handshake is not the handshake of a man meeting his son's roommate. David holds the grip and looks at Ilya, and his eyes are wet, which Shane warned him about: "He cries at everything, don't take it personally", and he says "It's good to finally meet you, Ilya" and the way he says it makes Ilya want to cry as well. The way he says finally, the weight on Ilya's name, it says everything. This is not a father introducing himself to his sons roommate. This is a father meeting the person his son loves, and the meeting is warm and wet-eyed

and uncomplicated in a way that makes Ilya's chest ache because his own father never met anyone Ilya loved and never will.

They go to dinner to a restaurant in the North End that Shane chose because Shane researches restaurants just like Yuna does — thoroughly, with reviews and menus studied in advance. The reservation is made for the exact right time so they won't have to wait because Shane doesn't do well with waiting in loud lobbies.

Ilya is nervous, which is new. Ilya Rozanov is not nervous. Ilya Rozanov performs for a living, has performed for NHL crowds, Russian coaches, and state banquets, and performing is what he does better than almost anything. But he can't perform tonight. Tonight, the people across the table know what he is to their son, and performing has no purpose, and without it, Ilya is just a twenty-one-year-old Russian man sitting across from his boyfriend's parents, trying to figure out what to do with his hands.

Shane is calm, and this is also new. Shane, who manages every social interaction with the precision of a missile guidance system, who rehearses small talk in his head before events, that Shane is calm. He orders for both of them because he knows the menu and what Ilya likes, and ordering for them is a small domestic act he does without thinking. Yuna watches it happen, her eyes moving from Shane to Ilya and back.

David talks hockey. This is the gift David gives, and Ilya receives it gratefully, because hockey is the common ground they have.

"The power play is looking good this year," David says, cutting his steak.

"Marleau is better. His timing on the one-timer is—" Ilya makes a gesture. "Like clock."

"Clockwork," Shane says.

"Like clockwork," Ilya corrects, and Shane smiles, and David sees it and his face softens.

David asks about the Conference Final's loss to Chicago last spring, about LeClaire's systems, and about the new Finnish goaltender. And the asking is just that, a man who played hockey at McGill and loves the game talking to another man who plays hockey at the highest level. It's easy and uncomplicated in a way that almost nothing in Ilya's life is easy and uncomplicated.

Yuna listens. Yuna always listens first. She is a woman who gathers information before she deploys it, who reads a room the way Shane reads a scoring sheet, with precision and total recall. She asks Ilya about his family. "Shane mentioned your father is unwell. I'm sorry to hear that."

"Thank you. Is... he has good days and bad days. More bad now."

"That's hard. Especially from a distance."

"Yes."

"And your brother? Alexei?"

Ilya's hand finds his glass. "Alexei is Alexei."

Yuna nods. She doesn't push, but her eyes are doing the thing. She's assessing and cataloguing, and Ilya can feel her building something, a picture of him. A picture of the person her son has chosen,

and the picture includes a declining father, a difficult brother, a country that is not kind to people like him and a sport that is hostile to people like Shane.

After dinner, David says he wants to show Shane something at the bar (photos from the garden renovation he's been working on all fall), and they go, leaving Ilya and Yuna at the table. The plates have been cleared, and Yuna has her tea, and Ilya has nothing in his hands and wishes he did.

"I want to say something to you," Yuna says. "And I want you to listen, not respond."

Ilya nods.

"I don't like your team." She says this flatly, the way she says everything that is fact. "I have managed Montreal Metros players for the past seven years. I watched your team end their playoff run last spring. I have sat in that arena and watched you cross-check my clients into the boards. I am not a neutral party here."

Ilya says nothing. This is not a conversation where he speaks.

"Shane is the most important thing in my life. I have managed his career, his nutrition, his training schedule, and his public image since he was ten years old. I have made mistakes. I pushed too hard in some places and not hard enough in others, and there are things about my son that I didn't see because I was too busy managing. The eating. The—" She pauses. "The everything."

Ilya is very still.

"I am not going to manage this. You and him. I'm not going to manage your relationship the way I managed his career, because I've learned, slowly and not gracefully, that Shane is not a project. He is a person. And the person he is when he's with you is—" Her voice wavers. "He's himself. For the first time, I think, he's actually himself."

The restaurant is loud around them. Nobody is listening, but Yuna lowers her voice anyway.

"So here is what I need you to understand." She leans forward. "If you hurt him, I will take you apart, professionally. I know your GM. I know your agent. I know every clause in your endorsement contracts because I negotiated the same contracts for better players on better teams. I will make calls, and you will not see it coming." She tilts her head. "I say this with love. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Ilya says.

"Good." She nods. Then, quieter, the edge gone as fast as it arrived: "He's happy, Ilya. I've never seen him this happy. Not once in twenty-one years." She picks up her napkin, folds it, and places it on the table. "Don't make me regret liking you. I already resent it — you play for the Bears."

She stands and squeezes Ilya's shoulder once. It's brief and firm, and then she walks toward the bar, where David and Shane are watching something on David's phone.

Ilya sits at the empty table for a moment before he steps outside. The November air is cold, and the restaurant's awning casts a shadow over the sidewalk. He lights a cigarette and calls Svetlana.

"His mother just threatened me," Ilya says.

"Good," Svetlana says. "I like her already."

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Two days after his parents leave, Shane suggests dinner.

Not dinner in the apartment, a real dinner in a restaurant. The two of them, at a table, like people. Like a date.

It comes from the high of the weekend. His parents met Ilya, David shook his hand, talked about hockey, while Yuna threatened to dismantle Ilya's career and then squeezed his shoulder. The world absorbed a tiny sliver of the truth and kept turning, and Shane is riding the momentum of that, the feeling that maybe the walls can come down further, maybe the hiding can shrink, maybe they can sit across from each other at a restaurant like two people who are together because they are together.

"There's a place on Hanover Street," Shane says. "It's Italian, very quiet. I don't think we'd run into anyone from the team there."

Ilya looks at him. It's a calculated look because Ilya is calculating the risk, exposure, and the chance of being seen. Then the calculation is overridden by something else, something that looks like want.

"Okay," Ilya says. "Like date."

"Like a date."

They get ready. Shane puts on a shirt that isn't a training shirt. Ilya puts on the jeans Shane likes and spends too long on his hair, and Shane watches him in the bathroom mirror and thinks: *This is what other people do. This is what Hayden and Jackie do every Friday.* This is the ordinary thing, the thing normal couples do, and the fact that it feels extraordinary is the measure of everything they've been denied.

The restaurant is small and dark and Italian in the way that Boston Italian restaurants are Italian, which is red sauce, candles, and a man named Tony who seats them at a corner table. Shane sits across from Ilya, and it's new because they've never done this, not in public, not at a table where anyone could walk in and see two men having dinner together and draw a conclusion.

It's good. For twenty minutes, it's really good. Ilya orders in the confident way he orders everything, charming the waiter, butchering the Italian pronunciations with his Russian accent, and Shane watches him and drinks his water and feels something expand in his chest. The feeling of being normal is enormous, of being a person at a restaurant with the person they love, of the world being simple for one evening.

Then the Carmichaels walk in.

Shane sees them first. Carmichael and his wife, Anna, are coming through the door, laughing about something, Anna's hand on Carmichael's arm. They haven't seen Shane and Ilya yet. They're being seated on the other side of the restaurant, near the window.

Shane's body changes. He can feel it happen. The expansion in his chest contracting, the warmth pulling back, his shoulders straightening. His face settles into the neutral expression, the one that says roommates having dinner, friends grabbing a meal, nothing to see.

Ilya sees Carmichael a second later. His fork pauses over his pasta, and his eyes move from his teammate to Shane and back.

"It's fine," Shane says. "We're just eating dinner."

"I know."

"Two roommates can eat dinner."

"I know."

But the date is over. The thing that was between them is gone, replaced by the performance. Ilya shifts in his chair, creating distance that wasn't there before. Shane picks up his water glass and holds it the way he holds things when his hands need something to do. The candle on the table, which was romantic five minutes ago, is now just a candle.

Carmichael spots them on his way to the bathroom.

"Roz!" He claps Ilya on the shoulder. "Shane. Hey. Didn't know you guys came here."

"Is good pasta," Ilya says, grinning. "Shane is the boring one. He wanted Italian. I wanted burgers."

"Anna loves this place. We come here all the time." Carmichael looks between them. The look is casual and easy, not suspicious, not anything. Just a teammate running into his captain at a restaurant. "You guys should come to poker on Tuesday. Carmichael's been asking."

"Maybe," Ilya says.

"Good to see you, man." Carmichael claps his shoulder again and goes to the bathroom, and the interaction is over, and it was nothing. It lasted thirty seconds, and yet Shane's hands are shaking under the table.

They eat the rest of the meal in broken silence. Ilya tells a story about Dubois that is funny, and Shane smiles. He eats his pasta while responding in the right places, and the candle burns between them. It's just two roommates eating pasta, and then these same two roommates will go home in the same car and won't touch until the apartment door closes behind them.

In the hallway, Ilya puts his back against the wall, pulls Shane against him and holds him.

"We shouldn't have gone," Shane says into Ilya's neck.

"We should have gone. We should be able to go."

"But we can't."

"No, not yet."

It hangs in the hallway between them. Shane doesn't ask when, and Ilya doesn't offer a timeline. They stand in the hallway of their apartment and hold each other, and the restaurant is a kilometre away, but might as well be on another planet.

Chapter 27: happy new year

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya spend Christmas and New Year together, and Ilya tells him the story of his mother.

Chapter Notes

Here's chapter 27 cause I don't have self-restraint, and I love this fic so much and want to share it with you all the time.

Christmas Eve is pelmeni. This has not changed. What has changed, though, is everything around it.

The kitchen is the same kitchen. It's small and narrow, the counter where Ilya rolls dough, and Shane folds. The recipe is the same recipe, Irina's recipe, handwritten on a card that lives in the cabinet above the stove in Ilya's handwriting, because the original was lost somewhere between Moscow and Boston. Ilya reconstructed it from memory, which means some of the measurements are approximate, which used to bother Shane, but doesn't anymore because approximate is how Ilya cooks everything, and the food is always good.

What's different is the space between them. Last year, Shane stood at the counter, and Ilya's arm was close, and the proximity was electric and terrifying, and Shane's whole body was a wire pulled taut, wanting and not knowing what he wanted. And then Ilya put his hand on Shane's hand, and Shane's world cracked open for one second before he shut it again.

This year, Ilya stands behind Shane and puts his chin on Shane's shoulder while Shane folds. His arms are loose around Shane's waist, his chest warm against Shane's back, and he watches Shane's hands work the dough with the focused expression he usually reserves for game film.

"You fold too tight," Ilya says.

Shane doesn't look up. "I fold at the correct tightness."

"Is not word, tightness."

"It is absolutely a word. It means the quality of being tight. These pelmeni are... precise."

Ilya laughs against Shane's neck, the breath warm on his skin, and his arms tighten around Shane's waist, and his mouth finds the spot below Shane's ear. Shane's hands stop folding. Ilya's mouth on his neck makes his hands stop doing everything.

"We're never going to finish these," Shane says.

"We will finish them."

"Not if you keep doing that."

"I can do this and fold at the same time. I can multitask."

"You can't fold from behind me."

"Watch me."

Ilya reaches around Shane and folds a pelmeni one-handed while kissing Shane's neck, and the pelmeni is lopsided and terrible, and Shane says, "That's the worst pelmeni I've ever seen" and Ilya says, "It has, what do you say... character" and Shane turns around in Ilya's arms and looks at him. He looks at the flour on his cheek, the curls falling forward, the beautiful grin, and kisses him

His mouth tastes like pelmeni stuffing. The Christmas lights are blinking in the living room, and this is the same kitchen where Shane pulled his hand away a year ago and said sorry. The distance between that kitchen and this kitchen is the distance between surviving and living, and Shane is living now, and the living tastes like Ilya's mouth and pelmeni dough and the particular sweetness of a thing you almost didn't let yourself have.

They eat on the couch, watching the Russian channel on television. Shane eats the full plate — twelve pelmeni, which is more than the calculator wants and exactly what Shane wants, and the wanting is winning more often now. The voice in his head is turned down by the nutritionist and by Ilya's patient plates on the counter and by Yuna's voice on the phone, saying *are you eating* and Shane saying *yes* and meaning it more often than not.

"Twelve," Ilya says, looking at Shane's empty plate.

"Don't count my food."

"I am not counting. I am celebrating. Twelve is a good number."

"Twelve is the number that was on the plate."

"Exactly." Ilya takes Shane's empty plate and his own empty plate and puts them in the sink. He then comes back and sits on the couch, and Shane puts his head on Ilya's shoulder. The television murmurs in Russian, and the lights blink, and the apartment is exactly where Shane wants to be.

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On Christmas morning, Ilya calls Grigori.

Alexei answers. Alexei answering Grigori's phone means Alexei is at the house, which means the arrangement is working, which means the money Ilya sends every month is doing what money does when you throw enough of it at a problem.

"Merry American Christmas, brother," Alexei says. His voice is tired. It's three p.m. in Moscow, and Alexei sounds like a man who has been in the house all day, which he probably has, and that is the thing Ilya is paying for, and he's both grateful for and guilty about in equal measure.

"How is he?"

"Today is good. He ate dinner. He watched the football. He called me Ilya twice, which is progress because yesterday I was Mama." Alexei pauses. "He asked when you're coming home."

"He asked for me?"

"He asked for Ilya. Whether that's you or the version of you he remembers, I can't tell. But he said the name, and he said home and Natalya says that's something."

"Tell him I'll come in the summer," Ilya says.

"I'll tell him. He won't remember."

"Tell him anyway."

"Okay." Alexei is quiet for a moment. "Happy early New Year, Ilya. Seriously."

"Happy New Year, Lyosha."

The nickname, the childhood name, the one their mother used, slips out before Ilya can stop it, and there's a breath on the other end of the line, a small intake, and Alexei says "Don't make me emotional. I have to go deal with Papa and the television remote" and hangs up. Ilya sits on the bed, holds the phone, and thinks about his brother and father.

Ilya goes to the living room and sits on the couch, and Shane follows suit, bringing with him two mugs of coffee. Ilya lies down, putting his head in Shane's lap, which is where Ilya goes when the Moscow calls leave him heavy. Shane's hand finds Ilya's hair automatically, the slow movement, and the apartment is quiet except for the Christmas lights humming.

"I'm sorry about your family," Shane says. "Even when they suck, you must miss them."

Ilya is quiet for a moment as Shane's hand moves in his hair.

"My mother didn't suck," Ilya says. "She was great."

Shane doesn't push. He waits. His hand keeps moving.

"How did she die?" Shane asks. He knows the broad fact. Irina died when Ilya was young, but the details have never come. Ilya doesn't offer details about Irina the way he doesn't offer details about how he feels when he comes home and sits for hours on the couch staring at the walls.

"By accident." Ilya's voice is flat. "She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills."

The sentence sits in the room. Shane's hand doesn't stop moving in Ilya's hair, but his breathing changes.

"How old were you?" Shane asks.

"Twelve. I found her." Ilya is staring at the ceiling. Shane is looking down at his face, the jaw, the curls, the light eyes that are fixed on nothing. "I do not want you to think she was weak."

"I don't."

"Because she wa- wasn't." The contraction feels heavy on his tongue. "She was so funny and beautiful." His voice loosens, the flat tone giving way to something underneath that is tender and bruised. "She did voices. Characters. She would make up stories for Alexei and me at bedtime and do all the voices, and Alexei would laugh so hard he could not breathe. She was funniest person I ever known." He pauses. "She was so sad. And my father was so hard on her."

Shane's thumb traces a slow line along Ilya's temple. Ilya's eyes are bright, but he's not crying.

"She had sadness underneath everything," Ilya says. "Like water under ice. You could see it if you looked. My father did not look. Or he looked and did not care."

"I'm sorry," Shane says.

"I found her after practice. I came into her room, and she was in bed. She looked like she was sleeping. I climbed in next to her the way I did sometimes when the house was bad." His voice goes quiet. "I tried to wake her up, but it did not work."

Shane's hand is still in Ilya's hair.

"I have never told anyone the details," Ilya says. "Svetlana knows she died. She does not know how. She does not know I found her."

"Now I know."

"Now you know."

Ilya reaches under his collar and pulls out the chain. Shane has seen it before. The thin gold chain, always there, always tucked under Ilya's shirt, the one thing he never takes off. Shane assumed it was a superstition.

Ilya holds the pendant between his fingers. A small orthodox cross, gold, worn smooth.

"This was hers. She wore it every day." He turns it in his fingers. "After she died, my father cleared her things. Everything. Her clothes, her books, the perfume on the dresser. He did it the same week. I was twelve, and I watched him put her life in boxes, and the house was empty of her in four days."

Shane's hand has stopped moving in Ilya's hair. His hand is just resting there, holding.

"I stole this from the box before he took it. I have worn it since I was twelve. It is the only thing of hers I have."

The cross catches the lights. Small and gold and worn smooth by nine years of a boy's hands, then a man's hands.

"Is nice, right?" Ilya says, and the voice is trying to be light and failing. "Russian gold. Probably not even real gold. But she wore it, and it is warm. From my skin." He rubs his nose. "Sometimes I think the warm is her. Still here against my chest. It is stupid."

"It's not stupid," Shane says.

Shane leans down and presses his mouth against the cross where it lies on Ilya's chest, a kiss so light it barely touches. Ilya's hand comes up to the back of Shane's head and holds him there, and

they stay like that. Shane bent over, mouth on the cross, Ilya's head in Shane's lap, on Christmas morning with Irina between them.

The rest of Christmas morning is quiet. Not the bad quiet, but the good quiet. But Ilya can feel the grey thing pressing closer than usual, the way it does when something has been opened that's usually sealed.

He sits on the couch while Shane makes more coffee. His body is present, and his mind is somewhere else. The flat place, the grey place, the one that doesn't have a name. He knows if he stays there too long, the performance will start. The grin, the joke, the noise. It always starts eventually, because performing is the only way he knows to climb out, and it works, but it always costs him something. The cost is why he drinks, why he smokes, why some nights he lies in bed and stares at the ceiling and can't move.

Shane comes back with coffee. He puts the mug in Ilya's hands and sits beside him. Doesn't ask him if he's okay, because he knows he isn't, and he knows Ilya wouldn't tell him the truth. He'd give him an answer he thinks would make Shane feel better.

Instead, Shane says, "Tell me about the voices. The ones she did for bedtime stories."

And Ilya talks. Not about the death, or the pills, or the bed. He talks about the voices, the characters Irina invented. The bear who was afraid of honey, the fish who wanted to be a bird. He talks and pulls out memories, and the memories pull him out of the flat place. By the time Shane says, "The fish who wanted to be a bird is objectively a better story than anything on your Russian television channel", Ilya is laughing, and the grey thing has receded; it's not gone, but it's quieter.

But it comes back.

It comes back that night, and it comes back harder than it has in months. December has been bad. Not for Shane, whose Worlds training is on schedule, whose programs are polishing, whose body is strong, but for Ilya. The Bears lost six of their last eight games. The scoring has dried up. Ilya has one goal in December, one, and it was on a deflection that he didn't even mean. The drought is eating him alive because Ilya's self-worth is tied to the ice. When the hockey is good, Ilya can outrun the grey thing. When the hockey is bad, the grey thing catches him.

Shane finds him in the bedroom at eleven p.m., sitting on the edge of the bed in the dark. His hands are on his knees, and his head is down, and he's not moving.

"Ilya."

Nothing.

Shane sits beside him. Doesn't touch him yet. "Talk to me."

"I can't—" Ilya's voice is flat.

"Try."

"I want to not be in my body." He says it quietly, like a confession. "I feel like... like I am in a box, and the box is made of me, and I cannot get out. Everything is heavy. The air is heavy. My hands are heavy. I played eighteen minutes last game, and I was invisible, and the ice felt like concrete, and I cannot—" He stops, rubs his face. "I do not know what is wrong with me."

Shane is quiet for a moment. His hand goes to Ilya's back, between the shoulder blades, and stays there.

"Do you trust me?" Shane says.

Ilya looks at him. The question is unexpected. Ilya's face shows it, the slight confusion cutting through the flatness. "What?"

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes. You know I do."

"Then lie down. Let me take care of you."

Ilya looks at him for a long moment. The bedroom is dark except for the lights bleeding through the doorway, red and green on the walls. Then he lies back on the bed, and Shane moves over him and kisses him slowly and carefully.

Shane undresses him. Shirt over the head, the cross settling back against Ilya's chest. Sweatpants and boxers down to his ankles and then discarded on the floor. Ilya lies still and lets himself be undressed, and that's what this is all about. Ilya, who controls every interaction with a grin and a joke, is letting someone else lead. Letting someone else hold the wheel.

Shane kisses his neck, then his collarbone. The moles on his chest and the ones on his stomach. He takes his time as he traces the cross with his mouth and moves down, kissing each rib, and Ilya's breathing changes. It slows, deepens, and the heaviness in his body shifts.

"Turn over," Shane says.

Ilya turns. Face down, arms loose at his sides, his back with its constellation of moles exposed. Shane kisses his way down Ilya's spine. Each vertebra, the small of his back, the dimples above his ass. Slow, deliberate, the way Shane does everything, with expert precision and focus and the absolute attention of a person who is mapping terrain.

His hands spread Ilya's thighs, and Ilya tenses.

"Do you trust me?" Shane says again, this time against Ilya's skin.

"Yes."

Shane's mouth moves lower. His tongue finds Ilya, and Ilya makes a sound. A sharp intake, a full-body flinch, because nobody has done this to him, not ever. Ilya has always been the one who does it. Ilya has always been in charge, on top, leading, performing even during sex, especially during sex, and this is new, and it makes his hands grip the sheets and his face press into the pillow.

Shane takes his time. His tongue circles and presses, and Ilya's body resists, and then doesn't resist. It surrenders, and that is what Shane is aiming for.

"Shane—" Ilya's voice is muffled. Wrecked. "I have never—"

"I know. Let me."

Shane's tongue pushes inside, and Ilya's hips jerk. The sound he makes is raw and surprised, and his thighs are shaking. Shane's hands hold him steady as his mouth keeps going, unhurried, thorough, taking Ilya apart the way you take apart something you built so you can see how it works and put it back together better.

Then Shane's fingers. Slick, careful, one pressing in while his mouth stays on him, and Ilya gasps and his whole body goes taut. Shane says, "Breathe" against his skin, and Ilya breathes. One finger inside, moving slowly, finding the place, and when Shane's finger crooks and presses, Ilya makes a sound that is close to a sob.

"More," Ilya says into the pillow.

Two fingers. Shane works him open slowly, his mouth still on him, and Ilya is trembling, and his cock is hard against the mattress. He's making sounds he's never made, they're small, desperate, vulnerable sounds that belong to a person whose body is being taken apart by the one person he trusts enough to let see what's underneath.

Shane's fingers find the rhythm, and Shane's mouth finds the rhythm, and the two rhythms together undo Ilya completely. He comes without being touched, his face in the pillow, Shane's fingers inside him, his whole body shuddering, and the orgasm is not the usual orgasm. It's longer, deeper, a wave that starts in his spine and moves through every part of him and leaves him empty in a way that he hasn't been in a long time.

Shane pulls him close after, his face in Shane's chest, Shane's hand in Ilya's hair, the cross warm between them.

"Where did you learn that?" Ilya says. His voice is raw.

"Research."

"You researched how to—"

"I research everything. You know this about me."

Ilya laughs. It's a small laugh, exhausted, but it's real, and the real is the point. The grey thing is still there — it's always there, it doesn't leave — but it's quieter now, pushed to the edges, and the centre of Ilya's body is warm and held. Shane's heartbeat is under his ear, and that is all that matters.

"Thank you," Ilya says.

"You don't have to thank me."

"I am thanking you anyway."

Shane's hand moves in his hair. The movement says *I'm here and I'm not going anywhere*.

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It's New Year's Eve.

They don't go out. Rose invited them to a party at her apartment with other skaters, and a few of Rose's other friends, the kind of gathering where people wear sparkly things and drink champagne

and count backwards from ten. Shane said no, and Ilya said no, and Rose said, "You two are going to sit on that couch and ring in the new year alone like the old married couple you are," and Shane said, "Yes" without hesitation, and Rose laughed and said, "At least open a bottle of something."

They open a bottle of something. Ilya finds champagne in the back of the cabinet, something left over from when Marleau brought it after a win in November. It's the good kind, French, and they sit on the couch.

The countdown is on. New York, Times Square, the crowd, the noise and the cold that Shane can feel through the screen. Shane watches the ball and thinks about the year. This year, this impossible year that started with the hand and the pulling away and moved through the fight and the confession and the couch and the first kiss and the summer and the reunion and the apartment and the bed and the parents and the friends and the lying and the truth and the slow, careful, terrifying process of becoming a person who lets himself be loved.

"Ten," the television says.

Ilya's hand finds Shane's hand.

"Nine."

Shane looks at Ilya, the champagne is in his other hand. The Christmas lights are still up, neither of them took them down, neither of them wanted to, and they cast colours across Ilya's face, red and green and white.

"Eight. Seven. Six."

"I'm glad it was you," Shane says.

"What?"

"Five. Four."

"All of it. I'm glad it was you."

"Three. Two."

Ilya's hand tightens on his.

"One."

At midnight, Ilya kisses him, and it tastes like bubbles and the year ending. The fireworks go on the television, and somewhere outside, someone is cheering.

Then Ilya pulls back, reaches behind the couch cushion, and produces a box.

"In Russia," Ilya says, "gifts are for New Year. Not Christmas. Christmas is for church and pelmeni. New Year is for presents."

"You hid a present behind the couch."

"For a week. You did not find it. I am very proud of this."

Shane opens the box. Inside is a watch. It doesn't look expensive. Ilya has money but doesn't spend it on expensive things. It's simple, silver, with a leather strap, and on the back is an engraving: 5:15.

Shane stares at it.

"Because that is when you wake up," Ilya says. "And that is when I know you are here, even when I am asleep. The alarm goes off, and I hear it, and I know." His voice is quiet. "It is the best sound in my life. I want you to always remember that."

Shane puts the watch on. The leather is stiff and new, and the 5:15 sits against his wrist where his pulse is. He says "thank you" in a voice that is steady because Shane's voice is always steady, even when the rest of him is not.

"I have something for you, too," Shane says. "I read up on New Year's Eve gifts in Russia, but wasn't sure if we were doing this."

He gets up, goes to his old room, and comes back with a small bag. Inside is a case.

Ilya opens it, and inside it is a three-month supply of nicotine patches, the good kind. And underneath the patches is a lighter. Silver, heavy, with numbers engraved on the side.

"I do not understand," Ilya says. "You are giving me patches and a lighter?"

"The patches are for quitting. The lighter is for when you can't." Shane pauses. "Also, I want you to have something good. For when the calls come and the night is long. Something to hold."

Ilya looks at the lighter in his hand. The numbers engraved in the silver are small and precise, the way Shane does everything. He turns it over.

"What are these?"

"Coordinates."

"Coordinates of what?"

"The apartment." Shane's voice is quiet. "It's where we fell in love. I wanted you to carry it."

"Shane Hollander," Ilya says, "you are the least boring person I have ever met."

"Don't get emotional. It's a lighter."

"It is not just a lighter."

"It's literally a lighter. It says so on the box."

Ilya puts the lighter in his pocket and pulls Shane toward him and kisses him again.

"Happy New Year, Shane," Ilya says against his mouth.

"Happy New Year, Ilya."

They don't move from the couch. The television plays the celebrations, and the champagne goes flat, and Shane falls asleep with his head on Ilya's chest and the watch on his wrist reading 12:47

and Ilya's heartbeat under his ear, steady and real, carrying them both into the New Year.

Chapter 28: Worlds

Chapter Summary

Worlds are coming fast, and Shane falls back into his eating habits. Ilya doesn't notice, but Rose does.

Shane comes home from practice at eight, and he can barely stand. Linda ran them through the Rachmaninoff six times. Full run-throughs, no stops, the lifts at performance weight, and Shane's body is a collection of complaints. His shoulders ache from the throw entries, his ankles are swollen, and his hamstrings are so tight that the stairs up to the apartment feel like a summit attempt.

Ilya is on the couch. He takes one look at Shane in the doorway and says, "Shower."

"I can't move."

"Shower first. Then you can't move."

Ilya gets up, walks Shane to the bathroom, turns on the water, and helps Shane out of his training clothes. He peels the shirt off, the compression tights, the socks, and Shane lets him because his arms don't work and because being undressed by Ilya has become a language of its own, the practical intimacy of two people who know each other's bodies almost better than they knew their own.

They shower together. The water is hot, the bathroom fills with steam, and Ilya stands behind Shane and washes his hair. His fingers work through the shampoo slowly, pressing into Shane's scalp, and Shane's eyes close, his head tips back, and the tension in his shoulders releases one degree at a time. Ilya's thumbs find the knots at the base of Shane's skull and press, and Shane makes a sound that is close to pain and close to relief and exactly between the two.

"Long day," Ilya says.

"Six full run-throughs."

"Linda is trying to kill you."

"Linda is trying to make us perfect."

"Same thing." Ilya rinses Shane's hair and turns off the water.

They brush their teeth side by side at the sink. This is the part of their life that nobody would write about. They're just two people in boxers brushing their teeth in a steamed-up bathroom, but it's the part Shane loves most, the ordinariness of it, the routine that says we live here, we do this every night, this is ours.

They get into bed. Shane on his side, facing away, and Ilya behind him, curled around him the way Ilya always curls — arm across Shane's chest, face in Shane's neck, knees tucked behind Shane's knees. The same position they sleep in every night, the same position that makes Shane's body relax.

Shane is almost asleep when he feels Ilya hard against him, pressing against the back of his, his body's response to proximity and warmth and the particular magnetism of Shane's skin.

"Sorry," Ilya murmurs against his neck. "Ignore it. Sleep."

Shane should sleep. His body is screaming for sleep, every muscle exhausted, the practice sitting in his bones. But Ilya is warm behind him, and hard against him, and Shane's body, which was finished thirty seconds ago, is suddenly not finished. He pushes back, a slow deliberate roll of his hips, and Ilya's breath catches against his neck.

"Shane. You are exhausted."

"I know." He reaches back and finds Ilya's hip and pulls him closer, letting Ilya's cock press between his cheeks through the cotton. They both make a sound, and it's the sound of two people who know exactly what this feels like and want it anyway.

"You sure?" Ilya says against his shoulder, his teeth grazing the skin there.

Shane reaches for the nightstand, finds the lube, and passes it back without turning around.

Ilya takes it. Shane hears the cap, feels the shift of Ilya's body behind him, and then Ilya's slick finger slides inside him, and everything slows down. Shane is already loose from exhaustion. His whole body pliant, his muscles too tired to tense, and Ilya's finger moves easily. A second finger, and Shane pushes back into the touch. Ilya kisses the back of his neck, and the kissing is lazy, open-mouthed, tasting the clean skin.

"Please," Shane says. His voice is thick with sleep.

Ilya pulls his fingers out, slicks himself, and then his cock nudges against Shane's hole, and his hand is on Shane's hip, pulling him back carefully as he pushes in, slow, past the rim, and they both groan.

They rarely fuck like this. The angle is awkward, neither of them has much leverage. But tonight it's perfect. Slow and lazy, Ilya rocking into him in a rhythm that is more tide than thrust, and Shane's body takes him easily, and the ease is its own kind of intimacy, the body that knows this body, the opening that is not effort but habit, the two of them fitted together in the dark.

Ilya moves slowly. His hand slides from Shane's hip to his cock, just holding him, not stroking. Shane's cock is warm and firm, and his thumb moves over the head in slow circles that match the rhythm of his hips. Shane's whole body is tingling, oversensitive from fatigue, every nerve close to the surface, and the combination of Ilya inside him and Ilya's hand on him makes his toes curl, and his breathing go ragged.

"Nobody sees you like this," Ilya says against his shoulder. Low, rough, barely a voice. "Only me. Only me sees you like this."

Shane's hand finds Ilya's hand, the one on his cock, and holds it there.

Ilya adjusts the angle and pushes deeper, finds the spot and Shane cries out, quiet and surprised, and Ilya does it again, and again, a slow relentless pressure that builds and builds and Shane is trembling now, his whole body shaking against Ilya's chest, and his cock is leaking over Ilya's fingers and he's close, so close, the pleasure building from somewhere deep and spreading outward.

"Let go," Ilya says into his neck. "I have you."

Shane lets go. He comes in Ilya's hand, a long shuddering wave that moves through his entire body, and the sound he makes is small and wrecked and muffled by the pillow. Ilya holds him through it, still inside him, still moving, and then Ilya's hips stutter and he presses deep and comes inside Shane with a groan that vibrates against Shane's back, and Shane feels it — the warmth, the pulse — and his hand tightens on Ilya's hand and they stay like that, connected, breathing hard, Ilya still buried in him.

They don't move, they don't clean up. Ilya softens inside him and eventually slips out, and the sheets are a mess, but Shane doesn't care. Ilya's arm is around him, and Ilya's breath is evening out against his neck, and Shane reaches for Ilya's hand and presses a kiss against his palm and puts it on his chest, over his heart.

"Love you," Shane mumbles, fighting sleep.

"Love you," Ilya says into his hair.

Shane falls asleep, and it's the deepest sleep he's had in weeks.

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Worlds is in London, Ontario, in March 2013. Shane has been training for this since August, since before August, since the day he and Rose auditioned for Linda and then moved to Boston with two suitcases and a dream.

The preparation is total, and they spend over six hours a day on the ice. Lifts, throws, step sequences, the Rachmaninoff program that Linda choreographed for them in September and that has been refined and rebuilt and stripped back and rebuilt again until it is a machine, a thing that runs on precision and trust and the particular alchemy of two bodies that know each other so well they've stopped being two bodies and become one.

Shane's body is a problem.

Not on the ice, on the ice, his body is excellent. It's strong, flexible, and reliable, the quad toe loop cleaner than it's been in years, the throw Lutz finally where Linda wants it. The problem is everywhere else. The problem is the kitchen, the counter, the scale, and the calculator that went quiet over the summer in Ottawa and came back in January. Quiet at first, a whisper, and is now loud again, louder than it's been since Colton's comment, and Shane doesn't know why it came back except that he does know — he knows exactly why.

Worlds.

The competition is the trigger. The competitions have always been the trigger. The approach of judgment, the awareness that his body will be on ice in front of judges and cameras and an audience, and the judges will see the line, and the line must be right because if the line is wrong, nothing else matters.

He stops eating the yoghurt first. This is how it always starts — the yoghurt goes, because the yoghurt is the easiest thing to cut, the thing that won't be missed. Then the portions shrink. The three-quarters cup of rice goes back to half a cup. The chicken breast gets weighed twice. The cereal in the morning goes from a full bowl to three-quarters to half, and the halving happens over weeks, slowly, the way all of Shane's systems develop — through calibration, through increments too small to see from the outside.

Ilya doesn't notice.

This is the thing Shane counts on and also the thing that breaks his heart. Ilya, who noticed the fridge organisation in the first month. Ilya, who noticed the shoes by the door, the cereal brand and the five-fifteen alarm. Ilya, who has been watching Shane since the alley with the focused quiet attention of a person who has made watching into a form of love — Ilya doesn't notice, because Ilya is in love, and being in love has made him blind in the specific way that love makes people blind, which is not that they can't see but that they see what they want to see, and what Ilya wants to see is Shane being okay.

Shane is not okay. Shane stands at the counter in the morning, and Ilya comes up behind him and puts his arms around Shane's waist and his chin on Shane's shoulder and says something that makes Shane smile. Shane leans back into him, and everything about it is real: the warmth is real, the love is real, and Shane has not eaten breakfast.

"You eating?" Ilya says, chin still on his shoulder, looking at the empty counter.

"I ate earlier. Before you got up."

"You never eat before I get up."

"I did today. Early practice."

Ilya accepts this. Ilya accepts this because Shane says it in the flat, factual voice that Shane uses for true things, and the voice is the same whether the thing is true or not.

Rose can tell the difference.

"You're lying to him," Rose says at practice, towelling her face. They've just finished a run-through of the long program, and Shane's legs were shaking in the last lift, a tremor in his arms that wasn't there in January, and Rose felt it because Rose feels everything, every micro-adjustment, every shift in Shane's centre of gravity, and the tremor told her something the scale would confirm if she checked.

"I'm not lying."

"The yoghurt is gone again. I can see your collarbones through your practice shirt. And your arms shook in the lift."

"I'm tired."

"You're not tired. You're underfuelled. There's a difference, and you know the difference because the nutritionist in Ottawa explained the difference to you eight months ago."

Shane takes a drink of water. The water is cold when it lands in his empty stomach and sits there. "I have it under control."

"You don't have it under control. That's the whole point. The control is the problem." Rose is not angry. Rose is never angry with Shane about this; she's something worse, something steadier, the patient, relentless warmth of a person who loves him. "Shane. Worlds is in three weeks. You need to be strong for Worlds. You need your body to work. And your body can't work if you're not feeding it."

"My body is working fine."

"Your arms shook in the lift. Three weeks before the most important competition of our lives." Rose looks at him. "Tell Ilya."

"There's nothing to tell."

"Tell him or I will."

Shane looks at her. Rose's face is set, the jaw, the eyes, the particular expression she wears when she has decided something and the decision is final. Shane has seen this expression before competitions, before arguments, and during that one time Rose told Linda that the choreography was wrong, and Linda changed it. The expression means this is happening whether you like it or not.

"Don't," Shane says. "Please."

"Then eat. The full portion starting today. I'll watch."

"Rose—"

"I will sit at your counter every morning and watch you eat the full bowl and the yoghurt and the toast, and you will hate me for it, and I don't care, because we are going to Worlds and we are going to win and we are going to do it with you at full strength, not whatever this is." Her voice doesn't waver. "You're not doing this alone. You were never supposed to do this alone."

Shane stands in the rink with his water bottle and his empty stomach and his shaking arms and looks at his skating partner, his best friend, the person he has lifted into the air every morning for four years, and it cracks something in him because Rose is right. Rose has always been right. The control is the problem. The control has always been the problem.

"Okay," he says.

"Okay?"

"Okay. The full portion starting today."

Rose nods. Then she puts her towel down and skates back to centre ice and holds out her hand and says "again", and Shane takes her hand, and they run the program again, and this time his arms don't shake.

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Shane is fine. Shane is training hard, the season is going well, the apartment is good, the couch is good, the bed is good, and Shane is fine.

This is what Ilya tells himself because this is what Shane shows him — the morning routine, the counter, the ginger ale, the glasses, the book. Shane in the apartment is the Shane that Ilya knows best. Thinner, maybe. A little thinner. But Shane is always thinner during competition season, the training burns through everything, and the thinness is athletic, is normal, is what bodies do when they're working this hard.

Ilya's season is going well. Ilya doesn't let himself think about how well, doesn't let himself look at the numbers or read the articles, because looking makes it real and real things can be taken away.

"You're going to win the Hart," Shane says one evening, not looking up from his book.

"You don't know that."

"I know statistics. Your points-per-game is the highest in the league. Your plus-minus is—"

"Stop. You're making it real."

"It is real. The numbers don't lie."

"Your numbers lie all the time. Your component scores are subjective."

"My component scores are a flawed system applied to an art form. Your statistics are a clean data set. You're going to win the Hart."

Ilya grins at Shane as he turns a page in his book. Their relationship is great, the season is good, and Shane is fine.

Except that Alexei calls on a Wednesday night, at one a.m., and Grigori is worse.

"He doesn't know the house," Alexei says. His voice is tired in a way that Ilya recognises — the bone-deep exhaustion of being responsible for a person who doesn't know you're responsible for them. "He keeps asking to go home. He's in his home. And yet he keeps asking to go home."

"What does Natalya say?"

"Natalya says this is normal. Normal for the illness. She says it'll — it'll keep going in one direction." Alexei pauses. "He asked about Mama yesterday. Not in the confused way. He sat in his chair, looked at me, and said where is Irina and his eyes were clear, Ilya. He was asking because he wanted her, and she wasn't there."

Ilya is on the balcony. No cigarette, not this time, because the patches are working. Shane is inside, sleeping.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asks.

The silence is long enough that Ilya thinks Alexei has hung up.

"No," Alexei says. "I'm not okay. He's my father, and he's disappearing, and I can't — I spent my whole life being angry at him, and now he's going, and the anger doesn't have anywhere to land, and I don't know what to do with my hands, Ilya. I don't know what to do without the anger."

Ilya closes his eyes. This is something he understands so completely that it hurts to hear someone else say it, because Ilya has been carrying the same thing for such a long time. The anger at Grigori that was the foundation, the thing everything else was built on, and the foundation is crumbling.

"You just keep showing up," Ilya says. "That's what you do."

"Easy for you to say. You're in Boston."

"I know."

"Send more money. The pipes are acting up again."

"I'll send it tomorrow."

He hangs up, goes inside, and gets into bed. Shane shifts toward him in his sleep, automatic, his body finding Ilya's body, and Ilya puts his arm around him and holds him and thinks: Shane is fine. Shane is here, warm, and fine.

He doesn't think about the collarbones. He doesn't think about the half-bowl of cereal or the yoghurt that isn't in the fridge or the way Shane's shirts hang differently than they did in September. He doesn't think about these things because thinking about them would mean seeing them and seeing them would mean the person he loves most in the world is hurting and he missed it, and missing it would make him the kind of person who loves someone and doesn't pay attention, and Ilya has been paying attention since the alley and the idea that love could make him stop is too terrible to hold.

So he holds Shane instead, and doesn't look.

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Worlds.

London, Ontario. The arena is smaller than Shane expected and louder than he expected, and his parents are in the stands. David with his camera, Yuna with her phone, both of them watching with focused attention.

Rose is beside him. She's been beside him every morning for three weeks, watching him eat, the yoghurt, the toast. She hasn't missed a day. Shane hated it for the first three days and tolerated it for the next four, and by the second week, it had become part of the routine.

He weighs 143 pounds. This is the same he weighed when he went home to Ottawa last summer, but less than he weighed last winter.

It's too much. It's not enough. The body he needs to hold Rose in the air and land the throw, execute the step sequence, and perform the Rachmaninoff program the way Linda choreographed it needs to be bigger and stronger. But this is what he has to work with now, and he's gonna make it work.

The short program goes well. The technical score is higher than their personal best. Shane's arms don't shake in the lift. Rose's throw is the best they've ever done in competition.

The long program is the next day. Rachmaninoff. The piece Linda chose because it requires what Shane is worst at — sustained emotional exposure, the slow opening that can't be faked, that the judges can see and the audience can feel.

Shane stands at the boards before they go on, and Rose takes his hand and says, "Think about Ilya."

Shane and Rose take the ice, and the music starts.

Four minutes and ten seconds. Shane lets it happen. He thinks about Ilya. He thinks about the counter in the morning, the thumb drawing circles on his hand, the alley, the smoke and the crooked smile. He thinks about the sound of Ilya's laugh, the weight of Ilya's arm across his chest at night, the way Ilya watched him in the morning. He thinks about the love he has for him and how much he wants to tell him that.

He opens. Not all the way cause Shane will never open all the way, not in public, not in front of judges and cameras. But it's enough. Enough that the slow section before the throw has something in it that wasn't there in practice, a quality of presence, of being in the body, of feeling the music rather than executing it, and the judges see it, and the audience feels it, and Rose feels it through his hands.

They land everything. The throw Lutz is clean, the lifts are strong, and the step sequence is the best they've ever performed. Shane's edges are precise and musical, Rose's expression matching his, the two of them moving as one body, one breath.

The music ends, and the arena erupts. Rose's hand is in his, and her face is bright, and Shane is breathing hard, and his body is shaking but not from weakness. It's from adrenaline, from the sustained opening, from the four minutes of being present in a way that used to be impossible and isn't anymore.

They win silver.

Behind the Russians — Volosozhar and Trankov, who were devastating, who skated with the kind of ferocious certainty that made the arena hold its breath. Shane stands at the boards and watches the Russian flag appear in the stands and thinks of Ilya.

In the corridor afterwards, a skater Shane half-knows — a singles man from some European country, stops him with a hand on his arm.

"Great program," the guy says, smiling at Shane. "You look good out there. Lean."

"Thanks."

The guy glances at the scoreboard where the Russian pairs team's numbers are still glowing. "The Russians are strong this year. Built like tanks." He looks at Shane again. "You should probably try it. Put on some muscle, bulk up a bit."

He walks away. He doesn't know what he said. He doesn't know that *put on some muscle* landed on a brain that can only hear *your body is wrong*, the same way Colton's comment translated into *watch your weight*.

The men's singles event is the next day. Shane sits in the stands with Rose and watches the skating, and doesn't watch the skating. His phone is in his hand, and Ilya's text from last night is on the screen: *Was beautiful Shane. Is always beautiful.*

Shane reads it again. The English is rough, the articles missing, and the roughness is what makes it Ilya — not polished, just the truth in whatever grammar it arrives in. Shane's thumb hovers over the

screen. He reads it a third time.

Patrick Chan wins gold.

Patrick, who Shane knew from the junior circuit, from before the growth spurt, from the years when Shane was a singles skater, and Patrick was the boy one year older who landed things Shane couldn't. They'd trained at the same camps, stood at the same boards, and then Shane grew four inches, and a new path was taken.

Shane watches Patrick on the podium with the anthem playing and the gold around his neck. He looks down at his phone. *Is always beautiful.*

He texts back: *I'm coming home.*

Chapter 29: one ticket to ottawa

Chapter Summary

Shane hasn't been eating, and it finally takes a toll on him. His parents decide that enough is enough and take him home.

He sees it shortly after Shane returns from Worlds.

Shane is at the counter making his cereal, and Ilya is in the doorway. The cereal bowl is half-full, the yoghurt is gone, Shane's collarbones are sharp under his t-shirt, and his wrists are narrower than they were in the fall. Ilya has been standing in this kitchen every morning with his arms around this person and hasn't seen it because he was too in love to look.

He's looking now.

"Shane."

"Hmm?" Shane is pouring milk into the bowl.

"We need to talk about the eating."

Shane's hand stops pouring, and he puts the carton on the counter.

"Not later, now. You have stopped eating yoghurt, and the portions are half what they were. You are measuring milk into a bowl."

"I'm adjusting for the off-season. The training load is—"

"No, do not." Ilya's voice is harder than he means it to be. "Do not tell me about training loads. I am not a judge, I am not Linda. I am the person who sleeps next to you, and I know what your body feels like, and it does not... should not feel like this."

Shane puts the milk in the fridge, and Ilya can see him close down. "You don't know what you're talking about."

"I know exactly what I am talking about. Rose knows, your parents know, everyone has been watching this."

"Then don't watch."

"I cannot do that. I love you, and I cannot watch you do this to yourself."

"This is my body—"

"Your body is our body now."

The sentence lands, Shane flinches, and the reaction hits him harder than anything Grigori ever did to him.

"I did not mean—"

"I know what you meant." Shane's voice is very quiet. He looks at Ilya, and his face is doing something Ilya hasn't seen. It's raw and ashamed and very young. "I know everything you said is right."

"Then let me help."

"I—" Shane's mouth works. His mind is fighting it, fighting the admission, and Ilya can see the fight happening in real time behind Shane's eyes. Then something gives. Something small and structural, like a bolt loosening. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. I'll call the nutritionist. I'll — I need help. I know I need help."

The words cost him everything. Ilya can see it in Shane's face, in his hands on the counter, in the way his whole body sags slightly. Shane admitting he needs help is the hardest thing he has ever done, and Ilya is watching it happen, his chest breaking and expanding at the same time.

Ilya crosses the kitchen, puts his arms around Shane and holds him. Shane's body is thin, and it's terrifying, but Ilya holds him tighter cause that's the only thing he knows to do.

"We are going to fix this," Ilya says.

"I know."

"Together."

"I know."

Then Shane's weight shifts. His body goes heavy against Ilya's chest and then goes limp. His knees fold, and Ilya is holding all of him, all of the terrifying nothing of him, and Shane's eyes are closed, and his face is white.

"Shane. Shane—"

Nothing. Shane is unconscious in his arms on the kitchen floor.

Ilya allows himself ten seconds to panic. His hands are shaking, Shane's name in his mouth, the disbelief of it, the body that was talking five seconds ago now silent and heavy on the tiles. Then the ten seconds end, and Ilya dials 911. He kneels beside Shane and puts his hand on Shane's chest and feels the heartbeat, faint and fast, and says the words to the operator. "He's unconscious, hasn't been eating, please hurry."

The ambulance takes seven minutes. Ilya knows because he kneels on the kitchen floor, holds Shane's hand and counts them all.

He rides in the ambulance with him. He sits in the back on the bench and holds Shane's hand while the paramedics work. The sirens are loud, and the city passes outside as they drive. Ilya is wearing

his Adidas warm ups cause he was getting ready for practice, and his phone is buzzing in his pocket. He doesn't check it.

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Shane wakes up in the emergency room at Mass General with an IV in his arm and a nurse asking him when he last ate. Ilya is in the chair beside the bed, still in his practice clothes, his face the colour of concrete.

"Hi," Shane says.

Ilya doesn't say hi. Ilya's jaw is clenched, and his eyes are red, and he looks like a person who has been holding himself together for hours and is going to stop holding any minute.

"Your parents are on their way," Ilya says. "I called your mother from the ambulance."

"How long was I—"

"An hour. You were out for an hour, Shane." Ilya's voice cracks on the number. "I counted the minutes."

Shane looks at the IV in his arm, then the monitor beeping beside the bed. He's wearing a hospital gown, and it's all too overwhelming. His breathing becomes erratic, and tears sting his eyes. He opens his mouth to say something, an explanation, a defence, and nothing comes out. There's nothing to manage. He's in a hospital bed because his body quit.

Ilya stays through it all. He stays through the blood draws and the intake questions, and the nurse who asks Shane to rate his pain.

"I'm not in pain," Shane says.

"I'm going to ask you some questions about your eating," the nurse says. She has a clipboard she's scribbling something on, and she doesn't look at Ilya, not once.

Shane answers all of them. How long, how much, the portions, the yoghurt, the cereal. He answers with Ilya in the chair beside him, hearing every word.

At four p.m., the door opens.

His parents are there, straight from the airport. Yuna stands in the doorway, looks at Shane, then at the IV, and her face is still. It's a look Shane has never seen on his mother. Blank, scared, and trying not to be either.

She crosses the room and puts her hand on Shane's forehead. The gesture is so old, feels so much like his childhood, checking for a fever the way she checked when he was six — that Shane's eyes burn.

"Mom—"

"Don't talk." Her voice is steady, but her hand is not. "Just let me look at you."

David comes in behind her. His face is already ruined. His eyes are red, his cheeks are wet, and he has the look of a man who cried the entire flight. He sees Shane in the bed, and his mouth opens,

but no sound comes out. He grips the bed railing, and his knuckles go white.

"Dad. I'm okay."

"You're not okay," David says, and his voice breaks. "You're in a hospital, Shane."

They stay. All three of them — Yuna in the chair on one side, David on the other, Ilya by the window, because there are only two chairs and he won't take one from Shane's parents. At some point, a nurse brings a blanket for Yuna. At some point, David falls asleep with his head on the bed rail. At some point, Ilya and Shane look at each other across the dim room, and the look is a conversation: I'm scared. I know. Me too.

They intend to keep him for two days. The doctors use words Shane files away: observation, refeeding, and an outpatient plan. They weigh him. They ask more questions about the eating, about how long, about the patterns, and Shane answers because the lying is over.

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Ilya checks his phone in the hospital parking lot at two a.m. He has seventeen missed calls. Twelve from the team, the coaches, the trainers, who expected him at practice over twelve hours ago. Five from LeClaire's personal number.

He takes an Uber home. When he gets there, he takes a shower and stands under the water for a long time. The water is hot, the apartment is empty, and Shane's cereal bowl is still on the counter with the soggy cereal and the milk, and Ilya doesn't touch it. He can't touch it.

He tries to sleep. The bed feels empty without Shane, cold, and Shane's pillow still smells like Shane, and Ilya lies there with the smell and the silence, and eventually exhaustion wins. He sleeps for four hours. It's not a good night's sleep; it's the kind where the body shuts down because it has no choice.

He wakes up at eight, gets himself ready and goes to the rink for ten a.m. practice. He walks to LeClaire's office; he knows he has to give a reason for missing practice. He's the captain; he's supposed to be better than this. As soon as LeClaire looks at him, he knows something's wrong.

"Sit down," LeClaire says.

Ilya sits. He knows what he looks like, which is like a person who hasn't slept, and that's because he hasn't.

"Where were you?" LeClaire asks.

"Hospital. My roommate — Hollander. He collapsed. I went in the ambulance with him. He does not have family here."

LeClaire's face changes; there's concern there. "Is he okay?"

"He is stable, yes. They are keeping him for observation." Ilya looks at his hands. "He has not been eating. For months. I did not see it."

"That's not easy to witness," LeClaire says. "Seeing someone you care about go through something like that. A friend."

The word friend sits in the room. Ilya looks at LeClaire, and the word is wrong. It's so wrong, and the wrongness of it presses against his teeth, and he almost says it: *He's not my friend, he's everything, he's the person I go home to, the person I sleep next to, the person whose heartbeat I monitor with my hand at three a.m.*, but the words don't come.

"Yeah," Ilya says. "A friend."

He goes back to the hospital after practice. Shane is sitting up in bed, and he's speaking with his parents. David is in the chair next to the bed, and Yuna is standing by the window with her phone.

"I need to speak with Ilya alone," Shane says.

Yuna and David step outside. The door closes, and the hospital room is quiet except for the monitor.

"I'm going to Ottawa," Shane says. "With my parents."

"For how long?"

"I don't know. Weeks. Maybe longer." Shane looks at the IV in his arm. "I need help, Ilya. Real help. Not the nutritionist plan, not the portioning." He's quiet for a moment. "And I can't do it in Boston. Every time I step on the ice, my body is being assessed. Every time I walk into a room, someone is looking at the line. I can't get better in the place that made me sick."

"I understand."

"I need you to understand that this isn't about you. This isn't leaving you."

"I know."

"It's leaving the environment. The rink, the... the whole system I built around the disorder. I have to take it apart somewhere else."

Ilya nods. His throat is tight, and he can feel the tears threatening to spill. Shane in Ottawa. Shane without him. No five-fifteen alarm. No ginger ale on the shelf. No reading glasses on the nightstand. No sound of the shower at dawn, the kettle after, the quiet "I'm going" from the bedroom doorway. No hand on his chest at night. No heartbeat under his ear.

"I will call every night," Ilya says.

"I know you will."

"And you will eat."

"I'll try."

"Don't try—"

"Don't say don't try. Not right now." Shane's voice breaks slightly. "Let me try. Let trying be enough for right now."

Ilya reaches for Shane's hand. The IV is in the other one. Shane's fingers are thin and cold, and Ilya holds them, and holding them is both not enough and too much.

"I love you," Ilya says.

"I love you too."

"Come back."

"I will."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

They sit in the hospital room holding hands while the monitor beeps. Outside, Yuna is making phone calls, and David is sitting in the corridor with a coffee he won't drink. Across Boston, the apartment is empty, and Ilya is dreading going home.

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The next weeks are the worst hockey of Ilya's career.

He is horrible in practice, and it bleeds into games. Angry, distracted, taking bad shots and worse penalties. He picks fights in scrimmages. It's not the controlled fights he normally instigates, the strategic ones, but real fights, messy and personal, and the team notices.

He snaps at Dubois during a drill. Ignores Marleau's pass in a scrimmage. Tells a trainer to fuck off when the trainer asks about his shoulder. The charming and funny Ilya is gone. What's left is someone who is angry, raw, someone who doesn't know how to exist without Shane.

After practice on Thursday, Marleau pulls him aside.

Not in the locker room, but outside in the corridor, away from the team. He leans against the wall, and Ilya stands across from him. His jaw is clenched, and his hands are fists, and Marleau looks at him with the steady, patient expression of a man who has been playing with Ilya since his rookie season and knows every version of him.

"This is about Shane," Marleau says. It's not a question, but a statement.

Ilya doesn't answer, which in itself is an answer, and Marleau reads it the way Marleau reads everything.

"Your roommate, your figure skater." Marleau crosses his arms. "I'm not stupid, Ilya. I've known for a while."

Ilya's blood goes cold. "Known what?"

"That he's not just your roommate." Marleau's voice is calm, and there's not an ounce of judgment in it. "I've seen the way you are when he's around. I've seen the way you are when he's not around. And right now he's not around, and you're destroying yourself on the ice."

Ilya opens his mouth, closes it. He wants to deny, needs to, needs to preserve what he and Shane have, but he can't. He's exhausted and alone and doesn't have anyone else to speak to about this.

"He is in Ottawa," Ilya says. His voice is rough. "He is sick. He collapsed and I — I called the ambulance, and he went to hospital, and now he is in Ottawa, and I am here and I cannot—"

"Hey." Marleau pushes from the wall and goes over to Ilya, putting his hand on Ilya's shoulder. "Listen to me. If you love him, and I can see that you do, I've seen it for a long time, then you have to be at your best. Right now. Not for you, but for him."

"I do not know how to..."

"You know exactly how. You're the best player on this team. You're the captain. You know how to show up when it matters." Marleau's grip tightens on his shoulder. "If you lose yourself, you're going to lose him as well. Because he's going to come back and he's going to need you to be whole. Not this." He gestures at Ilya — the clenched jaw, the fists, the dark circles. "Not this version. The real one. The one he fell in love with."

Ilya looks at Marleau, and Marleau looks back.

"Does anyone else know?" Ilya asks.

"I don't know. And I understand why that scares you and ... I'm sorry to say this, but it probably should." Marleau's voice is steady. "But that's not today's problem. Today's problem is you on the ice. Today's problem is being the person he needs when he comes home."

Marleau squeezes his shoulder once more and walks away. Ilya stands in the corridor. His hands are shaking, and someone knows, someone has known for a long time, and the knowing didn't end anything.

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The hockey is the best of his life.

On the ice, Ilya is a machine. Faster than he's ever been, meaner, the anger and the grief and the nothing funnelling into his legs and his stick and the puck, and all of it together produces hockey that the press calls transcendent, historic, once-in-a-generation. He scores five goals in the first round against Pittsburgh. He has a hat trick in game four against Tampa. The arena chants his name, and the locker room erupts, and his teammates pour beer on his head. Ilya grins and celebrates and performs, and the performance is flawless.

Then he goes home and doesn't get out of bed.

The apartment is the problem. The apartment without Shane is a museum of the life they built. The couch with the dent in the middle where they always snuggled together, the fridge with two shelves, the counter where Shane measured his cereal, the hallway where they first touched. Every room is full of the absence of a person, and the absence is heavier than the person ever was.

Ilya lies in bed and stares at the ceiling. He doesn't eat. He doesn't shower. He doesn't move. There's a heaviness sitting on his chest like a hand pressing down. The heaviness doesn't care that Ilya scored a hat trick last night, doesn't care that the Bears are winning, doesn't care about anything except keeping Ilya in this bed in this dark room in this empty apartment.

His phone buzzes.

It's Marleau: *I'm outside your building. Get dressed.*

This is the routine now. Marleau comes to the apartment three mornings a week, sometimes four, sometimes five, sends a text, then waits in his car and doesn't leave until Ilya comes downstairs. Marleau doesn't ask how Ilya is. Marleau doesn't try to fix it. Marleau drives Ilya to the rink and makes sure Ilya gets on the ice, and after practice, Marleau drives him home and watches Ilya walk into the building and texts him an hour later: *You eat?*

The FaceTime calls with Shane are the only thing that makes getting out of bed possible.

It happens every night at seven. Shane's face on the screen, sitting in his childhood bed, the slow return of colour to his cheeks. Shane talks about Dr Tanaka, the training with Rose, and the dinner David cooked. Ilya lies in bed, holds the phone, and watches Shane's face.

"Did you eat?" Ilya asks during every call, it's the first question.

"Full portion," Shane says (on the good days).

"Most of it," Shane says (on the other days).

"How are you?" Shane asks during every call, it's the second question.

"Good," Ilya says (it's always a lie).

Shane sees through it. Of course, Shane sees through it cause Shane notices everything. Shane sees the dark circles on the screen, the flatness in Ilya's voice, and the way Ilya holds the phone too close to his face, because the closeness is the nearest thing to proximity.

"You're not good," Shane says one night.

"I am fine."

"Ilya."

"I am playing well. The team is winning."

"That's not what I asked."

Ilya is quiet for a moment.

"The bed is too big without you," Ilya says. It's the most honest thing he's said in weeks, and it's not even close to the full truth, which is that the bed is too big and the apartment is too empty and the mornings are too heavy and the only reason he gets dressed is because Marleau is in a car outside his building refusing to leave.

"I know," Shane says. "I'm working on it. I'm coming back."

"I know you are."

"It might be a while."

"Take as long as you need." Ilya's voice is low and slow. "I am not going anywhere."

He calls Svetlana after. It's three a.m. in Moscow, but she answers right away.

"I can't feel anything," he says. "The hockey is good, and we're winning, which means I should feel something, but I feel nothing."

"You're depressed, Ilya."

"I'm not depressed. I'm—"

"You're depressed. Your boyfriend is in Ottawa learning to eat again, and you're playing the best hockey of your life, and you feel nothing. That's depression." There's a beat, and Ilya can hear Svetlana take a sip of something. "Have you told Shane?"

"Shane is in recovery. I'm not going to call him and say I can't get out of bed."

"So you'll just not get out of bed alone."

"Marleau picks me up, for practice."

"Your teammate picks you up for practice because you can't get out of bed." Svetlana's takes a deep breath. "Ilya. That's not fine."

Ilya doesn't answer. Outside the window, the city is dark, and the apartment is dark, and everything is dark.

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The Bears are running through the playoffs.

Shane texts before every game: *Play well*. Ilya texts back: *did you eat?* The exchange is their shorthand. Play well means I love you. Did you eat means I love you.

After beating Pittsburgh in six and Tampa in five, they meet Detroit in the conference finals. Game seven in Boston is the loudest thing Ilya has ever heard — and when the final buzzer sounds, the Bears are going to the Stanley Cup Final.

The Final is against Chicago, the team that ended them last year. It goes to seven games, and it's the hardest hockey of Ilya's life.

Game seven is in Boston. Ilya plays for thirty-two minutes. He scores the tying goal in the second period, and Dubois scores the winner in overtime. It's a one-timer off Ilya's pass, top corner, and the arena and the bench erupt. Marleau tackles Ilya, Dubek is screaming, and the noise is so loud it stops being noise and becomes something physical, something that enters his body through his chest.

They bring out the Cup. Ilya lifts all thirty-five pounds of it. The names of every player who has ever held it engraved on the bands. The weight is real in his hands, the team is around him, and the moment is the one he's been working toward since he was six years old on a rink in Moscow.

"Для тебя, мама," he says. For you, mama. He yells it into the noise, into the roar, loud enough for everyone to hear.

And for Shane. For Shane, who is in Ottawa getting better. But Ilya can't say Shane's name into a camera, can't say it into the noise, can't let the arena and the world have the thing that belongs to him and him only. So he says it silently, behind his teeth, while he skates the lap with the Cup over his head. For you. For both of you.

After the champagne and the locker room and the interviews and the photos and Marleau shaking his hand and saying, "I told you." After all of it, in the parking lot, at midnight, Ilya calls Shane.

Shane picks up on the first ring.

"You won," Shane says. His voice is thick.

"We won."

"I watched every second. We all watched the whole game. Dad screamed at the television for three hours, and Mom was so nervous she had to leave the room."

Ilya leans against his car in the parking lot. The arena is still lit up behind him, his hands are shaking, not from the cold, but from everything else.

"I wish you were here," Ilya says.

"I know."

"I looked for you in the stands.

Shane is quiet for a moment. "I was there. I was in Ottawa, but I was there in my heart, wearing your jersey."

"I know." Ilya closes his eyes. "Shane."

"Yeah."

"I won the Cup."

"You won the Cup."

"It does not feel like I thought it would."

"What does it feel like?"

"Like I want to come home and you are not there."

Shane is quiet for a long time. Then: "I'm so proud of you, Ilya."

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He's at Logan Airport on a Wednesday morning. His bag is packed for Moscow. The same bag, the same flight he takes every year, the route he's been flying since he was drafted. The gate is posted, and the boarding pass is on his phone.

The flight boards in forty minutes, but he can't get himself to go through security. Around him, the airport does its thing. There are announcements, footsteps, the particular anonymity of a place

where nobody knows you, and nobody is watching.

He thinks about Shane in Ottawa. How he's getting better, eating dinner with his parents, how he's been skating again with Rose, his voice on the phone every night saying *full portion* or *most of it* or *I'm trying*.

The boarding call comes. He's in first class, so he has priority boarding. He walks past a throng of people, past rental car kiosks and coffee stands, and stops at the ticket counter. He puts his bag on the floor and looks at the woman behind the desk.

"One ticket to Ottawa, please."

Chapter 30: law for the purpose of protecting children from information advocating a denial of traditional family values

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane share a summer in Ottawa. Ilya and David do puzzles, Yuna makes chicken parmesan, and Shane and Ilya try out the logistics of having sex in a bed that doesn't fit them. Then June 30th comes, and Ilya's world is turned upside down.

David opens the door.

Ilya is standing on the porch of the Hollander house in Ottawa with his bag and his dark circles and the flight from Boston still in his clothes, and David looks at him, and his eyes fill immediately. David, who cries at everything, is crying at the sight of the person his son loves standing on his porch looking like he hasn't slept in a month.

"Come in," David says.

Ilya comes in. The house smells like coffee and something cooking, and the particular warmth of a home that belongs to people who love each other. He's never been here before. He's heard Shane describe it. The kitchen with the worn countertops, the stairs that creak on the third step, the living room with David's bookshelves, but a description only gets you so far. Actually being there is overwhelming because this is where Shane grew up. This is where Shane ate breakfast. This is where Shane was small and whole and unbroken.

Shane is at the kitchen table with Yuna and a training binder. He looks up and sees Ilya, and for a moment his eyes are confused, like he can't quite place what he's seeing, and then they light up. He stands up, crosses the kitchen, and puts his arms around Ilya, and Ilya puts his arms around Shane, and they stand in Yuna and David's kitchen and hold each other.

Shane is bulkier. Ilya can feel it when he holds him, the body coming back, the ribs less sharp beneath his hands, the arms stronger around his back. Three months of therapy and training, and David's cooking and Rose at the rink every morning. Shane is coming back.

"You didn't go to Moscow," Shane says into Ilya's neck.

"No."

"Why?"

"Because you are here."

Shane pulls back and looks at Ilya's face. Shane, who sees everything, who has always seen everything, sees the grey thing in Ilya's face, and recognises it. The way Ilya recognised Shane's.

"Okay," Shane says. "You're here now."

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Rose has been in Ottawa since April.

This is the thing Shane still can't fully absorb. That Rose packed up her life in Boston, sublet her apartment, moved into a furnished studio twenty minutes from his parents' house, and has been on the ice with him every other morning for three months. Because they have an Olympic season and they need the practice time, yes. Because the Ottawa facility is adequate, and Linda okay'd it, sure. But also because Rose is the kind of person who doesn't leave.

"You didn't have to do this," Shane said when she arrived in April, standing in her new studio with a suitcase and a garment bag and the expression of a woman who has made a decision and does not intend to discuss it.

"We're going to the Olympics in ten months," Rose said. "I can train here, or I can train in Boston without my partner. These are not equivalent options."

"Rose—"

"Don't make it emotional, Shane. It's just logistics."

It wasn't just logistics. Shane knew it then, and he knows it now, watching Rose at the boards in the Ottawa rink every morning, steady and patient and completely unwilling to let him fall apart alone.

They train. The programs for Sochi are taking shape. The Chopin for the short, the Beethoven for the long. Linda sends notes from Boston. Video calls, detailed feedback, the particular intensity of a coach preparing her team for the biggest competition of their lives from 700 kilometres away.

In June, Rose says at the boards, not looking up from retying her lace, "So what you're telling me is that your boyfriend is sleeping in your childhood bedroom. With your parents next door?"

"Yes."

"He is so down bad for you."

"Rose—"

"The man gave up his entire summer to sleep in a twin bed in Kanata." She stands up. "I just think that's worth acknowledging."

"Can we skate?"

"We can skate," Rose says. "I'm just saying."

Shane implements everything Linda sends. The focus is good. The focus is better than it's been in months because his body is stronger, and the body being stronger makes the ice easier, and the ice being easier makes the programs possible.

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Ilya sleeps in Shane's childhood bedroom. The twin bed is small for one adult person and impossible for two, and they sleep in it anyway, tangled together, Ilya's feet hanging off the end, Shane's face in Ilya's chest, and Ilya's arm around Shane's shoulders.

In the mornings, Shane goes to the rink with Rose, and Ilya finds his own ice — a facility across town, nothing special, but ice is ice, and Ilya's body needs the routine the way a clock needs winding.

Ottawa is nice. This surprises Ilya. He expected Ottawa to be a smaller, quieter version of nothing — a government city, polite and boring, the kind of place where Shane's precise personality makes sense. But Ottawa has the canal and the river and the trees and the particular quality of Canadian summer light that is softer than Boston's, less aggressive, and the streets are clean and the people are friendly, and the coffee shops are good, and Ilya finds himself thinking, more than once, that a person could live here.

"The neighbourhood is nice," Ilya says one afternoon, as he and Shane are on a lazy stroll around the neighbourhood.

"It's a suburb," Shane says.

"Is nice suburb. Quiet. The houses have porches."

"Most houses have porches."

"In Boston, they do not. In Boston, houses have fire escapes and rats." Ilya looks at the street — the big trees, the lawns, the kids on bicycles. "I could live here."

Shane glances at him. "In Ottawa?"

"Maybe. Someday." Ilya says it casually, the way he says things that are not casual. "Nice place to live. Good porches. Good ice cream."

Shane doesn't respond, but his lips quirk up in a little smile.

In the afternoons, they exist in the Hollander house. This is the strange part — the part that is new, that neither of them has done before. They exist in front of other people. Not with any PDA, there's no kissing in the kitchen, no holding hands on the couch. They are careful because careful is what they know and because Yuna and David knowing is different from Yuna and David seeing.

But they are together. They sit on the couch, and their shoulders touch. Ilya makes coffee for Shane without being asked, and David watches it happen without commenting. Shane corrects Ilya's English at dinner, and Ilya says, "You're boring", and Shane smiles, and Yuna sees it, and her face does something quiet and private. They exist in the same room as Shane's parents, and the existence is ordinary, and the ordinary is extraordinary because they have never had this, the domestic thing.

David is the easiest person Ilya has ever been around. David talks hockey at the dinner table and asks about the Bears and listens with the genuine enthusiasm of a man who played at McGill thirty years ago and still loves the game. David makes terrible coffee and excellent dinners. David hugs Ilya good night every evening as if Ilya is going somewhere farther than the bedroom down the hall.

Yuna is harder. Not exactly cold, but very... precise. Very observant. She watches how Ilya is with Shane. She watches what Ilya eats, whether he offers Shane food, and how he handles the nights when Shane's plate goes back to the kitchen half full. Ilya can feel the assessment and doesn't resent it because it is how Yuna shows love.

One evening, on the porch, after Shane has gone to bed, they have a conversation.

"You're not sleeping," Yuna says.

Ilya looks at her. She's drinking tea and basking in the warm Ottawa evening.

"I sleep fine."

"You have circles under your eyes that suggest otherwise." She takes a sip. "Shane mentioned you weren't doing well. Before you came."

"I'm doing better now."

"Better is not well." Yuna looks at the yard. "If you need help, get help. Shane is getting help. There is no shame in it. The shame is in not asking."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. "Yes," he says. "I know."

Yuna nods, then finishes her tea and goes inside.

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Shane is getting better, Ilya can see it every day. The portions are bigger, the voice in his head is quieter, and his body is filling out. The training with Rose is strong, the programs are sharp, and Shane's face has colour, his arms have definition, and his eyes have the same focused brightness that Ilya remembers seeing when they first met.

And Ilya is getting better, too. He doesn't have a word for it, the way Shane has a word for his. Shane has a therapist, a diagnosis, and a plan. Ilya has Shane's hand on his chest at night and the Ottawa mornings and the porch and David's hockey talk at dinner and the slow, unnamed lifting of something heavy.

He doesn't get out of bed easily yet, but he gets out of bed. The mornings are not as heavy as they were in Boston, and that's because Shane is in the kitchen when Ilya comes downstairs, and David has made coffee and eggs each morning.

"Your mother doesn't eat until noon," Ilya says one morning.

"She's fasting."

"Until noon?"

"It's normal."

"It is not normal. Breakfast should be at seven. This is scientifically established."

"Not everyone is you, Ilya."

"Everyone should be me about breakfast."

Ilya looks at Shane across the kitchen table. The June light comes through the window and catches Shane's hair, and Ilya watches him eat without thinking about it. The full plate, the yoghurt, the toast with jam, no hesitation. Just eating.

"Eat your toast," Shane says.

"You are bossy. I like it."

"Eat. Your. Toast."

Ilya eats his toast. He's happy this morning. Shane is across the table, and outside the window, the Ottawa summer is green and slow, and the summer is theirs.

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The Hollanders fall in love with Ilya. Shane watches it happen and can't do anything about it, and doesn't want to.

David starts it. David starts everything in the Hollander house. David is the one who initiates, who reaches, who opens doors that Yuna assesses before walking through. David buys a jigsaw puzzle from the shop on Bank Street, a thousand pieces, a painting of a harbour, the kind of puzzle that takes a week and requires the dining table to be surrendered for the duration. On the first evening, he opens the box and spreads the pieces and says, "Ilya, do you do puzzles?"

Ilya has never done a puzzle in his life. This is immediately apparent when he picks up a piece and tries to fit it into the wrong section of the sky. But David doesn't correct him. David just sits across from him and sorts edge pieces and talks about nothing, the weather, the garden, a plumbing problem at work, and that is David's gift. David fills silence the way Ilya fills rooms, warmly and without agenda, and the puzzle becomes a thing they do together every evening after dinner while Shane reads on the couch and Yuna works at the kitchen table.

"This piece goes here," Ilya says, placing a blue fragment.

"That's sky. The sky is on the left."

"Is also sky in the harbour. Reflected."

"It's not... the reflection pieces are a different shade. Look at the box."

"I looked at box. I disagree with box."

"You can't disagree with the box, Ilya. It's the finished puzzle."

"David." Ilya places another piece with great confidence. "I have won Stanley Cup. I trust my instincts."

Shane looks up from his book. His father and his boyfriend are arguing about a jigsaw puzzle, and neither of them is right, and both of them are enjoying it, and the scene is so ordinary and so domestic and so completely unlike anything Shane thought his life would look like that his chest expands and he has to look back at his book before his face gives him away.

They finish the puzzle on a Thursday. David takes a photo of it. The photo goes on the fridge, held there with a magnet from a souvenir shop in Boston, and it stays on the fridge for the rest of the

summer, the rest of the year, and the rest of every year, because David never takes it down.

Yuna's falling in love is slower. Yuna does everything slower than David because Yuna doesn't trust what she hasn't assessed, and assessing Ilya takes time because Ilya is a person with layers.

Yuna makes chicken parmesan.

Shane notices because Yuna almost never makes chicken parmesan. Yuna makes Japanese food and occasionally Korean food, and on special occasions, the nikujaga. Yuna does not make Italian food. Yuna considers Italian food David's territory, and this arrangement has been in place for over 25 years.

But on a Wednesday in late June, Yuna makes chicken parmesan from scratch. The breading, the sauce, not the mozzarella, because that is difficult, and Yuna doesn't normally make Italian food. She puts it on the table, sits down, and says, "Eat," the way Yuna says everything, expecting compliance.

"You made chicken parmesan," David says, surprised.

"I made chicken parmesan."

"You never make chicken parmesan."

"I make it now." Yuna doesn't look at Ilya. "Ilya mentioned he likes it."

Ilya mentioned this once, three weeks ago, in passing, while talking to David about restaurants in Boston. He mentioned that the Italian place on Hanover Street makes good chicken parmesan, and he said it the way you say things that are true and unimportant, and Yuna heard it and remembered it and made it, and that is Yuna's love language. Not words, not hugs, not the things David gives easily. Yuna gives acts. Yuna gives chicken parmesan she's never made before because a boy her son loves mentioned it once.

Ilya eats three servings, Shane eats two, and David eats one and a half and says it's the best chicken parmesan he's ever had. Yuna scoffs, "Don't exaggerate", and David says, "I'm not exaggerating", and Yuna's mouth does a thing that might be a smile.

Then there's the ice cream.

This happens later in the summer, on a night when the heat is bad, and the air conditioning is out of order, and everyone is on the couch watching something David chose because David controls the remote and David's taste in television is objectively terrible. Shane is reading because Shane always reads during David's shows. Ilya is watching because he will watch anything if there's a couch and a person beside him, and Yuna is in the kitchen.

She comes out with two bowls of ice cream. Puts one in Shane's hand, then puts the other in Ilya's hand before going back to the kitchen without a word.

Ilya looks at the ice cream, then looks at Shane. Shane's eyes are locked on the ice cream.

"She brought you ice cream," Shane says.

"She brought us ice cream."

"She doesn't bring me ice cream. She has never brought me ice cream. I lived in this house for eighteen years, and my mother has never, unprompted, brought me ice cream on the sofa."

"Maybe she likes me better."

"She definitely likes you better. This is a betrayal."

"Is not betrayal. Is good parenting. She is rewarding the child who eats her chicken parmesan."

"I ate her chicken parmesan."

"You ate two servings. I ate three. Three is more than two. You can't do math, Shane?"

Shane takes a bite of his ice cream and glares at Ilya, but it's not real. The ice cream is good, and in the kitchen, Yuna is washing dishes and not smiling, except she is, slightly, behind the running water, where nobody can see.

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The sex in Shane's parents' house is a logistical catastrophe.

The twin bed is the main problem. The twin bed was not designed for two men just south of six feet, and it was definitely not designed for two men just south of six feet who are trying to have sex without making a sound because Yuna and David are down the hall, and the walls in the Hollander house are thin.

"Stop moving," Shane whispers.

"I am not moving. You are moving."

"I'm adjusting. The bed is too small."

"This bed," Ilya says, "is a problem."

Shane has his hand over Ilya's mouth because Ilya is incapable of being quiet and the inability is normally something Shane finds endearing and is currently finding terrifying, because his parent's bedroom is twelve feet away and David is a light sleeper and the conversation they would have to have if David heard them is a conversation Shane is not prepared for in this lifetime or any other.

They try missionary. The headboard hits the wall so hard that Shane puts his hand out to stop it. They try Shane on top. The bed groans so loudly that they both freeze and stay perfectly still for thirty seconds, listening for footsteps in the hallway. They try spooning — the only position the bed allows without structural failure — and even then Shane has to brace his hand against the wall to keep the bed from moving.

"This is undignified," Shane says.

"This is the sexiest thing that has ever happened to me."

"You're being sarcastic."

"I'm not being sarcastic. You, with your hand on the wall, trying not to make a sound, is—" Ilya bites down on Shane's shoulder to stop himself from making the sound Shane is trying to prevent,

and Shane makes a sound of his own that he muffles with the pillow. The bed creaks, and the wall takes the weight, and they finish fast and quiet and messy, Ilya's hand over Shane's mouth and Shane's hand gripping the headboard. Afterwards, they lie in the tiny bed, tangled together and breathing hard, and trying not to laugh because the laughing would be louder than the sex.

"We need bigger bed," Ilya says.

"We're not buying a bed for my parents' house."

"Please, Shane, I cannot fuck you like this, and I need to fuck you."

"We're in my parents' house."

"Your parents already know."

"They don't need to know more."

Ilya buries his face in Shane's neck and shakes with silent laughter, and Shane holds him, and the twin bed barely holds them both. Nobody says anything in the morning, though Yuna gives Ilya a look over her tea that suggests she heard something and has chosen, with the discipline of a woman who manages professional athletes, not to acknowledge it.

The new bed arrives on a Thursday. Shane is suddenly very busy in the living room when the deliverymen bring it through the front door. Yuna signs for it, and Shane does not look at her for the rest of the day.

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On a Tuesday evening in late June, Ilya brings up the apartment.

They're on the porch. David is inside watching an old baseball game, and Yuna is at a client dinner. The evening is warm, and the street is quiet, and Ilya has been looking at his phone for ten minutes.

"I have been thinking," Ilya says. "About when we go back. About the apartment."

Shane waits.

"Marleau asked me again. Before the playoffs. And of course, Hayden said it as well. Why am I living there when I am so rich?" He turns his phone in his hands. "What if I buy something. Two penthouses in same building. We live in one, and the other is for—"

He stops, can't finish the thought.

Shane finishes it for him. "For me to disappear into when you have people over."

"Shane—"

"That's what it is. It's the second bedroom, except it's a whole apartment." Shane's voice is flat. It's not angry, it's something worse. "When the guys come over, I go to the other apartment. When you host a party, I'm in the other apartment. When anyone asks, you live alone and rent out the extra apartment. Is that the plan?"

Ilya puts the phone down. "I'm trying to solve problem."

"The problem isn't the apartment."

"I know what problem is." Ilya is quiet for a moment. "What if we just... what if we come out. Be real couple. No more hiding, we just be... us."

The sprinkler clicks and sweeps across the lawn, and Ilya looks at Shane while Shane looks at his hands.

"Ilya." Shane's voice is careful now. "You're twenty-two years old. You're the captain of an NHL team. You're about to have the best season of your career." He looks at Ilya. "No openly gay player has ever played in the NHL. Ever. In the entire history of the league. And you know what the locker rooms are like. You know what the fans are like. You know what the media would do."

"I do not care about media."

"You would care. When it's every headline, every press conference, every game... When they're asking you about it instead of asking you about hockey. When the road games get worse. When someone in the stands says something, and it's not just a word anymore, it's about you, about us." Shane's hands are steady on his knees. "I know you want this. I want this. But I also know you're not ready to be the first, and I'm not going to let you blow up your career because you feel guilty about a second apartment."

"Is not about guilt."

"Part of it is about guilt. And part of it is about love and part of it is about wanting to be brave, and all of those things are real, and none of them changes the fact that the NHL is not ready for you and you are not ready for the NHL to know."

Ilya stares at the street. The big trees, the lawn David keeps immaculate. The nice suburb where a person could live someday.

"I hate that you are right," Ilya says.

"I hate that I'm right, too."

"No penthouses."

"No penthouses, not right now at least."

They table it the way they table everything that doesn't have a solution, quietly, by mutual agreement, the conversation folded and put away.

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The anti-gay propaganda law passes in Russia on June 30th.

Ilya finds out from Svetlana. A text at two in the morning Ottawa time. Svetlana has been tracking the bill since January, and the text says: *It passed. Unanimous.*

Ilya sits on the edge of the new bed in the dark with Shane asleep behind him. The phone screen glows, and he reads the words again and again. *Unanimous.*

He reads the articles on his phone for an hour. The enforcement language, the penalties. How any public act that promotes "non-traditional sexual relationships" to minors, which means any public act, which means existing, which means holding hands, which means a photograph, which means a rumour, which means anything and everything and nothing, because the law is not about what you do, it's about what you are, and what Ilya is has just been criminalised in the country where his father lives and his brother lives and his mother is buried.

Shane wakes up at three. He reaches for Ilya in the dark, finds the bed empty, sits up, and sees Ilya on the edge of the mattress with his phone.

"What happened?"

"The law passed." Ilya's voice is flat. "In Russia. The propaganda law. It passed."

Shane is quiet. He moves across the bed and sits beside Ilya, not touching him yet, because he can feel the rigidity in Ilya's body, how he is one touch away from breaking.

"If we come out," Ilya says, "I will never be able to go back home."

Russia just made Ilya a crime. The thought sits in the dark between them.

Shane doesn't say it'll be okay. Shane doesn't say we'll figure it out. Shane says, "Okay," puts his arm around Ilya, and holds him, and it's not a solution, it's not a promise, it's not enough, but it's the only thing Shane has to give.

They sit on the edge of the bed in the dark. The law is real, and Sochi is in eight months. The country that raised Ilya and buried his mother and broke his father just told him they don't want him to exist.

Ilya leans into Shane, and Shane holds him because it's the only thing there is to do.

Chapter 31: ships in the night

Chapter Summary

The season is good, the Bears are first in the league, and Shane is training for Sochi. They spend their first Christmas apart, and Ilya does not handle it well.

Sochi is in February, and it's only six months away. Linda has a plan, and it's a 47-page document that covers every element, every transition, every breath of the two programs she's built for the Olympics.

The short program is Chopin. It's lyrical, technical, and built around a throw triple Lutz that Linda wants to be the best throw in the competition.

The long program is Beethoven. The Seventh Symphony, second movement, the piece that builds from nothing to everything, that starts in silence and ends in something that feels like flight.

"This is not Worlds," Linda says on the first day back. She's standing at the boards with the clipboard and her reading glasses and the particular expression she wears when she's about to say something that will govern the next six months of their lives.

"Worlds was a proof of concept. Sochi is the execution. The judges who gave you silver in London will be in Sochi. They know what you can do. Now you have to show them what you can do at your best, under pressure, on the biggest stage in the sport. There is no margin."

No margin. Shane absorbs this the way he absorbs everything, that is, totally, and the words become part of the system that runs his body on the ice. No margin means every practice matters. No margin means the throw Lutz has to be clean every time, not most times.

No margin means the Beethoven program has to do the thing — the opening, the presence, the sustained emotional exposure that Linda has been building toward for five years.

He trains six hours a day. Sometimes seven. The mornings with Rose, the afternoons with the choreographer, the evenings in the gym. His body responds. The quad toe loop is consistent, the throw is getting cleaner, and the lifts are strong.

The nutritionist's plan is working. Shane eats the full portion. He eats the yoghurt and the toast. The calculator runs underneath every meal, but it's quieter now, not gone but quieter, managed the way you manage a chronic condition, with vigilance, with structure, with the awareness that the thing will never fully leave but can be lived with.

Linda tells them about the Russian pair — Volosozhar and Trankov, the team that beat them at Worlds. "They're the favourites. They have home ice, they have the crowd, they have judges who know them." Linda taps her clipboard. "What you have is the throw and the Beethoven and the fact that nobody in this field performs the slow section the way you two perform the slow section. That's your edge. The technical is close. The artistry is where you win."

Shane files this away. The artistry. The thing that used to be impossible and is now merely terrifying, the sustained emotional exposure that requires Shane to be in his body rather than above it. He's been practising. Not just on the ice but in the apartment, in his head, the deliberate accessing of the feelings he spent twenty years sealing away.

He thinks about Ilya. He thinks about them together on the couch and eating breakfast at the counter, and the way Ilya's thumb grazes his cheekbone before a kiss. He thinks about his mother's hand on his hand, his father's tears, Rose teasing him, and the first time Ilya kissed him. He collects these moments, and he brings them to the ice.

"Better," Linda says after a run-through in late September. "The slow section is better. Your face is doing something it wasn't doing last year."

"What's it doing?"

"Feeling things." Linda makes a note on her clipboard. "Keep feeling things. It's working."

Rose is brilliant. Rose has always been brilliant, but this season, the brilliance has an edge to it. It's sharper, more focused, the particular intensity of a woman who has been aiming at this for her entire life and can now see it on the horizon. She's added a new death spiral to the short program that makes Linda's eyebrows rise, which is the Linda equivalent of a standing ovation. She's also gotten stronger in the lifts — her positions are more precise, her transitions smoother — and the partnership between them has reached the level where the choreography disappears, and the movement becomes organic, two bodies operating as one.

They're assigned to Skate Canada in October, and the Grand Prix Final in December, and both are dress rehearsals for Sochi. At Skate Canada, they win gold — their first Grand Prix gold. Their long program scored 193.92 points, a personal best and within range of the Russians, which means Sochi is coming along nicely.

"We can do this," Rose says on the flight home, her head on Shane's shoulder, the gold medal in the overhead compartment.

"We can do this," Shane confirms. He doesn't add the qualifier. The *if everything goes right*, the *if my body holds*, the *if the judges see what Linda sees*. He just says it, for once.

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"We're going to medal," Rose says one morning in October, towelling off after a run-through.

"We're going to do better than medal."

"Shane Hollander. Was that optimism?"

"It was a statistical assessment based on our technical scores relative to the competition."

"It was optimism. I'm marking the date."

The apartment is good, better than good, actually. The six weeks in Ottawa made space for something more honest. When the calculator gets loud, Shane tells Ilya. Not always, and not easily.

But sometimes he says, from the counter, "it's loud today," and Ilya knows what this means and stays with him.

On the loud days, Ilya does specific things that Shane has never asked for and doesn't need to ask for because Ilya learned them the way Ilya learned everything about Shane: by watching, by proximity, by the slow accumulation of data about the person he loves.

On the loud days, Ilya cooks something that isn't on the plan, food that is about pleasure rather than numbers. Pelmeni, the chicken with too much garlic, eggs with butter and toast and the particular way Ilya cracks an egg one-handed that Shane finds unreasonably impressive. The off-plan food sits on the counter, and Shane looks at it, and the calculator screams, and sometimes Shane eats it, and sometimes he doesn't, and Ilya never makes him feel bad about it.

On a Thursday in November, a loud day, a day when Linda said sharper three times and the calculator ran the word through Shane's brain relentlessly and produced the number it always produces, Shane comes home, and Ilya has made solyanka. Ilya makes solyanka maybe four times a year. It takes prep, it takes time, it takes a version of Ilya who can be bothered — but today he could be bothered, and the pot is on the stove, and Shane stands in the doorway and understands exactly what it means.

Shane sits at the counter, looks at the solyanka, and the calculator in his head says no. Shane picks up the spoon anyway.

"How much?" Shane asks.

"However much you want."

"That's not an answer."

"It is the only answer I am going to give you."

Shane eats a full bowl. The nutritionist would say this is fine, while the calculator says this is too much. But Shane eats a full bowl, and the eating is an act of defiance against the thing in his head that wants his number to be smaller. The defiance is small, daily, and ongoing, and is the bravest thing Shane does, braver than the Beethoven, braver than anything he does on the ice.

Ilya keeps cooking. Ilya has been cooking Shane's meals since the spring, and the cooking has become part of the routine. Ilya makes the nutritionist's meals and his own, and his cooking is not about the food. It's about Shane not having to carry all of it alone.

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The Bears are something else this year.

Ilya feels it from the first practice in August — the way the team moves, the way the systems click, the particular hum of a group of men who won the Stanley Cup last spring and are hungry to do it again. Marleau is faster. Dubek is meaner. Dubois has added fifteen pounds of muscle over the summer, and his shot is a weapon now. And the new additions are great. A defenseman from Minnesota named Larsson, who can skate like a forward, and a Czech right wing named Kadlec, who has made the team deeper.

LeClaire doesn't talk about repeating. LeClaire believes that talking about the thing invites the forces that prevent the thing, which is superstition and also the way hockey works. But the banner is in the rafters now, the rings are on their fingers, and everything about this season says we did it once, and we can do it again.

The locker room has a different energy. The jokes are sharper, the music is louder, the post-practice conversations last longer. Marleau keeps on with the poker nights that have become a weekly ritual. Tuesday evenings, Marleau's house, buy-in of twenty dollars, and the poker is terrible because hockey players are not card players, but the ritual is the point. Carmichael brings Anna's cookies, Dubois brings wine that is too expensive for the occasion and explains why in detailed French that nobody understands, and Korhonen, the Finnish goaltender, says almost nothing but smiles at everything and wins every hand, which is very off-brand.

Ilya goes to poker night and performs, and it's easier this year because the team is easier. The Cup did something to them — the winning, the shared joy of it, the parade through Boston, the way they all stood on that ice together and held the thing they'd been chasing. They are bonded by the winning. They are more honest with each other because of it.

Marleau asks about Shane. Not casually — the way he asks has weight to it, the particular care of a person who knows and is choosing his words.

"How's he doing? The skating."

"Good. He's going to the Olympics."

Marleau is quiet for a moment. "Sochi." He says it the way everyone says it now, with the thing underneath. His voice goes quiet. "He's going to be okay over there?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "He will be okay."

Marleau nods. Then, quieter still: "You going to be okay over there?"

Ilya looks at him. The question sits between them, and what's in it — the law, the country, everything Marleau knows and doesn't say — is the most anyone on the team has ever acknowledged.

"Yes," Ilya says. "I will be okay."

Marleau nods again and takes a sip of his beer, and the evening continues.

By November, the Bears are first in the league. Not first in the conference, not first in the division — first in the entire NHL, and the city has started to notice the way it notices a team that might do it again. The games are sold out, the local news runs segments, Marleau is on the cover of a magazine. And Ilya is having a season that the hockey press is running out of adjectives for. Sixty points before Christmas. The Hart Trophy is a given.

In mid-November, Connors' brother visits.

His name is Cole, and he's in Boston for the weekend for a friend's wedding. He's a few years younger than Connors, leaner, with the same jaw but better hair, and he works in finance in New

York, and he is, within five minutes of walking into the rink facility to watch his brother practice, very obviously gay.

Ilya doesn't notice him at first. He's on the ice, running drills, the practice is intense because LeClaire has them preparing for a four-game road trip. But when the team comes off for a water break, Connors waves his brother over and does introductions. "Everyone, this is my brother Cole, yes Cole and Connor Connors, yes our parents are monsters", and Cole Connors shakes hands and makes small talk, and his eyes move along the bench the way eyes move when they're looking for something specific.

They land on Shane.

Shane is coming out of the locker room — he's been on the ice all morning and has just showered, and he's soft and clean now, wearing a worn hoodie, his dark-framed glasses on, his hair still damp. He's looking at his phone, not paying attention to the corridor.

Cole's eyes find him the way eyes find things they weren't looking for but immediately want.

Ilya recognises the expression instantly. He wore it for two years in those same stands.

Connors spots him and calls him over to introduce his brother. Cole shakes Shane's hand and holds the handshake a beat too long and says, "I've never met a pairs skater before. Must take incredible strength."

"Thank you," Shane says. Because Shane says thank you to compliments with the flat sincerity of a person who doesn't know he's being flirted with. "The precision is insane. Do you train here every day?"

"Yeah, every day, especially now that we're going to the Olympics."

"You're going to the Olympics?" Cole's face changes, and a genuine smile appears. "That's insane. Sochi?"

"Yeah, Sochi. In February."

"And you live in the area?"

"Close by, actually. Fifteen minutes or so."

Cole Connors smiles. The smile is warm and interested and directed entirely at Shane, and Shane is standing there in his soft hoodie with the glasses still on his face, and Cole is leaning slightly forward, and Ilya, who is twenty feet away, is going to commit a crime.

"We should get coffee," Cole says. "If you're free this weekend. I'm in town until Monday."

"Oh," Shane says. "That's... thank you. I'm usually at the rink on weekends."

"What about Sunday afternoon? There's a good place on Newbury Street."

Shane blinks, and his brain is finally catching up to a social situation it didn't anticipate. "I... that's kind of you, but I'm..."

"Hollander." Ilya's voice comes from across the corridor. It's controlled, but Shane knows him, and he knows the one that sounds casual and isn't. "Your coach wants to talk to you. Something about a death spiral."

Shane looks at Ilya. Ilya looks at Shane. The look contains a conversation that Cole cannot hear, and the conversation is approximately: *this man is flirting with you. I know. Do you know? I do now. Tell him. I can't tell him. Then I will tell him. Ilya, don't.*

"I should go," Shane says to Cole. "Good to meet you. Enjoy the wedding."

Shane walks away. He knows full well that Linda doesn't want to see him, that she actually went home 30 minutes ago, so he goes back to the locker rooms to see if Rose is still there. Cole Connors watches him go, and Ilya watches Cole Connors watch him go, and Ilya has never had to exercise so much restraint in his entire life.

Later, in the apartment, Ilya is livid, but not at Shane.

"He asked you for coffee."

"He was just being friendly."

"He was not being friendly, Shane. He was asking you on a date. At our rink. In front of me."

"He doesn't know about us."

"He held your hand for six seconds. I counted. Six seconds is not a handshake, Shane. Six seconds might as well be proposal."

"You're being dramatic."

"No no, I am not being dramatic enough. And you were wearing the glasses."

"What do my glasses have to do with anything?"

"Everything. The glasses have to do with everything. The glasses are—" Ilya makes a frustrated sound. "Nobody should be allowed to see you in the glasses except me. There should be law."

"There shouldn't be a law about my glasses, stop it."

"In Russia there would be a law about glasses."

"You know what, after everything I've learned about Russia, I'm sure there would be."

"Don't change subject, Shane," Ilya says as he crosses the kitchen and backs Shane against the counter. He puts his hands on either side of Shane on the countertop and leans in close and says, very quietly, "The glasses are mine. You are mine. Cole Connors can get his own figure skater."

Shane smiles at him, ridiculously fond. "You're being ridiculous."

Ilya says nothing. He looks away, and his jaw is set, and he is absolutely pouting.

Shane puts his hand on Ilya's jaw and turns his face toward him, and Ilya looks at him.

Shane kisses him, hard and possessive. The kind of kiss that is making a point, and the point is made, and Ilya's hands come up to Shane's waist, and he kisses back. The counter digs into Shane's back, and the glasses get knocked sideways, and Ilya fixes them, puts them straight on Shane's face, and kisses him again.

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"You're going to win the Hart and take the Cup again," Shane says. He's on the couch, reading glasses on, book in his lap, and his feet in Ilya's lap. Ilya is working his thumb into the arch of Shane's foot with the focused attention he applies to most things, and Shane's toes curl involuntarily every few seconds.

"Do not say that."

"It's a statistical probability at this point."

"Statistics do not account for hockey gods. Hockey gods are vengeful." Ilya's thumb finds a knot and presses, and Shane makes a small sound and turns a page.

"Hockey gods aren't real."

"Take that back."

"They're not a measurable—"

"Shane. Take it back."

"Okay, okay, I take it back." He turns another page. "You're also going to win the Conn Smythe."

Ilya stops massaging. "I am going to stop talking to you about hockey."

"You brought it up."

"I did not bring it up. You brought it up."

Ilya goes back to massaging Shane's foot, and Shane goes back to his book. The television is off, and outside, the November dark has settled over the city. This is what their evenings look like now. Ilya's thumb working into Shane's arch, Shane turning pages, them enjoying each other's company.

Except that they barely see each other.

This happens slowly, the way all the dangerous things between them happen — in increments too small to notice until the distance is already there. Shane is at the rink by five-forty-five. By the time Ilya wakes up, Shane is gone, and the apartment holds only the evidence of him — the rinsed mug, the shoes that aren't by the door, the faint smell of his soap. Ilya goes to practice, and then Ilya has a road trip — three games in five days, Pittsburgh, Tampa, Carolina — and comes home to a dark apartment and Shane asleep in their bed, curled on his side, the book and the glasses on the nightstand.

They're like ships in the night. Ilya hates the word, but it's accurate. They pass through the apartment at different hours and leave traces of each other. Ilya's hoodie on the couch that Shane wears in the evenings, Shane's training schedule on the counter with Ilya's handwriting in the

margin where Ilya wrote BORING next to the Wednesday rest day, and the traces are sweet and also not enough.

The couch time is less. This is the metric that worries Ilya, because the couch time has always been the measure of them, the place where the silences happen, the place where Shane's head finds Ilya's shoulder and Ilya's hand finds Shane's hair, and the world shrinks to a size they can manage.

In October, they had the couch most evenings. In November, it's three nights a week. In December, with the schedule compressing and Linda adding extra sessions and the Bears on a road trip that takes them through the entire Western Conference, the couch time drops to once, sometimes twice a week, and the gap made of schedules and exhaustion and the particular loneliness of being in a relationship with someone who is in the same apartment and not in the same room, opens between them.

Shane doesn't mention it. He processes absences the way he processes everything — by absorbing them quietly until the absorption looks like calm. Ilya can see it in the way Shane's face gets flatter when Ilya mentions a road trip, the way his "okay" lands without any weight behind it.

"I miss you," Ilya says one night in early December, from a hotel room in Columbus, phone against his ear, midnight central time.

"You saw me yesterday."

"I saw you for twenty minutes. You were eating cereal, and I was packing, and we talked about the garbage schedule."

"The garbage schedule is important."

"Shane."

"What?"

"I miss you. I miss sitting on the couch with your feet in my lap. I miss—" He stops, because the list is long and the hotel room is cold and Columbus is far away and the season that is giving him everything he's ever wanted on the ice is taking everything he wants off it. "I miss the quiet."

Shane is quiet on the other end of the phone. The quiet stretches, and Ilya listens to it and can't tell if it's the good quiet or the bad quiet, and not being able to tell is a problem.

"I miss you too," Shane says, finally. "I just don't know how to — the schedule is—"

"I know."

"And Sochi is—"

"I know."

"I don't want you to think I'm pulling away."

"Are you pulling away?"

The pause is a beat too long. "No. I'm just — focused. On the training. On the program. Linda says —"

"I do not care what Linda says. I care what you say."

"I say I miss you and I'm tired and I wish you were here and I don't know how to do this. I don't know how to make it all work —the missing, the training, the eating, the everything—all at the same time."

"I will be home Thursday."

"I have evening practice on Thursday."

"I will be on the couch when you get home."

Shane is quiet again. Then: "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Okay. The couch. Thursday."

Thursday comes. Ilya is on the couch when Shane comes home at nine, tired, his bag on the floor, his hair still damp from the rink shower, and he stands in the doorway and looks at Ilya on the couch, and Ilya looks at Shane in the doorway, and neither of them says anything for a moment. Then Shane crosses the room and sits down, not at his end, in the middle, and puts his head on Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya's hand goes to Shane's hair, and the apartment settles, and the gap closes. Not all the way, but enough.

They don't fix it, not fully, not right away. The schedules don't change. The training doesn't ease. The Bears keep winning, and Shane keeps skating, and the fragmentation continues — the ships in the apartment, the traces of each other, the couch time that isn't enough. But they name it, which is new for both of them. They name the gap, and they don't pretend it isn't there, and on the nights when they're both home, they sit in the middle of the couch and hold each other.

It's not enough, but it's what they have.

He calls Alexei once a week. The calls have changed. Alexei reports on Grigori the way a nurse reports on a patient, and then the reporting ends, and the other thing starts. The asking. Not asking, exactly. Implying. One week it's the pipes again, then it's the car or Elizaveta's school fees. Alexei doesn't say *give me money*, Alexei says things like *I don't know how I'm supposed to manage* and Ilya, who is in Boston with his NHL salary and his life, sends the money because the guilt is faster than the resentment. The fragile camaraderie between them is gone. What's left is the transaction and, underneath it, Alexei's anger. His anger at Ilya's absence, at Ilya's life, at the distance Ilya put between himself and everything Russia means, sitting in every call like something neither of them will name.

December is good. The Bears play Montreal, Tampa, Detroit, and Minnesota in the same week. It's a brutal stretch that Ilya runs through like he's been built for exactly this, forty-eight hours between games and no time to think about anything except the next shift. Dubek hits a thousand career games against Detroit, and the locker room gives him a standing ovation, and Dubek cries, and Marleau cries, and Dubois says something in French that almost no one understands but makes everyone cry harder.

On Christmas Eve, Ilya is in New York. Away game at Madison Square Garden.

They win at the Garden, 4-2, Ilya with a goal and two assists, the kind of performance that gets replayed on the highlights over and over again.

He calls Shane from the hotel room after. Shane is in the Hollander kitchen, flour on his hands, the pelmeni half-made. He holds the phone up to show Ilya the counter — the dough, the filling, Irina's recipe card propped against the backsplash. He brought it with him from Boston.

"I'm making them anyway," Shane says.

"I know."

"It's Christmas Eve, it's tradition."

"I know."

Shane's face on the screen is steady, but his eyes are glistening. "Next year," he says.

"Next year," Ilya says.

They stay on the phone for an hour. Shane finishes the pelmeni and eats them on the couch, holding the phone up so Ilya can see. Ilya lies on the hotel bed in New York and watches him eat, and the distance is only 100 minutes by plane, but it might as well be Moscow.

After, Ilya lies in the dark hotel room. The city outside is loud cause New York doesn't go quiet on Christmas Eve, New York doesn't go quiet ever, and the room smells like a hotel, and the bed is the wrong size, and Shane is not in it. He cries. Not loudly. Not the way Dubek cried in the locker room, the big open crying of a man who has nothing to hide. He cries quietly, into the pillow, the way Ilya does everything that costs him something. The Bears won, and December has been good, and none of it matters because Christmas Eve is for pelmeni and Shane, and tonight he has neither.

He falls asleep with the hotel pillow pulled close and the city still loud outside, and in the morning, he flies back to Boston.

The team lands at Logan on Christmas Day. Boston is quieter than New York was, not empty (cause it never is), but muffled, the usual noise turned down. He took a taxi to the airport, so he takes one back to the apartment, his bag between his feet, the driver with a Christmas song playing low on the radio.

The apartment is empty.

He knows Shane is in Ottawa. That was decided weeks ago. Yuna called him in for meetings, the Olympic prep, the contracts, the media strategy for Sochi. He knows this; he put the dates in his phone, and he spoke to Shane last night. The apartment being empty is not a surprise.

It feels like a surprise anyway.

He puts his bag down in the hallway and stands in the quiet. Shane's hoodie is on the arm of the couch. His book is on the nightstand, face down, the spine creased at page 200-something. The ginger ale is on its shelf. The apartment is full of Shane and entirely without him, and Ilya has two days before he flies to Edmonton, and then January, and then Sochi, and the distance between them is going to get wider before it gets smaller.

He sits on the couch. Doesn't turn on the television. Doesn't eat. Just sits in the apartment that is theirs and feels how far away everything is.

Ilya calls him.

"You left your hoodie," he says.

"I know." Shane's voice is quiet. "I wore it before I left. So you'd have it."

Ilya looks at the hoodie on the arm of the couch. He doesn't say anything for a moment.

"Get ready for bed," Shane says.

"You are bossy."

They brush their teeth with their phones propped up, Ilya in Boston, Shane in Ottawa, both of them in the mirror of their separate bathrooms, doing the same ordinary thing 700 kilometres apart.

"Okay," Shane says, when they're done.

"Okay," Ilya says.

Ilya gets into bed and takes the hoodie with him. It smells like Shane — the specific clean smell, the soap, the particular warmth of Shane's skin that Ilya can identify in the dark. He sees Shane on the other end doing the same, the rustle of sheets, the click of a lamp. They don't hang up. The phone lies on the pillow, and Ilya can hear Shane breathing, and Shane can hear Ilya breathing. At some point, the breathing evens out and slows, and they fall asleep like that — phones warm on their pillows, the hoodie pulled close.

Chapter 32: sochi

Chapter Summary

Sochi

Shane's flight is at six a.m.

He sets three alarms. One, one-fifteen, one-forty-five, the redundancy of a person who cannot afford to miss this flight, who has been building toward this departure for five years, who has laid out his clothes on the chair, his documents on the bedside table, his luggage by the door and his carry-on by the bed with the precision of someone trying to control the one thing that can be controlled.

It's eleven p.m., and he's not asleep.

He's going to Toronto first. A week of training camp before the team flies to Sochi. Shane has been to Toronto a hundred times. Shane has never been to Toronto as an Olympian, as a person who is about to spend three weeks in a country that has made him illegal by association.

Ilya is behind him on the bed, not asleep either, his arm across Shane's chest and his face in Shane's neck, and they've been lying like this for an hour without speaking. The apartment is quiet, everything is where it belongs, and nothing is right because in seven hours Shane is going to be on a plane to Toronto and then Ilya is going to be in Moscow and between now and whenever they're both back in this apartment, the law will be between them.

"I do not want you to go," Ilya says. His voice is low, muffled against Shane's neck.

"I know."

"I know you have to go. I know this. I just—" His arm tightens across Shane's chest. "I do not want you to go."

"I know."

Shane turns over. Ilya lets him, shifts to make room, and Shane faces him in the dark. Ilya's face is close, the curls falling forward, the light eyes that catch even the faint glow from the city outside.

"When do you fly to Moscow?" Shane asks.

"Thursday."

"And then Sochi."

"And then Sochi."

They look at each other. The word sits between them, the city on the Black Sea with the palm trees and the marble and the law, the country that made Ilya illegal, the country that is going to require them to be strangers for three weeks.

"I looked it up," Shane says. "The law. What counts. What doesn't."

"Shane—"

"I needed to know. I needed to know what we're dealing with."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. His thumb moves on Shane's jaw, the slow circle, their circle. "What does it say?"

"Any public display. Any statement. Any... existing, basically. The law is not specific. That's the point. The vagueness is the weapon."

"I know."

"We can't touch in the village. We can't be seen together in a way that—"

"I know." Ilya's voice is very quiet. "I have been thinking about this since June. Since the night we found out."

Shane remembers. The edge of the new bed in Ottawa, Ilya's phone glowing, *unanimous*. Shane's arm around him because it was the only thing there was to do.

"Okay," Shane says. "So we know what it is."

"Yes."

"And we're okay."

Ilya looks at him. The word okay has a specific weight in their language, the weight of something that isn't okay, and both of them know it and are choosing to carry it anyway.

"We are okay," Ilya says.

Shane kisses him. Soft at first, the kind of kiss that is just presence, just the fact of being here, in this bed, in this apartment, where they are allowed to be exactly what they are. Ilya kisses back the same way, slow and deliberate, his hand cradling Shane's face.

Then something shifts. The softness is still there, but underneath it, something else is building. The urgency of a clock, the specific desperation of two people who know they are running out of hours. Ilya pulls Shane closer. Shane's hand finds the back of Ilya's neck. The kiss deepens, and the tenderness becomes something more, the quiet thing opening into something that needs more than quiet.

"I love you," Shane says against his mouth.

Ilya pulls back enough to look at him. His eyes are bright. "I love you," he says. "I love you, and I will try to find a way to see you."

"Just to see me."

"Just to see you. Just to stand near you." His forehead drops to Shane's. "Three weeks."

"Three weeks," Shane says. "And then we come home."

"And then we come home."

Shane kisses him again, and this time there's no softness in it, just the urgency, just the clock. Ilya rolls them over, and Shane pulls him down, and they hold each other with the specific grip of two people who know the holding is temporary, who are trying to memorise the weight of each other, the warmth, the particular fit of these two bodies in this bed.

They make love slowly. The urgency is there, but underneath it, the tenderness holds — Ilya's hands are careful, Shane's eyes are open, both of them present in the specific way you are present when you know something is about to end. Shane doesn't close his eyes. He looks at Ilya above him, the curls, the jaw, the cross catching the faint light, and he looks at him the way he looked at him in the alley five years ago, the way he has been looking at him since — with the total attention of a person who has decided this is what matters.

"Stay with me," Ilya says, low, his mouth at Shane's ear.

"I'm here," Shane says. "I'm here."

After, they lie tangled together and don't sleep. Ilya's heartbeat under Shane's ear, slow and steady. At some point, Shane's first alarm goes off, and he silences it, and Ilya's arm tightens once.

At one-forty-five, the third alarm goes off, and Shane gets up.

The clothes are on the chair, in the exact order he laid them out, and he dresses in the dark. Ilya is awake, Shane can tell by his breathing, but he doesn't get up. He lies in the bed and watches Shane move through the room, the way he has watched Shane move through rooms for years, with the focused quiet attention that Shane used to find unnerving and now finds more familiar than his own reflection.

Shane picks up his carry-on, checks his documents, and puts on his jacket.

He goes to the bed where Ilya is lying. He looks up at Shane, and his face is open and unguarded. Shane leans down and kisses him. It's slow and long, the kind of goodbye that doesn't want to be a goodbye.

"Three weeks," Shane says.

"Three weeks," Ilya says.

Shane straightens up, picks up his bag, and walks to the door.

"Shane."

He turns.

Ilya is sitting up in bed, the cross warm against his chest, the curls a mess. He looks like every morning he has ever been in this apartment. He looks like the thing Shane is most afraid of losing.

"You will be so beautiful on the ice," Ilya says quietly. The way he says the things he means.

Shane stands in the doorway for one more second.

Then he goes.

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The atmosphere in Sochi is different from anything Shane has experienced.

It starts with small things. The way officials linger in hallways, watching. The way conversations stop when certain people walk by. The way his roommate mentions, casually, that he's pretty sure someone went through his luggage while he was at practice.

"Not like they took anything," Chan says. "Just... things weren't where I left them, you know?"

Shane nods and doesn't say that he's started leaving small markers. A hair across his suitcase zipper, a pen positioned just so on his desk. The hair moves. The pen gets repositioned. Someone is going through everyone's things, looking for something, or just looking because looking is what they do here.

It's not personal, Shane realises. The entire Olympic village exists under a layer of observation that feels different from security cameras at other competitions. This isn't safety - this is control. This is a reminder that everyone here is a guest, and guests can have their privileges revoked.

Shane starts to understand what Ilya meant about the law, about the risk, about the particular weight of being Russian in Russia when you have something to hide. Shane is Canadian, competing in figure skating, of no interest to anyone except as part of the medal count. But he can feel the machine around him, the apparatus that watches and catalogues and decides who matters and who doesn't.

If he can feel it as an outsider, he can't imagine what it feels like for Ilya.

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The paranoia is constant for Ilya.

He speaks Russian, so he understands what the officials are saying to each other. He catches fragments of conversations about "monitoring protocols" and "athlete behaviour assessments." He sees the way certain players get extra attention, not just random searches, but specific, sustained observation.

Ilya knows he's being watched more carefully than some of his teammates. Not obviously, nothing he can point to and say definitively, but he feels it in the way conversations change when he approaches, in the slightly longer looks from officials, in the questions that probe just a little deeper than necessary.

It might be paranoia. It might be guilt making him imagine things. But Ilya lived in Russia long enough to know the difference between paranoia and pattern recognition, and this feels like a pattern.

On Tuesday night, lying in his narrow bed, Ilya stares at the ceiling and calculates risk. The Olympics just started three days ago. There are two and a half weeks left of this surveillance, of

careful behaviour, of pretending Shane Hollander is just another athlete he knows from international competition.

He can do two and a half weeks. He has to do two and a half weeks.

But underneath the calculation is something else, something that's been building since they arrived. The need to see Shane. Not from across a courtyard. Not in a hallway with other people. Alone. Close enough to hear his voice without strain, even if they can't touch.

The need is stronger than the fear.

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On Wednesday morning, Ilya finds Svetlana in the family section of the practice rink, watching the team practice. She's wearing a Team Russia jacket and expensive sunglasses, and she looks like what she is — a Russian oligarch's daughter with access to places ordinary people can't go.

After practice, she meets him in the tunnel.

"You look terrible," she says, by way of greeting.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You look like someone who hasn't slept in days." She studies his face. "What's wrong?"

Ilya looks around the tunnel. Two officials talking near the exit, a maintenance worker mopping the floor, a cluster of coaches reviewing notes. Public space. Safe space, supposedly.

"Not here," he says.

They walk to the parking area, where Svetlana's driver is waiting with a black sedan. Official plates, diplomatic immunity, the kind of car that doesn't get searched or questioned.

"My hotel," Svetlana says. "We'll talk there."

The ride through Sochi is quiet. Svetlana doesn't press for conversation, doesn't ask questions that Ilya can't answer in a car with a driver who might be listening. She understands the paranoia because she lives in it too, the daughter of a man whose wealth comes from proximity to power and whose power depends on not asking the wrong questions.

Her hotel is the Hyatt Regency, where the families of important athletes stay. Svetlana's room is on the fifteenth floor, a suite with a view and the kind of furnishings that cost more than most people's annual salary.

"Sit," she says, gesturing to the couch. "Talk."

Ilya sits. Looks out the window at the Olympic park spread below them. "I need to see him," Ilya says.

"Shane," Svetlana says, not a question.

"Yes."

"How badly?"

"Badly enough to be stupid about it."

Svetlana nods. She understands badly enough to be stupid. She's Russian. She was raised understanding the mathematics of risk versus need, the calculus of what you'll sacrifice to get something you can't live without.

"They're watching you," she says.

"I know."

"They're watching all of us, but they're watching you specifically. You know this?"

"I know this."

"And you still need to see him."

Ilya looks at her. Svetlana, in her expensive clothes, in her expensive suite, with her expensive immunity from the things that could destroy ordinary people.

"I haven't seen him alone since we got here," Ilya says. "Really alone. We wave across courtyards. We nod in hallways. But I haven't—" He stops. "We sleep in different buildings. We eat in different dining halls. We pretend we don't know each other, and the pretending is killing me."

"How long since you talked? Really talked?"

"Two weeks. Since he went to Toronto and I flew to Moscow." Ilya's voice is quiet. "Two weeks of pretending we don't know each other."

Svetlana is quiet for a long moment. Then: "Use my room."

"What?"

"Tomorrow night. I'll be at a dinner with Papa, some state thing, hideously boring. Use my room." She gestures around the suite. "You and Shane can have some time."

"Svetlana—"

"No touching. That's not negotiable. If they catch you touching, we're all in trouble. But you can talk. You can be in the same room. You can say whatever you need to say."

Ilya stares at her. "You would do that?"

"I would do that."

"Why?"

Svetlana looks at him for a long time. "Because I know what it looks like when someone needs something badly enough to be stupid about it. And I know what happens when that need doesn't get met."

"What happens?"

"They do something really stupid. Instead of just a little stupid."

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The message comes through Marleau.

Shane is in the dining hall, picking at his lunch, when Marleau sits down across from him. He looks uncomfortable, the way people look when they're about to deliver news they don't fully understand.

"I have something for you," Marleau says quietly.

"From who?"

"Someone who said you'd know who." Marleau slides a small piece of paper across the table.
"Hotel Hyatt Regency. Room 1547. Tonight, eight p.m."

Shane looks at the paper. Hotel name, room number, time. No signature, no explanation.

"Who gave you this?" Shane asks.

"Mutual friend," Marleau says simply. "Said you'd understand."

Shane nods. He understands. Shane folds the paper and puts it in his pocket.

"You didn't see this," Shane says.

"See what?" Marleau stands up, his lunch barely touched. "Good luck, Shane."

Marleau leaves. Shane sits alone at the table, the paper burning in his pocket, and thinks about hotel rooms and surveillance and the mathematics of need versus safety.

The need wins. It always wins.

Shane takes three different routes through Sochi to get to the Hyatt Regency. Bus to the train station, train to the city centre, taxi to a hotel six blocks away, then walking the final distance. If anyone is following him, they'll have to work for it.

The Hyatt lobby is marble and brass and the kind of understated wealth that whispers instead of shouting. Shane takes the elevator to the fifteenth floor, finds room 1547, and knocks once.

The door opens immediately. Svetlana, in an elegant black dress and expensive jewellery, the kind of outfit that says she has dinner plans at the sort of restaurant that doesn't take reservations from ordinary people.

"You're late," she says, stepping aside to let him in.

"I was being careful."

"Good." She picks up a small purse from the side table. "He's in the bedroom. I'm going to dinner. I'll be back at ten."

"Svetlana—"

"Rules," she says, cutting him off. "No touching. None. If hotel security comes, you're friends from Boston talking about hockey. Keep your voices low. Don't stand near the windows. Don't do anything that looks like anything other than conversation."

Shane nods.

"And Shane?" Svetlana's voice softens. "He needs this. More than you know. Be kind."

She leaves. The suite goes quiet. Shane stands in the living area and looks toward the bedroom door, closed but not locked, and behind it is the person he's been trying to reach for six days, across courtyards and protocols and the surveillance state that wants to pretend they don't exist.

Shane knocks on the bedroom door.

"Come in," Ilya says.

Shane opens the door and steps into the room.

Ilya is sitting on the edge of the bed, near the window, still in his Team Russia tracksuit. When he sees Shane, his whole body tenses, like he's fighting the impulse to move closer.

"Hi," Shane says.

"Hi." Ilya's voice is rough, tired. "How are you?"

"I'm okay. Tired." Shane stays near the door. The distance between them is maybe six feet, but Ilya gestures to a chair that's closer - much closer. Three feet from where he's sitting.

"You sit there. I sit here. We talk," Ilya says. "But not closer than this."

Shane sits in the chair, close enough to see the exhaustion on Ilya's face clearly, the particular tiredness that comes not from training or competition but from constant vigilance. Close enough to reach out and touch, if touching were allowed. Close enough that not touching becomes a physical effort.

"I missed you," Shane says, because directness is all he has.

Ilya's hands clench on the bedspread. "Do not start with that."

"Why not?"

"Because if you start with that, I am going to want to touch you, and I cannot touch you, and the wanting is going to make this impossible."

Shane understands. Three feet is close enough to see the gold flecks in Ilya's eyes, close enough to smell his cologne, close enough that the space between them feels like a wall made of air that they're both pushing against.

"Okay," Shane says. "Different topic."

"Different topic."

They talk about small things at first. The ice, the team, and how Shane feels about the competition. Careful conversation, the kind that skirts around everything that matters. But gradually, Shane's voice gets warmer, more hopeful.

"Is your father here?" Shane asks. "I know he comes to your big games."

Ilya goes very still.

"I'd like to meet him," Shane continues. "Properly, I mean. Not just as a roommate or whatever, but as the person who..." He looks at the three feet between them. "As the person who loves his son. I know it would have to be later, when you're ready, but I think about it sometimes. What it would be like to sit at dinner with him and talk about books, or Moscow, or what you were like as a kid."

Ilya's face does something terrible.

"Shane—"

"I know it's complicated with him, with your family, but maybe someday when things are different, when you can be open about us—"

"Stop." Ilya's voice is sharp, breaking. "Just stop."

Shane stops talking. Looks at Ilya's face and sees something cracking there.

"You do not understand," Ilya says. His hands are shaking now. "You talk about someday like someday is real. You talk about meeting my father like my father would ever—" His voice breaks completely. "My father would rather I be dead than who I am, Shane. You understand? He would rather have no son than have a son like me."

Shane's face goes white.

"There is no meeting my father. There is no dinner where we talk about books. There is no world where Grigori Rozanov sits across from the man his son loves and does not put a gun to his head." The words are coming fast now, desperate. "You want to know why there is no someday for me? Because my father is the reason. Because this country is him, and he is this country, and both of them want me to disappear."

"That's not—" Shane starts, but Ilya cuts him off.

"It is not what? Is not true? Is not that bad?" Ilya's voice is getting harder now, defensive. "You do not understand what this is like. What any of this is like."

"I understand hiding—"

"You understand nothing!" The words explode out of Ilya. "You think you understand hiding? You think what you did was the same as this?" He gestures around the hotel room, at Russia, at everything. "Is no problem for you. Everyone already thinks all figure skaters are gay anyway. You come out, nobody is surprised. Is confirmation, not news. I play different sport. I am Russian. Is different for me. Is not simple. For you is simple."

The words hit Shane in the centre of his chest.

The hotel room is very quiet. Shane sits three feet from Ilya, and the three feet becomes a thousand miles because the words have made it a thousand miles.

"Simple," Shane repeats. The word is flat in his mouth. "For me, it's simple."

"I did not mean—"

"You said everyone thinks figure skaters are gay. You said nobody would be surprised. You said it's not news." Shane's hands are at his sides, and they are very still. "I spent twenty years not knowing who I was. I measured my food and lined up my shoes and built a system to survive, and I didn't know why I felt nothing when I kissed women, and I didn't know why my body lit up when you touched me, and I sat on Rose's couch and said the word out loud for the first time. And you just called it simple."

Ilya's face is changing now, the armour cracking, the fear showing through, because he heard what he said the moment he said it and knows that he just hit something he can't take back.

"Shane—"

"You're scared. I understand that you're scared. But don't make my coming out smaller to make your hiding easier."

The hotel room holds the silence. Ilya's face is wrecked — the armour gone, the fear naked, and underneath the fear something worse, the knowledge that he hurt the person he loves with a weapon he built to protect himself.

"I am sorry," Ilya says. His voice is barely there. "I am sorry, Shane."

Shane nods. He doesn't say it's okay because it's not okay, not yet.

"I need to go," Shane says. He stands up from the chair, and the three feet becomes an impossible distance again, a gap he can't cross even though everything in him wants to.

"Shane—"

"I can't. Not yet." Shane looks at him one last time. "I love you. But I can't do this right now."

Shane leaves through the hotel room door, and Ilya sits on the bed listening to his footsteps fade down the hallway. The room goes quiet except for the hum of the ventilation system and the distant sound of traffic fifteen floors below.

Ilya sits in the silence and stares at the chair where Shane was sitting, and thinks about simple, about figure skaters, about the way fear makes you hurt the people you love most when you're drowning.

When Svetlana returns just after 10 p.m., she finds Ilya exactly where Shane left him, sitting on the edge of the bed, staring at nothing.

"How did it—" she starts, and then stops when she sees his face.

Ilya looks up at her, still in her elegant dress, still carrying the particular confidence of someone who spent the evening at expensive restaurants with powerful people, and something in her expression breaks his last piece of control.

"I ruined it," he says, and his voice cracks completely. "I ruined everything."

Svetlana doesn't ask for details. She sits beside him on the bed and puts her arms around him, and Ilya collapses against her, finally, completely, the way he hasn't let himself collapse since he was a child.

"I told him it was simple," Ilya sobs into her shoulder. "I told him coming out was simple for him, and I know, I know how hard it was, I know what it cost him, but I was so scared, and I said it anyway."

"Shh," Svetlana says, holding him. "Breathe."

"He looked at me like I'd hit him. And maybe I did. Maybe I did hit him." Ilya can't stop crying. "I hurt the person I love most in the world because I was afraid."

Svetlana holds him while he cries, her expensive dress getting wet with his tears, her careful makeup probably ruining against his hair, and she doesn't care because this is what you do for family, even when family makes terrible mistakes.

"It's not over," she says quietly. "People who love each other the way you love each other don't give up after one fight."

"You didn't see his face."

"I didn't need to. I saw yours." Svetlana pulls back to look at him. "You're going to fix this."

"How?"

"I don't know. But you're going to figure it out, because the alternative is losing him, and you're not going to lose him."

Ilya nods against her shoulder, wanting to believe her, needing to believe her, even though Shane's face when he said "I can't do this right now" is burned into his memory like a brand.

"Tomorrow," Svetlana says. "Tomorrow you start figuring out how to fix this."

"Tomorrow," Ilya agrees, though he has no idea what tomorrow will look like, or how you begin to repair something you've broken in the space of three feet and two hours and words you can never take back.

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Russia loses to Finland 3-1 in the quarterfinals, and Ilya sits in the locker room and doesn't feel it.

He should feel it. The loss should be the thing — the host nation eliminated, the arena silent with the particular silence of twenty thousand people who expected victory and received nothing, the captain who played well and played hard and played twenty-two minutes and none of it mattered. The loss should sit in his chest the way losses always sit, heavy and grey and specific. But the grey thing is somewhere else tonight. The grey thing is in a hotel room where he said everyone thinks figure skaters are gay, and watched Shane's face go still.

He showers. Changes. Goes back to the village with his teammates, and they drink vodka because the loss requires vodka, and Ilya drinks, but the drinking doesn't help. The drinking used to help.

The drinking doesn't help anymore because the thing the drinking is trying to fix is not the loss, it's the hotel room, and the hotel room is not fixable with vodka.

He calls no one. There's no one to call. Svetlana already knows what he did. His teammates are processing their own disappointment. And Shane — Shane is preparing for his competition, putting the hotel room in a box so it won't interfere with the thing he's been building his whole life toward.

Ilya sits on his bed in the Russian building and stares at his phone. He could text Shane. Could try to apologise again, try to explain. But what would he say? *Sorry, I told you your coming out was simple, while I sit here too afraid to even tell my teammates I have a boyfriend?*

The phone stays silent in his hands.

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The state banquet is three days later.

It's a formal event — athletes, celebrities, officials, government ministers, the particular Russian machinery of sport and politics that exists in the same room and pretends the room is about celebration when everyone knows it's about power. Ilya wears a suit, and he performs. The performing is the thing he does best, the grin and the charm and the handshake, and the room is full of people who want to shake the hand of the hockey captain even though the hockey captain lost, because losing in the quarterfinals is still better than not being at the Olympics, and the hand is still worth shaking.

Grigori is there.

Ilya doesn't expect this. Alexei didn't mention it. But Grigori is there, at a table near the back, in a suit that doesn't fit because Grigori has lost weight and nobody has taken him to a tailor, and he's sitting with a group of older men, the particular kind of older men who move through rooms like this one with the ease of people who have always had access, whose deference to each other has the quality of a hierarchy so old it no longer needs to be stated. Men who knew Grigori when Grigori was someone to know.

Grigori sees Ilya. His eyes are clear tonight. It's a good night, and the clarity is the blade.

"My son," Grigori says to the men at his table, loud enough for Ilya to hear. "The captain. The one who lost to Finland."

The men laugh. Polite, uncomfortable, the laugh of people who don't know whether this is a joke or not.

"Three-one," Grigori continues. "In our own country. In front of our own people." He looks at Ilya, and the look is the old look, the one that found the bruise and pressed. "Your mother would have been ashamed."

Ilya stands in his suit in the banquet hall of a state event in the country that made him illegal and listens to his father use his dead mother as a weapon, and the grey thing fills his chest so completely that he can't breathe.

Svetlana appears beside him. She takes his arm. "Come," she says, firmly. "Now."

She steers him through the room, past the officials and the athletes and the waiters with champagne, through a corridor, down a flight of stairs, to a large bathroom on the ground floor. It's marble and gilt and empty, or it should be empty, except that it isn't.

Sasha is leaning against the sink.

He looks the same, and he doesn't. The same jaw, the same dark eyes, the same way of occupying a room as if the room belongs to him. But there are shadows under his eyes that weren't there at eighteen, and a looseness to him that might be the cocaine or might be the years or might be the particular quality of a man who has always taken what he wanted and is starting to run out of people who let him.

There's a line of cocaine on the marble counter beside the sink.

"Ilya," Sasha says. His voice has the quality it's always had — warm on the surface, something harder underneath, the voice that used to make Ilya do things. Not bad things. Not exactly. But things Ilya wasn't sure he wanted, delivered in a tone that made not wanting those things feel like a failure, like a weakness, like Ilya was being boring or young or not enough. The cocaine was like that. The sex was like that. Sasha would suggest and Ilya would agree because agreeing was easier than the look Sasha gave him when he didn't, the slight withdrawal, the cooling, the way Sasha's attention would shift to someone else if Ilya hesitated, and Ilya at fifteen was so desperate for the attention, so desperate to be wanted by someone who understood what he was, that he'd do almost anything to keep it.

He's not fifteen anymore.

Svetlana looks at Sasha, then at the cocaine and lastly at Ilya. Her face does something quick and sharp — she knows Sasha, she's always known Sasha, the three of them orbit the same world, have orbited it since they were kids in Moscow.

She takes a glass from the tray on the counter, pours three fingers of vodka, and leans against the wall with the ease of a woman who is exactly where she planned to be.

"Sasha," she says, warmly. The way you greet old friends.

"Svetlana." Sasha's smile is genuine, easier than it was a moment ago. "You look well."

"I always look well." She hands Ilya a glass. Vodka, clean and clear. "Drink."

Ilya drinks. The three of them settle into the particular ease of people who have known each other too long to perform.

Svetlana looks around the marble bathroom, the gilt fittings, the three of them with their vodka, and says, "This reminds me of us at seventeen. Different bathroom, but the same vodka."

"Better cocaine," Sasha says.

"You were always an optimist," Svetlana says.

Sasha laughs. "How long has it been? Four years?"

"Five," Svetlana says. "You missed my graduation."

"I was in Paris."

"You're always in Paris."

"Paris suits me." He looks at Ilya. "Unlike some people and their cold American cities."

"Boston suits me," Ilya says.

Sasha accepts this with a shrug. "The 7th arrondissement. Small apartment, very good wine, terrible neighbours. You should visit."

"He's busy," Svetlana says. "Some of us have careers."

"Ah, yes, and how is your Sports management degree working out?" Sasha asks, his voice laced with amusement. "You graduated last June, yes? Did you go to the party, Ilya?"

"I wasn't here," Ilya says, and the guilt is on his face before the words are finished. "I'm sorry I missed it."

Svetlana looks at him. "You sent flowers."

"I know. It wasn't enough."

The three of them are quiet for a moment, the comfortable quiet of people who share a past even when the present has taken them in different directions.

"Bad loss against Finland," Sasha says eventually, to fill the silence, because Sasha always fills silences.

"Finland played well," Ilya says.

Sasha shrugs. He has no opinion on Finland. He has no opinion on hockey. He was here for the party, for the banquet, for the particular social machinery that his father's connections provide access to, and the hockey was incidental.

Svetlana swirls her glass. "Boston will win the Cup this year," she says, conversationally, as if they are discussing the weather.

Ilya looks at her. "You think so."

"San Francisco in the Final. Six games, maybe seven. But Boston wins." She says it with the certainty of a woman whose father has been in rooms where these things are decided for thirty years. "The Bears are the best team in the league. Have been for the past two years. You're the captain, and you're having a historic season. San Francisco has the goaltending but not the depth. Boston wins."

Sasha examines his nails.

Svetlana looks at Ilya over her glass. The look says everything she won't say in front of Sasha. She finishes her vodka and sets the glass down. "I have an early morning." She picks up her bag and kisses Ilya once on the cheek, then Sasha. At the door, she pauses and looks at Ilya and her eyes say: be careful. Then: "Beauty sleep doesn't happen on its own," and she's gone.

"Bad night?" Sasha says.

"My father is here."

"I saw." Sasha picks up a rolled banknote from the counter and holds it out. "This helps."

Ilya looks at the cocaine. He did this when he was younger, when he was Sasha's. Twice, maybe three times, in bathrooms like this one, because Sasha did it and Sasha expected Ilya to do it, and that expectation had the weight of a requirement, even though it was phrased as an offer. Ilya was fifteen. He didn't know that Sasha's version of help was a leash disguised as a gift.

"No," Ilya says.

Sasha's eyebrow rises. The slight cooling, Ilya recognises it instantly, the micro-withdrawal, the way Sasha's face adjusts when he doesn't get what he wants. At fifteen, this look made Ilya's stomach drop. At twenty-two, it makes him tired.

"No, thank you," Ilya adds, because politeness is a habit, because the bathroom is marble, because they are in Russia, and because Sasha is the son of a coach who knows people who know people, and the power dynamics haven't changed just because Ilya has.

Sasha puts the banknote down. He steps closer. "You look terrible," he says, and his hand comes up and touches Ilya's jaw. The touch is light, practised, the touch of a person who learned Ilya's body when Ilya was too young to know that learning should go both ways. "You always looked best when you were a little broken."

The sentence lands in Ilya's chest and sits there. You always looked best when you were a little broken. At fifteen, this would have sounded like tenderness. But now, it sounds like what it is.

"I heard you have someone," Sasha says. His thumb moves on Ilya's jaw. "In Boston."

"Who told you?"

"I see things." His eyes are dark and close. "You look like a person who has someone. You also look like a person who's fighting with them." The thumb keeps moving. "I always knew how to make you feel better when you were fighting with those you loved. Remember?"

Ilya remembers. He remembers Sasha's father's office after practice and the couch that smelled like old leather and Sasha saying *come on, it's fine, you like this*, and Ilya not being sure if he liked it but being sure that he wanted Sasha to think he liked it, and the distance between those two things was where Ilya lived for two years, in the gap between wanting and performing wanting, and the gap was the first closet Ilya ever built, before the NHL, before the locker room, before any of it.

Sasha's hand moves from Ilya's face, down his chest, and suddenly his palm is pressing against Ilya through his pants, possessive and presumptuous. His other hand grips the back of Ilya's neck, pulling him closer.

"Let me—" Sasha starts, leaning in for a kiss.

Ilya shoves him back hard, both hands on Sasha's chest, sending him stumbling against the marble counter.

"No." Ilya's voice is sharp, final. "Don't touch me."

Sasha steadies himself, his face flushed, caught off guard by the force of Ilya's rejection.

"I do have someone," Ilya says, his hands still raised defensively. "And the way he makes me feel better is by not making me feel like I owe him something. By not taking what isn't offered."

Sasha's face changes. It's not hurt, not really, but something more like recognition. The outline of what he did, seen clearly for the first time, and the outline is not flattering.

"I'm going to go," Ilya says.

"Ilya—"

"Goodbye, Sasha."

He leaves the bathroom. Svetlana is in the corridor, leaning against the wall, arms crossed. She looks at him.

"Nothing happened," Ilya says.

"I know. If something happened, you'd look different." She pushes off the wall. "He's not a good person, Ilya."

"I know that now."

"You knew it then, too. You just didn't have anything to compare him to." She looks at him with the expression that sees everything. "Now you do."

They leave the banquet. In the car, Ilya texts Shane. Not the things he needs to say — those have to be said in person, in the apartment, in Boston, where the walls are theirs and the touching is allowed. Just two words.

I'm sorry.

Shane's reply comes eleven minutes later. Eleven minutes is a long time for Shane, who answers on the first ring and replies in seconds. Eleven minutes is the distance Ilya created in the corridor, and the eleven minutes is the cost.

I know.

Not I forgive you. Not it's okay. Just *I know*. Which is Shane saying I hear you without saying the rest, and the rest will have to wait for Boston, for the apartment, for the couch where everything between them has always been repaired.

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Shane doesn't sleep well in the village. He lies in bed and stares at the ceiling and thinks about the hotel room, about the three feet between them, about the way Ilya's face looked when he said simple.

The competition is in two days. The competition that will determine everything. Shane has spent years building toward this moment, and all he can think about is the sound Ilya made when Shane said he couldn't do this right now.

Rose knows something is wrong. She doesn't ask directly cause Rose understands that Shane's emotional management system is delicate and requires careful handling, but she watches him during practice, notices the way his shoulders carry tension, the way his timing is just slightly off.

"There's nothing wrong," Shane says when Rose suggests he looks distracted.

"I never said anything was wrong."

"Good, cause everything's... great."

"There's something going on, Shane. Your shoulders are an inch higher than they should be. Linda noticed. I noticed. The throw is suffering."

Shane adjusts his shoulders. Consciously, precisely, the way he adjusts everything — from the outside in. The hotel room is in his chest. Ilya's words are in his chest. *Simple for you. Everyone thinks figure skaters are gay.* The words sit beside all the other things, and they take up space Shane doesn't have.

"I'm fine," Shane says.

"You're not fine. But you're going to be fine, because you're going to put whatever this is in a box, close the box, put the box on a shelf and open it later. After. Can you do that?"

Shane looks at Rose. Rose, who has been his partner for almost eight years, who knows his systems, who understands that sometimes the only way through is to compartmentalise until the compartments are manageable.

"I've been putting things in boxes my entire life, Rose."

"I know. That's why I'm asking you to do it one more time."

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The short program is on Tuesday. Chopin. The program Linda built around the throw triple Lutz.

Shane eats breakfast, the full portion, and Rose sits across from him in the athletes' village dining hall and watches him eat and doesn't comment. Shane eats, and the calculator screams, but Shane refuses to listen to it.

The warm-up is good. Shane's body is strong, responsive, and the nutritionist's plan is paying dividends in the muscles that hold Rose above his head.

Linda is at the boards with the clipboard. "Short program. Chopin. You know this program. The throw is clean. The lift is strong. The death spiral is the best in the field." Linda looks at them. "Don't try to be perfect. Be present. Perfect takes care of itself."

They skate. The Chopin is clean — every element executed, the throw triple Lutz landing solidly, the lift positions held, the death spiral deep and controlled. The audience makes a sound that Shane feels in his chest, a collective inhale.

The scores come. They're in first after the short, but only by a narrow margin. The Russians are close, Volosozhar and Trankov skating at home, the crowd behind them. But Shane and Rose are first, and for now, that is enough.

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Wednesday is a rest day, and on Thursday is the long program.

Shane has never been good at waiting. He trains on Wednesday — a light session, preservation. He eats the full portion three times, and the eating is harder because the waiting amplifies the calculator.

He calls his mom when he normally would've called Ilya.

"How are you feeling?" Yuna asks.

"Prepared."

"That's not what I asked."

"I'm feeling prepared, and that's all I'm feeling."

Yuna is quiet for a moment, appraising, before she gets back to it. "Your father has told everyone at his office about you. Apparently, he's been printing out the competition schedule and leaving it in the break room."

Shane almost smiles. "Of course he has."

"He called me yesterday to ask what channel it's on. I told him three times." A pause. "Shane. Whatever else is happening, put it down for tomorrow. Pick it up after."

"I will."

"I'm proud of you. Regardless of what happens."

"Your dad wants to talk to you. He's been emotional since Tuesday."

"Dad is always emotional."

"He cried during the German pair's program, and he doesn't even like the German pair."

Shane smiles at this. Small, tired, real. "Put him on."

David gets on the phone and says "Shane" in a voice that is already thick and tells him he watched the short program on his laptop in the office and had to pause it twice because he couldn't see properly, and Shane listens and holds the phone and lets his father's voice fill the space where the corridor lives.

He doesn't sleep well on Wednesday night. He lies in the athletes' village bed and stares at the ceiling. His phone buzzes at eleven p.m.

Ilya

I'm still here. I'm staying for Thursday. I'll watch.

Ilya is staying. Ilya is staying to watch Shane skate, the way Ilya has always watched Shane skate.

Shane

Ilya

I don't know. I will find a place.

Shane holds the phone and the box on the shelf cracks open, and the corridor leaks out, and he lets it, just for a moment.

I'll think about you, he types, then waits a beat before sending it.

Ilya

I'm always thinking about you.

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It's Thursday.

Shane eats the full portion at breakfast. Rose sits across from him, and they don't talk. They have a language that doesn't need words — Rose's foot tapping Shane's ankle means I'm here, Shane putting his coffee cup down with both hands means I'm ready, standing up at the same time means let's go.

Linda at the boards. "This is the program you've been building for five years. The Beethoven is about what you show people when the music asks you to be open. That's the edge. That's what wins."

Shane nods. Rose takes his hand, and they step onto the ice.

The arena is enormous. Seventeen thousand people. The Russian pair skated before them — 152.68, a personal best. Shane and Rose need 151 to win. Shane looks at Rose. Rose looks at him. Her face is full of the total absolute trust of a person who has been held in the air by these hands a thousand times and knows the hands will not drop her.

The music starts.

Moonlight Sonata. The opening is a low, steady triplet in the bass, three notes repeating like a pulse, like water moving in the dark, and then the melody arrives above it, simple and inevitable, a single line that doesn't announce itself but simply appears. It has been there all along. It was always going to be there.

This is where Shane lives. In the foundation, in the pulse, in the thing that repeats until it becomes something larger than itself.

His body knows what to do.

They're midway through, in the slow section, when Linda's words flash before his eyes. *"Feel something."*

And so, that's what Shane does.

He thinks about Ilya watching him from wherever he is. He thinks about the law, and the fact that the two of them exist anyway, and how existing is the defiance, and the defiance is quiet, and the quiet is the truest thing he knows.

There are tears in his eyes, and his hand trembles slightly. Rose feels it through his hands and gives him more. He gives her more. The throw comes, and Rose is in the air, and Shane's arms are steady, and she lands on a clean edge, and the crowd gasps.

Everything goes perfectly. The step sequence. The final lift, Rose above his head, her body arched against the arena lights, the melody rising the way it always rises — inevitable, accumulating — and Shane holds her there, and what's more important, he is here. He's present, precise, and open. All of it at once.

The music ends. Shane holds the final position with Rose in his arms, and the arena is a wall of sound.

Rose is grabbing him, and she's crying and laughing and saying "Shane, Shane, we did it", and Linda is at the boards, her clipboard on the ground. In five years, Shane has never seen Linda drop anything. Linda's face is open and wet, and she says, "That was extraordinary."

The scores come.

153.17.

Gold.

Rose is screaming. Linda is hugging him, and the hug is unprecedented and means more than the score because Linda doesn't hug, and the hug says everything the clipboard has been holding back for five years.

Shane is crying; it just happens, the way things happen when the body has been holding something for too long, and the music stops, and there's nowhere left to put it. Rose's arms are around him, and he lets her hold him, and the tears come, and he doesn't wipe them away.

The medal ceremony is the next day. The anthem plays, and Shane stands on the podium with Rose, and the gold medal is heavy around his neck. He stands on the podium and thinks about the apartment and the couch and the only person he wants to talk to, wants to celebrate with, and the gold medal is for both of them, even though the world can only know about one.

Rose reaches over and squeezes his hand, and Shane knows what it means: *We did it. The thing we've been planning since 2007, the thing we said we'd do while sitting on the couch in 2010 and watching Vancouver. We did it.*

After the ceremony, after the press, after the interviews where Shane answers questions with the flat precision that journalists have learned is just how he talks and not a sign of disinterest, after Rose calls her mother and cries for ten minutes, after all of it, Shane goes back to his room in the athletes' village and sits on the bed.

The gold medal is in his bag. The gold medal is in his bag, and his phone is in his hand, and Shane is sitting on the bed in Sochi alone with the biggest achievement of his life, and the person he wants to share it with is in a different building, and they can't touch.

This is what the law costs. The moment when the music stops, and the scores are in, and the gold is won, and you want to go home to your person and your person is right there, in this village, in this city, and you can't go to them. You can't put the medal around their neck and say this is yours too, and feel their arms close around you and hear them say *I love you* in the voice that is only for you. You can't even text because you don't know who's watching, who's surveilling. The only thing you can do is type words onto a screen and delete them, so that's what he does.

Chapter 33: gold

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya come home from Sochi, and talk through what happened in during the Olympics. Later, Shane meets Ilya's hockey team at a club for the first time as his "friend."

Ilya lands at Logan on a Thursday.

The flight from Sochi is long and complicated. Moscow first, then the connection, the particular exhaustion of travelling away from something rather than toward it. He takes a cab from the airport. The Boston February is grey and cold and exactly right, nothing subtropical about it, no palm trees, no marble, just the city doing its winter thing, the roads salt-stained, the sky the colour of a practice jersey.

Shane is on the couch when Ilya gets home.

He's reading. The glasses are on his face, the book is in his lap, and he's wearing a hoodie — Ilya's hoodie, the sleeves pulled over his hands the way Shane wears things when he's trying to be small. He looks up when Ilya comes through the door, and his face does what it does, the thing Ilya has been trying to read for five years and finally can.

Relief. That's what it is. Shane's face is relieved.

Ilya puts his bag down. He crosses the apartment and sits on the couch, not at his end — in the middle, close, and Shane puts the book down, takes his glasses off and looks at Ilya.

They haven't spoken properly since the hotel room. They've texted a bit, tried to smooth over the crack in the foundation, the thing beneath the forgiving, but the forgiving itself has been waiting. Waiting for this couch, this apartment, the walls that are theirs.

"I need to say it properly," Ilya says.

Shane waits.

"What I said in the hotel room. About meeting my father, about being simple for you." Ilya looks at his hands. "I was scared. You talked about sitting at dinner with him, about what that would be like, and it felt impossible, and I turned impossible into something I could throw at you. Because you were there and fear was there and—" He stops. Starts again. "I know what coming out cost you. I have always known. I watched you do it. But when you talked about meeting him, I could not handle the idea that you still had hope for something I know will never happen." He looks up. "That is the worst thing I have said to you. And I have said some bad things."

Shane is quiet for a moment. His hands are in his lap, the glasses folded between his fingers. "You haven't, actually," Shane says quietly. "That's what made it worse."

"What?"

"You don't say cruel things to me. You never have. That's not who you are with me." Shane looks at him. "So when you said it was simple, when you dismissed what coming out cost me... it felt like you were someone else. Someone who didn't know me."

Shane pauses, choosing his words carefully. "I understand the fear. I do. I understand that you were overwhelmed and scared about your father, and you lashed out. But understanding it doesn't mean I don't feel it when it happens." He looks at Ilya. "It hurt because it came from you. Because you're the person who's supposed to know better than anyone how hard that was for me."

"I know," Ilya says. "I know I hurt you. I know what I said was wrong." He reaches across the couch and finds Shane's hand, the one with the glasses, and holds it. "It was not who I am with you. It was not who I want to be with anyone. And I am sorry, Shane."

Shane looks at their hands. Ilya's thumb moves on Shane's knuckle, the slow circle. "I know it's not who you are," Shane says quietly. "That's what made it so hard."

"Can you forgive me?" The question sits between them. Shane is quiet for long enough that Ilya's chest tightens.

"Yes," Shane says. "I forgive you." He squeezes Ilya's hand once, the grip firm and deliberate. "But I need you to hear what I said in the hotel room. Not just feel bad about it and move on. Actually hear it."

"Say it again," Ilya says. "I will hear it."

Shane looks at him. "Don't make my pain smaller to make your hiding easier."

The sentence lands the same way it landed in the room, exact and true and terrible.

"I hear it," Ilya says.

"Okay," Shane says. He's quiet for a moment. "I need to say something too."

"Say it."

"I'm sorry I walked away. In the hotel room, after you apologised." Shane looks down at their joined hands. "You were hurting, and you were scared, and I knew that, but I left anyway. I made you sit with what you'd said without any reassurance that we were going to be okay."

Ilya's thumb stills on Shane's knuckle.

"I needed space," Shane continues. "I needed time to be angry. But I could have said that instead of just leaving. I could have said, 'I need time, but I love you, and we'll figure this out.' Instead, I said 'I can't do this right now' and walked out."

"Shane—"

"Let me finish." Shane looks up at him. "I left you alone, thinking you'd ruined everything. And maybe you needed to sit with that a little bit, but not for such a long time. That was cruel."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. "You needed space," he says finally.

"I did. But I could have given myself space without leaving you thinking I might not come back." Shane squeezes Ilya's hand. "I'm sorry. For how I left. For how long I made you wait. For not telling you we'd be okay even when I was angry."

"You came back," Ilya says quietly.

"I came back. But I should have made sure you knew I would."

They sit in the silence for a moment, both apologies settling between them like pieces of a puzzle clicking into place.

"There's... something else as well," he says.

Shane takes a deep breath, the way he does before difficult conversations, and Ilya goes still beside him. Not the relaxed stillness of contentment, but the alert stillness of someone who recognises that something difficult is about to happen.

"I think you should talk to someone. A therapist." He feels Ilya go still beside him. "Not because something is wrong with you. Because what is going on inside you has a name, and it has a treatment, and you've been carrying it alone for a long time."

Ilya doesn't answer immediately. Shane waits, the way he's learned to wait with Ilya — without filling the silence, without making it easier.

"You see someone," Ilya says finally.

"I do. It helps."

"I do not—" Ilya stops. Starts again. "I do not know how to do that. Talk to a stranger about—"

"You talked to Svetlana."

"Svetlana is not a stranger."

"You talked to Marleau."

Ilya is quiet again.

"I'm not telling you what to do," Shane says. "I'm telling you what I see. And what I see is someone who deserves help the same way I deserved help." He looks at Ilya. "That's all."

Ilya looks at their hands. His thumb moves on Shane's knuckle.

"I will think about it," he says.

"That's enough," Shane says.

Shane leans back against the couch. After a moment, Ilya does the same, and their shoulders touch, and the apartment settles around them. Not fixed, not exactly — the hotel room is still there, the law is still there, the question of when is still there, unanswered. But the couch is theirs again, and the silence between them is the good silence, and Shane's hand is in Ilya's hand.

"I won gold," Shane says, his voice laced with disbelief.

"I know. I watched."

"In your room?"

"No, from the arena." Ilya's voice is quiet. "I found a way in. Up in the rafters, where nobody goes. I watched alone, and it was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, and I could not tell anyone that, and when it was over, I sat up there in the dark and I thought: I am the only person in this building who knows what that meant."

Shane is quiet for a moment. "The gold medal is in my bag," he says. "I haven't taken it out since the ceremony."

"Why not?"

"Because every time I think about taking it out, I think about sitting in that room alone after and—" He stops. "It should have been different. The after should have been different."

"Come here," Ilya says.

Shane looks at him.

"Come here," Ilya says again.

Shane shifts on the couch, and Ilya puts his arm around him, and Shane puts his head on Ilya's shoulder the way he does, the exact specific weight of it, the thing Ilya has been missing for three weeks. Ilya's hand finds Shane's hair.

"Go get the medal," Ilya says.

"Ilya—"

"Go get it."

Shane gets up. He goes to the bedroom. Ilya hears the zipper of the bag, then Shane comes back, sits beside him, and puts the medal in Ilya's hand.

It's heavier than Ilya expected. The gold catches the apartment light, the Olympic rings, the Sochi logo, the ribbon that went around Shane's neck on a podium while Ilya watched from a Russian building alone.

Ilya holds it for a long moment. Then he puts it around Shane's neck. Shane lets him, sits still while Ilya settles the ribbon, and then Ilya holds Shane's face in his hands.

"You won the Olympics," Ilya says. "And I was there. I watched, and it was the most beautiful thing." He presses his forehead to Shane's. "This is the after. Right here. This is what the after looks like."

Shane's hands come up to Ilya's wrists, holding them there.

"Okay," Shane says. His voice is not quite steady.

"Okay," Ilya says.

They sit on the couch with the gold medal between them and the apartment warm around them and the Boston February grey outside, and it's not the after Shane deserved, but it's the after they have, and the after is theirs.

Ilya's hands slide from Shane's face to his shoulders, fingers finding the ribbon of the medal where it rests against Shane's chest. He traces it gently, reverently, understanding what it represents: Not just Shane's victory, but everything they've endured to reach this moment.

"I want to see you," Ilya says quietly, his voice thick with emotion. "All of you. Like this."

Shane nods, and together they work Shane's shirt over his head, careful not to disturb the medal. The gold catches the lamplight against Shane's bare skin, and Ilya stares for a moment, his chest tight with something that might be pride or love or forgiveness, all tangled together.

"Your turn," Shane says softly, and his hands find the hem of Ilya's sweater, pulling it up and off with the same careful attention. When Ilya's bare chest is revealed, Shane's fingers trace the lines of muscle, the familiar geography he's mapped so many times before.

They undress each other slowly, deliberately, hands gentle on buttons and zippers, mouths finding skin as it's revealed. When Shane's jeans come off, the medal swings, and Ilya catches it in his palm, looking at it.

"Yours," he says, and there's wonder in his voice.

"Ours," Shane corrects quietly. "It's ours."

Ilya looks up at him, eyes bright, and Shane sees forgiveness there, real and complete. They come together on the couch, Shane settling into Ilya's lap, the medal warm between their chests. Ilya's hands span Shane's waist, thumbs brushing over his ribs, and Shane leans down to kiss him.

It's slow, this kissing. Like they're learning each other again after the fight, after the words that cut, after the separation that felt like it might break them. Shane's tongue traces Ilya's lower lip, and Ilya opens for him, lets Shane take what he needs, gives what Shane asks for.

"I missed you," Ilya whispers against Shane's mouth. "Even when you were right there, I missed you."

Shane answers with his body, rolling his hips down, creating friction between them. They're both hard now, have been since the first touch, and the slow grind makes Ilya's breath catch. Shane reaches between them, wrapping his hand around both of them, and Ilya's head falls back against the couch.

"Shane," he breathes, and it's a question and a plea and a promise all at once.

"I know," Shane says, his hand moving with the precision he brings to everything. "I know what you need."

Ilya's hands find Shane's hips, guiding the rhythm, and they move together like this, the medal swinging gently between them with each movement. It's not rushed, not desperate, but deliberate, intentional, the physical expression of everything they've said and haven't said.

"I want to be inside you," Ilya says quietly, his forehead pressed to Shane's. "Can I?"

Shane nods, shifting to reach for the side table where they keep what they need. His movements are graceful even like this, and Ilya watches him with something close to reverence.

"Here," Shane says, settling back in Ilya's lap with the bottle. "Let me."

He pours the liquid onto his fingers, then guides Ilya's hand, showing him exactly where and how. Ilya's touch is gentle, careful, one finger and then two, watching Shane's face for every reaction, every change in expression.

"More," Shane says quietly, and Ilya gives him more, always what Shane asks for, never more than Shane wants. The medal catches the light with each small movement, and Ilya thinks about how Shane looked on the podium, how proud he felt watching.

"Ready," Shane says eventually, and Ilya helps him shift, helps him lower himself down slowly. They both make soft sounds when Shane takes him in completely, and they stay still for a moment, connected, looking at each other.

"Okay?" Ilya asks, because he always asks.

"Perfect," Shane says, and begins to move.

It's Shane who sets the pace, Shane who controls the depth and angle, and Ilya follows his lead the way he always does. The medal bounces gently with Shane's movements, catching the lamplight, and Ilya reaches up to trace it with one finger.

"Watched you win this," he says, his voice rough with emotion and arousal. "Watched you on that podium and wished I could be there with you."

"You were," Shane says, his breathing getting heavier. "You were with me."

Shane's rhythm increases gradually, and Ilya meets him stroke for stroke, hands on his waist, supporting him. When Shane reaches between them to touch himself, Ilya covers his hand, helping, the way they do everything, together.

"I love you," Ilya says, watching Shane's face, seeing the moment when everything builds to the edge. "I love you so much."

Shane comes with Ilya's name on his lips, his body tightening around Ilya, and the sensation pulls Ilya over with him. They hold each other through it, Shane's face buried in Ilya's neck, the medal pressed warm between their chests.

After, they stay tangled together on the couch, breathing hard, Shane's head on Ilya's shoulder, the medal pooled on Ilya's chest like it belongs there.

"We're okay," Shane says quietly, and it's not a question.

"We're okay," Ilya confirms, his hand stroking Shane's hair. "We're going to be okay."

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Ilya mentions it on a Friday afternoon, casually, from the kitchen.

"Team is going out tonight. Axis. Marleau is organising."

Shane is on the couch with his book. He turns a page. "Okay."

"Probably late. Do not wait up."

Shane turns another page. The page says nothing to him. "Sure."

Ilya comes to the doorway. He's looking at Shane with the expression that says he's already done the calculation and arrived at the answer before Shane admits there's a question.

"You are doing the face," Ilya says.

"I'm reading."

"You are doing the face and reading at the same time."

"I don't have a face."

"Shane. You have many faces. This is the one where your mouth is flat, and you are not actually reading." Ilya leans against the doorframe. "Say the thing."

Shane puts the book down. "I'm not going to say the thing because the thing is irrational, and I know it's irrational, and acknowledging it out loud makes it worse."

"Say it anyway."

Shane looks at him. "You're going to a club with your team who don't know about us, and you'll be performing and someone will — there will be women, and—" He stops. "It's irrational."

"It is irrational," Ilya agrees. He crosses the room and sits on the arm of the couch. "You know what would fix it?"

"Don't."

"Come with us."

"Ilya—"

"As my friend. My very boring friend who reads books and goes to bed at ten and has an Olympic gold medal." Ilya's hand finds Shane's hair. "Come. Meet the team. Let me show them who you are."

Shane looks up at him. "Your very boring friend."

"My extremely boring friend who I like very much."

Shane is quiet for a moment. Outside, the March evening is doing its thing, the city warming up, the first hint that winter might actually end.

"I don't have anything to wear to a club," Shane says.

Ilya smiles. "I will find you something."

"If you pick something ridiculous, I'm not going."

"I will pick something perfect."

"That's what I'm worried about."

The club is called Axis, and it's the kind of place that exists specifically for professional athletes — the VIP section cordoned off, the bottles already on the table when they arrive, the particular darkness that makes everyone look better and nothing consequential.

Shane has never been to a team night out before. Not Ilya's team, not like this, not as a person who is introduced and has to stand in a circle of large men and be assessed. Ilya said *come out with us tonight* with the casualness of a person who has already decided this is happening and is informing Shane rather than asking, and Shane said *okay* because that's what he says when Ilya uses that tone.

The VIP section is already half full when they arrive — Marleau, Dubek, Dubois, Carmichael, Kadlec, a few others Shane knows by face from games. Ilya moves through the group doing the captain thing, the hand on the shoulder, the grin, and Shane follows slightly behind, trying to look like a person who attends club nights with NHL teams regularly.

Marleau finds him first.

"Shane." He shakes his hand, and the handshake is warm, the particular warmth of a man who knows more than he says. "Good to finally do this properly."

"Yeah," Shane says. "Good to be here."

"Ilya talks about you," Marleau says. And then, before Shane can process that: "Your program in Sochi. The Beethoven. My girl cried."

"Tell her thank you."

"Tell her yourself. She's been asking Ilya to bring you to dinner for three months." Marleau's eyes are steady and kind. "We'll make it happen."

Dubek appears beside Marleau, already holding a drink. He's bigger up close than he looks on the ice, which is saying something, and his face has the open, slightly overwhelming quality of a man who feels everything at full volume.

"You're the figure skater," Dubek says. Not unkindly. With genuine interest, the way a golden retriever is genuinely interested in everything.

"Pairs skater," Shane says.

"That's the one with the lifting? And the throwing?"

"Yes."

"That's insane." Dubek shakes his head. "I can barely lift my stick. You're throwing a person."

"I'm throwing Rose, she's tiny."

"Still." Dubek looks at him with something approaching reverence. "Insane. You want a drink? I'm getting drinks."

"I'm okay, thank you."

"I'm getting you a drink," Dubek says, and disappears toward the bar.

Shane stands with Marleau and watches the room. The music is loud, the bass physical, and the VIP section has its own ecosystem — conversations in clusters, the particular ease of men who spend nine months a year in each other's company. Dubois is holding court at one end, his French more fluid and rapid than anything Shane has heard him say at rinkside. Kadlec is beside him, laughing at something.

Ilya is three feet away, talking to Carmichael, and he catches Shane's eye over Carmichael's shoulder. The look lasts one second. It contains: you okay? yes? good.

Dubek comes back with a drink Shane didn't order, something clear with lime, and Shane takes it because the alternative is explaining things he doesn't want to explain, and the drink turns out to be mostly soda water.

"Smart," Dubek says, pointing at it. "The athletes' drink. I keep telling Dubois, no wine at the club, and he doesn't listen, and then tomorrow at practice he's slow by two percent and he blames it on his skates."

"Two percent is measurable," Shane says.

"Right?" Dubek points at him. "This guy gets it." He turns to Marleau. "Ilya's friend gets it."

The night moves the way these nights move. The music shifts, the drinks appear and disappear, the conversations overlap and separate. Shane talks to Kadlec about Prague, which Kadlec is surprised by, until Shane explains that he's been to every city with a major skating facility in Europe. He talks to Dubois about the Olympic judging system, which Dubois finds either fascinating or outrageous; it's hard to tell because the outrage and the fascination look the same on Dubois.

He is, against all reasonable expectations, having a good time.

Ilya reappears beside him at some point in the second hour, his shoulder against Shane's in the dark.

"You are talking to my team," Ilya says, low, close to his ear.

"You brought me here."

"I did not think you would actually talk to them."

"What did you think I'd do?"

"Stand in corner and read something."

"I didn't bring anything to read."

Ilya's mouth curves. He's warm from the crowd and the music, his eyes bright in the club dark, and he's looking at Shane the way he looks at Shane when they're alone in the apartment, the look that doesn't perform anything.

"Dubek likes you," Ilya says.

"Dubek seems to like everyone."

"Dubek does not like everyone. Dubek is very selective. He cried when we got new equipment manager." Ilya's hand finds the small of Shane's back, light, brief, concealed by the crowd and the dark. "Come with me."

"Where?"

"Just come."

Shane follows him. Through the crowd, past the bar, down a short corridor that leads to the bathrooms. Ilya checks behind them once and then pushes open the door to the single occupancy bathroom and pulls Shane in after him and locks the door.

The music is muffled now. The bathroom is small and dark-tiled, a single low light, a mirror that makes everything look better than it is.

Ilya turns to him.

"Hi," Shane says.

"Hi," Ilya says, and kisses him.

It's fast, urgent, the particular charge of doing something in a place where it could be seen, the risk, and the wanting tangled together. Shane's back hits the wall, and Ilya's hands are on his face, and Shane's hands find Ilya's shirt, and they kiss the way they kissed the night before Shane flew to Toronto, with the specific desperation of people who know time is limited.

"We have maybe ten minutes," Ilya says against his mouth. "Then stop talking," Shane says. Ilya laughs, low and warm, and then he stops talking. His hands move to Shane's belt, fingers working the leather through the buckle with practised efficiency. Shane's head tips back against the wall as Ilya's mouth finds his neck, teeth grazing the sensitive spot just below his ear.

The music is a low thrum through the door, and the bathroom is small and dark and entirely theirs. Ilya's hands push Shane's shirt up, palms sliding over his chest, thumbs brushing his nipples until Shane's breathing changes, becomes heavier.

"Hurry," Shane whispers, but his hands are gentle in Ilya's hair, holding him close as Ilya works his way down Shane's throat with his mouth.

Ilya's knee presses between Shane's thighs, creating pressure exactly where Shane needs it, and Shane rocks against him, seeking more contact. Ilya's hands make quick work of Shane's jeans, pushing them down just enough, and then his hand is around Shane, warm and sure.

"Like this?" Ilya asks quietly, his thumb sliding over the head, and Shane nods, his own hand covering Ilya's, showing him the rhythm he needs.

They move together in the dark, the particular efficient urgency of two people who know each other's bodies completely and have exactly ten minutes. Shane's free hand works at Ilya's belt, returning the favour, and soon they're both breathing hard against each other's necks, hands moving in tandem.

"Shane," Ilya breathes against his ear, and Shane can hear how close he is in the way his voice breaks on the word.

Shane comes first, his hand over his own mouth to muffle the sound, his body tensing against the wall as Ilya's hand works him through it. The sight and feel of Shane falling apart pushes Ilya over the edge a minute later, quiet and shuddering, his forehead pressed against Shane's shoulder.

They stand in the dark bathroom breathing for thirty seconds, hands gentle as they help each other clean up and straighten clothes.

"Your shirt," Shane says.

Ilya looks down. Fixes it. Looks at Shane in the mirror, the hair, the mouth, the particular evidence of what just happened. "You look—"

"Don't say it."

"Incredible."

"I was going to say obvious."

Ilya straightens Shane's collar with the focused precision he applies to everything. His thumb grazes Shane's jaw. "Give me two minutes. Then you come back."

"I know how this works," Shane says.

Ilya kisses him once more, quick and soft, and then he's gone.

They come back separately. Two minutes apart, Ilya first, then Shane, who checks the mirror and straightens his shirt and takes a breath before walking back into the noise.

Marleau is exactly where Shane left him. He hands Shane a fresh soda water without comment. His face is entirely neutral, which means he knows, and his knowing is the same as it has always been — warm, contained, not a problem.

"Dubek's looking for you," Marleau says. "Something about a bet involving the gold medal and whether you can actually lift Ilya."

"I can't lift Ilya," Shane says. "He's six feet and two hundred pounds."

"That's what I said." Marleau sips his drink. "He's unconvinced."

Shane looks across the room. Ilya has rejoined the group, his hand on Kadlec's shoulder, the grin deployed, the performance seamless. He catches Shane's eye again. One second. The look says: good? good.

Shane takes a sip of his soda water.

"I'll go talk to Dubek," he says.

They stay until late, until the crowd thins and the music shifts, and Dubek finally accepts that Shane cannot, in fact, lift Ilya over his head. When Shane starts getting that particular look that means he's reached his social limit, Ilya catches his eye across the room.

"Ready?" Ilya mouths, and Shane nods.

They say their goodbyes, Ilya extracting himself from a conversation about summer training, Shane collecting his jacket from wherever he left it. Outside, Ilya flags down a cab and gives the driver their address.

In the cab, Shane leans against Ilya's shoulder, tired and content and slightly overwhelmed by having spent four hours being social with professional athletes. Ilya's hand finds his in the dark backseat.

At the apartment, they get ready for bed together, the particular routine of two people who share space easily. When they get into bed, Ilya pulls Shane close, and Shane settles against his chest with a quiet sigh.

"Thank you," Shane says quietly.

"For what?"

"For letting them meet me. For... tonight."

Ilya's hand finds his across the sheets. "They like you."

"They like your boring friend who reads books."

"They like you," Ilya says again. "Marleau asked if you want to come to dinner next week. His wife wants to meet the person who won Olympic gold."

Shane is quiet for a moment. "Do I want to go to dinner next week?"

"I think you do."

"Okay," Shane says. "We'll go to dinner."

They fall asleep in each other's arms, warm and content and home, the city quiet around them and tomorrow full of possibilities.

Chapter 34: reset

Chapter Summary

Ilya works hard to take the Bears to the playoffs, and Shane gets a well-deserved break after the Olympics.

Chapter Notes

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

The Olympic break is over, and the Bears come back to Boston like a team that has something to prove.

Not because they were bad before the break, the Bears were good, sitting second in the Atlantic with games in hand when the break started on February 9th. But good isn't what defending Stanley Cup champions do, and everyone in the organisation knows it, from LeClaire down to the equipment managers. The eighteen-day break changed things. The break brought everyone home with their individual stories — the Russians' disappointment, the Americans who played well and the ones who didn't — and now those stories have to be folded back into the team story, the one that says repeat.

Ilya comes back to practice like a man who has been reset. Not physically, he is the same, maybe a little lighter from the stress of Sochi, maybe a little wound tighter in the shoulders from carrying the particular weight of playing for Russia while in love with a Canadian man. But something else is different. Something in the way he moves through the locker room, the way he takes his stall, the way he looks at his teammates.

"How was Russia?" Marleau asks, on the first morning back.

"Complicated," Ilya says.

"But you're back."

"I am back, yes."

Marleau nods. He doesn't push. Marleau never pushes, which is one of the reasons Ilya trusts him completely.

The Bears have nineteen games left in the regular season. They're first in the conference by four points, but Montreal is close, and Detroit is lurking, and the mathematics of the thing say that first place is not guaranteed. The playoff picture is taking shape — home ice advantage is the goal, the bracket positioning, the particular luxury of playing the first two rounds at home in front of their crowd that carried them through last year.

Practice is sharp. LeClaire runs systems with the focused intensity of a man who knows his team hasn't played together in eighteen days and needs to find their rhythm again. The power play, which

was clicking before the break, needs to rebuild its timing after the layoff. The defensive pairs, separated for over two weeks, work to regain their chemistry and communication.

They come back February 26th against Montreal, and it's not close. 6-1, Ilya with two goals and an assist, playing like a man possessed, like someone working off a debt. Against Tampa, he scores twice and sets up Dubois for the overtime winner. Against Buffalo, he gets an assist and wins seventeen of nineteen faceoffs and plays twenty-four minutes without looking tired. Against Ottawa, he scores a goal that makes the highlight reels — a move through the neutral zone, a shot that finds the top corner, the particular inevitability of a player who has decided the puck is going in.

"You're different," Marleau says, after practice one morning in March.

"Different how?"

"Sharper. On the ice." Marleau looks at him. "Something changed in Sochi."

"Many things changed in Sochi."

"Good changes?"

Ilya thinks about this. Shane on the couch in the hoodie, the glasses folded, the quiet conversation about the hotel room and the things that have been said and the forgiving. The medal scene that followed, the particular weight of gold in his hands, the specific relief of finally being able to touch what he watched from the rafters.

"Some of them," Ilya says.

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The therapist's name is Dr Volkov, and his office is in Back Bay, twelve minutes from the apartment by cab.

Ilya finds him the way Ilya finds everything he doesn't want to ask Shane about — by researching it himself at midnight, on his phone. He looks up Russian-speaking therapists in Boston, reads the profiles, discards the ones who specialise in performance anxiety because that's not what this is, and settles on Volkov because his profile mentions depression and because his face in the photo looks like a man who has heard things and not flinched.

The first session is in March, on a Tuesday, after morning skate. Ilya sits in the chair across from Volkov and looks at the room — the plants, the diplomas, the particular neutral palette of a space designed to contain difficult things — and thinks about leaving.

He doesn't leave.

"What brings you in?" Volkov asks in Russian. The Russian is a relief Ilya didn't expect — the language settling around him like something familiar, the language of his mother and his childhood and the things he has never said out loud in any language.

Ilya looks at his hands. "I have this thing in my chest. It comes and goes. When it comes, I cannot get out of bed. When it goes, I can perform." He pauses. "I have been performing for a long time."

Volkov writes something. "How long?"

"Since I was twelve. Maybe before."

"And what happened when you were twelve?"

Ilya is quiet for a moment. Outside, the Back Bay street is doing its spring thing — the light is different now, the cold finally loosening its grip on the city.

"Many things," Ilya says. "Many things happened when I was twelve."

Volkov nods. He doesn't push. He just waits, and the waiting is the thing, because the waiting says I have time and you have time and whatever is in the thing can come out slowly.

Ilya goes back the following Tuesday. And the Tuesday after that.

He doesn't tell Shane immediately. Not because he's hiding it, but because the therapy is new and tender and he doesn't have the language for it yet, and Ilya has learned — slowly, from Shane, from Marleau, from the long Ottawa summer — that not everything needs to be said before it's ready.

He tells him on a Thursday, in bed, the lights off, Shane's reading glasses folded on the nightstand.

"I have been seeing a therapist," Ilya says. "He is Russian."

Shane is quiet for a moment. "How long?"

"Three weeks."

"Okay." Shane's voice is careful, steady. "How is it?"

"Hard," Ilya says. "And also... I do not know. Like something is moving. Something that has been still for a long time."

Shane reaches for his hand in the dark, finds it, and holds it.

"Okay," Shane says again. The okay that means *I'm here and I'm not making this bigger than you want it to be*.

"You are not going to say anything else?" Ilya asks.

"I'm proud of you," Shane says. Simply, the way Shane says things that are true.

Ilya holds that for a moment. "Okay," he says, and means it.

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Shane takes three weeks off after Sochi.

This is Linda's prescription, delivered with the same authority as everything Linda delivers: three weeks, no ice, no training, just rest.

He goes to Ottawa first.

David and Yuna pick him up from the airport in David's car, which hasn't changed in ten years and probably won't change in ten more. David cries at the arrival gate, which Shane expected, and Yuna doesn't cry, which Shane also expected.

"Gold medal," David says, still hugging him.

"Gold medal," Shane confirms.

"In the car," Yuna says. "I want to see it."

In the car, Shane opens his bag and takes out the medal and puts it in his mother's hands. She holds it the way she holds everything precious — carefully, with the focused attention of someone who understands the weight. David reaches over from the driver's seat to touch it, just once, and then starts the engine.

"It's heavier than I thought it would be," Yuna says.

"Everyone says that."

"Did you show him?" she asks. "Ilya?"

Shane looks out the window at the Ottawa winter. "Yes."

"Good," Yuna says. "That's what it's for."

The house in Ottawa is the same as it always is — warm, cluttered in the specific way of people who read books and keep them, the chess set on the coffee table that David taught Shane to play on, and Shane always won. Shane's room is exactly as he left it in 2009 when he moved to Boston, except now it has a bigger bed.

He sleeps for twelve hours the first night.

On the second day, David makes pancakes and asks careful questions about Sochi, about the programs, about Rose and how she's handling the aftermath. Shane answers what he can and deflects what he can't, and David accepts the deflection the way David accepts most things, with the understanding that some things take time.

"Are you happy?" David asks, over coffee on the third morning.

Shane thinks about this. Actually thinks.

"Yes," he says. "I think I actually am."

David nods. "Good," he says. "That's all I wanted to know."

The week in Ottawa was quiet in the way Shane didn't know he needed. No training, no schedule, no performance of any kind. Just the house and his parents and the particular peace of being in a place where he is known completely and doesn't have to explain himself.

On the last day, Yuna drives him to the airport.

"Will you bring him back home sometime?" she asks at the departure gate. "Ilya?"

"Maybe," Shane says. "When the time is right."

"The time is always right for family," Yuna says.

Shane hugs her. "I know, Mom."

"Good," she says. "Don't forget."

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Montreal is different from Ottawa in the way Montreal is always different from Ottawa — louder, more chaotic, the particular energy of a city that takes itself very seriously and also doesn't take itself seriously at all.

Hayden picks him up at the airport in a car that has two car seats in the back and a small sock wedged under the passenger seat that nobody has gotten around to removing. Hayden himself looks the same as he always looks — big, easy, the particular warmth of a person for whom warmth is not an effort — except that there are shadows under his eyes and a coffee travel mug in the cupholder that is definitely not his first of the day.

"Twins," Shane says, by way of greeting.

"Twins," Hayden confirms. "Ruby found the dog's food bowl this morning and ate some of it before Jackie caught her. Jade won't sleep unless someone is holding her. I have not slept more than four consecutive hours since November 2012."

"You look good."

"I look terrible, and I know it." Hayden grins. "But wait until you see them."

The house is in Westmount. Jackie meets them at the door with a toddler on her hip — Jade, Shane learns, because Ruby is the one currently sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor surrounded by wooden blocks, looking at them with the focused suspicion of a fifteen-month-old.

"Shane," Jackie says. "Finally in the house. I've been asking Hayden for months."

"I know. Sochi got in the way."

"Sochi got in the way of a lot of things." She shifts Jade to her other hip. "Jade, this is Shane. He's Daddy's friend."

Jade looks at Shane. Shane looks at Jade. Jade reaches out and grabs his finger with the sudden, decisive grip of a toddler who has made a choice, and Shane's whole hand is immediately hostage.

"She likes you," Jackie says. "She doesn't like everyone."

JJ arrives that evening. He's recently single and says he's fine, but Shane can see he's not. He shakes Shane's hand and says, "gold medal, man," and then sits on Hayden's couch and lets Ruby climb on him with the ease of someone who has been doing this for months.

"You look good," JJ says to Shane, over Ruby's head.

"So people keep telling me."

"I mean it. You look lighter." He says it simply, without elaboration, the way JJ says things. He doesn't ask what changed. He has known Shane since they were ten and twelve, and the knowing means he can see the change without requiring an explanation for it.

The four days are easy. Not the specific ease of the apartment, which is its own kind of ease — the ease of two people who have learned each other completely. This is a different kind of ease. The ease of people who knew you before you were anything, who hold all the versions of you without effort.

They eat Jackie's cooking, watch Hayden's terrible television, and take the twins to the park, where Ruby immediately tries to eat mulch, and Jade sits in the swing with the expression of someone who has discovered something profound. Shane pushes the swing and thinks about nothing in particular, and the nothing in particular is the first he has had since August.

On the last evening, after the twins are in bed and Jackie has gone up, Shane, Hayden and JJ sit on the porch with their drinks and the Montreal spring night around them.

"Are you happy?" Hayden asks. Just like that.

It's the same question his Dad asked him a week before, and now Shane doesn't have to think about it.

"Yes," he says. "I'm happy."

Hayden nods. "Good," he said. "That's all I wanted to know."

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Shane comes home from Montreal on a Tuesday afternoon in April.

The apartment feels enormous after a week in his childhood bedroom and then another week in the Pike guest bedroom. Ilya is at practice — won't be home for two hours — and Shane stands in the kitchen and looks around at the space they've built together and feels something loosen in his chest.

He unpacks slowly. Puts his parents' gifts in the appropriate places — David's book on the shelf, Yuna's tea in the cabinet, the small ceramic bowl she made in her pottery class on the counter where it can hold keys and loose change and the ordinary detritus of a life lived together.

By the time Ilya comes home, Shane is sitting on the couch with his laptop, researching something that has been nagging at him since Montreal.

"Good practice?" Shane asks, not looking up from the screen.

"Fine. Marleau's knee is better." Ilya drops his bag, comes to the couch. "What are you reading?"

"Russian cookbooks."

Ilya goes still. "Russian cookbooks?"

"Specifically, how to make proper shchi. I was looking at your Mom's recipe card, but there were a few things I couldn't understand, so I had to Google it." Shane looks up from the laptop. "Mom has been teaching me basic techniques for Japanese food, but I want to learn your food. The food you actually grew up with."

Something in Ilya's face changes. Not surprise, exactly, but the particular softness he gets when Shane does something that proves, again, how completely Shane sees him.

"You want to cook Russian food?"

"I want to cook your food." Shane closes the laptop. "I have a week off. Playoffs are coming. I want to be useful."

"Shane, you do not have to—"

"I know I don't have to. I want to." Shane reaches for Ilya's hand. "Besides, you can learn how to make Japanese food. Seems fair."

Ilya looks at their joined hands. "My mother's shchi is complicated."

"Good. I like complicated things."

+++

On Wednesday morning, Shane goes to the Russian market in Brookline. It's a small shop tucked between a nail salon and a dry cleaner, the kind of place that doesn't advertise because the people who need to find it already know where it is. The woman behind the counter speaks to him in rapid Russian, realises he doesn't understand, switches to English with the particular patience of someone who deals with confused Americans (well, a Canadian in this case) regularly.

"Carrots," Shane says, consulting the list he made from three different websites. "Onion, potatoes, sauerkraut, Sour cream — but the Russian kind, not American."

She nods, understanding immediately. "First time making shchi?"

"Yes."

"For Russian partner?"

Shane pauses. They haven't talked about this — what to say when strangers make assumptions, how to navigate the space between truth and performance. But this woman is looking at him with the particular kindness of someone who recognises love when she sees it, and Shane finds himself nodding.

"Yes."

"Good." She piles items in his basket, adds things he didn't know he needed. "This sour cream. This onion, not the American onion, is too weak. And this—" She hands him a jar of something dark and mysterious. "For colour. For taste. Very important."

Shane pays for ingredients and drives home with the particular satisfaction of someone who is about to attempt something difficult for someone they love.

The shchi takes twenty-four hours to make properly — the slow simmering that builds the deep, complex flavour Shane remembers from research and YouTube videos of Russian grandmothers. He starts it on Wednesday afternoon, calls his mother twice during the process (once when the cabbage wilts more than expected, once when he's not sure if he's supposed to add the potatoes before or after the meat). Yuna talks him through it with the patience she used when he was seven and learning to tie his skates.

By Thursday evening, when Ilya comes through the door with his away game bag slung over his shoulder, tired from two days in Detroit, the apartment smells like his childhood memories of his Mama's kitchen mixed with something entirely new.

"It smells like home," Ilya says, standing in the doorway.

"Which home?"

Ilya considers this, dropping his bag and coming to the kitchen where Shane is ladling the shchi into bowls. "Both," he says finally. "It smells like both."

The shchi is not perfect, a little too salty, the cabbage slightly overcooked, but it's good. Ilya eats two bowls and looks at Shane with the expression he gets when words aren't sufficient for what he's feeling.

"Thank you," Ilya says.

"It's just soup."

"It is not just soup."

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On Friday, Shane meets Nora for lunch at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. They've been trying to coordinate schedules for months, Shane's training, Nora's cases, and the particular difficulty of maintaining friendships when your lives have gone in completely different directions. But she texted after the Olympics, and Shane suggested meeting somewhere that would remind them both of why they became friends in the first place.

They find each other in the courtyard, surrounded by art and the specific quiet that museums cultivate. Nora looks good — successful, settled, wearing the kind of tailored suit that says I am a lawyer who wins cases. She hugs him without hesitation, the easy affection of someone who knew him before he knew himself.

"You look happy," she says, stepping back to study his face.

"Do I?"

"Different happy. Not skating happy — that's been there for years. Something else."

They walk through the galleries slowly, the way they used to when Nora was a BU student, and Shane was figuring out how to be a professional skater, and neither of them knew what their lives would become. She tells him about her work — immigration law, mostly, the particular satisfaction of helping people build lives in places that will let them. He tells her about training, about Linda's new programs, about the specific difference between wanting to win and expecting to win.

In the Titian room, surrounded by Renaissance paintings, Nora says: "So. How's Ilya?"

Shane's face does something complicated. "Good. Really good."

"The relationship, I mean. You two seem..." She studies his face. "Settled. Like you've figured something out."

They sit on the bench in front of Titian's "Europa," and Shane finds himself talking honestly about the relationship in a way he rarely gets to. About living together, about the quiet domestic happiness, about learning to cook Russian food and the particular way love feels when it's built slowly and carefully over years.

"It sounds like you're domesticating," Nora observes.

"Is that what this is?"

"Learning to cook someone's mother's recipes? Shane, that's the definition of domesticating." She grins. "It looks good on you."

"Are you happy?" Shane asks, turning the question back to her.

"Yes. Complicated, but yes." She pauses. "I'm seeing someone. Another lawyer. Kevin. He makes me laugh and doesn't mind that I work sixteen-hour days."

"Good complicated or bad complicated?"

"Mostly good." Nora looks at the painting. "We're both figuring out how to be adults with demanding careers and still make time for the people we care about. It's harder than I thought it would be."

Shane nods. "I get that."

"How do you and Ilya manage it? With your schedules, the travel, the pressure?"

Shane considers this. "We plan. We make the ordinary moments matter. We..." He looks around the museum. "We show up for each other. Even when it's difficult."

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On Saturday, Shane discovers that being an Olympic Champion means being recognised at Whole Foods.

He's in the produce section, trying to remember if Ilya likes the green apples or the red ones, when a woman approaches with her phone already out.

"Excuse me, are you Shane Hollander?"

Shane nods, because there's no point denying it when she's already taking pictures.

"Could I get a selfie? My daughter skates — she was so inspired by your performance at the Olympics."

Shane takes the selfie, signs something for the daughter he's never met, and spends the rest of his shopping trip being quietly observed by people who recognise him but don't want to interrupt. It's not unpleasant, exactly, but it's different. The particular weight of being known for something good, something beautiful, rather than just being known.

He comes home with groceries and stories and tells Ilya about the recognition over dinner.

"How does it feel?" Ilya asks. "Being famous for skating instead of just skating."

"Strange. Good strange, but strange." Shane considers this. "People look at me like I did something meaningful instead of just something difficult."

"You did do something meaningful."

"Did I?"

"You made something beautiful. You shared it with the . That is meaningful." Ilya reaches across the table and takes Shane's hand. "Besides, you were already famous to me."

Sunday morning, Shane wakes up before his alarm and lies in bed watching Ilya sleep. The apartment is quiet around them, the specific quiet of a weekend morning with nowhere to be and nothing to do. Ilya's face in the early light, unguarded, the particular peace that comes from sleeping next to someone you trust completely.

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April ends with the Bears in first place in the conference, three points ahead of Montreal, with home ice advantage secured for the first round of the playoffs. The regular season finale is at home against Buffalo, a meaningless game in the standings but meaningful in other ways — the last game before the playoffs, the last chance to get the systems right, the last time the Garden crowd will see this team before the season becomes serious.

Ilya doesn't score, but he plays twenty-six minutes and wins nineteen of twenty-two faceoffs and makes the pass that sets up Dubois for the winner in the second period. After the game, in the locker room, LeClaire addresses the team with the particular gravity he reserves for moments like this.

"Playoffs start Monday," he says. "Toronto, here, game one. We've been here before. We know what it takes." He looks around the room. "The banner is in the rafters. It can be in the rafters again."

The locker room is quiet. Not the bad quiet, not the quiet of men who are afraid. The good quiet, the quiet of men who know what they're capable of and are ready to prove it.

Ilya looks around at them, at Marleau, Dubek, Dubois, Kadlec, Tremblay, all of them. His team. The team that will carry him through whatever comes next.

"Playoffs start Monday," Ilya says in his captain voice, steady and sure.

He doesn't say anything else. He doesn't need to. The cup banner hanging above the rink says everything that needs saying about what this team can do when it decides to do it.

Chapter End Notes

I just want to, once again, thank everyone so much for reading and commenting on this story. I try to answer some of your comments, but there are over 1,500 of them, and I'm just extremely

overwhelmed by it all (in a good way).

Thank you thank you thank you

Chapter 35: back to back

Chapter Summary

The Boston Bears go back-to-back, and Shane is there to see and experience it.

Chapter Notes

I've had a really tough day and decided to give all of us a treat. It's shorter than normal, but I hope you still like it <3

The playoffs begin on a Monday night at the Garden, and the Bears take the ice against Toronto like a team that has been waiting for this moment since the final buzzer sounded last June. The crowd is loud in the particular way Garden crowds are loud during the playoffs, not just in volume but in intention, the focused energy of seventeen thousand people who believe in the thing and are willing it into existence through noise alone.

Ilya wins the opening faceoff, gets the puck to Marleau, and the first shift sets the tone for everything that follows. Clean, controlled, purposeful. The Bears are playing like they remember exactly what it takes to win a Stanley Cup because they won one eleven months ago.

They sweep Toronto in four games. Not because Toronto is bad. On the contrary, Toronto is good and scrappy, the kind of team that makes life difficult for everyone, but because the Bears are better. Because they have Marleau on the blue line making the plays that don't show up on the scoresheet, and Dubois scoring goals at the exact moment goals are needed, and Ilya in the middle of everything, playing twenty-four minutes a game and making it look effortless.

Against Pittsburgh in the second round, the series goes to six games. Pittsburgh has the offensive firepower to match Boston goal for goal, and the games are high-scoring, chaotic, the kind of hockey that gives coaches grey hair and makes fans lose their voices. But the Bears have been here before, and Pittsburgh hasn't, not recently, and experience matters in May when the games get tight, and every shift feels enormous.

Game six is at home. Ilya scores twice and sets up Kadlec for the series winner with four minutes left in the third period. The Garden erupts. The celebration is controlled; this is not the end, just a step toward the end, but the relief is obvious. The second round is over. The conference final awaits.

In the locker room afterwards, LeClaire addresses the team with the same steady voice he's used all season, but beneath the steadiness, something has shifted. The playoffs are three weeks old now, and the team that came back from the Olympic break has found something else, something sharper and more focused than what they had before.

"New York," LeClaire says. "Conference final. Best of seven. They've been waiting for us."

The room is quiet. New York has been waiting. They swept their way through the first two rounds, looking dominant, playing the kind of hockey that makes analysts use words like inevitable. The Admirals are healthy, rested, and at home for games one and two. On paper, it should be the series of the playoffs.

"We've been here before," Ilya says, standing up. The captain voice, calm and certain. "We know what this feels like. We know what it takes."

Marleau nods. Dubois is taping his stick with the focused precision of a man who doesn't waste energy on things he can't control. Dubek is grinning, the way Dubek grins when the stakes get higher.

"New York can go fuck themselves," Ilya says, and the room erupts.

The conference final goes seven games, and every single game is decided by one goal.

Game one in New York: Bears lose 3-2, Ilya scores both goals, but it's not enough. Game two in New York: Bears win 4-3 in overtime on a power play goal from Dubois that finds the top corner with surgical precision. Game three at home: New York wins 2-1 in a game that feels like playoff hockey distilled to its essence — hitting, goaltending, and one moment of brilliance that decides everything.

By game five, both teams are exhausted and exhilarated in equal measure. The games have taken on the particular intensity of two heavyweight fighters trading punches for six rounds and discovering that neither is going down easily. The hockey is beautiful and brutal, the kind of thing that gets remembered twenty years later when people talk about what playoff hockey should look like.

Game seven is in Boston on a Thursday night in early June, and the building is the loudest thing Ilya has ever heard. The noise starts during warmups and doesn't stop until forty-three minutes later when Dubois scores off a rebound that Ilya creates by driving to the net with the kind of determination that referees call interference on lesser players and wave through on captains.

The Bears win 3-2, and they're in the Stanley Cup Final for the second year in a row.

The on-ice celebration is restrained. There's still work to do, one more series, the biggest series, but in the tunnel afterwards, walking back to the locker room, Ilya allows himself thirty seconds of something that might be called satisfaction. They're going back to the Cup Final. The defending champions are defending.

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The Stanley Cup Final is against San Francisco.

Svetlana, calling from Boston where she's been working for the Bruins since April, says it on the phone three hours after the New York series ends: "San Francisco has the goaltending."

"We have everything else," Ilya says.

"Everything else might be enough."

"Everything else will be enough."

She laughs, the dry laugh that means she's proud of him and won't say it directly. "We'll see. We'll see."

San Francisco has been the story of the playoffs. The team that wasn't supposed to be here, the eighth seed that knocked off the top three teams in the Western Conference through some combination of hot goaltending, opportunistic scoring, and the particular magic that happens sometimes in professional sports when a team decides it's not done yet. Their goaltender, a twenty-six-year-old named Anders Blomqvist, has been playing like a man possessed, stealing games, making saves that have no right to be made.

But the Bears have Ilya. And Marleau. And Dubois, who has been scoring goals at the exact right moment for three months. And they have the experience of having done this before, of knowing what it feels like to lift the Cup, of understanding that the Final is not about the best team but about the team that executes when execution matters most.

The series opens in Boston. Game one is a statement. The Bears win 4-1, Ilya with a goal and two assists, the kind of performance that announces *I am here and I remember how to do this*. Game two is closer, 3-2, but the Bears control the pace throughout, and when it ends, they're up 2-0 in the series and heading to San Francisco with the particular confidence that comes from knowing you're the better team.

Games three and four in San Francisco are different. The crowd is loud, the building is hostile, and Blomqvist is spectacular. The Bears lose game three 2-1 in overtime, a game they should have won but didn't because sometimes goalies decide to play like they're bulletproof. Game four is worse — 4-1 San Francisco, the Bears looking frustrated for the first time all playoffs, the series suddenly tied 2-2.

On the plane back to Boston, the mood is quiet but not panicked. This is not unfamiliar territory. Last year's Cup Final went seven games. The Cup is never easy. The Cup is not supposed to be easy.

"Back to the Garden," LeClaire says, addressing the team in the plane. "Game five. Home ice. Our crowd."

Ilya looks around the plane at his teammates — Marleau reading, Dubois sleeping, Dubek staring out the window with the expression of a man who is already thinking about tomorrow's game. The therapy with Volkov has been ongoing through the playoffs, Tuesday sessions when the schedule allows, and something about the work they're doing there has changed how Ilya experiences these moments. Less anxiety, more presence. Less performing, more being.

"Game five," Ilya says, loud enough for the plane to hear. "We've been here before."

The plane nods. They have been here before.

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Shane finds the jersey in Ilya's closet on the morning of game five, hanging with the other game-worn jerseys Ilya keeps but never talks about. Number 81, ROZANOV across the back, the fabric

soft from washing, faded slightly at the shoulders where the equipment rubs.

Shane has been thinking about this for weeks. About sitting in section 112 in his carefully neutral clothes while Ilya plays for the Stanley Cup. About being invisible in a building full of people celebrating the man he loves. About wanting, for once, to claim something publicly.

He takes the jersey. Ilya is at morning skate, won't be back for hours. Shane holds it up against himself in the mirror. It's a little big, the sleeves past his wrists, but it fits.

He looks like someone who belongs to Ilya Rozanov.

Shane folds the jersey carefully and puts it in his bag to keep. When Ilya gets home from skate, Shane doesn't mention it. He'll find out tonight, when he looks for Shane in the stands and sees him wearing something that smells like hockey tape and victory and Ilya himself.

Before game five, during warmups, Ilya scans the stands the way he always scans the stands, looking for Shane.

He finds him in section 112, four rows back from the glass. Shane is wearing a Bears jersey. Number 81. ROZANOV across the back. The seeing of it does something to Ilya's chest that he doesn't have a word for — the public claiming of it, Shane in a Bears jersey in the Garden, Shane who has been in the stands for years in careful neutral clothing that says nothing, now wearing Ilya's name.

Shane catches his eye during the second lap. One second. The look contains everything — *I see you. I'm here. Go win.*

The Bears take game five 2-1 in overtime. Game six goes to San Francisco, 3-2.

After game six, the media scrum is a wall of cameras and microphones and questions that all amount to the same thing: how does it feel to be one game away from back-to-back Stanley Cups?

Ilya sits at the podium in his suit, the tie perfectly straight, and gives the answers he's been giving for six years of playoffs. Measured, professional, the captain voice translated into media-speak.

"Obviously, we are excited about the opportunity," he says to a question about pressure. "Game seven, Stanley Cup Final, at home, this is what you dream about as a kid. But we know San Francisco is going to come ready to play, and we need to match their intensity and execute our game plan."

"Ilya, you've been through this before. Does having won it last year make tomorrow easier or harder?"

Ilya thinks about this. The therapy sessions with Dr Volkov have changed how he processes these moments. It's less about performing, more about presence, less anxiety about saying the wrong thing.

"Different," he says finally. "Last year, we did not know what winning felt like. Now we do. So the wanting is different — not desperate, but... intentional. We know what we are trying to get back to."

"What's been the key to this team's success in the playoffs?"

"Same thing as always. We play for each other. When Marleau makes a play, he's making it for Dubois. When Dubois scores, he's scoring for Kadlec. When I win a faceoff, I am winning it for all of them." Ilya looks directly into the camera. "That is what a team is. Twenty guys who understand that individual success means nothing if the team does not win."

After the scrum, walking back to the locker room, Marleau falls into step beside him.

"Good answers," Marleau says.

"You think?"

"You sounded like a captain."

"I am captain."

"Yes," Marleau says. "You fucking are," he says and slaps Ilya on the back.

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Shane calls his parents on FaceTime the day before game seven. David answers on the second ring, his reading glasses crooked. Yuna is visible in the background, sitting at the kitchen table.

"Shane," David says, adjusting the camera angle. "How are you? Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

"A little." Shane looks at his parents through the screen. David, in his ancient cardigan, was with papers spread around her like always. "I need to ask you something."

"Ask," Yuna says, appearing beside David in the frame.

"I want you to come to the game tomorrow. Both of you."

David blinks. "To Boston? Tomorrow?"

"I can get you flights. First thing in the morning. I have tickets to the game."

"Shane," Yuna says carefully, "that's very last minute."

"Not to see me. To see Ilya." Shane takes a breath. "I want you to be there when he wins. I want him to see you there."

David and Yuna exchange a look.

"You could wear that jersey you bought," Shane says. "Instead of just wearing it at home."

The screen goes quiet except for the slight delay that makes everything feel more distant.

"You want me to wear it," David says slowly. "To the Stanley Cup Final. In public."

"Yes."

David wipes his eyes. "Shane, are you sure? This is... this is public. This is us saying..."

"This is you saying he matters to me, so he matters to you too." Shane looks at his parents through the screen. "That's all I want, for him to know that."

Yuna leans into frame. "We'll be there."

"Really?"

"Really. Send us the flight information." She looks at Shane with the expression that sees everything. "And Shane? We're proud of you. Both of you."

David is openly crying now. "Game seven of the Stanley Cup Final. My god. I never thought I'd care this much about anyone's career but yours," David says, and means it."

Game seven is back in Boston, and when Ilya scans the stands during warmups, Shane is back in the stands wearing his jersey. But now David is beside him. David, in a Rozanov jersey, his face already doing the thing it does, the wet eyes and barely contained emotion of a man who feels everything at full volume. David Hollander, wearing Ilya's name across his back, Shane's father claiming him publicly in a way that makes Ilya's throat tight.

And beside David is Yuna. Not in a Bears jersey but in her own clothes, a dark coat, her hair perfect, her face composed. Which is exactly right, which is the most Yuna thing in the world. But she's there, in the Garden, watching Ilya play for the Stanley Cup, and her presence means everything to Ilya.

The three of them together, Shane in Ilya's jersey, David wearing Ilya's name, Yuna steady and proud, look like family. Looks like the thing Ilya thought he'd never have when he was sitting in Svetlana's hotel room talking about fathers who would rather their sons be dead.

The game is tight, defensive, the kind of hockey where every shift matters. Ilya scores first in the second period. San Francisco ties it in the third. With four minutes left, Dubois finds the back of the net on a beautiful feed from Kadlec.

2-1. Final.

The buzzer sounds.

The Boston Bears have won the Stanley Cup.

The on-ice celebration is the same and completely different from last year — the same pile of bodies, the same champagne, the same thirty-five pounds of silver and nickel being carried across the ice, but different because this is not the first time. This is the repeat, the back-to-back, the thing that separates good teams from great teams.

Ilya lifts the Cup, and the noise from the Boston fans is enormous and distant, filtered through the arena's acoustics and his own adrenaline. He says *для тебя, мама* into the roar, the way he did last year, but this year he also says the other thing, the thing that has been building since the moment he saw Shane in the jersey:

"And for you. You know who you are."

Later, in the locker room, the celebration is loud and chaotic and exactly what it should be. Champagne on everyone, Dubek crying (again), Dubois making a speech in French that nobody

understands but everyone applauds. Marleau, soaked in champagne, finds Ilya in the corner and shakes his hand.

"Back to back," Marleau says.

"Back to back," Ilya confirms.

"How does it feel?"

Ilya thinks about this. The grey thing is quiet tonight, has been quiet for weeks now, and the thing that's in its place is steadier, more sustainable. The therapy, the particular relief of finally feeling like himself — all of it has led to this moment, this Cup, this feeling of being exactly where he's supposed to be.

"Like we belong here," Ilya says.

Marleau nods. "We do belong here."

"Yes," Ilya says. "We do."

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The celebration at the Garden goes until past midnight — the Cup presentation, the interviews, the champagne in the locker room, the particular chaos of a team that has just won back-to-back Stanley Cups. By the time Ilya gets home, it's nearly three in the morning.

Shane is awake on the couch, the reading glasses on, the book in his lap, but Ilya can tell he hasn't been reading. He's been waiting.

Shane looks up when Ilya comes through the door, and his face does the thing — the relief, the specific relief of a person who has been carrying something and can finally put it down.

"You won," Shane says.

"We won," Ilya says.

Shane puts the book down and stands up and crosses the apartment and puts his arms around Ilya, and Ilya puts his face in Shane's neck and breathes in the smell of home, of safety, of the person who wore his jersey in section 112 and watched him lift the Cup.

"Dad cried," Shane says into Ilya's neck.

"He was wearing my jersey."

"I know. He bought it himself. I didn't ask him to."

Ilya pulls back and looks at Shane. "You didn't tell me they were coming."

"I wanted to see your face when you found them."

"Did you see my face?"

"During warmups. Yes." Shane's mouth curves. "It was a good face."

They stand in the apartment at three in the morning, the Stanley Cup somewhere in the Garden being prepared for its summer tour, the city outside still celebrating something that belongs, in part, to both of them.

"Shower," Shane says. "You smell like champagne and celebration."

"I smell like victory."

"Okay, you smell like victory. Now go shower."

Ilya goes to shower. When he gets out, Shane is in bed, the reading glasses off, the book on the nightstand. Ilya gets in beside him, and Shane turns off the light, and they lie in the dark apartment listening to the city celebrate around them.

"Two Cups," Shane says quietly.

"Two Cups," Ilya confirms.

"Back to back."

"Back to back."

Shane's hand finds his across the sheets. "I'm proud of you."

"I know," Ilya says. "I can feel it."

They fall asleep holding hands, and Ilya dreams of a future where he can celebrate with Shane on the ice.

Chapter 36: the funeral

Chapter Summary

Ilya gets some news from Alexei and goes back to Russia one last time.

Chapter Notes

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

Alexei calls on a Wednesday in October.

Ilya is in the parking lot after practice, his bag over his shoulder, the Boston fall doing its thing — the light going golden, the leaves turning, the particular quality of October air that smells like the season changing. He sees Alexei's name on the screen and knows before he answers.

"He's gone," Alexei says. His voice is flat. Not the flat of a person who isn't feeling anything, but the flat of a person who has been feeling too much for too long and has run out of register. "This morning in his sleep. Natalya found him."

Ilya stands in the parking lot. Around him, the city keeps moving, a car pulls out, and someone laughs somewhere.

"Okay," Ilya says.

"The funeral is Saturday." Alexei pauses. A beat that contains the assumption — the years of absence, the last visit in 2012, the money sent in place of presence. "I'll handle it."

"Alexei—"

"I'll send you the details, just in case." He says it without weight, without accusation. *Just in case*, which is Alexei's way of leaving a door open while pretending he isn't.

He hangs up. Ilya stands in the parking lot for a long time before gathering himself and driving home. The apartment is empty — Shane is at the rink, he won't be back until two. Ilya puts his bag down and sits on the couch.

He tries to feel something specific. Grief is supposed to be specific — the loss of a person, the missing of them. But what Ilya feels is not specific. It's the grey thing, and underneath the grey thing, something older, the loss of something that was never there. The father who was never going to be what a father is supposed to be. The phone calls that were always about Ilya's failures. The voice that used his mother against him at a state banquet in front of strangers. The father who cleared Irina's things in four days and gave Ilya nothing except the one thing Ilya stole.

He puts his hand on the cross. It's warm against his chest, from his skin, the way it's always warm.

He sits on the couch and waits for Shane to come home.

Shane comes through the door at two-fifteen and knows immediately.

Ilya is on the couch. Not reading, not watching television, not doing anything — just sitting, his hands in his lap, his face with the particular quality it has when the grey thing inside him has settled in.

Shane puts his bag down. He doesn't say anything, doesn't ask, he just crosses the room and sits beside Ilya and waits.

"My father is dead," Ilya says. "This morning."

Shane is quiet for a moment. "I'm sorry."

"I do not—" Ilya starts, then stops. "I am not — I do not know what I feel. I keep waiting to feel the right thing, and there is no right thing."

"There's no right thing to feel about your father dying when your father was the man he was."

Ilya looks at him. His eyes are dry. "The funeral is Saturday. In Moscow." He looks at his hands. "Alexei said he would handle it. He did not ask me to come."

"Do you want to go?"

Ilya is quiet for a long moment. "I do not know. Maybe I should not."

Shane watches him. "Why shouldn't you?"

"Because I did not go back. After 2012. He was sick, and I did not go back, and sending money was easier than going, and now he is dead, and I do— what is the point of going now? It will not change anything."

"It's not about changing anything," Shane says. "It's about you. Not him."

Ilya looks at him.

"You have spent so long being angry at him," Shane says. "You have spent years carrying that. Going to Moscow doesn't mean you forgive him. It means you close the chapter on your terms, not his." He pauses. "And your brother is there. And your mother is buried there."

Ilya is very still.

"Go," Shane says. "I think you need to go."

The stillness holds for a moment. Then something in Ilya's face shifts — not relief exactly, but the particular quality of a person who has been given permission for something they already knew they needed.

"Okay," Ilya says.

"Okay?"

"I will go." He looks at Shane. "How did you get so wise?"

"I'm not wise. I'm logical."

"You said that before."

"It was true before, and it's true now."

Ilya almost smiles. Shane reaches for his hand and holds it. The grief is still there, formless and old and not yet finished with him, but the direction is clear now, and direction is what Ilya needs when everything else is uncertain.

"Tell me about your mom," Shane says. "Tell me something about her I don't know."

Ilya looks at him. Then, slowly, something in his face opens.

"She made terrible tea," Ilya says. "Every morning. Too strong, too bitter, the wrong temperature. My father complained about it every day for years. She would laugh. She said if he wanted better tea, he could make it himself." His mouth curves slightly. "He never made it himself."

"She sounds stubborn."

"She was very stubborn." The curve deepens. "Alexei has it too. The stubbornness. I thought I didn't, but Svetlana says I'm the worst of all of them." He pauses. "She would have loved you so much."

Shane is quiet. The afternoon light moves across the apartment.

"I think I would have loved her," Shane says.

They sit in silence for a long time. Shane keeps his hands around Ilya's hand and doesn't try to fill the silence, because the silence is where the grief is, and the grief needs space.

At some point, Ilya turns toward him, the way the body moves toward warmth without asking permission. His forehead finds Shane's shoulder, and Shane's arm goes around him.

"Stay with me," Ilya says into Shane's shoulder.

"I'm here," Shane says. "I'm not going anywhere."

They stay on the couch until the light goes, and then Shane says, quietly, "Come to bed." And Ilya comes.

The bedroom is dark. They undress without ceremony. Ilya's shirt over his head, the cross settling back against his chest, Shane's training clothes in a pile on the floor. They get into bed, and Ilya lies on his back and stares at the ceiling, and Shane lies beside him and watches his face.

"I do not want to think," Ilya says.

"I know."

"Can you—" He stops. Starts again. "I need to be somewhere else. Just for a while."

Shane understands what is being asked and how to answer it.

He rolls toward Ilya. His hand finds Ilya's jaw, turns his face, and kisses him. Slow, deliberate, the kind of kiss that says *I have you and I'm not in a hurry, and we have all night*.

Ilya's breath changes.

Shane kisses his jaw, his neck, the place below his ear that makes Ilya's eyes close. His hand moves down Ilya's chest, over the cross, over the ribs, and Ilya's hand comes up and covers Shane's hand and holds it there for a moment — over his heart, over the cross, the warmth of both of them.

Then Shane moves lower.

He kisses his way down Ilya's sternum, each rib, the soft skin of his stomach. Ilya's breathing changes — slower, deeper, the tension in his shoulders releasing one degree at a time. Shane's mouth finds his hip, the jut of the bone, and Ilya's hand comes to rest in Shane's hair. Not pulling, just holding.

Shane takes him in his mouth slowly, and with the focused attention of a person who has decided this is what matters right now, and nothing else exists. Ilya makes a sound, low and involuntary, and his hand tightens in Shane's hair and then loosens, like he's reminding himself to let go.

Shane takes his time. Through the years, he's learned the rhythm of Ilya's breathing, what makes it catch, what makes it deepen, the specific pressure and pace that strips the performance away until there's nothing left but Ilya, present and unguarded. When Ilya says his name — *Shane* — it's not the performing voice, not the captain voice, not any of the voices Ilya uses in the world. It's the voice that only exists in this room.

Shane pulls back before Ilya gets too close. Ilya makes a sound of protest.

"Turn over," Shane says against his hip.

Ilya turns. Face down, arms loose, the constellation of moles on his back that Shane knows by heart. Shane reaches for the nightstand, slicks his fingers, and presses his mouth between Ilya's shoulder blades.

He works slowly. His tongue traces down Ilya's spine while his hand moves between his cheeks, one slick finger pressing in carefully, feeling Ilya's body resist and then yield. Ilya's breath goes ragged. His hands grip the sheets.

"Shane—"

"I've got you," Shane says against his skin.

A second finger. Ilya's hips shift back into the touch, seeking more, and Shane gives him more — the slow crook of his fingers finding the place that makes Ilya's thighs shake, his mouth still moving on the small of Ilya's back, unhurried, and thorough. Ilya is making sounds he doesn't make anywhere else, the small, desperate sounds of a man who has given up controlling what comes out of his body, and Shane receives them like they're something precious because they are.

When Ilya says, "Please," into the pillow, Shane gives him everything. His fingers work deeper, finding the rhythm that makes Ilya's breath catch, the specific pressure and angle that strips away everything except the present moment. Shane's other hand moves to Ilya's hip, steadying him, grounding him, while his mouth presses against the back of Ilya's neck.

"Okay?" Shane says against his skin.

"Yes," Ilya says. "Don't stop."

Shane doesn't stop. He works slowly, deliberately, his fingers moving inside Ilya while his mouth traces along his shoulder, giving Ilya the specific thing grief needs — to be held, to be moved, to be somewhere else, to be taken out of the flat place and into the body that is warm and present and loved.

Ilya comes with his face in the pillow and Shane's name on his lips, Shane's fingers still moving inside him, working him through it until he's shaking. Shane withdraws carefully and pulls Ilya against him, and afterwards they lie tangled together in the dark and don't speak for a long time.

"Thank you," Ilya says eventually.

"You don't have to thank me."

"I know. I am thanking you anyway."

Shane's hand moves in his hair. Ilya's breathing slows, and evens, and Shane can feel the exact moment it shifts from waking to sleep — the body going heavier, the hand on Shane's chest relaxing its grip.

He falls asleep with his hand in Ilya's hair.

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The morning is quiet.

Ilya wakes before the alarm, his body trained by years spent sleeping next to someone who always wakes at five-fifteen. Shane is beside him, warm, his breathing even, his face in the particular softness of deep sleep.

Ilya lies still and looks at him.

Shane asleep is one of Ilya's favourite things. Not because Shane is unguarded in sleep — Shane is always unguarded with him, has been for a long time — but because of the specific quality of Shane's stillness, the way his face settles into something that is just Shane, without any of the things Shane uses to manage the world. Just the person, breathing, here.

Ilya gets up carefully. He makes coffee. He stands at the counter in the October morning and looks at the apartment and thinks about Moscow.

His father is in a mortuary in Moscow. In three days, Alexei will bury him in the cemetery where Irina is buried, and Ilya will be there, and Grigori Rozanov will go into the ground, and the chapter will close. Not cleanly — it will never close cleanly — but it will close.

Shane appears in the doorway at five-fifteen. Hair a mess, a hoodie pulled on over nothing, the reading glasses in his hand because he picked them up without thinking.

"You're up early," Shane says.

"I am always up early."

"Earlier than early." Shane comes to the counter. Ilya pours him coffee without being asked. Shane wraps both hands around the mug and looks at Ilya over the rim. "How are you?"

"I do not know yet," Ilya says. "I think I will not know until I am there."

Shane nods. He understands this — the knowledge that some things can only be processed in the place where they happened, that grief has a geography.

"I will book the flight today and talk to LeClaire," Ilya says.

"Okay."

"I will be back Sunday."

"I'll be here," Shane says.

Ilya looks at him. The October morning light is coming through the window and catching Shane's hair, and he is standing in their kitchen in his hoodie with his coffee and his glasses and the whole ordinary extraordinary fact of him, and Ilya thinks: *this is what I am coming back to. This is what exists on the other side of Moscow.*

"I love you," Ilya says.

Shane looks at him. "I love you too." He takes a sip of his coffee. "Eat something before practice."

"You sound like me."

"I learned from the best."

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Moscow is grey.

This is not a surprise — Moscow in October is always grey, the particular grey of a city that takes the season seriously, the trees stripped, the sky low, the streets doing the thing they do in autumn, which is reminding everyone that winter is coming and it is not going to be gentle.

Ilya takes a car from the airport to the house. Alexei is there. He looks tired in the specific way of someone who has been managing logistics and grief simultaneously for three days, the particular exhaustion of the person who stayed.

They stand in the doorway of Grigori's house and look at each other.

"You came," Alexei says.

"I came."

Alexei steps back to let him in. The house smells the same — the particular smell of old furniture and something medicinal, the smell of a place that has been lived in by a sick person for a long time. Natalya has been here already, Ilya can tell. The surfaces are clean, the dishes done, the particular tidiness of a caregiver's last act.

Grigori's chair is empty. The television is off. The room is just a room now, without the person who made it what it was.

"He didn't suffer," Alexei says. "In his sleep. It was... it was peaceful, Natalya said."

"Good," Ilya says. And means it, despite everything. Despite the mother's name being used as a weapon. Despite the harsh words and harsher slaps. Despite all of it. He is glad his father didn't suffer at the end. He is surprised to be glad, but he is.

They sit at the kitchen table, and Alexei makes tea. It's strong, bitter, too hot, and Ilya thinks about his Mama and almost says something, but doesn't.

"The inheritance," Alexei says. "The house, the accounts. He had more than either of us expected. The KGB pension, some investments." He slides a folder across the table. "It goes to us equally. His wishes."

Ilya looks at the folder. He doesn't open it.

"I don't want it," Ilya says.

Alexei looks at him. "It's significant money."

"I don't want it." Ilya is very clear about this, the way he is clear about the things he has decided. "Give my half to Elizaveta. For her education, for whatever she needs." He pauses. "And keep some for yourself. Not all of it. Keep what you need."

Alexei is quiet for a long moment. He looks at the folder, then at Ilya.

"Okay," he says.

"Okay."

The funeral is on Saturday. It's a fairly large service, military honours, a flag-draped coffin, men in uniform who knew Grigori from his KGB days. The cemetery is full of people Ilya doesn't recognise, colleagues and contacts from a life that existed parallel to the one Ilya knew. Officials, former operatives, the particular Moscow machinery of state service and old connections.

Ilya sits with Polina and Alexei at the front, both of them in black suits, and watches strangers pay respects to a man who was, apparently, more significant than either of his sons fully understood. The priest speaks about service to country, about duty, about a man who gave his life to Russia in ways that could not always be spoken about publicly.

Svetlana stands several rows back, appropriately distant, her presence respectful but not presumptuous. She understands funerals, understands the politics of grief, understands when to be seen and when to fade into the background.

After the service, after the flag is folded and presented to Polina, after the final prayers are said, Ilya stands at his father's grave and looks at the ground and feels... complicated things. Not love. Not hate. Something older and more ambiguous, the residue of a relationship that was never what it should have been and is now permanently, irreversibly over.

He goes to Irina's grave after.

It's nearby, where her parents are buried. He stands in front of it for a long time. The wind moves through the cemetery, and the leaves are down, and Moscow is grey around him, and he puts his hand on the cross against his chest.

"I came back," he says. "For him, yes. But also for you."

The grave says nothing. The wind moves.

"I have someone," Ilya says. "You would like him. He is very precise and very kind, and he has been taking care of me in the ways that I needed and didn't know how to ask for." He pauses. "I think you would have known how to love him. You were good at that. Loving people who didn't think they deserved love. He deserves love, Mama. He deserves the world, he deserves more than me."

He stands there for a while longer. The grey sky, the stripped trees, the particular silence of a cemetery in autumn.

Then he says, "I'm going home now, and I don't think I'll be able to come back here. Я люблю тебя, мама."

When he turns to leave, Svetlana is waiting by the cemetery gate. She's in black, her coat expensive and perfectly tailored. She doesn't ask how long he needs or if he's ready. She just waits.

"Thank you," Ilya says when he reaches her. "For coming."

"Of course," she says, the way she says the things that are obvious to her even when they're not obvious to anyone else.

They walk to the car together. She doesn't try to fill the silence, doesn't ask how he feels or what he needs. She understands that some grief requires quiet, and quiet is what she gives him.

"Dinner?" she asks when they're in the car.

"No, I should go. I have to speak to Alexei and pack. My flight is tomorrow."

"Our flight," she corrects. "I'm coming back with you. Someone needs to make sure you eat something that isn't airplane food."

Ilya looks at her. "Svetlana—"

"It's decided," she says, with the tone that means the discussion is over. "Besides, I should get back. I have meetings on Monday morning."

He goes back to the house. Alexei is in the kitchen. They eat dinner — something Natalya left in the refrigerator, reheated — and the conversation is careful and quiet, the conversation of two brothers who have been circling each other for years and are trying, haltingly, to find a different way.

It is after dinner, over the last of the tea, that Ilya says what he came to say.

"I'm not coming back," Ilya says. "After this. I'm not coming back to Moscow."

Alexei looks at him. "Ever?"

"No, I don't think I will." He looks at his hands. "My life is in Boston. The team is in Boston. My— It doesn't matter. This—" He gestures at the kitchen, the house, the grey window. "This was my father's life, and my mother's life, and I loved them both in different ways for different reasons. But it's not my life."

Alexei is quiet.

"Elizaveta will have what she needs," Ilya says. "The inheritance will cover her education, whatever else she wants." He looks at his brother. "But I need you to stop — the calls, Alexei. The ones where you tell me what you need and wait for me to fix it. I can't be the thing you lean on from six thousand kilometres away. I have my own—" He stops. "I have my own things. My own life. And I need to be in it."

Alexei looks at the table for a long time. When he looks up, his face is doing something complicated — the anger is there, the resentment, but underneath it something else, something that might be recognition.

"You sound like Mama," Alexei says. "When she was done arguing."

Ilya looks at him. "Is that a yes?"

"It's a... yes. Fine." Alexei picks up his tea. "Go back to Boston, Ilya. Go back to your life."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me." Alexei almost smiles. It doesn't quite arrive. "Just... be well, Ilya. Be happy in Boston."

"I will," Ilya says.

They sit for a while longer, the brothers, in the kitchen of their father's house, the tea going cold, the night pressing against the windows. They don't fix anything; there is nothing to fix, not really, just the long history of two people who share a wound and cope with it differently. But they sit, and the sitting is something.

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The flight to Boston is quiet. Svetlana sits beside him in first class, working on her laptop, occasionally putting her hand on his arm when turbulence hits or when she notices his breathing change. She doesn't try to talk about Grigori or the funeral or what happens next. She works, and he looks out the window, and the quiet between them is comfortable in the way it's always been comfortable.

"He wasn't a good father," Ilya says somewhere over the Atlantic.

Svetlana doesn't look up from her laptop. "No. He wasn't."

"But I'm still sad."

"Of course you are." She saves her document and closes the laptop. "You can grieve the father you needed even when you're angry at the father you had. They're different things."

Ilya looks at her. "When did you get so wise about grief?"

"Moscow teaches you things," she says. "Whether you want to learn them or not."

The plane hums around them. Other passengers sleep, read, or watch movies on small screens. Ilya and Svetlana sit in their bubble of quiet understanding, and for the first time since Alexei's call, Ilya feels like he might actually be okay.

"Shane will be waiting," Svetlana says, as they begin their descent into Boston.

"Yes."

"Good." She looks at him with the expression that sees everything. "You need to be home."

"I need to be home," Ilya agrees.

Ilya and Svetlana walk through arrivals together, their bags wheeled behind them. She's still in her black coat, still perfectly put together despite nine hours in the air. Ilya is tired in the bone-deep way of someone who has buried a parent and flown across an ocean in the same week.

As they exit the airport, Svetlana notices the way Ilya's breathing has changed, the particular tightness around his eyes that means he's holding himself together through effort alone.

"Ilya," she says, stopping him with a hand on his arm.

He looks at her, and she can see it, the grief he's been carrying all weekend finally catching up with him now that they're home, now that the funeral is over and the performance of being okay can end.

"Come here," she says, and pulls him into a hug.

Ilya melts into her arms, his face buried in her shoulder, and for a moment, he allows himself to be what he is, which is someone who just buried his father and needs to be held. Svetlana holds him steadily, her hand in his hair, letting him take what he needs.

When he pulls back, his eyes are bright, but he's breathing easier.

"Better?" she asks.

"Better."

They walk to the parking garage together. Ilya's Ferrari is where he left it, sleek and low and entirely impractical for Boston winters but somehow exactly right for this moment.

"I can take the T," Svetlana says as they approach the car.

"Don't be ridiculous," Ilya says, unlocking the doors. "Get in."

He doesn't notice the photographer with the long lens in the parking garage, or the way the photos of him and Svetlana, the embrace in the terminal, getting into his expensive car together, will look to people who don't know that sometimes holding someone means you love them, and sometimes it just means you understand what loss feels like.

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Shane has made solyanka.

Ilya comes through the door at ten p.m., and the apartment smells like solyanka, and the lights are low, and Shane is on the couch with the book and the glasses, and he looks up when Ilya comes through the door.

Ilya puts his bag down. He crosses the apartment and sits beside Shane, and Shane puts his arms around him, and Ilya puts his face in Shane's neck, and they stay like that for a long time, the solyanka warm on the stove.

"How was it?" Shane asks into Ilya's hair.

"Hard," Ilya says. "And also... I do not know. Right? It was right thing to do."

"I know."

"You told me."

"I told you," Shane confirms, without smugness, just stating a fact.

Ilya pulls back and looks at him. The glasses, the freckles, the face that is the most familiar thing in his life.

"I went to her grave," Ilya says.

Shane is very still. "Yeah?"

"I talked to her." Ilya's voice is quiet. "I told her about you."

Shane doesn't say anything, but his hand finds Ilya's hand.

"She would have loved you," Ilya says. "I am sure of it."

"You said that before."

"I am more sure now." Ilya looks at their hands. "I told her you were precise and kind. She would have appreciated that. Kindness was not something our house had a lot of."

Shane squeezes his hand once. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

"I made solyanka."

"I know. I can smell it." Ilya looks at him. "You made solyanka."

"It takes prep," Shane says. "I had time."

Ilya looks at Shane — Shane, who researched solyanka and made it from scratch on a Sunday because Ilya was coming home from burying his father. Shane, who does everything with the total focused attention of a person who has decided that what they're doing matters.

"Shane Hollander," Ilya says. "You are the least boring person I have ever met."

Shane smiles. "You've said that before, too."

"It keeps being true."

They eat on the couch, the solyanka warm and there's too much garlic, yet it's exactly right, and outside, the Boston autumn does its thing, and Ilya is home, and the Moscow chapter of his life is finally closed.

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The story breaks on Tuesday.

Ilya is at practice when Marleau skates over during the water break, his phone in his hand, his face carefully neutral in the way that means something is wrong.

"You need to see this," Marleau says quietly.

He shows Ilya the screen. TMZ. A photo of Ilya and Svetlana at Logan Airport on Sunday night — she's beside him as they walk through arrivals, her hand briefly on his arm as she says something. The headline reads: EXCLUSIVE: Boston Bears Captain Ilya Rozanov's Mystery Girlfriend Supports Him After Father's Death.

Below the photo: "Sources close to the couple confirm that Rozanov, 23, has been quietly dating the stunning brunette for several months. 'She flew to Moscow with him for the funeral,' reveals an insider. 'She's been incredibly supportive during this difficult time.'"

Ilya stares at the screen. The photo is real. The airport, the conversation, Svetlana's hand on his arm. But everything else is a lie.

"Fuck," Ilya says.

"Yeah," Marleau says. He puts his phone away. "What do you want to do?"

"I will tweet TMZ," Ilya says. "Right now. Is lie. Liar told you that."

"Maybe wait," Marleau says. "Think about it first."

But Ilya is already pulling out his phone, already typing, already furious at whoever sold this story to TMZ, at the photographer who turned grief into gossip, at the unnamed source who decided to lie about his life for money.

His phone buzzes. A text from Shane.

Saw the story. Can we talk?

Ilya looks at the text. Then at the TMZ article. Then at Marleau, who is watching him with the expression of a man who has been through media storms and knows they're never as simple as they seem.

"Five minutes," Ilya tells Marleau.

He calls Shane.

"Don't say anything about it," Shane says, without preamble.

"Shane—"

"Don't, okay. It's just gonna turn it into something bigger if you do."

"But Shane, is lies."

"I know it's lies." Shane's voice is careful, controlled. "But maybe... maybe that's not the worst thing."

Ilya goes very still. Around him, practice continues. His teammates do drills, LeClaire shouts instructions, and the world moves around him.

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying maybe this is good for you," Shane says. "A girlfriend. Someone respectable, successful, beautiful. It's good for your image, your career. The league wants their captains to look stable, normal, settled."

The words hit Ilya like a physical thing. "Shane."

"The sponsors want it too. It's a great love story, the grieving son supported by his devoted girlfriend. It's perfect PR."

"Shane, stop."

"You're the face of the franchise. This makes you look—"

"Shane." Ilya's voice is sharp enough that Marleau looks over. "Is that what you want? For everyone to think Svetlana is my girlfriend?"

The line goes quiet. Ilya can hear Shane breathing, can hear him choosing his words.

"Yes," Shane says finally. "I think that's what's best."

The word lands in Ilya's chest like a weight. Yes. Shane wants the world to think he's dating someone else. Shane wants him to perform for career advancement. Shane wants their relationship to stay hidden behind a lie about Svetlana.

"Okay," Ilya says. His voice sounds far away to his own ears.

"Ilya—"

"Okay. If that is what you want."

"It's what's smart—"

"I have to go," Ilya says. "Practice."

He hangs up. He puts his phone away. He skates back to the drill and doesn't tweet anything, doesn't deny anything, lets TMZ keep their lie about Svetlana being his girlfriend because Shane thinks it's good for his image.

Marleau skates beside him. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," Ilya says. But it's not fine. Nothing about this is fine.

He gets through practice on muscle memory, goes home to the apartment where Shane is waiting, and tries to pretend his heart isn't broken by the man he loves asking him to hide their love behind a fake relationship with someone else.

That night, lying in bed next to Shane, Ilya stares at the ceiling and thinks about the word yes, and how sometimes the person you love can say exactly what they mean and still destroy you.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter actually broke my heart a lil bit 🥺

Chapter 37: the decision

Chapter Summary

The Bears start to decline while Ilya makes a decision that will affect him and Shane, and Shane goes to Worlds

The Bears have started the season like defending champions should. They're clean, confident, and have the ease of a team that knows exactly how good it is and doesn't need to prove anything to anyone. They win their first six games. The chemistry is there, the systems are sharp, and Ilya plays like a man who has figured out how to be captain of a team that expects to win every game and usually does.

By Halloween, they're 12-3-1 and sitting first in the division. The local sports radio calls them "inevitable." The analytics people run out of superlatives. LeClaire says nothing publicly and everything privately, the way he always does, but his face in practice has the particular satisfaction of a man whose job is secure.

November is when it starts.

The Bears don't suddenly become bad; they just stop being great, and the difference between great and good is enormous when you're defending a Stanley Cup. Marleau goes down with a knee injury in the second period against Montreal. Nothing dirty, just hockey — the wrong angle, the wrong timing, the particular physics of two large men colliding at high speed. He'll be out six weeks.

Dubois pulls something in his groin three games later. The medical staff says two weeks. It becomes four weeks, then six weeks, the injury stubborn in the way injuries are stubborn when a player is thirty-three and has played professional hockey for thirteen years.

By Thanksgiving, the Bears are .500. Not terrible. Not concerning. Just... ordinary. The word no defending champion wants to hear.

Ilya goes to therapy on Tuesdays and talks about the weight of expectations, about the difference between leading a team that's rising and leading a team that's trying not to fall. Dr Volkov listens and asks the questions that unlock the grey thing, the specific grey thing that comes from feeling responsible for twenty-one other men's success when success is becoming harder to find.

"It's not the same," Ilya says, in the chair in Back Bay, the November afternoon dark outside. "Last year, we knew we were better. This year, we know we were better."

"How does that feel different in your body?" Volkov asks.

Ilya thinks about this. "Heavier," he says. "Like I'm carrying something that used to carry itself."

Volkov nods. "What would it feel like to carry less?"

The question stays with Ilya after the session. He walks out of the Back Bay office, and instead of going straight home, he takes a walk. Through the Common, past the pond where couples are taking photos despite the cold, around the paths that wind between the bare trees.

He thinks about weight. About carrying things. About the particular exhaustion that comes from managing not just a struggling team, but the careful performance of being Ilya Rozanov, captain, the person who never lets anyone see him struggle.

And then, unexpectedly, he thinks about spring. The season ending, win or lose. The space between seasons when hockey players become just people, when the careful management of public persona becomes optional.

He stops walking.

The thought that comes is clear, sudden, like something that was always there and just needed the right moment to surface: he wants to tell them, about himself, about Shane. Not just Svetlana, or David and Yuna. Not just the people who already know. Everyone. The team. The media. The world.

He wants to stop carrying the weight of hiding.

Ilya stands in the Common in the November cold and imagines it. A press conference, maybe. Or something simpler — a statement, a social media post, the particular straightforwardness that comes from finally telling the truth. He imagines saying Shane's name in public, saying the word boyfriend, saying we instead of I when he talks about his life.

The fantasy is terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure.

He thinks about the Bears struggling, about his own struggle to hold them together, and realises that part of what makes it exhausting is how much energy he spends managing two separate selves. Captain Ilya, who gives interviews about teamwork and focus, and never mentions the person who makes him coffee in the morning. Private Ilya, who lives in an apartment with Shane and plans a future he can't talk about publicly.

What would it feel like to be one person? To have Shane at team events, to mention him in interviews, to stop parsing every sentence for accidental revelations?

Spring, Ilya thinks. When the season ends. When there's space to rebuild not just the team, but himself. When he can finally stop carrying what feels too heavy to hold.

The idea settles in his chest like something he's been waiting for without knowing it. It's something to work toward, to prepare for, to build the courage to actually do.

By the time he walks back to his car and drives home, Shane is already there, on the couch with his reading glasses and a training binder. The scene is so familiar, so domestic, that Ilya feels the weight Volkov asked about shift slightly. This is what he wants to protect. This life, this person, this future they're building together.

And protecting it, he realises, might mean finally stopping hiding it.

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Shane is preparing for Worlds.

The competition is in Shanghai in March '15. This time, Shane and Rose are the team to beat, the defending Olympic champions, the pair that other teams study on video and try to solve.

The programs are coming together. Linda has them working on refinements now, not rebuilds. The technical content is there, the difficulty is there, the presentation that judges love is there. It's the kind of preparation that comes from knowing exactly what you're capable of and having five months to make it perfect.

Shane comes home from practice with the particular glow of someone whose body is doing exactly what they ask it to do. His jumps are clean, his lines are sharp, and Rose is skating better than she ever has, the partnership hitting the specific synchronisation that makes pairs skating look like magic when it's done right.

"Throw triple?" Ilya asks, from the couch, when Shane comes through the door.

"Landed clean," Shane says. "Linda thinks we're ahead of schedule."

Ilya watches Shane move around the apartment — the training bag in the closet, the protein shake, the particular routine of someone whose day was productive. Shane is lighter these days, the specific lightness that comes from knowing your work is going well and your body is responding, and the thing you're building toward is going to be extraordinary.

The contrast sits in the apartment between them. Shane rising. The Bears are falling, and Ilya is trying to hold something together that wants to come apart.

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December is harder.

The injuries pile up. Kadlec goes down with a concussion — a clean hit, legal, the kind of thing that happens in hockey, but the cognitive symptoms linger, and he's week-to-week. Brown, already slow, gets slower, his thirty-four-year-old legs showing their age in the third periods of back-to-back games.

The Bears go 3-7 in December. Not disastrous (at least that's what Ilya keeps telling himself), they're still winning games, still competitive, but not the dominant team they were in October. The games are closer, grittier, requiring more effort to achieve what used to come naturally.

After a 3-2 overtime loss to Buffalo at home, the Garden crowd isn't booing, but they're not quite as loud either. The particular energy of a crowd that expects dominance and gets competitiveness instead.

Shane is on the couch when Ilya gets home, the reading glasses on, a training journal in his lap instead of a book. He looks up when Ilya comes through the door, and his face does what it always does — the assessment, the particular attention Shane pays when he's reading Ilya's mood.

"At least it was close," Shane says.

"We are playing harder for same results," Ilya says.

"Growing pains?"

"Something like that." Ilya sits on the couch. The apartment feels different when the hockey requires more effort, when excellence has to be earned instead of assumed. They're fourth in the division now. Still in a playoff spot, but not comfortably. The defending Stanley Cup champions, having to work for what used to be automatic.

Shane closes the training journal. "What did LeClaire say?"

"Nothing. In public, nothing." Ilya runs his hands through his hair. "In the room, he said, we need to find our game. Like our game is lost somewhere, and we just need to look harder."

"Maybe you do."

"Maybe we do." Ilya looks at the training journal in Shane's lap. "How was practice?"

"Good. Clean." Shane's voice is careful, the way it gets when he's reporting good news during Ilya's bad news. "Rose landed the quad throw."

"The quad throw?"

"Yes."

"Linda thinks you are ready for that?"

"Linda thinks we're ready for everything." Shane looks at him. "It's going well, Ilya. Really well."

The really well sits in the apartment. Shane's really well. The quad throw that's going well. The programs that are coming together, the partnership that's hitting new heights, and the specific trajectory of someone who is building toward something extraordinary.

Ilya looks at Shane, the careful voice, the particular glow that hasn't dimmed despite six Bears losses in a row, and feels something cold and familiar settle in his chest.

"I am happy for you," Ilya says. He means it, and he also doesn't mean it. And hates himself for not meaning it completely.

Shane looks at him for a long moment. "Ilya..."

"I am," Ilya says. "I am happy. Is good that your training is going well. Someone should be going well."

The sentence hangs in the apartment. Shane looks at his training journal, then at Ilya.

"Is not what I meant," Ilya says quickly. "I did not mean like that."

"I know."

"Is just... we are losing to Buffalo, at home. And you are landing quad throws, and I am—" He stops. "I do not know what I am."

Shane puts the training journal on the coffee table. He looks at Ilya with the expression he gets when he's seeing something clearly, the specific clarity Shane brings to problems that need solving.

"You're having a rough patch," Shane says. "The team is having a rough patch. It happens."

"Does it? Does it happen to defending Stanley Cup champions?"

"It happens to everyone. Look at Chicago last year. They missed the playoffs. Look at LA the year after they won. It happens."

Ilya knows this is true. He knows the statistics, the history, the particular difficulty of repeating as champions, and it's even more difficult to threepeat. But the knowing doesn't help with the feeling, the specific feeling of watching something you built start to crumble while the person you love builds something higher and cleaner and more beautiful than anything they've built before.

"Shane," Ilya says.

"Yeah?"

"What if I am not good anymore?"

Shane looks at him. "You are good."

"What if I am not? What if this is it... the decline, the end of being the player who can carry team. What if I am just going to be ordinary now?"

"You're not ordinary."

"But what if I am?" Ilya looks at him. "You fell in love with someone who was supposed to be excellent. What happens when excellent goes away?"

The question sits in the apartment. Shane is very still.

"I fell in love with someone who stocked up on ginger ale cause it's my favourite," Shane says. "I fell in love with someone who loves my glasses. I fell in love with someone who learned to cook my food and carries his mother's cross every day." He looks at Ilya. "I fell in love with you before you won anything."

"Shane—"

"I fell in love with you in an alley behind a rink when you were just a guy smoking a cigarette in the wrong place," Shane says. "The hockey came later. The captain came later. The Cups came later." His voice is steady, certain. "I didn't fall in love with a hockey player, Ilya. I fell in love with a person. And the person is who I want."

Ilya looks at him. The reading glasses folded in Shane's lap, the training journal on the coffee table, the particular steadiness in Shane's voice when he says the true things.

"Even if the hockey goes away?" Ilya asks.

"Even if the hockey goes away."

"Even if we do not make the playoffs?"

"Even if you don't make the playoffs."

"Even if I am just—" Ilya stops. "Just a guy."

Shane reaches across the couch and takes Ilya's hand. "You were always just a guy," Shane says. "The best guy. But just a guy."

Ilya feels something loosen in his chest. Not completely. The grey thing is still there, the weight of six losses in a row is still there, the particular pressure of being captain of a team that's forgetting how to win is still there. But something loosens, just enough for him to breathe properly.

"I love you," Ilya says.

"I know," Shane says. "I love you too."

They sit on the couch holding hands while the December evening settles around the apartment, and outside the city does its winter thing, and tomorrow there will be practice and more games and the long season stretching out ahead, uncertain and difficult. But the couch is theirs, and the hand in his hand is warm, and Shane fell in love with him before he won anything, and that, somehow, is enough.

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Christmas comes and goes on the road with three games in four days, the particular grinding schedule that makes the holidays feel more like an obligation than a celebration. The Bears win two of three, which is better than their recent average but not enough to feel like progress.

But the real Christmas happens between Christmas and New Year's, when David and Yuna fly in to spend five days in Boston. They book themselves into a hotel in Back Bay (the particular independence of parents who want to visit without imposing) and arrive with the specific energy of people who have decided to embrace their son's life completely.

"The room has a view of the Common," David says, settling into the apartment's living room chair as if he owns it. "Yuna booked us something called a 'luxury suite.' I think that means the bathrobe is very soft."

"It means the bathrobe is very soft and complimentary," Yuna corrects from the kitchen, where she's examining Shane's tea collection with the attention of someone who takes tea seriously. "And the thread count on the sheets is higher than our mortgage payment."

Shane looks slightly pained. "You know you could have stayed here..."

"Absolutely not," David says. "We're not twenty-five. We need our own space to complain about things."

"What things?" Ilya asks.

"Hotel soap. Room service prices. How loud the city is at night." David grins. "The sorts of things parents complain about so their children appreciate them."

They spend the five days doing the particular things that visiting parents do. Long dinners at restaurants Shane researches carefully, walks through the city that David approaches like a historian and Yuna approaches like an anthropologist, the specific tourism of people who are visiting a place their child loves rather than a place they chose themselves.

On the third day, they go to the Museum of Fine Arts. David gravitates toward the contemporary section, Yuna toward the classical, and Shane follows them both with the particular patience of someone who has learned that museums are where his parents are happiest.

Ilya finds himself alone with Yuna in the Asian art wing, standing in front of a scroll painting of mountains disappearing into mist.

"Beautiful," Yuna says quietly.

"Yes," Ilya agrees, though he's looking at her rather than the painting.

Yuna notices. She turns to face him, the specific directness that Shane inherited from her obvious in the way she meets his eyes.

"How are you doing?" she asks. "Really."

Ilya considers the question. They're standing in a museum in Boston, surrounded by art that has survived centuries, and Yuna is asking him how he's doing with the particular attention she brings to things that matter.

"Learning," he says.

"Learning what?"

"That struggling does not mean failing." He looks at the painting, then back at her. "That sometimes you can work harder and get the same results, and that is okay too."

Yuna nods slowly. "The team is having a difficult season."

"We are in fourth place. Still a playoff spot, but not..." He searches for the words. "Not what we expected."

"And how does that feel?"

Ilya thinks about this. "Different from what I thought it would feel like. I thought if we would not be dominant, it would feel like everything was wrong. But it just feels like... working harder."

Yuna is quiet for a moment, looking at the painting. "When Shane was young," she says, "maybe eight or nine, he went through a phase where everything had to be perfect. His room, his homework, his skating. If something wasn't exactly right, he would start over completely."

"That sounds like Shane."

"It was exhausting. For him, for us. He would spend hours on a single assignment, redoing it over and over because the handwriting wasn't perfect or he'd made a small mistake." She looks at Ilya. "David finally sat him down and said, 'Shane, done is better than perfect. Good enough is sometimes exactly enough.'"

Ilya smiles slightly. "Did Shane accept that?"

"God, no. He argued for twenty minutes about the philosophical implications of 'good enough.'" Yuna's mouth curves. "But eventually, he learned. Sometimes the thing you're working toward

doesn't have to be perfect to be valuable. Sometimes working harder for the same result is exactly what the situation requires."

They stand in the quiet of the museum, surrounded by art and the distant murmur of other visitors, and Ilya feels something settle in his chest. Not the resolution of the grey thing, that's still there, will always be there in some form, but the particular peace that comes from being understood by someone who sees clearly.

"Thank you," Ilya says.

"For what?"

"For raising someone who knows how to love people who are learning to be imperfect."

Yuna looks at him with the expression that sees everything, the same expression Shane gets when he's reading a situation completely.

"Shane has always been good at loving complicated people," she says. "He gets that from David."

"And the seeing clearly?"

"That," Yuna says, "he gets from me."

They rejoin David and Shane in the contemporary wing, where David is explaining something about postmodern interpretation to Shane, who is listening with the patient expression of someone who has heard this lecture before but still finds it charming.

"Find anything good?" Shane asks when he sees them.

"Your mother was telling me about good enough," Ilya says.

Shane looks between them, understanding immediately. "Ah. The good enough speech."

"Is very good speech," Ilya says.

"It is," Shane agrees. "Though I still think she's wrong about the philosophical implications."

Yuna laughs. "Some things never change."

They spend the rest of the afternoon in the museum, the four of them, and when they finally emerge into the Boston winter, Ilya realises that this — this family, this understanding, this particular warmth — is what winning actually looks like, regardless of what's happening with the hockey.

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At the end of January is when Shane leaves for training camp, the final push before Worlds, six weeks of intensive preparation with Linda and Rose and the particular focus that comes from knowing you're building toward something extraordinary.

The night before Shane leaves, they lie in bed and don't sleep, the apartment quiet around them, the knowledge that this separation is different from the others. Not because it's longer, or because the competition is more important, but because it's the last time for a while that Shane will leave for something that Ilya can't be part of.

"Six weeks," Shane says, into the dark.

"Six weeks," Ilya confirms.

"I'll call every day."

"I know."

"The Bears will make the playoffs."

"We will see."

Shane turns toward him. "You will. You'll figure it out, and you'll make the playoffs, and when I come back with the gold medal, we'll celebrate both things."

Ilya looks at him. Shane's face in the apartment dark, the certainty in his voice when he talks about coming back with gold, the particular confidence that comes from knowing your body can do what you need it to do.

"You are sure about gold medal?" Ilya asks.

"I'm sure about the gold medal."

"How sure?"

"Linda-smiled-during-run-through sure."

Ilya laughs. "That is very sure."

"That's completely sure."

They lie in the dark and talk about six weeks, about Worlds, about the Bears' chances and Shane's programs and the way time moves differently when you're apart from the person you love. At some point, Shane falls asleep against Ilya's shoulder, and Ilya stays awake listening to Shane breathe and thinking about gold medals and playoffs and the particular mathematics of love during uncertain times.

In the morning, Shane packs his bag, the competition clothes, the training gear, the particular items that make hotel rooms feel less like hotel rooms. Ilya makes coffee and watches Shane move around the apartment, collecting the things he needs to become the best pairs skater in the world.

"Ready?" Shane asks, when his bag is packed, his passport is in his jacket, and the car to the airport is waiting downstairs.

"Ready," Ilya says, though he's not sure what he's ready for. Six weeks without Shane. Six weeks of trying to drag the Bears into the playoffs. Six weeks of watching someone he loves achieve something extraordinary from thousands of miles away.

Shane kisses him goodbye at the apartment door, the way he's kissed him goodbye a hundred times before, and then he's gone, and the apartment is quiet, and Ilya is alone with the season and the grey thing and the particular challenge of being excellent when excellence requires more effort than it used to.

The Bears have thirty games left. Shane has six weeks to become perfect. And Ilya has both things to navigate, alone, until Shane comes home with gold around his neck and the future starts again.

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February is the month when Ilya admits it to himself: the Bears are struggling.

They're still in fourth place, still holding a playoff spot, still mathematically capable of everything they achieved before. But the ease is gone. The inevitability is gone. They're working harder for results that used to come automatically, grinding out wins that used to feel effortless.

The team meeting is on a Thursday morning, after a practice that felt more workmanlike than inspired. LeClaire stands at the front of the room and looks at twenty-two men who used to be dominant and are now just competitive.

"We have twenty-two games left," LeClaire says. "We're in fourth place. Three points up on Montreal, four points up on Detroit. We control our own destiny."

The room is quiet. They do control their own destiny. They're also defending champions who shouldn't be talking about controlling their destiny in February. They should be talking about home ice advantage, favourable matchups, and which teams they want to avoid in the first round.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat it," LeClaire continues. "This hasn't been the season any of us expected. But we're still here. We're still in the mix. And twenty-two games is a lot of hockey left to find our game."

After the meeting, Ilya sits in his stall and looks at his equipment. The captain's C on his jersey, the skates that have carried him through two Stanley Cup victories, the helmet that still has the championship sticker from June. The artefacts of success, on a team that's forgotten how to make success look easy.

Marleau sits down beside him.

"Feels different this year," Marleau says.

"Everything feels different this year," Ilya agrees.

"You good?"

Ilya looks at him. Marleau asking if he's good, after a season where good has required more effort than it used to, where excellence has become something to chase instead of something to assume.

"I think so," Ilya says. "I am learning that maybe struggling does not mean failing."

Marleau nods. "Sometimes struggling just means you're still fighting."

"Yeah," Ilya says. "I think you are right."

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Svetlana calls on a Friday evening in February, when Ilya is sitting on the couch with his laptop, reviewing game film from the Ottawa loss.

"Your girlfriend wanted to check in," she says, without preamble.

Ilya goes very still. Shane is in Shanghai, six thousand miles away, but somehow the apartment still feels too small for this conversation.

"Svetlana," Ilya says carefully.

"I saw the latest article," she continues. "People magazine this time. 'The Love That Keeps Him Grounded: How Svetlana Vetrova Supports Boston's Captain Through a Difficult Season.'" Her voice has the particular dryness it gets when she's finding something both amusing and irritating. "They used that photo from the airport again. I'm apparently 'radiant with devotion.'"

"I'm sorry," Ilya says quietly.

"Don't apologise. I look very good in that photo." She pauses. "How are you holding up? Really?"

Ilya looks around the empty apartment. Shane's coffee mug is still in the sink from this morning, his reading glasses are on the coffee table, and there is a particular emptiness that comes from loving someone who is six thousand miles away, pursuing excellence.

"Fine," Ilya says. "We're managing."

"Managing. Such a romantic word for a relationship." Svetlana's voice softens slightly. "Ilya, you know this can't continue forever, right? This performance we're all giving?"

"I know."

"Do you? Because from where I sit, it looks like you and Shane are both pretending to want something neither of you actually wants, and I'm the one who gets to be the face of your mutual self-destruction."

Ilya closes his eyes. "It's complicated."

"It's not complicated. It's stupid." Her voice is gentle but firm. "You're miserable. He's miserable. The only person who isn't miserable is my publicist, who keeps getting calls about my 'mystery romance.'"

"We'll figure it out," Ilya says.

"When?"

"I don't know."

"Ilya." Svetlana's voice has the particular quality it gets when she's about to say something he needs to hear. "I love you both. You know that. But watching you perform heterosexuality for career advancement while the man you actually love pretends to support it is breaking my heart."

"Svetlana—"

"I have to go," she says. "But think about what I said. And maybe, for once in your life, try talking to Shane about what you actually want instead of what you think he wants you to want."

She hangs up. Ilya sits on the couch with his laptop and the game film and the particular silence that follows difficult conversations. The apartment feels enormous without Shane in it, and also too small to contain all the things they're not saying to each other.

He doesn't call Shane that night. They text, the way they always text, careful messages about practice and games and the ordinary maintenance of love across distance. But he doesn't call, because calling would require him to lie about how the conversation with Svetlana went, and he's tired of lying, even the small lies that protect the people you love from truths they're not ready to hear.

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March arrives with Shane's return.

He comes through the apartment door at nine p.m. on a Tuesday with gold around his neck and the particular glow of someone who has just achieved the thing they've been building toward for years. The medal catches the lamp light when he moves, and Ilya realises he's never seen anything more beautiful than Shane Hollander holding a World Championship gold medal in their apartment in Boston.

"I won," Shane says. Simply.

"I know," Ilya says. "I watched."

They stand in the apartment and look at each other across six weeks of separation, six weeks of struggle and excellence happening in parallel, six weeks of missing each other while building different kinds of perfect.

"How are the Bears?" Shane asks.

"Still fighting," Ilya says. "Still in fourth. Three points up on Montreal with eight games left."

"Going to make it?"

"Maybe. Probably. It is close."

"You'll make it," Shane says. "I believe in you."

Shane puts his bag down and crosses the apartment and kisses Ilya hello, the way he's kissed him hello a hundred times before, except this time there's a gold medal between them and six weeks of things unsaid and the particular relief that comes from both of them achieving what they needed to achieve, even when the achieving looked different than they expected.

"I missed you," Shane says against his mouth.

"I missed you, too."

They go to bed that night with Shane's gold medal on the nightstand and the Bears on the verge of the playoffs and the season stretching ahead toward whatever comes next. Shane falls asleep against Ilya's shoulder, the way he always falls asleep, and Ilya lies awake thinking about struggling and fighting and the particular mathematics of love when both people are learning how to be excellent in new ways.

In the morning, there will be practice and preparations for the first round and Shane's programs to celebrate, and the continuation of the season that has taught Ilya that sometimes working harder for the same result is exactly what strength looks like.

But tonight, they're just two people in love, with gold on the nightstand and the last stretch of an NHL season ahead and the apartment warm around them. Just a guy who fights and a guy who achieves the impossible, loving each other through the particular challenges of being human and being excellent and being together when excellence looks different than it used to.

And in the morning, everything will be exactly as difficult and exactly as beautiful as it's supposed to be.

Chapter 38: coming out

Chapter Summary

Ilya drops a bombshell on Svetlana and finally, with Shane's blessing, comes out to his team.

Chapter Notes

It's back! I got a real nasty and extremely personal comment on my last chapter that took root inside my brain and made me re-evaluate everything. Everything has settled now, I am confident in myself, and I would never deprive anyone of this fic, especially since I had so much fun writing it and because it's already fully written and I just need to post.

Double chapters today as a thank you to everyone for being so incredibly kind to me.

The chair in Dr Volkov's office feels different in April. Maybe it's the spring light instead of winter light, the particular quality of Boston in April when the city starts to remember what warmth feels like. Maybe it's Ilya. He sits differently now, less collapsed into himself, more like someone who has figured out how to carry weight without being crushed by it.

"The team made the playoffs," Volkov says.

"Fourth seed. We barely made it." Ilya looks out the window at Back Bay, the trees showing the first green of spring. "Last year, we won the division. This year, we fought for our lives to get in."

"How does that feel?"

Ilya considers this. Six months ago, the question would have sent him into the grey spiral, the particular shame of a captain whose team had forgotten how to be excellent. Now it feels like something else. Not good, exactly, but manageable.

"Like we earned it," he says. "Like we fought for something and got it, instead of expecting it to be given to us."

Volkov nods. "Fighting for something feels different than expecting it."

"Everything feels different this year." Ilya looks at his hands. "The hockey, the media, the—" He stops. "The lying."

"What lying?"

Ilya is quiet for a moment. They've talked around this before, the unnamed thing that sits in the apartment between him and Shane, the performance they're both giving that neither of them wants

to sustain.

"Everyone thinks I'm dating a good friend of mine," Ilya says.

"But you're not."

"I'm not."

"And Shane knows you're not."

"Shane asked me not to correct it. He thinks it's good for my career. Good for my image." Ilya's voice is careful. "A girlfriend makes me look stable. Like a normal hockey player."

Volkov is quiet for a moment. "How does it feel to pretend to be someone you're not for career advancement?"

The question sits in the office. Ilya has been asked this question in different ways by different people — Svetlana, himself, the voice in his head at three in the morning when Shane is asleep beside him and the apartment is quiet, and the weight of performance feels heavier than hockey.

"Familiar," Ilya says.

"Familiar how?"

"I've been pretending to be someone I'm not for most of my life. The obedient son. The perfect captain. The person who never struggles." He looks at Volkov. "Adding 'heterosexual' to the list isn't that much harder."

"Isn't it?"

Ilya thinks about this. "It's different because Shane is asking me to do it. The other performances were things I chose. This one feels like—" He stops. "Like he's ashamed of me."

"Is he ashamed of you?"

"No. But he's ashamed of us. Or he's afraid of us. Or he thinks other people should be ashamed of us." Ilya looks out the window again. "I don't know which is worse."

"What would you like to do about it?"

The question Ilya has been asking himself for months. The answer that keeps coming back the same way, despite every reason why it shouldn't.

"I want to come out, and I want to leave Boston," Ilya says.

Volkov doesn't react. "Where would you go?"

"Canada. Montreal, maybe. Ottawa." Ilya's voice gets quieter. "Somewhere Shane and I could have the life we actually want instead of the life that's safe for my career."

"You would give up your team for that?"

"I would give up everything for that."

The words hang in the office. Ilya realises, as he says them, that they're true, that somewhere in the past year of struggling and fighting and learning to be imperfect, he's figured out what he actually wants. Not hockey success. Not media approval. Not the particular performance of excellence that he's been giving since he was eighteen years old.

Just Shane. Just the life they could build together if they weren't afraid of what other people would think about it.

"Have you talked to Shane about this?" Volkov asks.

"Not yet."

"When will you?"

"Soon, about coming out. About moving from Boston, though... This summer. I'm planning to take him somewhere. Away from here. Two weeks at a cottage." Ilya looks at Volkov. "Time to talk about what we actually want instead of what we think we should want."

"What do you think he'll say?"

Ilya thinks about Shane's face when he sees the articles about him and Svetlana, about the particular quality of his voice when he talks about being a secret instead of a boyfriend, about the way Shane holds him in bed like he's afraid someone might take him away.

"I think he'll say yes," Ilya says. "I think he wants the same thing I want. He's just afraid to ask for it."

"Are you afraid?"

Ilya considers this. Six months ago, the answer would have been yes. Six months ago, he was afraid of everything — losing, struggling, being ordinary, being seen. Now, sitting in the spring light in Volkov's office, he realises that the fear has changed shape. He's not afraid of being seen anymore. He's afraid of hiding forever.

"I'm afraid of staying," he says. "I'm afraid of being forty years old and still pretending to be someone I'm not. I'm afraid of never having the life I actually want because I'm too scared to disappoint people who don't really know me."

Volkov nods slowly. "Fear of staying is different from fear of leaving."

"Very different."

They sit in the comfortable quiet that comes at the end of sessions when something important has been said and needs time to settle. Ilya looks out the window at Boston, at the city where he's built a career and a reputation and a particular kind of success that requires him to hide the thing that matters most to him.

"The cottage sounds like a good idea," Volkov says eventually.

"You think so?"

"I think talking about what you want is always better than pretending you don't want it."

Ilya stands to leave. At the door, he turns back.

"Dr Volkov?"

"Yes?"

"If I leave Boston, will I still be able to see you?"

Volkov almost smiles. "There are therapists in Canada, Ilya. Very good ones. Some of them even speak Russian."

"But not you."

"Not me." Volkov's voice is gentle. "But the work we've done together, the tools you've learned, the questions you've learned to ask yourself — those go with you wherever you go."

Ilya nods. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For helping me figure out the difference between what I'm supposed to want and what I actually want."

"You figured that out yourself," Volkov says. "I just asked the questions."

Ilya leaves the office and walks out into the Boston spring, and for the first time in months, the city doesn't feel like home. It feels like a place he's visiting, a place he's staying temporarily before he goes to the place where he actually belongs.

He has dinner with Svetlana planned for tonight. Shane is in New York until tomorrow, some contractual obligation for one of his sponsors — photo shoots and interviews, the particular obligations that come with being a World Champion. And in two months, if everything goes according to plan, he'll take Shane to a cottage somewhere and ask him the question that will determine the shape of their future.

The spring air feels like possibility.

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The restaurant is small, in the North End, the kind of place that doesn't take reservations and doesn't need to because the food is good enough that people wait. Svetlana is already at a table when Ilya arrives, a glass of wine in front of her, her coat draped over the back of her chair. She looks good — rested, settled, the particular ease of someone who has found work that fits.

"You look tired," she says, by way of greeting.

"Hello to you too."

"I'm serious. When's the last time you slept properly?" She gestures to the chair across from her. "Sit. Order wine. We're celebrating, but first we're addressing the fact that you look like you haven't slept since the playoffs started."

Ilya sits. Orders wine. The waitress brings it quickly — a place that knows its clientele, knows when someone needs alcohol for good news instead of bad.

"So," Ilya says, raising his glass. "Your news."

"They offered me the permanent position," Svetlana says. "Not just player development. Assistant director of hockey operations. Working directly with the front office on roster decisions, psychological assessments, the whole program."

Ilya looks at her. "That's—"

"Significant, yes." Svetlana takes a sip of her wine. "Papa's recommendation carried weight, but the work spoke for itself. They're happy with what I've brought to the program."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you." She studies his face. "You don't look as happy as I expected."

Ilya is quiet for a moment. Around them, the restaurant does its thing — conversations, the clink of glasses, the particular warmth of a place where people come to eat and talk and celebrate things that matter.

"I am happy," Ilya says. "For you. This is what you wanted."

"But?"

"But nothing. No but."

Svetlana looks at him with the expression she's been perfecting since he was fifteen — the look that says I know when you're lying and I'm not going to let you get away with it.

"Ilya."

He looks at his wine, then back at her.

"I've been thinking about leaving Boston," he says.

Svetlana goes very still. "Leaving."

"My contract is up at the end of next season. I'm thinking about not renewing."

"With the Bears."

"With the Bears."

"To go where?"

Ilya is quiet for a moment. The conversation he's been having in his head for weeks, the one he's planning to have with Shane this summer, the one he's been building toward without quite admitting it to himself.

"Canada," he says. "Montreal, maybe. Ottawa. Somewhere in Canada."

Svetlana stares at him. "Canada."

"Canada."

"You want to leave Boston, where I just took a permanent position, where you have been building a life for six years, to go to Canada."

"Yes."

"Why?"

The question he's been asking himself. The question has an answer, but it's not one that's simple to explain.

"Because all my favourite people are Canadian," Ilya says. "David. Yuna. Shane." He pauses. "I want to be Canadian too. I want—" He stops. Starts again. "I want our children to be Canadian."

Svetlana blinks. Once. Then again.

"Children," she says.

"Eventually. Someday." Ilya's voice is careful. "Shane doesn't know yet. I haven't talked to him about it. The children or the Canada."

"When are you going to tell him?"

"This summer. I'm planning to take him somewhere. Away from Boston, away from training, away from everything. Just us." Ilya looks at his hands. "Two weeks at a cottage somewhere. Time to talk about the future."

Svetlana puts her wine down. She looks at him for a long time.

"Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov," she says, using his full name the way she does when she's about to say something important. "You are talking about changing your entire life for a person."

"I am talking about changing my life for the life I want."

"Which includes this person."

"Which is built around this person, yes."

Svetlana is quiet. She picks up her wine, takes a sip, puts it down again.

"Does he know how much you love him?" she asks.

"I tell him every day."

"That's not what I asked."

Ilya looks at her. "I don't know. How do you measure something like that?"

"You measure it by the things you're willing to give up for it." Svetlana's voice is quiet. "And you're willing to give up your team. Your city. Your language, in a way."

"I'm not giving up my language."

"You're giving up being around it every day. Being understood in it." She gestures around the restaurant. "This. Dinner where I can say exactly what I mean in exactly the words I mean it."

Ilya hadn't thought about that. The daily Russian of his life with Svetlana, the ease of speaking without translation, the particular comfort of being understood in the language he dreams in.

"I'll miss it," he says.

"But you'll do it anyway."

"I'll do it anyway."

Svetlana nods slowly. "He must be extraordinary."

"He is."

"I know." She picks up her wine again. "And now he's a World Champion too."

"World Champion," Ilya confirms.

"When are you taking him to this cottage?"

"July. After the season ends." Ilya looks at her. "However it ends."

Svetlana considers this. "I am angry," she says. "But not at you. At the timing. At the fact that I finally have you in the same city, and now you want to leave." She pauses. "But I'm not surprised."

"No?"

"Ilya, you have been different since you met him. Lighter. More yourself." She takes a sip of wine. "If being Canadian makes him happy, and making him happy makes you happy, then the mathematics is simple."

"It's not mathematics."

"Everything is mathematics if you look at it right." Svetlana almost smiles. "Go to Canada, Ilya. Have your babies. Be happy."

"You make it sound easy."

"It's not easy. But it's right." She raises her glass. "To Canada."

Ilya raises his glass. "To Canada."

They drink, and the restaurant continues around them, and Svetlana starts asking questions about the cottage, about Shane's reaction when he finds out, about the contract negotiations that are still more than a year away. Ilya answers what he can, but his mind is already on summer, already on the conversation that will determine the shape of their future.

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The story breaks the next morning while Shane is making coffee.

His phone buzzes on the counter, and he glances at it without thinking, the way he glances at his phone a hundred times a day. TMZ notification. He almost ignores it — he's learned to ignore most of the noise that comes with loving someone famous — but something about the preview text catches his eye.

EXCLUSIVE: Intimate Dinner Confirms Romance...

Shane picks up his phone.

The headline reads: "EXCLUSIVE: Boston Bears Captain Ilya Rozanov and Girlfriend Svetlana Volkov's Intimate Dinner Date Confirms Serious Romance."

Below it, a series of photos. Ilya and Svetlana at a small table in what looks like a North End restaurant. Wine glasses. Svetlana's hand reaching across the table toward Ilya's. Both of them leaning forward, deep in conversation, the body language unmistakable to anyone who doesn't know what they're actually discussing.

The caption reads: "Sources close to the couple reveal this was no casual dinner. 'They were talking about the future,' says an insider. 'It was clearly a very serious conversation about where their relationship is going. Very intimate, very romantic.'"

Shane stares at the photos. Ilya's face in profile, animated, engaged. Svetlana listening with the particular attention she gives to conversations that matter. The wine, the candlelight, the specific intimacy of two people sharing something important.

He knows it's fake. He knows they were probably talking about work, or family, or any of the dozen things that Ilya and Svetlana actually talk about when they have dinner. He knows the "intimate romantic conversation" was probably Svetlana complaining about her latest dating disaster or Ilya asking for advice about hockey.

He knows all of this.

But the photos don't lie about one thing: Ilya and Svetlana look good together. They look like two people who understand each other, who share a language Shane doesn't speak, who have a connection that doesn't require explanation or translation. They look like a couple who could plan a future together and make it work.

Shane's phone buzzes again. A text from Rose: *Saw the article. You ok?*

Shane doesn't respond. He puts his phone down and looks around the apartment — their apartment, the one he shares with Ilya, the one where they've built a life together that the entire world thinks belongs to someone else.

By the time Shane gets dressed and settles on the couch with his book and reading glasses, the coffee has gone cold on the counter. He tries to read, tries to concentrate, but the words blur together, and all he can think about are the photos, the way Ilya looked so comfortable, so natural, having dinner with someone who could actually be his girlfriend without it destroying his career.

When Ilya comes home from practice an hour later, Shane is on the couch, propped up against the cushions with his reading glasses on and a book in his lap. There's a cold cup of coffee on the coffee table that he's clearly forgotten about, and his phone is beside him on the couch, screen dark.

"Good practice?" Shane asks, without looking up.

"Fine." Ilya puts his bag down, moves toward the couch. "You're reading early."

"Couldn't concentrate on anything else."

Ilya pauses. He knows Shane's moods, knows the particular quality of Shane's voice when something is wrong.

"Shane?"

Shane holds up his phone. Shows him the screen.

Ilya goes very still. "Fuck."

"Yeah."

"Shane, you know—"

"I know what it is." Shane's voice is calm. "I know it's fake. I know you were probably talking about her promotion or my competition or anything except planning your future together."

Ilya moves closer to the couch. "Then what—"

"You look good together," Shane says, still calm. "In the photos. You look like two people who could actually be in love."

"Shane—"

"You look like two people who speak the same language. Who understand each other without having to translate every conversation." Shane finally looks up from his phone. "You look like two people who could have the kind of relationship where you don't have to pretend it doesn't exist."

Ilya is very still. "Shane."

"I know it's fake," Shane says again. "But looking at these photos, I can see why everyone believes it. Why it's such good cover for us." His voice gets quieter. "Because it looks real in a way that we're not allowed to look real."

"Are you angry?" Ilya asks.

Shane considers this. He looks at the photos again, looks at Svetlana's hand reaching across the table, at Ilya leaning forward, engaged, animated. The specific intimacy of two people sharing something important.

"No," Shane says. "I'm jealous."

"Jealous?"

"Jealous that she gets to have dinner with you and not worry about who's watching. Jealous that she gets to touch your hand in public and have it mean nothing. Jealous that when people see you together, they think it's beautiful instead of something that needs to be hidden."

Shane puts his phone down. Looks at Ilya.

"I'm jealous," Shane says, "that she gets to be your fake girlfriend, and I just get to be your real secret."

Ilya crosses the room to the couch, sits down beside Shane, close enough to touch, close enough that Shane can see the gold flecks in his eyes.

"You are not my secret," Ilya says.

"No?"

"You are my everything. There is difference."

Shane looks at him. Ilya in his practice clothes, hair still damp from the shower, the particular realness of him after spending an hour looking at photos of him with someone else.

"Show me," Shane says.

"What?"

"Show me the difference. Show me that I'm your everything and not just your secret."

Ilya's eyes change. Not surprise, exactly, but recognition. The particular recognition of a challenge that he knows exactly how to meet.

"Now?" Ilya asks.

"Right fucking now."

But before Shane can move, before he can kiss Ilya or touch him or prove anything, Ilya's hands come up to frame Shane's face, and he looks directly into his eyes.

"Wait," Ilya says. "I need to say something first."

"Ilya—"

"I want to come out."

Shane goes very still. But it's not the stillness of fear, it's the stillness of someone who has just heard something they've been waiting their entire life to hear.

"To the team?" Shane's voice is careful, like he's afraid if he says it wrong, Ilya might take it back.

"To the team. To the media. To everyone." Ilya's voice is steady, certain. "I'm tired of hiding. I'm tired of pretending that the person I love doesn't exist."

Something changes in Shane's face. "You want to tell them about us," Shane says.

"I want to tell them you're mine."

The words hit Shane like electricity. His pupils dilate, his breathing changes, and suddenly he's moving over, straddling Ilya, his hands braced on his shoulders.

"Say it again," Shane says, his voice low and demanding.

"Shane—"

"Say it again. The part about telling them I'm yours."

Ilya looks up at him. Shane's face in the afternoon light, his hair slightly messed from running his hands through it, bright eyes and the particular expression he gets when he wants something and intends to get it.

"I want to tell the team that you're mine," Ilya says.

Shane's eyes go dark. "And what else?"

"I want to tell the media that you're mine."

"And?"

"I want to tell everyone that you're mine."

Shane pulls Ilya's shirt over his head and then leans down and kisses him, hard and claiming and full of the particular hunger that comes from hearing exactly what you've always wanted to hear.

"You have no idea," Shane says against his mouth, "what it does to me when you talk about claiming me in public."

"Show me."

Shane pulls back to look at him. "You want me to show you?"

"Show me how happy it makes you that I want everyone to know you're mine."

Something wild flashes across Shane's face. He slides down Ilya's body, his mouth trailing over skin, his hands possessive and sure.

"This is what it does to me," Shane says, his voice rough with want. "Knowing that you want to tell Dubek and Connors and every single person in that locker room that I'm yours."

His mouth finds Ilya's stomach, teeth grazing skin, and Ilya's breath catches.

"This is what it does to me," Shane continues, his hands working at Ilya's pants with efficient desperation, "knowing that you want to tell the world that you're the one who gets to have me."

When Shane's mouth closes around him, Ilya arches against the couch with a sound that's half pleasure, half surprise. Shane has never been like this before — demanding, controlling, taking what he wants with the particular confidence of someone who has just been told they can stop hiding.

"Shane—"

"No." Shane pulls back just enough to speak. "You don't get to direct this. You get to sit there and take what I give you and think about how good it's going to feel when everyone knows that all of this belongs to you."

Ilya's hands grip the couch cushions. Shane has always been careful with him, considerate, asking permission. This is different. This is Shane taking what's his with the particular hunger that comes from being told he doesn't have to hide anymore.

Shane works him with his mouth until Ilya is shaking, until his voice breaks on Shane's name, until he's balanced on the edge of something that feels like it might destroy him completely.

"Please," Ilya says, the word torn from his throat.

"Please, what?"

"Please, Shane, I need—"

"You need what?"

"I need you."

Shane's eyes go completely dark. He reaches for his own clothes, stripping quickly, efficiently, then straddles Ilya properly, reaching for the lube they keep in the side table drawer.

Shane prepares himself with quick, sure movements, his breathing getting rougher with each addition, his eyes never leaving Ilya's face.

"This is what it does to me," Shane says, his voice rough as he positions himself above Ilya, "knowing that you want to tell the world that you're the only one who gets to have me like this."

When Shane sinks down onto him, it's with the kind of possession that makes Ilya's mind go blank. Not gentle, not careful, but with the specific intensity of someone who has just been given permission to stop pretending they don't belong completely to the person beneath them.

"This is yours," Shane says, his voice rough, his movements already setting a demanding rhythm. "And soon you're going to tell everyone that I'm yours."

"Yes."

"You're going to tell them that Shane Hollander belongs to you."

"Yes."

"You're going to tell them that you're the only one who gets to make me sound like this."

Shane changes his angle, finding the spot that makes him cry out, and the sound he makes is pure Shane — desperate and beautiful and completely unguarded.

"That sound," Ilya says, his breathing ragged, his hands gripping Shane's hips. "That's mine."

Shane sets a rhythm that's almost punishing, taking what he needs with the particular hunger of someone who has just been told they can stop being a secret. He rides Ilya with complete control, his hands braced on Ilya's chest, his head thrown back, completely lost in the feeling of being claimed and claiming in return.

"Shane," Ilyagasps, his movements becoming more desperate, "I'm going to—"

"Not yet."

"I can't—"

"You can." Shane's voice is commanding, his hands on Ilya's shoulders guiding the rhythm. "You can wait for me. You can come when I tell you to come."

Ilya has never looked more beautiful — beneath him, flushed and desperate, his hands gripping Shane's hips, completely under Shane's control even while Shane is the one being filled.

Shane lets Ilya work himself into a frenzy, lets him chase the edge until he's shaking, until every sound he makes is Shane's name broken on desperate breath. Only then, when Ilya is completely undone, does Shane lean down and speak directly to him.

"Come for me," Shane says, his voice rough with command.

Ilya comes so hard his vision whites out, Shane's name torn from his throat, his whole body convulsing as Shane holds him through it. Shane follows seconds later, his hands braced on Ilya's chest, his body shaking with the particular release that comes from claiming exactly what's yours exactly when you need it.

After, they lie tangled on the couch, breathing hard, their bodies slick with sweat and satisfaction. Shane's head is on Ilya's chest, listening to his heartbeat slow, feeling the particular peace that comes from having claimed what's yours completely.

"The photos don't matter," Ilya says into Shane's hair.

"I know."

"The articles don't matter."

"I know that too."

Shane is quiet for a moment, his fingers tracing patterns on Ilya's chest.

"It's my fault," Shane says quietly.

"What?"

"This. The jealousy. The articles." Shane lifts his head to look at Ilya. "I'm the one who asked you not to deny it. I'm the one who said it was good for your career, good for your image."

Ilya's hand finds Shane's hair. "Shane—"

"I asked you to let everyone think you were with her instead of me. And then I got jealous when they actually believed it." Shane's voice is careful, honest. "I created this situation and then punished you for living in it."

"You didn't punish me."

"I get possessive and demanding because I couldn't handle seeing photos of you looking happy with someone else. Even though I'm the one who asked you to look happy with someone else." Shane puts his head back on Ilya's chest. "It's fucked up."

Ilya is quiet for a moment, his hand moving in Shane's hair.

"We both agreed to it," Ilya says finally.

"No. You agreed to what I asked for. There's a difference."

"Shane, look at me."

Shane lifts his head again.

"I could have said no," Ilya says. "I could have denied it from the beginning. I could have told TMZ to fuck off and tweeted the truth." He looks at Shane. "I did not. Because part of me thought you were right. That it would be easier this way."

"Is it easier?"

Ilya considers this. "No. Is harder. Much harder."

"For both of us."

"For both of us."

Shane kisses him, slow and satisfied, and thinks about fake girlfriends and real boyfriends and the particular mathematics of love when it's yours and hidden and perfect and completely worth fighting for.

"I love you," Shane says against Ilya's chest.

"I know," Ilya says. "I love you too. More than any photograph could ever show."

They fall asleep like that, tangled together in the afternoon light, and for the first time in months, the future feels like something they're building toward instead of something they're hiding from.

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The Bears lose to New York in six games.

Not because they're bad, they're not bad, they're good, they fight for every goal and every shift and every moment. But New York is better, hungrier, younger, the particular combination of skill and desperation that makes teams dangerous in the playoffs. The series is closer than the games suggest. Four of the six games decided by one goal. Overtime in game five that could have gone either way.

But close doesn't matter in the playoffs. Close doesn't hang banners. Close doesn't get you another chance.

The locker room after game six is quiet. Not the devastating quiet of a team that doesn't belong, but the exhausted quiet of a team that gave everything and learned it wasn't enough. Marleau sits with his head in his hands, knowing this might be his last playoff game. Dubois stares at his skates. Kadlec methodically removes his equipment with the particular focus of someone who needs something to do with his hands.

LeClaire doesn't give a speech. There's nothing to say. The season is over.

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The last training session before off-season is on a Thursday morning in June. The whole team is there — this is the final mandatory session, the official end to the season, the particular ritual that marks the transition from being teammates to being scattered across the country for the summer.

But there's a different energy in the room. Lighter, maybe. The pressure is off. No games to prepare for, no systems to perfect, just the last skate together before they disperse to vacation homes, golf courses, the particular freedom that comes when twenty-two men who have spent eight months together suddenly have nowhere they need to be.

He tells LeClaire that morning, in the office, with the door closed.

LeClaire is behind his desk. He's a compact man, French-Canadian, with the particular stillness of someone who played ten years of professional hockey and learned not to waste energy. He listens to Ilya the way he listens to everything — completely, without interruption.

"I need to tell you something. I am bisexual. I have a partner. I am telling you because I am going to tell the team, and I wanted you to know first."

LeClaire is quiet for a moment after Ilya finishes. Then: "Does this affect your ability to play?"

"No."

"Does it affect your relationship with the team?"

"That is what I am about to find out."

LeClaire nods. "I appreciate you telling me. You have my full support. When are you telling the team?"

"Right now, if you let me."

"Of course."

The locker room before the final skate has the usual energy — the particular noise of twenty-two men getting ready to work, but softer somehow, the music Dubois controls playing something mellower than usual, the smell of tape and equipment and coffee from the machine in the corner mixed with the specific anticipation of summer.

Ilya comes in at the usual time, goes to his stall, and then stands up.

"I need a minute," he says.

The room quiets. This is the captain voice, and the team knows the captain voice.

Ilya looks at them. Marleau, who already knows, whose face is steady. Dubek, whose face is open and waiting. Dubois, who has put his phone down. Kadlec, Tremblay, the others — twelve men looking at their captain.

"I am bisexual," Ilya says. "My partner is Shane Hollander. You all know him. I am telling you because you are my team, and I do not want to hide from my team anymore."

The room is very quiet.

Then Dubek says, "Okay."

Not okay like dismissal. Okay, like I hear you, and this changes nothing, and we are moving forward. Dubek's okay, which is Dubek's whole personality compressed into one word.

Dubois says something in French. Ilya doesn't catch all of it, but he catches respect and obviously and something that might be we already knew, you're not as subtle as you think.

Marleau says nothing. He just nods, once, and the nod carries everything.

There are others — a couple of faces that go carefully neutral, the kind of neutral that isn't hostile but isn't warm, the baseline of men who are processing something they didn't expect and don't know what to do with. But the neutrals are fewer here, in this smaller group, among the men who chose to stay.

The point is Dubek's okay and Marleau's nod and Dubois's French and LeClaire at the back of the room with his arms crossed and his face doing something that might, on another man, be called proud.

"That is it," Ilya says. "Let's skate."

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The ice feels different under his skates. Lighter, maybe. Or maybe that's just him.

They skate for an hour — not a practice, not a drill, just skating. The particular freedom of moving without purpose except the movement itself. Dubois works on his shot. Marleau skates lazy circles. Kadlec practices faceoffs against no one.

Ilya skates the length of the rink, over and over, feeling the particular bite of his edges in the ice, the rhythm of push and glide that has been the constant of his life since he was five years old. The empty Garden around them, twenty thousand seats waiting for September, waiting for next year.

When they finally come off the ice, Tremblay falls into step beside him.

"Good skate," Tremblay says.

"Good skate," Ilya agrees.

They walk toward the locker room together, and Tremblay doesn't say anything else, doesn't make it a moment, just walks with him. The ordinary companionship of it. The solidarity that costs Tremblay nothing and means everything.

In the locker room, as they're changing out of their gear for the last time until September, Dubek catches Ilya's eye.

"See you in September, Cap."

"See you in September."

"Good summer," Dubois adds, in his accented English.

"Good summer to you too."

They disperse slowly. Handshakes, casual plans for the off-season that may or may not happen, the particular leave-taking of men who will miss each other more than they'll admit.

Marleau is the last to go.

"You good?" he asks.

Ilya considers this. The season is over. They lost to New York. He just came out to his team. Shane is waiting at home. The summer stretches ahead, uncertain and full of possibility.

"I think so," Ilya says. "I think I am good."

Marleau nods. "Good," he says. "You deserve to be good."

When Ilya finally gets home, Shane is on the couch with his book and his glasses, the same as always. He looks up when Ilya comes through the door.

"How did it go?"

"Good," Ilya says. "It went good."

Shane closes his book. "Tell me."

So Ilya tells him. About LeClaire's support, about Dubek's okay, about Marleau's nod. About the skate afterward, the feeling of lightness, the particular relief of finally being seen.

"I'm proud of you," Shane says when Ilya finishes.

"Are you?"

"I'm proud of you," Shane says again. "And I'm ready."

"Ready for what?"

"Ready for whatever comes next."

Ilya sits beside him on the couch, in the apartment they've built together, in the city where he just told his team the truth about who he loves. The summer ahead is uncertain — the cottage trip, the conversation about Canada, the future they're going to build together.

But for now, this is enough. The couch, the book, the reading glasses, the man who fell in love with him before he won anything and will love him through whatever comes next.

"Ready," Ilya says, and means it.

Chapter 39: the cottage

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya spend two weeks together, all alone, in a cottage in the Adirondacks

Chapter Notes

This is my favourite chapter and I hope you love it as much as I do <3

The cottage sits on a lake in the Adirondacks, four hours north of Boston and a world away from everything else. Ilya found it through a teammate's cousin's recommendation, and that's where they're going to spend two weeks in July, no neighbours within shouting distance, nothing but water and trees and the particular kind of silence that only exists when you're far enough from civilisation that your phone has no signal.

Shane stands on the dock while Ilya brings their bags in from the car, looking out at the lake in the late afternoon light. The water is perfectly still, reflecting the pine trees on the opposite shore, and Shane feels something in his chest loosen that he didn't realise was tight.

"It's perfect," Shane says when Ilya joins him on the dock.

"No one around, just us," Ilya confirms. "No photographers. No reporters. No one who knows our names."

Shane takes Ilya's hand. Out here, with nothing but lake and sky around them, the gesture feels different. Not furtive, not careful, just natural.

"Two weeks," Shane says.

"Two weeks."

They stand on the dock holding hands and listening to the water lap against the posts and the distant call of a loon somewhere across the lake. The air smells like pine and water, and the particular clean scent of a place where nothing has been performed or calculated or designed for public consumption.

The cottage itself is small and simple. It has two bedrooms, a kitchen with mismatched dishes, and a living room dominated by a stone fireplace. The furniture is the comfortable, worn kind that comes with rental properties, nothing precious or breakable, everything built for use.

Ilya puts their groceries away while Shane explores, opening closets and checking the water pressure and generally satisfying himself that this is a place where they can be completely

themselves for two weeks. No neighbours to worry about. No teammates dropping by unexpectedly. No carefully managed public personas to maintain.

"The bigger bedroom has the better view," Ilya calls from the kitchen.

"We're sharing a bedroom," Shane says. "Obviously."

"Obviously."

Shane finds Ilya in the kitchen, arranging food in the ancient refrigerator, and comes up behind him, wraps his arms around Ilya's waist. Ilya leans back against him.

"This is nice," Shane says into Ilya's shoulder.

"What?"

"Touching you without thinking about who might see."

Ilya's hands cover Shane's hands where they're clasped across his stomach. "We could get used to this."

"Maybe we will."

They make dinner together — nothing fancy, just pasta and sauce from a jar and a salad with tomatoes that Shane sliced carefully while Ilya handled the rest. They eat at the small table by the window that looks out over the lake, and the conversation is easy, comfortable, the kind of domestic exchange that feels different here, away from the city, where every gesture of affection doesn't need to be calculated.

After dinner, they sit on the couch with Shane's legs across Ilya's lap, Shane reading a book and Ilya working on a crossword puzzle, and the quiet is profound. No city noise. No world outside the walls that demands their attention.

"Listen," Ilya says.

Shane looks up from his book. "What?"

"Just listen."

They sit in complete silence. The cottage settling around them, the lake lapping at the shore, the wind in the pine trees. Nothing else.

"I can't remember the last time it was this quiet," Shane says.

"I can't remember the last time my brain was this quiet."

Shane marks his place in the book and sets it aside. "Want to go swimming?"

"Now? It's almost dark."

"So?"

Ilya looks at him. Shane's face in the lamplight, already standing up, already pulling his shirt over his head with the particular efficiency of someone who has made a decision and intends to follow through.

"The water will be cold," Ilya says, but he's already standing too.

"Good. We're tough."

They strip on the dock, their clothes in careless piles, and Ilya watches Shane dive cleanly into the dark water, his form perfect even in a moment of pure impulse. Ilya follows, the shock of the cold lake stealing his breath, and when he surfaces, Shane is already swimming toward the middle of the lake with strong, sure strokes.

They swim until their bodies adjust to the temperature, until the cold becomes refreshing instead of shocking, and when they finally float on their backs looking up at the first stars, the water feels like silk around them.

"This is perfect," Shane says, his voice echoing slightly across the water.

"Yes, perfect," Ilya agrees.

They swim back to the dock, and when Shane pulls himself up onto the wooden planks, water streaming from his body, Ilya doesn't follow immediately. He stays in the water, his arms braced on the dock edge, looking up at Shane silhouetted against the cottage lights.

"Come up," Shane says.

"In a minute."

"Ilya."

"I like the view from here."

Shane sits on the edge of the dock, his feet in the water, and looks down at Ilya with something that might be amusement and might be something else entirely.

"What view?"

Instead of answering, Ilya pulls himself up enough to bring his mouth to Shane's inner thigh, tasting lake water and skin and the particular salt that's purely Shane. Shane's breath catches.

"Ilya—"

"No one is around," Ilya says against Shane's skin. "You said so yourself."

Shane's hand comes to Ilya's hair, and when Ilya's mouth moves higher, Shane makes a sound that's half protest and half invitation.

"The neighbours..."

"What neighbours?"

Shane looks around at the empty lake, the dark trees, the absolute privacy they've paid for, and his objections dissolve into something more immediate when Ilya's mouth finds what it was looking for.

The dock is rough against Shane's back when he lies down, but Ilya's mouth is soft and sure, and the contrast makes everything more intense. The stars overhead, the water lapping below, the particular thrill of being completely exposed and completely safe at the same time.

When Shane comes apart under the summer sky, his voice carries across the lake and returns to them as an echo, and the sound makes Ilya smile against Shane's hip.

"Your turn," Shane says, breathless.

"My turn?"

They slide back into the water, and suddenly they're both floating, holding onto the dock edge, and Shane's hand finds Ilya beneath the surface. The water is cool around them, but Shane's touch is warm, sure, and when Ilya arches against him, the movement sends ripples across the dark lake.

They float together afterwards, still holding the dock, looking up at stars that are clearer here than they ever are in the city.

"We should go inside," Shane says eventually. "Before we freeze."

"In a minute," Ilya says.

"Ilya."

"I like this. Being here with you. Being able to touch you without thinking about who might see."

Shane turns toward him in the water. "Me too."

They finally climb out when the night air starts to feel cold against their wet skin, and they dry off with towels that smell like lake water and summer. Back inside the cottage, warm and drowsy, they curl up on the couch again, this time with no pretence of reading or puzzles.

Shane shifts so he's facing Ilya properly, legs across his lap, and they look at each other in the lamplight.

"How do you feel?" Shane asks.

"Good," Ilya says. "Calm. Like I can think clearly for the first time in months."

"About what?"

"Everything." Ilya's hands find Shane's ankles, trace lazy patterns over the bone. "The season. The team. Us." He pauses. "The future."

Something in his voice makes Shane pay closer attention. "The future?"

"Shane," Ilya says, and there's something careful in the way he says it, like he's been building toward this moment all day, maybe longer.

"What is it?"

"There is something I need to tell you. Something I have been thinking about."

Shane pulls his legs back, sits up properly. The cottage suddenly feels smaller, more intimate, like it's leaning in to listen.

"Okay," Shane says.

Ilya takes a breath. "My contract is up at the end of next season."

"I know."

"I am thinking about not renewing it."

Shane goes very still. "Not renewing with the Bears?"

"Not renewing with the Bears."

"Where would you go?"

This is the question. The one Ilya has been building toward for weeks, months, the one that changes everything or changes nothing, depending on how Shane receives it.

"Canada," Ilya says. "Montreal, maybe. Vancouver. Toronto."

Shane is quiet for a long moment. "Why?"

"Because all my favourite people are Canadian," Ilya says. The words he said to Svetlana, but they mean something different here, in this cottage, to this person. "David. Yuna. You."

Shane's face is doing something complicated. "Ilya—"

"I've been thinking about it since last summer. Since the Cup. Since — since everything, really. The team here... is not the same. We are not the same. And I keep thinking about citizenship, about what it means to build a life, a future." Ilya looks at his hands, then at Shane. "I want to be Canadian. I want to apply for citizenship. I want..." He stops. This is the part he hasn't practised, the part that's been living in his chest without words.

"I want our children to be Canadian," Ilya says.

Shane stops breathing.

Ilya can see it, the moment the words land, the way Shane's chest goes still, his eyes widen slightly, his mouth opens, and no sound comes out.

"Children," Shane says finally. His voice is very quiet.

"Someday. Eventually. I know we have not talked about it, I know this is..." Ilya's words are coming too fast now, the careful speech he planned dissolving into something more urgent. "I have been thinking about it, about us. About what we are building. And I want — Shane, I want everything. I want house and kids and a life where we do not have to hide, and we do not have to perform, and our children grow up knowing exactly who their parents are."

Shane is staring at him.

"In Canada," Shane says.

"In Canada. Where you grew up, where your parents are, where—" Ilya reaches for Shane's hand. "Where we could be married. Actually married. Not just — this." He gestures at the cottage, at them. "This is perfect, but I want more than perfect. I want legal. I want recognised. I want our names on same documents."

Shane's hand is very still in Ilya's hand.

"You want to get married," Shane says.

"I want to marry you, yes."

"And have children."

"And have children."

"In Canada."

"In Canada."

Shane pulls his hand away. He stands up, walks to the window, looks out at the lake in the gathering dusk. Ilya watches him from the couch and tries to read the body language — the set of his shoulders, the way he's holding his head. Shane processing, which Shane does physically, with space, and movement and time.

"Shane," Ilya says.

"I'm thinking."

"Okay."

Shane stands at the window for a long time. When he turns around, his face is doing something Ilya has never seen before; it's raw and surprised and almost frightened.

"You want children," Shane says again.

"I want children with you."

"I don't know how to be a father."

"I do not know how to be a father either."

"Your father was—" Shane stops. "My father cries at commercials. Your father was Grigori Rozanov."

"My father is dead," Ilya says quietly. "And your father taught me how to do jigsaw puzzle and bought jersey with my name and hugs me goodbye every time I see him. I think maybe David is better model."

Shane's mouth does something that might be trying to be a smile, but isn't quite managing it.

"Canada," Shane says.

"Canada."

"You'd give up the Bears. Boston. Everything here."

"I would give up team that is falling apart for a team that wants me. I would give up city for country. I would give up..." Ilya stops. "I am not giving up anything. I am choosing something."

Shane comes back to the couch, sits down and looks at Ilya.

"When did you know?" Shane asks. "About the children."

"I do not know. It has been building. Since you started talking about Ruby and Jade, maybe. The way your voice changes when you tell me about pushing them on swing, how content you sound. Like you belong there." Ilya's voice is quiet. "I keep imagining it. Coming home from practice and there is car seat in back of your car. Teaching them to skate. Reading to them. You correcting their homework because you are precise and I am the one who lets them stay up late."

Shane is very quiet.

"I keep imagining Christmas morning," Ilya says. "Not just us. A house full of noise. Little hands on piano. Stockings with names we chose." He looks at Shane. "I keep imagining growing old with you and not just growing old but growing old as family. As parents. As people who built something that will outlast us."

Shane's eyes are bright.

"Shane," Ilya says. "Talk to me."

Shane takes a shaky breath. "I'm terrified," he says.

"Of what?"

"Of wanting it too much." Shane's voice cracks slightly. "Of wanting it so much that I can't think clearly about whether it's actually possible or whether it's just—"

"Just what?"

"A beautiful thing that people like us don't get to have."

The sentence sits between them. Ilya reaches for Shane's hand again, and this time Shane doesn't pull away.

"People like us?" Ilya asks.

"Gay, queer, athletes, people whose lives are public." Shane looks at their joined hands. "People who have to hide, take your pick."

"We do not have to hide in Canada, we do not have to hide here, we do not have to hide in Boston."

"We'll always have to hide somewhere. You're going to be in the NHL. I'm going to be—"

"You are going to be my husband," Ilya says. "And the father of our children. That is what you are going to be."

Shane looks at him. Really looks, the way Shane looks when he's seeing everything and cataloguing it and making decisions about what it means.

"You're serious about this," Shane says.

"I am serious about you."

"Montreal?"

"Or Vancouver. Or Toronto. Wherever you want."

"You'd let me choose."

"It is your country."

Shane is quiet for a long time. Then: "What if I'm bad at it? Being a father."

"What if I am bad at it?"

"You won't be bad at it."

"How do you know?"

"Because you love completely. When you love someone, you give them everything. You'd give our children everything."

"So would you," Ilya says. "You gave me everything. Before I even knew I needed it."

They sit on the couch holding hands while the cottage settles around them and the weight of the conversation — children, marriage, Canada, the complete reorganisation of both their lives — hangs in the air like something physical.

"I need to think," Shane says finally.

"I know."

"Not about you. About — logistics. Timing. What it would mean for training, for Linda, for—"

"For your career."

"For our careers. Both of them." Shane squeezes Ilya's hand. "This isn't just your decision."

"I know. That is why I am telling you."

Shane nods. "How long do I have?" Shane asks.

"To decide? As long as you need. The season does not end until June. Free agency is not until July."

"So we have time."

"We have time."

Shane brings Ilya's hand to his mouth, presses a kiss to his knuckles. "I love you," he says.

"I know."

"No, I mean—" Shane looks at him. "I love you enough to be terrified of this and want it anyway."

"That is how we know is right," Ilya says.

They sit in the quiet cottage with their hands joined and the future stretching out in front of them, uncertain and enormous and full of possibilities that neither of them planned for but both of them, maybe, are ready to choose.

Shane doesn't let go of Ilya's hand when he stands up. He pulls Ilya with him, across the cottage, toward the bedroom, and the pulling is deliberate, necessary, the body's way of processing what the mind can't hold yet.

In the bedroom Shane turns and looks at Ilya in the dim light from the hallway. Ilya's face is open, expectant, the particular vulnerability that comes after saying everything true and waiting to see how it lands.

Shane puts his hands on Ilya's face and kisses him urgently, the kiss of a person who has just been offered everything and is afraid to want it and wants it anyway. Ilya's hands come up to cover Shane's hands, holding them there, holding Shane there.

"Shane," Ilya says against his mouth.

"Don't talk," Shane says. "Not yet. I need—"

He doesn't finish the sentence. He doesn't need to. Ilya understands what Shane needs, has always understood, since that first night when Shane said show me and Ilya showed him everything.

Shane's hands move to Ilya's shirt, pulling it over his head, and Ilya's hands find Shane's shirt, and they undress each other with the focused attention of people who have done this hundreds of times and are doing it like it's the first time, like it's the last time, like it means something it has never meant before.

The cross catches the light when Ilya's shirt comes off. Shane's thumb finds it automatically, traces the edges, the worn gold warm from Ilya's skin.

"Your mother's," Shane says.

"My mother's."

"She'd want us to be happy."

"She'd want us to be family."

Shane's breath catches. The word family in Ilya's voice, in the bedroom, with Ilya's chest under his hands and the future stretching out in front of them like something they could actually reach for.

Shane pushes Ilya toward the bed, and Ilya goes, his hands on Shane's waist, pulling him down. They land together, graceless, Shane's glasses knocked askew, and Shane reaches up to take them off and put them on the nightstand with the particular care of someone who needs to see clearly what's happening.

"I want to see you," Shane says.

"You are seeing me."

"I want to see all of you. Everything you just offered me."

Ilya's eyes do something. "Shane—"

Shane kisses him. His hands move down Ilya's body, mapping the familiar territory like he's learning it for the first time — the scar on his shoulder from a skating accident when he was ten, the mole below his left collarbone, the soft skin over his ribs. Ilya arches into the touch, his breathing already changing, and Shane takes his time because time is what they have, what they're planning for, what they're building toward.

When Shane's mouth finds Ilya's chest, Ilya's hands come up to Shane's hair, just holding, the way he holds everything Shane gives him, carefully, like it's precious.

"Tell me again," Shane says against Ilya's sternum.

"Tell you what?"

"About the children. About coming home to car seats."

Ilya's breathing stutters. "Shane—"

"Tell me."

Ilya's voice when it comes is rough, unsteady. "Coming home from practice and you are in the kitchen with flour in your hair because you have been trying to make cookies and they have been helping and the kitchen is a disaster and you are laughing."

Shane's mouth moves lower, over Ilya's ribs, his stomach. "What else?"

"Saturday mornings. You sleeping in because it's the weekend and I get up with them and make pancakes and we are loud and we wake you up and you come downstairs in your glasses and your terrible hair and they climb on you like you are jungle gym."

Shane's hands find Ilya's waistband. "More."

"Teaching them to skate. Both of us, on pond behind the house we will buy, holding their hands while they wobble and fall and get up again. You being patient because you are always patient. Me being silly because that is what children need."

Shane pulls Ilya's pants down, throws them aside. Ilya is already hard, his body responding to Shane's touch and his own words, the future they're imagining together.

"More," Shane says. His mouth finds Ilya's hip.

"Bedtime stories," Ilya says. His voice is breaking now. "You reading to them because your English is better and I am lying next to you listening to your voice and thinking — this is what love sounds like. This is what family sounds like."

Shane takes Ilya in his mouth, and Ilya's words dissolve into sounds, the careful narrative becoming something more immediate, more necessary. Shane works slowly, deliberately, the way he does everything, giving Ilya the specific attention that strips away the performance and leaves just the person.

Shane pulls away before Ilya gets too close. Ilya makes a sound of protest.

"I want you inside me," Shane says.

Ilya's eyes go wide. "Shane—"

"I want to feel what it would be like. If we were married. If we were—" Shane's voice catches. "If we were making our family."

Ilya sits up, his hands on Shane's face. "Yes?"

"Yes."

Shane reaches for the nightstand, finds what they need, and when he turns back, Ilya is looking at him with something that might be reverence.

"I love you," Ilya says.

"Show me," Shane says.

Ilya shows him. Slowly, carefully, his hands and mouth everywhere Shane needs them, preparing him, loving him, until Shane is open and ready and asking for everything Ilya has to give.

When Ilya presses into him, Shane's breath goes out in a rush, and his hands grip Ilya's shoulders, and they stay still for a long moment, connected, looking at each other in the cottage bedroom light.

"Okay?" Ilya asks.

"More than okay."

Ilya moves, slow and deep, and Shane moves with him, and the rhythm they find is not urgent, not desperate, but something else — deliberate, sustained, the physical expression of everything they just promised each other.

Shane comes first, Ilya's name on his lips, his body arching under Ilya's, and Ilya follows, buried deep, his face in Shane's neck, and afterwards they lie tangled together, breathing hard, the cross warm between them.

"That felt like a beginning," Shane says eventually.

"It was a beginning."

"Canada," Shane says. "Marriage. Children. All of it."

"All of it."

Shane turns in Ilya's arms so they're facing each other. "I'm still terrified."

"Good," Ilya says. "Terrified means it matters."

"It matters," Shane confirms.

They lie in the dark bedroom and hold each other and listen to the cottage settle around them and the lake outside doing its night thing, and the conversation they just had feels different now, less theoretical, more real, the future they imagined taking shape in the space between their bodies.

"Ottawa," Shane says quietly.

"Ottawa?"

"If we're doing this. If we're really doing this." Shane's voice is steady now. "I want Ottawa. I want to be close to my parents. But close enough to Montreal that we can visit Hayden, Jackie, and JJ. I want our children to know Ruby and Jade."

"Ottawa," Ilya says. The word tastes different in his mouth than it did this morning. It tastes like home.

"Think they need a centre?" Shane asks.

"They need everything. The Centaurs are terrible."

"Good. You can fix them."

Ilya laughs, the first real laugh he's had since the conversation started. "Shane Hollander, are you planning our life?"

"Someone has to," Shane says. "You're too busy being romantic about it."

"I like being romantic about it."

"I know. That's why I love you."

They fall asleep holding each other, the future settled between them like something they can finally touch.

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Shane wakes up to sunlight streaming through the cottage windows and the sound of Ilya moving around in the kitchen. The smell of coffee drifts into the bedroom, and Shane lies still for a moment, remembering the conversation from the night before — children, marriage, Ottawa — and feeling the particular contentment that comes from having made a decision that felt impossible and turned out to be inevitable.

He finds his glasses and pulls on clothes and pads barefoot to the kitchen, where Ilya is standing at the stove making eggs, only in his boxers and nothing else, his hair sticking up in directions that only happen after a night of being thoroughly loved.

"Good morning," Shane says, and wraps his arms around Ilya from behind.

"Good morning." Ilya leans back against him. "I made coffee."

"I can smell it." Shane presses a kiss to Ilya's shoulder. "Sleep okay?"

"Better than I have in months." Ilya turns in Shane's arms. "You?"

"Same." Shane studies Ilya's face in the morning light. "No regrets?"

"No regrets." Ilya's voice is certain. "You?"

"The opposite of regrets." Shane kisses him, quick and soft. "I keep thinking about house hunting. School districts. Whether we want a pond or just access to a rink."

Ilya grins. "You are already planning."

"Someone has to. You just declared you want to completely reorganise our lives. That requires logistics."

"I love your logistics."

"I love your grand romantic gestures."

They eat breakfast at the table by the window, looking out at the lake in the morning sun, and the conversation is practical now — contracts and timelines, what kind of house they need, where in Ottawa they want to live.

"I should call my parents," Shane says eventually.

"Today?"

"Soon. They'll want to know... about what we want. About..." Shane gestures between them. "About all of it."

"What do you think they'll say?"

Shane considers this. "Dad will cry. Happy crying. And then he'll start planning the wedding before we've even figured out when we want to get engaged." He pauses. "Mom will ask if you're sure you want to play for Ottawa."

Ilya laughs. "Fair question."

Shane is quiet for a moment, looking out at the lake. "Ilya, I need to tell you something."

"What?"

"I won't be able to move with you right away." Shane's voice is careful. "I have a partnership with Rose, I have more skating in me, and I can't just walk away from that."

Ilya nods slowly. "I know."

"You know?"

"I know you have more skating. I know Rose needs you. I know you are not finished." Ilya reaches across the table for Shane's hand. "I will set up our life in Ottawa. Find the house, get settled. We can do long distance at first."

"Are you sure?"

"I am sure. You gave me everything when I needed it. Now I give you this. Time to finish what you started with skating, while I build what we are starting together."

Shane looks at him. "How long do you think we can feasibly do it?"

"However long you need," Ilya says. "A year, two years, three years. I will wait."

"And I'll visit constantly. Every break, every chance I get."

"Every chance you get," Ilya agrees.

They sit at the breakfast table holding hands across the mismatched plates, and the future that seemed theoretical last night feels concrete now, real, something they can reach for and build and live inside — even if they have to build it in stages.

"Two more weeks here," Shane says.

"Two weeks to plan everything."

"Or two weeks to not think about planning anything. To just be us, here, without the rest of the world."

Ilya brings Shane's hand to his mouth, kisses his knuckles. "I like that better."

"Good," Shane says. "Because I'm not done with you yet."

"What do you mean?"

Shane stands up and pulls Ilya with him. "I mean, we just decided to reorganise our entire lives for each other, and I think that deserves some celebrating."

"What kind of celebrating?"

Shane leads him back toward the bedroom, the morning sun streaming through the cottage windows, the lake sparkling outside like something out of a dream.

"The kind," Shane says, "where I spend the next two weeks showing you exactly how much I love every single thing you just offered me."

"All of it?"

"All of it," Shane confirms, and pulls Ilya into the bedroom to begin.

Outside, the lake continues reflecting the sky, lapping at the shore, holding space for the people who come to its edges to figure out how to build lives worth living. Inside the cottage, Shane and Ilya do what they have always done best: love each other completely and, now, finally, with a plan for a future that includes everything they've ever wanted and were afraid to ask for.

Chapter 40: at last

Chapter Summary

Ilya talks with his agent about moving to Ottawa, Shane has a conversation with Rose about their future and the boys finally come out to the world.

Ilya calls his agent on a Thursday morning in August, while Shane is at practice.

Marcus Kellerman has been representing NHL players for twenty years, and his voice has the particular quality of a man who has had every conversation there is to have about hockey careers, contract negotiations, and the business of being professional. He's been Ilya's agent since his second year in Boston, and he knows Ilya well enough to hear the decision in his voice before Ilya says anything.

"You're not re-signing," Marcus says.

"No, I am not."

"Okay. What's the plan?"

This is why Ilya likes Marcus. No questions about loyalty, no speeches about what Boston has done for him, no attempts to change his mind. Just the practical business of moving a career from one place to another.

"Ottawa," Ilya says.

Marcus is quiet for a moment. "Ottawa."

"Yes, Ottawa."

"Any particular reason?"

Ilya thinks about Shane, about David and Yuna, about children who don't exist yet and a house they haven't bought and a life they're planning in careful increments. About citizenship applications, marriage licenses, and Christmas mornings with stockings that have names on them.

"Personal reasons," Ilya says.

"Fair enough." The sound of Marcus typing, pulling up files, doing the work. "They've got cap space. They need a first-line centre. You'd fit."

"Have they shown interest?"

"Actually, Coach Wiebe's been asking about you since January. Subtle questions." Marcus pauses. "I can make some calls."

"Do it."

"Fine, but you do know that more teams are interested in you, and have been asking questions. We've got New York, San Fran, Detroit, Montreal. You've got options."

"I know. Its..." Ilya says. "Look, I am thinking about making some things not quiet anymore. Soon."

"What kind of things?"

Ilya looks around the apartment — the kitchen, the couch, the TV, their bedroom, the life they've built in secret.

"The kind that changes everything," Ilya says.

That evening, Ilya tells Shane about the conversation with Marcus.

Shane looks up from his ginger ale. "How did he react?"

"Better than I expected. No guilt trips about Boston, just straight to business." Ilya sits beside him. "He is going to make some calls to Ottawa."

Shane nods. They both knew this was coming, but hearing it confirmed makes the future feel more real, more immediate.

"Are you nervous?" Shane asks.

"Terrified," Ilya admits. "What if they are not really interested? What if no one wants me?"

"Ottawa will want you." Shane's voice is steady, certain. "And if they don't, someone else will. Everything about this is complicated." Shane reaches for Ilya's hand. "But we knew that when we decided."

Ilya squeezes his hand. "Are you sure? About Ottawa, about all of it?"

Shane thinks about the cottage, about the conversation by the lake, about choosing Ottawa specifically because he wants their children to know his parents, to grow up close to family.

"I'm sure," Shane says. "Ottawa, the long distance, the waiting until I retire. I'm sure about all of it."

"Even if the separation lasts longer than we think?"

"Even then." Shane squeezes his hand. "We're building toward something. That's what matters."

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The Bears' training camp is a disaster.

Not in an obvious way. The systems are the same, the coaching staff is the same, the players who showed up are mostly the same. But something is wrong in the way that's hard to name and

impossible to fix. The chemistry is off. The timing is a half-step slow.

It starts with little things. Passes that miss their target by inches. Players calling for the puck a half-second too late. Line changes that feel awkward, mistimed, like everyone's internal clocks are running at slightly different speeds.

LeClaire runs the same drills they've run for three years, but they don't click the way they used to. The power play, which was automatic last season, looks clunky and uncertain. Players are thinking instead of reacting, and in hockey, thinking too much is death.

"We'll work through it," LeClaire says after the third day of practice, but his voice has a strain it didn't have last year. "Early season rust."

But it's not rust. Rust you can shake off. This feels deeper, structural, like the foundation of what made the Bears the Bears has shifted in some fundamental way.

"Fuck," LeClaire says in the coaches' meeting afterwards. It's the first time Ilya has heard him swear in three years, and it tells him everything he needs to know about where LeClaire thinks this season is heading.

Marleau tears his ACL on the fourth day. Marleau, who is their second-line centre, is the steady presence who makes everyone around him better. He's never been flashy or the star of the team, but he's the kind of player who does all the little things that win games. Without him, the lines don't balance the way they're supposed to. Players get shifted into roles they're not ready for, and the ripple effect spreads through the entire roster.

Then there's Dubois. His groin injury from the playoffs should have healed over the summer, but it's clear from the first day of camp that something's not right. He's favouring his right leg, his stride is shortened, and his shot, his cannon of a shot that's been his trademark for eight years, lacks its usual pop.

"Medical cleared me," Dubois says when Ilya asks, but they both know medical clearance and game-ready are different things, and they also know that medical only cleared him because of pressure from above. Dubois is skating at maybe eighty percent, and everyone knows it, including Dubois, who starts taking longer shifts to compensate and ends up more tired than he should be.

The medical staff wants to shut him down for another month, let the injury fully heal, but the team needs him on the ice. So he plays hurt, the way hockey players always do, and gets a little worse every day.

Petrov shows up with a separated shoulder from a motorcycle accident in Prague. He's cleared to play, technically, but his range of motion is limited, and his shot is affected. In practice, he can't lift the puck the way he used to. Simple passes sail wide. He compensates by playing more defensively, which throws off the chemistry of his line.

"I'm fine," he insists, but fine in hockey is a relative term. Fine means you can skate. It doesn't mean you can play at the level that got you here.

By the second week of camp, the problems compound. Carmichael, who's been their reliable third-line winger for three years, looks slow. Not old, he's only twenty-nine, but slow, like he spent the summer doing everything except conditioning. His first step is gone, and in the NHL, your first step is everything.

The young players who were supposed to step up aren't ready. Jenkins, the rookie they drafted in the second round, has the skills but not the speed. The game is too fast for him, and he's always a beat behind. Morrison, who looked promising in his call-up last year, seems to have forgotten how to play hockey over the summer. He turns the puck over in practice, in situations where he should be automatic.

"Growing pains," LeClaire says, but his optimism sounds forced.

The worst part is the leadership vacuum. With Marleau out and Dubois playing hurt, the alternate captains who are supposed to step up don't have the authority to make it work. They look to Ilya for everything, and Ilya finds himself carrying weight he's never had to carry before.

In previous years, leadership was distributed. Marleau handled the young players. Dubois was the emotional voice in the room. Tremblay provided veteran calm. Now it's all on Ilya, and the pressure is suffocating.

After a particularly bad scrimmage in the third week of camp (one where the first-string offence couldn't score on the third-string defence), Ilya sits in the empty locker room long after everyone else has gone home. The silence is profound, and not in a good way. Not the silence of satisfaction, but the silence of something broken.

His phone buzzes with a text from Shane: "How was practice?"

Ilya stares at the question for a long moment before typing back: "We're in trouble."

By October, the Bears are 3-7-2.

Marcus calls back in early October with news.

"Ottawa wants you," he says without preamble. "Murray called me back in six hours, which in GM time means this has been on his mind for months."

"What is their offer?"

"Five years, good money. They're ready to make it official in July when free agency opens."

"I want to do something else very soon," Ilya says.

"What?"

Ilya takes a breath. "I want to come out. Publicly as a queer man. Maybe December."

The phone goes quiet. Then: "Ilya."

"I know what you are going to say."

"Do you? Because what I'm going to say is that this changes everything. Your marketability, your safety, the way teams think about you. Ottawa might back out."

"Then they back out."

"You're willing to risk the contract?"

"I am willing to risk everything," Ilya says. "For the chance to stop hiding."

Marcus is quiet for a long moment. "Why now?"

"Because I am twenty-four years old and I have been in love with the same man since I was eighteen, and I have never been able to say that publicly, or hold his hand while we are walking together, or kiss him in a restaurant. I am tired of pretending to be someone I am not. Because I want to build a life with him, and I cannot do that from a closet." Ilya looks out the apartment window at the Boston afternoon. "Because hiding is killing me, and it is killing him, and I would rather be unemployed and honest than successful and fake."

"And if Ottawa withdraws their offer?"

"Then I find somewhere else to play. Or I do not play at all."

Another long silence. "You've thought about this."

"For months."

"And what does this man think about this?"

"He supports whatever I decide."

"Even if it means you can't play hockey?"

"Even then."

Marcus sighs through the phone. "Okay. Let me talk to Ottawa. See how they feel about signing an openly queer player."

"And if they are not interested?"

"Then we find someone who is."

By the end of October, the Bears are 8-15-4, sitting dead last in their division.

After a 5-1 loss to Buffalo, Ilya sits in his stall and thinks about Ottawa. About Marcus' phone calls, about the contract negotiations that are happening quietly, about the future he's building while the present falls apart around him.

"It is over," he tells Shane that night, on the phone in his hotel room, "The season, the team, all of it. We are done."

Shane doesn't argue. Shane watches enough hockey to know the difference between a rough patch and a collapse.

"How does that feel?" Shane asks.

"Like I can see the end now," Ilya says. "And it does not scare me the way I thought it would."

+++

Shane is at practice when Marcus calls Ilya back with Ottawa's response. He comes home to find Ilya sitting on the couch, staring at his phone, his face unreadable.

"What happened?" Shane asks, setting down his gear bag.

Ilya looks up slowly, like he's surfacing from underwater. "Murray wants to meet me in person. Tomorrow."

Shane's stomach drops. "Murray?"

"Bryan Murray. Ottawa's general manager." Ilya's voice is carefully neutral, the tone he uses when he's trying not to let emotion leak through. "He wants to meet about the contract."

"Just the contract?"

"No, about everything. The contract, the coming out, what it means for the team, for the organisation. For..." Ilya stops, runs his hands through his hair. "Everything."

Shane sits beside him, close enough to feel the tension radiating off Ilya's body. "What did Marcus say exactly?"

"That Murray did not say no. That he wants to have a conversation. That this is—" Ilya's voice cracks slightly. "That this is either very good or very bad, and we will not know which until tomorrow."

"Ilya—"

"I cannot read him, Shane. I have never met him, I do not know what he is thinking. What if he calls me in just to tell me they are withdrawing the offer? What if he wants to meet so he can explain in person why they cannot take a risk on me?"

Shane studies Ilya's face. He's seen Ilya nervous before games, before big meetings, before the kind of conversations that matter. But this is different. This is the nervousness of someone whose entire future hangs on a single conversation.

"Are you having second thoughts?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya is quiet for a long moment, staring at his hands. "About Ottawa? No. About coming out?" He looks up at Shane. "I am terrified."

"Of what specifically?"

"Of everything." Ilya's voice gets smaller. "Of Murray saying no, of the media reaction if he says yes, of the fans, of being sent back to Russia."

Shane takes his hand. "You don't have to do this. We could call Marcus back, tell him you've changed your mind about the coming out part."

"No." The word comes out fierce, immediate. "No, I cannot keep hiding. I won't." Ilya turns to face Shane fully. "But there are so many what ifs. What if I am making a huge mistake? What if coming out destroys my career and I end up with nothing? What if I have to go back to Russia?"

The words hang in the air between them. The fear that's been underneath everything — not just losing hockey, but losing the life they've built, the future they've planned.

"You're not going back to Russia," Shane says firmly.

"If I cannot play hockey, if no team wants me—"

"Then you don't play hockey. But you're not going back to Russia." Shane turns to face him completely. "Ilya, listen to me. I fell in love with you, not your hockey career. If you never played another game, I'd still choose you. Every single time."

"But without hockey, I'm—"

"You're still you. You're still the person who makes me laugh when I'm taking myself too seriously. You're still the person who remembers how I like my coffee and brings me soup when I'm sick and talks me through my nerves before competitions." Shane squeezes his hand. "Hockey is what you do. It's not who you are."

Ilya's breath hitches. "I do not know who I am without hockey."

"I do." Shane's voice is soft, sure. "You're kind. You're funny when you think no one's looking. You're stubborn about the stupidest things, and you care so much about people that it hurts you sometimes. You tip restaurant servers too much, and you always let people merge in traffic, and you cry at movies you pretend you don't like."

"Shane—"

"You're brave. Even when you're scared, you're brave. And tomorrow, when you walk into that meeting with Murray, you're going to be brave again. Not because you have to be, but because that's who you are." Shane's voice is steady, certain. "Yes, it's scary. But you're brave."

Ilya stares at him, eyes bright with tears that haven't fallen yet. "What if brave isn't enough?"

"Then we figure out what comes next. Together." Shane brings Ilya's hand to his lips, presses a kiss to his knuckles. "But I think brave is going to be exactly enough."

They sit in the quiet apartment, holding hands, and Shane watches some of the tension leave Ilya's shoulders. Not all of it — tomorrow will still be terrifying — but enough that he can breathe again.

"I don't deserve you," Ilya says quietly.

"You deserve everything," Shane says. "Including the right to be honest about who you are. Including a team that wants all of you, not just the parts that are convenient. Including a life where you don't have to hide."

Ilya nods, wipes his eyes with his free hand. "Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow," Shane agrees. "And whatever happens, we'll deal with it."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

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The meeting with Bryan Murray happens at a hotel in Boston, neutral territory, the kind of place where important conversations happen away from prying eyes.

Ilya goes with Marchus. Shane waits at home, pacing the apartment, checking his phone obsessively, trying to focus on anything other than the fact that their entire future might be decided in a conference room downtown.

When Ilya comes home three hours later, his face is doing something Shane has never seen before — not relief exactly, but something like it. Something like hope.

"Well?" Shane asks.

"They want me," Ilya says. "Contract and all. Murray said..." Ilya stops, sits on the couch. "He said the league is changing. Said it's about time someone had the courage to lead that change."

"And?"

"And they want to make it official in July when free agency opens. The signing has to stay quiet until then."

Shane feels something shift in his chest. "So you'd come out without mentioning Ottawa?"

"I'd come out as myself. The Ottawa part comes later, when it's legal to announce." Ilya looks at Shane. "Murray thinks it's better that way. Let people process me being gay first, then months later they find out I'm going to Ottawa."

"What happens after you come out?" Shane asks.

Ilya reaches for his hand. "We keep doing what we're doing. You stay in Boston, I go to Ottawa, we figure out the long distance. But we do it honestly. No more pretending you are just my roommate."

"People will figure it out."

"Eventually, maybe. But that is our choice when it happens."

Shane looks at their joined hands, at the apartment they've shared for years, at the life they've built in secret that might finally have a chance to become something public.

"I'm scared," Shane admits.

"Of what?"

"Of everything changing. Of you getting hurt. Of not knowing how to be in a relationship with someone under so much scrutiny."

"Shane—"

"But I'm proud of you," Shane says quickly. "I'm so proud of you for choosing this. For choosing honesty." He pauses, looks at Ilya directly. "And I want to choose it too."

Ilya goes very still. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't want to hide anymore either. I want to come out with you."

"Shane—"

"I'm ready, Ilya. I've been ready for months, I just didn't realise it until now." Shane's voice gets stronger. "We could post at the same time. Show that this is about both of us."

Ilya's eyes get bright. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." Shane brings Ilya's hand to his mouth and presses a kiss to his knuckles. "We could ask Mom to help us draft the posts. She's good with words."

Ilya laughs, soft and relieved. "She would love that."

"Then let's do this, together."

"Together," Ilya agrees.

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The conversation with Rose happens later in November, at the restaurant with the fish on a wooden board, where Shane has all his important conversations.

Rose is already at the table when Shane arrives, a glass of wine in front of her, her coat draped over the back of her chair.

"You look different," she says as Shane sits down.

"Different how?"

"Lighter. Like you've made a decision about something." She studies his face. "What's going on?"

Shane takes a breath. "Ilya's signing with Ottawa. And he's coming out publicly in December."

Rose goes very still. "Coming out."

"Yeah, coming out." Shane looks at her directly. "And I'm going to come out with him."

Rose's face changes, not worried but alert, focused. "You're coming out too?"

"We're going to post at the same time. Show that we're together, that this is about both of us."

"And then what? You both move to Ottawa?"

Shane is quiet for a moment. "He moves to Ottawa. I stay in Boston. We do long distance until..." Shane looks at the glass in his hand, tilting it slightly to one side. "Until we're done skating, until we retire."

Rose stares at him. "Long distance."

"For however long it takes."

Rose reaches across the table and takes his hand, and her face is sad. "Shane, that's going to be really hard."

"I know."

"On both of you."

"I know."

"And I'm going to watch you be miserable and pretend it's fine because we're still training together."

"Rose—"

"I'm not judging you," she says quickly. "I understand the position you're in. I just—" She squeezes his hand. "I wish it was easier."

They order dinner, and the conversation becomes subdued, the reality of the separation settling over them. Rose asks practical questions about timing, about media attention, about what happens when people start speculating about Shane's connection to Ilya.

After they finish eating, Rose is quiet for several minutes, stirring her coffee, thinking.

"I have an idea," she says finally.

"What kind of idea?"

"What if we moved to Ottawa too?"

Shane goes very still. "What?"

"What if we moved our training base to Ottawa? We're Olympic and World champions, Shane. Linda helped make us who we are, but we can maintain it with someone else, and there are coaches in Ottawa," Rose's voice is getting stronger, more certain. "I'm from Montreal. Ottawa's not that different. And we're good enough now that we can sustain our success anywhere."

Shane stares at her. "Rose—"

"We could make it work."

"You would do that? Move to Ottawa?"

"I would do that so my skating partner doesn't have to choose between his career and the person he loves." Rose looks at him directly. "That's what partners do."

Shane feels something break open in his chest, and it floods him. Relief, gratitude, the particular joy that comes from being understood completely by someone who doesn't have to understand but chooses to anyway.

"Rose—"

"Think about it," she says. "We don't have to decide tonight. But think about it. Because if you want to be in Ottawa with Ilya, and I'm okay being in Ottawa, then maybe the solution is simpler than long distance."

She raises her cup.

"To courage," she says quietly. "Ilya's courage to come out, your courage to come out with him, and both of your courage to figure out how to build the life you want."

"To courage," Shane says.

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They FaceTime David and Yuna on a Sunday evening, Shane's MacBook open on the kitchen counter, the familiar view of his parents' Ottawa kitchen filling the screen.

"Shane. Ilya." Yuna closes her laptop. "This is a nice surprise."

"Hi Mom. Hi Dad." Shane waves at the screen. "We have news."

David comes into frame, tea mug in hand, his face immediately shifting to parent-alert mode. "Everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Shane says. "We just — we have news."

"Ilya's signing with Ottawa," Shane says. "Five year deal. But it's been kept quiet."

David nods. "I figured something was gonna happen, with the season going how it is."

"There's something else," Ilya says. "We're both coming out publicly next month."

The kitchen in Ottawa goes quiet. On the screen, David and Yuna exchange a look.

"Both of you?" Yuna asks.

"Both of us," Shane confirms. "We're going to post on Instagram at the same time."

David leans closer to the camera. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"We're sure," Shane says.

"What about your training? Your sponsors?" Yuna asks Shane specifically.

"Rose is supportive. And if sponsors have a problem with who I am, then I don't want their money." Shane looks at the camera. "We're tired of hiding."

Through the screen, they can see David's eyes getting bright. "I'm so proud of both of you."

"Actually," Ilya says, "we were wondering if you could help us, Yuna. With the posts. You are good with words."

Yuna's face lights up. "You want me to help you write your coming out posts?"

"If you're willing," Shane says. "We want them to be right."

"Of course I'll help. Send me what you have so far and we can work on them together."

"This is going to be very hard," David says. "The media attention, the reactions."

"We know."

"But we're proud of you," Yuna says. "Both of you. For choosing to be honest. That takes incredible courage."

"And Shane," David adds, "we're so proud that you feel ready for this step."

Shane feels something loosen in his chest. "Thanks, Dad."

"It's going to be so great to have both of you closer," David says.

The FaceTime call goes on for another hour, the four of them talking across the distance, planning for less distance, the laptop screen holding them together while they figure out how to make their future work.

When they hang up, everything feels a little less grainy. The future is still complicated, still difficult, but it's theirs.

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On December 15th, they sit on the couch with their phones, looking at their draft posts. They've been working on them for weeks with Yuna's help, refining the words, making sure they say exactly what they need to say.

"Ready?" Ilya asks.

"Ready," Shane says.

They post within minutes of each other.

Ilya's Instagram post: a photo of him and Shane standing side by side in the parking lot outside the training facility. Their heads are touching and Shane has his hand on Ilya's back (but that can't be seen from the angle). He's also wearing Ilya's t-shirt but no one knows that, except the two of them.

ilyarozanov81

Time to be honest. I'm queer and I'm in love with this man. We've been together for years and I'm tired of hiding who I am. To anyone struggling with the same thing, you're not alone.

#Pride #BeYourself"

Shane's post goes up three minutes later. It's a different photo, taken from a hike they went on last summer. They're both wearing backwards caps, and Ilya is squinting, the sun in his face. Shane's face is scrunched in a grimace and his arm is around Ilya. ,

shanehollanderskating

"I'm gay and this is the person I love. We've been hiding long enough. To any young athletes reading this: you can be yourself and still chase your dreams.

#Pride #Authentic"

The notification count starts climbing immediately. 100 likes. 500. 1,000. Comments flooding in faster than Ilya can read them.

Some supportive. Some not.

But Ilya doesn't read them. Instead, he puts his phone face down on the coffee table and looks at Shane.

"How do you feel?" Shane asks.

"Free," Ilya says. "For the first time in my life, I feel free."

Shane takes his hand. "I'm so proud of you."

"Are you okay? With all of it?"

Shane considers this. The posts, the attention, the fact that they're now publicly out as a couple to the entire world.

"I'm nervous," Shane admits. "About the media attention, about what happens next. But mostly I feel relieved. Like we can finally breathe."

Ilya brings Shane's hand to his mouth, kisses his knuckles. "I love you."

"I love you too."

They sit on the couch in the December evening and don't look at their phones, don't read the comments, don't engage with the storm that's building online. Instead, they talk about Ottawa, about Rose's offer to move there, about the life they're finally going to build completely in the open.

"No regrets?" Shane asks.

"Only that it took us this long," Ilya says.

"We did it when we were ready."

"So..." Ilya says. "Ottawa in six months."

"And then we figure out the rest."

The phones keep buzzing on the coffee table, the world reacting to their truth, but they ignore them. Tonight is about them, about the choice they made together, about the future that's finally, completely theirs.

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov are out. Publicly, completely, finally out as individuals and as a couple. The secret they've carried is now revealed, and the world hasn't ended.

It's only just begun.



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Chapter 41: home

Chapter Summary

Ilya and Shane go through the backlash of coming out, still determined to face their future together, and after Ilya signs with Ottawa, they create the home they've always dreamed of.

Chapter Notes

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

The Bears finish the season with a record that can only be described as adequate. Not terrible enough to be embarrassing, not good enough to matter. They hover around .500, win some games they shouldn't, lose some they should win, and play the kind of hockey that gets you home for the playoffs in April while other teams compete for something that actually matters.

Ilya puts up decent numbers. It's not his best season, far from it actually, but respectable for a team that can't seem to find its rhythm. The media coverage focuses more on his personal life than on what he's been doing on the ice.

The coverage is brutal.

The comments under his Instagram posts are a mix of support and venom that makes Shane's stomach turn every time he accidentally scrolls too far. For every "you're so brave" there are three "keep your bedroom business to yourself" or worse. Much worse.

The news articles are even uglier. Every story about Ilya's performance, the Bears' season, or hockey in general becomes a referendum on whether gay players belong in professional sports. The comment sections are cesspools that Shane has learned to avoid entirely, but Ilya reads them sometimes, his face getting tighter and more closed off with each page.

The worst part is the arenas. Home games are mostly fine — Boston fans can be rough, but they're protective of their own. Road games are a different story. The booing starts during warm-ups and gets louder during play. Slurs get shouted from the stands, sometimes loud enough to hear on the ice. Security throws people out, but there are always more.

In Philadelphia, someone throws a rainbow flag onto the ice during the national anthem. The gesture might have been supportive, but the way the crowd reacts, the mix of cheers and boos and ugly laughter, makes it feel like a joke at Ilya's expense.

In Pittsburgh, the chanting is so loud and so vicious that the referees stop play twice to warn the crowd. Ilya's teammates skate by him during the stoppages, and some — Dubek, Tremblay, Dubois — tap his shin pads or say something supportive. But others give him space, like being gay might be contagious, like association with him might paint targets on their backs, too.

Marleau, still on injured reserve, watches from home and texts Ilya after every road game: "Fuck them. You played great."

But it wears on him. Shane can see it in the way Ilya's shoulders stay tense even at home, the way he checks his phone obsessively and then immediately regrets it, the way he's started leaving it in another room during dinner so he won't be tempted to read the latest round of hate.

"You could delete the apps," Shane suggests one night in February, after a particularly bad game in Nashville where the crowd spent three periods making his life miserable.

"I could," Ilya agrees. "But then they win."

Shane doesn't argue with the logic, but he hates watching the person he loves absorb that much poison on a daily basis.

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Shane doesn't realise he's doing it again until Ilya brings it up.

They're having dinner, pasta with the sauce Shane likes, salad, bread that Shane usually devours, and Ilya looks down at Shane's plate and frowns.

"You are not eating," Ilya says.

Shane looks down. His plate is mostly full, just pushed around to look like he's made progress. "I'm not that hungry."

"You have not been hungry in two weeks."

Shane's stomach tightens. Not from hunger, he's gotten good at ignoring that again, but from being caught. "I'm eating."

"You are pretending to eat." Ilya's voice is gentle but firm. "I know the difference, I have seen it before."

Shane's chest feels tight. He wants to argue, to insist that he's fine, that Ilya is imagining things. But looking at his plate, at the careful way he's arranged the food to look disturbed without actually consuming much of it, he knows Ilya is right.

"It's the stress," Shane says quietly. "All the comments, the articles, watching what people say about you. It makes me feel sick."

Ilya reaches across the table and takes his hand. "Shane."

"I know it's stupid. It's not even about me, but reading what people say about us, about gay athletes, about whether we belong in sports—" Shane's voice gets smaller. "It makes me want to disappear."

"Hey." Ilya's thumb traces over Shane's knuckles. "Look at me."

Shane looks up. Ilya's face is concerned but not panicked, the expression of someone who knows this territory and isn't afraid of it.

"How long?" Ilya asks.

"Since January. Since the Pittsburgh game, maybe." Shane takes a shaky breath. "I didn't mean for it to happen. I just started feeling sick when I ate, and then it became easier not to eat, and then—"

"And then it became the thing you could control when everything else felt out of control."

Shane nods, throat tight. "Yeah."

Ilya is quiet for a moment, still holding Shane's hand. "What do you need?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want to call Dr Kessler?"

Dr Kessler was Shane's therapist when the eating disorder was at its worst. Shane hasn't talked to her in over a year, but her number is still in his phone.

"Maybe," Shane says. "Yes. Probably yes."

"Okay." Ilya squeezes his hand. "We will call her tomorrow. Tonight, can you eat something small? Just so you have something in your stomach?"

Shane looks at his plate, at the pasta that feels like an insurmountable mountain, and then at Ilya's face, patient and worried and completely without judgment.

"The bread?" Shane suggests. "Just the bread?"

"The bread is perfect."

Shane tears off a small piece and eats it slowly. It sits heavy in his stomach, but it stays down. Ilya doesn't comment, doesn't make it a big deal, just continues eating his own dinner like Shane achieving one bite is completely normal and exactly what he expected.

Later, lying in bed, Shane's stomach growls softly, and he doesn't feel proud of the sound anymore. It just feels empty in a way that has nothing to do with control and everything to do with not taking care of himself.

"Thank you," he says into the dark. "For noticing."

"Always," Ilya says. "I will always notice."

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Dr Kessler's voice sounds exactly the same over the phone, warm and direct and completely unsurprised to hear from Shane after a year of silence.

"Stress-related relapse," she says during their first session back. "Very common. The eating disorder is a coping mechanism, and you've been under an extraordinary amount of stress."

They do FaceTime sessions twice a week, sometimes more if Shane needs it. She gives him concrete strategies for managing the anxiety that's driving the restriction, helps him identify the thoughts that lead to skipping meals, and teaches him to separate his feelings about the homophobic backlash from his feelings about food.

"You can't control what people say about you or Ilya," she tells him. "But you can control whether you eat lunch. One of these things keeps you healthy and strong. The other just makes you smaller."

Shane knows she's right. That doesn't make eating easier, but it makes the motivation clearer. He wants to be strong for Ilya, for their relationship, for the life they're building. He doesn't want to waste energy on making himself smaller when the world is already trying to diminish them both.

By April, he's back to eating regularly, though it still requires conscious effort some days. Ilya never makes a big deal of it, just continues cooking for two and putting food in front of Shane and trusting him to do the work of taking care of himself.

The Bears miss the playoffs by six points. At the press conference, Ilya is asked more questions about his "off-ice distractions" than his on-ice performance. He handles it with grace that Shane finds remarkable.

"My personal life makes me happy," Ilya says into the microphone. "Happy players play better hockey. I am looking forward to next season."

What he doesn't say: next season won't be in Boston.

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After the final game of the season, a meaningless 3-2 win against Buffalo that changes nothing about their playoff chances, Ilya sits in the locker room and watches his teammates pack up their gear for the summer. Some of them he'll never play with again. Some of them he's not sure he'll miss.

But some he will.

"Coach wants to see you," Dubek says, tapping Ilya's shoulder as he heads out. "His office."

Ilya nods. He's been putting off this conversation for weeks, but it can't wait any longer.

LeClaire is at his desk when Ilya knocks, still in his suit from the game, looking tired in the way coaches look when seasons end badly.

"Sit down," LeClaire says without preamble. "We need to talk."

Ilya sits. The office feels smaller than it used to, cluttered with the debris of a disappointing season — scouting reports that didn't matter, lineup cards from games they should have won, the accumulated paperwork of failure.

"You're leaving," LeClaire says. It's not a question.

"Yes."

"Ottawa?"

"Yes."

LeClaire nods slowly. "When?"

"It gets announced July first. Official start of free agency."

"But you've known for months."

Ilya looks at his hands. "Since November."

"That's a long time to keep a secret."

"I am good at keeping secrets," Ilya says, and there's more weight in those words than just his contract situation.

LeClaire is quiet for a moment, studying Ilya's face. "You know I have to ask — is this about what happened this season? The comments, the treatment on the road?"

"No," Ilya says quickly. "This has nothing to do with that. This was decided before any of that."

"But it didn't help."

Ilya considers this. "No. It did not help."

LeClaire leans back in his chair. "You've been a good captain, Ilya. Better than good. You held this team together when it should have fallen apart."

"The team fell apart anyway."

"Not because of you. Because of injuries, because of age, because sometimes things just don't work the way they're supposed to." LeClaire's voice gets softer. "You gave us everything you had. Don't let anyone tell you different."

Ilya's throat feels tight. "Thank you."

"Ottawa's getting a hell of a player. And a hell of a person." LeClaire stands up, extends his hand. "I wish you nothing but the best."

They shake hands, and Ilya feels something end that he didn't realise had begun seven years ago when he first walked into this building as an eighteen-year-old kid who barely spoke English.

The team meeting happens the next day, the official end-of-season gathering where LeClaire talks about the summer, about training, about coming back stronger next year. The room feels half-empty — some players have already left for vacation, others are dealing with exit interviews and medical evaluations.

Ilya sits in his usual spot and waits for LeClaire to finish his remarks about conditioning and mental preparation and staying hungry during the off-season. When the coach is done, when he asks if anyone has anything to add, Ilya raises his hand.

"I have something to say."

The room goes quiet. Marleau, still on crutches, shifts in his seat. Dubois stops checking his phone. Even the guys who've been mentally checked out since February pay attention.

"When you return in the fall," Ilya says, looking around the room at faces he's known for years, "I will not be here."

The silence that follows is profound.

"I have signed with another team. It gets announced officially in July, but I wanted you to hear it from me first." Ilya's voice is steady, matter-of-fact. "It's been an honour to be your captain. You are good players and good men, and I wish you nothing but success."

Dubek speaks first. "Where?"

"Ottawa."

Morrison whistles low. "Wow."

"Congratulations," Tremblay says quietly. "They're good guys over there."

Others nod, murmur agreement. A few look surprised, but most don't. The writing has been on the wall for months.

Marleau clears his throat. "You were a good captain, Rozanov. Best we've had since I've been here."

"Marleau's right," Dubois adds. "You never asked us to do anything you wouldn't do yourself. That means something."

Ilya feels his chest tighten. He didn't expect this to be emotional, but looking around the room at these men he's played beside, bled beside, won Stanley Cups beside, he realises how much he's going to miss some of them.

"Thank you," he says simply. "All of you. For seven years."

After the meeting breaks up, a few players come up to shake his hand, wish him well. Others just nod as they pass. Dubek lingers.

"You gonna miss it?" Dubek asks.

"Some of it," Ilya says honestly.

"Some of us?"

Ilya looks at Dubek — quiet, steady Dubek who never said much but was always there when things got difficult. "Yeah. Some of you."

Dubek nods. "Ottawa's lucky to have you."

"Boston was lucky to have all of us," Ilya says. "For a while."

Walking out of the locker room for the last time, Ilya doesn't look back. Forward is the only direction that matters now.

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Shane and Rose sit in a coffee shop in Boston with Rose's laptop open between them, scrolling through coaching profiles and training facilities in Ottawa. The move is happening whether they find the perfect situation or not, but they want to do their research.

"What about Marina Kozlov?" Rose asks, clicking through a coaching profile. "She's worked with pairs before, coached at the international level."

Shane reads over her shoulder. "Based in Montreal, though. That's two hours from Ottawa."

"Still closer than Boston to Ottawa," Rose points out. "And she has a good reputation. Very technical."

They make a list. Coaches who work with elite pairs, coaches who have experience with Olympic-level athletes, coaches who might be willing to work with a team that's already established rather than trying to rebuild them from scratch.

"The thing is," Shane says, stirring his coffee thoughtfully, "we don't need someone to teach us how to skate together. We already know how to do that."

"We need someone who can maintain what we have and maybe make it better," Rose agrees. "Someone who understands that we're not starting from zero."

"Linda's going to give us recommendations," Shane says. "She's been thinking about it since I told her we were moving."

"How did she take it?"

Shane smiles. "Better than I expected. She said Ottawa's skating community is small but strong. And she knows a few people."

They spend another hour researching, taking notes, making phone calls. Rose handles most of the talking — she's better at the business side of skating, better at asking the right questions about training schedules, facility access and what coaches expect from their athletes.

"I think we should plan some visits," Rose says finally, closing the laptop. "Go up to Ottawa for a weekend, meet with a few coaches, see some facilities. Get a feel for what's available."

"That makes sense." Shane looks at their notes, at the list of names and phone numbers and possibilities. "Are you nervous about it? Starting over with someone new?"

Rose considers this. "A little. Linda's been with us for years. She knows how we work, what we need, what pushes us and what shuts us down." She pauses. "But I'm also excited. New coach, new perspective, new challenges. It could be really good for us."

Shane nods. "I keep thinking about how different everything's going to be. Going back to places I haven't been in years."

"Coming home," Rose adds gently.

"Coming home," Shane agrees. "But the same partnership."

"The same partnership, you're not getting rid of me this easily," Rose confirms, and Shane feels something settle in his chest. No matter how much changes, some things stay the same.

They spend the rest of the afternoon making plans for their Ottawa visits, comparing training schedules and trying to figure out logistics. It feels good to be planning something together, to be building toward their shared future even as Shane's personal life takes him to a different country.

"Thank you," Shane says as they pack up their notes. "For doing this with me. For making it possible for me to have both."

Rose smiles. "That's what best friends do, try and make each other's lives as easy as they can."

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David and Yuna pick them up at the Ottawa airport on a Friday morning, David holding a thermos of coffee and Yuna clutching a folder full of real estate listings.

"House hunting weekend!" Yuna announces as she hugs Shane and Ilya in the arrivals area. "This is going to be fun."

They spend the weekend driving around Ottawa, Shane and Ilya in the back seat like teenagers being driven around by parents, looking at houses that range from completely wrong to almost perfect. David and Yuna know the city better than Shane and Ilya do, know which neighbourhoods have good restaurants and which ones have the best access to downtown, which streets flood in spring and which ones are convenient to the rink where Shane and Rose will be training, and the one Ilya will be playing at.

"Not too far from us," David says as they pull up to a house in Nepean, but not in a demanding way. More like an expression of hope.

"Close enough for Sunday dinners," Shane agrees from the back seat, and watches his father's face light up in the rearview mirror.

The house they fall in love with is in Manotick, a colonial with a big front porch and windows that let in ridiculous amounts of light. The kitchen is huge, open to the living room, the kind of space designed for entertaining and family dinners, and the life Shane can suddenly picture building here.

"It has good bones," Yuna says, running her hands along the built-in bookshelves in what will be Ilya's study.

"It has character," David adds, testing the sturdiness of the bannister.

"It has a hot tub," Ilya says from the back deck, and Shane knows they're going to buy it.

They spend Sunday afternoon at David and Yuna's house, making phone calls to real estate agents and mortgage brokers, starting the paperwork that will make the house theirs. Shane sits at his parents' kitchen table, the same table where he ate breakfast for eighteen years, and fills out forms to buy a house with the person he loves in the city where he grew up.

"It feels surreal," he tells Ilya that night in his childhood bedroom.

"Good surreal or bad surreal?"

"Good," Shane says, looking around at the room where he learned to skate in his imagination, where he dreamed about Olympics and world championships and never once imagined he'd be planning a life with someone who made him this happy. "Really good."

The paperwork takes weeks. Mortgage applications and inspections, and the particular bureaucracy of buying property when you're still technically employed somewhere else. But by late June, it's

theirs. Shane has never owned a house before, and signing the papers feels like holding a piece of the future in his hands.

They drive up from Boston on a Wednesday afternoon in June with a U-Haul full of furniture and Ilya's car packed with everything else they couldn't bear to trust to the movers. The house smells like fresh paint and possibility.

"Home," Ilya says, standing in the empty living room, and Shane's chest does something complicated and warm.

"Home," Shane agrees.

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The press conference happens on July 1st, the first official day of free agency, in a conference room at the Canadian Tire Centre that's been set up with Ottawa Centaurs logos and too many microphones.

Bryan Murray sits at the table in a suit that looks expensive, flanked by Coach Wiebe and Ilya. The questions are predictable — contract terms, expectations for the upcoming season, and what Ilya brings to the team.

"We're thrilled to have Ilya join the Centaur family," Murray says into the microphones. "He's a proven leader, a talented player, and exactly the kind of person we want representing our organisation."

The subtext is clear: we knew he was queer when we signed him, and we signed him anyway.

Wiebe talks about Ilya's hockey IQ, his experience in pressure situations, his ability to make players around him better. The questions are mostly professional, focused on the team and the upcoming season rather than Ilya's personal life.

But then a reporter in the back row raises his hand.

"Ilya, you came out publicly in December. Have you experienced any negative reactions from players around the league?"

Ilya considers the question. Shane, watching from the audience, sees him choose his words carefully.

"Hockey is changing," Ilya says finally. "Some people are ready for that change, and some people need more time. I can only control what I do on the ice and how I treat my teammates. The rest takes care of itself."

"Are you concerned about how opposing fans might react?"

"Fans have opinions about everything," Ilya says with a slight smile. "I have been booed before for scoring goals against their teams. This is not different."

It is different, Shane knows. But he admires Ilya's refusal to give the negativity more weight than it deserves.

"What does it mean to you to be playing in Canada?"

Ilya's answer is honest: "It means I can build the life I want with the person I love in a place that feels like home. Hockey brought me here, but what keeps me here is bigger than hockey."

After the press conference, they drive home to Manotick, to the house with the big kitchen and the hot tub and the study where Ilya will read during the off-season. Shane sits in the passenger seat and thinks about how much has changed since last July, when they were still hiding, still planning, still afraid of what honesty might cost them.

Now they know what it costs. But they also know what it's worth.

"Ready for your first season as an Ottawa Centaur?" Shane asks as they pull into their driveway.

"Ready for our first season in Ottawa," Ilya corrects, and Shane's chest does that warm, complicated thing again.

Home. They're home.

Chapter End Notes

It's almost over, gang, and I'm sad about it 😭

Chapter 42: family

Chapter Summary

Shane and Ilya settle into their new life in Ottawa.

Chapter Notes

[This](#) is basically how I see the inside of their house looking like <3

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

The house in Manotick still smells like fresh paint and possibility, even three weeks after they moved in. Shane wakes up every morning slightly disoriented, reaching for the light switch that's on the wrong wall, padding to a bathroom that's twice the size of the one in Boston, looking out windows that frame trees instead of brick buildings.

But Ilya's arm around his waist is exactly the same. The way Ilya mumbles complaints about morning light is exactly the same. The particular warmth of waking up next to the person he loves most—that's been consistent both in Boston and now in Ottawa, through three years of loving without the other knowing and four years of loving while hiding.

"Coffee," Ilya says into Shane's shoulder, muffled and demanding.

"Coffee machine's downstairs."

"Too far."

"You could get up and make it."

"Could," Ilya agrees without moving. "Won't."

Shane laughs and extracts himself from Ilya's grip, pulling on shorts and a t-shirt that says Ottawa Senators across the front—a gift from Yuna that he wore once to make her happy and now can't seem to stop wearing.

The kitchen still feels too big, too open, too bright. Shane spent eighteen years in his parents' house and then seven years in a small Boston apartment, and he's not used to this much space, this many windows, this sense that he could cook for twelve people without feeling crowded.

He makes coffee and scrambled eggs, sets two plates on the kitchen island, and calls up the stairs.

"Breakfast!"

Ilya appears five minutes later in boxers and nothing else, hair sticking up in three directions, squinting against the light like it's personally offended him.

"Much better," he says, kissing Shane's temple and stealing a forkful of eggs.

"I made a plate for you, too."

"I like yours better."

This is domestic in a way Shane never let himself imagine. Not just living together, they've been doing that for years, but living together openly, in a house they own, in a city where Shane's parents live fifteen minutes away and know exactly who Ilya is and what he means to Shane.

Yesterday, Yuna stopped by with groceries and a casserole dish she insisted they needed, and she hugged Ilya goodbye like he was her own son. The day before that, David helped them hang pictures in the living room, arguing with Ilya about proper wall anchor technique with the particular intensity of two people who both think they know better.

"What time is Rose coming over?" Ilya asks, checking his phone.

"Two. She wants to see the guest room."

"The guest room she helped us pick out furniture for."

"She wants to see it with furniture in it." Shane steals a piece of Ilya's bacon. "Different experience."

Rose has been in Ottawa for two weeks, settled into a small apartment downtown while she and Shane start training with their new coach. Marina Kozlov turned out to be exactly what they needed—technically precise, demanding in the right ways, willing to work with a team that already knows how to skate together.

"And everyone's coming for dinner Saturday?"

"Everyone's coming for dinner Saturday." Shane has been planning the menu for a week, the first real dinner party in their new house. "JJ, Hayden, Jackie, the twins. Svetlana flies in Friday night."

"David and Yuna."

"Obviously, my parents are coming."

Ilya grins. "First dinner party in the new house."

"First of many," Shane says, and the certainty of that statement settles warm in his chest. They're going to live here for years. They're going to host Christmas dinners and birthday parties and Sunday afternoon gatherings where people they love fill their kitchen and spill into their backyard and make the house feel like what it's supposed to be: a home.

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The hot tub was the selling point, but Shane didn't realise how much he'd love it until they actually started using it.

They're in it after dinner, the August air still warm but cooling as the sun sets behind the trees that line their backyard. The water is exactly the right temperature, the jets are perfectly positioned, and Shane is curled against Ilya's side with a glass of wine and no plans to move for at least an hour.

"This was a good investment," Shane says, watching steam rise from the water's surface.

"The hot tub or the house?"

"Both. But specifically the hot tub."

Ilya's hand moves under the water, traces patterns on Shane's thigh that have nothing to do with relaxation and everything to do with the particular privacy of their own backyard, their own hot tub, their own life that no one else gets to have opinions about.

"We should christen it properly," Ilya says, his voice dropping into the register that means Shane is about to forget about the wine, the sunset, and anything else that isn't Ilya's hands on his body.

"I thought we already did that. Twice."

"Third time's the charm."

Shane sets his wine glass on the edge of the hot tub and shifts so he's facing Ilya properly, legs on either side of Ilya's hips, the water making everything feel weightless and easy.

"The neighbours," Shane says, but it's not really a protest.

"The neighbours are inside watching television like normal people on a Tuesday night."

"The fence isn't that high."

"Then you'll have to be quiet," Ilya says, and his hands slip lower, and Shane decides that being quiet is a problem for future Shane to worry about.

Later, when they're both loose-limbed and satisfied, floating in water that tastes faintly of chlorine and Shane's sunscreen, Shane thinks about how different this is from every other place they've been together. Not just physically—though the hot tub under the stars is admittedly a significant upgrade from their various beds and couches—but emotionally. There's no urgency, no sense that they're stealing time or hiding something important.

"I love this," Shane says into the quiet.

"The sex or the hot tub?"

"The not hiding."

Ilya's arm tightens around Shane's waist. "Me too."

They stay in the hot tub until their fingers are pruned and the wine has gone straight to Shane's head, and then they stumble inside, dripping and laughing and completely unconcerned with being anything other than exactly who they are.

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Saturday afternoon, Shane stands in his kitchen and watches his chosen family fill his house.

JJ arrives first, bearing wine and the particular energy of someone who's excited about everything and wants everyone else to be excited too. He hugs Shane like they haven't seen each other in months instead of three weeks, then immediately starts helping with food prep without being asked.

Hayden and Jackie come next with Ruby and Jade, who are almost four now and full of opinions about everything. They run straight for the backyard, pronounce the hot tub "like a pool but smaller," and immediately start making plans for a swimming party that Shane is pretty sure he just agreed to host.

"They're obsessed with water," Jackie says, settling carefully into one of the dining room chairs. She's six months pregnant and moves with the particular care of someone whose centre of gravity is no longer where it used to be. "Everything is about swimming or baths or water balloons."

"They can use the hot tub," Shane offers. "If we turn the temperature down."

"You'll never get them out," Hayden warns, but he's smiling. "Fair warning."

Rose arrives with Svetlana, who flew in from Boston specifically for this dinner and looks around the house with the critical eye of someone evaluating real estate investments.

"Good bones," she pronounces finally, which Shane has learned is high praise from Svetlana. "Good light. Good space for entertaining."

"That was the idea," Shane says.

"And the hot tub?"

"Also good bones," Ilya says, appearing at Shane's elbow with a beer. "Very good bones."

David and Yuna arrive last, because they live closest and have the least excuse for being late, carrying a bouquet of flowers from their garden and a bottle of champagne they insist is for "the housewarming and also everything else worth celebrating."

Before they join the others, David pulls Shane aside in the front hallway.

"Your mother and I wanted to tell you something," he says quietly. "We're so proud of you. Both of you."

Shane feels his chest tighten in the good way. "Dad—"

"Let me finish." David's voice gets soft. "When you were growing up, we hoped you'd find someone who made you happy. We never imagined we'd get to see you this happy, or that we'd gain another son in the process."

"Ilya's not—"

"He is," Yuna interrupts, appearing at David's shoulder. "He's our son now. The paperwork might say otherwise, but he's family. And watching you two together, in your own home, surrounded by people who love you—" She stops, wipes her eyes. "It's everything we wanted for you and more than we dared to hope for."

Shane hugs them both, hard and fierce, breathing in the familiar smell of his mother's perfume and his father's aftershave. These people raised him, supported him through every difficult moment, and now they're here to celebrate the life he's built with the person he loves most.

"Thank you," Shane says. "For everything. For accepting Ilya, for welcoming us back, for making this feel like home."

"Ottawa was always your home," David says. "We're just glad you found your way back to it."

By six o'clock, the dining room is full of noise and laughter and the particular chaos that comes from having small children, adults who like each other, and enough wine to make everyone slightly louder than usual.

Ruby is explaining to Svetlana why carrots are "orange vegetables but not like orange oranges," while Jade shows Yuna a drawing she made of what she thinks Shane and Ilya's house should look like (it involves significantly more turrets than the actual house possesses). JJ is helping Rose organise the music playlist, because apparently every dinner party needs a soundtrack. Hayden and David are discussing hockey with the intensity of people who have strong opinions about defensive strategies.

Jackie, meanwhile, has cornered Ilya near the kitchen island and is asking him pointed questions about his intentions regarding marriage and children, with the particular directness of a pregnant woman who has no patience for evasion.

"We have talked about it," Ilya says, glancing over at Shane. "Marriage, kids, the whole thing."

"And?"

"And we want it. All of it. Just not yet."

"What are you waiting for?"

Ilya considers this, watching Shane argue with JJ about salad dressing proportions. "Nothing, really. We are already living like we are married. We own a house together, we are building a life together. The legal part feels like paperwork at this point."

"Good paperwork," Jackie says. "Important paperwork."

"Important paperwork," Ilya agrees. "But not urgent paperwork."

"And kids?"

"In a few years. When we are settled, when Shane is ready, when we both want to turn our attention to something other than our careers." Ilya's voice gets softer. "We want to do it right. Kids deserve parents who are completely ready to be parents."

Jackie nods approvingly. "Good answer."

Dinner is loud and chaotic and exactly what Shane hoped it would be. Ruby insists on sitting between Shane and Ilya, while Jade commandeers David's lap and provides running commentary on everyone's food choices. The adults talk over each other, interrupt constantly, and somehow manage to have three different conversations simultaneously.

"This is what family dinners are supposed to be like," Yuna says to Shane as he refills her wine glass. "Loud and messy and full of people who love each other."

"It's perfect," Shane agrees, and he means it.

After dinner, they move to the backyard, where JJ and Hayden immediately declare themselves in charge of getting the hot tub to "kid temperature" while Ruby and Jade run around in bathing suits that appeared from nowhere and create elaborate games that involve a lot of splashing and shrieking.

Shane finds himself on the deck with Rose and Svetlana, watching the chaos and feeling something he can only describe as complete contentment.

"You know," Svetlana says, taking a sip of wine, "when I first met you in Boston, you were wound so tight I worried you might snap."

"Thanks," Shane says dryly. "That's exactly what every person wants to hear."

"But look at you now," Rose adds, gesturing toward where Ilya is letting the twins use him as a human jungle gym in the hot tub. "Completely relaxed. It's nice to see."

Shane watches Ilya surface with Ruby on his shoulders and Jade clinging to his back like a small koala. The sight makes his chest do something warm and familiar.

"I never thought I'd want this," Shane admits. "The suburban house, the chaos, the arguments about vegetables. I thought I wanted something more... I don't know, significant."

"This is the most significant thing there is," Rose says firmly.

Shane looks around at his backyard, at Jackie and Hayden curled together on the patio furniture, at David and Yuna and JJ deep in animated conversation, and realises she's right.

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Mid-September, when NHL teams reconvene after summer break, Ilya walks into the Centaurs' practice facility for the first time as an official member of the team.

The facility smells like every hockey rink Ilya has ever been in—ice and sweat and the particular rubber scent of equipment that's seen too much use. But the faces are different, the voices are different, and Ilya is still learning names and positions and who likes their coffee black versus who needs three sugars.

The layout is similar to Boston—lockers arranged around the perimeter, training tables in the centre—but the energy is different. They're younger, hungrier, and less weighed down by the particular exhaustion that comes from a core that's been together too long.

"Rozanov!" Zane Boodram calls from across the locker room as Ilya finishes tying his skates. "Bood" to everyone who's not his mother, left wing with hands that are too good for someone who plays as physical as he does. "You coming to lunch after practice?"

"Where?"

"This place downtown. Shawarma. Dykstra swears it's the best in the city, but Dykstra thinks Nickelback is good music, so take that with a grain of salt."

Evan Dykstra, the defenseman in question, looks up from his phone with mock offence. "Nickelback is a national treasure."

"Nickelback is a national embarrassment," Wyatt Hayes calls from the corner, not looking up from the meditation app he insists helps his focus. "And I say that as someone who's proud to be Canadian."

"What do you know about music, Hayes?" Nick Chouinard asks, adjusting his shoulder pads. "You listen to nature sounds and whale songs."

"Meditation soundscapes," Hayes corrects with dignity. "Very different from whale songs."

Ilya finds himself smiling despite the nerves. This is what he missed in Boston during those last few months—the easy camaraderie, the stupid arguments about nothing, the sense that these people might actually like each other off the ice.

"Lunch sounds good," Ilya says.

"Excellent," Bood says. "Fair warning, though—they're going to ask you about Shane."

Ilya's stomach tightens slightly. "What about Shane?"

"Whether he's as good-looking in person as he is in pictures," Dykstra says matter-of-factly.

"Whether figure skaters really eat nothing but lettuce and sadness. Whether you two are planning to adopt me so I can have a famous figure skater dad."

"I want to know about the Instagram posts," Hayes adds. "Were you nervous? Did you plan what to say or just wing it?"

"And I want to know if Shane's going to come to games," Chouinard says. "Because my girlfriend follows him on social media and she's convinced you two are the most romantic couple in professional sports."

Ilya looks around the locker room at the teammates he's known for exactly one day, all of whom are looking at him with curiosity but no malice, no judgment, just the particular interest that comes from working with someone whose life is more public than most.

"He is better-looking in person," Ilya says finally. "Figure skaters eat normal food. I am not adopting any of you. The posts were planned with help from his mother. And yes, he will be at games."

"Excellent answers," Bood declares. "You're going to fit in fine here."

"Heard you're living in Manotick," Chouinard adds as they gear up for practice. "Good choice. Quiet, good for families."

The word 'families' sits in the air for a moment. "Yes," Ilya says simply. "Good neighbourhood."

"You settling in okay?" Dykstra asks as they tape their sticks. "Big change from Boston."

"Good change," Ilya says. "Team feels different here. Good different."

"Wiebe's building something," Chouinard adds. "Young core, good mix of veteran leadership. Room to grow."

It's the kind of conversation that happens in every locker room—veterans sizing up the new guy, new guy proving he belongs. But there's an undercurrent Ilya didn't expect: genuine welcome. No one asks about his personal life beyond friendly curiosity, his decision to leave Boston, or the media attention that followed his coming out. They ask about his hockey, his expectations for the season, and whether he needs help finding a good restaurant or a reliable mechanic.

Coach Wiebe appears in the doorway, sharp-eyed and serious in the way coaches are when they're thinking about systems and strategies rather than shawarma and relationship gossip. This is his second season behind the Ottawa bench, and the team already respects him.

"Ice time, gentlemen," he says. "Rozanov, you're centering the first line today. Let's see how you work with Bood and Karlsson."

"Yes, Coach."

"How are you settling in?" Wiebe asks as they walk toward the ice.

"Good. The guys have been welcoming."

"Good. They're a good group—young, but they work hard, and they care about each other. That's what matters." Wiebe pauses at the boards. "Any regrets about leaving Boston?"

Ilya thinks about this as he steps onto the ice, feeling the familiar bite of cold air and the particular freedom that comes from having space to move fast.

"No regrets," he says. "This feels right."

"Good," Wiebe says. "Let's see if we can make it feel even better."

During practice, Ilya starts to really see and understand what this team can do. The speed, the skill level, the particular hunger that comes from a group that hasn't won anything yet but believes they can. It's been years since Ilya played with players this eager to prove themselves.

After practice, as they're cooling down, Boodram skates over.

"Hey, my wife wanted me to ask if you and your partner want to come to dinner sometime? She's been wanting to meet you guys."

The casualness of it catches Ilya off guard. Not the invitation itself, but the way Boodram says 'your partner' like it's the most natural thing in the world.

"Shane would like that," Ilya says. "Thank you."

"Cool. Let's exchange numbers."

Walking back to the locker room, Ilya realises something has fundamentally shifted. In Boston, his personal life was something to be carefully managed, compartmentalised, and kept separate from his professional identity. Here, it's just part of who he is. Not a problem to be solved or a risk to be

managed, but simply a fact about Ilya Rozanov: good player, good teammate, queer man in a committed relationship.

"This is going to be a good year," Chouinard says as they reach the tunnel.

Ilya thinks about Shane at home in their kitchen, about the dinner party they had last month, about the life they're building in this city with these people.

"Yes," he agrees. "It is."

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A month later, on October 15th, Shane sits in the Canadian Tire Centre and watches Ilya skate in an Ottawa Centaurs uniform for the first time in a regular-season game.

It's Ottawa versus Toronto, a divisional matchup that has the arena packed and the energy electric. Shane has seats in the family section—a concept that still feels surreal, being officially recognised as family—with David and Yuna on one side, Rose and Svetlana on the other.

All five of them are wearing Rozanov jerseys.

"He looks good in red," Yuna says, watching Ilya take warm-up shots.

"He looks good in everything and nothing," Shane says, then immediately regrets the comment when David makes a face.

"TMI, son."

"Sorry, Dad."

The game is fast and physical, exactly what Toronto-Ottawa games always are. Every time Ilya touches the puck, Shane's chest does something complicated and proud. This is what Ilya wanted: a fresh start, a new team, a chance to play hockey without the weight of everything that went wrong in Boston.

"Goal!" the announcer calls in the first period. "Number eighty-one, Ilya Rozanov, with his first goal as an Ottawa Centaur!"

The arena erupts, and Shane finds himself on his feet, cheering with everyone else, completely unselfconscious about his enthusiasm. A year ago, he would have clapped politely and kept his expression neutral, afraid of drawing attention, afraid of speculation.

Now he cheers like the proud boyfriend he is, wearing Ilya's name across his back, sitting with Ilya's chosen family, completely visible and completely unashamed.

By the end of the second period, Ilya has two goals and an assist. The Centaurs win 5-4 in a game that feels like playoff intensity.

"That's our boy," Svetlana says, loud enough for half the section to hear, and Shane grins because yes, that's exactly right. That's their boy.

After the game, they wait in the family lounge for Ilya to finish with media obligations and post-game routines. The room is full of other wives and girlfriends and children, and Shane should feel

out of place—the only male partner, the only gay relationship.

Instead, he feels like he belongs.

When Ilya finally appears, showered and dressed in a suit that makes him look older and more professional than Shane is used to seeing him, he makes a beeline for their little group.

"How did it look?" Ilya asks, accepting hugs from Yuna, Rose and Svetlana, and a handshake from David that turns into a back-slapping embrace.

"Like you've been playing for Ottawa your whole career," Svetlana says. "Natural fit."

"Good game," David adds. "Smart plays, good positioning. The assist was beautiful."

"Thank you for coming," Ilya says to all of them, but his eyes are on Shane. "It means everything to have you here."

"Where else would we be?" Shane asks.

They drive home together through Ottawa streets that are becoming familiar, past restaurants they want to try and shops they need to remember to visit, through the city that's becoming theirs in the same way Boston never quite was.

"How does it feel?" Shane asks as they pull into their driveway.

"Different," Ilya says. "Good different. Like I can breathe properly for the first time in months."

"No regrets?"

"Only that it took me this long to get here."

Inside the house, they collapse onto their couch—their couch, in their living room, in their house—and Shane curls against Ilya's side the way he's done a thousand times before. But this feels different. Not stolen time or hidden moments, but the simple domesticity of two people who love each other settling in for the night.

"I'm proud of you," Shane says into the quiet.

"For what?"

"For choosing this. For choosing us. For being brave enough to build the life you wanted instead of settling for the life that was easier."

Ilya's arm tightens around Shane's shoulders. "We built it together."

"We built it together," Shane agrees.

Looking around their living room, at the photos covering every surface, the calendar marked with family dinners and friend visits, Shane realises how many people helped them build this life.

They're surrounded by people who love them exactly as they are: Ilya's teammates who welcomed him without question, Shane's parents who gained a son when they gained Ilya, Rose who moved her entire life to support Shane's happiness, Svetlana who flew across borders to be present for the

important moments, and all the friends who fill their dining room and cheer from the stands and show up when it matters.

This is his family now. Their family. The people who choose to love them and be loved by them, who celebrate their victories and support them through the difficult times, who wear their names on jerseys and sit in family sections and make their house feel like a home.

And at the centre of it all, Shane and Ilya love each other with the particular intensity of people who know what it costs to be honest and have decided it's worth the price.

The secret they carried for years is now a life they live openly, and the world hasn't ended.

They are home. Finally, completely, permanently home.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, you did not see it incorrectly. There will be another chapter, an epilogue, because I got an idea and I couldn't shake it. Coming later today!

Chapter 43: epilogue

Chapter Summary

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March 2026

Shane wakes up to the sound of small feet thundering down the hallway and the particular chaos that means both kids are awake before seven a.m. on a Saturday.

"Papa! Dad!" six-year-old Mila calls, bursting through their bedroom door with her dark hair sticking up in twelve different directions. "Leo's trying to eat cereal with a hockey stick again!"

From downstairs comes the unmistakable sound of something crashing to the floor, followed by four-year-old Leo's voice: "It's called practice!"

Ilya groans and rolls over, pressing his face into Shane's shoulder. "Your son has no respect for kitchen equipment."

"My son? He gets the hockey obsession from you."

"He gets the stubborn from you."

Shane laughs and extracts himself from Ilya's arms, pulling on a robe. His left shoulder twinges—it always does in the mornings now, especially when it's about to rain—and he rotates it carefully, working out the stiffness that's been there since the accident three years ago.

"Take it easy," Ilya says quietly, watching Shane's movements. "I can handle the breakfast chaos."

"I'm fine." Shane cuts him off gently but firmly. They've had this conversation hundreds of times since the accident, and while Shane appreciates the concern, he refuses to be treated like he's made of glass. "It's just stiff. Coffee will help."

Downstairs, the kitchen looks like a small tornado hit it. Leo has indeed been trying to eat cereal with a hockey stick, based on the Cheerios scattered across the floor and the milk dripping from the edge of the table. Mila is standing next to him with her arms crossed, clearly having appointed herself the responsible older sister.

"This is why we can't have nice things," she says with the weary tone of someone far older than six.

"Where did you learn that phrase?" Shane asks, starting the coffee machine and surveying the damage.

"Aunt Rose says it when Uncle Marcus tries to cook."

Shane makes a mental note to talk to Rose about what she says in front of the kids. Rose married Marcus two years ago—a quiet writer who somehow manages to keep up with her intensity—and they have a nine-month-old daughter who Rose insists will be on skates before she can properly walk. The baby came after three unsuccessful IUIs and one round of IVF that finally worked, and Shane has never seen Rose happier than she is as a new mother.

"Leo," Ilya says, appearing in the kitchen in pajama pants and a faded Ottawa Centaurs t-shirt from his playing days. He retired two years ago, after leading the team to their second Stanley Cup in five years, and sometimes Shane catches him looking at old team photos with something that might be nostalgia. "Explain the hockey stick."

"I'm practicing!" Leo says seriously, as if this should be obvious to everyone. "Coach Ryan says practice everywhere!"

"Coach Ryan means with a ball or a puck, not with breakfast."

"But breakfast is more fun."

Mila rolls her eyes. "Can we have pancakes? It's Saturday."

"What do you say?" Shane prompts.

"Please can we have pancakes, Dad?"

"Much better. Yes, we can have pancakes."

While Shane mixes batter one-handed—his left shoulder still doesn't like certain motions—and Ilya cleans up the cereal disaster, the kids chatter about their plans for the day. Leo has hockey practice at ten, and Mila has her art class at one p.m. She's been obsessed with painting ever since Yuna brought her a set of watercolours for Christmas.

"Are Grammy and Grampy coming to my hockey game?" Leo asks, carefully pronouncing each word. He's been working on his r's with a speech therapist, and he's proud when he gets them right.

"Wouldn't miss it," Shane says. David and Yuna never miss Leo's games or Mila's art shows, just like they never missed Shane's skating competitions when he was young. Some things don't change.

"What about Uncle JJ? And Uncle Hayden and Aunt Jackie and all the cousins?"

"Uncle JJ is busy planning his wedding," Ilya says. "But Uncle Hayden said he'd try to come if Aunt Jackie doesn't go into labour."

"The baby is coming?" Mila asks, eyes wide.

"Yes, Aunt Jackie is having another baby boy very soon," Shane confirms. "That'll make five kids."

"Five!" Leo looks impressed. "That's more than us."

"That's why Uncle Hayden had a procedure so there won't be any more babies after this one," Ilya adds, which makes Shane snort with laughter.

"What procedure?" Mila asks, because she's six and curious about everything.

"Ask your aunt Jackie," Shane says diplomatically. "She'll explain it better than we can."

The pancakes are a production, as they always are. Leo insists on helping flip them, which results in one pancake on the floor and another that's more of an abstract art piece than actual food. Mila sets the table with the precision she brings to everything, making sure the napkins are perfectly aligned and everyone has the right amount of syrup.

"Papa, tell the hockey story," Leo says through a mouthful of pancakes.

"Which hockey story?" Ilya asks, though they both know exactly which one Leo means.

"The one where you won the Cup and then you stopped playing."

"That was only two years ago," Ilya says, settling into the familiar rhythm of a story he's told dozens of times. "We were playing the Panthers, and it was game seven, and we were tied 2-2 going into overtime..."

Shane listens with half his attention while he cuts up Mila's pancakes and refills coffee cups. He's heard this story countless times, but Leo never gets tired of it, and Ilya never gets tired of telling it. Even in retirement, Ilya lights up when he talks about hockey—not with longing exactly, but with the deep satisfaction of someone who accomplished everything he set out to do.

"And then what happened?" Mila asks, even though she knows this story as well as Leo does.

"And then I scored the goal, and the crowd went absolutely crazy, and your Dad was crying in the family section, and I skated over to the glass and pointed right at him because none of it would have meant anything without him there."

Shane feels his chest do something warm and familiar. Ilya's final goal, his last moment as a professional athlete, and Shane was there to witness it.

"Tell about when you got married," Mila demands.

"That's a different story," Shane says. "And you've heard it a million times."

"But I like it."

"We got married twice," Ilya explains patiently. "Once just the two of us, because we wanted it to be just about us. And then again with everyone we love, because we wanted to celebrate with our family."

"And Aunt Rose cried so much she ruined her makeup," Leo adds helpfully.

"And Grampy gave a speech that made everyone else cry too," Mila continues.

"And then you adopted us," Leo finishes triumphantly.

"And then we became a family," Shane agrees, reaching over to wipe syrup off Leo's chin.

The rest of the morning is spent in the usual pre-hockey chaos. Leo's gear bag needs to be packed, his water bottle filled, his lucky socks located (they're under his bed, as always). Mila decides she wants to bring her sketchbook to the rink, which means finding the right pencils and making sure she has the eraser that doesn't leave marks.

Shane moves through these routines with the muscle memory of years of practice, but he's careful about lifting Leo's equipment bag. It's heavier than it used to be—Leo's growing, getting stronger, needing better gear—and Shane's shoulder doesn't forgive him the way it used to.

"I've got it," Ilya says quietly, taking the bag from Shane without making a production of it.

They've developed a system over the past three years, a way of managing Shane's limitations without making him feel diminished. Ilya carries the heavy things. Shane does more of the organising, the scheduling, the detail work that keeps their family running smoothly. It's not the partnership they had ten years ago, when they were both at peak physical condition, but it works.

In the car on the way to the rink, Leo practices his skating stance in the backseat while Mila draws pictures of flowers wearing tiny ice skates. The radio plays quietly—a compromise between Leo's preference for loud rock music and Mila's need for calm concentration.

"Dad," Leo says suddenly, "do you miss skating?"

It's a question Leo asks periodically, usually when they're driving to or from hockey practice. Shane has learned not to give easy answers.

"Sometimes," Shane says honestly. "I miss the feeling of landing a perfect triple axel, the way the crowd would cheer when Rose and I did very well. But I was ready to retire because I wanted to have the two of you."

"Will I be good at hockey like Papa?"

"I think you'll be good enough to play whatever level of hockey makes you happy," Shane says carefully. "Professional hockey requires a lot of sacrifice, and you have to really love it to make it worth it."

"Papa loved it enough."

"Papa did loved it enough," Shane agrees. "But Papa also gave it up when he was ready to be home with us every night."

"That's right," Ilya adds from the driver's seat, glancing at Leo in the rearview mirror. "Sometimes the most important victories happen off the ice."

Shane can see Leo processing this information with the seriousness he brings to everything hockey-related. At four, Leo already has the focus of a much older athlete, and sometimes Shane worries about the pressure that comes with being the child of two former elite athletes.

"Mila," Shane says, changing the subject, "tell us about your painting class today."

"We're learning about light and shadow," Mila says without looking up from her drawing. "Like how to make things look round and stuff."

"That sounds hard," Ilya says.

"It is hard. But I like hard things," Mila replies seriously.

They're loading everything out of the car for hockey practice when Ilya's phone buzzes with a text from Svetlana: *Call me when you have a minute. Want to tell you about the new draft picks before it*

hits the news.

Ilya shows the text to Shane, who grins. "First female GM in NHL history, and she still calls you first with the gossip."

"It's not gossip, it's insider information."

"Same thing."

At the rink, Leo transforms from talkative four-year-old to focused athlete in a way that still amazes Shane. He's been skating since he was barely walking—first just for fun, then with more purpose once it became clear he had inherited Ilya's natural ability and competitive drive.

"He's got good hands," says another parent, watching Leo manoeuvre the puck through a series of cones. "Reminds me of someone."

Shane glances over at Ilya, who's trying to look modest and failing completely.

"Must get it from his Dad," Ilya says. "Shane is very good with his hands."

"Oh my god," Shane mutters, elbowing him. "Not in front of the other hockey parents."

"What? I meant figure skating. Very precise. Very technical."

"Sure you did."

David appears at Shane's elbow, carrying two cups of coffee from the rink concession stand.

"Thought you might need caffeine," he says, handing one to Shane and nodding toward where Yuna is sitting in the stands, explaining hockey rules to Mila with the patience of someone who's done this many times before.

"Thanks, Dad."

They watch Leo's practice in comfortable silence for a while, the kind of easy quiet that comes from decades of shared experience. David has been coming to Shane's competitions and practices for more than twenty years now, and the transition from figure skating to hockey hasn't fazed him in the slightest.

"He's fearless," David observes as Leo attempts a move that's probably too advanced for his age group. "Reminds me of someone else I used to watch practice."

"I was never fearless."

"Yes, you were. It just took you some time to realise it." David takes a sip of his coffee. "You know, watching you with these kids—it's exactly what your mother and I hoped for when you were little."

"What do you mean?"

"We used to worry that you were too serious, too focused on being perfect. We wondered if you'd ever let yourself just... be happy. Messy. Normal." David's voice gets soft. "And now look at you. Pancakes with syrup on your shirt, arguing with a six-year-old about art supplies, completely in your element."

Shane looks down at his shirt, which does indeed have syrup on it. "I'm not sure 'normal' is the word I'd use."

"No, you're right. You're not normal. You're extraordinary. But you're also human now, in a way you weren't before. The kids did that for you. Ilya did that for you."

"They saved me," Shane says quietly.

"You saved each other," David corrects. "That's what good families do."

Meanwhile, in the stands, Yuna is finishing her explanation of icing rules when Ilya joins her, settling into the seat beside her with a soft grunt that speaks to almost thirty-five-year-old knees and fifteen years of professional hockey.

"How's the shoulder?" Yuna asks without preamble. She's been asking about Shane's shoulder for three years now, the way mothers ask about things that worry them.

"Better today. He did his exercises this morning."

"Good. I worry about him overdoing it."

"He won't let me worry about him," Ilya says with mild frustration. "But he'll let you worry about him."

Yuna smiles. "That's because I'm his mother. It's different."

They watch Leo score a goal in the scrimmage, both cheering appropriately, before Yuna speaks again.

"I never thanked you properly," she says.

"For what?"

"For loving my son the way you do. For seeing him—not the skater, not the performer, not the careful, controlled version of himself he used to show the world. For seeing Shane and loving him exactly as he is."

Ilya is quiet for a moment, watching Shane crouch down to Leo's eye level, clearly giving him some kind of gentle coaching advice.

"It's not difficult to love Shane," Ilya says finally. "He makes it easy."

"He doesn't, though. He's stubborn and private, and he has a hard time accepting help, comfort, or praise. He's spent most of his life convinced that love is something you have to earn and re-earn every day." Yuna's voice gets softer. "But with you, he's different. With you, he believes he deserves to be happy."

"He does deserve to be happy."

"I know that. You know that. It took Shane twenty years to figure it out." Yuna reaches over and squeezes Ilya's hand. "Thank you for being patient enough to show him."

"He showed me too," Ilya says. "How to be honest. How to be brave. How to build something real."

"You're both good men," Yuna says. "And you're raising good children."

On the ice, Leo falls down trying to execute a turn that's definitely beyond his skill level, pops right back up, and immediately tries it again. In the stands, Mila cheers loudly enough to be heard over the entire rink.

"Very good children," Yuna amends, and both she and Ilya start laughing.

After practice and Mila's class, they stop by the grocery store, where both kids immediately start lobbying for everything they're not supposed to have. Mila wants the fancy organic fruit snacks, Leo wants candy bars, and both of them seem to have developed a sudden, urgent need for ice cream.

"It's been a very hard morning," Mila explains seriously. "Leo was being very loud during art time."

"I was enthusiastic," Leo protests.

"You were being loud."

"Same thing!"

The grocery store trip takes twice as long as it should, because Leo insists on helping push the cart (which means they veer into several displays) and Mila reads every label out loud to practice her reading skills. Shane finds himself explaining why they need vegetables when they could just eat fruit instead, and why chocolate chips are not technically a breakfast food despite Leo's compelling argument that they contain milk.

In the car on the way home, Leo falls asleep almost immediately, his mini hockey stick still clutched in his hand. Mila draws quietly in her sketchbook, occasionally holding up her artwork for Shane to admire via the rearview mirror.

"That's beautiful, sweetheart. Is that our house?"

"It's our house if we had a tower," Mila explains. "Every house should have a tower."

"What would you do in the tower?"

"Paint pictures of everything I could see. And maybe have a library. And a place for Papa to keep his hockey trophies."

Shane catches Ilya's eye and they share one of those wordless conversations that come with years of partnership. Mila has never seen most of Ilya's trophies and medals—they're packed away in boxes in the basement, gathering dust. Ilya has never been one for displaying awards, preferring to keep the focus on current achievements rather than past glory.

But maybe it's time to dig some of them out. Not for vanity, but so the kids can understand the weight of what Ilya accomplished, the decades of work that went into becoming one of the best players of his generation.

In the car on the way home, with the kids finally quiet in the backseat and afternoon sunlight streaming through the windows, Shane reaches over and takes Ilya's hand.

At home, while Leo continues his nap on the couch and Mila sets up her art supplies in the living room, Shane and Ilya have twenty minutes of relative quiet. They use it the way parents of young children always do—catching up on laundry, checking schedules for the following week, discussing the logistics of daily life.

"Rose called while you were getting Leo's gear," Ilya says, folding tiny hockey jerseys with practised efficiency. "The Ava's walking already. Nine months old and apparently unstoppable."

"Of course she is. Rose's daughter was never going to be content sitting still."

"Rose wants to bring her to Leo's game next Saturday. Says it's never too early to start appreciating good hockey."

They work in companionable silence for a few minutes, the kind of comfortable quiet that comes from seventeen years of shared domestic responsibility. Shane sorts through the kids' artwork—Leo's drawings of hockey players in various action poses, Mila's increasingly sophisticated paintings of flowers and landscapes—deciding what to keep for the memory boxes and what can safely be recycled.

"We should probably think about summer camps," Shane says. "Mila wants to do that intensive art program at the community centre, and Leo's been asking about hockey camp."

"Different weeks?"

"Different weeks, different locations, different pickup times." Shane rubs his forehead. "Remember when we thought two kids would be easy because we'd already figured out the system with one?"

"We were very naive," Ilya agrees. "But just look at them."

Shane follows Ilya's gaze to where their children are—Leo sprawled on the couch with his thumb in his mouth (a habit he's supposed to be outgrowing but still reverts to when tired), Mila sitting cross-legged on the floor with watercolours spread around her like a tiny artist's studio.

"We have good kids," Shane says softly.

"We have great kids."

"Even when Leo tries to eat cereal with hockey equipment?"

"Especially then," Ilya says. "He's creative. He's problem-solving. He's thinking outside the box."

"He's making a mess."

"He's four. Making messes is his job."

The afternoon passes quietly, punctuated by the usual small dramas of family life. Mila runs out of yellow paint and declares her artistic vision ruined until Shane finds another tube in the supply box.

Leo wakes up cranky from his nap and needs twenty minutes of cuddles and quiet conversation before he's ready to engage with the world again.

Ilya finds himself thinking about the text from Svetlana, about the draft picks and the wheeling and dealing that's probably happening in Boston front offices right now. Three years ago, he would have been immediately on the phone, hungry for details about roster changes and potential trades. Now, he makes a mental note to call her back after the kids are in bed, when he can give her his full attention without worrying about small ears overhearing professional gossip.

"Dad," Mila says around four o'clock, appearing at Shane's elbow with paint-stained fingers, "I'm ready for my snack now."

"What kind of snack are you thinking?"

"Something that will give me energy for more painting. But also something healthy because you always say we should eat healthy things."

Shane considers the balance between parental responsibility and weekend indulgence. "How about apple slices with peanut butter?"

"And maybe some of those crackers that look like fish?"

"Deal."

While Shane prepares snacks, Leo emerges from the living room with his hair sticking up in all directions and announces that he's ready to practice hockey in the backyard. This leads to the familiar negotiation about appropriate outdoor footwear (yes, he needs shoes; no, his skates won't work on grass) and whether Papa needs to supervise every single shot (yes, if he wants to use the real puck instead of the foam ball).

"Five more minutes of painting," Mila bargains, "and then I'll come watch Leo practice. But I need to finish the sky first."

"The sky can wait," Leo says impatiently.

"The sky cannot wait. Skies are very complicated, and you have to paint them while the light is right."

"What light? We're inside."

"The light in my imagination," Mila says with the authority of someone who takes her art very seriously.

This is the reality of parenting siblings with completely different interests and personalities. Leo is immediate, physical, and focused on concrete achievements he can measure and display. Mila is contemplative, artistic, and more interested in process than results. Shane and Ilya have learned to honour both approaches, to find ways to support each child's natural inclinations while also encouraging them to appreciate each other's gifts.

"How about this," Ilya suggests. "Mila finishes her painting, Leo helps me set up the targets in the backyard, and then we all go outside together. Mila can bring her sketchbook and draw while Leo practices."

"Can I draw Papa teaching Leo hockey?"

"You can draw whatever you want."

"Can I draw Dad reading on the deck while Papa teaches Leo hockey, and I draw them drawing?"

"That might be too much drawing in one drawing," Shane says. "But you can try."

The evening unfolds in the familiar rhythm of family dinners. Mila insists on helping make the salad, which means there are cherry tomatoes rolling around the kitchen floor. Leo sets the table, carefully placing each fork exactly one inch from each plate because Mila taught him that's how "fancy people" do it.

"Dad," Mila says, tugging on Shane's shirt while he stirs pasta sauce. "Will you help me paint tomorrow?"

"Papa," Leo says, appearing at Ilya's elbow with his mini stick. "Can we practice passing in the backyard after dinner?"

Shane and Ilya look at each other over the kids' heads, and Shane sees his own contentment reflected in Ilya's face. They've built something extraordinary out of the simple decision to love each other honestly, to show up consistently, to choose family over fear at every turn.

"Absolutely," Shane tells Mila.

"Let's go," Ilya tells Leo.

But first, dinner. They eat around the kitchen table that's seen thousands of meals now, listening to Leo's elaborate explanation of why hockey players should be allowed to eat ice cream for breakfast ("It's just cold milk, which is healthy") and Mila's equally detailed description of the painting she's planning ("It's going to have seventeen different kinds of flowers, and they're all going to be singing").

After dinner, they split up as promised—Shane and Mila set up her easel on the back deck, where the evening light is perfect for watercolours, while Ilya and Leo head to the backyard for stick practice. But they're never really separate, not in this house. Shane can hear Ilya's patient coaching voice and Leo's excited chatter while he helps Mila mix the perfect shade of purple for her singing violets.

"Dad," Mila says, concentrating on her brushstrokes, "are you and Papa going to have more babies?"

Shane nearly drops the water jar. "What made you think about that?"

"Aunt Jackie keeps having babies. And Emily at school has three little brothers. And I was wondering if Leo and I are going to get more siblings."

Shane considers how to answer this. They've talked about having more children, but nothing's been decided, and four-year-olds and six-year-olds aren't exactly known for keeping family planning discussions confidential.

"Right now, we're very happy with just you and Leo," Shane says carefully. "But families change sometimes. If we ever decided to have more children, we'd talk to you and Leo about it first."

"Good," Mila says, adding delicate petals to a rose that looks remarkably sophisticated for someone her age. "Because I like being the big sister, but I don't want to share my art supplies with too many people."

Meanwhile, in the backyard, Leo is practising his slap shot against the garage door while Ilya offers gentle corrections to his form.

"Papa," Leo says during a water break, "when you were little, did you always know you wanted to play hockey?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "From the first time went to watch practice, I knew that's what I wanted to do."

"Did you know you wanted to be a dad?"

This question catches Ilya off guard. "I... hoped I would someday. But I didn't know how it would happen."

"Because you love Dad instead of a mom?"

"Because I love Dad instead of a woman," Ilya corrects gently. They've had age-appropriate conversations about family structures before, but Leo's understanding is still developing. "But there are lots of ways to make families. Some families have a mom and a dad, some have two moms, some have two dads, some have just one parent, and some families like ours come together through adoption."

Leo nods seriously, then brightens. "And some families have five kids like Uncle Hayden and Aunt Jackie."

"Exactly."

"Do you think Dad wants more kids?"

Ilya glances toward the deck, where Shane is helping Mila clean her brushes. "I think Dad is very happy with the family we have right now. But maybe someday we'll talk about it."

"I would like a little brother," Leo announces. "Someone I could teach hockey to."

"What if you got a little sister instead?"

Leo considers this. "I guess I could teach her hockey, too. Mila doesn't like it, but maybe a different sister would."

Later, when they're finally in their own bed, the house quiet around them, Ilya traces gentle patterns across Shane's chest in the darkness. His touch is feather-light as he maps the familiar terrain of Shane's injury, then he leans down and presses soft kisses along the length of the scar. It's something he does sometimes, when the weight of memory gets too heavy to carry alone.

"I can't believe we almost lost you," Ilya whispers against Shane's skin.

Shane's hand comes up to rest in Ilya's hair, fingers threading through the dark strands that are just starting to show silver at the temples.

"It's been three years," Shane says quietly. "I'm okay now."

"I know. I know you are." Ilya's voice is muffled against Shane's shoulder. "But sometimes I still wake up in the middle of the night and have to check that you're breathing."

Shane feels his chest tighten with love and gratitude and the particular ache that comes from being known completely by another person. "I'm here," he says simply. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Promise me," Ilya says, lifting his head to look at Shane in the dim light from the street lamps outside. "Promise me you won't do anything that stupid again."

Shane reaches up to cup Ilya's face, thumb brushing across his cheekbone. "I promise I'll be more careful. I can't promise the world won't be dangerous, but I can promise I won't take unnecessary risks."

"That's all I can ask for," Ilya says, and settles back down against Shane's chest, his arm careful around Shane's injured shoulder.

"Are you happy?" Ilya asks quietly, and Shane rearranges himself so he can look his husband in the eyes.

"Are you seriously asking me that question while sitting in our bed, in our house, after putting our children to bed?"

"I mean... are you happy with how everything turned out? The retirement, the kids, the suburban dad life?"

Shane looks around at their bedroom—photos of their family on the nightstand, Mila's latest painting hung on the wall where they can see it every morning, Leo's drawing of a hockey player taped to the dresser mirror. It's nothing like the pristine, empty bedrooms they used to have when they were young and childless and convinced that success was measured in medals and championships.

"When I was twenty-two and competing internationally, I thought happiness was perfect performances and standing ovations and seeing my name in the sports section," Shane says. "I thought it was being the best, being noticed, being celebrated."

"And now?"

"Now I think happiness is Leo's face when he makes a good pass. Mila explaining why she mixed seventeen different shades of red for one tiny detail in a painting. You telling bedtime stories in voices that make them laugh until they can't breathe." Shane turns in Ilya's arms to look at him properly. "Now I think happiness is this. All of this."

Ilya pulls Shane closer, pressing a soft kiss to his temple. "I love you," he says simply, and Shane feels the truth of it settle warm in his chest.

This is their life now: messy and loud and perfectly imperfect.

This is their happy ending.

Chapter 44: snapshots



roselandryskates • 10y
Boston, USA



62,288 likes

roselandryskates Found them like this after dinner. Some things never change ❤️

[View all 201 comments](#)

svetlanavetrova Ilya falls asleep on everyone. At least now it's romantic instead of annoying 😂



hayden_hockey I've never seen Shane look this peaceful





ilyarozanov81 • 9y
Ottawa, Canada



104,543 likes

ilyarozanov81 This tongue has many talents 🤔 Lucky me gets to find out all of them 🔥

[View all 256 comments](#)

hayden_hockey Bro I did NOT need to know this 🤒 🤒 ❤️
🤒 some things should stay private

svetlanavetrova you are absolutely shameless. Shane, ❤️
how do you put up with him? 😂 ❤️



shanehollanderskating • 8y
Ottawa, Canada



410,532 likes

shanehollanderskating Married

[View all 356 comments](#)

yunahollander My beautiful boys ❤️ ❤️ So happy for you both! Welcome to the family officially Ilya



davidhollander Couldn't be prouder of you son. And so glad to officially call Ilya our son-in-law ❤️ Love you both





yunahollander • 8y



6,378 likes

yunahollander My boys at the cottage ❤️ Some things never change

[View all 63 comments](#)

davidhollander Beautiful shot honey ❤️ Love having them here with us

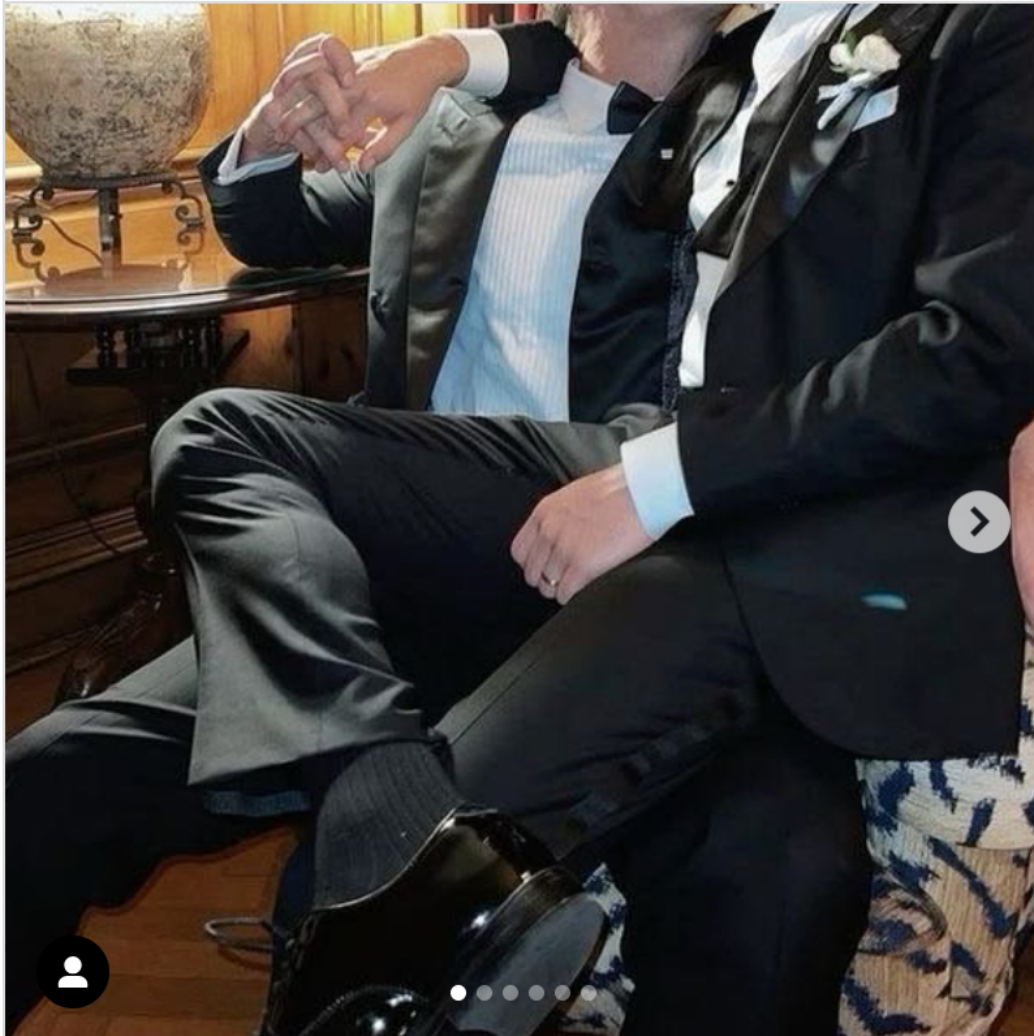


ilyarozanov81 Thank you for always making me feel so welcome at your special place mama Yuna ❤️





roselandryskates • 8y
Ottawa, Canada



76,245 likes

roselandryskates My skating partner married his soulmate today ❤️ So much love and joy I can barely handle it 🥹

[View all 241 comments](#)

hayden_hockey Rose you're crying in every single photo from today 😭❤️ Beautiful wedding though!



svetlanavetrova They look so happy. Finally these two idiots made it official! ❤️





shanehollanderskating • 7y

Ottawa, Canada



109,445 likes

shanehollanderskating This is what happens when I say I'm not hungry 😂

[View all 232 comments](#)

jjbhockey Ilya's love language is def feeding people! Remember when he made a whole feast because I said I was 'a little peckish'?... [more](#)



yunahollander That's how you know he's perfect for you honey ❤️ A man who makes sure you eat is a keeper! Your dad does the same thing... [more](#)





ilyarozanov81 • 7y
Toronto, Canada



215,456 likes

ilyarozanov81 Canada boy sees trees. Canada boy is happy 🌲

[View all 234 comments](#)

davidhollander Those Ontario forests hit different!
Hope you're both enjoying Toronto ❤️



jjbhockey Shane communing with nature 😂 How very zen of you!





ilyarozanov81 • 6y
Ottawa, Canada



572,533 likes

ilyarozanov81 GQ knows what they're doing putting us together like this 🔥 My beautiful husband looking like a whole meal 😍

[View all 642 comments](#)

shanehollanderskating ILYA! You can't just post things like this without warning me first!



roselandryskates I know Shane's face is SO RED right now! 😂😂 You two are ridiculous!





ilyarozanov81 • 6y
Ottawa, Canada



85,314 likes

ilyarozanov81 My husband showing off for our daughter
✈️ Mila thinks Dad is the coolest 🥰

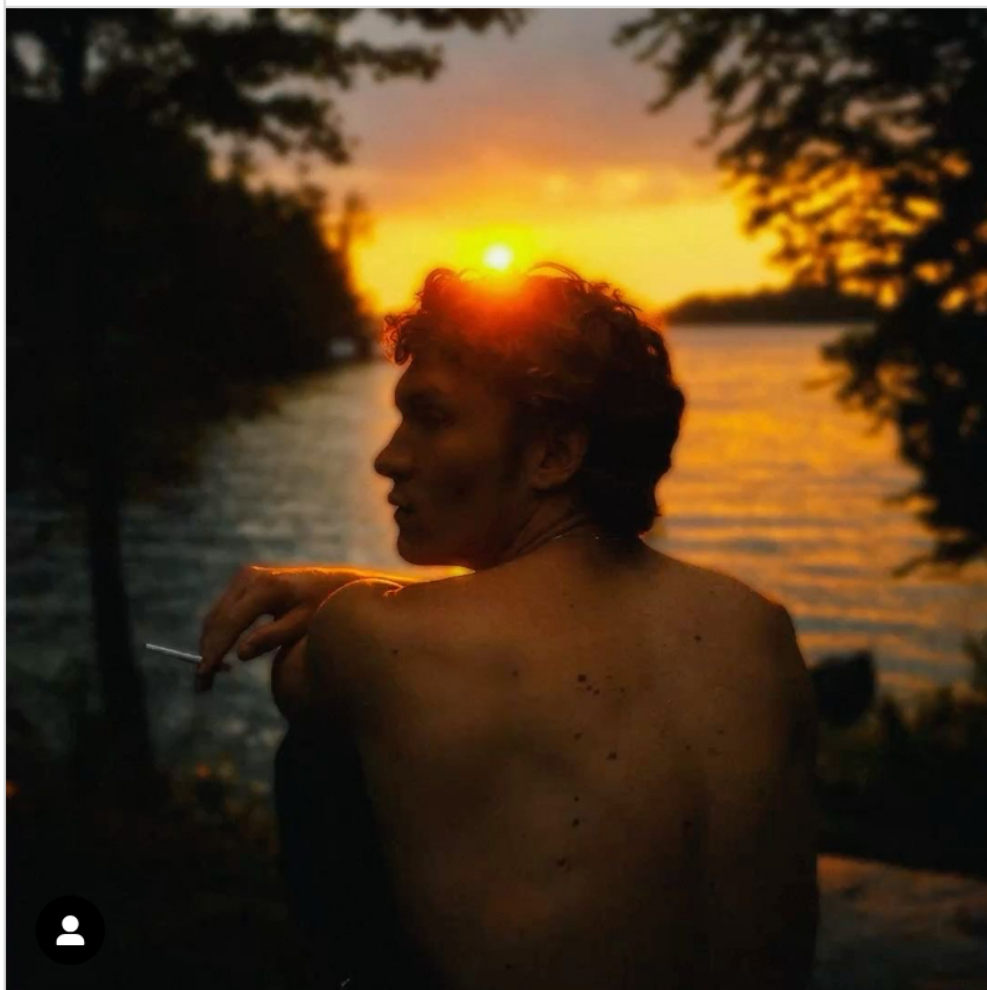
[View all 196 comments](#)

roselandryskates Shane's still got it! 💪 Mila is going to be doing handstands before she can walk at this rate 😂

davidhollander That's my boy! Still showing off after all these years. Mila's got the most athletic parents in Ottawa ❤️



shanehollanderskating • 5y



493,754 likes

shanehollanderskating Golden hour with my favorite person ✨

[View all 349 comments](#)

roselandry Shane this is absolutely beautiful 🥰 You two have always been each other's light. So much love for you both ❤️



svetlanavetrova You still look at him like he hung the stars in the sky. After all these years. It makes my cold heart feel things ❤️





svetlanavetrova • 4y

Ottawa, Canada



56,720 likes

svetlanavetrova These two idiots and their disgusting happiness 🤔❤️ (I love them so much it makes me sick)

[View all 197 comments](#)

roselandryskates Svetlana!! 😂😂 You're such a softie under all that sarcasm! This is the most beautiful photo ❤️



jjbhockey Lmaooo Svetlana calling them idiots while posting the sweetest photo ever 😂 We see you!





ilyarozanov81 • 3y
Ottawa, Canada



433,245 likes

ilyarozanov81 Post-workout 🍌 Ready for the play-offs

[View all 592 comments](#)

shanehollanderskating I...



shanehollanderskating How am I supposed to function when you post things like this???





shanehollanderskating • 3y

Ottawa, Canada



73,055 likes

shanehollanderskating Eleven years together and he still makes my heart skip a beat. Some things never get old 🌅



[View all 215 comments](#)

ilyarozanov81 You're going to make me cry in public again 🥹❤️ Love you so much

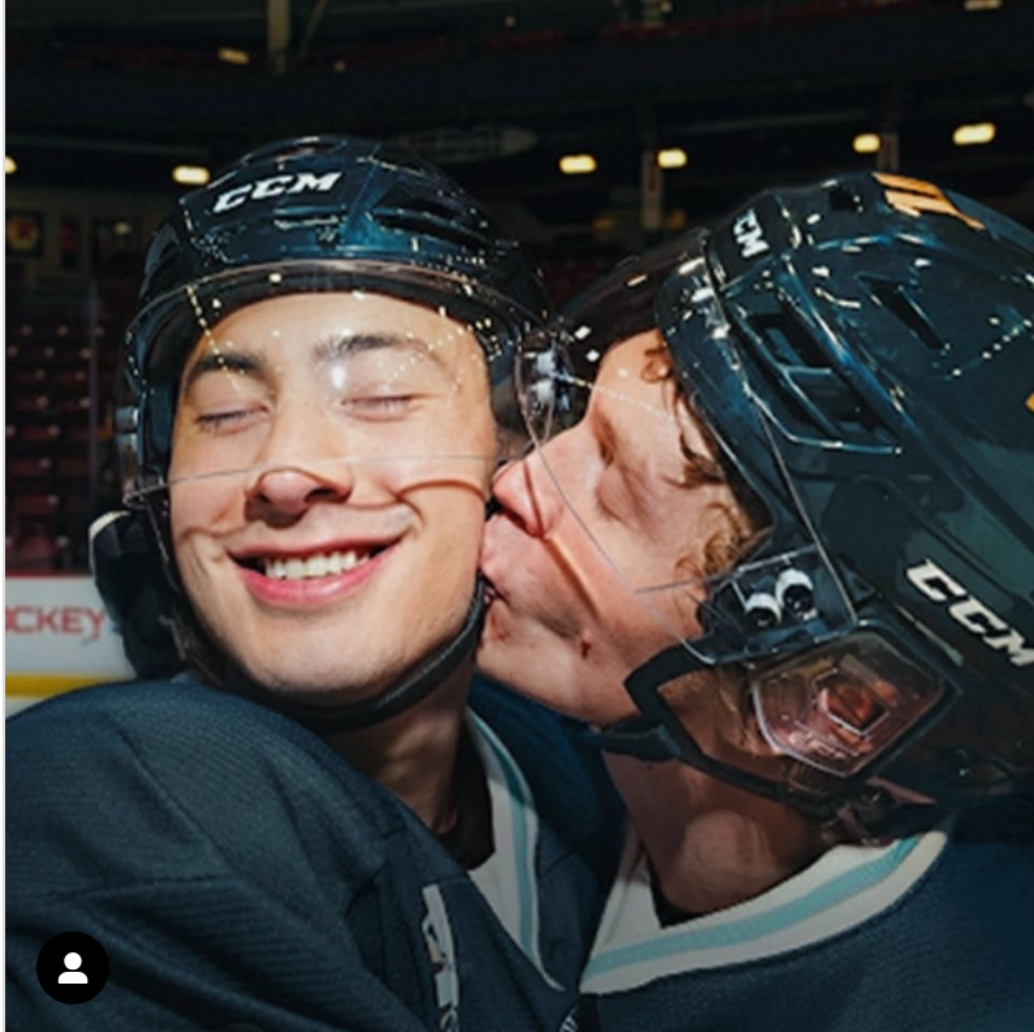


yunahollander My beautiful boys ❤️ Love you both so much





ilyarozanov81 • 2y
Ottawa, Canada



345,289 likes

ilyarozanov81 Finally got him on the ice for a little while

[View all 321 comments](#)

hayden_hockey Wait you actually got Shane to play hockey??



roselandryskates Shane on skates is always a beautiful thing to see Even with hockey gear on!





shanehollanderskating • 2y

Ottawa, Canada



375,032 likes

shanehollanderskating Best Papa in the world ❤️

[View all 235 comments](#)

yunahollander Our grandson is so lucky to have two dads who can teach him to fly on ice 🛹️ ❤️ Beautiful moment Shane



davidhollander Papa Ilya in action! Leo's got the best teacher ❤️ This melts my heart





shanehollanderskating • 35w

Las Vegas, USA



154,256 likes

shanehollanderskating Happy 7 year anniversary and congratulations on your MVP award. It's your special night



[View all 427 comments](#)

hayden_hockey Okay okay you two are actually disgustingly perfect together 🤪 Congrats Ilya, well deserved! 🏆



yunahollander So proud of both my boys ❤️ Seven beautiful years and many more to come!



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